

Interviewee: Eduardo Curry II

Place of interview: 1 Cooper Street (Charleston, S.C.)

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Interviewer: Shuhud Mustafa, Historic Charleston Foundation

Videographer: Emile Charles, Historic Charleston Foundation

Transcriber: Transcribe Me, Inc

BEGIN INTERVIEW

SHUHUD MUSTAFA: This is Shuhud Mustafa. And I am interviewing Eduardo Curry on Monday, July 12th, 2021, at the St. Julian Devine Community Center. Can you say and spell your full name?

EDUARDO CURRY: Eduardo Curry the II. It's E-D-U-A-R-D-O, C-U-R-R-Y, and two capital I's.

SM: Can you tell us about your background?

EC: I guess I'm second- or third-generation Charlestonian. My great-grandmother moved here from Wake Frost, Georgia, and that's how my family was planted here in the Charleston area. Her mother died at a really young age, so she took care of a lot of her brother and sisters, who we had cousins who lived in the Charleston area. So she moved from Wake Frost, Georgia down this way, and married a guy from Georgetown, and that's how we got planted here in the Charleston area. My mom is a judge, and my father's a lawyer here in the Charleston area. My mom works for the Charleston County Probate Court, and my father owns his own standalone law firm, The Curry Law Firm.

SM: Where were you born and raised?

EC: Right here in Charleston, South Carolina, at Roper St. Francis, downtown Charleston.

SM: And where do your family members live now?

EC: Currently, right now, a majority of my family members live in the downtown Charleston area. The other portion live in West Ashley and also in the [Latin?] area as well.

SM: Can you describe the neighborhood you grew up in?

EC: So I grew up in West Ashley, which is kind of suburb-ish out in the West Ashley area. I went to [inaudible] CE Williams and then West Ashley High School. Pretty much middle class is where I grew up in. And that's kind of changed for me because I now live in a predominantly black neighborhood in the Eastside of Charleston, called Rosemont.

SM: And was the neighborhood you grew up in more diverse than the neighborhood you currently live in?

EC: I would say it was about 30/70. My neighborhood was close to a lot of other black neighborhood, but where I specifically lived was 30/70. 30% black, 70% white.

SM: What was your high school like?

EC: My high school was huge. We had approximately 3,000 people that went to my high school. It was pretty much about 50% white, 40% black, and 10% other.

SM: What was the mix at that school like for you, and how did that influence you?

EC: I would say that, at my high school, we still had a lot of division, especially when it came to white and blacks. I played varsity for all four years, so I normally stuck with

athletes. So that's where pretty much my interactions came from, with my teammates and things like that. So I played four years varsity football.

SM: What sorts of classes did you take in high school?

EC: Home economics, forensics, like CSI type of stuff, weights, physical education. I knew that I wanted to go into the criminal justice field since I was in high school. And I really wanted to become a lawyer. But as you can see right now, I'm not a lawyer, so yeah.

SM: What spurred that interest in criminal justice?

EC: Growing up, my father always talked about the criminal justice field. He was a police officer before he became a lawyer. So a lot of the criminal justice system was exposed to us at a very young age. He was also a professor at South Carolina State University, where he taught criminal justice as well.

SM: How did your father's profession influence you personally?

EC: I think that it gave me an opportunity to feel comfortable in my skin, to be able to talk, to express myself, and not to be limited to my own feelings or what I felt, to be able to express that to other people and also to other situations. My grandfather and my father's family, they came from a line of sharecroppers. Her father was a migrant immigrant. So he would go place to place, to do farming in Florida, and things like that. So I came from a understanding of all the walks of life and all socioeconomics. So it didn't matter if you were rich, poor, or middle class, I feel like he gave me an opportunity to be able to work and to speak with each of those classes.

SM: Can you talk a little bit more about your father's experiences as a black police officer? Were there any people who look at him differently because of that?

