



Elliott Hurtig

EVANSTON SPEAKS

Oral Histories of Transformation and
Triumph from a Progressive City

Leadership Studies

Collection Editor
RENEE KOSIAREK

LIVED PLACES
PUBLISHING



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Dedicated to Robyn, Reed, and Leo

In memory of my parents, Anita and Martin

Abstract

In *Evanston Speaks*, readers are invited into the lives of community leaders whose personal narratives mirror the evolving story of Evanston itself. Through candid interviews, each story captures the perspectives of individuals from diverse backgrounds and fields, including educators, activists, business owners, and local officials. Each leader shares their journey, exploring how the city shaped their lives and how they contributed to Evanston's growth and identity. This collection offers readers an intimate look at how local leadership can make a profound difference, with Evanston serving as both backdrop and catalyst for change. *Evanston Speaks* is more than a historical account; it is a celebration of perseverance and the power of individual contributions to community life.

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Foreword

Evanston, Illinois has been part of my life since I was 11, shaping my worldview in ways both personal and political. I lived there from 6th through to tenth grade in the 1960s, the child of an activist minister who often brought me and my siblings to civil rights marches through its streets. Years later, my wife and I chose to raise our daughters in Evanston so they could experience its diversity, political leanings, and attend Evanston Township High School (ETHS), where I had been both a student and later an English teacher in the 1980s and 1990s. After our children were grown, my wife and I continued to live there until 2021.

I read Elliott Hurtig's astutely and sensitively realized *Evanston Speaks: Oral Histories of Transformation and Triumph from a Progressive City* through the dual lenses of a longtime resident and an oral historian. I have published two oral history books and am currently at work on two more. So, when Hurtig first described this project to me, I was immediately interested because Evanston is precisely the kind of community for which oral history is uniquely well suited.

Oral history captures what official records rarely do: tone and texture, hesitation and humor, the pause that signals the emotional weight a memory still carries. It preserves not only what happened but how it was lived and what it demanded of those who lived it. Hurtig's interviews go well beyond documenting milestones; they illuminate informal networks, acts of responsibility

large and small, and shared values that often remain invisible in conventional historical accounts.

Evanston has long carried a reputation as both progressive and fraught. Its School District 65 was among the first in the nation to voluntarily integrate its schools without a court order, and in 1967, it fully desegregated its elementary schools through busing. My father, as a community representative, publicly advocated for that decision before the school board. To some, Evanston stands as a model of civic engagement and intellectual and cultural vitality. To others, it remains a paradox: aspirational and uneven, inclusive in principle while continually negotiating what inclusion requires in practice. The city takes pride in its ethnic, economic, and religious diversity, even as it continues to struggle to make that diversity genuinely equitable and sustainable.

In an age of oversimplification and glib answers, I admire the way Hurtig's collected voices confront complexity rather than evade it. Taken together, they reveal how the ideals of equity and fairness that Evanstonians hold dear remain perpetually unfinished, tested again and again by lived experience. One of the book's central achievements is its refusal to resolve these tensions through tidy conclusions or abstract analysis. Instead, Hurtig hands over the microphone and listens closely to people who have been doing the work of the city: shaping it, leading it, teaching its children, all the while arguing with it, loving it, and surviving it.

As an Evanstonian himself, and as someone who raised his children there, Hurtig brings both deep local knowledge and the necessary critical distance to ask generous, searching questions.

He invites his narrators to move beyond recollection toward reflection, articulating what this town, with all its contradictions, has meant in their lives. He uses oral history to its fullest potential, preserving difference as a civic asset and refusing to subordinate conflict to comfortable truths.

By bringing the tools of oral history to a place he knows intimately, Hurtig preserves a vital civic inheritance. At the same time, he offers something larger than a local chronicle. For readers beyond Evanston, this book provides a compelling model for how communities everywhere might listen more carefully to one another, reckon more honestly with their contradictions, and remain accountable to the people and histories that shaped them. In that sense, *Evanston Speaks* is not only about one city, but about the ongoing work of democracy itself.

Mark Larson

Chicago, 2026

Acknowledgments

This book began in 1995 when Jim Wunderlich, my colleague at Maine East High School, told me I had to read Studs Terkel's interview of the Chicago Blackhawks hockey player Eric Nesterenko from the book *Working*. It blew me away. Thank you, Jim, for opening the door to Studs's genius and the power of oral histories.

