MEYER ELKIN
Interviewed at his home by
David Kuroda
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Meyer Elkin, a social worker with an MSW from the University of California, Berkeley, School of Social Welfare, created the Conciliation Court in Los Angeles as a vehicle for the Court to provide mediation and counseling to families considering divorce. It became the prototype for other conciliation court programs elsewhere in the United States. David Kuroda, with an MSW from the School of Social Work, University of Southern California, succeeded Meyer Elkin in directing the Conciliation Court in Los Angeles.

ELKIN: Dave, what we're talking about right now are kind of a warm-up for me. It's like a prelude to - what do you call it? - an introduction to a symphony - I mean, an opera where the music plays a lot and the singers do less screaming (laughter). Anyway, this is a warm-up.

What I have prepared for you is just a few of the articles I've written, and I'll try to Xerox as many as I can, since this is an archive, so anybody interested will have something to read.

KURODA: This by the way will be deposited at the School of Social Work Library at USC.

ELKIN: Good.

KURODA: We'll take good care of all this material. The hope is that this material as well as the interview are available for people years from now who will want to understand what happened in this area in social work.

ELKIN: Are we dealing primarily with - is the focus social work or the Conciliation Court movement? The two are inter-related, as far as I'm concerned.

KURODA: The interest of the California Social Welfare Archives is much broader than any single policy program that has to do with meeting the needs of people and families. I think your contribution certainly has been with the Conciliation Court. Maybe we can back up a little bit and you can tell us about how you became interested in social work, and how you got into the

profession, Meyer.

ELKIN: Well, the need to help others is, I'm sure, a projection of my own, unmet needs as a person. My childhood was not really a happy one because my parents were both from Russia, and like many immigrants when they came here, they felt lonely and isolated. The first nice person they met, they married. My father quickly became assimilated to the American culture. My mother remained the plain, simple Russian woman. So they grew apart, and when I was five years old, they pretty much began to separate. We lived in New York. There was never any official divorce, but for all intents and purposes, my parents were divorced from the time I was about five years old.

KURODA: What year was this?

ELKIN: I was born in 1915. By 1920, right after World War I, they were pretty much drifting apart. I don't recall any real family life. My mother raised my sister and me - my younger sister and me - and was kind of an over-protective, Jewish mother. There was a lot of pain in my childhood, because I never really knew my father, and knew my mother too well. (Laughter) As I look back, I really didn't know her either. She didn't tell us about her early childhood experiences; it never occurred to me to ask, "What was your childhood like?" or "What was Russia like?" There was pain. I remember our New York apartment house. People lived in apartment houses. When I was a young boy, I went down into the yard behind the apartment house, and I saw a cat with her kittens. I felt sad, looking at them; I felt the need to do something for them. There was no real reason for me to feel sad, but they looked forlorn. I went up to the house and got a glass of milk and brought it down. That was the beginning of my social work career.

KURODA: With cats and with people.

ELKIN: With cats. Then one of my classmates, when I was in second grade, was very poor.

You could tell by his clothes. He really had a dysfunctional family. I used to bring him home, and my mother would feed him. He was my caseload when I was seven or eight.

KURODA: At seven or eight, you already had a caseload.

ELKIN: I had a caseload of one. My need as a human being has always been to lessen the pain in other people's lives, because I knew what pain was like, and I knew what it felt like to have needs that were not met. I think that's how I got started.

On a more professional basis, what really got me started in becoming a social worker was that when I went to City College (of New York), my first assignment in Sociology I, my term paper, was to interview the Dean of the New York School and report on the emerging profession of social work to the class. I did that, and I was very impressed with the way they treated me. I was a sophomore at the time. When I gave my report, one of the students said, "Is this a good field for someone to go into?" The instructor said, "It's a new field, it's a good field opening up for men." That stuck in my mind, because I didn't know what I wanted to do. I've had asthma since I was two years old, and I needed to find a profession where I could use my head and my heart, rather than my hands. I couldn't do anything exhausting. So that really got me thinking. I immediately changed my major to Psychology, with a minor in Sociology, and that got me on the track.

When I graduated, I needed a climate that was warm. The winters were killing me in New York after I graduated. I thought about UC Berkeley. I applied, and I was admitted. I graduated in - I finished everything but the thesis in 1971, I had entered Berkeley a few months before World War II broke out. In fact, I took my final exams immediately after Pearl Harbor - a week later. Before I went to Berkeley, on a non-professional level I was involved in social work as a group worker. I got a job in a settlement house in the lower East Side of New York, a

summer job as a game-room supervisor. I used to love working with these poor kids on the East Side who were so ripe. They would come up to this game room that had ping pong tables and all kinds of games and arts and crafts, with patches on top of their patches. In those days, when you wore jeans, that was a symbol of poverty. They all mostly wore jeans.

I got a $200 scholarship loan from that settlement house so I could go to Berkeley. I was broke, and I just said, "Just give me enough money to get there, and I'll make it on my own." I'd had that job for about five summers. I also had a job in a Bronx House Settlement House for about a year. That was an NYA (National Youth Administration) job. So I had this group work experience, and then got my training at Berkeley. I had to go back and finish my thesis in 1954. I was lucky I did that, because without a master's degree, I couldn't have applied for the job in Conciliation Court, which I got in 1955.

