Oral History # 010

An Interview With
David L. Benson

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Interviewer: Lynn Schwartzenburg
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AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID BENSON

LYNN SCHWARTZENBURG: This is Lynn Schwartzenburg interviewing David L. Benson for The oH Project. The interview is taking place on May 20th, 2016 in Houston, Texas. I’m interviewing Mr. Benson to obtain his recollections concerning his experiences working with El Franco Lee, Harris County Commissioner, during the AIDS crisis.

Good morning and welcome.

DAVID BENSON: Good morning. Thank you very much.

LYNN SCHWARTZENBURG: Tell me, when and where were you born?

DAVID BENSON: I was born in a small town in southern Georgia, Waycross, Georgia, October 7th, 1947.

LYNN SCHWARTZENBURG: Tell me about your childhood.

DAVID BENSON: Well, I came up in a very old family. I was raised predominantly by my great-grandmother, who had been born in 1865 at the end of slavery. Her parents had been slaves, and as she told me, the governesses for the owners’ children were allowed to teach the slave children how to read and write after the Emancipation Proclamation. She was a very fortunate woman. She learned to read and write as a child, which was a very valuable ability for black people during that time. She was married in 1883. She had 16 children, three sets of twins, and then she also raised my mother’s generation, which was two women, two men, and my grandmother died in 1918, and my mother died when I was nine, so it was left to her to raise me.
I was raised in an old home in Georgia that was built before 1900, and we were the only members of our neighborhood who didn’t have an inside bathroom, and she wouldn’t allow anybody to change the house. She wanted it to remain as it was, so I was always ashamed to invite friends over. We also had to cut wood. We had running water, but it was out of a spigot, and so we really lived a very kind of old folks’ old-fashioned life, and I received considerable teasing from other kids about how I had to live. But it was a very strong childhood from the standpoint my family was still intact although spread from Brooklyn to Pittsburgh to Miami.

Upon the death of my mother when I was nine, they all took me in and treated me as if I were their own, so I lived in Miami, I lived on the east coast of Florida, I lived in Brooklyn, I lived in Pittsburgh. I got a real good overall, broad childhood experience.

My family members also were what we would say railroad people. They mostly worked for the railroad. Waycross was a very large railroad town. All of the trains from Chicago, New York came through there, so most of my family worked on the railroad either as porters, conductors, or in the shop doing the hard jobs that the railroad provided. It gave us a lot of opportunity to travel. It provided for my uncles and for families in my community a very strong wherewithal for young people to have good opportunities. Everybody I knew went to college. Everybody thought they were going to college. That was just the basic idea. It was a very high-achieving society at that time, and I think my childhood was one of high expectation, probably even a better basic education through high school than most black kids get in black communities today.
SCHWARTZENBURG: What did you want to be when you grew up?

BENSON: I think I started out originally wanting to be a priest. I had seen Spencer Tracy in *Boys Town*, and I just thought that was the greatest thing that he had such control over the young boys and could get them to respect him and care about him, and I just thought that a priest was really a good place to start to try to be a part of changing what was. Being very religious during those days — and I wasn’t even Catholic; I was Methodist who converted to Catholicism when I was 12 — philosophy was religion and religion was philosophy during that day. Jesus was the biggest philosopher I knew.

I think I wanted to be a priest first, and then I saw a show on TV, and I can’t quite remember the name of it, but it was one of the first hour-long shows, and it had to do with a guy being a criminologist, and I don’t know why that stuck with me. I decided that I wanted to be a criminologist. Between that TV show and another one, believe or not, called *Mike Hammer*, I wanted to be a private detective. The combination of criminologist and private detective really just enthused me as a young man, but there were other things.

I wanted to be a writer. I think I tried to start my first novel about fifth grade. I wanted to be a musician. The leader of James Brown’s band when I was in eighth grade taught me how to play saxophone. I think I wanted to be a chemist because I had heard something about being an industrial chemist. I didn’t even know what it meant, but I was good in math and science, so I thought that one might be my possibility.

In 1965, I was asked by someone familiar with an organization called COFO [Council of Federated Organizations] to go to northeastern Mississippi at
the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1965 to do voter registration work. I was, at the time, a chemistry major in college, math minor. I was converted then to become a sociology major, so I went back to my college up North and decided that I would become a sociologist.

SCHWARTZENBURG: What college was that?

BENSON: Rockford University in Rockford, Illinois. It was called Rockford College then. Now they call it Rockford University. I went back and I declared that I wanted my major to be sociology. I had a chemistry advisor from South Africa who was kind of basically racist, and when I went back to tell him that I wanted to change my major, he said, “Well, you don’t know what in the world you want to do, do you?” and so it was kind of a dismissal. From that time on, I was very interested in sociology. I got my BA in sociology. I went to graduate school in sociology. I thought I really wanted to be a social theorist, and I think that’s still what I would like to be.

SCHWARTZENBURG: You’re still working.

BENSON: Yeah, so I’ve gone from priest to social theorist, right?

SCHWARTZENBURG: With a detour into the sciences.

BENSON: That’s right. Sputnik happened, you know, in the late 1950s, and there was a big spurt of science just like they’re trying to revive now through these STEM [science, technology, engineering and mathematics] projects and whatever they want to call them, STEM, STREAM [science, technology, religion, engineering, arts, and math], they change it all. When Sputnik occurred, the Russians beat us to space. As a result, there was this big offensive in the U.S. in science and math to get kids interested in science and math in order to build a space program. We
definitely weren’t going to allow the Russians to beat us to the moon or to Mars
or wherever, and it really spurred an interest in math and science careers that kind
of trickled down to minority groups too because basically I think we were thought
to be not able to be, like sometimes now some have said at Harvard about women,
you know, they’re not built to be scientists, you know. But I think it trickled
down to a lot of people at that time, and so science and math became a central
portion of the high school as well as college curricula, and we were all kind of
advised to seek scientific careers. And sociology was such a relief, but also I saw
it as a very important piece because by doing voters’ registration work in
Mississippi, I saw what the social problems were, and I was converted to want to
do something about it.

SCHWARTZENBURG: After you graduated in sociology, did you get an advanced
degree?

BENSON: I went on to get a doctorate without dissertation in sociology at Michigan
State, and that itself is a book. Since my wife and I have been so involved in
helping young people get to and through college, it’s become more salient to me
how those experiences can be a travail. A lot of people seemingly can go through
school very simply and get it done, but I think during that day because of the
changes — and even me saying to you wanting to become a social theorist, when
I got to Michigan State, I think, as a black man, I was discouraged from thinking
in very broad terms. I was encouraged to become a demographer or a statistician
or something that was more career oriented, even maybe a social worker as such.
But to become a social theorist or to become a thinker or to become what I think a
lot of the other people aspire to be was just kind of just saying, “Well, why do you
want to do that?”

When I got to Michigan State, I was very fortunate to be seen as a new gun in town. Sometimes in graduate school, and I wrote in my journals, you kind of have to be a judoka. It’s a judo kind of thing. Everybody is sparring with concepts and ideas, and everybody is jockeying for a position in the graduate department, and there were some politics that went on during those days that as I look back at them were just insurmountable by a young person, I think, during that time, and the things that we went through to try to pursue our dreams.

Michigan State was a very interesting experience in that there were some severe politics. There were only, I think, three black students out of 180 in grad school at that time, so we fought. We struggled through school. Finally at the time that I was supposed to write my dissertation, my committee pretty much fell apart, and I ended up — I ended up with a man named Lightnin’ Hopkins at the time traveling around playing blues music and all over the world, so I just kind of got intrigued with that and pursued that course and just kind of walked away from it. I probably could have gone back and mended some fences or whatever the deal is, but the people weren’t there anymore. I went into the department when the Chair was a jazz musician, and I came out when the Chair was an agrarian sociologist, so you can imagine the ideological makeup of the department had changed. I went as an existential phenomenological sociologist very steeped in German and French theory, and I came out looking at drug issues in Mexico and Chiapas.

