

Transcript – Tawana Belinda Wilson-Allen

Interviewee: Tawana B. Wilson-Allen

Interviewer: Elizabeth Gritter

Interview Date: May 10, 2006

Location: Charlotte NC, at her office (Congressman Mel Watt's office)

Interviewer note: See also the follow-up interview I did of Ms. Wilson-Allen on May 11, 2006. I have placed copies of the pertinent material that she refers to in this interview in the folder for archival deposit; I have elsewhere indicated what I remember about the material she discusses whenever possible. In the folder for archival deposit are related materials that she does not discuss per se but relates to what she talks about in the interview; these materials particularly deal with her voter registration work.

TAWANA WILSON-ALLEN: She got her endorsement. She's real good grassroots. I mean she was one of the ones that we nominated to run for the post, and when she got to turn around, she got endorsements from us--. Look how big--.

ELIZABETH GRITTER: ()

TW: She got it from the *Observer* because they had in 2000 I was the voted for the national convention, National Democratic Convention.

EG: Oh, okay.

TW: [Referring to "Convention Diary" clippings, copies of which are in the archival material.] I got some, I found a few of those articles. I wrote articles all week long, and they wanted to know from a delegate's perspective what it was like, even the fun parts, anything. It was so exciting to jot down notes as I was going along and I was observing other people. At the end of the day I went down to hole, the news hole as they call it. I would write my little article and then email it back to Charlotte so they would put it in the paper the next day.

EG: Oh really.

TW: It was a lot of fun.

EG: Oh, that's super. Because that forces you to document all the stuff you normally maybe wouldn't.

TW: [Referring to a document of a statewide campaign of the North Carolinians for Effective Citizenship, which lists the A. Philip Randolph Institute and other organizations as partners.] This was something interesting. This looks like this old Operation '88, that was a statewide. I'll have, probably need to go in order because before MVC--. I told you had I Mecklenburg Voter Coalition. Before MVC, it was North Carolinians for Effective Citizenship. I was the state, I was the state director for that.

EG: Oh you worked with Randolph Institute.

TW: A. Philip Randolph Institute has always been a part of our coalition. At this point they were just like side by side with us, and there was a lot about fifteen different organizations in all. Did they have the League of Women Voters on here? That's what I'm saying, there's still some more that I'm not on there. This was from, this was Ron Charity and I ran the state coordinator campaign, and I was on staff here and here too at the same time. [See obituary of Charity in archival material.]

EG: Okay, so was there a lot of overlapping membership and leadership of some of these organizations?

TW: No, not a lot, not a lot. I guess we just need to start from the beginning and then, I'll lay the stuff out, and I'll just talk how I got started into it and come on down the line and then pick up stuff as I get to it.

EG: That sounds good.

TW: Maybe that's the best way.

EG: You have to leave by—

TW: I wanted to be over there at seven. () or not. [Referring to (generic) holiday cards she received from Gray Davis and the Al Gore families.] Do you do Christmas cards from—

EG: I don't. I'm not on this list.

TW: () This was when I went up to, () and I don't know how—

EG: Gray Davis. Oh yeah.

TW: Gray Davis. He says that, Clinton I've got—

EG: Oh cool. Right.

TW: See what I have now.

EG: Oh super.

TW: [Referring to a plaque she received from the following sorority.] That's the Delta Sigma Theta sorority because that's where a lot of my work with initiated—

EG: Were you a member from college on one?

TW: That's where I pledged in college. I think I told you, the reason I pledged, it was not for social reasons or just to become part of the sisterhood. It was to, so that I could get actual hands on experience with the day to day work world and with community organizations. Delta's very highly involved in the community, special projects and what not. So in light of the fact that we did not have internships and practicums, we worked for the students coming behind us to get them. But we did it through our special projects in our sororities.

EG: What college was this?

TW: North Carolina Central.

EG: Okay.

TW: That was what my undergraduate work was done.

EG: Okay sure. Yeah.

TW: See, there's that picture. That's where I got it from. I don't know if this is the same one.

EG: ()

TW: That actually gives a little better background on what I was going to tell you about how I got started.

EG: Oh good.

TW: [Referring to plaque or paper saying she was vice chair of the Mecklenburg County Democrat Party.] I was first vice of the party—

EG: Oh of the Democratic party. Yeah.

TW: (). This was after last year I was given the Democrat of the Year award [Plaque that she shows Gritter indicated this award is called the Jim Pierce award.].

