

Interview from the preparation of

Fell's Point Out of Time



Interview of James Bond, Living Classrooms, Feb. 19, 2004

Jacquie Greff, Interviewer; Kraig Greff, Camera

[Jacquie]

We'll start out. First tell us who you are and tell us about your organization here.

[James]

My name is James Piper Bond and I am the CEO and President of the Living Classrooms Foundation. Living Classrooms is dedicated to providing hands-on education and job training programs for, we reach I guess, about 31,000 students a year. Since we began in 1985 with the building of the schooner "The Lady Maryland" with the help of 100 children who helped us build the ship, we have now grown to about 38 programs. We employ 500 people in the summer time and about 220 year 'round. And our whole staff and mission is towards is making learning not only fun, but making learning all about learning by doing.

[cut introductory conversation]

[Jacquie]

How did you get started here in Fells Point with Living Classrooms?

[James]

Well, Living Classrooms Foundation began in 1985. With the building of the ship the "Lady Maryland", which is now the last pungy schooner in existence. And as with every project that we are involved with, students helped to build that ship.

We began here in Fells Point, I guess with, what we call the Living Classroom Maritime Institute, back in 1989. This is the old City Dock, this property here, where there was nothing going on at that time. In partnership with the city, state and the community, we came up with the concept of, "Lets bring the history of Fells Point back alive around the ship-building tradition." And to involve young people with that. So that was the genius and we began with a program called "Fresh Start" that was working with, and still works with, youth who may have had some trouble in the traditional school system, and may have had some scrapes with the law. But these kids are turning their lives around and they are here at a job-training program that's 40 weeks long that works on construction skills, carpentry skills. And also these kids build small boats as part of the program.

[Jacquie]

Give me kind of an overview of the program, because when I look at your web site, you've got your fingers in huge numbers of things you are working on.

[James]

Living Classrooms operates 38 different programs. We reach 31,000 children a year in our programs. And in our work with the National Historic Sea Port of Baltimore, we reach probably another million and half people. The essence of all our programs is hands-on learning, hands-on education and job training. We combine that also with community service efforts out in the neighborhoods, as well as economic development efforts, as it relates to the Maritime Heritage Tourism effort in the City of Baltimore. So, each of our programs connects back to learning by doing. And there is a special emphasis on serving disadvantaged children.

[01:03:58;07]

[Jacquie]

And give me some background about what you've been doing with the ... Maritime with Fredrick Douglass center over here. I'm not using the right words here, but.. Tell me about this. How did it start out? And what is going on?

[James]

The Foundation began a real presence here in the late 80's, on this property, which used to be Center Dock, and was a lumberyard. I know my Dad and Governor Shaffer and others called it the "trash pier" because the end of the pier is raised, and it used to be used to dump trash off into barges at the end of the pier. You know, horse and buggies or trucks eventually came to dump trash off.

So we began to develop this property in partnership with the City, State and community, and have slowly built each of these buildings with the help of students. Now we have a public middle school that operates here called the Crossroads Middle School working with children from this neighborhood, right from this geographical region. From the waters edge right on up just north of Hopkins, we have a variety of job training programs that operate here, such as the Fresh Start Program, Youth Build, Building Hope... And each of these programs are customized job training programs to give skills to young people and young adults so that they can be successful academically in the workplace and their lives. This campus has continued to develop. We have the Center Dock Marina, the Wetlands, the last marshland in the Inner Harbor. You know when Captain John Smith came up here, this whole Inner Harbor was a wetland. And now the last wetlands that are in this region are right here at this north shoreline of this campus, which students helped build back in 1989 and 1990. And it's all part of our education program.

The campus down the street is a joint effort with the community, with the state and corporations, foundations and individuals. We have raised over 12 million dollars to honor Fredrick Douglass, Isaac Myers and the Black Maritime History contribution to this city and state. And so we're really honored to be building the "Fredrick Douglass Isaac Myers Maritime Park," and to have saved the oldest industrial building on the waterfront, which those of us affectionately refer to as the "Sugar House," even though it was the Levering Coffee Hhouse at one point, too. So that building dates

back to, they're telling us now, to around 1804 [they have since learned it was 1806]. And we were fortunate to find bricks that came from a similar era, and we replaced 32,000 bricks with the help of students and our staff. We put a roof on that building – that building was very close to falling down – so we've spent over a million dollars to save that building. And that will be one of the centerpieces of a site that will also have a working marine railway, a shipyard, which after all that's what Fells Point, that's what the roots of this city all stem back to – is the Maritime heritage. So this Maritime heritage will come alive. Like everything Living Classroom Foundation does, it's always about bringing things alive, involving young people and the community. I think it's going to be one of the very, very special spots in this city.

