

**Dr. Hussein Ahdieh Interviewed by Barry Goldenberg**  
**November 11, 2016, at the Baha'i Center, New York, NY**

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**Barry Goldenberg:** My name is Barry Goldenberg, and we are here at the Bahá'í Center in Lower East Side, New York City, New York. It's November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2016, and I have the great honor to interview Dr. Hussein Ahdieh, who helped to start Harlem Prep, and I just kind of want to hear your story and learn about your experiences at Harlem Prep, and I'm so grateful that you are here and that you are able to share that. So, I just kind of wanted to start with—tell me a little about yourself, where you were born, where you grew up, how you ended up in New York, about your childhood, your educational experiences, and we'll start there.

**Hussein Ahdieh:** No problem. Thank you Barry, for this opportunity. As a matter of fact, I just finished writing another book at [my] old age, *Foreigner: From an Iranian Village to New York*. It's an interesting story, about how being a minority in Iran, and feeling like a foreigner in your own country, eventually I came to America and I ended up again to be a foreigner in this country, but at the same time, being a Bahá'í, it gave me an opportunity to be of some service to my family, my friends, and humanity as a whole. This is a major tenant of my religion, that's what we should really pursue. The place I came from is a small village in the south of Iran, it's not far from a big city called Shiraz, which is well known among the literary folks, because that's where the two great Persian poets came from—Hafez and Saadi, lots of their work has been translated into English. Being mystical figures, along with Rumi and Khayam, a leading mystical poets in Iran they attracted everyone's attention and love. Our village was pretty much divided between two groups: the minority of Bahá'í's and the majority of Muslims. Unfortunately the history of almost every religion shows that at the beginning minorities were prosecuted, they were abused, and suppressed, the same thing happened to my faith, which is Bahá'í. So, we were forced, eventually, to leave the village because my father was kidnapped and tortured. We pretty much had to decide to leave the town very quick. We went to another big city, Abadan, where I finished high school and decided to come to America. Maybe it was a mistake, I was too young, not enough experience, didn't know the language, but I wanted to get away from that sad and oppressive society, and go to a new place with a new culture. I went to the American Embassy, tried to get some help. I wanted to become a nuclear engineer. Those days, in the early 1950s, 60s, I was a fan of Einstein, Wernher von Braun and Sputnik, the idea of a nuclear engineer was the “prince” of the field. I guess they realized that I don't know what I'm talking about with my poor English, this farmer boy, who comes from a small town and wants to go to America—so they gave me a directory of American universities, and probably she [at the

Embassy] pointed out two places that had such programs. One was Columbia, and the other one was Harvard. Most likely she helped me to write a letter to them asking for an application. So, I followed the procedure. Soon, I got a negative answer from Columbia saying: you're not qualified, you don't know the language – so, they didn't accept me, but somehow Harvard accepted me. I was shocked, my family was excited. I remember my father would constantly brag about his son's accomplishment. I came to New York on a boat from England—it was an ocean liner called, "Queen Mary"—now, it is a hotel in the San Diego Area. It took five, six days to get here. I stayed in the YMCA downtown Manhattan. I was telling people I had to go to Washington to find a place to live, but then they kept telling me, "If you go to Harvard, you have to go to Boston," "No, it's Washington" [I said], then, I realized I was accepted to *Howard* University, not Harvard. Can you imagine? [laughter] A Persian boy going to Howard!

**BG:** It's a funny story! [laughter]

**HA:** A black university, to study nuclear engineering! I don't know why they accepted me—probably they figured, "Let's give this foreigner a chance." I came to New York, and of course life was quite difficult.

**BG:** How old were you when you came to New York?

**HA:** 17, 18 years old.

**BG:** And had you finished school?

**HA:** High school, I had finished.

**BG:** You finished high school, and came to New York.

**HA:** I finished high school in Iran and came to New York with the intention of going to university. Now, of course, Howard did not work out, so I found a university in New Jersey called Farleigh Dickinson, and that's where I started. You have to remember, I came with a student visa, and in those days, the idea of deportation of someone who doesn't follow his visa requirement was quite stringent and serious, so I was constantly under threat of being deported, and in order to stay in the country, I had to keep studying and going to school, but meanwhile I had no money, so I had to work illegally to make a living and pay for tuition, somehow I managed. So, life was not going very smoothly. The highlight of that period was going to the famous march in Washington, with Dr. King...