EG: Oh super. Yeah, one of my, well one of the coordinators of the project, she is really interested in knowing more about Jim Pierce and what he was like.

TW: Okay, yeah, I can-- [Referring to her picture in the 1999-2000 Blueprint Directory of Charlotte-Mecklenburg's Women's Organizations. Copies of the cover of the book and the page with her picture (her picture is the bottom one on the page) are located in the archival material.] There I am. I don't know why this was, well, see this was like () for all these women leaders in the women's associations, and they had me under the University Associations, and I'm not sure what that plug was. But I was doing more political and community work at that time. I had University ties too. So that was one. This was what we used to give out to my volunteers. This is—

EG: Those are nice.

TW: That came along in 1996. [Referring to "How to Vote" pamphlet in archival material.] This was a pamphlet that we put out. We were originally Mecklenburg Voter Registration Committee. That was the primary thing was registration. There were no instruct—there were no guides at that time. The League of Women Voters finally helped the board of elections to get a brochure, but we used things like this, step by step, showing people how to vote, the mechanics of voting.

EG: The voter registration committee, was that an organization that you started or was that—

TW: That was, we started it. There was, there was a group called Vote Task Force here in Mecklenburg County, and they only did voter registration. We came along and broadened it to a five-point voter participation program.

EG: Because you said you had accountability as part of that.

TW: We had voter registration, voter education which is the mechanics, issue education, get out the vote and accountability.

EG: How did you do the accountability part of it?

TW: League of Women Voters was a part of our group. They would do the forums, neighborhood forums as well as TV forums. What we would do especially with the neighborhood forums, the questions that we would ask of the candidates, what will you do when you get in office and then we had someone to follow those meetings. It never got off the ground as good as we would've liked it to. But the idea was for someone to rotate and go to every council meeting, every county commissioners meeting to follow through to see if in fact they were going to do what they say they were going to do. If not, we call a meeting of that () [talking simultaneously]

EG: Of the elected official--

TW: So that's—

EG: Did you find that was effective?

TW: Well, like I said. We didn't get into it like, it didn't bloom out to what we anticipated because we were volunteers, can't always-- It worked in some cases. It was really one of the hot issues on the table. But to get someone to those meetings sometimes is boring unless you're actively working on whatever issue it is. I'm dying of heat. Are you okay? Are you okay?

EG: I'm all right. Do you want a glass of water.

TW: I might get something. So, let's see. That's there.

EG: Is this voter coalition still active?

TW: It is, we just met Saturday. It's not in the form, it's not currently in the form that it was even last time for various and sundry reasons. Mostly with the, for a coalition to have lasted since 1984 is unusual. Coalitions come together for a certain issue, and then they disband. We came together and stayed together basically because I mean [I was] living here and I had some other people who were real interested in keeping it together. I told you the thirty-five counties that we worked in, a lot of that disbanded because we didn't have the same people that were trained at the outset. They didn't pass it along. You got different forms of voter participation along the way.

EG: So it was a statewide organization.

TW: Yes, this was North Carolinians for Effective Citizenship.

EG: Okay, [Here Gritter says in essence that the Mecklenburg Voter Coalition was a local affiliate of the statewide organization, North Carolinians for Effective Citizenship, which had county groups across the state.]

TW: One of the counties. That was exactly right.

EG: Yeah, you mentioned because you had [said] on the phone had the () so that's why you thought the MVC stayed longer than some of the others.

TW: That's what I was thinking happened but all kinds of things happened. We weren't non-partisan, but we acted in a non-partisan manner because a lot of the organizations that belonged to the coalition were non-partisan. Who is this? Oh.

EG: Were you Democrats? Is that your affiliation?

TW: My affiliation is with the Democratic [Party] ().

EG: I'm interviewing on Friday Margie Worthy [the current president of the A. Philip Randolph Institute group in Charlotte].

TW: Margie worked with us a good while. But her predecessor was the one who started because his name was James Lawrence.

EG: Okay, I've heard that name.

TW: Jim Lawrence. He was the original A. Philip Randolph person, and yeah, we had a very, very good relationship with him and—

EG: Well, thanks for taking the time to find all [this material]—

TW: I just grabbed all this stuff. This is interesting. I found that. I didn't even, I had no idea where it was.

EG: Oh yeah.

TW: That's what a lot of my campaign from the () was like the guru in political campaign. So I did my advanced organizing with Midwest Academy out of Chicago.

