

Narrator: Willie Stewart
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Interviewed by: Katherine L. Jennison
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[Katherine Jennison]: It's hard to find questions to ask for you about civil rights because I know that you had a huge part, but it's pretty clear to me that you didn't care that your name was attached to certain things.

[Willie Stewart]: I was a part of something; I wasn't the leader of it. I supported it. For example, I fought real hard through committee work and visitations to encourage the city of Tacoma to accept open housing in 1965, so a person could live anywhere in the community where they were capable of buying. So, I was with the group that pushed for that. I pushed very hard for people in the Hilltop area to register to vote. I stressed real hard for churches to show open leadership and concerns for the ethnic minority group. I encouraged First Baptist, at that time, which is now Urban Grace to reach out to communities with support. So, that was my way of doing civil rights. I was very active with the NAACP and went to their meetings and luncheons [as well as] signed petitions. The spokesperson was always someone else – Willie Muse, Jack Tanner, or Harold Moss.

[KJ]: Those are the stories that I want you to be able to tell. Tell me about pivotal moments or times that you were involved with the city.

[WS]: One pivotal moment was in [1969] when they had the riots in the Hilltop area [and] buildings were burned. There was a strained relationship between the police community and the African American community. At that the time as an educator and administrator at Gault Junior High, the police chief asked me to be a liaison between the police department and the black community by introducing them to key people so they can have conversations about [reducing] anxiety to reduce conflict. So, that was a front line thing. When there was a decision to close McCarver, which was a form of civil rights, I was asked to be the person to stand between the school district and the black community to accept their students being bused between their home and different schools throughout the city.

[KJ]: Was that a part of the counseling program?

[WS]: That's right. [The school district] wanted to show that their commitment was to have upward mobility among African Americans and I was chosen to be a principal in 1970 because they felt I was a person that could blend the black and the white community.

[KJ]: Do you remember the process that you would go through for the summer counseling program?

[WS]: The process was simply this: to get the list of the students who were going to junior high because they were removing it from McCarver. We would meet with the ten principals of the junior high schools and talk about numbers that they can receive so there can be balance of the students. Well, that was threatening to some principals, not because they didn't want the students, but because they didn't know how their parents would react to students. This is the same community that voted for [blacks] not to be able to buy houses in their neighborhood. Now you are going to tell them they are going to go to school in their neighborhood. So, that required some foresight in terms of working with the counselors to work through that and for the superintendent and school board to back that.

[KJ]: What was some advice that you would give to counselors and principals if they were faced with that challenge of parents?

[WS]: Be a good listener, be patient, and be persuasive. If it reached a crisis, then I would be involved.

[KJ]: Did you ever hit a crisis level?

[WS]: Oh yeah, many times. Primarily, the principal may not understand that this kid might really want to come there. So, I'd have to work with the family, who's school is no longer there, and the principal by convincing that this was the best program and most viable option for this kids based on where they live. Sometimes you just have to have a thirty-minute conversation or sometimes longer, but it was persuasive. The bottom line wasn't whether this kid was fit, it was really whether or not the principal convinced and the community was convinced that the black kid would be comfortable in that environment. I often rode the bus and ride the route with the kids. There were interactions with the bus drivers too, because they didn't have that many black students on the bus. At that time, we didn't use school district buses – we used city buses. You had an outside group of drivers compared to your own drivers.

[KJ]: Did Gault accept students from McCarver?

[WS]: Yes, but that was easy because there were a lot of black students there already.

[KJ]: Outside of McCarver Junior High was Gault the second highest [black population]?

[WS]: Yeah, and then the next highest was Jason Lee and then Stewart.

[KJ]: What is your opinion on how well [the desegregation] was implemented? Were there things that you wished were different? Were there things that you were happy that happened?

[WS]: In retrospect, I wish there were have been more African American counselors, but we used everyone we had – we just didn't have enough. We could have used a two-year education process, rather than one year. Many teachers had never talked to a black student, so those were some of the apprehension.

[KJ]: I know they had their three-year plan, but if I'm hearing you correctly, instead of McCarver closing immediately and dispersing all the students, you would have like to see that be a two-year process?

[WS]: That's right. It would be one-year preparation and one-year implementation.

[KJ]: Did it seem sudden when it happened?

