Oral history interview with James Baker, October 9, 2013

Baker, James, born 1942
Politician, former Mayor of Wilmington

Size: Transcript: 31 pages.

Format of recording: Originally recorded as digital wav file. Duration is 92 min.

Collection Summary: An interview of James Baker conducted October 9, 2013 by Margaret Winslow for the Helen Farr Sloan Library and Archives of the Delaware Art Museum.

This interview was conducted for Dream Streets: Art in Wilmington 1970–1990, an exhibition held at the Delaware Art Museum June 27–September 27, 2015 on the contemporary art scene in Wilmington in the 1970s and 1980s.

Funding for the transcription of this interview was provided by a grant from the Delaware Humanities Forum.

The transcript of this interview is in the public domain and may be used without permission. Quotes and excerpts must be cited as follows: Oral history interview with James Baker, October 9, 2013, Helen Farr Sloan Library and Archives, Delaware Art Museum.

MARGARET: This is Margaret Winslow, Associate Curator for Contemporary Art at the Delaware Art Museum interviewing former Mayor James Baker on October 9, 2013 at the Delaware Art Museum. Okay. And may I address you as James?

JIM: Oh yeah, Jim.

MARGARET: Okay Jim, good. And this is, just for the purposes of information here, Jim you were the 54th mayor of Wilmington and you held that office from January 2001 to January 2013.

JIM: Right.

MARGARET: You were born in Ohio though, not a native Delawarean.

JIM: Right.

MARGARET: And you joined the VISTA program which is the domestic Peace Corps program.

JIM: Right.

MARGARET: When did you join our program?

JIM: It was the same year 1966.
MARGARET: So you joined in 1966 and was your first assignment, for lack of a better word, here in Wilmington?

JIM: Training was actually at New York City.

MARGARET: Oh okay.

JIM: So we were assigned to different projects. I was assigned to, I can’t think of the name of the hospital but it was an old hospital in, somebody might have called at Lincoln Hospital or whatever but it was in the Bronx. And working with gang members who may have gotten injured and their families and all of that so I was learning basically social services in more of a direct way of connecting people with services and not so much dealing with the gangs and why they were doing what they were doing. Of course there was a lot of gangs then but where I was at there was more Hispanic gangs than there were others in the Bronx.

MARGARET: Okay.

JIM: And of course the Bronx then was old. People didn’t leave the borough basically. They just went to the local bars. They went to the local shops. You’d talk to them about going to Manhattan and their question was literally, “Why do I want to go to Manhattan? I’ve already seen it.”

MARGARET: Right.

JIM: But that always surprised me that they were so localized.

MARGARET: Right that’s interesting.

JIM: And it was like being in a small little town where they knew each other even though they lived in buildings that were, you know, apartment after apartment after apartment. And most of the Hispanics were Puerto Rican but many didn’t speak English at all so, and I didn’t, I spoke very little Spanish so I had to get an interpreter’s book and I’d go along and read a passage and hand it to them and they would give it back to me so that we knew what we were talking about. And then others came from other places, Hispanics. Those you could tell because they really didn’t want to speak to anybody that they thought was an official.

MARGARET: Oh interesting, okay.

JIM: So they were afraid of anybody that they thought might—and I took for granted that what they were afraid of was that somebody might send them back from where they came because they, probably weren’t there legally.

MARGARET: Okay.

JIM: So I look back at that when we’re talking about immigration now and people act like 13 million people just showed up. It’s been going on for years.
MARGARET: Right, that’s interesting. But they were really concerned about their status, okay.

JIM: Oh yeah fearful, they were very fearful.

MARGARET: And so your job with the VISTA program was to connect people to the social services.

JIM: Right.

MARGARET: And really so—

JIM: And find out the problems with the family itself. But this was all training. It wasn’t where it was actually my assignment.

MARGARET: Okay.

JIM: So we had professors of this and that and the other that would come in, very good people, who would talk about the different writers of the day. What was, Michael Harrington—I think he was the socialist writer of the day—what he meant versus somebody else meant or thought about what needs to be done. And then you had the ones, what was the big Swedish writer about poverty and all of that? I can’t think of his name.

MARGARET: Oh right. I can’t either.

JIM: But anyways we went through a lot of stuff with a lot of different people about community organization, about social service, about working with different groups and people. It was a very good training program. And then we were asked to select three cities that we would like to be assigned to and I picked New York, Pittsburgh and what was the third, I think it was Cleveland.

MARGARET: But not Wilmington?

JIM: Not Wilmington, no. And it ended up they said, “Well, we’re sending you to Wilmington. They need a young black VISTA worker that can work with the youth and in the black community in Wilmington.” Of course I had not really heard of Wilmington. I heard of Dover, the capital. I knew DuPont Company. Basically that and one thing that we knew in school that Delaware had, that we didn’t know of any other place had it, which was the whipping post. And so we thought it was barbaric that they had the whipping post.

MARGARET: Yeah.

JIM: They would whip people like back in ancient times. And they got rid of it I think in the early ‘60s.

MARGARET: Okay.

JIM: I met the last person that got whipped.
MARGARET: Oh my goodness! That’s—I didn’t—okay, so they had it that long?

JIM: Oh yes. It was modern. It wasn’t ancient and then dropped. They still whipped people here for various offenses. And the guy showed me, the guy that got whipped, he said, “You know they weren’t allowed to break their wrist, I mean there arm.” They weren’t allowed to do like that.

MARGARET: Okay.

JIM: That they had to—

MARGARET: To keep their arms straight.

JIM: To keep their arms straight. They would straighten it out and go whack but they couldn’t bend their arm. They had to go whack. He says it really stripped you up.

MARGARET: Oh my goodness.

JIM: And when they hit you but they weren’t allowed to break the wrist, or break their arm because they said that would be really—they would just tear your skin off if they had that kind of power.

MARGARET: Right.

JIM: But it wasn’t—to me it was always like—

MARGARET: That sounds like—

JIM: You still do that?

MARGARET: Yeah that makes Wilmington sound a bit barbaric.

JIM: Yeah it did. It sounded to me.

MARGARET: Certainly that’s corporal punishment. My goodness. So were you the only VISTA person assigned to Wilmington?

JIM: There were three other VISTA’s assigned with me so there was four of us all together.

MARGARET: Okay.

JIM: Dave Pence, Mike Remsen and Fred Rostov. Fred was a very spoiled kid. He calls his mom up and tells her, “You’ve got to bring down a table that we can eat on.” I mean we had a table but he wanted the table he was used to. So they actually sent it down.

MARGARET: Hmm, that’s maybe not the best program for him.
JIM: No. Well he was good, though. I mean he was a very decent guy, very good at what he did but he was,— I mean like food. He wouldn’t let anybody cook. He had to cook because he tasted all the food. If it wasn’t done a particular way he was upset. So he did the cooking. He had this grand—it wasn’t as long as this but I mean it was a long table for our living room, err, dining room and chairs to go with it. He would only eat at certain places when he went out. So he was very, very unusual and being in this kind of a program.

MARGARET: Right.

JIM: I mean he was a good guy but he was just different.

MARGARET: Right. Did they provide housing for you?

JIM: No. They gave us a stipend.

MARGARET: Okay.

JIM: That’s why we all lived in the same place. They gave us something like only $50.00.

MARGARET: And where did you live?

JIM: On West 7th Street.

MARGARET: West 7th okay.

JIM: 622 West 7th Street, that was our address. And all of us lived there. At first we were working on was the Westside Conservation Association. Our main deal was working in community organization, going door to door and that kind of stuff.