**BG:** So you were there?

**HA:** I was there. I went there with a few of my friends—Persian—we drove there, and we couldn't afford to go to a hotel, we had to sleep in the car for a couple of nights. The big discussion we had in the car, and while we were there, was wishing that something similar would happen in Persia. That the same oppression black people have gone through and were going through is happening to the majority of people in Iran, especially the Bahá'í's. This was always in the back of my mind, and somehow I identified myself—the same thing as Jews historically experienced, they have always been in the forefront of every civil right movement, because they've been oppressed. Somehow, I felt the same way, that we are in the same basket with lots of these black kids and others. At a later date, when I came across people like Ed and Ann Carpenter—these were the people who were beginning to get involved with Harlem Prep—I got excited, and I figured out this is one avenue that I can pursue. Of course my education had nothing to do with the working in [the] education system. I had a Bachelor's in electrical engineering, I had a Master's in European Intellectual History—all degrees to hold my visa. Then, eventually I got a PhD in Education, after we got involved with Harlem Prep.

**BG:** No, that's excellent, and I know in your book you describe some of the travels to New York. So, tell me about meeting Ed and Ann Carpenter, and you said in your book that they kind of drew you into Harlem Prep, and you said you didn't have a background in education—so what about meeting them, what did they tell you, what was that like that made you say “I think I want to go work at a school,” when you hadn't done that before? And also, what were they like, in terms of these first experiences, meeting them and deciding to do this?

**HA:** I was in a Bahá'í school—a summer school in Maine, called Green Acres, which is a beautiful setting, right close to Portsmouth, on the third day of my stay, this black couple came, they were quite dynamic, and the man was very talkative and charming, charismatic, and the wife was so serene and calm, and I don't want to sound racist—us Persians love watermelon, so we are sitting around a table and eating watermelon. The first thing the couple did – especially the fellow—he came and began to eat, without invitation, our watermelon [laughter]! So, I felt very close to him—with no formal introduction, we felt so casual, and he kept calling me “brother,” so I began to like him from that very first moment.

**BG:** A good connection.

**HA:** Exactly, it was watermelon that was our first connection! And then he talked about his work at schools and getting involved with Harlem Prep, and I think he gave a short talk to all participants about what he's up to. We stayed in touch after that, because he used to live in New Jersey, and I was in New York, we met few times, and little by little, I was drawn to the

idea. In process, of course, I went to some meeting with him and Whitney Young, who at that point was a national chairman of the Urban League. He was an amazing man—really, he was such a solid character, and unfortunately, he died too soon, he was drowned in Africa, in one of those rivers. The concept of Harlem Prep, as you have written about it, was an answer to the shortcoming of the public education system to fulfill the needs of the minority, in general, and in particular Harlem. The big disaster was “drop-out”—tragedy, more than 50% of these kids, at some point after they started school would leave, and they never finish high school—that was the end of, really, their dream. So, we came up with this clever plot—you know, in America, you have to come with some unique plan, something that appeals. We said okay, our school in going to be a college prep, the kids are only going to stay with us for one year, and we will not become sort of high school diploma mill. We will give them a diploma after they get accepted to university. They should realize it’s not a GED process, going to college was a focus, and we promised them that if they really commit themselves, and if they stick to their dreams and our suggestions, we’ll ensure they go to colleges and universities. In those days there was something in the air, the kids, the parents, and the community, were more committed to do something for the society and for the minority. So white, black, Spanish—everyone was working together. So that milieu, and that arrangement really helped us to attract a group of kids who want to succeed, they knew nothing was happening in the streets, they take their education seriously, and I am surprised the colleges, the universities, took our words by admitting them, because there’s nothing to show that these kids were ready for higher education.

