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Kurt Hill, October 18, 2018

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October 18, 2018 Eastern Michigan University Archives, Oral Histories

Oral History Interview with Kurt Hill (KH)

Conducted by Historic Preservation Graduate Student Rachel Burns, (RB) and Historic Preservation Graduate Student Matt Jones (MJ)

Transcribed by Historic Preservation Graduate Student Rachel Burns

RB: Okay. Today is October 18th, 2018. This is Rachel Burns, I'm a grad student in Historic Preservation here Matt Jones, a fellow HP grad. Today we are speaking with Kurt Hill. Hill is a graduate of Eastern Michigan University, active member of the Black Student Association, and Campus Service Corps, as well as present during the take over of Pierce Hall take over of February 20th, 1969. Today we are going to interviewing him as a part of our "Taking Great Risks" oral history program here at the University Archives. I'm gonna start off by asking can you describe the conditions for African American students when you arrived on campus?

KH: Good question. I think the conditions were one of just being recruited heavily because it was shortly after the the '67 riots. A lot of the recruiters were recruiting students of color, particularly African Americans students on campus. There wasn't a whole bunch of us but enough that I think that there was a beginning of a major number step up at university. I couldn't tell exactly how many but i think it was a sizeable amount coming in that year.

RB: When you arrived, did you have anticipations of becoming active or did you-how did you meet other students who were active?

KH: I met them through different organizations. One was of course the BSU, Black Students Union. Met a lot students that way. I started out with Starkweather with this program called Chapter One. That was a good introductory-it was almost like an introduction to the university type program. That was by Chuck Minneman, that's how I met him. That was my first step into it. BSU, then I joined the track team. Those were the major activities thus far. As far as becoming an activist, not really per say, but that's were the conditions around the country at that time what as going on with the Vietnam War, that was a big thing going on that time. Those were the conditions that the students were facing. The Vietnam War, being drafted, coming into a new environments at Eastern, a predominantly white university-but still we were here for our education.

RB: Okay. Were you involved with the meetings before the Pierce Hall demonstration-the planning meetings?

KH: Yes. Yes, there were several planning meetings prior. Those were to get to know the students on campus primarily and activities that were gonna take place-some of the conditions

the university were facing that were gonna take place. We were kind of made aware as first year students and second years students.

RB: Did you have a leadership position?

KH: Not in that perspective, no.

RB: What kinds of things were happening at these meetings?

KH: Oh, we were talking about students rights, as far as speaking up. Classroom conditions, mainly teaming up for I think study groups because there weren't many of us in the classroom, we'd be aware who were some of the teachers that they thought were kind of bias in their approach. We talked about those things. We also talked about the Campus Service Corps and how that was gonna head up, and how they were gonna recruit for that. Getting to know other students, their majors, what else? Some of the other things that were happening across the country like at major universities such as Cornell and other things taking place. Scholarships, things of that nature.

RB: You graduated in 1972?

KH: Yes.

RB: Were you in your freshman year during the takeover?

KH: No, I was about sophomore year I think. Sophomore, junior year.

RB: Okay. Could you give like a play by play as you remember it of the day?

KH: The day of that student protesting. We had gathered around Pierce Hall and a group of us we decided we'd be the first ones there and enter the building. At that time we were protesting, looking for the president to come out to discuss our demands. Low and behold, chains on the door start unravelling and I remember them being put on. At that time I said "oh, what's going on?" because I wasn't involved with the planning to take over the building per say at least not to shut it down. I remember the chains coming out, building being wrapped up, everybody was gonna sit tight until the president was gonna come. Low and behold, the police come and they came out from somewhere, but they had those bolt cutters and cut the chains off. The prosecutor at that time was nearby, he's saying "pick this student, this student, and put them in the paddy wagon." Next thing you know, the group of students are being arrested and taken to the city jail. I was caught up in that.

MJ: Might be kind of a simple question but were you scared?

KH: It was probably because I was caught up in the excitement but I wasn't scared at first until we got to the jail, being processed. I didn't know what going on. It sinks in. This is serious stuff. We had heard of other students at other schools being arrested. Eventually they were let out but it is a scary thing to be picked out and you don't know what's gonna happen, if you're gonna kicked out of school. That registered into my head, what if they press charges, et cetera.

