

TEMPE HISTORICAL MUSEUM  
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW #: OH-274  
NARRATOR: Gus Edwards  
INTERVIEWER: Aaron Monson  
DATE: July 21, 2008

GE = Gus Edwards  
INT = Interviewer  
\_\_\_\_\_ = Unintelligible  
(*Italics*) = Transcriber's notes

Side A

INT: Today is July 21, 2008, and this is the Tempe Historical Museum's pluralism at ASU renovation interview with Gus Edwards. So let's begin.

Can you start by telling me when and where you were born?

GE: I was born, actually, on a British island at the time called Antigua, but I grew up, really, in St. Thomas, Virgin Islands. Antigua was British; St. Thomas was American. And that's where I was educated primarily. The year when I was born was 1939.

I came to the United States in 1959, and the reason I came was to be an actor, and ultimately I became a playwright, which was an evolution of that process.

INT: Who was the first member of your family to settle in Tempe, or if not in Tempe, in the area?

GE: I am.

INT: And when and why did you come here?

GE: I came here, this was in 1984, I came here as Playwright in Residence to the Department of Theatre here at ASU, and it was a two-year contract. And when I was finished being Playwright in Residence, I really liked the area, not just Tempe, but the Maricopa County area. And my wife had joined me at that time, and she was getting her degree, so she remained. I didn't have a job, so I went back to New York, and I worked in New York in PBS, particularly television. Then I was offered a position to come back, first as Playwright in Residence again, but then it evolved into Director of Multi-Ethnic Theatre, and so that's what brought me back. The question you have here, "What made you

choose ASU as an employer?" My response is that I didn't choose them, they sort of chose me, and I really liked it.

INT: We'll jump around a little bit in the questions, through both the pluralism and ASU, so if you feel like I'm missing something on here, don't worry, we'll come back to it.

You said you were born in Antigua and you grew up in St. Thomas. Tell me a little bit about your family living there, where they lived, and who lived with you.

GE: St. Thomas is really what I call home, simply because I was brought out of Antigua when I was less than three years old, so I know nothing about the island at all. As a matter of fact, occasionally when they make a movie that's shot there, I go to see the movie just to see what it looks like, okay? (laughter) But I grew up in St. Thomas.

Like anybody else, I had a mother, father, brother. I went to a private school, a Catholic school there, and so my education was really via American nuns within the Catholic church, that's how I grew up.

And in that, surrounded by a few local people as well, I inculcated sort of an appreciation for the cultural aspects of life. My own parents were not involved with that. My father ultimately ran the sewer system of the land. My brother wound up working with him. My mom was just a housewife.

And so effectively, I was the first person to, one, leave the island, to seek residence in the continental United States; and, two, not just in my family, but in my entire circle of friends, to select some aspect of the arts in which I chose to make a living or even embrace it as a profession. I was discouraged a lot by people who meant well, but didn't see any future, particularly for somebody of an African American background, in film, or stage for that matter, because we're talking about in the 1950s, when things weren't so open yet for people of color in general. So that was the thing, but still, I wasn't going to be in any way discouraged by it. It was what I wanted to do, and I had seen so many major breakthroughs, people like Sidney Poitier, and stuff like that, that it felt like I had a real chance at it.

And so I moved to the United States in 1959, and since I've been here, I've never gone back to the islands for any extended amount of time. I've been back to visit, when they were around, my parents, and to visit friends and family, but I haven't been there continuously for more than ten days at any given time.

INT: When you were younger, how did your family spend time together?

GE: Well, it was the '50s, and the island itself didn't have that many diversions, so we went to the beach a lot, we did picnics. We went to the movies. I remember going to the movies a lot with my family, that was the way people went to the movies, until I got old enough that I tried to run away from my parents so that they wouldn't influence me, 'cause they didn't like the same movies I did.

And then we would take trips, there were other islands that you could visit, a short boat ride, that sort of thing. I remember thinking for the longest while that our lives seemed limited, because we'd read about all these things in the United States, but in retrospect, I realized that we had a relatively rich life, because it was so much togetherness in terms of family. Since you had no television, really, at the time, and the movies that came to the islands, generally they were approximately about a year old, and they left so quickly—they came and they played one day and they were gone, because we only had one movie theater on the entire island. And so that became the only thing you did, really, was either hang out with your family or hang out with your friends, and that was it.

INT: Do you remember any interesting stories that your family told you, maybe something funny about other family members, or work, or anything . . .

GE: Actually, the most interesting story I can think about my family is the reason they came to St. Thomas in the first place. My father was actually born on St. Thomas, Virgin Islands, but he was taken off the island when he was about six years old. His mom divorced, and so she remarried, and she married a man who lived in the Dominican Republic. So at six years old, him and his brothers were taken to the Dominican Republic, where his first language was Spanish. And my mom, on the other side, came from the French Caribbean island of Dominica, so her first language was Caribbean French, what they called Patois. And my father, once he became an adult, he moved to Antigua, and my mom, for economic reasons, moved to Antigua as well. They met each other, got married, and I was born.

