

Interview  
with  
WILLIE GILLESPIE

February 18, 1991

By Goldie F. Wells

The Southern Oral History Program  
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## INTERVIEW WITH MR WILLIE GILLESPIE

By Goldie F. Wells

Goldie: I am in the office of Mr. Willie Gillespie at James Kenan High School in Warsaw, North Carolina. Today's date is February 18, 1991. Mr. Gillespie has consented to take a little time out of his busy day to have this interview with me. I would like for you to introduce yourself and say that you know that this interview is being recorded.

Mr. Gillespie: I am Willie Gillespie, principal of James Kenan High School in Warsaw. I am giving this interview with the full understanding that it is going to be used as part of a doctoral dissertation.

Goldie: I really am pleased that you answered my questionnaire. I am doing this as a part of my study. I am doing a role comparison to see if black high school principals from '64 and '89 view their role in the same way. In 1964, there were over 200 black high school principals. When I wrote to the State Department in 1989, they sent me a listing of 41 and I found out that of that 41 some of the black high school principals are principals of alternative schools rather than traditional high schools so thinking about the size of our state we don't have very many black high principals. I want you to tell me something about yourself and how you became a high school principal.

Mr. Gillespie: Well, I have a long experience in public education in Duplin County. I grew up in Duplin County and graduated from a segregated high school here. I knew from the time I decided I wanted to go to college that I wanted to be a teacher. I went to Fayetteville State University and came back to Duplin County to teach and taught for about 12 years. I was perfectly satisfied in the classroom and figured that I would put in my thirty years and retire from the classroom. During the time that I was teaching several persons, including the principal that I worked under, suggested that I might be happy in administration. Also the associate superintendent approached me on occasions and suggested that I might want to go back to graduate school and get an administrator's certification. Listening to that and after being in the classroom some 15 years I decided that this might be a direction that I might want to go. I started my graduate work and before I completed that, one of the assistant principals at the elementary school passed suddenly on Labor Day and he happened to have been a minority assistant principal. They were looking for someone to take his place so I was encouraged to seek the position and I got it. This was prior to my completing my certification. I worked in that position from October until December. On December 25th, Christmas Day, one of the junior high school

principals in the county passed suddenly and this was also a minority principal. Immediately persons started contacting me and suggesting that I seek the position. At that time I was trying to adjust to the new position in elementary school. I taught all of my career at the junior high school and I was trying to adjust to the new position of a teaching assistant principal at the elementary school, which was all that I could do plus I was trying to finish my graduate certification so I had no dreams of applying or being considered for the junior high school principalship. But as the days and weeks went on I was approached by several people who convinced me that it might be a good time to apply after the superintendent approached me. I was advised by my principal that if you turn down an offer by the superintendent that you may in effect shut the door to future opportunities so I decided to go ahead and apply. I applied and was moved into a principalship February 7, 1983. I started the year off in a classroom and had gone to an assistant principalship in October and a principalship in February. So things moved pretty rapidly. I was somewhat distressed when I moved into the principalship. It was a successful one for me. I went there with the willingness to work hard and with a lot of experience having worked at the junior high and middle school level. I took that wealth of experience with me and was able to achieve some success in spite of the fact I think that one of the reasons that I went there was because I was expendable. It is no secret that when the black principal died and was replaced by his white assistant principal that people in the community had gotten real concerned and had expressed that concern and had demanded that the position be filled with a minority person. I feel that in some way that the superintendent felt that by sending me there that it would satisfy the communities demand for a minority but if I went there as a completely inexperienced person it might also say to the community that a minority cannot do it. So knowing that, I was determined that it was going to work, and I worked very hard to make it work and stayed there almost three years. On December 16th, I believe it was in 1986, I was approached again by the superintendent via telephone call and he had talked with me on several occasions about the possibility of coming back home to E.E. Smith. I was living in Kenansville and this was the high school that I graduated from in 1963, and of course it had been converted to a junior high school but it was still home school and he had talked with me about the possibility of coming back home and working there and said that that would be the ultimate challenge and I had thought about it but had not made a commitment in my mind and had not even entertained the thought of coming back before the end of the school year. But he called me on the 16th of December of 1986, and said, "Aren't you ready to move?" and I said, "Like when." He said, "Like tomorrow." We were getting ready to get out for the Christmas holidays the following day and he said I would like for you to be ready to move when the Christmas holidays are ended so you can start