RB: So I know from the research that I've done in the archives that the 10 to 12 students that were arrested had to plead to a lower charge. What was that process like?

KH: Intimidating a little bit because we were in court. I was lucky enough to have a decent attorney, we got the charges dismissed. It was intimidating, you lost time in class and things of this nature and of course it cost money. So there's a cost factor to it, but it was probably worth it in the long run. There was a lot of good things happening after that.

RB: On that day during the immediate aftermath, were other students reacting to the event?

KH: Okay. By me being in jail, I didn't see a lot of the protests being on campus, but when I got back to campus, a lot of students were protesting around the president's house. It was getting at a higher fever pitch I would say to the demands to let us go and listen to our demands et cetera. We wanted to talk et cetera. It got to a fever pitch where the university was still being stubborn in their actions but at the same time, students were aware that the 13 were arrested and we did our thing.

MJ: Can I jump in? Just to go back a little bit, you said you were talking about the reason for the demonstrations where you mentioned class conditions and teacher bias. Do you remember anything like the bias approach by teachers and how it manifested itself in class and were there reactions to it in class?

KH: That's a good question because a lot of that was perhaps in the business school and the economics area, maybe a few in the social sciences, but no. Not being called up on, I would recognize writing papers and being checked "is this really your paper?" That kind of bias- "could a black student write that well?"- those types of things would pop up. Make sure that we kept our heads down and on the paper because we didn't want to be accused of cheating, those types of things. Those would be those types of factors. We were kind of warned about that. I think the main factor was that we were really protesting that there weren't enough faculty of color there. That was a big thing. We had big departments, especially in science and business school but yet we noticed that there very few faculty members of color.

RB: Were you involved with discussion with administration after the take over?

KH: Oh yes. If I could recall we had faculty, students, and administration talk over the conditions and what were some the protests about, what it meant to the university as far as change and what we could to change some of those things. I think it was Professor Sandelow, he had a

book out about a discussion about what happened at Eastern Michigan. My name was left out but I think it was added in on pencil in terms of being on that student panel discussions. We talked a lot about what was going on, the mood of the country, what it meant for Eastern Michigan-the protest what it meant for us, especially Campus Service Corps. More black faculty, recruitment, I think one of the conditions we wanted was that the student population reflect the population of the Southeast Michigan area. So those were the main things that we talked about in that book. Of course, there were a lot of others in terms of black students fighting, the weather men and other groups to different things. Some of them were protesting the war. We weren't so much protesting the war, it was part of it, but we were more less protesting for other conditions to changes. The athletes that were there, some of them had lost their scholarships after they got injured or hurt, so we wanted them to make sure that those students still got their education taken care of when they were recruited here.

RB: Were you involved in the drafting of the demands?

KH: Towards the end, not towards the beginning not much.

RB: Would you say the initial 11 demands were like a jumping point?

KH: A jumping point? Yeah, and then we grew on that.

RB: How were you guys making those decisions for adding on to the demands?

KH: By the few faculty members of color we confided in them and some of the things that we noticed, we wanted to just verify and make sure we were on the right track. That's where the Ken Moons came in as dean of students at that time, but especially recruitment of faculty of color. That was something we had talked about. We had not been in the midst of that, talking about it with EMU administration until a little later on. I think there was Dr. Mildred Tate who finally came on. There were a couple of faculty members who were recruited- Dr. Ken Hicks was recruited here to the chemistry department, Dr. Bucky Buchanan in the speech department, those faculty members came on board mainly from the protest.

RB: At the same time, the late sixties and early seventies, there was a-I don't how to word this with sounding dramatic, but a mass exodus of black staff and faculty. How were you guys-I know that were letters written to The Echo, student senate made address, but was the black student's union's response to that mass exodus?