**BG:** Yeah, I kind of wondered that myself...

**HA:** Just a recommendation by the school administrator was sufficient—in particular the nuns, nuns have a great connection with all universities. There are two groups—the Jesuits and the nuns. These folks are the masters in finding ways of doing things. So, somehow they connected with their contacts and they got a whole bunch of our kids to university, and thank God they did good. So that was the beginning of taking some more students. And just [to] jump forward, if we would have stayed as a small setting, we could still be around and be successful, but the trouble in America is that you have to get big to bring more success. Suddenly there was a flow of money from all over, we got bigger and bigger and bigger, and reached a point where we needed millions of dollars to survive. So, most of our efforts, instead of going to education of the kids and doing what our original plan was, were spent on fundraising. Whoever came to our Board of Trustees—we asked what can he do to raise some money for us? Instead of what kind of education ideas he can contribute to our program.

Ed Carpenter and myself, spent more than 50% of our time going for luncheons with some rich folk who can give us a check for \$10,000, \$20,000, for \$50,000, and we managed. But then, eventually, it reached a point that this could not continue, because the big foundations, corporations, that helped us, they began to withdraw. They have the concept of not becoming perpetually involved in any program. They give the seed money, they support it, they encourage it, but then eventually they would withdraw, hoping we become self-sufficient. The choice was to either close the school, or go with the public system, which they were quite anxious to absorb us. So, we had lots of discussion with the faculty. There were quite a number of them who were against it, because we were “selling out,” but then there were a whole bunch of them who needed a job, and I don’t blame them. We negotiated a rather interesting arrangement with the Board of Ed. Ed left right away, I stayed with them and made sure the transition was in place.

**BG:** He left in ’74?

**HA:** Yeah, I don’t know exactly what year, then I stayed I think another year or so—or even maybe less, then I left also, and I later went to Fordham university.

**BG:** Yeah. I kind of want to get back to a few things.

**HA:** Sure, go ahead.

**BG:** But, since we’re kind of [at] the topic of the later years, and why did you—I found in some of the documents as well, [that you were at] some of the meetings, whether it be Exxon executives, and people like that. Why were they so interested in Harlem Prep from your experience? Why did they want to give money to this school?

**HA:** I think it was the beginning of the realization—especially with corporations—that they can not always look at the bottom line of how much they are making, but also what they are doing for society and what they are doing for the environment and what they are doing for education, but there were some people within these big companies who were not just looking for the recognition of the name of the company. Exxon, I’m sure, originally, did not get involved with Harlem Prep because they were a bunch of good Christians. They got involved because it was a good publicity for them. The same thing with Coca-Cola, and a few [other] foundations.

**BG:** That’s what I have been trying to figure out.

**HA:** Exactly. It was sort of a thing when the President of the Coca-Cola

Company came all the way from Atlanta to sit on a stage in our graduation ceremony and I gave him a certificate of recognition. He would go back, and they use this claiming they are helping black folks to go to college. But I'm sure that within the corporation there were those people who wanted to do something. This was an American tradition—the welfare of a fellow citizen is also considered in these kinds of adventures.

**BG:** No, that is really interesting. That's something that I've been trying to figure out—and not to sound cynical—what are the motivations and rationale for people like that to get involved? That's really enlightening. You also mentioned that it kind of got so big that it became all about fundraising. What would be, at least in your approximation, did you see a turning point, by the mid-70s or so...

**HA:** I think so-

**BG:** ...where it really started to grow, like “we need a lot more money,” there's a lot of students, because it started so small at the beginning.

**HA:** The third year of the school was the one [in which hundreds of people came to visit Harlem Prep], success began to get to our head, because when you see—believe me, I tell friends sometimes, that if I would have charged every visitor to Harlem Prep a small amount of money, that would [have been] enough to support the school. Every day, there was a busload of teachers, educators, all kind of people, locally, nationally, internationally, from Israel, from China, from Finland at our door. They would come to see one thing that works perfect—and you have to give credit to Ed Carpenter's charismatic approach—we got such a publicity for the school, it was unheard of. Every day that you buy a *New York Times*, *Amsterdam News*, or other news magazines, or listen to a TV, there was something about Harlem Prep: who visited the school, how they're doing, they need money, this was the trend that was going on. I remember I got the call from the office of this great fellow—William Buckley. I was fond of him, because I like how he defended his strong, conservative views. I watched him many times. There was a program on PBS called “Firing Line” where he was always debating a liberal and stood his ground very well. I think he's the one who wrote the book *God is Dead at Yale* or something—he was a Yale student. Now, they call up, say he wanted to come visit the school. Of course, he's welcome to come, [but] I anticipate some problems, because I knew his big mouth was going to get us in trouble. So he came, sat down, and said if there was any way he could meet with some students and some teachers, and we had this tradition if we had an interesting visitor, we would disband the classes and we would quickly form an assembly, the physical arrangement was such that it could be done. Mr. Buckley began to make his very conservative presentation on

education... [perhaps sometime about a voucher system?]

