

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

WILLIE MAE LEE CREWS

June 16, 2005

KIMBERLY HILL: This is Kimberly Hill and I am talking with Mrs. Willie Mae Crews at her home in Birmingham, Alabama on Thursday June 16, 2005. Thank you for having me and thank you for the lemonade.

WILLIE MAE CREWS: You're welcome.

KH: We are going to start by talking about how you first became interested in becoming a teacher and about your childhood.

WC: Where do I start with that, because I was not interested in becoming a teacher until later in life? My childhood was interesting now that I look back on it. There was much hard work as a child of a share cropper, so I never had the opportunity of attending school for the full nine months. Usually seven, sometimes six and a half months because the crops had to be planted, tended and reaped. I was interested early on in the printed word in books. We had very few books. There was always a Bible. We did something in our home that I see designers doing now; we papered our walls with the pages from magazines. I learned later that the pages were not only for a pleasing appearance, but they served as insulation because these were share cropper's tenant houses. I read what was on the walls, and sometimes I would do something you would find amusing; if I found a page with part of a story I'd read that part again and again and again hoping and wishing that somehow I would find the other part of that story. Of course it was plastered against the wall, so there was no way of ever doing that. That was my interest in reading, so I find it very difficult to get rid of anything that has print on it no matter what, magazines, papers, college books I have every book I think that I have ever read all over my

house and my basement. I learned a lot on the farm. I learned discipline. I learned how to manage my time well. I lived with family that loved family, so I always knew that. I lived with my grandparents the majority of the time; I didn't leave Marion until I was seventeen, and so leaving there was coming into a whole new world for me. There was also the fun of jumping into creeks and hunting muscadines and blackberries, as opposed to what the hard work was, like taking care of cows and mules, the cooking, the canning, that was difficult. I still learned discipline and that has been very important in my life. I think that all of my relatives but my first cousins were like brothers and sisters to me and my aunts and uncles were like parents, so we were a large family but we knew everybody. I don't find that to be the case as much now. There was great respect for elders and for the knowledge that they had. Going to town on Saturday was a big deal. Having major days at the churches, the anniversaries, the society turnouts with great food and getting a chance to speak to a boy, who was not allowed to come to your house, but you could talk on the church grounds. So, that was life for me growing up. For the first three years of high school there were no buses for children who lived way out in the country, so we got to school the best way we could and many times it was to walk the distance into town. My high school was founded by the American Missionary Society in 1867 and so that was the one school. The training school for black children, African Americans was in Uniontown eighteen miles away but that was established much later. The schools were designated training schools for black children and high schools for white children. So we were trainable, but not teachable. I have one brother and one sister. My sister is deceased and my brother lives here. I had two cousins that lived with us and they were brother and sister, but not biological in the sense that we lived together. That's pretty much it for growing up, I learned from my grandfather not to fear. He had no fears of anything or anybody. He was an atheist until I was ten and he was probably

seventy five or so then. My grandmother was as devout as anyone can be. It was unusual for her to be as devout as she was, and she was a woman I wanted to emulate and I still do. I still would like to be the woman my grandmother was, the love, the kindnesses, and the patience. My grandfather said there was nothing to that, but at about age seventy five he had a wonderful experience. We didn't know he could sing until it happened, and he would sing.

KH: Did he start singing in church?

WC: No. He would just sit on his porch and sing. I just learned from him not to fear. He said "your body can be destroyed, but not your mind." Oddly enough, the last words to me was not to be careful as I was leaving home to go to college, I had one foot on the step on the bus and he touched me on the shoulder and I turned thinking he was going to tell me to be careful, and he said, "Don't go down there to that school and come back here no fool." I eventually learned what he meant, and yet he was a man who never attended school one day in his life – nor my grandmother. He was born as he said, the year the country surrendered, which is probably 1865. That's my background of approaching things, being disciplined and not being afraid, learning how to measure real fear or danger. One does not have to be afraid of a rattlesnake, but you recognize that he is a snake and he is poisonous and you act accordingly. I learned much of that from my grandfather. He was a great farmer, he could grow anything. It was his profound belief that land could not be owned, and I still do not understand all of that, you can buy a car and own a car but not land. Someone told me that this was also a philosophy of some Indian tribes, that the land was there, it's God's land and it belongs to everybody.

KH: That's when I first heard of that philosophy. He sounds like a deep man.

WC: I didn't realize how deep until years later, just looking at his life and trying to work out just what there was about him. He loved my grandmother deeply, and I thought all men did

that. He'd go out into the fields, and if peaches or berries were in season, he'd bring something back for her. He'd put it in her lap if she was sitting or in her pockets if she was standing, working at the stove. If he went into town, even if it was just an apple or a stick of peppermint candy, always he would do that. So I thought all men did that when they left home, upon their return. Not expensive, they would bring something, a token of their love.

KH: High standards. [laughing]

WC: I had to teach my husband. [laughing] I had to tell him, I thought all men did that, he learned. He's deceased though. Is that enough about my background?

KH: Sure, that can be enough. What made you decide to go to college?

WC: I knew I would not pick cotton all of my life. I knew I was not going to be a maid all of my life. So my first option since we were very poor was that I join the armed forces, and use that to go to college. However, that year Dillard University gave tuition scholarships to valedictorians and salutatorians, I know from around the Southeast. I was the valedictorian of my class, so I got that scholarship. That was for tuition. That was a time before grants and loans, so I would work for a white family on the weekends and in the winter when we didn't have crop work to do. They knew a family in New Orleans, and the husband of that family was a Colonel at Marion Military Institute. I told them that I had a tuition scholarship, so they wrote to that family and asked if I could live in their home and work for room and board. They did not need anyone, but looked for a friend of theirs and that's what happened. I had my tuition scholarship and I got off the bus in New Orleans and someone picked me up and I went to a private home to work for room and board so that I could go to college. So I never lived in a dormitory and I worked for three different families during that time. That was my focus, I am not going to be a maid, or a cook, or a dishwasher or a share cropper for all the time that I had

left, whether it is fifteen years or fifty years, I am not going to do that. My focus was on school, I was going to go to school. I was fortunate enough to have a job in between classes at Dillard, so I worked for a couple of professors and I think I mentioned the research assistant work with Dr. Daniel Thompson on the follow up of children of bondage, so that was a little income during the summer to help me with books. Also with the causes of delinquency in New Orleans, that was extra income to help me also. That was my focus.

KH: Sounds like that was your family heritage, being very driven and knowing what you wanted.

WC: Just working, having a sense of ethics about working. Work hard for what you want and be honest. Have integrity. When I was a maid, I was a good one. I knew what to do, so no one could say this is sloppy or this is not what we want. I did not go to college to teach, that was something that I was not going to do. I was fascinated with Dr. Thompson and Joe Taylor, who were the Sociology professors. I was fascinated with language, with Dr. Swurdlow, and we had names for them. One teacher we called "Zeus" because he just reminded us of the Greek God Zeus. We had others that had interesting names. We had someone we called "Elevated Boogie" because he wore shoes with lifts in them and it caused him to sway when he walked. They were research people and they talked about Kenneth Cole and they talked about A Phillip Randolph, who was just beginning his prime work. They talked about Gunnar Myrdal and those things were fascinating to me, so I decided I wanted to be a sociologist and I wanted to do research. So I graduated from Dillard and went to Fisk, and I was there for a year. In January, Professor Vallian was the head of the department then and sent a team of three of us to Montgomery because he felt that based on the criteria for social movements that the bus boycott

was actually the beginning of a social movement. So, we went to just interview and talk with people.

KH: About the boycott? Wow.

WC: Yeah. I think we were there for three weeks. I interviewed Mrs. Parks in her home. I rode in a cab with her. I went to mass meetings and recorded the songs and what was said; I only kept three of them. The one with her, the one with the mass movement and what happened the first time the Kings' home was bombed. I don't know why Preston Vallian never wrote his book. The white girl Ann Holden, from Georgia interviewed white folks. She had the southern drawl, so she --

KH: Did she publish her book?

