

7-26-1994

Gray, Eric Oral History Interview (Africa-American): Asian and African American Residents of Holland

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Recommended Citation

Repository citation: Rottier, Donna M., "Gray, Eric Oral History Interview (Africa-American): Asian and African American Residents of Holland" (1994). *Asian and African American Residents of Holland*. Paper 4.

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Published in: 1994 - *Asian and African American Residents of Holland (H88-0234)* - Hope College Living Heritage Oral History Project, July 26, 1994. Copyright © 1994 Hope College, Holland, MI.

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Interview with
Eric Gray

Conducted July 26, 1994
by Donna M. Rottier

1994 Summer Oral History Project
The African-American Community in Holland, Michigan

DR: The date is July 26, 1994. This is Donna Rottier and I am interviewing Eric Gray in the Van Wylen Library on the Hope College campus in Holland, Michigan. Could you please repeat your full name for the record on tape?

EG: Eric Gray.

DR: Your current address?

EG: 41 E. 48th Street, Apt. 3, Holland, 49423.

DR: Thank you. And your date and place of birth?

EG: [date removed], 1953. I was born in Cook County, which is Chicago, Illinois.

DR: How long have you been in Holland, Michigan?

EG: Four-and-a-half years.

DR: Thank you. Could you begin by describing a little bit about the area where you grew up?

EG: I basically grew up all over Chicago. My family was a transit type of a family. I remember my early years on the south side of Chicago inner city. We moved from there to the west side, then further west, and then I subsequently moved back to the south side, which is where I moved from when I moved here. All this was inner city Chicago in what is called the ghetto.

DR: What did your family do?

EG: My mother was a basic employee, she was a laborer. She worked a number of jobs. My father was a laborer also.

DR: Could you describe a little bit of your educational background?

EG: In my elementary school years, I went to Catholic school, one of the best Catholic schools in Chicago, two of the best. One was St. Mels and one was Holy Family. After I graduated from St. Mels in 1967, I went to a public high school from 1967 to 1971. After that, I entered into a trade school. I went to Control Data Institute and studied computer technology. That's the extent of my education.

DR: What did you do once you got out of school?

EG: I got a job as a field service technician with Dow Jones, the Wall Street Journal branch. I was a field service technician for them. I repaired stock market equipment at various stock brokers' offices.

DR: How then did you get from Chicago to Holland, Michigan?

EG: That's a long story and I'll try to make it as brief as possible. Prior to going to the trade school, I was already involved in drugs and alcohol. I graduated from the trade school when I was twenty-one and I had already been involved in drugs and alcohol for four years. I started at seventeen. That began a seventeen-year drug and alcohol addiction. In 1987, because of problems that developed as a result of me being a drug addict, I entered a program called Teen Challenge which is a spiritual rehabilitation program located here in Muskegon. They have centers all around the world, but the closest one that I could get into was in Muskegon. I went in their program from 1987 to 1988, graduated

that, went back to Chicago, began to develop some more problems with drugs and alcohol, and I moved here in 1990 to get away from it once and for all.

DR: Did you know anything about Holland before you moved here?

EG: No.

DR: Why then did you decide to come to this city?

EG: Several of my associates or friends, or however you want to term it, that had went through Teen Challenge from various parts of the country had resettled here in Holland because they didn't want to go back to their neighborhoods like I did. So, when I began to develop problems again, I contacted them. They were already residing here, and they helped me relocate.

DR: What did you expect to find before you moved here?

EG: I didn't have any expectations. I was just glad to get out of Chicago. I didn't know anything about Holland, nothing. I knew a little bit about Muskegon, but I didn't know anything about Holland.

DR: What did you find, then, once you got here?

EG: People in wooden shoes and Dutch costumes (laughter). It was quite an education. Donna, you have to be a little bit more specific.

DR: Did you start working immediately once you got here?

EG: Basically, yes, I started working. I moved here in January of that year and I started working in March. Yes, almost

immediately, as fast as I could find a job. I started working at Bil-Mar meat-processing plant. I worked there two-and-a-half years.

DR: Where do you work now?

EG: I'm a director of what's called Holland Teen Ministry. We work with what's called at-risk and troubled teens. Teenagers who are suicidal, rape victims, all forms of abuse--physical, verbal, mental, and sexual abuse--runaways, anything that involves a teenager, that's what we work with.