KH: That's a good question. Concerned, but we knew that if you're gonna pick from the cream of the crop eventually they were gonna leave. Other major universities were after them, lets just call it. If a faculty member came here, they were outstanding, publications were well done, University of Michigan, Toledo, and other universities were on the hunt for good faculty. We knew it was going to be an ongoing fight. At least for this university to be aware of that and make that concern, it would be back in their minds. In order to have students of color here, we

need some reflection in the faculty and staff here in teaching in the classroom and learning process.

RB: When we interviewed Floyd Walton, he stressed that one of the difficulties in talking with administration is that being a college student, you're only here for 3 to 4 years and it's hard to see that change because of how bureaucratic things are. What kind of strategies were you using to make these changes because you can kind of some of the changes happening relatively quickly.

KH: Some of the strategies would be to make sure that we talk to the next set of admission recruiters that came about. The admissions and financial aid office were one office at that time. I know Marshall Jennings was one of the first people that I knew that was involved in the admissions' recruitment process and also involved in Campus Service Corps. He knew the university, he knew what was going on, and when Marshall left, I graduated shortly after that and he got me to apply and I became an admission officers and a financial aid advisor as well. I knew what was going coming where I was coming from. It was important that we kept that in mind and told the next people over and over. Over time, as we had MLK day and those types of programs and initiative were handled at that administration level, we got more administration of color in there and things of that nature.

RB: I was going to ask about your involvement with Campus Service Corps. Did you ever have an executive position?

KH: No, I had a very low role in that. I was concerned with students who were being brought in and still trying to get used to the college atmosphere. Some of them were flunking out because they were pledging too soon, or financial aid wasn't right, they didn't handle their budget rights et cetera. I became involved with the question "what can we do to keep the students here?" One of those issues of the cost of attending, books, et cetera. At that time, a group of students and myself and three or four others held one of the first scholarship drives and I think it was Dean Zumwinkle-he let us rent out the Pease Auditorium to have a talent show. That became the jump off to the first Martin Luther King and Malcolm X Scholarship. That was one of the things I was concerned with. Dr. Valmore Goines was very instrumental. He was one of the top administrators who worked with the various deans and top brass administration. We set up a tutoring session with Dr. Buckeye was very instrumental in the math department. There was another faculty member who came from the English department, I forgot their name but all these individuals came together and that was important because we were able to link the top notch students in those departments to students in Business and Math because they became tutors. Those are the things I was concerned with. I remember several students coming in and we talked about their role in the universities and what were their plans. A lot of them were here for teacher education, but some of them were for business so we linked them in other juniors and seniors here. A lot of them did well. I remember Debbie Map very well. She became head of the math department DPS in Detroit. She was top notch. She enjoyed it her and I enjoyed mentoring her. But there were other students like that who wanted to keep things like this going.

Because of that, we saw the power of the alumni coming back and saying “hey, what’s going on? How are students of color being treated here? What’s the population now? Are we meeting those goals?”

MJ: I’ve never thought about the role of alumni in showing support.

KH: Yeah, because when the Martin Luther King Scholarship was established, there wasn’t enough funds to make it a big scholarship. It was several years after I graduate, it finally introduced as a larger scholarship and alumni caught on and started funding that project.

RB: Was your role in admissions and recruitment while you were still a student?

KH: No, I had graduated and I was a professional at that time.

RB: But you were working for the university, right?

KH: Correct.

RB: Could you compare the vantage point you had as an administrator to being a student?

KH: Yeah, I could talk about my time here. The good times and the bad times. I was working on convincing the students that if they wanted a place where that if they wanted to study somewhere that was close enough but not far away Eastern was a great place to get your education. I got to talk to students who were not sure of themselves and got to show them where they needed to link in on campus, to find and use resources to help them be successful. One of the big things was “please, don’t pledge that first year, give yourself some time to adjust.”

RB: While you were a student, how you were able to balance all the work you were doing with trying better conditions for other students while also being a student yourself?

KH: Very carefully by not biting off more than I could chew because the main thing I was here for my education. But becoming an activist, some of those things can overpower you and that can delay your education. I was careful enough to not get overloaded by looking at things and determining whether or not I could impact it. If that wasn’t that was too big, I would just try to at least give my two cents. There were tons of meetings and workshops that I attended so that’s how I was able to stay active.

MJ: Do you think your activism improved your performance as a student?

