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Commentary

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Commentary

Tanya Hart

Tanya Hart: *You were educated in the public schools from age five on, and your mother was a long-time teacher in the Denver Public Schools until her retirement. Tell us about your experiences with public schools and their continuing value.*

Philip Hart: My memories are generally positive about the public education I received. My parents were very much oriented to doing well in school, and they were always involved in the schooling of my two brothers and me as we grew up. My older brother Jud was a good student, an excellent track athlete and a gifted artist. I was a very good student and a multi-sport athlete. My younger brother Chris was an excellent student, but not as athletic as Jud or me. Despite our interest in athletics, my parents made it clear that good grades came first. In addition, my family was very well known in Denver and my mother taught in the Denver Public Schools, so she knew all the teachers. My brothers and me had little margin for error in our behavior in school else my mother would find out from her friends.

Tanya Hart: *What about some of the people you went to school with over the years. Where are they now and did public schooling help or hurt them?*

Philip Hart: Growing up in Denver in the 1950s and 1960s was fairly liberal compared to other cities in terms of race relations. I grew up and went to school with kids from all racial and ethnic groups. When I look at my sixth grade class picture from Columbine Elementary School, I see people whose lives range from being diplomats, university professors, judges, FBI informants, petty criminals, business people, teachers, medical doctors, the whole range of life pursuits. I think for the most part attending public schools was good for the majority of these people. I think the added value is that this class portrait is like viewing a mosaic, kids from every racial and ethnic group represented. The teachers were mostly white. But I have positive thoughts about most of them...even Mr. Hinderlinder, my fifth grade teacher and a former Marine. If you were bad in his class, he had all sorts of Marine punishments to put you through at the back of the classroom. That is until, Bobby Hamm's dad, a postal worker and former professional boxer, heard about Mr. Hinderlinder's punishment and encouraged him to cease and desist - which he did.

Tanya Hart: *You graduated from East Denver High School which was then and is still now considered one of the best public high schools in the nation.*

Philip Hart: That was a good experience as well. My experience in public schools has made me an advocate of public education. Plus I saw how my mother prepared her lesson plans with such care every day. My friends from East High School are doing things with their lives ranging from being ambassadors, professional football coaches, running cities and states, delivering babies, teaching school, running businesses, to being incarcerated or dead. I was a good student and a good athlete in high school. I learned the value of studying hard and playing hard on the field or the court – and the discipline you acquire from both activities. East High School was a very well endowed public school. We lived on the north side of City Park, and the rich kids lived on the south side of the park and we all met at East High every day and received a great public education. I just wish every youngster could receive the public education I did.

Tanya Hart: *You then went on to the University of Colorado in Boulder and then to Michigan State University, where we met.*

Philip Hart: I actually attended Colorado College in Colorado Springs my freshman year, the only time I went to a private school. I transferred to Colorado University my sophomore year. I played sports and graduated in four years with both experiences furthering my education and view of the world. You and I recently returned from my Colorado University Black Alumni reunion at this year's Homecoming in Boulder, Colorado. Some of these people I had not seen in 25-30 years. I'm about 6'3" tall, but when I tell people I was the little guy on our sports teams in college they don't believe me until they see me with my boys...guys who are 6'7" to 7', and a little bigger around the waist now. But my motto has become, 'A Waist is A Terrible Thing to Mind.'

Of course we met at MSU. I won't bore our readers with the way we met on a trip from East Lansing to New York City. But it would make for a funny movie! You were an undergraduate student and I was a graduate student. Football was king at MSU then; what with Bubba Smith, Jimmy Raye, George Webster, and other guys. Earvin 'Magic' Johnson was just a little kid growing up in Lansing who used to come and watch me and my boys play pick-up basketball in the summer at Jenison Fieldhouse. MSU is similar to CU in that it is a self-contained campus and a big-time college sports program. The education at both places was great, and I had excellent professors. I graduated with

honors from CU. I became involved as an activist at MSU.

I helped organize the College of Urban Affairs. I helped bring Dr. Clifton Wharton on board as the first black president of a major white university. I worked for the Lansing Urban League while in graduate school. With their Labor Education and Advancement Program (LEAP) I helped prepare minority men and women for the building trades, many of whom have worked as journeymen now for over a quarter century helping to construct new buildings on the MSU campus, in Lansing, and throughout Michigan. I also ran the Urban League's consumer health education and training program in Lansing, which was a national program. My prior education prepared me well for all these demanding roles during my early to mid-twenties.

Tanya Hart: *We then relocated to Boston where in the early-to-mid 1970s you ran the alternative schools in Roxbury. Why did these schools form? What did they achieve?*

Philip Hart: That was a very interesting experience and a very interesting time. I was hired to be Executive Director of the Federation of Boston Community Schools in 1972. The Federation consisted of three schools, New School for Children, Roxbury Community School, and Highland Park Free School. These schools formed because black parents got fed up with the Boston Public Schools. Jonathan Kozol was among those who helped organize New School for Children. Harvard University professor Sara Lawrence Lightfoot's brother Chuck was the principal of the Highland Park Free School. I was twenty-eight and running an independent school system with nearly 200 employees, close to 1,000 students in K-8, in a city where racial tensions around public education were very high. When I started the job in September 1972, I had to raise \$500,000 by January 1973, or else the schools might have closed. Talk about pressure! I hired a very capable fund-raiser, David Smith, and we indeed raised the money we needed by December 1972. David went on to become an economic advisor on Ted Kennedy's staff for a number of years as well as the Economic Development Director for the City of New York. David's children attended Highland Park Free School. The schools were parent-controlled institutions so I reported to a Board of Directors made up of parents from all three schools. The schools used the open classroom model and were based upon African principles where the basics were emphasized with a good dose of self-esteem training as well. The schools did not believe in the value of standardized testing. But the funders demanded we administer these tests so they could see if they were getting value for their investment. We had funding support from

local and national foundations, as well as from the Federal government with programs such as the hot lunch program. Our hot lunch program not only fed the students, faculty and staff, but also needy community members. Despite the parents' lack of trust in standardized testing, our students always tested well above the national norm, and considerably above students in the Boston Public Schools. The Ford Foundation documented this in their 1973 report on alternative schooling throughout the nation, "Matters of Choice." I still have a copy of this report because I am very proud of what we were able to accomplish with minimal resources, but with a lot of love and attention devoted to the students along with a strong ethic of parent participation

Unfortunately, these schools as initially conceived do not exist anymore. The new "alternative schools" are places to which students considered unfit to attend public schools are banished and more often than not forgotten. But what the original concept of the alternative schools stood for does exist. The value of an active role of parents in the education of their children. The importance of self-esteem in education. The binding of the school and community. A healthy respect for the student and parent. The important role of a respected and well-prepared teacher in the educational process. The value of strong and caring administrators who can listen to the concerns expressed by parents. These are all things I grew up with in my experience with public education. These are things we can achieve in our public schools throughout the nation if we truly care about the value of providing a quality education for all of our children.

Tanya Hart: Thank you.

This interview of Dr. Philip Hart was conducted by his wife, Tanya Hart, an award-winning journalist. Tanya Hart is a graduate of the Michigan State University College of Communications Arts and Sciences. The university honored her as an Outstanding Alumnus in 1982. She also has a Master of Education degree from the Harvard University Graduate School of Education.