MARGARET: Okay.

JIM: And then I started working on the side with the youth that were in these areas. And eventually they stopped me from doing community organization and I was sent to do youth work under the YMCA.

MARGARET: Under the YMCA?

JIM: We had M, MCA.

MARGARET: Oh MCA, okay.

JIM: Yeah.

MARGARET: So were you sent outside of the VISTA program or that was still with them?

JIM: No outside of the Westside Conservation to the Y.

MARGARET: Okay, so specifically for youth programs.
JIM: Youth organization, youth worker work.

MARGARET: Okay.

JIM: Which was different than community organization.

MARGARET: Okay.

JIM: So that’s how I started in youth work and working with the different gangs in Wilmington. And at that time one person was murdered—one of the youth was murdered. BJ Keller was his name. He got murdered and so that panicked at that time—I think about all the shootings and things we have today, but that panicked everybody and figured we better do something about these youth because these gangs are everywhere and they’re fighting each other over everything. So we started a group called WYEAC—Wilmington Youth Emergency Action Council and it was done actually under a guy that worked for the Catholic diocese. And he was a strange character. He had this big red beard and it was sort of like—what do they call them, not a hippie but—

MARGARET: Like a beatnik? No?

JIM: Something like that.

MARGARET: Okay.

JIM: Out of New York what was the term we used then? I forgot. But anyways he was strange differently, very bright man but I think his name today is Eagle.

MARGARET: Oh okay. That sounds appropriate for that time period. Name changes yeah

JIM: He changed it to Eagle eventually. So anyway we worked with the different gangs and it was going very well. We got some federal funds for the community action program at that time even though there were a lot of people against it. They really did, were, at the beginning. If that program had continued through the years you would not see the murder rate that you see today with young people because they would have been able to connect with young people. You know bringing in young people, keeping some kind of connection to young people about what they’re doing and what they shouldn’t be doing, what they’re not doing. I don’t think drugs,—drugs would still be a problem but it wouldn’t be to the magnitude that we see today because like the United Way and other agencies, they dropped having youth workers, they dropped having community workers in the ‘80s.

MARGARET: Okay.

JIM: And I told the United Way then that it was a big, big mistake to stop that, but they were trying to cut corners and save money. These were dead end jobs blah blah bah blah blah. And if you see from the 80s that decision to take all these agencies that used to have community workers and youth workers working in their communities and they took it away and that was the linchpin connection between agencies in the neighborhood, their services, and the people in the
neighborhood. And so now what happened was over a span of time agencies just became—you come to the agency, if they can help you they help you, if not they refer you.

MARGARET: Right.

JIM: But there was no connection to the community except this agency that had been there for years. Everybody knew about it but they used to have people that went out and went door-to-door. They knew the conditions of those families. They knew who needed help, who didn’t, you know and all that stuff. And they communicated very well with the people. And that was all taken away and I think over a span of time, the 20 years it just grew into a disaster.

MARGARET: Right because those communities are no longer necessarily utilizing the services that are available within because you don’t have that connection. Okay.

JIM: You don’t have a connection and the agencies can’t prove that they really need the resources as much by the fact that they don’t have connections with people.

MARGARET: Okay.

JIM: So the association, neighborhood associations in those areas, are disconnected from the agencies that serve those people. So now you have isolation. You have the agencies over here, you have community organizations over here. You have churches over there. There used to be schools connected to these neighborhoods. They’re no longer connected, so they broke apart these neighborhoods and it was all done through social policy that was bad, bad social policy.

MARGARET: Okay.

JIM: And we’re reaping the whirlwind now because now those problems have gotten so huge, so complex, so interlocked that agencies are just overwhelmed. They just don’t have—you can’t uncouple it. If you have crime over here you also have drugs. If you have drugs you also have drug sales. If you have this you have a lot of children and a lot of women trying to raise the children. No men. And you don’t have a connection with the school so the schools aren’t open in the evenings, or they don’t really relate so the school is just there. The church—people used to walk to church, now they drive to church so on Sundays you would see this inundation of cars coming to the churches, when they used to walk from their community.

MARGARET: Right.

JIM: Used to have the African-American middle-class live in the city. No longer. , They left a long—they always talk about white flight. Well no, there was African-American flight too, because the African-American middle-class moved shortly after the white flight started when the riots took place and all of that. The black middle-class moved too.

MARGARET: As well. So let’s talk specifically about the riots. Were you still with the VISTA program?
JIM: Yeah they had two riots here—’67 and ’68. I was with VISTA in both of those. No, no, take that back. I was with the United Way in ’68.

MARGARET: Okay.

JIM: ’67 I was with VISTA. ’67 riot wasn’t nothing compared to ’68. A lot of breaking of windows, some bricks being thrown and stuff like that. But it wasn’t huge.

MARGARET: And what was the motivation behind the ’67 riot?

JIM: I think it was just because there was just so much dissatisfaction, and there had already been riots in Watts and Newark, all these different cities blew up in the ‘60s. Anyway From ‘65 up there were riots somewhere in the United States. And of course ’68 was Martin Luther King and that one was where actually places were set on fire and it went on for days.

And Wilmington was the longest occupation with the National Guard: nine months. It was the longest occupation of a military force in the United States history. And actually crime went up during the time of the occupation by the military because they’re not police officers. And they’re not there to calm things down as much as they are to—well calm things down in the sense of presence, but they don’t interact with the people.

MARGARET: Okay.

JIM: You know they were just there with their weapons

MARGARET: Right. And what were you doing, so you were with the United Way during the ‘68 riot?

JIM: I was working with the youths at that time.

MARGARET: Okay. And were you doing any sort of outreach during that period?

JIM: Some, yeah, sure. The youth workers were trying to stop the kids from doing what they were doing and they didn’t want to hear it anyway but you try.

MARGARET: Okay.

JIM: You had to try because you knew what was going to happen with them. They were going to get caught sooner or later or arrested. And so it was a very unsettling time, you might say. There was a lot of meetings, a lot of talking about what to do and how to handle the problem.

And I think that it just accelerated the white flight, accelerated the closing of businesses in these neighborhoods because there were a lot of businesses in these neighborhoods. There were little shops for meat, there were shops for tailors, there were shops for cleaning clothes, there were little restaurants, there was all kind of little stores, furniture stores. There were even banks in these neighborhoods, bank branches. And once the riots took place they just all disappeared, they were gone.
MARGARET: So it’s really that breaking apart of community.

JIM: Yeah. I think the social policy was disastrous. Urban renewal came in, bought up a lot of houses. They were supposed to fix the houses, bring people back into the neighborhoods. They never did. The government defunded a lot of urban renewals, so now city after city had vacant house after vacant house after vacant house. Then before I came they were building I-95, which took out one neighborhood after the other. Just removed people because they built it through the heart of the city instead of around the city, which took out thousands of people so they lost their home first through I-95.

Then urban renewal came, the riots came along. And urban renewal came along so the riots and urban renewal emptied the city neighborhoods even more. So your middle-class, your upper class had already gone and then your middle-class began the move. White middle-class. The African-American middle-class moved leaving behind his huge population of poor people and very few middle-class people. People who stayed had been living in the city, this was their neighborhood. They lived there, they’re going to stay there. But you lost what was a community.

MARGARET: Right.

JIM: You destabilized it, so now you have speculators buying up property, renting the property. Homeownership drops like a rock. People come and go. They don’t have the resources that they need to make a neighborhood because they are not buying the homes. They may stay six months, they may stay a year, they may stay two years and then go.

