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Interview with Eric Helt

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Melissa Straus

Interview with Eric Helt

Middle Ground, Gambier

Co-Workers present: None

Melissa: This is Melissa Straus, I'm at Middle Ground, it's about 10:15 and I am interviewing Eric Helt about public life in Knox County. Um, is that Eric with a C or a K?

Eric: C.

Melissa: Okay.

Eric: Mhmm.

Melissa: Um, so, where in Knox County do you live?

Eric: I live in, um, on Horn Road, which is in—we're a Gambier post office—

Melissa: Okay.

Eric: --and Harrison township is the actual place.

Melissa: Okay. Um, and how long have you lived in—

Eric: Um, twelve years.

Melissa: Twelve years. Have you always lived in, like, this Gambier area?

Eric: No, no.

Melissa: Okay. Where have you lived before that?

Eric: Oh, Boston, San Francisco—

Melissa: Oh okay.

Eric: --Montpelier, Vermont, Ann Arbor—

Melissa: Wow.

Eric: --West Lafayette, Indiana.

Melissa: You've been everywhere (laughs).

Eric: Uh, South Bend, Indiana.

Melissa: Yeah.

Eric: So lots of places, yes.

Melissa: Okay. Well, that sounds good, um—

Eric: Los Angeles, even.

Melissa: Really? That's a big change (laughs).

Eric: But I grew up in Ohio, so—and I grew up in the west side of Cleveland in North Olmsted...

Melissa: Oh, okay.

Eric: So this is sort of a familiar...

Melissa: Yeah.

Eric: Culture?

Melissa: Mhmm. I understand. Um, so—Marika told me that you were an East Knox football fan?

Eric: I am. Um, when I first came here in, lets see—and for a couple of years—'99, 2000, 2001, I was a volunteer guidance counselor at East Knox High School, 'cause they don't have—(talking to waiter) Thank you, sir (waiter responds)—and, um, I'm going to have to eat and talk (both laugh), um, so I got to know these kids, and uh, they only had one guidance counselor for, of the high school and the grade school and the middle school, and, I took kids, mostly I—well I counseled them about going to college since almost nobody's parents at East Knox had gone to college, so they don't have a reference point, so I got to know these kids and they happened to have a very good football team the first year I went there, which would've been, uh, '99 and 2000 football season, so I really got into it and went to the—they... uh, went to their... whatever, their regionals or sectionals, that way they played three games into the state tournament, which was—we followed them everywhere. So that's how I got into it.

Melissa: Okay. Um, how many games are in a season?

Eric: Um... eight. Eight games, usually four home games, four or five, and they play some out of conference teams and then they play in what's called the Mid Buckeye Conference, which is all these towns around here—Fredericktown, Utica, um, Danville, um... North Ridge, Centerburg.

Melissa: Okay.

Eric: So everybody knows—I mean, these are people that live close by, they aren't travelling, you know, like Mount Vernon does to places like Dublin and Worthington and um, where you don't really have anything in common with them, so people are pretty much—lot's of hillbillies.

Melissa: Um, so how often do you go to the Friday night games?

Eric: I go to, um, I pretty much go to all the home games, um, and I go to away games that are going to be interesting. I think it's not very far to Utica, or Fredericktown, or Danville-Danville is the big rival, this is sort of the Michigan - Ohio State of, uh, for East Knox and Danville, and it's the last game of the season. Matter of fact, there's so many—it's so—football, high school football is always played on Friday night, but this game is played on Saturday night because people from surrounding towns want to come to that game, and uh, it—this used to be much more intense, I think, I mean, it was a much bigger deal back in the seventies, eighties, um, then it is now in terms of the rivalry. It was sort of for everything, um, you know, pride in your community for a year if you won this game.

Melissa: Yeah. Um, so would you say that it, do you think that it divides Knox County by like, at least by the towns that are in the conference, or does it bring them together as a community because everyone's going to the games?

