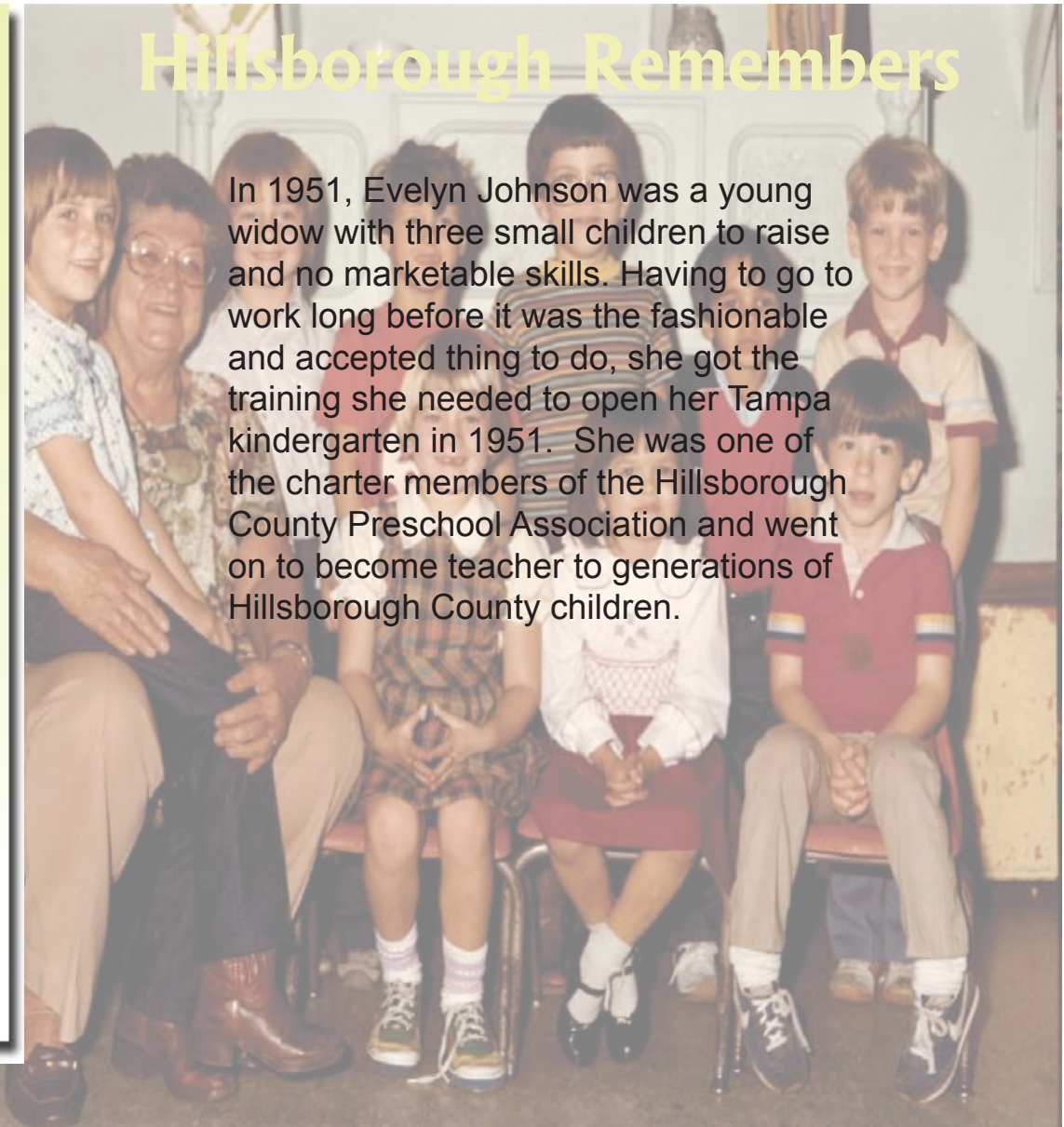




*Evelyn Johnson*

## Hillsborough Remembers

In 1951, Evelyn Johnson was a young widow with three small children to raise and no marketable skills. Having to go to work long before it was the fashionable and accepted thing to do, she got the training she needed to open her Tampa kindergarten in 1951. She was one of the charter members of the Hillsborough County Preschool Association and went on to become teacher to generations of Hillsborough County children.