And things economically—this was in the 1930s, 1939 specifically—were so bad that one day, my mother explained to me, she turned to my father and said, “You should go back to St. Thomas, because that’s American and people are making more money there than they’re making here.” To give you an idea of the difference, my father was a machinist, he was making \$45 a month in Antigua; when he went to St. Thomas, where he was born, he was making \$45 a week, so there was the difference.

The off-beat aspect of the story is that St. Thomas was Danish until 1918. My father was born in 1903. It was Danish until 1918, when the United States bought the island from Denmark. The reason they did was because the First World War was looming and they did not want the Germans to have access to South America, so they could probably, if they bought Puerto Rico, St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix, they could probably put their Navy there to patrol the oceans. Anyway, so what had happened is they (*U.S.A.*) naturalized everyone, this was in 1918. Now, my father had been taken off the island from 1906, he didn’t come back to St. Thomas until 1944. So it wasn’t discovered until a few years into his job that, one, he shouldn’t have had a government job, in public works, he shouldn’t have had it because he was not American, he was effectively a Danish citizen. Had he been a criminal and they wanted to deport him, they would have deported him to Denmark, an island he knew nothing about, a language he didn’t speak, or anything. Anyway, they very quickly corrected that error, but it was an amusing fact in our lives. My mother would always tell him, “Go back to Denmark!”, when he had

nothing to do with Denmark. But that was just one of the curiosities of the way things moved and turned around in those islands.

But for me, I was brought up and my brothers were brought up there. So you had this household in which two languages were spoken, one was Spanish and the other was this Caribbean French. And until I got to about ten or twelve years old, those are the languages I spoke. My nickname in the island was Chico, simply because friends of my father would come and what they would say was, “¿Como está el chico?”—“How is the kid?”—and people began to think that was my name. So on the island, they called me Chico all the time, like this, which is \_\_\_\_\_, like that. And then after my brother and I went to school, English became the predominant language, so much so that I forgot I knew Patois, or the French Caribbean language, until about 35 years later when I was watching a movie in New York, and it was in this language, Patois. The film was called “Sugar Cane Alley,” and I realized I didn’t need to read the subtitles. But I totally forgot I ever knew that language; I hadn’t spoken it for 35, close to 40 years.

So that was my background. Once I got out of high school, I made a beeline for New York, because I loved Sidney Poitier, the film actor. He came to make a film there (*on St. Thomas*), and the film was being made with John Cassavetes. I interviewed both of them, and they were very nice people. And I told them of my interest in theater and film, and both said what I had been thinking, but I just needed somebody else to verify it, they said, “Then you shouldn’t stay on this island, you need to get to New York.” So as soon as I graduated, that was the very first thing I did. I worked for about a year, procuring money to leave, and as soon as I did, I left and I went to New York, and I studied acting and I got involved with film.

INT: We’ll get back to that a little bit later; right now, I’d like to talk about your life and living in the city of Tempe today. Specifically I want to ask you a couple of questions about your neighborhood, where you live. Does your neighborhood have a name?

GE: Well, first of all, I don’t live in Tempe; I live in Chandler.

INT: You live in Chandler? Well, okay, let’s hear about it anyway.

GE: Well, I live in the Valley. I teach in Tempe, but I liked Chandler because it was less developed.

One of the things I like about living here in general is that after having lived in New York for as long as I did, and it was close to 35 years, I really wanted a different city, with a slower pace. I’m getting older, I wanted someplace with a slower pace. I wanted somewhere where I could have more time to really meditate on things, think about things, walk around, look at landscape, not high-rises, not deal with excessive traffic, etc., with a population where you weren’t just surrounded by people. And so that’s one of the things I chose about here. After having lived here for nearly 20 years now, my only regret is that I didn’t come sooner. I really like it, and when I’m driving to work sometimes, I’m

just looking at the sun and I'm thinking, "You thought this was a \_\_\_\_\_; it's just that fate didn't move me here sooner."

In terms of being involved directly with the community, I don't know how involved I really am. The community I'm involved with is essentially the community of my students here at ASU. I know my neighbors, they talk to me all the time, occasionally they even ask me about education questions of their own kids, advice, things like that.

I help my wife, she's a teacher herself, and she teaches Drama. She's worked at several schools, Higley High is the most recent. So I go over and I extend my expertise to help her students. Sometimes I bring them here. She brings her students here to interact. Several of them are going to be coming here, for the programs. The costume shop, I know, offers her all sorts of incentives, with borrowing costumes, and whatever expert advice the department can give, we extend.

