

Interview with Howard Peters

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Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Good afternoon. My name is Mark DePue. I'm the director of oral history at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Today is Wednesday, November 25, 2009. It happens to be the day before Thanksgiving. And today, we're excited about having the opportunity to talk to Howard Peters. Good afternoon, Mr. Peters.

Peters: Good afternoon.

DePue: We're going to start with the basics here; and the reason we're doing this, as you well know, is this is part of the Jim Edgar oral history project that we're working on. But today, it's not about Jim Edgar; it's about your life and experience. And I thought it would be especially appropriate that we spend quite a bit of time, because you have quite a personal story to tell. Let's start at the top, and if you can tell us a little bit about when and where you were born.

Peters: I was born near a town called Proctor, Arkansas, in 1945.¹

DePue: How long did you spend in Proctor?

Peters: Initially, very briefly. My grandmother was a sharecropper there. My mother actually lived in Memphis, but when it was time for me to be born, she went to her mother. I was born there, in this sharecropper's hut with my grandmother and a midwife.

DePue: A midwife?

Peters: A midwife.

DePue: What's the lore that goes along with that experience?

Peters: No, only that, (laughs) as I understand it, it was a very, very difficult delivery. But see, I tell people that I was born in that situation because God wanted me always to be loved; so I was delivered into the hands of my grandmother, who played, of

¹ Proctor is about twenty-five miles west of Memphis.

course, a very important role in my upbringing and my becoming the person that I am.

DePue: Does that mean, though, that you headed back to Memphis fairly early in this story?

Peters: For a period of time we stayed there with my grandmother, then my mother returned with me to Memphis. But early on—and I mean “early on” in terms of when I was around one year old—I then went back and stayed with my grandmother between one and three, three and a half years of age. Then my father, who had gotten out of the service—my parents got married—came, retrieved me from my grandmother and the plantation, and we lived in Memphis for a while. My father then goes back into the service, I now have two sisters and my mother, and we lived in a housing project in Memphis, Tennessee, called the Foots Homes. And there [I] really formed a lot of my sense of who I was, at least at that time. I hated the projects.²

DePue: But you were how old at the time?

Peters: I lived in the projects from the time I was about four until I was seven or so, because I moved out of the projects when I was in the second grade for the second time.

DePue: We’re getting a little ahead of the story. I wanted to have you paint a little bit more of a picture of your parents. Now, you mentioned your father was in the military. Of course, you were born November 1945?

Peters: Yes.

DePue: So this is the World War II era. Was he overseas during part of this time?

Peters: Yes, he was. And I don’t recall what part or what division he was in in the military, but at the time I was born, he was in service overseas. But as I say, he returned for a period of time and then went back into the service.

DePue: Were you the firstborn of the family?

Peters: Yes.

DePue: And you mentioned that somewhere in this process your parents got married.

Peters: Yes.

DePue: How old were you when that happened?

² This project, the largest in the South at the time, was developed in 1941. *Photographs from the Memphis World, 1949-1960*, edited by Marina Pacini and David McCarthy, 1998, published in conjunction with the exhibition shown at the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, 106-107.

Peters: I was probably about three at the time they got married.

DePue: Was that something that they knew they were going to get to, just a matter of the timing with his military service?

Peters: I think that they knew they were going to get to it. At the time that my mother was first with child, as I said, he was in the military, and they did not get married. My mother in the meantime actually married someone else, but then when he returned from the military and sought her out, they got married and came and retrieved me from Arkansas.

DePue: Do you remember any of those experiences? You were awfully young when you were with your grandmother. Do you remember any of that?

Peters: I do, a bit. It's fascinating how I can actually remember events that my mother will say, "You had to be not yet three years old or three years old when that occurred." So I do have some memories of the existence when I was three years old. I remember more events than day-to-day kind of stuff.

DePue: Anything in particular stick with you?

Peters: Not in particular, other than I was aware at a very young age that we were disadvantaged. I didn't know the term "sharecropper," that kind of thing, but I knew that my grandmother worked very hard and that the priority was the work and not us, and that the other people were in charge. So I had that sense that we were disadvantaged—I will refer to it as—but not a real cognizance of why and so forth at that age. We were just poor.

DePue: You mentioned you were about three years old when you moved back to Memphis, and you already alluded that you didn't really care to be living in the projects. What was that like, and what was it that you most disliked about that experience?

Peters: Living in a housing project is very difficult, and I think even more so for young boys—difficult in terms of being able to defend and protect yourself. Adults don't particularly or didn't particularly look out for the best interest of the children; you really had to fend for yourself. My mother, in all practical purposes, was a single mother. My father was in the service. She was the youngest among the parents in the projects where she lived, which meant others had older brothers and sisters, so they would gang up on you, so as to speak. So I was at a real disadvantage and was very aware that I was at a disadvantage, and [I] felt taken advantage of by the environment, by the fact that adults didn't particularly protect you, protect your rights. So you didn't have the kind of freedom that you would expect a child to have in a neighborhood, to come and go as they wish. People would take advantage.

DePue: But I'm guessing at that point in time, the only frame of reference you had was growing up in the projects. Did you have a sense that it wasn't supposed to be that way, or that's just the way it was?

Peters: I had a sense that it wasn't supposed to be that way, that I shouldn't be taken advantage of, that people shouldn't bully me. I didn't have a different frame of reference in terms of how others lived; it was my existence, but I knew I didn't like it. I didn't feel that it was right. I had a sense that I was owed more protection, that adults had more obligation to take responsibilities than they were. So I really developed a real dislike or disdain for adults—my mother being the significant exception.

DePue: Was this a segregated housing project?

Peters: Absolutely. I grew up in Memphis, Tennessee, and so it was a very segregated existence. I went through elementary school, high school, and most of my college years where everyone in my immediate environment—my teachers, my classmates were all—I guess we were “colored” then. This was long before we became “African American.” So I was not in a classroom with a person who was not African American until I was a junior in college.

DePue: And that's one of the reasons I wanted to do this interview, because you're growing up at a time when the nation is going through the civil rights movement, and then the Vietnam era, and really the race relations in the country are changing quite a bit. So talking about that, do you recall the first time you really became conscious that there was another world out there that you were different from?

Peters: I think in part I always knew that there was something about being of color and not being white. My earliest recollection of that point being really driven home took place when I was probably five years old. I was in the presence of my grandmother, and two Caucasian police bullies pulled up. We were playing on a sidewalk in front of a store. And for no reason—and I say “for no reason” as I understood it then and now—just decided to bother us; and so the two police officers started saying to me, first, “Come here, boy,” and then started saying to me, “Are you a good nigger boy, or are you a troublemaker?” And there was nothing going on that should have prompted any conversation with me, but they carried it on to the point of actually—now, remember, I'm five years old—putting me in the back seat of this police car and trying to force my grandmother into saying the words “He's a good nigger boy.” She would say things like, “He doesn't cause any trouble,” “He's a good boy,” and they would say, “But I want to know is he a good nigger boy, because if he isn't, we're going to take him to jail.” And of course, at that young age, I was pretty distressed, but again, very conscious of the fact that there is something wrong with this but that we are powerless and that my grandmother is powerless to keep these fellows from doing this, from treating me this way. So she was pushing the envelope as far as she could in her own way, to extract me from the situation while not upsetting these Caucasian police bullies. So that was an experience that stuck with me and helped circumscribe my sense of our situation as colored folk then, in Memphis, Tennessee.

DePue: I can't imagine how a five-year-old even begins to process that. Was this one of the first times you'd heard that term used on you? Did you understand it was that derogatory?

Peters: Oh, I understood it was derogatory. I'm sure it wasn't the first time I heard the term. But it was that incident in the life of a young boy that really drove home the point of the very nature of your disadvantage, that you had no real ability to protect yourself from the establishment. I had no rights that these policemen, these police bullies, had to recognize, and my grandmother had no ability as an African-American woman or as a colored woman to enforce the wrongness of this intrusion. People today, I think—and I have these conversations with my children—find it very difficult to recognize that there was a period of time in our country where the police saw it as a part of their function to help support the notion that these people were inferior and bound to behave according to some “good nigger” standards that were whatever they decided they were at the time, situation to situation.

DePue: Do you recall how the situation was resolved?

Peters: Basically they had had enough entertainment and said, “Okay, we're going to let him go, but you better make sure that he's a good nigger boy.”

DePue: This is about the same age that you had been starting at school. What was that experience like, to begin with?

Peters: (laughs) I was a very difficult and troubled student. I was wholly unprepared for school. I was angry about my situation there in the projects. I was, in so many ways, unsocialized, and so I had none of the behaviors or disciplines that would allow you to sit in a classroom, pay attention, follow instructions. It was, by the way, the first time I was in a situation with my peers where they didn't have others to protect them, others to fend for them, and so I spent some of that time just getting even. I was very disruptive. So I don't think I learned a thing academically, intellectually, in the first two years of school.

DePue: Was your mother aware that you were causing this much trouble at school?

Peters: Only to an extent. I remember one occasion where I behaved so badly that it literally forced my first-grade teacher to walk me home, and so she, of course, was expressing to my mother the difficulty. They would call her to the school at times because of problems that I had caused. But also, understand, my mother was quite young for a parent of three children at that time.

DePue: And your father's not at home at the time?

Peters: He is not. And so she was struggling to keep food on the table. She was working two jobs and trying to take care of those kinds of things, and not very sure what to do about this child that everyone else is finding so difficult. Because I knew my mother loved me, and I was confident about that, I wasn't difficult for my mother in any direct way. So in some ways, the problems that I was presenting for others were

foreign to her, and she had limited time to acquaint herself with those issues at that point.

DePue: What was your mother doing for work?

Peters: My mother worked at a tomato processing factory, where she inspected and bundled small little baskets of tomatoes that would go off to the supermarket.

DePue: I wasn't thinking that Tennessee would be an area where they grew many tomatoes. I guess I'm wrong in that respect.

Peters: Oh, I don't know that they grew the tomatoes in Tennessee, but they certainly processed them for retail sale. And she was paid so much a basket that she prepared, these baskets of tomatoes. And then in the evening, she worked at a little diner that was really not far from the projects as kind of a short-order cook.

DePue: We've got you up to about age six or seven years old. Things have not yet gone very well for you, Howard. So what's going to change here?

Peters: The first thing that changed that was significant was we moved out of the projects. My father comes home from the service—and this is actually the winter of the year that I would have been in the second grade for the second time.

DePue: Let me back up real quick. Why did you have to go to the second grade for the second time?

Peters: As I mentioned earlier in the conversation, I learned nothing in the first two years of school. I was just disruptive, so much so that when the teacher who was going to fail me or retain me in the second grade learned that she might have to keep me a second year, two teachers actually almost had a fistfight over who was going to take me. And imagine the impact on the psyche of a young boy, even though I may have warranted it, to know that adults would rather fight than have you in their class.

DePue: Were you watching this discussion?

Peters: Oh, yes, I was very conscious of it, as were other kids. It was not something that happened away in some private room; this happened right out in the hallway before children. I couldn't recite, at that time, the alphabet from A to Z. I just had not learned anything about school and academics. So my father came home, and there was a GI Bill that allowed him and my mother to get housing, which were single-family homes in another segregated neighborhood. So we moved out of the projects into this new neighborhood, and it meant I had to change schools. And I had the good fortune of going to a school, another segregated school, where the principle of that school, whose name was Isaiah Goodrich, and a second grade teacher, whose name was Felton, had a total different investment and view of children in general and me specifically.

Miss Felton said to me one day, early in my tenure at this school, “You can’t afford to allow people to think you’re stupid.” And interestingly enough, I remember that moment emotionally today. It really got my attention, because it had never occurred to me that I had any say, any ability to do anything about what people thought of me and whether I was dumb or not dumb. She began the process of creating a student in me. I went to her room, I think in March, and I left her classroom in May or June of that year, and I could by all means recite the alphabet. I began learning to read. She also discovered something in me, and that was that I had a considerable faculty for recall. So I couldn’t read the story, but if I heard the story, I could retell the story word-for-word. And she helped me learn how to use that as two things: one, as a way of distinguishing myself—I could do something that not every child could do, I could remember better—and secondly, to use it as a way of learning. So by the time I left her classroom and went into third grade, I actually had begun the process of being a student and begun the process of believing that I had a say in my character, my reputation. And of course, Miss Felton was tough, and she began to develop in me the discipline of being orderly in a classroom.

DePue: You’ve mentioned three things here. Your father came home, was home now after being in the military a lot of times; the family moved; and this powerful impact that Miss Felton had on you, and it sounds like it was only about three or four months that you were in her class. How would you rate those? Which was the one that really was most important, you think, or is impossible to unravel it all?

Peters: I think the thing that can’t be overstated is getting out of the projects, getting into a situation where your first preoccupation isn’t having to defend yourself, having to avoid being taken advantage of; so that created some degree of quiescence. And the second thing is being in the presence of teachers who were willing to invest and who really cared whether or not anything was ever going to become of you. Then it was the fact that this also allowed my mother greater involvement with us as children. She continued to work, but not totally focused on and invested in working two jobs. She became involved with the PTA. The teachers now know her, the teachers are now talking to her as what you would call a partner in our development. Teachers treat you differently when your parent’s invested and when they know your parents, and you have a different sense of yourself and your own importance. So I think those things together conspired to begin to create a more orderly, more disciplined person, and a person who began to see that they could have some control over what was happening with them.

DePue: One of the things you mentioned already was that your schooling, all the way up through even most of college, was in segregated institutions. Were the teachers black as well?

Peters: Absolutely. I was not in a classroom with a person who was not African American until I was a junior in college, and that was a visiting professor from an eastern school that I believe to be Yale. I was not in a classroom with another student who

was not African American until I was in graduate school at Southern Illinois University.

DePue: How important was it for you, then, to see these positive examples of what people can make of their lives, by what the teachers were—how they were involved in your life?

Peters: The importance can't be overstated. The teachers that I became involved with and aware of at the Ford Road School—that was the elementary school in the neighborhood—and the principal of that school, Isaiah Goodrich, really were invested in our development, really took responsibility for wanting us to do something with our lives. You don't say to a child today, "It is important for you to be a credit to your race, a credit to your family. You are representing our people when you go out and do foolish things or when you go out and accomplish things, and you want to do things to do your people proud." Many of those teachers were very much invested in that notion, and it made a great deal of difference. My wife of some forty-one years now went to the same elementary school with me—we went to school from second grade on and graduated in the same high school class—will have the same kind of remarks. We had a sense that the teachers, for the most part, were invested in our becoming, in our being able to make a contribution. You don't say to a child today—perhaps you should—but our teachers would say to us, "You've got to work twice as hard, you've got to be twice as good, as your white counterpart."

And so as I grew in this situation, I became more interested in who I was becoming and wanting to be able to contribute. It might seem strange to you, but when I was six years old, when I was living in the housing projects, I can remember consciously thinking with a kind of despair, "What will ever become of me?" Well, as I experienced the Ford Road School and that environment, and then later Mitchell Road High School—we had a lot of (laughs) imagination in naming our schools—because they built a black high school in the community eventually, the culture really continued through high school with a sense that I had a chance, that we had a chance, to become something, and it made a great deal of difference. Most people look upon segregation and segregated schools with an all-negative view. In some ways, for me, at least, it was a cocoon that was focused around me and my peers becoming something, being a credit to the community, contributing to the society.

DePue: Was religion a part of your life as well?

Peters: Yes. I grew up Baptist. My mother, to this day, goes to the same church that she did when I was three years old. I've had the good fortune of even preaching at that church. So, yes, religion was an important part of and faith was an important part of my upbringing as well.

DePue: Do you have any recollection about understanding that side of your life, the importance of faith and religion and God being involved in your life?

Peters: In the sense that—and I think this is probably true for most believers—I was very conscious of my grandmother’s God and my mother’s faith that good was going to come of us and that God was going to see to it. It was much later that I came to know God for myself, but I was propelled by my grandmother’s and my mother’s faith.

DePue: Listening to your story, I am fascinated by it, and I’m also wondering, asking myself, was this an overnight transformation in you? This incident that you talked about in second grade with Miss Felton—was there an immediate change in your personality, or was that kind of a growth experience for you?

Peters: It was certainly a gateway experience. As I look back on it, I do credit Miss Felton and my experience with her as a profound, changing, transitional experience. But if you can’t read, you can’t read. So it wasn’t in the sense of an overnight experience that all of a sudden magic happened (laughs) and I went from being illiterate to being a scholar. But you can’t go from being illiterate to being a scholar without the important transition experience that she, specifically, and other teachers, who helped create and perpetuate the environment at that school, created for me.

DePue: Let’s get you into the middle school and high school years. And in that respect, you’re growing up in the late fifties, early sixties. Again, this is right at the emergence of a real civil rights movement in the United States. Were you aware of what was going on in that respect?

Peters: I was. Again, I had lived a very segregated life. When you would interact with and go places where Caucasians went, you had separate facilities. You know, the colored bathroom and the colored water fountain, and there were places you couldn’t eat and all of that—so very much aware. I also, as an adolescent, worked the cotton fields of Arkansas and Mississippi just to make money. So nothing drives home the point (laughs) of your segregated, second-class status as working on somebody’s plantation picking cotton.³

DePue: And having the hands to show for it, I assume.

Peters: That’s right. Picking cotton or chopping cotton. So when the movement, if you will, started to sit in and picket to buy a bad hamburger at a lunch counter that wouldn’t serve you, I was a teenager and interested to some extent in being a part of that. So you would hear that they were going to picket the Woolworth’s, so you’d go down and participate.

DePue: Any particular anecdotes you remember about participating in that?

³ For example, in 1960, when Peters was fifteen, black residents of Memphis “could only visit the zoo, Brooks Memorial Art Gallery, and the main branch of the Memphis Public Library and Information Center on ‘black Thursday.’ They could only attend the fairgrounds during the one-day Negro Tri-State Fair held during the summer.” Sharon D. Wright, *Race, Power and Political Emergence in Memphis* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000), 56.

Peters: Not particularly. I was just a young boy willing to demonstrate, willing to sit in, but no real understanding of the national significance of this and the transformative impact that this would later bring about. I was just willing to protest.

DePue: Was the organization side of it something that was encouraged at your church or at school or at home, or...?

Peters: It was something that you would hear out of the civic club meetings in my neighborhood. My mother was very much a part of the neighborhood civics club, so you would hear about it from them. But my mother wasn't particularly interested in me going to picket or going to demonstrate, because this was dangerous activity. You could get arrested, the police were hostile toward you, and that kind of thing, so this was not something permissioned and sanctioned by my mother, and I dare say that most young people who were joining in weren't joining in because their parents were saying, "Here's a good way for you to spend (DePue laughs) the afternoon." We were doing it because it was something that we found intriguing and became convinced, because of something we either heard or read or saw, that we would be making a contribution. But more than anything, it was an organized way to be defiant against what you knew in your heart of hearts was wrong, that the instruments of government would prohibit you from being able to buy a soda at a lunch place.

DePue: It's interesting you use the word "defiant" here. Did you also understand the preachings of Martin Luther King and that group talking about civil disobedience, and that this needed to be non-violent?

Peters: Oh, very much aware of the tensions. One of the interesting things about American history and how we look back at that period of time: today there is universal consensus that Martin Luther King was right and that Martin Luther King was the leader. Not so in 1960 and 1964 and '65 and so forth. The idea of absolute adherence to nonviolence was very controversial in the African-American community. Some people were just as willing to hear what Malcolm thought about that, or H. Rap Brown or Stokely [Carmichael] or some of the others, so I can't sit here and tell you that I was really grounded and absorbed in the notion that we shouldn't fight back and that we should take whatever was handed out when we went to sit in or picket. It was certainly the mantra and the expectation of the people who generally organized these events, but don't think at all that there was universal agreement that we were just supposed to allow people to spit on you or throw stuff at you and not react and get waterhosed and so forth.

DePue: Did you have any of those experiences yourself? Do you recall—

Peters: Certainly.

DePue: —reacting to any of those?

Peters: Absolutely.

DePue: How did you react to some of those experiences?

Peters: As a young, aggressive boy might. People say things and curse at you; you say things and curse back. The people who were more grounded in civil disobedience, if you will, would warn us and admonish us, “Don’t do that. That’s not what this is about. That’s not going to do any good. That makes us just like them.” So I wasn’t necessarily even a good demonstrator (laughter) by those standards.

DePue: Where was your father at, in terms of his opinion about your involvement in this?

Peters: No parent would send their child off to get waterhosed or maybe subjected to abuse and violence and so forth, so this was not something I was going home asking permission to do.

DePue: What specific things were you involved with? Were you involved in sit-ins at Woolworth’s?⁴

Peters: Yes, yes.

DePue: Picketing anywhere?

Peters: Yes. Picketing city hall, picketing the school board. Now, my mother was (laughs) into picketing the school board, because my mother was very much a community activist, and so in some ways, this was “do as I say, not as I do.” But my mother was highly involved in causing the school district to do better by the community. My mother and a group of mostly women in our community brought about the Mitchell Road High School, insisting that we had enough children that we should have our own high school and not have to be bused somewhere. And then picketing and arguing with the board of education to build sufficient facilities—a science lab. I mean, I was in a high school that didn’t have a science lab until I was a senior in high school. We didn’t have a gymnasium until I was a senior in high school. So she was constantly involved in agitating around those kinds of issues.

DePue: But nobody was agitating for integration of the school system at that time?

Peters: Not in our neighborhood, and not really. We were pretty much, up to that point, trying to be separate but equal, trying to have significant facilities. We weren’t trying to be [integrated], and our parents weren’t trying to bus us off somewhere. The whole idea of busing kids and integration, you have to consider—even though it’s not talked about a lot in most of the history—came about out of absolute desperation and frustration of recognizing that the established leadership of

⁴ According to Karanja A. Ajanaku, executive editor of the *Tri-State Defender*, students from LeMoyne and Owen colleges organized the first sit-in in Memphis on March 18, 1960, at McLellan’s 5 and 10 on Main Street. *Tri-State Defender*, October 25, 2007, <http://tri-statedefenderonline.com/articlelive/articles/2126/1/The-first-photographer-on-the-scene-of-Memphis-first-sit-in-has-a-story-to-tell/Page1.html>. Wright places the date of this event the following day.

education is not going to provide our schools with the kind of facilities and the kind of resources that they provide to white children in white schools. So the only way that that's going to be possible is let us go to school with those children and let's integrate the schools—and the notion that then all the schools would be good schools. I am sure, and as I indicated earlier, it's not correct to think that there was universal agreement on some of these issues. It's not correct to think that black parents and black kids were trying to get to the white school. They were trying to get a quality education, and so whatever it took to get a quality education became the strategy.

DePue: I wanted to change the direction a little bit here and talk about some of the other activities you were involved with in junior high and high school, other interests—sports or music or anything like that?

Peters: My mother believed, and I think correctly—and I think schools and parents can benefit from the philosophy today—that the more things we were involved in at school and in the community that were constructive, the less likely we were to get into bad things and bad influences. So yes, I played in the band and played music, and this same group of women in our community marched and insisted that the board of education give us a band and give us instruments. So I was in the band and in the choir, play—

DePue: What instrument did you play?

