

James Eggleston, math teacher, interviewed by Bridget Vaughn.

Bridget Vaughn (BV): All right, uh, for the record, can you say your full name and what your role was at what was in high school?

James Eggleston (JE): My name is James Eggleston. I was a math teacher in high school for at least 18 years.

BV: Did you start when the school first opened James?

JE: No, I came about three years later. I was at von Steuben before that. I was integrated into von Steuben.

BV: So, I'm glad you shared that with me. Can you tell me what was the difference between von Steuben when you taught there and then when you transitioned over to Robeson?

JE: The difference was they kept von Steuben under a thousand students. So that meant that enrollment wasn't high so you have a nice class size of no more than 25 years in most of your classes. So, I walked, the hallways weren't crowded so it was kind of an ideal situation except for other aspects of it.

BV: And what were those other aspects, James?

1:09

JE: Racism. Actually, we were integrated into von Steuben because of a decree from the courts to integrate the teachers and the students. So, a lot of younger black teachers were transferred or sent north to teach so we can integrate the schools, and students were also bused north. We had kids from Morgan Park and Gage Park that were bused to von Steuben. And also kids who live on the West Side. They took the bus up to von Steuben. And in fact, when I was in high school, they came to us and told us that we could go to von Steuben or Roosevelt or some school North if we wanted to. But that would have been a long ride. So I stayed at Tilden Tech. [laughs]

2:03

BV: When, when did you... I just want to, um, for my own personal, uh, this is a personal question. When did you graduate from high school?

JE: 1964. Nineteen 64.

BV: OK. And then when did you teach at von Steuben?

JE: 1976 to 1980.

BV: All right, thank you. I have a friend who I thought she went to von Steuben but she actually went to Senn, and she grew up in Chatham, so .

JE: It was the same program. They were sending kids to Senn. They just dropped the kids off at the different schools.

BV: So you told me about von Steuben. Now, how did that compare to, from an education perspective, you started talking about the, uh, they kept the class sizes small. What was it like when you transitioned over to Robeson?

JE: When I came to Robeson, hardly any kids came to the class. It was like empty.

BV: And what year did you come to Robeson?

3:10

JE: February of 1980. What happened? We have gone on strike, so they laid off five. They laid off 500 teachers. So, back then everybody had to shift according to seniority. So that's how I got to get out of von Steuben. So, I pick Robertson. It was a new building, it was close to my house. My son's friend said it was a really bad school. I shouldn't go there, but I grew up in a rough neighborhood. So, it was just a new school. I didn't care what the kids were like.

BV: What was the student population back in 1980?

JE: Oh my god.

BV: Not how many came to school.

JE: Well, I think one reason... The teacher that was there, the kids like. So, when they got a new teacher they just didn't come. So that's what I believe. It was pretty crowded. It was about at least 16 to 1800 kids at that school. It was really crowded, every day. And all of juniors and seniors were in the old Parker building and the freshmen and sophomores were in the new Robeson building. So, the new school couldn't even hold all the kids, it was that crowded.

4:26

BV: What math classes did you teach?

JE: When I first got there, I was just teaching Algebra, and eventually I taught up to college Algebra.

BV: What was Robeson known for back when you were teaching?

JE: We were known for having a real good basketball team. Now, Robeson. We had really, we had good kids academically, good. Because back then you only had the neighborhood schools, so the kids

who were really smart, they came to the neighborhood school and they were in honors classes. So, we've had kids that went to Northwestern, Brown University, Isaac went to Princeton. Northwestern. So, we've at Illinois, one of my students was an engineering student in Illinois, where I went. Yeah. So, uh, then when you started getting the specialized schools and start taking the better academic school students out of school. So, by the time Robeson was reconstituted, 75 percent of entering freshmen were below the 25th percentile in testing. So, we had a very large special ed population.

5:51

BV: And when was the reconstitution?