MARGARET: Mm hmm, okay.

JIM: So school populations changed. Then in ‘78 they reenergized the desegregation issue because the ‘54 decision had never been implemented by the state, by the Supreme Court by desegregating the schools. So in ‘78 they took it back to court and we go through that process and then white flight gets even worse because they pulled their kids out of the public school system.

MARGARET: Okay.

JIM: And then the next thing you know you have a school system in the city of Wilmington that’s like 80 plus, almost 90 percent African-American and very few Hispanics at that time and very few whites. So now you’ve got another problem. You’ve got an education system that is now turned topsy-turvy. And then to make matters worse they get rid of the school district altogether. First they create one big countywide district—New Castle County School District I think it was called.

But then many whites began to complain that, oh their kids don’t have a school to call their own, or they can’t relate, and they can’t have competition and football like they used to, or basketball. So then they came back and they divided the school district from one big district into four districts. And they all carved out Wilmington. So you had four districts coming into Wilmington.
MARGARET: Into the city, okay.

JIM: Taking kids from this area, they went to this district and they went to that district and it was a mess. It should never have been done but it was done.

MARGARET: And that’s where you get to the—I know I’ve heard of the busing issues. So people being moved from out of communities?

JIM: Yeah. Even with the New Castle County District they still were a bussing.

MARGARET: Okay.

JIM: And city kids had to go, I think it was nine and three. City kids were bussed nine years while white suburban kids were only bussed three years. So then you had four districts so you had these kids going all over the place.

MARGARET: Everywhere.

JIM: You could have one side of the street people were going to this district school, and on the other side they were going to this district, so there was no continuity of community at all.

MARGARET: Okay.

JIM: And you’ve taken away the economic stability of the neighborhood. You’ve taken away the makeup of the school district that was in the city, then you break it up even worse by dividing it up into four districts and that doesn’t count—the vocational school district was the fifth district. So now you’ve this policy, these people with their stupid ideas. It’s amazing to me because they don’t understand people.

MARGARET: Yeah it seems so short-sighted.

JIM: Well its convenience. You know the highway people like to build straight lines right? We don’t want to curve, we don’t want to do it, right through.

MARGARET: Right down the middle.

JIM: And the only reason why they may curve is because of a mountain or something, a valley that it would be easier to build through than to go through the mountain or something like that, but we don’t have mountains in Delaware.

MARGARET: Right.

JIM: Social policy, economic policy was just disastrous for cities, especially Wilmington, being the largest city in Delaware. Along comes malls and more suburban development, because as these people wanted to flee the city, it just opened up a huge housing market. So now you’re building developments everywhere to meet this demand and the need of people wanting to run away from the problems in the city.
Now they wanted to be like rich people living out in wherever in their little developments, in their cul-de-sacs and all like that. So developers built one development after another development after another development, and obviously people made a ton of money because if the marketplace is there that’s what you want. You don’t want to build a house and nobody’s going to buy it.

MARGARET: Right.

JIM: So the market was there and then the malls came about. Well when the malls came about that meant a lot of businesses. They were family businesses in the city which couldn’t compete with those malls. So now you’ve got this draw, like a line of people just running to the malls not going downtown anymore. So then they put in movie houses, they put in restaurants, they put in all of that so now people say, “Well you know, I’m not going to that inner-city mess anymore because now it’s all black and I don’t want to be bothered with that. I can go here and be perfectly happy.

MARGARET: And have everything, yeah.

JIM: And it’s not far from my house so why should I drive into the city when I can go here.

MARGARET: Why leave yeah.

JIM: So it’s an economic issue. So you drain the economy of the cities and you’ve drained the people, you’ve drained the economy, you’ve killed the education system, and what do churches do then? Because even though they may traditionally serve the African-American community their patrons now that they had are somewhere else.

MARGARET: Right.

JIM: And all they have is these little old ladies that still go to the church, and the deacons that still go to the church, and all of that. And then they know they have to get these people to come back to the church. Then they get them but the church doesn’t serve as that centerpiece anymore in the neighborhood or in the community.

MARGARET: Right.

JIM: It’s just a place like a building. It’s empty all week long and then on Sunday or maybe Wednesday night there’s activity.

MARGARET: Right.

JIM: So it doesn’t connect. So you’ve broken every needed connection to a community. People no longer know the children living in the neighborhood. They no longer connect to the elders that lived in that or still live in that neighborhood. They no longer have any working conditions because they don’t—they’re unemployed, can’t get jobs. Drugs comes in, drugs then become more and more prominent. So now you get a drug addiction problem. Then you’ve got a drug sale problem. I mean we’ve created—this country has created some monsters.
And then we sit back and we say well we’re going to have a war on poverty. The war on poverty worked out very well actually. And unlike the conservative view that it was a waste of money, a waste of time, it was unsuccessful and we don’t need it anymore. They cut it off in the 70s or early 80s. Once that happened then all of the efforts that were done to try to get people from outside of the mainstream into the mainstream stopped.

And fortunately for most African-American families two thirds of the families got into—your education was more, during that period from the 70s, 60s–70s, into the late 70s. There were more African-Americans graduating from high school, more African-Americans attending college, more African-Americans graduating from college, more African-American businesses, more African-American elected officials, more homeownership. All of that was the biggest change in American society for African-Americans was during that time.

MARGARET: Was during that period.

JIM: And so you could see the records. They were just being busted one after the other. Heretofore you had an unemployment—in the 40s, the unemployment rate amongst African-Americans was something like 50-60 percent. It was horrible. And the secret is that when they close the door in the last 40 years African-American unemployment has never dropped below 8 percent. But when you go into the city for example unemployment rate may be 10 percent now, I think it’s around 10 percent. But when you look at the African-American community the unemployment rate is like 25 percent. So what do you do about it?

MARGARET: Yeah.

JIM: And then our economy collapsed in 2008—began in 2007 but collapsed in ‘08 and then we went to that. And we’re still going through it. And jobs were eliminated right and left, people lost their homes. So we have a double whammy in effect. We have no resources to go into these inner cities but the majority of society is also hurting. So they’re trying to figure out how we’re going to survive. I can’t be worried about other people over there when my wife lost her job or both of them lost their job. How do we pay for our mortgage?

Or people signed mortgages they had no business signing which meant the balloons were going to kill them. The flippers got caught in the middle because they were used to selling their homes in about six months. Now there’s no one out there.

MARGARET: They have no one out there, yep.

JIM: So they are stuck. Now they can’t pay the mortgages because they are used to not keeping it in the first place. So they are stuck. Most of the flippers walked away. They just walked away.

MARGARET: They just left the homes abandoned.

JIM: Cause it wasn’t really their home. The families who thought “Geez we’re moving up, we’re finally getting into that, we have a beautiful home” blah blah blah blah. Now we’re nowhere. And if we don’t make more money and what are we going to do and we can’t go to the bank.
And the bank was selling packages of mortgages all over the world so they couldn’t uncouple them and say, “Well your mortgage is in China and we’ll deal with them to get your mortgage reduced.” And so the banks are stuck. So the banks could not really fix things. So now they have one choice—foreclose.

MARGARET: Mm hmm.

JIM: And banks don’t want this property in the first place because they’ve got to take care of it. Then they’ve got to figure out how to sell it and all of that. Banks don’t like that but they did it during the depression. What’s the difference? They did it again. Seizing farms, seizing property and we’re right back where we started from with bad, bad economic policy, bad social policy. I just don’t understand why we get ourselves so messed up because we don’t know what we’re doing in reality.