**BG:** Were most people more liberal?

**HA:** Everyone was liberal.

**BG:** Okay.

**HA:** Everyone was liberal, most were actually radical, and most of them were leftist. Now, all of the sudden this archconservative is making [a] presentation, and I could see from the faces of the kids that they're not very happy. So after that, he opened the floor for Q&A and [I thought to myself] "Jesus Christ, why you do this?"

**BG:** Not a good idea, right? [laughter]

**HA:** Not a good idea. [We] open the floor for questions and answers, and so of course they start to jump on him, and he was giving very strong answers. I remember we had a teacher, Dr. Ben, he was our social science teacher, and he had this idea—some of it may be true—that everything started in Africa. Moses went to Africa and got his inspiration, Jesus got it from him—all of civilization started from Africa, which part of it was true, but I think he was exaggerating. So, he got up and made his statement. Boy oh boy, you should have seen Will Buckley, the way [Dr. Ben] jumped on him. I felt so bad for him, and I was afraid there might be a riot, because the kids loved that man [Dr. Ben]. He [Buckley] finished the presentation, and he came to my office, and he said, "I'm going to do something which I don't want anyone to know about this—none of the students." I said, "What, Mr. Buckley?" He said, "I'm going to make a contribution to this school, but I don't want [any] students or teachers to know that I have done that, because I don't want them to feel like I'm buying their love or their support." So I tell him "thank you" and [that] he's welcome [to do so], and I think he's going to write a check for a thousand dollars, five hundred. The check was much bigger than that. I said [to myself] "God Bless you, I love conservatives! [laughter] You can come back any day, no problem!" So, to have this, you know Senator Javits would come, Nelson Rockefeller would issue proclamations, many educational reformers like [Jonathon] Kozol and others.

**BG:** Why were conservatives so drawn to the school?

**HA:** They begin to realize they were challenged to solve the problem of the assimilation of the minority into American society. These people are not going back to Africa, so the sooner they do this, the better the country will be [in solving its social troubles]. So really, they mean it, and had this notion—unfortunately, things have changed—that the majority of the

volunteers who came to help us, many teachers who applied to teach, to get a job with low pay were from the white community because they wanted to do something for black community, and it helped, it did its job.

**BG:** I was kind of wondering, kind of getting back to the beginning of the story, and kind of getting the facts straight—when did you start at Harlem Prep? Had Harlem Prep already been going on, or it was the first or second year?

**HA:** I think it was the second year, because at that point, I was carrying a whole bunch of responsibility. I was married, I had two kids, they were just born, I had to finish my degree, I was lucky [in that] I married a doctor—that's my advice to people. If you're going to get married, at least marry someone who is professional and is going to make lots of money.

**BG:** My fiancé is a lawyer, so... [laughter]

**HA:** [laughter] That's very good. That's a big help, because at least you have some security and you can risk and take chances. I knew my visa situation would be resolved soon because at that time there was such a shortage of doctors in America, when my future wife came as a doctor, they paid for her trip, they gave her green card and place to stay. I was lucky that some nice package came along. So, not worrying about finances anymore, and not worrying about [my] visa anymore...

**BG:** So the stress was off.

**HA:** A lot of the stress was off, so I could have the luxury of volunteering and working for Harlem Prep for much lower pay than I would get if I went somewhere else. Besides, I did not want to work as an engineer for sure, even though I had a Bachelors degree in electrical engineering. My degree in European history would not get me anywhere, so this was really—and I was falling in love with the Carpenters and the whole concept and all of that, so I started teaching mathematics at the school.