KH: I think so because it gives you a sense of time management. It helps you understand what you can and can’t do. It’s not easy all of the time. When you’re a student and you’re concerned about others and you’re running track at the same time, I didn’t have a ton of free time. I can’t

imagine the other athletes who were playing football or baseball and still being active while getting their education.

MJ: I guess another thing I've been wondering about is when we talked to Floyd, he said something about-maybe I'm paraphrasing this wrong-but he said it was tough sometimes because you were an activist during the school year and you were still in the summer but it was kind of a roller coaster in the summertime. That's interesting to me. What would happen in the summer?

KH: Well of course, the efforts would die because if you had students who were at a fever pitch, it would die down until the students got back. At the same, there might have been enough to give us feedback and let us know where we needed to pick up from where we left off. It was rough but you had to remember that you needed to leave a legacy for those coming after you to fight that fight.

MJ: I remember the stories from the panel in July where you guys would jump in the state car and go to wherever Sponberg was. I was wondering if you were still on him in the summer months.

KH: I would say he was chased down enough that he got the message that "maybe I better respond and listen to the students because it would be for the betterment of the institution."

RB: One question that I have that I don't know how to articulate it well enough-hopefully you'll catch what I mean. So much of the documentation in the Black Student Union records from this time period has such an emphasis on Sponberg and his response and going to Pierce Hall to speak to Sponberg, going Sponberg's house. Why? Was it because he was the president, why him as supposed to Dean of Students or Campus Affairs?

KH: Well as the president of the University he's responsible to the board regents. He would want to keep the board of regents off of his back, so he would be smart enough to say "I need to talk to students and listen to them." If it wasn't for the students, he wouldn't have a job. So you have to go to the head person if you had certain things you wanted to say. He could influence the faculty members say something like "hey, we need to have a systematic way of recruiting faculty members. We need a way of getting more recruiters in who are responsive to student needs in terms of going to the Native American population, Hispanic population, Black population around the city and state. Scholarships need to be kept in tact. What are we doing that can better the scholarship and grant mix for students who are having a difficult time paying?" A president has a lot to do in terms of how it is ran and how it is looked at and to make sure how our reputation is growing. At that time, we were still a teacher education focused school but our business school was also growing leaps and bounds. We had a pretty decent reputation. Those students who didn't go to Wayne State saw Eastern as a way to get away from home but not be too far. We had a good reputation.

MJ: Were the activist here reaching out to other schools?

KH: I think they did as far as benchmarking. We were looking at other schools in terms of what was going on and how they did their thing. The same things that were going on Eastern were happening at Central, Western and the University of Michigan. I think it just so happened that Eastern was so close to the Detroit area that everything was more in your face.

RB: What changes were you able to see during your time for the betterment of students of color?

KH: Definitely recruitment. I think ways of keeping students here and helping them complete their education. I think alumni getting involved with the Martin Luther King Scholarship helped it grow. I think the students who graduated who had a good time here are the ones who come back to the homecomings and talk about Eastern and promote it. Those are things that I noticed that made things better.

RB: Could you talk about what was being done for retention and how that got better? I know that attrition rate at Eastern has always been an issue. So when you say that retention was higher, what do you think was put in place to make that so?

KH: The Holman Study Center and those types of things started to help. I think the whole scholarship packages were looked at a little differently. I think from the social side, I think the students began to talk to each other more and more. I met my wife at Eastern and she became one of the first faculty in residence. Here you had staff that would listen to students and get involved with the campus and their education. It was away from the academics in the residence halls where you could let your hair down and talk about those things. Those are the positives things that I could remember. Reverend Joe Dancy was here and took over Starkweather after Chuck Minneman. He was another key player in talking to students, their attitudes, what it meant to be successful, going grad school, et cetera. He got the students to think that there is a life beyond eastern and how to approach that. I hope that answered your question.

RB: Yes. If this is too personal you can not answer but what influenced your decision to leave Eastern when you were working in admission and recruitment?