[START TAPE 1, SIDE A]

*This is an interview with Evelyn Johnson (EJ), former operator of Wellwood Kindergarten of Tampa, Florida. Ms. Johnson has seen a change in family life over the past fifty years before and after technology. This interview is being conducted on July 6, 2001 at Tampa, Florida. The interviewer is Shelley Stewart (SS).*

*(recorder is turned off and then back on)*

**Shelley Stewart:** *Testing, testing, testing interview status, testing 1-2-3.*

*(recorder is turned off and then back on)*

**SS:** *Well, first of all, what was the place and date of your birth, if you don't mind?*

**Evelyn Johnson:** January 19, 1915 in Cleveland, Ohio.

**SS:** *And how did you end up here?*

**EJ:** Got married. [laugh] I attended Antioch College for a year and I met the man who became my husband. He was a senior there. He was from Largo, Florida. And, um, we engaged for a number of years and then uh, then we got married. Of course, I came to Florida. He had graduated from Antioch and he was employed by the State of Florida as an assistant auditor and, uh...so, we uh, from Cleveland, Ohio I landed in Cross City, Florida. In 1936, this is quite a different time, at that time, and uh, we uh, traveled. He was assigned to county seats uh, in Florida. We moved twenty-nine times in ten years. From one county seat, from Pensacola, Key West, Green Cove Springs, you know, ( ) the county seat. Week here, a couple months, you know, that type thing, until he was finally uh, assigned

to uh, Hillsborough County and was assured that he would be here at least five years. By that time we had three children. My oldest son was uh, five and the, the twins were a year old.

**SS:** *You had twins?*

**EJ:** Yes. And, uh, so, because of that, uh, we, bought a house, 'cause we thought that we would be here about and it would be easier to sell it if we were transferred elsewhere. However, he died in 1949. And my oldest son was eight, the twins were four. Uh, he was born with a hole in the interior wall of his heart, so...it was irreparable, you know and, ah, so then, I was faced with the problem of uh, having to earn a living and I wanted to hand-raise my children. Uh, we knew he was uh, uh, very ill. In fact, before the twins were born, we were told that he might not live until my baby was born. We didn't know there was two. And, uh, so that, I knew that I had to think about what I could do to learn a living for my children. Then the last year he was getting worse. Uh, his type of heart defect was one that was not diagnosed before this, until about a year before. He was made, the diagnosis made for him.

And, uh, so, I was exploring all the avenues open to me. However, most of the occupations where I was, we thought would be suitable for me required four-year degrees. I had one year and at Antioch and that wasn't quite, you see, because Antioch had the co-op program you had to go for six years, four years before you, six years for a four year degree. Because you did co-op work, you know, ( ). Uh, I went to the University of Tampa and talked to them and went to the different, took the different tests and that sort of thing. And at my own uh, thinking, I enjoyed children, and teaching, that sort of thing, and, uh, I

thought that it might be a good field to do. At that time, uh, there were no public kindergartens. Uh, there was daycare as such and there were a few private kindergartens here in Tampa at that time.

And my son, uh, my older son had been in a kindergarten in Bartow, where we lived for nine months before we moved here and it was a good one. I talked to the director there and, uh, I also had my twins enrolled in Storyland Kindergarten here in Tampa, which had a very good reputation. And I went and talked to Mrs. Mallard about the possibility of uh, studying under her. Uh, I had enrolled for my twins to be, to start in September in her four-year old kindergarten. And I was gonna go with them, to watch as she taught, and observe, an in-depth, hands-on type of training, 'cause I could not, I didn't have enough money to go to college. I had no family in Florida. There was no one I could turn to for help and I had to take care of my children.

As it happened, my husband died the day the two twins and I started kindergarten. And, I continued with my original plan to stay and study under Mrs. Mallard ( ) to the four-year old kindergarten. And then, that year, I began making plans to have a room built on the back of my house, uh, that I could use as a kindergarten and gambled our little bit of savings. My husband had a very small um, life insurance policy because, of course, he was not eligible for the full-time life insurance. There was no uh, social security for him because working for the state of Florida, they were not covered by social security.