EC: Yeah. He was a officer in [inaudible] Tennessee, which was a small town but by any means not a black town. He experienced a lot of racism. I think that that made him feel stronger about the criminal justice system, to become a lawyer, to be able to fight for people. His logo was always he's a crime fighter fighting a crime fighter. So it was big for him to be able to fight crime on all of those levels, as a officer, as a educator, as well as a officer, and now as a lawyer as well.

SM: Going back to your educational experiences, what kind of professional and work experience do you have?

EC: So it ranges. Starting with my bachelors degree, I got my bachelors in criminal justice. I also have a masters in mental health counseling. So professionally, I think that all of those kind of merge into what I'm doing here at the recreation, because part of what I'm trying to do is preventative services to programs. And I'm trying to implement programs to deter our kids from street life, or risky behaviors, and things like that, which goes along with basically the family dynamics. So I'm trying to start off at the bottom, with our children, and work my way all the way up, with a holistic approach, with our parents, and grandparents, and things like that as well.

SM: Can you talk a little bit more about your college experience?

EC: So originally, I went to Georgia State University, which is in Atlanta, Georgia, where I met my wife. I was on full scholarship, athlete, there for football. I was part of the inaugural football team there. That experience in itself put me in a different mindset because I really didn't understand how far behind Charleston was until I went to Atlanta. I didn't realize how racist our town was until I went to Atlanta, where all walks of people, all walks of life. Diversity was there. As long as your money was green, you were pretty much accepted. Here, in Charleston, we have a huge class system. We still have a lot of separation based off the old Charleston, the old money. And I didn't realize how far behind we were economically as well as physically. Here, in the Charleston area, you're starting to see a lot of new buildings, new structures pop up. But that was just in the past five years. The Charleston that people are visiting and

seeing now wasn't what I grew up in. It was more dilapidated. It was a lot less newer and kind of spontaneous looking. A lot of the buildings that we have now have been built in the last five years or so.

SM: What place do you think you and your family have in Charleston currently? And can you talk a little bit more about your family?

EC: It's hard, because we're kind of in a mixed up situation. My wife is half-white, half Filipino. She's from Atlanta, Georgia. And she's from a place called Peachtree City, which is a secluded town off of the south side. Not too far away from Riverdale. And it's in Fayetteville County. So she came here after we had our oldest daughter, who is now eight. I was 21. She was 20. And currently, right now, we live in a all-black neighborhood. Our daughter goes to a predominantly black elementary school. But she works in a predominantly white field. So our life is very diverse. We live our whole life in diversity. We have white family members. We have family members from the Philippines. We have black family members. So everything that we do, we try to raise our kids to embrace who they are, and not just shy away, and not just choose one culture over another, but to be immersed in all of our cultures that we have.

SM: How do you talk about diversity and identity with your children and maybe even the children that you work with currently?

EC: So for my children, it's about exposure. The biggest thing is that I do African African family cultural stuff with my daughter, as well as white and Caucasian, as well as Filipino. So we are very heavy immersed in food. The culture, when it comes to dance, always. And always music is the biggest way that I try to expose her to different cultures. Even though we might not always understand all of the words, if we're crossing from a Filipino song, or a Hispanic song, or a Native American song, I try to immerse her into all of that. Of course food is big in my family. I love to eat. So the biggest things that we try to do is we try to always expand our palates to different things and not just the traditional cheeseburgers, french fries, and things like that. Even if it's a different bread than we would eat in the Filipino culture, we try to expose our daughters to all of that. So far, here, at the community center, I've been working hard to expand our kids' palates, but they're very picky in what they eat, so I try to introduce small things. I wanted to introduce them to sushi. So instead of doing traditional sushi, I did a peanut and butter jelly sushi. So they're still eating sushi, but it was peanut butter and jelly style, with the bread, and the jelly, and everything rolled up. Trying to get them to eventually move to the real thing and just trying to expose to them little by little, because if you try to throw them in the pool, they might not necessarily like it or understand it.

SM: What is the name of your community center, and can you talk a little bit more about it?