[01:07:19;16]

[Jacquie]

I understand that your site has been involved in a little bit of defense against development, I guess, I would say, because the Allied site would like to build a bridge from their site across from to, for traffic and that would destroy your access to the water?

[James]

Well, I think that ... one of the really interesting things is, over the years, and having been involved with this for 18 years... it's kind a interesting. I never realized you know my family roots go back to being the last name Bond, and the Bonds who married the Fells brothers, and there's a grave right around the corner that ... You know, there is a lot of history in this community. And it's... so I feel very honored to personally be part of that, and to be part of an organization doing its part to keep the heritage alive. When we began down here in the late 80's, there was nothing really much around. We were kind of the pioneers down here in this part of Fells Point, you know in this western part. It's been really interesting and exciting to see all the development happening around us. And you know, all the buildings going up and I think its great for the City. At the same time, I think the development needs to be sensitive to Fells Point, and to this star community as well as the existing uses and existing projects, such as Living Classroom Foundation and what we are doing. And... we have an on going dialog with the developers, and we are making every effort to make sure they are able to meet their objectives, and at the same time not to contribute negatively to what we have accomplished on behalf of the city, state and community. At this time we're all talking, and there are no plans for bridges across our campus at this point. And so, we hope it will stay that way.

[Jacquie]

So it sounds like you've been fairly successful working with the developers. Have you found them sensitive? You said you had. How has that dialog gone? Are some people easier to work with than others, for example?

[James]

I think the dialog's gone well with the developers. I think sometimes it's frustrating for them because these guys are in it to... make a profit and do well and to accomplish their job and to do it in...

Excuse me let me get this phone.

... do it in a timetable ... look at where we are, in the middle of...

How long have you all been here?

[Jacquie]

We've been here for ten years.

[James]

So you have seen a lot happen? I mean over the last ten years. You remember what it was like ten years ago, when there was nothing much around.

[Jacquie]

Oh yeah. When there were empty parking lots with trash in them...

[James]

You know we park out front here. And you know back then, maybe our cars might have gotten broken in to or something. As so, as the development happens, in many respects, this part of town becomes safer.

But, back to your question with the developers – developers have... and you know I have and colleagues and as do you, who are involved in the field of development. They are all about completing a project doing it quickly, having it be accomplished in a way were they can make a profit. So, working with the developers and being on the community side or an organization like Living Classrooms, sometimes we can be seen, as not really a impediment, but they've got to have to work with us to come up with ways that hopefully our projects can be successful and the community also the heritage of the community is not damaged. So that's important to us, and we've had good success with that on the whole. So I think it's ... something we'll all continue to work on.

[01:11:36;20]

[Jacquie]

One of the interesting things that ... fears people have brought up in some of these interviews, is that Fells Point has changed character. It doesn't have the same feel as it did 20 or 30 years ago when it was working-class, it was almost destroyed for the road. And, one of the bright spots people mention for this character inactivity is "Spanish Town," but it occurs to me that you know the people your bringing in here are probably would add some of that to all, although they don't seem to penetrate the neighborhood very much.

[James]

Well it's interesting, with the amount of employees here, 500 people that work here, we are a major employer. And our people are in Fells Point every day, at the restaurants, the markets, at the stores... so I feel that we are contributing economically to the wellbeing of the business community in Fells Point. And we have our Seaport Water Taxis that are there to serve the community as well. And then our Project Serve Program, works with young adults, who ... we help to fix up the benches on the square and help with the park, the dog-walking park, I guess it's a dog-walking park down

near Johns Stevens. So we're trying to do... clean ups along the waterfronts... In fact, we're in discussions right now with how we can do more with cleaning up along the waterfront. I'm working with Ed Pitts to do, with our Fresh Start students, to do planting this summer, and landscaping work along Broadway and clean ups as well there... So the Foundation strives to be an integral part of the community.

