Oral History with Karen Edwards-Hunter

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Oral History with Karen Edwards-Hunter

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Biography

Karen Edwards-Hunter was born in Louisville, Kentucky in 1950 and has lived most of her life there. Her father was a mail carrier and her mother, who was originally a homemaker, was later a Teacher’s Assistant at Perry Elementary School. Edwards-Hunter grew up on 15th Street in the city’s Russell neighborhood and attended Perry Elementary School and Harvey C. Russell Junior High School when both were still segregated. She later attended Louisville Male High School before earning a B.A. in English at Eastern Kentucky University and the University of Louisville. She completed further studies at Bard College in New York and a Master’s degree in teaching theater at the University of Louisville.

Edwards-Hunter’s use of the Western Colored Branch began when she was a child. She visited regularly with her sisters and neighborhood friends. The library supplemented her studies at school and served her many personal reading interests. “Books,” she explains, “were the most important thing in my life.” She also describes the branch as an important place for socialization—“the center of [her] universe” where she spent much time with her sisters, neighborhood friends, and classmates. When Edwards-Hunter was in high school, several of her extracurricular clubs and organizations met regularly at the library. She also used the 10th Street YMCA directly across the street.

Edwards-Hunter, who years ago founded an African-American youth theater troupe called the Advanced Stage Theater Company, is today the Educational Programs Coordinator for a tutoring program that meets regularly at the library. After living for several years in other parts of the Louisville area, she once again resides in the Russell neighborhood.

Transcript

Griffis: This is Dr. Matthew Griffis of the University of Southern Mississippi interviewing Karen Edwards-Hunter on April 25th, 2017. I’m in Hattiesburg Mississippi, in my office at the University; Karen is in Louisville, Kentucky. And because of the distance, we are conducting this interview over the phone.
This is an oral history interview for the *Roots of Community Project*. I'll be asking Karen questions about her recollections using the library known as the Western Branch library in Louisville [KY]—or, the “Western Colored Branch” as it was once known—which was a segregated public library built with funds from Andrew Carnegie’s library building program of the early 20th century. The library first opened in 1905 and then moved into its new Carnegie building, built in the Russell neighborhood on the corner of Tenth and Chestnut Streets, in 1908. Another segregated branch, the Eastern Colored Branch, opened several years later in the Smoketown neighborhood but closed in 1975. The Western Branch remains open today as part of the Louisville Free Public Library.

So, thank you once again, Karen, for donating this interview and participating in the project. My first question: How long did you live—or have you lived—in Louisville?

**KEH:** I was in Louisville almost my entire life. Probably only two, three years have I lived outside of Louisville.

**Griffis:** Okay. And whenabouts was that?

**KEH:** While I was in college.

**Griffis:** Okay. So, you were born in Louisville, then?

**KEH:** Yes.

**Griffis:** In what part of Louisville did you first live when you were younger, when you were a child?

**KEH:** In the Russell neighborhood.

**Griffis:** In the Russell neighborhood. Are you still there now?

**KEH:** I’m back.

**Griffis:** Have you lived in other parts of Louisville, then?

**KEH:** Yes. I’ve lived in Chadley; I’ve lived in the eastern part of the county; and I’ve lived in the extreme southern part of the county.

**Griffis:** What do you remember about Louisville at that time, back in the 50s and 60s as a place to live?

**KEH:** Well, in the 50s … I mean, I was in single digits in terms of age—like really, really young. And our neighborhood was integrated and we were pretty insular in terms of that. I went to a segregated elementary school and a segregated junior high school. When I got in the ninth grade, I went to an integrated high school, and the population of minorities was probably 30 percent or less of the total population of the entire school. I remember
growing up and playing with white kids in the neighborhood, but I never went to school with them.

Griffis: Which schools were those? The elementary and the high school?
KEH: I went to Perry Elementary, I went to Harvey C. Russell Junior High School and I went to Louisville Male High School.

