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Interviewee: Douglas Eagles  
Interviewer: Gillian Demetriou  
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Editor: Gillian Demetriou  
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**Gillian Demetriou:**

Thank you. Okay, we're recording. Hi, my name is Gillian Demetriou. I'm a research assistant for the Paradoxical Paradise, an African-American Oral History and Mapping Project of Asbury Park. Today is Tuesday, February 16th, 2021, and I'm here with Douglas Eagles, the executive director of the Boys and Girls Club of Monmouth County. He has agreed to be interviewed for the oral history portion of this project. This interview is being recorded with permission of both parties. Thank you so much for joining me today, Doug.

**Douglas Eagles:**

You're welcome.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

My first question is, can you just tell us a little bit about your early life? Where were you born and raised?

**Douglas Eagles:**

Yeah, sure. So I'm a long time Monmouth County resident, born in Lincroft, New Jersey. Spent almost my entire life here. Spent five years in New York City when I went to graduate school. But yeah, grew up in Asbury Park. Or I'm sorry, I grew up in Monmouth county, but I've worked in Asbury Park for the past about 15 years now.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Mm-hmm (affirmative). So when did you move to Asbury Park?

**Douglas Eagles:**

I'm sorry, I don't live in Asbury Park.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Ah.

**Douglas Eagles:**

Yes-

**Gillian Demetriou:**

My apologies. You still live in Lincroft?

**Douglas Eagles:**

Middletown.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Middletown. Okay. Very cool. And can you just tell me a little bit about your educational background?

**Douglas Eagles:**

Yeah, sure. So I went to undergraduate school at Eastern University where I studied in sociology, then I went to graduate school at the New School in New York City where I got my Master's in International Relations and Conflict and Security Studies. And that's my academic background.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

That's very cool. And how long have you served as the director of the Boys and Girls Club of Monmouth county?

**Douglas Eagles:**

Oh, it'll be nine years in April.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

And where are your offices located at this time?

**Douglas Eagles:**

Yeah, so our main branch is in Asbury Park on Monroe Avenue on the west side of Asbury Park, and then we also have a facility in Red Bank as well.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

And how big is your staff?

**Douglas Eagles:**

Well, during the school year, our staff is anywhere from 60 to 75, and during the summer, usually around a hundred.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Are those volunteer staff?

**Douglas Eagles:**

No, they're all paid professionals. The majority of them are part-time, hourly. We have six full-time salary staff.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

My next question is, what are your major sources of funding? If you can share that information.

**Douglas Eagles:**

Yeah, I can share that. You can also access it online on our 990, which is publicly available information, but we have... Grant fundings are probably our biggest source, everything from federal, state and local government to family foundations and corporate foundations. Then it would be individual giving and special event giving and then program income.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Okay. And can you tell me about your job duties pre-COVID? What goes on during normal times?

**Douglas Eagles:**

Yeah, yeah, of course. So, yeah, I mean, we're an afterschool program. We're focused on really trying to empower the kids that come through our doors every day. We want to understand what their stories are, we want to come alongside them, and do really whatever we can to give them the tools that they need to succeed in life. So, it looks like any sort of traditional afterschool program. School gets out, kids will either walk to the facility, or we have buses and vans that go out to some of the schools that are further away, to pick those kids up, bring them to the facility. We have a schedule, a whole array of different programs and activities for while they're there, including homework help, including STEAM programs, physical fitness programs, mentor/tutoring, programs, meals. We provide them with dinner every night.

So, that happens during the school year. And then kind of the motto is when school's out, the club is on. So if schools close for holidays or spring break or winter break, the club will be open and we'll run full day services for those kids. And then, during the summer we run a full summer camp, eight week long, 8:00 AM to 6:00 PM, five days a week, breakfast/lunch, a whole host of different summer camp activities. Everything from field trips to swimming in the pool. We have an indoor pool at our facility in Asbury Park. A lot of collaborative relationships with outside organizations like Lake House Music Academy, Applaud our Kids, Project Right Now, all sorts of different community-based organizations that have different skill sets that we've partnered with, and they are able to bring those skill sets to bear in building and equipping our club kids.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

That sounds like-

**Douglas Eagles:**

Pre-COVID.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah. That sounds like a just overall great program. And can you just tell me a little bit about the population that you serve?