MARGARET: Right.

JIM: We don’t look and see what the impacts are down the line. We just say, “Oh it’s nice.” All the studies say if you have early childhood education from zero to five, well one, some studies say 90 percent of a child’s learning is between zero and five and others say 50 percent. Well either way why are we not doing more early childhood education you know? We got day care centers and all we do is tell day care centers you’ve got to have so many teachers per children. You’ve got to have so many assistants. You’ve got to build a playground. You’ve got to have a kitchen professional, you’ve got to have all those things they’ve got standards for. Your staff got to be at least an associate’s degree. No system.

MARGARET: Mm hmm.

JIM: So your day care centers basically vary from very good to very poor. So you have no system at the earliest childhood level which you should use day cares for that. Let’s set up a system. If you’ve got all these regulations for me to get into the business of day care, why don’t you have a system of early childhood education? It makes no sense to me.

MARGARET: Yeah.

JIM: But you look at the government people, you look at the school people. Then the school people in their great wisdom to protect their own interest say you can’t teach in the school unless you got a teacher certificate. That’s Delaware. I don’t know about other states but Delaware’s that way. So it doesn’t matter how good you are in whatever profession you’re in. You can’t go teach in a middle school or a high school or a grade school in Delaware. You can teach in a college but you can’t teach any youth.

MARGARET: Right.

JIM: Why do we have that requirement?

MARGARET: Right.
JIM: Because to me it’s just a protection of jobs. If I force you to go to school, and then they did a study where they gave tests to different categories like teachers with the teacher certificates, those that are in here and they did business people and all like that. And guess who got the lowest score rate out of all the professions that they tested? The people with teaching certificates.

MARGARET: The people with teaching certificates.

JIM: Which to me, don’t you think you ought to get rid of that?

MARGARET: Right.

JIM: These people aren’t educated in reality.

MARGARET: Right and they’re going to the public schools and then the other people go to private schools.

JIM: And then public schools go down and you go the other way. And so they don’t look at what they’re doing. They don’t know what they’re doing so they just keep doing the same thing and defending their selves by saying, “Oh you’re anti-public school system if you say change.” And the public school system keeps failing. And from my own experience, like with my youngest son, he was getting D’s and F’s and they said, “Oh he’s a problem.” We took him to a psychiatrist, a psychologist.

We’re going through all this expense trying to find out what’s wrong with him and finally we found out what it was was that the older kids that they were allowing on the bus to bring kids to school were beating up on the young kids, because he was only, I forget how old he was at that time, but they were beating up on these young kids, taking their money and he didn’t want to go to school. So he’s miserable so we took him out. We took him out and put him in the Catholic school system.

He goes from an F, D level to an A. he’s happy, he’s doing well so we kept him in the Catholic system until his senior year then we took him out of Salesianum [School] and put him in the Wilmington Charter School. He got into that luckily. But I mean he was killed later on in a car accident but I mean the point is why did we have to do all that when the school system wasn’t finding out what the problem was. All they did was say, “He’s the problem.”

MARGARET: Right. Addressing the child as the, and not addressing the system.

JIM: And that’s what society does.

MARGARET: Right.

JIM: It picks a victim and says you are the problem.

MARGARET: Right.
JIM: And if you straighten yourself out we’ll accept you back into society. Well it doesn’t work that way. Society has—we have a failed system. Now 80 percent of the families in Wilmington in the African-American community that have children under 18 years old, 80 percent are headed by single women. 80 percent! And what are we do about it? Well that’s too bad and we go to the school. The kid starts failing, by third grade, they are really—they’re done by the third or fourth grade. And we know that happens.

That little bright energetic kid comes in kindergarten, if they have kindergarten, Delaware doesn’t have mandatory kindergarten for all schools. I grew up, we had mandatory kindergarten. But anyway if they go to kindergarten, first grade, second-grade, all of that energy, all of that brightness just dies about the third grade because they change how they teach kids starting in the third and fourth grade. So then he starts failing and you know what’s going to happen. By 16 he’s gone or she’s gone. They’re not going to last. They’ve failed too often. People don’t keep failing and stay there.

MARGARET: Right.

JIM: If I can’t play basketball why am I out here?

MARGARET: If you can’t succeed you’ll leave.

JIM: Or football or anything that you want to do. So we know they are going to fail. School districts do nothing, absolutely nothing. They know these realities about early childhood education. They know that there is a decline in the third and fourth grade. They do nothing about it. Then in the middle school this kid acts crazy of course because his hormones are popping, his manhood and we got all of that. So then the school’s answer is you suspend them or kick them out or they don’t come at all. And one kid I found out in one school, he hadn’t been to school like in 120 days and yet they were carrying him still as a student.

MARGARET: Hmm.

JIM: And that was for many reasons of course. Well if you’re not going to change the system, the 100 million for rise to the top and then they gave them I think 50 million or 8-10 million, whatever it was, for early childhood education, it’s all going to fail because we don’t want to change our systems. The American school system is based on a Prussian system. The Prussian system doesn’t work anymore for us because we were taught if you act up in school they’re going to kill you when you got home.

MARGARET: Right.

JIM: You sit there, you listen and you do what you’re told. That doesn’t work anymore because that’s not the way kids think anyone.

MARGARET: Right.
JIM: And if they don’t why are we still doing it? Why are we still expecting this organized Prussian march to the order system and the kids are just saying, “Oh yeah, right. I want to hang from the ceiling. I want to see what this is about.” And you’re taking kids and trying to make them all learn the same way and they can’t. Upper-class kids, black kids coming to school with 20,000 or better word knowledge when they get into school. Poor kids and African-American kids for example come to school with about 1,500 word knowledge at max. Now how do you make those compatible and set the kids in the same room and say they’re going to learn the same way because you’re teaching this kid and this kid is able to compete, understand, move forward fine. This kid doesn’t know a heck of a thing about what you’re talking about.

MARGARET: Right.

JIM: It’s like you’re speaking a foreign language. So this kid doesn’t ever catch up with this kid so when you give tests you’ve got a gap. Now to me how smart are you people? You know there’s a gap. Why do you test them the same way? Why doesn’t this 1,500 person have a program where you say, “We know they’re down here low on their word knowledge.” Now let’s bring them up to 5,000 words by the time they get here and then maybe 10,000 and a progressive improvement change. They don’t do that. So this kid doesn’t compete with this kid and he doesn’t score so he’s scoring way below grade level. So what do we do, what we do, what we do? And I don’t know how long we’re going to play the game on these things and expected the democracy to survive. It can’t survive the way we’re going.

MARGARET: Right.

JIM: It’s just inevitable we’re going to have a big mess if we don’t change what we’re doing. And this fear of immigration and now we’re not having people come out of Europe. You’re having people come from the islands, from Eastern Europe, from Africa, from India, from Pakistan, the Arab nations. So we’re getting all this polyglot of people from all over the place coming to America. And as that keeps happening you’re going to get more and more fear from the traditional American that, “Uh oh, these people are taking our country.”

MARGARET: Are different, right.

JIM: And that’s where you get into trouble. That’s when you start doing stupid things. And you can see it in Europe. Europe is the first test maker because Europe for years most of those countries did not have immigration problems. So their former colonies, people were just coming into their country. France, Sweden, Norway, all those countries were getting immigrants, and Great Britain. Now they’re trying to stop the flow of immigrants. Germany, I didn’t realize that America, well Germany we have no laws about immigration.

MARGARET: No laws, that’s interesting.