Griffis: And Male High School was integrated?
KEH: Yes.

Griffis: Okay. You said earlier that you lived in an integrated community. Which neighborhood was that?
KEH: I lived in the Russell neighborhood. I lived on Anderson Street, which is approximately one block south of Broadway, between 15th and 16th Streets.

Griffis: How close did you live to the library?
KEH: I lived close enough to be in walking distance. We lived on 15th Street, and we would cross 15th Street and walk down Chestnut. So, it was like two blocks north, and then five blocks east. So, really close.

Griffis: Around what age did you begin using the library?
KEH: I was trying to figure that out the other day; I know it was fairly early. I’m gonna say that my mom ... One of the things that we liked to do was to walk to the library, and we literally walked to the library every day after school. And it was me, my older sister, and then eventually it was me and then the sister under me. And the three of us would walk to the library. That was the one thing that we always ... And I can remember doing it every single day during the school year; I can remember doing it during the summer; I can remember walking to the library in the snow, in the rain, when it was really hot outside ... I can remember that just as vividly as though it was yesterday.

Griffis: So you were fairly regular users of the library, then?
KEH: Not fairly. Regular. Yes, we went to the library quite a bit.

Griffis: And when you went to the library, what kind of things did you do there?
KEH: We were allowed to go to the children’s department and you could check out seven books per day, apiece. And so, we would go to the library every single day, and we would check out books, and we would check out up to seven. And I can remember waiting with anticipation if there was like a series of books, like Beverly Cleary and Beezus, that they had the serial books and we would wait for the new book to come out. And we would mark our calendars just to find out when the newest book was gonna come out. And when that book came out, then we would make it to the library, and we would have had it on reserve so that we could go home and could read it.
And my sisters and I were different kids. We would have reading contests, and the reading contests were to see who could read the most books—that was number one. And then second was to see who could read the fastest. I always won.

**Griffis:** You always won.

**KEH:** Even though my sister was older than me. That was about the only thing I could beat her at was reading and books.

**Griffis:** And again, what kinds of books were these?

**KEH:** These were just—I guess you’d call them chapter books. They were just pre-teen books, probably written for, maybe, third to fifth grade level. And I always read way above my age group in terms of my reading level. And so, they were just … Sometimes I read adventure books; I read biographies; I read whatever type of book sparked my interest. And I didn’t look at reading as something that you did for a school assignment; I looked at reading as something that I just loved to do.

**Griffis:** Were you able to tie your work at the library—what you were doing at the library—in any way with what you were learning in school? Or was it completely separate?

**KEH:** No, it wasn’t completely separate. And I was one of those kids who literally read anything that I could get my hands on. I wasn’t a very picky reader. If it struck my fancy, or if it struck my interest, then I would read it. I can remember reading at the library … encyclopedias, just going through and just looking up stuff. And I remember when I was in—I can’t remember when it was, probably in maybe 7th grade—and we were having a discussion about the Bronte sisters. And the teacher was introducing them and nobody in the class had even heard of the Bronte sisters. But I had just sat down at the library one day and just looked up “B” [in the encyclopedias] and somehow ended up reading about the Bronte sisters and the books that they wrote, and the whole nine yards. And I was the only person in the class who had knowledge of that, because I had read it just perusing through the encyclopedias.

**Griffis:** What can you recall about the librarians? Can you recall what they looked like? Or can you recall their names, or what it was like to speak to them?

**KEH:** I’m going to be honest, I don’t really remember their names. The only one that I do remember is Ms. Bowers, because she had kids that went to the same school that I went to and she had a daughter that was in my class. And she wasn’t at the library very long when I was there, but I do remember her working there. She was really nice; she always dressed very neatly; she always had on makeup and she was very friendly and very helpful.

**Griffis:** What can you recall about the library as a building? You’d walk in the front door—what did it look like, once you got inside?
KEH: To be perfectly honest, the exterior doesn’t look any different now than it did then, except they’ve maybe changed the windows and put protective coverings over it. But the building is pretty much the same.