It's been my philosophy ever since I became involved with the faculty is that ASU cannot be an island unto itself. It is a part of the larger community which surrounds it, and that extends to the entire Maricopa County.

So my title, officially, when I came was Director of Multi-Ethnic Theatre. And what that meant is that for the diverse student, student of color, who comes from a different cultural background, that they would find some harmony in the department, in terms of the work that was selected for them to do. There's two ways you deal with the diversity question. One, the traditional way of teaching theater has been through the Western European perspective or prism. And one of the things I try to do and one reason I was hired was so that the various students can also do works coming out of their own background. For example, there was a Latino man who I cast in a play some years ago, and the character was governor of an island, and the governor was Latino. And he said to me, "In all the years I've worked here at ASU, this is the first time my accent is absolutely right for the role." And he was a very good actor, he had played "The Odd Couple," he had done any number of things, but he always had to change his accent and not draw on his own cultural background. And so that was partly what my job is, and I told him I was doing my job, so to speak.

INT: We'll talk a little bit more about your work and career. I want to ask you a couple more questions first. Can you tell me what role religious faith or spirituality has in your life today?

GE: None particularly. As I said, I grew up in the Catholic church, and so I guess from that perspective, I have a Christian overview of faith. But in terms of embracing any religion proper, no. Periodically, if I feel like going to church, I'll just pick a church and go.

INT: Let's talk just a little bit more in detail about your primary and secondary education on St. Thomas. Can you tell me the names of the schools and which years you were there?

GE: Well, it's only one school I went to, it's called St. Peter and Paul Grammar and High School. It was a Catholic school, as I told you, and so that was the only school. There were only two schools on the island when I was growing up. One was a public school and the other was a private school, which was a Catholic school.

INT: Let's talk a little bit then about what you do here at ASU. You did mention that your title is Director of Multi-Ethnic Theatre. Can you tell me what accomplishments from your tenure here at ASU you're most proud of?

GE: Yeah, a couple of things. One, as a Playwright in Residence, I taught playwriting, and one of the things that I guess I promoted and preached, to put it that way, was the necessity for original plays in the theater spectrum. And I think I went so far as to say that if we stopped writing original plays and stopped doing them and only did the classic Shakespeare everywhere, the theater would be dead. And so what I consider a real success is the fact that after two years of teaching that, five different students I had went out and started their own theater, all dedicated to doing original plays. So it's one thing to teach the gospel, if you want to use a religious analogy; it's another for your disciples to go out and start their own churches. So this, I think, for me, was a signal of success. I was very proud of that.

The other thing that I'm proud of is generally, in any class I teach, what I try to do is teach provocative thinking, teach the students to inculcate, in whatever subject that they embrace for a profession, a provocative thought process. That's a thought process that doesn't follow the traditions, but thinks outside of the box. And it has come back to me in a variety of ways that a good percentage of the students that have interacted with me think like that, and I'm very, very pleased about that.

INT: And what was or is the biggest challenge that you've faced here at ASU, in this department?

GE: I guess the biggest challenge was to, particularly when dealing with Native Americans, get ethnic students to really, if it was their area of interest, to really think or believe that they have a future in either theater or film. And for many of them, it wasn't so much that they didn't believe but that their parents didn't. And they wanted to do it, but couldn't find a means by which they could convince their parents to support, pay for, an education in that area, an area where they didn't see any future for them. And in a lot of ways, and as I said, with Native Americans particularly, it was the toughest. One, because you don't see many Native American plays being done, and we've done some here, and there's a couple of Native American students who've gone out and actually are making a living in the profession. So it was an interesting challenge, but doors have opened.

INT: And tell me about what you consider to be the greatest success in your career at ASU?

GE: I think, again, being able to communicate with my students. And ultimately, what I think is a big success is that they go from students, many of them, to being friends, and I think there's no higher accolade you could get than that. I'm at the point that when I go to

New York now, where I lived for 30 years, I know more former students and visit with them than I do people who I used to know there.

INT: Is there one thing in your career that you either wish you could have accomplished or still would like to accomplish that, for whatever reason, you have not been able to?

GE: Yeah. What I'd love to see now, and this has evolved as time goes on, is some sort of continuous filmmaking community that involves graduate students really, where they could then really create an industry for themselves, rather than have to try to break into the Hollywood industry. I really wish we could do that. And I've said if I could win one of those jackpot lotteries, that's the very thing I would do, is I'd funnel money in that direction.

INT: Is it simply a matter of funding to get that to happen, or are there other steps as well?

