

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY STUDY ON WHITE PEOPLE

The Reminiscences of

Jeffrey Hillman

INCITE

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Interviewee, Jeffrey Hillman, conducted by Whitney Dow on September 24th, 2017. This interview is part of the Columbia University Study on White People.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

Session #1 (video)

Interviewee: Jeffrey Hillman

Location: Battle Creek, MI

Interviewer: Whitney Dow

Date: September 24th, 2017

Q: Can you tell me your name, where you're from, what you do, and a little bit about yourself, and your background?

Hillman: [10:04:52] My name is Jeffrey Hillman. I'm mostly from the Battle Creek area of Michigan. What do I do? Right now, I'm a full-time student in a PhD program at Western Michigan University in the Interdisciplinary Evaluation [Program]. Prior to that, I spent twenty-three years working at a local ambulance service as a paramedic doing paramedic stuff, and oversaw some operations with that, doing some paratransit and some of the community outreach stuff before I decided school was where I need to be.

Q: Where did you grow up? Could you tell me a little about the neighborhood and the area where you grew up. What was it like? Was it integrated, diverse, segregated, middle class, upper class, working class?

Hillman: [10:05:50] The neighborhoods we grew up in, we moved a lot. My dad was somewhat transient in ways. Our whole family was. We would move about every two years. We seemed to move around to different a neighborhood. We've lived in Michigan. I was born actually in Battle Creek. When I was too young to remember, we moved to Minnesota, lived in Minnesota in three different places there over a six-, seven-year period. It was a mix because, at one point, I know

we lived in a rural area where we lived on a farm, and then other times lived in a mobile home park. So that's the ones I remember in Minnesota. Then we moved back here—definitely not anywhere near middle class, definitely a lower socioeconomic ground there. We lived in Athens, [Michigan], lived in Joppa, which is kind of in between Athens and Battle Creek. And then from there we moved to Texas. The mobile home we lived in there, there were certain places in the floor you didn't step because you might fall through.

As far as the mix, it was generally white I think generally Caucasian. Obviously in Texas, the mix is a little different. It was never a big deal, I guess. From there, I moved to Haiti. I lived in Haiti for a year, working with a medical group there. Then I came back to Michigan and I kind of stayed here. Generally I guess the neighborhoods I lived in were generally white.

Q: How did those experiences, growing up in those different neighborhoods, create your sense of yourself, your identity? And did you see yourself as part of the group or did you see yourself as an individual? Did any of these experiences give you a sense of your race?

Hillman: [10:08:09] Not especially. I think probably what influenced at least my early part of my life was my dad was not necessarily always understanding of race. He had a job at Post [Cereal Factory]. It was prior to some of our moving to Minnesota, but had a job at Post during some of the big pushes in affirmative action. He lost his job because he was white basically. That's what they told him, was, "I'm sorry. We have to meet a quota. You're the lowest man on rail, or on the rung, so you're out and this person of color is the one who's going to take your job."

And so for him, that was a pretty poignant moment. He brought it up often. But even so, the workplaces were often mixed, so it was never something that was a complete, “Oh, all people of color are bad.” It was just kind of a part of the narrative of life where, I guess, if people wanted to get ahead they needed to get ahead on their own. They just shouldn’t have these programs I guess was kind of how dad shaped.

The neighborhoods I don’t think shaped as much, especially in Texas. There was a lot more mix, because we lived in a town where there was a nuclear power plant. There were people, you know, a large Asian population, whether it be India or different Asian countries. And then, of course, a large Hispanic population. I never felt any real tension in that, where I lived in Texas. So I guess that’s kind of shaping my early racial identity. I guess a lot of it was my dad’s talk.

Q: That sounds like a pretty traumatic event for him and pretty defining. I would imagine for me that would actually be—because a lot of people talk about the effects of affirmative action sort of theoretically, but that’s an actual real experience where it affected your family. Do you remember how that made you feel or whether that changed any of your feelings about race or your own race? Did that sort of help you form your sense of your own racial identity?

Hillman: [10:10:34] I was young at the time when it happened, so I don’t remember actually when it happened. I remember a lot of conversations. You know, people bring up Martin Luther King. Like, “Oh, all he wants is for black people to get ahead. He doesn’t care about anybody else.” And so those types of things, as society changed, became more accepting of the diversity, he struggled with that because of how it affected him. He never really let go of that moment it

seemed. But how that shaped me and my racial identity was, I often, as a young person, accepted that as that's the norm. If you want to get ahead you can. There wasn't a lot of consideration as some of the systemic racism that is true of our country.