SCHWARTZENBURG: It wasn’t a fit anymore.

BENSON: Yeah, you end up a fit when you went in, but over a four-year period or so
the department had morphed into a completely different thing, and so what was a
fit when you went in, you felt like you were a square peg in a round hole at the
end. I did get a Ph.D. without dissertation, and because of life circumstances and
even opportunities, I just haven’t pursued it any further.

SCHWARTZENBURG: What brought you to Houston?

BENSON: Well, I was fortunate enough to go to a school at Knoxville College in
Tennessee in 1963 between my 11th-grade and 12th-grade year, and it was called
the Summer Studies Skills Program. It was a program created by the Presbyterian
Church as part of its Freedmen’s Society that eventually became the Board of
National Missions when they euphemized that name, but after slavery they began
to help poor black kids get an education. That organization had persisted, and in
1963 they allowed me the opportunity to go to Knoxville College for a summer in
preparation to get better academic opportunities. The Civil Rights Act of 1964
had been passed, and so a lot of schools in the North began to open their doors to
minority students. To prepare those of us who had gone to Southern schools that
may not have given us quite the basis we needed to be able to perform in the very
good schools, they gave us this makeup training, I guess you might say.

I had gone through that program, and I went off to my freshman year at
Rockford, and after my freshman year that program hired me back as an assistant
math teacher. Remember, I was a math major then. I taught the next summer,
and I met a student who lived in Houston, and we became interested in each other.

As a result, the next year, while I was doing voters’ registration work in
Mississippi, it being closer to Houston than northern Illinois or Chicago, I came
over for the Christmas holiday to visit this friend, and she was having her cotillion
ball at the Rice Hotel. These were new freedoms, you know, in Houston, now that black people were allowed to go to the Rice Hotel and have affairs. I wore my first tuxedo, and I escorted her during the Christmas holidays to the cotillion ball at the Rice Hotel, and I was so impressed by Houston because black people were doing well here. Her father was a social worker, and I met a lot of people who were doing well: Debbie Allen, the whole Allen family, and they became quite well-known, Phylicia Rashad, her sister. I was thinking, you know, not only are there opportunities in Houston, they have some really pretty girls here. So first chance I got, I came back to Houston.

As a matter of fact, I went into the Air Force in 1966, and as part of that whole riddle of me trying to resolve how I was going to be able to get back to Houston to get with these people, especially that young woman, I ended up going to Thailand, going to Vietnam, and between Thailand and Vietnam I came back to Houston and I got married, and then I went to Vietnam. I came back from Vietnam. We had a child. So I was here in Houston. Now, with the GI Bill, of course, and my whole aim at that time in the front of my mind was going to school, University of Houston was a very open university at the time, so I used the GI Bill to go back to college, and I had a family and finished college as a married man with a child. So Houston became home as such.

SCHWARTZENBURG: What degree did you get?

BENSON: My BA degree at U of H.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Social work?

BENSON: No. Sociology.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Sociology, yes.
BENSON: A psychology minor.

SCHWARTZENBURG: You had started it at Rockford.

BENSON: At Rockford. I had two years at Rockford. Then I went four years of military and then came back to Houston and finished my BA. But I came back to Houston as a veteran, an older student. I think I really probably needed that maturity. I had finished high school when I was 16, so that was pretty young to go off alone to college. I left home at 16. I didn’t see anybody in my family for eight years. They began to call me the prodigal son because I had left and didn’t go back.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Well, your great-grandmother had passed.

BENSON: My great-grandmother died the day I left for college, as if she had done her job. I remember very clearly walking through our old house, and they had brought her casket and body into the house and they were having her wake as I walked through the house to head to the train station to leave. Leaving her and she having died, I felt that there were — and most of the people in my family were men. I think we had maybe one other woman in our family who was blood kin, and they had gone about their lives, so I really didn’t see any need to return. Probably if she had lived, I probably would have returned regularly, but since she died and I walked through, I thought that phase of my life was done and there was no need to return.

And then the old house was there, and nobody wanted to live in it. It is haunted, and it’s kind of like the movie with Oprah Winfrey, again, Beloved, if you’ve ever seen that movie, and the house is — I mean, I’m not saying that I believe in ghosts or spirits or whatever, but I know that there’s something that is
unexplainable as far as I’m concerned, and nobody wanted to live there because — of those 16 children my great-grandmother had had, you don’t know how many people had died in that house. And so as a boy, I was always told that there were spirits and ghosts, including my mother.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Right, the whole family was still there.

BENSON: The whole family was there. And my aunt would say, “I can see your mother come in,” sometimes. My aunt who contended that she could speak with the dead would say she would see my mother come and put her arm around my shoulders, those kinds of things. I don’t know whether those were controlling mechanisms to get me to do what she wanted, but nevertheless it was enough for me to believe that there was something else other there that I didn’t want to see. There was no return to a haunted house, so I stayed away and I didn’t return until probably after I got out of the military.

SCHWARTZENBURG: What did you do after you graduated from U of H?

BENSON: I got a job as a social worker. My first job was with Neighborhood Centers, and it was a program called Comprehensive Services. We’re still talking the same things to this day. It was an attempt to create a holistic kind of support system for people who, in my case, were junkies who had had children born hooked. I started out with 110 case load, 110 young women, mostly Latina, who were hooked on heroin, who had had babies who were born hooked. My job mostly on the north side of Houston — Gano, Chapman, Fulton, all in that area around Jeff Davis High School and north — I had 110 young women that I became their case worker. During those days too, you did — and being a sociology major, now, there were no jobs per se in sociology; the jobs were social work jobs and usually
only required a BA degree. I case-managed those 110 cases, learned a great deal about junkies, a great deal about Latino community. I learned a great deal about social work through managing those cases.

I was promoted to a case work supervisor, and I had an office over in Fourth Ward and I had another office at the time over in Clayton Homes, which is a public housing project here in Houston, and they were pretty tough places. I got a lot of experience in dealing with the community. I got a lot of experiences in dealing with a lot of different social issues and problems, and it was a good entry point into social services for me.

I also had won an award at University of Houston for academic achievement, called the Joseph S. Werlin Award. It was an award that’s still given. It’s very esteemed now, and I was one of the first recipients. I had been given a scholarship to grad school at U of H, so I was going to grad school, doing social work, and I received a letter out of the blue from Michigan State asking me — and again, this is during the times of affirmative action and them seeking black students — and invited me to grad school at Michigan State. So I got my BA in 1972, and I worked as a social worker until 1973, and then I went off to grad school at Michigan State. So that was my first thing; I got a job as a social worker.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Then after Michigan State?

BENSON: I came back to Houston.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Did your wife go?

BENSON: No. As a matter of fact, before I went to Michigan State, I got a divorce, so I went to Michigan State as a, quote, married man formally, but I got a divorce, and
I came back to Houston every so often, every chance I got. I was really immersed in Houston culture and Houston people, and all my friends were here. And when I left Michigan State, I came back to Houston, and I was fortunate enough to — and there were some other small positions: CETA [Comprehensive Employment and Training Act] worker during the summer for Gulf Coast Community Services as a social worker and a social work supervisor.

But then I received a job from the State of Texas. In 1978 I was hired as a Regional Civil Rights Officer for the State of Texas, and this was during the time that the State of Texas had signed a consent decree that its Merit System — it used to be when you got a job in Texas for the State, you had to take what was called a Merit System exam, and then your score on that test determined whether you were hired or what kind of positions you were hired in. So I had taken several batteries of that exam and had become classified as a Social Worker III and an Admin Tech IV, which were the highest levels during that time. There was no certification for social workers at that time. You could simply say you were a social worker, put a shingle out, and be one. But to work as a social worker, you had to have that Merit System exam.

Well, it was declared discriminatory, and it truly was, and it was a way of making sure that certain people didn’t work for the State. They got sued, and they signed a consent decree saying although it wasn’t discriminatory, they would cease using it and then they would appoint these civil rights officers statewide to look at cases of discrimination within the State structure.