Eric: Oh. It definitely brings them together, yeah, no it's—I mean, it is a rivalry, but I mean a lot of these people work together at Rolls Royce, or somewhere else, so I mean, people know one another in these communities. Not everybody, but I mean, it's a lot of acquaintances and friends that overlap these towns. No, it's a big show, it's a big, I mean, I guess I'll just—my cultural, well, the, it's sort of a tradition um, a lot of the guys who played football at East Knox, you know, they still live here and they always stand down by the fence. They don't sit in the stands, so there's always this big crowd around the fence of mostly men, uh, and there's a big crowd in the stand, too, but they're more sort of families, um, people like me, I always sit in the stands. Um, and then there's another group of, sort of, um, pink-haired, uh, loud, um, high school kids standing around on the periphery. They're sort of close to the, to the, the, you know, refreshment stand and they're mostly showing off for each other and they probably couldn't—they probably know who won or lost at the end, but they aren't engaged in the game. Then there's this third group that's always really cute (laughs) which are the young kids that—grade school kids, mostly—who get behind the stands with their little footballs and they're back there playing a game of their own. Or, and there's uh, uh, the stands sit up above the field and there's a long, oh long, I say maybe thirty-foot long bank and the kids are there rolling down the bank and chasing each other and so, other than the game, there's a lot going on, so, that's where, I think that's what gives you this sense of this—it's an event. You know, you go—doesn't matter if they're winning or—it does, there are more fans when they're winning but there's always a big crowd win or lose.

Melissa: Yeah, um, so I mean you talked a bit about the groups that are there, but for you personally, who can you expect to see when you go to the games, without even just planning ahead?

Eric: Oh, well, some of my neighbors who have lived by me, they're always there. Um, there's a guy that I know from the, uh, farm implement dealership, he's always there, um, I don't know, I have to say I don't know a lot of the people, I just—the people I run into that are clerks in stores, or, neighbors of mine, or kids that I know who went to East Knox, a lot of them come back, and then they sort of—they sort of fade off, I mean, they come for a couple years after graduation, but irregularly, if they're not going to college, and many of them aren't. And then after that you don't see them anymore. They get—of course, many of these kids have children of their own by the time they're nineteen or twenty, so, um yeah, that's—and then there's always the crop of parents of the current players, and uh, there—that's, that's a big number of the people who are in the stands, parents and grandparents of players.

Melissa: Are there any, like, other people that might not be related to players but are like, um, like I guess, like, any characters that go to the games (laughs)?

Eric: Oh no. There are characters, there's one guy, um, who's always at the games, and he always wears Bermuda shorts, even in November when it's really cold. Um, what's his name, he's a little short guy—oh! Shorty they call hi. You know, so there are, no there are characters, and some are, um, well I know the people. One of the, one of the refreshment stands is run by the band boosters and those are mostly parents of band members, and the others one's run by the regular athletic booster club, so, that sort of divides people up. If you're a band person, you go to the band, uh, refreshment stand and, well those are mostly parents there, and years ago I used to know a lot of them but I don't—I mean, it's getting so that I don't really know people anymore (chewing).

Melissa: Okay. Um, how many people would you say, would you estimate go to these games?

Eric: Hmm. Both home team and away team, or just home?

Melissa: Um, I guess like the whole crowd in general, or I just—

Eric: It's probably, for East Knox it would probably be, I don't know. Derick Busenberg who went to Kenyon and played football here and graduated from East Knox is now the athletic direction...

Melissa: I actually just interviewed him.

Eric: Oh, did you? Oh, he'd give you—he's much better than me...

Melissa: (Laughs) no, I need to hear from everyone's perspective.

Eric: No, no he's... he knows his stuff. He could've told you, 'cause he gets the money. Uh, and his wife is the treasurer so she counts the money.

Melissa: (Laughs)

Eric: I was going to say... twenty-five hundred, three thousand? It's probably, you know, when they're all—people are all spread out like that it's a little bit hard to tell, um, what it is, but... it's their, it's, for him, it's their main source of income for the athletic department (chewing).

Melisa: Yeah, so does everyone have to pay, like, a fee to get into the stands?

Eric: Mhmm. It's um, I think the going rate now is six dollars. Students might be three or four. Senior citizens five. Um, and I always buy a season—well, since they rebuilt the stands they now have some reserved seats that have arms, so Derick always gets me a good seat and I buy a season ticket.

Melissa: Um, that's good. How—so, do you think the program just, like, Friday night games in general including, like, you know, entertainment or anything, has it changed since you started going to the games?

Eric: Definitely, and, you know, Derick could speak to that, too, but it's very different. First of all, there aren't as, there aren't as many kids on the team, um, and, you know, ten years ago, I mean if you were a, you know, a participant in the high school and you were male and you could, even a little kid, I mean it's a small enough school, everybody gets to play... I mean, it's a badge, it was a badge of honor. Now, it's, you know, one of the issues is that they added soccer, um, and that draws some kids that in the past would have been playing football, definitely. And that's one of the reasons Derick opposed it, they're just too small to be running all these sports programs for a school that—I mean the graduating class is only like, ninety.

Melissa: That's really small.