DR: How did you get involved with that?

EG: In 1992, I began to do some anti-gang work in the area, some gang-awareness work. I started putting together some seminars for schools and churches and governmental agencies, just making them aware of some things that were becoming apparent in Holland. From that work I was asked to work alongside the public school system in Holland because they were developing some problems and didn't know what to do with those problems. That developed in a very good relationship and one thing led to another and it was suggested that I do this full-time because I was doing it part-time. There we have it; we began Holland Teen Ministry. It became an official ministry February of this year. It's been in the makings for the last year.

DR: I think it's changing recently, but I think a lot of time the perception is that Holland is a safe community, those types of

problems don't happen. How do people respond to the type of work you do?

EG: When I first began to do this type of work, the people in Holland have been in a mindset--I like to illustrate it like an ostrich with his head in the sand--they like to ignore problems. So I wasn't well-received. There was a lot of conversational thoughts like, "We can take care of this problem, it's not a big problem," this and that, this and that. People still dealt with me and worked with me from a more like a hands-off, from a distance. But after it became more and more apparent that these problems did exist and they did indeed need addressing, then I was well-received. It took almost two years to be well-received, as well as I'm being received now.

DR: In the time you've been working, doing this kind of work, have you seen changes in the problems?

EG: In the problems, no. The problems are getting, for lack of a better term, worse. They're still no way in the magnitude that the trouble might be in the inner city, because of the population. But I have seen changes in one area. One of the things that I was promoting was the working cooperative effort of all agencies--churches, schools, government, business, parents, social service agencies. They have to begin working together. You didn't have that two years ago. Now we're seeing a lot more of

that, a lot more of these agencies and institutions beginning to work together. I'm seeing changes.

DR: What do you think is causing those changes, or causing people to be aware of it and want to do something about it now?

EG: Not being able to ignore it anymore. Realizing that there are problems that need to be addressed. No one institution can address them all. Some situations, with some problems, the churches have been made to be responsible for that problem. The police department has been made to be responsible for the drugs and the gangs. The troubled teens, the social service agencies have been made responsible for that. Those individual agencies can't address that problem alone because the problem--you take, oh, individuals that go in the gangs, usually they come from troubled homes. So you have to involve, make the parents accountable for their child's behavior. They're realizing that one institution doesn't have the answer, that it is going to take a cooperative effort.

DR: What do you think is causing these problems?

EG: A demoralization in society, a breakdown in family values. This is happening all over the country. Holland is just like one of the last strongholds in the country. I'm just saying that because I don't know of any other places in the country that are experiencing the problems that we're facing. This is happening all over the country--a breakdown in moral values, a breakdown in

family structure. If there was any one or two causes that I would attribute to the problems that we're having, it's those two. And it's coming from the federal government all the way down.

DR: Why do you think that it's taken so long, not necessarily for the problems to hit Holland, but for people to realize that something needs to be done about it?

EG: To be honest, this community has been primarily, and still is primarily Dutch. The Dutch people have a history of dealing with only what they know. It's not common for them to go outside their intellect. Gangs, drugs, rape, incest, runaways, this is not common in the Dutch community--well, it's not publicized as being common. They're ignorant on how to deal with some of these situations. I'm not saying ignorant in a derogatory manner, just ignorant because they don't know, they didn't know anything about these problems. Instead of saying, "We're ignorant of this, we'll just ignore it as if it don't exist." That's the mindset of the Dutch community, to ignore things that they can't deal with. They just don't know how. The Dutch community does not like to involve or incorporate outside help or assistance. They don't. They like to do it from within. That's really been one of the major problems in this area with dealing with things like that, because they've been trying to deal with it from within, but there's no experience or knowledge of how to deal with some of the issues that we've been faced with. And subsequently, nothing happens.

because they don't know how. Now they're beginning to examine outside resources and implement input from different areas and different agencies from the outside of Holland area.

DR: Somewhat related to that, how do you think that Holland has accepted or responded to the growing ethnic diversity--people of Asian background or Hispanic background, or African-Americans that are moving into the community?