EG: Oh, I've heard of them.

TW: You've heard of them. So the local, I mean the first basic organizing training came with Cathy [Howell] and Si Kahn here. Then the advanced [training] was Midwest Academy and then Murray Fishel. This is a master's level program that he did and--. [She refers to a certificate she has—a copy is in the archival material—that states she participated in the Political Campaign Management Institute at Kent State University from July 16-18, 1987; Fishel was the director of the institute.]

EG: So you've really worked with the top people it sounds like or some of the top people in community organizing and so forth.

TW: I've met some wonderful people along the way. I was kind of thumbing (). That was another () but we just helped to get him, I don't know if you know the story about () Branson, first Latino or Hispanic chair of the party.

EG: Oh great. Great.

TW: He was great while he was in. Got into a little trouble after that. Let's see. This stuff I wrote, I didn't sign it. I got it on my computer somewhere. So this is talking to the role of the church as a nonprofit. See what they can do, get out the vote. I've found stuff. You've got Will Hunt—

EG: Would it be possible to have a copy of that.

TW: Uh yeah, sure. All right. I'm just going to get some water now, and I'll be right back.
[break in taping] Finally found, let's see. Okay. Now the other, I want to make sure I've got, where is the other sheet?

EG: Oh the life history form.

TW: Yeah.

EG: This one.

TW: You can put that together. And you know, I said () has been on here with () had been in here so long.

EG: It's like when you're so busy with other things it takes part ().

TW: He's really old too. So actually the institute was one of the last organizations that [Ron Charity] and I created.

EG: What was it called?

TW: It was Institute for Human Resources and Public Policy.

EG: Oh you've been involved in lots of ().

TW: [She refers to either the Institute's handbook or flyer; in any case, copies of both are in the archival material.] So it is documented here what I had done as far as, so that's helpful I hope to, maybe we can make a copy of this because I think it might be the only one I have.

EG: That would be good.

TW: It also, it tells what the organization did and what it's wanting, what it provided, skills it provided and then has what other (). It talks—specifically mentions me, () and a couple of things, we did work in other counties.

EG: Yeah, anything of that I can make copies of is helpful because just to have that sort of documentation is good. It [will be deposited] in the Southern Historical Collection, which is considered the

top collection in the world of materials related to the U.S. [South; it was] started at UNC-Chapel Hill, and then I'll be sure to send you a copy of the tape and transcript and so forth. So—

TW: Great.

EG: Yeah, has anyone ever done an oral history of you before?

TW: No.

EG: Oh okay.

TW: So I am really honored, and I didn't know quite what to expect.

EG: Yeah, basically if you say words I don't know how to spell, I'll just jot them down so I have it right for the historical record, and we'll have to save a little time at the end [to go over them]. And then there's interview agreement that we'll [sign at the end, provided we] both [are] happy with this oral history [and we] should be. We'll just sign the legal form, and it's just basically like a conversation and—

TW: Okay, well, I can do that.

EG: [Referring to informational interviews over the phone she conducted of Wilson-Allen.] Yeah, [it'll be] just like [when] we were talking on the phone just kind of asking some general questions, specific ones too about your community organizing, [and we're] really interested in [your] '70s and '80s work and so forth. Any time you want to stop or if you don't, sometimes people, they'll start saying something and won't feel comfortable then with what maybe they're going to reveal, we can--. I mean I had that earlier today. Stop the tape. Then tell me some () stuff (). So but so why don't we, so I--. This [material you provided me with] is great because this gives me some sort of background information too for knowing how to target the questions. You said on the phone that you came out of the civil rights movement in Durham.

TW: Yes, that's how, well that's almost the way my activism started. I'd like to go further back than that if I may.

EG: Yeah, sure because part of the process of doing an oral history is like both of us shape it, and I have questions but they might not be exactly the areas we want to talk about. And especially since we have a limited time, we should just focus maybe on the major things. From time to time I'm just going to be checking to make sure [the tape recorder is] picking up. Anyway, all right, that said. Go ahead. Tell me about the beginning of your activism.

TW: I just wanted to establish the mindset why I got into it. That comes from family. Okay. My grandfather who was a plastering contractor in Mecklenburg County. He worked all up and down the east coast and some of his most notable work as a plasterer was in Washington on a lot of the government buildings there, the last one being the Archives.

EG: National Archives. Okay, wow.

