

Judith: And we'll get started.

Will: Done.

J: Okay. So, ready? Okay. So, I'm Judith Monachina. I'm the director of the Housatonic Heritage Oral History Center at Berkshire Community College. It's a mouthful. And, today is April 6th, 2017, and I am here with Will Singleton. And we are also with Len Kates, who is a liaison to the NAACP. This is part of the NAACP project. And Wendy Germain, who is doing the sound. She's a technical expert, who does sound, and helps—and will help our students to do sound. We're in the Berkshire Eagle recording studio and this interview with you Will is our second one in the NAACP project. So, we're really grateful. Did I forget anything to introduce us all? Okay. Did I forget anything?

W: I don't think so.

J: Okay. Okay. So, this is going to be sort of a biographical interview. We're going to go in order, but we can jump all over the place. But it starts at the beginning.

W: Okay.

J: Can you tell me where you were born and a little about your childhood?

W: Mhm. I was born and raised in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Born May 3rd, 1944. As I said a minute ago, a long time ago. And each year that goes by seems like it's longer and longer, but the alternative can wait. So I'm—the only complaint I have about getting older is my hearing, but other than that, I'm reasonably happy.

J: Good.

W: So, my childhood. We lived on what was called Deering St. at the time, which is now where Riverview West is. And I went to Briggs School, which is now, it's not assisted living I guess it's just apartments there. And I was a traffic boy. Nice red flag. And then in third—in the middle

of third grade, we moved to 91 King St. and I attended Bartlett School, which is now an apartment complex.

J: Where is Bartlett School?

W: Bartlett School is at the top of Onota and Martin Street. A big brick building.

J: Yeah.

W: They built them well back then. It was what I would say normal childhood. My mother was a homemaker. My father worked at the **Modern Laundry** on First Street, which is right across—was right across from Dunkin' Donuts. Dunkin' Donuts wasn't there then. There's a glass business there now. A lot of people don't know it used to be a laundry there. And then he subsequently bought the **Quick n' Clean Laundry** on Elm Street, which was next to George's Package Store. When he went out of business, the whole place became George's Package Store. Hm.

J: I remember George's Package Store.

W: Yeah. And it's still there, it's just a little bit bigger now.

J: Yeah.

W: So we used to run down the hill for lunch. And when Paul Harvey said "good day", we'd run back up the hill to class. We, meaning my sister, who was a year younger, and my brother who was four years younger. My sister's name is Lisa and my brother's name is Leonard.

J: Can you describe that hill? You used to run down the hill.

W: Yes.

J: So where's the hill?

W: Well, it's called Martin Street. And if you look from the front of Bartlett—what used to be Bartlett School—there's the hill. It's a street, but it's a hill. And I have an unpleasant memory about that hill, because when I was in fifth or sixth grade, it had been freshly tarred. You really want to hear this? Freshly tarred—they used to put pebbles on it, and a neighbor had a dog. And my sister and I were coming home for lunch, and the dog ran out. And my sister pushed me down to get away, and I ended up with pebbles in my knee. I still have the scar. I never let her forget that. And her comeback is, I was just too slow, and she wanted to hurry up and get home

before the dog bit her. So— but other than that it was a good childhood. I mean, it was a good childhood. Lisa, Leonard, and I were very fortunate to have the parents that we did. I'll never forget, I came home—I guess I was in the sixth grade then—and I had a very good report card, but I got a “D” in conduct. And we got the report cards on a Friday. And I had a good friend by the name of Danny Rosen, and we were on our way to Boy's Club. So, I give my mother the report card, started out the door, and she said, “Hold it. What is this ‘D’ all about?” And I fumbled, and stuttered. And she said, “You're not going anywhere.” I puffed up, but I didn't go anywhere. Danny left. I never got a “D” in conduct again, all right.

J: You learned quickly.