the year off at E.E. Smith Junior High School. After talking with him and letting him know that I did not want to move and finding out that he very strongly wanted me to because that principal was retiring in the middle of the year I consented to move. I came back to E.E. Smith on January 2, 1987. I believe I had my dates right--maybe it was 1986. At any rate I came there and worked there until July 1 of that year and the high school principal here resigned and the folk in this district were telling me that the superintendent had brought me back into the district to move me into the high school position. The superintendent never discussed it or made any kind of commitments to me or we didn't even talk about the high school until the principal resigned and then I was encouraged to interview for the high school position. I felt the same way that I did when I was encouraged to interview for my first principalship, that I had not had any high school experience except for my first year of teaching and that was a typical first year. It had not gone well and I felt very comfortable at the junior high school but then I was encouraged very strongly to seek the high school principalship. I sought it along with four other candidates and was blessed to get the position and this is my fifth full year here. I feel like in many ways that I have had a successful experience.

Goldie: Do you come from a line of educators?

Mr. Gillespie: Surprisingly not. I am the first college graduate in my immediate family. I had an aunt who graduated from college in Elizabeth City and was a teacher in the fifties. Other than that there are no graduates in my family or my grandparent's family but following my graduation, I'm such an average person, then several of my cousins decided that if I could do it, they could do it too and so there are a long line of college graduates in the family that have followed me.

Goldie: Now tell me something about your school, James Kenan High School and I want to know about the students you served and faculty.

Mr. Gillespie: James Kenan High School is somewhat unique in that it is a rural school in a rural setting but draws its students from somewhat urban settings. We draw from three cities, Warsaw, Kenansville, and Magnolia. These towns are typical in that they have housing projects that have attracted masses of population to them and they have some problems that are similar to housing projects in the larger cities. So this is why I say that we are a rural school but we have an urban flavoring with the students coming from these housing developments. We are majority black. The blacks make up approximately 65% of our student population. I feel in many ways that we are one of the leading high schools. There are four in the county and we are one of the



leading high schools. We don't suffer adversely because of our minority population. Our minority students don't perform as well as our majority students do on Standardized Tests but they do well compared to the minority students in the rest of the county. We have a faculty of 45 certified persons and they are a dedicated faculty. They take teaching and learning very seriously. We are in the second year of the first full year of implementation of our school improvement project with effective schools. Vision state man is teaching for successful and effective learning for all. We are committed to the idea that all students can learn. We know that we are not doing an effective job of reaching all the students and teaching at a level in which they can learn and we know that this is going to require some rethinking and redoing and we try to do that. But that is a very difficult process and so we are struggling with it right now. That struggle has somewhat lowered, I think, the moral of the teaching staff because of the discomfort of change. So we are going through that this year. In the years past the moral has been very high among students and faculty. We have, like most high schools, private schools in that region that compete with us or compete against us for students. We have lost students. We have lost students in the last two private schools and a lot of those are coming back. We had a number of students to come back at the beginning of this year and we have had some come back as late as last month and we feel like this is an indication that we are doing some things right for students.

Goldie: What is the racial composition of your staff?

Mr. Gillespie: We work very hard to try to maintain a representative member of the minority teachers on the staff. We are close to 60%-40%.

Goldie: Now I am going to ask you something about the responsibilities you have and I will give you different areas I would like for you to address. Tell me about supervision and responsibilities you have and I will give you different areas I am going to address. Tell me about supervision and selection of your teachers.