[WS]: Not to me, but to the community it did because they had not been educated. But, there might have been a reason why they didn't wait for two years – that might have given them two years to build up resistance.

[KJ]: You say the community wasn't prepared, do you [feel the same about] the district offices?

[WS]: They were ready. Both [black and white] communities were not ready.

[KJ]: Do you think that the administrative offices could have done things differently in the community ahead of time?

[WS]: Maybe some town hall meetings.

[KJ]: Was there any community outreach?

[WS]: There was community outreach, but there should have been town hall meetings in each of the high school districts. Also, [outreach] within the black community because the blacks really felt disenfranchised because "my brother went to McCarver, my grandmother went to McCarver."

[KJ]: They lost their history. I think that is a perspective that some people forget. It's not just a change, it's also a loss of their past.

[WS]: What made this history different was the cultural group involved. They went through the same thing when they only had Stadium [High School] and Lincoln [High School], and then they opened up Wilson [High School]. That brought about a lot of

students breaking connections like when they opened up Foss [High Schools]. It was different because it was people of color this time versus everyone being a like.

[KJ]: From the counseling program what were some of the psychological things that students of color [experienced]?

[WS]: Whether or not they were going to be accepted [or] be together in their classes. How can we identify with the community because [students] are bused in at eight o'clock and [they] are bused out at three [o'clock]. What relationships were they going to have with the school (i.e. after school activities). The district did some things to resolve that because they would have an activity bus that would come later so they could participate.

[KJ]: So, it seems like [the district] worked to accommodate those students the best that they could?

[WS]: That's right. There were some positives. One black woman I know was thrilled because when her kids were in the same school together they fought each other all the time. When they had open enrollment she had one at Foss, Mt. Tahoma [High School], Lincoln, and Stadium. But, she lost identity because she couldn't go to the [Parent Teacher Associations] of the four [high schools]. That was just one family. This mother made the choice for family unity. On the other hand, there were some students who were upset because there would be four students on a block all going to four different schools. [Many] thought at first it was more of the adults reacting to it than the students.

[KJ]: What is your perspective on school choice?

[WS]: If school choice is based upon a curriculum interest, [then] I'm more in favor of that than anything else. Also, for school choice to be effective, every school must have equitable equipment, services, and staff qualifications, so regardless of what bus you get on, at the end of that drive your needs are met [with] a sensitive principal and staff fully equipped. When they closed McCarver, they had less equipment, support services, and counselors. I'm convinced to this day that if school boards would look back fifty or sixty years ago, and made sure that they had equal equipment, teachers, and representation of color then de facto desegregation would have never taken off. But, it also would have required the bankers, realtors, and churches being honest. Just as we were busing the black students out of McCarver, the white churches were closing their doors and moving to the suburbs – white flight. There's only one church in the Hilltop area that was built from the ground up by a black congregation – St. Paul. All the rest were blacks buying churches as the whites were leaving.

[KJ]: You said you experience discrimination in housing when you moved here. Can you tell me any stories about any racism that you did experience?

[WS]: I would approach an apartment and they would flip the sign to say “no vacancy” over and over. There were always white friends to the African American community that would just call and the apartment would be available.

[KJ]: Did the NAACP task you with any work to help with the housing issue in Tacoma?

[WS]: Yes, to get out the vote. I was never a point person for anything. You can't have all generals you needed to have soldiers. I was on the first commission [in Tacoma] for human rights. In 1972, I was on the first panel – Tacoma Human Rights Commission.

[KJ]: Can you tell me who else was on it?

[WS]: Father Pitch, from St. Patrick Church, and Victor Lyon, long time realtor. In fact, I'm the only one that's still living from that group.

[KJ]: Tell me what kinds of things you would go to with this commission?

[WS]: We were a body to receive information and process it to the city. We dealt with policy and we were kind of a hearing board for the public. We would transfer the information to the mayor and city council. We were trying to address public housing accommodation, and Victor Lyon was very good for that because he was one of the lead realtors in town and Jewish.

[KJ]: Do you remember any specific policy the Human Rights Commission influenced?

[WS]: We developed them all. We did a lot in the area of jobs. We couldn't do a lot in the private sector, but we would make statements to unions to open up their journeyman's program [to minorities]. We didn't have blacks as carpenters or painters because they could never get into the union. You'll always find someone that says this is the right thing to do. Some of the other things we did was work with people to identify their skills. Our leadership was able to get a clerk in Sears.