So I became for the Department of Human Services, it was called at that time a Regional Civil Rights Officer for 13 counties in Texas. I did that job for a
period of time, and then I was changed, promoted to a Quality Assurance Worker for the aged, blind, and disabled for 13 counties. And I traveled around, assuring that workers didn’t eliminate people from eligibility for service by overlooking certain elements of their condition. If a person was marginal in terms of receiving services for the aged, blind, and disabled, I would go out and reexamine that situation, for 13 counties, again, to see whether the person could be made eligible and needed to or whether the worker had overlooked something would have made them eligible.

I did that work for a while, and then I was changed and promoted to a Protective Service Worker for the elderly, and I was the only person who was doing that work at that time for the 13 counties. I went through all those counties, and any case that was reported in terms of exploitation, abuse, neglect of a senior citizen, I investigated the case.

Working with addicts, working in the civil rights arena, working in the disability community, and then working in the aged community really gave me a broad cross-section of experience in dealing with different populations from a social-work standpoint.

SCHWARTZENBURG: What 13 counties? What areas?
BENSON: I would say from Wharton to Beaumont, across Southeast Texas. It was a region at that time. I think they’ve changed some of their boundaries since then, of course, but it was a region for the Department of Human Services for the State of Texas.

SCHWARTZENBURG: How long were you with the State of Texas then?
BENSON: I was with them until 1981, and the man that I was traveling with at the time,
Lightnin’ Hopkins a blues Legend. We had gone to Japan, we had gone all over Canada, and while I was doing this work, I was working and still playing music and traveling, playing blues music. He died in January 1982, so it was such a big sea change in what I was doing and in my experience, I decided that I would quit the State and move to New York. I had been enticed by friends and everybody to move to the city, and it always seemed like a great experience, so in 1982 I moved to New York City. I drove taxi in New York for a couple of years and decided, with urging of friends again all over, to come back to Houston.

In 1983 I came back to Houston, and I was fortunate enough to be hired by Mental Health Mental Retardation Authority of Harris County as the Program Director of a community-based program for persons with mental illness. So now, addicts, another genre or class of people to deal with. I was there six years. I moved from Program Director to Assistant Director to eventually the Executive Director of Pyramid House, which was a psychosocial program here in the community, and managed that program as a day program with another program with a location in New Waverly, Texas, an 80-acre farm for persons with mental illness, as well as housing here in Montrose, aggregate, congregate, and independent-living situations for persons with mental illness. I did that for six years. That program became one of the top five programs of its type in the world and was acknowledged as an exemplar and a leader in the field. It was very rewarding work. It was very exciting, creative work, something that we really, truly need in Houston now.

And then at one of our annual fiestas, I was approached by a County Commissioner here in Houston to work for him and do some program design.
With the cross-section of experiences I had had, he thought that I could see what needed to be done. And then also one of our mutual, very close friends was Mickey Leland, the former Congressman who died in an air crash in Northern Africa helping refugee communities. Mickey was a very good friend of mine that gave me a strong global consciousness.

And then I also have a very close friend named Bob Kafka, who is in the Civil Rights Hall of Fame, who had had an accident in the early 1970s in Arizona and had been made paraplegic. Upon his recovery to the extent that he could, we became very active in disability rights. I assisted him co-found the Texas Paralyzed Veterans Association and became very active in activities around people with disabilities.

I was appointed by Ann Richards to a state council on developmental disabilities as a gubernatorial appointee, and I was doing quite a bit of statewide work for people with Alzheimer’s. I was on the Alzheimer’s board, served as a national participant for Pathways to Hope, which was a religious group trying to make people more aware about mental illness. Oh, I just became involved in a lot of issues around physical and mental disabilities for a while.

SCHWARTZENBURG: This was while you were at Pyramid House or after?

BENSON: Bob Kafka stemmed from about 1972 through now. We’re still very close friends. And then the mental-health issue came around Pyramid House, but I stayed very active in disability rights for physical and mental disabilities. So I was serving on the state level. There was a group called Advocacy, Inc., which was a group for persons with disabilities. I served on their board and on state committees. I got really active while at Pyramid House being involved in
statewide activities along those lines, and then when I joined the Commissioner’s office, I became even more involved in probably youth issues and seniors’ issues again, essentially in terms of designing programming.

SCHWARTZENBURG: And who was this County Commissioner?

BENSON: El Franco Lee, who passed January 3rd this year. He was in office 30 years, and I worked for him 26 of those 30 years.

SCHWARTZENBURG: What year did you start working for him?

BENSON: 1990. When Mickey was killed in Africa, there was a kind of a domino effect of positions that needed to be filled, and so I knew all these people from Houston over a long term, and so there were places that opened up in Franco’s staff. One of his staff members, Al Calloway, became a City Council member. There was just kind of a domino effect of availability of positions, and I was fortunate enough to get one at that time.

So I began with Franco in 1990. He was very interested in issues around teen pregnancy, senior services, youth services, and building partnerships in the community. I had proven that I could do that through Pyramid House. As the Executive Director of Pyramid House, I received Mental Health Professional of the Year in 1987–1988, so I had been relatively personally and, I think,
programmatically successful at that time in really addressing a problem that really needed to be looked at and served.

I have to say during that time we had no mentally ill people on the street. We had no homeless mentally ill people. We had housing, rural and urban. We had good day programming for people. I think a lot of the situations that we have now in the county jail were nonexistent because we had good programming.

It didn’t disappear because it wasn’t effective. It disappeared because of corruption, and that’s a good story in and of itself in terms of MHMRA. The executive director was indicted for graft. As a result of them remaking that organization, the people that they brought in couldn’t see the vision, and they were more interested in the fiscal issues than they were in the programmatic issues, so these things were gradually eliminated. As a result, we ended up seeing a lot of the issues that we’ve seen re-arise now because we don’t have those services available to people that need them.

SCHWARTZENBURG: When you went to work for Commissioner Lee, that was 1990, 1992?

BENSON: 1990.

SCHWARTZENBURG: 1990. That was a peak time for the AIDS crisis.

BENSON: Full-blown, full-blown.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Tell me what it’s like when you’re trying to focus on teen pregnancy, youth, and seniors, and building partnerships, but there was this big crisis going on, and I’m sure Commissioner Lee was very involved with the committee meetings and who’s going to take care of funding. Ryan White was coming into being during that time, and the GHAA [Greater Houston Healthcare
Alliance] had been prior to that. Tell me your recollections.

BENSON: The issue had raised its head in my province before then, you know, at
Pyramid House and dealing with persons who are mentally ill and a large number
of those people being in the street, having risky behaviors, being downright
promiscuous, male, female. A lot of my clients at that time were male and female
prostitutes on the street. To address HIV/AIDS at that time or to address AIDS at
that time or body positiveness at that time had already arisen as an issue with the
clients that I had then in terms of helping them become aware even in those days
in terms of needle use, in terms of condom use, which were bad things then.
Nobody wanted to talk about those issues, nobody really, because they saw the
problem as being grounded in the gay community more or less and that the
heterosexual community may have been at risk but only to the extent that it came
in contact with the gay community.

There were a lot of misleading kinds of views at that time that we had to
really deal with clients at Pyramid House, and I think at the time too, I was the
Chair of the West Gray Multi-Service Center. The West Gray Multi-Service
Center had been set aside as a community center for people with disabilities. As I
told you, my friend Bob Kafka, as a major advocate for people with disabilities,
had been one of the grant writers, along with Lex Frieden and some other people,
to create this special Multi-Service Center that was totally accessible for people
with disabilities.

