

Narrator: Willie Stewart
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Interviewed by: Katherine L. Jennison
Place: Tacoma, Washington

[Katherine Jennison]: I'm really excited about this. I hear about you a lot, I hear your name, about the things that you have done, but the more I research you the more I realize that you are way more interesting and it's very much a privilege that I get to do this. I want you to know that. So, yeah, let's just get started, cause this is very much you. Literally, my first questions is I want you to tell me about your parents.

[Willie Stewart]: Okay. My mother and father were teenage bride and groom. The first child was born and my mother was sixteen, and she was forty-three when the last child was born. She was thirty-eight when I was born. All the children delivered by a midwife and most of them by the same midwife. We were sharecroppers. During my time with family, we were in a situation where the farmer kept three-fourths of his products and then they gave one fourth to the owner in exchange for being on the property, and it was basically cotton for us and a little corn. Most of the older brothers were farm hands to the larger farmers. So, my date of birth was 12/25/1935, and most of my activity in terms of that life was from 1935 until 1953, which took me through my elementary, junior high and high school days. After that they switched my life.

[KJ]: Wow, okay, so you farmed and worked on the farm until 1953?

[WS]: Well, I worked on the farmed until about 1948. Actually, until about 1946 or 1947. Then we moved in town, but we still did farm work picking cotton.

[KJ]: What was your hometown?

[WS]: Columbus, Texas.

[KJ]: Is that where your parents are from? Were they born in Columbus, TX?

[WS]: They were born 14 miles west of Columbus. In a community called Weimar. Most of my brothers and sisters were born in Weimar. Just three of us were born in Columbus.

[KJ]: So both of your parents were born in Weimar and were high school sweethearts?

[WS]: No, well, no because she finished the fifth grade and he finished about fourth grade.

[KJ]: Can you...so part of my research is focused on civil rights in general, not that that is the only subject. There are lots of things that happened in your life that are very

significant to you and your life, but can you tell me growing up in Texas what was it like for you?

[WS]: Well, let me put in categories then. First, in terms of education, everybody was black; as a teacher, as a worker, etc. The only white contact there was in my whole [inaudible] is when I would ride the bus, because blacks were not allowed to drive the bus. It had to be a white bus driver. So, all of my teachers were black, all of my school mates were black, [and] all of the school we were in competition were all black. There was no association [with whites].

[KJ]: So it was like a mini district?

[WS]: That's right. Also, in the school setting for education we very seldom ever saw new materials like a new textbook or any supplies. It was what had been used at the white high school and as they got rid of their stuff it was passed onto us. Now, the unique thing about that separat[ion], though, the teachers were well educated, the teachers really loved us, and primarily during that time any professional black could pretty much only do two things: teach, preach, or run a tavern or a funeral home. There were no other options in terms of professionalism, but most of the people did menial work, low level construction work like digging the ditches because they didn't have all the machinery then. Working in the hay field, working in the cotton field that was the job market so education didn't relate to that. Even for those who finished high school, only out of any class it was lucky to get one or two blacks from the class that was in a situation to get high education, so what most of them did they went into the air force, army, etc.

[KJ]: And I know you did, you went into the army.

[WS]: Yeah, but I also went to college first.

[KJ]: You went to college first at Texas Southern University?

[WS]: Right.

[KJ]: Okay. Can you tell me about being in college?

[WS]: Yeah. That was quite an experience. First of all I didn't have any money and a group of women, though an organization, gave me \$125, which would pay for my tuition for the whole year. I had a sister and brother-in-law who didn't have any children, who lived in Houston where Texas Southern was located – 70 miles from my birth place. So, I was invited by them to stay with them and walk to school about a mile each day because they wanted to see someone from the family get an education and that is how I ended up with it. The interesting thing about Texas Southern [was] I had to take introductory English and introductory math because my school curriculum in high school, even though it was very good it wasn't as good as compared to the blacks who had graduated from the big schools out of Houston, Dallas, and Galveston. They had a high level of education

and you could see it. So, my first year I took the remedial class and then after that I ended being cum laude in graduation, so it was a matter of not having the experience rather than ability. But, all the classes were small, all of your professors monitored your scheduled [and] made sure you succeeded. If you had a problem, you could come to the office anytime for assistants. So, it was a rich experience from that point. But, also, I became attached to clubs for the first time; the science time, the Baptist student union club, and then eventually into a fraternity Alpha Phi Alpha. So, that gave me socialization [and] it gave me support and whatnot. And then also why I was there I met an unbelievable man by the name of Bill Lawson, who, if you looked on the internet, he was one of the fore right persons in the civil rights movement in the Texas era. A Baptist minister who taught me so much, extremely educated, in fact, his wife just died. He's about 84/85 now.

[KJ]: Did you say Lawson or Larson?