The journey of writing this book lasted six years, and like any creative project, it never would have been completed without the support of my village. It does, in fact, take a village to raise a child, and now I appreciate how much it takes a village to create a work of art.

To my dear wife Robyn, for being my support system, my muse, and *bien sûr, ma raison d'être*.

To Mark Larson, my mentor during this project. You showed me the path and then guided my vision with steady, insightful, and meaningful feedback and support. When I shared an early interview write-up, you said, "I think you are on to something here." Thanks to you, that "something" blossomed into this something.

To Renee Kosiarek and David Parker at Lived Places Publishing. From our first conversation, I felt a sense of trust, support, and belief that these stories needed to be told, should be told, and would be told.

To my sister, Janise, for connecting me with Lived Places Publishing. You knew all along that we were the perfect fit and

you were spot on. Your editorial insights were both thoughtful and precise and always given with a dose of love.

To Amanda Gibson, whose experience and expertise helped shape the feel and look of each interview.

To my dear friend Greg Lundberg. I leaned on your aesthetic vision, including the idea to use sketches instead of photos and helping me to pull all the loose ends together. You did it with confidence and grace.

To Dan Rogan, your loyal and calm demeanor during our 55 years of friendship is a deep part of me and now, including the concept for the cover, a part of this book.

To all of my early readers and helpers: Marcie Roman, Amy Davis, Ron Silverman, Jeff Berger White, Helen Crowley, Sarah Larson, Noel Abbott, Richard Cahan, Tim Chapman, Richard Engling, Judy Newton, thank you for your careful reading and insightful feedback.

To everyone who sat down with me to be interviewed. You shared your stories in such open, honest, and thoughtful ways that at times I got lost in your experiences and forgot I was even there, needing to be ready with the next question. In this sense, you were the guides and I was just along for the ride. What a thought-provoking, informative and inspirational ride it was.

I sat down and spoke to many people whose stories are not included in these pages. My appreciation and admiration for your contributions are felt deeply.

To Grosse Point Social Club: Unity through community bringing the beautiful game and beyond to life every Thursday night: Play

on! To Wednesday Whiskey Club, born out of “The Troubles” and now flourishing as we shift into the Third Act.

Props to all the baristas in all the amazing Evanston cafés who served up my cortados with cool designs and warm smiles.

Thank you Mom and Dad. You both were connectors. You were curious about the people around you, so you got their stories. Then you asked them follow-up questions and you listened. I watched and I learned.

Finally, to my hometown of Evanston. I have always felt proud to say I am from Evanston. Now I can say that a small slice of Evanston—however modest—comes from me.

Learning objectives

By the end of the book readers will be able to:

- Apply insights gained from Evanston leaders' experiences to propose one concrete strategy that could support inclusive and equitable community development in another city or community.
- Critically examine the impacts of race, economic inequality, and gentrification on Evanston by citing specific examples from multiple chapters.
- Analyze how oral histories function as a method for documenting community change by comparing perspectives from at least two leaders featured in the book.
- Identify and describe at least three distinct leadership qualities demonstrated across interviews with a minimum of five community leaders.
- Formulate at least three follow-up interview questions that extend three different oral histories, demonstrating an understanding of how questioning deepens narrative insight.

Introduction: My journey from Evanston roots to learning from leaders who have shaped our community

I have always felt a strong connection with Evanston, the town where I grew up and returned to as an adult. Nestled along the shores of Lake Michigan, Evanston offers stunning lakefront views, is home to Northwestern University, and is only a 20-minute drive to downtown Chicago. Although the town entered the twentieth century under the influence of the Temperance Movement and imposed racial segregation, Evanston has gradually become one of the most progressive cities in the country. In 2019, it became the first US city to approve a reparations program for Black residents impacted by historical housing discrimination.

My views on Evanston evolved when I went off to college in Wisconsin. The distance from my hometown allowed me to see and appreciate it from a broader and more nuanced perspective. Meeting people from so many different places and listening to them talk about their hometowns, I realized that Evanston was different. There is a certain pride—perhaps even an arrogance—that many Evanstonians carry about what a great city we live in. And yet that pride is complicated by our recognition that who we think we are—the idyllic suburb on the lake, diverse, welcoming, and progressive—is not as straightforward as it seems. We are a city that sees itself as a beacon for other cities around the world, and yet we engage in insider feuds that separate us, where groups of well-meaning and passionate people often work against each other. We are a city criticized for our “drive-by diversity,” a superficiality that obscures the economic and racial lines that divide us. And we are a city that is proud of all it offers for those who have the means to seek out and find its systems of support. I wanted to get to know more about this city. I wanted to learn just what makes Evanston the truly distinctive city it is and why my own identity is so deeply connected to the place where I grew up and later returned to.