EC: Certainly. So we're here at the St. Julian Devine Community Center. It's actually named after the first-ever black city councilman here in the Charleston area. St. Julian Devine was not just a city councilman, but a business owner and a activist here in the Eastside of Charleston. He owned, I think, approximately five to six businesses here and was a multiple landowner. So he meant a lot to the Eastside community and led them through civil rights and into the new age that we here now. Of course, right now, the Eastside has changed tremendously. Right now, our councilman is Councilman Mitchell. And he's been doing a wonderful job trying to continue on with that legacy of St. Julian Devine Center. This used to also be the old trash incinerator of Charleston. So where we are currently, off of Cooper Street and East Bay, used to be the edge of the city. So it used to be a landfill. And a majority of the housing and things like that that we have around, and some of the things that we have still, have some historical facts. Our smoke stacks, those used to be the trash incinerators here. So they would actually burn the trash for the whole entire city of Charleston here at this site.

SM: How did St. Julian Devine come to be, and how did you begin to be involved in it?

EC: So I'm not sure exactly what year the city of Charleston actually purchased this building, and took on this building, and made it a recreation center. But I do know that it was to fill a void here on the Eastside of Charleston. And we had approximately two or three schools that were here on the Eastside of Charleston that closed down. And the community centers around this area were Martin Park and Mall Park. Mall Park was cut into fours. And the city was able to take on a piece of it and create a actual recreation center. We, since then, have bought the Shaw Center, which was the old Boys and Girls Club back in the early 2000s, I believe. And that's how that became another site here on the Eastside of Charleston.

SM: And how did you get involved with St. Julian Devine?

EC: So the way that I got involved with St. Julian Devine is, about three years ago, I took on a job as a programs coordinator for the city of Charleston. And my office space was actually here on the second floor. But we didn't have Internet access, so I normally didn't really come to use the computer, or anything, or my office. But I would come in and I would work with Deonte Gibbs and Dylan Gardner, who were the ex-managers of this facility. And what happened was, initially, after we got done with Covid, I kind of helped them with programming. And I was always over here on the Eastside of Charleston through our other playgrounds, which is Martin Park or Mall Park. So I already had a connection with the kids and with their school. Sanders Clyde is obviously near and dear to me because that's where my grandmother started her education career at, as an assistant inside the classroom. So it was big for me to be able to come back to the Eastside, and work with Sanders Clyde, and to work with the Eastside community. So it's always been a focal point for me.

SM: How has working with the city as well as the Eastside been for you?

EC: It's been good. There's been some ups and downs because you have established leadership that's already been here. And with the new wave, I think that it's hard to let go of some of the power, some of the opportunities that were here that are no longer here. So I think that I represent a new wave of thinking. And especially when it comes back to diversity, because of what the Eastside is starting to look like with gentrification. I think that I can coexist no matter what. And I think that that's why I was able to become a manager here is because I think that the city of Charleston believes that I can work with African Americans as well as white persons who are moving here into the area.

SM: And what do the demographics of your community center look like currently?

EC: Right now, we are still predominantly black. But we do have kids from backgrounds of Latino backgrounds and Caucasian backgrounds who do attend our center. But they're our low numbers. Right now, we're still pretty much 95% African American.

SM: In the future, do you see yourself expanding on communities other than the black community and community center? And if so, how do you plan to do that?

EC: So certainly I started that last year with a homeschool group that I brought in. It's called GLOW Home School Group. I brought them in through a person I went to church with. I noticed that her son and daughter were homeschoolers, and I asked, "How can I get involved with their homeschool group and bringing them into the facility?" And that group is primarily white. 95% is white, and only 5% is African American. So bringing them into our programming and including them here in the center and our activities and things like that is something that I've been really targeting them on. So it's been a long process because a lot of them come from St. George, Mount Pleasant, James Island, and different spots, so they don't necessarily want to stay for the whole entire day. But definitely trying to target them as our potential clients moving here in the future.

SM: What role do you think St. Julian Devine has in the Eastside?