Well, along comes HIV/AIDS, and the disability community, at first in
some very weird ways, began to see the HIV/AIDS community as being
competitive. So especially in that Multi-Service Center, I was elected the Chair
of its Board around 1985 or so, and there had been a move now — as these Multi-Service Centers were designed, they were designed to give leases to community-based groups such that they could have a mutual place that they linked and provided services. The organizations in the Multi-Service Center began to become support groups for the HIV/AIDS pandemic more so than it had been for people with disabilities in wheelchairs or et cetera, so a lot of the people who were in that physical disability community began to take umbrage at the fact that their Multi-Service Center now was becoming an HIV/AIDS Multi-Service Center as opposed to a Multi-Service Center for people with other physical disabilities.

We were building a new swimming pool. A lot of politics, a lot of budgetary issues arose out of that. At the time, I remember there having been a new Director appointed at the Center who was a gay man, and so the disability community kind of — and these things were very silent because you know you have to be careful to not rob Peter to pay Paul and et cetera — began to complain that now Body Positive had an office, the AIDS Society had an office, or Montrose Clinic had an office, or whoever, and they didn’t have an office, so I became kind of an arbiter to begin to assuage that difference such that we all had issues that needed to be addressed and couldn’t we all do that in some sort of concerted, collective way. That was my first involvement in HIV/AIDS issues.

But I do want to say, now, I haven’t been a soldier, I haven’t been a warrior, I haven’t been the people who have been on the “front line of these issues.” I’ve always been in support situations where I had to do things that I thought were ameliorative to help people understand that you don’t have to be
gay, you don’t have to be infected to be concerned about AIDS, no more than I have to be paraplegic to be concerned about people who are disabled. There can be a concern, a social caring and concern, and even an indignation about injustice as it’s aimed at these particular groups. I wasn’t disabled, I wasn’t old yet to deal with seniors, I wasn’t disabled to be a part of the disabled community, I did not have HIV, I wasn’t body positive to be a part of that community, but I think as a social worker and as a sociologist, I was concerned about all those populations, and I certainly didn’t want them to fight each other for the modicum or meager benefits that were available at that time.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Did you get a sense of any lack of trust from the gay community towards you, or did you experience anything like that?

BENSON: No. I think, though, that there was a — even now, there’s a concern. “Why are you concerned about this?” You know what I mean? I’ve known people, a lot of people, who have passed. I know a lot of people who have been affected by the HIV pandemic. We said in a meeting the other day that we don’t say AIDS anymore; we say HIV only, you know. In Ryan White, we were discussing this. In the HIV community, I think — I’ve always lived in Montrose, and I’ve never been homophobic, so I’ve always been able — I hate to put it this way, but I’ve had a lot of friends who were at the advent, I think, of the countercultural gay community in Houston. We always kid about it.

Castle Court, which is next to the Southwest Freeway, is one of the first streets in the city in which there were a collection of gay people who lived in those apartments, and it was seen almost as if it were a gay street. But coming out of the 1960s and the countercultural revolution of the 1960s, love, peace, and
happiness, and I remember in one of the magazines it was seen to be a very 
generalized thing. If we can love each other, then it doesn’t matter whether 
you’re man, woman, child, loving each other, that’s what we’re looking for.

So we never were, my friends and I, we never were homophobic. If a 
person chose to be gay or was — and I think it comes both ways, choosing and 
natural — then, that’s what it was and we didn’t look at it any other way. We 
tried to be nonjudgmental because we didn’t want them to be judgmental, people 
to be judgmental of us for having long hair or being a part of a countercultural 
movement.

Myself, and I say this kind of as an admission on this tape, I’ve always 
been Marxist, and I am a very staunch, I think, leaning — I lean toward being a 
strong Marxist now, if I want to be called anything. If you are part of those 
countercultural movements and you’re antithetical to monopoly capitalism, then 
you don’t want to be caught in that camp of being a part of the closed-minded set 
that is holding something against somebody because they have a particular view 
or a particular lifestyle. So we never were that way. I mean, it never crossed my 
mind and such, and I think the tolerance came out of that countercultural 
movement. And I think even the coming out of people who are gay sort of came 
out of that movement as well because we finally could say I am Marxist, I am 
gay, I am — so what? So what about it? Let’s deal with it.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Do you think that experience or that viewpoint also is a reason 
why Commissioner Lee felt that you’d be valuable?

BENSON: Well, he said to me he was tired of people talking about these issues and not 
doing anything. What I had been able to accomplish, of course with a lot of help,
at Pyramid House was indicative of the social imagination or the sociological imagination that I might have to be able to approach some other issues. Teen pregnancy, and we didn’t approach it from a teen-pregnancy standpoint; we approached from an infant-mortality standpoint. At that time it wasn’t hard to be convinced, just like it wasn’t hard to be convinced to be a part of the anti-HIV movement. Babies were dying in Houston at a rate higher than 23 Third World countries. The March of Dimes was monitoring clinical appointments and availability, and at that time the wait period for a young woman to get an appointment at the clinic, she literally would have to make the appointment before she had sex in order to be seen in the first trimester of her pregnancy.

[END OF AUDIO PART 1]

SCHWARTZENBURG: It takes some planning.

BENSON: Isn’t that something? And so we knew that young women, especially very young women who are not in care by their first trimester, are more likely to have low-weight babies, which are more likely to be disabled, which in the Republican conservative convincing sense are probably going to be a high-cost person the rest of their lives. We knew that in the shadows of the Medical Center, which is the largest in the world, we had babies dying so fast, which also became a part of the mothers’ mortality rates too, morbidity rates. We got people dying, so they’re not only dying because of HIV, they’re dying because of the lack of medical treatment in terms of their pregnancies. There’s a commonality there between HIV and teen pregnancy in that regard in that it is a sexual activity which in our very puritanical society is not looked at as seriously and as strongly as it should be. So sexuality became a theme or a common element of both of those issues, so
how do we talk about risky behaviors in terms of sexuality?

There’s another thing that I’d have to enter into that. My junior and senior years at University of Houston, I worked for a man named James Leslie McCary, and Dr. McCary was one of the top five sexologists in the country, and he had a class at U of H that had 2,000 kids in it, on human sexuality, and I was a proctor for that class. He had other classes, abnormal psych, psychology today. I was the proctor for his classes. But mainly through that abnormal psych and human sexuality classes, I had learned a lot about the realities of sexuality, not just the stereotypes that I had gained in Waycross, Georgia and had carried with me as a young, virile man all my life. I had received training in terms of everything from venereal diseases to pregnancy and delivering babies and all of that. Sexuality wasn’t something that I saw as taboo. It had become something that was very easy to talk about and to relay to other people and not be stuck up about it.

Through McCary’s training and then the advent of HIV and dealing with this teen-pregnancy issue, the theme of sexuality was one that I was comfortable in dealing with, and so I began to work with the Baylor Teen Clinics, Peggy Smith, to create a program in the northeast part of town that dealt with young women to prevent pregnancy, but also to intervene in young women who were below 18 and had become pregnant. It was a very successful design that we came up with, and we were the first to include the male in the formula. Until that time, teen pregnancy was solely a woman’s issue. It was always the young girl who had to suffer the consequences, who had to see her life completely wrecked or changed. She had to do all of the work to overcome that issue, and the man just went on about his business.
We were the first to recommend that we begin to look at the men as well, and we were very surprised. We found out that up to 67 percent of the young women who were impregnated by the time they were 16 were impregnated by men over 21, so it wasn’t just a schoolboy-crush problem, which naively we thought at first. This is a very social issue in which there are young men who are taking advantage of very young girls mostly. And to negative consequence in the sense it is a crime, then it’s very hard to get those men to take responsibility for their actions.

SCHWARTZENBURG: They don’t want to come forward because they committed statutory rape.

BENSON: Sure. Or it’s just like a woman who is a crackhead, who wanted help, but she was pregnant. Now she is going to go to jail for harming the baby. How can she come forth to get help when she’s going to be punished for coming forth for help? It’s the same way, but we were able to design a program that became the March of Dimes national model. I was honored to be invited to Dallas to become a speaker at their national conference. It was how did we put the male into the design of helping or dealing with the issues of teen pregnancy and teen sexual risk-taking?