Mr. Gillespie: One of my major responsibilities is supervision of personnel and probably my most important job as a principal is to interview and select personnel. I've had a lot of that to do in the time that I have been here because the schools have undergone quite a bit of change. My second year here we added the 9th grade and that called for the addition of 15 new staff members who had to be interviewed for the position. In Duplin County all of the hiring is done by the personnel director but the procedure that we use is that the personnel director interviews persons and recommends those persons to principals and then the principals interview and make recommendations back to personnel right before hiring. Principals are given a large

site in deciding who is hired in a school. The Personnel Director will not override normally a principal's decision.

Goldie: Then when you evaluate do you give some of that responsibility to your assistants.

Mr. Gillespie: Yes. My assistant principal is responsible for observing and evaluating just as I am.

Goldie: You have one assistant.

Mr. Gillespie: One assistant.

Goldie: Curriculum and instruction.

Mr. Gillespie: The chief responsibility of the head administrator--unfortunately I am not able to spend as much time with it as I would like to so much of the administrator's time is needed for just management. Taking care of routine and day to day kinds of activities. I can plan as well as I want to and organize my day as well as I would like but there are some things that always come up that demand attention. The management makes sure that it has to be done. I feel that I am probably making more progress this year than I have in past years because of the school improvement plan and the school improvement team that is primarily responsible for driving that plan. This has included and involved more people in the decision-making process and in the management of the instructional process. I think that is going to help. As I said before it is going to take sometime for us to adjust to that way of thinking but I believe it is the way to go.

Goldie: Discipline.

Mr. Gillespie: Everybody's nightmare. From the primary level on up. It occupies most of our time--the assistant principal and myself. Unfortunately discipline at this level is not something that you can put on hold. If the problem comes up and regardless of what you are doing, somebody has to stop and deal with it, problems at the high school level are usually of the nature that interferes with instruction. It is a problem in the classroom. In order for the teacher to continue with instruction with the other class members then that problem has to be removed from the class and has to be dealt with by somebody. I take a different approach than most principals. Most principals give the discipline completely to the assistant principal but I have always shared that responsibility. If I am in the office and I am free then if a problem is referred to the office than I handle it. That causes me to be tied up a lot of times when I should be free to be doing things of a supervisory nature. It does keep me close to the students and more aware of what is going on.

Goldie: Transportation.

Mr. Gillespie: An assistant principal's responsibility. That is something that I have given completely to the assistant principal and of course he manages it very well. It is a problem that I sometimes get involved in when he is out of place and something that needs to be dealt with. It is a real concern for us right now because of shortage of certified drivers and Duplin County has done a real good job in managing the transportation. The fleet of buses is operated according to the state evaluation, 100% efficiency, and still we have been able to cut back on mileage and take a couple of buses out of circulation and save additional monies.

Goldie: Utilization of funds.

Mr. Gillespie: That is one of our biggest problems. Securing funds. In Duplin County all of the accounting is done at the central office level, that is all of the spending of our local funds. We deposit our local funds in a bank account and the county Board of Education drafts that account each month and then we have to request all of our monies from the Board of Education. We can't spend anything here. That helps us. But that also creates a lot of extra work. My secretary is our school treasurer and has to account for all the monies that are in and all the monies that are spent. That consumes a lot of her day and a lot of her nights because a good bit of the accounting is done at her home. But one of our big problems is budget. There is never enough to do all that needs to be done so we have to do a lot of local fund raising to buy supplies, to buy equipment, to keep it going. We just don't have enough money.

Goldie: Do you give your teachers input in the way it is spent?

Mr. Gillespie: We have not in the past. We are just doing that for the first time this year with the school improvement thing. As a matter of fact our business manager frightened us to death at the beginning of the year when he gave us an accounting of all of our money. A list of all of the monies that we have from all of our fund sources. He said this is yours and you take it back to your school and decide how you want it spent. That included state allocated monies, the local and federal monies and we have never been given that opportunity before and it was more of a responsibility than we knew how to handle. So armed with about a two hour workshop on how you go about budgeting and how you make sure you put money in the right fund source so it can be requisitioned. Later we came back to the school to try to do that and it caused us a lot of problems.