WC: No this was all for Fisk. We had to send our interviews back to our professors, because we were students. There were three students in the department at the time, two blacks and one white, in the graduate Sociology Department at Fisk. Those were interesting days. As we stood outside the King home after everyone arrived there from the church after the news came that his home had been bombed, the singing, the refusal to listen to the mayor or the city commissioner and then to have him come out and wave his hand in absolute silence. I talked my way into going in. I told them, "Mrs. King is from my hometown and she needs me, and they let me go in." She didn't know me because she graduated a few years before me, in fact she wasn't even at Lincoln while I was there. She was in school with my husband, but he wasn't my husband at that time and I didn't know him. I knew him and didn't know him at that time. I came in and said "I'm Willie Mae Lee and I'm from Marion, Alabama and I'm here to do whatever it is that I can do to help get through this night." So, I was there for the remainder of the night and into the next day. I took care of the baby; they had a new baby that they called



Yokie. People called, some said they were sorry and others said they brought it on themselves. Others called and said 'we missed this time, but we'll get you next time.' It was ugly what some people did. That was also an experience for me --

KH: Some good memories.

WC: Not even realizing how that was all going to play out. One writer said, do we ever realize life, why we live it? What is it, "Our Town?" I think it's "Our Town" by Thornton Wilder, I don't know since I have been out of the classroom for so long. Basically, it's that we don't fully realize it as we live it, it's looking back that we see. I knew it was important, but the historical role was something I did not fully fathom at that time. I came home the end of that year and went to Marion with my cousin and met my husband. So there were two jobs in Marion, Alabama, I would either work at the Laundromat or teach. Now remember, I did not go to school to do that, but I said I'll teach. I had a double major, because I loved literature and English. The superintendent there discovered that I had been in Montgomery doing the bus boycott and didn't hire me, so I got a job in Tuscaloosa working at Turrett High School. What I recognize is that life has a way of getting from you what you are here to do, and nothing in my life could have been any more glorious than teaching. Not instructing, there is a big difference between being a professor, an instructor and being a teacher. That to me is the highest calling, because you teach them all.

KH: What do you mean you teach them all?

WC: All children, it's biblical. Who so ever will, let him come. Especially in a public school, he will not look at a child and make the decision about that child's life that he can or cannot learn or that he should be denied certain opportunities because of his color or his ability. Well, you don't need this course or that course because of some superficial reason. If for

example, in your family there are three children and one is super bright, and another one is average and maybe one is slow. Something is wrong if your parents decide that the one labeled slow -- and I don't like labeling kids -- should not have the same opportunities as the others. Now the extent to which they can take advantage may be limited, but they need the opportunity. Just two weeks ago the system wanted to test, I have twin grandsons, and they wanted to test the one who is a math whiz and the parents said no, you have to test both of them. The one that's tested gifted is a sloppy one, who writes one sentence when he is supposed to write an entire page, and he will just erase stuff. I don't mean a sloppy person, I mean in his work. He just thinks anything will do.

KH: So he's --

WC: He met the standards of whatever they said about being gifted, but the one who is a math whiz did not test at that level. Whatever test they are using won't dictate what they are going to do in life or how well they are going to do. If that were the case, I don't think any of us would ever move beyond or would have moved much beyond slavery. Surely Dubois would not have worked and, what's his name, Douglass. Definitely Frederick would not have done what he did if that was the case.

KH: That's true.

WC: So, we are saying just give them the opportunity.

KH: So, after you got married and became a teacher in Tuscaloosa then eventually you ended up teaching in Birmingham.

WC: I taught for a year and a half at Tuscaloosa. I taught EMR children the first year and I think I loved them so much that it bothered me sometimes that I couldn't get them where I wanted them to be in short periods of time. So again, I had to learn patience with them. We did



all of the content, I had a young lady come in from the country and bring tadpoles. We charted their growth for our biology, and one Monday morning we walked in and little bitty frogs were hopping all over the classroom. [Laughs] We brought cans from grocery stores and I taught them how to stock them and how to arrange them. One young man in particular, I worked night and day to move him from counting strips of paper to transferring that to numerical symbols. We worked on helping him understand that if one has one apple and another apple that's two apples, but then taking it to the next step, to get him to transfer that to the symbol for two. It was very, very difficult. I refused to give up and he refused to give up and that was the important thing. He had patience to say 'I'm going to get this, I am going to understand that this is the symbol for three and this is the symbol for four and when you add them together they make the symbol seven.' After about six months he picked it up. I was happy and he was happy. So, that was good. Then I came to Birmingham, and my mother was here. I had my two biological children and my husband had a seven year old daughter when I married him. I found it very difficult to think of her as a stepdaughter. People will look at the date of her birth and try and connect how old I was, especially one of the teachers that I worked with who was married to one of the teachers that taught me in high school, because at that time girls had to drop out of school if they became pregnant. I never told him, he would just look at me and try and figure it out how this happened. She is deceased; she died of a brain aneurysm nine months after my husband passed. Most people didn't know that I was not her biological mother. They would say 'you never said . . .' and I felt there was no reason to separate children. My biological daughter didn't know until tenth grade that I was not Jeannie's biological mother. It was not anything hidden, there was just no reason to say that I am her stepmother and I'm their mother. When I married my husband she became my child.

KH: Yup, and you raised them all together?

WC: Yes, and that's what we said in his obituary, together we reared three children. That is what we did. She attended Birmingham Southern and worked for Bellsouth after she graduated and did very well. I guess the greatest compliment my husband ever paid me was to say to me 'if I just didn't know better, I would swear that you had her.' So, she was that much like me, which is more like me than the ones biological I guess. That was the best compliment that he could have paid me, to say that about Jean.

KH: That's a fine compliment.

WC: We have been doing a lot of crying this year because John, her baby was twelve when she died and he has been in the different bowls or something. He graduated from high school and L just look at my daughter and say I'm not going to cry and she says she's not going to cry either. Then the tears just roll. We think of her and what she meant to all of us. I'm rambling, am I not? [laughs]

KH: That's okay. What school were you at just before you went to Hayes?

WC: Tuscaloosa. Hayes was the only high school I worked at in Birmingham. I started at Hayes in 1963. There were three students in the department at the time, two blacks and one white, in the graduate Sociology Department at Fisk. Those were interesting days. As we stood outside the King home after everyone arrived there from the church after the news came that his home had been bombed, the singing, the refusal to listen to the mayor or the city commissioner and then to have him come out and wave his hand in absolute silence. I talked my way into going in. I told them, "Mrs. King is from my hometown and she needs me, and they let me go in." She didn't know me because she graduated a few years before me, in fact she wasn't even at Lincoln while I was there. She was in school with my husband, but he wasn't my husband at

that time and I didn't know him. I knew him and didn't know him at that time. I came in and said "I'm Willie Mae Lee and I'm from Marion, Alabama and I'm here to do whatever it is that I can do to help get through this night." So, I was there for the remainder of the night and into the next day. I took care of the baby; they had a new baby that they called Yokie. People called, some said they were sorry and others said they brought it on themselves. Others called and said 'we missed this time, but we'll get you next time.' It was ugly what some people did. That was also an experience for me -- There were three students in the department at the time, two blacks and one white, in the graduate Sociology Department at Fisk. Those were interesting days. As we stood outside the King home after everyone arrived there from the church after the news came that his home had been bombed, the singing, the refusal to listen to the mayor or the city commissioner and then to have him come out and wave his hand in absolute silence. I talked my way into going in. I told them, "Mrs. King is from my hometown and she needs me, and they let me go in." She didn't know me because she graduated a few years before me, in fact she wasn't even at Lincoln while I was there. She was in school with my husband, but he wasn't my husband at that time and I didn't know him. I knew him and didn't know him at that time. I came in and said "I'm Willie Mae Lee and I'm from Marion, Alabama and I'm here to do whatever it is that I can do to help get through this night." So, I was there for the remainder of the night and into the next day. I took care of the baby; they had a new baby that they called Yokie. People called, some said they were sorry and others said they brought it on themselves. Others called and said 'we missed this time, but we'll get you next time.' It was ugly what some people did. That was also an experience for me --

KH: Can you tell us just a bit about Hayes' history? How it started I mean.

WC: Yes, Hayes and Carver were built to keep children from attending, to protect Phillips High School and Woodlawn High School, which were all white. If we put these schools in strategic positions and then zone the kids, they would not attend Woodlawn or Phillips. Phillips was downtown. That was the reasoning behind building those schools where they were, and to do it quickly. The first Principal of Hayes, A.C. Dickenson, who died not so long ago, wanted the school to be named Pacesetters. He didn't want any names of animals, he said, "We're going to be Pacesetters." So Hayes High Pacesetters is what they are called.

KH: I heard that he wanted Hayes to have the best black teachers in the district and the best programs for students.

WC: He accomplished that. Andrew Abercrombie did class day activities that would rival something from Broadway. Once he redecorated the gym into a Hawaiian paradise and momentarily you thought you were in Hawaii. He was just that good.

KH: Was he one of the teachers?