JIM: So why wouldn’t you have something? Now they want to do it because the right wing is getting stronger in all of those countries. In France, in Germany, in Norway, in Sweden, in Greece, Greece, the right wing Nazis now are the third largest party in Greece.
MARGARET: Oh, I did not know that.

JIM: And Greece was such an example of democracy and fought against communists and now, they fought against the monarchy, and now what you have is this country is you don’t know where it’s going to go. And if they keep going to the Nazis for their answer because of fear of the immigrants it’s going to be a mess. I mean people are already getting beat up in places. You know that’s the way the Nazis have always operated. And fear has been there, and promising everything. You know we’re going to straighten everything and we’re not going to allow those people to take over our country from us because we’re German. You know we’re not letting them in. We’ll kill everybody different.

MARGARET: Right. Jim I want to get, I want to back up a little bit to your election to the Wilmington City Council in 1972 and then City Council President in 1984.

JIM: Okay.

MARGARET: But in talking about that period, so between ‘72 and really actually we’ll go up to the end of the 1970s. So you have all of this kind of, the disruption to the community and then really vacant spaces in downtown Wilmington. And at that point it seems like there are some interesting revitalization or renewal projects when it comes to some of the cultural institutions. So I’m thinking about the renovation of the opera house, the establishment of the Market Street Mall and then someone like Rob Jones taking advantage really of vacant spaces to host art, really contemporary art exhibitions and art programming.

JIM: Right.

MARGARET: So at the same time I also want to, and kind of thinking about this from ‘72 to late ‘70s, really the decade of the 1970s, that decade, we also have mayors, former mayors [Thomas] Maloney and then [William] McLaughlin at the end of the 1970s who are really putting a lot of support into the arts. I was wondering if you can talk a little bit about what you remember as the art scene being like in downtown Wilmington.

JIM: Oh you get, oddly enough you had a lot of entertainment during the ‘70s. You had clubs all over Wilmington. You had San Sushi’s like at 12th and King which was a jazz club and diner, dining club on 12th and King. I said that was 14th and King. At 12th and King you had the Roundtable which was another jazz club. And you had in downtown Wilmington, you had several clubs that you could go to in downtown.

And then there were others that were farther out, like farther out Market Street there were different clubs you to go to. So there were plenty of entertainment all over Wilmington during that period—the ‘60s into the ‘70s. And they were very successful. The disco period came in in the ‘80s and sort of wiped them all out which was unfortunate. Because then people found it was cheaper just to put a guy up at a record thing and spin the records.

MARGARET: A DJ, right.
JIM: But you still had the disco clubs took over but like the jazz clubs sort of died out and the other sit-down quiet things, they went out.

MARGARET: It seems like there were, from what I’ve been able to find, quite a few comedy clubs in Wilmington.

JIM: There was a couple. I don’t think there were a lot of them but there was a couple of comedy clubs later on.

MARGARET: Okay.

JIM: One was at 4th Street, 4th and Market, around that area, which a lot of people went to.

MARGARET: Okay.

JIM: So there was entertainment. It really was big in Wilmington I would say from the ‘60s, even in the ‘50s—‘50s, ‘60s, ‘70s, early ‘80s, and then slowly all of it began to close down and go out of business. You could go to Philadelphia which was just up the road which had many, many clubs and places to be entertained. You could go to Jersey to—Latin Casino was the big one in Jersey. And then that racetrack that burned down, once that racetrack burned down the Latin Casino had a hard time. Then they tried to convert to a disco and eventually they just had to close it all down. But the Latin Casino—those places had the best entertainment. And Wilmington, you had the King Center which had concerts out on Market Street, which is now an elderly center for living for elders.

MARGARET: Okay.

JIM: But at one time they had concerts. Like I remember the Delfonics and people like that would come to that center.

MARGARET: Oh that’s interesting. I found a few mentions of exhibitions in entertainment in the National Guard Armory.

JIM: Oh the Armory, yeah. That was back, as far back as the ‘50s.

MARGARET: See and that’s what I was curious about. I know that Aesthetic Dynamics, I spoke with James Newton and I know that Aesthetic Dynamics had their show in 1971.

JIM: [Percy] Ricks, yeah Ricks was a great guy. He had two major art exhibits of African-American artists and they were national. I mean I was just amazed that the people that came to that.

MARGARET: Yeah.

JIM: Cause you know usually you think Wilmington, you know you can get some guy he probably never heard of or whatever. But he had major artists.
MARGARET: Oh right. There was, I know that at least for the Aesthetic Dynamics in ’71, the Afro-American Images, 1971, there is a Norman Lewis in the exhibition.

JIM: Yeah. He had great, great major artists, African-American artists. But he had two exhibitions that he did. Unfortunately he’s gone now but he was a good artist on his own right. And of course [Edward L.] Loper was always around, his son was around. But Loper wasn’t paid that much attention here in Delaware. You basically heard about the Wyeths, the—what do they call them—the illustrationists that were here and they had that school up on Rodney Street that was started by—I was trying to think who the illustrationist was?

MARGARET: Oh the Schoonover?

JIM: Yeah that was up there.

MARGARET: Okay.

JIM: So you had not only the institutions like this but you had these smaller—you have even galleries popped up in Wilmington. In downtown Wilmington there were galleries and then there were galleries outside of the downtown area. Now a lot of those went out when the economy started getting bad. And what hurt most of the art scene in Wilmington, believe it or not, was when DuPont took out 10,000 workers out of the downtown area.

MARGARET: And when was that?

JIM: In the ’70–’80, in that era.

MARGARET: Okay.

JIM: They took 10,000. It ended up 10,000 workers out of the city.

MARGARET: Huh, so really draining the city of foot traffic and—

JIM: They drain these people who set up galleries, these professional people who go to the galleries, buy their works, get framed work or whatever, and then all of a sudden you don’t have a market anymore. You’re down by thousands of workers. A lot of people don’t attribute what economic impact that had on the city but it had an enormous impact. Just think now: 10,000 people who would go out to get lunch, buy things. You could not get into a restaurant in Wilmington, a decent one. You could—the flop out ones like just a quick hamburger or something, you could always go and get that. But the good restaurants, you know the English Grill, Ratskellers, all those different places in downtown Wilmington, you could not get into them at lunch time without a reservation. You could barely get into them in the evening for dinner without a reservation.

That’s how many people were eating in downtown Wilmington in these restaurants, especially the restaurants. And you know the family businesses like Braunstein’s and all those different places that were along the mall, and the mall came about when Harry Haskell who was the
Mayor before Maloney started having a task force meet about putting in a mall in downtown Wilmington. And eventually Mayor Maloney continued it and put the mall in place.

MARGARET: Okay.

JIM: Then there was also the idea, well why don’t we put in a little village like around Old Swedes Church of all the houses that were built back in the 1700s, cause they had that one, the Hendrickson, I think it was called the Hendrickson House.

MARGARET: Hendrickson House, mm hmm.

JIM: Which was in the 1600s. They would build a little village down there. And that changed and they put it out by the mall.

MARGARET: So that’s Willingtown Square?

JIM: Willingtown Square became that, although it was originally supposed to be at Old Swedes.

MARGARET: Oh, that’s interesting. I did not know that. Okay.

JIM: And so those houses went there and other houses were just torn down. So the lot of the 1700 houses that had been still around were either vacant or derelict, and nobody, except for you know, the usual historians tried to say that. They just got Willingtown. But anyway those houses were saved. So as the mall came about under Tom, the big thing was the Grand. The Grand Opera House was in derelict condition. It was a theater at one time, movie theater because I know I went to a movie or two in there. But it was always dirty and messy. It was never clean like the Warner. The Warner was grand. It was really a nice place, nice movie house. But the Grand Opera, he was like kids I guess cause they never seemed to clean it at all.