So for me it was just, because we always struggled, because we always struggled for food—we were homeless for a while. We always had this struggle for even basic survival. There was always the, “You can get ahead if you want to. If you want to do this, you can do whatever you want.” So that translated to everybody. Like, “If you want to get ahead—” There wasn't consideration to that in the sense of white privilege. That wasn't part of it.

Q: That's interesting. We often say that the views that people carry are somewhat hereditary. They're immersed in something. Do you remember what the process, or the moments, or the events that helped you begin to shape your own views that are different from your father's?

Hillman: [10:12:36] Probably the biggest moment that shaped my changes was living outside the country. I went from living, being in a—[phone ringing]

Q: Hold on.

Hillman: [10:12:52] Technology's our friend. It makes your life better.

Q: Sorry. I thought I had the phone turned off. It's very embarrassing. I told you to turn your phone off, but I didn't do as—my computer acts as a phone, so—

Hillman: [10:13:05] No worries.

Q: That was my computer ringing. I'm sorry. So could you start over again about what started changing the shape of your views?

Hillman: [10:13:14] The moment where I remember where I really changed—I guess the beginning of changes of how I view people was living outside the country. Predominantly grew up in an evangelical family, very white evangelical. And then going into a nation of basically where it was me and one other person in this particular region of Haiti where we were the only white people, and always being called white. That was something that was quite common. Like, “Oh, look. The white,” in Haitian Creole, but still, “Oh, look. The white.” And people would grab their children and run out. “See? That’s a white person.” Because they had never seen anybody with lighter skin before.

So having those moments of where it’s like, “Oh, my gosh. I’m immersed in a place where I’m the different one,” was definitely moments where it’s like— I don’t know. It changes how you view things. Where I lived there was no water or electricity, and how they had the subsistence, living something that—even though we were poor in the United States, it was a different level of poor. There wasn’t assistance. There weren’t things, support systems built into society that supported people. So they had to live. And seeing the joy that they had in life, even in these moments where they have a banana mat to lay on, and sleep on, and that’s all they might have, but they still had this joy of living. And the humanness of that definitely shaped how I viewed

the world. I still had some stuff left, I think. A lot of things were outgrown since then, but that was definitely a moment where I saw life differently, and saw people differently than I had previously.

Q: How did that experience translate with you back to the United States, and saw yourself in relationship to other white people?

Hillman: [10:15:23] I probably didn't speak up. I didn't speak up like I probably should have. Early on, I mean, I was still—I call myself still young. I was twenty or twenty-two-ish. I wouldn't stand up for people when others would say things about people of color. It was just like, "Oh, that's their belief. And that's theirs and their opinion. Leave it alone." Though I might have felt differently. It's like, "No. That may not be true. Just because they're of African descent, just because their skin is darker doesn't mean they're not smart. It doesn't mean they're not capable of more."

Surprisingly, in the business of paramedic, there's a lot of racism there, a lot of us and them, a lot of that that was part of that culture – not one I spoke against unfortunately, as much as I probably should have early on. As I learned, as I became more confident, I did. But early on, sometimes you just joined in. Like, "Oh, the—" I won't use the slurs. There were a lot of them.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about how you became an EMT and sort of getting into this culture that you talk about, of the EMT culture? There's one thing that's sort of interesting to me is that there's a lot of sort of focus on how government agencies and representatives of the government

interact with the different parts of the community. And it sounds like you had a very specific experience doing that here in Battle Creek.

Hillman: [10:17:13] I will say the ambulance service I worked for was not a government agency. They were a private service. My getting involved as a paramedic was shaped partly from the people I worked with in Haiti. Like if I had this to do again—they were registered nurse. If I had this to do again, I would prefer to go as a paramedic because built into a paramedic is the idea of autonomy, that you need to do the best you can with what you've got. You may not have all the resources you need. You may not have all the people you need. Hospital environments, nursing environments generally have more personnel. And so I'm working in Haiti with people who like, one nurse, maybe two nurses who they're it. They're the nearest medical personnel within a six-hour walking distance. So they got all sorts of interesting things. As far as interesting, there was a lot of medical issues that they wished they would have had that autonomy that we're taught as part of the paramedic program.