**EJ:** And, uh, our limited savings, I gambled \$4000. Two thousand five hundred dollars to having the room built and the other money for equipment, chairs, tables, piano, that

sort of thing, that I would need. And Mrs. Mallard was very, very helpful. She was a good, good teacher. She's involved with the First Presbyterian Church. And she had a degree and she had me formulate a program that I could do. And one year later, when I opened up my kindergarten, she passed on a few of the children that were on her waiting list to get me started.

At that time, there were only about four or five, I think, private



kindergartens, Holly Hill and Storyland and there were some others in south Tampa that I do not remember the names of, you know. They were real schools and not just daycare. In those days, very few women went to work. So this was something children just went to for like a half a day. That's what I started out with a half-a-day kindergarten. And I had the, actually a little later on, the, the room that was built on the back of my house that, uh, we used as a Kindergarten. Uh, I developed a rather good reputation and my school, uh, became larger and it never got very big because I didn't have that much room. I never had more than 35 children in my kindergarten, including the three year olds, four year old, and five year olds. Later, I--

**SS:** *Big class.*

**EJ:** Well, there were three separate classes, you see. Three year old, a four year old, and five year old class. And I had hired different people to help me. I did the programming and then they just divided the children up into different age groups and I taught them how to conduct their classes. They would watch me also. That's

mainly what I, how I started, depending on, I did develop, I did very, very important work.

The year before I opened my kindergarten, Mrs. Mallard and some of the other teachers from Holly Hill School uh, got together and wanted to organize the Hillsborough County Pre-School Association. They had been members of the Florida Association for Children Under Six, and were very, very impressed with those programs and they wanted uh, to have a professional organization to develop the standards, to improve the standards of child care. We believed that everyone taking care of children should have training in Child Development and the basic forms of teaching young children.

And so the Hillsborough County Pre-School Association was organized in 1950. I was one of the charter members. I think I might be one of the only charter member in Hillsborough County left. It has changed now and the various names, you know. But it still has been affiliated with the Florida Association, southwest, Southwest, Southeastern Association. The first name has dropped the "under six", because they are, some have children in the early childhood education a little bit older than that and they still are in business. In May, I was invited to attend their banquet, you know, and, well it was a luncheon at the University of South Florida, as one of the original members of our local organization. It's become very, very professional. We also worked within Teachers' ( ) at Florida State University in Child Development in their, uh...we had a problem there for a while because uh, the colored teachers were not accepted, but we worked and worked and worked. They couldn't be together. We talked with the ( ).

Eventually I went to Tallahassee during the summer and took some classes there. But I took many, many classes in early childhood development right here in Tampa. So that I had had professional training in them. I gained a reputation for my type of early child education that searches the child development angle. And I, the parents of the children who attend my school, were mostly professional people. Well, later on were women who went to work. I had children who are teachers, and, when their children had reached elementary school age, they still need to someone to take care of them while their moms were working. So, that's when I opened up daycare then, expanded to daycare. We had, uh, children of doctors and the teachers and professors at University of South Florida were here. I still keep in touch with many of them even.

**SS:** *When was this?*

**EJ:** This, some of the children I had to, the children of children had been in my kindergarten and I kept in touch with the parents of the children who had attended, you know. Ah, we became friends while their children were here and up until about a year ago, I wrote to people out of the United States who had been in the kindergarten. Ah, one of the, uh, vice presidents of the University of Tampa, ( ) kept in touch. I still keep in touch with the wife of one doctor. Her husband has died since then. But they write to me. I became especially ( ). Betsy King, uh, who is the librarian that uh, suggested I do the interview, had her two daughters in my kindergarten. Now Katy is twenty-seven. Barbara is twenty-five, so you know that's a few years.

We, I, I think it's part of being with almost a family and we had the same goals and, uh, they did not want a, just a dumping place for the kids. You

didn't want this, uh, I did, never believed in pushing reading at a very early age because I believed completely in the Giselle Love ( ) studies that uh, the eyes are not mature enough for reading, generally, before the age of six in girls and six and a half in boys. And they've written the books are about get your child in the right ( ). I believed in thoroughly.