Now how have things changed? You know... I grew up in Baltimore. I use to come down to Fells Point as a teenager. And I remember a different town than what we see right now. And being someone who is, I was a History Major in college... history is very important to us. And, it's hard to see things change, but change is the one constant that we have in life. And, as the development begins to fill all these empty spaces, it's going to be really interesting to see the effect on Fells Point.

And that's why I think the projects like the Fredrick Douglass - Isaac Myers Maritime Park are really important as a gateway to bringing people into the neighborhood and reminding them of the history of Fells Point and the heritage that relates to the ship-building tradition, as well as the heritage to black maritime history. Fredrick Douglass, who lived in this neighborhood for 11 years. Isaac Myers who started the first black-owned shipyard in the country... To be able to tell that story to Baltimoreans, to people from the neighborhoods, to people from Fells Point, to people from around the country and the world that come and visit this city.

And the Fredrick Douglass - Isaac Myers Maritime Park will really be one of the corner stones in the National Historic Seaport of Baltimore. Because after all, we are a National Historical Seaport here in this city, I would think so even more than New York and Boston or any other seaports around. This is really the National Historic Seaport for the country. When you look at all the heritage and you look at Fort McHenry, you know the birthplace of the "Star Spangled Banner". You look at the first black-owned shipyard in the country... you look at Fells Point, Canton, Federal Hill, these tremendous historic neighborhoods... an incredible geographic harbor that we call the "Inner Harbor" and where we have the Constellation, the Baltimore Maritime Museum, the Fells Point Maritime Museum, the Museum of Industry...

All these different sites, when you combine that together, and it can be marketed to the people that visit and it can be an incredible educational resource. And we utilize it as a job training resource as well. It's a place to employ youth, often for their first jobs. It's a very special place here.

[01:15:46;26]

[Jacquie]

Do you have a crystal ball for Fells Point's future? If you could look in one, what do you think personally, you would see?

[James]

I think Fells Point will continue to develop. I think there's going to be... It's going to be interesting to see. I want to stay away from the word "conflict" but more just with the new development and the history – how that's all going to meld together... How all these condos for a half million dollars and up, right on the edge of Fells Point, how is that going to meld in with the historic neighborhood? I

think it's really important to keep the historical roots of this community and make sure it doesn't get lost, because that's what makes it special.

And I think Fells Point... to answer your question, I think Fells Points will persevere. It has for 400 years, and I think it will continue to stay a very special place.

[Jacquie]

Do you have any nightmares to what might happen if the worse case occurred? Whatever the worse case is.

[James]

No. I think that things will be positive. I don't see any major shortcomings down the road. I think as long as we can protect those things that are historic, that we can protect the waterfront, and really celebrate the waterfront... That's really in the best interest of all the businesses that are, moving down here. That's in the best interest in those that are living in the high-end condos and new townhouses. I don't think people want to come and live in a place that could be similar to something in the suburbs. This is a very special spot right here on the waterfront, with the history here, and it's important that we celebrate that.

[Jacquie]

Were you involved with the development of the "Harbor Master Plan" that just came out recently.

[James]

Not personally, but Living Classroom Foundation was involved with that and tried to do our best to help to make sure that... because there is 3 different plans. But the Marina Master Plan, which is the one, well I guess is the one you are referring to?

[Jacquie]

I just read a couple of clips in the Baltimore Sun. And we did interview Paul Swenson of Moran, and he talked a little about it, too, but I haven't actually seen it.

[James]

Right. So that's the one... Because there are three different ones. There is the one where they brought New York consultants down to talk about the waterfront... But the Marina Master Plan, maybe they've changed in to the Harbor Master Plan, that was a good process – to have people like Paul Swenson and Bill Cunningham and people like Derrick Lynch, and others who are, who have been here for a long time, who understand the workings of the harbor, and what is really going on. They made some very smart recommendations in that report.

[Jacquie]

Yeah, it sounds like they really a good job on balancing all the various interests and not letting one thing overpower any of the others going into the future. There wasn't just... the ideal is to have only one Water Taxi service which...