So when I came back from Haiti, it was like, "Oh. Well, I'm going to do this, maybe then get my nursing, and I'll go back." I didn't go back. Not permanently. So that's kind of what got me into being a paramedic. I never really fit in a lot. I think that's just my life, but even to the point where one of the directors there was like, "I never thought you would be here as long as you have." One of the directors of the agencies. He's like, "You're just different than everybody else and I never thought you would make it." Yeah. That was probably fifteen years into it. I guess that's how I got into it, how I got into that culture. Yeah.

Q: Tell me a little about the experience of being a paramedic in Battle Creek and the arc of that experience, and also how your relationship to—because it sounds like you’ve thought a lot about this stuff. One of the things you said, this is interesting, is you talked about not fitting in, and this idea of whiteness and being part of something, and being a paramedic and being a part of something. Just talk about your arc of that experience in the years you’d spent working as a paramedic in Battle Creek.

Hillman: [10:19:47] The arc of my experience as a paramedic in Battle Creek was when recognizing a lot of the segregation that happens in Battle Creek, purposeful by the populations in Battle Creek, which I always thought was interesting. There was one gentleman who worked for us who was from Battle Creek. He looked white, but his dad was a man of color. And then his Mom was Caucasian. But he could very easily pass as Caucasian.

But he talked about his dad moving back to Battle Creek and having difficulty where he lived, and moving back to Battle Creek. And he was like, “Dad, I got this house for you. It’s in the Lakeview area of Battle Creek.” And his dad’s response was, “I don’t want to live with the whities.” Lakeview is generally a very nice neighborhood, but his dad did not feel comfortable living with the whities. He’s like, “I want to live in the neighborhoods where I feel comfortable with people of similar skin color.”

So he ended up getting a house for his dad up in what’s called The Heights area of Battle Creek, which is predominantly African American, predominantly low socioeconomic. I think some of the recent statistics I saw was somewhere around sixty to seventy percent of the people don’t

own their homes. Generally, I believe there's over fifty percent fall below the poverty line. So this is a part of Battle Creek that has the line where generally you won't find a lot of mix as far as interracial mix.

And even very purposeful, where people of color and the Caucasian—Lakeview is where the white people live. And seeing that all over Battle Creek, though. It's not uncommon at all. And so it was interesting to see that dynamic. So I guess as far as my overarching experience as a paramedic within Battle Creek, and related to race, I thought that was—it's very different. Even just a street. I think North and South Wabash [Avenue] were two streets that I thought was—it was just so different. South Wabash you're going to have higher drug rates, higher crime rates. You cross the street and it's all middle-class industrial type of housing. And it was very, very different, and it's literally crossing the street.

Q: What about the culture? You talked a little bit earlier about the culture of the paramedics, and sort of us and them. Can you talk a little about that, your experience working as a paramedic in these different neighborhoods?

Hillman: [10:22:46] The experience of a paramedic within what I experienced with the agency that I worked for, as far as an us and them mentality, it seemed—historically, being a paramedic is predominantly a Caucasian workforce. I don't know why that is, especially for this area.

It's very rare to have somebody come in who is not Caucasian, or could even pass, like the one person I spoke of. He could pass as Caucasian. There's very few. So it seemed like there was

always a lot of animosity towards—or depersonalization. I think there's a certain level of depersonalization that has to happen in order to do your job, but even that went a step farther for people of color. Regardless of who they were, it was just a "them" mentality. It's, you know, "All those people are the same. All those people are the same." And they're always classed in groups. You know, Hispanics. "Those are the people that are going to stab you. So watch out for them." "The blacks. Those are the people that are going to shoot you. So watch out for them. They're the people that take the services that I have to work for." And medical insurance, Medicaid, different things like that. It was like, "Oh, I have to work for a job, but they don't. They just sit on their porch."

There seemed to be a lot of those kinds of statements, were pretty common. Not amongst the leadership. I wouldn't say it was really amongst the leadership, but definitely at the street level. The people working the road tended seemed to have a little more of that type of idea.

Q: Jeff, do you have a necklace on by chance?

Hillman: [10:24:49] I do.

Q: Would you mind taking it off or—you can keep it on. That's all right. We can adjust.

Hillman: [10:24:56] It's not hard to take off.

Q: Okay. I can hear it tink just every once in a while.

Hillman: [10:25:03] It's been a while since I took it off. I don't know. I may have lied to you.

“No, it's easy to take off.” Geez. Me and my jewelry. Sorry.

Q: No. It's all right.

Hillman: [10:25:20] I'm going to flip it behind me?

Q: Yeah. Yeah. That'll work. How did the paramedics that you worked with, the EMTs who worked with you, respond when they would be called to the white community? There was a different way they would interact with the white community in these other communities?