WC: He was a teacher; he was head of the English department. Marion Rogers produced plays for "Raisin in the Sun" -- [telephone ringing WC answers]

WC: You could suspend [imagination] and think that you were actually viewing these. Laverne Cromer had a choir that would rival just about any college choir. We sent students to Massachusetts Institute of Technology, George Ritzer was a member of my church who went to M.I.T. We were Pacesetters with state troopers; we had the first female state trooper in Alabama. It was the first female, not the first black female, but the first female state trooper, Clarisse England. A picture of her was in the New York Times. I had asked her repeatedly to write her story in a little booklet and get it published.

KH: She should.

WC: Our Band Director was superb, Mechanical Drawing teachers, Physics, History, Florence Terrell in Art. They called us Little University sometimes. [laughs] We did, we had a wonderful faculty. Carol Robertson's mother was our librarian during the 1970s and she had reading clubs and she published her monthly bulletins "Mrs. Crews' class is reading, Mrs. Finch's class is reading, Mrs. Collin's . . ." The P.E. teacher was even a reader, oh and smart too, Josette Collins. One year the seniors had me first period, Mrs. Finch for second period and Josette Collins for third period. They said, "We give up, we'll come back next year, we cannot do three of them." We had pride in the school, pride in ourselves and pride in the students. We taught them, this is your school. What do you want people to think about your school? Then what must you do in order to generate that? They had their first major reunion in December of last year, maybe, I'm not sure when. There were people who came that did not have tickets, who could not get in because it was already full at the Sheraton.

KH: There is still a lot of pride in the school?

WC: Still a lot of pride in the school. They had given scholarships now because it was changed to a middle school and now it's a high school again. We had wonderful coaches. You couldn't go and play basketball or football like run-of-the-mill folks did, you had to have your hair cut and you had to be clean and people had to know you were Pacesetters. We had wonderful bulletin boards. For me it was a good place to work. We had good math teachers.

KH: Were you teaching English?

WC: I taught English the entire time. I would rotate up and down; I always wanted to teach all levels. Especially when I became department chair, so that I would know what was going on at the other levels. If I had twelve I would take a nine, or a ten and an eleven. I would go back and forth, to keep up with students. They would tell you there were only two excuses

for not having your work; either your house burned or you died, both of which we could verify. [laughs] They just laughed and said come on. The football players now will say, 'why do we have a test after a football game?' I would tell them that they knew in advance about the test, I wouldn't give them pop quizzes to fail them. You don't give exams to fail students, you want to know actually what the kids know. The tests allow the teachers to assess themselves and discover what needs to be taught again, what you did not teach well or where misunderstandings have taken place. I told the athletes, "You knew the football game was Thursday night and you knew the test was Friday, you had time to prepare. Just as you prepare for the football game, you prepare for me."

KH: They didn't care for that?

WC: They'd talk about it, but they did well anyway. Now they tell me they understand why. If you are assigned to me from eight until nine, then you belong to me. You do not belong to your coach, and you are responsible for this class. I have met students who barely made it and some who have come to me in tears to say 'I'm glad to see you because I wanted to let you know how important you were to me'. That is what makes teaching worthwhile. I think we taught more about integrity and honesty than anything else. You need to be good men and women. I remember teaching something in eleventh grade about character and something else, and the paper that they were to write said 'when I am thirty.' The teachers who got together for this assignment gave them a house, a bank account and a car, so when they wrote the paper they couldn't write about a five bedroom mansion or this kind of car because that was already a given. One young man wrote that when he was thirty he would have made an honorable man of himself, and I remember that because that is what he did. He became an honorable man. If they made a million dollars that was fine, but please become honorable men and women. That was a thrust of



our teaching at Hayes, that was our philosophical stance. We knew that we were in a sense parents and that we were taught to be good teachers. It would not have crossed our minds to say the parents should raise them at home. We believed that the students belonged to us, we were the adults and we were in charge. Not as police officers, but we had the knowledge and experience. We knew the kinds of things that they would face and we wanted them to be prepared. However we had to do that, by whatever means necessary [laughs], as Malcolm [X] said, to get you to read a book, talk about that book and understand what that writer said, whether you agreed with that writer or not was what we wanted. By not giving up, that is what we got.

KH: Did you also see students outside of school at church or other functions?

WC: At church especially. My church is in the neighborhood of the church, in fact one block from the school. So, I had one student say to me as a young woman, not too many years ago in a Bible study class, 'if Mrs. Crews said it' and I thought well I'm a church member and I can -- and she then said 'she changed me, I realized I have to get Shakespeare. It doesn't matter that she's a member of my church.' One young man said he discovered something when Mrs. Crews taught her own daughter, 'we thought since the teacher was her mother she would know everything. Well, we learned differently.' So, but I won't do that if I ever had the opportunity to do that again, because that was hard. It was hard for my daughter because she was smart and sometimes you need to be with someone else, as a teacher. But I enjoyed teaching.

KH: As far as you could tell at the time, do you think the administrators at Hayes had special relationships with the board considering that the school was established just to keep black students out of another school?

WC: I worked under two Principals- [interruption]

WC: The principals' as well as the teachers' abilities and knowledge was underestimated. Even though the people in charge might not have said it, it was the prevailing attitude that you cannot have the knowledge that white teachers or white administrators had. There is that line. Warner, I think did a diagram that was a square with a diagonal and everybody white above, so even the highest black underneath is still below, that's part of my sociology from way back. That was the thinking; they just didn't realize how truly bright many of our teachers were. There was not as many fields open to us, so many teachers had double majors Math and Science or English and Social Studies or English and Science. We had trained teachers in Physics and Biology. There was a woman at Parker named Mabel Phillips who went all the way to the national with students doing well. I dare say that if Mabel were in school now, and graduated, she would not be a teacher. She is retired but I'm thinking in Biology at that time --

KH: She would be a Researcher or Scientist.

WC: Exactly. That was the thinking. The second principal, John Norman, was a mathematician who could look at boards and arrange curriculums and arrange and balance schedules. He was just a fantastic mind, who believed in writing. If I tell you something, I'll write it down and I have dates and times. I think that is what caused some dislike for him, because he said what he needed to say about teaching. He knew instruction and he knew good instruction, and he asked questions about measurement. 'You tell me these are your goals, but how will we know the students have this knowledge? By what means will you determine this, so that you can be fair with your grades?' He did not buy into -- and I can't say about others because I did not work with them -- any belief that white is right or that white teachers knew more than black teachers, that was not part of his philosophical stance. He read lesson plans.

Maybe on a Monday he would say, 'I want all English lesson plans left in the office' and maybe the next week he would say all Math plans. He would read through those plans looking for goals, objectives, activities and methods of evaluation. He also looked for how you planned to teach it again if you did not reach your goals.

KH: Was that just to check on the quality of the work?

WC: Quality, quality work. He'd enter classrooms for a few moments to get an idea as to what was going on, or he would come in and sit for a while. It was not about personalities, he needed to see the issues and know what was being taught. He could support the teachers if a child made a failing grade and the parents came in, if he knew what the teacher had done. If the teacher had not done anything, then he couldn't support them. He was very objective with that. I appreciated working with someone with that kind of objectivity. [END OF SIDE A]

WC: [interview in process] ...with girls and boys advisor problems with boys, and I was just sort of across the board with all of them. I said, "I don't want to do this, I don't want to do this." He said to apply and I was thinking I love the classroom and I love teaching. I applied and went for the interview and I was hired. So, I was the first black English Supervisor. Some people were concerned about that.

KH: What were the concerns they raised?

WC: That there was somebody else that was white who was perhaps better prepared or should have gotten the job.

KH: There were other people who were white that applied for the job and didn't get it?

WC: Yes. That too was a good experience; I worked with all of the schools and had foreign languages and the English program and eventually the advanced placement program. I never stopped teaching. I would go into the classrooms. I learned to work well with the teachers

and they would invite me to teach a poem or introduce a play or to teach a novel to a specific class. This allowed me to keep teaching. That led me to opportunities with the National Council of Teachers of English. I started attending those conferences and those conventions. I was elected Associate Chair of the Secondary Section, all sixty thousand of them across the nation. I was shocked when I got the report from them that I had been elected to Associate Chair of the Secondary Section. I worked with them and worked on the Editorial Board with the National Council of Teachers of English. I was in a meeting with some people from the National Council and College Board, and the College Board was discussing doing a twelfth grade course in English and I was asked to work with that group and stayed with them. People like Arthur Appleby and a lot of folks that you would probably recognize, especially if you have been in Education at all, and in English. We went to New York for maybe four or five weekends and just fleshed out the idea, is there a need for this course? We are probably the only country in the world that uses another country's literature as our last course for high school, because we had used British Literature everywhere. We thought of a course, Alice Halzoy was with us, and we said we could do a course and call it Pacesetter English. We worked up a six part curriculum for that, and then we taught it the first time at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Then it traveled to Tennessee, Florida, and some other places. It got too big too quickly, because we didn't have enough people prepared to teach it. Then it was a problem to try and train enough people, because people were asking for the course. A wonderful course that would prepare a child to go into the world of work then go to college.