TW: National Archives in Washington was the last big piece that he did. But he and some other men in the neighborhood in North Mecklenburg up in the Huntersville area. Back then those were times of segregation, and it was during World War Two. So the black neighborhood was not incorporated into the town of Huntersville, nor was it in Charlotte. It was like a mile outside of the Huntersville town limits. So there was, it was this town called Pottstown, and it was like a little village. It did not have water piped in. A lot of people went to a spring to get their water, for washing, for drinking, for everything. It did not have lights. It didn't have paved streets. So a group of men in the neighborhood got together and said to the town of Huntersville if they would, if they could tap on to the water system, would they help them out. So Huntersville said yeah, but you're going to have to find your own pipe because this was when resources were very, very slim--during the war. So they took up the challenge. They found pipe. It was not to regulation or to specification if you will. They dug the ditches and put the pipe in, crossed their fingers and prayed that that water would come through. The town turned it on and the water gushed out. They had water for everyone in that neighborhood. They went on from there to establish streetlights and to get those streets paved. So these were the oral histories that were passed down. See this was before my time. I was born in 1949. So this was just prior to that. Of course as a baby I wouldn't know what had gone on. But they told me the stories and my grandfather was always one to not just settle with the way things are [but rather he was about helping to] make some improvements in his life as well as in his neighbor's lives as well.

EG: What was his name?

TW: Alexander Edward Henderson. My mother sort of took up that banner too when she and the other community leaders would come together to, they had a community association, and they worked on various issues together. One thing that my mom did was voter registration. That's how I got involved in it at the outset. She used to do that. So the things your parents do kind of fall by the wayside when you go

off to college and you think you go on anyway and you're off to live your own life. So I was an academic by this time, and I'm in college and the civil rights movement really hit in a lot of areas. In Charlotte, it was not the same as it was say in Greensboro or Durham and Wilmington. I think that in those other areas they were a lot more aggressive than in Charlotte. Charlotte was very, very polite. There was an undercurrent going on with my, let me go back just a minute here. Just prior to bussing, just prior to the official desegregation okay, we had, we were an, my class and my brother's class, he was like, I was in ninth or eighth grade, 1965, '64, '65. We were the first experimental desegregation class. It did not come by force. So I was at Torrence Lytle, which was reunion school, first through twelfth. So we could volunteer to go to North Mecklenburg [High School], which was a predominantly white school see a mile away.

EG: So you grew up in Charlotte.

TW: I grew up in Huntersville.

EG: In Huntersville.

TW: I took music lessons and everything else that I did extracurricular I did in Charlotte. The honors band and everything else, but I went to school and was raised up in the Huntersville area. This was all Mecklenburg County though. It was very interesting because by not being, by desegregation not being the rule, we were able to go into North Mecklenburg with over 300 African American students whereas at East Mecklenburg [High School] at the very same time, there was only one African American there. Then bussing occurred, and then it was spread out. Very interesting process because when we went in, this was an amusing story in a way. We were livid behind it though. North Mecklenburg, every school has a yearbook and a mascot. Before we went to North Mecklenburg, their mascot was the Viking. Their yearbook was the Rebel. If anyone knows anything about North Mecklenburg, its mascot right now is the Viking. But when we got there, they switched it around. They made the Rebel the mascot and the yearbook the Rebel. So you know how that made us feel going in. We burned the Rebel in effigy. We were quite upset behind that. But there was a little group of us who were considered leaders of our class. We went to the principal and said we're willing to sit down and talk and work things out. There were no African American cheerleaders. There were no African American queens or any of the court even for homecoming. There were not, what was it, majorettes. No African American majorettes, no one for the

Caroussel Princess, have you heard about that? [Gritter shakes her head no.] Well, then that person, she's like a princess that represents the county. She may or may not go on to some other, I don't know whether it's Miss North Carolina or whatever. But anyway she represents Mecklenburg County (). So they come from the high school. I suppose they do this in every county. Another girl and myself ran for Miss Caroussel Princess. We were right at the top. One of us should have won. I mean it was like two here, and the rest fell a long ways away in terms of talent and the questions that were asked of us. But neither one of us were chosen. It was a Caucasian female that was chosen. That's just the way things went at that time. Now we continued to go to the principal's office to meet about all these inequities, and we said we were willing to sit down and talk. Whereas our brothers and sisters from Alexander Junior High, once they got to North Mecklenburg, they would not sit down. They would act rather than talk. So my senior year in 1968, I ran off to Durham.

