

*Civil Rights History Project
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Interviewee: Mr. Junius Williams
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Interviewer: Joseph Mosnier, Ph.D.
Videographer: John Bishop
Length: 2:54:49

John Bishop: We're on.

Joe Mosnier: Today is Thursday, July 20, 2011. My name is Joe Mosnier of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I'm with videographer John Bishop in, on the Rutgers University campus in Newark, New Jersey, to do an oral history interview for the Civil Rights History Project, a joint undertaking of the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

And we're delighted and privileged today to be with Mr. Junius Williams, um, to talk about all of your work over the years in the Movement and in the decades since. So, Mr. Williams, thank you so much for the welcome to the campus and, uh, it's very nice to sit down with you. Thank you.

Junius Williams: Um-hmm.

JM: Let me have you just, to begin, talk a little bit about, um, where you were born, your parents, your family.

JW: I was born in Suffolk, Virginia, and my parents were music teachers. My father was the first black band director in Richmond, and my mother was the first coordinator of music in, uh, Norfolk, Virginia, for schools. So, they had a big musical impact on my life.

JM: Were your parents Virginians?

JW: My parents are Virginians. My father is from Danville. My mother is from Suffolk.

JM: Um, and how old were you when you moved from Suffolk over to Richmond?

JW: I was five, I'm told. So, I don't have too much independent recollection of growing up in Suffolk, although we went to Suffolk quite often in the summer, when my parents were off in summer school, uh, getting higher degrees, or working toward that anyway.

JM: Um-hmm, um-hmm. Where had they, um, gotten their musical training?

JW: My mother went to Howard University and then transferred to the University of Pennsylvania. She got a degree in music education. And my father got the same degree from West Virginia State.

JM: Yeah.

JW: He was a, he was a violinist and a singer. She was a pianist and a singer.

JM: So, it was a house full of music?

JW: House full of music.

JM: Yeah. Do you have siblings?

JW: I have – well, I had several siblings, but my most immediate sibling was my brother, John. We grew up at the same time. And then, I had other half-brothers and sisters.

JM: Um-hmm. So, you would have been, uh, if you moved at five, you would have done your schooling, um, in Richmond?

JW: I did.

JM: Yeah. Could you talk a little bit about the community, the neighborhood, the public school experience?

JW: Um-hmm. We started school a little early because, uh, my brother, both my brother and I turned five in the later part of the year. So, my mother talked the officials into letting us start when we were four, so we were always a little younger than our peers. We already knew how to read. We already knew how to count. So, that wasn't the issue. The issue was, should they have done it? And it didn't matter, because she got us in there.

Schools were segregated. She was a music teacher in the elementary schools, and my father was a music teacher in the high school level. So, school was, for us, it was fun. We had a good time. There were, uh, challenging moments, but, uh, nothing to do with race, because we were insulated from that, from the impact of race, partially because of, uh, our parents' middle class standing, uh, partially because of the skillful way in which they negotiated the system to keep us safe. So, we grew up on the North Side of town, which, uh, was a working -class, middle-class area, moved from North Avenue to Barton Avenue, where my parents bought a house.

And, uh, I remember high school, in particular, there was a, uh, moment in which I had to decide whether I was going to go to high school across the – high school in, high school in, uh, the northwestern side. I guess it was more West Richmond. I'm trying to think of exactly the sector that Walker was in, because that's where most of my friends were going, to Maggie Walker [High School]. But my father taught at Armstrong [High School]. My father wanted me

to come to Armstrong. He said that was a better school. I didn't want to go, because my friends were going to Walker, but he persuaded me to come to Armstrong.

Now, in Richmond at that time, there were two high schools for black people. You either went to Walker or you went to Armstrong. And, just to let you know how that rivalry played out, every Thanksgiving we had a football classic. It wasn't just a game. It was a classic, the Maggie Walker-Armstrong Classic. And it was so big they had [5:00] to put it in City Stadium. There were thirty thousand people who came to that game every year. You either were for Armstrong or you were for Walker. If you didn't graduate, it didn't matter. If you were associated with one or the other, you were for that team. So, that was one of the benefits of segregation. It kind of ordered our lives socially for us. We knew who we were and where we stood.

JM: Did, um – Were you an athlete? Was that something that – were you a football player?

JW: No, I played – well, I played tennis.

JM: Um-hmm.

JW: The football players didn't consider that a sport [laughter] – not until Arthur Ashe became a champion. I grew up with Arthur, as a matter of fact. Arthur was one of the people who went to Walker and eventually went to high school, I believe, somewhere in, uh, Los Angeles, maybe. I'm not so sure.

JM: Very interesting.

JW: But he went out of town to play tennis. So, when Arthur began to get national prominence as “the first black in tennis,” a lot of the athletes had to change their minds about that. And I was glad because by that time I had learned to play tennis. I played with Arthur a

little bit, which is to say, Arthur beat me in tennis. I think, uh, in doubles we once got three games out of two sets against Arthur and his partner.

JM: That's not bad; that's not bad.

JW: Um-hmm. [Clears throat]

JM: Yeah. Did your family, um, was church a part of your life coming up?

JW: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Baptist.

JM: Um-hmm.

JW: My father taught music, or was the music director at one church, and my mother had several choirs at, uh, Ebenezer Baptist Church. That's where my brother and I went. Music was a part of our life wherever we turned.

JM: Yeah. Um, so, you were born in '43, so by mid-decade in the '50s, you're, uh, twelve or thirteen years old. Were the events of – I'm thinking now about things like the *Brown* [*Brown v. Board of Education*] decision, about Emmett Till, about Montgomery, Little Rock –?

JW: Um-hmm.

JM: Was your household attentive in an active conversational way to those things?

JW: Yes, because of *JET* magazine and *Ebony* magazine. The picture of Emmett Till sticks in my mind now. That open casket picture in Chicago when – what was it – fifty thousand people filed by to see his bloated, disfigured body. I was a year younger, or maybe two years younger than Emmett Till, and I could just picture myself in that same situation. So, we got mad, mad, mad! That was one of the sparks that really lit the Civil Rights Movement in a lot of people's hearts, whether we did anything or not.

Uh, and then there were some victories that we had also along the civil rights front, of our own making. Um, there was one – at a certain point, there was a festival called the Tobacco

Festival Parade, because Richmond was a big tobacco town. They processed tobacco there. So, uh, it was usually segregated, and the white bands were supposed to be in the front, black bands in the back. Well, my father said, “We’re not going to march in the back,” and the other music teacher at Walker said the same thing – Joe Kennedy, a very prominent musician in his own right. And so, we didn’t.

But at some point, they said, “Okay, we’re going to integrate it.” So, there was this moment when we had four high schools – two white, two black – that were meeting at the gathering point in the West End of town, getting ready to march in the parade. There was Armstrong and Walker on two corners, and then, across the street on the others, were John Marshall and Thomas Jefferson. Those were the two main white schools.

So, of course, the whites presumed to practice first, and they did it with the drummers. And the drummers were very rudimental, very, very, very, very sophisticated and polished rudimental drummers. But we laughed, because we knew Armstrong’s drummers were precise, but we had soul. And we kicked their butt! There laid dead one of the great rules of white supremacy, that they could do it better than we could. We saw it for ourselves, so we had a victory! That was our first civil rights victory in my family, because we talked about that forever. And, of course, we marched gloriously. I mean, we marched like we had never marched before. And there were black and white people cheering us along Broad Street in Newark. I get teary-eyed just thinking about that moment.

JM: Richmond.

JW: Right, um-hmm. I’m sorry. That was in Richmond.

JM: Yeah. So, that would have been during your high school years?

JW: Yeah. You want me to say that again?

JM: No, no, that's fine. Um, did, um, [10:00] did – you had mentioned to me earlier when we were chatting before we started the interview that you thought very seriously about taking music, um, making music your life and going to school to study music in college.

JW: Um-hmm, um-hmm.

JM: How did you, how did you resolve upon the path towards Amherst?

JW: Well, my father was a professional musician, and he had played in some bands in Atlantic City, where he grew up, and other places. And he knew what the life of an itinerant musician was, playing in bands. So, he did not let me play in the pickup bands, uh, in Richmond. I was good on alto saxophone, and people asked me to play. But he said, “No, can't do it. I'm not going to let you go out here and do that.”

And then, they discouraged me from becoming a musician, because they didn't want me to have that kind of life of performance on the road, nor did they want me to be a music teacher in school, because they said that was too precarious in terms of the money. But I wanted to be a musician, so, uh, I applied to Northwestern, because I saw that band on television at some football game, some Big Ten football game, and I said, “That's where I want to go to school!”

JM: Because –?

JW: Because of the band. And I saw myself in that band. I played clarinet, saxophones, and drums at that point. And I was pretty good on all of them. So, I knew I would have a chance, at least, to get into that band. So, I got accepted at Northwestern, because I had good grades. I was valedictorian of my class. I had a 3.96 out of a 4.0 average. But they didn't give me any money.

Amherst College, on the other hand, which was recommended by a friend in the family, who had gone to Amherst and had just graduated the year before, said, “That's the best small

college in the country.” I didn’t know Amherst from Edison, but they gave me a free ride. They gave me the full package, full scholarship. So, of course, there was no doubt I was going to Amherst.

And, ironically, the music program was so bad that I put my saxophone down and didn’t pick it up for most of the four years I was there – *until* one day. This guy came up from the Movement one day, because my place was always available for people who needed rest and relaxation. This guy came up from Mississippi; I won’t mention his name because of what I’m going to say about him. Well, he had a harmonica and he was blowing it. He thought he was a bluesman, but he couldn’t play that harp. So, the next day, which was a Monday, I went over to the music store, which was next door to my, my, where I was staying in the fraternity house, and I got a C-harmonica. I brought it back. I just took to it, it took to me, uh, and I’ve been playing it ever since. [Laughter]

JB: Did you cross-play in what is it? What’s the cross-tuning for C?

JW: G.

JB: G?

JW: Uh-huh.

JB: So, you could play blues in G?

JW: I could play it mostly in G, because that’s where you get the full blues effect. And if you play it in C, you’re only on a limited basis. So, most of us play a fourth above the piano. Most blues harps are tuned – are playing one-fourth above, uh, the, the piano player or the guitar player, whoever’s got the concert C.

JM: Before you, even though before you – even before you departed for Amherst in the fall of ’61, the active phase, the demonstration phase of the Movement had come into your

world, and I, I, um, I'm interested in your recollections about events around Virginia Union in 1960.

JW: Yeah, Virginia Union, 1960 or early 1961. Charles Sherrod, who was the head of the black students up at, uh, Virginia Union University, led a series of, uh, demonstrations and sit-ins at the department stores in downtown Richmond: Miller & Rhodes, Thalheimer's, Kresge's. I'm not so sure where it was, because I never got that close. I told my parents I wanted to join, and they said, "Oh, no! Uh, the college students said they don't want any high school students involved."

When I met Charles Sherrod, I asked him, "Was that true? Did you guys really say you didn't want high school students because we couldn't be nonviolent?" He said, "No." So, that was just my mother and father's clever way of keeping me out of harm's way, as they saw it. Little did they know! So, they whisked me off to Amherst College in 1961. And, uh – but the fire was still burning, because I knew I had to do something, because I couldn't just let everybody else do it and I wasn't going do it.

JM: Yeah.

JW: So, eventually, uh, we formed – I was a part of the civil rights group there, and we were in support of [15:00] civil rights. But at some point or another, it was time for me to go south, so that's what happened in 1965.

JM: Yeah, let me ask about, let me, um – this is all so interesting I want to move with some care and a little bit more slowly.

JW: All right.

JM: I'm interested in, in, uh – you've just mentioned this incident with your folks, where they're looking out for their child and wanting to make sure that you're clear of the tensions and prospective dangers of these early sit-ins in Richmond.

JW: Um-hmm. Um-hmm.

JM: Um, what was the relationship that prevailed between you and your parents on those kinds of questions, and how were your views and perspectives developing in these years, just towards the end of high school, around the civil rights question? [Siren sounds in background]

JW: Well, first it was Emmett Till. Uh, then it was news about the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the rise of this man called Martin Luther King. And so, we talked about all those things. It was clear that things were changing. And, of course, we all knew about the *Brown* [*Brown v. Board of Education*] case. But, other than those small victories that we had, such as the Armstrong-Walker versus Thomas Jefferson-John Marshall little duel, uh, we didn't see much change. So, there was talk about it until the students demonstrated. And, of course, my parents were in favor of that, but they thought that was dangerous.

There was one other moment. At some point after the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the lawsuit came about that integrated, said you got to integrate bus transportation throughout the South. So, Richmond complied. [Laughs] So, uh, one day, the word went out that buses are now desegregated. So, my parents got hold of the news and told Johnny and me, because they knew we were going to try it. [Laughs] They said, "Now, when you get on that bus, I want you to be careful. Don't do this; don't do that." And I'm sure that was the conversation held in many homes around Richmond that day, with black parents trying to protect us.

[Laughs] So, we got on the bus. And, sure enough, we sat down in the closest seat we could to the driver. We sat down so close that we could see the color of his neck, which was red, [phone rings] when we sat in those seats, because nobody else had done it. [phone rings]

JB: I'm just going to pause here.

JM: Okay.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, we're back. [Phone rings]

JW: Why don't you just pick it up? Yeah, just answer it.

JM: They're gone.

JW: Okay, good. Where do you want me to start?

JB: We're still on.

JM: Okay, we're still on – the phone interruption, obviously. So, please, you were talking about you got on the bus and you –

JW: So, we got on the bus. And there was nobody seated in the front seats at all, and most of the older black people were still sitting in the back of the bus. So, we sat down, and we were close enough to the driver so that I could see the color of his neck, which was red at that point. He wasn't too happy about this. And we started laughing and smiling amongst ourselves, because we had done it. And it was the first time that the older black people who got, who were on the bus, they smiled. They smiled at us, because we had done something – [chokes up] hm. I get a little emotional about that. [Pause] Uh, we had done something they wanted to do for a long time.

And so, after the novelty wore off, which was within a couple of days, we all trooped back to the back of the bus, where we could cut up like kids like to do. But it was new

relationship between us and the older people by that point. But probably after time went on, they still looked at us and told us to be quiet when we were getting too noisy. But just for that magic moment in time, we did something they couldn't do for, for themselves. And then, gradually, integration just kind of stole its way onto the public transportation system in Richmond.

JM: Yeah. A couple more questions about coming up in Richmond –

JW: Um-hmm.

JM: Did you ever, um, you or family members or folks you knew well, um, have, as were so unfortunately common, experiences of violence and violence around, you know, around race?

JW: Um-hmm. We lived in a – when we bought the house, when my parents [20:00] bought the house on Barton Avenue, there was a steep wooded ravine, and on the other side, white people still lived. So, white boys used to shoot, shoot at us with BB guns. We, in turn, made weapons. We had bamboo growing in the yard, so we made – and there was slate coming from the roof – so we made tomahawks and spears and arrows and all that, but we couldn't get within range to use them. There was another street – and that was kind of comical.

At one point, there was a, a little breach. The guys came over, and, uh, I ended up getting shot in the hand with a BB gun, trying to make friends with some of them, because I was holding up something for one of them to shoot at, and he ended up shooting me. So, I think that was a lesson learned. So, uh, that was, I guess, our moment of détente, if you will.

JM: Because that shooting was unintentional, then. He didn't –?