KH: Were you thinking of Hayes when you came up with the name?

WC: No, they came up with the name Pacesetters and I said that's the right name.

Pacesetter English, and then they were going to do a Math. I think they did the Math, but did not

get to the Social Studies, because college boards ran out of money with that and with the training. All of Miami-Dade trained their teachers for Pacesetter English, so it was part of that program as well. I had wonderful opportunities doing that and listening to people. We fleshed out ideas and we did the various units. Serving under the committees with N.C.T.E. worked well for me. It's a matter of looking back from picking cotton and being dirt poor, share cropping Alabama's black belt to the doors that opened for me, and the faith that if they opened for me then it's my responsibility and my duty to work to open doors for others. That was pretty much what I've done.

KH: When you were traveling as a supervisor, did you sometimes compare other schools to Hayes?

WC: Yes. I compared the attitudes toward learning because I guess things were shifting, and they were always good teachers. There were good teachers in all the schools, but not all of the teachers were good teachers. So sometimes after observing a teacher who was not qualified or did not know how to teach, I would work with that person and then sit in on a class where people knew what they were doing. That would lift my spirits. Some teachers were open to learning and some were resentful.

KH: Resentful of learning?

WC: Resentful of my position and my saying what they did not know how to do. For example, when someone said that a student had written a paper on someone named Langston Hughes, and I was thinking, where did you go to college? What do you mean you have never heard of Langston Hughes?

KH: Someone didn't know Langston Hughes?

WC: Yes, someone did that. [laughs] [I said,] "I need to help you." Most of the time I used compassion and I never disrespected a teacher, but sometimes I had to close the door and say there are some things we have to do. If I saw something that was just totally incorrect, I would ask the teacher's permission to explain something in a different way. But, you always have smart students...so I would say she or he is showing you a different way to make sure the students understood. You never want to leave a classroom and leave things worse than how you found them. One must support the teacher and then later you can say "don't go to class unprepared, because kids know before you do." Kids will use that against you if you are not prepared. You do not have to be brighter than any of your students; you just have to know more because you are the teacher with the training. Some were very receptive to that.

KH: Have you seen any changes in students in your years traveling as a supervisor or in your time at Hayes?

WC: We kept Hayes pretty much where we wanted it to be. The students learned the school song and what it meant and that it was named for Carroll W. Hayes. They learned who he was, what he did and what he thought about education. That was the forefront and we want this for you, and things didn't change much because there was still a core of teachers at Hayes when I left. The head of the History department came to the [School] Board as Supervisor of Social Studies and the head of the Science Department for Hayes came to the Board as Supervisor of Science. The Math Department head became an Assistant Principal and went to a different school, but this was after Mr. Norman retired. In 1970-1971, when we were going to integrate faculties, the board set up conferences and meetings to talk about how this was to be done. Each school sent maybe four or maybe five representatives. I was greatly disturbed by what I heard in some of the meetings. There was an attitude or a belief system again that black kids cannot learn



what white kids can learn. In one of the sessions I heard again and again and again from different white teachers that they did not want to lower their standards. Finally, I could not take it and I stood to all of my five foot eight inches and said 'I had no idea that so many of you have been to the top of Mt. Sinai and God himself gave you a set of standards for teaching!' [laughs] There was absolute silence. 'I would like to know about those standards, and who is to say you will not have to raise those standards? You are presuming that black kids cannot learn. I'm black and I attended one room schools with six grades in one room with one teacher, and we knew cooperative learning even though we didn't attach that name to it.' I said, "Mrs. Adele Child knew and Mrs. Chloe Tutt knew that Willie Mae could read so sit with Clarence who doesn't read very well, John – you're good in math, sit with Paul who is not so good in math, so that at the end of sixth grade each of you will know everything you will need to know to go to seventh grade." They were all just looking. I was just so upset by that.

KH: Were they saying this over and over again because they thought that would keep them from going to a black school?

WC: No, they thought that they would have to lower their standards and they just wanted us to know that the kids would flunk because they couldn't come up to these standards that God had given them on these tablets. Then the board hired teachers they would not have hired, just for white schools. Some came to Hayes and John Norman said you can't work here.

KH: Did he really send them away?

WC: Yes, yes he did. Indeed he did. One lady came on a motorcycle and we thought she got lost in the woods with this man who was on the motorcycle with her. They were dirty. And then the board would send white teachers to two or three black schools to make a decision to see if they wanted to teach at any one of them or not.

KH: So, they chose the schools?

WC: Right, and we didn't have that opportunity. A counselor came with her mother and father to look the school over and see if their daughter would be safe.

KH: Really? They went through a tour of Hayes to see if it was safe for her?

WC: Some were poor teachers and they didn't understand that children will try their teachers if you are new. It has nothing to do with color. You are a new teacher and we need to know whether you know what you are doing, so we will ask you questions and we will try your patience. We will ask to be excused to see if you will allow us to be excused. That's the way kids are. Some came with the impression from their background that I am white and blacks will respond to me in a designated way or a learned way, and that's not the case.

KH: Which ways did they expect?

WC: That was what they expected, that kids would -- if I see you on the street, if you work in my home or if your mother works for me then you acquiesce to superiority. That was an attitude, and some didn't know that they had the attitude, but it was there. Now we did get some excellent teachers. We had one teacher I remember in particular that the kids liked. When she left, another teacher came who was white and the kids said to her, "You come in here acting like you are Ms. Strawbridge and you are not Ms. Strawbridge." These were smart kids, when she'd turn to write on the blackboard they would clap, stamp their feet or make noises; and when she'd turn around they were perfect. She finally said she couldn't take it. I told her I was glad that she was able to admit that and maybe with more training and more knowledge perhaps she could come back or become a teacher at another school. We had one teacher who had not been out of a mental institution very long. He walked around with one shoe in his hand.

KH: He was a teacher?

WC: The principal called the board and said you have to come get him, and they did. We had one teacher who was floating, and he said he took forty Bufferin for his hay fever. John Norman was not tolerant of strange behavior; you could be eccentric and know what you are doing, but that he was not accepting of. He believed in having every teacher read the rules and regulations in a meeting and signing that you have a copy and that you have read them, so you could not say you didn't know about this or you did not know about that. The board promised in those meetings that every school would be allowed to keep a core of teachers that the principal's designated, and they'd be in a position to help everyone else work into that school's philosophy and system. That did not happen. Also in one of those meetings I said, "Please do not transfer the best black teachers to schools that are white and leave the black kids with what you deem the poorest black teachers and the poorest white teachers, that's totally unfair."

KH: Did you see that happening?

WC: It did happen. Carver had wonderful teachers, and I think all four of their department chairs were moved to other schools and they were part of the core for that school. They moved our Art teacher to a white school. She was there for one week and our Principal said to the Superintendent -- and Cody would listen -- "You cannot leave my students without an Art teacher to give an Art teacher to schools that have one, so I want my Art teacher back." So, in one week our Art teacher was back. On my first visit to the Board, I went and the personnel person did not offer me a seat, did not attempt to rise to indicate that I had come into his office, and he wanted to know when I entered the door if I minded teaching children of the opposite race. Well, you know in my head I was thinking, "Opposite race of what?" I didn't say that, I just said, "No, I do not." He said we will let you know about your assignment. I said, "Please send them to Hayes High School. That is where I will teach them." Then he dismissed me, and

that was the end of that. Maybe three or four months later a young woman came to the school saying that she was my replacement. My principal sent for me and asked if I had retired or resigned and I said no. He told me the woman had come saying she was my replacement. I had nothing in writing, when he said "Daughter," that was it. He said, "Daughter, we can't use you" and that was the end of that.

KH: So the board sent a replacement for you without actually --

WC: Without saying anything to me -- without transferring me. But, like I said, that was the end of that.

KH: Why do you think the Superintendent was so responsive to the Principal?

