

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

YVONNE WILLIAMS  
October 29, 2004

WILLOUGHBY ANDERSON: Today is October 29<sup>th</sup> and the interviewer's name is Willoughby Anderson. I'm here at the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute interviewing Mrs. Yvonne Williams for the Southern Oral History Program's Long Civil Rights Movement Project on school desegregation in Birmingham. Say your name and we'll see how you're picking up.

YVONNE WILLIAMS: My name is Yvonne Williams.

WA: All right, let's start by telling me a little bit about your childhood and then we'll go to your first teaching experience.

YW: I've lived all my life in Birmingham. I'm the oldest of six. I love to say that I raised my brothers and sisters because my mom worked and so did my father. And I attended public schools of Birmingham. I attended Tuskegee Institute. And I've been working seriously since I finished Tuskegee, by the blessings of God and a friend. But I really signed my teaching contract in January of '72. I was blessed to do thirty-one years and those years were the joy of my life because teaching is my love, although I have retired. But I was again blessed to do thirty-one years.

When I first came back home from Tuskegee in '71, or '72, which like I said when I signed my contract to teach, integration was still a little fresh. If I had twenty kids, eighteen of those kids were white. Two may have been black. The most ironic thing is the school that I was assigned to I had to go find it with my mom and dad because it was a school that we weren't allowed to go to so I didn't even know it existed until I got the job there. And it was not a bad experience at all. I think if I had

not had the cooperation of my parents down through the years, black or white or whatever, I wouldn't have made it the thirty-one years. My first teaching job was in an area that I could probably say was a low income area. I guess that's why they said I didn't have to pay my loan back, thank God. It was a low income area and after you teach there for so long they disavow your loan. So, okay, I did that much not even knowing what I was doing.

But it was an area that was predominately white and I often tell people about my experience about Alabama history. In Alabama grades four, six, and nine teach Alabama history. So I was teaching and learning at the same time because coming up we did not have Alabama history and what I did not learn about black history at Tuskegee, I had to pick it up. We only were familiar with Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver. So there was a little part of the book that dealt on KKK and it was not many years would go by when the children would raise their hand and tell me that their dad used to be one. And my only reply was, "We don't want to do that anymore, do we?" And they would say, "No," and we would go on to something else. So that was really shocking to me. They did not have to be told this but there were some adults that wanted their children to know this. So I guess that's when I summed it up a lot of times and I would say we have adult problems, not children problems. I stayed at that school for about seven or eight years.

WA: And which school is that?

YW: Currie Elementary. I want to really be frank with you. That was really my first time even dealing with or being around whites. It didn't floor me at all. I wanted to teach so bad it didn't matter what color the children were. They could have

been polka dot. I wanted to teach. But I'm the kind of person I can get along with anybody as long as they can get along with me. So everything went well.

But I fell in love and I got married. I mean I, putting it in the right order, and then I got pregnant and I was transferred to another school. My heart dropped. I had never experienced that before but last one hired, first one fired was always etched in my forehead and I knew. He came to me every year and the last year he came to me and said you may have to go. I said well, I'm going to stay here and take my chances. So seven years was my chances. I was transferred to another school, Avondale.

I stayed there six weeks. My children were in what they called a multi-cultural class. By the time they came back to me I felt like I was just not needed too much there. So my doctor solved it all. He said you're having complications. You got to go home. And he saw I was going to fight this and he told me something I will never forget, and this child is twenty-four years now, and because I went home I think I practically saved his life from something. So I did that and when I went back to work it was during summer school. I wanted to get back in the swing of things. I said I'll do summer school just to get back in the swing of things. I left my first child at six months. I have a very supportive husband that so supportive that as I taught down through the years, nobody really realized that my children had a mother but they knew that they had a dad because I was always teaching. First day of school for them, my husband went. First doctor's office visit, my husband went. But that's part of teaching. That's part of teaching and we dealt with it. We coped with it.

Well, the summer school teaching was great. I taught under a lady that people were afraid of. She was wonderful. And then my facilitator, Mr. Mallory Coats, when

I started working here at the Institute, his face came up on the computer. I said, oh, my God, he was a foot soldier. So I know a famous person. My facilitator was a famous person. He doesn't even know I know it. But we got along well. The children were in the downtown area. They lived in projects and this was the kind of principal if you didn't show up at school she would go across the street in those projects and get you out of those projects. And that's the kind of person she was. We had an upright summer school and that was an experience that I will never forget. Miss Eva Jones, a great lady.