[James]

Well, that makes the most sense. It makes sense to have a Water Taxi Service that is unified and working together, because that is what is best for the people that want to use the service. That's what is best for the people in the neighborhood. That would be best for the business owners along the waterfront. That would be best for commuters that want to utilize the service. What happens is with the Water Taxi businesses... are that in the summertime, there's times where... there's kind of a feast or famine during the summer it is just really busy and both operations can run at full speed. And then the shoulder season, in the winter months, it's very, very slow. Economically, it would make more sense for us to work together as much as possible.

[01:20:02;24]

[Jacquie]

Do you have any thoughts about transportation? Transportation and parking seem to be really big issues. And I know your students... You bring a lot of students in and out of here... How do they get here?

[James]

Our students come to this campus... many walk, many take buses, sometimes 2 or 3 buses to get here, because we have students from throughout the city. You've seen the summertime where we have 10 school buses lined up here. We have buses that not only come from the city, but different counties and regions around the state.

[Kraig]

Do they come all the way from the West side? Sorry to interrupt.

[Jacquie]

That's OK.

[Kraig]

I mean I never was... sure.

[James]

Yeah. We work with kids through every county in the state of Maryland, and really a 5 state region. We have people come and take... whether they go, because we operate 5 historic ships, The Lady Maryland, 2 of the skipjacks – you might remember when we had our “Save the Skipjacks Program” here and we helped restore 6 skipjacks with the help of students. Two of those we retained, the Minnie V and the Sigbee, they are out every day with classrooms full of children. And we have two Buyboats, historic Chesapeake Bay Buyboats that we restored that operate. One is the Mildred Belle that we have been operating since 1989. And the other is the Half Shell, which used to be in Fells Point for a while and now is based on the Anacostia River working with Washington D.C. children... Because we now have a Living Classrooms National Capital Region Division, and we work with about 5,000 disadvantaged children out of Washington each year as well. There's a whole effort to recreate what has been successful here in Baltimore, down in the Nation's Capital.

So we have these 5 boats that are out every day with 30 children on each vessel. We also are the umbrella organization that oversees the U.S.S. Constellation. And the effort that Chris Rowsom, who I've worked closely with for 18 years... Chris is the man we named Executive Director there, and he does an incredible job. I don't know whether you have been on board of the Constellation lately, but when that boat came back in in 1989, it was basically a shell. The outside looked beautiful, but the inside there was nothing really done. And Chris and his team of shipwrights, working alongside students, have done a fabulous job of building out the inside – the captain's cabin, all the cannon carriages, the sick bay area... They've opened up a bridge down on the very bottom of the ship where you couldn't go for the last 12 years... So his team has done a remarkable job.

[Kraig]

That's open now? So I can go down there?

[James]

Sure. Please go by and check that out, because it's fascinating. And Constellation's original roots come back to Fells Point, the original frigate.

[Jacquie]

Yeah. There is a heated debate in certain circles, whether that... The Constellation.

[James]

Sure. Well the original Constellation was built, the frigate was built right here in Fells Point. And then she was rebuilt in 1854. And it's still a sloop of war, a total new configuration of ship, and there is 8 pieces of the original ship in the new version. The Constellation's just a tremendous piece of art history here from Fells Point, and for the city. So we take that responsibility very seriously. The maintenance, the upkeep of that ship, and there is a whole education around... someone recently donated 60 hammocks, and so we do overnight programs with the kids on the ship. And also the Baltimore Maritime Museum, which merged in with us, I guess about 7 or 8 years ago. And that's the Coast Guard Cutter Taney, which we had to haul out and do a half million-dollar refit of last year... We were fortunate to get a Save America Treasure grant and get the Coast Guard to help us... The submarine Torsk, the submarine that sank the last 2 ships of World War II... The life ship Chesapeake and the 7-foot Knoll Lighthouse... All 5 of those, the Constellation, the Chesapeake, the Taney, the Torsk and the 7-foot Knoll Lighthouse are all National Historic Landmarks. And it takes a lot to maintain those and to keep them up. So we are the stewards of those historical landmarks for the city, the state, for the country. They are also living classrooms that are utilized for teaching children on a daily basis.

[Jacquie]

There was one that saved Fells Point from the fire of 1900 or 19-something. That wasn't one of the boats you mentioned was it?

[James]

I don't believe so. No.