JE: 1997. The state would kept mandating that the schools had to be better or they would take over. So, I guess they made some kind of compromise to go in and take out some teachers, whatever, try to make it better. Of course, that failed because you just can't blame the teachers for the schools failing. There are a lot of socio economic issues that you have to deal with or the schools will never get better. And uh, so they reconstituted the school. But, of course, nothing really changed because you still have the same student population that you had to deal with. You have to just teach them to the best of your ability and help them overcome whatever obstacles and issues. Their parents don't have the resources that other people have. Like my daughter went to an Ivy League college. Well, I worked two jobs, I did everything. She had all kind of resources, and so she was able to perform well, which I expected. But some kids, they barely have enough food to eat. They come to school, they, you know, angry, upset. They don't, you know, they don't have a lot of reasons to want to excel, but that's where we came in. We had to make you excel whether you wanted to or not! [Laughs]

BV: Wanted to or not! Yeah. [Laughs]

7:33

JE: I don't care if you hungry or not, I don't care if you had a bad night, you gonna come in here, you gonna do your work, and we're gonna build success. So, I never had kids—I had barely no problem with cutting, cause if I find out you're cutting, I'm going to go find you and bring you to class. [Laughs]

BV: So, how many teachers were like that?

8:00

JE: The majority of the teacher. We were—I really hated our family got broken up. We were dedicated to that school, because we could've easily transfer out to other schools. You know? But we had been there, we had a strong bond with each other. We had a strong bond. We liked the kids. We loved the kids. They can be bad as I don't know what, but we loved them. And we worked hard with those kids. We would donate money so kids could get tuxedos and stuff for their prom. We used to do all that. Pay for their ticket, whatever they send around “a note: so and so, she needs some

money for a prom dress, can you help?" So, we donate five or ten, and then somebody take them to go get the prom dress. Yeah. I've driven students to their interview for college. I've driven them to college.

8:55

BV: Well, when I mentioned your name, people, people say, Oh yes, I remember Mr. Eggleston. Yeah, a lot of people like you.

JE: Oh, thank you.

BV: Which is why you were at the reunion.

JE: Oh yeah, if I don't come they gonna be mad at me, so... I come to almost everything. I still go. It's fun to see them.

BV: Did Robeson, or even Chicago Public Schools, did they have guidance counselors for the students?

9:22

JE: Yeah. We had really good guidance counselors. One lady who still comes to our luncheon, Ms. Beenum (?). She retired about ten, twelve years before I did. I used to go to the counselors office. My son is acting up, or my daughter's this, or how can I do that? So, I didn't have no problem going to see it on myself.

BV: And so, after the reconstitution where the guidance counselor still there,

JE: There were guidance counselors, uh, about 57 teachers left, about 25 were not rehired, and about another 27 or 30 of us left. So, it really kind of destroyed the whole family. It took the time to recover.

BV: And then during the time that you were there, the enrollment, as you've mentioned, classes were crowded. It was so many kids there. And while you were there, just continued to decline?

10:21

JE: No. Well, they built the New Englewood so that kind of took the pressure, some of the pressure off us. But there were still kids, when I left, there were still kids in the old building. There was still a nice population. What's happened over the last 14 years is you got all these charter schools, so a lot of kids are not going to the—and the regular public school got such a bad reputation. So, nobody wants to send their kids there, they want to send them to the specialty schools, but there's only so much space there. So, then they say, I'm not sending my kid to Robeson. So, they send them to the charter school. And then Black people over at least 170,000 to 200,000 Black people have moved

out of Chicago. When they tore down all those projects. I mean people just leaving. So, we've lost a lot of people in the last ten years, and um, Englewood, it's lost over half of their population since the 50s. They've lost thousands of people out of Englewood. So that's another problem. We just losing them out of Chicago, and then the ramifications of losing people out of Englewood.

11:44

BV: One of the statistics that CPS quoted at one of the community meetings I attended is that 92 percent of the high school age children who live in Englewood, they go to schools outside of the district.

JE: Right. Because they don't—Englewood schools have a bad reputation and all the reconstitution. So, people, like I said, I'm not sending my kid to Robeson, I'm not sending my kid to Englewood. So they send them anywhere, but there. So that ends up killing the neighborhood schools, which has happened to all the—Hirsch. They're closing it this year. They had about a hundred and some kids. Wendell Phillips, that dropped to about 250 kids. That's the neighborhood school where I grew up. They brought it back up to 650.