In the first two years of the program in the ten schools — it was called the Northeast Adolescent Program in the northeast sector of town — in two years, no young woman dropped out of school because of pregnancy. Now, I’m saying that she didn’t drop out of school. That was the indicator that was used. We didn’t stop young people from having sex. I don’t know whether we even lessened the pregnancy rate, but nevertheless those young people who did become pregnant,
we created support mechanisms for them such that if a young woman did become pregnant, she stayed in school, she didn’t miss her homework, and all of those kinds of things.

SCHWARTZENBURG: And she got prenatal care.

BENSON: And she got prenatal care the first trimester, with social-work support, which was a very important piece. They hadn’t thought of that before. We were able to usher through in those two years a lot of fat babies, but they would grow up healthy and they would become full-term children.

It was very successful, and the program then mutated or morphed into becoming a standard part of the delivery of clinical services. We were able to even redesign a static clinic model where you come to get services, you get the services, and you go. No, now you are engaged by a social worker who helps you be able to obtain that service. Your service then is supported by the social worker through the term of that baby, actually in using infant-mortality criteria until that baby is one year old.

You saw this tremendous change in the community. You saw a whole different approach to youth services, medical services in the community, in that those clinics then started doing everything from sports medicine to just regular physicals. Just very quickly, what has happened over the years, even in those clinics — and I say “we” because I still serve on the advisory board — have morphed even now from dealing with teen pregnancy to dealing with STD’s and HIV because now teen pregnancy hasn’t disappeared, and it’s still an issue, but it is not the strongest issue that those clinics face. The strongest issues now, today, that those clinics face are STD’s, especially syphilis, chlamydia, and HIV.
Pretty much there wasn’t a week that passed that I didn’t hear cries about someone in the clinic because they tested positive. But at least we’re doing testing because the priorities for Ryan White now are men having sex with men, and they usually are under 30, under 25; minority women now over 35, and that’s because we had to couch it that way; and usually risky behaviors in the community. You’ve morphed now from teen pregnancy to HIV/AIDS. I’ve seen that in terms of an aspect of my concern and purview dealing with it.

Now, if we go back to the 1980s, or let’s go back to the early 1990s, when Jon Lindsay was the County Judge and Ryan White was funded, of course there was a radicalism in the community that has in retrospect to be tremendously respected because as people were dying and there not being this response to it that should have been, because of the prejudice toward the gay community or a social problem being defined “if it doesn’t affect us, it’s not really a problem” kind of thing, or not seeing how that problem could affect. I’ve seen that with mental illness, also. I’ve seen it with people with disabilities. When it begins to affect people who are close to us, then we change our minds about the character of the people who are affected.

I think prior to the Ryan White Act, pretty much there was some just disgusting kinds of things, everything from HIV coming from sex with monkeys, to you could only contract it through anal sex, or it was g-d’s will. I mean, all of these ridiculous kinds of theories that arose to, in some ways, denigrate the need for proper people to take active measures toward this issue, but people were dying.

When I began to work for the Commissioner, my office was in the curve
on Westheimer, around the 1400 block of Westheimer. Everything that was going on in Montrose, Bering Church, everything in terms of the nascent services during that time, were beginning to bud, but at the same time you saw this horror of people having friends just virtually just almost just dropping dead daily, and the fear, the anxiety, the panic that came out of that because there wasn’t any kind of seeming response or substantive response to try to find a solution. So you had groups like ACT UP [AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power] and very radical groups and individuals who came to the fore to advocate for better services.

When Ryan White was passed and the Ryan White Council was created, of course a lot of those activists were members of that Council. So there was a boiling body of people who wanted something done and wanted something done immediately, and they had no reservation about raising hell about it because it was a life-and-death matter. Ryan White, when it first started, was a very turbulent group, and turbulent to the point where in its nascency not really knowing what it needed to do either in trying to develop services in the community.

Judge Lindsay took action in the early 1990s. Because of the dissent and because of the radicalism that was occurring, and he being a right-wing Republican judge and being in charge of Ryan White, decided he would just shut it down.

Now, in Ryan White law, a lead governmental official in an area is given unilateral oversight of Ryan White funding. Lindsay, as opposed to the Mayor, was given that position, which meant that having unilateral oversight, he didn’t have to ask the rest of the Commissioners Court what to do. He was the boss over
it, as is the County Judge now. So Lindsay decided, because of all the dissent and
the behaviors that he didn’t support, he decided that — one morning they came to
Thomas Street to go to work, the Ryan White support staff, and all of their
computers, files, furniture had been confiscated. They didn’t have a place; they
didn’t have a job.

Now, Lindsay knew what his power was, but a lot of people didn’t
understand how unilateral it was, and at the time, and I won’t name people
necessarily, but they had an Executive Director of Ryan White then who basically
had been given that position because it was a job at the beginning of this new
money that’s available. “Who will we hire to do these things?”

Several people that I had worked with a MHMRA became staff members
of that original Ryan White support group, Charles Henley being one of them who
was at MHMRA with me, and then with the advent of Ryan White was hired by
them. Kate Sexton, who had been the Director of Pyramid House prior to me,
became a staff member of that Ryan White group. You had some people there
who already had experience, especially in mental-health services, who now
became staff members for Ryan White, but you had some people too who weren’t
necessarily that experienced in these issues because these issues were very new
too.

When they came to work in the early 1990s and Lindsay had pretty much
just dismissed them, and I was already hired by Franco, I was asked to become —
and it was an indirect path to this too — I was asked to become the Grant
Manager, the first Grant Manager for a new department in the county called Grant
Management, and I would oversee the millions of dollars that the county received
from various grantors, public and private. But one of the things I would have to accept as the new director of this new department would be oversight of Ryan White.

Of course I accepted that responsibility, and the woman who was over Ryan White at the time didn’t like that change. I don’t think she took anything personal about me. I think it was a matter of her losing her leverage. She went to Lindsay — and you-all may even interview her; her name was Sue Cooper. She’s a person that everybody who’s been around Ryan White knows and very seldom say anything positive about. She decided to go to Lindsay, pull her power card to disallow me to become over Ryan White.

We had a big meeting, and that’s when the decision was made to place the fiscal aspect of Ryan White under the Health Department, and the Judge’s office retained the support part of Ryan White, and that was the reorganization of the Ryan White Council, but for that brief period, I would say two to three weeks at the most, I was briefly in charge of Ryan White.

My boss was always interested in those issues because we’ve always been interested in social issues, period, but there became another little rub there. As I said, the County Judge unilaterally was in charge. There was no need to ask any of the four Commissioners for permission for anything, but the County Judge, if there were something that he did not want to take responsibility for, he brought it to the Court. And so when it would be on the Court agenda, my boss would refuse to vote for it because legally, technically, the County Judge was responsible, and he wanted the County Judge as a conservative Republican to take responsibility of his charge.
It was a formality to say, “I will not vote,” but then in the community it began to appear that my boss wasn’t for those issues that came to the agenda around HIV, which was not true?

My job began then to dispel those constituent inquiries all the time about, “Why didn’t Franco vote for the issue? Why didn’t he vote for the item on the agenda?”

We always had to explain we have no purview; it is a political move by the County Judge to include us in the decisions he doesn’t want to take responsibility for, but he unilaterally makes the decisions that he wants without bringing them to us.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Right, he can’t have it both ways.

BENSON: Yeah. It was so muddled that Franco didn’t like being put in the light that he wasn’t adequately supportive of the initiatives that wanted to deal with HIV.

As a result, when the next County Judge came in, Eckels, I don’t know what negotiations went on, but there was an agreement to informally have a position on the Ryan White Council to which Franco could appoint a person. This was an attempt to give Franco some input into the Council as a kind of ameliorating measure that “I am the County Judge. I am fully responsible, but I’ll give you some indirect word into the process.” That’s how the position that I hold now on Ryan White Council came about; that the Commissioner was allowed to appoint a person to that seat pretty much every year with the Judge’s approval.