EG: So the ones that came you said in terms of act rather than talk, they would protest. [Wilson-Allen nods.] Okay.

TW: Really protest.

EG: You tried to negotiate.

TW: We tried to negotiate, right. So we didn't know if that was going to come to fruition or not. But sure enough. My sophomore year at Central, I went on spring break to Europe, and I was flying back. The person that was sitting in the seat next to me on the plane asked, did we have very many problems with desegregation. Did we have any problems with riots? I said, oh no. It wasn't too bad so far. I'm from Charlotte. I got back and I looked in the paper. All hell had broken loose in Charlotte. They were rioting at North Mecklenburg as well as some of the other places too because of those very same things that we're going through.

EG: So you didn't end up, they're going to give in not to your demands or—

TW: A few things were changed but not across the board, and it wasn't full participation for all students. So the other thing that happened that you run into-- I had a Caucasian friend that was in the band with me. He wanted, my brother and myself were playing in this jazz band with him. We were walking down the hall talking about what we were going to do. This woman who was I guess with the business education, she was in the secretarial pool or something like that. She looked out and saw us

walking down the hall, and she told the principal we were walking down the hall holding hands. We were not. We were not. It was very constructive conversation. Of course he got upset, this student got upset about [it]. He said, let's give them something to talk about. We did a lot of planning together. We actually held hands. We weren't going together or anything. But do you know the Klan actually called the principal.

EG: I was going to say.

TW: [Interviewer note: see my oral history of Dawne Y. Gee in the Long Civil Rights Movement series to find out about a similar experience of being raised as a child in a "color-blind" way.] Told him he'd better break that up or else they were going to do I don't know what all. See I never realized that it was that kind of contention going on before high school. Because when I was a little girl, my mother never told us the difference because she didn't want us to have any less confidence or self esteem than anybody else. She didn't say we couldn't sit at the lunch counters. She'd say we're going to eat somewhere else today rather than tell us the truth. A couple of times she let us sit there and the clerk would actually give us a hotdog or whatever on their own at the five and dime store. Sears there was, the water fountains were different, had colored water fountains and white, said colored and white. My mother never told us that we couldn't drink out of either fountain. So we just did. We wanted to know, we went to the colored fountain really excited because we wanted to know what colored water tasted like. We thought it was like colors and maybe the taste was vivid like colors. So she never told us those differences, and it hit pretty hard. By the time we got to high school Martin Luther King died. Kennedy was assassinated. Robert Kennedy, all that just jolted us. This is around last year of junior high, high school. We were brought into the real world at that point. The other thing along with that guy asking me what was happening in my town regarding were we rioting or whatever, the other thing I noticed, when I got off that plane, I caught a cab back to campus. I was going by, the cab had to pass by the student union on the way to my dorm. I saw this fellow sliding down off the side of what had he had been leaning on () he was sliding down. I didn't know what it was. I was totally naïve. I found out later that he was high on heroin. Heroin had been introduced to the African American community, and it just blew up. It was just like all of a sudden. There was no way in the world that they could've imposed that on themselves. It was brought from outside. That's how, I've seen some other commentaries who indicate that that might have been what happened too, but it's just,

it was just all of a sudden unless I was just so naïve that I didn't see it coming. You're thinking about musicians or whatever. They're (), but it was not pervasive at all. It was just boom. It was there.

EG: With the late '60s, early '70s, interesting.

TW: Exactly. Exactly. Moving right along, I think I was telling you earlier that we didn't have the internships and practicums that most students have now. We had to work for students coming behind us to have those opportunities, those working experience-type opportunities. But we had our sororities and fraternities. In particular Delta Sigma Theta was my sorority, and that was a major reason I pledged--to gain public service. This was right in the middle of the riots in Durham also. So I got to work at a halfway house. I got to work for a breakfast program where you had inner city kids starving right there in the United States. I marched in downtown Durham protesting with bricks being thrown and glass flying, and we were just sort of oblivious. We still didn't understand the whole ramifications. We didn't understand what all was going on, but we knew that we were trying to fight for something better, to be able to participate [in] something better in our lives. People should not be separated like that, and we should be able to engage in the same activities regardless of race. Race was just a, there is no real definition for it to tell you the truth. When you bring it right down to it, there is not. So we just did not understand that. We were ready to fight for whatever we had to do. I was in a lot of danger--we and the rest of the people that were along with us--but we didn't have any idea of the real magnitude of it.

