Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History
Special Collections Department
University of Arkansas Libraries
365 N. McIlroy Ave.
Fayetteville, AR 72701
(479) 575-5330

Arkansas Memories Project

Interview with
E. Lynn Harris
April 10, 2006
Fayetteville, Arkansas

Interviewer: Jane Gearhart

[00:00:00]

Scott Lunsford: E. Lynn, this is a videotape recording being done for the Barbara and David Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History. It will reside in Mullins Library in the Special Collections Department in Fayetteville, Arkansas—University of Arkansas. We're also doing this recording so that we may prepare a tape—videotape to be shown at the Silas Hunt Legacy event, April 28, 2006.

E. Lynn Harris: Okay.

SL: Okay.

EH: All right.

Jane Gearhart: Great.

SL: All right. See y'all later.

JG: E. Lynn, thank you so much for being here today.

Mandy [Last Name?]: Nice to meet you all.

EH: Bye-bye.

[00:00:36] JG: Bye-bye, Mandy. My first question is tell me your earliest memory of growing up, either in Michigan where you were born or in Little Rock.

EH: Well, I really don't have a lot of memories of Michigan. I think the—the first memory that I have that has kinda always been there is the first day of school, you know, when it was first grade—Gibbs Elementary School, and my mom leaving me. I—I just cried like a baby, and a few seconds later I was okay. And that was the start of it. I can still remember the room. I can still remember the school. I later transferred over to Bush Elementary, which was in the east side of—of Little Rock, and we stayed on East 21st in a shotgun house—two bedroom, small—small house. I remember that house. I could walk to Bush. It was about maybe five blocks from where the house was.

[00:01:41] JG: You were raised with three sisters.

EH: Uh-huh.

JG: Is that right?

EH: Yes.

JG: Tell me a little bit about that.

EH: All of us are, like, three years apart. They seem to have always been there. I do remember, you know, my little sister, Jan—I do remember her being born, and being happy and kinda disappointed 'cause I was hoping that she would've been a boy, and she wasn't. We had the same kind of skin color, if you will, so there was a connection there. But my sisters—we're—we're a lot different, but we're very, very protective of each other—they of me and I always of them. My stepfather left when I was, like, twelve years old, and so basically at twelve I had to become

the man of the house. And so it's always been me and maybe—you, know, the older-brother role for them most of their lives.

[00:02:41] JG: Tell me about your mother and your real father.

EH: My mother [Etta Mae Williams] is one of the most wonderful women you ever want to meet. I think one of the things that I get from her that I'm most proud of is the fact that she's so humble, and she's always taught us to treat people the way we wanted to be treated. And I've always seen her treat people that way, no matter who they were—no matter what their station in life was. Even people that she might've worked for, you know, as a domestic—she always seemed to treat people the same way. My real father [James Jeter], I know very, very little about him. I only had the opportunity to meet him once, and that was when I was about fourteen years old. Met him in Michigan—recounted a lot of it in my memoir, but a—a lot of—of the memories are—are really gone. I mean, I remember the day—I remember the first time I saw him, and even though no one told me that that was my father, I knew who he was immediately, because I was standing in the kitchen washing dishes in a cousin's house, and he got out of the car with my uncle, and my uncle didn't say, "I'm gonna bring your father by today." I didn't even know for sure if he was still in Michigan. I spent my summers in Michigan from the time I was twelve to maybe sixteen years old. And I just knew immediately who he was.

JG: That's fascinating.

EH: Yeah.

JG: And you met him one time.

EH: One time.

JG: Tell me—go ahead.

EH: He was killed the next summer in a—in a car wreck.

JG: Wow.

EH: Yeah.

[00:04:06] JG: Was he also the father of your three sisters?

EH: No, no.

JG: Okay.

EH: No.

[00:04:09] JG: Tell me about your stepfather.

EH: My stepfather, you know, and—was Ben—you know, Ben Harris. And I found out later when I grew up that he was who my mom dated most of her high school years, and then she moved to Michigan after she graduated from high school and met my father. And then maybe when I was about three or four years old she came back to Arkansas and—and married Ben. Ben was the kinda person who when he was up he was the greatest, you know, guy in the world. But when he was drinking or in one of those moods, it—it was a total nightmare for me—not so much for my sisters, because he—he was the kind of guy that all the kids in the neighborhood called Uncle Ben, even though they didn't have any relationship to him at all. So he was gregarious and what have you. I remember him being a really talented painter. And when he was—when he was nice, he was, like I say, one of the nicest people you ever want to meet. But he really did have kind of a—you know, a split personality.

JG: I see.

EH: Uh-huh.

[00:05:16] JG: What—what was it like growing up in Little Rock. When—you were born in what year?

EH: I was born in [19]57.

JG: [19]57.

EH: Uh-huh.

JG: Okay. That was the year of the—the . . .

EH: Central. [Reference to the desegregation of Little Rock Central High School]

JG: Right, Central High School.

EH: Uh-huh.

[00:05:25] JG: What was it like for you as a—as a child and then a teen living in Little Rock, especially during that time?

EH: Well, you know, I don't—I don't really remember Little Rock being the way it's often portrayed, because I came on the tail end of everything. You know, I went to West Side Junior High [School], which was an integrated, you know, school. I went to Hall High [School], where I was one of the few African American students, but I went without incident. And, I don't remember, you know, riding on the back of the bus or anything. I remember getting on the back of the bus because that's where I wanted to sit. You know, you got a—had a much better view. I don't remember—you know, and I don't remember—of course, I don't remember any of that Central stuff. It was just stuff that I read in the history books. And, interestingly enough, I lived in the Central district. You know, I

could walk to Central High. But when it came time for me to go to high school, I purposely didn't want to go to Central, because I remembered, you know, what had happened in—in [19]57. And never once have I been inside Central High. I've been inside their gymnasium, but never, you know—walked past it a hundred million times, but never have I been inside it.

[00:06:42] JG: Was it complicated to go to Hall High School instead of Central?

EH: No, because they had a thing called freedom of choice, where if you were a minority and, believe it or not, during that time African Americans were the minority in Little Rock Public School District. You could go to any school where, you know, you were in the minority.

JG: Wow.

EH: Yeah.

JG: That's—that's interesting.

EH: Yeah.

[00:07:04] JG: So you don't feel like you felt any of the racial tension or any that . . .

EH: You know, the little stuff that—that kids go through that kids even today kind of say, "Oh, I didn't get this because, you know, I'm African American," or what have you, but no out-and-out stuff. I mean, there was more a difference in economic status for me and my classmates at Hall than there was about race. I had, you know, had jobs at the Baskins and Robbins [ice cream store] in that neighborhood where the kids from Hall went. You know, I'd had jobs downtown, so I knew some of 'em just from them coming in, you know, the Baskin and Robbins where I worked. And, you know, and I don't think I'm being naive when

I say that. It just never was really an issue for me. Now, you know, I know it was an issue for—for other people, but it was never really an issue for me.

JG: So your childhood, other than your stepfather, sounds like it was fairly ideal.

EH: No, it was not ideal by any stretch of the imagination, because we—we were poor, and I didn't like that, you know. I used to think that I was the only one in the household who knew we were poor. And the interesting part about it is that my mother and my grandmother, you know, would work for wealthy white families. And sometimes we got to tag along with them, and so, you know, I saw how other people were living and I just didn't really think, you know, that that was fair. So, I had a lot of angst, you know, growing up because I wanted, you know, more out of life. And it didn't seem as though, you know, people in my neighborhood or even my own sisters wanted that. So for me that caused a whole lot of turmoil in my life.

[00:08:50] JG: So you feel like you were fairly ambitious from a pretty early age.

EH: Oh, yeah.

JG: I believe I remember in your memoir about some—some of the clothes you bought early on.

EH: Uh-huh.

JG: Can you tell that story?

EH: Yeah, I—I used to, you know, lay away clothes at, you know, M. M. Cohn, and Blass Department Store, you know? . And the interesting thing is when we made money, my mom—even though I felt like I needed to be helping out—my mom never really asked us for money. I remember one time at West Side Junior High

School, a gentleman, Moise [B.] Seligman [Jr.] came to speak, and he was president of Arkansas Paper Company, and I was asked to introduce him. I don't know why I was asked, because I wasn't, like, president of the student body or anything. But I was asked to introduce him at a student assembly, 'cause he had gone to West Side. And after the assembly I wrote him and thanked him for coming to West Side and asked him that if he ever had a job for, you know, somebody who was very ambitious, you know, would he consider me. And a couple days later the principal's office called and said Mr. Seligman was on the phone, and he offered me a job—I was in the ninth grade—at Arkansas Paper Company. I don't—didn't have anything I could do, because I was a little kid, and—but for the whole summer I tooled around and hung around Arkansas Paper Company. Some days I went out to his house. I remember he lived on Beechwood, and he had a—a couple, if you will, who basically were take care—caretakers of his home and what have you. And, you know, again, I was being exposed. But he took an interest in me. He took an interest in me even up to, you know, my college years. And I remember when one of my—third or fourth novel came out, his wife came and told Mom, you know, that—you know, that—that he wasn't doing well, but he had kept up with my progress and that he was really, really proud of me.

JG: That's most interesting.

EH: Yeah, yeah.

JG: That's great.

EH: Yeah.

[00:10:42] JG: What other memories do you have of—along that time as you started moving into the high school years and—and what were your interests? Were you always interested in writing?