JW: I don't think he was – I don't think he wanted to do it.

JM: Right.

JW: I don't think he wanted to shoot me. At other points, he probably would have.

JM: Yeah.

JW: But not at that point. But he went back to where he lived. We went back – I went in the house and got something to put on my hand. [Laughs]

There was a street, though, called Brooklyn Park Boulevard in the north part, the North Side of Richmond, where whites lived totally, on the other side, and we didn't dare go across that street. So, I never went over there to test it. We went on the Avenue sometimes to buy ice cream at High's, but that was it – H-I-G-H-S – so that was about it. We went to buy ice cream at High's, and my mother loved to do that. But other than to go up there to participate as merchants, as, uh, as consumers in these merchant's stores, that's about the only interaction we had. I had no white friends in Newark my own age.

JM: In Richmond.

JW: I'll repeat that: I had no white friends in Richmond of my own age. We were, uh, just about totally insulated at school. There was one Russian professor at, uh, at, uh, school, at Armstrong, but all of my other teachers were black. Uh, in church – black. Uh, there were some black professionals we saw in the medical profession. I had a, uh, I had asthma, so I had to go to an asthma specialist, and he was black. And, uh, so, except for the doctors we saw, that was pretty much it.

JM: Yeah. That one white member of the faculty at the high school, Russian –

JW: Um-hmm?

JM: Did he happen to be Jewish also? Do you know?

JW: I'm not sure. I didn't take Russian.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Um, were you, when you were – just before heading off to Amherst again, um, in fall of '61, I mean, '60, '61, that period is, um, pretty busy with Greensboro [North Carolina] and –

JW: Um-hmm.

JM: Virginia Union [University, in Richmond] and –

JW: Um-hmm.

JM: Rock Hill [South Carolina] and Freedom Rides and – um, when did the idea of becoming a lawyer enter into your thinking, and did it relate at all to the civil rights question?

JW: Oh, yeah. Well, it kind of stole into my consciousness that that might be something I could do. I was at Amherst College, but my major thought was that I was going to go south and be in the Movement, uh, and become a professional Movement person, whatever that was. Uh, I wanted to be with SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee]. I wanted to be a SNCC field secretary. I wanted to organize people to do whatever had to be done at that particular time.

So, my parents put that idea in my head. And I remember they didn't want me to be a musician, but lawyers were fine. If I had wanted to be a doctor, they would have encouraged that, too. But clearly I was not on the science/math trip. So, uh, they said, "Well, why don't you become a lawyer?" And they kept pushing that program, because they saw where I was going with the civil rights thing.

I was, uh, telling them about things I was doing on campus. Uh, when I came home during spring break, I was doing voter registration in Richmond. I did voter registration in Springfield, uh, Massachusetts, which was right around the corner from Amherst. Uh, I had this conference called "The Civil Rights Movement: Reform or Revolution?" I, and a group of

others, uh, carried that conference out in the, I guess, it was the winter of 1965. About a thousand people came from all over the East Coast to that conference. So, they saw where I was going and said, “Why don’t you be a lawyer?”

So, I thought about it and I said, “Well, maybe so, but not now.” I could see being a lawyer, being a civil rights lawyer, because I knew of the great civil rights lawyers in the *Brown* [*Brown v. Board of Education*] tradition. As a matter of fact, Oliver Hill was a neighbor.

JM: Is that right?

JW: Yes, he’s a good friend. He became a better friend after my mother passed. But he and she went to Howard at the same time. He was a law student, and she was an undergraduate [25:00] at Howard at the same time. And so, living in Richmond, we went to the same church.

So, it was kind of like a – you know, there’s a little story there, because [laughs] one time we were talking, and he said he was driving through Suffolk on the way to Norfolk to argue the, uh, case for equal pay for the teachers, and he got stopped by the police. And so, he said the first person he called was my grandfather, Junius White, uh, because he had to get somebody to vouch for him to get out of jail. And my grandfather was well respected as a businessman and churchman in the town. So, the white people in charge said, “If Junius White says he’s okay, then we’re going to let him out on bail.” They didn’t know what he was doing, of course. They had no idea he was going down to try that case. Otherwise, Junius White or anybody couldn’t have stopped them for keeping him.

So, uh, that’s, that’s the way that went. I wanted to be a lawyer because they wanted me to be a lawyer more than anything else. So this is what I said, uh, “I will apply to two law schools. If I get in one of those two, I’ll go. If not, I’m going south.” So, they said, “Okay.” But they didn’t understand the high stakes poker I was playing, because I only applied to

Columbia and Yale. And I said, “Well, what the hell, if I get in there, I’ll go.” I was not going to spend all of my time filling out forms for seven law schools, [laughs] and I didn’t want to go to any of them anyway!

And I got in! But by this time, Tom Hayden had, uh, approached me – but we might be getting a little ahead of the story.

JM: Yeah, yeah, we’ll come back to that.

JW: [Laughs] All right.

JM: Let me ask you to – it’s really interesting. I have to say, Oliver Hill, that’s not a – that’s, that’s a pretty substantial, uh, role model.

JW: Oh, yeah.

JM: He was quite a –

JW: Um-hmm.

JM: That was quite a firm, and he was quite a, quite a significant attorney.

JW: And the firm of Hill, Tucker & Marsh [African American law firm in Richmond, Virginia]. They were there, too. They were all my family friends.

JM: Amazing.

JW: Um-hmm.

JM: Yeah. Would you say, thinking about, thinking about folks like Mr. Hill and his law partners and your folks and other people in the community –?

JW: Um-hmm. Um-hmm.

JM: As you think back, who would you say probably – you know that question about who shaped you most? Who most influenced the way you came up and began to think about yourself as a young adult man?

JW: My father. Yeah, he was my kind of – I guess he was, he was my role model. I liked the way he, he, uh, talked to people. I liked the, the popularity that he had. The kids called him “Pop” Williams. Uh, he would sit on the front porch and speak to everybody who passed. My mother said, “What are you speaking to them for? You don’t know them.” “I just like to speak to people.” I speak to people, now, if I see them in the street. I speak to people. So, I would say he was probably my biggest, closest role model.

JM: What was the experience like, um, coming out of segregated Richmond and landing as a college freshman in Amherst, Massachusetts?

JW: Um-hmm, um-hmm. [Laughs] Well, these are the best of times and these are the worst of times. Uh, my mother’s plan was: Get him out of the clutches of segregation, and, to do that, you need to go to the best schools. Now, she had gone to Howard and she had gone to University of Pennsylvania, so she had some credentials to speak about both.

My father had gone to West Virginia State, which was a land grant black college out there. Uh, he didn’t have too much to say about this. As far as he was concerned, black colleges were fine. But she didn’t want us to go to a black college. That was straight-out her opinion, “Got to go to a white school *and* in the North.”

And so, she engineered that and got us ready. We went to, uh, summer courses at, uh, various places. Whatever, whatever special preparatory thing she could find, my brother and I went to those, and we went to camp in New Jersey and somewhere else. So, we were *socially* accustomed to white people, not through Richmond, but because of our summers away from Richmond. So, there was no culture shock in that respect.

But what *was* a culture shock was the fact that we were there and couldn’t retreat and go anywhere else, back to our own little enclave, as we could after the summer was over with, uh,

those other programs. So, there I was. I wore a yellow sweater and had a big smile on. And that's what I remember my image was most of the time. Uh, people would come up and say, "You're not [30:00] like most of the colored people that we know," um, or "most of the Negroes that we know," and then they'd go on to tell some anecdotal something or other that was totally irrelevant and hurting. And I would just smile and keep going.

And social life was absolutely horrible, because the, the way it was structured at Amherst and all of those other colleges, you've got to understand, uh, Amherst was all men at that point. So, uh, there were four black people in each class, and it had been that way forevermore. So, there's a, there's a, there's a little mixed reaction that I have. I really appreciated Dean Wilson, who came and recruited me to come to Amherst, but – and maybe, but for him, there would have been less – but there *was* a quota. To those who speak about, against quotas, remember there have been quotas for a long time – and still are, but that's another story.

So, there were four plus four plus four. And at Smith College, there were four. At Mount Holyoke College, there were four. And that – there was no other; Hampshire College wasn't there at the time. And, of course, at UMass [University of Massachusetts-Amherst], which was a big state school a mile away, actually closest, uh, there was a whole class barrier there, but they didn't have very much – it wasn't very much different down there either. Now, I say that because most of the dating by Amherst guys was done at Smith and Holyoke. [Someone coughs] I didn't care about going to UMass. It was just very few people down there. I don't know of any people in my class who were black, any young ladies, at that time who were there.

And I certainly wasn't going to be the one who was going to try to do the interracial dating thing at that point in my life. It just wasn't done. I look at the interracial couples that I see now; it's very casual in America. America has changed in that respect. But at that time, it

just wasn't done. So, whenever I was put in a situation where, uh, I had to seek out and be friends with a person of the other sex, it was always iffy. You ask somebody to dance at one of those God-awful mixers. I got told, "No," more times than I got told, "Yes." So, if I – and on those "Yes" occasions, it was always, uh, seemingly – well, not always, but most of the times, it was just, "Well, I don't want to embarrass you and I don't want to appear to be other than what I am, so I'll go ahead and do you a favor." That's basically the way it was.

But the guys were good. I mean, I had good roommates. Um, other than those people who questioned me about, uh, various things – uh, but the people that I was associated with at Pratt Dormitory in my first year were, were, uh, were basically good guys. Now, I ran – I ran – I participated in the, uh, rush in my freshman year for fraternities, because Amherst at that time was about ninety, ninety-five percent fraternity, because that's the only place you could go to have girls in the rooms and throughout the house, so to speak. The social life in the dorms was really, really, really slim. So, that's the way they encouraged fraternities. They have no fraternities now. But at that time, that was part of the social fabric. That was part of the culture, rushing in your freshman year.

So, uh, I was approached by, uh, several houses, one of which was Alpha Delta Phi, which was one of the most exclusive fraternities on the campus. They had had no black people in their history. And so, uh, the other one that I narrowed it down to was Theta Delt, and, of course, they were playing the race card in the other way, because they're saying they don't want you for any other reason than you're black. And, uh, I said, "Okay, well, I'm going to go where I feel most comfortable, and that had to do with who were my friends who were going," and all those kinds of things guys usually do. So, I got a, I got a bid to go to AD [Alpha Delta Phi], and that's where I went.

So, I, I had that reputation of being the first. And I would say that was probably the, uh, the mix of what I was involved with at most times, the mix being those people who I genuinely could get along with and genuinely liked me, uh, versus the opportunities to be the first, wherein you really don't know what's going to happen to you, because you don't know what folks' motives are [35:00] underneath all of that. It's kind of like going – I imagine what it was like going – to school in Arkansas for the first time, the Little Rock Nine, except that there was a more pleasant face to the racism, in some cases.

But, in the case of Alpha Delta Phi, it was great. I mean, the guys were, were wonderful. They were – welcomed me, except for two people, maybe three, that I kind of stayed away from. Most of the people, if they had any ill feelings, they didn't show it. I fit in with them, and they fit in with me.

JM: I'll ask about how you got connected there in Massachusetts to SNCC in a minute, but – well, let's pause for a second.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're back.

JM: Um, how about the academic experience?

JW: Academics was rough. I found out later that the schools in the South, in general, not just the black schools, but the schools in the South in general, just didn't have what was on the plates of the schools in the North. For example, I didn't have any calculus. I didn't have any pre-calculus. The most I had was trigonometry. The guys I was in school with had already had calculus. I didn't even know what calculus was. I still don't know what calculus is, if you ask me now. But I made it through with a C!

Now, that to me was a major hurdle in my life. A) I had never made a C in my life before, and most of what I made in that first year, because of calculus and because of physics, which was based on that same calculus, which I still didn't know, that pulled away my time to study the English and the French and the history and all that. I just didn't have time to do it, because I was scrambling, trying to get that math. So, I ended up with a C average, but I didn't get below a C. I had no Ds. I never had a D on my transcript.

Uh, but, of course, that kind of ruined my, my, my, uh, the possibilities of me getting a really, really, really high grade average, because for two semesters I had two courses of four credits each, that's sixteen credits of a C of one kind or another. I don't even know if it was a solid C but it was in that C range, 75, 74, whatever it was. Uh, so my grades suffered, and my ego suffered, because I thought I was dumb. I thought I wasn't able to learn, because I just couldn't catch on to some of that stuff that was done.

At one point, in my second semester, the, uh – I had a math professor named Bailey Brown, and Professor Brown gave a midterm exam in calculus. And I had written the answer and I looked at it and then I just x-ed it out and put something else down. So, he went over my paper and he looked at it and said, "You had the right answer," and gave me an A, because I had it. I just did not have the confidence in myself to know that I had actually understood it to put it down on the paper. So, I went around campus telling everybody, "Ooo! I got an A in calculus!" Everybody said, "Ah! Junius got an A in calculus!" So, we celebrated that for a minute, until it was time to go on to something else.

But then, in the final exam, I had three exams in two days – physics, calculus, and history – uh, I think two in one day, and one was on the third. And I fell asleep and I couldn't study for the calculus. So, I ended up failing the exam. So, an A plus an F gives you what – a C! I

couldn't get away from that C. No matter how well I had done, I ended up falling down. But finally when I got out of my freshman year, in my sophomore year, I began to get some Bs along with some Cs. Junior year, more Bs, until my senior year I got Bs and As because I was into some areas that I felt better with and I had more confidence. I got into political science, for example.

Um, I took economics from a professor, who, uh – one economics course, the first economics course I took, I got a C-plus in it. But then, I met – I heard about this man named Colstead Warren, Professor Warren. And because of my work in the Movement – uh, in 1964, I worked in Harlem, and I was there with, uh, Julian Houston and, uh, some other people whose names will come back to me, [40:00] but Julian Houston and “Pigeon,” uh, Norman, “Pigeon” Cousins, Norman Cousins' daughter. I can't think of anything else right now but “Pigeon;” that was her nickname. So, we were always discussing the Civil Rights Movement. But these young people knew the whole Marxist context, which was up to that point an anathema to me, an anathema to me, because Marxism was something you were automatically against. You didn't think about Karl Marx as anything genuine or good. But these kids, they understood it. They weren't Marxists, but they understood Marxist analysis. And so, they were applying that to the Civil Rights Movement.

And I couldn't keep up, so I said, “I'd better go back and find out some of this.” So, I went and took Colstead Warren's course. And, of course, he explained a lot of things that I just didn't know. So, I got an A in that course. Uh, and that was the first time that I read anything by Karl Marx, but I also read all the other great economic treatises that I hadn't read in Economics I, which was just about supply and demand. So, I knew about capitalism, I knew about Marxism, I knew about socialism – uh, that was probably the best course that I had, in terms of opening my

eyes to see the world as other people see it, and in terms how they valued and judged what we were doing here.

And it introduced me to the whole concept of class, because up to that point I had only been dealing with race. Everything was race. Things were wrong because of race. But these kids introduced me to, “Well, you know, you’ve got to do the class analysis, too.” So, once I had that, the tool that I got from Amherst through Professor Warren, I was able to see, uh, the whole situation in another set of glasses.

JM: Yeah. How did you first, um, get formally connected, so to speak, with SNCC at Amherst?