When school started again in August I was put at Inglenook Elementary. Again, I had to find this school. I had to find this school. While at Inglenook I think, I'll use the word served, under approximately six principals and they were each unique in his or her own way. Some people at the time they were leery of being under a woman principal. This particular principal had been a sergeant in the Army. She was straight up and down but she was so friendly with me. I don't know whether it's my personality or what it is, but she was a great lady. She eventually retired and moved to Florida. But she needed a favor from me and when she got that favor done, in return I asked her to send me some Florida oranges. Didn't think she was going to do it. One day I got home from school and this huge box was setting on the porch. Those were my oranges. And Miss Fisher was a fantastic principal.

When I arrived at Inglenook it was half and half. Things were you could see things were just about getting back to where they started. We integrated and here we were going back. So I had great parents in the Inglenook area. When I first went out

there middle class blacks were living in that area and the whites that were living there, they eventually, slowly but surely moved away.

WA: That was about '79 when you went there?

YW: Un-uh, '80.

WA: Eighty, okay.

YW: Eighty, that's when King was born. In '80, my son was born in '80. I got to know people, parents. I stayed there so long I became a family teacher. I taught brothers and sisters and then, believe it or not, somehow they left and grew up and they sent children there. I didn't realize I was teaching children of children I had taught. It's weird. It's really weird. [Laughter] I'm only fifty-four years old. It's weird. But they had, we had good experiences, sometimes funny experiences. I'll never forget the one about the spelling word. I would always have my children to make sentences out of their spelling words and one word was clam and I asked them to make a sentence. And this little boy said, "Don't clam up that tree." And I tried my very best not to laugh aloud. God, I went down behind the desk. But I called it southern drawl. I sent it into a magazine. They sent me money for it. [Laughter] That's when I realized this is a good one. This is a good one. And so, you know, I had all kinds of experiences.

What really hurt me the most and yet does about our children is what boggles their mind the most and that's reading. This is a big problem and I think it's worldwide. We have a problem with reading, with children comprehending. You have to explain to the parents if they're calling words and not understanding what they're saying, they're not reading, and that's a hard thing to do. It almost seemed like

the more the teachers learned, the less the children learned. I went on to get my master's and I'm so glad I did it way back when the dinosaurs roamed because, and I did it before I got married, it probably would have been a big problem. I see so many people going back and getting their master's now but we worked. Teachers banded together, we worked, and we helped each other to attain this goal and I'm glad I did. I'm glad I did a lot of things before I got married but with the support of my husband after we got married I continued to do things and he had no choice but to help me. Teachers tend to make things out of nothing and I got to the point where I could be walking in the mall and if I saw some kind of trashy thing someone had discarded and I would look at it and my husband said, "Let her do it, she's a teacher. She's going to make something out of this." And eventually I would.

I saw changes, people say like day and night. That was true for me. I saw my teaching experiences go from a big thrill, in which I wanted to be, a way of life. But on down the road somewhere it became a job for me and that hurt me too because I didn't want it to get to the point where I would get up in the morning and not like where I'm going. For the last few years that I did teach, I hate to say this, but I did feel like a professional babysitter. I didn't feel like a lot was being accomplished. And I admire the younger teachers who I left behind and who are going into this profession because I know they love it. You've got to have a love for it to even think about going into it. One good thing I think they're doing for these young kids today, when we were in school our last year of school was our student teaching year. We had no other experience but the last year and today that would be too late. I think by them putting them in the classroom and letting them pick up on experiences earlier, if they



have to "run, Forrest, run," they can do that, you know, and they can do that change or whatever because you know what you're looking forward to.

We often remember certain students. I had one that was Carlos. Carlos was bigger than your normal fourth grade student. One morning when I got to school I noticed a police car outside and when he saw me he ran up to me. He said, "Mrs. Williams, I tried to tell them." I said, "Carlos, what happened." And the police are supposed to pick these students if they're anywhere after eight o'clock. You can't miss them. They're in uniform [her students wore uniforms to school]. And so he was picked up and he said, "I tried to tell them I was in elementary school." I said, "Oh, my God." I said, "Carlos, look in the mirror. They made an honest mistake. I would have too." But Carlos was one of those students that you might say was being raised by a child. His mom was thirteen when she had him and at this point she was trying to do everything she could for him to make his life better than what she had. So that meant that Carlos was left home at night some nights when she was in school. Some mornings when she was not there he had to come to school without seeing her first. And they were just trying to keep each other encouraged and alive, surviving. Well, Carlos was not your typically good student and we were going on this field trip and I told Carlos' mother, mama, that he just can't go and she agreed. She agreed. Cooperation of my parents, that sustained me. I said okay, but the day we were going on the field trip, Carlos came to school looking good and groomed and smelling good and hair combed. But what happened was, he came to the office where I was making last minute preparations and he looked into my eyes and his eyes were filled with water. I said, "Don't do this to me. I didn't know you could cry. Don't do this to