The inside of the library has probably been remodeled maybe two or three times or more since I was a kid. And we just went through a major remodeling—I think it was in 2008 or 2009. And downstairs, in the basement, was one big huge room. And it had a sliding door that you could divide the rooms off, so if you wanted to you could have a large meeting in one large room or you could close the sliding door or wall and divide it into two separate rooms. So now, when they remodeled it, they removed that sliding wall and just basically made one side into a reference or an archival room, and the other room is a lot smaller than it had been for years, and that’s the room where they have meetings down there. And that’s actually where I teach the reading program, in that smaller room. And there’s an elevator in there now, and it’s more modern. Because as kids, we weren’t allowed to use the elevator. So, I don’t remember whether the elevator was there when I was a kid or not. I don’t think it was.

Griffis: Probably not. There’s a mural down there. Was it …?

KEH: That mural was on the other side, where the reference room is. And the artist came and completely recreated that mural and moved it to the other side of the building.

Griffis: So the one that’s there … It’s painted on there, but it’s not the very first one? It had to be redone?

KEH: No, it’s not the first one. Because when they did the remodeling of the library, they actually tore all that down to do the remodeling. It was closed for about a year. And they were able to get that same artist to come and reproduce it and put it on another wall.

Griffis: Interesting, okay. That’s good to know, because I wasn’t entirely sure about that. I’d heard about the remodeling, but I’d thought: “How would that work with the mural? Wouldn’t the mural have been elsewhere?” And as it turns out, that is so.

As a young child, was there anything in the basement that you used? Were there any programs or anything going on that you used to go down there for?

KEH: We used to go … They used to have the story hours—actually, that was upstairs in the children’s department. But as I got older, sometimes, groups at school—especially when I was in high school—they might have meetings. Because I was a member of the Junior Urban League, and sometimes we would meet at the library and would have committee meetings there. And then there was a group called, I think, the Seniorettes, from high school. So, we used it. And because it was directly across the street from the 10th Street YMCA—which is where we went a lot for parties, especially once I was in high school—we could go to the library after school, get our homework done;
and then if it was my organizational sponsor, then I would go over there and help decorate, help prepare, and take care of that.

**Griffis:** The main floor: In what ways is it different, if at all, now from what you remember back in the 50s and 60s?

**KEH:** Well, for one thing … Of course, it got a lot more modern furniture. And the reception desk—when you come in to check out your books, or whatever—when you walk into the library, it’s directly to your right and sort of slanted at an angle. And before, when you came up the steps and into the library, it was directly in front of you. So, it was more centered.

And to me, especially as a kid, it seemed like it was so much larger. But now that I’m older, I’m like, “Where in the world did all the space go?” Because there were so many more rows and aisles of books that you could peruse. And I can remember, it was just like a rite of passage being able to leave the children’s department and to be able to use the main library.

**Griffis:** And how old were you when that transition took place?

**KEH:** I think you had to stay in the children’s section until you were about twelve. So, sixth grade.

**Griffis:** Do you remember some of the first books that you borrowed from the main library—the adult section? Or, some of the first things you did … ?

**KEH:** I remember I was in the seventh grade. And I took this class called “Health Science and Safety”, and I had to do a science report. And I did this term paper—and for whatever reason, I chose birds. And I did all my research … Because back then, there were no computers; you could only use encyclopedias; and everything you looked up, you had to look up through the Dewey Decimal System and you wrote everything down on cards. That’s how you found your books.

And so, I can remember just going up and down the aisles, and everything was in alphabetical order. And of course, it was divided according to different subjects. And I can just remember going in there and finding the books that I needed to do this research project. Which, by the way, I got an A+ on.

**Griffis:** Good for you [laughs]. You mentioned going to story time … Do you have any specific memories about that experience? When was it—was it on a Saturday?

