

Interview with David Harris

Listokin: So we have sent a short list of just general topic areas.

Harris: Did you?

Berkhout: Yeah, it was in the e-mail I sent.

Harris: Oh, okay.

Listokin: It's not like there is a Q&A and you know, it's pretty straightforward, it's who was involved and what were some of the motivations and what happened.

Harris: Uh hum.

Listokin: So first of all, let me thank you for coming.

Harris: Okay.

Listokin: I think this is an important project. We often don't have an opportunity to look back on that, so I think we hope to be interviewing twenty or twenty-five people who were connected with the redevelopment of the city. And as I mentioned, this will all go into the Rutgers archives, so it will be both a transcript and the audio and the visual in the archive, but we hope to do something more with it.

What we're finding, it's good to know whom we're talking to and how they got connected into New Brunswick. So if I could just start with that, could you give us a little background on yourself and how again your connection is to New Brunswick?

Harris: Well coming out of the activism of the '60's, I was living in South River and like all of the towns around the hub city, the center of African American culture was New Brunswick. It was a place where we could get our hair cut in a real barber shop and not someone's kitchen.

Berkhout: (Laughter)

Harris: The women found beauty salons and there were great Black churches.

And you know, places to shop and soul food restaurants and bars and all.

Listokin: And this was roughly about when, when you were living in South River?

Harris: Well this is early '60's, '60 and '61 and I was a part-time Rutgers student.

You could pick any period around there because it took me about twenty-two years to graduate.

Berkhout: Hum.

Harris: (Laughter) So but the point is, I did.

Listokin: And just for the record, in which program?

Harris: Political science, with Professor Baker and that crowd, there were some really good people. Well anyway, the Anti-Poverty Program as we moved down in the '60's, Lyndon Johnson and the Great Society, the Office of Economic Opportunity and the designation of Middlesex County as a grantee, again added to some of the excitement, community organization, neighborhood service centers. So after working for DuPont in Parlin for five years, I left in 1965 to come over here to be the Director of Citizenship Education under the Anti-Poverty Program. The name of it was the Middlesex County Economic Opportunities Corporation.

So that gave me a direct involvement, voter registration, citizenship education and all of the lawbreaking, partisan voter registration. But in any event, that's. . .

Listokin: And again, you became the head of the agency?

Harris: Head of just that one department.

Berkhout: In '65?

Harris: '65, citizenship education, voter registration, citizenship education and you know, and a neighborhood service center was opened on Nelson Street. And so there were a lot of great levels of activism going on in the city, the civil rights movement, the Rutgers

students were very, very involved. The war. . .

Listokin: And what were your impressions of New Brunswick at that time, talking the mid '60's.

Harris: Well, New Brunswick, again I have to go back to what I said earlier, it was the center of African American culture in the region. So, like our family on our street, we were the only Black family on the street in South River. Well, we spoke some Polish, some Hungarian and some Italian. It was insufficient to – even though my grandfather's house was the first one on the street, we still had like the League of Nations there, and our earliest lessons in terms of getting along with people of a variety of backgrounds. We went to school together, you know we played ball and we were good friends.

Listokin: Actually just so we can continue the chronology, maybe you can just take us in an overview fashion after becoming head of [citizenship education for] the Anti-Poverty Office, maybe you can just take us forward and then we'll go back.

Harris: There were many great issues and they involved starting with the New Brunswick Housing Authority, which we'll recall now about a thousand people living on about an acre of land in four buildings, poorly maintained, we argued, designed for failure.

Listokin: This was Brunswick Homes or . . . ?

Harris: Brunswick Homes, Memorial Homes.

Listokin: Yes, Memorial Homes.

Harris: Now it was a very important piece of real estate and some of us argued that that was just an interim step for – you know, you remember the urban renewal process was in full swing so they cleared that area, which were mostly homeowners, African Americans, Whites and some Puerto Ricans because the other groups had not begun to come. The

Dominicans weren't here at the time, Mexicanos and Puerto Ricans. In that area were African American homeowners right on what they called [. . .], Memorial Parkway, in those homes. We saw that.

Listokin: Now this was the neighborhood that was then demolished to put up Memorial Homes?

Harris: This was the area that was demolished to put up Memorial Homes.

Listokin: Okay.

Harris: It was sold as better housing, a better situation, slum clearance.

Listokin: And I remember the *Home News* on its editorial page had what their forum was, what they believed and one of the things was "slum clearance," urban renewal. And you know the cliché had come up already then that urban renewal was Negro renewal.

Listokin: Yes.

Berkhout: Uh hum.

Harris: And this was a very critical set of decisions for the City of New Brunswick and we could see the sketch of a plan emerging to take back that very potentially valuable land along Route 18.

Listokin: Uh hum.

Harris: So over the years, [. . .]the Housing Authority [built Memorial Homes], it could have been '59 or '60 or whatever, but they had a density that was greater than Central Harlem. So you could see that there was something there in terms of the built-in failure. I don't want to align myself with the people who say that 9-11 didn't take place.

Berkhout: Right.