MARGARET: Oh that’s curious.

JIM: You’d walk into sticky and all that, so you could understand why people that would go to the Warner would never go to the Grand.

MARGARET: Oh that’s so interesting. And the Warner was on?

JIM: 10th,—was that 10th Street?— yeah 10th Street. Delaware Avenue and 10th. Those two sort of blur there.

MARGARET: Right, right, okay.

JIM: It was a beautiful theater. I remember seeing The Sound of Music there.

MARGARET: Oh wow.

JIM: I always loved The Sound of Music. But they had the more classy movies and they were—it was a beautiful theater. There were other theaters, the one that was way down at the end of the
civil rights picketing was down around Second and Market. I don’t know if that—how long that lasted before it closed.

MARGARET: And I know one of them, was it the Warner that burned? No I think it was one of the other ones did. I can’t remember.

JIM: Yeah, yeah. It wasn’t the Warner. The Warner was just torn down.

MARGARET: And it was torn down, okay.

JIM: But anyway there was a lot of entertainment, a lot of art. It was interesting that the African-American art and traditional new mainstream art was big. And it was just nice to be able to go downtown and you can actually go for hours between one club to the other club. Even during the disco period. And you could just have fun. And of course all that period of time eventually those things went away. The galleries closed. The comedy club moved up to Jefferson Street in that big building at—what is that Jefferson and 11th?—I think it’s 11th Street.

MARGARET: Okay.

JIM: But anyways there is an office building there, right across from the post office.

MARGARET: Oh okay.

JIM: That’s where the Greenery moved from Fourth Street that had the comedy club and entertainment.

MARGARET: Oh right, okay.

JIM: And they moved up to Jefferson Street and it continued for a little while but it didn’t last long.

MARGARET: It’s interesting. That’s where—you know this is wonderful. You’re one of the first people I’ve spoken to to really be able to articulate some of these shifts, because I am seeing the same shifts, the closing of commercial gallery spaces. Of course some of the commercial gallery spaces that were established in the 1970s are still going strong, but they are only a few. So it’s Carspecken-Scott, Hardcastle, Station Gallery, Somerville-Manning.

JIM: Yeah.

MARGARET: Fifth Street was admittedly pretty short-lived and Rob Jones went up to New York but then the other really contemporary commercial gallery space was Susan Isaacs Gallery that was in downtown Wilmington.

JIM: Right. She did some framing for me. And there was another one, hers was on Tatnall Street.

MARGARET: She was with LB Jones on Tatnall and then she moved—
JIM: She moved up to 11th or 10th Street.

MARGARET: 10th, 11th.

JIM: Yeah.

MARGARET: So really kind of downtown.

JIM: She had a real nice one up there for a while. Then the gallery, which had all kind of interesting entertainment, art entertainment, he really wanted to create this multi-artistic place where people could gather to just be there. I mean it was, Tons of people came in there.

MARGARET: Yeah. It seemed like the creation of such a scene.

JIM: Right. It was just a place to be if you wanted to just come and you can see art, fine art. You could hear performing art. He did, he got sick though. I know he went to New York and he got ill up there with AIDS. But anyways it was just too bad. It was just way before people were ready to understand that cities should become entertainment centers again.

MARGARET: Right, right.

JIM: And not be business centers but entertainment centers.

MARGARET: But then it’s interesting, so then Susan Isaacs closed right around ’92.

JIM: Right.

MARGARET: And I’m wondering, and I think that you can speak to this given your experience with the city council, I also see some shifts and some decreased support of the arts when Mayor [James] Sills was elected in 1993.

JIM: Yeah. Well, their problem was they had a big deficit. They had like, it was almost up to twelve million eleven point something deficit that they had from Dan Frawley and they were struggling with that. And Jim’s problem was he has the same problem that the current mayor has.

Both of them came out of the House of Representatives and both never—Jim had been elected a councilman back in ‘68 or from ‘64 to ‘68 I think, but that was a different Wilmington and that was a different city government. And being on the legislative side doesn’t give you the first idea what an administrator goes through, like a mayor or a department head or anything. So Jim came in and he was going on theory. He taught urban affairs at the University of Delaware.

MARGARET: Wow.

JIM: And the one thing that you cannot do in government is think that you can theorize and operate it that way. It doesn’t work. You’ve got very pragmatic issues. You’ve got a budget problem. He really didn’t understand how bad it was and we had to keep pushing him, “You’ve got to deal with this deficit.”
So I think they just got consumed with people who really didn’t know how to be in government, didn’t have the skill set that they should have had. He was a good man. He wanted to do good but you can’t use city government for that kind of social change. He wanted to change the social layout in terms of jobs for African-Americans, in terms of how you redid the African-American community. All these kind of things which was great but it couldn’t be done at the city government level.

MARGARET: Okay.

JIM: So you had this theory but then you have all these problems and you don’t know where you’re going. You can’t project an image of a vision. Fortunately, Wilmington 2000 had been set up. A whole group of people kept meeting out at across from the DuPont country club out there. I forgot the name, something Rod or another. I think it was [Pierre S.] Pete du Pont’s family home or something like that. But anyways they were meeting out there all the time. I told them what we can do to help fund the government.

So they did get together a plan and this was before Jim was elected and he was running against Dan and they said, “Well we’ve got to go to both mayors, both people and say that if you get elected will you support like a Wilmington 2000 where we in the business community want to help revitalize Wilmington?”

Which was a great idea by the way, and I don’t know how I got invited but I was invited to be with that group. And they did. They went to both and both agreed they would support Wilmington 2000 if they got elected. So Jim got elected and Wilmington 2000 then became like a pro city group. They came up with ideas like the arts school.

MARGARET: Okay.

JIM: They came up with the dinosaurs, and all different kind of things to promote Wilmington, and it worked out very, very well initially. When they went to go to development of buildings between Fourth down to Second, that’s when things began to fall apart for Wilmington 2000, because they weren’t developers. Even though they brought in the Ross people who were excellent developers but it didn’t work.

MARGARET: Okay.

JIM: And so then Bill Wyer who’s the director, he was living very well off of Wilmington 2000 and then people got—business people got upset saying, “Why are we paying all this money? He shouldn’t be doing this.” And then that sort of slowed 2000 down and they got a new director and then tried to move on from there. But it never was the same.

MARGARET: Okay. Did Wilmington 2000 shift into anything that we still have today?

JIM: Oh yeah. The Renaissance—
MARGARET: It’s part of the [Wilmington] Renaissance [Corporation], that’s what I was wondering. Okay so Wilmington—

JIM: They changed their name after all the mess because they thought they needed to because of the problems that they had with Wilmington 2000 when Bill was there. So they changed the name, but what happened with that was the corporate leaders who should have been sitting on the board started sending representatives, people who always had to come back and say, “This is what they would like to see.”

So that energy of the top CEOs of the city working on projects for the city just disappeared. So now Renaissance has to struggle to keep alive because you don’t have this commitment that you used to have from the CEOs. It was set up for CEOs and top political leaders, top corporate leaders as the movers and shakers for the city. And it started out that way and then— fortunately the school has been very successful.