EH: No, not really. The writing—the—in the ninth grade—eighth to ninth grade I was kind of a—for lack of a better term, a bad ass, and I used to always get in trouble. And there was an incident in the eighth grade with the math teacher where I was reading a comic book and we had these big math books. I remember they were, like, aqua, and he came and, you know, told me to put the comic book up. And, you know, everybody started laughing, and I said, "I will." He said, you know, "Put it up now." And I—I—I didn't move fast enough for him, and he jerked it out of—out of the comic—out of the math book, and I threw the comic—the math book at him. Got drug up to the principal's office. Got suspended. Didn't tell my mom, so I end up staying out of school, like, forty-four days, because my mom went to work at 6:00 in the morning. She came home in the evening, so she didn't know what—you know, she assumed that we were going to school. And I remember, you know, getting—you know, getting a whipping, and then her having to take me to school the next day, and her in tears trying to explain to this principal how difficult it was raising four kids alone. And I was so embarrassed by her crying and—and that I was causing this, and the principal looked at me and said, "You know—you know, look at what you're doing to your mom." He said, "What are you gonna do with your future?" And I—I said, "Well, you know, I'm going to college. I'm gonna do something with my life." He says, "Not with these—these grades and the way you're doing now." And he said to my mom,

"He tests higher than anybody in the school, but we can't get him to do anything but D and C work," and—because I was so busy trying to be with the popular kids and skipping school and what have you. And I made a decision that day that I was never gonna embarrass my mom like that again, and that I was gonna turn my life around, you know, academically. And so the next year in the ninth grade, I was in all these remedial classes because of my grades, but now I was applying myself. And so the teacher suddenly didn't know what to do with me. I remember I had a math teacher, Miss Young, who was teaching remedial math, but she would take—put me in the back of the room and she taught me algebra. The same thing in English. And what was also interesting, I submitted a story for the school newspaper and got picked without her knowing what my grades were. She just liked the way I wrote, and so I made the newspaper. And suddenly I'm on the newspaper—this C and D student with all these kids who were A and B students—all straight-A students, and that was, like, the *West Side Bear Chat*. It was a—the school newspaper and I was the sports writer, and I won a first place in the state for, like, sports writing. And so I suddenly thought, "I want to be a sports writer." And—because I loved sports and I loved writing. And then when I went to Hall, I kinda ran into a little bit of discrimination, because the journalism teacher there had that reputation. And she all but, you know, put the—the [bud?] on—on my career. I—I took journalism in the tenth—tenth grade, but every year I applied for the newspaper staff and the yearbook staff and was never chosen—which I got a really big kick out of sending her the yearbook from the University of Arkansas four years later, when I got to edit the *Razorback.*

JG: Wow.

EH: Yeah.

JG: Wow . . .

EH: Yeah.

JG: . . . that's a great story.

EH: Yeah.

[00:14:09] JG: That is a great story. So you love sports.

EH: Uh-huh.

JG: And that—that's well known.

EH: Uh-huh.

JG: And I'm not skipping ahead here, but one of my favorite things you've ever done was be selected to write the essay on Arkansas for *Sports Illustrated* when they . . .

EH: Uh-huh.

JG: . . . celebrated each state's contributions over fifty years.

EH: Yeah.

[00:14:26] JG: So tell—tell us a little bit about your love of sports.

EH: Well, that was a big thrill for me. I mean, you know, talking about God making all your dreams come true—when I didn't become a sports writer, I basically had to give up my dream of writing for *Sports Illustrated*, or so I thought. So that was a—a real big thrill for me, writing that piece and—and the response I got from people. And I got it from people not only at the university [of Arkansas], but from all over the—the country. People who, you know, had grew up here loving

the Razorbacks and who had left. And so that was a really big thrill in terms of my—my career. But I guess it started, you know, very early. I used to, you know, play. I have a mark on my leg now from playing street, you know, football in my neighborhood. And, it's—but when I got to seventh grade I was just too small to play. I mean, and when I came to the University of Arkansas, I was probably 115 pounds dripping wet, and it was here when I started, you know, to pick up and weight and develop a body that might could've played sports. But—but by now you really would've had to had some experience. I always loved to play, and I always loved to watch. That was one of the things that Ben did give me—you know, the love of sports. It was one of the things he almost thought he was doing something that might aggravate me by making me watch. We were big Dallas [Texas] Cowboy [professional football team] fans and, you know, St. Louis [Missouri] Cardinals [professional baseball team]. And I've always just—just adored sports for—forever. Then in the African American community there was a black school called Horace Mann High School, and all the black community supported Horace Mann. We—we used to love going to Horace Mann games. And even though Horace Mann was closed by the time that I went there, they had the band, and I remember when they started to play the white schools, it seemed like the most important thing in the world that we beat Central and Hall. They never did, you know, for the most part, but it just seemed like it was the most important thing in the world.

JG: That's fascinating.

EH: Uh-huh.

[00:16:20] JG: What's your favorite sport?

EH: College football. College football. I, you know, love—loved it from the moment Arkansas played [the University of] Texas [for the NCAA championship] in 1969, which was very interesting, because I remember watching it with uncle and aunt, who lived on Jacksonville—Little Rock Air Force Base, and my uncle, you know, teasing me because, you know, Arkansas didn't have any black players, and he was pulling for Texas. Well, Texas didn't have any black players either, but I just remembered being—you know, like the world had ended when they lost that game that day, you know?

JG: Uh-huh.

[00:16:53] EH: And, you know, I remember my first, you know, Razorback game. They were playing Stanford, and I had saved up money to get a ticket, you know? And I had a—I wouldn't say a bad memory, because I understood the time, and we—we talk about this whole thing about race. Once I had a job at—it was called [Crank's?] Drug Store, and they had, like, a coffee shop, and I was a bus boy. And there was a young lady who worked there one summer who was a student at the University of Arkansas. She was a med[ical school] student, and we just hit it off, you know? They liked me because I liked to talk, you know, to people and didn't steal tips or anything like some of the other bus boys did, and she knew I loved the Razorbacks. And she said that she was gonna take me to a Razorback game, and it was—that was gonna be my first one. And I remember the day she came in—that—that Saturday I was supposed, you know, to go to the game. She had on the Arkansas stuff and whatever, and—and she told me she was sorry she

couldn't take me, but that her mother didn't think it would be good for her to, you know, be seen at the stadium with a little colored boy. And I remember I was devastated, you know?

JG: Wow.

EH: I was—yeah.

JG: What a story.

EH: Yeah.

[00:18:04] JG: Did you—? But, overall, in your childhood you had a minimum of those kinds of events . . .

EH: Uh-huh. Yeah.

JG: . . . is really what it boils down to.

EH: Yeah, yeah. You know, sitting here talking—you know, I remember those—those kinds of things, but, you know, I was resilient in a—in a lotta ways and, you know, I remember quitting that job. I know I didn't ever want to see her again, you know? And she was much older. You know, I was in, like, the—you know, eighth or ninth grade and she was a college student, so it wasn't like it was a date or anything.

JG: Uh-huh.

EH: It was that she knew I loved the Razorbacks and . . .

JG: Uh-huh.

EH: . . . you know, she wanted to take me to the game.

[00:18:36] JG: Amazing. Just amazing. Any other memories from that high school time when you weren't selected to be on the staffs of the publications or any other

memories of your time at Hall that stand out for ya?

EH: Well, the first year at Hall when I went there, I decided I would run for sophomore class representative, which is like sophomore class president. And I wanted to run because I thought it would be a good way of meeting people, and I really didn't—didn't think I could win, because a young man from Forest Heights Junior High, who had been president of the student body there, was running. And I remember there was eleven people running, and I remember us giving our speeches to the sophomore class. And I remember my little closing line was, "Put the little X in the little box. That'll put Lynn in the top spot." That was my little thing. And everybody that day who didn't know me, you know, were coming up to me in class—said, "I really liked your speech. It was the best one," you know, blah, blah, blah. And I remember—that must've been the tenth grade, because I remember I was working at [Crank's?], because a young man came in, and he said, "I heard your speech today. It was really good." And I said, "Are you gonna vote for me?" He said, "No." And I said, "Well, why not?" He said, "Well, you know, my girlfriend, Sherrei Kaufman, is running." He says, "But if she—if you—if you make it to the runoff, I'm voting for you," he said, "but I can't vote for you tomorrow." And so then we voted, because there was, like, eleven people running and my class was about 800 people. And there was a runoff, and I—'cause the first time I led. I got, like, 120-something votes, and led, and then there was a runoff between Brian [Sudderth] and myself. And I campaigned really, really hard, and on the day of the election, it was a few black students who—because they had closed Horace Mann—who were bused to Hall.

They didn't like Hall as much as I did, because they were bused. I came to Hall on my own free will. Well, that morning the bus, for some reason, was late, and so when they came in they said, "Where do we vote?" And I said, "Oh, we—we've already voted, you know? You need to go to your homeroom teacher and ask them if you can vote." And they went to their homeroom teachers, and they said no, you know, the voting was over, and what have you. And I remember the principal calling Brian and myself in the office, and I remember him saying, "Lynn, you got 340 votes. I think that's wonderful." And he looked at Brian, and he said, "Brian, you got 343 votes." He had beat me by three votes, and after—I congratulated Brian, but I was, you know—after he left I told Mr. Faulk about the—the minority students—African American students not being able to vote. And he said to me—he says, "So what are you suggesting that we do?" I said, "Well, I think they should be allowed to vote." He says, "Well, Lynn," he said, "you know, if we did that, that would certainly change this election, and—and what about Brian? I mean, he's already called his parents and told 'em that he's won." And he said, "I just think you should be just proud of how well you did, and basically, kind of move on." And I remember telling my mom about it, and then she didn't understand how important it was to me, and all she thought—for her to come up to the school to raise a stink about it, she would have to miss work. And so it just became one of those things. And, matter of fact, I left Hall for nine weeks and went to Parkview [High School] because I was devastated by that. I came back to Hall the next year, 'cause I really did like Hall. But I just thought, you know, it was not gonna be fair. But the interesting thing about it was

I made so many friends. Everybody, you know, thought what I had done had been remarkable. But, for me, I hadn't—I didn't win, so it wasn't too remarkable. But they were trying to get me to understand that, you know, 340, you know, white students, maybe—you know, or three—'cause I voted for myself [laughs], you know, had—had voted for me.

JG: That's a great story.

EH: Hmm.

[00:22:34] JG: Did you ever run for anything again?

EH: No.

JG: That was it.

EH: No, that was it.

JG: Uh-huh.

EH: Everybody thought that—that I would come back and run for student body president against Brian, and I basically left, you know, after my junior year. The interesting thing that a lot of people don't know—I don't have a high school diploma. You know, I left and came to the university early, so I never got to, you know, challenge, you know, Brian for, you know, student council. And it—my popularity grew. I remember I won friendliest junior boy, you know, and—and, you know, a lotta the little popularity things that they did. I—and I made a lotta friends. I mean, I remember I had two young ladies, Karen Krenz and Becky Henry—really wonderful white girls who used to take me to McCain Mall, 'cause they had cars. And we would just—we—they—they were just my friends, you know?

[00:23:27] JG: Are you still in touch with some of those people?

EH: Becca—when I was in *USA Today* a couple years ago had the *USA Today* mounted and framed and sent to me in New York, and Karen comes to my book signings whenever I'm in Houston [Texas], so they all—always show up. And I remember Becca sent me an e-mail [electronic mail] saying, you know, when—when she was sending this thing to me, she was sending it Federal Express, and the girl was, like, "Is this the writer?" And she go, "Yeah, I went to high school—" She go, "No, you didn't. You don't know him," you know, and—and how she got a really big kick out of—of—of saying, "Yeah, I've—I've known him for a long time."