**KEH:** No, I was thinking about that one, and that one I don’t have a lot of experience with. I’m one of seven children. I remember going to the library with my older sister and the one sister that was under me; but I remember taking the younger sisters to the library and then dropping them off at story time, while I went over to the other part of the library and sat down and found books or I read. I didn’t spend much time in the story time; that wasn’t one of my things that I really wanted to do. I wanted to do more reading.
Griffis: One of seven children? It sounds to me like you all were using the library at one point or another. Were your parents big library users? Or was the use of the library something that was encouraged in school? Or how did you…?

KEH: My parents did not go to the library with us. I don’t remember my mom or my dad ever taking us to the library. But it was one of the things that my sisters and I did every single day. So, it was more or less that …

The love of books was instilled by my father. My father read to us from the books of knowledge—from, I guess, as early as we were able to sit, probably even before we were even willing to sit still and listen—but we had sets of encyclopedias at home, and he made sure that they were updated. They had what they called a yearbook every year, and so we would always had books in the house. But mom and dad didn’t go to the library with us. It was something that we just gravitated towards. My older sister was … I can remember when she was five years old; she would sit those of us that were born at that time down, and she would read to us from the books of knowledge. We had the encyclopedias; we had the books of knowledge in the house. And by the time that all seven of us went to school, we were all reading fluently. And the oldest ones … It was just like, I guess, what was modeled for us. My father read to us; he taught us how to read; and then the older sister would read to the younger siblings, and we would teach … And I can remember my two youngest—sister number six and sister number seven—I can remember sitting down and teaching them the alphabet, simple math problems, how to write their names, and that kind of stuff.

Griffis: Now with seven children, I imagine your mother worked at home?

KEH: My mother was a stay at home mom up until my youngest sister went to kindergarten. And my mother’s very first job outside of the home was as a teacher’s assistant in my baby sister’s classroom.

Griffis: And that was at the school that you attended?

KEH: Yes, it was the same school: Perry Elementary. And my mother was president of the PTA, and she was in and out of school. She was a stickler about getting good grades, which meant A’s; and she was also even more stern about perfect attendance. She didn’t think you could learn if you weren’t there. So, she treasured those perfect attendance certificates as much as she did the honor roll and those kinds of things.

Griffis: What did your father do? What kind of a job or jobs did he have?

KEH: My father was a mail carrier and he carried mail for 43 years. He’s retired from the Post Office. But he was a history buff and he was a wonderful writer. He did go to college; he did not graduate. I think if he had graduated, he probably would have been a history teacher, or something similar to that. And he was an excellent writer.

Griffis: Did he go to college in Louisville?
KEH: He went to Municipal College—which, before the University of Louisville was integrated, that was the segregated portion of it, for what at that time they called “colored people.”

Griffis: What can you recall about the other library users? … I guess, what I’m really wondering is: When you went to the library, there would be other people there—did they seem like strangers to you? Or did you recognize them from other places in the neighborhood, or…?

KEH: It was a neighborhood library. So most of the kids who went there—you either knew them from school, or you knew them from the neighborhood. And so, when we would go to the library, it would be kind of crazy. But we had a route and we walked a certain path every day; and we would stop at our friends’ houses. And I had two friends that lived on Chestnut Street; my sister had a couple of friends that lived on either 15th or Chestnut Street. And we would stop at their houses and get them, and they would walk to the library with us. And especially my oldest sister—she was two years older than me, but she was a real cutie. So, the boys would always wonder where you were going: “We’re going to the library. If you want to spend time with the Edwards sisters, you got to come to the library. We’re gonna go to the library and check out books and read, or we’re gonna do this; and if you want to spend time with us, that’s what you have to do, too.”

The library was certainly the center of our universe at that time. It was a means for socialization, because we would have friends that would be there. And like I said, [there were] social clubs and organizations we would belong to, [and] we would have meetings there.