**Douglas Eagles:**

Yeah. So in Asbury Park, we're largely serving the west side community, the immediate neighborhoods where our club is located, which is primarily African-American. Although we've seen a growing population of Hispanic kids at that unit. We also have a after school program at the, Our Lady of Mount Carmel Catholic School, and that's 78 to 80% Hispanic in population. Our College Achieve site, which is also in Asbury Park, is a mixture of Hispanic and African-American kids. The majority of them coming from families that are eligible for free or reduced lunch, which is an indicator of where the families are coming from a socioeconomic standpoint.

So a lot of these kids are from under-resourced situations and who don't have the types of resources that you'd need to enroll in a summer camp somewhere else, or to enroll in an after-school program somewhere else. And we're able to provide a low cost, high quality program experience both during the school year and during summer camp for those kids.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

It literally just sounds like a great program. So pre-COVID, do you feel that you had enough resources that you needed to execute your mission?

**Douglas Eagles:**

Yeah. I mean, that's an interesting question. It's not one that's easily answered with a yes or no. It's a constant hustle to raise dollars to fund a nonprofit like the Boys and Girls Club. The key to making that happen is to ensure that you're running a high quality programs and programs that are having an impact. And as long as we can continue to demonstrate impact and align that impact with the interest and vision of donors, we've been able to raise the money that we need to fund our mission.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Okay. And what in your eyes were the strengths and areas of potential growth in your operation?

**Douglas Eagles:**

Well, the strengths are really the underlying fundamentals, the organizational structure of the board of directors. I have a really strong and dynamic senior leadership team. We built a really dynamic organizational culture, kind of built around this idea of bringing corporate 500 values to the nonprofit sector where we really see ourselves as youth development professionals. We're not there to babysit. We're there to maximize the time that we get with these kids to do everything that we can to ensure that their lives will be better off as a result of spending time in our club.

And so, that really takes a lot of investment in building the right kind of culture and attracting the right kind of a team, both at the frontline youth development level and at the senior leadership level and the board level. And I think the future growth opportunities, really, we opened up the College Achieve and the Mount Carmel site last year during COVID. Those were things that we had been working on, and we were able to officially get those sites launched. We also have potential in Long Branch to open up a unit in Long Branch. Hopefully, sometime this year, if we can find the right location and align the right partnerships, but that community has expressed interest in having the Boys and Girls Club come and run after school programming there.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

That's great. I really hope that works out just because I go to school in Long Branch and I can see how that might benefit the community there. So thinking back, what are your earliest recollections of hearing about COVID?

**Douglas Eagles:**

So, in early February, I was headed to a national conference in Las Vegas for Boys and Girls Clubs of America. And at that point I had already begun to hear about this virus that was in the Pacific Northwest. So, before I left, I met with my senior leadership team. We actually talked about developing a COVID-19 management plan, assuming that at some point the virus would spread to our area of the country. And we wanted to make sure that we were equipped and ready to continue to run our operations in the face of that virus. So my chief operating officer, Karen Odom, got together with my senior leadership team while I was away, and put together a preliminary COVID-19 management plan.

And when I came back from that, we sort of went around to a couple of different key stakeholders, finalized that plan, and then began training our staff in... We were kind of making it up as we went along. This was early on and there wasn't any directives yet spelled out by local departments of health or anything like that. But there was enough information coming out of the CDC that we knew enough about social distancing and washing hands. And so, we were implementing those practices at the end of February and the beginning of March.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Did you sort of... Okay, sorry, trying to think of how to phrase my question.

**Douglas Eagles:**

Yeah, yeah. Go for it.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

When you first heard about it, did you expect it to be as prominent as it is? Like completely life stopping? Does that make sense?

**Douglas Eagles:**

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah. And I think-

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Okay.