Eric: That's *really* small. Uh, that means you have like forty-five senior boys, and by the time you spread them out between track and soccer and basketball and football and... they used to do swimming, I don't think, I'm not sure if they do or not, they don't have a pool but... So, I think that uh, I mean, I see a real deterioration in sort of school spirit, um, they uh, and I think it shows up—it's always been there academically, you know, another badge of honor was getting pregnant and then that would be a big deal, and they—and there are a lot of girls that, you know, do get pregnant, and a lot—I say somebody else could tell you how many but there's that culture like, "I'm not going anywhere after high school and what's the difference," and just a sense of, uh, you know, they have no, um, oh, what'd you call it, no intellectual or academic home life. I mean, you just take something like, grammar. I mean their grammar, even Derick's brother who works for me and goes to Wittenberg, I mean, he can't get verb tenses right, and uh, for, there's always, you know, the—we as a matter of fact have that language around the

house, you know, “I seen him,” you know, that’s a standard, um, use of the verb ‘to see’. Um, or, even the students here can’t get ‘bring’ and ‘take’ correct. ‘Take’ has disappeared from the vocabulary, but there it’s really—it’s really dramatic and I think it’s extreme—it must be, well there’s a lot of bravado around um, you know, “I don’t get good grades,” there’s really some shame to it and a discouragement, and I think it’s slopped over into the, in the football program and the athletic programs. And now they’re also playing, I mean the schools that are more suburban, like Johnstown, places where people could live and commute to Columbus, which would be North Ridge, Johnstown, Utica, primarily. They’re attracting more of a suburban, kind of, college educated parent, and so, they’ve sort of gotten more, I don’t think they’ve had the same deterioration, because the deterioration leads to loss in athletic participation. Um, wouldn’t necessarily need to be that way but, it seems to be, um, so, I have to say we’re, you know, and Derick could speak to that, he tries to keep his chin up, but... (chewing).

Melissa: Mhmm. Well, I guess, I was wondering if there would be any—despite the changes, if there are any traditions that have maintained themselves throughout the year, like either in preparation for a game—I know that, um, Derick was talking about like, bonfires for the team members—so I was wondering if there were any traditions outside of what the team does, but like, things that the community does to prepare for games.

Eric: Hmm, well they always line up in the field in two, in two rows and the team runs through and they break their paper banner and are all pumped up about that and, I think that one of the things that’s pretty much remained the same is the younger kid’s participation in football. I mean, they have... they start at grade school, and I’m not so sure about that, but they have a seventh and eighth grade team, I think they have a seventh grade team *and* an eighth grade team, so you know, to get a team together for, you know, in the seventh grade, you’ve got to have some participation. So I think there’s a lot of aspiration about it, and that’s an old tradition. They had a, a coach, Jet Looney who just retired, not just, who retired um, I’d say, um, seven years ago, he had been the coach for thirty-five years and it started out where, you know, he was seeding the grass out there and mowing it in the summer himself, and that’s where the tradition started. They played sort of a brand of what’s referred to as smash mouth football where they had big running backs, uh, very strong running game, not much passing, and that’s how they came to be a power in the Mid Buckeye Conference and won a number of MBC titles, uh, during his years and, probably that last good year was ’99, 2000, and since then, you know, they’ve been battling to win half their games and most of the time they haven’t. When he left to... one of his assistants came in for, uh, Tom Holden for five years, he was not—he’s a very nice guy, but he was not a very good coach and things deteriorated under that and that was a problem in this transition to, uh, uh, uh, Hatfield, Calvin Hatfield, who comes from Maine and was a Most Valuable Player at Kenyon, um, really a good kid, really knows football. But he sort of started after this five year hiatus with um, long-time football coach, long-time head coach Jet Looney, so he had to sort of pick up the pieces and then as people drifted away from football and, his attitude was, you know what, if they don’t want to play I’m not going to come beg you. After two losing seasons he told Derick, “I’m going to start to beg them.” So, to rebuild one of these things is hard. The fans still come, um, another great, another great tradition of East Knox

football is to, um, in the stands, the chatter about what they ought to be doing. “Should be passing there,” and “should be running here,” and it’s all sort of in vain and not very bright. But they’re—it’s their right, and you know, a lot of screaming at the coaches, and... (chewing).

Melissa: Yeah, I see a lot of that at Kenyon, too.

Eric: Yeah.

Melissa: Because I’ve been to the football games at school...

Eric: Yeah.

Melissa: And there’s a lot of that. Um, (plates clinking) alright, so, I guess—are the games advertised at all? Like, radio, or TV, or...

