

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Youngstown YMCA Project

Employee Experiences

O. H. 807

HUGH FROST

Interviewed

by

Jeffery S. Collier

on

September 9, 1975

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: HUGH FROST

INTERVIEWER: Jeffery S. Collier

SUBJECT: YMCA involvement, personal history, youth experience, YMCA career, West Federal YMCA involvement

DATE: September 9, 1975

C: This is Jeff Collier. I'm with the Youngstown State University Oral History Program. I'm sitting today with Mr. Hugh Frost in his office at 200 Kilcawley Center at Youngstown State University. Today's date is September 9, 1975. It is about 3:30 p.m.

Mr. Frost, could you give me some history about yourself, where you were born and raised, your education as far as high school, and then also your college education. Sort of bring myself and the tape up-to-date as to where you've worked and things like that?

F: First, I was born in Youngstown. I was born in Brier Hill, 59 Spruce Street. I attended the Youngstown public school system, Covington Street School, Hayes School, and Rayen School. I went to the service and after returning from the service I attended Bluffton College where I received my B. S. degree. I went to Case Western Reserve School of Applied Social Sciences in social work, and I completed two years; I did my field work, but I did not get the degree because at that time I was at a social agency and I was going to school while I worked at the agency. I have a Master's degree from Westminster College in education and psychology. I've had a number of jobs. I'm a certified YMCA secretary. I worked, likewise, in Kinsman, Ohio and did my field work there. After graduation they wanted to hire me, but I was hired six months prior to graduating from college.

C: Is Bluffton in Findlay, Bluffton College?

- F: No. Bluffton is in Bluffton, Ohio. Findlay College is in Findlay, Ohio, and the Findlay YMCA is in Findlay, Ohio. I also did volunteer work in Lima in an interracial situation. When I graduated I was hired in Columbus as secretary of Spring Street YMCA.
- C: Is that the main Y in Columbus?
- F: No, it was one of the branch Y's in Columbus. While I was there I was the first black to be camp administrator at Camp Alfred Wilson where the program was integrated for the first time as a camp. My mother died in 1950, and my dad was sick. That was one reason why I left Columbus to return to Youngstown, because of my dad's condition here. I left Spring Street Y and I worked at General Fireproofing for a short while. Then I started working at the West Federal Y. A lot of the programs were developed like the Mothers' Council was started; many of the clubs were started. We had a lot of activities here.
- C: What years were you at the West Federal Branch?
- F: 1952-1955.
- C: During that course of time did you work with Jimmy Smith?
- F: I worked with Jimmy Smith; he was executive director. James Lottier was physical director. I was Boys' Work secretary. Graham Lynch was assistant to Boys' Work secretary.
- C: I didn't know that they had three, four, five staffs. I had been aware that Jim Smith was there and Jim Lottier. You said you were Boys' Work secretary.
- F: We had our Boys' Work committee and all the programs that. . .
- C: I was just going to ask you what that encompassed?
- F: We had Boys' Work committees and we had all club groups from eight to nine. We had them in club groups. Then we had coed groups and Mothers' Council and we had a number of educational programs, Family Forums in dealing with problems.
- C: How was it that you became involved with the YMCA? You made mention to me that you grew up in that area. When you were growing up did you attend the West Federal Branch Y?
- F: Yes. When we lived on Griffith Street, 635 Griffith Street, we attended the West Federal Y.
- C: What was the West Federal Y like when you were growing up? As a boy, what do you remember about it?