**BG:** Tell me about your teaching experiences. I would love to...

**HA:** After I did my engineering degree, I realized that I really don't want to work as an engineer, but I had to always remember that I had to go to school so I could maintain my stupid visa. So, what do I do? So I said, "okay, maybe I become a mathematician." Let me get a Masters in mathematics, because that's closer to engineering and they would accept [it]. So, I began to take math courses—a whole bunch of math courses at Columbia, at NYU, and a few other places. So, when I started at Harlem Prep, I had a good background in mathematics. Then, education-wise, again, we met this wonderful guy called Dwight Allen, who was a Dean of the School of Ed at the University of Massachusetts, and he had this



notion that if there are folks who are doing their thing in the field, there's no reason to drag them to the campus and give up their professional life. So, I became [part of this] sort of distance learning, I set up a committee, and wrote a proposal, and visit them every other month, so that's how I got my PhD eventually. What was your question?

**BG:** About teaching. You were a math teacher. So how long were you a math teacher?

**HA:** I was a math teacher.

**BG:** What was that like? Your experiences in teaching?

**HA:** [Math] was very boring, very boring. In my country—the “prince” of the field are doctors. They have this system—I think it's a copy of a French system—called *concur* (competition exam). It means that you take a national exam when you finish high school, the top group goes to medical school, regardless whether they like it or not. The first thousand, medical school. The second few thousand, go to engineering school. The third, agriculture. The fourth, legal. The fifth, let's say literature. So, we were all trained to wanting either to be a doctor or an engineer, so when I came to this country, I had the notion and background that I'd study engineering because it was in my DNA not realizing it's an awful major, and I'm not really interested. Since I had also a degree in European Intellectual History, I began to teach a course called “Contemporary American History.”

**BG:** You taught that at Harlem Prep?

**HA:** I was teaching that at Harlem Prep, yes.

**BG:** So you enjoyed that more than teaching math?

**HA:** I loved that course. But then, I realized Ed loves me, I love him, I've spent so much time with him, there's so many administrative problems, so little by little I was drawn to the administrative part of the school, and especially since Ed was always away, I had to cover the school in his absence in terms of resolving conflict, hiring teachers, dealing with volunteers—all kinds of problems that were happening. So that's how I eventually joined administration, and it was a good thing, because it was more exciting.

**BG:** Yeah, it fit you better.

**HA:** It fit me better, I was on the road, going and meeting people, all of these big shots. I remember, one of these rich folks on the East Side—Richard Feigen. They have these huge galleries, they still are there—they had a

fundraising dinner in their apartment, and for the first time I went to some really multi-multi-millionaire's apartment—oh my god, I was so impressed. They kept saying, “Oh, this painting is by Matisse, that sculpture is by Leonardo Da Vinci, or some character”—they could be made up, and then the people who were sitting there, all I remember, I used to see their faces in newspapers, I'd never seen them in real life! The wife of Mr. Rockefeller, the wife of Senator Javits, and all that. Boy oh boy, my parents—they couldn't believe it! That was an exciting time. I became the school administrator, and I was kind of happy with that.

**BG:** Yeah. I'm still fascinated with—what drew those type of people to Harlem Prep? Because I'm sure there were many things they could have—even if they wanted to improve society and they're interested in racial issues, conservative or liberal, what drew them specifically to Harlem Prep? Was it the “success?”

**HA:** I think the nuns play a big role. Never underestimate nuns. They were all part of Manhattanville College. This College, I think, was a place where many rich, white girls would go in New York, and these girls were either daughters of millionaires, or they would marry millionaire, so I think that connection helped. I remember Mother Dowd, for example, who was the assistant principal—she knew everyone, and I would not be surprised, the few phone calls she was making, to some of her former students, telling them: “talk to your husband, talk to your brother, etc. [about Harlem Prep].” That was a good connection. Then, the National Urban League also was a big help, because the trust of their activity was to get the businesses involved in helping the minority program, and when they came up with this idea of the street academy, as you know, before Harlem Prep was formed, they had this very elaborate system, which unfortunately did not work out. They would set up the Street Academies all over and then from there they would feed them to Harlem Prep, but since that failed, Harlem Prep became more independent. Also, there were few black leaders—Kenneth Clark was one of them, or Robert Magnum was another one—these were solid civil rights leaders in the New York Community. There was an organization, I remember, that got very involved, that was called “Hundred Black Men,” a fellow named Eugene Calendar got involved with our school. We were a lucky bunch, really, at that point, the combination of bleeding heart liberals and activist black leaders, they came together, and they helped this project as much as they could.