[00:24:04] EH: So how is it you decided to leave high school a year early and go to the university, and how did you make that happen?

EH: I was just ready to move on. My mom used to always tell me to slow down. Best advice she could've ever given me, but I was not listening. I was ready to get on with my life, and a part of that had to be college. And I remember the guidance counselors telling me, "You know, this is a big risk, because if you don't get a college degree, you know, you're not gonna even have a high school diploma." And I was, like, "I don't care, you know? I'm—I'm ready to go." And, you know, applied to the university—came up here for financial aid and started school.

[00:24:41] JG: At that point, obviously, the high school diploma wasn't a prerequisite.

EH: No.

JG: Did you have to take any of the standardized tests that they take now?

EH: Oh, yeah, took—took ACT [American College Testing Program test].

JG: Uh-huh.

EH: I did really well on ACT.

JG: Mh-hmm.

EH: So, yeah, I had turned my grades around, and I was bored with school—with high school, you know?

[00:25:00] JG: What was your freshman year like here? What—what did you do the first thing?

EH: First thing—I remember getting on campus, and I remember just trying to find other black people, you know, 'cause I had never been to Fayetteville. The first time I showed up here, that day I had never driven my car on the freeway, and certainly, the "Pig Trail" [Arkansas State Highway 23] was a challenging last forty miles. I remember going to the financial aid office to make sure my financial aid was in order, and going to housing, and I lived in Hotz Hall my first semester. And, you know, first semester was—was fun, but academically I did horrible, you know? I did—you know, I had, like, a one point three [1.3 grade-point average], and—'cause I was partying. It was the first time I had really been on my own, and—but I had a good time.

[00:25:55] JG: Who—do you remember your roommate? Did you have a roommate there?

EH: I had a roommate, and I don't—I don't remember him. I remember him being a white guy from a small town. I remember he was—he was obese and that he snored, and he never said anything to me. And maybe a month later I met

somebody else on campus—somebody black—and we decided to be roommates. And so that was only a short time that I had a roommate.

[00:26:22] JG: When—when did you discover—I already know you had an interest in journalism . . .

EH: Mh-hmm.

JG: . . . but when did you discover your interest in cheerleading, and of course, I know the fraternity was a big part?

EH: Uh-huh.

JG: Tell—take me through your second semester and—at the university and on.

EH: Second semester my mom threatened that I have to come back home if continue with—with grades like that. So my second semester I had to really get serious. And I remember basically tricking my adviser, because I took nineteen hours, and he was, like, "You're on academic probation. You can't take nineteen hours." I said, "I know, but I want to go to these classes the first day to decide what to drop." And I had no intentions of dropping anything, so the second semester I—I took nineteen hours, and I ended up making straight As and one B, you know. And then I had developed a reputation for being smart and the doors just opened. I remember applying for Cardinal Twenty, which was an organization that was supposed to be the top twenty freshman men. You had to go through an interview, and it was based on grades and it was based on that interview. And I was, like, the first black guy ever to get in Cardinal Twenty. And I got into Phi Eta Sigma, which was a national honor society for freshmen who finished their first year with a three-five [3.5 grade point average] or better. And all of a sudden

all these doors were opening, you know, for me, and, you know . . .

JG: Had you declared a major at that point?

EH: No, no, but I knew it was gonna be journalism. I thought a minute about political science, because I thought I wanted to be a lawyer—not that I had some burning desire to be a lawyer. I always say this in my speeches now, when I'm trying to encourage kids to really follow their own passions. I said I wanted to go to law school because I thought people would be impressed that I was a lawyer. I had—really had no interest in law whatsoever.

[00:28:08] JG: When did you pledge your fraternity?

EH: I pledged my fraternity my second year.

JG: And its name?

EH: Alpha Phi Alpha, you know.

JG: And you're—are you still involved with Alpha Phi Alpha?

EH: Not as much. Not as much. At the time it was a very, very important part of my life. I was elected president, you know, right after I was initiated, which was a huge honor because I was so young. And, you know, I really did a—I think, a great job in helping establish a fraternity on this campus. They're still here. They're still, you know, doing very well. They've, you know, been here over thirty years. And, as I've grown older, you know, and I have encouraged young people to—to participate in things like that, but as I've grown older, you know, some of my interests have changed. You asked me about the cheerleading thing. The cheerleading thing, interesting enough, was something I was always interested in but that Ben discouraged. I mean, that, you know, no—there was no

encouragement there. When I was in the eighth grade of my junior high, I tried out because I could tumble, and I was the only guy, and he made me quit. And so I didn't get a chance to do it, so . . .

[00:29:22] JG: Well, when did you become involved here in cheerleading?

EH: When I was at Arkansas, cheerleading was the last thing that they—when I say "they," [I mean] "the Establishment" were willing to give up. And it was lily white, and it was not going to change. I remember my freshman year trying out and getting to the finals, and the only other black girl who had tried out didn't make the finals, and so I dropped out. That was after my freshman year. And during—right before my senior year, the African American football players went to Coach [Frank] Broyles and said they wanted black cheerleaders, and so he said, "Okay." And so they had, like, a—a tryout, and it was interesting, because it—they—they did something with the votes, because Coach Broyles said that we could do it, but he let the cheerleaders who were already there in charge of it, and they were so against us, they did not want to have anything to do with this. But they went on—along with it, 'cause Coach Broyles said it was gonna happen. And so, that was an interesting story. Did tryouts, and by now I'm a senior so, you know, I'm editor of the yearbook. I've—you know, everybody on the campus knows me. And it seemed like they wanted someone who was very, very passive. I remember seeing one of the cheerleaders talk derogatory to one of the African American girls during the clinic, and I went over and said, "You can't talk to her that way," and—and so, I guess they viewed me a troublemaker. So, anyway, they had three judges from out of town to come and judge—from OU

[University of Oklahoma], and [University of] Texas, and three judges from Arkansas. And so when the judging was over, it came out that I was the alternate and that this other black guy, who was a freshman and very, very quiet, had made it. And I was very disappointed, because I knew I was the best. And I was walking through what was then Wilson Sharp Hall, and a football player named Bruce Mitchell, who later—who died very young—but Bruce said, "Congratulations, Lynn." I said, "For what?" He said, "You—you made cheerleader today, didn't ya?" And I said, "Well, not really." I say, "I'm the alternate." He said, "Man, there's no way you couldn't have made it." I said, "I didn't make it." He said, "Well, I saw the tryouts," and he says, "No way you couldn't have made it." And so I said, "Well, I didn't." And so next day the campus was kinda rustling that I hadn't made it and that they—they thought something was—was fishy. And the dean of minority students got the scores—confiscated the scores, and they found out that the judges who were not from Arkansas had given me perfect scores on everything, and that the judges from Arkansas, the cheerleaders already on the squad, had given me zeros. And so she went to Coach Broyles and said, "How can somebody get a perfect score and then a zero?" So what ended up happening—Coach Broyles saw what had happened, so instead of getting two African American cheerleaders, they ended up with four, which made matters even worse. [Laughs] And I—you know, I remember, you know, traveling, and the other black guy—he later dropped out because of grades, and so I remember them coming to me and saying, "Would you mind being partner to both of the African American girls?" Which was funny now, about

that, is that they would put the African Americans together. Now it's kind of a unwritten rule up here at Arkansas that they never do that. They never put an African American girl with an African American guy. They just avoid at all cost. Even if they are height and weight [matched], you know, and it—it was an interesting year. It was an interesting year, because they were not—you know, when we would travel they were always cold and, you know, not—not friendly. I remember the first time we went on a trip, of us having a—a—two beds and then a roll-away cot, and—and I remember, you know—the guys were not as bad as the girls, 'cause some of the guys on the squad, as the year went on, you know, became friendly. And there was a couple girls on the squad—a young lady, Michelle Reynolds, who ended up marrying Ron Calcagni from Little Rock—she was friendly. And a young lady named Patty Tiffen, whose mom—who lived in Dallas was a single mom—she was—she was friendly. Some of 'em, those same kids, you know, I've seen as adults, and—and they seem to have changed, but for a period it was very difficult. And it was more difficult on my partner, her name was Dionne Harold, because she was young. She was a freshman. And I remember sometimes they would do things like tell her they were gonna wear one uniform, and we would travel out of town, and they would all have a different one. And I remember we were playing Baylor [University in Texas], and she was—she was just in tears, because she had on the wrong uniform. And I was saying, "You know, when you cry they win. Don't let 'em win, you know?" And I said, "They'll just think you're captain," because they all—the uniforms looked alike, you know. Hers was just white and they had on red.

JG: Uh-huh.

[00:34:26] EH: You know? And Dionne died young, too, and I've established a scholarship up here at the university for the spirit squads, you know, in her name and in her honor. She later became captain of the pom squad before she left here and was Homecoming Queen, so, you know, things took a turn for the better for her as well.

[00:34:45] JG: That's fascinating, and so basically your cheerleading experience was not the happiest memory, but it certainly has influenced you to this day that you're still involved in cheerleading.

EH: Well, you know, it's—it's interesting. What I think has happened, you know, 'cause, you know, my faith is very, very important to me—I think me coming back in 2003, and the first—one of the first calls I get is from [Derek Gregg?], who said that the cheer coach had quit that day—the first day that I'm here before I've even taught a class, and would I mind coming out and helping Jean Nail [spirit group coordinator for the Arkansas Razorbacks] just for a couple of weeks until she could find another coach. And I knew Jean. Jean wasn't the sponsor when I was up here, but I knew Jean, 'cause I wrote her and she had had me up to judge try-outs. And she had really kind of welcomed me back into the program, so I felt a part of the program, you know, through—through Jean. And I ended up, you know, I'm still doing it. And I said I've gotten—you know, my whole cheerleading experience has been rewritten thanks to the kids in the program now and Jean. It's—it's just—I have a—I have a really healthy love for the program, and even though this is—in 2006 will be my last semester, I feel like I'll always

be a part. And then—and I feel like I've had four years. One of the reasons that I'm—am coming back is 'cause some of those kids who—who made the squad when I was freshman, this is their senior year. And I promised them that I would stay with them through—through their senior year. And as they move on, you know, so will I. And they've been totally the opposite of what my experience was. We have a large number of African Americans on the squad and everybody gets along. And it's just one really big, happy—and, you know—family, and I, you know, say that in all honesty. I mean, times have changed and the kids have changed.

[00:36:34] JG: When you say this is—I don't want to skip too far ahead, but this is your last semester that you're coming to teach, too?