[WS]: L-A-W-S-O-N. The experience was wonderful. I got a chance to go to all the athletic events because my sister and brother-in-law didn't want me working they wanted me to really become a college person and that I will be forever grateful. And so, I completed that and I had my degree in biology and chemistry, and with that I used it to teach for one year, 1957-58. And then, 1958-60 I was out here in Fort Lewis, WA and then after that my career in Tacoma.

[KJ]: Your first year of teaching, did you...well, I did have a question, was Texas Southern University a black college?

[WS]: Oh yes, it was founded because of the civil rights movement.

[KJ]: Was it?

[WS]: Yeah.

[KJ]: Tell me about that cause I don't know.

[WS]: Heman Sweatt made an application to go to law school at the University of Texas, and Texas would not accept him, but offered him money to go out of state to law school and they would fund it. He challenged that and it went to the Supreme Court, and the Supreme Court ruled that Texas had the obligation to education all of its students, including Mr. Heman Sweatt. And so what the state did at that point, [they] took the Houston negro college and made it Texas State College for Negroes. That was the title. You cannot offer a law school unless you are a university, so therefore they created three other schools: school of education and industrial arts, school of science and business, and then the school of law. That all happened in 1947, so I'm in the class of '53 so it was only six years old when I first began. We had the founding president, R. O'Hara Lanier, is the president at the time. So, everybody there, all the teacher were black, all the students were black, all of our athletic events were against other blacks and other black schools.

[KJ]: Did Bill Lawson...when did you meet him? Was he a teacher?

[WS]: No, he was the advisor to the Baptist student union that was allowed to be on the campus even though it was a state school. And I was very active with that so he took us a lot of Baptist stuff.

[KJ]: Did you protest, did you work in the community?

[WS]: We just, at that time, we were not engaged in, there was no formal protest during my time in school, but we did volunteer to do things in the community. In fact, I never was engaged, my only civil rights engagement really took place in Tacoma, WA, never in the south because I had left before the activities began. And, even the civil rights movement, the visible action, didn't come until the mid-60s.

[KJ]: With the Civil Rights Act.

[WS]: Yeah, well, 1954 was the civil rights Brown vs Board of Education, then later on in 64 and 65 you had the Voting Rights Act, but you had Martin Luther King and others who were at the forefront of some things and then when you had all of the protests from the colleges, going into world war, and sit downs and what not that just opened the whole thing up.

[KJ]: I will probably have more questions about Texas, however, we can get to Tacoma. So, you finished college, you taught for a year, can you tell me about your first year of teaching?

[WS]: Yeah, it was an all-black school; Asbury High School in Yoakum, Texas. I taught grades 9-12, basic math, algebra, life science, biology, chemistry; five preparations. And was the assistant football coach.

[KJ]: Did you like...

[WS]: It was great because I didn't have anything else to compare it with.

[KJ]: That is very true. What made you...did you join the army? Were you drafted?

[WS]: I was drafted. In fact, many of the guys who were in school with me were not drafted because they were able to get a waiver because that draft pool was in the larger cities. Mine was in a small city, and I asked the draft board to bypass me over letter. You know, you are Texan, we are southerners, everybody serves the military, you must go. Your induction date will be December 5, 1958. So, I wrote back and said I appreciate that but would you be polite enough to make it in August, so when I separate in two years I can start a school year some place. And they consented and I entered the military August 5, 1958.

[KJ]: Was your draft card attached to you being from Columbus, or was it attached to you...

[WS]: It was attached to anyone who was in Colorado County. It was a country draft board; it was established by counties.

[KJ]: Did you travel around the south when you were little? Did your parents ever travel?

[WS]: All my travel growing up was going to the cotton fields and when I played basketball and football I was traveling to the different towns where we played.

[KJ]: Okay, so you were an athlete?

[WS]: Yeah.

[KJ]: I was an athlete. I played softball and basketball when I was in high school.

[WS]: Oh great.

[KJ]: You were drafted in to the army, were you immediately stationed at Fort Lewis?

[WS]: That's correct. I was processed in Arkansas at Fort Chaffee. That's where the induction station was and everyone from that whole army division was placed there. Then out of that they then determined where you would go for your training. Some went to Kansas, some to Arkansas, some to Texas, and they sent me to Fort Lewis, Washington.

[KJ]: So what was your immediate response when you got to Washington? Cause I can only imagine how different it would feel.

[WS]: Well, it was nothing about Washington, it was about the military. So, you don't have any association with the community at that point. It was a matter of making the adjustments to the lifestyle of what the military would be like, but in terms of a reaction to Washington it was negative because it was so cold and wet all the time.

[KJ]: I can see that.

[WS]: But, I ended up...you know...it was just typical all of us went through the same thing making the transition. Probably the biggest transition was the social transition. It was the first time any association with a person that [didn't] look like me. So, that was a challenge too.

[KJ]: That makes sense because some of the research I've done has kind of shown that, especially within the Tacoma area, the black community really didn't get, I guess, really didn't rise until the army started stationing people at Fort Lewis...

[WS]: ...Army, Air Force, and the Bremerton naval ship yard.