me." I picked up the telephone. I said, "Call your mom." He said "...," I said, "Call your mom." And when his mother's voice came over the phone I said, "Let him go." "But, Mrs.," I said, "No buts, let him go." She said, "What will he eat." I said, "I have lunch enough for both of us." So when we got on the bus we were sitting opposite each other and Carlos looked over at me with his unforgettable face and he said, "Miss Williams, nobody has ever done anything like this for me." And I said, "Nobody would ever do it again, Carlos." I said, "Sit back and enjoy the ride." And so we went on to have a beautiful day.

I was not your typical zoo teacher. I told my children from the get-go, "I don't take people to the zoo. Let your mom and dads do that." I believed in exposing them to experiences that they may not have even thought about doing in their lifetime, or whatever, anything that would make things better or make them think. I would take them to college campuses and plays. We would eat in hotel ballrooms and this kind of thing. My husband, who has been blessed to be a lieutenant for the Birmingham Fire Department, I wanted them to see where he worked because at this time he was the only black officer in that particular place. His fire station is on a military base. It's at the airport so he only takes his truck when something happens at the airport. You can go and fall down the escalator he's going to come see about you. And if your plane crashes, God forbid, he will come and see about you. So we took the children to the airport and they treated us like kings and queens. But I wanted them to understand how he got there. They had seen children sprayed with water and battered all up beside buildings but this will not happen again and I wanted them to understand who made these things possible. Sacrifices were made. So they treated us so well. They



let us go out and get on a plane, not take off, just get on a plane and come across that big wide airfield. Oh, you think the children had a ball. I was losing my mind too. I was going crazy. But we had a wonderful time that time.

I think the most touching thing that happened is when I took the kids to a play on a college campus and I had told them beforehand to bring money to eat lunch. And when we went in the cafeteria and oh, cafeteria's a mild word. This is a beautiful institution. It was a beautiful campus. And I told the ones who had their money to get in line and the ones who if you don't have your money to sit aside. So many went to the side, there goes my heart again. I'm surprised I haven't had a heart attack by now. But I went to talk to somebody and when I turned around I noticed that all the children were in line again and as a teacher would do, I went over there waving my finger. "Didn't I tell ...," and somebody approached me and said, "Leave them alone. It's okay." She said, "Let them eat anything they want." She said, "Because if they don't we have to throw this food away." And you know what, I think those cooks and things, it was about time for them to get off, if the children requested something and they didn't have it ready, they cooked it for them, the fries, the hamburgers. I said, "Oh, my God." I looked like Carlos with the tears in my eyes. And so they ate. They had a ball. We took a bus full of sick kids back home. They ate until they were blue in the face. But it was a beautiful day.

And I learned in a workshop once to ask the kids before they leave you, "What did you learn today?" I used to tell my own kids, I said, "You know what, I think if Jesus came to your campus when you got home you would never tell me because it just doesn't faze you to tell me." So I would start doing that. I said, "Tell your moms

what happened today. Let them know.” We need to let parents know. Some work hard. Some are doing this and I always tell my children, I say, “Who do you think they’re working for? They’re working for you so you deserve to do a whole lot better than you’re doing.” I say, “You can never pay them for what they’ve done for you or are trying to do for you, so at least take good grades home. At least take a good conduct grade home.” And then they would look at me and then get quiet for five minutes, next five minutes they’re talking, talking, talking, talking. And I never understood why they talked from eight to three. Is this the only place they see each other? Are they locked up when they go home and never talk to each other again til eight o’clock the next morning? That question was never answered out of the thirty-five years that I worked.

But, you know, there was one day when they were talking and I said, “Close your books. Let’s talk.” You would not believe the things they want to talk about and it’s like they’re getting a lot of stuff off their chest that they weren’t able to do at home or after school or whatever. I think the children today they’re so different. They have so many other life things they have to contend with. They don’t know who they’re going home with this weekend. They have different names for mom and dad. They can’t understand when they can’t use mom’s name, so many things. I used to be nosy. We had enrollment cards and then they got these things called computers where we couldn’t read our children’s business anymore. But I was always interested in who came out of a two-parent home and when I first started teaching that was prevalent. But in the last few years, no, no, no, no. Everybody was familiar with the word divorce. Everybody was familiar with the word separation. Children became familiar

with the word grandmother. Grandmother became a parent because mom or dad was on the drug scene. They had no time for these children so grandma and grandpa were doing the jobs of parents now. And that's how the lifestyles of children have changed.