Harris: But locally, I think it's born out with the history that this was the earliest

move to so-called “revitalize” New Brunswick, that was a key stroke. And you cannot have those four buildings and over 1,000 people, eight floors with one elevator in each building. So when the elevator was down, you had to lug it up to the seventh floor. There were no laundry facilities, people had to go up to the corner where the Chinese had a combination cleaners/laundry. You had to find places, get cabs and so the fact that those amenities were not built in, to me and others, was a sign that this was a temporary, a transitional stroke.

Berkhout: Uh hum.

Harris: There were no bathrooms on the ground level. So if the kids are out playing and you’re on the seventh floor, your turn to bat comes and you run, the elevator door closes and boom, that’s where you do it and run back out and hope you didn’t miss your turn. So they blamed the people for all of these things and said, “Oh. . .” I have a very bad feeling when I hear that because we still hear it today. Those are some of the finest people, they were middle-class African Americans, upwardly striving and many of them had very good social work/teacher type jobs. The initial, if someone could get the initial residence in Memorial Homes, the best the African American community could offer, essentially. And when I say African American, there were a minority of Puerto Ricans also there. So I don’t need to. . .

So you looked at that corridor, which was a very important corridor close in to the central business district. People making complaints about the crime rate and having so many. . . See over the years, the middle class moved out of there and the tenancy was not something that they really were concerned about. There were political connections or whatever to get into the homes. The supervision and the security and soon it developed a reputation where, if New Brunswick police were assigned there, they were on punishment duty. Nobody wanted to work at “The Homes,” and so it developed a real stigma.

So looking at that corridor, you know you look at it and you say, “Hey, that was the place it began and – for good and bad – you know, obviously something had to be done. But what has been missing from the beginning of time to the present day is an approach that includes inter-racial teamwork, an approach that is cross-cultural that is integrated economically. That vision was never presented by the folks who had the authority to act. Their dreams could come true, we see what their dream, the result of the dream is. We see that result, but the consequences that have negatively impacted the community are not as clearly seen or understood by someone who comes in from Highland Park or East Brunswick to go to a lovely State Theater, have a great meal at some of these great restaurants.

Listokin: And actually if I could fast-forward.

Harris: Go ahead.

Listokin: Because ultimately the Memorial Homes reaches such a point of disinvestment . . .

Harris: Yes, absolutely.

Listokin: That it’s knocked down under a HUD Hope VI and this was true in other.

Harris: Not as bad as what I go through, but I’ve got it.

Listokin: So the towers went down and there were certain, I guess, townhouse-style apartments are built and then people were relocated, just to get your perspective on the post Memorial Homes?

Harris: Don’t forget the party that I can just roughly call “The establishment” had on top of the Hyatt Hotel on the day that Memorial Homes was imploded.

Berkhout: You’re kidding?

Harris: They had a full-blown party.

Berkhout: For that purpose, to watch it?

Harris: For that purpose, absolutely, to watch the homes go under. So if we didn't understand before, it was clearly communicated.

Listokin: Repeated again.

Harris: They did build some additional housing on that site and it essentially answered the question that we raised before. If people had these little simple walk-ups, community condominiums or whatever, there would be no need to pee in the elevator. The structure dictated the terms of the living conditions to the tenants, and I don't care how great you are.

I was tutoring and I'll remember and I'll never forget this. Franklin Torres was one of the brightest kids around and I, when I would drive him back from the library or some school activity, he knew that I didn't want to go up the elevator with him. And as we returned, I said "Are you okay" – this is at building four – "Are you okay, Franklin?" He said, "Oh yeah, my mother, you see her up there?" And they had this chain link fence-type grid on one side, which is another message, another message. His mother would be there. And I'd get out of the car and "Here comes Franklin." But Franklin knew, this guy is afraid to go up the stairs with him. Not the going up, but the coming back. So. . .

Listokin: So if I can. . . Going back, so you mentioned clearly this had a terrible effect on the immediate neighborhood when it was build and then ultimately deteriorated into an abject slum, in part, because it was designed that way.

Harris: Yeah, it was a horrible structure.

Listokin: And then you said, "Well there were some glimmerings," they wanted to redevelop along Route 18, which got your antenna up. But maybe now let's think about, because

it happened not that much later with the city now, J&J becomes involved and they want to redevelop and there is an American Cities plan.

Harris: Yeah.

Listokin: So if I can just get your perspectives on the post Memorial Home within the city's efforts of redevelopment and your perspective on that, and that.

Harris: Well, a planning process, it's like my opinion about the New Brunswick High School. The building has to emerge from the curriculum. The building has to emerge; the structure has to emerge from the needs of the students and our philosophy as to what we plan to do and how this will impact our lives. You don't build a building and then say, "Hey kids, guess what? This is the fanciest high school in New Jersey, get in there and get going." It doesn't work that way.

I would quarrel for a second with you, because you seem to enter, bring J&J into the picture with the American Cities study. The only long-term memory in this town is Johnson and Johnson, from 1888 forward, the only long-term memory. And I think it's had a tremendous positive impact, just that name, because it's one of the most respected brands in American business history.

Listokin: Yes.