Peters: Drums. (laughter) I was beating on things. So I was in the band. I played baseball, football. I enjoyed basketball more than all sports. I was never good enough to be on the high school team, I hate to say. But I was involved in the science fair, and I won ribbons for being in the science fair. So as a kid, even though I was very much the normal kid who did the things that kids do in the streets, I really was highly engaged in activities; and those activities did in fact help propel me through high school, help keep me out of some of the things that young boys are willing to get into. I can remember distinctly guys that I ran around with who would get arrested, and the only reason I didn't get arrested with them was I was at this or that practice, I was in this or that activity, so I wasn't on the corner at that time, I wasn't there at the time. So it really is unfortunate, I think, that because of the economics of education, schools are having fewer and fewer activities to help hold kids to the school and in constructive engagement.

DePue: What were some of the negative things that were going on outside the school and outside this cocoon of your family and church and environment? Gangs?

Peters: All of the things that are negative in low-income communities. So of course, gang activity of sorts. Alcohol. Substance abuse. All of that's out there. Different from today, however, and this is a point I'd make: when I was in junior high school or high school, if I wanted to come in contact with drugs or alcohol, I knew where to go; but I had to go there, I had to seek those things out. Today, those things are omnipresent in the life of some kids in the communities where they live and

perhaps to some extent in the community where I grew up. My mother still lives in that community. Several times on the way to school, a kid may be asked if he or she wants to smoke something or use something. It wasn't that prevalent in my day, but of course, you knew where it was, and if you were so inclined, you knew how to find that kind of trouble. Fortunately for me, while I had associates and friends who did, I was never interested and never got involved in those kinds of problems.

DePue: In talking to you this morning, your mom comes up quite a bit in these discussions. Would it be fair to say she had a more powerful influence on you than your father?

Peters: Absolutely. I am in so many ways the product of my mother's teachings and my grandmother's love.

DePue: That's a wonderful way of putting it.

Peters: That's the way it is.

DePue: Tell me about what your aspirations were, then, as you got into high school. What did you see yourself becoming?

Peters: First and foremost, by the time I got to high school, I wanted to be special, so I wanted to be smart. There's a running debate between me and one of my sisters-in-law where I once said out loud in an assembly, "I want to be the smartest man in the world," and of course she was outraged and thinking, Who would say such a thing? I think in large part because she probably thought she should be the smartest person (DePue laughs) in the world.

DePue: Does that mean you don't remember saying that?

Peters: Oh, no, I do remember saying that. I do remember wanting to be that. I have to be fair and say I didn't have the discipline at the time to do the work to be that, (laughs) but I wanted to be knowledgeable, I wanted to be informed. When somebody would say, "What do you want to be," more specifically I would say things like, "I want to be a doctor; I want to be a neurosurgeon," and you would pick those things because you knew you had to be really smart and knowledgeable to do those kind of things. But in truth, it's important to be aware that it's hard to aspire to things you've never seen and to things you've never seen anyone do or be. I didn't know neurosurgeons, I didn't know scientists, so those were really just words. So it's not surprising that when I did get a chance to go to college, I went to college and qualified to teach, because that's who I saw in my environment. Those were the people who were the most knowledgeable in the community; those were the people who dressed like I wanted to dress and lived more, had more of the things and stuff that I wanted to have. I actually wish teachers today would dress better—and I mean no disrespect to teachers—but I wish universally they would dress better and see themselves as setting the standards and the models for the students that they come in contact with, because for so many kids, they are the only professionals that kids will see. I never saw a dentist. I was in college the first time I went to a dentist. So the notion of aspiring to be a dentist, that's something that can

happen for kids who I guess really read a lot and can come to think of themselves in that way.

I have a son who graduated from Harvard and Stanford, and I recall once asking him when did he first know that he could compete at that level and go to those kinds of schools. And he tells of a story when, by chance, he met the nephew of a friend of mine who graduated from MIT, and that conversation with that person made it real for him that I can do that too if that's what I choose to do. So it's important to bring kids in contact with accomplished adults who are doing important things and making a contribution, if you want them really to aspire to that. In my case, teachers circumscribe my sense of professionalism.

DePue: Let's talk about going to college, then, and maybe also about how you managed to go there—because it didn't sound like you came from a lot of money—and were able to afford the tuition once you got there.

Peters: I could not have gone to college without financial assistance. So we wouldn't be having this conversation were there not a lot of financial assistance opportunities for students at the time I graduated from high school. I graduated from high school at a time when "Negroes," we were by then—

DePue: Nineteen sixty-four.

Peters: Yes. I guess we were becoming "black"—we're just going into predominantly white schools. That was maybe three or four years in. So some consideration was given that I should go to Memphis State because it was so cheap, it was there in Memphis, but I had the good fortune of the guidance counselors helping me get a scholarship to Tennessee State University, which is a traditionally black school in Nashville, Tennessee. And I say "I had the good fortune," because in so many ways, I still didn't yet have the discipline to have been an integrationist. I have to accept that. And I think the reason that the guidance counselors pointed me to Tennessee State was because they thought that as well. My sister, on the other hand, went to Memphis State. She had a lot more discipline. We graduated from high school the same year because, remember, I was retained that year [in second grade], and she caught up. She had the discipline to do well in that experience.

So I got a scholarship to Tennessee State University, which I promptly lost as a freshman because I went to college and had a wonderful experience for two quarters—we were on the quarter system—that had nothing to do with going to class (DePue laughs) and being a student.

DePue: I would imagine people back home finding out about this might not be too happy about hearing that you weren't nearly as focused as maybe they thought you should be.

Peters: An interesting experience with that that also helped shape my later conduct is I received notice that I was not to come back to school in the spring because of my grades, and I really did know that my mother was going to kill me (DePue laughs)

dead. So I got on the Greyhound bus and I went home. My mother picked me up at the Greyhound bus, and we stopped at a supermarket—it was called Giant’s Food Store—and I decided to tell her there in that supermarket that I had flunked out of school. I guess I calculated that she probably wasn’t going to commit a murder in the supermarket, and so I told her. And my mother *really* surprised me. In a very calm way she said to me, “Hm. You know, college isn’t for everyone, so if you’re not college material, I guess we have to find something else for you to do.” And that was like a punch in the solar plexus, because I knew I hadn’t tried, I hadn’t applied myself, I hadn’t gotten started. And I responded by saying, “But I am college material.” And she said, “What happened?” And I told her, “I just never got started. It was like the time just got away from me.” And she said to me in the supermarket, “Well, you need to get back on the bus and go back to Tennessee State and find someone that will let you try. You can’t spend the rest of your life never having tried.”

We left the basket of groceries in the store, went back to the Greyhound bus station, she put her little money together, put me back on the bus, and sent me back to Nashville. Now, this is spring break. (laughs) Who knows who’s going to be there, (DePue laughs) but I don’t remember saying, I need to wait until after spring break. I got on the bus, went back, and found my way to the dean of faculty, a guy whose name was Jackson, Dean Jackson—told him my tale of woe. He helped me get back in school on probation. And then I said to him, “But I need financial aid.” And I remember him saying to me, “You want me to let you back in school—you haven’t done a thing in school—and you want us to pay for it?” And I said, “I can’t be in school without financial aid. I have no money.” He got me a work-study job. I didn’t have it coming; I didn’t deserve it. For whatever reasons that made sense to him, he got me a work-study job working in his office. And in the next quarter, he helped me learn how to go to college. And I made good grades that quarter and never looked back in terms of difficulty in school.

DePue: Did he ever tell you later on what he saw in you?

Peters: No. He never asked for anything in exchange; he never explained himself. He basically functioned on, You get one quarter, and you’re done. You make good of it, you’re on your own; you don’t, you’re done.

DePue: Howard, this is the second time in your life that an educator intervened in a very positive way. Maybe they didn’t necessarily see it that way at the time, but it certainly turned out that way.

Peters: It did, and what it’s done for me, both in terms—it certainly gave me opportunity. I would not likely have been a college graduate were it not for Dean Jackson’s intervention, and certainly wouldn’t have been college material were it not been for Miss Felton. What it does say to me is that kids deserve a second and a third chance, but it’s not just saying, “Okay, you can have a do-over,” because neither of those persons just said, “Okay, you can have a do-over.” Miss Felton got busy teaching me. Dean Jackson got busy—remember, my job was in his office, so he

would routinely meet with me and say, “What have you been doing since the last time we talked?” And he wanted to know what was going on in my classes, when last I’d been to the library, and those kind of things. So when I say he helped me learn how to go to school, I mean he actually did that. He even helped me figure out how to get books either free or very inexpensively. So he taught me some things. He didn’t just say, “Okay, you can have a do-over.” So when I say kids deserve a second and a third chance, it means we really do have to invest in them. So I owe kids, (laughs) and I hope I’ve been a good steward of that.

DePue: It sounds like the tough love approach that he was taking.

Peters: Yeah, the extent to which there was love in it. (laughter)

DePue: Maybe you weren’t feeling it at the time, huh?

Peters: No, but I was aware that he was giving me a better way. I knew I didn’t want to be back on the streets of Memphis. I knew that.

DePue: What was your major when you started college, and what did it become after this first-year kind of a fiasco, for lack of a better word?

Peters: The first two quarters, I majored in biology because I was going to be this scientist or this physician. And if I discovered something in those first two quarters, it was I didn’t particularly enjoy chemistry at the college level in those kinds of courses, so I changed to political science. I graduated with a degree in political science, with teacher certification.

DePue: How much did that decision have to do with your involvement in the civil rights movement, what’s happening in the larger African-American community at the time?

Peters: I don’t think that decision had a lot to do with that as much as it... I did learn something about the courses I was better at (laughs) and the courses that I wasn’t. I also was aware that if you decided at some point you wanted to go to law school, having a degree in political science was a degree of choice, or so as to speak.

DePue: This is the same time period—we’re talking ’64 is when you started, so ’68 when you graduated...

Peters: Yes.

DePue: Vietnam’s building up, and a lot’s going on on college campuses in the United States at the time. A lot’s going on in the United States at the time, especially 1968, God forbid. How did the military factor into what was going on with you in college?

Peters: I certainly wanted, by now, to be in school and to get a degree. I believed that my chance of becoming something worthwhile was tied up in getting a degree. I was

convinced of that at the time. But that was during the draft, and so you would get classified as 1-A—which means you were eligible for the draft—if you didn't have enough hours to get a student deferment. And so I would go through the roller coaster ride—in the spring, I'd get reclassified to 1-A because I had wasted the first two semesters and didn't have enough credits to be a sophomore when I was supposed to be a sophomore. But I'd go to summer school each year, which was one of the things that Dean Jackson told me was going to be a must for me if I was going to graduate by '68; and so by the fall, I would have enough hours to be a sophomore, or a junior as the case may be, and I'd reapply, and then I'd get a student deferment. So I got through college without being drafted because I was able in that way to keep up with my class, and then graduated in '68 and became a teacher at a juvenile correctional institution. And in that year, '68-'69, you could get a deferment if you were a teacher. There was apparently a shortage of teachers, and you could get deferred as a teacher, so I taught for the next couple of years.

DePue: From what you mentioned before, I think you got married towards the end of that college experience as well, did you not?

Peters: Yeah, I got married in '67—December 24, 1967.

DePue: So you better remember that day.

Peters: Absolutely, absolutely.

DePue: Your wife's name?

Peters: Beverly, Beverly Peters.

DePue: And you mentioned earlier that you met her in grade school?

Peters: Yeah, we were in the same elementary school from second grade and graduated in the same high school class.

DePue: Does she remember the Howard Peters, Troublemaker?

Peters: Absolutely. (laughter) She'll complain to this day about some mean stuff that I did to her in elementary school.

DePue: Anything in particular we can hear about?

Peters: No. (laughter)

DePue: Darn. Graduated from college, had a teaching certificate—to teach what?

Peters: History and social studies, I was qualified to teach. And what happened was I actually started, in my junior year of college, working at a juvenile correctional institution in Nashville called the Jordon State Training School for Boys. I was a correctional officer there. And this institution was the earliest experiment in

Tennessee of actually having integrated corrections. Up to this point, you had a separate institution for blacks and whites. This institution was integrated a few years earlier, so they were integrating it in about '65 or so.⁵ So I became a correctional officer there. But when I got my degree, the superintendent of the institution, who had come to know me to some extent, said to me, "I hear y'all getting a college degree," and I said, "Yes." He said, "Well, you know, we don't have any colored teachers. Why don't"—

DePue: "Colored."

Peters: "Any colored teachers. So why don't you come and be a teacher here?" And I guess the way he became aware that I was getting a teaching certificate was I applied to get my shift changed when I had to do student teaching. So he became aware, and he offered me the job to become the colored teacher (laughs) at the Jordonnia State Training School for Boys. And in the fall of '68, I started teaching there.

DePue: You said you were a correctional officer before that time.

Peters: Yeah.

DePue: Is that the classic understanding, what we would think is correctional officer now? Basically a prison guard?

Peters: Yes, but in a tough juvenile institution.⁶

DePue: And you said that was basically the first experience you really had in an integrated institution?

Peters: That's exactly right. That is ironic, that the first non-blacks that I actually knew were, first, inmates at this correctional institution; and then later, other correctional officers who were Caucasian; and then later, teachers who... So yes, that was my real first integrated experience in terms of actually knowing people. Now, of course, you had interacted with them when you went downtown or in various jobs that I had had, like working at a hotel restaurant, but I didn't know and interact on any kind of personal basis until I actually went to work at this correctional institution.

⁵ Jordonnia had been opened in 1911 as the Tennessee Reformatory for Boys. In 1918 the state opened the Tennessee Reformatory for Negro Boys in Pikeville. Both institutions were renamed State Training and Agricultural Schools in 1951 and then State Vocation Training Schools in 1955. Tennessee desegregated its juvenile institutions in 1965 and its adult institution cell blocks in 1966. 1965 also saw the opening of the Intensive Treatment Rehabilitation Center for juveniles in Nashville. Jordonnia was renamed the Spencer Youth Center in 1971. Tennessee Department of Correction, "Historical Timeline," <http://www.state.tn.us/correction/pdf/historicaltimeline2006.pdf>.

⁶ Jordonnia had long been notorious for its tough environment and corporal punishment. "Jordonnia kindled fear in Tennessee's youth for 60 years," *The Tennessean*, March 8, 2006, excerpts, World Corporal Punishment Research, <http://www.corpun.com/usr00603.htm>.

DePue: Anything about that experience that surprised you, about now actually working in a very close basis with some white kids?

Peters: No, not really. The thing about that experience was it really was finding a career. I never planned to work in corrections; I was just needing a job. And actually, a guy told me—I'd been singing with a band, and we got thrown out of the club we were singing in, and my tuition was due—and a guy said, "This will blow over, but in the meantime, I know where you can get a job doing nothing." And that was right down my street: (laughter) a job doing nothing, that pays money? And it was working at this correctional institution. He worked on the night shift. And so I applied and eventually got hired at this correctional institution.

Many of the kids in this institution, I knew from back in the neighborhood in Memphis, and so to that extent, I could relate to them, not because of any correctional theory or delinquency theory, but knowing them from the streets. And many of them knew me from back home because these guys would have been a few years younger than me. They were the younger brothers of guys in my class or girls in my class, so I knew them, in a sense, from a distance. But because they knew I knew the truth about them, that they weren't really so tough, I could get them to do things. The superintendent was fascinated with the fact that I could get them to comply, and that's why he, I think, eventually offered me this job as a teacher there, and I really got invested in that career. So I kind of stumbled through the back door of the correctional system.

DePue: I'm intrigued by your having ended up as that as a career choice, and I'm intrigued because this first memory you have encountering a white and understanding that you were an African American was this experience where you can't even say "police officer" when you tell me the story, because they were basically just thugs who were wearing a uniform at the time. Did you see anything ironic when you found yourself in that environment?

Peters: Interestingly, I didn't. (laughs) It was some work that I discovered that I was fairly effective at and felt I had a contribution to make. It wasn't long after I was a teacher that I spotted the position that I wanted, and so it just occurred to me that this is a place—that I can be good at this.

DePue: What was the position you spotted?

Peters: (laughs) So I'm a teacher, and as a teacher, you've got to go to the same classroom every day, do the same thing, and I really hated routine. There was a young fellow whose name was Terry Bassom. Terry Bassom doesn't know me, but I'll never forget Terry Bassom—and it's interesting how people affect your life. Terry Bassom was called the assistant to the superintendent for programming, and he would wander about the institution, deciding how programs should go, what kids needed and didn't need. And it always occurred to me, He doesn't know these kids; he doesn't know what they need or anything. So I said out loud, "I want that job," and people would say to me, other teachers—all of whom, as you've figured out by

now, were white—would say to me, “No Negro is going to have that job.” Plus, they would say, “You don’t have a master’s degree. Terry Bassom has a master’s degree.” That became my motivation (laughter) to get a master’s degree, because the other issues I couldn’t do anything about. So Terry Bassom drove me to graduate school, and I went to graduate school with every intention of going back to Tennessee and getting that job. I got a chance to come to Southern Illinois University, and they did internships in the Illinois Department of Corrections; so while pursuing my master’s, I became familiar with people in the corrections system, and they offered me a position after I got my master’s.

DePue: I’m going to be blunt here, because as you describe this and the position that he had, your ambition to become that was—one, that was a matter of a success, but two, it was an easy job; and the trajectory of your life, from what I understand, is anything but taking the easy job.

Peters: See, I didn’t see it as an easy job. I saw it as an influential job. He got to decide. So you did hear me say he wandered around the institution deciding, but the operative word was, he got to decide. He decided what was best for kids; he decided what they needed; he decided what programs the institution would invest in or not. So it wasn’t that I was looking for easy, I was looking for impact; I was looking for the position of authority to decide a course.

DePue: Maybe you just answered the question, but I’m going to ask it in a different way: what was it about corrections work, and what was it about what you brought to corrections, that was a good marriage?

Peters: Corrections work was simply the opportunity that presented itself. If an opportunity had presented itself to be an intern at General Motors, I might have become a person who ran General Motors. I don’t know, but I believe that to be the case. So it was the opportunity that presented itself, and it presented itself in a way that I was almost immediately effective. I had immediate recognition from the kids in my charge, so I had some immediate ability to say to them, “This is going to get you nowhere. This is running into a brick wall. This is a way that you can get some of what you’re after.” I remember not having any particular allegiance to the institution or its rules, but a kind of allegiance to say to them, “That’s a losing proposition that you’re fighting. (laughter) You’re fighting a losing battle. You’re going to get nowhere.” Because keep in mind that in 1967, cruel and unusual punishment was defined very differently from how it’s defined in 2009. They could lock kids up and not feed them. So my investment was trying to be effective, trying to, in a sense, show them that their strategies weren’t working—not, as I say, so much because of an allegiance to the rule as much as these guys were losing big-time.

DePue: This is a different direction here, but I don’t want to lose track of this entirely, because this is another aspect of your personality and your life. You mentioned you were in a band.

Peters: Yes.

DePue: Did you play the drums in the band?

Peters: I did not. I was a singer in the band. I was never a good drummer—I was never as good as I wanted to be—but I loved entertainment, so I was a singer in the band and actually had the opportunity to record a few records in my college years for a subsidiary of Decca Records on a label called Coral. I came to recognize that I had just enough talent to be local, to enjoy it, to have fun, but not nearly enough to make a career of it.⁷

DePue: What style of music?

Peters: Rhythm and blues. Rhythm and blues.

DePue: Made a little bit of money that way?

Peters: A little bit, mostly from performing as opposed to from records. No money off of the records that I recorded, but opportunities to perform.

DePue: So what you said was there was never really a serious intent on your part to pursue this as a profession?

Peters: No, I had much interest and intent to pursue it as a profession. That's what I wanted to do in life, was be a recording star and be an entertainer—like a few hundred million other people (DePue laughs) out there. I had the blessing of not being a one-trick pony. While I was very invested in music and wanting to entertain, I was also a student and pursuing a college degree. At the time that I actually went to SIU to graduate school, I actually made a choice between, do I accept a recording contract and an opportunity to record for a certain studio, or do I go to graduate school? And fortunately for me, I recognized that I'm not going to be a star. I'm not writing music that's going to sell a lot of records, but here's an opportunity to go to graduate school—I'd best do that. And I did, and it was the right choice for me, but if I had had a little more talent, (laughter) or maybe a little less opportunity to pursue college—so many people who are both successful and very unsuccessful in the entertainment world are people who saw themselves or see themselves as having no other options; it's this or nothing. If you were talking to people who are now very successful in the entertainment industry, they saw themselves as this or nothing. They had nothing else to pursue, and so they stuck it out, and it worked for them. But there are also many, many people who are very disappointed with how their lives turned out because they had no other choice, or saw themselves as having no other opportunities, and it didn't work out for them.

⁷ Coral released two 45s featuring Peters. In 1967 he recorded *Tell Me It's Alright/Tighten Up The Slack* (62533), and he followed this up in 1968 with *Soulville/The Thrill Will Still Be New* (62546). *45 Discography for Coral Records 62000 Series: 1958-1970*, <http://globaldogproductions.info/c/coral-62000-series-us.html>.

DePue: What was Beverly's vote on that equation, on that decision?

Peters: The good fortune is I'm married to a woman who has really been willing to support my pursuits. She gave up a lot in my pursuit of a career in corrections and how that all worked out so nicely. I'm confident to say that if I had thought that I really could make a go and be successful as an entertainer, she was open to that as well.

DePue: Did she go to college at the same location you went?

Peters: She did not. She graduated from LeMoyne-Owen College, which is another historically black school in Memphis, Tennessee.

DePue: And her degree?

Peters: She graduated with a degree in elementary education, because she was first a second-grade teacher. I was not good as a teacher in those couple of years that I was a teacher. Beverly loved teaching and was exceptional at it. I can remember names of kids in her room in the second grade, (DePue laughs) she talked about it so much. So she graduated with a degree in elementary education.

DePue: How did you end up at SIU for graduate school?

Peters: Another blessing and good fortune. I decided I needed a master's degree to get Terry Bassom's job, so I started talking about the prospects of getting a master's degree. And one day, a fellow was reading a trade magazine—I don't remember which one—and he said, "Hey, you might be interested in this." And it was an article about a program that they were going to have at Southern Illinois University, where they were going to select twelve people to have this graduate program to train people to be managers in the field of criminal justice. It really was kind of the front-runner of the criminal justice program at Southern Illinois, at Carbondale, and it was run out of the crime and delinquency center there on the Carbondale campus. I applied and was one of twelve people accepted into that program.

DePue: Carbondale is a little bit different kind of town, I would think, than Memphis.

Peters: Carbondale was culture shock for me. Remember that I've spent my time now in Memphis and in Nashville—and in Nashville, on an absolutely black, African-American campus. Down the street is Fisk University, another historically black school; Meharry Medical School, another historically black school. So that side of Nashville was all black and the black experience. So I've now spent all of my formative years in the cocoon. The food I ate, the music, my social experience, my academic experience—all black. I go to Carbondale. Culture shock. Here is different music; here is a different sociology. I found the adjustment frankly very challenging. I didn't like pizza. (laughter) I didn't like rock music. So it was a serious, serious adjustment for me.

DePue: And this is 1969?

Peters: Yes.

DePue: A lot of turmoil going on (laughs)—

Peters: A lot of turmoil there. Exactly, exactly.⁸

DePue: I guess I'm trying to find a good way, an eloquent way of asking this question. Did you like that experience?