WA: So you taught fourth grade?

YW: The bulk of it was fourth grade. I taught two, five, six and I found out from teaching two, five, and six I loved fourth grade. I loved fourth grade. I laugh sometimes. I think when I taught fifth and sixth grade the children were so much taller and bigger than I was, I was much younger looking than I am now, they couldn't tell the teacher from the children. So I think she just moved me down to fourth grade. So I'm glad. That's one thing I can thank that particular principal for, for moving me down to fourth, helping me to find my first love on my school journey and that is fourth grade. In fourth grade they're not in love with each other so you don't have to worry about hugging up and stuff in the hall, not the fourth graders. They still hit each other and say stay away from me. It's in fifth grade they fall in love and find each other.

WA: So you talk about you went to Inglenook in 1980 and when we were talking yesterday you said you began to see a change in the '80s in the school and the students. Can you tell me about that?

YW: It did not necessarily have to be, at this point it wasn't a racial thing. It was home environment, social and economic type thing. You just noticed a change from a neighborhood of black middle class. Well, you know, if children came from a middle home they show this at that time. But one fall semester I came back there was a, it was like a three hundred and sixty degree turnaround. The children were

different. The parents were different. I'm going to go down to the '90s. The parents were not your suit-wearing, hat-wearing, tie-wearing, purse-carrying parents. They were mini-skirt, tattooed, earring-wearing, skull cap type parents, young parents. So young you couldn't tell whether they were coming to see about their little brother or sister or coming to see about their child. And I learned to let them talk first. I made a terrible mistake once. A young man came to my door wearing earrings, young guy, maybe eighteen, and so I just assumed he was coming to pick up his sister who was somewhat of a little headache during the day. So I had built myself up to say and when you get home, you tell your mama. He said, "Oh, that's not my mama. That's my friend." And that's when I realized this eighteen year old, in my book, child, was possibly going with this child's in my room mother who was maybe twenty or thirty years old. I learned it the hard way. From that moment on when any kind of parent came to my door I let them talk first so I could see whether this was their child or their brother or their sister or their neighbor. And that's the way it changed. And I'm not old. Maybe my values are, my morals are, but the way I saw a parent was not the way I saw parents coming in in the late '80s and early '90s, and, God forbid, the 2000s. They're just not the same.

WA: And so when you started teaching at Inglenook in '80, you said it was about fifty-fifty black and white?

YW: Yeah.

WA: And then did that change throughout the '80s and into the '90s?

YW: Yes, Birmingham right now I would say is about ninety percent black.

We've pretty much gone back to where we were. But I also say the struggle was not

in vain. What they sacrificed was not in vain. This point had to be made. At this time some things had to be stopped. Some things had to be recognized and it was done. Also when I left we noticed that the Hispanic population was building up. I had one little cute boy. His name was Arisel. Arisel could speak English but his parents couldn't and he did pretty well academically. There were some things he had to grasp a little harder than others. But I noticed that the last weeks of school most of the children dwindled, come one day and, you know, but Arisel kept coming and coming and coming. And he would ask me Mrs. Williams, are you coming tomorrow. I said, yes, Arisel, I'll be here. You come on. So the last day of school he and I watched maybe the dinosaurs. We laughed. It was me and Arisel, buddy, buddy. And so I found out from my principal when I came back for the following year that Arisel was allowed to go to summer school because no one was there to keep him during the day. His parents had to work. So here we go again with children contending with adult situations and they've got to cope with this and grow up with this. And that's what, that's the turning point now, our Hispanic population building up and teachers being prepared to teach children who not only cannot speak English probably and if they can't speak it they definitely can't understand what you're trying to teach them. So those are the kinds of matters these bright, young, brilliant young people are coming in now have to deal with. I talk about them. I'm not making fun of the new teachers and younger teachers. My heart goes out to them. They have a job. I don't know if it will ever be a way of life for them. They have a job to do.

WA: So what, you came into the school after the sort of the first push of school desegregation. You started teaching after that but you said that it was still sort of slow getting going, even in the early '70s when you were.

YW: Well, I said that, well, I wanted to teach so bad, it didn't matter about the color of the children's skin. But you know I know sometimes I could see some of them kind of staring at me and it was things they had to get. If you've never been around certain people before, let me say certain people, then it's something you have to get used to. But again when you're born your mind is a blank sheet of paper so everything you learn is taught to you. Your parents are your first teachers, and if, as the poem says, if you live around hate, you learn to hate. If you live around love, you learn to love. [Recorder turned off and on again.]

