Kenneth Ray: Custodial Staff, Mattin Center

Housing Our Story Interview with Rollin Hu and Laura Oing

November 26, 2018

Rollin Hu: Time.

Laura Oing: Here we go.

Rollin Hu: All right. Today is ... what's today's date?

Laura Oing: 26th.

Rollin Hu: Today is November 26th, 2018. This is Rollin Hu interviewing Kenneth Ray. So to get started, can you tell us a little bit about your childhood?

Kenneth Ray: I was born here in Baltimore, Maryland. I grew up in the Alameda Shopping Center area, which is about a 10 minute, 15 minute drive from here; and of course, I was born in John Hopkins hospital. During my childhood—it was a good childhood coming up—I was known as the rich kid in the neighborhood. Never went hungry or anything like that for food or clothing. Then friends in the neighborhood, I would bring to my grandma's house then we would feed 'em because they was going through hard times and actually didn't have enough food to eat day to day. It was pretty much day to day that we actually fed people in the neighborhood.

Rollin Hu: Wow. What time period were [in] you growing up and what were some of the trends that you experienced?

Kenneth Ray: Well, this was like during the 70s back in the era where it was like Superfly, where you wore the high, platform shoes, and the long tweed coat with the fur around the collar.

Rollin Hu: You mentioned your grandmother. Can you tell us a little bit about your grandmother?

Kenneth Ray: Yeah, my grandmother. She was a private cook over in Cross Keys [wealthy neighborhood in Baltimore]. She worked for a millionaire for decades. You know
their kids were little and grew up and left home and she continued to work for him.

Rollin Hu: What did you do for fun as a kid?

Kenneth Ray: Well, I played with my electric train sets, racing cars; you know we also did street skating. Where you clamp 'em on to your shoes and just go around the city skating during the summer. During the winter, we threw snowballs at each other; we went where the Rec Center was and had a hill that you had to climb down, and we used to go there during the winter when the snow was on the ground and do sled-riding and that was fun.

Kenneth Ray: And we played basketball; went on the pond when we weren't supposed to go that was frozen and played ice hockey. Fortunately it never gave away so nobody didn't get hurt, and played baseball. One of my favorites was to play tackle football in the street. It was just something about when you got tackled and then when your skin slid across the black top, that was the exciting part of the game.

Rollin Hu: What was Elementary School or Middle School like?

Kenneth Ray: I went to Winston Elementary and it was a nice school. Everything was good in school.

Rollin Hu: Was it integrated?

Kenneth Ray: No. That didn't happen until once it came to going to Junior High. When they started to end segregation, that's when I was bussed to Robert Poole—that's over this area by the University. And I didn't like it being bussed and then once I got bussed everything was ... it was supposed to fifty fifty, but it was only five blacks and everybody else was white. And out of the five it was three students and two teachers.

Rollin Hu: What was it like being one of the few black students at a white school?

Kenneth Ray: It was very racist. Nobody cared when one of the bikers beat us up and stuff. It was kind of traumatizing to have to go to that school knowing that was occurring, and then when you defend yourself then they would come back with their uncles and they stood about seven feet tall. And then we got [inaudible] again, of course, and then the [inaudible 00:05:05] police would come around and they would break it up and chase them down the street a few blocks. But
then they'd turn around and come back to where we were to say they got away, 'cause we could see 'em running down the street.

Kenneth Ray: And then of course we was winning the fight, we got arrested and [they] took us down to the police station.

Rollin Hu: What do you think helped you get through that time period?

Kenneth Ray: Well, I guess 'cause I wound up developing a lot of anger. Not hatred or anything toward any other nationality, 'cause my granny raised me not to be that way. But just environment made me had a lot of anger, and that's what got me through; fighting and once I proved myself I could hold my own and then I no longer had those issues. But if I was walking with someone they wanted to beat up, they would walk a wide circle from my right and go to their left and then beat that person up.