GE: Well, you know, I was talking to a few students the other day about this and I was saying since we don't have the money, we have to find another way. And I was saying that generally a film movement begins or evolves around an overriding philosophy. We're talking about the philosophy that informed the French New Wave, the philosophy that informed Dogme 95. And I said to them that I would do it, too, because it's a challenge. I said let us think in terms of a philosophy around which we can decide that we are going to make films, because then other people buy into that, just like the guys with Dogme 95. And so that's what we're looking at now. So it's always a poor excuse to say, "We don't have enough money." We have a mind, we have imagination, we have energy.

INT: Let's talk a little bit about ASU as a whole, from your perspective. What are some of the changes that you've seen happen at the university since you arrived?

GE: The growth of the university. It's become at least twice its size since I've been here. It's a double-edged sword, as far as I'm concerned. The size makes things impersonal, because it can be too extended. Subsequently, things break down into little boutiques, which is good, but I think the quality of education can suffer because of that. The other side of that, what I hope they'll continue doing—and there's a lot of evidence that, not just here, but universities in general may not, because of the economy—is hiring quality teachers, and in order to do that, you have to pay quality salaries. And using tenure, the whole process of tenure, which is always in question, will undercut the education process that is there. When a school is this big, it runs the risk of becoming generic, and that's something that they need to watch for.

INT: And what would you say the university excels the most at?

GE: It excels the most at, right now, of listening closely to voices like mine, like other people, and I'm not very important here, and at least giving it some serious thought process. They don't necessarily act on everything suggested, but at least we get the feeling that people really think about it, so that's something. And that's not necessarily true of other places.

- INT: You described yourself as being “not very important” in the university just a second ago. Are you not involved in any boards or committees?
- GE: Oh, yeah, we all are. I said that, but I meant that in the question of hierarchy of an administration, and they set the rules. But, yes, I’ve been on many, many committees, many boards, both administratively within the college and within the department as well. So when I said that, I wasn’t being self-effacing, I was just pointing out that the President, the Provost, on that level, they really set policies. We can make suggestions, and they’ll listen to us, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that they’ll completely adhere to everything we say. We don’t have the big picture, and so frequently we can be dissatisfied with something, but if we’re able to see the larger picture, we might change our minds. So that’s really what I meant, it’s really just a matter of degree.
- INT: And then I want to ask you, conversely, what you see as ASU’s biggest weaknesses or challenges today?
- GE: Again, the biggest weakness, I think I mentioned before, is the rapid growth, in a couple of areas. One, we grow so fast, and we don’t always have the money to support that growth. Right now, in this department, in the Film program, the program is new, but we have been very severely underfunded, to give the best quality education that we would like to give, so that is a major problem. And I’m not sure how we can solve it. I have suggestions, but those things are only from a very narrow perspective, you see what I’m saying? But somehow they need to address that, on a moment-to-moment basis, a department, or college-to-college basis, and then from there into a department-to-department basis. Because I’m not the only one complaining out here \_\_\_\_\_.
- INT: And how has the university, and also this department, changed as an organization since you arrived?
- GE: The way it has changed that I’ve seen is the faculty has changed, so subsequently much of our perspectives have changed. For instance, we really are generally much more diverse than we were before, our programming, the courses. We have a program called the Borderlands Project that’s maybe our biggest project going. We get some funding for it, but it’s something we’re very proud of because, once again, we’re dealing with what is indigenous to the area, so that we’re not reaching and saying, “Well, Yale is doing this, and so we ought to be doing that,” or Princeton. We say, “What do the people here need, and what riches can we mine from the cultures here that we can pass on?” It’s not just a matter of teaching people how to make a living or even how to think; it’s also teaching people how to be proud of what has been accomplished by their grandmother, their grandfather, other things like that.

Earlier you asked me a question about what I was proud of. We have a program here called the Ambassador Program, and what that is, is the various professors are asked if they would donate time to various schools around. I go to the gym here in the early morning, at six o’clock, and the head of that program introduced herself to me and asked



me if I would. I would never have run into her if it wasn't for that, so there's a sense of community. And I said yes, and I did it last November. It was a sixth grade of Latino kids, and between the responses that they gave me and the letters, everyone wrote me a letter saying how much I had made them aware of the various other possibilities for their future. I asked them, for instance, if each one had, what they wanted to do. And generally speaking, they replicated or repeated the professions of their parents or maybe their uncle, working in an auto service station, be a clerk at the 99¢ Store, etc. And once I would begin to show them how movies are made, and more than that, I showed them some of our students' films which came out of their own Latino background, they were amazed at that, and it began to open up the possibility that maybe they could think about that. And it hadn't even occurred to me how narrow and limited their perspectives were, so this is something I was very pleased about.