My office mate on Westheimer, whom I’ve always suggested that you-all interview as well, Jane Cherry, was one of the original members of the Ryan White Council at that time. Her true liaison from the office was to the Council,
and she’s the one who really saw the horror every day of what was going on because she lives here in Montrose as well, and a lot of her friends, her very close friends, were dying or very ill. Through her I made a lot of friends in the area and was able to see what the picture was, and in those short stints of being in charge of Ryan White, et cetera, I became more aware of the importance of HIV services and how they had to be developed.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Personally, how did you deal with all the death, living here in Montrose?

BENSON: Tough. Went to a lot of funerals. Went to a lot of tributes. Had a lot of people come by the office who were closer and more affected than we were. Jane was very close to a lot of people.

It was like a war. I’ve gone through segregation, which was a war. I’ve gone through Vietnam: 24 months in Southeast Asia. I’ve seen a lot of death, and I think that it was a war-ravaged situation. I mean, if people weren’t dead, they were severely ill. I mean, it was very commonplace. To see the situation we have now in no way depicts what was going on then because there were no medications. The pill burden, even if you could afford it, was so high that you were eating pills as if they were cereal.

The weaknesses. I learned that term “rally.” Before a person dies, the person rallies, you know. They’ve been very ill, and then all of a sudden they rally and you think they’re getting better and they seem stronger, and it really is just their last burst of attempt to stay alive. It became a part of our vocabulary of people rallying, and “he rallied.” It just became a common feature and especially, like I said, here in Montrose, because this being sort of the gay center of town, it
became something that we saw every day or heard about somebody every day.

People hadn’t really made it clear as to we know that condom use or needle use or whatever could be a preventive factor. I don’t know whether those practices were deemed to be as effective as we see now in some ways.

The heat in the community. From a human sexuality standpoint, I think the heat was greater than the common sense, and I think we kid about it sometimes, the brain was in the wrong head. I think at first that heat overrode the lifestyle of gay Houston.

I remember as a taxi driver here when I was in grad school, I would come to Houston and I’d drive taxi to make some money to go back. All of the bars along Westheimer that range from the Ripcord to you name them, these places were coming up so fast and becoming so popular, and they were almost like a vacuum that pulled people into the Montrose area because this is such a new freedom, a newfound freedom that people were taking advantage of because as a gay person, man or woman, it was more allowable to be seen as your true self, and especially in the context of this community. People were moving in and there were activities, and so it became a very, very thick kind of situation. That’s dissipated somewhat now.

SCHWARTZENBURG: It was almost palpable, just that energy.

BENSON: The spirit of that time was almost palpable. Now, maybe that’s one of the reasons why we’re struggling so hard to get the word out, because that community is not as thick as it was. It’s more dissipated spatially as well as maybe even philosophically. During that time, I think there was this amassing of the spirit and the concern, and then death being a very strong driving factor. Not only people
dying, there were so many people ill and weak, and that’s another situation. Now we have committees on HIV and aging.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Yeah, what a concept.

BENSON: Yeah, we’ve come a long way, and not to get ahead of myself necessarily, but that’s one of my biggest fears now. As the epicenter moved out of Montrose and out of this very thick — using a kind of atomic model, this very thick critical mass, now that epicenter has moved from here in Montrose to minority neighborhoods of Southeast Houston and East End Houston for black and Latino communities. As minorities become the major patients and clients, that traction that was created through the radicalism of the gay community at that time is becoming somewhat diluted, I think. If we aren’t careful to remain vigilant advocates for, even now, the enhancement of services, not only just the retention of services, but the enhancement of services, we’ll lose the momentum and the effectiveness that has been gained through the activism of that previous community.

SCHWARTZENBURG: The gay community was out and very active, and Hispanic and African-American communities are more down low and secretive and not out, so it is more challenging.

BENSON: That’s right, and in the black community — there was a racism in the gay community. All right? I mean, to be a Latino gay guy or a black gay guy, unless you were in the down low in the black community, you had to come to this community. You came to these bars. There was still this magnet of all groups to become involved. Now as neighborhoods are segregated and re-segregated and those services have to be in those segregated communities, then it’s possible that
we could lose a lot of the traction that’s been gained, and I’m really afraid of that.

I see the makeup the Council now, for instance. We probably have one, three people on there who remember. Most of the people are very new. I don’t want to take anything away, because they still have the dedication, the knowledge. It’s one of the greatest organizations I’ve been a part of in terms of regular people having input into an issue, but they don’t remember that fight. They don’t remember that people really went to fisticuffs and threw things across the room because people weren’t listening and those kinds of things. A lot of things have been put in place as controlling mechanisms in Ryan White now for that dissent that don’t need to be there anymore, but the people who are currently part of the Council see them as being commonplace.

One example is if someone comes and addresses the Council about services or an issue they have in mind, you know, public input at the beginning of the meeting, the Council is not allowed to ask them questions or make comments. Well, that came out of that period in which when people did come and do that and they were not exactly saying what the people on the Council wanted to hear or they were BS-ing, the Council got on their tails about it, and it became this lively debate. So in order to curtail that, they created these rules that you can’t ask people questions when they come and make presentations. Well, now the Council is very civil and organized. There’s no need to have that rule in place anymore.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Right, and you may need those probing questions to really get more to the heart of it, but you can’t do it.

BENSON: Right, right. One of the things that I’ve been struggling with on the Council in my eight years is this conflict-of-interest thing. In the beginning, because it
was such a nascent body, there were always people looking out for each other or looking out for their friend, trying to push a contract this way, trying to do this that way, so they built in a lot of features to keep people from having conflicts of interest, so conflicts of interest now can go three or four levels. If your mother’s mother’s mother worked for this place, you can’t vote, you know, kind of a thing, and it’s unnecessary now, you see? I mean, conflict of interest is always something that you want to be able to control, but it was at such a level that they had to take radical measures to control it. Now those radical measures aren’t necessary.

When you are in a state of war and you declare control over all of the elements through martial law, once the war is over, liberty should be re-established. You shouldn’t just say we fought a war in 1944. We established martial law. We’re going to have martial law from now on. As things return to a certain normalcy, then you pull back on the martial law and then reinstall the freedoms, right? Now nobody remembers why those things were put into place in the first place, so they seem to be normal now. You know what I mean?

So my case, for instance, working for the Commissioner, I think the Sheriff’s Office receives — this is a round figure — receives about $380,000 as part of a case-management contract in the county jail. Since I work for a Commissioner who has no legal authority over Ryan White, as I just mentioned, but since he has some legal authority over approving the Sheriff’s Department’s budget, and the Sheriff himself is an elected official, which the Commissioner cannot tell him to do anything, but since there’s $380,000 out of the $25 million allocated, I can’t vote. So when you bring that up and say it’s $380,000 of which
I don’t receive personally a penny, my organization directly doesn’t receive a penny, and the vote that my boss has is over the budget of this department, which does not include the $380,000 in any way, and it doesn’t need to come to the Court for approval; do you see?

Through that same thing that we were talking about, they put it on the agenda, it comes to the Court. My boss years ago just gave up on not voting for these things because it caused so much of a problem. So he just as a formality says, “Okay, yes.” Well, he voted on it because it was on the agenda, but it never had to be brought to the agenda in the first place, so where is the conflict of interest? Do you see?

SCHWARTZENBURG: Yes.

BENSON: So when you bring it even to the committee within Ryan White to ask them do I have a conflict, their concern is, and being ushered by the support group, says, “Yes, that is a conflict,” because of the reason I just said. There is no conflict. But that over concern and sensitivity about that came out of that fight, and it was valid at that time, but now it’s not valid anymore. Ryan White is very slow to make those changes. Even the members themselves who are in the committee who consider it don’t remember that history either, so they’re making their decision in a historical vacuum, you see.

There are some things like that that you have to look at that are vestiges of necessity that are no longer needed, and that’s some of the things that I, as an older member of this group, concern myself with. I don’t want us to lose that momentum, because my interest is not whether people are gay or not who are mostly affected by this disease. I am more concerned about people regardless of
what their sexual proclivities or innateness is. That’s not my business.