WA: Okay, we were talking about that when...

YW: So, you know, I could clearly understand when I first started if some of them kind of looked at me strange or may have said some little thing, just a little off the wall. I would never allow slang names or words to be used in my room. Too many people gave their lives and sacrificed for us to not use these type of words and names.

WA: Okay, so for this next question, what do you think were the goals of school desegregation when it first?

YW: That's a very heavy question. I think one of the main things might have been equality. Everything should have been equal for everyone. But you know, and that was a good thing, but I don't want anybody to think that because we didn't have the things that another group might have, that we may have been lacking in one thing



but the most amazing thing to me, the high school I went to and this was a time I will never forget. Our high school was located in a neighborhood that just had a bad reputation. But I always said the high school was like an island in the middle of this neighborhood because we had a principal who believed in principles and he was an upright man. He taught values and morals. And I can remember there was one class and out of that class five doctors came out of that class and that was from Carver High School in North Birmingham. And at least three of these doctors are operating right here, a play upon words, I'm sorry I didn't mean that. [Laughter] But they're right here in Birmingham and that was a beautiful thing. And that's where a lot of this me wanting to teach started. Like I said, as far as children and being the oldest, it wasn't a great love for children as such. It was just the attitude of my teachers, the caring that they showed. Like I said, one of them came to my house to help me fill out applications to go to college and I don't think a lot of that goes on now. Don't get me wrong, I don't think I ever went to one of my children's house to do anything. But my teachers did this for me and this was from grade school on up. When I chose to go into teaching I made up my mind that I wanted to do the same thing. I had this kind of faith in teachers whereas if they told me if I went to the edge of this cliff and it would make my grade better, I believed them. I loved school and I loved them. I saw one of my teachers once and I told him I said, "Look what you got me into." [Laughter] He said, "Well, let me make you feel better. Jesus was the first teacher." I said, "That's enough, I'm going to stop right there." I said, "Thank you for encouraging me." And so that was how I always feel.

WA: Okay, so do you think, so we were thinking about the goals of desegregation and you said equality and what else or isn't that enough?

YW: Well, equality and in my personal opinion, taking advantage of that equality, now which I don't think is being done. I used to, and I'm going to tell you the truth. I used to fuss at my kids and tell them look at what you have here and take advantage of what you have. I said, "Now, I fixed this room up." I said, "This is not for me. This is for you." The pupil's supply money that we would get, I said, "Now you let your moms and dads buy the crayons." I said, "We bought TVs. We bought VCRs." The DVD is the thing now. "Overhead projectors," I said, "look at what you have." I said, "Wonder what our lives would have been like if we had had this." I said, "But you're able to get this now. Take advantage of it. Use it."

But I think with the personal problems of these children, I think that has precedence over us trying to teach them. Sometimes it looks like they're more giving when you're talking to them about what is it, what's wrong, just talk. Let's just talk rather than when you open that book and try to show them how to divide or multiply or subtract. They so easily want to talk about what happened during the day, what happened last night, and these children are so innocent and naïve. Sometimes they tell you the wrong things about their parents. But they've just got to get it out. Somebody's got to know and you have to realize what they're going through. Somebody needs to hear. They really need to hear what these children have to say and it will really blow your mind. And then you could probably understand more and be more sympathetic as to why they go in the restroom and don't use that but blow little

things up and throw them in the wall. I don't know what they're trying to express. It runs a teacher nutty. It does.

But it's a reason for some of these things and all this misbehavior and talking and bringing guns to school. Had one instance where this little student, he wasn't as big as a loaf of bread, and I heard the children talking about him. "Mrs. Williams, he brought a gun to school." I said, "Don't, don't even start." Well, yes, he did. And so we sent the coach down to the restroom next to the special ed children and there was a gun. So, of course, grandmamma was raising him but mama lived there too. And I called grandma and she said, "How you doing, Mrs. Williams." I said, "I'm doing fine, how are you?" She said, "I'm okay. I'm moving around a lot and going to a new house." I said, "Do you have a gun?" "Yes." I said, "Would you see if you can go find it please". And I heard her running back to the phone. "Oh, that boy got that gun!" I said, "Yes ma'am, come on up, you need to talk to him." And she said, "Well, let me get my lady to bring me." My lady being her employer, I understood fully what she said. Look at your face [the interviewer had a puzzled look on her face] But she came and that was it. I'm sure that was suspension or something else. But one day when I got to school early this man was in the hallway and he was wandering. I said, "Aren't you," I forgot his little name, I said, "Aren't you his father." He said, "Yeah, Mrs. Williams, can I talk to you a minute?" Well, this was his biological father, which he did not like. He lived with grandma and mama. Mama and biological father eventually married but he still didn't like him. So he lived with grandma. And he said, "Mrs. Williams, those two women took that boy to the mall. No, first they slapped him on the hand for bringing the gun to school and they took

him to the mall." He said, "I give up." So here we go with different people trying to raise one child in three different kinds of ways.