EH: Mh-hmm. Mh-hmm.

JG: And then it's over.

EH: Yeah.

JG: You—you—you're—that's all you wanted to do or is that mutual or . . .?

EH: Oh, no, no. [Fulbright College of Arts and Science] Dean [Donald] Bobbitt had left—left it open, but I told him that—that I—I think that I need to, you know, concentrate on, you know, on my writing. But the experience of teaching—I was supposed to do it for one semester, and next fall will be my eighth semester.

JG: And that'll be the end?

EH: That will be the end.

JG: I see.

EH: Right. I never say never. I mean, Dean Bobbitt has left the door open. But, as

for me, it's like, you know, getting to redo my college experience over.

JG: That's neat.

EH: Yeah.

JG: That's really neat.

EH: Yeah.

[00:37:16] JG: Let—let's go back. Tell me a little bit about becoming the *Razorback* [*Yearbook*] editor and what that was like. You were the first African American *Razorback* editor.

EH: Right. I got involved with the yearbook my sophomore year and did every job imaginable, you know, from when—when you take the class—the day pictures—putting them in alphabetical order—I just knew from the moment I got up here that I wanted to be editor of the yearbook, and so I just mapped out a plan. So, for my sophomore year I just did "gofer" work. I was just always over there. My junior year I was production supervisor, which meant, you know, I had to make sure everything went smoothly in terms of deadlines and—and stuff. And I was basically learning how to—to do a yearbook, because we didn't have a faculty adviser or anything. It was a independent kind of position. The Journalism Department wasn't involved with it in any way. It was a budget. You were elected by the Board of Publications, which was made of all people from all walks of the campus life, and you had to make a presentation of how—what the yearbook would look like and what have you, and what your plans were—what your budget was and what have you. And we'd go down to Dallas [in the] summer—spend a week at—at the—the publisher of the yearbook and—and plan

the yearbook. And I just did everything that it took to make sure that there was no way that they could turn me down. And I made my presentation to the Board of Pub[lications], and I don't know if anyone ran against me, but I—I got the job, you know? And I remember being on page two of the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, you know, "African American Selected Editor of the Yearbook." [Editor's note: The *Democrat* and *Gazette* became a combined publication, *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, in 1991; Mr. Harris graduated in 1977] And it was in *Jet*. And *Jet* magazine said I was the first ever in the South at a major white Southern university, you know, to be editor of the yearbook.

[00:39:01] JG: How did you go about selecting your staff?

EH: I put everybody on the same level. The—the editor the year before had an associate editor, you know, all these different positions, and they were paid positions. And they were—you know, they looked good on your resume, but I just hired staff members. And then on the first meeting I said, "These are the positions that are available, and as the year progresses I will put people in 'em who work in 'em." And interestingly enough, there was a young lady named Christy Kalder, who, when she came in for the interview, my initial impression was "This is a pretty sorority girl who's getting something to pad her resume with." And—'cause she—to me, she looked like a young Cybil Shepherd, and she—she came in, and somehow we became like best friends, and she was second in command. I—she knew my whole vision for the book, that if something happened to me, that she would have taken it and ran with it. And it was interesting, because I also had African Americans on campus who were really

proud of me, who weren't really interested in journalism or the yearbook, but just wanted to work on it because I was a part of it. And so all of a sudden you had this mix of the girls—the African American girls who, you know, just come in and do whatever I asked them to do—weren't really interested in the technical aspect. And, you know, sorority girls, you know, who wanted to be on the staff, you know, and just—they were—they were different. They were from different parts of the campus, if you will. And somehow we—we all came together, you know? And it was a wonderful year. That was one of the best experiences, you know, of my life, being editor of the yearbook.

JG: That's great.

EH: Yeah.

JG: And it all—and it came out on time.

EH: It came out on time. That was the thing—making sure that it came out on time—that you met every deadline. I remember we had to go down to Dallas during the last weeks of it just—you know, we didn't have Federal Express and all that stuff then to make sure that everything was gonna be on—on time.

[00:41:00] JG: Was it Taylor Publishing?

EH: It was Taylor Publishing.

JG: Taylor. Uh-huh.

EH: Taylor Publishing. Absolutely.

JG: Yeah.

EH: Yeah.

JG: That's great.

EH: Yeah.

[00:41:05] JG: That is great. Okay, so you are finished now. You've been highly successful at the university. You—you're—you've accomplished just about everything you set out to do and more, and it's time to go to work.

EH: Uh-huh.

JG: And back then computers were still relatively new. How in the world did you get interested in going to work for IBM [International Business Machines]?

EH: Well, interestingly enough, another one of the [Silas Hunt Legacy Award] honorees, Randall Ferguson, is responsible for that. I didn't know Randall when he was a—a student here, and one day I remember walking in the [Student] Union, and I see this really, really good-looking African American guy, and he told me that he was looking for—he—somebody had told him that I had pretty good grades and that they were looking for students with good grades. And he asked my grade point and what have you—what I was majoring in. And he told me he worked for IBM and that he had graduated from the University of Arkansas, and would I be interested in talking to the manager from IBM. And I said, "Sure," you know, because they had a summer job, and he was trying to get me the summer job. Interestingly enough, I also had a job to teach cheerleading that summer all across the country, and I was really looking forward to that. But he was telling how much money he could make and blah, blah, blah, and so I went on the interview, and it was this really big white guy, and he just kinda—I remember him always looking at me—peering over—you know, with his glasses, because he would look at my resume, and he would go, "Wow, you—you're a

cheerleader, yearbook editor, you know, Phi Eta Sigma, Order of Omega, Motive Award," all—you know, all the stuff that I was in and all these honors that I'd gotten—dean's list. And he was just kinda shocked, 'cause he had gone to the university, you know, like, in the [19]50s, but he had gone to the university and he was really—he told me he was really surprised at all that I was doing here. And so he said to me—he said, "I want you to take this test." He said, "You're not gonna do well on it," he said, "because you're—you're a liberal arts major, and this is really for business people and engineering, but," he said, "there's just something about you." He said, "You know, maybe we can get you a job, you know, selling typewriters for IBM or what have you. It won't require as much technical thing." He said, "You know, go over to the Union—blah, blah room and take this test." So I went—you know, he told me I wasn't gonna do well on it, so I didn't go in with any pressure. I just went in and took the test. I was always an excellent test taker of standardized tests. So I took the test. And the next morning at about—before—before 7:00, I get this call and he says, you know, "Lynn?" And, "Yeah, who—who is this?" He says, "This is Bob Oliver from IBM. You remember me?" I said, "Yeah, Mr. Oliver. How you doing?" He said, "I'm doing fine." He said, "Can you come over and see me this morning? I'm gonna be over at the placement office." I said, "Yeah, for—for what?" He said, "Just—just—just come [see] me as soon as you can." So I go over to see him, and he said, "You blew the roof off this test." He said, "I've never seen a colored—" and he—and he said, "Heck, I've never seen a white student score this high on this test." He said, "You gotta come to work for us."

And I said, "Well, you know, I don't know. I'm teaching cheerleading this summer." He said, "Cheerleading?" He said, you know, "What? I'm offering you a job at IBM, you know?" And I—it was a lot of money for someone who wasn't even twenty then. And I—I said, "Well, I don't know. I don't—I don't know about this—this IBM thing." And he—and he was, like, you know, "Come down to our office and—and meet some people from the office." And Randall was encouraging me, you know. And he said, "You get to work alongside Randall." So we worked it out where I was able to work for IBM, you know, half the summer, and I got to teach cheerleading for, like, you know, a couple—for a month. And then in the summer they offered me a job, and I said, "No, no." And they went, "Why?" And I said, "When I grew up in Little Rock, you know, I know there's some more of the world out there, and I wanna see it." And so they said, "Well, where do you wanna live?" Well, from being a cheerleader, we played only Texas schools then, and so we—we were always in Dallas, and I just loved Dallas. And we were going to Austin. We'd stop in Dallas and spend the night. We were going to Waco—all these different schools. And so I said, "I wanna live in Dallas." And so he said, "Well, let me get back with you." And the next day he—he called me and he said, "We've arranged for you to fly down to Dallas for an interview with the IBM branch there. We really want you here in Little Rock. You'd be the first black salesman we've ever hired, but we want you with IBM, and if Dallas is where you wanna live, then, you know, that's what we'll do." And so they sent me to Dallas. I had an interview, and by the time I got off the plane coming back to Fayetteville, I had a job offer. And Randall

really—and I was, like, "I don't know if I can do this. They're talking about a lot of math. I don't really like math. I don't know if I wanna be a salesman." And they were, like, "Oh, you—you know, you got the personality to be a salesman. You know, give it a shot. You know, you—you'd be one of the few African American salesmen selling computers—the big computers. We have African Americans selling typewriters, but nobody selling computers. Here's a chance for you to, you know, break some new ground." And so I said, "Okay."

[00:46:11] JG: What was the learning curve like to begin to [laughs] sell computers.

EH: Oh, that was one of the most difficult times in my life, because at IBM, they send you to school. The first year you don't work. They send you to school. And they send you to school in Endicott, New York, and it's like an M.B.A. [masters in business administration] program, and they don't play. I mean, I remember the first day I went to school at Endicott, everybody got up and they told their background. And I remember getting up and saying, "I'm—I'm Lynn Harris, and I don't know what in the hell I'm doing here," 'cause everybody was Wharton, Harvard Business School, M.B.A.—just the top of the—you know. But what was interesting about it—they didn't view me as a threat, and so they—they were helpful to me. I mean, they were cutthroat with each other, because you were ranked, you know? I was the bottom of my class—every single class—until the last class, which was the marketing class, which was when you took all the technical stuff you learned and the marketing skills, and then it was more about doing one-on-one interviews. It wasn't just test taking, it was people skills. And I—I remember one time I got the—the highest ranking on a sales call, and the

class just giving me a standing ovation, because they knew what a tough time I had. I had a very tough time. It was—it was more—it was the first time in my life that seventy-five—'cause you had to have seventy-five [percent] to pass. Seventy-five was—was—was—was wonderful. I remember one class, which was a four-week class, was one of the toughest class. I go in then on the final evaluation, and the said, "You know, your average is ninety-one," and I'm going, "Yes!" I said, "What is my ranking?" "Last." Dead last again with a ninety-one ranking. So, you know, every—each class I improved. I remember that first class—just getting seventy-five, then a seventy-eight, then I managed to reach the eighties. And then when I got that ninety-one, I just thought, "Oh, you know, I'm gonna be at the top of the class." And they ranked you, and I was the—dead last in ever single class until the—you know, the last one.

