Interviewee: Dan Withers

Interviewer: David P. Cline

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Length: 2 discs; approximately 70 minutes

START OF DISC 1, TRACK 1

DC: Great. So if we could start just with a little background, you're a native of Louisville?

DW: I was born in Chicago, but I came here when I was about six years old and I've been here pretty much ever since. Left to go to school, went to school in South Carolina, four years at Allen University in Columbia, South Carolina. Was drafted into the service immediately and I probably spent about six years away from Louisville during that time, because I would only come back to Louisville to visit during school like at Christmas time, a couple of summers, because a couple of summers I worked in South Carolina. I left when I graduated from high school in '64 and didn't come back until January of '72 and I've been working with the school board ever since, or I've been working for the Jefferson County school system. Initially it was Louisville public schools and then when busing started, it became Jefferson County public schools.

DC: Right. I'll ask about that in a second. Just your own schooling here, so you went to schools in Louisville?

DW: Yes.

DC: Which elementary school?

DW: At the time it was called Virginia Avenue Elementary School; it is now Carter Elementary School. Went to Duvalle Junior High School and then to Central High School, where I'm the principal at this time.

DC: So this is a homecoming for you?

DW: Yes it was.

DC: Yeah. Were the schools that you went to at that time, were they mostly black schools?

DW: They were predominately black. Virginia Avenue was all black. Duvalle, we had a few white students who lived in the projects; I couldn't tell you how many. When I got to Central, there were two white students, but I think their parents or their father was a civil rights worker or an attorney or something; I'm not sure what he did but it's my understanding that he was in civil rights so they chose to come to Central. Central wasn't, even then Central wasn't segregated by choice; white students could attend if they wanted to. But historically, Central was always a black school up until '75 .

DC: So when you came back to town, what was your first--. Well first of all, you started as a teacher?

DW: Yes.

DC: What inspired you to be a teacher?

DW: It's something that I just always wanted to do. I didn't always realize it, but one day I was looking back at my yearbook and one of the quotes at the back of the yearbook was "What do you want to do for your future career?" And I did have teaching down there. But teaching, I've always had a passion for math. I was a math major in college. I always wanted to teach. So I fulfilled two of my passions, working with math and then teaching. Later on I became an administrator, but I just kind of grew into that.

DC: So what was your first teaching assignment?

DW: I taught math at Shawnee High School in Louisville, Kentucky. I stayed there for three years, that was from '72 to '75, and started busing along with students. When they desegregated the school system, they, along with transferring many blacks who were going to Shawnee and Central to desegregate the entire Jefferson County public school system, they transferred a lot of students, but at the same time they transferred black teachers, because the majority of the black teachers were in the city school system in Louisville, not in the Jefferson County area. As a matter of fact, there were very few black teachers in Jefferson County at that time. So to integrate the staff, they also had to transfer black teachers. So I was transferred to PRP.

DC: Which is Pleasure Ridge?

DW: No—I'm sorry, Pleasure Ridge Park, yes it is.

DC: Yeah, Pleasure Ridge.

DW: Yeah, Pleasure Ridge Park High School.

DC: So once you were transferred there, what was the mix of faculty then?

DW: I couldn't give the exact percentage, but it was a low percentage of blacks throughout the entire system because they didn't have enough black teachers to raise the percentage in Jefferson County to any more than about five or six percent. I think all your county schools at the time, they had to have at least, I think it was five percent and the window was between five and seventeen percent. If you got over seventeen percent, they were looking for those teachers in that particular school to move to another school. But the problem as I see it is the school system, then and now, was about thirty to thirty-three percent black, the student body. And I always thought that the ratio of the teachers should be comparable to that of the student body and that wasn't so and it's still not so. We only

have about maybe ten, if I'm not mistaken, maybe ten, no more than fifteen percent black faculty in the entire Jefferson County school system. I think that should be increased to be comparable with the percentage of students we have in Jefferson County, which is about thirty-three percent black students.

DC: Overall right now?

DW: Overall, yes.

DC: Right. And here at Central right now—

DW: Here at Central, we have about eighty percent black students and there's a reason for that, of course.

DC: And the faculty, though, is—

DW: The faculty has to stay within the range; it's about twenty percent. We cannot go any—there is what they call the Singleton Law; I'm not sure why it's called Singleton, but that keeps us within a certain ratio. We're not supposed to be any higher than seventeen-point-some percent blacks and we have about twenty percent. So I was told last year, you cannot hire any more minority teachers.

DC: And how do you feel about that?

DW: Well again, I think the teaching staff should reflect the ratio of the student body. I've never felt that we should go back to a one-race school. So I'm not asking for the staff to be eighty percent black, but I think when we have eighty percent student body, I don't know why they should cut me off at twenty percent minority staff.

DC: So when you were at Shawnee and busing first started, were you involved in the process leading up to that? Did you know it was coming? Did it strike you as a surprise? I mean it obviously affected you personally because it moved you across town.

DW: No, I wasn't involved. We probably knew it was coming a year or so ahead. We knew something was going to happen. We weren't looking for it and I don't really remember thinking about being transferred. I enjoyed my time at Shawnee High School; there was a lot of camaraderie. It had an excellent study body there at the time. So when I was moved, I was a little bit shocked, disappointed, but we moved and we grew into it. When I got to PRP, there was some adjustment but I ended up liking PRP. PRP is a good school.

DC: Can you tell about those sort of first days or weeks or months of adjustment there?