[Jacquie]

Because they called it, I read in one book, they called it a Revenue Cutter, and apparently...

[James]

No, we don't have that one.

[Jacquie]

It stood out in my mind because it was built in...

[James]

Have you talked to Bob Keith?

[Jacquie]

Yeah, but he didn't talk about it.

[James]

Because Bob is the man as far as history.

[Jacquie]

No. We did a interview on him, but he didn't talk about his Maritime background that much. I found out about it at the Grind one day.

[James]

Was he talking about parking and everything?

[Jacquie]

Yeah.

[Kraig]

Bobs dogs and ours hate each other. I love Bob, but my Doberman and his... [smacks his hands] I mean it's like that.

[James]

Yeah, he's a piece of work.

[Jacquie]

No, I just remember this boat because it was built in the Dubuque, Iowa, that's my hometown. A boat being built in Dubuque, Iowa to be was saving part of Baltimore was kind of interesting.

[James]

That's wild.

[01:25:19;13]

So there is this whole other part of Living Classrooms that is not based right here in Fells Point, but that connects to our Maritime Heritage, which stems from Fells Point, such as the Constellation. We're excited all those partnerships, not only for maintaining the Maritime Heritage, but also we employ 85 to 90 young people throughout the National Seaport of Baltimore sites each year. And we also bring through close to 15,000 young people in education programs throughout these sites as well. So it's a way to really keep the heritage alive for the next generation.

[Jacquie]

Some of the people that are going to be watching this ... you know, new residents that are thinking about moving down here... Do you have any thoughts for them as how to appreciate the neighborhood more, or maybe just visitors to the neighborhood ... anything that you'd like to say?

[James]

Working in Fells Point daily... also I feel my genes and roots stem from here with the Bonds... Every day when I walk threw the neighborhood I feel the charm.... I feel the charm; I feel the history. When I walk through the "Sugar House" that we are restoring... when you are inside, and you all have to come... you just get a sense and a feel of the history. I think for anyone coming to Fells Point that's visiting or living, that's why they are here. That's what they want to experience. And to be so close to the waterfront, and to experience a working harbor is also really special.

[Jacquie]

Is there a future in the working harbor or do you foresee the working harbor becoming extinct at some point?

[James]

Its great that Domino is still here, and we have the ships here every day. Again the Harbor, both National Historic Seaport and Baltimore's working port and harbor, is a major piece of what Living Classrooms Foundation shares with children on a daily basis, when we take them out on our historic ships with our curriculums that are up in the schools... We have staff up in... today I believe, here we are in February, in 15 schools, we have staff working in city schools today. I think that the heritage of the area... and the working port will continue out towards Fort McHenry and towards that way. But I think the Inner Harbor area out towards Fells Point, that the tourism industry has really become the major industry that drives the working port. But we want to keep the history alive.

[Jacquie]

Any other thoughts or interesting stories that you have or anything that might be useful for us to capture? Just kind of a free-form question...

[James]

No. I think we've covered it.

[Jacquie]

You've done a really nice job of covering some topics where I felt like we had some holes. I really appreciate your time.

[Cut discussion of helping promote the documentary]

[Jacquie]

Well, what I think I would like to do is come back in the spring, and get a couple of shots from you students.

[James]

Yeah. 'Cause again... and this is for the record, it's not about James Bond. It's about... We have an incredible staff. We have incredible... hundreds of volunteers. The children that are, here are changing their lives for the better.

[Jacquie]

That's just totally amazing. You must have a really good staff or you couldn't pull it off.

[James]

It's an incredible group of people.

[Jacquie]

This is what I needed, and I really appreciate it.

[01:29:16;12]

[Kraig]

I've got a question... The program seems to be very successful and something that, not only... if it didn't work... how do I phrase this...

[James]

If it didn't work we would go out of business a long time ago. [Laughs] Especially in this tough economy.

[Kraig]

In education, half of it is the people doing the instruction and half of it is the students. They seem to be very interested in this type of program. So, in order to pull off a successful educational venture, the students have to be actually involved. In classrooms today, kids just don't pay attention. Do you see this type of program being... do you see anywhere else in the world that it might work? England, Australia, anywhere like that?

[James]

That's a good question.