JW: Well, we were friends of SNCC. We were friends of all civil rights groups, but especially SNCC, because they were our age. So, I was in charge of, uh, a group called SRE [Students for Racial Equality]. Uh, there’s another story there. Somebody wrote an article in the Amherst paper, the *Amherst Student*, and didn’t sign his name to it. He was, uh, decrying the civil right tactics and the civil rights cause. So, I took him on, uh, in an editorial, and not only did I shut him up, but I got praise from my English teacher, who at one point thought everything I wrote was just crap. But he wrote me and told me, “That was a great example of understated emotion. I’m proud of you, you’re a credit to your race, *and* you know how to write!” That was the *best thing* I had ever gotten from a, from a teacher up to that point. I lost that letter, but that’s what he said. So, uh, after that, my name kind of became synonymous with civil rights.

JM: On campus?

JW: On campus. So, they made me president of the civil rights group, which was called the SRE, Students, Students – Students for Racial Equality. All right? So, uh, the Students for Racial Equality did demonstrations, we had silent vigils on campus, uh, and we raised money for

SNCC and other people who were in jail. Uh, I remember one time the SNCC Freedom Singers came over and sang at, uh, at Smith College. So, I went over to hear them. I met them. Cordell Reagon became a friend of mine. Uh, Merble Harrington was at Smith College. He met – she met Cordell at the same time, and they were eventually married – that was, uh, Cordell’s second wife – uh, because of that same, I guess it was the same day. So, we all stayed in touch with each other that way. People were coming up from the South with, uh, with the stories about what was happening, and we let them stay in my house. I stayed in the fraternity house by this time. So, that’s how I got familiar with SNCC.

JM: So, your fraternity house – just for one small aside – your fraternity house was okay with black civil rights workers from the South coming and staying?

JW: They stayed in my room. They didn’t care. [JB coughs]

JM: That’s great. Um, so when did you first – I want to ask about the conference, because that was a major undertaking.

JW: Um-hmm.

JM: When did you first come south to do some work, because you mentioned Harlem in ’64?

JW: Well, the first work I did was in Richmond in 1962, I guess it was, uh, or was it 1963? I was in a demonstration with one of my childhood friends, Brenda Blake, who was in charge of the NAACP youth group, [45:00] which was called the Commandos, I think. Excuse me. That was a hip, uh, [laughs] name for young people at that time. So, I was in a, on a picket line in front of the State House in Richmond, and there was this guy sitting in a Ford. I’ll never forget this, too. This fat guy got out a camera and took, with a camera and just deliberately took

everybody's picture on that picket line. And we knew who he was. He was "the man" from some level of government. That was meant to intimidate us, which it did. He made his point.

Uh, then the next summer I did voter registration. I think it was with the NAACP. Well, maybe it wasn't the next summer. It was the next spring vacation when I came home from Amherst I did voter registration. Um, I did voter registration in Springfield, Massachusetts, during another break of one kind or another, or maybe just on the weekends. And, um, that was the extent of my direct action up to that point.

JM: No trip to Atlanta? You hadn't met the SNCC folks down there for any meetings?

JW: No. No, I hadn't gone to Atlanta. I just knew who the SNCC people were through the SNCC folklore.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Um, you attended the March on Washington?

JW: Yes. Uh, I had, uh, met Marian Wright Edelman up at Amherst. She came to speak.

JM: I guess she would have still been Marian Wright at that time.

JW: She was Marian Wright, yes. And she was a vibrant young black woman lawyer, who had worked in Mississippi, been in the Movement, and that's what she was there to talk about. But afterwards, me being one of the only blacks on campus, they asked me to go to the president's house to meet her.

So, I went and met her. We started talking. And, uh, she had mentioned something about Crossroads Africa. I said, "What's that all about?" So, she asked me, uh – we talked a little bit about that, uh, Dr. James Robinson's group sending people over to different countries in Africa to engage in some kind of civil project, uh, usually constructing something. So, she asked me if I

was interested. I said, “Yeah, but I don’t have any money.” She said, “Don’t worry about it.” So, within days, I heard from Crossroads Africa, and eventually I had a scholarship.

They sent me to, uh, Uganda, where I stayed ten weeks in a tent up in the Kigezi District, lots of adventures. We built a hospital, an extension to an already existing hospital. And, uh, we did it with bricks, so we helped them make the bricks, we carried the bricks, we laid some of the bricks, except on the corners. They had technical students from Uganda who knew how to do the corners, because we couldn’t do the corners.

And, uh, so, coming back from that stay, I landed in New York, unbeknownst to me, on the day of the March on Washington. It’s early in the morning. My mother drove to Washington to be with her friend, uh, Charlotte Nash – they grew up together.

JM: To attend the march?

JW: No. Charlotte lived in Washington. She was bringing Charlotte back, I believe. Charlotte had come out to meet me and was in New York with her or something. Maybe they drove up together and came back. I don’t know how it was, but they were together, as they oft times were at that time. So, she, uh – she said, “Oh, and there’s a March on Washington.” I said, “What?!” I said, “I want to go.”

So, Johnny and I, my brother and I, she dropped us off on some corner and told us to meet her somewhere else later on in the evening, which we did. And so, for the whole day we were there! And we saw and we learned, and I wanted to be a part of it. I don’t think Johnny wanted to be a part of it as much as I did, but I certainly did. And, uh, the SNCC kids were the ones that blew my mind, because they were singing all their most recent songs from Danville.

And, ironically, I had seen an old newspaper while I was in, uh, I was in, uh, Kigezi District in Uganda. And it was an old newspaper; I guess maybe it was a *London Times* or a

New York Times or something, and it had a picture of, of, uh, of what was happening, you know, the violence in 1963, earlier that summer. And this was, of course, maybe a month later when I saw it. And I said, "Man, I should have been there," because if I had been at home, I'd have been there.

So, that's how I – that was my introduction to SNCC, all those little pieces. And, of course, Charles Sherrod's people, they became a part of SNCC. That's when SNCC formed, in, uh, in Raleigh [North Carolina], that same year. So, that's what, uh, that's what that was all about.

JM: Yeah. You wouldn't – I wouldn't guess that, say, that day of the March on Washington, you would not have already been attentive to [50:00] these tensions emerging in the Movement between, say, you know, King's faction and the younger folks, who were getting – John Lewis and SNCC – who were getting pretty frustrated?

JW: Not at that time. I've read about it and talked about it and people have told me things about it since then.

JM: Yeah. Tell me a little bit more about, um, about – in mid February of 1965, you convened and organized a very, very large conference, um, as you've mentioned earlier, um, on the campus. [Camera beeps] Let's pause for just –

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JW: Want to talk about the conference?

JB: Okay.

JM: Okay, we're back on after a break of a few minutes to –

JW: I had – it was Malcolm X, uh – I blank on those names sometimes.

JM: Harrington?

JW: Michael Harrington and Ossie Davis. I always blank on his name: Michael Harrington, Michael Harrington. I don't know why. [Coughs]

JM: Let me say, it sounds as if, uh, you were a pretty ambitious young man to contemplate a conference of this scope and scale. Can you talk about how it all came into being?

JW: Um-hmm. Well, I guess we were tired of doing vigils on the campus. [Laughter]

JM: [Laughing] This was a big upgrade on the standard campus vigil, wasn't it?

JW: [Laughing] Yeah, right. And we knew from the buzz around the civil rights college circus, circuit, that, uh, there was disagreement about the directions in civil rights. Uh, there was Black Nationalism as, uh, identified and promoted by Malcolm X, which had not really come into the common day lexicon of most students, certainly not in mine. But there was something terribly thrilling about Malcolm X, from what I had seen and heard.

I hadn't met any of the people who really knew him well, as I was subsequently to meet, such as Percy Sutton, who became a friend of mine, who was Malcolm X's lawyer. I hadn't talked to, uh, any of the people who, uh, vilified him, but I knew there must be some reason why this man was getting vilified so much on television on a daily basis sometimes, "The Hate that Hate Produced." Well, I wanted to see for myself, and the rest of us did, too.

Ossie Davis we chose because, uh, someone knew he had a great civil rights record. He was not just an ordinary actor. And, uh, Michael Harrington because he was the man that they said, quote/unquote, "discovered poverty" and, uh, and he was a prolific writer. So this little committee of ours knew these people or knew of these people, and so we said, "We're going to really have this. The opening session is going to set the tone for the rest of the convention, 'Civil Rights Movement: Reform or Revolution?'"

So, I got Malcolm X's home number from somebody I knew; again, it was the network.

[Laughs] So, I called him up. He answered the phone. And I said –

JM: Twenty-two years old.

JW: No.

JM: You're twenty-two years old?

JW: I wasn't twenty-two.

JM: Twenty-one?

JW: I was – this was in, uh – we were planning for this thing, so I was twenty. I was probably twenty years old when this thing was being planned, so, uh, maybe twenty or just turned – no. I don't know. Twenty or twenty-one, one of those – does it matter? [Laughs] You're right, I was a young kid.

So, I called him up. He answered the phone. I said, "Wow, I'm talking to Malcolm X." And, uh, I explained what I wanted. And he said, "Well, what kind of honorarium do you have?" I think I told him a thousand dollars. And he thought for a minute, "That's not very much money." Then he thought some more. And I think I may have explained that this was important, because we wanted to explain just what these ideas, these emerging ideas that were coming out of the American culture, especially from black folks, something like that. I must have said something, because he said, "Okay, I'll do it." So, I said, "Wow."

And I put the phone down. It was a public phone somewhere on campus, because we didn't have phones in our rooms. This was all done at a Bell Telephone, with me standing there at the wall, on a wall, not even in a booth, talking to Malcolm X. [Laughs] I hadn't even thought about that before, uh, because I had another strange experience like that, but anyway – uh, [55:00] involving trying to get a date, with guys just looking over your shoulder. You're

standing there with this big phone on a wall and you're sitting there talking, "Well, you don't know me, but, uh, my name is so-and-so, and I was wondering if you'd like to go out with me." Now, similarly, transfer that whole experience, up it a notch, several notches, and I'm speaking to Malcolm X, and he says he's gonna come. I went back and told the group. Everybody said, "Wow!" And we had similar experiences with, uh, whoever called Ossie Davis, whoever called Harrington – I didn't do those two – and they all said they would come.

So, then we had to fill in for our ordinary, uh, little, little, uh, breakout sessions. For our, quote/unquote, "ordinary little breakout sessions," we had all the civil rights luminaries that we could find, the people who were in the trenches, mostly in the South, but some in the North, as well. I still have that, uh, that, that poster. We had, uh, people who were in CORE [Congress of Racial Equality], people who were in SNCC, people who were, uh, in the Northern Student Movement, all the groups that were doing anything on the cutting edge anywhere, and they all said they would come.

And they all *did* come, except Malcolm X was in France an extra day, trying to get into England, or out of England into France, one of those, and they wouldn't let him in, so he lost a day. So, I got a call from one of his people saying, "I'm sorry, Mr. Williams, but he's not going to be able to be there. He really wanted to come." And I really believed he did. Um, so I was down to two.

So then, the day of the conference, which was a Friday, I think, February 12, 1965, I got word from Michael Harrington he couldn't make it because of an ice storm in New York. So, I'm saying, "Oh, my God, we're going to have a thousand people hanging from the rafters at Mount Holyoke, and they're not going to come there to see me." I was chairing it. I was emceeding it.

But Ossie Davis came through, because he had left a day earlier, got ahead of the storm some kind of way. So, he came, and I explained the situation to him. I said, "Malcolm can't come, blah-blah-blah, Michael Harrington can't come." So, he said, "That's okay. I'll talk about what they would have talked about, and then I'll talk about what I want to talk about."

And because he is the consummate, he was the consummate actor that he was, he put himself into each role, and because he was very knowledgeable about who they were, he pulled it off! Got a standing ovation! *We* got a standing ovation. We got the legitimacy we needed, because, you know, these colleges had put some money into this thing, and they didn't want to see me up on the stage either, holding my hands out when I couldn't get anybody.

And the conference just flowed from there. I mean, it was just, just a big success. I met a lot of people that day, uh, that I hadn't met, hadn't met before, people who were, who were just, uh, folks that I had heard about but hadn't really met. Uh, got some more intelligence about what was going on, especially in the South, but also in places like Harlem. So, it was really good.

JM: What was your, what was your perspective around that weekend of that conference on the question of reform versus revolution?

JW: Revolution. I was becoming a revolutionary. I mean, I was listening to all of those other pieces. I didn't know that much about it. Uh, I didn't – for example, I told you I didn't know the class aspect of what was going on. But this was no reform process. I could see that this was going to change people's lives forever, and it was going to change America forever. If we got what we demanded, and we were intent on getting what we demanded, this was going to change the institutions in America forever. And to a certain extent it did.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Malcolm X was, uh, killed a week later.

JW: Yes, that Sunday, the twenty-first. And I always wonder: Would somebody have tried to kill him in Massachusetts? Because you certainly had enough room to escape in all of those woods and all of those hills – just coming up the hills, winding your way to South Hadley, it's mountains, not mountains like out West, but certainly steep hills, and very lonely, and two-lane highways and stuff like that. I said to myself: I wonder if someone would have tried to get him there, as opposed to when they actually did get him in the Audubon Ballroom a week later.

JM: Yeah.

JW: It's a chilling thought.

JM: Yeah. Do you remember your reaction? [1:00:00]

JW: To Malcolm's death?

JM: Um-hmm.

JW: Absolute anger, sadness, grief, regret that I hadn't really had a chance to meet him, just that one conversation. Because I knew I would have liked him, just from the conversation. Uh, I liked the sound of his voice and the, uh, the intensity and the honesty that was there. He really cared about me and this conference. That's why he agreed to come for so little money.

JM: Yeah. Um, not many weeks later, you, uh, you went to Alabama.

JW: Right.

JM: Yeah.

JW: That was February. And in March, this same little group decided we were going to go to the, uh, Selma to Montgomery March. It was kind of like, "Done – well, we've done this. [laughs] We went from vigils to a magnificent conference. Where can we go next? Well, we've got to go south." It was time for our Manifest Destiny. We had been beating around the bush.

And, uh, I had been to Harlem the summer before to work with, uh, my, uh, childhood friend, Julian Houston, who's, uh, who is now a retired judge in Massachusetts. Uh, but he was on one of those projects called the Harlem Education Program, which was associated with the Northern Student Movement. Um, so, I had had that experience. But I hadn't had the frontline experience that only the South could bring. And none of us had, because we'd all been in college. We'd all decided to stay in college. We were committed to the revolution, but you can't really be a revolutionary until you go to the frontline. So, that's what we did.

We piled into a Volkswagen bus, about, uh, seven of us from UMass – University of Massachusetts – from Mount Holyoke, from, uh, Smith, and from Amherst, and we went on our way. So, we stopped at my mother and father's house in Richmond, just to stop in and, uh, get fortified along the way, because we didn't stop driving. We weren't going to sleep overnight anywhere. We just rotated drivers. [Clears throat] And, uh, my father took a look at that Volkswagen bus, because I think we were having some trouble. He said, "No, no, no, no, no, no. Take my station wagon." So, he gave us his station wagon, which was a big Buick station wagon, uh, was full of people, seven. And we piled our luggage in the back and, uh, we went on our way.