**Douglas Eagles:**

... we knew it was coming at an intellectual level, right? It was news being reported out in the Pacific Northwest and Seattle area. There were clubs that were up in the Seattle area, who the executive directors that I was in contact with, and they were pretty scared. So I think we took it serious enough to develop a management plan, and we were in regular... I was in regular weekly meetings with execs from other clubs throughout the state. And so, we had access to information that felt, that prepared us for... Even before the governor announced that they were doing a two week close down of everything, we were anticipating that was going to happen. But we never, in a million years, thought it would be something that we'd still be dealing with a year later. We thought it would be more of a temporary issue that we had to manage in the short term, but thought we'd be back to normal life at least by summer.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah. So, as the pandemic has unfolded, how did it impact your operations day-to-day?

**Douglas Eagles:**

Yeah. So, I want to say the second week of March, we... Before the governor closed down the state, we actually had a staff member who exhibited symptoms. And so, we closed the facility, brought in an outside company to do a deep clean, and then came back, and [inaudible 00:13:25] board executive committee to talk about the risks and whether or not it was worth us continuing to operate. Because at this point it was clear, it was rapidly spreading, and we made the call to continue to operate. So, that Monday we were operating. And after that day, I actually got back with my executive committee and we made the determination that the risk just seemed too great, and we just didn't have the right supplies to manage it for the long term. So we decided to close, and it was later on the end of that week when the governor officially shut everything down.

So, prior to the governor officially shutting everything down and prior to us closing our own facility, we knew we were headed that direction. So, a lot of my staff started coming in on off hours and during the weekends and pre-recording program content. So, once the governor closed everything down, we had a database of video content that we were able to edit and start to push out online, so that we could continue to make sure that we were providing some sort of program content for our club members; just to maintain some sort of semblance of normalcy in this rapidly changing, operating environment.

We also did something we had never done before, which was, we opened up ourselves as a daily distribution site for grab-and-go meals. So immediately within the first week of the governor closing everything down, we had set up both our Red Bank and our Asbury Park units as distribution sites. So we were serving anywhere from 225 to 250 meals a day in Asbury Park, six days a week, out of that location on Monroe Avenue. And then we started to put that pre-

recorded content out. We also realized that we needed to develop something a little bit more formal with the online content.

There's a lot of issues around safety and making sure that we're providing a safe environment, operating environment for our kids. So we created a new platform called BGCM Boundless, which enabled us to create a logon mechanism for our club members and the parents. And the parents would log in, fill out a permission slip allowing their child to participate in the online forums. And within two weeks of the governor's shutdown, we had migrated all of our in-person club programming to an online platform where we were running programs virtually, both prerecorded and live streaming five days a week. It was not attended or we didn't get the same level of participation.

Before COVID, we were serving 350 kids a day, at our various sites throughout the county. And once we went to virtual, if we were serving 75 to a hundred kids, we were lucky. Fast forward to summer. We got permission from the governor to open up and run a summer camp, albeit with a dramatically reduced capacity, because we had to implement all the, you know, the social distancing and all of those different COVID-19 protocols. So we ran summer camp. And again, always thinking that at some point we would snap back to normal, but as we came to the end of summer camp, we recognized that that wasn't happening. So what we did was we created remote learning centers. We used our facilities, which again, they're usually idle during the school day, but we realized that schools were going to be going virtual, so we opened up our centers to kids who were doing virtual learning so that parents could drop their kids off at our facility, and we could provide those kids with support while they were doing their online schooling.

Helping to keep them on task, providing them with games and activities in between their class sessions, providing them with breakfast and lunch, which again, for the population that we serve, was a really important kind of service to offer because a lot of the families that we serve are hourly employees, and if they have to stay home to watch their kids do virtual learning, that means they're not able to go to work and earn their paycheck. So, it was really something that we saw as an opportunity to take our facilities, which again, traditionally are closed during school hours, and open them up so that we could provide the best possible support in this unique operating environment.

So we went from all virtual immediately to in-person summer camp with a reduced number of kids that we were serving, to remote learning centers in the fall, even to now, plus our regular actual program. That's how we responded operationally to the presence of COVID.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Very cool. Did COVID impact your funding at all?