Years prior, earlier in my tenure here, I would spend Saturdays in Guadalupe, and the same thing again. I would bring . . . . We even had town halls here in the Fine Arts Center over here, where I'd bring maybe forty or fifty young people, McDonald's would donate hamburgers and drinks, and we would just tell them about the university, so that they could see that as a possible aspect of their future, and several have actually come. The same thing with South Mountain, because they've even been in my class.

And so those are some of the things that the university has given me the opportunity to do, the department encouraging it and sometimes funding it, that have made me proud, and those are some of the changes I've seen. The most important change, for me, has been the diversity of faces I've seen, both in my classes and on the university grounds in any given new semester.

INT: Let's look a little bit into the future, maybe ten, twenty, or even fifty years, if you can look out that far. Where do you think the university and this department will be at that point?

GE: Based on what I'm seeing now, things could do a 360° turn. We even joke about it. The university is expanding itself so much that I would guess, a hundred years from now, fifty years from now, that this won't necessarily be the main campus. There will be campuses of equivalent sizes, maybe five, six or seven, as satellites.

I have said to ethnic students, Latinos and stuff, when we talk about the changes, "If you really want to see change, you have to take over this university." And what I meant, I didn't mean armed resistance or rebellion; I meant study, become presidents, become provosts, become vice presidents. And I suspect in the future, that's what we will see. We will see a Latino, we'll see a Native American, who will be president of ASU, that sort of thing. We're seeing the possibility of an African-American President (*of the U.S.*), and things move very quickly in the country, and I think that's a healthy thing for America. And those are the good things that I see.

From what I'd love to see is that our Film program becomes a department unto itself, and that we are cutting edge, that the ASU Film program becomes the cutting edge for films

around the world. In other words, we're not replicating what Hollywood does so well, but we're showing new directions to things. That would be what I'd hope to see.

INT: Can you relate a funny story from your time in office here, anything, from a meeting or a public address or a play . . .

GE: Well, I'll tell you one, what I think is funny anyway, but it led me to write a book. One of the things I did before coming here is I was a screenwriter, and I wrote the screen adaptation for James Baldwin's novel, Go Tell It On the Mountain. He is a well-reputed African American author, and this is the only book of his that has been made into a film. So I showed it in class, and afterwards, I was talking a little bit about him, and I asked—and this is a class of mostly African American kids, and I got a sense from their expression they didn't know who James Baldwin was. And I said, "Show of hands, somebody tell me who James Baldwin is." And this young man put his hand up, and I said, "Who is he?" And he said, "Isn't he the brother of Alec Baldwin?" (laughter) So when he told me that, I said, "Well, you have the wrong race." And it occurred to me that it wasn't his fault that he didn't know who James Baldwin was; it said that there was a gap in his educational process.

So that moved me to write a book, it's called Black Heroes in Monologues. And the reason for that is it occurred to me that people don't read histories, and I thought well, if you put it in theater, and what I did was, I just came up with actually thirty African American heroes, including James Baldwin. And what I did was I wrote a monologue, as though they were speaking about their lives, and then I put a facing essay telling who they were. Because I figured people would read a one-page synopsis of somebody's life, where they wouldn't read a whole book of three hundred pages, and a monologue would kind of give the body of what they were up to.

And so, that was one thing. But there's always a lot of amusing things that happen in class. That's why I do it all the time; I love it. I have a good time with the students, and I hope they have a good time with me.

INT: I've heard ASU described as a regional leader in integration, and obviously your position here at the university deals with a lot of diversity issues. Can you share your thoughts or experiences about integration at ASU?

GE: What I've seen of it, and ASU is such a large community in terms of its faculty and its staff that it's very difficult to know a lot of people. I even once said to the Dean downstairs—because every time I get put on a panel I find that I have really interesting colleagues, and I would never encounter them if I hadn't been put on the panel—I said, "Every year, you should have at least one party where we all get together at one time." And every Dean I've said that to had one question, "Gus, if you figure out how I'll pay for it, I'll do it, okay?" That's a qualification on what I'm saying.

I have come across, through dance, Africans. I've come across, through art, African Americans. I've come across Latinos, in the very limited scope of the people I've come

across. So my perspective on the diversity aspect of things is that ASU is a leader in some ways. I've also sat on search committees, and I know that we go into various areas in search of diversity for our faculty, and we do have a relatively diverse faculty, also having to do with gender specification as well. So, from my limited perspective, I guess they're doing quite well with it.

INT: Then I would like to also ask you, from your perspective, what other factors have fueled the growth of diversity at ASU, not just in faculty necessarily, but also the student body?

GE: I think one leads to the other. If the faculty makes a student welcome and makes the student feel that they have a place here, the best publicity you get from anything is word of mouth. You can take ads out if you like, but that doesn't do anything more than word of mouth. My classes are popular, and the only reason they're popular is because students tell each other about them. I almost discourage telling people about my classes, and nevertheless, they are always filled up, and I know it's word of mouth that does that.