These children can't handle this and they have, what we got to understand is because they're children that doesn't mean they'll get over it. They hurt. They have problems. They think just like we do. They have feelings and we need to respect those feelings. Oh, it's just a child. No, it's not just a child because eventually those feelings, those problems and all this, it balls up into this big ball and it becomes a problem for a teacher or somebody trying to show this child how to make a better life. But they don't want to hear that right now. What about my life right now? What is this? I want to go home. I want to be happy. I want to be with my mom. I want to be with my dad. And no, they're going home to broken families, latchkey kids. Those are the ones that go home, nobody's at home with them, keys around their neck so they unlock the door when they get home and stay there until somebody shows up, somebody shows up. So these are the things and I often say if we teach two hours out of the day we're doing good because the other hours we are policing, advising, counseling, trying to find them, trying to calm them down, trying to show them that school is a good way of life, that we have something to offer that may make your life better. But at some point in time they stop hearing this. They stop hearing this because there are other things that need to be attended to first, attended to first.

We have so many special kids, so many kids taking medication. I promised them I was not going to sign a paper for any child to take medication. I just don't believe in it. I said it must be some other way to get this child together. I understand when there's a serious, real serious when only medication may help, but it just has to

be another way. I'm hearing terrible stories of kids who've been taking drugs since they were little, fifteen-year-olds having heart attacks, drugs sedating these kids until they don't know where they are. They're downing them. Their personality is down. It either hikes them up or puts them down. I can't cope with that, not for a child, when a lot of times all these children, they're just rubbing on you. They want love. They're hugging on you, you know, eventually and this is boys and girls too so, you know. I think love is a big factor in it and sometimes they're just not finding this at home.

And if they're coming to school and, I don't want to use that word, and being put down by an adult, that's not going to help either. You can tell children who have been put down a lot because when you try to get close to them, not be friends, not too much but just be nice, they look at you like, "Who are you. Get away from me." Well, you know, and some of these kids who are at that point, they've been put down ever since kindergarten. They're in my grade now, fourth grade. Well, what kind of change can I make? All they know is being put down. "Why aren't you reading?" "I can't read." "Who told you that?" "Somebody down in that other grade." I said, "What about you, do you feel like you can? Think for yourself," you know. We have tests. We have, all teachers, we have so much to contend with and then if you have twenty children, oh, that's a handful. When you have twenty-five you have a babysitting service. Twenty, I mean these are twenty distinct personalities and you have to spread yourself those twenty different ways.

I had one little boy for a year. I knew there was a problem. Here we go again. Academically he was okay, well groomed, clean, mother college grad and nobody told me but I noticed that when he got to a point on his paper when he didn't want to do it

anymore, he wrote this one word all the way down his paper. I said okay, something is wrong here. And then he had a book bag with two tails and they must always be crossed. He could find that book bag across that room and I couldn't. If somebody had accidentally kicked it and knocked those tails off he would go and cross it back. I said yeah, we've got a problem. I talked to his mom. His mom knew more about his condition than I and when we finally had a, I hate to say, a pow-wow, we had the counselor, the mom, I learned more about this child from the mom than I knew myself. Here again, with two or three hours of special ed like we used to get back there when the dinosaurs roamed, these kids coming here now, these regular classroom teachers, they are not going to be able to cope with these special children. I know we have special ed teachers but it's beginning to be more than they can bear because we're dealing with drug babies, alcohol babies, some preemies that just didn't get quite right. And then we're dealing with children who just have social problems, period. They know about gangs. They know about sex. They know about drugs. And these are my fourth graders. And I'll tell you the truth. I believe there are some kindergartners that could tell you about it too. That's the scary part. That is the scary part. When you see a kindergartner with his jacket not on, thrown over his shoulders, and he's doing this what they call a pimp walk down the hall, this is a kindergartner, what is that child going to be like when he gets to me?

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGINNING OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

WA: So we talked, you mentioned yesterday your son's experience in testing and testing in the schools. You want to talk a little bit about that?



YW: Yeah, they have what we call here an exit exam. Probably have it all across the country but I know it here.

WA: And when did that, that started in the 90s?