Goldie: Was it on a computer printout?

Mr. Gillespie: That added to it--trying to read the printout.

Goldie: Cafeteria management.

Mr. Gillespie: I think I am very fortunate in having one of the best managers in the county. She is experienced and very professional. My dealing with her has been from a basis of either you do the job in there with my assistance as needed or you let somebody else do it. She has appreciated that. She has appreciated my giving her the responsibility of managing the cafeteria including staff and takes that responsibility very seriously and does a good job with it. She is always trying to come up with ways to improve the appeal of food and the facility itself to students and staff--also, ways to improve participation and she does a very good job of evaluating the managing staff.

Goldie: Do you have anyone at central office that directs that?

Mr. Gillespie: Yes.

Goldie: Building and grounds.

Mr. Gillespie: We have four custodians. I have two males and two females. I think they do a reasonably good job. I have had a lot of turnover with custodial staff. One of my instructors told his class when I was in graduate school--he was a former principal and he said, probably the most serious problems that he had as a principal had been with the custodial staff and I did not understand that. I thought that these people understood what they did and would go through with the routine and there would be few problems but I have had a number of them that have been there and a lot of it relates to my difference in perception to what is clean and what is not clean as compared to their perception of what is clean and what is not clean. We don't always see eye to eye on that but for the most part they are committed to keeping the building clean and attractive and keeping the grounds clean and attractive. I think we do a fairly good job with that. We maintain a good sanitation rating.

Goldie: It looks very neat and when I came up here two guys were sweeping the walk.

Goldie: Community relations.

Mr. Gillespie: Probably one of the areas that I have to work hardest on. Because I am basically a reserved and very shy person. That is not my strong suit and I know it and my first evaluation as a principal suffered adversely because of that. The superintendent worked with me and made suggestions on



ways that I could improve and I feel that I have experienced some growth in that area. But still if I had to identify one of my inherent weaknesses, that would be it. One reason that that is so critical is because community relations is a very important thing that we do. We are what the community perceives us to be.

Goldie: Since you pull from three towns how are you viewed by those three towns. Have you pulled the schools together so the students do not think of themselves from Warsaw, or Magnolia, or do they just think of themselves as students here at the high school?

Mr. Gillespie: That is a difficult thing to do because I have a middle school that feeds in here from Warsaw and another school that feeds in here from Kenansville. They compete against each other in academics and in athletics and nearly every other way and they come here as very strong rivals and then the 9th grade year they are thrown together and say let's compete together and that does take some doing. In the past it has caused some problems discipline-wise with gangs of students from one town wanting to keep weekend kids from going on campus. I've learned to take every opportunity that comes my way to get involved in community activities. I never turn down an opportunity to attend a social function in the community that I am invited to. I take every speaking engagement that is offered to me at churches which I don't get very many because I'm not a good public speaker but I do like to show up if I am asked to do something. That has helped. A lot of my experience has been in the Warsaw community. I worked there as a junior high instructor for 12 years. I live in Kenansville so most folk know me there and I am very visible there and Magnolia is the smallest of the three towns and so it is kind of meshed with Kenansville at the middle school level. So in that way we have managed to keep the 3 together.

Goldie: How much administrative power and control do you think you have over your school site and the responsibilities?

Mr. Gillespie: Not enough. I think that even with tenure principals have limited power. We have a lot of responsibility but not a lot of authority to carry out responsibility. When I say that I should qualify it with an explanation--when it comes to evaluating staff and actually dismissing staff members who are not doing the job, that can be very, very difficult and sometimes next to impossible unless the staff member is completely asleep on the job or doing something immoral. There are so many procedures and policies and regulations from the central office and just about every decision that we make has to be cleared with somebody or some policy and we are vulnerable. One thing that I do and I am sure all the other principals do is each

year try to keep up with case law to determine who has been sued for what and how the case came out because we know that every decision that we make whether it is one that relates to a student, a teacher or a parent can and possibly will be contested on the way to the courts.