Rollin Hu: You talked a little about how your grandmother raised you. What were some other big values that you learned through her? Or your parents as well.

Kenneth Ray: Well, my granny raised me from two months. I didn't know of my parents until I was ... well, I knew of my dad at the age of five, but that was just five years of my life, and so my granny basically raised me. I didn't know who my mother was until I was the age of 13. At that point in time, she was coming and saying she wanted to raise me, and my granny told me I had a choice: I could go with her or stay with my grandmother, and I'm like, "I don't know this lady. I'm not going with her." So, I stayed with my grandmother.

Kenneth Ray: And my grandmother had a very strong influence on my life 'cause she talked to me a lot; explained life to me as I grew up in age and everything. She had a lot of wisdom, which she passed on to me.

Rollin Hu: Can you give us an example of one of the lessons she shared with you?

Kenneth Ray: Like for example, when I got around about 15, she started explaining it to me about beware of the con artists out here, but during her era they called it the 'flim-flam man.' And the little trickery things that they would try to do to influence you to get your money or whatever it may be that you have that they want to get from you.
Rollin Hu: Going back to school. What did you enjoy studying and what did you think you wanted to do after school?

Kenneth Ray: Well, I enjoyed everything about school, but always had a desire—but never pushed forward—was to play baseball. That was my thing, but I just never pursued it.

Rollin Hu: What was your impression of Johns Hopkins while growing up and throughout your adult life?

Kenneth Ray: Growing up, Johns Hopkins was ... I never really gave a thought to it. But I gave more thought to it once I started working here, because—I would share a story with you that have to do with Jesus. When I was in Sacramento, California and living there and it was 1986, he revealed things to us and allowed us to see when we sleep, or sometimes when we woke. And what he showed me was Bloomberg and I was pushing the dust in my past and that's the program; and at that point in time I had no intention of coming back to Baltimore; and then another thing he revealed to me was the Mattin Center. During that time when he revealed that to me, there was nothing but trees at the Mattin Center. This building, when I started in 2000, it was under final construction. And all the staff that worked here, he revealed that to me too.

Rollin Hu: So, he's Jesus?

Kenneth Ray: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Rollin Hu: Okay. How did you get started working here?

Kenneth Ray: Funny you should mention that, 'cause I had this old piece of job and I would always ride past the athletic center. And it always held my interest, but there was never no one on the field. And then my ex-wife worked at the post office and through marriage one of the family members worked there too and them two started talking and they talked about me. So that's how I got into Johns Hopkins. I called it "getting blessed in," 'cause I came straight in from my 90 day probational period.

Rollin Hu: Can you talk a little bit about what you were on probation for? If you're comfortable?
Kenneth Ray: Oh, it's just work probation. You know, anytime you start a job and they give you that 90 days; see if you come to work on time, do your job, et cetera.

Rollin Hu: Got it. What do you enjoy the most about your job?

Kenneth Ray: What I enjoy the most about my job is that once I do my work, and then people that know me and know of my work ethics and then they look and say, "Well, I know Kenneth been here, and he did this work." And that gives me a lot of enjoyment that people say that; and it makes me feel good when they acknowledge it to me and say, "Well, thanks for doing a good job."

Kenneth Ray: Motivate me and have a job to hear people say good things about you; and then of course you know, going back in history at the Mattin Center and what I do. When I first started working here in the Mattin Center I used to maintain all four buildings and do all the set ups and break downs, and Baltimore City Sun paper came up here and they'd go around and they'd check restrooms. And for four years straight, the Mattin Center was the cleanest boys and girls restroom throughout campus, throughout the city, throughout the whole state of Maryland.

Kenneth Ray: That made me feel good, although I didn't get any perks behind it, but just for him to write that up, that gave me a lot of enjoyment.

Rollin Hu: So The Sun evaluated bathrooms on campus?

Kenneth Ray: Yeah.