Hillman: [10:25:47] I think there was less assumption that they were on Medicaid or they were like, “Oh, they're on Medicaid” – so it was considered a bad thing. So when responding to Caucasians, responding to white populations or white neighborhoods, I think they were more relaxed. It was that automatic assumption you were going to be safer for some reason. And even to a certain level, I would imagine I did it. I know I did. It was just less assumption that they were a leech on the system, or, “Look, I'm going to take them to the hospital and I'm going to be the one paying for their medical bill.” It was like, “Oh. They're white, so they probably have a job, and they probably have insurance.” So they're taking care of themselves, whereas these other populations I have to take care of them. That seemed to be definitely a way that we approached it.

Q: Talk to me about your arc of experience over the fifteen years with that culture and how you felt about it in the beginning, and any change that you felt towards that culture as time went by.

Hillman: [10:27:20] The arc of my experience within being a paramedic and in how that changed, I definitely bought into it to a certain level. I may have contributed at times. You know, just fitting in or whatever the reason. I certainly didn't speak against it at times. I think as I became more educated, as I chose more education, I was like, "Oh, wait a minute. This isn't okay." As I did more personal reading to try to look at people differently, move away from dehumanizing.

I had a moment probably about seven or eight years in as being a paramedic where I was probably angry. I was angry a lot. And I knew I had to change. Either I had to get out of the job or I went into somebody's house and they were not the best housekeepers. And I was walking in and I was kicking their stuff down the hallway. And I was angry. I don't know why I did it. But I was angry and I was just kicking their stuff down the hallway. It's like, "Oh, great. Another nasty house. Another dirty house, bugs, whatever." Probably swearing a lot at the time, as well.

And I knew I had to change something, that I get out of this work or I find something else to do. So I ended up finding something else. Within the company, there was a position open. I was able to move, but with that, I became kind of this quest of how do I change what I'm doing, because the way I'm going right now I'm not in good shape. I'm angry and frustrated. So I started to try to make purposeful movements towards how do I view this differently. It took some time. It took some time. But I think where I feel like I've made the biggest difference was, as I moved away

from being a paramedic and, where I was always on the street, and moved more towards— because I ended up, before I quit, I was overseeing several operations that worked with elderly, people with cognitive and physical disabilities. Oversaw the 2-1-1 Center for a period of time, which provides social services to—it’s kind of like a clearinghouse. So, “I don’t have food. Where do I go?” So if someone dials 2-1-1, they can be like, “Oh, I can’t pay my electric bill. What do I do?” “I would like to volunteer. Where do I volunteer?” So it’s kind of the central clearinghouse for social services in a sense. And it’s a statewide program.

But that’s a place where I think I felt I changed the most, was as I started to recognize and see the differences, as I became more educated and sought education outside the realm of a paramedic. I began to view the world differently and see how important services are, and how important these things are to the growth of our society, which is strange, because I grew up as a Head Start kid. I was a Head Start kid in the early ’70s just a few years into the program. And to see how important that was in my life and seeing some of the studies now years later, and how that affected where I choose to stand and where I have sought more education, and which has been commonly found—a common link found, a relationship.

So as I recognize that in myself and saw how services were applied within my life, and then seeing how I could benefit others, and what richness that can bring to society, I think that’s definitely where I saw the biggest change in myself, and stepping away from that culture, and speaking up more. I know. Just because a man of color is walking down the road in the middle of the day doesn’t mean he doesn’t have a job, or that he’s a criminal. Or it’s just maybe that’s his day off. Maybe he’s on his way to the park to see his kids. We have this automatic sense that’s

been engrained in our society of if there's an African American man, if there's a black man sitting there, then he's lazy. [Snaps] And we think it. And it's like, "Wait a minute. That needs to change. I can't view things that way." And I was years into it, but that's really I think where I saw the biggest shift in myself, was seeking education. Finished the Bachelor's degree, finished the Master's degree, working on a PhD. You know? That's probably where it changed the most, was as I saw those services being meted out to all populations, and seeing how those benefited people at their very base level. It changed how I viewed people.

Q: Let's circle back a little bit to your own relationship, to your own identity. You talked about your sort of unlock moment or a shift moment in Haiti. How do you think of yourself? When you think about your identity, how do you rate it hierarchically about how you view yourself in the world? Both as a person, as a father, as an academic, as a white person, as all this stuff? How do you sort of rank—I'm asking this question really badly, so I apologize. What are some of the things how you rank your own identity?