Now, that was fortuitous because in South Carolina – by that nightfall, we were in South Carolina. And a guy named Fred Aronow was driving the car, and he was apparently – because the rest of us were asleep – he must have kind of fallen asleep at the wheel and he was going over the highway. And a cop stopped him. So, the five whites stayed in the middle of the car, wherever they were, and the two of us who were black got in the backseat underneath some clothes and hid, because we did not want to be seen in, and we did not want to be caught in an integrated car. So, Fred, who was quick on his feet, told the cop we were on our way to Florida

for the Spring Break Fling that they had down there every year, where thousands of white kids get together, get drunk, get laid, and go on back to school. So, he took a look at Fred, said, "Be careful! You look like you're a little sleepy, but go ahead!"

Now, later on, we heard that other integrated cars got stopped, and they never made it to the March because they were arrested on some trumped-up charge in places like South Carolina or wherever we had to go. So, but for Fred's quickness afoot, you know, saying, you know – he certainly could have said, "Well, we're on our way to the March," you know, self-righteous. No, we're on our way to Port, Fort – what is it? Fort Lauderdale, where they have these things, you know, these Spring Flings? So, we got away. And we went on down.

Later on, we had an accident. This big semi-trailer truck plows into my father's car – I was driving at that point – just caved in the front fender against the wheel. We were in one lane, he was in another lane, and he just turned right into us. So, we had to – the filling station was right there, the gas station was right there. We pulled [1:05:00] into it as much as we could, but the bumper was on the wheel. You couldn't drive. So, I don't know why this guy – I mean, the guy, these young guys in the, uh, in the gas station didn't seem to mind that this was an integrated group. He didn't care where we were going. He just fixed the car. He just pulled it off. We got some gas and got the hell on out of there, because it was in some little town in Georgia.

So, we kept going and finally got to Montgomery. They had told us to check in with the SNCC office before going to Selma, because you want to find out if the Klan had been operating along Route Whatever-that-was at that particular time. They were always operating, but you wanted to find out if there was a heightened watch on that. [Clears throat] And, uh, we went upstairs on the second floor, corner of Jackson and High Street in Montgomery, which is where

the SNCC office was, and there were various SNCC operatives there. I don't know who they were, who they all were.

The only one I recognized was Stokely Carmichael. And he said, "What the hell are you going to Selma for? We need you here in Montgomery." And then he explained that we were doing a, they were doing a parallel operation because they didn't trust King and SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference]: "We don't want to get sold out on this voter rights." So, they were running a separate operation in Montgomery.

Now, as I look back into the – how the March unfolded – I didn't know at the time that this was a SNCC idea to begin with, because Jimmie Lee Jackson had been killed in some little town on the other side of the bridge, uh, days before. And so, the people were mad, and so they wanted to march. And John Lewis led that march, and there's a famous picture of him being beat down. That was before SCLC and King were involved.

King, I also found out, didn't want to get involved, but his people were telling him "You've got to get in front of this march." He didn't want to do it because the, the "law," quote/unquote, was not on our side at that point. There was an injunction: no marches. But then, the people in the United States got involved and pressured [President Lyndon Baines] Johnson to lift the stay. So, Johnson got in touch with the judge, apparently, and the judge lifted the stay, so the march could go on. And so, that's when it became an SCLC march, as opposed to a SNCC march. So, I'm putting two and two together. Nobody told me, but SNCC was probably mad anyway, because this thing had been taken away.

There was a – the third thing I learned from listening, just in listening to Stokely, was that there was competition from the good guys, from within the ranks of the good guys. Uh, and so, the, uh, Montgomery was set up [snaps fingers], just like that. SNCC was able to do that,

because SNCC was SNCC. And they had, they had the power to do that. They could come in and virtually take over the city, command the attention of the police power, so much so that they could just shut us down – they had to use all those forces to shut us down at the corner of Jackson and High Street. They didn't let anybody out. They were letting people in, though, which was their tactical mistake, because more and more people were gathering.

And they had hired, or maybe they were volunteers, maybe these people were volunteers, but they had guys from the country coming in on horses with great big long sticks, not your ordinary police billyclubs – they were there, too – but long sticks, maybe three feet wide. I understand they used them to herd the cattle, to beat the cattle along when they were moving them, I guess. So, they were given permission to knock the hell out of us whenever they wanted to. So, every time we tried to march out of that corner of Jackson and High Street, these guys on horses and the police on motorcycles would beat us down. I understand these guys were the Klan; they had just deputized them for the moment. I have no confirmation whatsoever, but that was what was said, the rumor rampant in the street. But we didn't care who they were. They were trying to knock the hell out of us. So, I was quick enough to stay away from it, from the beating.

There was one time when, uh, we were on a little – there was a little church there in the middle of the block, or the beginning of the block, that never opened its doors to help us. Never, never, never did that church open, and there were three steps going up to the door. And we were running [1:10:00] from the cops, running from the police, and that was the only place to go, and they had us surrounded. And they were about to charge, and somebody started singing, [sings] “This may be the last time, It may be the last time, I don't know.” And that song sticks with me

to this day, because everybody started singing it, and we were all prepared for whatever might happen.

But the horses stopped, the motorcycle people stopped, they looked at us, turned around and let us go. And that was the first time I had any evidence there was really a God, because there was *no way* we could have stopped them. There was probably five or six, seven of us, had all come running to escape the inevitable. And here it was, but it didn't come. I had to change my mind about God at that point. I was a member of the church and I had been baptized, but I hadn't paid much attention to that. But from that point forward, I had to really revise my thinking about who was in charge on that street. Because I escaped; a lot of people didn't. I escaped unharmed, in terms of physical damage.

Another time, I ran from horses into somebody's house. And their door was open, but the door was so – the door was, you know, a regular-height door – and the horse couldn't get in there, and that's the only thing that saved me at that particular time. And on the television, I saw Lyndon Johnson in front of the Congress when he said, "We shall overcome," talking about the voter rights of people. And he made that famous comment about, [speaks in a nasal drawl] "We shall overcome." And I'm standing there looking at him and I'm watching what's going on in that street, and I plunged back out into the dark. And that's, you know, that was what was in my mind, that this man was a hypocrite.

Uh, another thing that happened during that situation, a Puerto Rican guy [coughs] – he was Latino. [Coughs] I think he was Puerto Rican. Uh, let me get some more water.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JM: We are back on after a short break, talking about Montgomery. Um, how long were you – when did you arrive? You arrived in front of the John Lewis march, obviously, March 7.

JW: No. It was after that.

JM: Oh, just after that?

JW: Um-hmm. All of this is after that.

JM: Okay, and also after the kneel and turnaround on the ninth?

JW: Yes.

JM: Yeah, then, okay. So, kneel, okay, so you arrived for the march that is scheduled then – okay, all right. And um, so you were there when the marchers arrived?

JW: Never made it to Selma.

JM: No, but when they came to Montgomery.

JW: Oh, yeah.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

JW: Yeah, you know – well, I was and I wasn't. I was in Kilby State Prison at that time.

JM: You had been arrested by then?

JW: Yeah. Yeah, I had been arrested by then.

JM: What were the circumstances of your arrest?

JW: Uh, well, let me tell you this one thing first about the guy with –

JM: Yes, please.

JW: The Puerto Rican guy.

JM: Oh, I'm sorry, yeah.

JW: He went, he kneeled – the cops came zooming through on their motorcycle, one cop did, drove down to the end of the street. And he kneeled down in front, just as a protest. The guy came and hit him with the motorcycle! But he was able, nimble enough, to take the blow on his left thigh, and he kind of rolled away. The motorcycle fell. The cop was scattered all over

the ground, and there were no cops around. The rest of us moved forward to get that cop, me included.

He jumped up – this was the most brave thing I’ve ever seen – he jumped up and stopped us, because we were supposed to be nonviolent. He reminded us, “This was nonviolence. We can’t do that.” That cop would probably have been severely hurt that day. And then, it would have been a whole different kind of situation, because they would have brought in all the police power in the state and would have snuffed us out, because then we would have been terrorists instead of nonviolent protesters. And he was smart enough to do – so, I’ll always remember him for that. And he was on one leg, because he couldn’t move that other leg. And he *stopped that crowd*: “You can’t do it.” And so, we all backed off. The cop jumped up, got that big heavy motorcycle, *zzzrrmm*, and drove on back to where he came from. [1:15:00]

Now, how did I get arrested? Several times we tried to march, and each time they drove us back. At one point, King came over, because the march had already started. Somebody told King, “This thing’s getting out of hand, and you better go to Montgomery,” because now more and more press was coming, more and more media was coming. Uh, so he came over, and amazingly the doors opened, and we could go – when I say “the doors,” I mean the barricades were removed, and we marched. But he only marched us for about two blocks, and then he turned us back around, and we went back toward the barricades. And during that time the cops were throwing peanuts at us, with this grin on their face, as though they knew what was going on, this thing had been planned. This was supposed to take the edge off our desire to march. But, of course, people weren’t going to be satisfied with that. We were young people. We weren’t going to be satisfied with that.

Uh, so that same day or the next day, the SNCC organizers led us through the backdoor, so to speak, because they hadn't, didn't have cops down at the other end of the avenue. We went out the back way very quickly, went around the side of Alabama State University, went in the school, emptied the school, singing freedom songs – *emptied – everybody in that school* came. Some professors tried to stop the kids. Some of them just stood aside and smiled. By that time, we had doubled in size, and now it was a mostly black group, as opposed to integrated heavily with whites. Now it was mostly black, with all of the energy that conveys, young black men and women. So, then we went back to march again. They clubbed us, as we were trying to go downtown.

And at one point, this young man's – at one point, this young woman was run over by one of the horses. So, there was a guy near me who picked up a brick. I found out later that was his sister, not just his, his, uh, his "sister," in terms of, uh, being a fellow black person, but his real biological sister. Uh, he had a brick. And so, I jumped on his back. I told him, "You can't do that. You're gonna be killed. *We're* gonna be killed if you throw that brick." He ran with me for about a block, a block. This guy was about a linebacker size, and I was about a hundred and forty pounds. But I'm talking to him all the time. And he put the brick down, came to his senses, and turned around. The young lady got up, and she was unhurt.

So, I wrote a rap about that, as a matter of fact, that my singing group used in some of my, some of our concerts. I said, uh – so, that's the way I commemorated what, uh, what happened at that particular time. I told, I said, uh, [raps] "I jumped on his back. I said, 'Brother, don't do that. They've got too many guns, and that's a real fact.' As he turned and looked around," well, I don't remember all of it right now, but anyway. Uh, so we went back and licked our wounds.

But, then, the third day, we marched down again. And by this time, we were five or six hundred people, and they just couldn't stop us. So, we – they decided they weren't going to bother us anymore, uh, until we got downtown. And all along, we were picking up people, picking up people, picking up people, until we got downtown to the State House, where they had the Confederate flag and the American flag. And, uh, the cops wouldn't let us – the city cops didn't let us march on the sidewalk, and the state cops told us we couldn't march in the street, so we saw what the game was. We just sat down, and they arrested us. There were too many people for the jail, so they put, uh, many of us in Kilby State Prison, and that's where we stayed for about a week.

JM: Umm. Do you remember the experience in prison?

JW: Yeah, yeah. Um, Worth Long, another famous – not so famous outside of SNCC, but in SNCC very famous – uh, we were in this big bullpen, seventy-five men, and about an equal amount of women on the other side. Uh, and so, [1:20:00] they just had mattresses with no blankets, and it was cold in that particular time, uh, in March in Alabama. So, they just threw in a handful of dusty blankets. And, of course, the bigger guys went for them, and they were just taking the blankets. I was standing on the side because, as I said, I'm a hundred and forty pounds. I wasn't about to get into that frill, that, that fray.

So, uh, Worth Long stood up on a table. [Clears throat] Worth Long is about five feet six, five feet seven, I guess, maybe five feet eight, but not a big guy. And he had on glasses. He looks like an organizer, in the whole European context. Um, and he says, "Hey! Hey! Hey!" He had to holler a few times. He said, "I don't know about you, but if I was a man, I wouldn't take a blanket unless everybody had a blanket." And they're still fighting. [Speaks louder] "I wouldn't take a blanket unless *everybody* got a blanket!" So, by this time, people are looking

around at themselves, and one by one, those guys just caved – *pow!* – threw those blankets down. [Laughs] Another movie moment in my life, because from that point forward we were organized.

And the cops outside, the jailors, are saying, [speaks in a nasal drawl] “Well, we don’t have no more blankets.” “Well,” Worth told them, “Then we’ll all be cold.” And everybody said, “Yeah. That’s right.” So, miraculously, they went and found some more blankets and brought them in. And immediately we saw the value of organization. That’s the first time I had ever seen it so quickly. It’s one thing to think good of yourself because you didn’t do what they expect you to do; it’s another thing to actually see some material results. So, that was the low-hanging fruit.

Now, eventually, Worth got taken from us and put in solitary confinement, because he was trying to integrate the church service or something. And, um, so that left us leaderless. So, me and a guy named [Stuart] Stu House became the leaders. Stu House was a young, uh, man from Detroit in SNCC, but he was in SNCC fulltime. This was my first time. So, people listened to me, and I was very, uh, happy with that, because we weren’t talking about college folks now. We were talking about folks who were in college, some of us, but some of us who were not, who were street brothers. So, I was able to learn that folks listened to what I had to say. That was my first leadership role, uh, in the Movement, was to hold that cell together for those seven days, along with Stu.

JM: Yeah. What were some of the other issues you had to deal with in the cell?

JW: People wanted to get out, people who got swept up in it in the spur of the moment and wanted to leave. So, we just had to keep up the morale. We sang, we talked, we sang, we talked. We refereed fights over food. Um, one guy, I remember, wanted to keep his food. He didn’t want to eat it all at one time, so he had hidden it under the mattress. And somebody else

saw it over there and just went over there and took it. And he wanted to fight, so we had to stop that, calm him down. The freedom songs were very helpful.

So, we made a pact that, uh, we were going to all get out together. But, because I came from Massachusetts and because we were good at what we did – remember I told you we raised money for people who were in jail. Well, then it came back to me, because we – very quickly in Massachusetts – raised money to get me out of jail. So, I didn't want to go. So, the lawyers told me, "If you don't use this money, somebody else is going to use it, and we don't know when you're going to get out. We got to take you when you come. As soon as we get money attached to a person, we're going to bail people out. It's not going to be all or nothing." So, reluctantly I left, me and a few others, at that time, said good-bye.

And, uh, by that time, the march had reached town. So, we went out to the big cornfield or fairground or whatever that place was, where they had the final massing before going into town the next morning. And that's where you had all the stars, Harry Belafonte, Nina Simone, uh, who else was there? Whoever was there, I saw them, because I was – me and a few other people who had been bailed out by that time, we were known as "the ones who were just released from Kilby State Prison." That was our title. [1:25:00]

So, it was like, you know, the waters were parted [laughs], and we were most welcome. It was a rainy day; I remember that. But I didn't care about that, because I was sad about those guys who were still there, because I had said I wasn't going to leave, but my circumstances wouldn't allow me [clears throat] to stay. So, uh, we helped. We did what we could to, uh, make the, uh, thing, to accommodate what was going on.

Uh, the person in charge at that point was another guy I was very impressed with, Ivanhoe Donaldson. He was one of the few people, I found out later, who agreed to work with

SCLC from the SNCC side to make this thing happen, along with John Lewis. He was his own man. He decided, "I don't want to do that." So, he was doing logistics, as he often did and did it very well. So, my impression of him was a very, uh, calm but focused young man with a walkie-talkie wearing a yellow rain slicker. That was Ivanhoe. I wanted to be just like him when I grew up. [Laughs] Although he wasn't that much older than me, that was my idol for a long time, because I saw him – a take-charge kind of guy in a very hostile situation, and that's what he did very well.