EG: Was anyone, were you ever injured or anyone you were with ever injured?

TW: There were some people that were injured. I can't even remember their names now. I don't remember any deaths per se, but we were in precarious situations at the school.

EG: What gave you the strength to [carry on]--.

TW: The group.

EG: The group

TW: The group and then people, this was also the beginning of the Black Power movement.

EG: Do you consider yourself part of the Black [Power movement?]

TW: No, not really. I was part of the establishment more or less. Then the Black Power movement, we all tried to conform, I mean it was, that was hilarious some of the things we did.

EG: What, so the civil rights marches and so forth, you participated in. Was this part, like associated with an organization or were you, was the sorority more like public service or was it—

TW: The sorority was public service, but it was so much more than a sorority. Okay. I mean and I don't really know who all the leadership groups were at that time, but it was like a call to action, and we all came together. You could get students to do that before. You could [get] a lot of the people in the community to do that.

EG: I know like Howard Fuller was like a major activist.

TW: So there were always speeches and stuff going on. This action is taking place here. That action is taking place there and everybody just went. That's what I'm saying. We were oblivious to some of the real results of what was going on too.

EG: What do you mean by that?

TW: Well, we didn't know what it was really going to result in. We knew a little bit about it. But [we didn't know it would] actually change any laws or change anyone's perspective to the degree that it did. Now I still feel like we're going through it. Don't get me wrong. But there have been a lot of changes.

EG: What time period were you doing these marches and college? When were you in college?

TW: That was between sixty, that was around '70 something, '70, '71, something like that, '68 to '71. Something like that.

EG: So you said you still see the struggle as on going. What do you think they accomplished and what do you think there still is to accomplish?

TW: Okay, well, the laws changed a little. So we can go to restaurants and to hotels. We can buy homes in whatever area although I understand there's an undercurrent there even in some cases where African Americans are not encouraged to a certain-- The amount for the home or whatever is so high. It's like an economic thing now, but then [what] it boils down to [is] people don't want others in the neighborhood. I think it's just taken on different, a different look now, and I think it's not as overt as it was before. A lot of people said they won't speak out and let their real feelings be known. I currently go to a mixed church. That's one of the last bastions of segregation as far as I'm concerned.

EG: Churches. Yeah, I know--

TW: Church, funerals. When you're getting around to cremation, that part of it doesn't make any difference, but those are still places where you see a lot of segregation.

EG: Yeah, so would you say that this participation in, this kind of awakenings to civil rights issues when you were in college and your work with the sorority is what inspired you to end up making this--it sounds like to me--a whole career of community organizing and so forth.

TW: Well, it was activism then. There was a distinction. It was total straight out activism because it was the right thing to do I felt like. But I'm still pursuing a degree so that I can get out there into the work world, and I felt like, I separated the two. But what essentially happened, I went in okay, I was in, I was planning to do some type of social work, social service work. When I went in, the doors were wide open, went into college. When I came out, Nixon had just been elected. I was trying to go to work with NIH—.

EG: National Institute of Health.

TW: [She nods.] All the social service type programs were shut down. I ended up working at Department of Labor for a while. That's all personal history [as to] how I ended up in DC. But it was like I applied for about fifteen different jobs in the Charlotte area, and being young and impatient, I waited maybe thirty days of that before I took off to Washington.

EG: () place to be.

TW: With cousins and what not. So I worked with Department of Labor for a little, for a very short while. I almost got a second degree in early childhood education. So I started working on issues with children during that time frame. I just didn't--. There were publicly funded programs both in Washington and in Maryland, the state of Maryland because I was married to a Washington policeman. I do feel like that my life, the way my life has gone, I've actually been able to experience a lot of the issues that people are going through, and I think that was intentional [by God] (). So that I like to talk. So as to be an advocate to work with people, you've got to feel issues in your gut before you can really work to do anything about them. I really feel that that's what's happening with me. At twenty-seven years old I became a widow. My husband was a policeman and was killed in the line of duty, and he was in vice and narcotics. So and he even took me around once to see some of the neighborhoods that he had worked and everything. It was like I wanted to gather all of the children up, put them on a bus, and take them

somewhere else because of those experiences that they were seeing in Washington. So I was a widow at twenty-seven, feeling a little bad, feeling by myself, but [this] was also during the time of Vietnam War. There were a lot of young widows. So had to buck up and go on. I moved home, had a two-year-old son. Moved home with the hopes of growing up with Charlotte. That's exactly what happened. I moved—

EG: Being here.