And after the changes that were done, the LOMA district—of course I called it Ship’s Tavern. I actually proposed that project, but I called it Ships Tavern because there was a plaque on a building at—it was Al’s [Sporting Goods] I think at Third and Market and it showed there, the plaque was to recognize the first Irish immigrant who set up a business in Wilmington in that area.

MARGARET: Okay.

JIM: It was a tavern. It was called Ship’s Tavern. Now I think you had Jefferson and all these people who actually went there, stayed there. The coaches I guess stopped and they would rest there, they would eat there and all of that. They had a water spring in the lower level of the building that people used for drinking water and it was supposed to be for health purposes. And of course they had plenty of the other stuff to drink too.

But as time went along they wanted to change it because of the nonproduction that took place. So they changed it from Ship’s Tavern to the LOMA district which was all right. I didn’t, I still don’t like the name, but it’s all right. I always thought Ship’s Tavern was a neat name. And I always thought if you played off of the name you could do things like, you could put up ships, you could put up different things, artwork around that area so that when you got there you knew you were in Ship’s Tavern.

MARGARET: Right.

JIM: How can you know when you’re in LOMA?

MARGARET: Yeah when—I never know where LOMA starts. I actually don’t know.

JIM: I mean lower Market Street. I mean I understand what it’s supposed to be about but it doesn’t really allow you to take art and connecting with history and making it work.

MARGARET: Right. Lower is an arbitrary term.
JIM: Yeah right. What does it mean? Where does it begin? Where does it—

MARGARET: Exactly.

JIM: And now they sort of stretched it up to the Queen to make it look like the Queen is part of LOMA. And I always argued with the business people down there. I said you’ve got to put entertainment down here. What you don’t seem to understand is this: is that now that the Queen and all of this is going on, you’ve got the Grand, you’ve got the Queen, you’ve got DuPont, you’ve got Christina Cultural Arts, you’ve got the—what’s the singer, he is—

MARGARET: Oh Bromberg, David Bromberg.

JIM: Bromberg. Great guy and both of them are great artists really. She [Nancy Josephson] is more into the making of things. But anyway you take that and put entertainment down in your district where people could come in. Maybe it’s just a pianist, maybe it’s a trio, maybe it’s somebody actually painting people and things right in front of people. I mean you got artists who are very quick at design and movement. And why not have somebody in there doing that? Somebody come in and here a guy could do a painting and say I’ll sell it to you for 100 bucks or 25, whatever but something that you could walk right out of. The guy would sign it, walk out with a brand-new painting. Who knows what it would be worth later on?

I mean things like that. Music. Let people hear [t from the street level so that— like New Orleans when you walk down the street you hear all this great music, clamoring of sound. And people would then say, “Geez I want to go down there and see this place. I want to go down there and hear.” They never really—they did some of it.

MARGARET: But it seems like that’s what artists and musicians and dancers were also really trying to do in the 1970s.

JIM: Right.

MARGARET: Really trying to bring that energy—

JIM: Life.

MARGARET:—and life onto Market Street. The Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts with their outdoors festival.

JIM: Oh they did a—yeah they were a great group.

MARGARET: And they were just diagonal from the Delaware Theatre Company, also founded at the same time. So it’s interesting to see that.

JIM: Well you know I was on council and got the—first it was Dollar Theater. They needed a place so I got them that the theater, the old fire station on Third Street. On Third and Walnut. And they moved in there and you know everybody was saying, “Oh yeah right let them have it. We don’t need that fire station. “Because they closed certain fire stations anyway. And so they
operated there for a while. And Dick Prier and I got the Contemporary Arts the Water Works facility down at the other end on 16th Street.

And they moved in there and they were in there for a long while before they moved to the river front. And I remember they came and said, “We’d like to move and build a facility.” It was great because they were talking about housing as well as for the artists, workspace and all like that kind of—and it was part of the lifting of the waterfront. And the theater company, they moved way ahead of everybody down on the waterfront with that.

And after they built that facility, it was such a grand place, it needed more with it. And I don’t know, people, they always talk about critical mass and all like that and I just say, “You just need more. That’s all you’re saying.” To me any place that you go where there’s entertainment and it still alive and vibrant is that they feed off of one another, the restaurants, the entertainment centers and you can walk from place to place to place. I remember the lower East side in New York—oh, just packed with places to go to. And all kinds of artists that today we thought we’d see them as big guys you know.

MARGARET: Right.

JIM: Of course at the time they were just people like the rest of us. But going to there and into the Bowery and it was just fascinating. You would get there and there was these—I forgot the name of the Irish, it’s a big Irish club, drinking spot and buses would even come and let people off. And as people were getting off, I mean you could walk down the street and there was a grate, and they’d be this guy laying on the grate and they’d say, “Oh he was a former banker,” and whatever. But I mean it was just fascinating to—the Bohemians. That’s what it was, Bohemian.

MARGARET: Oh Bohemian. Oh okay.

JIM: And you had poetry, you had music, you had all of that going on. And the art itself, that you had fine arts going, all that was going on. And that—I always remember about how if you ever really want to make something work, you get a bunch of artists who can come in and you have to have a mixed art. It can’t just be one fine art place. They work but only in certain districts, in certain economic levels.

But if you put all of it together you know LOMA could be so fantastic. And the one thing I always had the ability to do, people always say, “How can you even think of these?” Because I can see it in here. See when I talk about the district I can see it, I can see the streets, I can see the buildings and I know you know if you did certain things you could make it a fabulous place for people to be.

MARGARET: Right.

JIM: And they are slowly, they have a lot of people to come in on weekends and we meet next door to the pizza place and the places down there. But you could make that place really pop, and you’d have to fix Second Street because people are traveling very, very rapidly there and I would say slow them down.
MARGARET: Oh right.

JIM: That’s just a light changed. Make King Street, Market Street—but Shipley Street has to change on the backside. And if we got Del Tech [Delaware Technical Community College] more interrelated with the arts community and the business community—that lower area—they’ve got that gate up now. —They call it security for their kids and all of that. And I know that they worry about security, but I kept telling Juanny Jord, “you’ve got to integrate with the people. You know Del Tech just sits there and kids come and go. They do nothing for the city.” Oh he got upset. He said, “What do you mean?” I said, “You’ve got 1,500 students coming into Wilmington to go to school at Del Tech all day long and you don’t even know—nobody knows they are there.”

MARGARET: Yeah. DCAD [Delaware College of Art and Design] has been so much more successful, it seems like, at integrating the students into the city.

JIM: Right. They know what they’re doing. And I could not get them to change. I even offered to build student housing, close down Tatnall Street behind them between Fourth and Second. Close it down. Rebuild the houses right back there. “Oh we don’t want to manage any student housing,” I said, “I’m not asking you to manage it.” I said, “Do you realize that most of your foreign students that come to your college live out on DuPont Highway. They live all over the place because they got resources to live there because they wouldn’t be here if they were poor foreign students.”

MARGARET: Right.

JIM: Why not have them live here?

MARGARET: Right.

JIM: You can get a management firm to manage the houses. You guys wouldn’t have to have anything to do with it. We’d just set up a corporation and let them do it. I said, “We would contact the people who would run it for you.” Not for, but who would run it and you guys wouldn’t have to worry about it. “Well you know we’ve got cameras and we don’t want to trim the trees.” And we don’t want to do this, err no, they wanted to trim the trees. They didn’t want more trees. And I said, “Well you know, you don’t understand city living. You don’t understand. You’re a suburbanite college plopped in the middle of the city because you’re so afraid of crime.” What happened with Temple, Pennsylvania? They’re in the middle of damned New York College. What about all these colleges in big cities?