Peters: I did not. I wanted to be in the rhythm and blues world; I wanted to be in the experience that I was comfortable with. Now, it turned out to be, in terms of my own growth, very growth-promoting. I needed to be integrated into the larger American society. I didn't know I needed to, but I did. So it was a good developmental experience for me to begin to know people of other cultures, people of other inclinations, to come to know Caucasians or white people in a real way. It's interesting that—you know all of the stereotypes that white America had about black America? I had all of those stereotypes about white America. So all of the negative things that were believed about us, we believed were true of white people—and certainly that they all were absolutely against us and absolutely committed to our oppression. That's just as misguided as many of the stereotypes that people have—or had at that time—about black folk. So it was a needed experience, but not one that I was looking for, after, or even welcomed. So it was cultural shock.

DePue: Another thread I want to pursue here, especially at this point and beyond: you're going to SIU to work in criminal justice, and I would imagine at that time it was all about rehabilitation.

Peters: Yes.

DePue: What was your position on that question, which has kind of gone on a roller coaster in criminal justice for a long time?

Peters: Oh, I was absolutely convinced that people, offenders, could be rehabilitated, and that there was an affirmative obligation on the part of correctional professionals to

⁸ Angered by the killing of four Kent State students by the Ohio National Guard, and frustrated by racism, the war in Vietnam, and the ROTC presence on campus, among other issues, fifteen hundred Southern Illinois University students began a major demonstration on May 7, 1970. Conflict between students, Carbondale police, and the Illinois National Guard steadily escalated, resulting in a weeklong battle featuring the widespread use of tear gas against students and numerous acts of vandalism by students. On May 12, after twenty-five hundred students marched on the home and office of Delyte D. Morris, the university president, and threw rocks through his windows, SIU officials cancelled classes until the start of the summer quarter. Katie Laux, "From Bancroft Way & Telegraph Avenue to Woody Hall: Student Demands and University Failures at the University of California at Berkeley and Southern Illinois University at Carbondale" (senior thesis, Southern Illinois University, 2002), IllinoisHistory.com, <http://www.illinoishistory.com/katielaux-protestpaper.htm>.

provide programs and services that were designed to return them to the community better people than they were when they were first incarcerated. So yeah, I was very much out of a school of thought—and was, of course, going to college and graduate school at a time when that was certainly in vogue. Part of the whole idea of the program at Carbondale was to cultivate leaders in a movement to rehabilitate offenders and be more humane, to have a more humane correctional system than what had existed heretofore; and I very much bought into those notions, and to some extent still do.

DePue: How would you characterize that academic experience? Was that a good academic experience?

Peters: Outstanding. We were very fortunate, the people who completed that program. They really designed courses of study around our needs to grow into people who could manage and lead in criminal justice. And a number of people who came out of that experience did go on to lead in various ways in criminal justice. It was an outstanding experience.

DePue: I know you never went back to take Terry Bassom's job. What happened?

Peters: I didn't, but there was certainly a fascinating thing that did happen. I went to work in the Illinois corrections system, and about four or five years in, I went to a conference in Dallas, Texas, and ran into a fellow who was in my fraternity, whom I had known at Tennessee State, and we kind of said to each other, "What are you doing here?" And I told him I was working in corrections in Illinois. He had Terry Bassom's job, (laughter) so an African American whom I did know ultimately had that job. I got the biggest kick out of the fact that he had that job.

DePue: And you were happy where you were at at the time.

Peters: I was happy where I was at the time.

DePue: What did you do then? I think you had an internship while you were still at SIU?

Peters: I had a couple of internships. The more significant one was an internship at a juvenile institution called Pere Marquette, just north of Alton, Illinois, on the river, near Grafton, Illinois. And in my internship there, a fellow whose name was John Platt—he was the superintendent—took an interest in me and introduced me to people in the Illinois corrections system, most notably a guy named Peter Bensinger, who was then the director of corrections. And Peter went on to run the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency.⁹ Peter Bensinger was the director of corrections, and I was introduced to him and a fellow whose name is Samuel Sublett Jr., who had a major impact on my development and really became my mentor. They

⁹ Bensinger served as DEA administrator from 1976 to 1981. On his appointment as director of corrections, see Jim Edgar, interview by Mark DePue, May 22, 2009, Jim Edgar Oral History Project, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield, IL, 71-72.

became aware of me and, when I finished my master's degree, offered me a job at St. Charles, and that started my career in Illinois corrections.

DePue: Wasn't it kind of unusual that an intern should get introduced to the director of corrections? It's a huge institution.

Peters: It was, and so we have to give John Platt a lot of credit for investing in an intern in that way. But John decided that he thought rather than go back to Tennessee, I should stay in Illinois, and actually was pursuing the department to allow me to become his assistant superintendent at his institution. So he wanted them to become aware of me as a prospect for a middle management position in this small juvenile institution. He was only partially successful, in the sense that they did offer me a job but not working with John Platt. I'm indebted to John for his early investment in me and for introducing me to people who could make a difference.

DePue: Was your first job in Department of Corrections—beyond the internship—at St. Charles, though?

Peters: It was—which was the last place I wanted to go, by the way, because it was so much like the Jordon State Training School for Boys. And in Illinois, they had these smaller institutions that at that time were called juvenile correctional camps, and that's where you really could have a lot of hands-on experiences with kids and really provide more guidance and counseling. And I really enjoyed that internship at Pere Marquette, and that was what I wanted to do, not go back into the large training school kind of institution. But that's where the opportunity was; there I went.

DePue: There'd been quite a lot of moves already. There's a lot more to come. What's Beverly doing at each one of these steps?

Peters: Beverly was a teacher, and so when we were in Nashville, she was teaching second grade. We came to Carbondale—one of our good fortunes and blessings was she took special education courses when she was getting her degree.

DePue: This had to be really early in that program.

Peters: Absolutely. This was actually right before the federal legislation that required schools to have special education programs and so forth, and so she was trained and had enough coursework to get a special ed certification.¹⁰ We came to Carbondale to look for housing, and while we were in Carbondale, one of the office people said, "You know, here are some school districts around, if Beverly wants to make application and so forth." So she went to Marion; and the personnel people became aware that she had special ed certification, called the superintendent, and Beverly went over and was actually interviewed on the front lawn (laughs) of the superintendent of the Marion School District and hired on the spot to become a

¹⁰ The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975).

junior high school special education teacher in Marion. So she actually had a job before we had housing. (laughter)

DePue: I know a little bit about Carbondale. There's a long tradition of a thriving black community in Carbondale.

Peters: Yes.

DePue: And I think I know enough about Marion to know that there wasn't much of a black community there at all.

Peters: Not at all. I don't recall this with certainty, but I'm fairly certain that she was the only black teacher that they had. But because of this legislation that had recently passed and the demands on school districts to gear up to provide special education services to students who required those services, they looked past any considerations for race and hired her because of her qualifications.

DePue: Did she have a rewarding experience there at Marion?

Peters: She had a good experience there.

DePue: How long were you working at St. Charles, then, and what were you doing there?

Peters: About two and a half years. At the time, St. Charles was probably the largest juvenile institution in the country. There were eight or nine hundred kids there at the time. And so in an effort to try to break down this large institution, they went to a unit management system to try to provide more hands-on experience with kids, more programs for kids. Peter Bensinger was very much into the whole idea of rehabilitating kids in particular. I was one of the program administrators in one of those units, so I was a lower-level middle-management person at St. Charles, responsible for programs and services for kids.

DePue: What was the racial makeup of the students, the kids?

Peters: It was a predominantly black institution—certainly a significant number of white kids, but probably 65, 70 percent black, a lot of kids out of Chicago.

DePue: Was that a reflection of the overall population in the state?

Peters: No. (laughs)

DePue: I should—

Peters: African Americans are disproportionately incarcerated in the country, so wherever you go, we represent a larger percentage of the incarcerated population than we represent in the larger population.

DePue: Was that reflective of the corrections population, is what I meant to say, at the time, in Illinois.

Peters: Yes, yes.

DePue: Racial tensions among the young kids?

Peters: Not as much as one might think. A lot of tensions, but not so much racial as much as along the lines of the aggressions that kids who are incarcerated bring, from whatever environment that they come from. So a lot of challenges in terms of resocializing them, helping them to function and to get along, to keep down violence, that kind of thing. The nature of corrections at the time was—to a large extent, the correctional staff was white, predominantly, and the inmate population was predominantly black, so the whole issue of staff development and training and sensitivity was very much an issue.¹¹ So the racial issues were as much staff issues as they were issues among the kids who were incarcerated.

DePue: What was the most challenging aspect of working with those young people? What was it that was bringing them there in the first place? Maybe that's the way to ask the question.

Peters: The real challenge was having enough commitment to the kinds of resources that kids needed to deal with resocializing, developing discipline; getting them the kind of educational services that they needed to go from, again, kids who were illiterate or near illiterate to kids who could function in an academic setting and so forth. It's very challenging, even then, to get a commitment of the kinds of resources that it takes to do a good job of resocializing, rehabilitating, and reintegrating kids back into their communities, which is why in more recent times, there has been a turning away from the whole idea of rehabilitation and so forth. That's an expensive undertaking that the society is quick to run out of patience with, the notion that if we're having a hard time providing good educational experiences for kids in the community, why should we be making those kinds of investments for people who were incarcerated. So there's always tension around resources.

DePue: One of the things that's going on at this same time, when you're involved in the rehabilitation and corrections business, is the demographics of the American family are changing. Now that I think about it, you remember very vividly—you remember to this day—when you were five or six years old, asking yourself, “How can I possibly get out? There's no way out of my circumstances.” Is that one of the things that you're encountering with these young people?

¹¹ According to a 1974-1975 survey of 929 Illinois prison guards—a survey which provides an interesting overview of an important part of the world Peters was entering—85 percent of the guards were white. Peters's background was also somewhat anomalous in another sense; only 16 percent of the guards surveyed grew up in cities with populations greater than 25,000. James B. Jacobs, “What Prison Guards Think: A Profile of the Illinois Force,” *Crime & Delinquency* 24 (April 1978), 186.

Peters: Absolutely. There is, certainly among incarcerated kids, a reality that they don't have much prospect of a future in which they're going to prosper and things are going to be okay. The communities that they come out of don't give them much hope of that, and so now that you are in the system, so as to speak, there is a certain despair. Kids don't own up to that kind of despair, but they're aware of that. They're up against it. There are not many good prospects that things are going to be okay. And the staff in those institutions is aware that the prospects aren't good. The people who really are invested and who really care don't have a real sense that this is the last chance this kid may ever have to turn her life around or to turn his life around. It's tough sledding. And particularly knowing that even if you can make a turnaround with this kid and get this kid invested, you're going to turn this child loose at some point—back to the old neighborhood and the old way of doing things, and the old lack of opportunities—and it's hard to figure out how to impact on where this kid is going back to. So it's challenging.

DePue: Could you tell, in the corrections system, that oftentimes there was an erosion in the families in these cases, that the youth were coming there because they didn't have that strong foundation of family and community?

Peters: I was certainly aware that most of the kids who came into corrections, and that more and more kids were coming from situations where they were being raised primarily in female households with very young parents, which was not unlike my own situation early in life. So you're very aware that the parents of many of these kids have limited abilities to know what to do about managing their children, and especially in the environments where they live. You don't want your son to be violent, but you live in a very violent neighborhood.

DePue: In your experience, what worked in working with these kinds of youth?

Peters: I think the thing that most works is a kid having an awareness that adults have not totally given up; that they have some ideas about what to do with and about them, and that they're committed to seeing to it that something is done with and about them, whether it's dealing with their illiteracy or dealing with their anger and their hostility. But first and foremost, that adults haven't given up, and secondly, that they are committed to doing something about their circumstance and their situation. Then, if you can deliver programs and services that work, you're onto something. But it begins with a sense that there are possibilities, that there are prospects for my future that are better than my past.

DePue: Would it be fair to say that what you were trying to create in working in these environments is those same kinds of moments you had with Miss Felton and the dean?

Peters: That's what kids need. And I don't want to romanticize that. As I said earlier, it's not just a second chance; it is then the investment in efforts to deliver change and life-changing experiences, you know? So many kids—so many adults—who are incarcerated in Illinois today, dropped out of school before sixth grade. There is no

hope, or little hope, for kids who don't get a sense that academics matter, that learning matters; so if you can't get that turned around while you have them captured, they're going to prison.

DePue: St. Charles was just the first of many locations—and I think we're going to run out of time today to get through all of these, but we can pick that up and move through them fairly quickly next time and then get into the meat of the Edgar administration. But where after St. Charles?

Peters: I then went to East St. Louis to work in community-based corrections. And that was an exciting period of time, because in or about 1973, the federal government started investing in grants to states to help move kids out of training schools—large institutions—into community-based programming, believing that if you can put programs in those communities where kids live, you can have a greater impact, and, in fact, can do it more cost-effective. So I went to East St. Louis and was responsible for the thirty-or-so southern counties, providing small group experiences for corrections kids as much as possible in the communities where they came from.

DePue: Another rewarding experience for you?

Peters: Another big learning experience in terms of how to lead people and how to manage programs and institutions.

DePue: So you're towards the bottom of the corrections rung of the ladder, if you will, to use a bad analogy. The next time we get together, we'll talk about going to Chicago. I'm going to finish with this question for you today: What were your career aspirations in these early years with the corrections department?

Peters: While at St. Charles, I decided I wanted to be director of corrections and had an experience at St. Charles, where I applied for a job that I didn't get and was, I'll say even to this day, wholly, by far away, qualified to have. And I got an explanation from the person who made the decision, that I thought was more an excuse than an explanation. What he said to me was that I didn't have a certain skill that they wanted. I made a declaration that day—because of a song I heard on the radio—that I would never be in a situation to want a job that I wasn't fully, in every way qualified to have. I developed for myself a motto that said, "Ready, even if you don't get to go."

DePue: I think that's a pretty good way to finish for today. It's been a very rewarding experience for me to hear these stories, and I think it's important for everybody to hear these kinds of stories. Such a positive message that you've got. So thank you very much, Howard.

Peters: Thank you.

(end of interview, part 1))

Interview with Howard Peters

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Interview # 2: December 21, 2009

Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Good afternoon. Today is December 21; it's a Monday. It's 2009. My name is Mark DePue. I'm the director of oral history at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, and today it's my honor to interview Howard Peters. We're going to be talking to Howard about his experiences in the Department of Corrections and as secretary of Human Services. Good afternoon.

Peters: Good afternoon.

DePue: This is part two. I'm sure people who were watching part one of your interview got fascinated with your life and the story that you had to tell, just as I did, so they're hopefully looking forward to this second session as well. And I thought this would be a good place to start—to interject the role that religion played in your life, because I know that you are an ordained minister. So before we get back into your Department of Corrections career, if you could tell us a little bit about how that happened.

Peters: (laughs) I grew up in church. As I mentioned in other discussions, my grandmother and my mother are both very committed to their faith and to God, so I spent time in church as a child and was always hearing from them about God and their God and what God would do. And ultimately you have to believe for yourself. I did become a believer, and in 1999, I preached my first sermon. Preaching was never something that I wanted to do, but it was something that I believed the Spirit of God had spoken to me about for a number of years; and I finally surrendered and preached my first sermon in 1999, and preach every chance I get. I'm an associate pastor at the Union Baptist Church in Springfield, teach Sunday school every Sunday morning, and, as I say, preach every chance I get.

DePue: That story, then, at least the preaching portion of it, comes well into what we're going to be discussing today. Do you recall the moment when you were baptized?

Peters: I do indeed. I was actually baptized (laughs) in Memphis, Tennessee, in a swimming pool. (DePue laughs) And I remember being a little bit disappointed because up until that point, people were actually baptized in a pond, and that always seemed more religious and spiritual and special to me. So when finally I was a believer and confessed Christ and was going to be baptized, my assumption was we

were going to go to the pond; and when you're at the pond and the mothers are singing, it's a very, very spiritual situation. Instead, I was baptized at the local swimming pool. Probably a lot more sanitary (laughter) and a lot more safe. But yes, I remember quite vividly.

DePue: Was this the shallow end of the pool?

Peters: It was.

DePue: How old were you at the time?

Peters: I was in my early teens. I don't recall precisely how old, but it would have been in my early teens.

DePue: And I assume throughout your career, you stayed active in church activities as well?

Peters: Yes, particularly after I moved to Springfield. Early on in my career, we moved a lot, so we were affiliated with various churches as we moved. When we came to Springfield in '91, a pastor of a local church actually came to my office—I had recently been appointed director of Corrections—and claimed me as a member of his church. Rev. Rudolph Shoultz, who was then the pastor of the Union Baptist Church. And as he requested, I did start attending there and ultimately joined. He was a great mentor for me, and eventually he was the pastor that ordained me.

DePue: Just like so many other people in the Bible, then, it wasn't you choosing them; they chose you, huh?

Peters: That's exactly right. That's actually scriptural. Jesus taught that. We didn't choose him; he chose us, and God decided to call us out and call us unto himself.

DePue: I think last time when we left off, we had you in East St. Louis, and I wanted to start with your move to Chicago. Would East St. Louis be right?

Peters: I did spend a period of about five years, from '73 to about December of '77, I believe, and then I went to Chicago to be responsible for juvenile field services in the Chicago, Cook County area. So we had some community-based correctional programs, parole services that we ran, some vocational and alternative school programs that we ran for kids there in Chicago, Cook County.

DePue: That's a huge area. Cook County—you're talking about five million people at the time?¹²

¹² In 1980, 5,253,655 people lived in Cook County, down from 5,492,368 in 1970. Richard L. Forstall, ed., *Population of Counties by Decennial Census: 1900 to 1990*, Prepared by the Population Division, U.S. Bureau of the Census, Washington, DC, 1995, <http://www.census.gov/population/www/censusdata/cencounts/files/il190090.txt>.

Peters: It is a huge area, and it was a growth spurt for me in terms of being able to manage bigger, more complex things. I have really had the good fortune to see my career progress through a series of steps where progressively larger opportunities came. Actually, after a year managing juvenile corrections programs in Cook County, I then was asked by Governor Thompson to become the regional director for Children and Family Services in Cook County, and that was another eye-opening experience. The whole idea of protecting children from their parents, from abuse and neglect, is a daunting and difficult undertaking. I have an abiding respect for the people who do this work.

DePue: When you were doing that, did you step away from the corrections work, or was this an additional duty?

Peters: No, I actually left the Department of Corrections and went to the Department of Children and Family Services and took on the responsibilities of regional director in Cook County for that period of time.

DePue: Now, this is one of those jobs where you're rarely a hero. There's lots of problems and issues that come up. Are there any instances that stand out in your memory during the time you were doing that?

Peters: It was a good experience and a learning experience, but as I say, a very, very difficult experience. We completely reorganized the Cook County Children and Family Services during the period of time that I was there, and got a better handle on making sure that children who were abused or neglected didn't suffer second and third incidences of abuse—which sometimes can be fatal—before we intervened. So it was a good experience. It was a very difficult experience. I stayed there for a little over a year and then went back to corrections as the superintendent of the largest juvenile institution, at St. Charles—the Illinois Youth Center at St. Charles—which you will recall, I actually started in a lower level position in Illinois Corrections at St. Charles.

DePue: Was that a refreshing move back, or did you regret it—or a little bit of both, making that move?

Peters: The Children and Family Services experience had been a real learning experience, a real growth experience, but I did feel at that time, that I was more suited, more prepared, for a career in corrections than a career in child protective services. I think that we added some things, we improved some things, and then it was time to move on. So I was glad to be back in more familiar territory, if you will, but St. Charles was a huge challenge as well. At the time that I became superintendent there, the community was in uproar. They were having record numbers of escapes, and kids were running away, stealing the neighbors' cars, breaking into neighbors' homes, and people were calling for the institution to be closed. It was a crucial moment in the history of Corrections as far as that institution was concerned. So I got a call from the director of Corrections actually asking if I knew someone I'd recommend for the job, and on the third time he called me looking for

recommendations, I said to him, “You know, I think I’d be interested in doing that.” And so then I returned to corrections and became superintendent there, and was superintendent there, I think, for the next four years.

DePue: It sounds like that move was something of you being the fire brigade, riding to the rescue. Would that be about right?

Peters: In a lot of ways, a number of positions that I’ve had in my career were kind of fire-brigade experiences. When I was asked to go to Children and Family Services, it was a fire-brigade experience, and then coming to St. Charles, and there were some other stops along the way, in adult corrections, that fit that same pattern.

DePue: When you went from Children and Family Services back to the Department of Corrections, did that require picking up the phone and talking to Governor Thompson?

Peters: Actually, the director of Corrections, a guy named Gayle Franzen, had worked that out with the governor once I said that I was interested in the position. The question then was what to do about the Cook County region of Children and Family Services. That got worked through, and I was off to St. Charles.

DePue: Now that you’re back in the youth center—this is basically where you started your career. You’re in corrections, and the true meaning of the word “corrections.” I want you to reflect on that a little bit, working at a place like St. Charles. What does that mean? How did you approach really trying to solve these young men’s problems? And I assume it was young men you were working with.

Peters: That’s correct. I had the good fortune of a man whose name is Samuel Sublett Jr., who actually adopted me as a mentee.¹³ He really became my mentor. He was involved in something called the accreditation process for the American Corrections Association, and early on in my tenure back at St. Charles, he gave me the book of standards and said, “Here is something that you can take a look at”—with no real expectation that St. Charles was an institution that in the near term could be accredited. Actually, no juvenile institution in the country at that time had been accredited. And so I looked at the standards for a period of time and then declared out loud and to the staff at St. Charles that we’re going to become the first juvenile institution in the country to be accredited by the American Corrections Association.

One of the great utterances of my career, (DePue laughs) because what it required us to do was really examine every operation, every policy, every procedure

¹³ Sublett, a native of St. Charles, Illinois, was a national figure in the corrections profession. Beginning in 1974, he served every American Correctional Association (ACA) president as a senior standards adviser. He also had a ten-year term on the ACA Standards Committee. Beyond his work on standards, he was a president of the ACA and sat on the group’s board of governors. “Samuel Sublett Jr.: Standards Innovator Receives Walter Dunbar Accreditation Award,” *Corrections Today* (June 1994).

in that institution, and not just did we have a policy or procedure, but to measure the practice continuously against the policy and procedure. It allowed us to go from an institution that the people in the community wanted closed, to being, especially for a large juvenile institution, somewhat of a model institution. We didn't become the first institution accredited in the country; we were the second juvenile institution accredited in the country. A small juvenile institution out East beat us by a few months. But it was, again, a great experience in terms of my own growth and development as a leader of people, as someone who could inspire people to do what was viewed as unattainable. Because St. Charles was an old, large institution, and no one contemplated, at that time, that big old large institutions could meet the standards. So when you first utter that as a goal, the reaction is, Is he serious? (laughter) It turned out that I was serious, and we got it done.

DePue: Take you a while to convince the staff, though, that this was worth doing?