[KJ]: So, that would...I mean that makes sense when you say that. Connecting to some of the dates that I've read. So, have you, at this point in your life, have you met your wife?

[WS]: I had met her, but no association with her.

[KJ]: What's her name?

[WS]: Her name is Fay Neil. She lived in Yoakum, and she was in college at Prairie View. I roomed at a home that was three doors from where she lived. And so, I met her, really, I knew her and the really met her at the end of her college years. she was in college at Prairie View. I roomed at a home that was three doors from where she lived.

[KJ]: Where did she go to school?

[WS]: Prairie View A&M.

[KJ]: Prairie View?

[WS]: Yes, it's another black school.

[KJ]: So, you met her the first year you were teaching or when you...?

[WS]: I knew of her the first year...yes, I would say I met her then, basically. But not in a relationship, just knowing her.

[KJ]: Okay, and then you moved to Tacoma?

[WS]: Right.

[KJ]: I mean, essentially...

[WS]: Yeah. We had dated a couple of times. So, I was in Tacoma for one year, 1960-61, and my mother said to me it was time for you to have a family. You need to have a wife, it's a public school setting, and it's not good to be a bachelor or her words "unmarried person". So, when I was back home in 1961, [Fay] was living with her brother in San Antonio. So, we dated heavily for a few, couple of weeks, three weeks and we decided to get married. Then we came to Tacoma.

[KJ]: Where did you guys get married at?

[WS]: On the front porch of her house in Yoakum. It was a Sunday, August 13, 1961.

[KJ]: So, you still had your duties in Tacoma so did you have to come back?

[WS]: Oh yeah, sure. I was only ever going to support her was to take my teaching position here.

[KJ]: Yeah, tell me about that. So, you get stationed at Fort Lewis, were you active when you were stationed or did you...so were you active and then found a teaching position and so then you went on reserves?

[WS]: Pretty much right, you just hit it. When I was...in the spring of 1960, my mother, through her level of thinking, said it would be not wise for me to return to Texas because they were beginning to integrate the schools; even though the decision had been made in 1954. And in small towns where I had an interested, they were not retaining the black teachers. So, therefore, you should not come back and try to get a career in Washington, but she thought that it was Washington D.C. She didn't know it was the state of Washington because she said to me I want you to stay there because you were close to the president. And so, I made application to teach in Tacoma and I came down for an interview in early part of May in 1960. And it was on this floor...

[KJ]: It was on the 7th floor?

[WS]: I believe it was. The person in this chair was a guy named Leslie Hoar. We talked for a good 30 minutes and I said to him, Mr. Hoar I really came down for you to interview me for a teaching position. He started laughing, he said well welcome aboard fellow Texan, you're hired! And he said to me, I grew up in Terrell, TX, and I know what it's like in Texas, it's not like that here. In fact, I have two administrators that you are going to be working with coming to pick you up. And that was George Miller and Fred Heeney. I ended up teaching at Gault.

[KJ]: Gault Middle School?

[WS]: Junior High.

[KJ]: Was Leslie the director or was he....

[WS]: He was the assistant superintendent of personnel. It is amazing I ended up doing two other jobs that he had because at one time he was an assistant principal at Lincoln, so was I for one year, he was the assistant superintendent of personnel, so was I.

[KJ]: Did you keep in contact with him as you were going through the system?

[WS]: Yes, but he was really up in years. He retired and moved to a retirement home down in Olympia and then he died later.

[KJ]: So, tell me about Gault. So, you're still kind of new in Tacoma...

[WS]: That's right. Gault scared the hell out of me. All the white folks and I recognized that this is the way the world is.

[KJ]: So, back up a little bit. It sounds like coming from Texas, Tacoma was just a completely different reality?

[WS]: Totally, new world.

[KJ]: Tell me about that. Did you come in and think oh my gosh there has been a mistake.

[WS]: No, for three reasons; (1) it was the reception by Mr. Hoar, (2) the support of the two administrators at Gault, and (3) it was the students at Gault, they just loved me to death. I was the first black teacher in the system in terms of middle school and junior high. There were only three black men in Tacoma at that time: Ester Wilform was at the elementary level, Willie Muse was at the high school level, and I was the junior high level. There would be many black students who would just come to my door and peak just to make sure. A couple of them even wanted to touch my hands to make sure I was real. It was a culture shock for the black students as much as it was a culture shock for me to be in that environment.

[KJ]: Was Gault Junior High integrated?

[WS]: Yes. Tacoma schools have always been integrated. They were integrated but also segregated because there were limitations on where black could live. They could buy homes and live in Salishan, east side below Portland Avenue, or the Hilltop area. There were no blacks north of Sixth Avenue.

[KJ]: So, in reality it was a controlled placement?

[WS]: Yeah, it was de facto segregation. Many of the white students had never seen a black teacher. So, I developed strong relationships. In fact, I just talked to one of my students who is now 68 and was at Gault. He called me to get some guidance. It was a huge school, over 900 kids at that time. Great athletic programs. My first year there was a team that was undefeated in football, basketball, track, and baseball.