JG: Well, so, did you just—go ahead.

EH: But I—and I called Randall and I wanted to quit, you know, and—and he was very encouraging. He became like a big brother to me. And he just said, "You can do this. I know you can do it." And then it became a thing of, "Yeah, I gotta show them I can do it. I'll quit when—when this is over, but I'm not gonna quit now." And I think it was—what I had learned here at the university, that I, you know, that I could do anything if I put my mind to it. And it became kind of a battle, the part of me not wanting to do it and a part of me that felt like I had to prove that I could do it.

[00:49:49] JG: Were you the only African American in that class?

EH: No, there was four of us. And . . .

JG: Out of how many people?

EH: Forty-four. I know it was forty-four because I was always forty-four. And then one—one young man came and he joined our group, and he was from Harlem, and he did worse than I did. And so—but we became very, very good friends. The young African American young ladies—I remember one had been to—went to Harvard and the other one had gone to Cornell. They did okay. They always did fine in the class. But, you know, I got along with everybody in my class. You know, I—I remember doing a lot of things for the first time through the IBM experience. There was a young lady who worked in the New York office who knew how much I loved Broadway and invited me to New York one weekend, and we went to see *Annie* and *The Wiz* and—and, you know, got to see New York things. There was another one of my classmates who went to UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles] and lived in San Francisco and invited me to San Francisco. And a young man that had gone to Notre Dame and OU, you know, who I became really good friends with.

[00:49:51] JG: So you then embarked upon your career in Dallas selling . . .

EH: Uh-huh.

JG: . . . big computers.

EH: Right. Uh-huh.

JG: And they were big back then.

EH: They were big back then, and cumbersome.

JG: And tell—what did you think of—how did you like that part of your . . .?

EH: Well, interesting thing—my first assignment was on a team, and a team—that was

a good thing because on a team you—there were big sales—the older salesmen, and you just did what they told you to do, and you got—made commission, because—because they were making big money. They were selling—it was the—the ARCO [Atlantic Richfield Company] account. It was ARCO Oil and Gas, which was a great first assignment. And I did, you know, well, but I was doing a lotta "gofer" work, learning how to be a salesman. And I remember the lead salesman was a—an Aggie [a student of Texas Agricultural and Mechanical University], and we used to kid each other about football, because Arkansas and Texas A&M were big rivals then. And I learned a lot from him. I remember one time, I got a call from him on a Sunday, and he said, "Lynn," you know, "you know I'm supposed to take the CEO [chief executive officer] from Dr. Pepper [Bottling Company] and [MAZTEC?] to San Jose [California?] for this thing called DPEI [stands for?]." And what it was—it was basically a boondoggle where the salesmen take these—these executives, and they wine and dine 'em all week and get 'em to buy a lotta stuff. And something happened to one of his sons. He was in an accident or whatever. He says, "Now, I need you to go to the Dallas airport and meet them and go with them," you know, "to San Jose." I wasn't even twenty-one years old. I think maybe I'd just turned twenty-one years old. And I said, "What do I do?" He said, "You just make sure they stay happy the whole week." And it was the first time I'd ever flown first class. It was just—I told 'em, I said, "I don't have a clue with what I'm doing. All I'm supposed to do is make sure y'all are happy." And, they just took me under their wings, and it was a great week. And so when I came back they—you know, they

decided that I was ready, and they were gonna give me my own—my own territory. And I had every—every salesman had an SE [stands for?], and SE was the technical support. And my SE was this young named Julie, who had graduated from Notre Dame and who loved football as much as I did. And the first couple of calls and stuff we went on in Denton and places like that, 'cause I was given a territory outside of Dallas, and I was given a couple of accounts where they knew I could make some money and some where I needed to grow. I remember, you know, always having a hard time getting appointments, and some of 'em—they would always look at me kinda strange, and I thought it was 'cause I was African American. And one of my managers later pointed out—he says, "It's not because you're African American that they are treating you—" anyway, he said, "You're so young." He says, "You're trying to tell them to spend millions of dollars, and you look like you're still in high school, you know?" He said, "I think that's what the problem is, you know?" So, we, you know, had to work around it. And interestingly enough, that's kinda how the E. Lynn came about, because no one had ever called me Everett, everybody called me Lynn, and so I started signing my letters "E. Lynn Harris," you know, to make it sound more business-like, you know? And it—it was—it was interesting. But, you know, during that time in my own personal life, I was very, very miserable. And so working for IBM, it brought me—it was like a calling card in terms of—of middle-class blacks in Dallas, because they were going, "Oh, there's this black guy, you know, who's a salesman for IBM." So I started meeting people who were professional, but I was still real young. I was still running back to

Fayetteville every weekend for football games and—and—and, you know, missing college and missing my fraternity and what have you. And they were trying to get me to be an adult.

[00:53:28] JG: So how—did—you were very successful selling computers for IBM.

EH: Mh-hmm, mh-hmm.

JG: And—and how many years did you stay?

EH: I stayed four years and then I left, because I wanted to leave Dallas. And I moved to Houston and went to work for Hewlett-Packard. Hewlett-Packard basically kinda wooed me away from IBM, 'cause they were looking for salesmen who could sell, because by now they were getting into the computer industry in a—in a big way. And so they were looking for IBM salesmen, and so they offered me a whole lotta money, and by now I'm very—was very, very influenced, you know, by money. So, I went to work in Houston.

[00:54:04] JG: And how long were you with Hewlett-Packard?

EH: I was at Hewlett-Packard for a couple of years, and then I was wooed by AT&T [American Telephone and Telegraph] to sell computers, so I went to sell computers for AT&T in New York in the World Trade building—Trade Center.

[00:54:19] JG: And, what finally—you finally left that part of your life behind. What was . . .

EH: About twelve years later.

JG: . . . and what was it—what—what got you to finally do that, 'cause you were making a very comfortable living?

EH: Making a very comfortable living, but I was miserable. And I went through a

huge bout of depression. I was diagnosed as—as being depressed maybe when I was twenty-six years old, and really didn't understand what that meant. And in my early thirties it hit in a—in a very crippling form. And, interestingly enough, when I got ready to go back to work, 'cause I was not working for over a year, you know, it was kind of a period where I didn't leave my home, I didn't socialize, my mom—nobody knew what was going on with me. I had just—had locked myself away from the world. And I remember as I came out of the depression and was getting ready to go back to work, I went to an interview for a company called Sperry Univac, which was computers. And the guy was really, really impressed with my resume, but he said, "You know, you're really over-qualified for the job that—that we have." And I said, "Sir, you know, you're right." And I got up out of that interview and walked out and never looked for a job again. Never. And I haven't.

[00:55:37] JG: Is that when you began writing?

EH: That's when I began writing.

JG: Was that part of coming out of your depression . . .

EH: Absolutely.

JG: . . . was—was—was that suggested to you or did you . . .?

EH: I remember talking to my therapist about what I really wanted to do, and my aunt ,and my mother, and my support system, and I kept saying, "I want to write a book. I really think I can write." And one of 'em remarked—I think it was my aunt—that I was the only one in my way. And so, the light switch just went on for me. I rented a room from a good friend of mine. I gave up—I didn't give up,

it was taken—everything I'd accumulated in my car. It was repossessed. I was, you know, kicked out of my apartment. I think one of the most humiliating things I've ever gone through was begging a judge not to evict me on the weekend, because they were getting ready to evict me from my apartment, and I wanted the weekend to at least be able to take my things and put them 'em into storage—because it had gotten to the point where the marshal was coming to—to bar the door down. And I remember a judge, I don't remember his name, but I just remember him giving me 'til Tuesday of the next week to get my stuff out. And, you know, they just kinda started it.

[00:56:48] JG: So the room you rented was your office—your . . .

EH: It was my whole . . .

JG: . . . your whole . . .

EH: . . . everything.

JG: And that's where you began to write.

EH: That's where I began to write.

JG: And your first novel was . . .?

EH: *Invisible Life*. When I was in Lithonia, Georgia, I—I—interestingly enough, right before I left—I was living in Washington, DC—right before I left, I got an insurance settlement. And I got an insurance settlement because this—this—the insurance guy let it slip that the insurance company was looking for a way to avoid paying me for my depression. I had disability insurance, and they had gone to the doctor, you know, getting records and all this stuff, you know, and he said they—they really—because I made so much money, they really didn't want to

pay me. And, I had it taped. And so I basically—my uncle, who was a lawyer, said, "Oh, you—" you know, "you got them." And I didn't have to go through a lawsuit or anything. They just very quickly, when I told 'em I had what the insurance salesman had said, decided to settle with me, you know? And so I took that money, and moved to Georgia, and decided I was not going to, you know, look for a job, that I was going to write a book. And I went out and bought a computer. Computers weren't so, you know, they weren't like they are now, where everybody had one, so it was a big investment. And I just decided I was gonna write a book and live off that money, you know, that I had gotten from the insurance settlement.

[00:58:22] JG: And you did.

EH: Mh-hmm.

JG: And you self-published . . .

EH: I self-published *Invisible Life*.

JG: . . . and it was then picked up, though, isn't that right?