DW: Well, there's a lot of war stories at several different high schools, especially out in the county. The PRP transition, it was pretty good, it was pretty smooth. There was some, a few problems. I think the one that struck me the most is when I first drove through the gates—drove through the entrance, it wasn't gates—but at the entrance at PRP. Like in many other high schools, there was a lot of adults standing there, white men and women. They were holding bats and bricks and I said, "Oh my goodness. What's going on here?" I was driving an MG Midget at the time, a convertible, and I said this doesn't look good, but you know, drove through, nothing ever happened to me. At that particular site, PRP, the buses were not rocked. Our buses were not hit by bats. They were just standing there, but it was rather intimidating to drive through initially. Then after awhile, they stopped coming. But at first, to drive through, it looked pretty hairy. Then nothing ever happened, so we were okay.

Inside the building, it was pretty cordial. The transition again was good. I don't know of any student who got harassed. I was one of the few black male teachers. I know there were several parents who said, "Mr. Withers is the one that you go to if you need

help." So I would have kids who came to me. But there was never anything they came to me about that was really, really serious, like being stalked or intimidated or something like that. It was just the parents advised them that Mr. Withers is a person that you need to go to. So it gave me the opportunity to form a lot of relationships with the young kids; I enjoyed that part of it.

There was this one situation with white students were going to walk out in protest because of busing, and the principal, I think, was in a meeting when it initially was supposed to happen, wasn't in the building. The assistant principal got on and in a rather weak tone, saying that he understood their feelings and why they felt this way about busing. His announcement was more or less in support: if you walk out, it's okay. We're not condoning it, but it's okay. What I really respected about the principal when he came on, he got on the intercom and he was very strong and in a strong voice: "If you walk out of this building, there will be a suspension and I will schedule appointments to get back into this school in such a way that it will be ten days before you get back. And you can walk out if you want to, but you will be suspended." That nipped it in the bud and stopped it right there, so there wasn't a walkout. So I appreciated the principal for taking a strong—I don't know what his views on busing were, didn't matter. He said the law is systems will be desegregated and the busing is the way we're doing it. If you walk out, then this is the consequence.

DC: Who was the principal at that time?

DW: That was Mr. Pervus at the time, Claud Pervus.

DC: Was there ever a time for you, as a new teacher, when he invited you all in or sat you down or welcomed you, or was there, your sort of transition as a member of the faculty, how did that—

DW: No. I felt welcomed by him. No, I don't remember calling a meeting and welcoming. It could have happened; I don't remember him even welcoming us to the staff in a faculty meeting. I'm not saying that it didn't happen, because usually if you're a new staff member in the first staff meeting or faculty meeting, they'll say, "Dan Withers is a new member of the family," or something. And it could have happened; I just don't remember it happening. So there wasn't any big transition where I was introduced to the faculty. Basically, we formed relationships on a one-by-one basis. I would have faculty members that would not speak. I was always used to, for three years when I was at Shawnee, like I said the camaraderie was great and people talked to each other. We socialized together on the weekends, I mean the whole staff. When I got there, there was no really socialization, at least that I was invited to. There were some teachers who you'd speak to in the hallway and they would turn their nose up. So you just learned those individuals and I would stop speaking to those folks. But there were other people who would come to me and be quite open and quite friendly and quite inviting. So I developed relationships, I mean great relationships, at PRP, but it was done on an individual basis, not the whole staff.

DC: Would you say there was active resistance on the part of these people, some of these other faculty, to busing, or was it just in the way that they kind of shut you out?

DW: Yeah, I think it was the way they would shut other individual teachers out, the way they would treat students; it was subtle. Basically, what I would advise students, I was telling them it's a challenge: "Your mother and father didn't raise quitters. You find out what this teacher's expectations are and then you meet those expectations. You don't have to like him or her. He doesn't have to like you. It's a matter of you doing what's required, just like everybody else." This is the way I would counsel students. But there were teachers

who obviously didn't agree with busing, didn't agree with having the larger number of black students in their building. But there were other teachers who were quite inviting, accepting of the diversity. It took awhile.

There were parents that would resist. I had a parent who called me one morning and was complaining because I signed her student a seat and the seat happened to be adjacent to a black boy. So he called complaining and I said, "I sat her in the front because she was talking. I wanted her to be away from the crowd." "But she's next to a black kid." I said, "What difference does that make? First place, I'm in the room with her, so I don't think anything is going to happen. But I'm black." I had to tell him, "I'm black too, so what difference does it make if she's sitting next to a black kid? I don't understand what the problem is." Well then he ended up calling me a racist. And I said, "I don't understand." I said, "I don't have a problem with her sitting next to a black kid, but apparently you do. So I'm not sure who's a racist here." But I would have conversations occasionally like that.

In terms of kids getting along though, I think it was pretty normal. They were rare, but there were a few fights between black and white kids; but it was as far as I can determine, it wasn't because of race. To jump a little bit, though, I ended up being transferred to another school that was quite a bit different. It was in more of a rural area, even more than PRP High School.

DC: So how long were you at PRP then?

DW: I was at PRP for five years.

DC: So that was '70—

DW: That was '75 to '80.

DC: '75 to '80, okay.

DW: And then in '79, I was asked to take an athletic director's position at Shawnee, so I went back to Shawnee. The clientele, student body, was a little bit different then, but I enjoyed it even then. I was the athletic director for two years and math teacher still, and then my third year, I was selected as an assistant principal, AP, at Shawnee. In those years, I think the enrollment at Shawnee was probably fifty-fifty. What I was saying I was going to jump ahead, after that, when I became assistant principal, they transfer assistant principals because they want to keep the ratio of administrators somewhat diverse too. So I was transferred to Fairdale and that experience was even much different from PRP.

DC: Fairdale?

DW: Yeah, Fairdale High School.

DC: And that was in—

DW: Fairdale, Kentucky.

DC: But I mean what year?