Eric: Well... (chewing) um, it’s in the paper, plus everybody knows, I mean, uh—they know it’s a home game or an away game but people know it’s Friday night and, “Are you going or not,” and, “Oh, where is it,” and “Who is it?” So, I think it’s word of mouth—it is in the paper, and then we have, uh there’s a great tradition here of, um, WMVO, the, actually, this is on the FM station, but it doesn’t matter, same people, um, after the games starting at nine o’clock it’s a radio show with, um, oh this guy’s been here forever, oh what’s his name... he also does a talk show in the news, and the, uh, WMVO... I’ll think of it. But anyway, so people start calling in, you know, oh, “Fredericktown won, you know, twenty-eight thirteen,” and then they’ll engage while—and he knows most of the people, I mean everybody knows who’s calling and it’s, “Is this you Charlie,” “Yeah, oh yeah this is me.” Um, so that goes on for a couple hours, so when everybody leaves the game they tune in to WMVO to hear who won the other games. And uh, that’s a great community tradition. I mean, you could find out within—oh, they’ll even call in before the game’s over, you know, “We’re leading, you know, twenty-seven twenty-one with two minutes to go,” so that’s it. I always listen to that (chewing).

Melissa: Um, so, okay. I—I have never gotten to go to one of these games since we started this project late after the football season. Um, could you tell me what, like, the rivals are, and the teams—I mean, I know East Knox and Danville have their rivalry...

Eric: Um... Utica and North Ridge. They’re right close together when you go to the airport, you go past North Ridge on sixty-two—it’s sort of the rural part that runs between, well really about here and then just the side of Utica, so that’s a big rivalry. Um, Centerburg, I don’t know, Fredericktown, um, Fredericktown has been winning the last couple of years, and these schools are—all though, you know the amazing thing is that Danville is extremely good and they’re graduating class is about fifty. I mean, this is a tiny, tiny school, but they have a, I mean, the people in Danville, I always tell the people, you know, who grew up there to make sure you carry your gun—they are just rabid football fans and, uh, they’re willing to bend some of the academic rules and um, if you’re not a winning coach you don’t last long. They’ve um, they’ve gone—I don’t know

if they've ever won a state championship or not, and uh, the teams divided up into districts, into... by size, so they're small, and their in division six. And East Knox is either in five or four, and so, this MBC league stays together even though they've got a division six, which is, it's, it's determined by the number of boys in the four grades nine through twelve. And the, so, probably the biggest school, and uh, it's probably either Johnstown or Centerburg, they might have—and I'll always go by how many in a graduating class—they might have a hundred and thirty in a graduating class and Danville would have fifty, but Danville could still win these games, and...

Melissa: Okay.

Eric: So there's sort of an imbalance in their, in fact, the league—this is the last year, this coming season is the last year in the Mid Buckeye Conference, all these teams—'cause Utica is in, actually in Licking County, uh, North Ridge and Centerburg are sort of, gravitate that way to, toward uh, uh, what's that county, the big city, uh, Newark. Newark as they say there, um, so those teams are leaving to join the Licking County league, uh, which is a tougher league, too. So Dan—and Fredericktown's going to the league to the West and... I think Centerburg, Utica, and North Ridge are going to the Licking County league, it's basically the league Danville—oh, Loudonville's uh, also in this league, so Loudonville, Danville, and East Knox are going to be looking for a new home. So that's going to change this whole chemistry that we're talking about here, in terms of these relationships, 'cause it's Derick—I don't think they've decided yet, but they're—we're going to end up going toward Coshocton. And you're going deeper into 'billy land when you're going out that way, I mean it's more poverty, more—there are some good schools out there, Riverview, and, so we're going to end up out there and that's going to change this whole thing (chewing).

Melissa: Yeah. Um, I mean, so do you think it'll be, like, a positive or negative change, or just a change?

Eric: Um... I think it's definitely going to be a negative change.

Melissa: Yeah.

Eric: Because the natural relationship of these communities that have been in the Mid Buckeye Conference transcend football, and we have almost no relationship with Coshocton or, I don't even know what the names of the schools out there are, so, that's going to be a long—although I think it'll be better for East Knox. They might win more games, some of those schools are going to be weaker than these teams that are strengthening at the suburban fringe of um, Franklin and Licking County to our south, the places to our south.

Melissa: Yeah, um, I mean you've mentioned that the football games transcend football. Um, so I guess I was wondering how you see Friday night football playing a role in the community greater than just, football. Like (inaudible).