So, my last memory of that was, uh, you know, people were marching in, and I really was tired, physically and mentally. So, uh, there was a first-aid Jeep that was the last vehicle, the very last vehicle, the very last set of people in the march. I got in that Jeep. I was the last person, because I could look out and see the road from which we came, which at that point was devoid of anybody, because all the police by that time had cleared away the racists. But it was my thought that somebody was going to come up and shoot us from the back. And if that had been done, I'd have been the one they had shot, but it didn't happen, fortunately.

Later on, going back, Viola Liuzzo got shot. She was the person who was shot last, I think, in this demonstration, taking people back along the highway –

JM: To Selma.

JW: To Selma.

JM: Yeah. Let me take you –

JB: Can I ask one – do you have any other recollections of Worth Long? Or was that your only encounter with him in Kilby Jail?

JW: Uh, I talked to Worth – Worth was sick. Uh, he couldn't come to the fiftieth anniversary, so I talked to him on the phone. He's in Atlanta now. Um, he did some, um, music.

He did some ethnomusicology. He was an ethnomusicologist, I don't know if officially or not, but that's what he did. He went out and found old blues singers and hooked them up –

JB: He and I made a movie about the blues together, so –

JW: Is that right? That's how you know him, huh?

JB: Yeah. I know he's known in legend and song, but not very many people have stories about him.

JW: Yeah? Well, there you got one.

JB: That was a good one.

JW: He was my man. That was my other idol. I wanted to be just like Worth, because he calmed the waters.

JB: Yeah. Let's take a – just a –

JM: Okay.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JM: We're back on after a short break. You were recalling another person you met in Montgomery.

JW: Posey, yeah. Posey Lombard. No, I knew Posey from Smith. Posey was a young white woman from Massachusetts, who's now dead because of a car accident. A great artist, visual artist. Uh, but she committed to work for the Movement after that and went to work somewhere in, uh, Georgia, I believe, with SNCC. But she and Worth were close. She and Worth were close. Um, and that's about all I know about Worth from there. I mean, I've only talked to him that one time since then, and I was hoping he was going to come. But they told me he was sick, so I called and talked to him. And he seemed upbeat, but, uh, clearly he was not the Worth Long that I knew.

JB: Yep.

JW: He'd lost a step.

JB: Yep.

JM: Do you, um – when you think back to the moment when you and, um, and Stu House are chosen to kind of be the two leaders of the seventy-five folks in that big enclosure –

JW: Nobody chose us. We just evolved.

JM: That's what I want to ask. How do you think that – [JW clears throat] what was it about you that made you ready and an attractive candidate for that leadership role in that context?

JW: That's a good question. I saw things were going wrong and I spoke up, and people listened to me. And the same thing with Stu; Stu had a little more experience. I had had the experience of running a civil rights group at a college. Uh, he at least had had the experience of being with SNCC somewhere. [1:30:00] So, I had no experience in dealing with folks other than college types. But it – I just decided that it was something that had to be done, so I just stepped up.

JM: Yeah. Um, how long were you in Alabama before going back up to Amherst?

JW: Oh, right after that, we got back in our cars and we started going back, just, you know – I guess it was the same day that the march was over. That night we were headed north.

JM: Any final thoughts about the culmination of the march?

JW: Yeah. Posey was driving my father's station wagon when I heard on the radio that Viola Liuzzo was killed. Just kicked me in my stomach, everybody there – we had a moment. And there was a screwdriver in my father's car, and I just picked it up. And I said, "If they come for me, this is not going to be a nonviolent confrontation." [long pause]

JM: After, um, after your return, you were – graduation was just in front of you, a few months ahead of you and, um –

JW: Um-hmm.

JM: And you, uh, would make a choice to go to Newark –

JW: Um-hmm.

JM: In part because of a connection to Tom Hayden.

JW: Yeah.

JM: So, let's turn the conversation towards all these many years that you've been in Newark. In the early summer of '65, you came here.

JW: Tom Hayden was back in, uh, the Connecticut Valley, as we called it, for some reason. He had been there in March for the Civil Rights Conference, but he was back to Amherst doing something. So, he sought me out. He wanted me to come work in Newark, because of my work that he knew with the conference, and he also knew I had gone down to, uh, Alabama. [Clears throat] So, it was like my only interview for a job. Nobody else wanted to interview me, and I didn't want to be interviewed. [Laughs] I don't even know if I had found out I was accepted at law school at that point. I don't think I had.

So, uh, he said, "The Civil Rights Movement is over." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Selma to Montgomery – that was it. You got the voter rights law. There's just not going to be anything else." And Tom was like that. He had kind of a prescient, uh, view about a lot of things. So, he was, he was telling me something that he had figured out before other people had. So, I thought about it, too. And maybe within a day or so, I got the letter saying I was going to go to, to – that I could go to law school. And so, I said, "I could kill two birds with one stone. I can go to Newark and still go to law school that summer, I'm sorry, after that summer." If I

didn't like Newark, I would just go on my way. But if I did, I would call that my home, and the law degree would be applied there.

So, as it worked out, I did like Newark. [Clears throat] Lots of adventures there, which you probably want me to tell you about – but that's how I came to go there. I went home, uh, at the end of, uh, the semester, graduated. My parents wanted a big formal graduation, of course. Uh, I didn't particularly care, so I went for their sake. And I went home and came back up on a bus to Newark.

JM: Um. Did you – you just mentioned that Hayden already was, you know, looking past the, all the work in the South to a new type of phase of the Movement. And, um, I know that, in many respects, Newark then would be a place where the Movement came and found an urban context.

JW: Um-hmm.

JM: And the Movement came north.

JW: Um-hmm.

JM: Did you explicitly understand that that was your project when you came, or –?

JW: Well, I did. Uh, the Movement had already come north. I just didn't think about it as being the Movement. [Clears throat] Because what I was doing in Harlem – trying to build a playground with Julian Houston in 1964 – that was part of the Movement. The Northern Student Movement was part of the Movement. I just didn't see me as part of that until Tom brought it home.

So, SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] had already been formed to do the same thing. I mean, the ERAP projects [Economic Research Action Projects] were all in the North, based on that same concept: We have to take on what's going on in the North, because it's

harder, it's more about class – in their minds – than race – they were to be proved wrong. Uh, but that was the foundation that brought them here.

Now, these young people in, uh, the Students for a Democratic Society, or SDS, they were not Marxists, but they understood Marx. They understood [1:35:00] Marxism, just as Julian Houston and 'Pigeon' [Cousins, daughter of Norman Cousins] had. And when you applied the, uh, analysis, the class analysis, they thought that racism could be overcome if we adjusted the, the class, uh, background to include more people in the economy of this country. So, they came to Newark based on, uh, getting people to get jobs.

When they came here, they were supposed to be working with a group called the Clinton Hill Neighborhood Corporation [Clinton Hill Neighborhood Coalition], which was an older group of white liberals, [clears throat] mostly Jewish, who had been in Clinton Hill, which is to the south of here, for, uh, many years, since the 1950s, uh, fighting progressive causes – fighting urban renewal, trying to make sure that there was no discrimination against blacks. And they were, they were an integrated group of mostly white Jewish homeowners with some black homeowners as well and, uh, and some working – they were all had a working class basis of one kind or another, but there were professionals in it, as well. So, it was an interesting mix of people.

But, to make a long story short, um, the SDS people thought they were working with poor people, and they weren't. And the Clinton Hill folks thought the SDS people were going to just pick up from where they were, and they didn't want to do that. So, there was a split. So, by the time I got here, Tom Hayden and the other SDS people had moved *down* the hill into Lower Clinton Hill, where there were fewer homeowners – practically no homeowners, but some – and

a lot of tenants, and mostly black, uh, mostly black working class and poor, living in the same neighborhood.

So, they had already organized people when I got here. They had been here a year and they had a base of, uh, several hundred people, maybe two hundred people, and, uh, several – on several blocks. And the issue that they came, which was unemployment, that, that didn't work. People didn't want to talk about their employment status. And, as Betty Morse explained to me, one of the black folks who I met while I was here, uh, people had jobs; they were just bad jobs. They were underpaying jobs. It was not that there was a lot of unemployment like it is now, but it was *underemployment*. It was the beginning of the era of the working poor. We didn't know it at that time, but that's really what it was.

But what was on people's mind was police brutality and landlords and storeowners gouging people, because you didn't have, uh, credit cards then. People got credit, and people would – the storeowners would up the credit, and then there was a whole lot of bait and switch, in terms of the product that you got. So, uh, that's what NCUP [Newark Community Union Project] was doing, taking on those kinds of issues.

JM: And how did you – how did you find your way into a role here? What, what commanded your attention? What, what, uh, what captivated you? What drew you into all this work?

JW: Um-hmm. You mean once I was here?

JM: Yeah.

JW: I wanted to be an organizer. You know, I saw that as really what I could get from being here. Uh, the SNCC experience taught me how to walk through the valley of the shadow of death, uh, and to keep a cool head. But I wanted to be an organizer, and here we were on a

frontier that SNCC could really not compete with, because you did have that class aspect. I understood class by this point, because I had been talking about it and reading about it and studying it. So, uh, I was ready for that challenge.

How do you get black people organized in a context that's not purely racial, not purely racialized, but – where you're not going to have people with, with a, with white masks, who are terrorists per se, but you have the police who are doing it legally; uh, where you're not going to have people who get thrown off a plantation, but people who didn't have enough money to make their way, based upon the little job that they did have; where you don't have folks that say, "Well, you can't live here," because the whole area was black, but the housing was so bad, in some cases, you wouldn't want to keep your dog there. So, how do you fight that? How do you get people involved in it? That's what kept me here, and I wanted to organize people to fight that kind of fight.

JM: You mentioned NCUP, the Newark Community Unity Project, yeah?

JW: Union Project.

JM: Excuse me, Union.

JW: Newark Community Union Project.

JM: Yeah. [1:40:00]

JW: N-C-U-P.

JM: And, um, and it set about this program. And you also, um, would work with Phil Hutchins.

JW: Um-hmm.

JM: Yeah.

JW: Yeah, yeah.

JM: Can you describe the, the range of organizations trying to begin this effort in Newark to find some progressive change strategies?

JW: Yeah. Yeah, that's a good question, because NCUP was not the first, by any means. There were people here who were already struggling against that same array of, uh, new enemy, if you will, not new, per se, but that new array or newly discovered array of forces that were keeping people down. So, uh, CORE was, uh, one of the allies of Newark, and then there were, uh, various combinations of people associated with CORE and various other organizations, the names of which I forget. One was called ANVIL, A-N-V-I-L, I remember that, and, uh, there were, uh, some black labor unions and some preachers who were, who managed to stay out of the clutches of the then-Mayor [Joseph] Addonizio. So, that was the coalition. There were some white, uh, rabbis, Rabbi Dresner was dragged through the mud in a CORE demonstration, uh, protesting, uh, lack of construction jobs at a school that was being constructed here, the Barringer High School demonstration. So, you had a black and white coalition that was, uh, liberal. I would call it liberal, mostly liberal.

And, and the NCUP students came on. They were the radicals, because they were insisting upon a form of democracy that nobody was willing to allow, and it was a form of democracy that had not taken root in this town. But the NCUP people said, "Let the people decide," and the people were then meeting till all hours of the night, just like in SNCC. People met all hours of the night to make most of the basic decisions. It wasn't into bureaucracy. It wasn't into one leader, although, as it turned out, *the* leader was Tom. I mean, Tom was the main man; he was the big man on campus, so to speak. And then, there was Barry Kalish. He was the big man, also, vying for, competing for, uh, that same position, although they wouldn't have said it, but looking at it from the outside.

And then, there were the community people, who had their own, uh, set of standards for what they wanted to see done. And there were people like Terry Jefferson, who you didn't really do anything unless Terry said, uh, what had to be done. She was the office manager. Uh, you had, uh, Bessie Smith, who was found in, uh, discovered by the NCUP people, and she and her husband, Thurman Smith, were like mainstays of the organization. Um, that's how we got, all got together and, and fought bad landlords, rats and roaches, a little police brutality.

Now, see – that was interesting. The police brutality situation – and this is more from my review of the written record about NCUP, as written by some of the organizers. A lot of the organizers felt – not a lot of them, but some of the organizers felt that police brutality was too volatile. Why? Because it was racial; there were white cops beating black heads, and you couldn't get away from that. And this was something they really didn't want to deal with, because they couldn't control the emotion of the people who were affected, and they thought it was going to lead to a riot. So, they said, "Let CORE deal with that." So, CORE had weekly demonstrations against police brutality, because at that time, people were getting beat up regularly, and some people were being killed.

As a matter of fact, I came to Newark – the first day I came, I was in a demonstration, a CORE demonstration against police brutality, uh, from, because of a, of a black man that was shot by a cop named Hank Martinez. Now, I didn't know Henry Martinez at that time. I didn't even associate him with anything other than the fact that he was a cop. Years later, the same Henry Martinez ran for City Council and won from the East Ward, and he and I became friends. I had no idea that was the same man that I was, in my first demonstration, against, on my first day in Newark, probably my first hour in Newark. I had no idea. This was a completely different man. I didn't see how that man could have shot somebody. And I didn't – you know

how I found out? I found out by doing some research about what was going on, [1:45:00] on that corner on that day. And I have yet to talk to him about that and probably won't.

JM: Um, um-hmm. How did you judge the, uh [JW clears throat] – of course, what will happen in the summer of '67 is that the rebellion will suddenly dominate all of, so much of how people think about this history here in the city.

JW: Um-hmm.

JM: But, um, prior to that point, all this festering tension, police brutality, terrible conditions in housing, underemployment, and, and, and – how did you feel about [JB coughs] your progress, so to speak, against the goal of starting something that would yield results? How did you feel across, say, the first twenty-four months you were here?

JW: Well, when I first came to Newark, I wasn't here for twenty-four months straight. I was here for the summer.

JM: And then you went to New Haven?

JW: Remember I went to New Haven to Yale, so you have to give me another yardstick. In my first several weeks I realized one thing: that race was going to be a bigger issue than these kids were able to deal with. So, Phil and I were the two black college types on campus, so to speak, and we talked about it all the time, that it was becoming more and more difficult for white people to go out and organize black people. Already SNCC had said, I think in 1966 – maybe not already, but it was still, there was a whole lot of conversation about that, and the final axe fell in 1966, and Phil said, and SNCC said, "White people, you've got to go out and organize amongst white people."

JM: Carmichael replaces Lewis.

JW: And Carmichael replaces Lewis at a very tumultuous meeting where Lewis went away, thinking he was president, and they reconvened the meeting and put Carmichael in, and that's when the whole process of the purge began. Well, see –

JM: You were there at that SNCC gathering.

JW: No.

JM: Yeah?

JW: I wasn't there. No, no, no, I was not a part of the SNCC hierarchy. I was just a grunt in Montgomery. That's all I was, a soldier in the army of the Lord. So, uh, I heard about this later. But it didn't happen overnight, because people were saying within SNCC *and* within Northern Student Movement and other places, "White people can't do this. Race is predominant."