Hillman: [10:33:36] Hmm. In ranking my identity as a white person, I guess it's multi-faceted on that one. I don't know exactly where you're going with the question, but I guess when I look at myself internally, like as a person—

Q: I'll be very direct now, because I think a lot of times when I ask this question, people are kind of looking for what I'm looking for. But actually what I'm actually interested in is that when people think about themselves, how do they rank the piece of their identity importance? Like I'm a woman, I'm a mother, I'm American, I'm white. Or I'm a white male first, or first I'm gay,

then I'm a musician. Do people tend to have certain things that they really hang their hat on as like who they are, what they are? What is their primary identifier? And I'm interested in how that relates to how people actually see them, so that you see yourself one way and the world sees you another way. More often, those two things are very different. So I'm really interested to think about how you think about yourself.

Hillman: [10:34:49] When I'm asked to tell about myself, like when a, say, what kind of person are you? Usually I start with father. I'm a dad. It's been the best couple of summers. I've gotten to spend almost every day with the kids and it's the best thing in the world. I can't enough say how much I appreciate where I am in life. It's amazing to spend that time. So I guess that's where I identify first. If I'm going to say, "This is who I am," I'm a father. I'm a student. I'm a husband. But I guess father kind of ties in with the whole married and husband part. That's kind of a good part to have. But I talk about them first, because that's really who I am.

I never feel like I identify as white. I am white. I recognize intellectually, I guess, the privilege that I have in that, again, I have those poignant moments where I was walking into work, or I'm working at Western as a graduate assistant, a doctoral assistant now. But at the time, working within that department, I was walking in and I was wearing a black leather beret. Just because I could. So I'm walking in and the young man that I work with is a young man of color. And as I was walking in, I was like, "What if he was walking in wearing the same thing? How would people view him?" Here's this twentyish-year-old young man, and if he wore a black leather beret, how would people view him? Probably not in the same way they would view me, as a middle-aged white male. He would be a militant or he would be—and so there's these automatic

assumptions we put on people. So I wouldn't say I identify as white. Like, oh, it's one of my first thoughts. But on the other side, I try to consider how I approach things, and who am I? And what assumptions am I making about people and about race, and about everything. I have this constant questioning in my mind.

I do like to identify with my heritage. I have a strong French heritage, but that's just part of heritage. We were immigrants. We came into Canada. My family links in through Canada and French Canada, into the Bay City area of Michigan. So I like to identify with my heritage because I think it's very interesting, and I think there's a lot of history there. But in that, it also brings out that part that I came to this country just like everybody else. Whether by force or by choice, we came to this country. So it's just part of my heritage, but not necessarily a part that identifies me as white or racial. It was more just an ethnic, like, "Oh. I like cheese. So I'm French." [laughs] You know.

Q: Is that a French beard?

Hillman: [10:38:30] Sure. [laughs] That's just a I-decided-not-to-shave moment that has gotten out of hand. [laughs]

Q: You answered one of the questions I also asked, which is describe a moment where you became aware of your race, and that situation wearing the beret is exactly one of those types of moments that I'm always like really interested, is when people think about themselves in racial

ways, white people—because so often we don't. We don't have to. Do you feel like you have kinship with other white people? Do you feel like there's a white culture that you're a part of?

Hillman: [10:39:14] White culture? It's a big question. Identifying with the white culture, I guess I see our society shaped around white culture. So in that sense, I'm part of it because I'm part of the society, but I don't have to espouse it. I see the privilege that I have and the responsibility with that privilege that, because our society was shaped very much by the white Anglo mindset, I have a responsibility to learn more, and to do more with what I have.

Fortunately, my wife and I do this together, so it's like a thing. We're always trying to push, "What assumptions are we making? How are we shaping our lives in order to give privilege to others?" Because we know that as a white person, as white male, I'm likely to get paid more, I'm likely to be respected more in the workplace. Her as a white female may get paid less. She may have to struggle to get her positions within work that I as a white male, there's automatic assumption. And that's part of why I like to identify as a father. Like I'm a dad. Because it breaks the norm. It pushes away from the idea of my work identifying me, which is part of what society pushes on white males is your work has to identify you. I want to push against that. So there's this constant recollection and constant look at our own assumptions of who we are. So I'm fortunate that I also have a constant sounding board, my wife, whose background is in gender women's studies. And she's really pushed into that realm in her studies.