Rollin Hu: Wow. On the flip side, what do you enjoy the least about your work here?

Kenneth Ray: Well actually, to be honest with you, there is none. I like what I do.

Rollin Hu: If there's anything you can change about Hopkins as whole, what do you think you'd like to change?

Kenneth Ray: I guess that would be what everybody always say: a better pay scale.

Rollin Hu: Is there a certain stigma when working for Hopkins, like when you go home after work and if you talk to someone it's like, "Hey, I work at Hopkins." What are peoples' reactions?
Kenneth Ray: Well it depends on where you go and who you talk to. For example if you go to a car dealership you say, "I work for Johns Hopkins," they tend to say, "You work for Johns Hopkins? Johns Hopkins?" They get so elated. Hopkins' name carry a lot of clout. [inaudible 00:14:16] basically give you a car.

Rollin Hu: Can you describe a little bit more about that clout? Like what's inside of that?

Kenneth Ray: You know, for example, in some places, where you live, and you mention you work for Hopkins and they will give you a $100 discount off on your rent.

Kenneth Ray: You go in some stores and you can get a lower discount by mentioning Hopkins name. Or you rent a car, and for faculty and staff and with AVIS car rental they will give a 30% discount for renting a car.

Rollin Hu: What is one part of your job that you feel others don't recognize?

Kenneth Ray: One part of my job that others don't recognize? I would say the passion that I put into my work.

Rollin Hu: And why don't you? What do you think is holding other people back from seeing that passion?

Kenneth Ray: My thought on that is because my name [inaudible 00:15:50] written around this campus for doing good work and some people I feel as though they feel a little intimidated by that because my name is always mentioned a lot. People know me. I don't even know them, they're like, "How are you doing?"

Kenneth Ray: Okay, how are you doing? Who are you?" And that stems all the way back from when I first started working here the first six months and people were always speaking on how good a workier I am, and here it is 18 years later and they still saying the same thing.

Rollin Hu: You answered my questions really well.

Kenneth Ray: Well, thank you.

Rollin Hu: So, can you tell us a little bit about where you're living now?

Kenneth Ray: I chuckled because I never thought in my wildest dreams that I'd still be living in the same neighborhood I grew up in.
Rollin Hu: What do you enjoy doing in your free time after work?

Kenneth Ray: Actually, getting on the Xbox 360. I find that to be very relaxing and then of course with the Xbox 360, 'cause I am a man of God and spending time with Jesus, and doing my bible study.

Rollin Hu: Can you describe the role that God and Jesus and religion has played in your life?

Kenneth Ray: I would say my life, speaking from a spiritual point of view, protection and he kept me— 'cause at the age of 14, Jesus spoke to me and he said two words. First thing he said to me is, "Tell your mother to take you to the doctor to get a check-up."

Kenneth Ray: Next thing he said is, "You have a calling." And when I told my mother to take me to the doctor to get a check-up and at the age of 14, my blood pressure upper number was 250, my lower number was 162, and the doctor said if I didn't come to the doctors when I did, most likely I would've died in two days.

Kenneth Ray: So, it's been 44 years and some change he hadn't been keeping me; I have not had a stroke. And the calling was to take care of my granny that raised me when she got 83. When she got sick for the first time and I took care of her for ten years, along with still working at Hopkins.

Rollin Hu: Can you describe the church that you go to?

Kenneth Ray: Oh sure. I go to Memorial Baptist Church; the address is 1311 Caroline [Street]. And then also God spoke to me when I was joining my church I was—just don't go to the church and just sit there on the pews. I am active in my church. I am an usher; appointed by God to be an usher in that church.

Rollin Hu: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Can you describe the congregation? The people you interact with as an usher, what that job is like?