KURODA: When you were in school at Berkeley, was there a specialization?

ELKIN: Yes, I specialized in psychiatric social work. In the last half of my second year, my asthma became very bad, and I had to leave school and went to Tucson where I had gone for a few months when I was still a single person. It was like a miracle, the way I felt in Tucson. I was newly married at the time, and my wife and I just left and went to Tucson. In a couple of weeks, I was feeling well enough to work at one of the war plants; Aluminum Alcoe.

KURODA: After you graduated from Berkeley, where did you work then, Meyer?

ELKIN: When we went to Tucson. I'm a big believer in fate, that things happen to you. The fine strokes of life are papered on the canvas of your life by whoever it is up there - - he, she, or they. Since I'm big on group process, it could be that God is two people. Who knows? (Laughter) Or three. It could be that many, who knows? But anyway, what happened was that I needed a ride to town and lived four miles out of Tucson. I thumbed a ride, and on that day, the

man that gave me the ride was the superintendent of a Federal prison camp in the mountains near Tucson, twenty miles away from Tucson. He was specifically going to Tucson to look for a parole officer, because his parole officer wanted to transfer. When he asked me what I did, I told him I had a social work degree. He couldn't believe it. It was like God had dumped me in his lap. I went up there, and I got the job up there and started out as a guard. This was during the War. It took about nine months for the transfer to take place, and then I became the parole officer, which was a great experience for me.

I was more than just a parole office. This was an honor camp; no guns, open barracks, like a CCC Camp. I was in charge of the vocational program, athletic program, plus the counseling. It was a marvelous experience, but I began to feel that the whole field of corrections was on the wrong track, that nobody could really be rehabilitated in that system. These people needed - they all had low self esteem - they needed a lot of attention and love. When they came in, they were immediately stripped of everything and ended up as a number. Numbers don't make for self esteem. Staff used to be guards whom I got along with very well. I was one of them, and they liked that one of them was promoted to be a parole officer. One of them, a guy in charge of the laundry said, "Oh, you're just a fearalizer," when I'd tell him about my ideas. I had to get away from that field. We moved to Los Angeles, where I worked for the Jewish Committee for Personal Service, which is an agency of the Jewish Federation. They provided a counseling service. They wanted only psychiatric social workers. Wherever there was a Jewish person in a mental hospital or in prison in California, we caseworkers would go out there and be of whatever help we could on a counseling basis. I was in the correctional and not the mental health end. So my job was to visit, among other things, the County Jail, which I didn't enjoy visiting, but I thoroughly enjoyed my twice-a-month trips to Chino, which was one of the most advanced

institutions in the country at the time, as was the California Correctional System.

When I left the prison camp, it was with an idea to start a movement called "Transgressors, Anonymous," which, in essence, would allow people on parole to meet x number of times a week or a month for constructive purposes, namely, group counseling. They introduced a group counseling program, which was the first in the history of the Federal Bureau of Prisons in that camp. I got that idea about group counseling from Alcoholics Anonymous. I knew nothing about AA. The parole office in Tucson, whom I got to know well, took me to a meeting once. I created an AA Chapter among the prisoners. I used to sit in to see what happened. I was amazed at what was going on, and I figured, "Gee, if it helps prisoners with an alcoholic problem, the method seems to be one that would lend itself for use with all human beings. That's only a symptom they have of their troubles." I developed in my mind the idea; I introduced the group counseling there and saw some very good results. The idea of a national movement emerged. But there was a dumb law in the country at that time that parolees could not associate with each other. They used to work in the same places, they used to meet in the parole offices during their monthly visits, so they were having contact. If they wanted to meet and plan a crime, who would stop them anyway? I spoke about that idea at an organization called Correctional Service Associates, which consisted of some of the leading people in the correctional world in Southern California.

KURODA: About what year was this, Meyer?

ELKIN: This was 1949 when I came to L.A. I had been at the prison camp for about six years. There was a great interest in the idea. Then kind of like syphilis, it went - this is a terrible analogy - you know nothing happens, and twenty years later, you go nuts. Delayed-------

KURODA: Sort of a late, dormant period?

ELKIN: Dormant, yes. The people there were impressed, I know, and there was an assistant superintendent of Chino there. Eventually, couldn't get the idea off the ground because of this parole. Eventually, they - and I'd started a group therapy group at the Chino institution; the first group they ever had there among the Jewish prisoners. That lasted about three years. It was an open-ended group.

KURODA: Is that the one that focused on alcoholism or........

ELKIN: No, it was - no, this was just group therapy because of my experience at the prison camp with it, and my experience with AA. I know that the guys that were in that group had a much better chance of succeeding when they got out than if they had not joined that group.

KURODA: So that was really one of the first times that you set in motion a new program.

ELKIN: Yes. That was a pioneering - I set it in motion at the Federal Bureau of Prisons, I set it in motion in California, and eventually, therapy was the preferred method of treatment for prisoners. That's when they were really trying to rehabilitate prisoners in California. Eventually, in 1962, I served for about a year as a consultant on a new program. They wanted to see if big groups of parolees could get something out of 30 or 40 men in a group meeting once a week. I concluded it was a waste of time to have such a big group. But that was a pioneering thing.