YW: Yeah, you're asking me, yeah, because he graduated in '98. And ironically when it first started I think it was on the eighth grade level and we're talking about high school children taking an eighth grade test. By blessing he went on and passed the reading and English right away but not the math. And they were allowed to take it more than one time, more than one time, and he was on his last time. And this is why my and I, some of our hairs are gray before time. But I heard some children, two children on TV, explaining and they were crying. This was an honors student looking at her cap and gown, wouldn't be able to wear it because she could not pass this eighth grade exit base test, exit exam. And another child, this girl was really out of it because she said, "I'm going to be the only one in my family who's ever been anything like this." But another young lady who was also crying her heart out, she said, "They're giving us stuff we haven't had in a long time." So as old as my brain was, a light did go off. I said, "That's it." I said, "That's it." And not that they weren't providing tutorial classes for these children but if things are not mandated these children are not going to because they think they know this stuff. Why wouldn't an honors student feel like I know this stuff? I'm an honors student. I should be able to do this. So my son, well I went in his bedroom, I got him up. I'm not going to tell you other things I did to him personally. I said, "Get up. We've got something to do." "Mom, you don't know this math. You teach fourth grade." I said, "I teach fourth grade but I know the math." And we started with a few problems. They gave them

study guides and stuff. And sure enough, he said, "Oh yeah, this is the way you do this." He did pass eventually. He did and I was very excited about it, so excited that it brought me to the point of tears because we're like any other parents, we want our personal children to be successful. That's what we're supposed to be. I mean my husband and I both have degrees. Why wouldn't we want this for our children? They're in college now. I don't talk about my boy too much but he should have been finished two years ago. But his sister has caught up with him, which has brought him to shame, thank God, and it's put fire under him to finish. So if they come up next year and say "Mama, we're graduating, we're doing it on the same day." It won't be a problem for me. We'll split ourselves. My husband will go one day. Just let them say the magic words, "We're graduating," and that will be the joy of both our lives. What parent would not want what they have, already have, why wouldn't they want this for their kids? And then we know what they're going to be confronted with working when they graduate. You know, they need a little more than just a high school education. Grant you, if I could drive a UPS truck I would because they make more than when I was teaching, but who doesn't? It's a low pay career, you know. That's why I say you've got to have a great love for what you're doing. And I used to tell people I didn't go to school four years to sit at home.

Something else I realize is on the job training too. I mean they take you for a lot to get that paper, that degree. But once you get in that room and get with those children it's all about you and your kids. It's all about you. And something else, when I taught anything, taking math for example, if it was something about long division that they, half of my class didn't get, I blamed myself. It didn't have to take

but half and I didn't blame them. It was me and I had to make a change to myself to get it to them. I would always make things as easy as possible because I felt like if it worked for me it can work for them. If I said divide, multiply, subtract, bring down, then I would say, "Does-McDonald's-sell-Big Macs," they relate to that. But it's still divide, multiply, subtract, bring down: "Does McDonald's sell." They remembered "Does McDonald sell." So we didn't have a whole lot of problems with long division. Well, now if I was there I'd probably would have given them a big magazine. I didn't think about that then. I didn't think about that then.

And I would always try to find little innovative ways because they have to be motivated. When we were in school we had to sit in a chair and shut our mouth and now they have to be motivated. So I tried to do that. I think all my children's savings clubs it about drove my husband and I crazy but we were determined to do it. They could open up a savings account for five dollars. I guess God gave me that idea and we did it three, maybe four years. And then one year didn't get a whole lot of response from parents. I'm not crazy. I know when to stop. So we stopped that particular idea. And when some of my ideas are put in a suitcase I come up with some more. One year I had a "Just Say No" club. And one lady came in and interviewed one of the students. She said, "Why are you in this club?" "She gives good treats." Oh, so okay, that's didn't, oh, okay, okay. So I knew what route I had to take and I did. [Laughter] But that was to get them to come to the club. And so you can know about what year "Just Say No" was. I don't even think they say it anymore. I don't even think they say it anymore.

One year I was named "Teacher of the Year." Might have been '85. My question was why are you doing this to me. When I went in the office my principal had this funny look like she was so happy. I said, "What is it?" And she let me talk to this person and well, you know, they told me they said, "Well, you used our facilities." These were science facilities but I told them, "I use you all out of desperation." I said, "Some of this stuff I'm supposed to teach the kids for the tests ...oh, tests ..." I said, "You know this. I don't. You know the metamorphic and igneous rocks and sediments." I said, "Come and tell them about it." And so I found myself calling on all these facilities, outreach programs that would come to me. I believed in, you know, if they come to me here. But if they couldn't come to me I went to them. So that's what happened that year.