BV: Is that because of the football?

12:36

JE: Because of the football, they've gone to 650. But when my sister went to Wendell Phillips, she had to go and get out at 4:00 o'clock it was so crowded. [Laughs]

BV: So she started late.

JE: Yes, yes, the late start her freshman year. Plus they had a branch over by, uh, Wentworth and 39th. There was a branch, I forgot the name of it.

BV: Abbott Dawson skill center?

JE: It was Abbott branch. Abbott grammar school over there. Yeah.

13:15

BV: So, what you knew about Robeson when you were there, talk a little bit more about the students. You mentioned that there was an accelerated program, honors program, but tell me a little bit more about the students, the culture. What were they involved in? Because, most recently, I'm hearing a lot about the gangs. I'm hearing a lot about the gangs and the gang fights inside of the school where the parents would come in and fight with the kids. I'm hearing about the drug trade, but I'm not really hearing about the students themselves.

JE: The funny part is that as a teacher and stuff, you probably didn't know all of that stuff—like the drug trade—you don't even be aware of the drug trade. Well, there would be fights, but it wasn't like every day. Mr. Bonner was the assistant principal. He knew how to keep the lid. He knew all the old gang members, he could call them up and quash stuff in a minute. But, well, you're going to have your urban problems. So, you did have an attendance problem. So, we did have a dropout rate with freshman to juniors. I forgot what the dropout rate was because the kids, a lot of them, were low achievers, so they'd get frustrated and just not want to deal with it. And um, the kids were basically good kids. They were good kids. You just had to work with him, you know, and show that you had their interests and that I want you to come to class and I want you to do your work. And you would give them their work and they would do it and they, you know, they will do the best they can. And you just had to really work hard. And just let them know that they were valuable and valued, and that they could become something, that it wasn't like the world was going end tomorrow. And so I was able to do that. I always had real good attendance. I always had—the kids would come to class.

15:38

BV: Were there a lot of kids that had IEPs?

JE: Near the end, when they reconstituted, as we started getting 75 percent of kids below the 25th percentile. But that never bothered me, that a student was special ed, because when I first came to Robeson, one of my best math students was, he was special ed. Even if he special ed, I can teach you stuff, so I will just, I'd probably have to work with them a little closer and maybe explain things a little better. But I didn't feel that you couldn't learn. I mean IEP, IEP, but you're gonna come to class and if you just learn one thing that day, then you learned that and you can't give up. I didn't believe in that.

16:34

BV: So, when the schools can reconstitute, prior to that were there special ed classes at Robeson and those folks get mainstreamed with everybody?

JE: Well what happened at Robeson, we had a principal that was really ahead of her time, so that was when they was first beginning to main street the kids into the regular classes and bringing in a co teacher. So, she went to that model and trained us and had us work with special ed teachers. So, that was a good model because it didn't isolate the kids. So, that gave me a chance to do the lesson and then work with the kids and then they could work one on one with their kids and I can still come there and work with them with the kids. So, that was the model they can institute before we were reconstitute. So, we had a large number of special ed teachers. Only some kids had to still be self-contained, but they tried to integrate the kids in as best possible.

BV: How many principals did you work with?

17:42

JE: At Robeson? Two.

BV: Was one Ms. Collins?

JE: No, I didn't work with her. I worked with Dr. Simmons, and then when she went downtown, Mr. Breashears became the principal.

BV: Are you still in touch with either of them?

JE: Oh yeah. I just saw her at our monthly lunch, Dr. Simmons. Yeah. Yeah. And Mr. Breashears passed. Yep.

18:08

BV: So, there's, I heard, and this may not have been when you were there, but I heard that at some point there was a very high pregnancy rate amongst the young ladies at the school.

JE: That was a high pregnancy rate across Chicago in the inner city schools with the young ladies. I think what they usually try to attest it to maybe there's, a lot of times there's no father figure. Also, belonging. And then, if you don't have goals like four or five years, then you are living in the now. So, if you're thinking that you're not going to go to college in four year, so then you don't have to postpone a lot. So, a lot of middle class people learn how to postpone gratification that they know they got all these goals. So, the other kids, if they don't have those kinds of goals, so they going to do what they're going to do. Something that they did. In fact, one year the Valedictorian girl got pregnant.