KURODA: So just to summarize things, it sounds like you introduced the concept and the idea of using groups in the correctional system in California.

ELKIN: And federally.

KURODA: And federally. That's right.

ELKIN: Sure. Then I introduced group counseling in the Los Angeles City main jail. That was sponsored by the Adult Education Department and by the jail personnel. They wanted

something for these, as they called them, "skid row" bums, to see what could be done to help them. I didn't see anything dramatic that could rehabilitate those men, but the mere fact that a decent human being came in once a week for three hours and met with them and treated them like human beings, was in itself important, I felt. They were given an opportunity to talk about their experiences in the jail, outside the jail, what they could do when they got out, and so on. That was the first jail group therapy program in the history of this country. That lasted from 1952 to about 1963.

KURODA: Why do you suppose you were able to, as a fairly new and young social worker, introduce these new ideas into very old organizations?

ELKIN: I was hoping you'd ask me something like that because I noticed on the thing you sent to me, "What helps programs?" I think that the most important ingredient of any program, particularly a pioneer program, is the zeal and the zest and the enthusiasm of the person holding that idea. I could talk about my experience in the Conciliation Court with the same enthusiasm right now that I had the first day I started working there. You have to have a missionary zeal. I wasn't consciously aware that I was filled with this missionary zeal. I was filled with desire, because of my own childhood experiences, to ease the pain and suffering of people involved in divorce process, particularly the children. But it's not enough for the leader to feel this way. He must impart these feelings to a staff. That's why when I became the director, our standards for counselors was ten years of clinical experience.

KURODA: You mean before they could —

ELKIN: Before they changed it to the present - what is it? Two now, or five? When you apply for a job in Conciliation Court now, you need a master's degree in social sciences, plus five years' experience, I think.

KURODA: That's right.

ELKIN: We made it ten years for a very reality-oriented reason. Marriage in our court settings was a totally new idea. It was the only place in the whole world where such a program existed as a complement to the courts served; the Divorce Court. It was not to supplant it; it was to supplement it. Now this program was viewed by my colleagues with great suspicion and distress. I recommended we set the standards sky high, so that nobody could say to us, "That's just crap you're giving us. It's not counseling, especially if you're only seeing them once or twice or three times." We pioneered, in a large way; when I came into Conciliation Court, crisis counseling was not around. That was a new idea, because social workers, and others, were still functioning in the shadow of psychoanalysis. You know how a child, when it starts working, when it's say, a year or so, when it takes a few steps, it turns around to see if the parents approve of what it's doing. Well social workers were acting like that child, at times. They wouldn't dare make a move without psychoanalysts patting them on the head and saying, "That's okay." But you can't turn around and look at anybody when you have a pioneering idea. You can only look within yourself and try to spread this excitement to others in your own community and, I've always thought, globally. It wasn't enough just to improve this court, but I thought, and still do, that we should have conciliation courts all over the country in every county. It's as much a right for a citizen to have that service available as it is a police department, a fire department and a health department. The State has a definite role in this whole area because when you get married, you have to go to the State to get approval to get a marriage license. When you get divorced, you have to get the State's approval, because the court represents the State. But nowhere in between those two points did anyone raise the question, "Can we help you?" That question was revolutionary in a court house, because the court house was like a marital mortuary. You went to court to bury your marriage,

hopefully with dignity. That was not even allowed because of the adversarial system. There was no dignity in burying this marriage.

KURODA: What was your role, Meyer, in setting up the Conciliation Court and setting up the procedures for the counseling and the courts?

ELKIN: The first thing was I spent two and one half years as a counselor when I started.

KURODA: What year was that?

ELKIN: It was June, 1955, I started. I was the first trained, professionally-trained counselor, in the history of this court, which at that time was the only such court in the whole world. I should have been more scared than I was; it was like walking into a forest with no trails. Like in that fairy tale, hopefully you have a ball of golden thread to unwind so that when you want to get back to wherever you were, or find your place again, you follow the golden thread. There were no precedents for me to follow. There were no traditions for me to follow. My whole job, as I saw it, was to break as many molds as I could. Can you imagine, in 1955, when people got a divorce, they became part of the adversarial system, which was antiquated; it was archaic; it was back to the Middle Ages; it was unrealistic; and it aggravated an already aggravated system. It was without dignity, without respect, full of stigma, and that was what I wanted to change. When I say, "I," I don't take credit for my doing it without the help of many other people. This would never have been accomplished. You need a very good staff, and I looked for more than technicians as counselors. In any profession, between a technician and the artist, the technician asks the questions from the head, and knows when to grunt and when to smile and when to whatever. The artist has the gift which you can't learn in any school. It's just there, and I don't know why it's there. That's what you have, see?

KURODA: Do I have to grunt, or am I the artist?

ELKIN: No, you not only have the grunts, but you have kind grunts. The grunts have to be kind and giving. See, you can't fool your clients. You meet people - ask yourself, "Can I tell this person my problems? Or would I send my family to this person?" The artist works with the heart as much as the mind. To me, training, whether it's social work or psychology or medicine, or whatever, the training you get, the formal training you get is merely a way of amplifying a talent you have as a person. Now if you have a radio that's no damn good, or just an average radio, the sound that comes out when you turn on the volume will be an entirely different sound. You'll hear the song, but you won't feel that you're in the symphony hall. The artist makes you feel like you're in the hall itself, and there's no distance between you and the musicians. You know what I'm trying to say?