**Douglas Eagles:**

It did initially, but once we were able to demonstrate to funders that we were continuing to show up for our kids and still carry out our mission, we were actually able to attract a whole bunch of new funding that hadn't previously been there. So yeah, I mean, in the short term it did, but in the long term, we didn't take a big hit financially.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

That's good.

**Douglas Eagles:**

Yep.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Cool. So... Sorry, I'm just reading my question, because I think you answered it already in your previous answer.

**Douglas Eagles:**

No, that's fine.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

I don't want to keep asking you the same question. Are you guys planning anything more to do on top of the remote learning centers?

**Douglas Eagles:**

Yeah. So right now, what we're doing, we're focused on really trying to pivot and adjust to meeting kind of the mental health fallout from COVID. Again, a lot of the... Everyone, right, has been a little bit more isolated, and the communities that we serve had experienced different levels of trauma, even before COVID, and with COVID that has kind of exacerbated the levels of trauma that a lot of the kids that we work with endure. And so, we have worked over the past three to four months to build the capacity of our staff to address, through a trauma informed lens, the different mental health issues that some of our club members are dealing with. So, that's kind of what we're focused on right now.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

That's awesome. So are you guys sort of reaching out to mental health specialists and stuff like that?

**Douglas Eagles:**

So, that's the plan in the long-term, but in the short term, it's really about providing training opportunities for our staff. The state right now just recently rolled out a... Through their Office of Resilience, a roadmap to help community-based organizations become trauma informed. And in addition to the state's efforts on that front, the Boys and Girls Clubs of America, which is the national parent entity for our local club, is also focusing on that. So we're leveraging the resources from both of those initiatives to build up our own internal capacity with our staff, to be able to ensure that the program that we're providing is done in such a way as to provide a safe, both emotionally and physically, safe space for our club kids to understand and navigate the different traumas that they're experiencing. Not just from COVID, yes, from COVID, but also



from other traumas that are associated with just growing up in neighborhoods where there's things like high prevalence of gang activity and gun violence and street violence.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

It sounds like a really great and definitely important program. So, kind of shifting from that, did you personally feel that you got what you needed out of local state and federal authority?

**Douglas Eagles:**

Guidance and such?

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Guidance, resources, anything like that?

**Douglas Eagles:**

Yeah, I mean, listen, my expectation is tempered by the reality of large bureaucracy to be able to respond to fast moving, changing environments. And they don't have a good... They're large bureaucracies, which means they just by nature don't respond quickly and well to a fast moving environment like that. That being said, I think given the circumstances, DCF, who we deal with directly as a result of [inaudible 00:23:11], and the DOH, both of those organizations really did the best that they could in helping provide guidance to us. So, yeah, I mean, I never had big expectations that they were going to show up in any way differently than a bureaucracy would. But I think given the dynamics, I think they did a decent job in providing the kind of guidance and support that organizations like ours needed.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

And how do you think the Boys and Girls Club will be changed in the long run as a result of the pandemic?

**Douglas Eagles:**

I think one thing is the idea of virtual remote office work. I have a lot of back office staff who don't need to be onsite all the time. They're all working remotely. So I think that's a fundamental shift in terms of how do you maintain and build a cohesive organizational culture when a lot of people are virtual. I also think we recognized that, or I recognized, and my team recognized too, that you have to be in the work that we do, not for the paycheck, but for the impact you know you're going to have on the kids that you're working with. That's the only way that you're going to [inaudible 00:24:40] at risk and come out into a global pandemic and show up at work and be there for these kids.

And I also think my team recognized how under the right circumstances, how well they can pivot and reinvent themselves as an organization. I mean, the speed at which we moved from in-person to virtual was just awe-inspiring as a leader, to see how well they came together to accomplish that. So I think just learning what we're capable of and knowing that there's so much

more that we can do given the right incentives and given the right support structures to continue to have an impact, not just on the kids that we serve, but the families that they're a part of and the broader community as a whole.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Are you guys still a food center, like a meal distributor?

**Douglas Eagles:**

Yeah. We're still doing that.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Still doing that?

**Douglas Eagles:**

Yep.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

That's so great. Everything that you've told me has honestly sounded amazing.