- F: It was very outstanding. In fact, at that time everyone was at the same socioeconomic level. We had the housing projects. That was before the housing projects were built.
- C: What year are we talking about?
- F: About 1935. The Y was the place to go; that's where all the activities were. When you came to Youngstown, Mr. Booker was the executive director and I think at that time Jimmy Smith was physical director. There was Tom Young, Al Wadlow; a number of outstanding persons grew up in the Y.
- C: What would a typical day be like in going to the Y as a youngster for yourself in 1936? You would come there in the morning and then what would a day's activities be like?
- F: We were in club groups--we would be placed in club groups--and then we had a free period and we would go so many hours assigned in the gym and go swimming. The Y was very highly organized, a very fine system and a good working group. You had some volunteers. I would say that there was a great deal of instruction in swimming instruction and gym instruction. They had a well-rounded program.
- C: One thing that I was quite impressed with in talking with the people about the West Federal Y was, as you said, that it was an area of activity, a beehive of activity. There were so many clubs and groups that met there; it seemed to me more so than, perhaps, what you see at a YMCA today. Perhaps I'm not totally abreast of everything that happens at the Y because I don't go to the Y like I used to. The Mothers' Auxiliary, the Mothers' Council which came from that, was established after the auxiliary sort of died off there. Helen Suber was telling me some of the names of the groups there and I was quite amazed that there was so much that happened at the West Federal Y. When you were in the capacity there working as a professional secretary of the YMCA, you mentioned that this activity continued at that time?
- F: Oh yes.
- C: The people were still going very strong.
- F: For example, we used to have a father-son banquet in which we had about 300 or 400. Family relations were different; it was more family involvement. Everybody worked on committees, like Boys' Work committee. We had a good working relationship, the staff working relationship, because many times we would exchange. I would go in the gym and sometimes Lottier. . . We would switch off so we would give each other a little time. We had a very close working relationship.

I left first and I went to Indianapolis for a while.

C: At the Y?

F: Yes, as membership secretary. The Indianapolis Y was the largest life Y in the country. It was the largest and I was number two on the staff.

C: You said that you were the first black person at the Findlay Y, is that correct, the first black staff member?

F: No, I said that I did my field work at the Findlay Y. At the Spring Street Y I was the first to go to camp as camp administrator in Columbus. I was the first camp administrator.

C: Is there any reason why you went from. . . You had a rounded background with the camping experience, with the youth experience, and organizing the program and things like this. Why did you go to the membership up in Indianapolis?

F: I had quite an experience working with interracial groups and all white groups. In New York they were pretty much interested in my experience and my background because, I guess, I had been first in working with many mixed groups. They contacted me direct because there were a number of other YMCA's seeking my services because of my experience. When they approached me into membership and it was a considerable increase in salary, I felt that it was an opportunity for me so I went.

C: At this time, that would be 1955 you say, when you went into membership work, was there a lot of interracial things happening at the Y?

F: Which Y?

C: Let's use, for example, the Youngstown area and then move to Indianapolis if we could. The West Federal Branch YMCA, was that an all black YMCA?

F: No. It was black, but it was not strictly black because we had some whites. We dealt with children. It didn't matter if it was all white. Many of the programs were integrated. The boxing programs were integrated. They had whites participating. It was predominantly black though, I would say.

C: Would you say that the YMCA was changing attitudes or something at this time? Is that why they wanted you to move into a bigger YMCA?

F: With my experience, for example, if you field work at an all

white Y and they want to hire you as a physical director in Findlay, Ohio, which is a predominantly white community, evidently you were able to relate to them and they were impressed with this. I've always been interested in people. I didn't have the hang-up that I would just like to work with black kids. I was interested in working with boys as children. They needed good YMCA experience.

- C: Going back talking about the blacks in the Y there, I'm not sure if it was Jim Lottier or Dave Fleming that mentioned that they used to have some black history taught. They would relate this to the young blacks coming through there, people to look up to in this area, people that they should have pride in in the country and things like this. Was this something that you also tried to inspire or teach to some of the young, black people?
- F: During the years that I mentioned what he was talking about was that we used to bring in outstanding black leaders throughout the country. We used to get some very outstanding speakers. Although, there was a case where we brought in a number of outstanding athletes like Bill Willis and some others too to motivate the young people. We have brought in a number of black leaders.
- C: Did this continue, do you feel, all the way up to the time that the West Federal Y closed?
- F: After I left, the Y was doing that. Later I returned to become director of McGuffey Center. I was busy building a program in that vicinity and I wasn't as active in the Y.
- C: Did you have any relationship with the Y when you moved back to this area at all in terms of the West Federal Branch, serving on committees, or anything such as that?
- F: I served on some committees. I helped them with their membership drives. I was head of that, but I was at the university at that time.
- C: When would this be, 1970, 1971, 1972?
- F: About 1971, 1972.
- C: Were you involved at all when the decision was made to close the West Federal Branch YMCA?
- F: No, I wasn't involved in that.
- C: You were on no committees or anything like that?
- F: No, I wasn't on committees.