In our Theatre program, for instance, one of the things that we talked about, and I made a point of it when I first got here, I said, "Saying that we have a multi-ethnic program is one thing; we've got to show it." We've got to show it in the plays that we select, because, again, if people see it on stage, "Oh, this is a place for us to come."

I remember we had a fellow here and he was working in the shop, he was a very good carpenter. And I never really paid much attention to him in the beginning, other than he worked on the sets and stuff. And one day, he came here to my door, and he said, "I'd love to talk to you." I said, "Sure, come on in." And he gave me a play. He was from Hawaii, and he was a playwright. I said, "Why do you bring it to me?" He said, "Well, I heard you talk about \_\_\_\_\_." And I looked at the play, and I really liked it. We did it, and it met with sort of measured success here. But later on, he moved on, and what I found out really about him is was very serious about his own Hawaiian background. He moved to Hawaii, he got his Masters, and he teaches Hawaiian culture. And he did that very same play, and the play won a major Hawaiian award at the time.

So the fact that somebody who I didn't even know, he wasn't like a student presenting himself in my class, because he had no pitch. But he was somebody I just thought was in service to us, and he was getting a message, and he felt welcome. And more than that, he developed his own sense of who he is, to the point where he left, and now that's what he does there. Because that told me we only prepare people here to go out into the world, for themselves. Not for us, but for themselves. And so that's something that I've been at least a part of.

INT: Since we're talking a little bit about the history of the city of Tempe, even though you live in Chandler, I do want your perspective on some of these issues, since you're working here. What do you see as the biggest impact the university has had on the city of Tempe?

GE: I guess two things. One is from the student body perspective, we actually go out, at least from our department, we go out and we enliven aspects of the city, artistically speaking, culturally speaking, that probably would lie dormant. For instance, David Saar, who created Childsplay, which is nationally one of the best-known and one of the best theatres for youth in the whole country, it started here at ASU, in this department. The strongest area of our department, we think, is our Theatre for Youth program. And him moving into Tempe and creating this treasure that really provides for the population, not just the cultural aspect of it, but a voice. I think that's one of the things.

I don't know enough about the Engineering areas or the Legal areas or the Sciences; I know through the Arts. And through the Arts, I see examples of the work all over the new Arts Center. Almost everything that was there the opening week, I was involved in that, were from the Art Department—from Dance, from Music, from Theatre. And so I think that's one of the things, that the growth aspect of Tempe has been through ASU's impact, in terms of the arts. Again, from my very narrow perspective, that's where I've seen it.

Conversely, the City of Tempe, via the Mayor's office, has provided, through grants, many, many systems of support that encourage that. So it's one thing to ignite the interest, but that interest will die if the support isn't forthcoming. So that support has been forthcoming from the City. And even in areas addressing photography, the library you work for, you have a very good photography area there, and I've had the occasion to interact with them. And the support that I have gotten has been wonderful, without hesitation, just in scheduling, you know, sometimes "We can't do it right now, but we can do it in three weeks for you." So there's a nice harmony. And that's one of the things I've said, once I got here, I always feel that a university can't be an island all to itself. I've seen that other places, it is part of the community. And a lot of people who are former faculty, like Lynn Wright and other people like that, now really work for the community and donate their time. So it's an exchange that I see that has happened.

From my point of view, when I first came, I started a workshop, I called it the Multi-Ethnic Workshop, and what I did was I opened it up—I taught it on Saturdays, because I didn't want it to conflict with other people's schedules and even work—and the only requirement—anybody could come, people from the community, from Phoenix, anybody could attend a workshop—was if you wanted a grade, then you had to enroll, because it was officially a class. And I would say maybe 40% to 50% of the actors of color of a certain age came through that workshop. In many cases, a lot of them decided that's where they wanted to go as a profession. But they are now working in Phoenix, either in community theater or professional theater, via some training that they got from this workshop. So, again, it became an exchange.

INT: I'll take this opportunity to flip the tape, because it shows we're running out of time. So this is the end of side one of the Tempe Historical Museum interview with Gus Edwards.

*(end of recording)*

Side B

INT: Side B of the Tempe Historical Museum's renovation interview with Gus Edwards. Let's continue.

I want to ask you a little bit about civic involvement in the Valley. Were you or are you involved in any civic organizations, either in Chandler or Tempe?

GE: No.

INT: Okay. Can you tell me about a time when you advocated for something you believed in strongly, and why you did so?

GE: The only thing I ever advocated for is freedom of expression, on any level, and I've never had the necessity to militate for it, say, in a crowd outside or anything.

The thing that I was most active about is the AIDS epidemic, when it was as strong as it was across the country. There were groups here raising funds, doing whatever they could to provide support for people who were stricken with this dreaded plague, and so I was active in that.