Harris: Sadly, unfortunately, the leadership at that time had insufficient grounding, insufficient awareness, insufficient commitment to democratic principles when they turned their face to the community in a democratic society. So the most powerful, resourceful, long-term activist was Johnson and Johnson. They only came out from their sub-rosa existence after the heavy, undemocratic blows were struck. Down with Memorial Homes, the campaign to, in a sense, "assault" those people who live there, who worked hard, produced many college

graduates, that was just an ongoing drug-infested public – it was a regular tagline. They were there, they came out, you're right with American Cities Corporation and you know established New Brunswick Tomorrow and Devco. "Here's what we're going to do now."

The Hyatt Hotel, that was probably the first proposal, that old circle down there and the Route 18 extension. Looking at the Route 18 extension right now, I'm not talking about the first, who would quarrel with that? One of my favorite departments in the state government is the Department of Transportation. The job they did coming through New Brunswick from the junction of Route 1 all the way through to 287 was wonderful, an extraordinary piece of work, enhancing the aesthetics and everything, the flow of traffic.

Listokin: You're talking about the current . . . ?

Harris: The current, not the first Route 18 extension.

Listokin: So maybe we could go back to, first Route 18 and . . .

Harris: Yeah. We suffered all along, it's hard because my relationship in view of Johnson and Johnson is so strong on one side as a business, you will never go wrong if you pattern your business after Johnson & Johnson, never go wrong. But their view, their face to the community where they count their money, lacks the sensitive, creative leadership. Their giving is tremendous, but it's subtle in nuance. And in a town like this, you've got to be out. If you walk around and you try to talk some B.S. to these kids who are 12 and 13, they'll call you out.

Now here, I couldn't count my money in a place like this and look down the street at Eric B. Chandler and see the women and children in line, waiting for an appointment for well-baby services, having waited two or three months, not where I count my money. I'm never going to let that happen. You can be subtle in nuance in terms of your giving to support that, that's why. But the job has to get done.

Listokin: Now I mention this respectfully, you know, it's been I guess some other individuals involved, you know speak about in fact how Johnson & Johnson and Devco reached out to the community with meetings and with having people on the board and . . .

Harris: I was on the Devco board for a period of time.

Listokin: And in fact, you had a Devco which was doing the physical development and then you had New Brunswick Tomorrow, which was looking at some of the social and so your perspective on that? That's one take of . . . ?

Harris: Well, they knew what they wanted to do, as the kids say from Jump Street, "They knew where they wanted to go." Now making it . . .

Listokin: Which was a physical redevelopment.

Harris: Oh, absolutely and to diminish the African American presence and the presence of poor people in the central business district. You don't move the welfare office out to How Lane, you don't get rid of the YMCA, the YWCA, okay you put a bank and a theater. You don't do that and argue that we had community people at the table. As if to say that they agreed with that. You could do those things and at some level, it turns out that those were good decisions but there was no quid pro quo. We'll take that swimming pool from the Y, both pools, the YMCA which is George Street Playhouse right now, and the YWCA, which was a core of women's activism. That board, those women were strong in their support on behalf of poor children. So you don't take down two pools in the name of "it makes more sense," and it did make more sense, in the end. Grudgingly, I yield that point because it made places that are the arts, the business more of a comprehensive area. It made sense not to put a swimming pool for poor kids right in the middle of that.

Listokin: And what should have happened would have been . . . ? But then you keep

these institutions and facilities and you make sure it's established elsewhere.

Harris: That they will be available elsewhere in the community.

Listokin: And it was not.

Harris: It did not happen.

Berkhout: So no, there is no YMCA or YWCA location anymore for anybody?

Harris: No. You cannot do that and continue to argue that New Brunswick

Tomorrow is taking care of the community, as John Heldrich used to say, "the software" and that Devco is doing the "hardware." These issues are not complicated. If we just roll back in the *Home News* and *Star Ledger* and look at the recent comments of Devco announcing the progress of the construction of the new high school, in what community could we live in, could you go to East Brunswick, and the construction official is going to tell the public about the progress of the school? That's the board of education, superintendent. "Well we have John Jones here from ABC Construction," but that will be at a board of education meeting. And their feet would be held to the fire. Why is there no swimming pool at the most expensive high school in the history of the state? Why don't these children have a swimming pool?

Why is there no in-school health care center? I don't mean an area, a glorified "go to the nurse" station.

Berkhout: You mean like what Gloria Bonilla-Santiago developed down in Camden, having services as part of the school building?

Harris: Absolutely. There are better examples in Newark where they have complete, federally qualified health centers in the elementary and the high schools. So the kids who have some kind of lesion, some kind of discharge could go talk to a health care professional and get information to deal with it.

So the long road from Memorial Homes to what we have now, one of the most spectacular sites driving, I guess that is South on George Street, or coming up New Street and you come face to face with the Heldrich Hotel. It will knock you down. It will knock you over when you lack the information as to what it cost us in a moral sense to get to that place.

Remember the old Roger Smith Hotel?

Berkhout: Right.

Harris: The old welfare hotel.