W: I did. I did. But other than that, it was going to Boy's Club, going to the YMCA. Oh, I guess I should tell this. When you went to the Boy's Club, you wanted to swim, play basketball, run the track that used to be at the Boy's Club—really going back now. But my mother insisted that I learn how to type. I said, “Type?” And of course, when my mother insisted, you know, that was it. So, in—what was I in—seventh grade, eighth grade, I started typing. Learned how to type. Now, some people accuse me of being sexist when I say this. I asked—I was asked to speak in Housatonic a couple of years ago, and I was telling this story. I said, “One of the best things about the typing class was that the teacher was very pretty, and that really encouraged me to go to class.” And at the church, there was some ladies sitting down in the front, and they get this look over their face. I said, “Well listen, I'm seventy-one years old, and if I want to say that the teacher was pretty, I'm going to say it. I've just said it. Now, we'll move on.” And I did. But, I

was very happy that my mother insisted, because it helped me all through college. And to this day, I can still type without any problem, so.

J: Wow.

W: And told my mother—I've told my mother—that over the years, that I was glad she insisted. And I knew better than to be stubborn.

J: And, and so the typing was at the “Y”?

W: At the Boy's Club.

J: At the Boy's Club?

W: The Boy's Club. Yeah.

J: Well, that's interesting too.

W: That they had the class. Yes. Yeah.

J: Was it all boys?

W: No.

J: Girls and boys?

W: No, I guess it was all boys. No, it wasn't the Boys' and Girls' Club, because the Girls' Club was down on East Street, up from the high school. Pittsfield High, right? Yeah, so, no, it was all boys. Yeah. And you can edit this if you want, but looking at Nancy, that was her name—I can't remember her last name—that's when we knew we were heterosexual. For all it's worth.

J: So, you enjoyed your typing class?

W: I did.

J: And you probably enjoyed the other things too.

W: Oh, I did. Yes. That's a Friday night movie. When I came back to Pittsfield, I remember saying to some people, “Whatever happened to the Friday night movie so kids could have something to do besides hang out in the street and get into trouble?” And for some reason, they

stopped that Friday night movie, and they haven't brought it back yet. I hope they do. But it was fun.

J: Yeah. So, you spent a lot of time at these places? Boys' Club, YMCA.

W: No, because I guess, before it became a popular word—I guess I was a bit of a nerd. So that I spent a lot of time studying, during the week. Friday, Boys' Club movie. Saturday chores. I had a paper route, it was the Springfield Union. It was a morning paper. I would get up around six o'clock, deliver the paper. Winter time—what do they say—"the mail never stops." Well, we believed that everybody should get their paper in the morning. It was a good experience, taught me some discipline. Had a little money of my own. Hmm, and that was until—you want me to jump to high school?

J: Sure. So, you went to elementary school—

W: Went to elementary school at Bartlett, and I went to North Junior High.

J: Bartlett, North Junior High.

W: Which is now Reid Middle School.

J: But it was that, it was that building?

W: It was that building, Yeah. It was called North Junior High. That was a good experience. They had something called a "Core Curriculum". And that was supposed to prepare you for college. And so I got into that. Ruth Mills was my teacher. She's gone onto glory now. So I had a Mr. Green. I think he's gone too. But it prepared you in the area, especially of reading, understanding literature. Being able to write in a coherent fashion. All good things that helped me when I went off to college.

J: So, you remember those two teachers in particular. What about them that was special?

W: I had a Latin teacher, Mr. Cahill, at North Junior High. I had trouble with Latin. My mother came up, he was very pleasant. He helped me. I finally passed class. Had trouble with Algebra—Mr. Martinelli, he was also very helpful. I finally passed his class. Was there a Mister—well

that's—we'll get to the high school in a minute. At North Junior High—oh, Miss Mills. Did I say Ruth Mills?

J: You did.

W: At North Junior High?

J: Yeah.

W: No. I want to jump to the high school—Miss Hoffman—I'll talk about her when I get to high school.

J: Okay.

W: So, at the junior high school—those were teachers most helpful to me.

J: Yeah. Mhm.

W: Mister Jacobs, Larry Jacobs, was the assistant principal. And he would get on the P.A, and everybody would sit in their homeroom, hoping he wouldn't call their name, because he would call people who had been in trouble down to his office. And it wasn't anything private about it, he just announced your name on the P.A and you knew. Anyway.

J: Any special friends during that period?