Goldie: How did the desegregation of schools affect your role as a principal?

Mr. Gillespie: I have just been principal of an integrated high school so I have no comparison basis but I see it as being a plus for principals. I think that undoubtedly white principals have much more authority in segregated schools than in integrated ones. I think they commanded much more respect in the community. I remember the principals at the high school that I attended, they literally walked on water in the community but all of that has kind of changed now. The principals, black or white but especially black in those communities, are recognized on a first name basis in most places. But I think all in all it is still a plus.

Goldie: Do you notice any difference in supervising black teachers and white teachers?

Mr. Gillespie: Yes, I think that there is still somewhat of a carryover from the bygone days of segregation when there was a perceived difference, when there were ingrained ideas that certain people may have been a little bit more capable or smarter than other people. While those feelings are suppressed they are not always done away with. Sometimes in certain situations they surface and have to be dealt with. It is also sometimes difficult to deal with minority teachers. I don't know how to suggest a reason but just the fact that sometimes they get the idea that because of the principal being black that "I can behave differently" and I think that may be something that is an ingrained job thinking that we perform better for some people than we do for certain other people.

Goldie: Do you enjoy your job?

Mr. Gillespie: Yes, I do because I feel like I am in a position to make a contribution to the students here and their success now and their growth and development and success in life in the future. I also feel that I am in a position to serve as a role model to students here. I feel like that is tremendously important for students in this community to know that if they are willing to sacrifice, and if they are willing to prepare themselves, that they can have a future and they can succeed and they can do things to make a worthwhile contribution right here in the community. I feel too that I was blessed to come back into the community where I grew up and have been privileged to work as a teacher and to be kept by the Lord in position so that things could not

be found in my background that would prevent promotions and it has been an extra special privilege for me.

Goldie: What do you consider your major problem of your principalship?

Mr. Gillespie: Change. I think we have seen so many changes and we have seen so many innovations in teaching just in the short time that I have been an administrator until it has gotten teachers a little bit jittery. We have had so many things to come down the pike and everything came down as a panacea. This is going to solve our problems as contested and tried here and there. Just in the short 8 years that I have been a principal we have gone through the basic education plan; the basic education plan had millions of dollars invested in it. It was going to make things equal in Duplin County so far as study opportunity is concerned. We said great, that is a good idea. Before the basic education plan could even have an opportunity to get fully implemented off the ground we coming with other things, the latest being Senate Bill 2. Senate Bill 2 placed an authority for the city in making the local level which is where it should be and given the opportunity and the resources we can really evaluate ourselves and we can find out what our student needs are, and we can develop strategies to meet those needs. We can turn ourselves around and we can show good results on student performance instruments but even before Senate Bill 2 is fully implemented here we come with restrictions tied to possible cuts so you're in control but we are going to control this and we are going to control that. So I think probably before it is fully implemented some other reform movement will come down from Raleigh and it is things like this that made teachers very suspicious. How long is this going to last--by the time we get set up and in gear will there be something else. This has been the most disturbing thing I think as a principal. Give us something that we can believe in and hang on to and do well and then give us the opportunity to go out there to do it and give us support and we will do a good job.

Goldie: What do you consider the most rewarding about your principalship?

Mr. Gillespie: That has differed at different levels. At the middle school level I was a little bit closer to students. The students were a little bit closer to teachers and to me. At the high school level students are more distant to teachers because they are growing up and doing a lot of things on their own. The rewarding things at the high school level I think are seeing students succeed. Any time a student succeeds at anything it really makes me feel good and seeing teachers succeed or hearing students saying good things about teachers. Student measurement instruments that indicate that teachers have done well with the class then



that is very rewarding to me as a principal.

Goldie: How do you feel graduation day?