EG: Well, when I got here in 1990, this appeared to be a storybook type of a community. Everybody was pleasant, everybody was open, everybody was friendly. But as time went on, I began to see that what I'm seeing is not really how people feel. There has been a rejection; people reject having to deal with the African-American communities. They've tried not to have to deal with the African-American communities. You take like the Asians and the Hispanics, they more or less help them set up their own network so they can deal with their own people. The black community is a little bit different because of the small number of blacks that have been in this area. There has been no great need to support a networking where they can help themselves. So there's been an overall rejection that I've been sensing of having to deal with the African-Americans.

DR: What do you think will happen in the future when more and more of these people are moving in and they'll have to deal with it?

EG: There's going to be a lot of friction because it's something that they're not used to. It's something that they didn't contemplate when they sat down and formulated a twenty-year plan for this area, of having to deal with the African-American groups. It's something that they're not comfortable with, so there's going to be some friction. I'm not talking about violence, that type of friction or anything like that, but there's going to be some friction, there's going to be some real tough areas.

DR: Can you see a positive side of this, too?

EG: I've been very optimistic about this area. A lot of people would say that this area's going down. If you look at it from the surface, you would say that, yes, it's going down. But I'm very optimistic because this is one of the few areas that I've been, had the opportunity to examine, or live in, that has been opening up more and more with working together to solve the problem. You don't find this anywhere. Like I said, I come from Chicago. In the inner city you can't get agencies to work together unless there's some monetary gain involved, some political aspirations able to be achieved from the working together. Here, in this area, people really want to work together, to solve the problem, to try and get Holland back to where it is that they saw the nice little docile, cute little community that they wanted it to be, maybe twenty years ago.

DR: Do you think that it can go back?

EG: I don't think that it will ever be able to go back. I think there's going to be some drastic changes. It's going to have to be. This community can never be what it was twenty years ago because of the ethnics, because there are minority groups that are here. They have to be recognized, they have to be incorporated in the political structure, they have to be given business opportunities. And that's going to change the face of this community drastically. We're just going to have to get used to that.

DR: What part do you think should the ethnic minorities play in that? What should their role be, or their responsibilities be?

EG: That's a hard question--what *should* their role be. Well, to do whatever they can, as much as they can, to get hands-on involvement in the changes. Instead of being the secondary recipient of the changes, be the initiator. Get involved in politics. We have a large number of Hispanics that are involved in the political arena and the business sector. We have some Asians involved. We have a few blacks. But there needs to be more and more involvement in the decision-making policies in this area. There should be more blacks involved with politics. There should be *more* Hispanics involved with politics. There should be *some*--as far as I know, there are not any--Asians involved with politics, where they're involved with the decision-making process in this community as it changes.

DR: Why do you think that is, that there isn't that involvement?

EG: From my point of view, it could be just their culture, not wanting to be involved. It's just not them to be involved. The Asians have a way of separating themselves. Every community that you go in across the nation, they have their own community. Because of where they came from, that's their culture. The blacks have a tendency of feeling not wanted, not accepted. Blacks in this area--this is common all across America--they don't feel a part of the community. They don't feel like they own, they don't feel like they belong, so there's no motivation to get involved in the decision-making processes. Every now and then you have uprisings of people advocating certain things, but after that thing is done or rejected, then you see all the motivation and interest in that particular area diminish and then you don't see them anymore.

DR: Do you have an idea of how many blacks live in Holland or the Holland area?

EG: From what I understand, it's less than one percent, which is a very very small number. I see more than that, and not knowing the demographics of the area or the population in the area, it's kind of hard for me to say, but the statistics that I've been given is less than one percent.

DR: How much contact do African-Americans have among themselves within the community, do you know?

EG: Not much. Blacks have a tendency to--you get yours, I got mine type of mentality. There's very little involvement with one another except when there's urgent, immediate concern. Then there may be a pulling together to address that concern, and then it dwindles down. That's just typical of the Afro-American communities around the country. That's just our history, that's the way that we've always operated, and it's sad that we do that. We're trying to change that in this area by developing groups and forming different organizations where we can support the black community.

DR: How much contact do you personally have with other African-Americans that live in Holland?

EG: A lot. I'm involved now with a group of individuals that's trying to develop a support mechanism for the Afro-American teens, particularly the males. I'm very much involved with the Afro-American community. Not as much as I would like to, but a lot of my work limits me from a lot of things.

DR: You say a support mechanism. What sort of things or programs would that involve?