DW: It was in Jefferson County. That was in '83. And I formed relationships there too. So if I say something, it wasn't that it was all bad, because again, I had to form individual relationships. But the community was very closed and very few blacks even ever lived in that community. I think there was a little section where they had a place that made bricks and I think blacks had a little settlement there, but that was years ago. Other than that, I think maybe two or three black kids had gone to Fairdale. They didn't mind calling you a nigger. When I confronted them about it, they'd say, "Aw, I didn't mean you, Mr. Withers." Well what do you think I am, you know?

DC: This was from students or from faculty?

DW: No, students, but their parents didn't mind doing it either. Rarely would you get it from a teacher, not to an administrator. But you knew, or you could sense, or you could read some of the feelings that some of the staff had. Basically, it was a community, it was the parents, the people in that community that made it very closed.

DC: Can you think of a particular time or instance when something like that happened?

DW: Well, I probably could think of quite a few. I would have dealt with the student and I would have a father who would come in and the mother was okay with the penalty, but the father ended up calling me a nigger, because he didn't want his child penalized by a black man, I guess. There was another situation where my children would come out to Fairdale with me in the summertime and they came running back, said that they'd tried to run them over with their truck. Or they would run down to the swimming pool, which is about two or three blocks down the street, and called them niggers, those type of things in the community itself. Now every teacher in the building was not from that community, so keep that separate, but the community was quite closed, wanted to treat you differently.

DC: Right, but black kids were being bused in?

DW: Black kids were being bused in and at that time, my understanding, in '75, it was rough there because buses did get rocked. But where I was, it did not, but I was not there at the time, so I'm not sure. I couldn't give you first-hand stories of what happened at Fairdale in those particular years, from '75 to '83, before I got there.

DC: But in '83, what was—

DW: In '83, the parents were still, it was a closed community. They didn't like us being there. I say parents, it's very generalizing because every parent in the community

was not like that, but when you're confronted with it and they call you nigger, then you say well, somebody here feels like this. I don't know how many of them, but there's some.

DC: So do you know what the percentage of black students was in '83?

DW: There, I think it was about twenty-seven percent; they were staying around twenty-seven percent during the entire time I was there. They bused kids in from, you know for me, it was Louisville, but from the west end, about three different sites from the west end that were bused in from the west end to Fairdale. Fairdale had no TARC [Transit Authority of River City] or no city transportation, so once they got there, they were pretty much trapped there until the end of the school day and then they were transported back by school bus.

They did have a lot of good athletes, because a couple years I was there, they won state championships in basketball. But the basketball team was made up of a majority black students from the west end; now those kids got transported back. But they really weren't inviting to girls to join the cheerleading squad, because they would not provide the same transportation for them, because the practice may be at different times. So they just wouldn't join; they didn't have any girl cheerleaders. They had one, I think, who lived there at the time, lived in Fairdale.

DC: So how were these black athletes treated then? Were they treated in a different way?

DW: They were treated like royals. If they could use you as an athlete, then they were treated like royalty. The other kids, you know, they were complaining. Again, it was never announced that Mr. Withers was a person that you needed to go to, but there was a bond, because I was the one who would transport them back to the west end. I was living in Shively, which is close to the west end. I was living basically in the west end then. I

would be the one who would transport them back to the west end. So I would have five or six kids in my car almost daily going back when I left work, and I didn't leave until five o'clock or so, but they would wait on me. We had an opportunity to develop great relationships.

The one thing that I did notice, and I'm not sure if it's even an interest in this type of interview, is I always said that it looked like we lost a generation of black kids academically. When I was at Shawnee, as I mentioned before, there were a lot of excellent students. I taught algebra 1, ninth grade math at Shawnee, but the advanced program, and I had two sections of it, which is about twenty-five per class, fifty students of advanced level students. They move on to their next level, so it meant in geometry, you would have another fifty students. So throughout the entire school of about a thousand students, you probably had close to two hundred black kids who were in an advanced-type program.

Well when I went to PRP, these kids were still in their academic mode that they had not been taught not to be good academic students; they did very well, extremely well at PRP when I was there. I would follow them, because I'm the one that they connected with. At Shawnee, I said we had two hundred. At PRP, we had a comparable number of students who did extremely well at school.

But when I got to Fairdale, out of eleven hundred students, three hundred black students, it was less than ten who were on the honor roll, and it was there for the entire time—I mean it was that way for the entire time. I was there for about eight years. I said we're losing a generation. Where are our black students going to? I hope they were someplace, because they did have magnet programs that they could volunteer to go to. I was hoping that if they weren't at Fairdale, they would still be at other schools in the system. That's one reason I was pretty much anxious to come to Central, because I just

knew, by my work with the black achievers at the Lincoln Foundation Math Science Program I ran in the summertime at U of L for minority students, that a lot of black students were going to Male, Manual, and Central. So I said well, I have an opportunity to go back to Central, which was historically a black school, where I graduated, where I'm still having black kids who are doing extremely well.

But either at Fairdale they were just transferring out because they didn't like the reputation that Fairdale had, or we just lost them someplace in the school system before they got to high school. Because black kids just were not doing very well at Fairdale academically. Like I said, I would have maybe ten; those kids, we would have a great relationship because I was still hauling those kids home too from time to time. But you know, I was just constantly talking, what aren't we doing? Why aren't we making the honor roll here? Why aren't we doing what we've got to do? And it wasn't always the school's fault. It was the kids just weren't being motivated, but where we lost them, I don't know. Was it in elementary during the busing years, or was it in middle school during the busing years, or they just chose not to go to Fairdale—they had an opportunity to go to Manual or one of the magnet schools and they transferred out? I couldn't tell you. I just, my experience at Fairdale was that we had lost a lot of our minority students.

DC: So when you came back to Central, did you get an answer to that question at all?