My concern is the public-health issue, and the public-health issue is that black women, for instance, right now, as part of that, the way they always say it, the question they ask a black woman is, “When did your husband get out of jail?” if she’s HIV positive. That’s why we’re doing black women over 35, because most of them are over 35 and their men are returning from prison or have been in the county jail or whatever the deal is, and we know that the prisons are harbingers of HIV, and we know that it’s still a matter of that single thread of sexuality.

We’re dealing with sexuality as a very general concern, not whether you’re gay or straight, but sexuality in general. And as long as the prison system denies that sex is being had, and men are coming out positive with minimal follow-up services, we’re all at risk, you see? So the woman becomes positive unwittingly. If 25 percent of the people now don’t know they’re infected — that’s a number that we hear very often — then she may become pregnant and have a baby who’s born body positive, even in today’s world.

The issue is not whether gay men had sex. The issue is whether gay men had sex resulting in HIV transmission that may be turned loose on anybody. It’s not an issue of being for a certain proclivity. I think that’s the least of our concerns, is patrolling and managing and policing the bedroom.

SCHWARTZENBURG: That’s right, because you’re not going to be able to do it anyway.

BENSON: This is something that I think constantly we all have to constantly, you know, I won’t say ruminate, but we run through our minds in terms of clarity. The
issues that I mentioned to you, you can see the threads that tie teen pregnancy, young-sexuality issues, even old issues. Thomas Melancon, the noted playwright, he and I have done some things together, notably created a senior-citizens drama group, and one of the things that he addressed in his early senior-citizens plays — and they write them with him — was the relationship of HIV and seniors, and even throw in the little blue pill.

One of his plays, it’s very comical but very serious at the same time, of a man who is taking the blue pill, and his wife dies, and he’s still got a full prescription, so now what happens to him as a sexual being if he’s 75 years old? Is he at risk now, because he’s going to go and probably secure favors from — he’s going to become more risky possibly. That’s what this play was talking about. What happens?

The issue then becomes an issue for everybody. It becomes an issue for the young. It becomes an issue for the old. It becomes an issue for the affected. It becomes an issue for the infected. You have to stay involved in it because all of these things come together at such important points that as a sociologist, as a social worker, as a person who’s interested in helping my community, I have to be concerned about those issues.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Your work is not done.

BENSON: Yeah, that’s right. It never will be, and it’s an intersection of a lot of other issues. It’s not just gay men having sex.

SCHWARTZENBURG: It stopped being just that a long time ago.

BENSON: It affects the whole cross-section, the same way I’m on the board for the Rothko Chapel, and we’re doing a series of symposia coming next spring on
incarceration, there’s no way we can deal with incarceration without dealing with HIV. There’s no way we can deal with incarceration without dealing with male-on-male sex in the community because once a person does, and this may be controversial in some ways, but once taboos have been suspended, behaviors that were previously taboo become easier to be involved in. So men who go to prison, who become involved in the sexual life of the prison, are likely to be involved in that life when they get out of prison, although they may say, “I did it because that’s just out of necessity.” But once the taboo has been suspended, it’s no longer a taboo.

SCHWARTZENBURG: It’s no longer a taboo, right.

BENSON: So we have these issues. We have issues of down low, especially in the black community, in the black power community. And there’s nothing more dangerous than a gay person in the closet, politically. If a person is out and if a person is maybe becoming somewhat comfortable with their personhood, then the danger disappears. But if they’re in fear of being outed and they are in a powerful political, social situation, they will do anything necessary to resist being outed. They become dangerous. You have a lot of people, and I won’t name names here in Houston, but you have a very strong down low community of very powerful individuals.

I was watching — what’s the movie with President, you know, Kevin Spacey? Have you watched that? I saw it last night. I’m mass-watching all these series now, but it’s about him becoming President. Last night, it was the issue of he and his wife both having a very kind of advanced sex life, and the biographer last night was talking to him, and they saw themselves as having a kind of
penchant toward each other and had to back away. Well, this show shows that the President of the United States, according to this TV show, is on the down low.

That’s something that we have to deal with in the HIV community because this is the very area in which you cannot deal with the people who are participating in risky behaviors. Like I said, if 25 percent of the people don’t know that they are HIV positive, and we don’t have good initiatives for testing — and that’s what we try to do somewhat. We try to get people just to test. But then you’ve still got a big job to do. You don’t know what you’re dealing with. I think it’s something that I have to remain involved in as an interested person, and I have to be interested in its makeup as a social worker and a sociologist. I don’t have to be gay, I don’t have to be infected, I don’t have to be — you know what I mean, to be concerned.

SCHWARTZENBURG: You don’t have to be it, to be concerned and do something about it.

BENSON: Sure. Do something about it. If I had to wait until one of those things happened —

SCHWARTZENBURG: You’d be like everybody else.

BENSON: Yeah, that’s right.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Well, I’m glad you’re in the fight.

BENSON: Well, I intend to stay. I’m hoping now in Ryan White that I can remain on the Council as an independent person. I think I’m very respectful and I find it to be, like I said, one of the best community-involved groups that I’ve ever been in, in terms of people being knowledgeable and committed to the issue, and it is proof that regular people can be a part of deciding what happens in their everyday
lives. Bob Kafka taught me years ago in the disability movement, “nothing about us without us.” That’s one of the themes of the disability movement. “Don’t talk about me as if I’m not in the room. Give me some part in terms of design. Don’t talk about me needing a ramp, and then I can’t be a part of the design.” “Nothing about us without us,” and that’s the idea, I think, in terms of the HIV community or of those of us who are struggling with the issues. “Nothing about us without us.” And I think that Ryan White really exemplifies the inclusion of everyday folks into that decision-making process.

I’ve been on the Homeless board, until recently, for 25 years, and homeless people have never been involved, never been involved, except in the most micro formalized ways in determining what services should be provided for them because they’re deemed to be unable to see the issue well enough, which I find just — I have been one of the biggest proponents, from the start, of the involvement of people who were homeless in this issue. This never happened. Now, on the board they may have a formerly-homeless person. Well, that doesn’t really cut it.

When I asked them to create homeless advisory councils, where people could come in and talk about what services and how services should be designed. We have invested money into designing programs that could virtually eliminate homelessness in Houston. Nobody wants to hear it because it is not dealt with by the people who are affected by it. It’s dealt with by people who want to deal with it to not see it or not be confronted with it and not have to face it, so you end up having programs that don’t fit the bill.

SCHWARTZENBURG: That makes them feel better, but it doesn’t help the homeless
BENSON: When I first joined the Homeless board, not to change the subject, they were going through some changes, and we were in a meeting on the 30th floor of a building downtown of one of the major corporations, and the fellow there thought he was very nice in giving us his office space. He had a nice luncheon set up and everything. When I walked over to the window to get my lunch and I looked down 30 floors, I said, and I hadn’t put my brain in gear before I put my mouth in motion, you know, and I said, “You can’t see homeless people from here,” and everybody went quiet. Well, it’s true.

So it’s the same way. Ryan White exemplifies for me the opportunity for people who are at the grassroots level to be involved in the decision-making process of what happens to that $25 million. That’s why I’m very sensitive to being excluded in a vote, you see, because I think that that participation needs to be maximized as opposed to regulated because of a potential conflict. I think that the process has to always be toward making sure that there’s maximum participation and power about those who are involved. If gradually it’s taken away and never returned, then you have just an official body that’s rubber-stamping stuff and not really getting much done. We slide that way all the time in terms of our services. I’ve seen social services go from client-centered services to organizationally-needed services.

The same way with the Homeless Coalition right now, homeless services in Houston now. Don’t get me wrong. When a person is given something to eat or is given something in terms of assistance, that’s fine, but if it’s just that and it has no cumulative, long-term strength, then the problem is just going to persist.
And I’m very simple. I think if you have preventive, educational, and interventional services, just those three things, if they are correct in their approach to the etiology and the nature of the problem, you can get something done. But if they are not, the clients themselves don’t participate, so then you wonder, “Why aren’t we making any headway?”