[KJ]: You spent a lot of years in administration as the assistant superintendent of personnel. Tell me about your philosophy for hiring when it comes to equity – what were you looking for?

[WS]: I was looking for sources for the persons who could do the job. That's why I was going to the historically black colleges and universities because they trained teachers. I went out to the officer's club at Fort Lewis and McCord, because most of the black officers in the air force or the army had gone to all black schools. We felt that we should hire aids, teacher assistants, and we had some very talented teacher assistants so we worked with the district to get some funding to send a group over to Central Washington [University] during the summer and then they would take classes during the year to become teachers. So, we were able to get minorities that way. But the point was, we had

a superintendent that believed in it and he educated the school board. Not only [Angelo] Giaudrone, but you had [Alexander] Sergienko and Dele Cross and they all believed in it. We had a personnel director at the time that was really dynamic, Trygve Blix, [and] Blix [Elementary] is named after him.

[KJ]: Do you remember what the teacher demographics was when you became assistant superintendent and then when you left?

[WS]: I don't remember the statistic, but I know we increased it. We had a good number of black principals and assistant principals.

[KJ]: Where has Tacoma gone, in your eyes, from when you left?

[WS]: I think they've advanced, but the demographic of the city and district has changed. If there is any shortfall within the district, and there's always been even when I was here, it would be the absence of the African American male principal.

[KJ]: What about your opinion or your insight on curriculum?

[WS]: The biggest thing that's helped curriculum has been technology where they don't have to rely on textbooks for everything because by the time your print one it's out of date. With technology they are able to bring a lot of diversity into the game.

[KJ]: Last time we spoke, you seemed to have some army stories in mind.

[WS]: The biggest thing for civil rights was when I was appointed as the first military reserve officer in a pay scale in Pierce County. It was such a volatile thing that one of the officers left the unit because he couldn't accept the fact that I'm an African American, he's a second lieutenant and I was commissioned as a first lieutenant. He didn't have any respect for my education or background. For my position I was able to get several other black that were officers into pay slots. The other thing about the military was you still had a lot of blacks that were in, but they weren't getting promotions. We were able to use the military program for affirmative action and equity to get more persons of color into leadership roles. They had the ability but it was just the good old boys game that left them out. What we don't want to forget is that every segment of society is still America. We may call it military, a university, or a public school but they are still the same people, so the challenges are the same. You had a high number of blacks not getting promoted, going to prison, and getting article fifteens, which will impact your [military] promotion really fast.

[KJ]: How long were you in the reserves?

[WS]: Thirty years. I went from first lieutenant to colonel six – that's one level beyond a general.

[KJ]: We you ever called for any particular situation?

[WS]: No, we were hospital. We were a thousand-bed hospital, so when you mobilize a thousand bed hospital then you have a major crisis that you need a thousand beds for a thousand patients. The thousand bed hospital was only activated one time and that was for the Iraqi situation. We were loaded with nurses, physical therapists, occupational therapists, dentists, nutritionists, and I happened to be in administration. When that unit returned they had so many problems that they dissolved the unit. Many doctors lost their practice while they were gone – and they were only gone for about four months.

[KJ]: Did you chose to be with that unit or were you assigned?

[WS]: I was assigned to that unit when I first got out as an enlisted person because when I separated I had to be in the reserve unit for two years minimum and then inactive reserve unit for four years. When I was performing as an active reservist, the commander said I was good and that I need to stay in the reserves and go for a promotion. I always had a paid position, but it was enlisted [rather than reserved].

[KJ]: Do you have any other stories?

[WS]: I think an interesting story was coming from Lincoln High School as principal to this building as the assistant superintendent. There were those who were upset that I had received a promotion because they felt it should have been a lesser position – not the top position in personnel. There were others already in personnel and I was brought in over them. I'm sure that part of the decision was having an African American in a high visible position.

[KJ]: Did any animosity hinder you?

[WS]: I think initially, but after they got a chance to meet me and work with me it worked out fine.

[KJ]: No hiccups?