I am a life-long admirer of the work of Chicago’s original oral historian, Studs Terkel. I first discovered him early in my career as a high school English teacher, when a colleague shared an interview from Terkel’s *Working*. The oral history genre felt so much more poignant and immediate than my other history books. I immediately knew I wanted to incorporate his work into my curriculum. So I created assignments for students that asked them to interview people in the community. They loved the

experience and how other people's stories provided insight into their own lives and a window into the wide-ranging complexity and richness of human experience.

In 2022, I retired from teaching high school English after 33 years. What would I do with this sudden abundance of time, I wondered. Reflecting back on what I most enjoyed during my years of teaching, I decided to begin a project much like the assignments I had given my students over the years—an oral history assignment. And what better place to focus on than my beloved, and complicated, hometown? And so I embarked on this exciting endeavor.

As a kid, I held an idealized view of Evanston as a place where racially diverse kids would hold hands in a circle at Martin Luther King, Jr. Laboratory School, my elementary school, and where singing songs of liberation was the norm. This perspective shifted a little in high school as I became aware that most of our classes were racially divided and that the cafeteria where I ate lunch was predominantly white, while the one on the other side of school was predominantly Black. The parties I went to were by and large segregated affairs. The only place I felt there was true integration was on the soccer team. But once the season was over, even those connections slipped away. I knew all of that but didn't really consider it very critically. Instead, I held on to the perception that Evanston, in today's terms, was "progressive" and "diverse," and that no other place could match it.

I carried those ideas with me until I returned as an adult. That is when I first heard the term "drive-by diversity" and began to realize that my sense of what Evanston was; my lived experience was

very different from what the Black population here had experienced. Even my precious experience of going to King Lab was tainted when I learned that, in order to create King Lab as a magnet school, many kids in the predominantly African American Fifth Ward were bused out of their former neighborhood school, Foster School, in a well-intended but harmful effort to diversify our schools—an effort that ended up deepening the community's racial divide.

When I interviewed Kimberly Holmes, the executive director of Cradle to Career, she talked about how eye-opening it was for her as a young Black girl walking home from Haven Middle School in sixth grade and watching all the white kids cross the bridge at McCormick Boulevard and Bridge Street and head north. She took in a clear visual representation of how divided our town became once the school day was over. Kimberly walked home in a different direction from the white kids, and she would pause, look over her shoulder, and take that image in.

Kimberly Holmes like so many of the Evanston leaders I interviewed for this book, helped me see and appreciate Evanston in a completely new light. Each of these leaders described their experiences and articulated their insights in ways that unfolded naturally, revealing a much more complex and nuanced understanding of Evanston than I previously had.

So, who did I choose to interview and why? I stole my approach from Studs Terkel, whose last question for each person he interviewed was “Do you know someone you think I should interview next?” In that way, this adventure unfolded quite organically. I had no clear path; instead, I started with an idea and a first step.

The idea was that each interview would lead to the next one. The first step was getting the courage to ask Bill Logan, Evanston's first Black police chief, if I could interview him for the book. Mr. Logan, now deceased, is legendary for all of the community work he did in Evanston. It just so happened that he also worked out at the Levy Senior Citizen Center, where I went to work out every Saturday morning with my dad. When I asked if he would be willing to sit down for an interview, he was incredibly gracious and receptive to the idea. Each time we met, I was deeply impressed with the passion and detail with which he shared his story and how his approach to leadership was so connected to his desire to give back to the African American and broader Evanston community.

That first interview with Mr. Logan signaled a huge shift in my approach to writing this book. I started with the very Terkelesque idea of capturing the voices of everyday Evanstonians: the crossing guard, the server, the electrician. But at the end of my interview with Mr. Logan, I asked him who I should interview next, and he said, without skipping a beat, "Delores Holmes." Ms. Holmes was a retired alderperson and also a deeply respected community leader. I was not expecting on this journey to focus on leaders in the community, but as I drove to Ms. Holmes's house and took a right off Church Street onto her street—now called "Delores Holmes Avenue"—I felt a surge of excitement about the emerging focus of the book: the impact community leaders have had on Evanston and how Evanston has shaped their identity and their direction.