DW: Well I came back to Central, but I don't think it was an answer, because I don't think every—if we had two hundred at Shawnee and there were two hundred at other schools, I don't think that Central would have held all those kids, all the good kids, or either Male or Manual, when they couldn't go above a certain quota of a number of black kids. I think we lost them. But when I got back to Central, yes, I was pleasantly surprised. I

was back in a situation where we had a higher number, a much higher number, a higher percentage of black kids who were doing extremely well, honor roll, advanced program, all that. I had children at the time, and one child went to Central; he's a college graduate. My other two, one went to Manual; one chose to go to Fairdale, because I guess he kind of lived with me out there when he was a little kid and he still wanted to Fairdale. I could never figure out why, but he did and he did okay. He ended up going to the Marines. But my daughter, who went to Manual, ended up finishing college and working as an engineer now. So she did extremely well.

But Manual had a large percentage of black kids there and I knew that. I knew that because even before my kids went there, I coordinated a math-science program that was sponsored by Lincoln Foundation, which if you're not from Louisville, you may not be familiar with it. They sponsored a program for mostly minority kids, but they didn't reject white kids. It was geared for kids who were in the honors to advanced program, who had interest in science and had showed good math ability. We would try to give them a little head start in their math careers, prior to going into their particular grade. If they were ninth graders and they were going into algebra 1, our program that summer was geared to help them in their math in algebra 1. If they were going in algebra 2, then the program that summer would give them a boost to do better in algebra 2. Year after year, parents would come back and commend us and compliment us on turning their kids onto math, because they had not been before, and how much better they were doing. So that was a real payoff for us, at least spiritually, in saying that we are making a difference for kids in the community.

END OF DISC 1, TRACK 1

START OF DISC 1, TRACK 2

DW: Well, I knew when I was coordinating that program which schools the kids went to, because one of the things on the application form was were you attending school or were you expected to attend school, if they were in a transition year. So I knew a lot of our kids were going to Central, Manual, and Male. We got most of our kids from those areas, from those three schools. So I knew where a lot of our black kids were going. But even Manual and Male could only take fifteen, twenty percent, maybe thirty at the most. I think their population of black kids was fifteen to twenty percent, so you knew every black kid in the system was not going there. So I still felt that we were losing kids for whatever reason.

DC: I'm just interested in, going back I guess to Shawnee for a second, your relationship with black parents at that time.

DW: I'm smiling because I'm not sure what you're relating to, but I was raised in the west end; Shawnee is in the west end. I think I had an advantage over a lot of teachers even after I became an administrator, because—

[conversation breaks off as telephone rings]

DW: The advantage I had is because I was from the west end. A lot of the parents already knew me; not all of them, of course, because the west end is relatively large, but I felt comfortable because I was coming from the same culture, soul culture. I had no feelings of apprehension or any fear, because I'm part of it; I'm part of the same culture. So when I go to their houses and that's one thing they would say: "You're the first teacher who's ever visited my house." Well this is home. I can come here and I don't feel uncomfortable in doing it. So I think my advantage was that I was part of the culture where

my kids were coming from. The black parents received me extremely well. I never had a confrontation with a child or a parent, but for the most part, my comfort level was very high. I was received, for the most part, very, very well.

DC: At Pleasure Ridge, did that kind of relationship continue with some?

DW: It continued with the black community, the black kids. I did find out when I got to PRP that kids are all the same. I love teaching. I realized once I got to PRP, and it was an awakening for me because of my biases, because I was from an isolated community. I was raised in the black community by an aunt and uncle who were black, and I'm biracial; my mother is white. The reason I was born in Chicago is because my mother and father could not live in Louisville. Back in the 40s, I was born in '46, they were even shot at, so they moved to Chicago and I was born subsequently. Then when they broke up, then I moved back and lived with my father's relatives. I lived with my aunt and uncle on my father's side, who are black, in the west end of Louisville. So I'm mentioning that only to say that people could interpret it saying well, you come from two different cultures. I was not raised by a white family; I was raised by a black family. So even though I might be biracial, my experiences are basically from the black community. Then I developed biases, just like white folks develop biases because they lived in an isolated community with only whites. Then I went to a black elementary school, a black junior high school, a black high school. Allen University is an AME church school. It's an African-American, Episcopal, Methodist church school, so it was predominately black.

I guess my first experience dealing with the diverse society of everybody, whites, blacks, and orientals and everybody, was when I was drafted into the service. I came back out and went to graduate school for about a year and then came back and started teaching. But the majority of my experience was just in the black community. So my feeling was I

wanted to go back to either Central or Shawnee, to the black community, and give back something to my community. Of course, being the communities are majority black, I was thinking black folks. Well, I got to Fairdale. I said, this is crazy. I have a gift that I can give to anybody, regardless to race. So I found out that white kids were just as receptive of me as the black kids. I had much to offer to them. I didn't need to feel inferior, because I think there was some inferiority complex with me because of my isolation: can I compete with white folks? I've never had to compete with them before. But when I found out that the white kids were no smarter, no better than our black kids, that meant they were no smarter, no better than I was when I was a kid. Then I felt very comfortable and I had as much to offer for anybody, white or black kids, and the kids were very receptive to me. Only in certain cases were parents weren't normally--. The kids and I could always work it out. Even when there were confrontations from time to time, some of the kids I had confrontations with were my best, greatest supporters afterwards. So I found out in teaching at PRP that I didn't need to be concerned about just helping black kids, but helping all kids. I thought I grew a lot in those years when I was at PRP.

DC: So you really saw change happening for you?

DW: I saw changing happening for me, not that I was a bad person prior to. It was just that because I lived in a closed society that I saw it from one lens or one viewpoint. As I opened up and dealt with people of all races, I realized, you know, people are people, wherever you go. Kids are the same. They try to differentiate black kids, white kids. In my experience, you develop personal relationships and you find out people are basically—you've got some bad people, yes. You've got some bad black people, bad white people. But for the most part, the vast majority of the time, the relationship that you build is based

on your individual relationship with an individual. It doesn't matter what color they are. I hope I'm not rambling.