WC: I think Dr. Cody wanted to do what was right. He was from Mobile, he had graduated from Harvard and he had some insights, but was quiet. John [Norman] on the other hand was vocal, and he could back up what he said. When the personnel people would send him a list and say you need to lose two teachers, he had his curriculum boards with his numbers of students and he would go directly to the Superintendent and there were people who didn't like that. He would put his boards out and asked the Superintendent to show him how he could lose two teachers and then asked him to balance the classes for him. As a Mathematician himself, he knew that it could not be done. So, they would see what he was talking about, and he would keep his teachers. So, he kept his core and did not allow the board to move his core of teachers.

KH: So, generally in this process, the board wasn't paying much attention to actually leaving schools adequately staffed.

WC: Right, just pulling the best ones. All Supervisors were white at that time, and they were the ones who were asked who the best teachers were, and those were the teachers that were transferred to the white schools. The white kids who were transferred did not attend the black

schools. I think we graduated perhaps four white students at Hayes. One young man had very long hair and it was flowing, and the kids called him "Jesus boy." He got along very well though. Then we had one group to come that didn't stay very long because they were in neighborhoods where people were saying to them "You are allowing your children to go over there with those black kids," so they were having problems from their community. A parent of one of the teachers, which I became good friends with told me that her bridge club would ask her everyday whether she thought it was safe for her daughter. She told me that after so many times she began to wonder against her better judgment, you know maybe there is something to this. One day they were playing cards in the garden and her daughter came home from school and she came around the outside of the house to the backyard, and someone said they would worry about someone raping her and she said she saw her daughter walking up smiling and told them, "Well, if they did she is smiling, so she enjoyed it." That shocked them, my friend said she didn't know she was going to say that, but she was just tired of them programming her to think that something was going to happen to her daughter. We went into a period that became detrimental to our children I think. That period was "I'm here to teach and do nothing more" and that had never been our philosophy. That thinking was that parents will raise you; I will start teaching at the beginning of the hour and finish at the end of the hour. It had always been our stance to teach kids social skills and also general negotiation skills for the world out there, and parents don't have thirty sixteen year olds in their homes and they don't have thirty five year olds in their homes either. So, between the hours of eight and three thirty is a legitimate environment that requires negotiation skills that will be useful in the job market and useful in their future organizations. Kids need to learn how to think about things, to learn how to participate in a discussion, to actually learn how to read different works. You can't read math the way you read

poetry, you can't read a novel the way you read a poem. The woman who lives in that long house down there was a Foods teacher, and when her kids left they knew everything about food service and about food, not the dishwashing part, but they had other skills. Some became managers of small restaurants when they got out.

KH: Which is a good position.

WC: Exactly, exactly. The seamstress did not just have you making an apron. The spring of each year the teacher had a fashion show and the kids talked about their garments. I am heavy set, so these kinds of garments would look good on me. She taught them design and then they bought wonderful fabric and made their clothing and then modeled them. Young men made some things and modeled them. It was not a sewing class for making aprons and other things.

KH: Doilies or whatever.

WC: Exactly. Design, what looks nice on someone who is five foot ten and weighs one hundred pounds will not necessarily look like what you want if you weigh two hundred pounds and you are five foot five inches. They learned how to change patterns, how to take basic patterns and make other kinds of patterns from them. The choir naturally did a concert. The art students had their exposition. As these teachers left and retired the school changed, some of these things changed too. For example, one lady came and said she was a drama major and did a script from [the t.v. show] "Good Times." John Norman hit the ceiling. "Anybody can imitate and walk up and down the halls and say 'Dyn-o-mite!' -- you have not taught them one thing." She was just in tears, and that was not what we were used to. We were used to kids learning the fundamentals of acting and then making a production, but not an imitation. Because that's all it was. You take a script and imitate J.J., but that was it. The new art teacher did a bulletin board that was so terrible that the teachers came and asked me if I had seen the new bulletin board.



"Crewsie Mae, have you seen our bulletin board?" Because when you enter the hallway, you are supposed to see this beauty and see whatever it is that welcomes you to a school, not junk. I said no. "Go see the board." The science head said, "Crews, have you seen our board?" [When I saw it,] I said, "What is that?" We did not hurt that lady's feelings but we got great teachers that knew the skills of bulletin boards and said since we are having the choir concert and the band concert we said we wanted to have something about music, so we politely took all of that stuff down. [laughs] She had to redo the board. She never knew, but we didn't want to hurt her feelings. We were gung ho, classrooms should look inviting. You should be able to go into an English classroom and know that it's an English classroom. There ought to be books about English, there ought to be poems, there ought to be posters, just something that says learning, language or literature in this room, you can see it.

KH: The newer teachers weren't really doing that?

WC: They were not trained to do that. The whole system of teaching teachers, not all of them, because as I said we had some wonderful white teachers, was not Alabama State, Miles, Stillman, Talladega, or Tuskegee. Their stance about teaching was just different. A student can only bring to the table what he has.

KH: And you don't expect more of him?

WC: You have to expect more, you have to say, "No, he doesn't know how to do this but we have this child for twelve years between the hours of eight and three, and there are things we can teach this child." When we did our career ladder training, I was paired with a white man from Mountain Brook and we went to Talladega and Tuscaloosa. He told me about a case of a firm inviting a young man who had applied for a job out to dinner. He was told that the man's eating habits were not what they had expected and they didn't hire him because of it. I told him

they were stupid, because if he had the skills that could advance their company they could have told him what other things he needed to do to get the job. When I was growing up we did not sit at a table with a salad fork and a dinner fork on the left and a knife with the blade facing the plate on the right with a spoon, and the glass at the tip of the spoon. We didn't have all those utensils. We had a pan, sometimes a plate, we said grace and we ate. Then when I got to high school and Laverne Powell said, "we don't know where you're going, the sky is out there, but here is the fundamental setting of a table." "Now, if you are invited and there are three forks and all these things, be a good listener and follow your hostess, because only a fool would set a table with all of those things and not know how to use them. If you get to Carnegie Hall," she would tell us, and of course we were thinking where in the world is that? I'm a sharecropper's child, where is New York even? I know it's on this map but where is it in relation to Perry County? If you are at a concert, explain the dimming of the lights at the intermission, one, two, the third one and then lights out and you should be back in your seats. How would I know that from where I lived, if no one taught me? That was that stance; we will teach you what you need to know beyond just the textbook to manage out there. To negotiate, because that's what it is, negotiation skills.

KH: If you had to put a time span on when that change happened, when would you say?

WC: During the 1970's. Maybe not the first five years, but then gradually you could see it coming. We could see people releasing students from certain responsibilities, saying that it was not their job. Others, new teachers coming in -- blacks as well as whites -- started to buy in to that philosophical stance. Then rules, rules, rules and more rules were created to control students. The zero tolerance business. Hitler practiced zero tolerance; how far do you want to take that? The principals that I worked under said that if you failed to plan then you planned to fail. You have to know your content. The students are not solely responsible for what we find in

classrooms now. We let go, we backed off, and so adults are just as responsible. It is not just the mother who has the child when she is thirteen or fourteen and doesn't know how to rear a child, and her mother is maybe thirty or thirty five. So, it was a gradual happening.

KH: Involving the teachers of that mother and maybe the grandmother too?

WC: Yes, and having students believe that you want the best for them and not for you and every behavior that is listed on the book is not a behavior to send a child home or to expel him. If he is out of the classroom then he is not learning. There are ways of reaching children, not all of them but the majority of them. By just stepping outside of the door to ask if you have done something to offend them, because then you are putting the ball in the child's court. When they answer, no, it opens the door for a discussion. You can let them know that you know something is going on and that they may not want to talk about it, but you see that something is going on that is interfering with learning. "I will not tell anyone what we discussed if you don't," and then the child feels there is a bond that encourages them not to act out anymore. You will have that child that takes a special teacher to meet their needs.

KH: So you'd say nowadays discipline is firmer but there are also more discipline problems?

WC: I'm not sure that we understand discipline the way we did when I was in the classroom. I think now there's a set of rules, violations one, two, and three and if you do any of these it's automatic. It's more automatic than the court system that allows reasonable doubt. This is act two and this is the punishment for act two, there is no gray area or any discussion about it. You did this, so this happens. Life sometimes allows us space to correct, or space to recuperate and when you get the zero tolerance -- now, some things we need zero tolerance, but if every behavior is zero tolerance -- what if that maxim was applied to all of us?

KH: We'd be in trouble.