I believed in reading readiness very, very strongly and this is what I say, that children should know what a, that a ball can be many things. It can be a dance, it could be a ( ), it could be many different things before they actually read the word "ball." So that when they get to reading, they know what the words mean. And not only did you play the words, you use song and fingerpaint and things like that. And puns and jokes and uh, rhyming and the whole thing with children's literature, you know, they should be familiar with all of that as background and then when they start reading it has meaning for them. I believe also that children should uh, walk balance beams.

***I developed my own style of teaching***

You know, well, that's, I'm really talking about the theory of education, not our topic here. But at the time that we started out, all that needed, you needed to open a kindergarten was a yard with, uh, ah, some sort of division. It didn't even have to have fences at first and, uh, crayons or something to keep them busy. Ah, the, uh, teachers had to be tested every year for tuberculosis and communicable, venereal diseases. But that essentially was all the regulations for kindergarten. That only you had to, I, was pushing for more uh, limits, more guidance, it's more, uh, safeguard, for the children and the

teachers, and we pushed on that. Uh, the, I don't know exactly what else that you are interested in...

**SS:** Well, ( )...

*(recorder is turned off and then back on)*

**SS:** So, the materials you started with were just basically your building and some, let's see, supplies, and, what...?

**EJ:** Well, uh, I did, I had that year in which to build it up while I was learning under Ms. Mallord. Uh, we made a tables, uh, the lower ( ) and we bought chairs. I bought a used piano. We uh, bought a swing set and a slide and uh, playground equipment. Of course, a lot of the paints and books and things like that that you just had to have. And, uh, Mrs. Mallard used a ( ) book that was built that I followed for a few years, then I discarded that.

I developed my own style of teaching and I did not care for that type of ( )

in this book, also because of something that I learned of at FSU. But, uh, we built saw, we had saw horses and put up a rope swing in the backyard, that I felt was a very important development. Later, my friends helped me build a ( ) that we called the power strip. Uh, it was because we believed in developing children imagination and also the skills of walking the balance beam, that's all part of reading readiness. The rope swing was part of that. We used the back yard, the outdoors alot and we believed in painting. I bought easels that we hung on the wall so that we could do our painting outdoors.

**SS:** *So most of the things that you started with, you borrowed or you made yourself.*

**EJ:** Absolutely.

**SS:** *So, ( ).*

**EJ:** Yes, yes.

**SS:** *So, what was the classroom like, when you got started?*

**EJ:** Uh, the back room is, a big twelve-by-eighteen room with a bathroom attached to it. That was basically the first one. Later on, after I, uh, went into the daycare, I had to expand into, kinda into my house and used all of the front part of my house that is in there. It was blocked off, so many bedrooms mainly, but that was the only part that was off limits. Bedroom and the kitchen were off limits to the children. That's it.

The rest of it, we had cots, you know for their naps. Uh, ( ) I did, I've even forgotten some of things that I did, had to buy and how I had to change my house. Uh, we had to, uh, this front door is here. We had to get permission to move that ( ). Eventually, we had to move the kitchen, close up my garage and make my garage into a kitchen and that area that is now my pantry, was the three-year-old room.

**SS:** *Oh.*

**EJ:** The fours and fives were in, they divided up into different areas of the house with their teachers and ( ). And then you would have the main sessions in the back room there. Where we had tables that folded up, lift up, moved out of the way. I used almost all of my house, except my bedrooms and my front bath. Eventually, actually changed the bathroom and the back room and

eliminated the old heater as we uh, got air conditioning and that type of heater, you know.

**SS:** *I ask you about. Did you start out, you started with no air conditioning.*

**EJ:** No, Honey, hardly anyone had air conditioning in those days. We went to the breeze in order to get air conditioning. You didn't have it in your house, you just had fans, you know. There was a lot of things that, ah, fifty years ago, that's a long time ago.

**SS:** *Did you telephones?*

**EJ:** Oh yes. Always. Back in those days, we always had a telephone. And I picked up children uh, with, in my own car. For those who needed transportation, other than their parents brought them here. I believed in a lot of parent participation. So we took field trips. The parents were, uh, were involved in that. Ah, quite early on, when they first began the swimming lessons with the Red Cross and the City of Tampa Recreation Department, we participated in that. We uh, took the children to Davis Islands, to ( ), to, uh, to the children's pool next to Adams Junior High School; all different places, you know. No, it's the one at, um, I've even forgotten the name...the one...