{KJ}: Did you coach?

[WS]: The second year I started coaching there.

[KJ]: So when you got hired at Gault you were a biology teacher, correct?

[WS]: Life science and physical science.

[KJ]: Do you remember any stories about just you and your relationship with you students that really...

[WS]: By all means, in fact, one of my favorite ones was we had a back to school night and I had an overflow crowd in my room every period. At the end of the session, this

white couple sat outside of the door and they said we'd like to come in and visit with you. I just want you to know, our daughter was very emphatic that if they didn't go to all of the classes they had to come to your class. They said you have to go to Mr. Stewart. And he said, what shocks me about this, I'm so thrilled, I'm thrilled for my daughter, but she never told me you were black. We just saw it the first time we saw you. That same girl, we won the sweepstakes in UPS in the science fair. The other story, there were kids that would come up to try to get in trouble just to get the attention of me – the black kids, they just loved me.

[KJ]: What would they do to try to get your attention? Back in 1960, was a kid doing to try to get your attention?

[WS]: Peeping in the door when you're teaching or else coming into your classroom knowing they were not students.

[KJ]: Do you remember, as a teacher, instances you knew that you as a black teacher were making an impact whether it was a white student or a black student?

[WS]: Yes. The mere fact that they all wanted, when I was coaching sports, to be on the team. The young ladies formed an intermural program just so I could coach them, so that was another level of appreciation. All of them made sure that parents came to back to school night. They involved me in the parent teachers association – they wanted me involved. I was one of the first persons to get a golden acorn – that's recognition from the PTA for being outstanding.

[KJ]: When you first went to Gault was it predominantly white?

[WS]: Yeah. I would say it was at least 75% white. I think the anxiety was, if any, would be with the staff. But the thing that was great, one of the history teachers by the name of Dale Platt befriended me, [and] since I was a bachelor he invited me to athletic events. He picked me up and took me and made me feel a part of Tacoma. Several of the staff did that eventually, so there was no rejection, there was full acceptance. Gault was a unique place, and I think maybe the reason why was being we all bonded behind the challenge of the students – meeting their social needs, their economic needs, their educational needs, so we didn't have a chance to focus on each other.

[KJ]: It's refreshing to hear that you were focused on each other because I think it makes a huge statement. Remind me where Gault Junior High was located?

[WS]: It's the corner of...you know where McKinley Avenue is? You go east on McKinley to 34th and when you get to 34th and McKinley you make a left and it's between McKinley and Portland Ave. When you get to that street its three or four names because it kind of breaks into three streets. [Currently] the swimming pool is run by the city.

[KJ]: You became assistant principal at Gault before you moved over to Lincoln, correct?

[WS]: That's right, 1966.

[KJ]: Were you only assistant principal for a couple of years before you went...?

[WS]: I was assistant principal for about three years.

[KJ]: Tell me about transitioning into your first administrative [role]?

[WS]: The teachers were fully accepting of me. They like my leadership in relationship to students; my firmness and yet flexibility as an assistant principal. It so happened that the [principal], I was only with him for one year because he took an assignment and went to Lago, Nigeria. Upon his departure they brought in a principal by the name of O.M. Peterson who had been over at Hunt, and he was sick quite a bit the two years I was there. So, I was pretty much running that school for two years.

[KJ]: They didn't bring anyone in to do interim...?

[WS]: No.

[KJ]: So what was your decision to move over to Lincoln?

[WS]: [Oliver] Magnuson, who was the assistant principal at Lincoln, decides to take a sabbatical and go to Washington University to get a doctorate. He recommended to the superintendent that I should be his replacement at Lincoln. So I was at Lincoln as the assistant principal with Edroy Wilseth and Bart Niccols for one year, and at the end of that year I went to my military training in the reserves. I went to Albuquerque, New Mexico, Sandia Base. I was driving, and on that Monday night I called home as I usually do, and my wife said at ten o'clock tomorrow morning the superintendent would like to talk to you. Now, that was in sixty-six when he appointed me assistant principal. But, in sixty-nine, I went for two weeks and came back and one of my roles as the assistant principal at Lincoln was processing the mail. So, I came down to [the Central Administration Building] and the mail box was on the first floor. Angelo Giandrone, who was superintendent, and his assistant [Joe] were walking the halls and they stopped me and said "Willie, what do you think of the new principal at Lincoln High School?" I said, oh I have a new boss? The superintendent looked at Joe [and said], "Didn't you call him?" "Well, you're the new principal!" It shook me. That's when I really became nervous. I'm thirty-four/thirty-five and there's only two or three members on the staff younger than that. I had to calm down, call my family, and then I went to the school. I said [to Maxine the office manager] I want the records of all the staff. So, I concentrated on memorizing all the teachers there and tried to get a little something about them – name of their spouse or kids. That's what I did the summer of 1970. Then I picked up the newspaper, ["First Negro Principal Named"].