WC: I could not manage with zero tolerance. That kept some teachers from having to be responsible for their classrooms. "I have a list of rules and if you do this you are out the door, you do this and you will answer to me." That was what teachers used to do, I'll go home and I'll call your mom and your dad and we'll talk. Nobody wanted their parents to be called.

KH: Other teachers I have talked to say that the students don't really care about calling parents anymore, and that the parents don't bother to address problems.

WC: Some don't. Again, sometimes that has to do with the approach. If I called you and you are already stressed out, feeling like you have already done all that you can for this child, don't call me. I think we'll get more if we say, "If you have some time, I'd like to talk with you. You see I know what you want for your child and I want the same thing." So you are helping the parent take a position or a stance. Whereas, if you call and tell them their child did a, b, c and d and we want you to come to the school. Or if we call with a stance that I am right and I have some things to tell you about your child, sometimes they have heard so many negative things about themselves or their child that they just don't want to hear anything that's negative. If you phrase it more like, "I know you want him to do well, do you think maybe the two of us together can get him to see or understand." You may not get them all, but you get more. I remember my grandmother saying, "The one thing I can do is die easy if I know my children will work." You find a way to get to that parent. Put yourselves on equal footing, you are not the parent's teacher; you are their child's teacher. As a supervisor, case in point, I had a parent to bring *Native Son*, *Black Boy*, and something else-those are Richard Wright's, but another book too. She took the bottom of the bag and eased it up to allow the books to slide out onto the desk, because she couldn't touch those books. She then took her pencil and moved pages to show me

the language. She wanted me to remove those books from all of the public school libraries and especially the school where her child was. I looked at that and said, "Yes, I know all of these words, there isn't a word here that I didn't know, but I would never label myself as a bad or evil person because I know these words. I knew these words a long time ago, because I heard them. Maybe I wasn't supposed to hear what was said behind the barn because they were not said in my house, but I heard these words when there were men out talking as they were killing hogs." The words are in the context of the story, Bigger Thomas heard these words. I offered her something to drink and told her that I thought she looked like an upright good woman who cares about her family, but you know these words. I was smiling with her and telling her you know these words and they have not affected your value system. I told her I can talk to the teacher and have her assign your child another book to read that is comparable to the problems that Bigger Thomas had, but not to say that other kids can't read this. Many of the kids say these words; I have heard these words in the hallways. I just walk up and put my arms around the child and tell them that they have hurt me. I say, "Oh you have hurt me, did I just hear that?," and they just apologize. After that I asked her about her family and we had just the nicest conversation, and I said, "You may take them back with you or you may leave them with me."

KH: That's a good way to address it.

WC: Right, and she took them back. You must be on your toes for that person and how that person will respond, and not reject that person. You can't reject parents; you can't be mean to parents. Some will come angry and attack once they see the teacher without talking, they are just that angry. There are ways of approaching it, and I think I still have that hope for our children. For that matter all children. I taught a class of white students for a black teacher that was in another program for a day and she told me what they were supposed to do. One young



man was just as charming and nice looking as he could be, he just got up and did something -- I don't even know what it is that he did. I asked if anyone had any questions, all the kids just looked up at me and smiled, he headed toward his seat and he said he had a question. He just sort of went around the bush with that and then I said, "That's alright, don't answer that one, I have another question." Finally, he said, "I don't know what I'm doing." [laughs] He came back after class and asked if he had gotten an F and I said, "Uh huh." Ms. Jackson told you I'd give you a grade.

KH: You called his bluff.

WC: He said, "I just didn't think you knew." I said, "Why, because I'm black?," and he said, "I don't know, I just didn't think you knew." [laughs] I said, "At least you are honest; perhaps she will give you an opportunity to get a better grade." He just thought that his teacher was out for the past two days and the teacher that had been in the day before had retired from that school with a stellar reputation. Now this new woman has come in and maybe she's just a substitute teacher and she doesn't know very much. But at least he was aware.

KH: Was that mother in your last story objecting partly because those were black literature books?

WC: I think it was more the language, she didn't like the profanity. I never thought of it as that, she was a black parent, but sometimes black parents object to what you are doing. I told her about the experiences that Richard Wright had in his own life and why he wrote *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, and why he left the country and went to France. [End of Tape 1]

KH: Was there a lot of neighborhood transition in the area of Hayes in the 1970's?

WC: No, the transition happened prior to the 1970's. The majority of the people in the Hayes zone either rented private homes or owned their own homes. There were numerous



modest home owners in the area. The city built the two housing projects. They built homes a block from the main thoroughfare at the airport. If you go into the airport there is a building with a dome around, that's Hayes, and then there is a housing project. They built private homes and said other homes would be built in that entire area. Once the homes were built and purchased, the other area from here [explaining/drawing layout of housing project] let's say this is a street, a home is here facing this way. The housing project is from here to the main thoroughfare, and then the housing project goes all the way down, cross one street and comes back this way. These homes are encircled by the housing project and O'Neil Steel at the back; that was deliberate. Projects have also taken on and that's what we call a set of government housing, they call it the projects. [Authentic] was that. Morality is not meted out to the wealthy or the well educated and denied to the poor. So, there are people in housing projects who are just as moral and have values just as high, if sometimes not higher than someone who may live in a mansion. So, it doesn't matter that you live across the street in a housing project and somebody else lives in a home. What matters is what you do with what God has given you. So, those people were there and the Kingston project, they also took modest private homes and built another one. We just learned a month ago that the man in charge of the state interstate [highway system] deliberately [phone rings] with his crew plotted and planned Interstate 59 and Interstate 60 to break up the Eleventh Quarter community because part of that group was involved in the Civil Rights Movement. So, let's run a freeway through some on this side and some on the other side, and all those houses that are on Eleventh Quarter and those areas, let's just get rid of those. Then it's easier to control, because we can bomb Shuttlesworth's house and we can bomb Shore's house, because Shore's house is now here and somebody else's house is across there. So that was done, deliberately, so these things were set up.

KH: The projects were also --

WC: Set up to do that, if we can get the poor ones and the limited incomes here, they won't go to Woodlawn. Yet there is this downtown project where whites live that were students at Woodlawn, that was your city center, but the projects were segregated. There was Elyton over here, and those kids would have gone to Parker. There was not what we perceive now to be a project mentality. You were students and we expected you to learn, and we will do everything we can to see that you learn. We'd even scare you into learning. [laughs]

KH: The project mentality is that they can't learn?

WC: Right, and that you are not as good as somebody else, whatever "good" means. You don't have the abilities, you are less than. Almost as old George Fitzhugh said. Was he from South Carolina? He said, "Show me one of them who can speak a word in Greek or utter a phrase in Latin" -- I'm paraphrasing now -- "and I will be forced to believe that he at least has human potentialities." I should use that and ask them to write a paper and refute it. See, those are the kinds of things that get kids going, it gets their juices flowing. What can you say to this man? Are we going to call him a [whisper and laugh]? He is not saying that he would believe you are even human, what he is saying is that he believes that you at least have the potential to become human. You see, there are people who look on kids, where they live or who their parents are in that same way. We have to say there are examples that refute that all along the way, and you need to know that. That is why we became involved, [as African Americans who were the first to do] A, B, C and D. Because if that person could do it under those circumstances, then you can do it.

KH: And there is more pressure to follow in what they have done.

WC: Yes, indeed. So, that is a mentality that I don't like, and did not like. One of my students who lived with a grandmother in a housing project, who was very poor, turned around a Coca Cola bottling plant. They were going to close it and Harrison sent me the booklet from the Communications something, something, not magazines that you find on the regular news stands, but specific trade magazines that detail what people are doing in that particular market place. There was a wonderful write up that he said 'give me a chance' and he turned it around. David Jackson did not graduate from Hayes, in fact he is from Marion, but he turned around one Wal-Mart. They then gave him three, then five, then ten and then the entire West Coast. He was in the February Black Enterprise as one of the top seventy five African Americans in corporate America. Of course David has just retired, he must be fifty five maybe.

KH: He must be pretty wealthy too.