Listokin: Was that the one across the street?

Harris: That's it right there, the same ground as Heldrich.

Berkhout: It was a Days Inn at one time.

Listokin: Can you talk a little, which was replaced by a multi-use hotel office condo residence.

Harris: The owner struggled in the – he had to become a welfare hotel because he had no money to do anything. That's why these hotels and motels on the roads close to the city, you see a million cars there during the day. It's not because they have that much business, they are welfare hotels. Now again, I think Chris – I think was the name of the gentleman who owned it, it kind of runs past me – but he was bombarded with the same public relations package Memorial Homes faced, openly called a “welfare hotel.”

Listokin: What might have been an alternative use of the block?

Harris: Just like it's being used right now, not an alternative, a real hotel. If they had embraced him and brought him in and said, “Listen, under these terms and conditions, we'll help you do this. Now are you financially set to take a percentage of this ownership? Fine, we want to leave you whole. Take a look at this proposal that we have.”

Listokin: So the alternative would have been to bring forth the existing owner into the new . . .

Harris: Treat him as family, bring him in. And then you can say, you could say reasonably, accurately, morally that we weren't there to displace and run these people out. I'll remember, probably forever, sadly, they had – you brought up Antone Nelessen, I remember a meeting – it could have been. . . where was that meeting? It was somewhere close to J&J, it could have been wherever. But they were talking about the initial proposal for the Hyatt Hotel and Antone with his brilliant, sensitive self, proposed an alternative.

Berkhout: Right.

Harris: To the J&J proposal.

Listokin: Now this is Tony Nelessen?

Berkhout: Yes.

Listokin: Yes.

Harris: Dick Sellars was in charge of J&J, a big, handsome guy. He knew the business. He was tough and he knew what had to be done for that great company. When he stepped across the street to be involved in the community, he was a fish out of water. Here's Nelessen getting up to propose the alternative after Dick Sellars and his crew made their presentation. And obviously the crowd was for Nelessen, and Dick Sellars said something that I could actually see him saying this right now, it hurt so bad. Dick Sellars said, "That's a great plan," to Nelessen. "But the only plan I have money for is this one."

Berkhout: Hum.

Harris: There was your community involvement. Yes, Nelessen did succeed in knocking the scale of the hotel down and some of the other amenities, but I looked in his face

and I could have cried with him. The way this brilliant scholar was abused that night by the people who claimed to be acting in our behalf, I wanted to cry, too.

Berkhout: Now David, you served on a Devco board, Roy Epps was on NBT?

Harris: Yes.

Berkhout: I don't know if he was ever on Devco. And obviously, I assume, you must have raised some of these issues at board meetings? I'm just wondering, well, if you did, and what kind of responses you would get?

Harris: I didn't stay there long. It was clear that the meetings were really essentially designed to get the community input on what they had already, essentially planned. And when George – is it George? yeah, Zoffinger came out in the paper, again it's back to this high school thing, the way he talked about it. I had a public fight with him over that and I did resign from Devco.

Berkhout: I see.

Harris: But, he knew better than I did what direction the high school was going in. And I said how could these people be telling us? And I'm not even going to say they should have to live here, because I don't want to be that provincial to say, "Zoffinger doesn't live here." No, let's deal with his ideas. What the blank are you telling New Brunswick about a high school for? Have you usurped the authority of the Board of Ed, the mayor and the others? Sure, you're going to build it.

Listokin: Actually back a little on the high school, besides you mentioned some of the limitations of not having full-fledged health facilities. Do you think it should have been placed elsewhere, you know what might have been an alternative?

Harris: Oh you mean with the high school?

Berkhout: The building, the new building.

Listokin: With the new high school being built, what would have been a more community input . . .

Harris: See we're not in government and they built it on a site that needed to be cleaned up in terms of the environmental protection agency. Why did they do that? If that site could be approved, the state would have to pay for the cleanup. So at some level, the decision had nothing to do with education.

Listokin: Alright, it was just. . .

Harris: It's . . .

Listokin: Fortuitous, financial. . .

Harris: Yeah, this is millions of bucks and let's clean up this site.

Listokin: Okay.

Harris: Where do you put a high school? First of all, I just don't believe in building any school for more than 500 kids, okay. So now they're talking thousands of kids. So for me, I'm going to have the schools spread around, smaller scale density so that teachers and principals can know every kid.

Listokin: I guess it's carrying forth the Memorial Homes, just large scale, high density.

The Berkhout: Uh hum.

Harris: This is just – and I had my tour again, that's what my grandmother used to say. "June, don't cry." She'd always say "You're a crybaby." I said, "its okay, mom." I wanted to cry when I got back to my car, to see that expenditure and to be in a place that was so cold. There was no one else there but the construction people, Jean and the construction

manager. They gave me a good, they knew what my feelings were, so they took me around to be impressed and I was impressed at what we could do. But what. . .

Listokin: If I could, your perspective on Hiram Market and could it have been preserved? I mean your thoughts on looking back?