KURODA: The whole notion of presence.

ELKIN: Yes, presence.

KURODA: As if you were there, yes.

ELKIN: I've always felt that that presence, the counselor's personality, is one of the most helpful tools in the whole counseling process. The counselor should learn how to use himself like learning to play a violin.

KURODA: One of your secrets was to hire good staff and to look for those qualities in your staff that you think or that you valued in the profession. How about in the system itself in working with judges. You were in a system that you said goes back to the Middle Ages.

ELKIN: That's right.

KURODA: Tell me, Meyer, how you were able to introduce the new ideas of what a service like the conciliation court could provide in the court setting.

ELKIN: Yes, that's a very good question. I've often asked myself, "How could I have

accomplished so much?" I don't regard myself - my self-perception is not someone who's aggressive. I used to regard myself as a very passive person, with low self-esteem, and yet there was something in me when I was excited about something that helped me to overcome this passivity and speak my mind. Be assertive. There wasn't even such a word then. I could see, from the very beginning, I've always been a very inter-professionally oriented professional.

KURODA: What does that mean, "inter-professionally oriented"?

ELKIN: Inter-professionally oriented means that no matter what profession you're in, you can't meet all the needs of your client or your patient, that you'll have to reach out for ancillary services and make referrals and work in cooperation with others who can add another dimension of help. You're dealing with a total person. I never thought I was dealing just with a person who has a marriage problem. My orientation was always I'm dealing with a total family situation, and even though the kids were not in the room, their presence was always in that room. I was also aware of and I subscribe to the homeostatic principle: anything that happens to one member of the family is going to affect everyone else. It's like a mobile; you touch one of the things in a mobile, and the whole thing begins to vibrate in different ways. But mainly, I think it was me as a human being.

KURODA: Tell me about how the judges within the court system were responsive to your ideas.

ELKIN: It wasn't just me. The judge plays a very important role in a Conciliation Court. He's not just a figurehead. He would interpret to two of his fellow judges as to what it was we were trying to do. Most of them rejected the idea of marriage counseling in Conciliation Court.

KURODA: At that time was marriage counseling required prior to divorce?

ELKIN: No, oh no. It was never a mandatory service. It was always a voluntary service. We only got about five percent of the divorcing population in this county. I never felt that mandatory marriage counseling in the court should be introduced. We once ran a little experiment - 250

people - where the judge sent couples that were in a divorce, and practically ordered them to come down. Those couples were not really interested; it was a waste of time and money. There has to be some motivation on the part of one, at least. We didn't get much support from judges. You see, the first judge I had was eventually Justice of the Supreme Court in California: Judge Lewis H. Burke. He was the one who hired me.

KURODA: In those days, the judge was the one who hired you?

ELKIN: Yes. I had to meet with about 30 judges in my oral interview. It scared the hell out of me. They had to sign an approval sheet when I was hired. I got the sheet with about 50 names on it.

KURODA: And all those people approved you?

ELKIN: I don't know if they approved - yes, they presumably approved me. But at the beginning you were faced with the job of converting skeptics into supporters. The question that arose was how to do that in any field. I'm basically a modest person, but I have enough self-esteem now so I can talk about myself in immodest ways. I can say to you with much comfort now, without feeling that I'm bragging, that I think I'm a fine human being. I'm a "mensch," as my mother would say. My mother used to say to me, "Meyer, be a good person no matter what you do in life." That's a simple statement by a simple Russian woman, but if that was the credo of every person in this world, what a world this would be. Be a good person. Now I had enough pain in my life to be empathetic to other people's feelings. That's why I was an outstanding counselor, I felt. I counseled out 5,000 families in the court until administrative duties became so large, I had to even drop the counseling, which I missed. Attorneys would come in. I felt that the court had to create - the Conciliation Court had to be a haven in that court house. As you walked into our waiting room, you would feel something different. That's why when I

employed clerks, I regarded them just as important as the counselors. The counselors used to hate to hear this, because they were the first contact with the family or the person. The way they were greeted in person and on the telephone made it easier or harder for the counselor. In social work we say the setting has a large impact on the service you're offering in that setting. I wanted a very human haven, and I managed it by getting the counselors and the clerks who were a certain caliber of people. Attorneys would come in, and we would treat them carefully. You know, social workers traditionally had a lot of hostility toward attorneys, and they toward us. I overcame that. When they came in with their clients, they were seen were seen before anybody who walked in without an attorney. The clock was running in terms of money. If they sat in our waiting room for two hours, it would be more than if we took them right away. We'd always interview the attorneys first, and they liked that. We were interested in what they had to say just for a brief period, a couple of minutes. They'd get some impressions about the couple. As the years went by, more and more attorneys used us and more and more attorneys liked us.

KURODA: Now this was still for the marriage counseling?