- C: Were there any particular programs or anything like that that you yourself instituted and initiated when you became involved with the youth at the West Federal Branch YMCA?
- F: Sure. I started the Mothers' Council; coed group, we had a coed group that we started, and we enlarged the different club groups. We started the Family Forum series. We had a Family Forum series committee.
- C: What is the Family Forum series?
- F: The Family Forum series was that we had a committee to pick out topics such as dealing with the family structure, dealing with problems, delinquency. Where does character begin, in the home or in the community or in the schools? We deal with all problems and we had different people discuss these things. Any issue like juvenile delinquency, crime, all of these things we discussed. At least if we could provide an activity or create the thinking of the people, make them aware of some of the problems, this was the purpose.
- C: How would you account for the fact that the Mothers' Council, the Mothers' Auxiliary, things like that, were so actively involved in the West Federal Y? Perhaps because it was a smaller Y? I don't know the answer. It doesn't seem to me that the women were that involved at that time, in the early 1950's, mid-1950's, with the YMCA. Why was it that they were so strong in the West Federal Y?
- F: Since I started the organization there were a number of women. We had a number of very fine women whose children were involved in the program, so they had a special interest in the program and then it was organized. The fact that it was organized here . . . I also worked at the Mothers' Council in Columbus. I was the secretary working with them. They had an organization in Ohio, a Mothers' Council, with Springfield, Columbus, Dayton, so then we became a part of that organization, an overall state organization. The individuals, I would say the women themselves and their children. . . I think many times women show a great deal of initiative in terms of getting involved in places where it affects their children, more so sometimes than men.
- C: When you say involved now, are you talking about involvement of their daughters or their sons or both?
- F: Sons.
- C: Mostly sons?
- F: Yes, mostly sons.

- C: What about the involvement of the family? You mentioned that the family was very much involved in the West Federal Branch YMCA?
- F: You have to realize that the West Federal Branch YMCA was. . . We had family night too. I didn't mention that before, but we had family night. West Federal Y, at that time, had the kind of prestige in the community that most black people related to; they enjoyed going there and you had really good leadership, people that served on the board of trustees, You had the kind of composition there that people enjoyed. You had a swimming pool, you had a gymnasium, you had all of the physical activities in it.
- C: Taking that into consideration and being involved with the community as you have been, and were at the time that the West Federal Branch closed in about 1972, what was the feeling that you--I'm sure you've heard some things here . . . Can you give us any feedback as to what the general feeling of the black community was in the closing of the West Federal Branch YMCA?
- F: There were mixed feelings on the part of many of the black community. I think the black community, many times you had to support the West Federal Y. I think there was a loss of support at the West Federal Y.
- C: From within the black community?
- F: From within the black community and also when you have a budget you have to maintain; they had less staff and I think that the staff situation and the financing of the agency, I think this is quite a problem. If you don't have the staff, then how can you save the total community?
- C: Do you think that a larger staff, for instance, a good example would be the staff that was there when you were there of three or four or five full-time people and some good part-time people, do you think that would have continued a strong organization with that basis?
- F: I think you have to realize too that there is a number of other agencies that have been built since then. We've had the McGuffey Center, the Associate Neighborhood Center, and then you have the Elks, which draw some of the activities. Also, the south side, there's the Clingith-Rothman Center. There are a number of other centers that were built later that took something away from the West Federal Y.
- C: Did these centers have the facilities that they had at the Y then?
- F: They had some physical facilities, but not the swimming pool.



They had basketball; then they had those other activities.

C: Were they as highly organized?

F: Yes. The McGuffey Center, I know, is highly organized.

C: The Central YMCA, of course, after the closing of the West Federal, just brought everybody downtown. The West Federal YMCA, of course, closed then and the Central Branch has remained a strong facility. They offer the things that, I'm sure, the West Federal Branch did, but on a much larger scale and the YMCA's continue to be a pretty strong organization. Why is it, considering that, that the YMCA Central has not gone down in stature?

F: The Central Y has their problems too. You say it hasn't gone down in stature; how can you explain that? I think the fact that they have opened their activities for a number of boys and integrated a lot of the boys that attended West Federal. . . They had a larger staff and they're competing. You have to realize too that when Central. . . Prior to that, the building of the Beeghley Center took away a lot of the students from the Central, which hurt their program. I think the fact that Central was not able to support the kind of budget the West Federal Y had was one of the causes for them to consolidate the operation more. The West Federal had a certain budget that they had to meet and it was very difficult to meet the budget with all the other activities and all the other agencies that were functioning in the area. I think this is part of the whole thing why West Federal went down, and leadership; there are all kinds of reasons.