Malcolm X, there's a lot of what he says people didn't go along with, but a lot of it people did go along with. And there were other nationalists raising that same issue. The integrationists in the Movement were losing ground. King was losing ground on that level, because he saw it himself: "I can't go out telling people to be nonviolent in the face of the kind of violence I saw in Chicago. And I can't keep continuing to tell the nationalists that they are wrong unless America gives me something to work with." So, all of that was militating against it, and we saw it on our little microcosm here in Newark, because of the police brutality, uh, demonstrations that just were just *that far* from getting out of hand, because people had just taken as much as they could take and just weren't going to take it anymore.

So, SNCC then – Phil organized SNCC in Newark with the support of Tom at the second SDS office that we had in town, which was in the Central Ward. You had the South Ward, which was based on the landlord-tenant and the store problems, but in the, uh, in the Central

Ward, the NCUP office here was just kind of like a hangout for young men, mostly. And that's where Tom spent most of his time, cultivating people here, and Phil. And eventually that became the SNCC office, whether it was in '65 – I don't think, no, because in '65 I was still here. Maybe after I left in the summer, it became the SNCC office as well as the NCUP office. But then, Phil and SNCC began [phone rings] to take that separate line of, uh, of, uh, Black Power.

JM: Yeah. Let's stop for a moment.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JM: Where you thought you were –

JW: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, and I was talking about race. Um-hmm. So, it was impossible to do anything in Newark without addressing the racial issue. And so, we looked at the double-edged sword that white organizers presented. Some people liked to talk to white people. They thought it was great that some white people wanted to come into the neighborhoods and help. Some people didn't.

Newark at that time, in 1965, was full of people who had just come from the South. This was part, this was the tail end of the Second Great Migration from the South, so people were here who had the Southern experience, [1:50:00] and a lot of people didn't trust white people. A lot of people loved white people and wanted to be with the white people, but that same racist, racism that created that kind of, uh, of inkling within the wannabe mentality also created a great deal of hostility. And we were beginning to see that there was more hostility [clears throat] and we couldn't get people to understand that these white people over here are different. It took up too much time and energy to explain that.

And I found that on the block, because at some point I was organizing – I was given my own block to work with Corrina. Corrina and I had a new block, Corrina Failes. I must have been doing all right, because they assigned me and Corinna to work with each other on breaking open a new block over in the Central Ward. The issue there was a stoplight, how we were going to get a stoplight. That's what the people said they wanted to do. And amongst the people was a man named Billy. And Billy said, "I can work with you, but I can't work with her."

Later on, Billy became a Muslim, uh, or he already was. I'm not so sure which, but he knew the Muslim line – he knew the NOI, the Nation of Islam line. And he challenged me, and it made me worry. Phil and I talked about it. I didn't want to stop working with the students and I didn't for the rest of that summer, because I still believed in an integrated Movement and I thought the whole class issue was the best way to deal with it, but it was becoming more and more impossible.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Um, you lived – you and Phil lived together?

JW: Yes.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Um, was there any point at which you – obviously, you know, uh, the FBI, COINTELPRO, House Un-American Activities Committee, these would all be parts of the story ultimately –

JW: Um-hmm. Um-hmm.

JM: Did you have any sense that you were already folks who were being kind of watched and monitored very closely?

JW: Um-hmm, uh, more because of Phil than me, because of Phil's connection with SNCC. Uh, I was – again, I was just a grunt. I was a grunt in Montgomery. I was a grunt up

here in Newark, just doing what they told me to do, uh, until I got my block. Then I had some kind of say-so over what was supposed to happen there, in conjunction with Corrina.

Um, but a little later on, I guess it was in 1968, I looked back at that point, because, uh, in 1968, there was a House Un-American Activities Committee meeting. And at that point, some policeman came from Newark and presented a letter from me to Tom Hayden, saying, “Yes, I’m going to come to Newark.” Now, I didn’t give him that letter. I’m sure Tom didn’t give him that letter. Who the hell gave him the letter? Another – and he accused me, and it was really an accusation, he accused me of living with this hell raiser, Phil Hutchins, who everybody knows is a hell raiser because he’s affiliated with SNCC. And they were all trying to blame us for the riot, for the rebellion.

JM: Conspiracy.

JW: That was the – it was a conspiracy – that was the context. That’s how this House Un-American Activities convening took place. Uh, HUAC [House Un-American Activities Committee] had lost its pop by then. They did their damage in the ’50s and in the ’60s. Nobody was really paying attention to them. They had, there were more important things to deal with. Uh, but I just offer that to show you that we were under surveillance at that time.

Another time I went to, uh, California to see my sister, who was alive at that time, living in Los Angeles. And, uh, I came back, and my bag was open. And I wondered, “What happened to my suitcase?” A few days later, Jimmy Hooper, who was the head of, uh, CORE at that time, Newark CORE, said, uh, “Uh-huh, I understand you went to California.” I said, “How did you know that?” “Because the FBI asked me what were you doing in California?” And I put two and two together: They had searched my bag when I came back, because they wanted to see if I was bringing anything in.

Uh, and the third piece of evidence, also in 1968 – all of this is post-rebellion, where I become more of a, of a, more than just a yellow sticky [i.e., Post-It note]. Um, I went, I was asked to go on a trip to Europe to look at new towns, based on, uh, some group's [1:55:00] interest in housing. They knew I was interested in housing, because of the work that I had done with the Medical School fight, and, uh, so I was asked to go kind of at the tail end. So, I got my passport and I went.

And in France, I ran into this young woman named Jackie. And I was surprised, because here she was in France, and here I was in France, and we had this great reunion at this, uh, Automat. People don't know what an Automat is now, but that's the, that's the way, you know, that was the fast-food restaurant of the day. So, I'm buying food, and this fine lady comes up. And she looks at me, I look at her, and we have this big reunion in the Automat, "Oh! Wow!" And everybody is happy, happy, happy.

But to make a long story short, we got together later on that day, and she started asking me questions about what was I doing in France. What was I doing on this trip? Who did I see? What was I doing? Blah-blah-blah-blah-blah. And so, I'm thinking that, uh, you know, she's attracted to me, because I certainly was attracted to her. And I'm walking, we're walking down the Left Bank of the Seine River, and she just walked on ahead. And I said, "Well, Jackie, why are you running – why are you walking so fast?" And she just kept walking. And I walked faster; she walked even faster. So, at some point, my ego said, "I don't need this." So, she walked on. I've never seen her again. She never contacted me. I put two and two together. She was representing "the man" and wanted to find out why I was there and what I was doing. Well, she got the confirmation that she needed, that I was really harmless, because [laughing] I really

was there to look at some houses in France, England, two or three other – Russia. We even went to Russia. So, uh, that's the kind of thing that was – yes, there was presence all the time.

And then, later on, I'm just thinking about this, too. I got permission to look at, uh, Governor Hughes's papers down in, uh, in Trenton [New Jersey]. He and I became friends after the Medical School fight, and I asked him, "Could I take a look at your files, because I'm thinking about writing a book?" This was long before I actually wrote anything down. And he gave me permission to look into his files, which was replete with all kinds of stuff from people that I knew, who were informing on us to the police! And I was amazed! So, that's the way it went.

JM: Yeah. I'm sure you weren't, um – well, let me just check. So, '65 to '66, you're – the two academic semesters, fall and spring, you're up in New Haven. [JB coughs]

JW: Yeah, right.

JM: The summer of '66, here again.

JW: Right

JM: Fall of '66, up to New Haven, and then, spring to New Haven.

JW: Right.

JM: And then summer of '67 –

JW: I'm back.

JM: Yeah. And, um, I'm sure it – well, you can tell me. I'm presuming that it didn't surprise you, but were you anticipating [pause] open conflict in the streets of Newark. It had happened other places already.

JW: Yes, everybody was predicting it. And, uh, people were just [laughs], probably people had some bets as to whether it was going to happen in Newark at the particular time that

it did. But I was coming back from, uh, Philadelphia, uh, from a Black Power conference down there, and I heard it on the Turnpike. I was kind of sleepy, but I woke up then, driving my Ford Fairlane. And, uh, so I came into Newark, because I heard the city had been sealed off, but we could get in. We knew the streets. So, I came in and I think I went home that day.

But the next day, or it could have been that same night, I was in the car with, uh, three other guys. I think it was the next night, because these people didn't go to Philadelphia with me. And we were just riding around, looking to see what was going on. And two blocks from here, on the street next to the AME Church, whose name I will remember in a minute, but I can't right now. I think it was Court Street. Going up a hill, I heard the sirens coming. And I looked through my rearview mirror, and sure enough, there was a cop car bearing down on us. We were out after the curfew. They pulled me over. Four guys get out, pistols, shotguns. [2:00:00] "Up against the car, motherfucker," which, of course, we did.

And, uh, they searched us, found nothing on us, and then they told me to open the hood. Now, fortunately, I had law books that I had forgotten to take out, because it was a tense moment there. And the sergeant said, "Okay, these guys are law students. Let them go." But the other police, they didn't want to do that. Shotgun Man had that gun on all of us at the whole time, leaning up against the car, and he wanted to do us; Pistol Man, too. But the sergeant, who was supposed to be in charge, had to say it again: "These are law students," as if to remind them, "You're going to have trouble explaining this one if you kill *these* guys."

Now, the other guys, the other guys did not, were not law students, but I think he was trying to save our lives. So, at some point, they made a decision, holstered the guns, shotgun down, jumped in the car, and tore on up the street, turned right at this street right out here, High

Street, and went on wherever they were going next time. That was one of the – that was the first time I looked down the wrong end of a shotgun.

JM: Yeah.

JB: We need to pause. I have to change the disk.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JM: We're back after a short break and we've swapped drives, if that is something we want to make note of. Um, Mr. Williams, I'm interested, I'm interested in the following. You had been in Philadelphia for a Black Power conference and you had come back and tremendous tumult in the streets, five days in Newark.

JW: Um-hmm.

JM: How did you assess what was happening? How did you think about it? How did you add it up at the time?

JW: Well, at the time, after that first encounter with the police, I tried to stay undercover as much as I could, especially living with Phil. At some point, we just left the house and went somewhere else. We were in a basement apartment. But I think they might have had the wrong address, you know, because that HUAC report gives, has us at 642 High Street, but it was really 624 High Street, so that might be significant, just some bad policing on their part. I saw a whole lot of stuff. I saw people happy to be destroying, happy to, uh, turn the tide. Uh, but I knew something was going to happen. And sure enough, when the police came into town, when the state police and the National Guard came in, things changed, and it was during that second period that the police rioted, especially the state police.

So, at the time, I was in charge of a group of law student VISTAs [Volunteers in Service to America program], and we were working on a housing project: How do we stop urban

renewal? And we were investigating the whole relocation process, and that's what eventually we cited [loud engine sounds] to do some serious damage to that urban renewal machine. But we stopped doing that to go interview witnesses to the police violence, and that's when I really saw what the damage had been. Um, so my law students took information. I remember one.

There was a bar in the South Ward where two young men had come in after the thing had been looted and were still looking for whatever they could find. And the state cops rolled up on them. They couldn't get out. So, one of them hid, and the other one said, "Okay, I'm here." And the cops said, "What do we have here?" This is based on the witness that I interviewed. And then, they just began to systematically shoot him, and they shot him forty-some times, including in the top of his head after he had fallen to the floor. Um, and so, we took that, we took that information down and we thought somebody was going to do something about it, because there were stories like that coming in from all over the place.

And after the rebellion was over, once Oliver Lofton and Annamae Shepherd from the Legal Services Project – that's where I was working – took all this information and turned it over to the authorities, I was called before a grand jury. And one of the questions was – well, here's a part that I missed, that I didn't tell you. [2:05:00] Baraka found out, Amiri Baraka, found out about this particular incident and sent a photographer to Perry's [Funeral Home] – no, to one of the funeral homes, and took pictures of the corpse, which was destroyed, as you can imagine. And then, he made a flyer and put it out all over town: "Is this what we're going to allow to happen to our young people in town?" Something – words to that effect.

So, when the grand jury, when I was called in for the grand jury, they asked me didn't I think it was inflammatory to pass that flyer around? I said, "Well, first of all, I didn't pass the flyer around. But, second of all, don't you think it was inflammatory that the man was shot

forty-six times, including the top of his head?” So, now I’m a smart aleck. They didn’t like me, but there was nothing they could do about it, because they knew it was true. So, uh, as the time went by, during the actual time of the rebellion, it would just – became more and more stories like that, and people were really whipped. But, as it turned out, the power structure was really scared of what was happening.

There was a woman named Louise Epperson, and I wish she were alive so that you could interview her, but she was a person who was a homeowner, working class woman, who was a homeowner and a district leader in the Central Ward right up the street here, whose house was in the path of the proposed College of Medicine and Dentistry, which at that time was supposed to take two hundred acres of land. And she was organizing homeowners against it. And she said, when interviewed, “*Before* the rebellion, I couldn’t get anybody to talk to me, but *after* the rebellion,” and she had this twinkle in her eye, “*everybody* wanted to talk to me.”

So, it was that kind of experience. So, Phil and I said, “Well, we’ve got to do something about that. We’ve got to capture and bottle some of that energy that’s now running in our favor. The tide has temporarily turned in our favor, despite all the violence, which nobody wanted. What can we do with that image of that black man with that brick? What can we do to turn things around and make things better?”

JM: Um-hm. Out of all that, [clears throat] and I – actually, before I ask the next question, can you say a word about Baraka’s United Brothers?

JW: Well, the United Brothers was formed – I think the letter came out in December of 1967. Um, Baraka came to Newark, came *back* to Newark, because he was born and raised here, in 1965, but then he went out to California and met Ron Karenga and became very much influenced by what Karenga was doing in Los Angeles with his group called US, just capital U,

capital S [US Organization, a Black Nationalist group founded by Ron Karenga and Hakim Jamal in 1965]. And he wanted to do something like that here.

But he had another concept in mind of electing a black mayor, because this was a majority town, and he understood the whole concept of a black united front better than most of us did. He had been to New York and been on the frontline with a lot of people who were thinking thoughts that we just weren't thinking at that particular time. Uh, and he was in a position to do that, because when – during the rebellion, he was beaten badly by the cops. He had a national reputation, but not that many people knew him here, except the people he grew up with. He was doing his own work, uh, with the, uh, arts. Just as we were doing our work and each of us in our own little bailiwick, he was doing his with the arts in a, uh, with a group called the Spirit House Movers.

But when he got beaten and the, the cameras went all over him, his name became much bigger than it was. And so, he then – and then, the Black Power conference came about during the, the, the last days of the rebellion anyway, and folks said, “Well, you need to stop that.” And they said they're not going to stop it. Wright was his name. I forget his first name. Wright was the guy's name who, uh, who was in charge of that. And Baraka became the keynote speaker at that particular event, and from that point [2:10:00] forward, uh, he was the man. So, he was in a position to call together a lot of people, most of whom were his friends from college, I mean, not from college, but from high school and other, growing up here in Newark. And he included some of us, who at that point had taken on a leadership position.

Uh, my position was, as I told you before, I was just a soldier in the army until after rebellion, when we resurrected the Medical School fight. We resurrected a fight that had really been lost, because the, the community had come together in the spring of 1967 to demonstrate at

City Hall about this Medical School proposed. There was a lawsuit, and they lost the lawsuit, which was based upon an incompleteness of, uh, testimony at the, uh, at the blight hearings to determine whether the land should be taken. So, they lost that.