Periodically there are get-togethers where ethnic groups—Latinos, Native Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans—get together and, for one reason or another, they want to assert their identity. And if they ask for my support, either physical or vocal or sometimes financial, I will provide it, as long as I feel that it is responsibly done. I'm not of the '60s-kind of hippie who wants to burn down courthouses; I think that we have systems wherein we can do it in a legal way and affect intelligent change.

INT: In a similar-sounding question, tell me about a time when you stood up for yourself or for something that you believe in?

GE: More often than not, when I've had to stand up for myself—and it's a long, long time now since anyone's really challenged anything I believed in—is when I feel that my sense of my own self or dignity is being encroached upon in a way that is untenable to me. I would say if somebody makes me feel bad about myself, I don't want to know that person. And so I've had a few occasions in life, and they more often than not were not public things.

I grew up on an island where Black people were the majority, so I did not grow up in the severe circumstances that African Americans have grown up in, people of my age anyway, with the picketing in the South and all of that stuff. When I came here, that was happening, and it was new to me, and I've never lived in the South, so I never had that kind of thing.

But on a one-on-one set of circumstances, I've had that. And usually it never had anything to do with race; it had to do with opposition of ideas, and I'm always irritated and angered by people who feel that they must superimpose their own opinion over

yours. I think ideas are valid; even in class I never try to force them to think the way I do. I offer out an opinion, and if somebody disagrees, I'll accept it. I'll say, "Fine, that's your opinion." I'll even concede, I'll say, "You're right, from your point of view." So whenever I have to stand up for anything is when I defend that perspective of myself. But saying that, I will defend that for anyone.

I'll give you an example, this is what talking gets you. Many years ago, we had a Native American filmmaker, and I actually saw his film in Scottsdale, and it had to do with Native American background and stuff like that. And I invited him to show the film in my class. And he had a very, very prickly attitude about things. And ultimately he did it, I wound up getting it, and we paid a fee to have him come to the class, and he showed the film. And after the film was over, there was a Q&A. And within three or four questions, I could see that he was being, one, adversarial to the students and, two, insulting to them. They were Anglo students. And whenever we do racially-specific things, I always tell the students—I think you may have heard me say this—that it's nothing related to you; you did not picket, you did not pull anybody out of their house and hang them, and stuff like that. And the very fact that you're in here says that you want to expand yourselves. So I don't think it's right for any ethnic person to come in and insult students. And so I stopped it and I asked him to leave, because I thought that was very wrong, and I'll defend the students against that kind of abuse. I don't think that's proper. And I even complained to a Native American committee they had here, and they spoke to him as well about that. And one Native American man even said to me, "Gus, I have been nose-to-nose with this guy about his attitude." So you get that kind of thing, these are the kinds of things that sometimes come out.

INT: Can you tell me about a time, if there have been any, where you've felt most misunderstood, or perhaps when someone has made an assumption about you?

GE: All the time. (laughter) Whenever I talk about sex or show anything having to do with sex in films, I'm looking at it from an intellectual perspective, and more often than not, people think it's because I want to show the pornography or I want to do something salacious. (laughter) That's a misunderstanding.

I remember the most silly . . . you talk about silly stories. I don't know where it came from, but it came back to me that students said to other students that I didn't like people wearing baseball caps in my class. I didn't understand why.

Another time, I was teaching Theatre at the time, and I had this book of plays, and it had a dozen plays in it. And I didn't want to burden the students with reading a dozen plays, and so there were certain plays that I felt guys would understand more; there was a play called "Streamers" that was in there. And then there were plays like "Crimes of the Heart," which is about sibling relationships, I thought the girls would understand more and could give us more insight. So I said, "Why don't the girls read these plays, and the guys read these plays, and then we'll discuss them." And it came back to me that I was being sexist. And I had explained in clearer detail than I explained to you my rationale in doing it.

So those are areas where you get misunderstood, and that always happens, and you learn to deal with it.

INT: What would say defines your life experience in the Valley?

GE: My students, again. I keep going back to them, but it is true. There's a saying, "By your students you are taught," and it's true for me. They tell me things, they show me perspectives that I never thought of, even when I think I know something. And so I tell them, and it's very true, I tell them they keep me young, and I mean mentally they keep me young. So that's \_\_\_\_\_.

INT: Here's kind of a broad question. Can you tell me a story about an experience of acceptance that you have had in either the Valley or Tempe?

GE: Yes. When I first came here, I was brand new to it, and there was an organization—and I can't think of the name of the organization, it's on the thing—but they came to see everything I had done here. And the first few years I was here, I was very, very active with theatre, and I did a lot of different theatre. I did Native American, I did Asian American, I did African American, back and forth. And within a year-and-a-half, they gave me their top prize, and I was really surprised by that. I was pleased by it, I was thrilled by it.