Harris: You know, from time to time, because I usually don't get out of the daycare until 7:00 or 7:30. And one of the things that I like to do is to go, I used to go walking, but I just get in the car and just drive through there. Because it's so quiet, it reminds you of some of the areas in the East and West Village and other very quiet places in New York. I kind of love what they did with Hiram Market.

Now because it's just so soft, it's so comforting, it has such a good feel to it. You know, we're not developing something that says, "Hey, look at me." And I get a feeling that the people who live there kind of enjoy it. They know each other and the several times I have been there and invited for various things, they know their neighbors. So as to the history of Hiram Market, I – you know, we needed to pay probably a little more attention to how important that was in terms of the city's economic development. But I would say that we got a pretty good result, given the forces that were against something more historic, the battle that the Frog and the Peach had to fight -- one of the things that sets the tone there is that beautiful, understated elegant restaurant. Where you see people from Connecticut license, New York chauffeurs, to a place that's not saying "Hey, look at me," except in the kitchen, except in the service, except in the cleanliness and the attention to detail at the bar. They were fought tooth and nail by city leaders. They had some prior information and they picked their spot to put their restaurant, a glorious accomplishment.

Berkhout: Now did you, were you involved much with John Lynch while he was. . ?

Harris: Yes, John Lynch and I have had a long history. I ran against him a couple of times.

Berkhout: Ah.

Harris: We developed a level of respect for each other, while he was incarcerated, we would correspond. And I sent him a subscription to *Atlantic Monthly* magazine; I said “John, these are some of the magazines you should have been reading all along.” (Laughter) And a whole set of other things to kind of let him know that, you know nobody is all one thing.

Berkhout: Uh hum.

Harris: You were there, you made contributions, and we might have fought like cats and dogs, but we’re not going to forget you or kick you while you are down. We fought and John Lynch was – the thing I loved about this is he had a temper. And if you said something in a public forum, you could expect to have a message in the office or a letter that he would have sent over by a courier; he would send you a letter. And I would read the letters and I would – I wouldn’t copy them, I would take a post it, put it on there and send it back to him in the mail and say, “John, if you really want me to have this, send it back.” I don’t have any letters, he never sent any back.

But I talked to him; he called me after he – he’s in a half-way house now and has weekends off.

Berkhout: Right, we met. We actually interviewed him a couple of weeks ago.

Harris: Oh did you, okay. A hell of a battler, I remember him playing either shortstop or second base, a tough Irish kid. He would fight you to the end and, you know, he was a tremendous leader. It’s too bad, again, and my criticism there is the same as my criticism of the J&J leaders before Burke, you’ve got to divide that.

Listokin: Talk a little about that, please.

Harris: Burke was the transition person at J&J, the reason that you see now that they are one of the top three in terms of environment, women, and community involvement, that's Burke. That comes from Burke. Once Burke got in and they looked around and he said. . .

Listokin: And for the record. . . ?

Harris: Jim Burke.

Listokin: Jim Burke came in roughly when?

Harris: That's a good point.

Berkhout: The early '80's or late '70's?

Harris: Maybe.

Berkhout: He is the one that dealt with the Tylenol issue.

Harris: With the Tylenol.

Berkhout: Early on in his. . .

Harris: I don't mean the crime, but the way he handled it, it was just part of his nature. He turned and developed the Burke Scholars. He listened – you know, Heldrich, and the rest of them, but they wanted to improve New Brunswick High School, and again, they had no idea and they didn't listen. But in any event, Burke looked at the community with a different eye and a different level of sophistication, education, and there was a generational change.

Burke looked around and saw how few African Americans were involved there and how few other minorities, Jews and others. And he called them in one day, his troops, and he said "Guess what? We're going to be number one in this area." And he brought people in -- Hal Simms, the former head of the Urban League after Whitney Young died, Hal Simms came in. His job was to scour American and the world to bring in minority folks. And they did it and

received all kinds of awards.

Berkhout: Hum.

Harris: hey had a lot of things to overcome, but Burke just said “Hey look, no vas.”

Listokin: Your perspective on Rutgers in all of this with respect to the re-development?

Harris: I don’t think Rutgers was ever recognized or treated the way it should have been, because Rutgers is our central asset. Because the economic downturn hit us, New Brunswick, but when you have a university of the level of Rutgers in your midst, those jobs will continue for the local folks. It’s like the way of the hospital. There are jobs for the indigenous population and I don’t think Rutgers. . .

I go after Lynch on this one because they wanted to – Oh, what is the word – when you take something and break it up, cannibalize Rutgers. McGreevey -- break it up and do this and that. Rutgers is the reason anybody really talks about New Brunswick. Go to the landlords in terms of the place the apartments, the millions that come in from rents alone, all across New Brunswick. And the reason they move all across New Brunswick is that they can’t have cars if they live on campus.

Berkhout: Right.

Harris: If you’re living off campus, these kids want their cars. So Rutgers, remember the big fight moving the bookstore to where it was?

Berkhout: Yeah.