**BG:** That's powerful. I definitely want to hear some more about your experiences as an administrator, but since we're on the topic of the New York Urban League, I have a few more pointed questions.

**HA:** Sure.

**BG:** Two things: I know that Harlem Prep merged with the New York Urban League, out of the three-step program initially. I know also that they eventually kind of broke away, in a sense, or separated maybe is the right term. Once Harlem Prep separated from the New York Urban League, how much was New York Urban League involved in Harlem Prep?

**HA:** Not much.

**BG:** Not much.

**HA:** Not much, unfortunately, especially after Whitney Young died, and I think the following year, if I'm not mistaken James Farmer had taken over. He was more of a civil right politician than a real leader, like Whitney Young. He was looking for more recognition for this and that, local politics that he was involved [in]. I shouldn't talk like this [in a way] that is not nice, but that was the truth. The League itself lost its real impact on the urban areas in the country. Whitney Young had this ability – and I mentioned this in my book about Harlem Prep—of really maneuvering in the very high level of American administration. He was working with Johnson administration at the national level, came from a solid background. One thing I learned also, throughout my experience at Harlem Prep, [is that] there were a good number of black families in America that were quite well to do. Financially, educationally, socially, but you don't hear too much about them, you don't see them that much, they're not really in the forefront of this movement, but they do their best. For example, they said that Michelle Obama's family is one of those—that they are educated, they are wealthy, they are established, and they have connections. So, those people were also—thank God, on our side, and they helped us.

**BG:** Yeah, that helps. I have one more kind of pointed question.

**HA:** Sure.

**BG:** Then I'd just love to hear about your experiences. In your book—and what I haven't really been able to figure out – [is the admission policy]: what were the admissions standards, or how were students admitted to the school? You mentioned there was a test they had to take—what was the application like, how was it decided [on which students to take], especially as it got more popular [and] you had these waiting lists.

**HA:** It was a kind of haphazard, really.

**BG:** I know it probably changed throughout the history.

**HA:** It did, there was not really an established system in order to go to Harlem Prep, you did not have to have recommendations like, “you have to have

this background, you have to be this age” [and so on, etc.].

**BG:** It wasn’t like that.

**HA:** It was not really like that. Most of the time, at least when we were smaller, the faculty, get together, either as a whole or as a smaller unit, they review all of the applications. For example they look at Joseph Smith’s background—how old is he, they have to write a statement. Even for a while, I think, they had to sign a contract, you know, this is what they commit themselves to do, and if they don’t fulfill it they would be asked to leave. The age was not a requirement, because we had some students who were almost 40 years old and some who were 16, 17. The big thing that also helped us was the selection of teachers—we didn’t go in the route of credentials and the requirement [for degrees]. There was a guy, his name was George Simmonds [and] Ed Carpenter knew him—he was a good preacher on the street corner of Harlem, so he had seen him many times. I think he didn’t even have a high school diploma, but he was such an eloquent guy—the way he talked and dressed, so we hired him, and he was marvelous.

**BG:** That’s awesome.

**HA:** We also had some PhDs—they would help. There were lots of women who applied for jobs—white women mostly, and they had high degrees—Masters, or a couple of them Ph.D.’s. Then—I don’t know why I remembered this—there was this math teacher, what was his name? Art. He came to my office and said, “Doc,”—he used to call me Doc. He said, “Doc, there’s a problem upstairs.” My office was in the basement. I said, “What’s happening?” He said, “This guy is walking around with a gun in his hand.” I said, “With a gun in his hand?” He said, “Yep,” So I said, “Jesus Christ. I have to get involved. This is serious. I have to get involved.” [laughter] So, I went up, and I saw him—big black guy, a kid, you know, maybe 20, 24 years old. So I ask him, “What can I do for you? Who are you? What are you doing here?” And he of course he was bad-mouthing, “Who the ‘f-‘ are you?” “I’m the school director.” And I remember he said, “You are not the school director, what are you talking about?” So I said, “What do you want anyway?” He said, “I’m looking for some kid.”