[KJ]: I found an article that said that, and there was a different article that said that...

[WS]: African American. Because at that time, “negro” was common. Twenty-five years later they said Willie Stewart was named the first African American – they switched it with the times

[KJ]: So, I found an article that credited you as being the first black principal in the state.

[WS]: That was an error. The first one was the principal of Lincoln High School in Seattle.

[KJ]: So tell me, after this, did people start to call asking for interviews?

[WS]: I should have kept the stacks of congratulatory cards. There were two people, who are not to be named, who were both principals, called me up and said they were unhappy with my appointment. [They said], “because of your age.” I said thank you. I said, why don’t you look at the ages of these two white principals, and then they never said a word anymore.

[KJ]: Were you the youngest principal at the time?

[WS]: No, there were two others. I was the youngest in high school. Both principals, later, came to me to be rescued.

[KJ]: In what way?

[WS]: One of them had a major grievance against him by a black family and he asked me to testify on his behalf in superior court.

[KJ]: Did the other one have to come to you for any assistance?

[WS]: Yes, he did, but all of the principal voted me as president of the administrative group.

[KJ]: Do you remember the organization’s name?

[WS]: Yeah, Tacoma Association of Public School Administrators (TAPSA).

[KJ]: Were you voted president of [TAPSA] the first year you were principal?

[WS]: No, I was voted [president] in about 1973. So that’s two years after.

[KJ]: Tell me about your first year being a principal. What stood out about Lincoln? Do you have any stories?

[WS]: Yes, because the first decision I made, which really make my career good. [Oliver] Magnuson, who had been the assistant principals, was returning to Tacoma Schools and they were going to sign him as my assistant. When they told me I was the principal, I was shocked, and then I asked who would be my assistant and they told me [Oliver] Magnuson. I told them that's not right, [because] I replaced him. He should be the principal. They said no we have a special job for him coming up next year. I said what is that job? [They said] he's going to be the principal of the new high school, Henry Foss High School. I said, if that is the case, why don't you make it this way: "[Oliver] Magnuson, Principal Designee for Foss, Acting Interim Assistant Principal at Lincoln High School". So, the staff at Lincoln that would be loyal to him not getting that job would not be concerned because they know he is getting a greater job. Also, I knew that we would have to lose staff because teachers would want to go to that new school. So, their behavior was perfect for the full year. The thing that was amazing, one staff member [Oliver] wanted, at any cost, and this staff member said, "No I'm loyal to Mr. Stewart, I just can't go." [Oliver] came to me and said, "You know, he won't go. I need him, and you know that I need him, because of the population of the students and he is so good with persons of color." So, I call in the guy, and I said, "Now, I want you to go because the needs are greater there than here. I can handle this." So, we became instant friends forever, even now. Even he and his mother had separated from conversation because he was African American and he had married a German woman. His mother is deep southern and couldn't accept her son. It just so happened that I was in New Orleans, recruiting at two schools in Louisiana, and I called up his mother and talked on the phone. I said, "How can a person give birth to a child and not have love for them. You are going to let a marriage separate the two of you? Is that what you call Christianity?" She called him up and he went home to visit.

[KJ]: What was his name?

[WS]: Al Phillip. He was one of the first liaisons in the district. He is a retired soldier.

[KJ]: Was he the only black teacher?

[WS]: No, he wasn't a teacher. He was a liaison and worked with the students in the community. We have liaisons now, we call them paraprofessionals. He knew all of the behavior that was going on in the community. But, I knew several other black guys, in fact, Aaron Pointer, of the Pointer Sisters, who was playing baseball for the local team here. He worked with me at Lincoln during the off-season. You've heard of the Pointer Sisters? [He] is their brother. He's here now, he's on the [Metro Parks] Board. He's the Commissioner.

[KJ]: When you got to Lincoln were there any black teachers?

[WS]: One, Connie Lasley. She and another lady were the first two black teachers in the state of Washington. The other one was up in Seattle and she came from the University of Chicago and she was teaching at the age of sixteen. She was a math wizard.

[KJ]: You were principal at Lincoln for almost a decade, any good stories?

[WS]: I dressed as Gerald Dean and walked the hallways. I was the cheerleader for all of the athletic teams. In fact, I was on a plane about five years ago and a guy said, "I know you, you won't know me, but I remember you in 1974 in Husky Stadium that you were the cheerleader for the Lincoln Abes as they won the state championship in basketball." I said, I'm that person.

[KJ]: Did Lincoln have minority students when you started?

[WS]: I can just say this, we were 14% black, 7% Hispanic, about 3% Asian, maybe 1% bi-racial, and 70% white.

[KJ]: I know the time when you were transferring over to Lincoln was when the 5-point plan the district had come up with was really starting in 1968. I know that you were probably more involved with [desegregation] than any research I could find.