ELKIN: Yes. When I talk to you, I'm not talking about investigation, I'm talking of only marriage counseling in the court. Now the court has expanded to other matters. I can only talk to you about the marriage counseling function and the Conciliation Court, not the family court. The Conciliation Court. You're faced with getting on your side the attorneys and the judges and the community. One of the first things that Judge Burke said to me was, "You know, Meyer, when these couples leave us, I know that the one or two interviews or three that you give them isn't enough. We have to do something about finding referral sources, so where we stop will be continued by community agencies, mainly family service." I thought that was a great idea, and I went down to the Los Angeles Welfare Planning Council and told them our problem, and they

were very enthusiastic and arranged for a meeting of all the family casework agencies in the community and Judge Burke and me. We told them what we wanted and what we were doing. I could see the meeting was very dull up to that point. The Judge told them, "I have to get back on the bench by 1:30. Can we be on your agenda right now?" They said, "Yes." Everybody woke up when we told them what we were doing and what we needed and how much we needed their support.

KURODA: What year was this?

ELKIN: This was 1955, right after I started. They picked up the idea. One of the reasons I think we were effective was that it was very important to define your service so that people know what you do or what you don't do. We told these agencies, "We are in the business of crisis counseling only; one, two, and if they were lucky, three counseling sessions. A lot of people want our service, and we don't have enough staff, so we have to be realistic and do the best we can. We need your help so that when couples reconcile, they can seek roots in their reconciliation by going to you and digging a little deeper instead of reasons why they're doing these things to each other. We're like an emergency receiving hospital. We don't have time to do any surgery. We can only start them breathing again or whatever you do in emergency; first aid." But it was really more than that because we all saw that in one or two or three sessions, you can accomplish a hell of a lot. So we developed procedures with them for referrals.

KURODA: That was really one of the first steps in the partnership between the courts ------

ELKIN: Courts and the community, yes. Then as the years went by and other California jurisdictions began to establish conciliation courts, there emerged a need for judges and practitioners to meet and talk about what we were doing. This was pioneering work. What are your successes and why? What are your failures and why? In 1963, two important events took

place. I originally thought of a newsletter that I would write for the courts. There were six courts in California. Then one of my counselors said, "Look, if you're going to put that time and work into it, why don't you start a journal?" I said, "Fine." So that's how the *Conciliation Court's Review* started in 1963.

(Interview is interrupted, then resumes)

KURODA: We were talking about your achievements when you were with the courts. out.

ELKIN: In essence, we were talking about what some of the contributions of the Conciliation Court were to families and to society. One of the things we did was to help marriage counseling to become a profession. The first marriage counseling licensing law took place in California; thereafter, in the whole country, we started it.

KURODA: You mentioned that there was a judge who had friends who were ordered to go to counseling.

ELKIN: Yes. The idea of licensing marriage counseling and setting standards was based on the personal experience of a judge in San Francisco whose dear friends wanted a divorce. But they went to a quack marriage counselor who wore a turban. In those days, anybody could present themselves as a marriage counselor. He inflicted such harm on this couple that they told their friend the judge, who in turn went to the Governor and said, "How do we stop this?" In that way, the Governor set up a Commission on Family Law in 1966. Through the dissatisfaction that was emerging in California about divorce and the way people had to get divorced, the terrible system of divorce, there emerged standards, and a Board of Behavioral Sciences Examiners. I don't know exactly how that was created, but that played a big part, and it helped the whole profession of marriage counseling which started out as a method of help, not a profession. It's just like group counseling started out as a method, but now group therapy is a profession. So we ended up with

licensing standards, which keep improving every year. The court made great contributions to the development of that, first by the model it set for its own court, which was ten years of experience plus a master's degree in one of the behavioral sciences. The State set it up as a master's and two years. The amount of supervision has increased over the years, so now you have a pretty solid degree. We felt at the time that if you were a psychiatrist or a social worker, it was not enough that you were licensed as such. You should be licensed as a marriage counselor, because that is a different kind of counseling. That is relationship counseling. It's not a one-to-one kind of counseling. And the goals of marriage counseling are not the same as individual counseling.

KURODA: You also were instrumental in developing a partnership between the courts and the communities.

ELKIN: Yes, that was done through the Welfare Planning Council. It quickly became apparent to us that the short contact here in our reality-oriented crisis counseling could be very helpful to couples. Sometimes that's all they needed; say, three interviews to get them back on track. But we felt that for many couples that was not enough. They should be continuing the process that started with us, which we could not continue because we didn't have enough staff. There were too many people wanting our help. So the Welfare Planning Council arranged for all the family casework agencies in L.A. County to meet with me and Judge Burke, who was my boss at the time. We told them what we did. They probably never had heard about what we did. What we needed from them as a total community effort was to help people who were involved in marital counseling, whether they were in a divorce or not. Their response was incredible, because that was their work - families. This added another dimension to their counseling, even though they didn't have people they called marriage counselors on their staff, they certainly knew enough. I was not a marriage counselor when I came to the court. It was a whole new area of help. We had

to learn to be marriage counselors. But as a social worker, you know enough about counseling to help people who are having marital problems. That's how we got involved.

We got involved with the Welfare Planning Council when the pre-marital counseling law for minors came up. We followed the same model. We went down to the Welfare Planning Council, and said we need the community served now and a new law directed at minors who wanted to marry.