KH: No, that's not too personal at all. We were right next door to U of M and when you are in recruitment you meet a lot of your contemporaries right there. I would run across admission folks from U of M Dearborn, Flint and Ann Arbor. We would talk and low and behold there was an opportunity at the University of Michigan and I applied. Boom, the rest is history.

RB: Do you think a larger school like U of M with more resources has an easier time with recruiting and making all of these programs for retention? Or does that not matter necessarily?

KH: In a way it does because you when you have resources you can always build on it and expand. U of M definitely had resources to extend for students who qualify but are the edge of admissions. We could talk about how repackage financial aid with a powerful base of alumni and other faculty giving money that allowed to make those changes. Research-you could have a program where you invite students to spend the spring or summer at U of M and let them do research with a top professor. Those things would allow students say "I wasn't thinking about going to U of M but I think I want to go there." So, yes, having more resources means that you can do a lot more. But that doesn't necessarily mean your quality at a smaller school isn't as good. Some folks just like a smaller environment.

RB: What did you get your bachelor's degree in?

KH: In Sociology/Social Work.

RB: Okay. Is it fair to say that the roles you took on as a student influenced your career path?

KH: Oh yeah, definitely. I would say so.

MJ: Random question here. We've mentioned a couple times Chuck Minneman. He gets mentioned everytime we interview. I always wanted to know if you were surprised to find an ally in Chuck? Or I guess why if you were and why not if you weren't. Could you describe him?

KH: His background was on the theology of things. I think he was just a good person deep down. He was concerned, knew the mission of Starkweather Hall, knew the mission of the university and how it could tie in well. As an ally, he was very instrumental in changing the way people thought. He would say "hey, did you think about this?" or "Do you think the university will recognize this if you approach it in a certain way?" He was kind of the person who would make you think before you just jumped in a did things. At the same time, he was willing to stick his neck out like talk to administration on our behalf to make sure things got done. Especially with Campus Service Corps. I met him through Chapter One and got to know him that way. During my senior year, he had an extra room, so I lived with him for a little while. We got to talk about things happening on campus and what was going on around the country. He was very knowledgeable. He had a Yale background so he was aware of the things that upper echelon could do.

RB: Can you describe what Chapter One is since it is no longer a program on campus?

KH: Yeah, Chapter One was- I want to find the right terminology. It was Eastern Michigan University's week long or three day get to the know the campus and faculty program. When you came there, Dr. Buchanan from the speech department came to talk about what it meant to be a student on campus. Dr. Story would come in and talk about listening skills. We had other student leaders that were there and what they liked about the university. Student life, living off

and on campus, what it meant to be on your own for the first time- Chapter One was about those sorts of things.

RB: You said it was a week long?

KH: I want to say it wasn't a week long. It might have been three days like a weekend. Orientation. It was like an orientation.

MJ: So there's nothing in Chapter One about taking over a college? (Laughs)

KH: Oh no! No,no,no. (Laughs) They build their skills for getting to know your professors and the campus. Nothing like that. It was good program. I know the university wanted to do something else and might have added something like that for orientation.

RB: During your time here as a student, when you were involved with this activism, did you ever approach the student senate and student government for support?

KH: I know others did, but I didn't personally. Good question though. I'm sure they gave support for MLK day and things like that.

RB: I remember reading about Richard Skutt. He was student body president at the time of the takeover and he gave support of the student.

KH: Yes. There were a lot of things going on. ROTC was being rocked a little bit.

RB: Were you involved any other demonstrations after Pierce Hall?

KH: No, I think one demonstration is enough in a students life (laughs). It became "you demonstrated, you made your point. What can you do to now to make sure one or two of those things get done by the time you graduate?" My role was more or less how to keep students here on campus so they didn't flunk out as well as in financial aid to make sure they could afford to go.

MJ: Did you talk to new students coming in about activism?

KH: No, I talked strictly programs, what their dreams, their goals and I would say once I saw that student come here it was more or less "what are you involved in?" I told them to take their time and try find their place before getting involved. My wife and I were talking about the way we talked to students who were having issues. It was basically like "if you have an issue, say something."

MJ: Then, did you ever think that now that would be remembered as a subject of a day long presentation and sitting here doing an oral history interview?