[WS]: That's right. The first phase of the desegregation of schools was to close the junior high component of McCarver and take all of those seventh, eighth, and sixth graders and put them in the other ten junior highs in Tacoma. They had a summer program, working with those families to transfer their kids into schools and also get the receiving school to understand. So, I was hired as the administrator for that program. It was a summer counseling component. I wasn't a counselor, but the counselors worked for me as an administrator.

[KJ]: So, you were the lead on the summer program?

[WS]: Yeah.

[KJ]: I had found this report that the United States Commission on Civil Rights wrote in 1978. It was interesting because I read through this whole thing, your name popped up when I asked about who should I interview, and I remember, when I went to look at articles it briefly mentioned you as the lead for the summer counseling program. This report actually credits the summer counseling program as what made the desegregation [in Tacoma] as successful as it was.

[WS]: And I agree.

[KJ]: Can you tell me about [the program]?

[WS]: We had the addresses and the names of all of the kids who had to be placed at other schools. We didn't want to be disproportionate to any of the [junior] high schools, but we knew that the one that would be the most challenging for them to accept would be Meeker because of the great distance across the bridge on the hill. So, that left us to look at Baker, Gray, Stewart, Gault, Hunt, Mason, and Truman. We would meet with the

parents and give them the options. Sometimes we would try to make it as close as their boundary. The unfortunate thing for some of them, you could take one block and you can have kids living on one block going to five different high schools.

[KJ]: Did most students chose based on the programs offered [at each school]?

[WS]: The programs were all the same. It was just a matter of feeling where they would be comfortable. There was nothing magical about one building over the other. I think that there was some reluctance about going to Truman [Junior High] and going to Mason [Junior High] because kids knew that it was predominantly white – almost 100% white – and they may not enjoy that, but they ended up going there. Truman had a great receiving principal (Fred Haney) and Mason had a great receiving principal (Gale Nelson).

[KJ]: What are your thoughts on choice? What are your thoughts around the idea that these students could choose?

[WS]: We were convinced that they were not getting a quality education at the junior high component [at McCarver]. Plus, it was all black, and we wanted to comply with the U.S. commissioner and provide [students] a multi-cultural environment. We worked very hard with the families, it was not a piece of cake, it was challenging. There was some who still wanted to stick in their community. We made it convenient for the buses to come right through the neighborhood, [so] it wasn't inconvenient to get to school.

[KJ]: What made I difficult with families?

[WS]: Just the closure of McCarver, and some of the uncertainty of how the kids would be treated at the receiving schools.

[KJ]: Do you remember the family's perspective on closing McCarver?

[WS]: [The parents would say], "My other kids went there, and the school is in my neighborhood." Sometimes, [students would say], "I would like to go to the same school that my brother went to or my sister went to." Some of them said, "Am I going to get to Stadium High School?" Because that was the primary school where most of the black went, so they wanted to have that continuity. The other neighborhood where most of the blacks lived was Lincoln.

[KJ]: Was there any backlash from families that needed to be bused elsewhere?

[WS]: I think after the first week the kids accepted it. Kids are more flexible than parents.

[KJ]: I know the country at the time was in a state of flux, with districts having to implement plans, whether they were voluntary, like Tacoma's, or whether it was forced, so it makes me wonder how it was received by the parents.

[WS]: There might have been more reaction from white parents, not to me, but to the superintendent. You had some families who moved out over to University Place and some who moved out to Puyallup. But, something else helped too, the leadership of our superintendent and our school Board ensuring the quality of education for all students. [They] put solid programs in all of those schools, taking what was left at McCarver and Stanley making sure they had enriched elementary programs. In fact, they removed some of the elementary students from Stanley and made them go to elementary schools so white students could come into their inner city.

[KJ]: The report talked about, once McCarver became an elementary school, they essentially put a cap on demographic enrollment. I think for McCarver, at least, it was 40% as the cap for minority [enrollment]. Since you were an administrator at the time, do you remember any issues with white students come in and minority students staying?

[WS]: I would imagine you would have something, but there was nothing that was earth shaking. After I had done [the counseling program] for two years, the program was transitioned to counseling administrators because I had to concentrate on my work.

[KJ]: Do you remember any stories when you would visit homes?

[WS]: I very seldom would visit a home. I would only visit a home when there was tension in terms of understanding the program, and I would go in and try to appease them and help them understanding the long term value. And, sometimes a black person just wanted to hear from another black person.

[KJ]: Were you ever pulled into any other Board related, policy, or administrative [action]?

[WS]: Oh yeah, we gave reports on where we were having challenges and where we were having successes.

[KJ]: What's interesting about Tacoma is, as you read through some of the information about [desegregation], you almost don't find anything that sticks out because it went so smooth.

[WS]: Very smooth. Tacoma is a small population. I think people keep forgetting. That was a stroke of genius of the superintendent and this Board to do it when the population is small [than] wait until you get a massive number.

[KJ]: There were statistics that attributed Tacoma [district] as being nine percent black or minority. I know that today, Tacoma Public Schools is 60% minority. It's just interesting to know that at the time [desegregation] happened it wasn't like we were talking about this giant amount of students.