[WS]: Well, you always have those – at any job. Same thing when I went to Lincoln, there was a guy that said I was too young. After a couple of years, they called me up and apologized. They are just people and they still react that way to persons now – they react to females in positions. What's important is make sure that you can perform. Performance is what removes doubt and questions.

[KJ]: I'm running out of questions.

[WS]: I think you've done a good job. I think one of the things in the process of my visibility by being in the community so much is that it served as an enabler. For example, [a company] wanted to employ some blacks so they would call me up because they felt that I had credibility and I would recommend someone who would do the job. I didn't recommend on the basis of skin pigment alone. Can you go to work on time? If a person reports to work on time the rest will take care of itself. We had a couple of principals that said they needed an English teacher or a math teacher and they knew I knew their school and their needs. There was another principal who I knew what he was going to ask for when he came down, so I didn't let him come down much. He was the vainest of persons. Age doesn't dictate your ability to perform – either end of the spectrum.

[KJ]: Who do you try to be for others and why do you think they continue to reach out to you?

[WS]: They know I care. They know that I will tell the truth and they can trust me. They know I have a passion for them, as well as the job – it exudes. I'll tell you a story, I had a woman who was from the Philippines, an elementary principal in Tacoma, and I didn't work with elementary principals so I assumed she was okay. A neighboring district was in need of a person of color, and she had been a student in that district, so they quickly hired her and it didn't work out. They released her back to Tacoma and the people over Elementary Education, who had the authority to recommend her wouldn't recommend her. I was very upset with them, personally, because if she had those weaknesses then why did they let her go out to other districts – why didn't they train her. She came in and she cried. I said I have a teaching position and you would be at this [salary] level. She was still crying and said she was going home, and I said "let me just tell you something, if you go home and stay then you get zero dollars. If you come in and teach, you get roughly \$50,000." Two years later she's got a principal position again. I had one principal who only wanted young staff, so I told him to look in the mirror – one of these days when you look in the mirror you are not going to be as young and spry as you are now, and you are going to wonder how people treated me. It so happened in his own career he was pushed aside because of his age, and he came to me. Age discrimination is real – they will lie about it – but it's real. What made education so different today is the number of jobs of high salary at the beginning phase. If a teacher would settle down and think in terms of medical, built-in retirement system, family leave, vacation that it might be worth taking a job that's ten thousand less because, in reality, you're getting more than ten thousand.

[KJ]: I feel like I talk to more people that somehow you touched in many ways.

[WS]: I'm still doing it. I was on the School Board for six years. [I ran] because I wanted to be involved with the schools, effect policy, and wanted to work with the superintendent and get a chance to be with the schools on a different level.

[KJ]: Did anybody encourage you to run?

[WS]: Couple of blacks from the community wanted a black on the School Board.

[KJ]: You only served one term.

[WS]: Because of my wife's Parkinson's. It was not best for my family situation.

[KJ]: What were some policies while you were on the School Board that you were a part of?

[WS]: The sabbatical leave policy and the suspension policy. What we did was we made sure there was a level before there is a final exclusion that there would be at least two board members to hear the case.

[KJ]: Why did you feel that was an important change to make?

[WS]: It would help [the board] to understand our students and the families at another level and to support the school district so we were feeling the same thing they were feeling. Also, the opportunity to look at contracts with minorities. I wanted to make sure that there might be some ethnic minority vendors who were competitive. We were concerned about quality bids because the lowest bids are not always your best bid. You don't learn about how a district operates being a principal or employee, you learn when you've been in all the positions. I wanted our School Board to reflect our community, so we had a Hispanic, an African American, a Japanese, and three females.

[KJ]: Do you still work with the School Board?

[WS]: Yeah, I'm on the citizen audit committee. I review the budget. There are six of us on there. [I've served] about seven years now.

[KJ]: Do you want to discuss U.S. politics?

[WS]: It's sad right now. I'm concerned about our nation because what gains were made we are going to lose. We are caught on two divides – either conservative or liberal when it's neither, its respect for each other. [President Trump] spends more time what [President] Obama did, rather than decide what he's going to do with a positive program. People are insane over the future of health care in this country. There are a lot of people who are in limbo, and I have a great empathy. I go to get medicine worth three or four hundred dollars and I pay zero because I'm a retired soldier with health care for life. But, I can't just be comfortable because I'm comfortable, I have to be concerned about others in that situation.