**BG:** This guy still has a gun in his hand?

**HA:** He still has a gun in his hand. I say, “What do you want from him?” He said, “I want to kill him.” I said, “You want to kill him?!” I was shocked! So I say, “Why do you want to kill him?” He says, “Oh, he owes me 20 dollars. He hasn’t paid me. I want to kill him.” Jesus Christ. What the hell do you do with somebody who wants to kill one of my students for 20

**BG:** dollars? I don't know why I told him this—I told him, “Look, listen fellow, why don't you wait until three o'clock and kill him outside?” [laughter] [laughter] Not in your school, right?

**HA:** Yeah, not in school. It shocked the hell out of him. He said, “I told you you're no ‘f-ing’ director.” [laughter] So, that somehow eased up the situation, and I think I gave him 20 dollars to save the poor kid's life, and he left. We had lots of incidents. We had a group of people called the “Five Percenters.” They really thought they are the chosen people, because they have this concept that I never understood. It was a weird explanation that black people are the chosen ones, then within black people there are a smaller portion, then eventually it comes to them, that they are the saviors. Everybody thinks they are the saviors. We had a large number of black Muslim students, and they all dressed so sharply with the suits and the bowtie, and they come to the class and school and they always call you brother, and they're quoting Malcolm X or Elijah Mohammad. Actually, I had an experience with Malcolm X.

**BG:** You met him?

**HA:** Yeah. So what happened, there was this Bahá'i who had a printing shop in Harlem, and Malcolm needed somebody to print his flyers for publicity, so they got to know each other, and he invited Malcolm to his house, to what Bahá'i's call “Fireside.” Fireside is a setting that they get together and they talk different subjects and issues, so of course being a Bahá'i, I went there also. So, on one of the occasions he said how awful white people are, and how miserable and how they all should die. It was quite an extreme. So, I couldn't control myself, I said, “Brother Malcolm, there are some good white people in this world, you know. I'm coming from a culture and places where even though the Muslim are abusing the Bahá'i's, but I come across a lot of very good white people who are not as bad as—” and he said, “What's your name?” I said, “Hussein.” “Ha! Hussein!” [he said]. He was shocked. He said, “Brother Hussein, let me tell you something about America,” because I guess he realized I'm not American. “When a snake bites you in Mississippi, then you come to New York and you see a snake, you don't ask the snake ‘are you a good or a bad snake?’” [laughter] “You either stay away from that snake, or you crush his head.”

**BG:** That's a really good analogy.

**HA:** Poor guy was bitten by a snake, so that's why he was upset. His successor, Minister Farrakhan, visited the school many times—he was a speaker at a couple of our graduations, and before he goes to [the] extreme and makes, unfortunately, these anti-Semitic statements, he was a fine leader for the community. We had the support of many musicians—I got to know so many wonderful musicians through Harlem Prep – [Sammy Davis Jr.](#),

Dizzy Gillespie, Billy Taylor, Pete Seeger, Mike Longo. These were all the people that helped us [in] fundraising. Bill Cosby. Actually, I read in one of your papers—how come I missed that? That Bill Cosby organized and chaired a luncheon for Harlem Prep?

**BG:** Yeah, I have a pamphlet from that.

**HA:** I missed that. I'd like to see that pamphlet.

**BG:** I'd love to show it to you.

**HA:** I thought, "Where was I? How'd I miss that?"

**BG:** There were probably a lot of things going on.

**HA:** No, especially with Bill Cosby. I went to school with him at the University of Massachusetts, we got our degrees together. I didn't know that he's doing all these things to women [of course]. At that time, he was very funny, and everybody loved him. So, Billy Cosby was also involved, and this woman who represented District of Columbia was with us in the Congress—Holmes? A very fine black woman.