Also, the Dean prior to this Dean, I ran a place called Prism, which was a small theatre across the way. And, again, we used to try to do plays that were provocative, plays that were simple, but nevertheless plays that would generate talk. And when he first became Dean of the School of Fine Arts, nine months later, what he did was he wrote their newsletter to us, and he said in that nine months, he had attended every artistic endeavor we had because he wanted to familiarize himself. And he listed the five best things he saw, and three were the plays I had done across the way.

And another thing, again, when you talk about being pleased about things. One day in class—I have big classes, so I don't always know everybody—and periodically sometimes just in conversation, having nothing to do with what is being taught, I'll say, "What cultural thing have you done; tell us about it?" And this girl put her hand up and she said over the weekend, she and her friend went to see this play. It was a play called "Oleanna" and it was done in my theatre, but she didn't know I ran it. And she said, "I wasn't even in the mood to see a play, and I went to see this play, and this play stirred me and my friend up so much, we argued about it all night, and I think I may have lost a friend over it." The play had to do with a professor being accused of sexual harassment of a student, it's a David Mamet play. And the fact that that could stir up that kind of thing told me what we were doing was successful. It wasn't even my production; I just sponsored it. A student had asked me if he could do it, and I said "Sure," and he did it.

So those are the things that please me.

INT: I'm not entirely familiar with Prism. Can you talk a little bit more in detail about what it does and your involvement in it?

GE: I'm not involved with it anymore; I now teach Film. Actually, what has happened is, in the time I've been here—I came here in '84—I taught Theatre, then multi-ethnic stuff, and then evolved into teaching Film. And after I stopped doing Theatre, I turned Prism over to the students. It's actually moved, and this is an example of the university's support, because it was in an old building over on Terrace, and they knocked all those buildings down and re-landscaped everything. But they preserved Prism, and they put it over in the Cornerstone Mall (*970 E. University in ASU Performing and Media Arts building*). And now the students run it, and it's one of the liveliest programs we have, because they have kept it more active than I ever could have kept active. They have something going just about every weekend. And it's totally run by them, and the only time we even look in on it is if they invite us or if they need something. But it was named for the diversity thing, the prismatic colors of the spectrum, is why I called it that, because I named it.

INT: Can you tell me a story about a time, if any, when you felt unsafe or unaccepted in the Valley?

GE: I can't think of any. None.

*(interruption, telephone call)*

INT: Another similar-sounding question. In what way do you feel most connected to Tempe, or the Valley, if you prefer to answer that way?

GE: I feel most connected through the ASU connection. And by that I mean, I could just about walk into any office, and I have for whatever reason, and if I say "I'm a professor at ASU," they say "Oh, yeah, sit down," and they'll talk to me and listen to what it is I'm asking about or requesting.

INT: How would you define your identity, the characteristics of it? Culturally, or professionally?

GE: I would define myself as, first, a teacher. After that, a film person. After that, a theatre person. And a cultural outlaw. (laughter)

Somebody asked me for an interview on the internet, they asked what religion I embraced. I said I worship at the Cathedral of Gordaud (*sp?*). (laughter) \_\_\_\_\_

INT: Can you tell me about your fondest memory of Tempe or Chandler or the Valley, something that really stands out for you, significant either in your own life or the development of the Valley?



GE: Well, it's one quick little thing. When I first came here for my interview, I dressed up. And they sent this man, Johnny Saldana, they sent him to meet me at the airport. And as I got off of the plane and we shook hands and he took me to the car, he said, "Gus, you'll find that virtually nobody in Arizona wears jackets." And that has been the most pleasurable thing, the most truthful thing, and the best aspect of this, is you don't have to wear a jacket anywhere. (laughter)

INT: One more question to wrap up the interview. This is a serious question, so I'm sorry I'm laughing. How can Tempe's, or the Valley's, diverse populations come together and form a more cohesive community?

GE: They have to talk to each other more, I think, and not think of themselves as just individual packets, like Native America here, African American there, Asian American over here. I think if there was more dialogue, just generally as people, respecting each other's cultural specificity, but just that exchange of conversation, of music, of cultural artifacts via painting, dance, whatever, that I think would be wonderful. And that's kind of a Utopia, but still, why not?

INT: All right. We can conclude the interview there. If you have any other final remarks or final statements that you want to make while we're on the record, I'll give you the opportunity to do that now.

GE: No, I think I've said more than enough. (laughter)

INT: All right. Well, then, we'll conclude the Tempe Historical Museum's renovation interview with Gus Edwards on July 21, 2008. Thank you.

GE: Okay, thank you.

*(end of recording)*

Transcribed by Susan Jensen

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