EH: It was picked up. I self-published *Invisible Life* in December of 1991, and in July of 1992, Doubleday signed me. And it was really interesting how that happened, because I was selling the book out of my car to anybody that—I was going all over the United States just trying to sell this book. And I had—but I always put my phone number in the book, because you really couldn't get the book in the bookstores, and if people wanted to get the book, they would have to call me and I would deliver it. If they were in Atlanta [Georgia], or overnight it, you know? And, interesting enough, another one of the [Silas Hunt Legacy] honorees, Janis

Kearney, kinda gave me my first, you know, book party in Little Rock—my first launch. She was owner of the State Press at that time, and so it was—it was only Little Rock and Atlanta who were really getting the books. And then I started getting calls from people in Philadelphia [Pennsylvania], who said they had heard about the book, and where could they get a copy, and could I come to Philadelphia and they'd give me a book party. And, you know, in all different cities. And a lot of those times I went to those cities with my books where I would carry 'em, hoping I sold enough books to be able to get back to Atlanta. Well, one day, in that little room that I was renting, I get this phone call from this lady, and she said, "Someone gave me a copy of your book this—on—on Friday, and it was one of the most enjoyable weekends I've ever had—reading." And I said, "Oh, that's really nice." And I could tell from her voice that she was white, and I thought, "Oh, this is great." And so she said, "So what are you doing now?" I said, "Well, I'm trying to sell these books." And so she says, "Well, if you're ever in New York, I would love to meet you." And I said, "Okay." I said, "Who do you work for?" And she said, you know, "I work for Doubleday." And I said, "Oh, okay." And I said, "Well, let me—let me write your name down." And I learned that from my IBM experience to document everything, and so I wrote down and I took her number down and what have you. So, a couple of weeks later, I'm finally getting a meeting with an agent that wants to—is—not—is willing to at least talk to me. So, I got into—go up to New York—fly to New York, rent a cheap room—hotel in Times Square, and I go to see this agent, and I'm really trying to sell him on taking me on as a client. And he said, "Well, I'm

not really taking clients right now, you know, but, you know, leave your stuff here and, you know, and—and—and we'll, you know, we'll see." Well, his assistant was this young white guy who had just graduated from Brown [University in Providence, Rhode Island]. Well, his assistant read the book and came in the next day and said, "I think you really should read this." And he said, "Okay." So he reads it, and he calls me—he tracks me down—didn't even have a cell phone then. He tracks me down. He said, "Can you come back to my office to see me?" I said, "Well, I was getting ready to go back to Atlanta today." He said, you know, he said, "Just—just give me thirty minutes." And the whole tone had changed, and he was suddenly trying to sell me. And so when I go back in, he tells me that he's represented Alex Haley, and he's represented Richard Wright and Joyce Carol Oates, and—and I'm going, "Oh, that's nice to know, blah, blah, blah." And he says, you know, "I read your book," and he said, "I think you got something here." And he said, "I would really like to represent you." Nobody else wanted to rep—I said, "Okay, what do I do, you know?" He said, "Well, it's just a gentleman's agreement. We don't sign any contracts." He said, you know, "I—I don't get paid until you make some money." And I said, "So what are you gonna do?" He says, "Well, how many books have you sold," you know, "of—" and I told him. And I had—had a few newspaper articles—really big articles. He said, "I want you to send me that," because the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* had done a—a big feature on me, because some woman had read it in a beauty shop, and she had told some friend of hers who worked at the paper, and I was selling the book out of my car. And so the *Atlanta Journal* thought it—and it was, like, a

huge front page. You know, it was my first big splash. And so all that was going on. And so I said—he said, "I'm gonna gather all this information. I'm gonna get—how many copies of the book do you have?" I said, "Oh, maybe a thousand." He said, "I need you to send me about twenty-five, and I'm gonna take 'em to all the publishers in New York." I said, "Well, I sent it to all them and they—and they sent it back." He said, "Yeah." He said, "They—that's what they do." He says, "I'm an agent. They will read it, you know, based on my recommendation." And so . . .

Franklin Evarts: We need to stop, right now, we're gonna have to change the tape.

EH: Okay.

JG: Oh.

[Tape Change]

FE: We're rolling.

[01:02:43] JG: Okay, so you were talking . . .

EH: So, I asked him if Doubleday was one of the companies that he was gonna send my book to. And he—he thought about it for a minute. He said, "Yeah, yeah, of course. Why did you ask that?" I said, "Well, you know, a couple weeks ago some lady from Doubleday called me and, you know, maybe she's some secretary or somebody who can help us out." And so he said, "Do you have her name?" And I said, "Well, I have it in my notebook back at the hotel." And he says, "Well, give me a call." He said, "I know some people over there," he says, "but it'd be good to—to know." I—and I told him the story of how she much she liked the book and what have you. And so, when I got back to the hotel—because he

had convinced me that—to stay in New York a couple days, and he was gonna get me some meetings and—and what have you. And I told him I didn't have enough money, and he said, "Well, you know, we'll—we'll take care of it." But when I got back to the hotel, I found the name in my notebook, and so I called him back and I said, "Well, her name is Martha Levin." And so he starts to laugh. And so I said, "What's so funny?" He says, "She's no secretary." He says, "She's probably the most powerful woman in publishing in New York." He says, "Can I call her and tell her I'm your—your agent?" I said, "Of course." So thirty minutes later he calls me back and says, "We have a meeting with Martha Levin in the morning." So that night I went to Kinko's [photocopy and printing company] and got all this presentation of all my articles and how many books I'd sold, and why I thought this book, you know, was filling a need that—that hadn't been met, and—and what have you. And from my IBM experience, I knew how to dress and I knew how to conduct a meeting. So I had my best blue suit on, my white shirt, my red tie—even though I didn't have a lot of money, one of the things that I have learned is that when you do have money, you buy nice things, and they last a long time. So I had nice clothes, I just didn't have anywhere to wear 'em, 'cause I didn't have a job. And so we went over to Doubleday the next day, and I remember this African American woman just really smiled at me and saying, you know, "How are you doing, young man? Who are you here to see?" And I'm, "Here—here to see Martha Levin." And she go, "Oh, okay, that's—that's good. Good." You know, and she's just, like—just very conversational. And we go into the meeting. John gets there and we go into the meeting, and

there's a David Gernert, who was John Grisham's editor, and Martha Levin, and this editor who's supposed to be really hotshot. Her name was Sally. I've forgotten her name. The three of 'em were there, and John. And they were kinda looking at me, and then, you know, I'm looking at them. And so they say, "Well, you know, it's good seeing you, John. You know, what—who—what do we want to talk about?" And so everybody was kind of, you know, looking around, and so I just got up and said, "Why don't I start the meeting?" And I pulled out my little briefcase and the packets that I had made at—at Kinko's the night before, and I just start telling them why they should buy my book. And they really seemed blown away, and when we left, John and I were standing on Fifth Avenue, and he said, "You know, I've been an agent almost twenty-five years," and he said, "I've never seen anything like that." And I said, "What do you mean?" He says, "Oh, you've—you wowed them." He said, "When you went to use the bathroom, they go, 'Oh, he's gonna be great on TV and blah, blah, blah.'" And I said, "Really?" He says, "I've never seen anything like that." He said, "I am so glad I signed you." He said, "You know, we're gonna make some money." And so while we're in the cab, he gets this call, and when he gets off the—off the phone he just says, "Doubleday just offered you a three-book deal." And I went, "What?" He said, "Three books." I said, "They want me to write?" And he said, "They want to buy *Invisible Life* and reissue it in—in a year, and they want you to start working on a new novel right now. And they want you to write your life story." And I said, "My life story?" By then I was, like, thirty—you know, thirty-two years—said, "Yeah, they—they think you're fascinating. They want you to write

a memoir." And I said, "Wow!" And so they did a contract, and I remember going back to Atlanta and being able to get an apartment, and that's kinda how, you know, it—it started. It wasn't a lotta money. It wasn't even six figures. But for someone who had nothing, it was a whole lotta money, because I remember John saying, "Oh, when you sign the contract you'll get $45,000." I went, "At once?" And he goes, "Yeah." And I went, "Wow!" And that's how my career with IBM—I mean, with Doubleday started.

[01:07:04] JG: Are you—you're still with Doubleday?

EH: Still with Doubleday. Still with the same agent.

JG: Wow!

EH: [Laughs]

JG: And is—is Martha Levin still a part of . . .?

EH: No, Martha left after my fourth book. She is now president of Simon and—one of—the vice-president—executive vice-president of Simon and Schuster. We still keep in contact. And when she left, I—I was really upset. But then what was interesting, the president of Doubleday flew me to New York and took me to lunch—the president, who I had never met, and the CEO—to tell me how important I was, because they thought I was going with Martha, because she—I could've left and gone with her, 'cause she left Doubleday and then went to Hyperion, and then from Hyperion, she went to Simon and Schuster. And they wanted me to—to know how important I was to them—them. And they said, "You can meet with any of the editors in the house and decide who you wanna—to publish you. And, you know, we just want you to know how important you are

to us." And I selected a young African American lady who had never really edited any—she had been a managing editor, not an editor. But over the years, even though I was with Martha, we had become friendly, you know, 'cause whenever I'd go to Doubleday, I would see her and we would speak, and I knew she wanted to be an editor. And so I took a chance, and she's—Janet Hill is her name. She is now still my editor and she's a vice-president—has her own imprint and—and the whole deal, you know? And I think—one of the interesting things is—is that my mom didn't really understand a lot of this, but I think she was really, really impressed one day when I told her I saw Mrs. [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] Onassis get on the elevator, 'cause Jackie Onassis was an editor at Doubleday when I—when I first signed. And I used to—you know, always loved going there, you know, hoping to get a—a glimpse of her, you know. But I told the story about the elder African American woman, her name is Emma Bolton. Emma's still with Doubleday. She's, like, in her eighties, and she's like the gatekeeper. And every time I go to Doubleday she says, "You remember the first time you came, and you know, you had your suit on, and you had your briefcase," and—and now, as I go back as, you know, one of Doubleday's celebrated authors, she says, "Who knew," you know, "that it was gonna turn out like this?" And I always acknowledge Emma in my books, 'cause I—I said she treated me that day like was a best-selling author, and I hadn't sold a single book. So I always remembered that.

[01:09:35] JG: Wonderful. Absolutely wonderful story. Now, how many books have you now published?

EH: I have published eight novels, with the ninth novel coming out May 2, and one memoir. I've done two anthologies, and I've done a short story—a collection of short stories with some other African American male authors. The anthology that I did is called *Gumbo*, and it was the best—I got all of the African American writers to give me a short story, and all the proceeds went to the Hurston Wright Foundation, which supports African American writers. I'm on the board of directors there. And so, I went to Doubleday with this idea of raising funds for them by getting them to publish a book. And we got Terry McMillan, Toni Morrison—everyone. And it's an—an anthology—paperback anthology, and all that money went to the foundation. In 2007, I'm doing another four novellas introducing—it's kinda first reality-based theme for writers. It'll be me and four new writers who have never been published, and people will vote on the story they like the best, and that person will get a contract from Doubleday for their first novel. And all the proceeds of that, interestingly enough, is coming back to the University of Arkansas for the Butch Carroll Scholarship and the Dionne Harold Scholarship. So, one person'll get a book contract, and three other people will get read—will—can say that they're—they've been published.

[01:11:10] JG: So this—that—was that your brainchild?

EH: Yes.

JG: Kind of in response to reality television?

EH: Yes.

JG: And Doubleday's behind it.

EH: Hundred percent.

JG: Wow!

EH: Yes, yes.

JG: That is most interesting.

EH: Yes.

JG: That is great. Is that well known yet? Is . . .?

EH: It's—it's—it's been delayed so many times because of my teaching.

JG: Uh-huh.

EH: I'm the hold-up. I found the writers. They turned their stories in. But we thought one of my stories would help to sell it.

