

Student Handout
Oakland Museum of California
What's Going On? California and the Vietnam Era
Lesson Plan #2

1968: Year of Social Change and Turning Point in Vietnam and the U.S.

Oral History

Ezra Pratt #2

Ezra Pratt is an African American Vietnam veteran from the Palm Desert Area in Southern California.

Interviewer: Did you get a job? Are you living with your parents right now?

No. I'm trying to go back with my girlfriend and start a life with her. Because like I said, it's been easy—before I—the American system, the United States' system of, you know, going to school and all that ki—it's pretty simple, you know, to me. I didn't get involved in it because I've been blessed with certain gifts that I could apply to society to get my, to get my ends met, my needs met. So it was not hard for me to get started in doing things, but I could not sustain anything. I could not sustain an intimate relationship with my girlfriend because I had these burning questions going on inside of me that were driving me nuts. But I didn't know how to approach myself or those issues. I didn't like—a huge part of myself I didn't like. And, um, so of course if I don't like myself, I can't feel no sustained— But I didn't—like, this is hindsight. I just—you know, if I'm full of drugs trying to get to squash those feelings—I didn't understand why I was so attracted to drugs. You know, I didn't understand why I couldn't stay anyplace for, say, any more than eight to ten months, then I had to move. I had to get away. I had to break off from it, whether it be my girlfriend or my family or a job. I don't know. I didn't know why I developed this restlessness in me. And I had to get away. You're getting too close, you know. Or you're making me—I'm beginning to think about what's happening inside of me, and it's very, very, very uncomfortable, you know. All the answers I kept coming up with is that I'm a, I'm the devil. I'm f----- up, you know. That I'm—there's something—I'm flawed.

Interviewer: Where would you run away to?

Myself. I don't know. I did a lot of time for, like, burglaries and possession and—back in the '70s and '80s I'd get busted. And actually, when I went to prison, I did much better. You know, because it was so structured. And all the guys in there, you know, it was kind of like, um, I would get involved with certain groups. And there was a lot of Vietnam veterans in the joint. Lot of them. And, um, I don't know, it was more black and white, I guess, in the joint. Like, who the enemy was and who the—it kind of reminded me—and there was tension in there at times. This incredible tension could come up around race.



There'd be race riots or just, just, just riots in general sometimes. So that would give me something to take my mind off these questions that were unanswerable that were running through my head all the time. So in a lot of ways, prison was what gave me some respite from myself.

Interviewer: Did you continue your drug habit in prison?

Of course. Up until the third time. Then, after a while, I stopped doing drugs in prison. I don't know where that came from, but I just didn't do them. I didn't pursue them. I saw them as a waste of time in prison, but the minute I got out, I got out in the larger world, I started doing them again. Because I could not cope. I could not cope coming—well, I guess with you knowing me, or something. That's what they tell us. I, I, I—you know, all my focus was on the outside—