Peters: Absolutely, but not just that it was worth doing—that it was possible to do, because it was old, it was crowded, it had a poor reputation at the time, and it was in a head-down, stay-below-the-radar, just-try-to-survive kind of mode. And here is this notion that we're going to lead; that we're going to be a head-up, proud operation; that we're going to lead the rest of juvenile corrections into this accreditation movement. And that's actually what happened, but it did take a lot of work to help it catch on with the leadership of the institution and then the rank and file. You can't be—and certainly couldn't at that time—an accredited institution, without really broad-based commitment and investment on the part of the staff. And so they had to learn that I was committed enough and strong enough to take them there.

DePue: Was part of the accreditation process that you had to meet certain goals for actually proving that young men's lives had been turned around?

Peters: There were standards that deal with everything—treatment and rehabilitation and education and vocational programs and security, right down the line. Every aspect. There were, as I recall, about 450 or 480 different standards that you had to meet. And by the way, it required—when you were ready to be evaluated—a team of people from outside of the state of Illinois to come in and evaluate your facility against these 480 objective standards. So it wasn't, "Do we like these people" or "Do we think they're trying," but, "Are they actually meeting national standards?" And you had to meet each of a high percentage of those standards. And we came out in the upper 90 percent of meeting all of the standards that were established for a juvenile corrections institution. And it was a multi-year work. This was not something that we said we were going to do, and in a couple of months it was achieved.

DePue: Do you recall any of those things specifically that really worked well in terms of effectively changing a young man's life for the better, or maybe something that didn't turn out the way that you had envisioned?

Peters: Oh, there are many instances where kids' lives were changed and turned around, and it has as much to do with—as anything—the investment that young people, young men, see you as making in them. Can you get the staff really invested in a meaningful and real way in helping this young person believe that there is the prospect of a future in which they do constructive things, in which they prosper? And yes, we have seen it, where you take an adolescent who is literally illiterate—cannot read—teach that child to read at a fifth-, sixth-, seventh-grade level, and a brave new world opens up for them. You teach them some self-discipline. The thing that young people—and it's a serious problem in our country today—need is to recognize that there are forces in the world stronger than the will of a fifteen-year-old, and that they can begin to have some discipline about themselves and some restraint.

And I think of many, many times in the course of my career where you see young men, young people, beginning to get a glimpse, a grasp that they can learn, that they can transcend the environments where they came from, that they can be disciplined, and that they can do worthwhile things. If they're illiterate, you've got to teach them to read. If they're addicted to drugs, you've got to get them treatment and get them unaddicted. You've got to teach them the discipline of work and those kinds of things. So there are many, many instances. I remember one young man in particular—and this young man really comes out of my first experience at St. Charles—who was just a mess. I (laughs) wish I could tell you his name, and I could give a shout-out to him. We actually shared the same birthday. And there was not much hope for a turnaround in his life, but we got invested in him, got staff invested in him, and years later—when I was now warden of the Centralia Correctional Center—on a Sunday morning, a very handsome young man knocked on the door of my residence. I opened the door, and this young man rushed to give me a hug and told me who he was, and we sat and talked for hours about the changes that had occurred in his life.

And the thing that you have to remember, that people have to remember, is when you invest in young people, you don't get an immediate return on that investment. They don't all say, "I wish someone had told me this years ago. Oh, what a wonderful person you are." (DePue laughs) So you have to give them, each one, your best effort, the best programs and services that you can, and then you see

what happens; you hope for the best. You know that if you don't, they'll continue in despair. But when you do, there is a return on that investment, oftentimes, like in this case, years later. I had no idea, really, that I was reaching, and that we were—and it wasn't just me; it was the team of people I was working with—reaching this young fellow. But his recollection of it when we were sitting on my porch that day was how invested we were and the things that we said to him and the things that he remembered from that experience. But he wasn't saying at the time, "Oh, I'm going to remember this forever." (DePue laughs) "This is really going to be useful to me."

DePue: Yeah, I'm sure he wasn't.

Peters: Yeah, so there are those instances where you get feedback years later, of the impact, and you see a young man with a family and with a career and doing well.

DePue: How hard—

Peters: There are also disappointments.

DePue: Yeah. I was going to say, how hard was it for you—having the kind of background that you did, and your own personal story—to see these young men coming there who really had no kind of family foundation? Was that a difficult thing to deal with for you?

Peters: It is difficult not just for me but for all of the people who encounter young people in this kind of condition—a sense of, Where do I start? And the thing that I have found is that leaders have to work to keep the staff's spirits up, to keep their sense of optimism, to remind them that this really is good work; this is work that's going to have a return. You won't see it during the period of time that you are invested in this young man or this young woman's life, but failure to make the investment is to condemn this young person, and to make the investment has a promise of hope. We never know how young people are going to turn out. People were pretty pessimistic at points in my life about how I was going to turn out, and perhaps with good cause; but if some of the adults get invested, it's going to matter.

DePue: Now, when we had met earlier, you suggested that I should ask you about, "Where is my mother?" Is that a story that comes to mind?

Peters: Oh, yes. That was during the period of time that I was at Children and Family Services. It's very difficult to protect children who are neglected and abused, and during some of the effort to make sure that children are not abused or neglected a second or a third time, there's a tendency to grab up children and put them in foster care or in substitute care or in group homes, believing that's the way to protect them. And I had an experience that helped me understand that you've got to be more careful and more thoughtful and diverse in your effort. It was two young girls, who are now teenagers and had spent most of their lives in substitute care—from one foster home or group home to the next. And these two young girls came into the office this particular day just screaming, "Where is my mother? Where is my mother?" and feeling that they had been robbed of their roots, had been robbed.

And we can make some pretty harsh judgments sometimes about the usefulness of parents. They have addictions, they have problems, and we decide to write them off. But we have to remember that their offspring will come looking for them. Their offspring want to be grounded in their parents, and whether we realize it or not, they are. So we really do have to be willing to make the investment in trying to, as much as possible, sustain children in the context of their families and work with difficult families, and not just grab children and put them in substitute care. We have to think about how we can reunite children with their parents; otherwise, they will wake up one day with an empty space inside of them that they will want filled. It was just a harsh learning experience that day with those young girls; to remember that, when you're working with young people, [despite] the judgments that you can make about the hopelessness of their situation or their parents and [the need to] write them off and think that you can put them in a better place or better situation, you have to be careful and remember that children want connections with their roots.

DePue: We've been talking about other families and your role in helping young men and your role of helping children who are finding themselves in a very chaotic situation, but this is during the timeframe you're building your own family, I believe. It seems to me that you're moving every couple years, and wives have opinions about that sometimes. How did Beverly deal with all these moves you're making?

Peters: I had the good fortune of being married to a woman who was highly supportive of my career aspirations. Remember that this is a woman who has known me since second grade. We were in second grade together, graduated from high school together—so this is someone who knows me. She was a teacher. We graduated from college the same year, and as much as I did not find teaching to my liking, she loved teaching. So she was a good teacher. I can remember kids who were in her room in the second grade the first year we were married. As I moved in my career, she taught in public school, so she would, every couple of years, find herself having to find a new teaching job. Because she was trained as a special education teacher, she was able to get a new job each year. But it was to her disadvantage, because she would develop a reputation as a master teacher, then she would move. And sometimes, at the time that I was being offered a promotion or a new job, she was as well, and she conceded to go where I needed to go in pursuit of this career. I had decided early on I wanted to be director of Corrections, and I was willing to pursue the kind of experiences that it would require to become director of Corrections.

She took off a few years to have our sons in the middle seventies. We have a son who was born in '75 and one who was born in '76. And when she decided to go back to work, in about '78 or '79, by then she had decided, and I think wisely, that she would just teach in the Department of Corrections so that when then they wanted to move me, they'd have to move her as well. So while I was superintendent at St. Charles, she was actually teaching at the correctional institution for juvenile girls at Warrenville. And it did turn out that as I moved to various prisons, the department would move her to teaching at a neighboring prison. It wasn't desirable for us to work at the same institution, especially if I was the superintendent or the

warden of that institution, so she would get a position at a neighboring institution, which sometimes would be forty or fifty miles away. So to her disadvantage, but she endured it, only to now tell people the story that the minute I became director of Corrections, (DePue laughs) the first thing I did was fire her. That's not exactly the way it (DePue laughs) went, but she did leave Corrections after I became director of Corrections.

DePue: You mentioned last time—we finished off with your aspirations to eventually become the director of Department of Corrections, and you just mentioned it again, so this is probably a good time to bring it up and to elaborate on that a little bit. I'm thinking that as a fairly young man new to corrections, the thing not to say to all your colleagues is, "I think I want to be the director someday. That's what I'm going to do." That might alienate people in the process. And also I'm thinking that many people would approach that and say, If that's what I want to do, then I need to get more involved in politics, because that's how you get to those kind of positions. What were you thinking at the time, and how did you approach that?

Peters: I'll first tell you that it didn't as much alienate people as it humored them.

DePue: So you let people know? You weren't shy about that.

Peters: I was very open and verbal about the fact that I intended to be director of Corrections, so much so that when I actually became director of Corrections, people would come up to me and tell me this story. They would say, "Do you remember, in '82, we were at this place, and you said you were going to be director of Corrections, and we all started laughing, and you didn't laugh?" (laughter) And I didn't remember every one of those situations, but I certainly remembered some of them, and it was just an indication that, yes, I was very open about the fact that I intended to be director of Corrections.

And keep in mind—why would people laugh? At the time I was saying I was going to be director of Corrections, there were maybe one or two people in the country who were African Americans who had been directors of Corrections, and there hadn't been one in Illinois. And people were thinking, Even when there is, (laughs) why you?

But I was serious about it. And I tell this to young adults and young people starting out in the profession all the time: it matters if you set career goals, because you move toward what you think about. I decided, for example, they're not going to make me director of Corrections unless I can show that I can do difficult things, so I sought out difficult jobs. You said earlier—used the term "fire brigade." I made myself available to go into situations that were troubled, with foreknowledge that if I couldn't make a contribution and I didn't prevail, I was going to get fired, because I served at the pleasure. I didn't have civil service protection and that kind of thing, so I served at the pleasure of the director and the governor. So I made myself available for difficult assignments because I came to believe early that it's in those assignments wherein lies both the proving ground and the learning experiences, the

things that I needed to learn. Now, I wasn't always realistic about the things that I needed to learn, but I had the good fortune of being put in some situations where I learned some things that I didn't even know I needed to learn. So I began to pursue opportunities. The other thing that I was very conscious of was developing a reputation of getting things done and being helpful. So I wanted to be the guy that, if you had a difficult situation, you would call up and ask for help, and I'd make myself available for help. I mentioned at the end of our last conversation that I developed a personal motto for myself, that I'll be ready even if I don't get to go, because I had no control over some things—whether I would actually get picked, whether the politics would be right, whether the equal opportunity would be there, whether race would stand in the way—I had no control over that and really decided not to bog myself down into that, but to look at and work on my own preparation. And I believed that God would see to everything else.

So no, I didn't get involved in the politics. That wasn't something that really even occurred to me. What occurred to me—and I know the old saying about, "It's not what you know; it's who you know." I was more focused on the "what you know" part of it and developing the kind of reputation that—I used to say, "I'm going to be the heir apparent." And what I meant by "heir apparent" was that if someone said, "If there is going to be a new warden of a maximum-security prison, who do you think it would be," people would have to call my name. If someone would say, "If there is going to be a new deputy director, who do you think it would be," they'd have to call my name. And ultimately, if a new governor is going to pick a director of Corrections who can really get this done, who do you think—and they'd have to call my name. That's what I was grounded in and focused on, and so I never got involved in the political side of it. That wasn't something I knew. I didn't know political people. I remember when Governor Thompson asked me to be regional director of Children and Family Services. He then asked me about the party chairman in the county I lived in, who was a very well-known political figure. I had no idea who he was. (laughs) So I didn't get involved in the political end of it. I had the good fortune of doing the work and ultimately getting recognized by political people—Jim Edgar, as someone that could be useful to him, that could be helpful to him.

DePue: I'm taking you back now to your high school days. Had you at least given up on the aspiration of becoming the smartest man in the world? (laughter)

Peters: Oh, let's just say I didn't stop wanting to be, (DePue laughs) I just didn't diligently pursue that aspiration as I pursued being director of Corrections.

DePue: You mentioned Governor Thompson, and during the time you're at St. Charles, there are a couple new initiatives that he's pursuing on the political agenda, if you

will, that impact the Department of Corrections, especially down the road. And I'm thinking of Class X felonies.¹⁴

Peters: And determinate sentencing. Governor Thompson did come in with a kind of get-tough-on-crime movement and did institute or legislate Class X offenses and determinant sentencing. And that was a move that was going on not just in Illinois but across the country, and it did have a major impact on the growth of Corrections, especially on the adult side, in terms of the prison population. At the time I became director of Corrections, for example, Illinois had built fifteen prisons in the previous fifteen years—in other words, a prison a year. Illinois, in 1991, when I became director of Corrections, had 21 percent growth, which made it the fastest-growing prison population in the country. So those measures did have an awful lot of impact on the growth of the size and the cost of the prison operation. And I'll talk—or certainly would like to at some point—a little bit about the Edgar years and some of the things that we began to do to try to get a handle on the kind of spending and the kind of growth in that population.

DePue: Yeah, we will certainly be doing that. I wonder if you can express your personal views about Class X and whether that was the right direction to take on this issue.

Peters: I don't know that I can say it was the right or wrong direction to take. Certainly in those years, there was a growing concern in communities about crime, and something needed to be done to get a handle on people who were really making communities and the streets unsafe for the people who lived there and who were trying to be law-abiding. But like any public policy, it needs to be revisited from time to time. There are unintended consequences, and so we find ourselves, or found ourselves, with a lot of people who needed to be in prison—and some people needed to be in prison forever. I've met guys in prison where you'd have a conversation with them and walk away from them and want to say, "Man, I'm glad you're locked up." But at the same time, there are many people that alternatives to incarceration could work or shorter prison sentences could work, so it's a matter of striking the right balance. So some of those measures needed to be revisited during the nineties and to some extent need to be revisited now.

DePue: Another one that was in discussion during those early years of the Thompson administration was the death penalty—another one that has a direct impact on what's going on in the Department of Corrections. Your thought on that?

¹⁴ In November 1977, the Illinois legislature passed a bill that grouped "rape, deviate sexual assault, aggravated arson, armed violence, armed robbery, treason, 'heinous' battery with intent to harm or disfigure permanently with caustic substances, certain hard narcotics transactions, calculated drug conspiracy, and aggravated kidnapping for ransom" under the new category of Class X offenses. Conviction of a Class X offense came with a mandatory six-year minimum sentence. *Chicago Tribune*, November 24, 1977. For Edgar's views on Class X sentencing, see Jim Edgar, interview by Mark DePue, June 9, 2009, Jim Edgar Oral History Project, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield, IL, 45-47.

Peters: You may not be aware, but I was director of Corrections and oversaw the first execution in over thirty-some years, when we executed John Wayne Gacy, and did several other executions during my tenure. So I'm not opposed to the ultimate penalty. I'm not opposed to the death penalty. As a matter of fact, to get ahead of the story, I was very disturbed and disappointed in Governor Ryan's actions. You see, there are people who may have been on death row, whose sentences needed to be looked at and a lesser penalty—life imprisonment—may have been appropriate for, but to do it on just a blanket scale as opposed to a case-by-case review, I found very distressing. Now, I'm well aware of the fact that in our country and in our state, the people who face the death penalty are mostly poor and colored. They are Latino, Hispanic; they are African American; and they're poor. So there is a class issue and a race issue that's affected and involved in this whole capital punishment question, but there are offenses that I do believe capital punishment is appropriate for. That's unfortunate, but there are people who demonstrate that they cannot live in a community and [have] the rest of us be safe. They kill, and they kill more than once. And some of those folks demonstrate that they can't live in a prison environment while the rest of the folks are safe—they kill in prison. It's a small slice, but there is a role for capital punishment. I think that we can do a much better job of making sure that people who do get sentenced to capital punishment have the right kind of trial, the right kind of review, the right kind of appeal process, to make sure that they really are guilty and this really is the right penalty. So we can do a better job with how we process capital crimes and capital punishment in our country.

The other part of the reality for me is that if capital punishment is going to matter and is going to work, the idea of a person committing a crime and fifteen, twenty years later, they're executed, is offensive to the sensibility. That's no deterrent and no real punishment, because the victims of that crime have suffered continuously for that fifteen-year period. So we've got to do a better job. We can be more efficient. But I'm not a person who is opposed to capital punishment. I do think it needs to be very narrow in terms of how it's applied, when it's applied, and I do think we need to look at the class issue and the race issue.

DePue: I think it's very important for us to get some markers as we talk about these more philosophical issues, and you've done a wonderful job. Now we're going to go into some more moves that you've had, and I believe the next move is to Centralia. Does that sound right?

Peters: Yes.

DePue: Nineteen eighty-four? February 1984?

Peters: That's right. February 1, 1984, the director of Corrections asked me to go to Centralia, Illinois—a place that I had no interest in going.

DePue: Why?

Peters: (pause) I'm an urban-center-focused person—at least, that's how I saw myself at the time. I wanted to be near and in an urban center. That's where the music I wanted to hear and the food I wanted to eat and the lifestyle I wanted to live was. And the director did me a favor and sent me instead to Centralia, Illinois. What I didn't know I needed was a real sense of legitimacy among non-African Americans, to be in an environment where you are the leader and really a minority—there were very few African Americans in Centralia and who worked at that prison. And my going there—although there were problems to solve, which was part of the reason for my going there—was very distressing to the staff there. And years later, I had conversations with people who worked very effectively with me there, who talked about crying when they heard I was coming and when they met me, because of assumptions that they made about the kind of person, the kind of leader, the kind of priorities I would have. And I was very unaware of the need to demonstrate to people my leadership rather than having it assumed.

So it was that I spent two years and a month in Centralia. And there was a very rigorous auditing process, performance auditing process, of institutions that the then-director of Corrections had put into effect. It was a very demanding process—even more so than the accreditation process. And in going to Centralia and looking at Centralia, I decided that Centralia would be the first institution that had no negative findings. Well, no institution had ever had no negative findings and here I come, this outsider, saying, "We're going to be an institution with no negative findings," which was viewed as impractical. We were the first institution that had no negative findings. And it wasn't just because I said it, it wasn't just because of me, but it was getting the staff to rally around a goal that was important to the operation of the institution, the safety of the staff, the safety of the inmates, the effectiveness of programs, and void of a focus on personality—mine or theirs. And again, it was a learning experience in terms of leading people.

DePue: You've mentioned this a couple times. In a couple of different institutions, you set very ambitious goals, and I suspect that in those institutions—you've already alluded to this—when you first stated those goals, there was some pushback and some reluctance to accept that. I wonder if you could explain how you saw yourself as a manager and your management process.

Peters: Somewhere along the line, I became aware of the notion that real leadership is taking people to places that they would not go on their own or by themselves. And after my experience at St. Charles and the accreditation process, I started to look for those imperatives. What's the imperative? What is it that we want to try to help people rise to another level, do what they wouldn't do without us? I would say to the leadership team—and after Centralia, everywhere I went, when we weren't performing well, I would say to our team, "They could do this without us. They don't have to pay us to get this result. They could do this without us. What's our added value?" So part of the style, if you will, as it began to emerge—it wasn't like I read a book or had an epiphany; it evolved out of my experiences of looking for, What's my reason for being at this place now?

DePue: You mentioned already that one of the challenges you had is you're a black man in a white world—at least Centralia was certainly that way.

Peters: Absolutely.

DePue: I'm wondering if you had to also overcome some hurdles as far as age. How old were you when you got there?

Peters: I don't recall age really being an issue, but what I learned later—coming from the juvenile division to the adult division was an issue. It didn't occur to me that it should be an issue, but as I learned later, they thought of me as a juvie; that I would come thinking that what inmates needed was a hug and that staff were too demanding of them, too hard on them, and that I would be more on the inmates' side than on the staff's side, because, after all, I'd come out of this juvenile background; most of these inmates are African American or brown. So they had those kinds of stereotypes or biases. I don't remember age being one of them. They had the big fish to fry, (laughter) and so they never got around to thinking about, He's too young.

DePue: I think we neglected to describe what Centralia was, what kind of a prison it was.

Peters: Centralia was a medium-security prison for adult males, and because of the growth spurt in prison populations in Illinois—because of some of the policies we talked about earlier—Centralia was a prison that was built for 750 inmates, as I recall, but had about eleven hundred inmates at the time that I went there as a warden.

DePue: And that wasn't an issue with anybody in the state or the accreditation process that you've talked about before, that serious overcrowding had occurred?

Peters: Serious overcrowding was an issue for not only the accreditation process but the day-to-day operation, to make sure that the programs and services and security and safety still excelled. The reality for me, having gone through the situation at St. Charles, was a sense that, We can do this. We don't have to let quality slip or security slip because we have more inmates. And fortunately, the people there bought into the notion that we can still excel, even though we're now double-celling in rooms that were designed for one person, and for some period of time had people sleeping in the gymnasium and sleeping in other spaces that weren't designed for housing.

DePue: You came from an environment where it was very much about helping these young men adjust and become productive back in normal society. Medium security—that's a little bit more towards the side of the spectrum that deals with, Maybe we just need to protect society from these folks. But was there still a healthy amount of corrections, and how did you find that balance?

Peters: There was. Even at the period of time that I went to Centralia, we had an agreement with the local community college to come in and teach vocational programs, to teach college-level courses. We had a full blown school program. So there was still

in those days a commitment to the notion that we wanted to return these people to the community better than they were when they were first incarcerated. So there was still a commitment at that time for vocational treatment programs, academic programs.

DePue: Maybe we're getting too ahead of the story, but you said "in those days," "at that time." Attitudes have changed towards that now?

Peters: Certainly did as the cost of corrections continued to increase. As people became more negative about offenders, they started raising questions about, "Why should inmates have academic and vocational programs? Why should they have college programs? Why should they have recreation?" So what I will label a meanness did begin to evolve into the process—to expect and be concerned less about the kind of treatment that offenders get and more just keep them locked away, feed them, focus on security and not some of these other kind of things. Fortunately, to some extent, maybe, that came more after the Edgar days and after my period of time in Corrections. You can see a real decline in the number of academic and vocational programs and treatment programs that took place following that. Now, don't—

DePue: So that is a perception that the public has, not necessarily the mission that the Department of Corrections has?

Peters: It's certainly not shared by the corrections professionals. To this day, there are some education, vocational programs that people are still struggling, trying to give these incarcerated people experiences that are going to allow them to return to the community more likely to be law-abiding than they were when they came in. So that effort continues. It continues with less support than was the case earlier. And I don't want to put this on the public exclusively. This is a political phenomenon as much as it's a public phenomenon. People who run for office tap into those negative vibes, if you will, and they campaign on getting tough and eliminating these programs for these inmates, and they target—or they have targeted at times gone by—inmates and prisons as places that should be more strict and less concerned about treatment and that kind of thing.

DePue: What's next after Centralia?

Peters: I then went to Sheridan, a prison west of Joliet, in LaSalle County. Again, a medium-security prison that was housing far more inmates than its designed capacity at the time. Sheridan is a town of—I think they claimed a population of about seven hundred, so the prison population was bigger than the town. My children were the first African Americans to go to school in the town of Sheridan—because we actually lived in the little town of Sheridan—and my kids were in school there for a couple years. So it was another opportunity to build on the Centralia experience.