So identifying, recognizing my whiteness, but not necessarily identifying it as part of who I want to be within this society. So I guess in that way, that's how I identify with my society is that I

have a responsibility to be something different, and to choose differently, to view differently, is how I view myself within the current framework. And the responsibility as a white male to push that privilege on others, and to say, “Just because I’m white doesn’t mean that I’m better. Just because I’m male doesn’t mean that I’m going to be a better leader.” As a matter of fact, some of the studies are showing women are better leaders than males, but that’s a whole different thing.

Q: Well, I think that actually I’m going to get at something a little different. That was [00:37:30 not the place] I was going to go to, and that’s really interesting about the relationship you have. But you talked about as an EMT, [unclear] that there was blacks, there was Hispanics, there were whites, and you kind of interacted within the communities differently. If there’s groups that you can identify as black and Hispanic culture, is there a white culture?

Hillman: [10:42:27] Yes. I would say there is a white culture. I think generally the white culture—And the neighborhood I live in is predominantly white. The way I see it, I guess, is there’s an assumption that whites are the ones who are working. Like we work. We work to build our society. We work to build the economic stability of our nation. It’s the white people. And there seems to be a certain level of that that is assumed. And so yeah. I think there’s a white culture and sometimes I see that often times, people don’t see their privilege, but they feel, “I should have this because I worked for it.” And that’s more the mentality. “I shouldn’t have to give it to somebody else,” is what I experienced within that, my culture of working as the paramedic. And even some I see in my neighborhood where, “We work. That’s what we do. We’re building our nation. We’re building our economy because we work.”

And so there's a certain expectation that you work. So I'm kind of outside that, too, because I work, but I am going to school. But I think that's where I see white culture is a sense that white people are responsible for economic prosperity.

Q: Are you happy you're white?

Hillman: [10:44:38] I'm indifferent, I guess, to whether I'm white or not. I think it gives me privilege obviously. I have mentioned that a few times, but being happy about being white—the way I equate is—and I haven't done this exercise with my kids, but I'm going to do it because it seems to be coming up more as they're coming home from school with different ideas and different things that they're saying, “Take a crayon. Take a brown crayon. Color lightly and color darkly.” And it's all the same pigmentation. You can color really light or you can color really dark. The crayon isn't different. The crayon didn't offer a different color. It's just a different amount of pigmentation.

And so my being white just happens to be the color of my skin. It happens to be less melanin than others. So happy about being white? I see more responsibility in what I do, to make sure that I'm not buying into assumptions, I guess. But as far as white versus—it's just the amount of pigmentation in your skin. It doesn't make people less or more human.

I'm proud of my heritage. I like my French heritage. I like studying the lineage, but if my skin was darker, I don't know that would be happier one way or the other.

Q: It certainly would have changed your experience in the world.

Hillman: [10:46:27] Most definitely.

Q: I guess that's what I'm trying to get at, if you had the opportunity to walk through the door and there's a fifty-fifty chance that you would be changed to be a black American, would you walk through that door thinking, "Oh, well, I don't really care." If you're indifferent to it, would you walk through the door and say, "Well, yeah. It doesn't matter to me. I can come out as I am or I can come out as a black American and that's totally—" If you're indifferent, are you completely indifferent to that outcome?

Hillman: [10:47:01] Because I have an inquisitive mind, I think if I had the opportunity to walk through the door and like the fifty-fifty chance of whether you're going to be white or black, I would take the chance. Would I end up in the same place? I don't know. Mostly likely not. Possibly. But the experience is entirely different. I say I'm indifferent to being white because, like the questions in the survey that I just took, it's like, you know, if your family member married a person of color, an Asian person, how would you feel? It's like, "I don't care. Sure. If they want to." So I guess in that way, I see myself as indifferent. But I'm not indifferent to what it means to be white in our country.

Again, coming back to that is I feel a sense of responsibility. I need to speak up. I need to change how I have viewed and how my children view people. I want them to have an interracial experience. My daughter, the youngest one right now goes to a daycare where there are people of

various ethnic backgrounds. And I want her to have that. I don't want her to ever think, "Oh, this person's skin is different," or "This person's eyes are different, and therefore they are less human or they are not allowed to have the things that I have." I want her to grow up in that and not have the same assumptions and the same experience that I have had. I'm not indifferent to race, but whether I have darker skin or don't have darker skin, I would take the chance. I would be like, "Let's step through the door and see what experience that is." Unfortunately, it's not a good one often times.

Q: What about Battle Creek? You had a lot of experience as an EMT. What are the racial relations like in Battle Creek now? Can you talk about that?