Kenneth Ray: Being an usher—while I stand there at the door and, of course, having a happy smile on my face that pretty much set the mood for people when they come into the church, versus when I'm there and I'm looking angry at something and that will put them pretty much in that mode. So, I'm one of the first people they see, so when they come to receiving their teaching that the pastor preached. And then hopefully everybody has their heart open so they can receive the word and get the understanding of Jesus and become believers.
Rollin Hu: I know you touched upon this earlier, can you describe the path that led you, as a child, to your religion to Jesus? 'Cause I know you talked a little about anger and you used that change—

Kenneth Ray: Well, back during the day when I was a child, it was mandatory that you go to church because your parents pushed that stuff—or grandparents—that you had to go to church and take in the word. And that's when the seed was planted; [inaudible 00:20:50] that mustard seed. But then also, as time went on, some people stayed with it. But then when you got to the age of 13 and your parent would have a talk with you and say, "Now, you have a choice. You can continue to serve Jesus, or you don't have to to if you don't want to."

Kenneth Ray: Course I chose not to anymore; and then decades—all the way up until I turned 50—till now it's been eight years that I surrounded to Jesus again.

Rollin Hu: Can you describe what pushed you to that shift? What pushed you to change?

Kenneth Ray: My grandmother. Because coming up through childhood Jesus always communicated with me, and when he said to me at 14 I had a calling, kept reminding me of it, regardless of what I was doing. Not saying, necessarily every day, but he would say these words: "She's gonna need you." Then a long period of time would go on, and then I'd hear it again: "She's gonna need you."

Kenneth Ray: Because when you study the word and then Jesus, he chooses people for what path, or what they gonna do. In my case it was to be a caregiver of my granny, because before I was conceived in my mother's womb he had already made that decision of what would be happening with my life. Although it gave me a chance that I could stay with them or walk away.

Kenneth Ray: Of course, when I came back, my transition to come back and bow down and surrender to him for me it was easy. You know how many times I spoke to him and said, "I'm not ready yet." But when I got ready I said, "Yes, father. I will surrender." Then he spoke to me and said, "Get on your knees and pray to me."

Kenneth Ray: And so, I had that experience with him. Oh boy, I get a little teary eyed because my spirit rolling down and I could feel his presence sitting here as I talk about it, because he do give us gifts and one of the gifts he revealed to me is the gift of discernment. And then as I was first starting to speak, I could feel your spirit starting to rise; and I could feel your spirit too. And when I feel in my body it be in various places. Or if it's just like here in the cheeks, then that's when I know that your spirit is looking at my spirit and smiling or when your spirit is coming up and it goes, start from your stomach and come on up. Or in your arms. Or like now, right here in the shoulders.
Rollin Hu: Going back to an earlier thing that you mentioned; you said that you traveled away from Baltimore for a bit and then, later on, came back. What were you working on it that time away from Baltimore. Where'd you go and what sort of work did you do?

Kenneth Ray: Actually, I went to Sacramento, California. I was with my family then and I decided I wanted to get out of Baltimore. And when I went out there, I was pretty much doing the same work that I'm doing now: custodian.

Rollin Hu: I think those are all of my questions.

Kenneth Ray: Oh, and what brought me back was, when my granny got older and a lot of family members passed away, that's why I came back. I tried to get her to come to Sacramento before she got older, and she said these words to me I never understood: "I'm not quitting my job." And I just didn't understand that, but I have children—I have two daughters and ten grandkids, eight boys, two girls, and my daughters ask me from time to time, "Dad, why don't you move back to California?" And I find myself saying those same words, "I'm not quitting my job."

Rollin Hu: Are they all in California?

Kenneth Ray: Yes. My oldest grandson, this year, he went to the Army tank division and then my oldest granddaughter, her passion is art. So, she got a scholarship to go to college for art. So, I'm waiting to see what the other eight are gonna do.

Rollin Hu: What are some big lessons that you have passed on to your children and your grandchildren?