KH: To tell you the truth, no. But I knew if people did their reading in the history, it might crop up but never to get to such a development like it did over the summer. That was great.

MJ: One other thing I've been wondering about is that we had a really good talk with John Sanford yesterday. We went to his office.

KH: Oh you went to Lansing? Very good.

MJ: We like to sit face to face whenever we can. First he suggested we do it by phone, but then our boss told us to just go. It was great, sitting in his office with him. We talked a whole about the relationship you all had as activists on campus and how strong those bonds were and how they still are. Do you still feel connected you were protesting with?

KH: Oh yeah, definitely. I might have lost touch those who were arrested with me. I know they graduated but I would like to know how they are doing.

MJ: Why did you lose touch with them?

KH: They were juniors and seniors. Some of them just got out of here. I think the students who got arrested had a big impact as a whole. Those who weren't affiliated with anything, or those affiliated with the fraternities, they were caught up in it and were saying "let my people go." I think the beautiful thing about the black student movement was that we got our voice heard, but we didn't destroy any property. Whereas other protests got a little bit out of hand there.

RB: It just seems late sixties and early seventies was just a restless time here on campus. Speaking as a person of color, a lot of times when you are upset about something, you can't really show your true emotions because you have to worry about the optics. I was wondering was that of concerns of you guys? Was there a level of "we have to present ourselves this way so that we are taken seriously."?

KH: I'm sure that there was a time where we said "okay, enough is enough." If you could see a dean given you the runaround, we knew it was time to take another approach. That different approach could have been where you had to protest, got out there to see the dean or the president and make your concerns known. As far as what it looked like, because other universities were out there heavy, I mean, heavier than we were. I remember vividly, the picture at Cornell. There were so few people of color but they were so intense. You could see some with shotguns out the window. Other schools were going through a little more tougher than we were. So we weren't the first. The whole Civil Rights Movement with Dr. King, that impacted the whole country and students.

RB: This is for our future listeners. You brought a folder with you with documents. Could you describe what the contents are?

KH: The contents are how we started the MLK Day Scholarship. It was signed officially by myself, Mr. Ken Moon who was Dean of Students, Mike Davis, Ralph Gilden who was in charge of financial aid, and the president himself.

RB: That's when you were a student?

KH: Mmhhh. I also have in here some stuff about the Martin Luther Scholarship reports. That's what I brought in the folder.

RB: The creation of the MLK Scholarship was one of the demands, right?

KH: Yes.

RB: So my assumption is that protestors were looking for administration to create that. But it seems like you were instrumental in doing that.

KH: Administration was responsible in seeing that this thing would grow. They worked on workshop, criteria, and who would get it.

RB: So you were sitting in on that process?

KH: Yes.

RB: Did you ever expect that the scholarship would become part of this large celebration that happens every year?

KH: I knew if it grew students would know about it, yeah. I guess when you say in terms that this was a big thing that blew up, I guess the answer would maybe, maybe no. When you look at how it was labeled as the Martin Luther King/Malcolm X Scholarship and then the creation of the program it would it get larger.

MJ: Do you have kids?

KH: Yeah.

MJ: Would you encourage them to get into activism, even if it meant that they would have to go to jail?

KH: Absolutely. As long as they were doing it for the right purposes, they thought it through and thought about the consequences.

MJ: I think we've had varying responses to that. I remember someone saying no.

KH: But if you believe in something, it might lead to jail. Students have died because of things. It's all dependent on what you believe and your stance. You don't want to see them go to jail or get hurt but it might happen.

RB: If you could you boil down your one greatest contribution to Eastern Michigan, what would you say it would be?

KH: Oh boy. I would have to say, meeting the types of men and women that really enjoyed themselves here, who were activists and thought this institution could do a whole better than what it was doing. The other thing would be certainly helping establishing this scholarship that is still living on. Just making sure that students graduate (laughs).

RB: Those are all my questions. Anything else for the record that you would like to share?

KH: I would to say that taking on this venture has been quite a masterful accomplishment. Y'all did a great job this summer in bringing us all together. Hopefully it will be a learning process for other students to see that students could be serious and got things done.

RB: Alright, thank you.