Hillman: [10:49:41] I hope it's better. [laughs] There's still definite lines. I mean, I see it as very segregated communities. And I don't see a lot on the leadership side of this community trying to bring that together. And I don't know why that is. Jorje [F. Zeballos], with the Center for Diversity and Innovation at KCC [Kellogg Community College] is really trying hard. Like I know him and his group is really doing their best to try and bring talk of diversity and talk of racial equality to this community, working with the different community groups, working with the different businesses. It seems to me like there's still a lot of divide. It's unfortunate, because we have a very strong Burmese community, as well, and they're amazing, wonderful people.

Unfortunately, within the paramedic realm, the only ones that they generally see are people who are in trouble. And so then that one or two experiences with a particular population shapes the way they see the entire population. When I was working there, they're like, "Oh, Burmese.

They're just the drunk ones and they just get drunk all the time." And it's not true. It's not true at all. But because of the experience of one or two incidences, these one or two shape the way that they choose to see the entire population. So I don't know. I think Battle Creek still remains very separate, separate communities with not as much interplay as I think there should be.

Q: So your answer to that question—I'm taking that your meaning is that segregation is bad and is always bad. You live in a predominantly white neighborhood.

Hillman: [10:52:00] Mm-hmm.

Q: Why is segregation bad? Is segregation always bad? Is self-segregation – Should there be forced integration? I mean, I know there's a lot of talk about diverse integration, but in your opinion, is it bad? Does it need to change? And how do you change it?

Hillman: [10:52:23] Forced segregation is bad. Where segregation I believe becomes bad as not forced, where people choose to live in a neighborhood because we're alike, is it still creates that wall and that divide. And to grow within our society, I think we need to get away from that because there becomes this divide. Even whether it's forced or self-inflicted, it creates a separation, and so it becomes easier to dehumanize and depersonalize. And so in that way, yes, I believe segregation, whether it's forced or self-imposed is bad, because it's easy to keep your assumptions and your stereotypes when you are like, "Oh, that's those people," or "That's those people." So it becomes easy to keep assumptions and easy to maintain the status quo, which is

that separation of, “Oh, that’s those people. And they don’t work as hard as me. They don’t contribute as much as me,” which is what I saw.

Q: I was thinking about this a lot during the course of these interviews this weekend, and a lot of people talked about wanting more diversity and integration. We talked about black culture, white culture, Latino culture. Is it necessary to have an erasure of different cultures in order to have that? How do you actually maintain your culture? How do you maintain your pride and your relationship to your French heritage, and if you’re just being in a white community where you feel comfortable? Or how like the person who talked about his father was like, “I don’t want to live with white people, I want to live with my own people who I feel comfortable with.” How do you accomplish creating equity in a community without erasing the things that make people who they are as individuals and give them the freedom to building their own identity? That’s a big question. I don’t have an answer for it. I’m just putting it out there because we’ve been talking about it.

Hillman: [10:55:00] I don’t believe there should be a big erasure on race and segregation. We need to recognize it. I think where it comes is the conversations. My situation wouldn’t have changed if I hadn’t sought it out, or worked with people of color and went, “Oh, wait a minute. They’re human. They’re just like me.” Done my own studying. You know, my situation may be different, but I don’t necessarily [think you] should remove the richness of a person’s culture, because they’re—I say culture – ethnic backgrounds, things that they do because it’s part of their experience and part of who they are. But on the other side, the danger then comes where we make automatic assumptions about them, and that’s where I think we need to find that bridge.

That just because you're Hispanic or Latino, and you have a big party on your daughter's thirteenth birthday, or sixteenth birthday. I can't remember.

Q: Yeah. I think it's fifteen.

Hillman: [10:56:25] Fifteen? Sorry. I just had somebody who my wife works with who's like, "Oh, you need to come." They shouldn't lose that. I don't think they should lose that, but we shouldn't as a society make an automatic assumption that just because they're Hispanic, they're more likely to get drunk and violent. That's not true, but we make assumptions about a culture. And so when there are those divides, I guess, and we don't take the time to understand, it's easy to keep those assumptions. Should would erase it? Is there an answer? The biggest thing for me has been communication, just been talking. Last fall, I worked with a girl of color and she was very open about talking about race and her experience as a black female, and as a lesbian black female. So we had a lot of conversations where it was just talking about our experiences and the things that we had through life, and how that kind of shaped who we are now, and the choices we're making in our careers, and the people we're talking to.

