

INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE EHRLICH

In 1939 and 1940 I was teaching in a junior high school in Brownsville. And the class I had consisted of 22 boys, all of whom had IQ's of less than 75. It was part of the CRMD Program that is, children with retarded Mental Development. In those days the Board of Education had rented busses and classes were taken to the world's fair from junior high schools. When the schedule for my school came out I noticed that my class had been omitted. When I went to the teacher in charge he said well the principal thought maybe your class shouldn't go after all. With their low IQ, if some of them get lost they'll never find their way home. I thought it was very unfair to deprive these kids of an opportunity to see the fair. They were from a poor neighborhood, their parents couldn't afford to take them. They had very few experiences outside of the school neighborhood except in the case of an occasional movie, and I went to the principal and I assured him very confidently, although I didn't feel that confident, that I would be responsible for the boys, I would see that they would stay together, they would keep out of trouble and I would make sure they would all get back safely.

With that assurance he made arrangements to squeeze my class into the schedule and we went to the fair. It was an exciting time for most of the students. They enjoyed it, it was a new world for them. It had its problems. Everybody had to go to the toilet at a different time. Some kids ate their lunch at eleven o'clock and got hungry at one and somebody else had food and there were arguments.



But they stayed together and we enjoyed it.

We came at last to an exhibit called City of Light put out by the electric power companies of New York State I believe. The outside of the building was a waterfall and we went through the waterfalls by means of a glass tunnel. We got inside and we saw a large diorama of Midtown Manhattan somewhat like the diorama that's here in the Queens Museum but on a much smaller scale. However it ran about 30 or 40 feet at least in length. It showed all the skyscrapers, and the buildings, the department stores of Manhattan in a typical day and at the end of the diorama there was another diorama of generating power station up along the Harlem River showing the dynamos, showing how the power was generated for the lights and the electricity in New York City. The presentation took about 20 minutes. As we watched, it suddenly got darker; the sky got darker and you could see a storm coming on. There was a rumble of thunder, lightning flashed and as the sky got darker the lights in the buildings came on, more and more of the skyscrapers had little lights which lit up as the sky darkened. And as the lights came on, the generators at the power plant were added to the circuit, first one generator and then a second, showing how the Edison Company met the sudden need for the additional lights.

At the end of the 20 minutes I started to move my class onto the next exhibit. One boy stood there gazing at the diorama. I turned to him and said Pete, you're going to be holding up the class. We're ready to go to the next exhibit.

He turned to me and he had a dazed far away look on his face. He didn't see me although I was right in front of him and he said to me, This is the most beautiful thing what I've ever seen in myu whole life. That was 40 years ago. I've forgotten many things about the fair, but not that.