Just a few weeks ago we had a group from Russia visit. We had a group from Ireland a month ago. People from California last week. It's amazing the people that come to see Baltimore and they want to come see Living Classrooms Foundation. I think it's interesting because this organization is very unique worldwide. I spent 4 years myself going around the world myself living in different countries and working.... is to be able to combine hands-on education, job training, economic development,

around heritage tourism, and doing work up in the toughest neighborhoods of the city with Project Serve and Community Development. To have an organization that combined those things based on a waterfront. And when you think about all the waterfront cities around the country and around the world, they are all hungry for something like this. That's why the Nation's Capital, Washington D.C., very much wants to see something like this adapted to their city. And we have people come all the time pick and our brains and ask us. And we are happy to help others, to be able to help people in their communities, but to be able to do something special on the waterfront. There is nothing really similar to Living Classroom Foundations of this scope that we are aware of around the world.

And also about your question. It all comes down to bringing learning alive. And it's got to be real. When you work with tough inner city kids, kids who have lost their parents and best friends, and who have dropped out of school and have seen a lot of hard knocks in their lives. They can see through a lot of BS. When these kids come here, and these young adults are involved and they're building that Mikulski Center out there. Those are young men who have fought off addiction, who may have spent time behind bars at one point in their life. But they're here day in and day out, working to gain skills and to better themselves and to help others. And that's what gets me up in the morning. That's why this organization has thrived and been successful. And we've got to show return on investment. When the city invests, when you invest in this organization, when someone donates something, they need to see what's their return on that investment? What are they getting back? How are we making a difference? So every one of our programs has metrics and measures to show how there has been improvement. And if a program is not improving or has the metrics that are not showing continuous quality of improvement, then that program will cease. And we'll start and do something else or put the energy elsewhere. The Cross Roads School – 19% of these children could pass a basic functional test when they came here last fall – up to two grades behind. And by the spring, because of intensive effort and the incredible teaching staff that Mark Conrad's hired and the partnership with Towson, 92% of those kids are now passing that basic functional test. So it's those kinds of measures... 100% of the families are involved in 3 or more activities on this campus. If you go around any other middle school around the city, if you get 20%, you're lucky. Those are the kind of measures that we are looking to and trying to make a difference in a young person's life.

[Kraig]

So you've really raise the bar as far as testing, SAT, ACT-type....

[James]

Everything we do is based on results. We are a nonprofit organization, but we are very results-oriented. On the Seaport Water Tax, we are hiring 25 youth who are often getting their first job and getting a chance, and learning skills. Now that's an extra expense to us, that's an extra cost, but that's our mission. At the same time, we want to run the best dog-on business we can, to be able to serve the community as well. So to be able to combine these things... The same as the Constellation, an incredible museum that employs 20 to 25 youth, often getting their first job. So it's a very creative mission that this organization has and tremendous staff that can implicate it – to combine running a high-quality museum and train young people to get skills, so they can go on to jobs at Marriott, or other companies around the region. And at the same time, bring thousands of children through with their schools, because we work with 300 schools, so they can learn about the Math and Science and History, and do it all in a hands-on way.

I don't know, in school I didn't do as well when someone was yapping at me all the time. I did well when I was out doing something, especially outdoors. And that's why these kids seem to thrive. It works with the most gifted child, and it's especially effective with those that are at risk and have had some learning disabilities or issues.

[01:34:55;29]

[Jacquie]

And you're not being hit by current educational crisis in Baltimore, the finances?

[James]

Sure. We have just gone through the toughest economic down-turns, and this organization has actually had a 3, 4% increase. And this happened the last economic down-turn. What tends to happen, again I'm proud of our staff and students, is when the rubber meets the road, you've got to be able to show results. And those that are investing money, whether it's the City, the State, the corporations or foundations, they will stick with and actually support more those organizations that are showing true results, that are helping people and measuring up. So that's our challenge. So we've been able to do pretty well through the recent economic down-turn.

[Jacquie]

That's great.

[James]

But we still do not have a major endowment in the bank or anything like that. We have to struggle each year, we have an 11 million dollar budget, and we struggle day in and day out to meet that budget each year and to maintain these ships, to build the building for these children in the school, and to have the Maritime online. It's an on going effort. We need all the help we can get.

[Jacquie]

Thank you.