C: One final question about the YMCA. Do you think that. . . Both Dave Fleming and Jim Lottier, and in fact Helen Suber, they all seemed to feel that the blacks would rather have their own YMCA; they've stated that to me. What are your feelings on that first of all? Second, do you think it could ever come that they could organize the leadership and find and build a facility, physically, a plant, to take and have their own YMCA?

F: Many of the blacks wanted to have their own YMCA, but in having your own YMCA you have to support your own YMCA. Many of the blacks were not willing to support it for the amount of money.

C: Why not?

F: Because they didn't have the kind of staff. I don't think they had the staff--they had the facilities--to really deal with the number of boys that were coming there in the

program. You have to have somebody that has knowledge of this. You have to hire and you have to pay staff people in order to direct the type of program, to bring people to the Y. I think this is part of it too. Surely many of the blacks who went to the Y felt this. I felt strongly too about the West Federal Street Y, and I tried to help them in my own way in directing one of the campaigns. I think that year we brought in the most money we ever brought in when I was director of it. I still think they needed more support and more staff, and a training staff, and also more money. When Central loses everybody is busy trying to keep their head above the water; it's the same thing that happened to YWCA. When they combined forces everybody was upset.

C: I'm not sure what you're referring to there?

F: The YWCA, they had a Belmont Branch of YWCA and they integrated the Y's and a lot of people were upset. What I'm saying is, that I think you have to have the kind of budget and receive the kind of money in order to hire the kind of people who will do the job. If you don't have the finances it's very difficult to hire.

C: Since the YMCA has closed and everybody is down at the Central Branch now, again going to. . .

F: Everybody is down at the Central Branch.

C: They had the West Federal and the McDonald Branches; those are the only two branches they ever had, except for Camp Fitch, which they consider a branch, which is a camp up on Lake Erie which is still very successful for them. In fact, they just finished out the most successful year ever up there. Have you heard in the community, the black community, that the people have been satisfied with the fact that everybody is down there together now?

F: I haven't heard anything because I have been too busy up here. I haven't made an effort to find out at this point. I do know that other agencies seem to be working very well. I think the Elks Club seems to be moving, and McGuffey Center, and some of the other agencies seem to be carrying on programs, but I haven't made an effort.

C: Except for the McGuffey Center, I'm not really that up-to-date on the Elks and the Methodist Center, is that what you said?

F: Yes.

C: Are these integrated centers around the city that take and provide physical activities for the people?

F: Yes. They're integrated centers, but in a predominantly black area, so mostly the people would be black that are participating, but it is integrated; it's supposed to be.

C: Is there anything that you might like to add that you could think of about the history of the Y that you would like to finish with?

F: I would like to say this: I think that the Y's, and I say Y's whether it's the downtown or the West Federal Y, played a very important role in the lives of many young people, especially in my own life. I feel that it's very difficult to measure the value of the institution at this time, but many people have been very successful and proud of the West Federal Y. I know they're very much concerned that they're no longer in the city. They grow up in this community and leave. It would be very fine if they would return or maybe you could find the leadership that could support the kind of Y that we should have had.

I do think it's important that we have YMCA's because I think it's a deterrent to crime. In spending money I think it is best to invest money in YMCA and recreation facilities. It's best to invest in those institutions rather than invest money for criminals.

I, myself, have gained greatly from my Y experience. I hope the fact that the downtown Y is doing a good job. . . I've always had a good relationship with the downtown Y too and helped them in many areas.

On a whole I think that the YMCA is a needed institution in the community. I think its concept is very unique in the terms of body, mind, and spirit; I think this is very important today in dealing with the whole person. I think this is something that many agencies cannot deal with that the Y has dealt with. Body, mind, and spirit are unique.

C: It must have had some influence in your lifetime because you've been successful. You were in the YMCA business, as such, for a number of years. I'm sure that that has helped in a lot of your endeavors as well as some of the contacts that you've made.

F: Many times I thought about going back to the YMCA, even at this stage in my life. I still have a feeling about the Y, what I can do for it, and I think this is what life is all about--you have a commitment and you commit yourself. It's important. I feel that way even now.

C: I would like to thank you for taking the time to talk to me. Thank you.