KURODA: Were you at all involved in the passage of that law that requires so many hours of counseling for minors who want to get married?

ELKIN: I was there when it was passed in 1970. That was a very important year, because that was the year the "no fault" legislation was passed and the pre-marital counseling law was passed.

KURODA: Oh, both of them were passed then.

ELKIN: Yes, in 1970. The proposed legislation was dumped into our lap with no previous notice or warning by the Legislature. It was cold. So we defined for ourselves, as a court, that our job was to implement the law, but it was the community's responsibility through its agencies to provide the counseling. We got together with the agencies and said, "Look, we're in the same boat as you now, the law was just dumped on us. We didn't have time to prepare for it. Will you help us by providing the marriage counseling?"

(At this point, a very loud noise was heard where the interview took place, and the tape was turned off. It starts again......)

ELKIN: At this point, I don't see a necessity for going into much detail in this interview because as the conciliation court movement developed, I wrote about everything that was happening. Anybody who's interested in the movement from beginning till now can find it in the articles that I've written. I've written most of them. I don't think there are many others who've sat down and

written about conciliation court matters.

KURODA: Have you thought about writing a book?

ELKIN: Well, the book - that's a constant source of frustration. I don't have the energy now to go out and hunt for publishers or anything. I would like to get everything I've written and put it into a hard cover book, or a soft cover. I don't care what kind of book. Then people who are interested in this movement would have it all together instead of having to jump from journal to journal. I've even thought of the idea of publishing my own book and not pay for a publisher to do it. I just don't have the strength anymore to do this. In 1985, when I developed this peripheral neuropathy, I was just about getting ready to make some effort to find a publisher to publish my work as a collection. It would not only trace what happened historically, but many of the ideas I have advocated and which are in my articles, have still not been in effect. They've not been put into effect yet. So it's more than an historical narration. It's an advocacy thing, too. I personally regard the Conciliation Court movement - and in years to come, I think historians will also regard this movement - - as one of the significant movements of the twentieth century. Does that sound like a very grandiose statement to you?

KURODA: Oh, a little grandiose, but I think quite true. Your ideas about how the whole process of divorce has been completely changed in the courts and how that has affected families - - I think is just tremendous, including the whole notion of how through mediation, the changed divorce process has impacted children. In fact, I heard Justice King, in one of his talks, speak about the two great revolutionary change in family law. The first, in 1970, was no-fault divorce. The second one, ten years later, in 1981, was the mandatory mediation law.

ELKIN: It's interesting he didn't mention Conciliation Court.

KURODA: No, no.

ELKIN: That was one of the most revolutionary things I left with all those other things.

KURODA: I think he, as a..........

ELKIN: I know Justice King. He's a very important contributor to the movement.

KURODA: I think Don King thinks in terms of laws, not necessarily organizations.

ELKIN: Right. This movement continues to improve. Some scholar ten, twenty, thirty years from now, when they have a perspective to view this whole movement that's been accomplished, will be impressed. Conciliation Court is like a pebble we threw into the public pond. The single court in L.A. County was the pebble that was dropped into the national pond, which caused ripples. The ripples are not enough. We still don't have conciliation courts in every county in the United States.

KURODA: Is that what you would like to see?

ELKIN: I'd like to see this service available to every citizen in this country and elsewhere as a right. As a citizen, you have a right to have a fire department in the community and a police department. These are protective services. The Court, between giving you permission to marry and giving you a death certificate for your divorce from your marriage, between those two points, the State has a responsibility to say, "What can we do to help you? We are part of your marriage. We gave you permission. Now you want us to end it. Is there anything we can do to help you?" So a conciliation court raised that question for the first time since the Middle Ages. What we're talking about is the result.

KURODA: Is there anything that looking back you would have done differently in your professional career?

ELKIN: Much of what you do is happenstance - how you get into what you do. Luck. It's fate. How I got the job in the Conciliation Court was fate. How I got the job in the prison camp

was fate. For example, if I hadn't gone back to Berkeley to finish my thesis in 1954, I wouldn't have gotten the job in 1955, because you needed a master's degree. I don't think I would have fulfilled my own needs - because I didn't get fulfillment in my family: I didn't get the recognition I needed and a certain kind of love. I got love from my mother, but it was a conditional kind of love that an overprotective mother gives you. There was always this deep well in me that had to be filled, that never will be as long as I live. To this day, I still have a need for somebody to pat me on the head and say, "You're doing a great job, Mike." That's okay. But I'm aware that I have that need. I didn't do what I did in this movement because of that need. My wife said to me, "Why didn't you go into private practice? You would have made a lot of money." I said I'm not money-oriented to start with. The court job filled my needs for doing something for people, it helped my self esteem, because I was doing something that I was successful at and saw great results. So it made me feel important to myself, made me like myself better. The court was a medium for expressing my creativity. Anything pioneering is a creative, lonely endeavor.

KURODA: Meyer, how do you account for the fact that out of adversity and out of the years growing up in New York without your father around, some people would have gone the other way. They would have given up and said, "I just wasn't blessed, and I just didn't have what I needed, and I'm not going to do very much." In your case, you took that adversity, turned it around, and it sort of drove you to achieve and to accomplish and to become the kind of person you have been. How do you account for that?