[WS]: What makes it so different today is you have such a large number of culture groups here. So, there's more acceptance. Plus, you have a large bi-racial group. You go into Whitman, Grant, Boze, Blix, or Lister and you see the United Nations.

[KJ]: What is your opinion on the state of Tacoma today? As far as the way that school are moving or neighborhoods are developing, do you feel like we are moving in a positive direction?

[WS]: I think we are in a positive direction, but my concern is that the increase in housing cost is going to force the marginal income people to become low income and that might have an impact in terms of the social structure. In the paper yesterday, they pointed out that many of the renters now are being evicted because so many people are coming from Seattle and other areas and they are willing to pay more per month for the same property.

[KJ]: For students to choose, you mentioned that one neighborhood street these students could be going to five different school, so I didn't know if you thought that affected their identities?

[WS]: No, it didn't. Now, it's been so long ago that no one even talks about it or thinks about it.

[KJ]: That's also a credit to how successful the program was.

[WS]: But, also says something about the people of the city of Tacoma. They kept passing the levies and kept passing the bond issues, so they felt good about it.

[KJ]: At the time, were you ever approached by the NAACP?

[WS]: I was a life member of the NAACP.

[KJ]: I know early on they were pushing the district to make some sort of [plan].

[WS]: Sure, that was the late Jack Tanner and the late Willie Mill. It was not a challenge for the superintendent, he invited Roy Wilkins, Executive Director for the NAACP, and gave him an award. He brought [Eugene] Breckenridge on staff to oversee equal opportunities [assistant superintendent of affirmative action].

[KJ]: I don't remember if it was 1965 or 1966, the NAACP threatened a lawsuit. Do you remember why?

[WS]: They were showing the McCarver was disproportionate with students.

[KJ]: Was that because nobody was listening? It's a huge step to threaten a lawsuit.

[WS]: That was universal, it wasn't just Tacoma. They did it across the country to point out that they were emphasizing de facto segregation in the south and de facto segregation in the north from housing patterns. At that specific time, in the 1960s, the biggest problem was not the school districts but realtors and persons not willing to let blacks to buy homes all over the place. So, the way they dealt with it was to deal a lawsuit to get students moved, but now families live all over the city. I was a housing thing that really created the problem.

[KJ]: I know they put a lot of pressure on the school board at the time and the superintendent to put together a plan.

[WS]: You don't get anything unless you asked for it.

[KJ]: The subcommittee put together the plan that was going to be put into place.

[WS]: Sure, there was involvement in the community. You can't be unilateral. You have to involve your stakeholders. They went to the older citizens in town that they knew and they worked together.

[KJ]: Why did they go to the oldest?

[WS]: They had the knowledge. Not necessarily for what would be better, but they were respected in the community.

[KJ]: Did they bring any administrators from the district?

[WS]: Sure, [Eugene] Breckenridge was involved. He was the first assistant superintendent for affirmative action.

[KJ]: Did you work together?

[WS]: Oh yes, I was principal while he was [at the central administration building]. He retired in 1977, and that position was vacant, so they filled it with Tom Dixon from the Urban League for one year. After one year they found a person, because they asked me to do it and I refused.

[KJ]: Why did you refuse?

[WS]: Because I'm an educator for kids and running the school, not for an isolated [position].

[KJ]: Did it feel more political than you wanted?

[WS]: It had nothing to do with politics, it was just who I am. There were several of my friends that wanted the job, and I could name three other administrators who eventually retired who would have given anything to have been that person. But that's just not me.

In fact, the late [Alexander] Sergienko, who just died, he came many times and asked me, so did Jim Boze on the Board. So, they said, "Would you take the personnel office job?" And I said yes.

[KJ]: So, what made you decide on that one?

[WS]: Because I can impact people there. I'm hiring staff and placing the staff.

[KJ]: Did you stay assistant superintendent for personnel until you retired?

[WS]: Yes, for eighteen years.

[KJ]: You were an administrator longer than you taught or were an administrator, correct?

[WS]: That is correct.

[KJ]: What was the motivation to say [in this position] I can affect change?

[WS]: That I could hire persons of color.

[KJ]: Can you tell me about your experience finding black or persons of color?

[WS]: Even as the principal of Lincoln, I traveled to the black schools for two weeks every year. I would go to Chaney State, Virginia State, Hampton Institute, Jackson State, Alabama State, Tuskegee, Xavier, Texas Southern, and Prairie View.

[KJ]: Did you implement that?

[WS]: My predecessor had done that. He selected me to go with him to these schools. They were all black schools, with good staff. They wouldn't do it now because the salaries are just as good there, now, and it's not as expensive to live.

[KJ]: You were already doing recruiting as a principal, so what changed when you became an administrator? What were some other opportunities that you got to do?

[WS]: Well, it was the visibility of my position to the community – that was very important too. The other thing, too, there was respect for my ability to evaluate staff and to select staff. I had the personality and the flexibility that they enjoyed and I became the president of the Washington State Personnel Administrators. In 1989, I became the national president of the Association for School Administrators.