EG: A support mechanism like the one that is being proposed now is something that deals with the Afro-American teenage male--what are your problems, what are the changes that you see should take place to help you alleviate these problems, what changes would you like to see in Holland for the betterment of Holland? Then we would in

turn try and bring those things to pass, by getting involved in the political arena, business arena, whatever you have. By doing this, this would develop some trust from the black community that there's someone there to help, and instead of feeling no one cares, they will know that someone is there to care. And possibly this could be a vehicle where people would come and vent some of their frustrations and anger, instead of venting them other ways.

DR: Have you noticed or experienced yourself racial tension or discrimination here in Holland?

EG: Oh yes.

DR: In what sorts of ways?

EG: It's difficult to give you specific examples, but when you walk in a restaurant and you draw everybody's attention, that would raise some, "Why's everybody looking at me?" Because you're black. When things are printed in the media involving a black, Afro-American--and this is just all over the country--this is typical, to stereotype blacks. If one is bad, all of them are bad. There's different instances where blacks are looked upon as troublemakers. You look at the teens and how they're treated. You have a group of black teens on this corner and a group of white teens on this corner. If the police car when they come through, they're going to check the black teens first. That's automatic; it's just the way it is. Holland is not exempt from racism. There's a lot of racism going on in this community. As I

said, there's a lot of resentment--I wouldn't say rejection, I did say rejection earlier about the ethnic groups--but there's a lot of *resentment* with the ethnic groups. There was a saying when I first came here and I didn't understand that: "If you're not Dutch, you're not much." So there was an automatic resentment just by that saying that was communicated in the minority communities, not only the minorities, but the whites. If you're a white person, you're not Dutch, you're not much. That in itself is racial discrimination.

DR: How has that affected you and the way that you act here?

EG: Not at all. Donna, I'm a different type of a person. I went to Catholic schools most of my childhood, which gave me the opportunity to go to school with whites. I lived in the ghetto where it was all black. So you see I have lived both sides of the fence. I come from a pure racist town, Chicago. If you want to see racism personified, go to Chicago. I'm used to this. I've lived in this. I don't have a problem dealing with, if you were an apparent racist, I don't get all bent out of shape because you are, because I've dealt with this. It has a lot to do with how I think about myself. I feel pretty secure about who I am and what I am. It doesn't matter how you feel. That's not going to affect me. I'm a different breed of an individual. But you look at other Afro-Americans, they have a hard time with racism. They have a hard time hearing people say, "I'm not a racist," and being

treated discriminatory. They have a hard time with that. Blacks come into this area. They come from a racist area. They come from an area where they don't trust society or white people, and then they come in this area where it's mostly, predominantly white, and automatically they don't trust nobody.

DR: Changing the subject a little bit, could you explain the role of religion or a personal faith in your life, if you have that?

EG: Jesus Christ is my Savior. I'm a born-again believer. I'm a radical Christian. My whole life is based around bringing young people to Christ, or anybody. I'm a licensed minister. I look at myself as a Christian first, before I look at myself as an Afro-American. If I could in any way not identify with being an Afro-American, I would. Because when people see me, they automatically stereotype me as Afro-American. Seventy percent of all the teenagers we deal with in my ministry are white. When I was first asked to go in the public school system, they wanted me to work with the blacks. The black community was the last community that I was able to tap into because the black community didn't trust me. That has a lot to do with me being able to deal with racism. Because God is my God and Jesus is my Savior. If God has no respect to a person, than neither am I. It doesn't matter what color you are, or how you feel about me, I still love you. That's the way I conduct my life. That's first. That's my whole life. Christianity is my whole life.

DR: Are you involved with a church or religious organization in Holland?

EG: Not in Holland. I go to church in Grand Haven, a place called Grand Haven Outreach. But my ministry is up under the umbrella of Christ Memorial Church which is a Reformed church here in the area. That's where our tax-exempt status is achieved and obtained through, and their Board of Directors is on that ministry. I associate and work with any and all denominations that will allow us to work with them. I have a staff of three people--one full-time staff person and two part-time volunteer staff persons. They come from a variety of churches and denominations. One of the things that we promote in our ministry is unification of all Christian organizations or quote unquote "religious" organizations.

DR: What do you see as the connections between Christianity and being able to solve some of these growing problems?