DC: No, no. I completely get what you're saying, I think. Did you see change happening over time, say at Pleasure Ridge, from when you first got there, through the time you were there?

DW: Yes and no, because you can integrate a school, but you can't really—or you can desegregate it, but you can't make the kids integrate into the group. You will still see it probably in most schools today. You'll go in the cafeteria and you'll see a table full of white kids and then you've got another table full of black kids. So you forced integration on the school system, but you can't force those kids to integrate. Here, I think it's a little bit different, partly maybe because there's such a high percentage of black kids here. So the white kids, if they have an opportunity to socialize, they have to mingle in with some of the black kids. So you'll see tables that are integrated, but you still see tables that are majority white, of kids sitting by themselves. We haven't grown to the point where there's total integration within the student body. As a matter of fact, when I was at PRP, the staff was the same way. You go to the lunchroom and all the black teachers are sitting together.

END OF DISC 1, TRACK 2

START OF DISC 2, TRACK 1

DW: And what's funny to me even today when I go to a principal's meeting, of all the principals in the system, it's not blacks anymore, but all the women sit together.

DC: Interesting.

DW: I guess it's just a phenomenon of people. They just gather toward each other if they have something in common, commonality. I know when I was in the service, I was in Vietnam, it was incredible to me how people who felt the same way about the war would gravitate toward each other. This was regardless to race. I learned it quickly because I was opposed to the war. There's certain things I didn't want to do, I was in infantry, as an infantry person, when I was in Nam. One of them was in going in, I knew that they sent you out on ambush. I said really, I don't want to go on an ambush. I don't know what I'm going to do about this, because I was really very opposed to the war. I had just finished college. I didn't want to go to jail and not be able to ever get a job. So when they drafted me, I accepted the draft and went on. But in Nam, the first week I was in the field, they said, "Well, your group is going to do the ambush." Well I had already gravitated to this group of guys that I enjoyed talking to. In that type of situation, they don't assign you to squads. The people that you're with, they do: one, two, three, four, six, you guys are going to do the ambush. You guys are going to do LP tomorrow night, listening post. Well, I was always with the guys I wanted to be with, but I really hadn't thought about how they felt toward the war in Vietnam. We'd just kind of been talking together. So they told us we're going to ambush and the guy who had been there the longest, six months, I guess he was a corporal, I was a private, he says, "We're not going on any ambush." I said, "What do you

mean, not going on ambush?" I said, "They just gave us an order. We've got to go on ambush." He said, "We don't go on ambush here." I said, "What are you talking about?" I said, "If you don't go on ambush, they're going to court martial you. That means you're going to do six months bad time. That means you've got to stay here another six months, be in jail six months and then they send you back out in the field for an additional six months." He said, "Man"—do you mind if I curse? I won't repeat it.

DC: No, no, that's cool.

DW: He said, "What the f-- is an ambush?" I said, "You got out and you set up and if the enemy comes, you shoot and kill them." He said, "Well, who the hell is going to check on you? You sit up there a mile away from the camp and they're going to come back and check on you and you're supposed to shoot people who come out there?" He said, "Who in the hell is going to check on you?" I said, "I guess nobody." He said, "We don't go on ambush. I'll tell you what we're going to do." He said, "At dusk, when we're supposed to go out, we go out and we come back in and we'll hide in our bunker together, six of us together, or we'll sit up with the LP." I found everybody—I mean not everybody, because some people are doing the whole—but a lot of people were doing this. They didn't go on the ambush. They would either set up with the listening post and they would come back and we would hide in our bunkers; as soon as it was dark, we would have to sneak back in. I said, "That's fine with me." I said, "Because you're right. They're not going to check on us." And the advantage of sitting up with the LP was that when you're on ambush and LP, the COs, the regular man, would call out every fifteen minutes and we'd answered in sit reps, we called them sit reps. The only thing we were supposed to say was "sit reps;" that means we're still alive. They would say, "Charlie one to Charlie two over," and you would say "sit rep." That kept you off the radio, so the enemy couldn't tell where

you were. At the same time, they would let the people, the officers know that you were still alive out there on ambush or on LP. If you sit up with LP, if there were six on ambush and six on LP, you got twice as much sleep, because one person would answer the sit rep for both people.

DC: Right.

DW: Answer the sit rep for both people. Well, the people on the radio knew what was happening.

DC: The same voice.

DW: The officers knew what was happening, but nobody really cared about that in Vietnam. It was a strange war. You were there to get back home. Then you got people who were there who actually wanted to kill people. We never wanted to kill people. I always wanted just to get back home. If we're on ambush, if we have to go on ambush and one time I did, the time I was there, they walked us out and stayed with us until it was dark and we couldn't get back, but the other times, we would either sneak back with LP or come back in the base camp. But as I said before, they knew. And I knew one time, and this is after I had been there six months, and I played the same role that the guy played with me when I had a new guy who said, "Well, if we're not going to ambush, we're going to get court-martial." "What the hell is an ambush, son? What are you going to do on an ambush and who in the hell is going to check on you if you come out there?"

I remember going out one time and it was on the side of a mountain. It was actually, when we got ready to go sleep, it was so steep that we actually had to tie ourselves to trees to keep from sliding down. We went out a mile and came back. It had got so dark, we couldn't find the LP. So we just said, stop where we are, doesn't matter, we'll stay here. We're not a click out, so we're not going to ambush anybody. Nobody's

going to come this close to the perimeter. So we'll stay where we are. But while we were sleeping, the person who was awake, because one person did have to stay awake and answer sit reps, or stay awake to make sure that we weren't attacked, he woke me up. I was the elderly person—

DC: At what age?