**BG:** Oh, a black congressman?

**HA:** Yeah, a black woman.

**BG:** Shirley Chisholm?

**HA:** No, Shirley Chisholm died. She's still alive. She's a person that represents D.C.—she was elected.

**BG:** I'm not sure.

**HA:** Something Holmes was her name.

**BG:** That's all super—it's all fascinating.

**HA:** It was an exciting time. I mean, not only exciting in Harlem Prep, exciting time in America. The late 60s and early 70s was a special period. The other day, I was watching a march by kids for a silly issue, and I think "my God, those days we were marching for civil rights, we were marching against the Vietnam war, thousands of people were dying." They carry a sign, some silly thing, "Don't shop at Macy's, because they are making their shirts in Cambodia," [laughter] and things like this, which is fine, but, it's a different era.

- BG:** It's a different era. There's different stakes.
- HA:** A different stake, exactly.
- BG:** Just listening to your stories, and all those people, do you think the fact that it was the only school in Harlem was one reason why people were so drawn to it?
- HA:** I think it was down to it because it was successful—people love to be part of success stories. When folks get together [and] they hear Josh Smith is writing such fancy, nice letters about Harlem Prep, the Chase people said, "Is that true? Why don't we send Frank Shea, he's a nice boy, to see what they're up to." We had funny relation with Al Shanker. Al Shanker, you know, was a tough cookie.
- BG:** Yeah, I'm not sure if you've seen his—he wrote some tough articles on Harlem Prep.
- HA:** I did. He was bad. I remember we had the meeting with the Vice President of Exxon, and Judge Magnum, a few others, and I was so...
- BG:** What was that meeting like?
- HA:** I was so upset about—I think he wrote something for the *New York Times*.
- BG:** He did. It was blistering [but] it was inaccurate.
- HA:** Yeah, exactly. And I wanted to answer him right away, "Do this. Do that." How could you say this kind of thing? And I remember, one of the people who was in the meeting said, "Hussein, he's looking for us to go against him so he gets more attention. The best thing is to ignore him." Now that I'm getting old, I realize that this is the best method. Just ignore them, and they die out, instead of fighting, because that's what they're looking for.
- BG:** Yeah, they want a response.
- HA:** They want a response, yeah. Don't give them that pleasure. That's the good old days.
- BG:** Yeah. So, it's been about 52 minutes or so. Any last thoughts, or just, about the school, or about your experiences? I don't want to take too much of your time.
- HA:** I don't want to take credit for it, but I have a feeling it was Harlem Prep and some similar schools that really prepared the groundwork for all these charter schools, because now I hear that there are a thousand of them all

over the country, and sometimes when I look at their by-laws, or sometimes when I look at their platform, or what they stand for [although] whether they do it or not, that's a different story. It reminds me so much, really, of what we did. The difference was, those days we were working with the private support, so we didn't have to be bound by the control of the central board, and these charter schools, they still have to work in the system, but they have more freedom. The whole idea of "charter school," a smaller unit, flexibility in terms of teacher qualifications and student admissions and all of that, these are all the things that we really—so, I take a great deal of pride that we were really a forerunner of all these charter schools, whether they know it or not, and I think those people who are dead by now—Whitney Young, Ed Carpenter, Judge Magnum, they should be very proud of the work they did. I salute them, for sure.

**BG:** It seemed like such an extraordinary place.

**HA:** They did a great job. God bless them.

**BG:** Well, you certainly had a big role in it as well.

**HA:** Well, we all tried. For a foreigner, I think I did alright [laughter].

**BG:** [laughter] Yeah, I think so.

**HA:** The guy who was editing my book for publication, he said, "Hussein, as the foreigner, as long as you don't say, 'in my country, I was poor. I came to America and now I have two Kentucky Chicken Fried shops and I have one Dunkin Donuts [laughter] and I drive a Cadillac, this is not what I like to see.'" So, I try to avoid that and so I went with a different approach. I'm going to email you my manuscript of my new book. Take a look at it and give me some ideas, really, because it's not published yet, so you may have some ideas.

**BG:** Oh, okay, I'd love to read it. I'd love to. Okay, that will end it, so thank you so much for telling your stories.

**HA:** Perfect, thanks a lot Barry. Love you, take care.

**BG:** It's mutual. Thank you.

*[end of recording]*