JG: Mh-hmm.

EH: And I've never written a novella, so I—I'm doing that now. That's what I'm working on now so that we can get that out.

[01:11:40] JG: What is it—what's the pressure like to—to have to write a book by deadline? What's—what's that—what kind—what kind of life is that?

EH: I don't really work well under the deadline. That's probably one of the reasons I didn't go into sports writing or—or working for a newspaper. I find that, in this second half of my life, that while I think it's important—I always teach my students to be on time and to, you know, to do what you say you're gonna do. For me, I don't like that kind of pressure in terms of dead—of deadlines. When I did things for *Sports Illustrated* and I recently did something for *The New York Times*, you know, it was deadline. They—they're used to working in that thing—in that format. And even with my novels, I haven't had real pressure from my editors. There are deadlines in the contracts, and they could really, you know, void the

contracts if you don't meet the deadlines. But I always keep them abreast of what I'm doing. Like last year, I turned in two novels, you know? For three years I hadn't turned in a single one, and in a year I completed two. And so now my 2007 novel is already ready to go, and I'll start when I finish the—the novella, I'll start on my 2008 novel.

[01:12:54] JG: So your contract—they—they would like a—a novel a year from you.

EH: Yeah, I recently, maybe in January, signed another three-book deal with Doubleday with—for three more novels and a memoir—a memoir about teaching.

JG: About teaching.

EH: Mh-hmm.

JG: Okay. That's just fascinating.

EH: Yeah.

[01:13:15] JG: So tell us—tell me about your life now. How—life is good?

EH: Life is good. I have a home in Atlanta, Georgia, and a home in Houston [Texas], and I have an apartment here in Fayetteville [Arkansas]. So I spend a lot of time going back and forth. I have one in Houston because I have godson. My best friend is Judge Vanessa Gilmore. She's a—a federal judge in Houston. We've been friends since we both got out of college. The interesting thing about us is that we—all of our peers were older than us in terms of—I remember used to being—lying about my age to say I was older, and Vanessa had graduated from college, too, when she was around nineteen. And, I met Vanessa through one of my best friends and fraternity, Butch Carroll, who I met here, and Vanessa and Butch started their career at Foley's [Department Store; purchased by Federated

Department Stores and merged into Macy's Department Store in 2006]. And he said, "There's this girl—she's graduated from Hampton [University located in Hampton, Virginia]. You gotta meet her. She's so fabulous." And we've been friends ever since. And about six years ago—five years ago—she adopted a little boy, and she asked me to be the godfather and to really be the male influence in his life, and so, that's one of the reasons I have a condo [condominium] in Houston, because one day he called me on his cell phone, and I thought, "Wait a minute. This kid's growing up, and you know, I'm missing this." And so, you know, I go to his school on—on dad days and all that stuff, and, you know, do gymnastics and golf with him. And we just got back from vacation, so he's a big part of my life. And so, you know, I've been getting—a lot of these kids up here that I met my first year pretty much adopted me and I—I have adopted them, so, you know, I have to keep up with them and stay on them. Spent a lot of time in New York. You know, my publisher is there. Before I came to Fayetteville, I was living in New York, so, I didn't miss it the first year or two I was down here, because this was such a—a welcome breath of fresh air. But lately I've been missing not, you know, being able to go to a play when you want to or just to walk. One of the things that I don't like about Atlanta—it's not a walking city. You have to get in your car to go everywhere. Same thing with Houston. Same thing for Fayetteville, pretty much. And I really like, you know, walking and the interaction you get with other people. And—and whenever I was writing in New York, whenever I would run out of ideas, I would always be inspired just by listening to people—conversations and what have you—on the street.

[01:15:46] JG: So do you see yourself maybe eventually moving back to live in New York?

EH: I've thought about it. I've thought about it. But since I've left Fayetteville and not teaching this semester, I've really become reacquainted with my Atlanta home. You know, for the last two years that home had practically—been no one there, because I thought when I came here, that I would go home every weekend. I got involved with the cheerleaders. I haven't missed a, you know, Razorback game in the last three years, so, I wasn't in Atlanta a lot. I mean, and—and the only time I really use the house is during the SEC [Southeast Conference] tournament, when I would give a big party for the spirit squads. And—but this—this semester since I haven't been teaching, I've been spending a lot of time in Atlanta. And I had the house on the market, but I took it off 'cause I thought, "This is a great house, you know?" First I thought it was too big for one person, and it is too big for one person, but I like it. The Houston house is—I've made my workspace. I can really write there, you know? It's—the way it's set up, I have a view of Rice University, a view of Reliant Stadium, and a view of downtown Houston, you know, all from my office. And it kinda—when you write, you need a open space, I think, to let the ideas come in and flow. And so the Houston house is perfect for writing.

[01:17:01] JG: That's interesting. So tell—you—you—no, let me go another direction here . . .

EH: Uh-huh.

JG: . . . because I gotta be sure I get this in. This is sort of where we are now.

What—how do—I know the University of Arkansas has changed dramatically . . .

EH: Mh-hmm.

JG: . . . since you were here. Tell me a little bit about how you see it today in matters of diversity and race, and any—all—all kinds of tolerance, and where you see the University of Arkansas going, please.

[01:17:27] EH: Well, one of the things I really like about the University of Arkansas—they're not just talking the talk now. I think back when I was a student here it was just kind of a—"Do we need to do it? Do we want to do it?" I think from every person that I've met in administration, from Chancellor [John] White to—to—to [Vice Chancellor] Dave Gearhart, there is a desire to make this one of the finest universities in the country. And to be one of the finest universities in the country, you have to have diversity. I don't think it's just being talked about. I see people doing things about it. I know in my own commitment, you know, to diversity and getting minority students here, I think the academic standards—even though they are higher, I still think that they need to, you know, to be flexible enough in—in some areas. So I'm very pleased at the fact that I think we have leaders who—who don't just, you know, talk the talk. They walk the walk as well, and you can see it happening, you know. Dr. [Johnetta] Brazzell [Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs]—I mean, just—just the different people that I've met here. You know, I don't remember a lot of the administrators or, you know, the commitment, you know, to diversity. And I think to be a great university you have to be diverse.

[01:18:39] JG: And do you see yourself someday even coming—if—if when you're

schedule settles down and you get some of these projects out of the way, that you might ever come back—live here more—more of the time of your life or teach again?

EH: Yeah, I mean, I have loved every moment of teaching. And then the—and then it's a part of me, you know, don't, in fact, want to give it up. And so I left it open. When I talked to Dean [Don] Bobbitt [Dean of the J. William Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Arkansas] I said, "You know, I'm gonna come back next fall, but I think it's gonna—I'm gonna take a little break after that."

JG: Uh-huh.

[01:19:09] EH: And he said, "The door is open whenever you—you want to come back." And, I just am overwhelmed at the response I've gotten, you know, from students—you know, regular students—student athletes—the way they've responded to my class. I didn't even know if I could teach—if I'd be any good at it. And it's just been wonderful to have—to discover at this point in my life that I'm passionate about—something else that I'm passionate about. I'm very passionate about writing, but I'm also passionate about teaching. And there's a story in my memoir where I talk about I used to want to be a teacher. And my teachers would give me the old books when they were, you know, no longer gonna use 'em. And I would have class in the summer, and I would be the teacher, and I would teach the younger kids in my neighborhood until one day, you know, Ben, you know, halted that because he thought being a teacher was a sissy job. And so I never even thought about being a teacher again, you know?

[01:20:07] JG: Wow. Of course, you've been very generous to the University of Arkansas, and—and with your resources, but beyond that, I don't think you're interviewed or go anywhere where you don't somehow work the University of Arkansas in your—in what you say, and that means a lot to us. That means a lot to us. Tell—why is that? Put that into words for me, please.

[01:20:27] EH: Because this is a place where I did a tremendous amount of growing, and this is a place when I started to feel like, for sure, I could be somebody. The university has given me more than I can ever give it. Just from the people that I've met, the things that I've learned, and that it is something that I take great pride in. It is something that I'm very, very happy that I spent, you know, four years here and that I wouldn't trade for anything in the world.

[01:21:01] JG: And receiving—comment a little bit about receiving the Silas Hunt Legacy Award—the inaugural one, and one of ten outstanding African Americans to be honored.

EH: Well, I'm—I'm very honored. You know, in 1999, I was selected as a distinguished alumni for the U of A, and that was a very, very important thing in my career, 'cause it said that my university home was proud of what I had accomplished. And I feel the same way about the Silas Hunt Award. This one meaning—takes a extra—extra special meaning in the fact that it's named for a man who made it possible for me to go here without incident. You know, I understand that it wasn't very easy for him. I know he came here without fanfare—you know, it wasn't like James Meredith or any of the people at Ole Miss [University of Mississippi] or anything—he just came here. But I—I have

to know that it couldn't have been easy for him, and the—the mere fact that this award is named for him, you know, makes it even more outstanding, because hopefully, you know, somebody'll say, you know, "E. Lynn Harris, you know, a writer from the state of Arkansas, from the University of Arkansas—maybe I can be a writer, too." I often tell the story of—people ask me what's been the most special moment, you know, in my career as a writer. And I said that it happened very early in my career—maybe on my third novel. When I first started going out to the book-signings, maybe I'd have ten, and then the crowd started growing to, like, fifty. And, then it started growing to, like, you know, a hundred. Now I have, you know, it's not unusual for me to have 900 people show up at a book-signing, just to see me, and that—that amazes me. But on my third book, I was in Houston, Texas, ironically, and, I had, like, 150 people on a humid summer day, and I thought that was just great, and I was on a cloud that 150 had come to buy my book and to meet me. And at the end of the book signing, when I was getting ready to, you know, go back to my hotel, because book tours are exhausting, and so you all—hotel food and every day a different city. It was this family that was waiting at the end. They had waited to be last, and there was a husband and a wife and a little boy who—who maybe was nine or ten years old. And his father came up—they came up, and he was standing in front of his father and his mother, and his father said, "Tell him." And he kind of dropped his head, and I said—I came from around the desk and got eye level with him, and I said, "Do you have something you want to tell me?" And I was really afraid of—I didn't know. And then his mom said, you know—she called his name. I don't

remember the name. And she says, "Tell him." And he's still, you know, was looking down. And so I said, "You know, what—whatever you want to tell me, I'm—I'm here to listen." And he looked up at me with eyes I shall never forget, and he said, "I want to be a writer." And my—I just—I could've wept, because I thought if I had had the opportunity to meet James Baldwin or Richard Wright when I was a little boy, I would've know that being a writer was a career option for me. And the mere fact that his parents—and they went on to tell me they had driven, like, 125 miles so that he could meet me and see me, you know. It wasn't that he was reading my books or even that they were reading my books, it's that they saw me as a writer, and that they wanted their young son to see that it was possible for him to be a writer as well. And even though I met a hundred—thousands of people, I will never forget that little boy's face. And now, you know, he's, like, eighteen or nineteen or twenty years old, and I told him, I said, "I can't wait 'til the day when I can come to one of your book-signings." So I think it's important for me to not only talk about my life, but talk about my life as a writer, because sometimes there might be someone out there who don't even see this as a—as a possibility of a career, because we don't see a lot of that in our community. So, I feel like I owe my success—that's why I'm doing the contest for the—the new writers. And any time I can help someone—someone kidded me. They said that I have the reputation of being the nicest guy in publishing, because I'm so willing to help. I remember, when I first started out, they sent my book out and was asking people to do quotes on it, and no one would—would give one. No one had heard of me. They didn't want to read the books or

whatever. And so now you see my name on a lot of books, because I said if I was ever asked to help somebody, they thought my name would help 'em—that I couldn't say no to 'em.