**SS:** *I know what you mean, though.*

**EJ:** Of course, the one that next to the Seminole Branch Library. The one that we were assigned to. Our parents, um, we worked with the Red Cross and the City of Tampa Recreation Department in uh, teaching the parent volunteers who wanted to help teach kids swim skills. I thought that was one of the most valuable things that we did. Yeah, five weeks every year, we did not start, uh, the City of Tampa did it for six weeks but I said that it was too cold and too early in the year. I said

five weeks of swimming, you can learn just as much in warm water as sitting on the bench in cold weather. But, uh, that was one of the most valuable things that we taught, was the swim skill.

**SS:** *Especially in Florida.*

**EJ:** Right. One of my sons, one of my children actually became a Navy Seal. Eventually. Which was kind of nice.

**SS:** *What did he write?*

**EJ:** Well, I, uh, what, uh, can't even think of what now... ( ).

**SS:** *Did you have a daily schedule or...?*

**EJ:** Oh, yes.

**SS:** *What was that like?*

**EJ:** Um ( ), I don't even, we had certain times that uh, we were all together and there were certain times that they divided up into different age groups with the individual teachers. Uh...

**SS:** *Did you have like a nap time in the afternoon or recess?*

**EJ:** Oh. After lunch, you know. One thing that we, ah, we didn't consider that recess, we considered that teaching children while working outside, but a lot of free play. I believe very strongly in free play. And uh, very seldom were we working out there where they were under a schedule that they had to follow, you know. Uh, we had the equipment for them to exercise and to invent their games. And we were there to see that the rules were followed.



Safety rules are followed, friendship rules are followed, whatever.

Uh, after, we had, they brought their own lunches because I believed that, uh, children are better nourished on the food that they would enjoy than pushing around something that somebody said was good for them to eat. And, uh, we could heat up soup or anything like that if it wasn't in a thermos, but other than that, they brought their own lunches. And after lunch, they had a nap time for uh, over an hour, you know. We had a short, very short period of rest in mid-morning, too, you know. But, then there was, in the afternoon it was playtime outdoors, uh, story-time and I always had help, with the outdoor ( ) in the play yard until their parents picked them up. That's mainly it.

**SS:** *So, most of your communication was just your talking to ( )... [END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A] [START TAPE 1, SIDE B]*

**SS:** *So, most of your communication was to, talking to the parents directly and ( ).*

**EJ:** And sending notes home.

**SS:** *Sending notes, okay...*

**EJ:** I always kept in touch by sending home notes. In the early days, uh, we had a gelatin form that you could put a message on a ...with uh, purple...I'd always use purple ink and you'd turn down on this gelatin form and then you'd make the print, you know. You'd leave off on there, I've even forgotten the name of it.

**SS:** *Mimeograph?*

**EJ:** It was...No, mimeograph was continuous. That was, no, that was different, ah, ( ). These were, uh,

these were earlier form than the mimeograph.

**SS:** *So you'd see the colors yourself...*

**EJ:** Oh yes. Yes. Uh, they came...there were better forms of this type of thing that you could write out and, on a desk, uh, uh, liquid that you could print in many sheets, you know. Like, I've forgotten of the names of them, you know, is what I'm talking about.

**SS:** ( )

**EJ:** I could type them, you know. Or have someone type them.

**SS:** *What changes did you notice over the, the period of time that you were in the school, in the family life, or were there any?*

***a selected group of parents chose my school, who were interested in education***

**EJ:** Oh, there's always changes because the, the women want to go to work. Yeah, there had to be changes. Ah, most of the women who had children in my kindergarten uh, who were teachers, some were office workers, but uh, but all of them were interested in education. Uh, I can think that was the main thing I noticed. And it may be that because, a selected group of parents chose my school, who were interested in education, that we had more of them coming to my school for that reason. And so I would not see as much of the change as other daycare facilities would be concerned. Uh, I can't think of anything else that...

**SS:** *When exactly did you run the school then?*

**EJ:** 1950 to 1983.

**SS:** *And you just stopped because you just retired?*

**EJ:** Well, yes. I was 68 years old. And, uh, see I was 34 when I opened up the store and I was 68 when I, I stopped and uh, I was just getting too old. Also, the public kindergarten opened up.