My soapbox real quickly. Houston is always lauded as a very diverse city, and so if we go back and say how many nationalities live here, how many ethnic groups live here, how many whatever live here, yes, we seem like we are just Joseph’s coat. We seem like we’re just multicolored, multicultural, but Houston is No. 8 in the country in terms of economic segregation. Every school east of Main Street is predominantly minority and probably as segregated as it was prior to 1954. When we look at it, we backslide back into the very condition that we fought against.

That’s what I’m talking about in terms of Ryan White. We’ve backslid because corruption and hate don’t relinquish themselves to sensibility. They fight back. That’s what we don’t realize most times. We think that if we can make sense and show the reality of a situation, people will change their minds. It doesn’t happen that way. You can make all the sense you want, but if it’s not in their interest or their perceived interest, then they will proceed to do exactly what they’ve been doing all along. We can talk about it here in Houston. We talk about, “Oh, we’re so diverse.” But look around you. How many black people or how many Latino people do you see where you live? If schools are continually based on housing, and housing is segregated, schools are going to be segregated by default, and then funding is going to be segregated by intent.
If a kid is going to Lamar High School, black kids can go there, but no white kids are going to go to Wheatley. Until white kids are in Wheatley, no one is going to fund Wheatley to the degree it needs to be funded, so Wheatley is going to be 100 percent, 97, 98 percent black and Latino, and we consider that integration. It’s the same thing. We backslide into these our problematic situations unwittingly, and we’re there before we know it.

We have more black men right now in prison than were in slavery in 1850. Now, we’re not talking about the percentage of the population. We’re talking about numbers.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Raw numbers.

BENSON: We have more black men in prison than were in slavery in 1850. If that’s the case and prisons are harbingers of HIV, look at the issue that we have. But when you say it’s a labor issue, and that’s waxing sociological, most people don’t understand that. “What do you mean, it’s a labor issue?”

Well, it’s a labor issue because you have a workforce that’s unneeded. I was talking to my wife the other day about me going to the tobacco fields when I was a boy. When you had that labor, even then — and I was telling her how they got to needing less and less of us — when they introduced machinery, you didn’t need as many workers. If 10 of us were working, 20 of us working in a tobacco field and a machine comes in and they only need 5, you’ve got 15 people who don’t have jobs.

[END OF AUDIO PART 2]

SCHWARTZENBURG: Nothing to do.

BENSON: Nothing to do. My people came up railroad people. How many people work
on the railroad these days? The railroad was intensive in terms of its labor. You had everything, as I said, from porters to cooks to you name it. In those days, my uncles walked through the railyard stuffing rags into the wheels of trains because the lubricants in those days were made of pith, and which you stuffed this cabinet on the wheel with this pith, and then you oiled it and then stuffed it, closed it, and you did every wheel while the freight train was sitting in the yard. Now, that’s how you lubricated the wheels on the trains.

You don’t need those people anymore walking through those trains, because now the lubricant is just a pad that you toss into the wheel, even if you do that now. Look how many jobs were lost. Passenger trains that had porters, that had cooks, had waiters, they don’t need it anymore.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Nobody will pay for it.

BENSON: The prison system was a labor system. When Lightnin’ Hopkins wrote the song about “You should have been on the Big Brazos down in 1910 when Bud Moore drove those pretty women just like he drove those ugly men,” when Bud Moore would go to the prison, to TDC [Texas Department of Corrections], and TDC would give him prisoners to go work on his farm, then he would indebt them while they were working such that when their time ran out in jail, he still owned them because they owed him money, so you became an indentured labor source.

Well, we don’t need that labor anymore. The machines go out and pick the soy beans or the cotton or the tobacco or whatever the deal is. Black men are not needed anymore. Then when our immigrant labor forces come into the country, we use them and use them in a very discriminant way. When you go over to Harrisburg and pick up some Latino workers, there are not Latino and
black workers there. The black workers are not sitting out under the tree waiting for a ride, but we’ll say, “Oh, they don’t want to work.”

That’s not true. It’s a very segregated labor system. We don’t see that, so we pick up a team of Mexican laborers, take them out, get them to do work, drop them back off. They get no benefits, they get no insurance, they get no nothing, yet we gain the profit from it, but yet we’re against immigration.

But then the black males who are not part of that, because like I said, it’s very ethnically centered, they’re sitting in Fifth Ward. Used to be the time when you had poolrooms, barber shops, beauty parlors, whatever, and that culture was alive, then those black people made their own jobs and created their own little cafes and their own little bars. They are not there anymore. Lyons Avenue is as bare as a church on Sunday morning in terms of its cleanliness. Nobody is living that undercover life. I came up in the poolroom; you know what I mean? It was a whole life.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Right, it was a social structure.

BENSON: It’s not there anymore. All these neighborhoods have been destroyed. I can’t go to a single town, my town in Georgia, the towns I lived in in Florida, Miami — those neighborhoods don’t exist anymore, and they were vibrant, foaming, boiling neighborhoods when I was a kid. Ice cream on the street and all that, but now, they’re dead.
Integration brought about our demise; black folks’, I’m saying. I never was for integration per se; not against it, but I mean my struggle. My struggle was for freedom, not integration. My struggle was for liberation, not integration. I considered an integrated society to be indicative of those freedoms being present, but I wasn’t struggling to be with somebody. You know what I mean? “I want to be in there with my white buddy.” No, that wasn’t it. I was struggling for freedom. I was struggling for choice. I was struggling for the ability to go anywhere I wanted to go. But it was our demise, because as we saw integration as the goal, we lost the thickness of the soup we had created in a segregated society. The same thing is going to happen to Cuba right now.

When I was a boy, or prior to me being here, the teachers in the high school had degrees from Princeton, Yale, because they couldn’t teach anywhere else. So if a black person left Georgia and went to a good school, they could only come back and teach in the black school. So the black school had the best of football coaches, the best of music, the best of the black talent, so it was thick. But then when it integrated and you diluted that talent and then you don’t put that kind of talent back into those schools, you lose the quality, and that’s the way it is now.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Well, I certainly enjoyed talking to you today. Thank you so much for spending time and giving us your perspective. It was very valuable.

BENSON: Thank you. Well, it’s my honor, and I would like to reiterate I’m not one of the big names. I think I’ve always been in the background. I would prefer to continually stay in the background. I think there are a lot of people who really fought very courageously and made their lives dedicated to this proposition,
whether they’ve died or have grown older.

I think that, as I said, my biggest fear is that we don’t lose the traction and momentum that they’ve created, because this issue hasn’t gone away, and it can grow on us to the proportions that it was very easily if we don’t really pay attention to it and let those prejudices go. I think we’ve gotten to a point now where we’re not concerned about people’s sexuality as much as we are about their character. That sounds like a rephrasing of Martin Luther King, I guess, in some ways. We’re more concerned now as to whether you’re a good person and whether I can trust you regardless of what your proclivities are or your choices are. And I think that once we can get to that point, we can get to a point where we can see this problem as a public-health issue and fight it like we fought polio and like we fought tuberculosis and other things that we’ve been able to — hep C, we’ve come so far in terms of hep C treatment, but now we’ve got it down to affordability and get away from those class things.

Age, sex, gender, class, those are the things that really are the matrix we need to look at because all the prejudices and discriminations that we face all hinge around those things. And the irony of it to me is the people who really want to fight against it are the ones who really participate in it in down low ways.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Beware of those who protest too much.

BENSON: If a person says that “I don’t steal,” you better hide the silverware. That’s an old saying, you know. But I am honored to be a part of the fight. I am honored to be interviewed as a part of it, and I intend to continue to be dedicated to the proposition.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Great, thank you.
BENSON: Yeah, thank you.

[END OF AUDIO PART 3]

[INTERVIEW CONCLUDED]

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