EC: Well, to be honest with you, my goal and the role that I see is that St. Julian's going to be the hub. Everything's going to run through St. Julian. All of our services, all of our programs are primarily probably going to come through here. We're not going to be athletic-driven. We're probably going to be more culturally driven in the arts. So visual arts. And I'm working on culinary arts as well, currently, right now. But we'll probably be the new hub for the whole entire Eastside. I think that most of our information, most of our classes is going to come through here. I think that the community is starting to find that there's a home here for them as well, for any meetings and information that they need to get out to the community as well.

SM: Can you talk a little bit more about the sort of programs you offer at St. Julian Devine currently?

EC: Yeah. So currently, right now, we are heavily into our elementary aged kids. So most of our programs are centered around our elementary aged kids. And now I'm trying to work on middle school. So after-school programs and homework help is an essential here. Last year, we were able to have a obstacle course. We were able to have-- dang, you're kind of putting me on the spot. But we were able to have some environmental education. We were able to have poetry. We were able to have something called [Pawsitive Kids?], which is introducing our kids to some of the animals that they're scared of, especially dogs and cats. We were also able to introduce them to music and yoga through technology and things like that as well. So this year, my main focus is going to be on art, dance, and music. Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays are going to be those days that are going to be primarily designated to that. We have Boeing in Charleston, who's going to introduce our kids to aeronautical engineering on Mondays. And on Fridays, we're looking at doing an initiative where we're bringing in different organizations for our parents, as well as fathers and mother support groups.

SM: What sort of impact do you think the programs you are working on currently, as well as the shift to culture, arts, have you had on the kids you're working with?

EC: I really believe that it's going to be able to allow me to plant a seed. Even though we may not have a long period of time with our kids, I'm hoping to plant a seed so that when they get older, or when they move to go to different places, they know exactly what they're looking for and what they want to be involved with. Ultimately, I would say that for the kids who have taken opportunities to utilize our programs, it's been a huge plus. And for those who haven't, I think that they know what we have but are scared to commit. With anything else and in any other community, you have those who are on the fence. A lot of times, they'll peek their head and they'll come around, but they not necessarily are taking advantage of everything that is there for them. But if we can get our people to buy in and give us an opportunity with endless resources-- I think that one of the biggest things of why I took this job was that I could bring all of my resources to one location and one place and be able to give it out to the community. So if we can just get our people to buy in, there's endless stuff that's here for them.

SM: Besides the city of Charleston, who are you collaborating with currently?

EC: Okay. So currently, right now, I'm collaborating with my community's keeper mentor group. I'm collaborating with MUSC. I'm collaborating with a fatherhood initiative, as well as the Charleston [inaudible], which is a male's rites of passage. I'm also collaborating with a couple of nonprofits that are specialized in music, which is Healed with Hearts, as well as I'm working on finalizing something with an African American studies group, as well as the Avery Research, which is a part of the College of Charleston. Burke. So we have a lot of collaborations that we're doing. I think that the biggest thing that we have to focus on is that we have a great facility, but we have to figure out how to piece it up because we really are a narrow part of the programming. So basically, from 2:30 to about 7:30, 8:00 at night, we're back to back to back to back with all of our programming, where we could try to spread it out and kind of get adults to try to come in during the daytime to utilize more of those resources in those times, because that's our dead period, from about 10:00 to about 1:00.

SM: Can you talk a little bit more about parent involvement at St. Julian Devine and how that's been?

EC: Certainly. Our parent involvement is getting better. I'm trying to do a lot more rewards for our kids, and awards for our kids, so our parents will come out to support them now that I found one of my big partnerships with BeAMentor. So with BeAMentor, we've put on parent nights, family game nights. And now we are trying to just continue to create that involvement. And now want to see what their kids are doing and their curiosity, because the kids are like, "I'm excited. I want to go to after-school." I want the parents to be like, "Well, why do you want to go to after-school? Who is over there?" So a lot of times, I go out and walk the community. And when I walk the kids home, introduce myself to the parents, give out my phone number. Let them know who I am, where they can find me, what times I'm in the building, and things like that as well. That's one of the biggest ways I try to create involvement with our parents and stuff like that as well.