**Douglas Eagles:**

Thank you.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

No problem. So, how has the pandemic impacted you personally?

**Douglas Eagles:**

Well, I mean, I think like anyone else, just the isolation, not being able to go out, staying home with my two boys and my wife and just being inside more often than not. I'm an outdoor type person. I love being outside. So that I think is just emotionally draining and exhausting over time. The continued level of uncertainty, when it comes to being a leader of an organization where you need to plan long term, not knowing what the operating environment is going to look like on any given week, I think has been really hard in terms of seeing what it does to my team. One week we'll be fully remote or doing the remote learning center, and then the next week we won't, because the schools are all in-person. So it's just kind of a constant whiplash. And watching my team go through that, I think has been challenging.

We also lost a staff member early on in April of last year, Simon died. It was never verified that it was the virus, although everyone feels and thinks it was. He was turned away from the hospital twice. He had symptoms of COVID. But again, this was early on and the hospitals were only taking what they perceived to be high risk populations, so older people, people with underlying conditions. Simon was young in his mid 20s, healthy, fit. And so, that took a toll on me personally and my whole team.

I mean, Simon had been with us for six, seven years. And so, losing him hit my entire staff and the club kids pretty big. He was prominently figured in a lot of our pre recorded content that we put together and put out to the club kids. So, I don't think it's any different than anyone else. I mean, I think maybe in some ways personally, I was better because I was able to commit myself to not focusing on how I was being impacted, and redirect that focus on how we can help other people who are being impacted.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

I'm very sorry for your loss.

**Douglas Eagles:**

Thank you.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

But it sounds like you have personally persevered through this, and it sounds like you've been doing really amazing work. So, on a little bit of a lighter note, what are you looking forward to post-pandemic time?

**Douglas Eagles:**

Oh, man. Post-pandemic time. So when we first opened the [inaudible 00:29:05] for two or three months, and then everything was shut down. The enthusiasm and the joy that was in their eyes, you couldn't see their face because they were covered with masks, but the enthusiasm and the joy that they had where they could just come back together and be kids. Granted, we had all the social distancing and all that, but them just being able to come together and have fun in summer camp, it was so inspiring. So I'm looking forward to just getting back to that regular, energized, club experience where kids are just able to reconnect and be... I don't know if we'll ever be normal, normal, but we can all just get back to the business of living life. So yeah, I'm looking forward to that.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Very cool. That's it for my questions. Is there anything that you wanted to talk about that we didn't touch upon?

**Douglas Eagles:**

How is Eileen Chapman involved in all this?

**Gillian Demetriou:**

She... I have to think about how to answer this. She also works at Monmouth.

**Douglas Eagles:**

At the Bruce Springsteen Center. Yeah.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah. And she works very closely with Dr. Ziobro who I believe you emailed back and forth-

**Douglas Eagles:**

I think I emailed with... Right. Yeah, I emailed with her.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah. So they're very tight if you will. And so, Dr. Ziobro has been... Eileen was the first person I interviewed for this project, just about her role as a councilwoman and how the... Basically all these questions, but tailored to her.

**Douglas Eagles:**

From a city perspective. Right.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Exactly. So Dr. Ziobro had reached out to Eileen initially, and then kind of asked if she knew anybody else who she thought would be willing to be interviewed and was an active member of the Asbury Park community. And that's where your name came up from Eileen. So, she's not involved, involved. She might be like a board member or something, I think.

**Douglas Eagles:**

Right. A resource for the professor.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yeah. Yeah.

**Douglas Eagles:**

Awesome. Well, I hope the rest of the project goes well.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Thank you very much. I think we have a website going up soon. So when I get that information, I'll relay it to you. The transcript from this interview will be up there, a little summary about you. So I'll send that your way as soon as I get that information.

**Douglas Eagles:**

Awesome.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Thank you so much for your time today. Really appreciate it.

**Douglas Eagles:**

Yeah, no problem.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Have a good day.

**Douglas Eagles:**

You too.

**Gillian Demetriou:**

Yep. You too. Bye.

**Douglas Eagles:**

Bye.