DePue: I know that Centralia now is a drug rehab program. Was that the case—

Peters: It's actually Sheridan that's a drug rehab program.

DePue: And that's what I meant to say.

Peters: It was not at that time; it was a regular medium-security prison. The drug rehab came much, much later. It's only about three or four years old.

DePue: And you were there for how long?

Peters: Two years and a month.

DePue: The kids are getting used to going to new schools, too.

Peters: (laughs) That's right. When we went to Sheridan, my children's request was, "We've got to have a dog." (laughter) When we left Sheridan, it was, "We want to be in a town with a swimming pool and a movie theatre." (laughter) So their needs were those of sixth-graders that were just basic. And as it turned out, Pontiac was where I went after Sheridan. They did have a swimming pool and a movie theatre.

DePue: And the hierarchy of prisons in Illinois—you already alluded to the fact that, He's working with youth; that's not quite like in the big leagues. Pontiac—how was that seen in the hierarchy of things among the folks in the Department of Corrections?

Peters: Pontiac's the big league. There were basically three maximum-security prisons: Pontiac, Stateville, and Menard. To some extent, Joliet was considered a maximum-security prison, but really it was just three: Pontiac, Stateville, and Menard. Very, very difficult places to manage. The day I was asked to go to Pontiac—and, by the way, I was looking for maximum-security experience, but—

DePue: Why?

Peters: I did not believe an African American could become director of Corrections who didn't show and demonstrate that they could do the toughest jobs, and the toughest jobs were in those three maximum-security prisons. I believed you had to show you could successfully and effectively run a maximum-security prison, but I wasn't willing to go to Pontiac at the time that I was asked to go to Pontiac. A year earlier, a dear friend of mine had been killed there, a man whom I loved had been killed there, and I just didn't want to go to Pontiac.¹⁵ It wasn't that I wasn't still interested in maximum security; it was too soon in a real way for me to go there. The director of Corrections convinced me it was the right place for me to go and that he needed me there, because when I went to Sheridan, the agreement basically was things were okay at the maximum-security prisons at the time; go to Sheridan and kind of be the person in waiting, so that when there is a fire to be put out in a maximum-security prison, that's where you'd go. As it turned out, the day I was asked to go, which was April Fools' Day of '88, there was a fire to be put out. The inmates in

¹⁵ On September 3, 1987, two Pontiac inmates—acting as part of a broader circle of conspirators—killed assistant superintendent Robert Taylor as he worked at his desk in a converted cell. Like Peters, Taylor started his career at the Illinois Youth Center in St. Charles. *Chicago Tribune*, October 17, 1987.

the condemned unit had literally set on fire the condemned unit, and it was a serious fire. And as they were flying me into Pontiac, you could see the bellows of smoke, black smoke, coming up from (laughs) the institution, and that's the scene and how I became warden at Pontiac. So I'm walking into this prison, and the fire trucks are going, and the ambulances are going, and smoke is towering up, and the media is there.

DePue: Microphones in your face?

Peters: Microphones in your face. "What are you going to do to fix this?"

DePue: And what's going through your mind?

Peters: I was really taken aback because—there was this landing strip behind the prison, and we actually flew over it, and you could see this humanity running in different directions and the urgency of the situation. That didn't really get my attention, in terms of the reality of the situation. That really happened after the fire trucks were gone and after the media was gone, and I was walking through this prison and seeing the situation. And if you are in that situation and something inside of you doesn't go, "Damn," you're on drugs. So I was really struck in that moment by the magnitude of the challenge, that you've got to convince the staff—and the inmates, for that matter—that this isn't the normality, that the fire brigade isn't the normality; that this place can be managed orderly and people can be safe, and the staff can expect to come to work, do their eight hours, and go home safely. So I was very struck later that day by the immenseness of this challenge, and you could see the despair on the faces of the staff and the inmates alike, that this is bad.

DePue: What had gone wrong under the previous administration?

Peters: I don't know that I want to speak to that.

DePue: What did you decide you needed to do to fix the problem?

Peters: I knew that I needed to convince the staff that there was a way to exist without running from one crisis to the next, from one emergency to the next, from one injured employee or killed employee to the next, and that we could do that and still be humane. There was a lot of anger, and in some ways rightfully so, at Pontiac at the time. The person who was a dear friend of mine was a superintendent there and had been killed. Just a couple of years earlier, an assistant warden had been killed by former inmates while he was visiting in Chicago. And those events caused a rekindling of the 1978 riots, where people were killed. So there was a lot of anger among the staff there.¹⁶ And inmates felt a sense that these people are out to get us. (laughs) Some of these inmates were dangerous desperados. They were in

¹⁶ For a sense of the difficult challenge Peters faced and some background on the various incidents he mentions, see the *Chicago Tribune's* series "Pontiac State Prison Still a Battleground," which started July 17, 1988. For example, in the year leading up to the series, Pontiac employees reported 256 attacks on them by inmates.

maximum security for good reason. Some of the guys, or most of the guys, in the condemned unit were awful people in a very real way. So it was a matter of wanting to appeal to the staff from inside of them—to call upon them, their higher calling to do good, professional work and to be professionals, to require high standards, and to be humane, all at the same time. To be an accredited institution, even in the face of this kind of history.

DePue: What was the relationship with the community like when you got there?

Peters: That's very interesting in the sense that this prison was very important to the community. The warden of this prison was the most watched (laughs) person in America as far as they were concerned, so they were highly invested in your methods, and they wanted to know what was going on. When there was an incident and the emergency alarm went off, it struck a chord, because they'd had situations where inmates escaped and did awful things to people in the community. So it was important to keep the community informed about our goals, our progress, what we were doing, how we were doing it. And I was much more, in that sense, a local public figure and became more aware of that responsibility for the first time at Pontiac because the community was so invested in what went on there, and rightly so. But mostly supportive, because the prison was the economic engine of the area; they were mostly supportive. They wanted the prison, they wanted things to go well, they wanted it run well, but they were skeptical. People coming through to say, "We're going to fix this," generally were short-lived and didn't last long.

DePue: So you're walking into a job where people kind of burn out after a year or two. Would that be fair to say?

Peters: It's fair to say that wardens didn't last long. There is a conference room where all of the former wardens' pictures are around the wall, and I used to ask them, "When I leave, don't put my picture on this wall." (laughter) And they put the tenure of the warden, from this date to that date, and there were individuals after individuals who were there less than a year, so a two-year tenure was the exception.

DePue: What was the policy as far as the Department of Corrections was concerned? How long would they typically—maximum length—leave somebody in a place like Pontiac.

Peters: As long as you could (laughter) keep it working and keep things going well.

DePue: And I assume all the other pictures on the wall were of white men.

Peters: Not exclusively, but mostly.

DePue: So you weren't necessarily the first African American on the wall?

Peters: I absolutely was not the first African American on the wall. There were three African Americans whom I knew during their tenures at Pontiac, so there were at least three African Americans who preceded me there.¹⁷

DePue: What changes did you make to turn things around?

Peters: I don't think of radical changes as much as really focusing on doing the things that we were supposed to do, making sure that our policies worked, that people were actually following them in a rigorous auditing process to make sure that we were self-evaluating. Are we doing this the way that we're supposed to? Are we classifying inmates properly? Does our count procedure work? Is our movement procedure being followed? And we would set up tests to see if contraband could be smuggled in, if inmates could be out of the cellhouse they were supposed to be in and not be missed. And so in some ways, the self-evaluation process was stepped up to really try to keep staff on their toes and paying attention to what was going on.

There were some programs or operations that needed radical change. We had an industries program where they made materials out of sheet metal, and it was (laughs) a good program in terms of doing the signs that needed to be made out of sheet metal but disastrous in terms of the amount of and the number of weapons that inmates could fashion out of the scrap metal. And so we put in place a process where we wanted to eliminate every source of an illegal weapon, of a shank, of metal that shanks could be made out of. I was ambitious enough to want a shank-free environment, because that's how inmates and staff receive their most serious and life-threatening injuries. I can't say that Pontiac really became a totally shank-free environment, but I do believe that the number of inmate-fashioned weapons that were in that environment substantially decreased through the efforts of staff and looking at our operations and figuring out, Where is the material that this shank that we've found—where did that material come from, and how do we cut off the supply of that material?

DePue: You mentioned just a bit ago the evaluation of some of the inmates, and I would assume that obviously some are much more violent. Were you able to treat them differently than the general population?

Peters: To some extent. Now, do keep in mind that the prison system is very crowded at this time. Pontiac is housing twice as many inmates as they should. There was no super-maximum security prison in those days.

DePue: We're going to get to that later.

Peters: Some days, in order to put someone in segregation, where they are under closer supervision, you had to let someone out, and sometimes you'd have to let someone out early. So we didn't have many of the resources that later came to corrections to

¹⁷ Appointed in 1973, James C. Fike was the first black warden at Pontiac.

allow the population to be even better managed. It was a hundred-year-old institution with lots and lots of challenges, including crowding.

DePue: Were gangs a problem for you?

Peters: Absolutely. In some ways, a nightmarish problem. When you have people who are bad people, in a situation that's crowded, in an older prison where the architectural design works against you, problems like gangs are a huge problem.

DePue: Any way you can really work against that to mediate that?

Peters: Of course you work at it. You try to keep the predators separate from those inmates who might be victimized. You try to do a lot of gang intelligence to figure out who's creating the problems and try to hold them accountable for the problems that they create. You try to separate, by moving to different prisons, some of the people who are the most difficult. When I first came to Pontiac and we really had to get some controls in place and help send a message to the inmates that we were prepared to run the prison—having staff run it rather than they run it—we actually shifted some bad guys outside the state of Illinois, just recognizing that we had to send a message that we're not taking anything that you fellows dish out. So some of the guys who were the most problematic shot-callers, as they were referred to, found themselves way off in another land, so as to speak, all with the intent of them getting humane treatment where they were, but far enough away that they weren't able to get people hurt back at Pontiac or other prisons in Illinois.

DePue: What was the racial climate of Pontiac during the time you were there, especially when you first got there?

Peters: Most of the inmates were African American and Latino, Hispanic. That's just the makeup of the maximum-security population in Illinois. Most of the staff was Caucasian. The big problems, though, I would not attribute to race. The management issues were dealing with the reality that you have this physical plant that works against you because it was built a century ago, you have twice as many inmates as this place is designed to hold, and the inmates are constantly up to no good.

DePue: (laughs) But the prisoner-on-prisoner violence wasn't necessarily racially motivated?

Peters: No, it was more gang-motivated than racially motivated. It was more that kind of polarization than it was having much at all to do with race.

DePue: Let's move to the real essence of what we were supposed to be talking about all along, and that's your relationship with Governor Edgar, and especially your time in the Edgar administration. What was the first opportunity you had to meet—I would assume Secretary of State Edgar at the time? Is that right?

Peters: I never met Secretary of State Edgar.

DePue: So the first opportunity you had to meet him was when?

Peters: He was governor, and I was being considered for the position as director of Corrections. I said earlier I was not politically involved, so I never was involved with the campaign activities and those kind of things. He was elected governor, and I got a call on Christmas Eve and asked by a person, “Why haven’t you applied for the position of director of Corrections?” It never occurred to me to apply. I just was of a mind that the governor looked around to see who could do the job and decided if he wanted to talk to someone. So this person asked me to send them my information. I did, that day, and then things started to happen in terms of interviews with the selection committee. There was a committee of people that the governor had appointed, as a part of his transition process, to interview candidates for various positions, and so I became involved in that process.

It did turn out that the mayor of the town of Sheridan, where I lived as warden of that prison, actually wrote a letter to Governor Edgar, asking that I should be considered director of Corrections—which I found fascinating. And State Sen. John Maitland, who later became a congressman, also wrote a letter in my behalf. No, State Senator Maitland did write a letter, but he wasn’t the person who became a congressman; the state representative at the time, who later became congressman, also wrote a letter to the governor in my behalf. And these were men who got to know me as warden because of their concern for the prison and how it was functioning in that district, not from a political perspective. So I sent my information in, and people started talking to me and examining me and looking into my background, and when that vetting process was sufficiently done, I was invited to come to Springfield and meet with Governor Edgar.

DePue: Explain that experience. Describe that.

Peters: (laughs) I’m a person who isn’t inclined to be in awe (laughs) or to be nervous or that kind of thing. I remember being very nervous (laughs) that I was actually going in to see the governor, and it was a good discussion, in spite of the fact that I was nervous and apprehensive. It was a conversation that really, I think, characterizes in a lot of ways who Jim Edgar is when it comes to the public administration. He was really wanting to understand my history, my experience, what I brought to the job. He was really trying to figure out, Is this a person who is prepared to do this job? Is

this a person who is adequately prepared for—is he up to this job? There was no discussion of politics and whether I voted for him or how I had voted or any of that; it was really all about Corrections, what I thought needed to be done. It was about his reality that we were in a recession and the kind of dollars that in a sense had been poured in to building new prisons and so forth over the previous fifteen years was not likely to be there; and if I felt I was up to the task of managing within the resources that were available, and what my thoughts were about that.

DePue: Do you know if he was interviewing other people for the same job?

Peters: As I'm recalling now, he interviewed two people. Now, there were other people, in addition to the two people that he interviewed, who were being considered and who were interviewed by the transition committee, but to my knowledge, Governor Edgar interviewed two people.

DePue: Did he make any commitments at the end of your meeting with him?

Peters: Commitments in the sense that I was going to have the job?

DePue: Yeah.

Peters: He did not.

DePue: What were your thoughts when you walked out of that meeting? (laughs)

Peters: That I was not going to have the job.

DePue: Really? Why do you say that?

Peters: I actually didn't think that I put my best foot forward. I was very conscious of, as I said, my nervousness and the intensity of the moment, so I didn't think I had done my best work in that interview.

DePue: That being a goal that you'd had for many, many years—well over a decade—kind of a downer walking out of that experience, then?

Peters: Absolutely, and I guess part of it was the pressure you put on yourself, that this is the moment (laughs) that you've been waiting for, in a sense, and so it has more importance to me, I think, in an odd way, than it had to the governor. He'd have many other opportunities to make key decisions about appointments and so forth, but this was my moment, and I just really didn't think I had done my best work.

DePue: When and how did you find out that it was your job to have?

Peters: About an hour after the interview, I got a call from the governor's office saying that the governor was indeed going to appoint me to the position and when he was going to make the public announcement.

DePue: What was your reaction at that moment?

Peters: I was, of course, excited; I was relieved. This was something that for almost twenty years I had wanted and worked for, at least the way that I thought you worked for something like this, so I was just tremendously excited and had great anticipation of the contribution I now could make.

DePue: Were there discussions between yourself and Governor Edgar—questions like, If you got this position, what kind of philosophy would you have; what kind of changes would you want to make? Anything like that in the discussion with the governor?

Peters: Absolutely. He wanted to know what kind of manager and leader of Corrections I would be, so we did talk about the work, the challenges, and what my thinking was; what my philosophy was; how I felt about capital punishment; how I felt about incarceration, control, security. And that's what I meant earlier—it really was an interview for a professional position by a professional. He was very focused on what kind of director he would get in me.

DePue: What were your initial impressions of the man?

Peters: Serious, impressive, thoughtful. I was surprised at how much he actually knew about the goings-on in Corrections, how much thought he had given to—if I were appointed—the importance of the first week, the first month of that, and how that would evolve. I was impressed.

DePue: I know you also got a New Year's Eve call. Can you tell us about that call?

Peters: The New Year's Eve call was the call about whether or not—or why I had applied to the job. Is that the call you mean?

DePue: I thought you'd mentioned earlier that was Christmas Eve. This was the New Year's—

Peters: Oh, I'm sorry, that was New Year's Eve when I got the call about why I hadn't applied and to send in—to fax in, actually—my information to trigger the process.

DePue: And who was it that called you that night, that day?

Peters: A woman named Janis Cellini.

DePue: Who I've interviewed, and who has the distinction of being known today as Edgar's patronage chief. I think she was his personnel director, but that's the term that the general public generally knows her, so...

Peters: And she was a good one. (laughs)

DePue: And interesting that the patronage chief, who normally makes the connections between politics and political support and the governor and these plum assignments that the governor now finds himself with. And you already mentioned—the subject of politics didn't come up in that discussion at all?

Peters: Not at all. I have the sense that for this position and some others, the governor had made it known to his key people, like Janis, that what he was looking for was someone who had standing in the system, someone who had the right background and experiences to do the job. So her call to me, even though she was the patronage chief, if you will, wasn't a political one; it was [because] she had become aware of me. It was out of that—remember the heir apparent notion? It was out of that notion; that as she started asking people and looking around, on behalf of the governor, for people who were capable of doing this job, my name came up, and so she called me. And I had not known her prior to that phone call. I consider her to this day a good friend, and she proved to be very, very helpful to me in the course of my tenure in state government. But we didn't come to know each other through the political process.

DePue: I'm going to ask you a question that you can turn down if you'd like, but I would like to ask you about your own personal political philosophy.

Peters: Do you mean am I Republican or Democrat?

DePue: No, how would you describe your political philosophy? And I guess that would put you into one camp.

Peters: I'll say I consider myself a Republican. I consider myself a moderate, which sometimes makes it difficult to be a Republican, depending on the issue. But because of Jim Edgar and the opportunities that he made available to me, I became much more involved in the political process and felt at that time that I had much more in common with what might be referred to as a conservative Republican philosophy than a liberal one. Now, interestingly, I grew up—my mother is very political and is a lifelong Democrat and is active politically today at eighty-two years old. So it was a surprise to her (laughs) to find that I was a Republican, and maybe even to me, when I got serious about thinking about political issues and political questions. So my family considers me much more conservative than I consider myself. If Beverly were sitting here, she would not agree that I was a moderate. She sees me as much more conservative, and on some social issues, that's probably correct.

DePue: Did you feel that at the time that Edgar was asking you to be his director, you were in sync with his political platform as he was running for governor?

Peters: I'll have to confess that I didn't pay much attention to his political platform when he was running for governor, but I felt very much in sync with his philosophy with regard to crime and punishment. The conversation we had—I came away very comfortable that Jim Edgar was humane. He talked about wanting inmates to return

to the community better people than they were when they were incarcerated. We talked about treatment, but we also talked about punishment, so I came out of that conversation very comfortable that here is a person who wants the system to be controlled, has no reservations about consequences for bad actions. I came away knowing that in our tenure together, there was likely to be an execution. I knew that there were several inmates whose appeals were running out, and so we talked about that reality, that there would be an execution during our time together, and whether I was comfortable with that reality.

DePue: Did you have a sense that he was comfortable being the person who had to decide if the appeals were going to end and finally, I guess, sign the piece of paper condemning somebody to death? Did you have a sense of it at that time?

Peters: At the time that we were interviewing? Absolutely. We knew that we had to trust each other in that process, and we wanted to be comfortable that we were both prepared to do our jobs.

DePue: And as much as that's a crime-and-punishment issue, it's also a political issue, isn't it?

Peters: It can be made to be a political issue, but I will tell you that Jim Edgar did not function with it as a political issue. When a person's time came, we staffed the issue with the governor and key people around the governor; and the questions were not, "How is this going to look to the public," as much as how convinced we are that capital punishment is right in this case for this person, because he ultimately—in spite of what the courts had done and all of that—had a decision to make as to whether or not the execution would go forward. And I'll remind you that in one instance, while he was governor, a decision was made not to go forward with an execution but to commute a sentence.¹⁸ I can say that he did so, and those discussions had full recognition that if he did commute this person's sentence, there would be serious backlash in the media and in the public, and that was not a deterrent for him. He was more focused on what are the issues, what's right. He wanted to know what key people around him thought. Edgar has an interesting decision-making style—and we can talk more about that at some point—but he would cause a debate on critical issues among key people. He wanted to hear that debate. He'd ask the tough questions. He would almost at times be like, Let the three or four or five of you all fight about this verbally, and that would help him crystallize his position and see what the pros and cons were on both sides. But he was decisive, and ultimately he would decide. And no, he did not politicize this decision. I think it would have been unbearable had this just been about the politics of how we're going to look. I think he—

DePue: Unbearable to you or to him, or both?

¹⁸ Edgar commuted the sentence of Guinevere Garcia, who had been given the death penalty for killing her husband. *Chicago Tribune*, January 16, 1996.

Peters: Fortunately, I think both. I think that Edgar is a believer; he has faith of his own and has had a real interest, as conscious as he was of the politics of his position—had an abiding want to do good and to do right.

DePue: This is a big job you're going into, one that you'd aspired to, as we already have discussed many times, for many, many years. What goals did you have in mind when you walked into the job?

Peters: Let me first say, it was a big job, but I have to say—and I hope this doesn't sound and it's not taken as egotistical—I felt very prepared. As I looked back over the various positions I've had in parole services, in juvenile corrections, in three different prisons of different types in different parts of the state, in different environments of the state, I really felt prepared. I also felt that there were some people in the Department of Corrections who were up to the task as well. There were people in the department that I had an awful lot of respect for, and some of them were people who were to become deputy directors and other key positions around me as warden of prisons and superintendent of juvenile institutions and the key staff that I assembled in the director's office.

I felt we were up to the task, and the goals were to create in every prison an environment where people could come to work, do their work, and return to their families uninjured; that we would have programs and services that were designed to restore people to their communities better people. But, as I said, an awful lot of it—what keeps governors and directors awake about corrections is safety. Are people going to be safe? Is it going to be a safe work environment? And trying to help everyone understand that it can't be safe for the employees, it can't be safe for the staff, and not be safe for the inmates. It has to be an environment that's safe for them as well, and that we also owe to their families that these people are sent to prison as punishment, but not to be punished on a daily basis and live a miserable existence. So I wanted a corrections system that was respected around the country, that people believed that in Illinois, we're doing it right, but recognized that it's challenging, it's difficult.

The year I became director of Corrections, we had the fastest-growing system in the country. Jim Edgar came into a situation where there was a recession. We had new prison beds that we didn't have the money to open. So now imagine you've got a very crowded condition, staff and people are looking for relief, and there's a new prison that's been built down at Rend Lake—to come to be called Big Muddy—but we can't open it because we don't have dollars to do it. We had three work camps, as I recalled, and a work release center that had been constructed, but we had not the resources to hire staff and to operate those beds. And the staff is aware that we're going to get this new prison so our population is going to go down, and we're saying, "No, we've got to make this work with what we have right now."

DePue: So you understood walking in, and Governor Edgar did as well, apparently, that this growth spurt was going to have to come to an end?

Peters: We knew that the prison-building every year was going to have to come to an end, and we talked about that. The people of Illinois, we thought, couldn't afford to build fifteen more prisons over the next fifteen years—that that had to stop. It didn't mean that there wouldn't be some additional beds, and it didn't mean that those almost two thousand beds that had been built, which we couldn't open, that at some point we weren't going to open those beds. But we knew that we needed to look to alternatives to just locking more and more people up for longer periods of time. In the first year that I was director, because we had to squeeze ourselves inside of a budget that was not nearly enough, we eliminated for all practical purposes what people would refer to as parole services. There were district offices and regional offices and parole agents with caseloads all across the state, and that went away. We created something called PreStart, where we would actually start while the inmate was still inside of the prison, developing a strategy, developing a plan, so that when they left prison, they would have that plan to operate. And we had far fewer offices for that person to check in with to get some assistance with the plan and so forth, but we didn't have traditional parole and saved millions not having traditional parole in the sense that it had existed previously and exists today.