SM: So you've talked a little bit more about your work with St. Julian Devine and on the Eastside. How have things changed?

EC: So right now, there's been a clear change, because I think that people know that they're welcome here. That they can come here at any time and that somebody can pretty much be here to welcome them inside their doors. I normally work really late at night. So a lot of my kids know that, "Hey, I can peek in and say what's up to Mr. Eddy. I can play a video game. I can have a snack." I do whatever it takes to make sure that the community knows that this is theirs and that they're welcome here at any time. And I really love our kids. I'm hoping that we grow with them and that they know that this is a safe haven and a safe place.

SM: And can you talk a little bit more about how the Eastside has changed as you've worked and lived here?

EC: Well, so basically, for me, I think that the Eastside has started to become a more valuable and wanted place because of the buildings that have been placed on either side of King Street. Basically Morrison Drive. They're basically squeezing the neighborhood with new constructions, and new bars, and new restaurants. So it used to be like this was the undesired place. But really, in reality, this has always been a middle class type of area. A lot of people would look at the buildings, and the houses that are around here was primarily owned by African Americans. And I remember, growing up, I used to go to-- well, I still go to Ebenezer AME Church. Walking the streets, and seeing black neighbors, and seeing black people. But now you're starting to see more college students. Now you're starting to see more yoga parents. Now you're starting to see more bridge runners. And it used to be, after a certain block of time, you wouldn't come through the Eastside. But now it's more comfortable, more desired, and more laid back.

SM: Can you talk a little bit more how these newcomers have impacted you and how you see yourself collaborating with them and how the Eastside community collaborates with them [crosstalk]?

EC: So I will say this. A lot of the newcomers are very open to helping our kids, mentoring our kids. This is being received the right way so that they know that they're welcome. Overall, though, I believe that if there's a way for us to put out our needs and wants, I think that there's a way that they would be willing to work that out for us.

SM: What is your perspective on activism, and how do you see yourself playing a part of that?

EC: So I'll be honest with you. I'm not a frontstreet guy. I'm not a guy that's going to go and dress up and hit the streets and protest. But I'm more of an educator. I really want to put the information correctly into our kids' heads. I want to teach them the truths about what's really going on. Not the history books that they force us to read inside schools.

One of the biggest things that I always talk about is-- everybody talks about Tulsa, Oklahoma. Well, I found out about Tulsa, Oklahoma five years ago, when I was 25. And at that point in time, I thought I was a really big black history kind of guy and guru. But it was like, "How did I miss something as huge as that?" I knew about places like Rosewood. There was one that happened-- either Durham or Raleigh, right? A race riot that happened there as well. So I knew about some of these areas and some of these things, but I totally missed Tulsa. So bringing that type of information to our kids is important because those are the things that we don't learn about that are lied and covered up that spur that activism and spur that knowledge, I think, is primarily what our kids really need, is they need the truth. They don't need a watered down history book, or watered down history, and just talking about Dr. Martin Luther King. He wasn't our only great African American. Malcolm X wasn't our only great African American. Introducing them to those other people who are great activists here in the Charleston area. Robert Smalls is another huge guy. That's a Civil War guy that a lot of people don't talk about. So bringing that type of history is-- where I see myself in an activism part is giving them that knowledge and hiring people who are studying. We have a nice young lady who works here who's an African American Studies major at College of Charleston.

And the real reason why I hired her is like, "Hey, as you're learning, bring that to our kids. Bring that information back," kind of almost like a Booker T. Washington theory thought process. You go and get the knowledge, and you bring it back to your community and bring it back to those who may not be able to have that type of access.

SM: Can you talk a little bit more about the education that your kids currently receive? Do you think that there are gaps in that?