Eric: Mmm. Well, it's definitely bigger than football, um, well it's about community pride. It's like... they're as crazy about their teams as they are about Ohio State. You know, you know (chewing), people who probably don't go to any, probably can't afford to go to any Ohio state games, the kids certainly aren't going to college, you know, they'll have all their Ohio State red and grey regalia on, so, that is a, is a very apt analogy. Now, North Ridge has had several bad years. They had some good years, and the people really start dropping away then. But you can... in communities where there's a lot of... in migration, which is not in Danville, so they don't have to worry about losing their tradition. They're all inbred, they're all Collopy's, or the Collopy family and the Mickley's... it's a very Catholic community. That's another thing that's sort of unique to Danville, um, so they have that church relationship. It's still, you know, predominantly agriculture, so those are relationships that sort of transcend and behind all this, when you get down to Johnstown, it's like, not that way anymore. Yeah, there's a few big farms down there, but there mostly suburbanites.

Melissa: Oh, okay. Um...

Eric: So that's a good point. Farming is a binding, uh, factor.

Melissa: Yeah.

Eric: And how, how central it is to the businesses in the community: the grain mills, and the kind of numbers of people who are involved in it.

Melissa: Um, I guess I was also wondering if there was any other reasons why you attend football games. Like, I know it's, you know, partially entertainment to see the game, also because you know the students from—or you have that connection to East Knox—um, but what about like, do you think like, the band of the cheerleaders attract people as well?

Eric: Oh yeah.

Melissa: Do they bring a lot to the atmosphere?

Eric: (Chewing) And the band is—that's an interesting point—the band has gotten better, they had the—years ago they used to have the same band director for, you know, forever, and he was good, and then they had several in there that were problems. I think there was sex with a student or something, they have a fair amount of that. Um, but this band director, I think this is probably like his fifth year, and so he's started to—it's become a source of pride, you know, and it's just, you know, I mean you're not far out of high school to know, you know, that what your friends are doing, um... so it, I think that it, I mean, I really got to enjoying it. I mean, they really do a good job, I mean, we're a—we're only talking about a band of, well they have flag and they have majorettes and all of that is less than fifty, you know, or forty-five. And it's hard to do that stuff with, you know, thirty-five forty people to get, but they're good, and uh, that's a positive thing that just sort of developed and you can just see every year it's a little bigger (chewing).

Melissa: Yeah. Um, I know at the Kenyon football games they have the Mount Vernon High School come in and they play the band, so that's always fun. Um... well, I guess I got a lot of what I was looking for, but...

Eric: Okay.

Melissa: ...if you think there's anything else that you wanted to add about—that I missed about how football plays a big role in the community and how it's a public place...

Eric: Uh... well, they just started—Derick probably mentioned this—pay-to-play.

Melissa: He did say a few things.

Eric: Well, I think football is a hundred and fifty dollars, and that's eliminated a lot of people because of their financial trouble—they've been trying to pass the bond issue in East Knox for, um, I don't know, I'll say about four times. It's not any—it's just, you know, it amounts to, believe it or not, about a hundred dollars—no, it amounts to about eleven dollars a month for a hundred thousand dollar house and they can't pass it. That's one trip to McDonalds a month. It's sort of—and they have this big schism, um, well, I mean one of the problems with the poorly educated community, they think, "Well, we can cut back on whatever, you know, we don't really need the money," and I know enough that the woman who does cleaning for us says, "Oh, they're just going to put the money in raises." Well, they're cutting sports and—so that's been a big factor, the pay-to-play thing. Because some parents just won't do it, and, um, it's also, um, when you—when these, particularly men, fathers, have a son playing, they're very intrusive with Derick and um, the other, the other coach, you know, um, "Why aren't you playing my boy," and, so they will have a school meeting about their statewide academic performance results, you know, and two people are meeting, but if it's about football, you know, they'll get a big—everybody's got an opinion. And we—this is sort of an aside, but this is originally the Howard High School and um, it was, there was a Bladensburg school. Well, there was the Gambier High School also—all these old towns had high school. And when they created the consolidated district, the Bladensburg High School became grade school, and Howard High School became the high school then three, four years ago they built the middle school, uh, facility, which we've been lucky to get, I mean, we're lucky they got that passed. And so now, with these cutbacks, there's talk of eliminating the Bladensburg grade school. That's a huge issue for Bladensburg—I mean, that's sort of all they've got left as a community, as a grade school, and this has been very divisive. It's sort of Bladensburg versus Apple Valley, so the more, I guess those are more affluent people in Apple Valley, and they don't want to have the kids in the bus going all the way to Bladensburg which is like—some of them are on the bus for certainly an hour, I mean, if you have a first grader two hours a day, you'd be... So, that's a big issue, and the money. And that's very corrosive.

Melissa: Yeah, that sounds about right. Well I hope you, these changes aren't...

Eric: Yeah.

Melissa: Too intense all at once, also. Um, well I guess that's everything.

Eric: Alright.

Melissa: Thank you very much.

Eric: It's (mic turns off).