But during that time, a man named Colonel Hasaan had, some of his people had taken, had knocked the books out of the hands of the clerk, and the people said, “Whoa!” So, everybody started coming to see what was going to happen next. So, it became – he became a cause célèbre, and the event became a cause célèbre, and it was said that the Medical School fight was one of the reasons for the rebellion. So, I had nothing to do with any of that. I was in the audience sometimes when that happened, one or two times when it happened, [clears throat] because I came down and saw it, from New Haven, but I wasn’t anywhere near the leadership of that.

But when – after the rebellion, Phil and I put together this organization called the Newark Area Planning Association, or NAPA, N-A-P-A. And I had been in New Haven and talked to some of my friends at the Planning and Architectural School. And I said, “That medical school is too large,” and we started talking about an alternative plan.

JM: The idea was they would build [clears throat] a massive footprint through urban clearance.

JW: Um-hmm.

JM: Yeah. A hundred and sixty (160) acres was the original proposal or something?

JW: It was two hundred (200) [acres], and then it was brought down to one eighty (180) [acres].

JM: Yeah.

JW: And so, I asked [sirens sound in background] the planners up at Yale, “What’s the smallest footprint you can give us?” And they said, “Well, we can use American Medical School Associates – American Medical Association’s standards, and we can give you a nineteen (19) acre footprint.” “How?” “By going up.” So, that became the rallying cry for the new opposition. So, in my little office over on the corner of South Orange and Bruce Street, which was an old candy store, which had no heat and hot water, um, we had a press conference.

And, in addition to that, I had gotten in touch with the, uh, Legal Defense Fund, and the Legal Defense Fund said they would handle the case. So, Jack Greenberg sent over, uh, a young man, who was our lawyer. And it was, the complaint was going to be made to HUD [US Department of Housing and Urban Development] and to HEW [US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare] based on the insufficiency of housing, the research for which had been done by me and my VISTAs [VISTA volunteers] the summer before and into 1967. So, based upon that research, we knew there was a one percent available vacancy rate in Newark, which meant on any one given day, only one percent of the houses were available. But they were driving people out of their homes that they were already in – so much so that there was no way they could possibly accommodate all those people.

So, with the combination of the lawsuit and an ultimate plan, we revised the Medical School fight, and I became a leader. So, in December of 1967, before we even began the negotiations, which ended up in, uh, success for the community, uh, Baraka asked me to become a part of the United Brothers. [Clears throat] The United Brothers was a group that was formed for the purposes of pulling together the community to elect the first black mayor. That’s how we got started.

JM: Um-hmm, um-hmm. How did you swing – in practice, how did you swing the successful, um, negotiation through NAPA on the sixty acres for public housing and job creation?

JW: Um-hmm. Well, it wasn't just NAPA. It was also the Committee Against Negro and Puerto Rican Removal, which Ms. Epperson headed. And she had other people who were from the ordinary, regular political persuasion folks who were involved in that, uh, with her. And I had the new breed with me in NAPA. So, together we had a coalition going into – so, we said, "You've got to sit down and talk to us," we said to the Governor. He had us down to his place and all that, [2:15:00] to Morven. And, okay, so we were going to talk.

So, they – we set up negotiations. And negotiations were based on the belief that they were going to let people come in and, quote/unquote, "have their say," and then they were going to probably throw us a bone, and uh, the band would play on. But we said, "No. We have a negotiating team. We have a nine-person negotiating team, three from NAPA, three from the Committee Against Negro and Puerto Rican Removal, and three from other organizations." So, they said, "Well, what about everybody else?" And then, we had an audience of about two hundred people, most of them our supporters, and one by one people just stood up and said, "Well, I want to say," "I want to be part of the negotiating." We shut them up. We would not let them talk. With the support of the two hundred people, Harry Wheeler and I just wolfed them down. I mean, I can't explain it any other way. We shut them up. They had no way to go.

So, the people on the other side of the table, who were representing the Governor – the Commissioner, the new Commissioner of the Department of Community Affairs, which was new, a man named Paul Ylvisaker, who became my friend as well; uh, Ralph Dungan, who was the, uh, head of the, uh, New Jersey Department of Higher Education; and various other people

who worked with them – they said, “Well, okay.” So, over the period of months, we negotiated an agreement, and we had done our research. We had our supporters from Yale, of course, but we also brought in other people who were experts on Affirmative Action, hiring, we had people on housing, we had people on health, we had all – so, we negotiated what’s been called the Medical School Agreements.

And that’s where we got sixty acres of land for – vacant urban renewal land – for housing, which was done by nonprofit groups here, headed by a Housing Council, which we set up, which I ran eventually. About a year later that happened. We said we want the Model Cities, uh, program, uh, we want to have that group set up, who was set up as the Advisory Committee – we want that whole group thrown out, because it was the Mayor’s buddies and henchmen, and we had an election. I was elected to that, along with other people. We had that covered. We wanted a, uh – we wanted to set up a training program for blacks and Latinos to get the construction jobs, because they were gonna say, “We don’t have anybody.” “So, yeah, you’re right. Because you’ve been discriminating against us for years, we’re going to train them.” And they said, “Okay.” And we had a group of people brought together, the, the name of which I forget at this point, but it was a group of all the, the, the stakeholders in the jobs – we had the unions, we had the contractors’ association, we had the city, we had the housing authority, we had the people from the community – they met regularly to see what kind of compliance that was going on.

That’s the key thing: We had an entity that we set up to make sure they did what they promised to do at that table. And all the time, the concept of that invisible “Brother with the Brick” was right there with us to let them know that if you mess with us now, you’ve got to pay for it later. Now, we never said that, but that was in their minds. Now, as time went by, that

lessened and lessened and lessened and lessened, but we got as much as we could out of it. [JB coughs]

JM: You would, um, you would contribute your efforts to the, um, campaign of Kenneth Gibson –

JW: Yes.

JM: To be elected Newark's first black mayor –

JW: Um-hmm, I was his first campaign manager.

JM: In 1970, yeah.

JW: Um-hmm.

JM: Um, so, you've been through '67. You've had the – you reached the agreement in '68, which probably – you can tell me how you evaluated that, in terms of how encompassing your success was in that. It sounds like you managed pretty well to achieve some very substantive results.

JW: Yeah. The only thing is we had to fight within the community to make sure that the results really were substantial. Because if you're looking at land – here, we had sixty acres of land – all kinds of people came out of the woodwork and wanted that land. So, at that point, the white controllers were standing around watching the black folks fight each other, saying, "May the better man win, and we hope it's not Williams."

But we won. We established the Housing Council and *we* decided who was going to get the land. So, right now, there's a thousand units of housing around that the Housing Council determined. They didn't want the, uh, the Newark Construction Trades Training Corporation to succeed, [2:20:00] but hundreds of young men were successful in getting their union books, because we fought the unions, we fought the state, we fought the local folks to make sure that

happened. People – uh, Gus Henningburg was involved in that, George Fontaine was involved in that, Jim Walker – those were the people who handled that part of it. We backed them up, and they backed us up when we needed it.

So, those were the two most exciting – and, of course, the Model Cities election produced a whole new set of characters that hadn't happened before, including myself, uh, to become involved with a federal program of that magnitude, which is 5.6 million dollars, and we had a joint veto. If we didn't like what the City wanted, we could veto; and, of course, if they didn't like what we wanted, they could veto. All of this came out of the agreement. I don't think we had that anywhere else in the country.

JM: Right, right. Um, Gibson is elected in 1970. You obviously are very close to the Mayor.

JW: Um-hmm.

JM: What's your feeling about how you've managed through the late '60s and where you stood at that point, and how did you feel about prospects for further change and kind of building the world you were trying to build?

JW: Um-hmm. Well, I was high on the result of the Medical School fight; what we were doing at that time in the street; the street organizations that we had; the fact that it wasn't a Democratic Party group; it was not just them alone – we had some of them with us – but the real momentum for this thing came from the people from our Civil Rights and Black Power groups that had put Gibson in office. And I think he knew that. He's said that in the years that have followed.

Uh, but when I got the job – and he had promised me the job earlier, I think, and I was happy he lived up to that. [Someone coughs] I learned the potential in the job from being on the

Model Cities Neighborhood Council. And I learned how that particular position was what I wanted if he won. So, he won. And, uh, so I was in charge with planning most of the federal money that was coming into town, which was substantial. I was twenty-six years old at that time. I was making twenty-six thousand dollars. That made a whole lot of people mad, at least raised some people's eyebrows.

So, there was a lot of, uh, of an attempt by our part to continue what we had started in the streets, just to bring it into the suite. We wanted to make sure there was democracy for the people in the City and that they got the best of whatever was possible. So, that was what was in our minds.

JM: Yeah.

JW: Because that's what we grew up on. Uh, Baraka, I believe, wanted that as well. But, see, Baraka had a big heavy organization at that time, called Committee for Unified Newark, which was the main group that pulled the folks together to put Gibson in office, but it was a cultural nationalist group. A lot of people didn't like cultural nationalism, including me. I didn't think that – I thought it was somewhat artificial to go and say we're going to speak Swahili and then put on West African garb and we were all supposed to be, therefore, legitimate. And anybody who wasn't doing that was illegitimate. I didn't believe that, because at the time I like to wear jeans and I liked to eat pork chops, which I don't do now, [laughs] but at that time I thought I was just as black as anybody else, all right?

Uh, so there was that conflict within the community that, uh, Gibson took advantage of, to a certain extent, because he was not really one of us. He was kind of like there, but he really was not on the frontline of most of these struggles. He came in kind of like after the battle was over. And if you needed somebody – for example, he was the vice-president of the Business

Industrial Coordinating Council, which came out of the Barringer fight, and he helped get some jobs. Okay, so he was in – he was not in the vanguard; he was kind of like in the second tier. So, that was his M.O., and perhaps we needed somebody like that, because he wasn't so controversial.

But then, when we got into City Hall, and I say “we” advisedly, because when *he* got into City Hall, he did not want people like me or Baraka in any kind of leadership position. So, he handled us in two different ways. Me, I worked for him, so eventually he fired me, uh, because his people told him that I could not be trusted, I was going to take his job. But all I did was make him look good, because from that 5.6 million dollars that I raised with the Model Cities Program, [2:25:00] I doubled that, plus brought in the best, what the HUD called the best housing redevelopment, housing rehabilitation project in the country, called Project Rehab, which was another umpteen millions of dollars in mortgages.

Uh, so eventually he found a reason to fire me, which was based on an audit, an old audit, which was dug up by a man who was running for office, and they said, “HUD questions three hundred thousand dollars.” Well, HUD had questioned that a year before he brought it out, [laughs] and we were in the process of answering those questions, and there was really nothing missing. What had happened was we had interpreted HUD guidelines one way, and other people had interpreted the other way, namely the people in the Gibson administration who didn't want me there.

So, uh, I could tell you about those adventures. Man! We went to war with, uh, with a Congressman, whose name was [Joseph] Minish. I had an opportunity – Minish was in the front page of the *Star-Ledger*, advertising his false claim, with his little subtle reference that I had stolen the money, without really saying that. And, of course, the people were saying, “Oh, yeah,

we told you. We told you. We told you. You can't put them in there. They're going to steal the money." A lot of my friends were even saying that.

So, then I came back. I went over to see Mort Pye, who was the editor of the [Newark] *Star-Ledger*, and I said to Mort Pye, "You have done me a disservice because, up to this point, you have not listened to what I said." This was over the telephone; I told him that. And so, he asked me to explain. So, I explained to him what was going on. And he paused for a moment and he said, "Bring me down what you have."

So, I brought him an article, and I knew how to write press releases, I brought him the article stating what our responses *had already been* to the audit, and he ran that front pages on Wednesday. All of this other stuff was Saturday and Sunday. The following Wednesday, I got front page. So then, some of the, some of my friends came back and said, "Oh! Now we're seeing what you're saying. Yeah, yeah, yeah! You're not so bad after all."

But Gibson didn't like that. So, as I was gaining more and more support – I was on television. I was on a – on this guy's show, I forget the guy's name, but it was the equivalent of a Jerry Springer type show, where he comes on and vilifies people. So, I was on there, and he was asking what he thought were hard questions, and I was just giving him back the right answer. And so, he said at the end, "You know, Mr. Williams, there are good guys and there are bad guys, and I've decided," and there was this pause, and he's got this rabid audience all around him, "That you are a good guy." And the audience explodes, "Yeah! Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!" He comes up, shakes my hand. I'm standing there smiling my father's grin. And, uh, so the whole thing turned around.

And so, Gibson at one point called me – oh, yeah, there was – yeah, yeah, yeah. Minish – because I said, at that point in the newspaper, I said, "Minish was just setting me up as a

scapegoat.” So, Minish had to respond to that. And he says, “Okay, so I’m going to have a hearing.” So, he called a hearing. This was before the TV experiences, I think. He called the hearing, and there was a tie. I mean, he had his guys come out and say that I was wrong. I had my own notes, which said I was right. So, you know, when you get a U.S. Congressman into a tie in a public forum, you’re doing pretty good.

But one thing was very clear. You asked me how I, what I noticed: My comptroller was not there with me. He had been told by Minish’s people “Don’t show up,” because they thought I needed him to get the information. Hello! I’m a lawyer. I had been wrestling with this thing. I knew this stuff inside and outside. And everything he threw at me, I threw right back at him, even with nobody there on my staff. None of my staff showed up. My director, my deputy director didn’t show up. Nobody showed up. I was there by myself.

So then, after that, and after the television series, Gibson calls me in and says, “I want you to resign.” I said, “Why?” He said, “Because of the audit.” I said, “Well, by this time, I know you don’t want me. But I want time to answer and respond and get this thing out of the way, and then I’ll leave,” because I had planned on [2:30:00] leaving anyway. I didn’t want to be there anymore. And he said, “No, you can’t do that. I’ll give you thirty days to make up your mind.”

So, during that thirty days, I collected all the documents that I had, uh, that I knew I needed, because I thought somebody else was going to come after me with an indictment, which they never did, and I’m going to tell you why in a minute. Uh, and so, he called me in at the end of the thirty days and fired me. Uh, now there was one more incident in there, too, because I was going to have a rally, and I expected four or five hundred people to come out, to run Minish out of town. And he told me, “Don’t do it.” And I said, “I’m going do it.”

JM: The Mayor told you?

JW: The Mayor told me that, through an intermediary, of course. He didn't have the guts. He didn't have the balls to tell me this himself. And so, the intermediary came back and said, "Anybody on your staff who goes to that rally will be fired." So, I told my people to get the word out, but they showed up anyway! Most of them showed up anyway, not my top staff, but the little people showed up anyway.

I had four hundred people, and Ray Brown was the main speaker, asking, "Why wasn't the Mayor here?" Ray Brown, the famous lawyer, who had been the one who got Baraka out, [clears throat] and who got a lot of other people off, because of his excellent legal presentation, um, he said, "Why isn't the Mayor here, and why is he trying to get rid of Williams?" So, anyway, the Mayor had the power; he got rid of me.

So, I went on to set up my law practice. But about a year later, maybe a few months later, I'm on my way to Washington for some reason and I get off the old Eastern [Airlines] Shuttle. And there's this little man, who comes up to me and starts talking: "Mr. Williams, you don't know me, but I was one of the auditors when you were the director of the Model Cities Program." So, I immediately stiffen. And this guy says, he's a little guy, he says, "The prosecutor came to me and asked me, 'Was there anything there to indict this man on?' And I told him in no uncertain terms, 'There is *nothing* there.'" He turned around, walked back into the crowd, and I've never seen him since then. True story!