During these interviews, I often found myself lost in the heartfelt and touching way people shared their stories. They were open,

vulnerable, eloquent, and committed to sharing a part of themselves and their role in contributing to making Evanston a more connected and compassionate place to live.

There are several threads weaving through these interviews. For many of the leaders I interviewed, some kind of event took place in our city or in their lives, an event that some people might talk about, complain about, or simply deny. In contrast, the leaders in this book took steps to respond to those events in order to make our city better. For instance, Chris Livatino, athletic director at ETHS, shared how, after the tragic shooting of ETHS graduate Ryan Bost in 2020, the teachers, faculty, and staff quickly rallied together to organize a response to all the shootings of young Black boys in the community. As an action step coming out of their meetings, the group started Camp Kuumba. “Kuumba” is a pillar of Kwanzaa, meaning “to use creativity to make your community better than you found it.” The camp is now in its third year and is thriving.

Patrick Hughes described how, during his sophomore year in college, he randomly crossed paths with a severely autistic young man named Jay Turnbull in the lobby of his fraternity. Hughes made the spontaneous decision to connect with Jay. This moment transformed Patrick from being a troubled kid trying to find his way into a young man dedicated to helping people with special needs find *their* paths. His latest project is helping young people in Evanston find careers in the trades.

When I asked Olivia Ohlson, a junior at ETHS at the time of our interview, how she wishes her education would have been different if she could have more control about what she learned,

she shared how important a class she took on Black Chicago was to her. She said the class included learning about the predominantly Black Fifth Ward in Evanston: “I was reading about people who grew up blocks from our school, and their stories were so fascinating I just wanted to keep learning more.”

I know that the 26 interviews in this book are only the tip of a deep and layered “Evanston iceberg,” and that many people who read this book will wonder how in the world I could have missed this leader or that activist. Dear reader—you are right! There *are* so many more voices in Evanston whose stories need and should be heard. My hope is that this book opens the door for someone else to write Part II, then Part III, then Part IV, because as new and diverse voices are shared, we learn more about our city and ourselves. I tried to include a broad spectrum of voices: Black, white, Latino, LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual, and more), young, old, cynical, and optimistic, covering a diverse cross-section of Evanston. Is it balanced perfectly? Absolutely not. I know I have not achieved that balance, and that is why I welcome and encourage others to take up the mantle and continue the journey to add more voices to the mix.

In these times, we need stories more than ever. We do not need to build more walls. We do not need to tear people apart. What we *do* need is to listen and learn from others. That is an art we need to be intentional about. My hope is that reading these stories will help bring a clearer sense of the promise for change and the promise for action that resides in all of us. My hope is that reading these stories will help each of us deepen our understanding of how place impacts identity and how we each play

a role, in our own way, of making this place, the city of Evanston, Illinois, a beautiful model of what might be possible.

This collection of oral histories is a celebration of resilience, a celebration of those who have a vision to improve our community and the will to act on that vision. Through these stories, this book honors the leaders who have woven their lives into the city's fabric, leaving a legacy that will both inform and inspire future generations.

A note on stylistic approach

In shaping these oral histories, I have followed an approach inspired by Studs Terkel, who believed that every person carries a story worth hearing and that the role of the interviewer is to listen with respect, patience, and curiosity. The interviews were lightly edited for clarity while preserving the speaker's natural tone, vocabulary, and rhythm. What follows are not interpretations of people's experiences, but their own words—shaped just enough to allow the written page to reflect the spoken voice. The goal here is not to speak for others, but to create space where people can speak for themselves.

The organization of the interviews into five parts emerged organically as the project unfolded. Clear patterns began to surface, with each conversation finding its place within a particular section. I was intentional in opening the book with more established leaders and concluding with younger voices, creating a narrative arc that reflects both the depth of experience that has shaped the city and the promise of what lies ahead.

Part I

Pioneers and visionaries: Empowering change

This opening section highlights seven Evanston leaders whose vision for a stronger and more equitable community helped pave the way for future generations. Their stories reveal how deeply personal experiences shaped their commitment to service and how their professional contributions transformed institutions, expanded opportunity, and strengthened civic life. They broke new ground and took risks that reveal not only what they built, but also how their courage, persistence, and creative approaches continue to inspire those who follow.