Harris: Rutgers was just dealt with like a step-child and I think it’s just, again, those old leaders, anti-intellectual folks still going back to the days of Professor Nelessen and the

others in that group who argued the way that they did against the Vietnam War and a whole host of other things – turned out to be right. We didn't have a good match. If we had those forward-thinking leaders at J&J, and someone of Mason Gross' character, of his stature, they could sit down and really and it would be Mason Gross who would say, "Well, what are we going to do about the, you know, the folks who live here? And someone on the other end would have been there to listen. They are just – they have just begun to scratch the surface as to what Rutgers has to give to this community.

Listokin: But do you think New Brunswick was much on Rutgers' radar? I mean I hear what you are saying, Rutgers is a key economic. . . ?

Harris: That's a very good point. That is a very good point. Not until McCormick, sadly, inexplicably. Fran Lawrence was not and prior to that.

Listokin: And Bloustein . . . ?

Harris: And Ed, he was premature, it was just – No, still that kind of public ivy attitude, still that kind of attitude.

Listokin: Of what, there but not there when . . . ?

Harris: You know, let the folks kind of run around and do the things they want to do. We're here for the Nobel Prize.

Listokin: Okay, so not being engaged with the city?

Harris: A tremendous error through the whole process, tremendous error. Now it's just begun to kind of develop. Alvin Rockoff, you should have seen the battle that we had. Anyway, I was on the Board of Governors for a while and I was also Chair of the Board of Trustees for a couple of terms. And it's just amazing the two perspectives of the city and I think now that the economic crunch has hit the way it has, a lot of kids in New Jersey are staying home

to go here, which means the attention of their parents is also here.

Rockoff residential hall, right here, look at that. You can't be any deeper into the city than that. And again, the opportunity for more Rutgers, not just physical but emotional presence, because it follows if our kids are going to be down on George Street, across from Davidson Liquor, we're going to make sure that we know what's happening on George Street. That whole tract of land across from Rockoff, George Street to New, up to Tabernacle Baptist Church to Nelson Street is another huge opportunity for a partnership.

Berkhout: Uh hum.

Listokin: Where the Abundant Life Church is, Davidson Liquor, C-Town.

Berkhout: Right.

Harris: And that little cemetery up on the other end.

Berkhout: Right.

Harris: A tremendous opportunity to do something big for Rutgers and New Brunswick.

Listokin: You started to mention your perspective on the hospital and its connection to the redevelopment?

Harris: The hospital means jobs to us and you know we talk about health care and all of that. Their focus is kind of somewhere else in terms of that issue, but there are jobs there. I think they are the number one employer of local people, but not far from Rutgers. Rutgers is up there also. Rutgers essentially are ten-month jobs, the hospital is three shifts a day.

Listokin: What about the role of the churches? We have many longstanding churches in town.

Harris: Yes we do. And we have a passing of those old, great leaders who had

ties to the political establishment, not only here, but statewide. You know, I look at Henry Hildebrandt at Mount Zion – passed; I looked at Ebenezer Baptist Church, Lonnie Ford passed and some of the new people are commuters. I know at Mount Zion, the minister is a commuter, can you imagine that? But City Hall has done a beautiful job, I'm going to say perversely beautiful, in putting all essentially the Black clergy in their hip pocket.

Listokin: Actually one of the things we observed in people who left New Brunswick often would have some tie back, including like you say, commuting to church.

Harris: That is a very good point.

Listokin: So New Brunswick wasn't entirely off their radar.

Harris: That is a very interesting point.

Listokin: Or moved to Highland Park.

Harris: That's a very good point.

Listokin: Because it takes us back to the beginning, you remember New Brunswick being the cultural center for African Americans in the surrounding areas, and so we come back to that. The folks who grew up left, but come back to the churches. And I would – It would be difficult; I could probably name the churches, maybe only four that would have a predominant local membership.

Listokin: Congregation.

Harris: Most of the, Abundant Life certainly the people commute, you can see by those cars that are out there. Buster – commuters. So, it's that emotional tie to the church, Ebenezer, Sharon Baptist, those were the old churches my grandmother used to talk about those ministers and how they would come and help people and all of that.

Listokin: I could talk some on transferability and maybe if I can just start the dialog

where. . . I'm getting a sense from yourself that you're argument or difference is less with some of the things that happened.

Harris: Yeah.

Listokin: But that this process didn't have, in your perspective, a real dialog with the community. Not just a dialog, but that in a bit of quid pro quo, that more resources were not extended to the community's needs and institutions.

Harris: Right.

Listokin: Is that a fair . . . ? And maybe other, what would be other take-aways or do you want to elaborate on that thought and what would be some other take-aways about looking back with 20/20 hindsight.

Harris: Yeah.

Listokin: What could or should have been done differently?

Harris: Well, if I counted my money here, I would have the best bilingual, bicultural programs in the nation. I would embrace these children. If they knew what I know from the daycare perspective and watching my kids grow up – I've got a wonderful kid graduating from engineering this year. She came here, dressed as a little boy in the arms of someone else. Her mother gave her to get on that plane to get to the United States of America – illegal – call it whatever you want, but her mother had sufficient sense to look at what was going on in Oaxaca and say, "Hell with this, my baby is not growing up here. Dressed her as a little boy, got some papers and sent her on the plane." Most of the Mexicans in this town . . .