WC: He is, he is. His dad had the opportunity to take him to the bank in Marion, where the old banker had said maybe he could let him have the money. When he went to get it for his third or final year in college, there was a young man that said, 'Why don't you just let that boy come on out and get a job? He's been down there for three years or whatever.' And he said, "No, your dad has said I can have the money." So, after David made it really big, he went down and said, "I want you to see David. David is over so and so and so and so...and he rides in a plane with Sam Walton." [laughs] "Well, are you going to bank some of that money with us?" No, but he said he was going to buy back his mother's father's land. Again, that's from that discipline that our high schools and our colleges offered us, and that is what I would like to see continue. That there is hope, and we can't give up. As teachers we have to rethink what it is we are about, what it is we want to do and what we want students to learn. I was at Dillard for my golden reunion; the Education program received A plus ratings for the second consecutive year. Loyola

didn't get that, Tulane didn't get that, Xavier didn't get that and Southern did not get that. I talked with a young woman who was in education there and she said it is one of the toughest programs she has ever been in. I said, the nursing program is tough as well, because you can't take the state exams unless you pass the Dillard exams. They all do well. The wonderful experience I had there was that sixty one percent of the students who came in four years ago graduated. So, that says something is going well now. I saw more young men, and more of them graduated with honors because now we have generally in college except for where we have football, the ratio of men to women are three or four to every ten women. So, that seemed to shift, as the philosophy of the Interim President there was that "I need you to hold this seat for four years and then I need you to go, because somebody else is coming and they are going to need that seat." I found that to be a wonderful philosophy. The young man that spoke at Commencement had faked a resume, got a job as a busboy at an upscale country club in Connecticut and wrote about what he heard said about Jews and African Americans. We would think at this point, that those things would not have been said. So some things have not changed, some attitudes have not changed. There have been and always will be groups of people who understand. There were always white Americans who knew and understood. Some were so pressured by their own environment that they could not say what they wanted to say without repercussions, that they perhaps themselves could have taken, but if they had children they didn't want certain things happening to their children. So they too stood silently. I knew some like that.

KH: Do you think that the attitude is still a problem now?

WC: Of speaking out?

KH: Do people have a problem speaking out?

WC: Some do, but some do not. I noticed in my very small hometown, I know at least one black member of the Kiwanis Club and there might be others. It just happens that I know this person, and that just would not have happened. In my school there were white teachers until 1943 and they were given twenty four hours to leave Marion. They were not teaching us I suppose about farming and being good servants.

KH: Oh, yeah.

WC: That's a story that I am working on, because that's a school Mrs. King graduated from. Also, Andrew Young's late wife, Jean, graduated in 1950 and I graduated in 1951. It was her mother who taught me in that one room with the six grades in one classroom.

KH: If you had to sum it up, what changes do you think need to happen for schools to be better than what they are now?

WC: We need well prepared teachers, and that does not mean that some are not well prepared. We need a tough curriculum and we need to change our stance on who deserves the best, and recognize that all children deserve the best. We get pockets of it, the kids who did well on the calculus test for the ACT or the SAT in California, that's a pocket. Just last week a group from Texas made some kind of motorized something and they won over the kids from Harvard. What that says is that there is a teacher in the midst of poverty and a lack of standard language skills who has the motivational techniques and the knowledge to pull out of students what they themselves don't yet know is in them. Benjamin Mays who was a President of Morehouse at one time, I understand he had that. He could go to an assembly and speak, and a student who was failing would become so inspired that they would pass. One of his students wrote that "I was making a failing grade and I went to see Benny Mays" and the student went back and aced the course.

KH: Wow.

WC: I think we need faith in kids, and let them know that. We need assembly programs and session room programs, those were the things we had that we no longer have. Session room meant that -- were you ever in a session room program, do you know what that is?

KH: No.

WC: You are assigned to a teacher, you report to that teacher and that gives you admission to the school for that day. You report to your session room teacher, you are nine A, or nine B, or nine one, whatever, you have ten ninth grade classes that you have to designate a number or a letter to. You report to that teacher for check in. If something is going on, you may be with that teacher for fifteen minutes or you may be with them for thirty minutes. If during activity periods, your auditorium is not large enough for all students to attend, maybe ninth and tenth graders or tenth and twelfth graders will go to assembly today and the others are with that session room teacher. That teacher also had your schedule because your schedule was also in the office. If a parent came and needed to know something, they could also check with that session room teacher. Your grades went to that session room teacher, now it's all on computers, but I had a grade book for my session room students. So I knew what Mary made in Math, Science, History and P.E. and I could talk with her about that. During that twenty or thirty minutes, issues were discussed. Most of us had a little box on our desk, what do we want to talk about today? We elected session room officers, so you knew what it was like to be a President, Secretary or Treasurer, you learned that. We would have discussions about whatever was in the newspapers and we had good questioning skills. I remember sitting outside of Josette Collins's room when I didn't have a session room, just in awe of the kinds of questions she could ask. We did not tell them to think one way or another, but we wanted them to question what the evidence was. I



heard those kids complaining about food one day, someone said something to them about not wasting food and one of the students felt that comment should not have been made. I overheard this in the session room and said, "Let's work something out." [working community, non-working community.] Among the nonworking community people are disabled and people who are able bodied who are not working. Now, we have a government, these people get paid and our streets get paved. We tore up strips of paper to make it money. You work, so I will take some of this money to take care of these people. It's alright for the people that are disabled, but for these people...now one of you can't work, so I have to go back to those who are working and take even more money. Without saying anything, they became aware of an economic system and [the dream.] [interruption, people talking]

KH: If changes were made to schools so that everybody was getting equal resources and they had quality prepared teachers who expected them to do their very best, what difference would it make in that situation if there was racial diversity within the school?

WC: In one sense it would not make any difference and in another it would. That would take us back to Thurgood Marshall. As long as students know in their hearts that one is not better because of race, because our schools in Birmingham now are segregated, we have very few white students. You must be prepared for what you want to do and present yourself as best you can. Then remember what Bishop Vashti McKenzie said, 'the fault is not always in the stone', and what she said that you may be rejected, but it's how you look at rejection. She gave several examples, and one was that Nelson Mandela was rejected but there was no fault in him. Adam Clayton Powell was rejected and removed from the government structure, but the fault was not in him. He knew too much and he knew what others were doing so let's get rid of him. So, if our students know that rejection does not equate with fault then you have a foundation to

move into the community. Recognize the power of language; recognize that the language of the market place is as much yours as anyone else's. So you will not respond to what is authentic and what is not authentic, allowing that to control your life. If someone says you talk or you run or you act or you think white, there is an economic issue. Think economically, that does not belong, no one has a monopoly on that. So, if you think honor, no one has a monopoly on that. Learn the language; no one has a monopoly on that. I just saw on the news the black girl, who knows Arabic extremely well, and there's a young woman in Birmingham who knows Japanese and she's the interpreter for the Japanese car folk in Alabama. She completed the Japanese studies program at Dillard and is doing very well. Just think about it, these are young African American women moving into cultures where women are not thought highly of in the first place. [So I think that it has to do with self esteem, but people think that when you say that you are telling kids that all they need to do is have a good feeling, that's artificial.] Self esteem is extremely important, but that comes about from genuine work. We have to teach children that they can feel good about themselves if they clean the kitchen and stand back and say that kitchen looks good, I did a good job with that. Or, 'I wrote that paper and it's well written, I can feel good about that'. It's not false esteem, it's not just telling them you need to feel good about yourself, no, do something well and that's how that comes about. I had self esteem about picking cotton because I could pick two hundred pounds a day, so I can do that. I think that's the kind of thing we need when we talk about self esteem, that I can read a poem and I can read it well. I can enter into a conversation, or I know when to say something and when to be a good listener. [interruption]

WC: ...know that they are worth something, they have value. If we don't help them see that then somebody else will, and perhaps it's the wrong value that they will see. Teach them

how to do something well, and that in itself brings about the esteem that we talk about. That I am worth something, I do have value, rather than just say those things and then ask them what they can do well --

KH: And they don't know.

WC: Right, or they want a job but they don't want to work for this and don't want to work for that. Then the ball is in their court to tell us what they can do, and who knows that you can do it. You tell them when you leave that they need to live their life so that at least three people who are not related to you can recommend you for a job. They are not getting those kinds of things now. If you are going to apply for a job, you are going to say to those people by how you dress and how you present yourself that you can be a part of their establishment. You don't dress for your friends; you look at what's there. You explore the company, you go with knowledge about the company-we used to tell kids that, and I'm not sure they are being told that now, or taught that. I can't say because I'm not in the classroom, but I know we did that. When you're with your friends and you dress a certain way, but if you go into a business and you want them to employ you, there are ways of presenting yourself. If kids are never told how to present themselves, how will they know? If they are from a home where the parents don't know, and we have to assume that some don't know because they have not had those experiences.

KH: It's interesting that you have so many specific ideas about improvements that could be done for the school, but you don't sound as pessimistic about the Birmingham schools as most of the people I have interviewed. So many say that the public school system is just too far gone, that kids are too rowdy or violent, or don't listen and that the parents don't help with anything.