EC Well, we already know that there's already disparities. That's proven through research. And we already know that there's disparities based off of where our kids are, based off of the Title 1 themes, and stuff like that. We have a Title 1 school. It's Sanders Clyde. But ultimately, I really want to see our kids get a different type of education. Not just one that is the state model. We have to understand that everybody learns different and everybody has different interests. I think that our school system needs to go more into what type of learner that you are. I think that that's something that's determined very early for most of our kids through our testing. So I think that we need to go to a model more of the critical theory thinking. I think that we need to go more into a hands-on approach versus trying to teach all of the theories that we've been taught all of our lives. We know addition is critical, but the reading, are we reading things that are really interesting our kids? And I think that that's probably the reason why reading is not something that is enjoyed. We do 20 minutes of reading here, and my kids about fight me. And I'm just like, "That's only 20 minutes. That's just the basic requirement." So I think that we need to have a different teaching model that's really going to help our kids in the future.

SM And how do you think we can accommodate for that sort of individualized learning that you just talked about?

EC: I think that we really need to step it up in the education system and how we're teaching our teachers. Our teachers are taught, "This one model, and this is it. You take a test on it. If you pass the test, then, great, now you can teach." We have to get more specific into the different learning styles and recognizing that-- one of the biggest things I saw here in the low country is that we're starting to get those types of schools that focus on literacy. We're starting to get those type of schools that focus on athletics. We're starting to get those type of schools that focus on art and things like that. And even college. Early college is now [inaudible] where you're getting basically an associate's degree by the time you graduate. So we're starting to get there, but I think we have to have it more at a elementary to middle school level to help break that up a little bit.

SM: Where do you see yourself and the neighborhood in five to ten years?

EC: To be honest with you, I will always be here. I'm probably going to never sell my house. I'll always live in the downtown area. But so far as working, I don't know. We're not in the progressive recreation department. Movement is very, very limited. We're very top-heavy. And there's only about five positions. So, so far as working for the city of Charleston, I don't know. But I'll always be a part of this community, and I'll always go to church in this community, and I'll always live in this community. I would never change that for anything.

SM: What's your vision for this community in the future?

EC: To really be able to take this punch. Right now, we're getting a huge, huge punch. How we react, how we prepare for the next five to ten years is going to determine our next generation of kids who live here on the Eastside. I think that we have a five-year window, because a lot of the parents-- our guys and girls who are teenagers are going to be parents in about five years more realistically. So they'll be raising the next generation of Eastside Charleston kids. And if we can get it, and they get good jobs, or some type of trade, or something that they could build upon, then I think that we will be okay. But I think that if we stay in the same model, in a rut of not having education, or not having at least a way out, we'll see another generation all fall and get pushed out.

SM: Is there anything else that you haven't talked about that you want to talk about now?

EC: I think that the biggest thing that I would like to speak about is just the education of who we are as Charlestonians. I think that a lot of our true roots of we have been covered up, and that's because they don't really want us who we really are. And it's not about kings and queens, because everybody can be a king and everybody can be a queen. But just having a sense of pride, I think, goes a long way than just covering it up and saying, "Hey, you were supposed to be a millionaire in someplace." We all know that's not true. But just having pride and teaching our kids how to have pride is something that's really, really huge. If we can teach our kids how to have pride in themselves, in where they live, in what they're doing, I think that we'll see a change faster. But it takes somebody to be able to plant that seed not only in the kids, but also the parents. So I know what it is to be a young parent at 21 and not be able to afford diapers, and daycare, and stuff like that. And I get it. But I had to put my bootstraps up and get it like everybody else. I had a support system, but by the same token, I did the right way, I believe. So I think that that's the biggest thing, is teaching everybody like, "Yo, you have options. Your life isn't over at 13, 14, 15. Don't smoke it away. Don't drink it away." Things like that. And that's the biggest thing I think that a lot of our kids are doing. They lost a lot of hope. So trying to get that hope back and have some pride is where I'm at.

SM: Well, I'd like to thank you for sitting down with us today for this oral history. I really appreciated listening to you about your experiences in your work at St. Julian Devine. So thank you.

EC: Appreciate you.