But for me … Books at one point were the most important things in my life. I mean honestly they were. When I was a kid, I would get in more trouble for sneaking and reading books after lights out. I had a flashlight and I would read under the covers when I was supposed to be asleep. If it was a good book, I didn’t want to put it down. And I had such a love for books, it also got me in trouble too, because at one point I had so many books … Because I would check out books from the library; I would bring them home and I would read them. And I liked to read books over and over. When I read a book, and it was a book that liked, I wouldn’t read it just once; I would read it two or three times and it became like my friend. And at one point I had so many books from the library so overdue that my mom threatened to take my library card if I didn’t take those books back to the library [laughs].

Griffis: Did you ever use—or attempt to use—other libraries in Louisville?

KEH: We used … When I was in high school, we could use the University of Louisville’s library to look up specific things—more advanced things that were very specific, that we may not be able to find at the public library, just because it was, in terms of curriculum that I was taking in high school, they recommended that we go to the University of Louisville library. And we had an agreement that we could use their library, so we went to that one. I can
remember going to the library in Shelby Park, probably maybe only one or two times, because it wasn’t within walking distance of where I lived and we basically really stayed in our neighborhood.

Griffis: The one in Shelby Park—was it integrated?

KEH: By the time that I started going to it, it was.

Griffis: Okay. So, you never visited the main library at all—the main public library, downtown?

KEH: Oh yes, the main library … Actually, everybody used to laugh and joke and say, “You’re at Karen’s table,” because, when I was in high school, I used to go down to the basement of the main library and go to the reference room. And that was a really good place to study, because it was very, very quiet. And they had reference books in there, and I had a table that I would go to. And I would just go in there and study or do my homework, because it was quiet and somewhat isolated. And I could get so much more done than I could at home.

Griffis: I assume it was integrated by the time you were using it, then?

KEH: Yes.

Griffis: Is there any one particularly memorable incident that you experienced at the library that stands out? Maybe finding a book that had a huge impact on your life, or meeting someone that became a great friendship? Anything like that?

KEH: Well, like I told you, I loved to read anything and everything. So, the first time that I was able to go to the adult section of the library, I was perusing … And maybe it wasn’t even supposed to be in that part of the library; I don’t know how I got that book checked out … But I was reading this book and I thought it was kind of interesting—it piqued my interest. And my mother saw it, and she asked me where did I get that book? And I told her, “I got it at the library.” And so, she said, “Do you know what the book is about?” And I said, “Well, the name of the book is Impatient Virginia, but there’s nobody in this book named Virginia”—and that it was just a lot of stuff about a girl who lived on a farm, and she was … a lot of stuff. But the name of the book was Impatient Virginia. And my mother actually let me finish reading the book! Because she kept asking me all these questions, and I had no idea what I was reading. And she was, “It’s totally over your head.”

Griffis: Were there any other places in town that you would say were community meeting places—either generally or specifically for African Americans—in the Russell neighborhood?

KEH: We used to go to this place called Paige’s. And Paige’s was a little—it was on Old Walnut Street, and you could go in there and get frappes, or get drinks and a hamburger. And my older sister let me tag along with her and her group. And I remember that was like the biggest thing for me, being able to go into Paige’s with my older sister and her crowd. And we had a skating rink
down in the West End, and we would go roller skating and we would do that … I’m trying to think what else … And of course, church.

Griffis: What church or churches did your family attend?

KEH: Well, it depended on the years of my childhood. We had a church directly down the street from us, between 16th and 17th on Anderson. It was Shiloh Baptist Church. So, when we would walk to church, my mom made sure that we went to church on Sunday. She didn’t necessarily go with us; sometimes my dad would. Primarily when I was young, that was her time. And she would make sure we went to church, and then eventually …

My mom was an only child, and my grandmother had—it was five children in my grandmother’s family, and my mother for various and sundry reasons was the only child that lived to maturity among my grandmother’s brothers and sisters. So, we were like the only grandchildren, the only nieces and nephews, and so we were kind of doted on. So, every summer, as soon as school was out, we went to Chicago and stayed with my grandmother, and then we visited from family member to family member. So, I don’t remember a whole lot during my youth of what was going on in Louisville, simply because if school was out on a Friday, the following Saturday I was on my way to Chicago. We didn’t come back until the Saturday before Labor Day, because at that time school started the Tuesday after Labor Day.