[01:25:42] JG: Just great. That—when you said your name it reminded me—tell me when you decided to go lowercase with E and Lynn in your . . .

EH: I . . .

JG: Is that a story?

EH: That—it's a story there. I—I—maybe it—the first time I really started to make some money and, you know, be exposed to the finer things of life. I remember, you know, being upset because something just wasn't right, because here I was, E. Lynn Harris, and it wasn't done right. And it was an African American woman—older woman—who came up to me one time, and she said to me, "You know, I was so happy when we made *The New York Times* best-seller list." And I just had to chuckle, because she said, "We." And I thought, "Yeah, *we*." And I realized at that moment I didn't want to get the big head and become—because at this time everyone was talking about E. Lynn Harris. I'd just signed a—a seven-figure contract for, you know, with Doubleday, and it'd been reported in *Entertainment Weekly* and in the trades, you know, that I had just signed this—this mega-deal and what have you. And I started to write my name in lowercase so that I would never forget where I came from. And that's why I do it.

[01:27:03] JG: Tell—tell me about you new novel coming out in May.

EH: My new novel coming out in May is called *I Say a Little Prayer*. The interesting thing about it—when I started it, it came to me like a gift here in Fayetteville. I

was working on a book that's coming out in 2007, called *The Great Pretenders*, which is a book about a young man who's a football star and his relationship with his mother. And the first time he falls in love with this young lady, and the conflict—and I was writing it in third person, and it really wasn't working. And my editor told me—she said, "I think you can write this twenty-one-year-old boy." And I said, "This twenty-one-year-old straight boy? You think I can do that?" She said, "Yeah." And she said, "You always talk about your students, and it sounds a lot like—a lot like your students. I think we ought to rewrite it in first person instead of third," 'cause I was trying to tell it from the observer's point of view. And I said, "Oh, I don't want to rewrite this book. Maybe—" you know. And so [Derek Gregg?] and his wife, [Sonja?], had been on me and on me about coming to their church. And I was, like, "Oh, I don't want to go to church," you know? You know, Fayetteville's—is either—Sunday is used to either replay the game in your mind or to be depressed because you lost. I mean, if you won you replay it. If you lost, then you—you don't read the newspapers or anything. But they just stayed on me. And so I went to their church this Sunday, and the minister's sermon was as though he was talking directly to me, that God had another idea for a book for me. And when I got back from church, I started to write this book about this young man having problems with his faith and the megachurches, and how church had always been so important to him. And this character—and this book just poured out of me. And it started here, you know, in Fayetteville—the idea.

[01:29:58] JG: Is it one of the easy—easiest you've ever written?

EH: Easy—one of the easiest I've ever written. And I just got the actual book, and I've been reading it, and it's—and it's really good. I mean, Kirkus is this—this big company—*Kirkus Reviews*—and they do reviews of every book that's published. You can go online. It's not like a—a—a magazine. It's like bookstores buy it to know what books to buy, and they've never given me good reviews, and they loved this book. They said that it was sensual and spiritual and that, you know, that I had told the story and not told it heavy-handed, 'cause I do have a problem with the mega-churches in Atlanta where I go to—where I live. All the churches are huge, and I think we've lost that thing that I grew up with in Little Rock at a place called Metropolitan Baptist Church. It was just a church in the community, and you know, and that's where, you know, I got saved and where I learned about God, and—and I felt like I had lost that. And I found it back right here in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

[01:30:04] JG: Neat. What will be the first printing—what is the printing—the first printing on this book? Do you know?

EH: I think it's 250,000.

JG: Gosh!

EH: I think it's—I'm not certain about that, but that's—that's what my last book was, and . . .

[01:30:16] JG: And how is the—how is the—*The Great Pretenders*? Is it—you say it is totally finished also?

EH: It's finished, but it'll be out . . .

JG: [?]

EH: It'll be out in 2007.

JG: And you've already put it in first person. You went back and . . .

EH: Yes, I went back and rewrote it. After I finished *I Say a Little Prayer* and it was accepted by Doubleday and put into production, I went back to Houston, and with the help of some of my students that I've had here, because I wanted to make sure that the language was fresh and you know, "twenty-one-year-old," 'cause the main character's twenty-one. And they would read it and—and say, "Oh, no, we wouldn't say that now," 'cause it's in present time. And I'd spent about eleven days in Houston—never left my condo, and—and finished it and got it sent out to New York and got that one accepted. So they're—they're really happy now, 'cause they have two E. Lynn books. I mean, my publisher, interestingly enough, have always treated me the way they treat me now. You know, before I was a *New York Times* best seller, you know, and that's one of the reason that, you know, I don't really look around. Interestingly enough, my agent told me when the first time we signed a really big deal with them, he said, "I really shouldn't be doing that," he says, "but another publisher called and said, 'How much would it take to get E. Lynn from Doubleday?'" And he says, "Well, you know, I really can't entertain that conversation," and then he said, "Well—" he—he said—the editor said, "Yeah, I know, but what if we, you know, offered him $1,000,000 more? Would he—would he be interested in leaving Doubleday?" And my agent said, "I have to tell you this, because," he said, "there is money out there." And I said, "John," I said, "Doubleday has always treated me with respect, and I'm a firm believer in loyalty. And if they gave me what you asked them for, for me,

and without any quibbles, I'm fine there." And they—they know that. I mean, every time we get ready to do another contract, John'd say, "You know, we can go talk to so-and-so—XYZ publisher. They'd love to have you," and—and I said, "Yeah, I'm sure they would." I said, "But, you know, I—this feels like home, and I'm willing to stay here as long as they're willing to have me."

JG: That's great.

EH: Yeah.

[01:32:20] JG: Absolutely. What book has sold the most copies? What of your titles has sold . . .?

EH: *Invisible Life*. It's almost nearing a million dollars—million copies on its own—the first self-published book.

JG: And does that include the books you sold from your car?

EH: No, it does not.

JG: Wow.

EH: And, interestingly enough, it sold a lot of 'em in paperback, and then maybe in—in [19]98 it was selling so well, Doubleday decided to do some hard covers, because people who had just discovered me said, "I want all his books in hard cover," and so they did a special edition—limited edition. They printed, like, 100,000 hard covers, and all those sold out, so—*Not a Day Goes By* was the fastest-selling book I've ever had. That one is the one that debuted at number two on *The New York Times* best-seller list and number one on *Publishers Weekly*.

[01:33:14] JG: Do—let me think what else? Oh, I just drew a little bit of a blank. Anything that I've missed that you'd want to add to this—to this account of your

life? Who—who is your favorite author right now? Who do you like to read when you're sitting down to read a book?

EH: Well, interestingly enough, I don't read fiction. I buy a lot of [non]fiction. I don't read fiction anymore because I don't want anybody else's ideas to get in—in my head. I read Terry McMillan, because she's the only one I'm chasing in terms of—of African American authors. I—I read John Grisham. I like John Grisham. I really love—have a new love for Toni Morrison. I taught her in my classes up here, and so I have a—a new love for her. Now, when I was teaching a class, I would read the books that I assigned my students. I tend to like to read memoirs and about real people's lives and real people's situations.

[01:34:11] JG: Okay, anything I've left out that—that you want me to add—would like to add for the record here, about your life—anything I've missed asking you. I mean, there's a ton more, but anything that would be good to throw in here?

EH: Well, I just think that it—that it's interesting in a way how life for me has come full circle right here in Fayetteville, you know? That this was the first place that I lived on my own, so to speak, 'cause, you know, I left my mom's home to come to school up here, and this is the place that I came back to in 2003 that, in a sense, rejuvenated me. I really didn't know that I was burnt out, if you will, of the New York—I was going to, you know, parties. I was, you know, being invited everywhere, you know? People—you—you call to make a reservation on a airline or anyplace, and people go, "Are you the writer? Are you E. Lynn Harris?" And people in the airports stopping me and maybe people who are not readers going, "What do you do?" You know, I'd be sometimes sitting on a plane

in—in—in first class or something, and somebody'd get on the plane and they go, you know, "When is that new book coming on?" And a lot of my fans have developed a familiarity with me. They feel like they know me. "E. Lynn, when the—when are we gonna get another book? You—you stayed away too long. You—you know, that's good, you're down in Arkansas, but you—we need you to get back to New York or someplace where you can write some books." You know, they—they just talk to me that way. And—and to come back here and—and to be rejuvenated. And, like I said, to be open and honest about who I am as a person, who I am as an individual, and have those students respond to me that way has been one of the best things that's ever happened for me in my life. It gives me a lotta hope for what the future can be like for—for anybody that's different, because I think if you give people who you are, they respond, you know, to that. But I speak at a lotta colleges, and I always tell people—tell the students that I speak to, you know, "Make sure the dreams that you're pursuing are your own. Don't pursue the dreams of the world or your parents or your fraternity brothers and sorority sisters or people who say that they love you. Pursue the dreams that you dream when you are totally alone. And if you do that, magic will happen. 'Cause I only became a writer when I decided to not listen to any of the outside chatter, you know, and—and what other people thought about me trying to be a novelist. I only listened to what was in my heart, and that worked for me."

JG: That's it. [Laughs] That just couldn't be any better.

[End of Interview]

[Transcribed by Cheri Pearce Riggs]

[Edited by Joy Endicott, July 27, 2009]

[Reviewed by Susan Kendrick-Perry, July 29, 2009]