MARGARET: Right.

JIM: Their kids are sitting out in the squares, at the circles. They’re walking all day long and the night acting crazy sometimes and you’re telling me you’ve got to protect your students so you build this fortress, 1,500 people plus the teachers in there, and the food staff and all that and they’re all just there.

MARGARET: In their little fortress.
JIM: And that school could do so much for downtown Wilmington in the arts, in living and it’s just sad because they won’t change their policies.

MARGARET: Mm, that’s a shame.

JIM: And colleges have to integrate. I mean I got Drexel to come here and then the University of Delaware hated their guts and fought them at every term so they eventually left. I got Delaware State to come downtown and then Delaware State double-crossed us the minute they got that National Guard facility out on Kirkwood Highway then they left the city. And here we had Drexel, Delaware state; we had Cody Lieberman one time. We had Widener, Delaware Tech and the University of Delaware. Think of that, it was all in downtown Wilmington. Now Delaware University is still there but barely at 5th and Market. Widener left, or was that Wilmington College?

MARGARET: Wilmington College.

JIM: Wilmington College not Widener.

MARGARET: Right.

JIM: Wilmington College. Then they left. Then Delaware State left. Drexel left. So now we’re down to the art school, University of Delaware, Delaware Tech. And I kept telling them, “Students make these cities that are still vibrant.” It’s not the rich guys that live in the penthouses that are making New York City. Yes it’s important but if you look at the number of people who are visiting the arts, the number of people that are going to school, if you add all that up that’s your vibrancy.

You take Philadelphia, Temple deliberately expanded to improve the neighborhoods, the neighborhood that was surrounding them. We can’t get these colleges here to do crap for nothing. That’s what bothers me. Why are you so backward? And I just don’t know why. And you know fear, damn fear. If you want to be afraid and shake in your boots go somewhere else to live. Go to Australia or go someplace where you can think, “Well I’m safe here,” But the only way you chase crime out of areas is to be vibrant. Crooks even enjoy Disneyland and Atlantic City. I mean they talk about the off spin of the prostitution and all of that. Well in my view that’s a minor irritant compared to what you got.

And Atlantic City killed their own selves. Right now they’re trying to fight against all the other casinos that have been set up. But Atlantic City killed their own selves. If you walk down the boardwalk and you look at the backside of those casinos there is no vibrancy. It doesn’t have any liveliness. There are the backdoors and that’s what they look like and therefore they have no relationship to the boardwalk. Why don’t they do that? Why don’t they fix up? If you drive down the main what is it Atlantic Drive? Atlantic, yeah I think it’s Atlantic Avenue. Atlantic Avenue I think.

But anyway you drive down their main drag where all of those casinos are, the street is bumpy, it’s unkempt. You look at some of the gaps between the casinos and terrible looking places. And
they did put in the new shops down there so people are coming there to shop, but there’s no relationship between the casinos and like the shopping area. There’s no relationship between the casinos and the boardwalk. There’s no relationship between the casinos and the land around it. Why do you think you have a problem? You’ve got these huge gigantic buildings.

And like I gamble, I don’t have that excuse. I gamble, love it. Like I’ll get, if I don’t use my card, see you don’t get credit. So they’ll send me a card in the mail that says come to Tropicana or come to Rebel or whatever and you have $30.00 waiting for you in free slot play. Now I’ve got to drive two hours to get to Atlantic City. Are you nuts? For 30 bucks? So why do you do that? Why do you think you’re doing something? Now for a senior citizen who may have nothing else to do. And the buses don’t run between Atlantic City and Wilmington like they used to. They used to get them out on Union Street and then take people down.

MARGARET: Right.

JIM: And I remember this elderly lady who used to go. She got $20.00 every time she went down. So she would go down every single day. She would pack her lunch and she would eat and sit at the casino, not spend a dime for five days and she would end up—either five or seven—she’d go every day for five days. But whatever she did, so she made $20.00 a day going to Atlantic City. So by the time, you know that’s $125.00. Yeah $125.00—yeah $100.00. She would make $100.00 or $125.00. Or maybe it’s $100.00. But anyways she would either make that or if it was seven she made about $150.00. But that helped her live.

MARGARET: Right.

JIM: She wasn’t a gambler. She just took the money. I mean that may sound bad for Atlantic City but it’s not.

MARGARET: Yeah.

JIM: And since we’re so backward in our thinking here, we’re afraid of everything. We don’t want gambling. We don’t want the—Wilmington, if it had a casino that’s ten million more dollars for the city of Wilmington minimum. That’s thousands of jobs, hundreds—not hundreds, but quite a few business spinoffs would begin to gravitate around it. That would be another entertainment center for the city. And then if we fixed downtown up as a place for performing arts and fine arts… I even wanted this place to come downtown and have— they have a little exhibit in downtown, but I wanted them to come downtown and be in a building where they could take their art and say you know, “We’re in downtown Wilmington.” Because I know when I was in New York we used to go to the art museum and eat lunch. And you never did get to see the whole thing.

MARGARET: Yeah.

JIM: But like Smithsonian Institute.

MARGARET: Yeah too big.
JIM: You just go forever and ever and ever and you never get to see it all. But if we had a nice place—and I always thought the building of Gene’s, if it was fixed into a housing thing, that would be grand for an art museum there because it’s a contained building. But it would have to be, in my opinion, it would have to be on the King Street side not the Market Street side.

MARGARET: Oh interesting.

JIM: And the reason for that because King Street has no walking activity.

MARGARET: Right.

JIM: If you look at King Street it’s a highway.

MARGARET: Right.

JIM: People just start from one end and try to get through all the lights on their way out.

MARGARET: Right.

JIM: And if we started looking at King Street as a boulevard, fixing the centerpiece into a boulevard with trees and places for people to feel more calmer about and slow down the traffic, and then have restaurants and entertainment or places for people to go like a museum and all like that, we would then give the city a much different kind of feel for downtown.

MARGARET: Right.

JIM: And our cross streets are terrible. We haven’t figured out what to do with the cross streets. Like if you go downtown at Fifth Street or Sixth Street, you go down there, you know the area between Shipley and Market, or from Market to King are usually desolate. There’s nothing there.

MARGARET: Mm hmm. They are really the backsides of.

JIM: Right. You look at Shipley Street. All my time in the mayor’s office I said we’ve got to fix, and I couldn’t get the state to give us the money to fix Shipley Street. Shipley Street has to be fixed. It has to look much, much better. It can’t be the back alley. Do you realize that Shipley Street is the avenue straight to the main headquarters of DuPont, the entrance to DuPont?

MARGARET: Hmm, oh of course, right, yeah.

JIM: But it’s never treated that way cause it’s got all the garbage and all the—

MARGARET: And it’s all the backside.

JIM: And then we got that great little beginning of the arts place on Seventh and Shipley, the [Shipley] Lofts. And of course the Renaissance wants to put more artist housing in that area, further back towards Orange Street—West and Orange and in that area. And if it happens it
would be great, but I said, “You can’t reproduce Bartucca in Wilmington.” Bartucca has houses with land, houses with land. We have everybody together.

MARGARET: Right.

JIM: So we have to approach it differently but you can still create a unique art compound, colony in that area. So hopefully—right now there’s no money for it—but hopefully, eventually they’ll be able to do it.

MARGARET: Yeah I have been excited about what I’ve heard in regards to some of the development in terms of artist housing and artist studio spaces as well.

JIM: Right.

MARGARET: Well Jim I’m going to stop this for today.

[End of Audio]

Duration: 92 minutes