[KJ]: Do you remember any distinct stories while you were assistant superintendent? Challenges and successes?

[WS]: Yes, two of them. I would make recommendation to the superintendent and the superintendent would recommend them to the school board. At that time, you had to put ages and ethnicity [on the recommendations], so Jim Boze [board member] asked for the personnel items [at one particular meeting] to be put under discussion before voting. The superintendent looked at me, and Jim Boze said, "I just want to commend the assistant superintendent of personnel who recognizes that you can be over fifty-five and still get a job in this district." One of the applicants was a woman of fifty-eight. She was a dynamic teacher.

[KJ]: What made you look at her and say yes?

[WS]: We interviewed her. I interviewed everybody. It was a secondary school and she was very dynamic. She had raised a family and relocated. Another [hire] would be the principal at Wilson [Dan Bessett] and Pat Erwin [current principal at Lincoln]. I hired [Pat] as a teacher in Tacoma. He was a bartender at a tavern raising four kids. I was visiting with his dad on the race track for the cancer relay and we were talking about families. He was saying how his son was and I said I'd like to meet him. He came down to the office and we chatted. He as a social studies background and we had a vacancy at Hunt, so I assigned him to hunt. In five years, he's down at central over social studies. My other story was in 1977, I get a call from a friend of mine at UPS [University of Puget Sound], and he said, "Willie, I have this dynamic guy in P.E. At all costs, you have to hire him – Dan Bessett." I said to send him down. On that day a vacancy in P.E. developed at Gray Junior High, so I signed him at Gray and one of his first students was my daughter, Collette.

[KJ]: I'd love to hear about your activism in the community. Tell me about the Boys and Girls club?

[WS]: That's my heart and soul. When I first started it was just the Boys Club, and then it became Boys and Girls Club. All of the Boards wanted color on their Board, and I was visible, so most of them invited me to serve and then they wouldn't let me off. White's ran [the club]. I fundraised and mentored, I still mentor. Many kids came through our club: Isaiah Thomas [professional basketball player], The Trufant Brothers – one played for the Seattle Seahawks and one for the New York Jets.

[KJ]: What is it about the Boys and Girls Club that energizes you?

[WS]: The growth and development of the boys and girls through all of the program. We have a reading, recreational, art, and dental care program.

[KJ]: What are some things that you are still doing now? What are some organizations that you are a part of?

[WS]: Boys and Girls Club, Tacoma Athletic Commission, Shanaman [Sports] Museum, the National Football League, and Urban Grace [Church].

[KJ]: It sounds like anyway that students can be involved, you were involved. So tell me about Urban Grace Church. I hear it's been 20 + years that you have been serving breakfast?

[WS]: I started in 1995, so it would be in its twenty-second year now. I think I've missed six Sundays out of the twenty-two years.

[KJ]: Why did you start it?

[WS]: I was on the president of the church congregation at that time. We were trying to determine what we could do as a community outreach. We debated about doing a lot of things, and one of the people there, a cook at stadium high school, [suggested] a breakfast. The first Sunday we had about four people, six the next Sunday, and we said let's give it a month before we make a decision whether it's going to go. Then we picked up about fifteen and anywhere to forty and it then after that it never dropped below one hundred. Last Sunday [there were] two hundred eighty-four [people]. We were asking members of the church to contribute and I said my contribution, in addition to giving dollars, would be to go to the base and buy the food because it's cheaper there. I would get the meat and the grits. We just became a family. Whenever we have a fifth Sunday my fraternity [volunteers].

[KJ]: Alpha Phi Alpha?

[WS]: Yeah. I was the founder of that chapter here in 1969. [There were] seven of us [and] I was the only civilian. You had to have a degree and had to have been in the fraternity. There were no black fraternities up here, so these guys were all officers who had gone through ROTC. We formed our chapter, then after that we could induct others.

[KJ]: I have general questions that pertain to civil rights. You came to Tacoma around the same time as the Urban League starting, were you involved with them?

[WS]: Financially, you know, I couldn't find housing my first year here; I had to live in a cubicle. No apartment would rent to me. So, it was real. No jobs were open to blacks. You never saw a black working in bank, as a clerk, or anything. It was through the Urban League and the NAACP, thought Tom Dixon, Jack Tanner, etc., they recognized that blacks had money so they wanted to open up and get it developed. I would go up to rent an apartment and they'd put up a "no vacancy", [so] I'd drive around the block and [then] there's vacancy.

[KJ]: Did you call them and say you wanted to come look at the place?

[WS]: No I would never do that because they would pick up your voice.

[KJ]: I can't believe I haven't asked you about being on the School Board.

[WS]: Well, I will tell you what, let's have a second session. There are some areas I want to talk more in depth with; (1) the treatment by other schools, (2) the United States army reserves. There are some real strong civil rights stories there, I was the first black officer on payroll in this area.