WA: Well, is there anything that I haven't asked you? We'll sort of, to do the last couple of questions, is there anything about school desegregation in your experience in the schools that I haven't asked you about that you think is important and that you want to talk about?

YW: I guess the only thing about the desegregation part is again, I'm going to say this again. Children will be themselves if adults leave them alone. And I'm not, well, like I said, I didn't think they should have told the children that they used to be a Ku Klux Klansman. You know, why was this done? Well, it was like maybe why would I tell my child I used to be a Black Panther? I mean, come on. You want to make it better. If you're not that any longer, why would you do that? So I feel like what we fill their heads with, if it's negative it's going to bring out some negativism in them. But then again, I had a young man to come in this gallery who is a student in

Birmingham but he's from a little town in Alabama. And he sat at the computer and he looked at it and he looked at me he said, "You know what, I'm going to have to get my parents to come in here." I started thinking about, I had to read between the lines. I said, "Are your parents going to be able to handle this?" He said, "They're going to have to." So sometimes those children who have grown up in a certain environment that may not be so positive about other races, by some hook and crook, something makes an impression on them and they know this has got to change. It happened to the best. It happened to Malcolm. He changed his philosophy. And it happened to other people, famous, but they've changed their philosophy on life. They changed their feelings of how they felt about other people. Well, in my case, even when we were in school, "Oh, don't go to that teacher. She's so hard." That's the one I wanted to go to. And I've never based my feelings upon what somebody else said about them. I wanted to go to those people. I'll find out. I'll find out for myself. And I found out that I liked these people, different strokes for different folks. That was a good show. That was a good title and it's true. It's true.

I've never had any problem with any other races. I'm so interested in them. We learn from each other. We learn from each other. I hate we were forced together but then once we learned each other, that forcing in some aspects was a good thing. And then some people's feelings will never change. They will never change and they make sure that these feelings are passed on. Maybe that circle will be broken eventually. I looked at Oprah one evening. She had the, I call them, "The Arkansas Nine." I hope I'm not misquoting what they're called. And we have a picture in the gallery of these white girls yelling at this one girl in that Arkansas picture. They were

yelling and Oprah invited them to her show. They came. There was but one question Oprah could possibly ask them. "Why were you yelling at her like that?" And the girl had to be truthful. She said, "I thought this was the thing to do. This was what we had been taught to do. I thought this was a way of life, this was what I was supposed to do." She apologized to that lady, to that young, well, then they were women, because they were children at the time. She made a tearful apology to her. And so, you know, like I said, if you want to break that mode of thinking, it's up to you. When it comes to the children, "Don't use those kinds of words. Don't call each other nigger and whittie and this. Don't do that." I said, "Too much as been sacrificed for you to do that. Make life better."

We have a Birmingham pledge and I used to teach it to the children. And I said and when people come into the gallery they want to sign it. "What is this I'm signing?" I say, "You need to read it," and I say, "When you finish it you're going to see that you're pledging to make this world a better place." In a nutshell, that's what it is. Doesn't take a whole lot of effort. Doesn't take a whole lot of effort. Just treat a person with kindness, you know. Look at them like they're human. You know, smile. Be kind, just smile. I'd never met you before but, you know, if you had come into the gallery and because I saw what color you are, "What do you want?" No, that's not my personality and I find that a lot of people, they've seen a lot of stuff before they get to me and I'm about the last person they will see. I don't think they know what to expect when they see me sitting there. It's like, "Is she going to get smart with me? Is she angry with me for what I saw?" No, I'm not. No, I'm not. This was not done to me. I'm not doing anything to you so let's just be nice to each other. We can't forget it. It



won't be forgotten. But the main thing now is for our children to understand it doesn't matter: black, white, Hispanic, they need to understand what happened. And you know, my fourth graders used to have their little fist balled up. "Why didn't ya'll fight back, Miss Williams?" I said, "You're missing the whole point here. Dr. King said we're going to do this in a non-violent way." Well, our country now is so filled with violence. Oh, my God, what are we going to do? My children outside playing, they hear something, sort of gunshot. I'm looking out the door and my children hit the ground like they're in Vietnam. I say, "What are you doing?" "We heard a gunshot." I said, "Who taught you to fall on the ground?" I don't know what I thought. I said good thing they did but that bothered me. I don't want them in that kind of environment where they got to fear going outside or fear hearing gunshots or that kind of thing. Well, that's life, but I believe in God and I pray a lot. I pray a lot and my prayers are answered. I have no complaints and God knows that.

WA: Well, thank you so much.

YW: Is that it?

WA: That is it. Thank you.

TRANSCRIBED JANUARY 2005 BY CATHY MANN