Listokin: If I can build off of that, so what could of or should have been done that would have leveraged off of this characteristic?

Harris: As we saw that trend, most of the Mexicans here come from Oaxaca, the

state of Oaxaca, and that was a message for not only the schools, the health care and the whole deal. And I know these things cost money, but if we open up an emergency room, we know that that's money. We needed to – If you didn't want to have the Mexican American Festival on George Street on the weekend, like they had the Feast of San Gennaro, then let's go to the schools and say, "Here's what we know about the demographics of the folks from the state of Oaxaca. We know they are poor, yadda, yadda, here's what we need to be thinking about in the public schools."

Do you know why? Because Mary Carmendaza, this student who is coming out of engineering this year – well, in May – we need her. That's a knowledge worker there. We do not see that kind of production, stick-to-it-tive-ness. An illiterate mother saying that, "my kid . . . I'm in the shadows, but here it is." This is the new group of folks and we didn't have the sense to identify them and basically say, "These are our kids." Because they are, they know nothing else. If you send these kids back to Mexico who came here, they don't know anything about Mexico. So the schools, the health care and I want to run those two together and open up the dialog. J&J has access, and they'll tell you they don't, to the foundation. I guess is Governor Kean still the chair of the foundation?

Berkhout: I'm not sure, I think he was.

Listokin: Okay, but they have a special set-aside for New Brunswick and some of that could have been moved to make this place – I don't know, are Zebras good swimmers? I think they are. But we could have had our own swimming group of kids come out, theme schools where these kids would go to school at 7:00 in the morning with their parents, they are there for the early session and have their greeting and eating and whatever else, and get in the swimming pool with their instructors until 9:00. Then come out, shower and go to class. We

could have a model theme situation where we could roll these kids out and say, “Hey guess what, this cost us a ton of money, but here’s another example of what’s possible.” And the sense to kind of put a positive face on all of this.

Right now we struggle, we struggle. They built a new school, Lord Stirling School, it’s a factory. Look at that school stuck right up on that corner and they wouldn’t go the extra distance to take the Exxon off the corner.

Berkhout: Oh, right.

Harris: Take that Exxon off the corner and those other six properties and build these kids a beautiful playground. Go up there and see what they have as a playground.

Listokin: Alright, so that’s clearly an important element. It’s more than just a dialog; it’s embracing the indigenous population.

Harris: And bringing them along.

Listokin: And what about in terms of clearly the emphasis has been on new construction. Do you think with our 20/20 hindsight we could have kept more of the existing stock and had more Frog and the Peach’s and interesting old buildings and walks and what have you? Is that something with out 20/20 hindsight that perhaps should have been done?

Harris: Absolutely. You look up and down the line and you see this . . . and I heard a conversation one day where they were demolishing yet another place, and they said . . . I can’t recall who was saying this, but “let’s get the demolition done in a hurry before somebody finds some chicken bones.” Now that’s their attitude, you know, if you find some old arrows from Native Americans or something, you’d have to stop construction.

Berkhout: Right.

Harris: So again, that generational problem and it goes back to when John and I,

Heldrich, we've had a long relationship, a rocky relationship since the sixties. A sweet guy who will really help you on any personal issue, but ideologically he's always going to be a rock solid conservative, which is okay if that meant fiscal policy and international relations, okay, I could accept that. But you can't be rock solid in favor of continuing slavery, as a conservative.

And I just feel he was just such the critical person and J&J always respects their leaders and it tells you something about having resources, when you can give a guy a town to play with. "John, your thing is New Brunswick." What? That's what I would have said, "What?" But he said, "Gee, just New Brunswick?" I'm sure that's what he said. So his lack of enlightenment on a lot of these issues and his fear of the community building process led to a lot of problems. You're not going to find a stronger, more committed family man or anything like that, but. . .

Berkhout: But what about his program for jobs and the fact that he got involved in the SETC and all of that?

Harris: I thought that was very positive.

Berkhout: I mean do you feel that he, going through this process, he may have understood more of what community issues are?

Harris: Yeah, I'm sure he grew during that time.

Berkhout: But you think not enough?

Harris: Not enough and too late. Too late. These schools could be the real thing, but they're not. They're not, if you spend any time in them . . .

Listokin: The arts have clearly become an important element in New Brunswick.

Harris: Which they should have.

Listokin: And brings in people from afar.

Harris: Absolutely.

Listokin: And feeds the restaurants, which is important, the economic.

Harris: That's part of it.

Listokin: If I could continue with the theme of the community being involved, I go to George Street; it looks like Exit 8A has come. Do you think that's something that a, your perspective on the arts in New Brunswick's redevelopment and also the arts and the community?

Harris: Well, and I'm glad you put it that way, because it is two separate areas. We want comprehensive redevelopment, so every asset does not have to focus on the needs of the community. Having an asset, you know, it's like the State Theater. You know, it's a great sign that we have an entity that can attract people, that can urge people to come here and enjoy those offerings.