Griffis: Did you use any of the public libraries there?

KEH: No, not in Chicago. My grandmother and her sisters and my uncle, they took more time with us to show us all of what they call the cultural events. So, they took us to the history and science museums; they took us to the great landmarks.

Back in those days, beaches and resorts were segregated. And so, we would go to Cassopolis, Michigan on vacation while we were in Chicago on vacation. And one of my aunts would take us there every single year. My grandmother would take us to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and I can remember as a child going to the Schlitz Brewery and drinking as much root beer as I could drink [laughs].

Griffis: The last question I have written down here is: When did you stop using the library? And I have that written down because most of the participants I’ve interviewed for this project, so far, stopped using the library when they went away to college. Was that your experience? Where did you go to college, may I ask?

KEH: I went to Eastern Kentucky University and I did the majority of my undergraduate work there. Then I transferred to the University of Louisville—and I also went to graduate school at U of L. And I did scholarship programs at Bard College, which is in Annandale-on-Hudson in upstate New York.

Griffis: And what were those degrees in?
KEH: I have a BA degree in teaching secondary English. I have a Masters—an MAT degree, a Masters in the art of teaching theater with an emphasis on directing.

Griffis: And so I assume, then, that your career was in teaching?

KEH: Yes, originally. I stayed in classroom teaching until I went back to get my Masters degree. And then I decided that I wanted to do theater. So, once I got out of U of L, I started my own theater company. And it was a non-traditional theater company, specifically designed to tour African American theater to the state of Kentucky and the surrounding region where it was not readily available.

Griffis: What was the name of that company?


Griffis: Obviously, when you were away at college, you weren’t using the Western Branch Library. But when you returned—and you lived your adult life and began your career in Louisville—were you using the library then, too?

KEH: Yes. I’ve used the library my entire life.

Griffis: How has it changed? You were there, I assume, when it became integrated. Can you remember anything about that—what that was like?

KEH: Even though it was integrated, it is still predominantly black. There wasn’t that much of a difference.

I go to the library every day. The librarians and the people who work there are primarily Caucasian. But in terms of the percentage of usage, I’m going to say it’s going to be 95 to 99 percent African American.

Griffis: Before we began the interview, I asked—or maybe it was at the beginning of the interview—either way, I asked about where you’re living now. And you said, “I’m back in the Russell neighborhood.” So, it sounds like you spent some time away. Has the neighborhood changed? Is it different at all now than what it was when you were younger?

KEH: Tremendously, yes. The neighborhood has changed. And it’s changed in a lot of ways. I live on Muhammed Ali Boulevard, which used to be Old Walnut Street. And Walnut Street was where there were a lot of historical places. Of course, all of that’s been torn down and I don’t have a lot of memories of that. My older sister, of course, has more than I do; but I don’t have lot of those memories. I read about it.

But in terms of the neighborhood? It’s up and it’s down. My brother is a builder, and the house that we live in is an exact replica of the house that he
built out in Lake Forest, in the extreme eastern part of the city of Louisville. And it’s really kind of out of—how can I say it? You wouldn’t expect to see the house that we live in, in the West End. That kind of thing. And the biggest change in Louisville, especially in the West End, is the violence. It just … The violence in Louisville is just crazy.

Griffis: Much more now than it was previously …

KEH: And it’s gotten—especially the last two years have been horrible. Absolutely horrible.

Griffis: May I ask what brought you back to the Russell neighborhood?