19:22

BV: So, besides people like in the early seventies when you, when you started teaching there, tell me about some of the students that you taught later on that were excelling.

JE: Ok. One of my students, Jerry. He was a really good math student, and he wanted to be an engineer. Now, I had gone to Illinois to be engineered, but I wasn't successful. So, he wanted to go Illinois to be an engineer. So, I was so excited. So, he applied. He got accepted. So, my daughter's junior year I had her go to the engineering program in Illinois, and he was her head counselor.

BV: Really?

20:13

JE: Yeah. He graduated and he's now an engineer. I haven't talked to him in awhile, but I was so excited about that. Yeah.

BV: You have any other success stories?

JE: Oh yeah. Isaac Carter, even though he wasn't in my class. He's, you know, very successful. Went to Princeton. I had another student, he went to Brown and my daughter was thinking about going to Brown, so I had he—I let her talk to Isaac and uh, and I forget his name, I forget his name, but he went to Brown. And he was so smart. One time, he messed up on a test. I called him up. I said, I am so disappointed in you, you know you can do this test. Now, I want you to go home and I'm gonna give a makeup test and you—I want you to go home and study. So, he got 100 on the make up test. [Laughs] Oh yeah. Oh God. One young lady, we still hang around with, Jackie Jones, she's a successful remodeling. She's done work for me here for the condo. And her sister's a teachers. So, she's doing real well, that rides a motorcycle. Calvin Holiday, he's done well. There's a lot of—what's her name, that played basketball.

BV: Alfredrick.

21:45

JE: Alfredrick Hughes. He's doing well. A young lady, Lisa, went to U of I in accounting. She's a CPA, she's doing super well. So, we've had a lot of kids that have done well. And some of my kids, even in the late eighties, had gone to college, graduated. One of them came up—he was going to Western [Illinois University], he was on my cross-country team—ran track for Western, Dennis Russell. Came up the school to see everybody and got recruited to go to the army. I was so mad I could have killed him. But he ended up being in the army and had successful careers. Retired now and lives in Oklahoma City. So, I had a cross country team. A lot of them did go to college and graduated. Kwasi (?), Sam. One of them went to Illinois State. Dennis Russell. He went to Western. Ended up getting the army career. I can't. Who else? I can't think of it, but they a lot of them went to college and did well. Yeah. The guy from Western who come and recruit them. Yeah.

23:00

BV: So let's shift gears and talk about the new Robeson.

JE: Okay, okay.

BV: I want to hear you share with me your thoughts on is this a good thing or bad thing and the next thing that we can move forward to is what should they be doing in the new school that they weren't able to do in the old school?

JE: The main thing for the school to be a success is that the parents and the community support the school and want the school. If not, it'd be a whole bunch of kids from other neighborhoods at the school. Because kids can go to any school they want to now. So, that's going to be a main theme to try to attract the neighborhood kids. They gonna have to put in some really good programs. They really should have a real good STEM program and then that'll attract a lot of students. If they could put in IB—International Baccalaureate—or a very strong academic program in there also. It's going

to be such a big school have such a lot of money. Then they could also put in—like they did at Westinghouse—a career development part to the school. I don't know. Have you heard anything about the programs they're going to put there so far.

24:29

BV: I heard STEM and tech-focused.

JE: Okay, okay. Well that can be good, but they still need a strong academic and a strong, maybe at least a career component maybe around the STEM program. So, you can have a choice. Because that's what they do at Westinghouse. You can either be in Westinghouse College Prep or you can be, they got a career component for other kids. So, maybe you could even do a conglomerate of both of those where kids could take academic and a tech career program.

25:16

BV: So, one of the things that I did hear is that they are going to be partnering with Kennedy-King so that some of the students can take college courses while they're in high school. Probably the older students of course, the juniors and seniors. They are moving in that direction.