TW: Uh huh. I moved home in '77, end of '76, moved home after he was killed. Went to UNC to do graduate work over there, I was doing a degree in urban administration, which was the same thing as public administration.

EG: UNC-Charlotte?

TW: [She nods.] And rode past what was called Carolina Community Project over on Seventh Street, and I was wondering what in the world is that, Carolina Community Project. That really intrigued me. So I found out later from a friend that they were organizers. It was this house on the corner of Seventh and Laurel. It's not there anymore. The landlord was the same guy that built this two-story building that's over there right now. Si Kahn had a group called Grassroots Leadership, regional organizing outfit that provided technical assistance to existing organizations as well as helping to create others. So it was the region. It was like the mother ship if you will. They had an office in that same house. It was a blue house. So they operated on a regional level. Then Carolina Community Project was something they created as a statewide group of organizers. It was not membership based. But we worked with other membership based organizations and we helped to create others where voids existed. I came on to work for Carolina Community Projects. My very first job was to help develop what came to be Mecklenburg Council of Senior Citizens. That was very, very interesting work. You haven't worked with anyone until you've worked with senior [citizens], so energetic, so energetic. This was back during the time when Senator Claude Pepper was, he was, when he was in office. We developed this action where we were trying, well first of all we were celebrating the birthday of [the] Social Security [Program], and we were trying to get the cost of living increase to continue. Okay. We had one congressman in Charlotte for the, it was all the ninth district. There's three congressional offices now representing Charlotte Mecklenburg. Back then it was only one. That was McMillan, and he had the ninth district. So the seniors did this big action where we invited McMillan to come down. I was the organizer. So they had very good questions ready to ask

Mr. McMillan, and I was so proud of our group. We had this huge cake representing the birthday of Social Security. The cake had candles on it, [and] also it was lined with little tiny American flags. This is hilarious. I lit the candles, and I was bringing it down the hallway up to the podium to him to present to him, and the theme was "cut the cake and not the COLA," the cost of living increase. [laughter] The hallway had a breeze going. The candles lit the little flags. The flags were on fire. [laughter] I was so embarrassed.

EG: ()

TW: Yes, it was. The seniors were having a ball. I was embarrassed, but McMillan took it in stride. He was a good, but that was one of my first organizing fiascos. But then after that we went to Washington. We went to (). We went to Washington, and all these things from all over the country met there. They had jalopies and all these buses and parades around the capitol, and then we went to the various senators and congressional offices to talk about the senior's issues. Oh man we had a ball. We went from there, when the funding ran out from there, then they got-- All of a sudden all these private foundations were interested in voter participation. That's when we formed North Carolinians for Effective Citizenship, and I went to that full-time. But I'm still connected with Carolina Community Project. The ASL, the League of Women Voters, I mean just about fifteen different organizations that came together to do statewide voter participation. We did it in about thirty-five counties that year, and so it was, the group was very strong up until the '90s when we had senatorial campaigns going on. Harvey Gantt's senatorial campaign, both of them in '90 and '92. His first mayoral campaign, we won the first two and the last one Sue Myrick won that one. So we were interested in, the main thing was we wanted to get [was] people to participate. The group itself was not nonpartisan, but we operated in a nonpartisan manner because we had so many people, organizations that were nonpartisan. So our main interest was participation. So we worked, you had really high levels, contested campaigns all through that period. Of course it was Mel Watt--who is my boss--who was elected in 1992. So I actually came from [the] campaign to come work in the congressional office. A lot of people don't understand that there is a difference though. Like if I go to work on a campaign, I have to take leave from the congressional office to work. Congressional office is totally and pure service oriented, paid for by taxpayers' money. Anyone who has an application or claim with a federal agency can come to us in the district and try to help them unravel it. Whereas the DC office

is mostly legislative in its work. Okay, you have legislative liaisons there. We're on the front line here in the district with the constituents, with their problems with the federal agencies. Then on campaign side we can actually pull out and you can go work that if we had--. Not everybody but some people are just strictly congressional. But with having campaign experience I would go on leave for a few months to work the campaign.

EG: I'm going to turn it off for a second. [break in tape] The preceding was--

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

EG: The preceding was Elizabeth Gritter interviewing Tawanna Wilson-Allen at her office, Mel Watt's office. That's where she works right now in Charlotte, North Carolina on May 10, 2006.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by L. Altizer, June 1, 2006