When I interact with them, however, with the leaders, the arts leaders, I always try to emphasize that your programs for school kids are great, but we don't want them to learn to be another type of consumer, now the consumer of the arts. I want the kids to get up on stage – and they do have some areas – but I want them to know what is a Stradivarius; they might not ever be able to buy one but Itzak Perlman – I want them to know who he is, just like they know who Michael Jordan is, have an appreciation for what folks can do. Aida, Boheme, and Carmen, I want those names to be within their general ability to discuss, from having played a part in a school, from having gone to the State Theater and having a try-out for a part for a school production. So I want their fannies in the chairs, but I want them up on the stage and in the pit. I like what Alvin Ailey does with their school, they bring those kids in there. They don't have to be stars, but they understand the discipline of what's trying to be done. And so we are moving more in that direction.

I saw a beautiful publication from, I think it was Mason Gross, where they now have

programs for children to come in and learn. Now, you have to pay, but that asset wasn't available before.

Berkhout: Right, yeah they've done a lot of outreach.

Harris: That whole new program, the person leading that is just tremendous. It's going to catch on after a while. I've been trying to encourage a couple of parents. I have a couple of kids who could really benefit from that. And you want to be quiet in terms of saying, "Oh yeah, we'll pay for it if you make sure that you are there when the lessons are scheduled, on time." But that's great and that is just beginning to scratch the surface of what the university is all about.

Listokin: Any further perspectives?

Harris: Well, I'll give you a novel characterization of the process, a tale of two cities. (Laughter)

Listokin: Alright, one of my early favorites growing up.

Berkhout: Right, "it was the best of times; it was the worst of times."

Listokin: It was the best of entities. (Laughter)

Harris: I'll tell you, Professor Clem Price.

Berkhout: Uh hum.

Harris: Wrote a book for the New Jersey Cultural Society and I think it's *Freedom Not Far Distant*. And it has a chapter or a couple of chapters on Central Jersey, greater New Brunswick/Middlesex area and how difficult it was for African Americans who came into this area and how active the slave catchers were. The process is never-ending. The thorough and complete diminution of the African American community in New Brunswick, I mean it's complete, obliterated through this process, not necessarily deliberate. On my good days I say

that.

But the result is if you look around – and I’m conflicted on this point because I don’t like to put people in groups where the only thing that holds them together is what they look like. So I generally reject the notion of the African American community. But for the purpose of this argument, people of color suffered greatly. But the whole result kind of put New Brunswick on the map in terms of what you can see.

The physical development, again let’s go back and let’s end as we began, coming North on Route 18 and looking at the skyline of the City of New Brunswick. An observer, an untrained eye, is doing cartwheels looking at that, an enormous accomplishment, even if we just restrict it to the brick-and-mortar, an enormous accomplishment. And peeling back that layer, you see the unfinished business, maybe that’s left for us or the next generation. But the price was tremendous, a tremendous price.

Listokin: Okay, well thank you. Really, thank you very much.

Harris: Hey, it seems like every two or three years I end up here talking about this.

Listokin: We need to understand this, you know.

Harris: Yeah, you know.

Berkhout: We’ve interviewed – I guess now with you, eighteen people, about an hour and a half to two hours each. Of course John Heldrich, we had Kenneth Wheeler, we had Tony Nelessen, we had mayors . . .

Listokin: Including John Lynch.

Berkhout: So if there is anyone else you think we might need to talk to.

Listokin: And we can send you, we can send you a list of. . .

Berkhout: We did – and Roy Epps and Jeff Vega and of course Paladino and of course, Chris Foglio.

Harris: Oh, you had Chris come up?

Listokin: Who was a former student of mine? See I've met a former – Glenn Paterson was a former student.

Harris: So we have you to blame. (Laughter)

Berkhout: And John Lynch.

Listokin: Maybe I'll exit. And if you have materials that perhaps you can share with us, that would be . . .

Harris: I'd like to pull out some of those articles when I was fighting with Heldrich.

Berkhout: Alright, that would be good.

Listokin: I would, I would. . . That would be good.

Berkhout: Because part of this eventually is maybe going to be some more data collection, of articles, of minutes, of things or whatever.

Harris: Or the great – I'll tell you, I spoke at Records Hall, is Records Hall still there?

Berkhout: Yes.

Listokin: Yeah.

Harris: And this was, was this Martin Luther King, April 4th is Martin Luther King, when he was assassinated?

Berkhout: I don't recall the exact date.

Harris: I think so. Well we had a big meeting at Records Hall and we were

having problems with the poverty program leadership and control issues. It's the story of New Brunswick, the control. And I said "What we need to do is go out and march," because that was the think, you know.

Listokin: Uh hum.

Harris: And the paper said, "There were between 3,500 and 4,000 students who were following this guy and marching against racism."

Berkhout: Uh hum.

Harris: And those were some heady days, you could have used all of that energy.

Listokin: Well, I remember when I first came to Livingston in 1971, it was a different. People in the planning program and there would be "radical priests" and it was a very different . . .

Harris: Yes.

Listokin: And of course, Livingston was different, you know.

Harris: Yes.

Listokin: We would shut down every Monday. . .

[end of recording]