DePue: I want to go into that one more, and this might be a little bit awkward, but I think it would be important for you to give us a thumbnail sketch of what the Department of Corrections was at the time you stepped into it; then we can go back to a lot of these initiatives, and we'll start with what was going on with the parole services.

Peters: At the time I became director, Corrections had a designed capacity of about nineteen thousand. It was, in other words, designed to house nineteen thousand inmates, and we had almost thirty thousand inmates.

DePue: And that includes youth services?

Peters: Yes, that included about thirteen hundred juveniles. So we were a system that was considerably crowded. And the state was in a recession, and we had to come up with our share of reductions, of savings, because every dollar you spend incarcerating is a dollar you can't spend on education or early childhood services. So we're in a challenged period of time. That was the year, too, that the legislature went well into July, and the new budget's supposed to happen July first. They couldn't agree on a budget July first. We went deep into July trying to put together a budget because of the recession and how you balance all of these issues.

DePue: What was the male-to-female ratio like?

Peters: Oh, the prison system is mostly male. The female population was growing at a rapid rate. It was growing faster than the male population, but the good news is it was on a much, much smaller base. We had, I believe, at the time I became director, twenty-three prisons, and only one of them was a female prison. And then we had a work release center that was for females, and so most of the rest of it was male. We developed additional female capacity in the coming years, but at the time I came, we basically had one female prison, one female work release center.

DePue: Did you say there were twenty-three facilities?

Peters: Yes.

DePue: And they had built fifteen of them in the last fifteen years?

Peters: Yes.

DePue: So this is like a tripling of the facilities, if not the prison population. Would the prison population have gone up roughly the same amount?

Peters: I don't recall what the rate of growth of the prison population was, but in the eighties, there was an explosion of new inmates because of Class X and determinant sentencing and therefore a corresponding explosion of new prisons.

DePue: When you walked into the job, how much of it dealt with the parole services side?

Peters: We probably had twenty thousand, twenty-five thousand, releasees at the time I became director of Corrections. Now, that's not counting those almost thirty thousand who were actually incarcerated, but there were probably another twenty, twenty-five thousand who are in the community, who have served out their sentences and are on some period of community supervision or parole, as people traditionally call it.

DePue: How many employees did the department have?

Peters: I don't recall the actual number of employees at the time.

DePue: Thousands?

Peters: Oh, absolutely. Maybe, sixteen, seventeen thousand.

DePue: Do you have a rough estimate, then, of the guard versus prisoner ratio that you had in these prisons?

Peters: Each prison had a different ratio, of course, depending on the size and the configuration of the prison and the level of security. In a minimum-security prison, you're going to have a larger ratio of inmates to staff than you're going to have, for example, in a maximum-security or medium-security prison. So there wasn't one standard for the entire system—that wouldn't have been very efficient. The ratio had a lot to do with the design of the prison and the type of inmates in that particular prison.

DePue: And I assume that most of the prison guards were unionized?

Peters: No, all of them were unionized.

DePue: (laughs) So you had been a union member yourself for many of these years?

Peters: No.

DePue: Never?

Peters: I had not been a union member. I've never been a union member.

DePue: Give us a little reflection on the relationship between union and management, then.

Peters: I'm not sure how you mean the relationship between them.

DePue: Were there challenges in that respect?

Peters: Oh, absolutely. And I had always been management, from the time that unions first became legal in Illinois, back in '71 or '72, so I had not been in a union, and in some ways was an antagonist to the union.¹⁹ It was very interesting that when I became director of Corrections, the president of the union was supportive of my becoming director of Corrections, when we had had so many tensions over the years between us. But a degree of respect. I understand that unions and union leaders have a job to do, and I have a job to do, and our jobs and our focus of concern may at times conflict. It doesn't necessarily make either of us bad people; it means that we have to come to the table and figure out how to make these things work. Of course, if you have the kind of crowded conditions that we had and this new prison that's supposed to open, and you're not opening it, that creates a lot of tension with the labor union because they see that as new union jobs and an opportunity to relieve crowding in existing prisons. All of those parole officers out there were union members, and you're eliminating parole, from their perspective, so

¹⁹ As early as 1962, over half of Illinois' 1,100 prison guards joined the State, County & Municipal Workers union. *Chicago Tribune*, October 17, 1962.

you're eliminating jobs and their members. That always creates a lot of tension and issues that we have to work through.

DePue: So when you're talking about eliminating or drastically reducing parole services, that means you're firing a lot of parole officers?

Peters: Oh, yes, many of them.

DePue: And was the public response—this is my perception, maybe I'm wrong in this— Now we have all of these recently released prisoners out there, and nobody's supervising them to make sure that they're entering into the public in a way that's not going to be returning them right back to prison again.

Peters: That was one side of the story that others were trying to market and get out, and our side of the story was that providing surveillance of parolees was really not a realistic way to manage that population, because it's not as though you can keep up with twenty-three thousand people, or whatever the number is, twenty-four hours a day. And so we were trying to help the public and our own employees see that preparing these fellows for release well in advance of their release date was a more efficient way to provide for public safety; to see to it that they had a resume, they had some job prospects and so forth, well in advance of the release day. I think the public by and large accepted the strategy. The other thing that we were focused on, given the nature of the prison system, the crowded nature of the prison system, was making sure that we had sufficient number of staff to manage and control that population, and that that was a better use of the taxpayers' dollars than all of these parole officers all over the state that returned limited real value.

There were certainly some growing pains and some negative reactions to it, but I can tell you as I sit here and look retrospectively, that it mostly worked and mostly worked out well, and that the number of incidents with releasees during that period of time is not greater than the number of serious incidents today, where they actually returned to that process. Because there was always the hue and cry among staff who wanted to be parole agents and return to those days, when the Ryan administration came in, they hired hundreds of parole agents. And of course they got applauded by people who were the constituents of that. But if you look at how things actually work, if you look at the data, the period of time when we had the PreStart program worked fairly well and was a better return on the taxpayers' investment, I would suggest. And I think it's important to say this is not a statement about the employees who were parole agents; this is a statement about the system and the process and efficiencies.

DePue: Believe it or not, we've only got a couple minutes left. We've been at this for a while, and it's fascinating to listen to you talk about what it was like during the crucial periods when this explosion was occurring in the Department of Corrections system. So let me just ask this as the end question for this session, then we'll pick up the rest of the innovations you had to deal with and that you brought into the system as the director: on the parole services side, was this a decision that was

made primarily to save money or because of the inefficiencies you saw with the old system?

Peters: Those two issues belonged together. When you're spending taxpayers' money and when the taxpayer is saying, "We have no more money for you," (DePue laughs) efficiency and performance and results belong together—even, by the way, in good times, in times of prosperity. State officials—any officials—ought to be really examining, Are we returning a value for what we're spending? Are there other ways, better ways, cost-effective ways, of doing this? So yes, the economic times forced upon us a decision, forced a choice of if you want to buy this you can't buy that. But I would submit it's the right exercise. It was the right exercise for the time; it's the right exercise today.

DePue: I'm afraid we're up to the tyranny of the clock right now, so we'll call this session to a close. Thank you very much. It's always a pleasure to talk to Mr. Peters, and fascinating insights in the Department of Corrections—and more in the future. Thank you.

Peters: Thank you.

(end of interview, part 2)

Interview with Howard Peters

ISG-V-L-2009-036.03

Interview # 3: January 21, 2010

Interviewer: Mark DePue

DePue: Good afternoon. My name is Mark DePue. I'm the director of oral history at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Today is Thursday, January 21, 2010, and this is part three of a series of interviews I've been having with Howard Peters.

Good afternoon, Howard.

Peters: Good afternoon.

DePue: It's fun to be back here. A little bit wet outside, but the first video interview we've done this year, so I thank you for the opportunity of talking to you. When we left off last time, back in 2009, (Peters laughs) we were talking about your term as the director of Department of Corrections, and we'd gotten through a lot of the

discussion on taking over and administrating the department, and some of the philosophies that you were using. So I want to start with something completely different here to catch up with some loose ends, if you will, because in doing some of the background reading that you very graciously allowed me to do, I noticed that there was one article that made light of you being a weight-lifter. And in the same article, it also made mention that you had once played in Jimi Hendrix's band, played guitar with Jimi Hendrix.

Peters: Actually, I was for a period of time very much into weight-lifting, really enjoyed it, and it's only been in the last few years that my body can't take it anymore. (laughs) So I still work out, but not with heavy weights. But for a period of time, I was really into power lifting.

As far as music is concerned, while I was in high school and college, like so many young people, I had fantasies of being a real musician. I was more a singer, actually, than anything else, and I spent, as you know, my undergraduate years in Nashville. A fellow named Jimi Hendrix was in the military in Kentucky, not far from Nashville, and would come to Nashville on the weekends and play in the local clubs. And I would sing in the local clubs, so from time to time, we would work the same club at the same time. And he was just one of many, many amateur musicians who were in and out of Nashville, Tennessee, at the time. He was stationed at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, and would come up from time to time, and later, he went to Europe and became quite celebrated, quite famous, and the rest is history, as they say. But my small bit of contact with him was long before he was the Jimi Hendrix (DePue laughs) that the world knows.

DePue: Enough to make mention of it in this interview, though. I didn't want to let that opportunity pass by. Something of a renaissance man, then. Did you envision yourself as that? Because you are an ordained minister as well as being something of a musician, a power lifter, and then obviously the professional careers that you've had.

Peters: I never thought of it as being a renaissance person. You do what opportunities God makes available to you at the time. I have had the benefit and the opportunity to do a lot of different things, and for that I'm grateful and blessed. And you didn't even mention that I was also a dog trainer and showed dogs for a period of time.

DePue: Well, there you go. (laughter)

Peters: Which is another thing that I thoroughly enjoyed and is something that, when there is more time, I'll do again.

DePue: Excellent. Let's get you back to your years in the Department of Corrections, and I want to quote something from the *Bloomington Pantagraph*. It reflects something of your view towards your job: "Do we want to incarcerate, or do we want to educate? The money that we spend on incarceration is money that we don't spend on education, child abuse, or drug treatment programs." I wonder if you can reflect on that, especially since what you're doing at Department of Corrections is after all of these failures had occurred.

Peters: Remember that in the early nineties, prison incarceration was exploding around the country. Illinois, in 1991, when I became director of Corrections, had the fastest growing prison system in the country. We grew over 21 percent that year. And every state was building like mad. The problem with all of that was, as I was saying

in the article that you reference, every time we build a new prison—whether it costs eighty million or a hundred million dollars in pay; twenty thousand, thirty thousand, to incarcerate more and more people—those are dollars that are not being spent on the kinds of things that really can improve the quality of life in the society. And so people in my line of work at the time, who understood our role in public safety, understood our role in controlling and managing criminals, also wanted to cry out to the public that we've got to do more than just lock people up; we've got to care about early childhood education and those kind of programs and services that improve the quality of life for communities. I used to say often that the most important thing that we can do is deliver a child from birth to first grade, undamaged. So many people who later find themselves incarcerated are people whose harm that got them off track can be tracked back to events that took place before they ever got to first grade.

DePue: I think back to our first discussion and your own childhood difficulties and, would it be fair to say being rescued in the second grade in your case?

Peters: Absolutely. There's no question that—I don't imagine what might have become of me had not some of the people like Miss Felton, when I was in second grade for the second time, intervened in my life and had the impact that she had. And later on there were some others who also had profound impacts of either getting me back on the right track or helping propel me down the track.

DePue: And that's an important thing that I think later in this interview we're going to come back to again. But another shift in direction, and I want you to think back in that

year of 1993, the year of the Great Flood. How did that impact the Department of Corrections?

Peters: Governor Edgar had early on expressed an expectation that where there were opportunities to get inmates involved in real work, real public service, we ought to do that, whether that's picking up or cleaning up along the highways or cleaning up along lakefronts or river banks; we ought to find real work to put inmates to, that was going to be a service to the community in and around those prisons. And in the southernmost part of the state, we actually had a program where inmates were part of the emergency transport system, EMTs. We were constantly looking for ways to be of service in and around the communities where prisons were located. That was a part of our charge.

So when the flood occurred and people were working mightily up and down the Illinois River, up and down the Mississippi River, trying to preserve property, trying to preserve their homes, and in some ways to protect people, we got involved in a big way. We engaged thousands of inmates up and down that river system, working side-by-side, hand-to-hand with community people, and we received some of the nicest, moving correspondence from people in those communities who really did feel, when it was all said and done, that they survived, that their communities survived as well as they did, because of the work of those inmates up and down that flood line.²⁰ So it was a good experience for the system; it was a good experience for those inmates. Because we also, if you can imagine, had a lot of positive

²⁰ See Al Grosboll, interview by Mark DePue, October 22, 2009, Jim Edgar Oral History Project, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield, IL (ALPL), 6 and 23, for community appreciation of prisoners' flood relief efforts.

feedback from those inmates who felt that they had, for a turn, done a good deed, and they talked about and told stories about the families that they met, that they worked with and had an opportunity to do good on behalf of. So it was good for communities, good for the system, and good for the people involved, including the inmates.

DePue: How did you select the inmates who were going to be able to participate, and what did you do once they were out in the communities doing their job, in terms of security?

Peters: That's an important question to ask today. We made sure, first of all, that we not only looked at what their offenses were, but we also looked at their entire records and something called the statement of facts, which gives you an opportunity to really look at all of the circumstances around that commitment. In some instances a person might plead guilty to a theft, but they may have assaulted and battered someone on the way, that they weren't actually convicted of or charged with. We wanted to make sure that we knew a lot about the inmates that we were putting out in communities, so there was a pretty rigorous screening process. And I can tell you we had not a single adverse incident—and inmates and criminals will disappoint you, but we, in that effort, didn't have a single adverse event. In addition to the screening process, though, we had a lot of staff involved, making sure there was proper supervision. A lot of the wardens. As director, I was out there on a regular basis, not only seeing what was going on and making sure that there was proper oversight and supervision, but contributing to the work effort as well. So we

understood that even though this was to do a good thing on behalf of communities, it required proper planning, proper screening, proper oversight and supervision.

DePue: Did you have any of your own facilities that were affected by the flood?

Peters: We did, (laughs) mostly the prison at Menard, which is located right off the Mississippi River; it had some flooding problems. But most of the other situations we had—we had some other water problems or water issues, but they were relatively minor. The bigger problem, as I recall, was at Menard. And again, we had a lot of labor. (laughs) We had a big labor force. Menard was a prison of probably two thousand inmates or more, so we had plenty of labor, and it worked itself out. Governor Edgar actually went down with me on one occasion to look at the situation, look at the damage, and see what we needed to do to make sure we kept that prison online, and of course we were able to achieve that.

DePue: What was your assessment of how well the Edgar administration responded to that?

Peters: Very well, because there was great anticipation—first of all, when we first started recognizing that this was going to be something different from the normal spring rain season and high water season, the governor put together a group of people to start paying attention to what kind of efforts and what kind of help communities might need out of state government. So the Emergency Management Agency was involved; the state police were involved; Natural Resources; the Department of Corrections, Transportation, and others. We had a workgroup that was put together very early to start looking at what our options were, what communities would need, so I think that the Edgar administration responded very well. And I think that the people of Illinois, and especially those effected communities, based on what they

wrote to their editorial boards, what they wrote to us at the time, really appreciated the early response and the continuous response. We were in it to the end. And as I said earlier, not only did we have key staff people out there on a daily basis—deputy directors and directors and so forth—but the governor himself was out on a regular basis, evaluating and assessing what was going on and looking for other ways and other things that we could do to help communities through this.

DePue: This is, I would think, a rare occasion where the Department of Corrections is getting a lot of positive publicity.

Peters: It was, and it was a good period. In fact, so much so that the National Governors Association recognized us and invited us out and gave us an award before all of the governors for that effort. As I mentioned, it was a good effort. It was good for those communities; it was good for inmates. And actually, when you think about it, taxpayers spend a lot caring for prisoners, so when there is an opportunity to engage them in giving back, it's important to find ways to do that. And I suspect that Corrections today would be looking for opportunities to do the same thing.

DePue: Let's talk about a different kind of publicity, if you will: the pending execution in 1994 of John Wayne Gacy. Do you remember that? Can you tell us how that situation evolved over time?

Peters: Illinois had not executed anyone for an extended period of time, maybe twenty-five, thirty years, as best I can recall, because there was a period of time when capital

punishment was found to be unconstitutional. The state went through a process of reinstating a law that was tested and found to be constitutional.²¹

DePue: Yeah, I think that was early in the Thompson administration.

Peters: That's exactly right. And then people were convicted, and their appeal process worked its way through the system. And it came to be, that on my watch, inmates started running out of appeals and running out of time, and John Wayne Gacy was the first person who did. So we had the—

DePue: And you can't find too many more heinous criminals than John Wayne Gacy.

Peters: (laughs) That's true. It was, in some ways—when you think about killing someone, though, on behalf of the people of Illinois—and that's really what execution is about. We don't like to think about it that way, but the state is really asking for a group of people to put someone to death on behalf of the people of Illinois. It's a very demanding responsibility, and there's a lot of concern that goes with it. Oddly enough, your great fear is you don't want to mess it up. Put another way, you don't want to not kill this person. And when you think about those emotions, how odd and how unusual is that? But that's your responsibility. That's what you're being asked to do. So because we hadn't—in Illinois—done it in such a long period of time, we had to select the process, and it was of course going to be lethal injection. That was the method of execution that had come into vogue, moving away from gas chambers and electric chairs and so forth. And so we actually went to a couple of

²¹ In 1972, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled the death penalty, as then practiced, unconstitutional. In 1976, the Court clarified the grounds on which the death penalty would be constitutional, paving the way for its reinstatement in the states. Gacy was arrested in 1978 and sentenced to death in 1980. *Furman v. Georgia*, 408 U.S. 238 (1972); *Gregg v. Georgia*, 428 U.S. 153 (1976); *Chicago Tribune*, May 5, 1994.

other states to witness executions by lethal injection, to learn what we could learn, and put the process together, went through an extended training process with the people who were going to be involved. And when the courts made their final determination that it was the will of the people, we oversaw and carried out that execution.

DePue: What were your personal views about the subject?

Peters: I believe that there is a place for capital punishment. I think there are crimes, circumstances, and individuals, and I think you have to look at each of those—not just a crime, but the crime, the circumstance, and the individual—and I think that there are occasions where those three things collaborate in such a way that capital punishment is the appropriate sanction. There are people who just have demonstrated that they cannot live safely among people in the sense that the other people can be safe. So I feel and felt very comfortable with the executions that I've been involved with, because in addition to the review that the courts had gone through, we had an opportunity with the governor to look at and weigh all of the circumstances; because ultimately, he had the awesome responsibility to say, Yes, go forward with the will of the people for an execution. So we had those opportunities to review those situations as well. I don't have a problem with the notion that capital punishment has a role to play.

Now, like most people who've thought about this in a serious way, the social issues—the race and ethnic issues that are involved, the socioeconomic issues—to some extent are bothersome. When you look at who faces capital punishment in this country, you can't miss that they are black and brown and poor and usually come

from very troubled circumstances. And so you do take notice of that and worry that this isn't just something that's happening to people because they are poor and disadvantaged, but it is really a function of their crime, their circumstance, and their personalities.

So it is something to take into account, and that's why it's so important for a governor, I think, in the final analysis, when the court is done, to finally and once again weigh all of those circumstances and be courageous enough to say no, when no is the more appropriate course.

DePue: You mentioned earlier on in this discussion that one of your concerns was getting it done correctly, doing it right, and I do recall there was a bit of a glitch involved with this execution. Wasn't there something where they had to postpone the execution for just a few minutes while they figured out something?

Peters: I wouldn't call it a glitch, in the sense that nothing happened that wasn't anticipated and planned for and that we didn't have a solution to. So no, I wouldn't agree that there was a glitch. It took a few minutes longer than some people might have anticipated. The other thing that was always ironic is the press, the media, was in such a hurry—that it's going to start at twelve o'clock and it's going to be over by this specific moment—and we weren't caught up in that. We were just wanting to make sure that we did it right, so as to speak, and that is indeed what took place.

DePue: I want to change gears again—and a different kind of discussion. I know that in 1992—I believe it was 1992—the governor created an Illinois Task Force on

Crimes and Corrections.²² Would it be right to assume that you were involved in that?

Peters: Absolutely.

DePue: One of the recommendations that came out of that was about a supermax prison.

Peters: Yes.

DePue: And so that's the next topic I'd like to have you kind of flesh out for us.

Peters: Again, remember that the Illinois prison system was very crowded during this period of time, and with crowded conditions come other management problems. You have offenders in prisons that make it harder to keep order, harder to program and provide services for those inmates who are available to participate in what you would call rehabilitative services. In the Edgar administration, we were still committed to trying to do things that were going to increase the probability that offenders will return to their communities having been involved in programs and services that were designed at making them better people than they were when they first came into the system. For that to happen, you have to have the resources and the ability to say to a twenty-five-year-old or a thirty-year-old that there are forces in the world stronger than the will of a thirty-year-old. And there were just some inmates who were sufficiently disruptive and problematic that that commission and the corrections leadership came to a conclusion that we needed a prison that was designed with them in mind, designed to maintain the kind of control and custody and supervision of people who were aggressive, violent, dangerous, and disruptive.

²² Governor Edgar formed this group, headed by former U.S. Atty. Anton Valukas, in February 1992; it completed its work in March 1993. *Chicago Tribune*, March 23, 1993.

We looked at what the federal prison system was doing with that kind of population, and we looked at what other states were doing. We actually went to a number of states and looked at state and federal situations in terms of the management of that type of population and then came up with a very good design, I think, that was then built at Tamms. I was saying to someone in a different conversation earlier today, that I was the director during the course of that commission, it was certainly my recommendation that we move in that direction, and I was pleased that Governor Edgar made the decision and the legislature supported it. And I was of course involved in the site selection and all of that and made many trips to Tamms, but by the time it was actually built and operational, I've never been there. (DePue laughs) So I've never seen the operation and can't speak with any kind of authority with regard to how it's operated, but I know that its design and its intent were good in terms of allowing the rest of the prison population to be able to be managed better and programmed better.

DePue: Obviously just in various groups, you sit around in bars or restaurants, you talk about these things, and you have this legend, if you will, of what life is like for a prisoner at Tamms. What was the intention that you had? What would a typical life be for the hardened criminal who would end up in Tamms?

Peters: Understand that the intention was for safety; for control, supervision, and oversight; for the inmates there to be safe from harm from each other, for the staff to be safe from harm from the inmate population, and for the inmates in all of those other prisons where those guys were no longer being housed to be safe from their aggressive and sometimes terrorizing behavior. Because the people who were

selected to go to Tamms were people who not only had committed awful crimes in the society, but they were people who had committed awful crimes within the prison system—violent acts against other inmates, violent acts against employees in those prisons. So control, supervision, and security were the watchwords, if you will.