ELKIN: Pain was a great motivator to change the world. I read a book that had biographies of the hundred most important people that ever lived in this world and how they changed this world. It reinforced a theory I had that the people that go through great pain - just being alive is painful - but I mean above and beyond the normal pains of living - they go through that, and it will either kill

them or help them walk into greatness so that they can help others. Pain develops empathy, which to me is the most important ingredient in the counseling process. I postulate that you can take the same human beings with certain sets of problems and send them to ten different therapists, each with a different theoretical orientation, and all ten could help this person. It's not the theories that help this person. The theories helps the therapist feel more secure. Theory is like sucking your thumb. It makes you feel you're underpinned with some security so that you know what you're doing, so that you're less anxious when you're talking to somebody with problems. But really, it's how you interact and how they perceive you and how they feel your love and concern and caring. That goes for teachers too, not just counselors. Teachers and counselors are not too different as far as I'm concerned.

To answer your question, I think, in defining the quality of how I overcame what was really a crisis - a prolonged crisis in which my needs were not being met. In a crisis you can only go two ways: you can either live with it or you can die with it. You can live with it and grow because of it and in spite of it, or it wipes you out. Why didn't I end up in a mental hospital, for example? Or as a juvenile delinquent? I think it's something genetic. When I started social work school, the emphasis was talking about the inner and outer factors causing problems. The emphasis at the time in school was that the environment plays the biggest part in shaping you as a human being. I don't agree with that anymore. I think that we have not paid enough attention to the genetic component of personality. I don't know how you're going to measure that, but in my own case, there must have been something genetically strong in me to help me overcome the childhood I had and to grow with it. In spite of the fact that I had hardly any self esteem or self confidence or any feeling of security, in spite of that, I never consciously said, "I'm going to overcome this crap." It was there, and why it's there, I think is a genetic factor. A Judge, who was my boss, was raised

on a small farm in a very rural area when he was a child. I used to talk to him about my ideas about rehabilitating prisoners and he thought that was a bunch of crap. He said, "You know, Mike, on my farm there were certain horses we would treat with kid gloves. No matter what we did that was nice, they would go around kicking the fences down. There are some people like that. There's something genetically in that horse that makes him kick the fences down." Now that kind of stuck in my mind. He was adding a little reality. He was leavening my idealism with some reality. I don't have answers that I can prove experimentally or write about how I survived this or anybody else survives that kind of thing. For example, there are some children who grow up (there are studies on this) in the most horrendous conditions: mother's a prostitute, father's a drug addict. In spite of that, they turn out okay. How do you explain that? There has to be something genetic involved in that. Their environment is the worst they could have grown up in. So it's a combination of both factors. I don't believe anymore in either/or things. We have a tendency - for a long time the human being has had a tendency because the human mind is incapable of comprehending all things. We have to understand by breaking things down and studying them. That's why we have specialization in different professions. That's why it's so interprofessionally oriented. People go to you, whatever your profession, because they have a problem they can't solve by themselves. It takes more than one body of knowledge and skill to help the total person. I'm a big believer in genes - and Joan - you know, so I don't sound sexist. (Laughter)

KURODA: You were also talking about the human spirit and about people and their resiliency and their ability to overcome deprivation and pain and really move into greatness. You mentioned this book of a hundred people......

ELKIN: A hundred people, men and women, whose childhood was terrible.

KURODA: You could probably rewrite the book and say one hundred and one people.

ELKIN: Well, I don't know about that. Probably thousands, hundreds of thousands people like that in the world. But the book made me feel so good, because I've always felt that the people that do the most good in this world are the people who experience the most pain. A lot of people don't buy that theory. They feel that you can accomplish great things without pain. I don't think you have to go around feeling pain all the time. It's what you do with your pain. Now what you do with it - I can't explain why I did what I did with my pain.

KURODA: You must be very proud, though, looking back at your life and all the accomplishments that you've been able to achieve.

ELKIN: Yes, I really am. What I was in has been very good for me because it was feeding my ego all the time. I was doing something worthwhile for personkind, for the community, for the nation, for the world. I always think globally. I'm not satisfied to just think what the L. A. Conciliation Court could accomplish, when I was in it. Somebody would write me a letter, "What do you do?" I'd send them reprints of all my articles, hoping that this package of seeds I mailed out would take root somewhere. I was always trying to plant seeds. I was willing, and that's another thing that makes agencies work, that makes this community. I was always willing to share my experiences and knowledge. I always thought that's the way to do it - - until I had a counselor from Portland, Oregon. We became like a trading center in LA when any community started a conciliation court or just said they were going to have one, would send the first counselor down to us for training. They knew nothing about Conciliation Court. I trained practically every counselor in California and Portland and Tucson and Phoenix. One judge said, "Let's invite these people to send their counselor down here and pay if they want to come. We'll train them. We'll give them all the forms we have. We'll tell them all about our experiences. We'll give them our

orientation and fill them with our idealism, our goals, and what not." And that's what happened. When that happened, that's when the need for review and a conference emerged. Here you're training all these people, and once they leave your office, how are you going to hear from them? They send you a letter once in a while, but that's not enough. There had to be face to face contact.