DW: Well not elderly. I mean I had been in Vietnam the longest time. I was twenty-one, but I had been in Vietnam the longest, so I was the senior person out there. So he woke me up and said, "We've got a tiger to our front." I said, "Oh God." I said, "A tiger, you sure?" Because I really couldn't see him, but there was an odor, so there was something out there. I said, "Oh man." I said, "Let me have that radio." So I called back, said, "Charlie one to Charlie two, we got a tiger to out front." He said, "Well shoot the m-f." I said, "I can't shoot him." He said, "Why?" I said, "I don't know where the LP is." I knew we were caught then, but they didn't care. He said, "Well, that's your problem." He said, "Throw a hand grenade," and we're on the side of a hill, the side of a mountain. I said, "We're on the side of this mountain. I don't know, the hand grenade might roll down to the LP. I don't know"—

DC: Sure.

DW: Well they should have known we weren't where we were supposed to be, because the LP only went a hundred yards out for listening post for the perimeter. We went a mile out. But they never confronted us about it. But we ended up throwing a hand grenade to get the thing out of there and went on back to sleep; I did. But anyway, to get back to the school system, that's the whole story. But the point that I was making there is that it was incredible how me migrated toward toward each other, because you had other groups that migrated toward each other, that wanted to kill people. They went on the

ambushes all the time. They would volunteer to go on ambushes. But us, and I don't know how I got with this group, I really wondered how I got with this group who felt the same way that I felt.

DC: And these were white guys and black guys?

DW: There were white guys and black guys. And I was also in the group that didn't smoke pot, because it was incredible the amount of drugs they used there. They would smoke pot and you could smell it a mile. I said, "How come these people don't get killed?" And sometimes they would get caught or get ambushed, because they would be out there smoking pot. Now maybe that's one of the things that attracted me, because I wasn't going with the group that was smoking, because I didn't smoke. But the other thing was how did I get with these people who felt about the war the same—I didn't interview them. I didn't question them. I just ended up being that way. So when I got back to the system, back to the school system, I always thought about that. I said people gravitate to people that they have something in common to. I guess that's the reason that we are the way we are. Black kids gravitate to other kids because they see, it's obvious that there's something in common there. Females gravitated toward females in the principal's meeting because there is something common there. But I think it's our duty to somehow try to break this and make people realize, not make them, but somehow encourage them, allow them to realize that you have certain common things other than just race.

DC: So you think that integration then—

DW: I think it helped over the long run. I think it has helped society. It's been a struggle, but I think it's helped society, because I think that now white folks who thought of blacks as being inferior or being bogey bears, realize that black kids aren't all that way, or most of them are not that way. They realize that black kids are human just like they are.

The black kids who've developed their biases because they lived in isolated communities realized that all black folks aren't bad. So I think it has opened up society in terms of allowing blacks and whites to accept one another and to integrate. I think society is much better off for it, in my opinion. You would have people who would disagree with me adamantly probably, black and white people, but I think it has helped society. I think that it's been a struggle and I think we lost black kids in the process, because I think they just didn't have--. One thing about teaching, it's not just delivery of information, but you've got to develop relationships with those kids. I think the relationships were lost in the transition.

DC: Do you think you're still, in some of the schools in town, losing kids?

DW: Yes, yes. And I don't know that it's based on race anymore; it's just based on there are teachers who think their only job, their only duty is to deliver information, and to be a good teacher, you don't have to develop those relationships. But in order to do anything in any organization, if it's going to work right, there has to be the relationship. It can't be that I know this, or I'm the best person in this content area, I'm the best engineer that they have. If you can't develop a relationship with the other workers, then it doesn't run very smoothly. The analogy I always give is it's like building the best automobile in the world: you've got the best transmission, the best engine, but if you don't have the connection between that transmission to make the relationship, that damn thing doesn't run. That's just like anything, any school, any organization. You can have the best people, the most skilled, the talented people, but if you can't get people to work together, it just doesn't function right. I think that's what's wrong with the school system in a lot of cases. We have to work on our relationships, relationships between administration and teachers, teachers and students, administrators and students. You have to have that. Kids will turn

off on you. They could be the smartest kids in the world, but they'll turn off on you and won't do anything if you can't develop a relationship. A kid that you can develop a relationship with, they'll run through a wall for you, a coach, or anything. But if you don't have that relationship, they're so immature, they'll close down on you, don't realize it's impacting them for their life. But you've got to have those relationships, I think. And this doesn't have anything to do with race necessarily. It could, because if you're a white person that don't like black kids, well of course, you're not going to develop relationships. Yeah, that's a barrier; if you're a racist, you've got the barrier. You're not going to get to the black kids. But I'm saying this is not just a race issue; it's a human issue.

DC: Yeah, certainly. How about with the changing that Central has had recently and the black population going up, returning to that historic level, what about the relationships in the community and Central as a center of the black community here? Does it sort of serve that role that it once did?

DW: It always did, even though—the building being that, geographically, it's located where it is, it's always been the focal point of the black community.

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DW: Even when the ratio of blacks to whites was less than fifty percent black at Central, the building itself symbolized a focal point for the black community. During the civil rights movements in the 60s, where did they meet? They met here in Quinn Chapel. The Black Achievers program has met here since their inception in the early 80s. This is the place that they will meet on Saturdays. If we have church groups, or churches who the church burnt down, or they didn't have a location, they would use this place on Sundays and they still do. So this has always been a focal point for the black community.