Understandably, then, they would spend most of their time by themselves in their cell or cubicle. They would have minimum contact with other offenders, and in fact, minimum direct contact with staff. And because of that level of security and supervision, that meant they spent a lot of time in their living quarters, in their cells, and that was understood. Now, it doesn't mean, in terms of design and intent, that a person might spend their entire prison sentence at that level of security. In so many ways, it's up to the offender. If you come to yourself and recognize that there's a better way to function and demonstrate that you can live in an environment with less security, the design was, and I'm sure is today, to prove yourself and move to less secure settings. But while you're at Tamms, the design was—when I was involved, anyhow—very much about supervision, control, and safety.

DePue: Once they're in their cell, I would assume there's a sink and a toilet and a bed.

What else might be there?

Peters: Since I've not been to Tamms, (laughter) I can't say, but more typically in those environments, you had what you needed for living purposes. As you said, you had a bed, you had running water, you had toilet facilities—those kinds of things. You could have books and reading material, but you couldn't have a lot of property.

DePue: So no TV, no computer.

Peters: Not that I'm aware of.

DePue: How much was the existence of Tamms a deterrent in all of those other prisons that you had? People saying, Oh, I don't want to go to Tamms, and so I think I better behave myself.

Peters: To some extent it was a deterrent, but more important than being a determinant for the inmates, it's the system having an option, the system having not to put up with your dangerous, violent conduct, and only having the option to ask you, "Would you please behave better?" (laughter) So what was important and what is important is that the system has a reasonable response in terms of managing people who don't want to be managed and keeping others safe from people who are otherwise intending to be very dangerous. Now, I am sure, and it is in my belief system that when you have that kind of option, it does have a deterrent effect on some offenders, and therefore some people will behave better. But I'm not naïve enough to think that it's going to make some of these guys who really are hell-bent and determined to do it their way, that it's going to change them or rehabilitate them. And that's why the real focus is, Does the system have the resources it needs to manage such people? In my tenure, in some ways, we didn't, but fortunately, we were able to work during my tenure to make sure that subsequent administrations did have more resources and more options.

DePue: Do you remember any stories involved with where you're going to put this supermax facility?

Peters: Not really. I can tell you that any time we were going to build a new prison, there were communities all over the state who would apply and want that prison in their

community, and so Tamms was no different. I am remembering (laughs) one issue. I don't know that I can remember all the details of it, but after the site was selected and we were ready to go to construction, someone decided that there was some mouse, some (laughter) type of mouse that was there or near there that might be an environmental concern.

DePue: An endangered species, perhaps?

Peters: Yeah. As I said, I don't remember all of the details, but it was something that momentarily was at issue that we were able to work through. I remember being pretty disturbed at the time that a mouse was going to (laughter) stand in the way of a major prison construction and development, but fortunately it didn't turn out to be the problem that originally was thought.

DePue: Now, let's face it, the public doesn't normally generate lots of sympathy for a mouse.

Peters: I don't think so, and that's why I was kind of stunned at the time that this originally was presented to me as a potential problem.

DePue: Maybe on the opposite side of the supermax approach to corrections: boot camps. And that was something else that was kind of a new trend in corrections at the time, was it not?

Peters: It absolutely was. We were looking, in the Edgar administration, for alternatives to the most expensive incarceration, long-term prison incarceration, and some other states had some experiences, some good experiences, with intensive short-term stays for mostly first-time, nonviolent offenders. So we got involved in testing out that concept as well and developed a couple of boot camps around the state, and the

early returns were that those offenders were recidivating—in other words, going out, committing new offenses—at a far lower rate than people with regular prison experiences with similar offenses. So for a number of years, boot camps were effective not only here in Illinois but in some other states as alternatives to longer-term incarceration.

DePue: This is roughly the same time, I know, that the Illinois National Guard got involved in the business. They established their Lincoln's ChalleNGe program, which was taking people, young offenders, who really weren't serious enough to reach the Department of Corrections. Were you involved in that program at all?

Peters: Only in providing some consultations with them and going over and speaking to the classes from time to time, when they would have kids getting their GEDs and so forth. The notion that we had in Corrections at the time was we wanted to work with communities and courts and others who were looking to do alternatives to incarceration. So with regard to some of those programs like Lincoln's ChalleNGe, it was clear that without some kind of intensive intervention, many of those young boys and young women and young men were headed our way, and we wanted to get involved in supporting the development and the sustainability of those types of programs. Some we got involved in directly, others more indirectly.

DePue: And for those kinds of programs—boot camps and what the Lincoln's ChalleNGe program was doing—what was considered to be a measure of success? Was there a percentage where, if you could prevent them from getting involved further in the corrections—

Peters: Yeah, the measures of success were, first of all, that you could instill the necessary discipline in these young people that they could get through the program, because the program was not going to bend to them. And that's the thing about so many young people then and now who are headed down a path that's going to bring them to terms of incarceration—the lack of discipline and acceptance that the world is not going to bend to their will. So the first measure is to impose on them enough constructive discipline and constructive activity, which is the other thing that so many of these young people are involved with. When you look at a lot of first-time offenders and you look backwards in terms of how they were spending their time and how they were spending their days, they were not in school, they were not working—they were idle. So the idea of getting up early and working all day, into the evening, is novel for so many of these folks. [By] getting them the discipline and the rigor of expectation and demand and challenge—so that they can see success; they can see that they can get through it—what you're looking for is the transference of that discipline, that work ethic you are trying to instill in them, that sense of achievement, out into the bigger world, the real world. That's what you were trying to do, whether it's a boot camp or Lincoln's ChalleNGe or other such programs. And of course, the ultimate determination is whether or not they go out and commit new acts that are against the law, where they are self-destructive. And again, early on, what we were finding is that there were indications that these programs were having some effect of these young men and women not reoffending at the same rate as persons who did longer terms of incarceration. That did not

mean that some of them didn't reoffend, but they reoffended at a much lower rate, and that's what you're looking for.

DePue: Yeah. You mentioned "early on"—later on down the road, were you able to see some benefits to it?

Peters: I'm aware—and keep in mind I've been out of corrections for a while—that today, boot camps are not used with the same degree of frequency and excitement on the part of corrections leaders as was the case when I was around. I have some sense that it is because there was a decline in confidence of the long-term effect of those types of programs.

DePue: We've gotten up to about 1994, and so this will be another change of direction, because '94 is a gubernatorial election year.

Peters: Yes.

DePue: And some things happen in 1994. In particular, I'm thinking that Lt. Gov. Bob Kustra—I think it was in June, late June of '94—kind of surprisingly made an announcement that he thought he wanted to be a radio announcer more than he wanted to be lieutenant governor (Peters laughs)—which I'm sure threw a couple curveballs Governor Edgar's way.²³ And very quickly, your name started to appear as a possible candidate to be lieutenant governor. So let's start by asking you, what was your political involvement in those first few years in the Edgar administration? Were you involved in politics in any way?

²³ Lieutenant Governor Kustra resigned his post June 28 and announced he would start work August 1 as an afternoon talk show host on WLS-AM 890. On July 18, Kustra reversed course and announced he would remain lieutenant governor. *Chicago Tribune*, June 29 & July 18, 1994.

Peters: To an extent I was, in the sense that I got invited frequently to speak at Lincoln Day dinners around the state. Those are the annual Republican day celebrations. So I became a frequent speaker at Lincoln Day dinners, and people in the political world came to know me—and when you are Director of Corrections, you have a certain visibility anyway. So I began to be known and get to know people in political circles, and I certainly was a strong advocate for Jim Edgar. So, to some extent.

DePue: How would you describe your political philosophy at that time?

Peters: I don't know what you mean by my political philosophy.

DePue: Your political views. Previously, we've defined that you were certainly comfortable with being in the Edgar administration and being identified now as a Republican.

Peters: Yes, I was a Republican and identified with the kind of values that are more typically subscribed to Republicans.

DePue: Did you have any political ambitions at this time for actually running for office?

Peters: (laughs) When you are involved in the kind of work that I had been involved in, whether it's corrections or being deputy chief of staff to the governor, you have some thoughts about being an elected official, maybe being governor.

DePue: So you did flirt with notions of someday running for governor?

Peters: Perhaps.

DePue: As soon as Kustra stepped down, of course the buzz in the political circles and in journalistic circles—Who are the heirs apparent? And Loleta Didrickson was one of the people who—it sounds like she kind of eagerly threw her own hat in the ring, with the notion that Edgar's going to be running against Dawn Clark Netsch, a female, and it might be good for him to have a female on the ticket, and it might be

good for him to have an African American or another minority on the ticket. And that, I think, is one of the reasons that your name surfaced as well. Were you actively seeking the opportunity to run for lieutenant governor?

Peters: I was not. That does not mean I would not have been interested, but I wasn't knocking on doors, actively seeking—I wasn't throwing my hat anyplace. (laughs)

DePue: People were asking you, though?

Peters: It would come up. It lasted a few days. Because keep in mind, Bob Kustra didn't stay a radio announcer very long; it wasn't very long before he was back as lieutenant governor, so this wasn't a protracted period of time.

DePue: Did Edgar or anybody in his administration approach you with the possibility of running?

Peters: I don't want to say that I was approached or not approached. I think it's best just to leave it at there was a buzz momentarily, and I'm a public servant, and so I might have certainly been interested. It didn't happen.

DePue: This is the last question I'll ask on this line, then. Was it rewarding or flattering to you that you were at least being considered by the general public, if nothing else?

Peters: I spent [my time], as we talked about in another conversation, trying to make myself worthy of opportunity, wanting—when opportunities came, and people had to say, “Who's capable; who can do this?”—to be worthy of my name being among the names that were discussed.

DePue: Fair enough. Any other activities or roles that you played once this Bob Kustra incident kind of blew over and Kustra decided to stay in the administration? Any other ways that you supported the Edgar reelection campaign?

Peters: Oh, I certainly strongly supported Governor Edgar's campaign and worked in various efforts to support that effort.

DePue: So you're out on the campaign trail?

Peters: Absolutely. I'd probably be out on the campaign trail today supporting Jim Edgar, if you could convince him to run for something. (laughter)

DePue: Well, we wouldn't be doing this interview if he had any aspirations for the future.

Peters: I know, I know.

DePue: July seventh was another challenge for the Edgar administration, because that was the day that he had a serious heart condition and ended up going under quadruple bypass surgery for his heart. Do you recall that?²⁴

Peters: Of course.

DePue: And what thoughts were going through your mind when you heard that at first?

Peters: I was of course surprised, because I saw Governor Edgar as a healthy person living a healthy lifestyle. I was surprised, as others were, certainly praying for his complete recovery, but I don't remember being concerned or afraid that he wasn't going to completely recover. I remember having an abiding confidence that things were going to be fine. I think that's a function of my faith and my sense of his faith. So I was concerned, as we all were, but I always remember having a strong sense of confidence that this is going to be fine.

DePue: Of course, it wasn't too long after that that he was able to get back on the campaign trail and run a very credible campaign—although Dawn Clark Netsch also ran a campaign—

²⁴ Mike Lawrence, interview by Mark DePue, July 2, 2009, Jim Edgar Oral History Project, ALPL, 24-27; and Grosboll, October 22, 2009, 41-43.

Peters: (laughs) More than a very credible campaign.

DePue: Yeah, he won rather handily.²⁵

Peters: And he swept everyone else on the ticket in with him. I don't think there was a Republican in captivity that didn't win that year.

DePue: (laughs) That puts it into perspective. Thank you. But now, typically in these administrations, people within the administration are looking to make some changes. Were you, at that time?

Peters: In a sense, yes. I had spent all of my adult life in corrections. Out of college, I went to work as a correctional officer in a juvenile institution in Tennessee; came to Illinois, went to graduate school—and while in graduate school did internships in Illinois corrections; got out of graduate school, went to work for Corrections. I had spent my entire adult life working in corrections and, up to that point, wanting to be the director of Corrections. I had that blessing, so now I'm thinking, So now what? (laughs) I'm obviously not going to be governor, (laughter) so now what? And I did start thinking that I'd like to be involved in a bigger way in state government, so I expressed some interest in being Edgar's chief of staff during his second term.

DePue: I want to read another quote that you gave, and this is right out of the *Daily Record*, which is Lawrence County's newspaper of record. And it's a theme that we've talked about before already, but perhaps it will kind of tie into where you're going to end up here in these next couple steps. And this is your quote: "Too many young people have no vision of a future with good things. They see only darkness. For too many, the choice is death or prison." Obviously you spent many years in the prison

²⁵ Edgar defeated Dawn Clark Netsch 1,984,318-1,069,850, a margin of 914,468 votes. State of Illinois, *Official Vote Cast at the General Election, November 8, 1994*.

side of the equation. “They needed positive role models, productive adults who are not trying to exploit them. I know second- and third-generation gang members and youths who have never known an adult who worked for a living. We need to deliver our children from birth to first grade undamaged”—going back to that comment you made earlier today. “We need to adhere to the notion that every child is precious. They need contact with people who will work and encourage them to learn. It’s a proven fact that volunteers do make a difference.” I mention that, because our last part of this conversation today is going to do first that period in time when you’re working in Edgar’s administration, and then as the first secretary of Department of Human Services. And what strikes me about this is perhaps you’re frustrated, to a certain extent, of seeing them in the Department of Corrections and knowing there’s not a whole lot you can do to affect people’s lives. Are you looking now for an opportunity to really affect people in those crucial early years of their life?

Peters: Yes. And not just to affect the children directly, but to affect the parents. It’s interesting that we as a state, as a nation, are willing to do a lot of things to protect children, but I don’t think we always recognize that you cannot protect children if you’re not willing to engage with their parents and provide their parents the kind of support and services and incentives that are going to make life better for the children. And so, in a real way, if you want to protect children, then you have to work in the context in which children live, and that’s families—sometimes families that we don’t like, families that we don’t describe as families for ourselves, but they are their families, and it’s in that situation, the context of that situation, that you’re

going to have to intervene if it's going to matter in the lives of those children. You can't get children to first grade undamaged without getting their parents in some instances, many instances, to behave differently.

DePue: We've got it at the end of 1994. Edgar has just been reelected. Pretty much, I would assume, everybody knew within the administration that Jim Reilly, his current chief of staff, was there just for that election year.

Peters: Right.

DePue: So there's the opportunity. And did you approach Governor Edgar then about the possibility of serving as that next chief of staff?

Peters: Yes.

DePue: And his response?

Peters: "I've already given this job to Gene Reineke." (laughter) And so we talked about it, and Gene Reineke and I talked about it, and ultimately we decided together that I would go over as Governor Edgar's deputy chief of staff, working with Gene Reineke.

DePue: Now, it sounds like there was a bit of a reorganization within the top tier of his administration, because I believe before that time, he had a group of executive assistants.

Peters: That's right.

DePue: And how did that change come about? What was the change? Let me put it that way.

Peters: It came about because he decided he wanted to move in a different direction. He had this group of—I believe it was five—executive assistants, and he decided

instead that he would have a chief of staff and two deputy chiefs of staff. And I became one of the those deputy chiefs of staff.²⁶

DePue: And the other one was Andy Foster?

Peters: A guy named Andy Foster, yes.

DePue: How did you divide up the turf, then, between the two of you?

Peters: Sitting down with Gene Reineke and the governor, we looked at what things naturally fit together, looked at some of our own strengths and background, and simply made some decisions around where we thought and how we thought we could best serve the governor.

DePue: Did you mention to the governor at that time that you would like to get back and be a director or a secretary of a division or staff within the government?

Peters: I did not. I had no sense or interest that that was what I would want to do in the future.

DePue: So tell us again your purview, your specific areas of responsibility as the deputy chief of staff.

Peters: As I recall, I was responsible for Public Safety, of course; Human Services; some of the administrative agencies, like Central Management Services; the natural resource and environmental agencies, and transportation.

DePue: In that position of deputy chief of staff, were you a liaison with the directors of those departments or were you their boss, or a little bit of both?

²⁶ [When Mark's interview with Governor Edgar dealing with this reorganization is finished, place the reference here.]

Peters: I worked directly with those directors. Jim Edgar was the boss, and like me, those directors were appointed by the governor; so they did a lot of their work with and through me, but I wouldn't describe myself as their boss.

DePue: This position, though, did put you a lot closer to Governor Edgar himself—close enough to more closely observe his leadership and management style. So I wonder if you can describe that a little bit for us.

Peters: Actually, I had the good fortune, even when I was director of Corrections, of having a lot of direct contact with the governor. So I had developed a pretty good understanding and appreciation for him before going over to the front office, but there were even more opportunities there. The thing that I think is important and that people should know is how seriously, personally serious, Jim Edgar took governing. He didn't just want to be governor; Jim Edgar really wanted to govern and worked at governing.²⁷ We would (laughs) say behind his back—he's not going to see this—

DePue: (laughs) Of course not.

Peters: —“Man, is he cheap”—and we weren't talking about his personal money. (laughs) Jim Edgar spent the people's money like it was his own in a very real way. He didn't think about it in the millions of dollars; he thought about it in much smaller sums. So he was a governor who wanted to know and who really participated in the deliberative process. One of the interesting things about Governor Edgar was when there was a difficult, tough decision, a dilemma, a controversy—I'm sure it's okay to say this—he would put a group of people in a room that he saw as

²⁷ Mike Lawrence shares this assessment. See his telling anecdote in his interview with Mark DePue, April 1, 2009, Jim Edgar Oral History Project, ALPL, 54.

knowledgeable on the subject and cause them to debate the issue or argue the issue, and he saw these issues as important enough to argue about. And so there would at times be very heated arguments or debates on or about a given issue. And it seems to me, as I observe this, that that was a part of his learning process; that's how he really gathered information about the pros and cons of a given issue, and it somehow helped him draw his conclusions and make a decision. Edgar, in my experience, was very decisive but very deliberative in coming to the decision, and very often, he would wear the staff out (laughter) in debating the issue in order to come to that conclusion. Because sometimes he'd actually send you away to do more thinking or more looking into an issue, to come back to fight another day.

DePue: I'd suspect that a lot of the arguments happened when you got sent out of the room and continued to debate the issues with each other.

Peters: Sometimes, yes.

DePue: When it was all said and done, though, was it clear to the group, Here's the side of the argument that the governor came down on?

Peters: Oh, absolutely. As I say, he was a very decisive leader, so he would declare a position. He would decide at some point, Enough already. (laughter) And that would always be interesting, since he started it. But when he decided that he had heard enough and we'd had our chance to make our case, he would take a position. And of course it was then our responsibility collectively, no matter what side of the debate you were on, to go make it work.

DePue: Pretty early on in the time you were serving as deputy chief of staff, a decision started to percolate, or an issue started to percolate, about whether or not you

wanted to reorganize something that would be called the Department of Human Services. Can you talk about how that came to the surface in the first place?

Peters: Yeah, by the time I went over to the governor's office, there was actually already a task force on human services reform. The Casey Foundation had given the state a grant to start looking at how to better use the human services dollars and to have a greater impact on communities and beneficiaries of those programs. And so there'd already begun to be some discussion about whether or not we were getting the most for our human service dollar.

The other intervening variable was welfare reform started to percolate at the federal level. Now, there had already been some welfare reform efforts at the state level, but it started to percolate in a big way at the federal level, and there were going to be requirements that the state move people from welfare to work and reduce their case loads in a constructive way. And that caused us, on a faster track, to begin to evaluate whether we were organized in the best way to meet the needs of disadvantaged people, many of whom had spent much of their adult lives on welfare, and what services they needed in order to habilitate themselves such that they could actually go to work, earn a real wage, and so forth. So those kinds of things became the catalyst for human services reorganization.

DePue: You said this is already very much in discussion when you arrived, but who was at the heart of the discussion once you arrived in that level of the administration?

Peters: There was actually a person who was in charge of this human services reform, a woman by the name of B.J. Walker. She was called the executive director of this task force that had been established, and when I got to the governor's office, she

was just getting started and was relating to Joan Walters, who was then the budget director. And then—

DePue: Who was ready to move, as I understand, talking to her.

Peters: If that's what she says, that's what she said.

DePue: She was looking for new opportunities, yes.²⁸

Peters: Joan was one of the really hard workers, really one of the contributors in the Edgar administration, and made a lot of fine contributions. And she was interested in this human services reform effort and really got interested when we got into the work of human services reorganization. It was really me and Joan Walters and a fellow by the name of Steve Schnorf, who was a policy director to the governor, who really got invested in looking at how we're organized, whether we are organized in the right way, what are the results we're getting, can we get better results. And over a period of well over a year, the governor became convinced, as a function of those efforts, and subsequently issued an executive order to organize what is now the Department of Human Services. There was a legislative task force put together to study the issue. The legislature saw it as sufficiently big and significant that they wanted more involvement, so there was a legislative task force that was put together to look at it as well. Ultimately, over a period of about a year, the Department of Human Services was established.

DePue: I know that there was an announcement at least in March of 1996 that the reorganization would be happening. And of course, it didn't happen till about a year later.

²⁸ Joan Walters, interview by Mark DePue, August 13, 2009, Jim Edgar Oral History Project, ALPL, 11-12.

Peters: That's right.

DePue: What were the pieces of the government that were going to be brought together under this new umbrella of Department of Human Services?

Peters: What we ultimately brought together was what was previously the Department of Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities, the Department of Rehabilitative Services, the Department of Alcohol and Substance Abuse, a large part of the Department of Public Health, a significant part of the Department of Public Aid, and a small portion of the Department of Children and Family Services.

DePue: A couple questions then in that regard. What portion of Children and Family Services wasn't brought under that umbrella, and why was that part left separate?

Peters: The Child Protective Services part of it—in other words, the child abuse and neglect part of it, and licensing of foster homes and the like—was left with the Department of Children and Family Services. And then—

DePue: And that was an issue that had brought the tail end of the Thompson administration a considerable amount of grief and bad publicity, if I recall.

Peters: Absolutely. And the reason that that legislative task force decided to keep it separate was in large part [because] they [DCFS] were under a court order, and that court order was requiring lots of new spending in Child Protective Services. The legislature believed that if it became a part of a much larger entity, it would be harder for the legislature to monitor the progress that the agency was making toward getting out of the court order. And so a decision was made to leave it, for that period, a separate agency and that at some future date, the governor or a

governor could decide whether, once those issues were settled, it should or should not become a part of Human Services.

DePue: You also mentioned the Department of Public Health, but was the Medicaid program part of what became part of the Department of Human Services?

Peters: Medicaid, by the way, was at Public Aid as opposed to Public Health. Medicaid stayed separate. Interestingly, the part of Medicaid that dealt with eligibility determination came to the Department of Human Services; the part of Medicaid that dealt with the payment for health care and the policy development around what those payment policies would be stayed as a separate entity. It was at that time thought that Public Aid would be more the health care finance agency for the people who were on Medicaid, which is primarily poor and disabled people.

DePue: What is the benefit, then, the ultimate benefit, of reorganizing and bringing all these agencies together, if you could put it in a nutshell?

Peters: The ability to coordinate those services that directly impacted families and their ability to be self-sufficient. Those services and programs that went to Human Services were care delivery, service delivery functions—so functions that had a more direct impact on families and individuals.

DePue: This might be a very trite way of saying this, but was that another way of saying that you got a benefit because, for the person who's a potential client who needs the help of the government, it's one-stop shopping?

Peters: That's right. It really was intended to allow, rather than the family—and families, as you know, exist with coexisting conditions and not “a condition.” A family that's receiving a welfare check may also have some mental health issues, may also have

some alcohol and substance abuse issues, may also have some other abuse issues.