Kenneth Ray: Education and family. You need the education to make it in this world and family should always have a tight bond. Although there is no such thing as a perfect family, family should be there for each other, especially in times of need. Not saying that letting a family member take advantage of someone, just keeping that strong family bond, 'cause that's how I was brought up. And nowadays for example, we used to always go to the family reunion, and you'd see all of your relatives that were in town, out of town, and it would be the long picnic table. And it had all kinds of food and snacks, and everybody that's talking and having a good time.
Kenneth Ray: You don't hear too much of that now.

Rollin Hu: Did your grandmother raise you up with with any siblings?
Kenneth Ray: No, it was just me.
Rollin Hu: Just you.
Kenneth Ray: I was two months when she took me in. And when I left home I was 20.

Rollin Hu: So, I already asked you what drew you back, but what pushed you to go?
Kenneth Ray: To California?
Kenneth Ray: Actually, I was doing what average man do. Light went out. I kept cheating on my kids' mother and I thought if I go to California that I would calm down. So that's what pretty much made me go to California.
Rollin Hu: Were your kids' mother ... she was in California?
Kenneth Ray: No. It's funny that you should mention that because my kids' mother, we had a very long history. When I first had a crush on her, I was ten and she was eight. You had to go back that far.
Kenneth Ray: We grew up on the same block. She stayed one block away from the house that I grew up in.
Rollin Hu: Do you still keep in contact with her today?
Kenneth Ray: Sometimes.
Rollin Hu: I think those are all my questions we went further than my questions outlined. Laura, do you have any questions?
Laura Oing: I don't think so.
Kenneth Ray: Last chance, Laura.
Rollin Hu: Is there anything that you'd like to bring up further? That you would like to share?
Kenneth Ray: Well I would say this: I think that both of you all and you, Rollin for asking me to do this—I do get enjoyment out of this when Hopkins students come to me. Because this is not the first rodeo for me doing this. Over in the photo class in the Mattin Center, one of the students—he was doing something about caregivers and he walked around campus, followed me, taking pictures, and went to the day care center where my grandmother was, over to building three where I punch in and out of. And I got a lot of enjoyment out of it and a couple of other students they did theses on me when I shared my past history and my life experiences and everything.

Kenneth Ray: So, I find it to be self-rewarding. And then you get all an A on it, that gives me even more joy.

Rollin Hu: Going into your relationships with students, how would you characterize it? You feel like a lot of students talk to you? Or do you—

Kenneth Ray: Well, some students talk to me and some students don't. I think maybe they ... I'll start with you, for example: by you being a female I might say, "Hi, how are you doing?" But I'm just saying, 'Hi, how’re you doing?’ And no farther than that. And then if I—say you listen to me and talk and don't feel intimidated and then I will say this, "Although we not related, close by family, but on the tree of the family that extends back years, we are related. And I know your parents are very proud of you going to college, and pursuing your dreams of college, and I may not be there with you when you walk across the stage and get your degree, but I'll be there in spirit, cheering you on.”

Kenneth Ray: So when a student want to come in, talk to me, [inaudible 00:31:50] I'll talk. And I'll motivate you like, "You still crunching the maze?" There was one student—I was very moved with him. His name is Patrick Knowitall [sic]. Yeah, what a last name, huh?

Kenneth Ray: And he was around here and you know when students needed to be tutored, he was tutoring the students. And he came from Dinwiddie [Virginia]. And that's where my mother live at: in Dinwiddie. What a coincidence. So, me and him would talk and everything. We'd go to Ruby Tuesday; and remember when Ruby Tuesday they would have that big, colossal burger and we would make a bet: "Bet you can't eat all that." And we did that and when it came to his Army induction, he had told his parents about it. And I met his parents and then his parents said, "Oh I want to thank you for keeping Patrick company."

Kenneth Ray: And he insisted that I be there with his Army induction. And he went into Army intelligence and about four years later he came back up here, looking for me. And it was good to see Patrick. He gave me one of his Army pendants.

Rolllin Hu: Great story. Well, I think we can stop the recording.