And so it was a very open dialogue, and I was very much able to appreciate her experience, and how certain things make her angry because she's like, "Why do white girls have dreadlocks? Don't they know that their hair consistency is different, and if they do this, then they're going to get this type of mold, and it's going to rot their hair?" So she had some very practical aspects to it, as well, but also she saw it as a breach into heritage, where she's like, "That's not part of what white people should have because, number one, it's unhygienic," because of the nature of the

consistency of the hair is different. But also that, “Are they stealing part of my identity as a black female?” So just having those open conversations. I don’t know if that’s the only—there’s got to be better answers, but sometimes it’s just that really personal, how do we get past our stereotypes as we give someone a hug and we tell them, “Hey. You’re okay. You’re human. Let’s enjoy this human experience together.”

Q: A couple more questions.

Hillman: [10:58:56] I’ll answer quickly. [Laughs]

Q: One is that you’re obviously someone who cares about, who thought deeply about this. You care about it and you’ve changed things in your life about it. Talk about your personal experience, how it’s lived. You live in a mostly white community. What’s your sort of immediate social circle? How diverse is your immediate social circle? And how are these feelings you have, the beliefs you have, transferring into your everyday experience? For example, when was the last time you were in a person of color’s house for dinner or things like that? How is that playing out in your personal life?

Hillman: [10:59:38] My social circle is mostly school and work, which is on Western’s campus, which gives me a wealth of diversity.

Q: Just wait till the motorcycle passes. He’s gone. Okay. Go ahead.

Hillman: [10:59:55] All right. So my social circle tends to be more within the university setting where I work and obviously go to school. It's been a long time since I've been to anybody's house for dinner. It's just, I don't know. But my neighborhood is my neighborhood. It's where my house is, and I have some interaction with my neighbors, but I wouldn't say it's close enough that we even invite each other over for dinner or have get-togethers.

My social circle is the university setting. So just Friday, a bunch of the students got together, and there's one girl from Malaysia. And so she's part of that. Everybody else is Caucasian. And then there's one transgender female that's part of our group. It's just a very open group in that way. Other people within our social circle weren't able to make it Friday, because there's a lady of color who is, yeah. And then we have the girl from Malaysia.

And so there's a lot of diversity within that university setting. One of my wife's and my friends is from Jakarta, [Indonesia]. So hopefully get to go visit her soon. But we've had a lot of that international experience because of school. So I consider my social circle work and university setting. And so the people that I interact with, there's a lot of diversity. But it's also a setting that allows for a lot of questioning. So that's good. And challenging norms because of it. Just the nature of academia.

Q: Is there anything we didn't talk about in this interview that – you obviously wanted to participate, you were in touch with Sam – that you felt it was important to say, and you didn't tell her [him]?

Hillman: [11:02:09] I guess not particularly. I didn't come in with particular assumptions or expectations. I wanted to come in with a kind of an open mind of what do you want to know? And not necessarily what you want to know, but what do we all want to know about race and race within our nation? And what is whiteness? And how do we get away from it? But I chose not to come in with assumptions or expectations.

Q: And how was the experience?

Hillman: [11:02:42] I don't like some of my experience and the things that I—I look at it now and it's like, "Oh, my gosh. I was a horrible person sometimes. Like I chose to allow particular --" And that I see now as, "Those were some poor choices." Maybe I wasn't a horrible person. I was still trying to do good for our communities, but the assumptions that I made were pretty awful at times.

Q: Well, thank you so much. We're going to take a few stills of you now.

Hillman: [11:03:13] So smile and look pretty? Pose? [laughs]

Q: We're going to memorialize the beard.

Hillman: [11:03:21] Well, my daughter wants it to grow to my bellybutton. The youngest one's like, "Dad, you need to have it to your bellybutton."

Q: That will happen in time.

Hillman: [11:03:43] I keep telling my wife that one day it's going to be long enough I can hide her in it.

Q: [unclear].

Hillman: [11:03:48] She's short, so—

Q: Now relax your face.

Hillman: [11:03:57] Hmm?

Q: Just relax your face.

Hillman: [11:04:20] How relaxed do you want me?

Q: Like you're going to go to sleep.

Hillman: [11:04:24] I'm a doctoral student, right? That's all I do is stay awake and read. I don't want it to be fake. Fake smiles are awful.

Q: I really like to go with a laxer face, but there's something—some people are totally revealed when you just see their face at rest in a way that's really interesting. But I think it's without the process of the forced smile. Thank you so much.

END OF INTERVIEW