So it was an effort to put those services in one place that would have an effect, and rather than a family receiving something here and something there, an effort and a way to coordinate the delivery system.

DePue: Now you mentioned this was an executive order, and you also mentioned some legislative committees were looking into this. Was there a bill that supported this initiative as well?

Peters: Absolutely.

DePue: I would assume that you then got to testify before the legislature in the process?

Peters: Often. (laughs)

DePue: Any memories with that?

Peters: Not really. Keep in mind, as director of Corrections, you often testify before committees. As deputy chief of staff, I would occasionally testify anyway. So presenting before a legislative group was not a new phenomenon. Now, after I became secretary of Human Services, of course, there was lots of interest in what we were doing with welfare reform—how that was coming along, what was happening to all of these important groups that now were coming to the Department of Human Services. The disabilities people didn't want to get lost in the maze; the people who provided substance abuse didn't want to get lost in the big agency. So there was a lot of interest among legislators of wanting us to keep them informed and report on how we're organizing ourselves—whether we were saving any money, whether we were having any qualitative impact on the populations we were serving, and so on.

DePue: This might be a bit out of context—I hope it’s not too far out of context—but I know I’m supposed to ask you about flying an airplane while you’re in the midst of this reorganization.

Peters: The notion was that here we were, reorganizing a multi-billion-dollar agency, some twenty-four thousand employees, as I recall, and several hundred thousand clients. We need to reorganize, put together this organization, build this organization. But the world is not waiting on us to do that. The clients won’t say, “When you guys get organized, I’ll show up for service.” So you’ve got to serve these several hundred thousand clients at the same time you’re building an organization. And I likened it to flying an airplane while you are overhauling the engine and rebuilding the plane, which as you can imagine, would be a daunting and scary task.

DePue: Was there some parochial pushback you were getting from some of the various departments that were going to be coming together?

Peters: Absolutely. As I alluded to earlier, the clients of those particular agencies, or former agencies, were concerned that they were going to be lost in the context of the bigger agency. Some of those clients didn’t want to be associated with the welfare people, and everyone was concerned that the other group was going to get more time and attention and demand than they would get. And of course the staff and the leaders coming from those other disciplines were concerned that they were going to have less importance, less significance, less impact on their client population than was previously the case. So you had all of those issues to deal with, and then you had, as I said earlier, legislators who cared about those various interests as well.

DePue: From what you've been discussing already, it sounds like this is not just a matter of putting in another layer of bureaucracy, with these existing organizations staying pretty well intact, but a true effort of integrating and changing the dynamics within those institutions. Can you talk about exactly how you were leveling the playing field, bringing and integrating these various agencies together?

Peters: You are exactly correct, that the task was not to layer something on top of what was, and the band plays on; it really was to do something fundamentally different and to, in fact, merge those silos and cause joint planning and interaction to make sure, as much as possible, that families get the services that they need in a more coordinated way. That meant that you had to eliminate separate business functions, separate administrative functions, separate communications systems, separate computer and information systems, and build a system that met the needs of all of those functions. And so you're having the same system that's sending out welfare checks sending out checks for daycare and substance abuse and rehabilitative services and so forth. And we reported large savings in administrative overhead and administrative costs in the first year just from those kinds of consolidations alone.

DePue: Does that mean that there was downsizing of the staffs—there were some layoffs?

Peters: There was certainly downsizing of staff. You can't have efficiencies if everybody's going to continue to do what they were doing. We tried to, as much as possible, not just have big layoffs but find other legitimate vacancies for people within the organization. And so we were substantially able to absorb people whose functions were eliminated or subsumed by other structures.

DePue: Before we move on to actually taking over the agency, I want to ask about your impressions of some of the people that you were working with at that top tier of the Edgar administration. And let's start with Mike Lawrence, his press secretary.

Peters: I became very fond of Mike. Mike's a very decent and honorable fellow, and Mike functioned in the administration as much more than a press secretary. Mike in some ways was our alter ego. He certainly provided a lot of the moral compass. Mike cared with a passion about mental health services, and so Mike was a real advocate each year during the budget fights to make sure that mental health services had a fair airing at the table. So Mike was, as I say, much more than just a press guy; Mike was very much involved in policy.²⁹

DePue: Next one on the list: Gene Reineke, the chief of staff during the time you served there.

Peters: Very hard-working, very bright. I always prided myself during the course of my career that I might not be smarter than everyone else, but I could outwork them. I could never beat Gene Reineke to work. (laughter) Gene Reineke and Joan Walters (laughs) must require no sleep. Gene was the kind of guy who came to work early and stayed late. He certainly understood the politics of governing and came to appreciate and understand the policy side of things as well. Gene was a good balance in the administration.

DePue: And you already mentioned this person—Steve Schnorf is one of the policy guys at the very top tier. Tell us a little bit more about Steve, your impressions.

²⁹ All of Governor Edgar's officials interviewed as part of this project shared this opinion of Lawrence and assessment of his role in the administration.

Peters: Again, a very, very bright fellow. Probably enjoyed being budget director more than policy director, but a bright fellow, and again, a hard worker. He had worked with the governor while they were at Transportation, so he had a good feel for what the governor's needs were, and he knew how to anticipate the governor in advance.³⁰ (laughter) And in that sense, Steve sometimes had an advantage. When we were trying to convince the governor to do a certain thing, Steve, because he had worked for him in previous situations, would know we were playing a losing hand. He wouldn't always tell us (laughter) we were playing a losing hand, but... He was good at anticipating how far Governor Edgar would go. And again, a bright fellow.

DePue: And you've already mentioned her name a couple times, but Joan Walters, who had suffered long and hard in the trenches of being the budget director in those very tough years of trying to balance the budget.

Peters: Now, I don't know how hard Joan suffered. I don't buy that. (DePue laughs) Joan enjoyed being the budget director. Joan enjoyed the challenge of doing more with less. And Joan, if you watch this, yeah, I said it. (laughter) Joan had no problem saying no and enjoyed saying no, so I think Joan Walters was as good a budget director as Jim Edgar could have had.³¹ I think her personality was right for him. She had the right skill set and was highly conscientious and I think enjoyed the work. So even though we had tough budget years during some of that period of

³⁰ Peters is referring to Edgar's years as secretary of state, where Schnorf served as the director of the senior citizens' division (1981-1983) and director of drivers' services (1983-1991). Schnorf also served as Edgar's director of Central Management Services (1991-1994), policy director (1994-1997), and budget director (1997-1998). See Stephen Schnorf, interview by Mike Czaplicki, February 23, 2010, Jim Edgar Oral History Project, ALPL.

³¹ For an example where Walters had to say no to Peters, see Joan Walters, interview by Mark DePue, July 29, 2009, Jim Edgar Oral History Project, ALPL, 18-19.

time, I don't accept she suffered through it. (DePue laughs) Joan was good at her work and I think enjoyed it.

DePue: And I understand that even while she was still serving as budget director, she was very much involved with this reorganization of Human Services.

Peters: Absolutely. Highly invested and made major, major contributions and put in a lot of work to help see that done, and done well.

DePue: I think this is fair to say—were you aware that she was interested in that job of being the first secretary of Human Services?

Peters: Yes, I was, and in fact, assumed that Joan was going to be the first secretary of Human Services.

DePue: How did that decision come about, then, where you were selected?

Peters: I don't know the answer to that. The governor called me one day and asked me to come and see him, and I walked in, and he told me he was announcing today that I was going to be secretary of Human Services. I said, "Governor, we never talked about that." He said, "We didn't need to. This is what I need you to do." So it wasn't through a conversation or conversations that we had had or that I had had with any of the other staff; it was a decision that the governor, for his own reasons, decided. And of course, I am very grateful. I think that some of my best work in state government was done while I was secretary of Human Services, so I am very appreciative to have had that opportunity.

DePue: Going back to these quotes we've read right at the beginning and a little bit later today that addressed the need you saw of helping those families out, helping that

young child out before he or she got to the first grade—are you seeing this as your opportunity to do that?

Peters: This certainly became my opportunity to do this; but understand, this wasn't a notion that I had in advance, that if I get a chance to do this, this will be my opportunity to do this. It became the opportunity. Some of the finest work that we had the privilege of doing was taking, during the period of time I was there and that Governor Edgar was there, about 112,000 or 115,000 people and helping them go from welfare to work. And that means you've got to develop the systems, you've got to develop the supports, the services, in order to make that happen. Sometimes it means job training; it means developing job-seeking skills; it means job development; it means developing necessary childcare, substance abuse services; and it means going out and convincing employers that this is a good deal for you—that these people can and will do a good day's work. We had occasions where Governor Edgar would invite all of the major employers in the Chicagoland area, for example—the airlines, major manufacturers and retailers, and so forth—into one room where we would make the case that welfare-to-work was in their interest, and that working with us to employ people who were now on welfare was in the interest of those companies and was in the interest of Illinois. And we got great cooperation with some of the bigger companies in Illinois.

DePue: Do you recall any of the specific companies?

Peters: United Airlines, American Airlines were huge supporters of the welfare-to-work effort.

DePue: And also UPS.

Peters: Yeah, I definitely should have mentioned UPS. Employed hundreds of these individuals. So yeah, big companies who were focused on work and not social services got involved and helped us move scores of people from welfare to work. Needless to say, those companies wouldn't have stuck with us very long if we weren't able to deliver people who were prepared to work and people who could get to work, so we had to solve the transportation problem and the childcare problem to make sure that people were reliable. And it was a great experience for Illinois. During the course of all of this, Illinois on one occasion won a thirty million-dollar bonus from the federal government for its effort in moving people from welfare to work. On another occasion, I think it was a forty-five million-dollar bonus for that effort. The Women, Infant, and Children's program was recognized by the federal government as the best—the program in the Chicago area was recognized as the best Women, Infant, and Children's program in the country. So a lot of good work was happening; a lot of good things were happening on behalf of the families that we were serving.

DePue: You got to that position in '97, and this is about the time that the American economy is booming, especially with all the new Internet startups, and it's just a great time economically for the country. Does that give you some advantages in terms of cutting down significantly on the welfare rolls?

Peters: Remember that in the first part of '97, the economy was not doing well, and the jobless rate was significantly high in Illinois, which was one of the things that people early on were saying: "How can you reasonably expect to find jobs for these people? No one's going to hire them, there are no jobs, and they won't work." So it

was initially a hard sell. As we got into it, the economy started picking up, and of course that was useful and helpful to being able to find jobs for people. But even in a recession, there are jobs that people who are otherwise unemployed and on welfare can do if the right incentives and supports are in place.

DePue: I wanted to just kind of take a step back here and read the Department of Human Services' mission statement. This is a time when mission statements were in vogue as well, but I think this one in particular is significant; especially if we [not only] tie this with, as you've already talked about, welfare reform at the national level, but also initiatives that the Edgar administration had taken with welfare reform very early in his administration—which precedes by several years what's going on at the national level. Here's the mission statement: "To assist Illinois residents to achieve self-sufficiency, independence, and health to the maximum extent possible by providing integrated family-oriented services, promoting prevention, and establishing measurable outcomes in partnership with communities. There's a couple portions of that that really stick out to me, but how significant a philosophical change was that phrase, "achieving self-sufficiency and independence"?

Peters: It was a big deal in those times because to some extent, people who are poor and on welfare—people with disabilities, physical and developmental disabilities; people with mental illness; people with substance abuse issues—are written off. They're discarded. There isn't an expectation that they're going to be self-sufficient. The question is, How much welfare are you going to give them? How much government stuff are you going to give them? And of course the answer to that is always going

to be, Not nearly enough; but that's generally the question. And so to have an expectation and a model that says our goal is not to take care of people but to support them toward being self-sufficient and independent, I think was a change in attitude and approach, especially for some of those populations.

DePue: We've already talked a little bit about the importance of a job to that equation to becoming self-sufficient. What are some of the other challenges and hurdles that you and your new department had to face in helping people achieve that goal?

Peters: Housing issues, transportation issues, substance abuse issues, other abuse issues, because many of these issues had heretofore either gone unaddressed or were addressed in disparate ways. For example, there were childcare programs. You could have childcare if you were on welfare, but you couldn't have childcare if you were on a job. You could have childcare if you were in an abusive situation, but if that situation is resolved, you can't have childcare. And there were all kinds of policies that in a sense didn't support self-sufficiency and didn't support work. In other words, if you were dependent, you could have childcare; if you weren't, you couldn't have childcare. So we changed policies to where childcare was more associated with work and movement toward self-sufficiency and your level of income, as opposed to some other artificial status. We knew that if we were going to take welfare mothers, if you will, and put them to work, then we were going to have to solve their childcare problems.

We knew that if we were going to help people move from welfare to work, we were going to have to deal with some transportation issues. And so in those days, we actually worked with Pace, worked with some of the public transportation

companies, to make sure that the bus routes accommodated work.³² So we had those kinds of challenges and issues. If you are going to employ people in the Chicagoland area at the airlines, then you had to have an ability to get them from the South Side or the West Side to their jobs at the airport. So we had transportation issues to deal with and any number of those other social issues.

You also had to teach people job-seeking and job-retention skills. If you haven't worked for twenty years, there's an awful lot about responding to supervision and being on time that you're not attuned to. But if you put the incentives in the right place to say, "We're not going to just keep sending you a check, but we're going to help you make more money than if you were just taking a welfare check," you're going to have to address these issues.

DePue: Does that mean that your agency got involved with running clinics on basic survival skills and job-training skills and things like that?

Peters: That's right. One of the other key parts of that mission statement is "with communities," and so we got involved with community organizations and community agencies in helping them run those kind of supportive programs and helping fund programs that helped prepare people to be self-sufficient and independent.

DePue: One of the conservative critiques of the classic model of welfare as it was established in the sixties and seventies was that that welfare system was undermining or destructive to the nuclear family; that the government was stepping

³² Pace operates suburban bus service in the Chicago suburbs for the Regional Transportation Authority.

in and playing the role of the father too much. Was that a valid critique as you saw it, and were there initiatives that the state was taking to address that?

Peters: Absolutely. Absolutely that was a valid critique, and absolutely there were policy changes that we made to make sense out of that. We developed two-family-member caseloads. Heretofore, welfare families were primarily single parents, and we began to focus on two families, not penalizing families when both parties lived in the home, and, in fact, putting in some benefits for two families where one member was working. So we put some incentives in the right place to support two-parent families. Children are far better off with two parents who live and support them, especially if one, if not both, of them works.

DePue: How about the challenge of drug and alcohol abuse, substance abuse? What was being done in that arena, and how frustrating was it when you saw that as one of the issues that was so frequently coming up to prevent people from becoming self-sufficient?

Peters: A huge problem, but less frustrating, because we were able to sit with the substance abuse experts and the self-sufficiency or the welfare staff in one room and talk about how to make sure that those clients got, as a matter of priority, the substance abuse services they needed in order that they could address their problems and go to work. So it was less frustrating because we had the ability to force, if you will, or focus the coordination that was necessary to make sure that people were getting the services and the follow-up that they needed. It wasn't as it was in the past: you went to one agency, Public Aid, to get your welfare check, and the social worker there might recognize that you have a substance abuse problem and give you a number or

a contact person at another agency to go see if you can get on the waiting list to get substance abuse services. Whereas now, we had the opportunity to forge the coordination of those services together.

DePue: Great success—you've already mentioned this—in decreasing the welfare roles, which means you're spending less money in welfare, and you've now got, I assume, more money available to be used by the department for other activities. Was that correct?

Peters: That is correct.

DePue: And how did you funnel that money, those resources?

Peters: If you track the Department of Human Services' budget from '97 to 2000, you will see that a lot of it went for childcare, and childcare that supported not just people who were on welfare but people who left welfare, and to help working lower-income parents to never have to be on welfare. Before we organized childcare as we did, we'd have—if you can imagine this—parents rejecting income increases so they could stay below the cutoff to continue to have their childcare, and so we eliminated those kind of barriers to people working and supporting themselves. So a lot of those resources went into childcare. We created a program called Teen REACH, one of the things that I'm very proud of—a program that goes on to this day, which is designed to allow community agencies, community organizations, to develop after-school and non-school-hour programs that are designed to help develop opportunities for kids to stay constructively involved, to prevent their getting involved in drugs and crime and violence. Some of the studies of those programs show that kids who were involved in those programs do better in school,

have less problems in school, and so on. So it was the opportunity to also create some programs that do some of the kinds of things that we talked about earlier in terms of giving young people constructive opportunities. A lot of it went into substance abuse programs, mental health programs. So it was the opportunity—because what the federal government did was block grant, the TANF [Temporary Assistance for Needy Families] grant to states, which in essence said, If you don't spend it all on checks to individuals, you can use it in constructive ways to help support those people in being self-sufficient.³³

DePue: About the time you took over as secretary of Human Services, it was about the time the federal government basically handed over direct responsibility for administering welfare programs to the state. How important was that to you, from your perspective?

Peters: It was extremely important because it really did help focus our work. Remember, they didn't just hand over this blank check to states and say, "Use it and have fun." There were some goals, some benchmarks that you had to meet each year in order to protect that block grant, the TANF grant, to the state, and an opportunity to earn some additional dollars from the federal government. I mentioned earlier that on one occasion, the state got about a thirty million-dollar bonus, as I recall, and on another occasion, they got about a forty-five million-dollar bonus, so there were real serious strings attached that could become serious embarrassments and financial burdens for the state if you didn't meet your targets.

³³ The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 ended the Aid to Families with Dependent Children Program, replacing it with TANF.

DePue: I think the most well-understood target as far as the public was concerned was the requirement that able-bodied men and woman who were of a working age find work within two years.

Peters: That's right.

DePue: Were you optimistic that that was achievable?

Peters: I wasn't just optimistic; I was absolutely convinced. I had no doubt that this was the right work to do and that we were the right folks to do it, and that's why it happened and it worked. If these folks gave us half a chance and worked with us, and if we put the policies, the right policies, in place and the incentives in the right place, I was absolutely convinced that we would not have families drop into a black hole.

DePue: Let's put some numbers onto it, and the numbers I read were that the welfare rolls in 1994 were 242,000 in the state of Illinois. That's a significant part of the working population. Four years later, 1998, it goes from 242,000 to 109,000. So you've cut that down to about 40, 45 percent of what it had been. Sense of satisfaction of achieving those goals?

Peters: Absolutely. And it's important, not because there were fewer people on welfare, but because there were many, many more people now working. The percent or the number of people who previously had been on welfare who were working [had been] insignificant. Now we had 112,000 people who had been on welfare, who were working and earning and taking care of their families and moving toward self-sufficiency. So it wasn't just getting people off welfare; it was doing it in a way that was constructive—constructive toward those families, constructive toward the

children who resided in those families, and therefore constructive toward the society.

DePue: What part of your job, your challenge of adopting all of these changes and running this new agency, stayed elusive and frustrating to you?

Peters: There were always those who wanted to go back, not unlike when the children of Israel were freed from Egypt. (DePue laughs) There were always people.

DePue: When they were waiting in the wilderness and wondering why they didn't have the milk and honey that was back in Egypt?

Peters: That's right. There were always people who wanted to go back. And that's true on any endeavor, because it's challenging, it's hard. It's not easy to reform a system that's functioned in a certain way for so long. And some people were good at the old way and benefited from the old way, so there were always—

DePue: Are you talking about the people within these various organizations that had been brought together under the new Department of Human Services?

Peters: Those also. Yeah, people who came from the different organizations wanted to go back. They understood the old rules, they understood the old ways, and some of them were good at it. And clients wanted to go back. Getting up, going to work is harder than waiting on the postman for your welfare check. That's just the truth. And some of the advocates wanted to go back. So you always had those tensions, and it was frustrating when you're trying to build something that's going to last. We wanted the effect and the impact of these improvements to last long after we were gone onto something else.

DePue: Unfortunately, Howard, we are up against the tyranny of the clock, and there are still a few questions that I've got to ask you. I did want to ask you about the transition from the Edgar administration, because you were on board with the George Ryan administration for a year or two afterwards. So just very quickly, if you could talk about that transition and some reflections on the difference between Ryan and Edgar as governors.

Peters: I did stay on with Governor Ryan for a year after he became governor. And the Illinois Hospital Association showed up and offered me a position after about a year, so in 2000, I went to work for my present employer, the Illinois Hospital Association. Governor Ryan, I had known, of course, long before he became governor, in his various other positions, while I was warden of various prisons and while I was director of Corrections and secretary of Human Services. So after he was elected, we talked, and he asked me to stay. I actually said to him at that time—without knowing what I was going to do next—that my interest was to stay a year or so and then leave state government and find something else to do. He agreed, and I had the good fortune a year later to have this position come along.

DePue: Were you able to notice any difference in emphasis or philosophy from the Ryan folks versus the Edgar administration?

Peters: Yes. (laughs)

DePue: Willing to talk about any of those that you observed?

Peters: Let's just say—I don't want to be, and it would be easy, to be critical of Governor Ryan, and I don't want to pile on that pile—but I mentioned earlier that Governor Edgar not only wanted to be governor but was really invested in governing and, I

think, enjoyed and was motivated to govern on behalf of the people of Illinois. I didn't observe the same level of involvement and intensity in the new administration.

DePue: Let's get on with just some general wrap-up questions, if you will. And I wonder if you could tell us what you thought was the more significant challenge. Was it those years with the Department of Corrections, especially as director, or fashioning and then heading up Human Services as the first secretary?

Peters: I don't know which was more challenging. They were both great opportunities for me and what I was highly motivated to do at the time. And so I don't look back on them as challenges as much as cherished opportunities. I'd like to believe and believe in my heart that the benefit of my time at the Department of Human Services was greater in terms of its impact on people. I sincerely believe that those children who were in those families that moved from welfare to work, those children who were in those families where drug treatment really started to happen, were so far better off in their chance and prospect at wholesome life.

DePue: Would it be fair to say, then, that that's the accomplishment that you're most proud of, looking back at your long career in public service?

Peters: No question. I certainly think that the other opportunities helped prepare me for that time.

DePue: What would you want to be remembered for, then?

Peters: I don't know. I don't particularly get invested in (DePue laughs) that. That's for the people and the facts. If anything, I'd say really look at the data, the facts around what happened in the lives of people during that period of time.

DePue: You've talked a lot already about who Jim Edgar was as a governor, and you stressed several times that he was a believer in governance as well as just being the governor. Any other thing that you'd like to say in summing up our several-hour discussion now?

Peters: About Governor Edgar?

DePue: Governor Edgar.

Peters: The thing that I think is important is—in addition to the other things I've either said or implied—he is a genuinely decent human being. He's honorable and really did care about what was good and what was best for the people of Illinois and insisted on that from the people around him.

DePue: This has been a wonderful series of conversations with you and very enlightening and encouraging to hear firsthand some of these stories as well. I think I've only left you a few seconds, but do you have any final comments for us before we close today?

Peters: I don't. It's been a good experience for me as well. Some of these issues I haven't thought seriously about for a while, and so it was a good experience to talk about them and think about them. I hope that however these conversations are going to be used, that they are helpful to others who are either now or will be in public service, to help them think about and think through what's important for their tenure in government.

DePue: Thank you very much, Mr. Peters. It's been a pleasure.

Peters: Thank you, thank you.

(end of interview)