**SS:** *Oh, uh huh.*

**EJ:** And I had children in here for several years even after public kindergartens. At least five years after public kindergartens were opened. But there was a certain type of person that wanted my type of teaching, rather than the more reading-oriented public school kindergarten.

**SS:** *And so that was your reason for closing?*

**EJ:** Yes, uh, I never charged enough money. Uh, and never had a very large school and it was becoming more and more difficult for me to make ends meet. I was getting older and so I decided to just stop.

**SS:** *Did you just charge people on a weekly basis, I mean...?*

**EJ:** Weekly, monthly, sometimes they got carried ( ). Some people never did ( ), never did, like doctors and everything out there, some things stayed on the books ( ). I had some uh, parents who were on very limited incomes, and the mothers needed to work and needed some ( ). As long as that type of care, and they if they gotta have that, I offered to do it for them. I, people helped me, doctors

helped me when I couldn't afford home care, full charge. I know doctors charged me less for my children.

**SS:** *Do you think that's something that's changed today?*

**EJ:** I don't know because, uh, I stayed friends with the people who have my philosophy...of life. I have never been one who valued money above other things. I think that what you give comes back and you must give, if someone gives to you, you must give back to the community and to people. That's my basic philosophy.

**SS:** *So, this is how you give back.*

**EJ:** Yeah. I survived and uh, I am proud of the people who have chosen to say thank you to me through the years. And uh, I've never been in real, in real hard tough...the interesting thing is that, at the time that we bought the house we had chosen several others and for one reason or another, they had problems, too, until we came to this house. I bought this one without my husband ever seeing it, you know uh, he had died. The, if I had been in any of the other houses, I would not have been able to open up the kindergarten.



**SS:** *Oh.*

**EJ:** It just seems as if fate has worked it itself, that this is where I needed to be. ( ) religion, you know. And my own self.

**SS:** ( ).

**EJ:** It's a philosophy or a religion, you know, whatever you want to call it or

not. It is, uh, this is where I needed to be and I've had a good life, you know.

**SS:** *Um, okay, so...( )*

**EJ:** Also, my twin sons, uh, when I, um, closed up my kindergarten, they said, "Anybody who has finally graduates from kindergarten after thirty years needs the graduation present, so they gave me a trip to Hawaii."

**SS:** *Oh! That's wonderful! [both laugh]*

**EJ:** I did go, uh, eventually when USF was opened. Uh, they would not, would not allow us to have workshops all these years. University of South Florida insisted that people should go to full uh, college and you get your early childhood education in the second, last two years. We thought that uh, everybody needed uh, knowledge about childcare in kindergartens, and so, we worked with the University of South Florida to set up, uh, one week or two week classes, you know, in childcare. And so that we would continue being able to offer some type of, of childcare knowledge without actually having to go to four years of college.

**SS:** *Really.*

**EJ:** Right. Uh, I myself, went back to school after my own children graduated, my own sons graduated uh, at night time, you know, until I got to having to take my math all over again. And I decided I did not need to go back to learn my high school math all over again 'cause I'd forgotten it. I didn't feel I needed any trigonometry in order to be a good kindergarten teacher, so I quit.

**SS:** *[laugh] So they, I've noticed that even my daughter's daycare, they must have to go to training, so that's part of your legacy that you started.*

**EJ:** Yes. Yes, we did. We also worked to have ( ) license, to ( ) licensing board, you know. Uh, set up to help evaluate ( ) came in to check on the schools to see if they were clean and safe and things like that. We also worked for the University of South Florida, I did at least. They had a program there to detect learning uh, disabilities uh, before kindergarten age, um, before public school kindergarten age. So that they could work for the child who ( ) or who had other problems, you know, before they entered school. And so we had, my school, at least, there were many others in the Association who did too, work with that program. I think that's been changed now, but that's one of the things that we did. We worked with them to get licensing and training for the ) people. So I believe, we did something good.

**SS:** ( ), it's very ( ).

**EJ:** Also, one thing I will say, I probably would not be able to have a kindergarten today. My type of school would not be able to be started. Uh, things happened in my school and I thought I was a very caring, very safety-minded person and yet, things happened in my school that they would, I'd be sued for and would be shut up for. If they happened, if I were operating today, I would be afraid.