This counselor said, "You know Mike, you're so willing to tell me everything you do." I said, "Well, what's so great about that?" He was a social worker, and he said, "There are many people that don't share, especially when they have a successful program. They guard it very zealously. They want to hold it to themselves. Get all the glory or whatever it is they're looking for."

KURODA: But not Mike Elkin?

ELKIN: No, I like to share things, because I have a mission. It's very important for a program to work, to have a well-defined - when I was in the court, there was no such thing as a mission. That's new lingo (laughter).

KURODA: Although you had one.

ELKIN: I'm using new words to describe old events to you. You need a well-defined structure that you can explain to somebody. I heard one person saying, "If you can't tell people in two sentences what your mission is in your agency, you're in trouble." I don't buy that, exactly. I've written thousands of words about my mission, or aspects of my mission. But in a sense, I've been like a missionary. There is a spiritual side to this. I'm not a religious person. The first time I went to synagogue is when I was bar mitzvahed, and thereafter, very few times. But I am a very spiritual person. It comes out in my writing, in my feelings, in my thoughts. I think poetically. When my wife and I celebrate an anniversary, or she has a birthday, I write her a poem. We married May 14, 1965. Every month on the 14th, she gets a poem from me. So there must be a

very poetic side to me. That's why I want to devote so much of my time now to writing poems. There again, I'm not going to follow any traditions. I'm just going to express myself. I'm not going to babble or rhyme. I'm not interested in rhyming. I don't like too much structure. Creativity should not be surrounded by a tight structure. It should fall freely.

KURODA: That's the story of your life, not only in your poetry, but in the way you've lived your life.

You were saying that somebody asked you once what you do, and you said, "Read my articles." I've read your articles, at least some of them, and I have to tell you that there's something that comes across in person that I think is very unique and very special. What we've tried to do today is capture some of that on tape, and if someone is listening to this in the year 2040 or 2060, we hope that they'll have a sense of what life is like in the 70's, the 60's, and what Meyer Elkin has done to make this a better place. Thank you very much, Mike

ELKIN: Thank you. I've enjoyed talking to somebody who I - you know how I feel about you. If there had been another interviewer, I wouldn't have felt as comfortable, especially now, at this point in my life. I still have a sharp mind, but fatigue colors something in your thinking process. It's hard to explain. But I think the idea of archives is a great idea.

You asked me, you gave me this list of questions, the outline they gave you to help interview me. One of them was, what do I think of the social work profession. Was that one of the questions? What can I say to the social work profession that might be helpful. I'd like to answer that.

The social work profession has always been too timid, suffering from low self-esteem, lack of confidence, and unwilling to risk the wrath of their other mental health colleagues, including psychiatry. For example, when I came to this community, I was using the words, "group

counseling," "group therapy." I was doing it at Chino for three years. When I explained what I was doing to social workers, they weren't comfortable with my use of "group therapy." They said, "How can you be doing group therapy? That's only for psychiatrists." That bothered my. Why? I used to look at the programs of national meetings, local meetings. I used to feel so mad that they were rehashing the same old junk. For many years it was transference and counter-transference and that sort of thing. They were still stuck in the ignorance of psychoanalysis. I, myself, was analyzed for three years by an analyst. My experience, although it was helpful to me, was helpful not because he was a psychoanalyst, but because I had someone to talk to.

I think social workers as individuals are very creative people, but their organizations are not very creative. They leave much to be desired. We're still too much a middle-class profession. I was on the Board of Directors of El Nido and President for a couple of years. What an agency! They served the unserved and the under served. They were not middle class. If I hadn't gotten ill, I still would be active with them. I thoroughly enjoy that agency.

KURODA: Celeste Kaplan, and.........

ELKIN: Yes, she left.

KURODA: Fritzie Davis.

ELKIN: Fritzie is great, just as Celeste was. But the Board of Directors is fantastic! They're not just rubber stamps. We're too middle class because I felt - see there's my social work coming out again - the reason the branch court started - considering you're the head of that now - I felt that what happens to the black person in Watts who can't afford the fare to come downtown? Maybe there's no bus, even, to get downtown. We have to make that service available close to home. What about Southeast Los Angeles and the Hispanic population? Same thing. In the early days

we couldn't bring the program to these communities. We had to consolidate the program first. But we finally got a judge to say, "Mike, I think we're ready to go into the local communities." I used to express the wish that we could do that. But he said, "I think we're ready now. This program's been around long enough to where I would feel in control of this program if it was a branch. If you're not fully informed, you send your counselor down to East LA." Before you know it, the judge was saying, "This is my program." He wants to run it his way. He says, "I'm going to make it clear it's my program, not his program." So when we got to that point in that development, we decentralized. We brought the service, as you know, all over the county, which was great. So we were not really a middle-class service, at any time, because the law permitted anybody to apply, no matter what their economic status or whatever. If you lived in this county, you were eligible to apply.

KURODA: Yes, that for me is one of the great things about working in the court, and in our profession - that anybody who needs the service, rich or poor, black or white, can come and talk to one of our people. Any last closing words before we end today?

ELKIN: I'll leave you with two thoughts: be well and enjoy the rainbows.

KURODA: Okay. Thanks a lot.

ELKIN: Thanks for coming up.

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