So, that's what happened to me with this great new city experience. I was not able to apply all of the skills that I wanted to. I was able to do some things. Uh, Baraka had a similar experience with some housing he was trying to build, but that's a whole different story. I'll let him tell his own story. Uh, and the Mayor flubbed him up with that, and as a result, he lost all of

the programs that he was trying to do, including building and housing. Um, and he just kind of, uh, put cultural nationalism aside and decided he was going to be a Marxist. He turned, he said, “I’m a Communist now.” And so, people – he made that abrupt turn. A lot of people couldn’t go with it. So, now he is still just as famous as he was, ever was as a writer and as a playwright and a poet. But, uh, he was, after that point, out of the mainstream, and Gibson, with his non-progressive politics, was able to reign supreme.

JM: Yeah. Let’s take a break and then we’ll come back and finish up.

JW: All right.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay.

JM: We’re back on after a short break. And I want to, as we sort of look to the years beyond, um, beyond the early ’70s, um, I’d really like to have you touch on a couple of things. One is your election to the National Bar Association presidency in ’78 –

JW: Um-hmm.

JM: Uh, youngest person ever elected to that role. And, of course, that’s the group that is the black analog to the ABA [American Bar Association] –

JW: Um-hmm.

JM: Given the long history of discrimination and exclusion in the latter organization.

JW: Um-hmm, right.

JM: Um, I want to hear about the, um, I’d love to have you sort of frame your mayoral race in ’82. And let me just leave those two things with you.

JW: Okay. Well, I went into practicing law after I left City Hall, but I just couldn’t practice law. I mean, it was like, how are you gonna keep them down on the farm after they’ve

seen Paris? You know? So, um, I ran into a friend named O.T. Wells, who I had met, when I, at Harvard when I was speaking there. I was the Model Cities director. He was president-elect of the, uh, of the National Bar Association, and he convinced me that I should play a prominent part in the National Bar Association. I believe I had gone to one meeting, one convention before that. And he invited me to be his guest.

So, I became a part of it. He appointed me [2:35:00] as Assistant Regional Director, which was really something he just dreamed up; it wasn't in the constitution. And to make a long story short, because of some foul-up in Los Angeles the following summer, his convention couldn't be there, and he had no one to plan his convention. There was no staff at the NBA at that time. So, he said, "Junius, I want you to plan my convention. It's going to be in San Francisco. Go do it!" So, I started calling people all over the country, my dime, my time, lawyers that he had given me the names of, or other people had, or people I had heard of. And I put together a great convention for him, if I must say so myself, which he also agreed. And I met a lot of people along the way. So, that was my organizational basis, if you will.

And so, by the time I came to his convention, which was in San Francisco in 1973, yes, uh, there were other issues that had to be dealt with. There were a lot of young lawyers, especially women lawyers, who were dissatisfied with the way the bar was going at that time. And we, who had been in the Movement or who had been influenced by the Movement, were steeped in the tradition of democracy. We wanted people to be involved in a lot of decisions, and they weren't. The National Bar Association, uh, was kind of like an imperial potentate kind of arrangement. If you were the president, you were the man. You did what you damn well pleased.

So, we elected – two things happened that time, vis-à-vis young lawyers. We elected a new treasurer, Arthenia Joyner, from Florida, a lawyer from Florida, and I became elected to the board, uh, at that particular time. Now, that was the first two things, but I also revived, along with some friends, we revived the Young Lawyers Division, which had been started once but had died down. We revived that. That was our vehicle. And I drew upon the knowledge I had of the people around the country that I had been calling, some of whom were young, some of whom were not so young, to make that organization very viable. So, to make a long story short, we became – the Young Lawyers became a campaign, uh, enterprise for young and aspiring lawyers who wanted to see some change come about, to make the bar more interested in issues than just conspicuous consumption amongst some very prominent black attorneys, as it had become.

So, the next year, in Chicago, I ran for fourth vice-president. Then, the next year, somewhere, I ran for third vice-president; and then second vice-president. And then it was time for me to run for president-elect. Nobody ever ran against me, because I had the Young Lawyers as a basis, plus the Women Lawyers, because I believe the Women Lawyers in '74 were formed. And it was like a complete overlap, because the women who were in the Women's Division were also in the Young Lawyers Division, so we always had a, a, a coalition, and we were able to go into each of the large delegations and we would offer tradeoffs: You support our candidates; we'll support yours. So, that's – that way, I parlayed my way up to becoming president-elect.

And so, in Florida of 1978, I became the youngest person ever elected to the National Bar Association [presidency], because I was only thirty-four years old, and immediately, uh, we began to do things on a collective basis. The most important thing was to introduce to the National Bar Association the whole concept of the freedom, the independence, uh, of Southern Africa. So, they had never done that before. One of my friends from SNCC was very influential

in this next move. We knew that the, the racists in southern Rhodesia were trying to prop Abel Muzorewa up as the next God coming for African independence, but they really weren't going to give them any independence. The Constitution really kept all the power for the whites, and everybody knew that. But we were lawyers and we knew how to say it.

So, my International Affairs Committee dissected that and did a very wonderful paper. As a matter of fact, the guy who is now the, uh, the, uh, the head [2:40:00] of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund was the head of that committee, whose name I just cannot think of. This is terrible, going into the historical record I couldn't think of his name.

JM: It's not Teddy [Theodore] Shaw?

JW: No, Teddy Shaw was not –Teddy Shaw was gone before that. It was Julius Chambers and then, I think –

JM: Elaine Jones.

JW: Elaine Jones, Teddy Shaw, and now – this guy – John, John – it'll come to me in a minute. Sorry, John. So, uh, the committee – you know, otherwise, you know, it was a very legally, scholarly document, and we knew we had something. But it was just going to be another document.

So, I called my friends from SNCC and I asked, "Can we get this before the United Nations' Africa group, the Organization of African Unity?" So, uh, we were able to go to the United Nations. The organization heard what we had to say. There was a rush for copies. Not only did the OAU accept it, but it was adopted by the General Council of the United Nations as an official document of the United Nations on the question of independence for Zimbabwe. And it was translated into seven languages and sent all around the world. A friend of mine from,

from Ghana sent me an article, front-page lead article in the Ghanaian *Times*, “Black Lawyers Champion Africa Rights,” or something like that.

So, it was like my Movement days were coming true. You know, here we were involved with African independence as African Americans, and for a long time there was a great deal of unity between the, uh, Africans who were in the United Nations and eventually the ones in Washington who were, uh, diplomats of a higher level, as everybody sought that paper. I went to, uh, Jamaica for another one of the United Nations committees, and there everybody wanted a copy. I got invited to Cuba because of that paper, which I eventually did a year later.

Uh, I had an idea to bring lawyers and doctors and, uh, nurses and pharmacists, not pharmacists – dentists to Zimbabwe. That got shot down, because the Zimbabwean, um, um, ambassador, when Zimbabwe did become independent – they were very grateful for what I had done, what we had done – he didn’t call me back in time for me to get this Ford grant that I had set up. The Ford vice-president said, “Mr. Williams, this thing is going to die unless we get the Zimbabwe government to agree.” And he never got back to me. It’s not that they didn’t want it; he just didn’t see the importance of this whole thing.

So, the good part of it was that I was able to parlay this, this, this paper on behalf of the NBA into a position where black lawyers could really help in the independence of Zimbabwe. And here’s – the crowning achievement was my people in the White House got the document to Jimmy Carter and got him to hold onto sanctions because of the document. That’s what we were told. So, that was probably the most significant aspects of, uh, of what I did when I was president. That Movement connection was there because we were able to organize the people, but also we always kept our focus with our eyes on the prize.

Right after that, so that was over in 1979, had a great convention in, uh, in Los Angeles, and for my keynote speaker I had Louis Farrakhan to come out, uh, who wowed and mesmerized the people. There was a hush when I walked down the aisle with him to bring him into the first plenary session. I had met him in New Haven when I was up there, and he was the Muslim minister in charge of, uh, the mosque there. That's another story. But he wowed them. He spoke for about an hour, and everybody gave him about – it must have been at least ten standing ovations when he got finished. He was, he had everybody in the palm of his hand. So, that's how I went out.

The next year I went to Cuba. The following year I went to Harvard for the, uh – I called Paul Ylvisaker, who was my friend from State here in New Jersey, if you remember from the Medical School fight.

JM: Um-hmm.

JW: He was then the dean of the [2:45:00] Education School. So, he said, "I got something for you." I said, "I'm tired. I need something to do." So, he got me in the Institute of Politics at the John F. Kennedy School at Harvard for a semester. So, um, I was beginning to believe that I belonged there [laughs] until the Miami riot occurred. I wrote an article for the *New York Times*. I wrote an op-ed piece. That was my first op-ed piece anywhere, and that kind of brought me back to earth.

So, I said, "I've got use all these skills and the talents I have to go back to Newark. And, what can I do?" Gibson had been there for then going on twelve years; uh, very little had changed. He had not used the power in the street to match that power which he had in the suite to force any kind of real change. For example, he was raising taxes. The state was not given enough money, kind of like it is right now. So, here he was, saying, "I'll take whatever the state

will allow,” and still begging for money from the feds. And it wasn’t coming, because now we were in the age of Reaganomics. So, the power of the people was divorced from the power of the institutions that we had created an entrée to. Bad English, but you got the point.

So, I wanted to correct that. And I wanted to create another movement to get me in there, so that I could make sure that the independent organizations that had been killed by Gibson could be revived, and we could, once again, get the kind of power we needed to back up the folks who had been elected and put into office. Um, obviously, I didn’t win. Uh, I didn’t have the money he had. There were other people running, too. I didn’t have anywhere near the money that was necessary. People told me I should have run for Council first, but I thought the time was now – City Council – I thought the time was now and once I got involved in that whole process and I saw what you needed to do to raise money I realized that was not me. I couldn’t do that, um, because you have to be kind of like all things to all people, and I wasn’t that. I was for “the people,” quote/unquote, and I knew what that took. And I was interested in people, empowering people. I was interested in people, uh, becoming a part of the process, just as I always had been. So, I realized that was not the vehicle that was cut out for me, because I would never be able to raise that kind of money. Uh, so that answers your question.

JM: Sure.

JB: Keep going – I’m just changing –

JM: I think John’s going to change a video card.

JB: Yeah, but you can keep talking.

JM: Okay. Let me ask, uh, to kind of wrap up. You’re doing very, um, interesting and forward looking work here at the Abbott Institute. Can you describe that and how you connect

the, all this history to struggles that you can envision may one day be fought by some of the young people here today?

JW: Um-hmm. I was the, uh, town attorney in Irvington [New Jersey], because I had a good friend, Sara Bost, who became mayor. And she originally asked me to be counsel for the City Council, where she was president of the Council in Irvington, which is a town next over from Newark, a town of about fifty thousand, mostly black. And then, when she became mayor, I helped her in her election. She asked me to be, uh, [hiccups] the town attorney. So, once she decided [hiccups] – excuse me – not to run again, I decided I was going to do something here in Newark once again.

Uh, here was a [hiccups] program, called the Abbott Program, which was in trouble. It was always in trouble, right from the onset. In 1981, a group called the Education Law Center filed a suit, saying that you have to match the money, state of New Jersey, you have to match the money that the suburban schools are getting, yeah, you have to match the money that they're getting and put that into urban schools. I don't know if that came out right –

JM: Oh, yeah.

JW: Because it's getting late in the day. I'm going to try it again.

JM: Was that a claim under the state constitution?

JW: Well, it was based on the state constitution, which has “thorough and efficient” in its language. And so, the constitutional claim was upheld by seven white men over the age of fifty with a whole lot of money. They saw it. They said, “We have to have in the city the same amounts of money that they spend in the suburbs, not just the average amount, but the higher suburbs are paying. That's what you need to have real school reform.” And they prescribed [2:50:00] a school reform program, which has supplemental programs, which, if necessary – and

they always were – you have to pay more, state of New Jersey. So, now, no governor since that time has agreed to that in total – Democrat, Republican. So, I said, it's time to get the parents involved.

So, to make a long story short, I went to some foundations and I said, "We're going to build, we're going to build this, uh, organization at Rutgers, uh, based upon, uh, our ability to teach people how to become involved. We're not going to have an organization, but we're going to teach people how to get organized. So, I have been able to bring all of my skills and all of my memories and all of my, uh, ability to help people strategize to do different things, whether it's on a little school basis or whether it's to help save the Abbott Program or whether it's to now helping young people to become involved in the process.

I said, "We've got older people involved as parents. Let's get the ultimate beneficiaries in here," because when I was that age, I was thinking about becoming a member of SNCC. No such thoughts have been going on regularly on the part of young people today. There have been spontaneous outbursts. There have been people who want to mobilize to do different things. I'm not saying nobody is conscious, because they are. But the whole concept of organization has been lost. And it was lost when we put all of our eggs in the basket of electing black politicians, and those black politicians turned around and destroyed the organizational base that brought them over.

So, there's a whole brand new group of people out here who don't know anything about SNCC and CORE [clears throat] and NCUP and NAPA, and how we got over and how we did what we did. So, that's my job. I'm teaching a whole new generation what we did. And everything I've been talking to you about for the last three hours we've been talking about [laughs] in one way or another in those classes.

I am very excited about both groups: the parents getting organized more and more, not just because we're doing it. Parents are organizing all the time. But what we're trying to do is to help those parents who are so inclined to get involved, we're teaching them that there is a certain way you use information, there's a certain way that you position yourself, there's a certain set of strategies that you can use to make your presence more profitable, in terms of the goals that you have.

With the young people, we're saying to them, "You have a voice, and your voice deserves to be heard, and if you learn the skills of the media, your voice can be amplified." Now, the first part of that is the most difficult. A lot of young people have been so beat down they don't think they have a voice, much less that it should be heard. But we introduce that whole concept, and once you open the door with them, *boom!* [Snaps fingers] They walk through.

So, now, we've got a whole lot of young advocates here who know how to speak, they know how to interview, they know how to use cameras – not quite as expensive as that one. They know how to, uh, put projects together. They know how to – we haven't taught them how to edit. Hopefully, we'll do that this summer. It's a summer program on an intense basis, five days, four days a week. In the spring and in the fall, it's two days a week after school. And they have produced a lot of documents that, uh, a lot of people have paid attention to – short public service announcements to longer, uh, documentaries.

JM: Right.

JW: We've got some young people who have, uh, graduated and who now come back here and help us as interns. We've got some young people, who have graduated, and I meet them in the store or something, and they say, "You know, because of that program, I went to

college. And now, I'm really doing some advocacy things in college." So, we planted a seed that's being watered every day by the events of the time.

JM: That's right. That's right. Um, I know there's even more history, much more history even, that we could discuss. But today, you have been just so remarkably generous. And what a pleasure! So, it's been an honor and a privilege. Thank you for such a generous and substantive contribution to the series.

JW: Well, I hope everybody runs out and reads my book once it gets published. It's called *Unfinished Agenda*, and hopefully, it will be produced, it will be, uh, it will be, uh, published by Smithsonian. So, let's hope so.

JM: Really look forward to it.

JW: All right.

JM: Thank you so much.

JB: Thank you.

[Recording ends at 2:54:49]

END OF INTERVIEW