**SS:** *You were, what things did you do?*

**EJ:** Well, you'd, the prices you would have to charge, in order to pay for some of the things that they are requiring today, I would never have been able to manage the way I did.

**SS:** *So things have changed from the way...?*

**EJ:** I would not be allowed, I don't think they would allow us to have the parents take the children on field trips

to Lowry Park like we did for years. The parents went with us, you know, and they'd use their cars and --

**SS:** *It'd have to be some ( ) vehicle.*

**EJ:** Yeah. So there's some definite changes, some of them good, some of them bad. Uh, no matter how careful you are, the, there'd be a child that gets around the corner, child would climb somewhere that he's not supposed to. Uh, I had only one major accident in all the years, and that's child that fell down off the slide and hit his elbow. And uh, it's a bad, you know, crack, you know, right in there. But that's was the, nothing happened to anyone, anywhere. Nothing happened to ( ).

**SS:** *Well, sometimes kid just do things ( ).*

**EJ:** My, uh...

**SS:** *When you started teaching ( )*

**EJ:** Children bite.

**SS:** *[laugh] Yeah.*

**EJ:** Young children bite!

**SS:** *That's what I was getting at...*

**EJ:** --and you cannot stop them, no way, no way. You can teach them all you want to that dogs bite, children don't bite and, you know, that sort of thing. But, uh, kids are kids. And you watch them the best you can, you teach them the best you can, and, uh, we feel that today that the, the growing sense that anyone that is, suffers an injury, you have to find someone else to blame and see if you can sue them.

**SS:** *And that's just lawyers fees and ...*

**EJ:** That's...yeah! Absolute. The lawyers get it. How can you put a price on a child's injury?

**SS:** *Right, injury, suffering...*

**EJ:** Right, right, right.

**SS:** *So, basically an increase in overhead or cost of operation....*

**EJ:** A lot of it, is going into lawyers, legal fees, insurance, that I would not be able to do it today the way I did.

**SS:** *Well, let me just ask you one more thing. Here, um, what organization did you say you started?*

**EJ:** The Hillsborough County Preschool Association.

**SS:** *Okay, Hillsborough...*

**EJ:** County Preschool Association.

**SS:** ( )

**EJ:** It's now turned into the Hillsborough County Early Childhood Association. HECA, the Hillsborough Early Childhood Association.

**SS:** *Okay. So, were you able to, in your spare time, [laughs] to do the things besides run your school? Um, ...*

**EJ:** I had three friends. Eventually, my sister came to live with me uh, in 1951 because uh, her house had deteriorated and she worked for, uh, the, okay, she ended up working for the Tribune. She worked ( ) before that. She worked for the, uh, ( ), you know, but anyway. She did live with us, then eventually, my mother came [laugh] and uh, she lived with us until she died at 94. That was only just, not too many years ago. She lived with us for twenty-seven years. Ah, at different times, uh, when my son was

going to Chamberlain High School, a friend of his, um, that uh, parent had to be transferred to Jacksonville, and he wanted to finish going to Chamberlain, so, ( ) pulled up a cot in my kindergarten and slept there at night, and he and Alan rode to school together.

For just a few months, you know. Uh, I just, I brought in different people. Uh, incidentally, last year on my, when I ( ) . And there, on my doorstep was a young man who was going to be 32 years old, the following, in October of that year, uh, who had been in my kindergarten. He was schizophrenic, homeless, on the street, ill. But he had walked from town because he remembered this is a happy place. He had come to visit me a couple times and, uh... His sister and brother also came to my kindergarten and we stayed friends for many years afterwards. But, um, ( ) it's one way of saying that, he had some happy memories.

**SS:** *Yeah, that's something ( ).*

**EJ:** Right.

**SS:** *Obviously, you must have been important to him.*

**EJ:** Yes.

**SS:** ( ). ( )

**EJ:** Well, I stayed friends with the family for many years but even so, to walk all the way from town, because this was a happy place. His family in Pittsburgh couldn't stay in touch with him, but he would forget to take his medicine and ( ) left it here. ( )

**SS:** *Well, I think that's it. ( ). ( ). Um, ( ). [END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B]*

*[END OF INTERVIEW]*