KEH: When my youngest daughter graduated from college, I was living in a five-bedroom home that was way too big. I was the only person in it. My son had passed in 2006, and my older daughter is a nomad and was living in Europe. And there really wasn’t any reason for me to have a house that size. And my brother who is a builder kept telling me—he kept questioning me about retirement: What do you have saved up? What are you doing? And so, I kind of listened to him, because he’s done really well financially. And so, he made me this proposal, and set me on a savings plan, and said, “What are your biggest expenses?” And we went through that.

And the bottom line is: I sold my house, moved into one of his houses to save money—and where I live now is, like I said, not very far from where I grew up. Same basic neighborhood, just on the other side of Broadway. And so, I really came back for—I’m going to say, economics.

Griffis: For economic reasons, yes … Tell me a bit about the tutoring program that you’re involved with at the library.

KEH: The tutoring program has been in existence since, I guess, one of the Bushes was in office: “No Child Left Behind.” And so, when it started, we got monies from the federal government that trickled down and we started this program. And originally, it was students in Grades K through 5, and math and English were a part of the program. And then, by the time that I came to work in this office, which will be seven years ago next month, it was only offered for reading for students in Grades 1, 2, and 3.

And we actually have two sites: We have one for students who go to Portland Elementary School, and they are tutored at the Portland library; and then we have this one, for students who attend Coleridge-Taylor Elementary School, and it’s held at the Western Branch Library. Now, we do have students who can come—anybody who needs help, as long as we have enough room to enroll them. But we don’t provide transportation, so a lot of the kids in the program are students who live really close to the area, or their parents are able to pick them up after the program is over.

So, we work with the kids, and all the kids in the program are kids who need remediation with their reading. Their teachers work with us and let us know where they need the most help. And so, the program starts in late
September—it usually starts between September and October. It varies from year to year, but it’s usually over by the third or fourth week in April. So, it’s a six-month program during the school year. And the kids come to the program. When I started working in the tutoring program, it was three days a week. And so, basically, they got six hours of instruction.

We make sure they get fed—the Lincoln Foundation provides a snack. The kids at the Western Library were able to get into the kids’ café, where they actually got a hot meal; and now the Jefferson County Public Schools has it set up so that the kids who are in the program, they eat at school. And then we walk them from the cafeteria at the school to each one of the sites.

Griffis: Okay. And again, you’ve been doing that for how long?

KEH: Me personally? For seven years.

Griffis: Seven years? Okay.

KEH: Now, I haven’t always been the teacher. It’s been one of my programs that I supervise, but this past year we have a brand-new Director of Education, and so I’m an Educational Programs Coordinator. And she changed our job descriptions, so myself and one of the other coordinators are basically teaching the actual reading program.

Griffis: That sounds like a really, really valuable program.

KEH: We’ve seen kids grow. And the one thing about our programs is that they’re all evaluated, every single one. And when the kids come into the program—we have nine education programs—they take an entrance test, and so we log that in. And then they take a test at the end of the program, and it’s the same one. So, they take a pre- and a post-test, and we can see how much they’ve gained over the time they’ve been with us. And we, without fail, every year, have seen some significant gains with our kids who are in the program.

Griffis: Those are great results. Congratulations on that.

KEH: Thank you. And it’s free. The kids don’t pay.

Griffis: That’s really good. So, it’s interesting how you began to use the library when you were really young … You mentioned how some of your younger sisters, you kind of mentored them—and their use of the library, and integrating reading into their lives—and you taught them things—and now, you’re doing work at the library as a teacher: doing something very similar for a lot of the neighborhood kids. That’s fantastic.

Was there anything that you were expecting me to ask, or hoping that I’d ask, that I didn’t? Or anything else that you’d like to add?

KEH: You pretty much asked all the questions that I was thinking about.

Griffis: Oh, good.
KEH: So, that was good. I think we were pretty thorough; I just hope that this is useful for you.

Griffis: Oh, absolutely! Yes, it will be a very useful interview. And I’d like to thank you again, Karen, for your time and your participation in this project. Your contribution is invaluable. Thank you so much, again.

KEH: Well, you’re very, very welcome. Thank you.