Mr. Gillespie: Elated! Elated! I am still hoping that we are going to have a graduating class before I leave here that will graduate 100% of the seniors that start off in the fall of the year. We have done half the year but that is certainly my goal. All in one class.

Goldie: If you knew of a black young person, male or female, that aspired to be a high school principal in the state of North Carolina, what advice would you give to that person?

Mr. Gillespie: I would tell that person to work very hard to become the best principal that he could as quickly as he possibly could. I think that there is a bright future for black principals in North Carolina. I think more importantly there is a need for black principals in the state of North Carolina. I think that need is hinged upon the fact that most of our black kids are going to be educated in the public schools in North Carolina regardless of what happens to the Governor's voucher plan, regardless of what direction the federal and state government go with freedom of choice or schools of choice or whatever. I think most of our kids are going to be educated in public schools and they are going to be a lot better off if we are there, if blacks are there as principals and as teachers.

Goldie: Well, we have come to the end of the interview. Do you have any words of wisdom you would like to give?

Mr. Gillespie: I am usually very short on words of wisdom.

Goldie: But you have some wisdom, so share it.

Mr. Gillespie: Well, I would say being at this point in my career as an educator and lately as a principal and as an educational administrator, I feel that education is still the most rewarding profession that one could possibly pursue. I feel that we, as educators, have not been very kind to our profession. I think that we have been unwilling in the past to elevate education at all levels to a professional level to the point where we were respected and admired by the public for what we do. I think in a lot of cases we have sat back and we have waited for them to tell us what to do and they have not been reluctant to do that, at the general assembly level all the way down to the local drug store and the barber shop. Everybody knows what educators should be doing and what they are doing wrong and I think that we have been very willing to listen to this and very willing to sit back and wait until the next suggestion is made and then we try to implement that. But I think the expertise is in the classroom, in the central offices and the local school



office. I think if we were to take a look at ourselves, we know what it takes to turn ourselves around and do a better job. I don't think that we are going to see a lot of improvement in terms of resources, in terms of pay for what we do in the immediate future. I would encourage any young person who is going into education, even my own children, to go into education because I think it is going to be very rewarding in the future but I think prior to that we are going to have to do some things ourselves to stop kidding ourselves and stop injuring each other and become more supportive of each other and the job that we are doing. The end of fighting of the classroom teacher against the administrators and the administrators against the school board and the school board against everybody else I think has to end and has to become a more cooperative effort. When that begins to happen I think we are going to see education move forward in the state of North Carolina. And I think too that the persons out there who are demanding more of us will have to be more supportive to businesses and industry out there. They are going to have to get involved and they are going to have to be more supportive of us in order for us to do the job that we want to do and that we are capable of doing.

Goldie: Thank you very much. This has been an interesting interview and I came a lot of miles but I am glad I did. Every interview that I have done has been quite interesting. I have been quite impressed. I feel with the small number of blacks that we have in this role that you are all the best. Everyone has been great. I think that it comes from the fact that you have all been tried and tested before you get to the position but I am really impressed. Do you think that having someone of the other race to affirm your preparedness is almost necessary?

Mr. Gillespie: Yes, not only is that necessary upon entering in but it is a continuing requirement. It is almost as if and I don't say this in any kind of negative way even though it is going to sound very negative. It is almost as if we have to prove that we can do while somebody is given a chance proving that they can't do. It is an everyday task. We have to prove it over and over again. Either we are willing to do that or we fall by the wayside. I think that is what we have to instill in our youngsters today that any time that there are two races you are going to have to excel in some way and we can't do this necessarily with students but I think in the communities that we have to instill in our young people--you have to be willing to try harder. You may not get the same breaks that somebody else is getting but you can't say to yourself that I'm going to quit because of that. You have to be persistent and you have to be determined and try harder and harder and be willing to stay up to do the extra hour of work, the extra hour to get it done and prove yourself because unfortunately as you and I both know, what we do when we open the door for somebody else who is coming behind us we

slam it shut forever. It should not be that way but that is the way it is.