WC: Well, there are children in the system who are members of my church and I still have contact with several teachers, one at Parker who will call me and tell me what her students

are doing and the papers they are writing. She tells me there are papers that I just have to see. There are kids going to college, going to work and our problem is with the drop out rate. They are dropping out around the tenth grade because of the law that states you can drop out at age sixteen. There are also some very good kids in the system. When we look at the scholarship record, we have to say someone is doing something. I think maybe Fairfield High School had a total of about three million dollars in scholarships. I don't know what the individual schools in the Birmingham system have received, but I know some good things are happening. I know some good teachers are there. I don't want to live long enough to have no faith in what kids can do or what they can become. If we feed them our pessimism in the classroom – "Well you don't think I can do anything anyway so I might as well disrupt the class..." There is a teacher at Parker who teaches Math. I had been in a class for about four years because I was looking for a student that we were going to send on a trip. Within five minutes of that class, there wasn't a student in his seat. One kid had his knee in his chair answering and talking [she mimics the students' frenzied responses] I enjoyed that class! She was just asking questions and pointing to students; that class was as exciting as my high school math teacher was. They were standing, they were just gung ho! It was wonderful! There was excitement, and those same kids could probably go down the hall to someone else's classroom and not do anything. They need to be taught as one man in Washington told me, who was principal of a school they said was no good and nothing good could happen there. He taught his students how not to be tolerant of poor teaching, that you might joke for one day but the second day your going to have to teach, because we are not going to be tolerant of your not teaching us. You owe us. This principal said he went outside and talked to the winos and drug addicts, took them some lunch and said, "You have nieces and nephews at this school. If the windows are broken in the summer it's hot in

there and if they're broken in the winter it's cold, I need your help to protect this school. I need you to put your needles in garbage cans so your nieces and nephews or your children won't step on them." He said every once in a while he would go out, bring them sandwiches and ask them how they were doing. No more broken windows, that's how a school would have to take care of it.

KH: Now that's the essence of community involvement.

WC: Yes. Why call the police, they'll just run them off for a day. Tell them that this is what we need you to do. So, I have hope. I cannot throw away our children. I have hope. I think we have to listen to them, to what's going on in their heads. I would not want to be a teenager today because there are too many things out there. I don't know that I would climb through all of that, I don't know that I would swim across all of that or through all of that, I don't know. I did have strong people standing, saying you can do this. My grandfather counted on me. When he would take his cotton to gin when I was in fifth grade, that cotton was twenty one and three fourths cents a pound and the bale was five hundred and whatever and he would look at me and say figure that, because if you go to school you were supposed to learn something. The man with the machine hitting and pulling the leaf off the side would say it's so and so and so and so, but my grandfather would say she will figure it, so I had to be right. I had to know how to change fractions to decimals and multiply, put the decimals in the right place and say it's this. If I could do that, and if teachers who taught me could have faith in me, who came to school not speaking standard English, not even knowing what that was . . . who knew that I was not in school in September unless it rained, for most of October, who knew that in April we were going to sow these seeds and in May we were going to chop cotton and I'd get to come to schools two or three days, who knew that! Still had sufficient faith to say this is what you need to know. If



you can't buy a book then go to the library, we have copies and copies of *Wuthering Heights*. *Invisible Man* was written at the end of that year. All of the Victorian novels, we have copies of Shakespeare, you take these books and you read them. We give you questions and when you come back you are on target. With all of that I graduated valedictorian of my class, and that was because of teachers, who knew and had faith. When I left school, we had a Biology lab and we had a Chemistry lab and this was unusual and there are folks now who say how did you have all of that? We did. Those teachers, as I said, made the difference. They had faith in us, so how could I not have faith in children? I taught them and saw the growth, I saw children who came to the table with very little but left with full plates. Because of the Hayes Pacesetter faculty -- I saw that, and it doesn't matter. We had children from the Kingston housing project, Southtown housing project, Avondale housing project, Dixie housing project -- because they bused them past Woodlawn High School, plus we had the kids from the private homes, we were a good school. The students felt good about being Pacesetters, and I hope that that will return because the alumni from Hayes are now working with them. My charge to them at their big reunion was everyone that is good in math form a team -- remember you don't run the school, there is a principal and there are teachers. You go and ask if there is a space or a room where you can go and work with the children in math. If somebody needs to know Calculus and they don't have a Calculus teacher, you go teach them Calculus.

KH: Community tutors.

WC: Right. If you are good with language than you need to do that, too. If you are a business man, go in and have conversations with them about business. Tell them that the way they are presenting themselves, you would not hire them. The business world will not tell them that, they will never know why they didn't get hired, but you can tell them that. If you are good



in Biology, then go out and get them what they need to dissect-now it's all done on computers now, virtual dissection or whatever. Do those things. If you know Physics, then get in there and get a Physics class going. Don't usurp anybody's authority, but you get the kids excited about learning stuff, and then you will have what you need. That is still my stance, get them excited about learning. It is not rote that I walk in and lecture at the college level. You can do introductory lectures in high school, but you engage them to find out what they are thinking, their responses and you read. You have to read. Walk into a classroom reading something, laugh about it, put the book down and start the class – "What were you reading?" [laughs] I'll give you the name of the book --

KH: Get them curious.

WC: Right, and then you ask them what they are reading. Sometimes they are reading stuff that they say you can't read. [laugh] I'd say, "I'm married and have children and you say you're reading something I can't read?" They'd say yes. [laughs] So, that starts them, you walk in and put a statement on the board, math, science, it doesn't matter, just put something on the board. They look at it for a while, then they look at you and then they look at it again. You leave it for five minutes. They will think and talk and look at the logic of that one sentence. Or you write it up, tell them to write it down and then go on with whatever else you were doing-it doesn't matter the course, P.E. or anything, because you are generating a curiosity about words. No matter what you know, you have to put it into words, even if it's on a computer. If you are a math whiz, you still have symbols that you must put on paper, and they need to know that. So, I'm excited about kids learning and with our system discussing a new program for kids who are serious discipline problems. Someone asked whether it will be boot camp and will we just tire them out. I said there is one other component you will need, and that is a rigorous academic

program. If he goes out and runs around the track, then comes back and you slap him with one page of *My Dungeon Shook* with James Baldwin, and you demand that they read it and talk to you about it. Then you pull one page or one paragraph from Malcolm X saying I was not literate I wanted to write this letter but could not, what was he talking about here? Where was he when he died in relation to where he was then? You pull a page from Edgar Allen Poe that has all this dreary, cold stuff and you read it 'the heart thumping under the floor and you are hearing a heart that's not beating', what's going on there? They have to come up with answers and you get them engaged. Then you do not hurt them by asking for in an English classroom, you must learn standard English. It's not going to hurt anybody, let them speak their own language. Well, their own language is not going to get them some places that they might want to go, they are not going to forget that. See I'm bidialectal, I can go to Marion, Alabama and say "Hi dere y'all" and "Hi Cousin so-and-so" and [other examples of country dialect]; I can do all of that with ease. I'm not going to forget that because that is part of who and what I am. I also learned from teachers and from courses standard English, the language of the marketplace. Not good English, but standard English. That will put you in good stead in certain situations, and you need to know that. You can't play football if you don't know the rules of the game, and so that's how you use what it is that they have. You also ask kids what they want to do, what they want to become. You don't get there overnight; you are on the way now. If you want to be a fashion designer that means teachers must be on their toes. Name some fashion designers and ask them if they know anything about them, you give them a research project to find out about fashion design. Find out what it is they want to do. I had to ask my grandson who just graduated from high school and he said he wants to be a computer engineer, what is that?

KH: Did he explain it?

WC: He explained some of it. I asked what you have to do to become that, he wasn't sure. Now, you should go online and look up the required courses for three colleges for becoming a computer engineer and when you get that come back. The first semester Calculus 1 and he said he didn't know it would require Calculus. I said see, it sounds good, but then you get here and it says electronics. You didn't say technician, you said Computer Engineer. Do you know what Engineering means? He looked at the courses, he's going to try it and if he puts his mind to it he will do it, but he had no idea of the course load. Physics and Calculus, two of the heaviest courses one can take, in his first year. Kids need to know that. It's not, "Oh, I'm going to be" and you wiggle your nose or you clap your hands and you become that, so they need to know. So, I'm not pessimistic about students and what they can do and what they will become. Too many of them are doing well, not enough, but enough for me to see that as evidence that we are not losing all of our children. One is too many, but we are not losing them all.

KH: Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed August 2005 by Chris O'Sullivan