JE: Right. That'd be a, that'd be good. We did that. We had a Robeson outpost and some of the kids, we were in Kennedy-King. It was like an alternative school, but it was still a high school within Robeson. And kids with different kinds of problems or whatever came up there. So, they were able to take college classes at Kennedy-King. So, a lot of schools have that kind of a program already, so that would be really positive. Yeah, that would be really positive.

BV: So.

26:05

JE: And I used to work at Kennedy King. I used to walk, drive right up under the viaduct and I taught adult ed at Kennedy-King for 12 years. Computer science.

BV: Good money.

JE: Yeah. I liked it.

BV: Two pensions. [Laughs]

JE: Well, they wouldn't let us get a pension.

BV: Really?

JE: Right. Because you couldn't be in two state-funded school programs. So the money I put in, they just gave it back to me as a lump sum. Yeah, yeah.

BV: So as you know, Englewood is being gentrified more and more as we speak, as you know, with the Starbucks and the Whole Foods.

JE: I know.

BV: I'm not sure who it's for anymore. Right.

26:50

JE: In fact, my kid's mom, a guy just asked her did he know about, does she know about any property in Englewood. I'm a realtor. And so, she said, she told me about what he asked because as you said they're beginning to do gentrification. It's easy to get downtown in 15 or 20 minutes. More, four hours or three hours driving to those suburbs.

BV: I totally agree. So, there are people who think that the new school is not for the community that currently exists there, that they're building the new school for what they anticipate being a new group of people who can live, who will live in Englewood.

JE: No, I, I don't think the board has that kind of conspiracy theory, that they don't want the school for the community. I don't believe that. I believe that they do want, they, I think Rahm Emanuel really likes Englewood for some reason, so he's been trying to think of all these ways to make it better and this is probably some kind of way he's got his hands into getting this school over there, which can be a real good plus and all the Black people don't have to run out the community.

BV: Well, if they can afford the tax hikes.

28:20

JE: Well, that's true. That's true. But, we have to learn how to fight for what we got and not get. That's why I'm not leaving right here. I'm not going anywhere. And I got white neighbors too, other families over there. We had a family here. Their family got too big, so they moved to Oak Lawn. And we had an integrated couple on the third floor. They had to move to Atlanta. They got a job at Emory College. But, this neighborhood has been gentrified, but it's still majority—well, it's still a lot of us around here. [Laughs] So, there's... there's Black people that can afford to live and we'd prefer living in the city. So, there's a market for Black people that can come into a community and support it and not run, we don't run each other out, you know, we have to learn how to live together. So, that's how that goes. And we don't have to give a school up to no white people, we don't. I mean that's our school. So. No, no I don't, I'm not. If it happens, I'm going to be really upset and I hope that's not the plan. That would be very underhanded.

BV: Any other comments about Robeson. The past, the present, and the future?

30:00

JE: Well, I want to say that I really love my 18 years working at Robeson. Even though my son's friends told me not to go there. Thought the kids were really bad. But, I love those kids and I enjoyed working there. I love the faculty. We still meet every month and have lunch and about at least 30 to 31 of us show up, and the principal, she shows up, and we're still a tight-knit group of people, and we loved working there, we loved working with the kids. And, I always will have real good memories of Robeson even though I had to leave.

BV: Where do you meet at the school?

30:53

JE: No, at lunch at different—I think I've been at every restaurant in the city, in the metro area. We were just in Highland, Indiana at Theo's Steakhouse and Fish. It was really good. That was my von Steuben group. Where were we? Robeson? We were at a barbecue place out South West.

BV: Not Chuck's, was it?

JE: I can't remember. There's so many restaurants.

BV: Okay. That's cool. You think any other faculty members would be interested in talking with us?

JE: Yeah, I know I can recruit Edris Adams. She's the one who organizes all of our. You might want to come, if you can, come to a luncheon.

BV: When is the next one?

JE: It's every third Wednesday of the month.

BV: So, the third Wednesday in May?

JE: Yes.

BV: So, when would be me, because I'm going to be out of town, but there's a team of four of us working on this project.

JE: Well, they could come in and ask to have someone volunteer.