The problem is that it's never been accepted as a legitimate school in the white community, by most. See our problem before the '99 decision was we struggled to get quality white students here, because traditionally this is not the school that the white kids went to. There is no tradition here at Central for the white community. Their tradition was at Male or Manual, because all your affluent people, if they went to public school, white folks, they went to either Male or Manual, or many years, Shawnee, Atherton. But only black kids went here, so there is no tradition here for the white community. That meant that we had an abundance of black kids who were applying to get into the magnet program before '99, but we had to accept every white kid who applied, to keep the ratio up. So we were accepting white kids who weren't academically oriented; there were behavior problems. Then we put a quota on the black kids. It didn't matter if they were all A's. If we reached that quota, they wouldn't let us accept any more.

Prior to the decision, I was wondering who was going to win this battle, because when I would read things about it, the argument was that because Central was a predominately—it was historically a black school, and that "What's the problem with having a school that's eighty percent black?" It seemed like all the arguments were wrong; it didn't seem like you were going to win this battle with this argument. But when the judge made his decision, to me it was incredibly simplistic and anybody should have been able to think of it. The judge made his decision based on the programs that were offered here at Central High School. We offer unique programs that were not offered at any other school in the system: a nursing magnet, a premed magnet, a law magnet. These magnets were not offered anyplace in the system. If you refused a child to get into this program based on his race, then you are being discriminatory. So the judge said you can't deny a child entrance into Central based on race alone. It's a violation of his or her civil rights,

because if you don't offer this program anyplace in the county, and Central's the only place you offer it, then you've got to let him in. You can't deny him based on his race. So I said, this is incredibly simple. I mean why didn't people—I mean I had never heard that argument, but that's the logic he came up with. I said well, it's incredibly smart on his part. So you know, the board was angry about it, apparently, because the next year, they made us accept every kid. We couldn't screen any kid out; any kid who applied, we had to accept him. We got a load of kids that year that were discipline problems, but then the next year, we were able to screen them out again. But any rate—

DC: Does every kid go in the magnet program or there are different tracks?

DW: Every kid has to choose a magnet, every kid that's in the magnet. Now back in the early to mid-90s, when it was in transition by grade level, so every kid in this building was not in magnet. But I think about '96, every class, every kid in the building had to have chosen a magnet to get into Central High School. So there's about eleven different magnets they can choose, but they have to choose one. Well they can change in their freshman year, because actually, they don't concentrate on one magnet their freshman year; they rotate through all of them. But in coming in, they do have to make a selection. Now at the end of their freshman year, they have to make a definitive decision which magnet I'm going to go into: are you going to be veterinary science, are you going to be nursing, or premed, or what.

DC: How are your sports teams doing?

DW: Football this year is five and two. We feel that we can make the playoffs. The first two games we lost, we shouldn't have lost. The first one, we were twenty one to zero until the fourth quarter and then blew it. But we have a good team. It's been up and down. But in the mid-90s, we made it in 4A, that's the top level, almost to the state. We lost to

the team that won the state and then we kind of went downhill. Now we're building back up our team; this football team is going to be good. We changed basketball coaches at the end of last year, so we feel that we're on the way up in basketball. What's strange about it is that we have a very low percentage of males here. Most of our programs, apparently, have a high percentage of girls.

DC: Oh, that's interesting.

DW: We're about seventy percent girls. Even though we have a low percentage of males, we're doing quite well in athletics. I'm knocking on wood, but that's good for us.

DC: Well you mentioned that the rural school that you taught at and that seemed to—

DW: I was the assistant principal; I didn't teach there.

DC: Oh, I'm sorry.

DW: I'm not sure if you're talking about PRP or Fairdale.

DC: Fairdale, I was thinking of.

DW: I was an AP; I was an assistant principal at Fairdale.

DC: Okay, when you were assistant principal there and—

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DC: The way that black athletes are sort of pulled out there perhaps, and treated there. Did the black community, say around Central, feel that these kids were sort of being stolen from them and sent out? Because I know that athletics were always a point of pride here.

DW: I wasn't at Central at the time, so I'm not sure what the feeling was. I always think that the coaches and community thought that black kids were being taken from Central ever since '56, ever since the school system was integrated here in Jefferson County, or in Louisville. But Jefferson County, for the most part, didn't integrate. Well they integrated, the kids could go, but they had a very, very small percentage. But the community was very polarized. All your blacks lived either in the west end or in Smoke Town or in Fort Hill. So there's little pockets of black communities, but in all those communities, it was basically within the city; it was not in the county. So they still didn't have open housing, not until the late '60s or probably early '70s, when they started fighting the open housing issue, and that's when blacks started moving back into the suburbs. So up until '75, most of your black kids were isolated within Louisville itself. But the schools that the black kids did go to from the time I started in high school, because I started in high school in '61, blacks were already going to Male, Manual, and Shawnee.

The argument even back then was that they're stealing our best athletes because they're offering them monetary awards for going to that school, tennis shoes, whatever it was. So we had a lot of kids who chose—and that wasn't true, not for the most part. I think there's some basketball players we knew that got these fancy tennis shoes to go to Male. But for the most part, the kids chose to go where they wanted to go. Because I know when I was in the ninth grade, I was thinking about Shawnee, because Shawnee in those years

was an excellent school, predominately white, but it was a good school. And the tradition in my family was no, you're going to Central High School.

But kids in our community, kids I know, chose to go to Male, Manual, Shawnee, because they wanted to, because their parents allowed them to and they wanted to. It wasn't because they were being bribed, for the most part. They just wanted to go there and they may have had an opinion that because it was a white school, it was a better school. Because you know, racism is a terrible thing, not just because say the white race put black folks in this particular situation and they said you're forced to live here and you're forced to not be able to go into this restaurant, but what it does to us psychologically. And still today, blacks in many cases have it in their minds that white is better. That's just the generations and generations of brainwashing that blacks have gone through. I'm not saying me. I've heard blacks say that I wouldn't go to a black doctor. Why? You're saying something about yourself when you say that. You're saying that you're inferior, because you're saying a black man is not smarter enough to be a doctor. But this is the psychological damage that racism or that segregation has done to black people, because it's not always what's heaped on you from the outside, but it's what you think about yourself because of the centuries of brainwashing that you've gone through. I won't say I thought that way then, but later black kids went to Male or Manual because they thought Male or Manual is better because it's a white school. To me, it was always part of another evil of racism that people started thinking badly of themselves because they're black, because white is better. Again, I hope I'm not rambling.