EG: You're good. The only solution to any and all problems this world is facing is Jesus Christ. That's the only solution. If you look across history of America--governmental history, community history, or whatever--everything that has come, every device, every solution that has been put together and proposed has not worked. None of them have worked. Jesus is the only one that I know that works.

DR: Thank you. You obviously have contact with the school system with working with kids through your program. What do you feel about the general quality of education in Holland?

EG: In Holland? It's great. To me right now it's second to none. Coming from the Chicago public school system, which stinks, which I think they should just eliminate and do it all over again, this is a dream come true. When I came here, I had a twelve year-old daughter. She came from overcrowded classrooms. She wasn't learning anything, and I mean that literally. And when she came here, she began to learn. The classrooms were smaller. I remember one time she stayed home from school and I got a call from the school, wanting to know where my daughter was. I was thrown for a loop. You don't have that in Chicago. I hear people saying, "Man, I hate Holland, I hate the schools." I'm like, you don't know what it's like. If you knew what it's like to have worse, you would appreciate what you got. I think the school system here is fabulous. There is some racism, some ignorance I would say to racism in the school system that sometimes is a detriment, has negative effects on some of the minority students. But they're working on that, they're trying to solve that problem or address that issue. That show me that they're concerned about the welfare of my child.

DR: Does your daughter still go to school here?

EG: Yes. This fall she'll be a senior at Holland High School. So when she graduates, I can get rid of her (laughter).

DR: How do you think that her life has been different growing up in Holland than it would have been had she grown up in Chicago?

EG: She's not around the negative element twenty-four hours a day. She doesn't have to deal with the influences of the negative element, of being around the negative element *all the time*. She doesn't have to deal with negative peer pressure *all the time*. She has the benefit of being able to see positive, have some positive role models in this community. Whereas in Chicago in the ghetto you have little or none--no positive role models. Everybody is out trying to do their own thing, and as always they're usually doing something wrong. I'm not painting a bad picture for Chicago, but that's the general overview of any ghetto community in Chicago. It's been better for her. She has dreams and aspirations of going to college and making a good career of herself. When she first came here, she had to deal with some hard truths: being a black, being a female, being new, and being a Christian, and going to a predominately all white school. She had to deal with the racial slurs, the prejudice. She had to deal with a lot, but she's come through that and right now she's a very healthy, mentally and spiritually, young lady. I don't believe that she would have had that opportunity to be that in Chicago. I know a lot of teens. I have relatives who are nice, and they're

healthy, spiritually and mentally, and they have grown up in the Chicago area. I'm not saying my daughter would not have been able to grow up that way. But the chances and opportunities are greater here than they are in Chicago.

DR: What would you say is the main reason that you've stayed in Holland as long as you have?

EG: Two reasons. One, because God won't let me leave, which has a lot to do with the ministry. The ministry has grown, we've been accepted, we get referrals from the police department, social service agencies, the schools, churches. I've thought about leaving several times, but as I pray about it, God won't agree with that. The other thing is my daughter. I couldn't see myself leaving unless I was going to a better environment. I couldn't see myself going back to a Chicago, not at this point in time. That would be ludicrous. Not with her being a senior in high school and have some aspirations of going to college and the opportunities that are made available to her here that she would have never been able to take advantage of in Chicago.

DR: What one thing do you think people should know about yourself or what you do that should definitely be included in this interview?

EG: That I love this city, and, like I said before, I'm very optimistic about this city. I am a Christian; Jesus is my Lord and Savior. Wow, it's difficult to say what I would like folks to remember me as or what I would like to be made known about me.

Well, Donna, you've stuck me with that one. I don't know. I'm an advocate for unity among the churches, among the body of Christ. I'm an advocate for unity among all races, which makes me an advocate for equality and justice, and I stand by that. I don't compromise that. And I'm an advocate for teenagers. I would give my life for a teen. I want to see teens healed. There's a lot of hurting teens in this community and I've given my life to them. I would lay down my life for a teenager. I guess that's about it.

DR: Well, I've asked all my questions. Thank you very much. You've had a lot of very interesting, wonderful things to say. If there's anything that you think I should have asked that I haven't, or anything else you'd like to add, feel free. Otherwise, thank you very much for taking the time to do this.

EG: No, I think you did a pretty good job. You're good at this. Thank you.