DC: No, I'll just ask you a couple—I know I don't want to take up too much of your time.

DW: I've been kind of enjoying it, so—

DC: Oh good, excellent. Well we were talking before, I'm just really interested in the terms integration and desegregation. Do you use them interchangeably or do you think of them as separate things? I mean I think before you said—

DW: To me, it's separate, because you can—I'll probably forget which way now, but you can force desegregation, but you can't force the kids to really integrate, or people. You can say that, in '75 they did say that blacks will go to PRP or go to Fairdale or go to Valley High School. But once they get in the building, it's another battle to force them to integrate within the population. Now we did have rules in classrooms that you shouldn't let all the black kids sit together and all the white kids sit together; you have a seating chart. Sometimes you didn't want to do that because in certain classes, you did want some communications; you wanted people to work together to help one another. In math, I was a math teacher, I knew the importance of two kids getting together working in pairs and working in groups. If I have a group and I have a black kid and he feels totally uncomfortable and he won't open up and speak, well this is not going to be helpful to him as a person, or to his goals in terms of math. It probably won't be helpful to the group, because he could have a valuable input that he could say something to the group that would open a door or light up a bulb for them.

So I always had mixed feelings about that, but I do feel that we need to integrate. But I wanted the kids to be able to feel comfortable at the same time and being able to communicate to one another certain concepts that I may not be able to get across just by saying it or lecturing. But you can't do it until they engage and they're doing it themselves. Then suddenly a bulb goes on because oh, they felt that, "I know what you're talking about now, because I'm doing it and I see what you're saying." Sometimes it takes communication between two kids, three kids to do it. That didn't mean that there was a lot

of talking in my classes either. There was talking, but I always say to them, "Math is fun, but it's not funny." So I know the difference between the noise when you're socializing and when you're talking about the problems or talking about math. So you do want the conversation, but you have to control that. That's off to the side.

DC: I could have used a math teacher like you. Do you see desegregation in Louisville as accomplished or as an ongoing project?

DW: Oh no, it's ongoing, ongoing. I don't think it will ever be accomplished, not totally. It will never be done, because we can go back; I guess we can go back to where we were in 1860. It's something I didn't even think about actually. Is it ever possible that blacks will be enslaved again? Not really, not unless Bush stays in another—that's another story. (laughter)

DC: Put my political views on tape here.

DW: I guess I shouldn't have said that on tape. But at any rate, no, I think we could backslide easily, so I think it's never accomplished. We need to keep the doors open. I think there's certain things that have happened now that would make it very difficult for us to go back. One thing that has helped us as a community to no longer polarize, you don't have pockets of blacks here just in the west end. Now the argument that you hear now is that the west end, or the ghetto, or the hood, is so bad because all your influential blacks have moved out, which is true. Prior to the 60s or prior to the 70s, your influential and if you want to call affluent black people—which really there weren't any affluent, because the best jobs you could get were teaching and postmen and waiters, to pay any money. But your affluent black people, if you consider those affluent—were living in the west end with everybody else. There was some leadership in the black communities. When they moved out to the suburbs, it took out that leadership.

DC: When would you say that happened?

DW: It started happening probably in the late 50s, but they were moving out to pockets of black communities out in the suburbs. It really started happening with the opening housing in the early 70s, just prior to busing. Then it became against the law to discriminate on the basis of—selling houses on the basis of race. So blacks now live all over Jefferson County, and that meant that you've got a higher percentage of black kids who live in the community that go to Ballard High School or go to—not much at Fairdale, but some do go to Fairdale. But you still have a very large percentage of blacks still isolated in the west end, and those communities still don't have enough people in their geographical area to fill the quota of thirty percent, twenty-five percent black kids. So they still have to come back to the west end to satellite those kids out to the suburban schools. But the migration, I guess, of blacks out into the entire suburbs, the big push started probably in the early 70s, I would think. I'm not into community politics, but that's my guess, the way I see it and visualize it.

DC: Is there anything that I haven't asked you that you sort of wished that I brought up?

DW: I think I kind of injected a few things in regards to how people are attracted toward one another and regardless to race. My feelings on—my gift is not just for one race, but for anybody; my belief that I don't want to go back to a one-race situation, one-race society. It's not good for anybody. It doesn't allow us to grow. I think that if we're going to progress as a nation or as a community, you lose a lot of your potential when you disenfranchise a certain segment of your population. If you've got a female who can be a great engineer, but you say, "Well, she can't do that because she's a woman," well then you're not growing. You're just losing the possibility of somebody creating an invention

that would progress or catapult this community or this nation to some type of status that they're never been before, because you're losing your potential, because you're saying that these people can't do it because they're either black or because they're female. So I think that to take full advantage of our potential as a nation, we have to use everybody—not use them, but at least use their skills and not say you can't do, you can't be a pilot because you're black. That to me is just insane.

DC: Any final words?

DW: No, I think I'm finished. I've preached enough, I think.

DC: Okay, cool. Thanks very much. I really appreciate it.

DW: I can say if you really want to interview somebody with in-depth knowledge, it's not me, but other people in the community that either have gone through but for much longer and that were probably into politics or into social sciences, where I was a math person. I'm not into all that other stuff, so you probably could interview other people that could be more—

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Emily Baran. February, 2006.