W: Yes. We had a little group. Robert Russo, John Marshall, Larry Madison, and myself—the four of us. Robert Russo is gone now, Larry Madison is gone now. Passed on. John Marshall, I don't know where he is, 'cause he left before we went to high school. And I forget now where he is now. But we had our little group. But that was mostly in school. At home, it was my brother—four years younger—but we were very close. It wasn't like, "Get away from me." We were close as kids. And he had a friend his age, **Jimmy Cheverette**, and I had my friend, Danny Rosen.

And Friday nights, we'd go to the Boys' Club. Saturday, we'd go up to Onota Lake, have fun, swim. Sunday, we went to church, and we had a big Sunday dinner after church. Yeah.

J: Wow. And what about—where'd you go to church?

W: Second Congregational.

J: Wow, it does sound like a nice childhood.

W: It was. I mean, when I think about—I mean, we would sit in the den. We grew up on “Howdy Doody”. What was his name—Bob, Buffalo Bob. You didn't see any black people in those shows. But somehow, I guess we didn't think about that. Because I guess the values that were there were universal. And so we took those in—we, meaning my sister and brother and myself. We enjoyed the cowboy movies. I can't think of who—what his name was—but “Hop-Along Cassidy” and “Johnny MacBrown”, “The Lone Ranger”. On the radio, we had a big ole fashioned radio. We listened to “Sky King”. “The Lone Ranger”, before it came on tv. Believe it or not, I used to watch Billy Graham. And my mother and father always thought I was going to become a preacher, because I was fascinated with his voice—before I found out about his politics. Same thing with Paul Harvey. I loved his voice. I still loved his voice despite his politics, but, be that as it may. So—but let me quickly say about the cowboy movies. Nobody was ever killed—“The Lone Ranger”—“Roy Rodgers”. They shot the gun out of your hand. And so I'm sure that would hurt your hand if it happened. But it wasn't this—there wasn't kind of lack of empathy for life, which we've lost. I mean, I mentor a young man now, I take him to the mall—to the arcade. And they love to with the guns and killing policemen or killing civilians, or what have you—and that's fun. I just find it sad. It's not that we didn't have guns. We got cap guns, BB guns, as kids, but there wasn't a sense of life isn't valuable, which I fear is too prevalent today.

J: Mhm. Mhm. And you attribute some of that to what we do for entertainment?

W: Yes. We think of it as entertainment. Yes, we celebrate “Rambo” killing a lot of people, all right. If we label them the enemy, then it's all right to kill them. No, I have a problem with that.

J: Yeah. So, do you remember any particularly good experiences at school or any particularly bad experiences at school?

W: They were all good. I don't think I got into any trouble. I'll never forget the assistant—well, that's, well I'll go to the high school—the assistant principal was **Ed McKellen** and he came into one of our history—why am I remembering this? He came into one of our history classes. And Ed was tall, never smiled and so he started to talk, and I turned around to **Gary Sitzer**, who was

sitting in the back. And I did something like...and I turn back around and Ed McKellen looking dead in my eyeballs. He said, "Will, I want to see you outside." Oh, my knees were shaking. He said, "That's not acceptable." I said, "Yes, Mister McKellen." Went back, no problem. Other than that, we didn't skip school or, you know, smoke in the boys' gym—boys' room. None of that. We just didn't do it.

J: Yeah. So, you didn't meet any resistance?

W: No. I mean, we, we—the idea was you didn't want to get into trouble, so that your parents would be told. But as long as we're being honest, I will say that after the Boys' Club, we would smoke cigarettes. And I'm so glad we did, because the excitement of it wore off and I never smoked again. The last couple years of high school, college, the rest of it—never smoked.

J: So, you had it out in high—you got it out when you were young.

W: What's that?

J: You got it out of your system.

W: I did. I did, I'm happy to say. I don't want to sound like a paragon of virtue, but I'm glad we did it then, and the excitement wore off. In fact, I had my junior and senior years in high school, I worked at First National Grocery Store, which is now 510 North Street, where you have the health facilities. And one of the—he had an aisle—I forget what his aisle was, but it was grocery—it was breakfast food. He gave me a cigarillo or some kind of cigar, and I brought it home, opened the window in my bedroom, closed the door, smoked, and got sick as a dog. Never again. Never again. So, that was it.

J: So there wasn't any peer pressure to smoke or do things that—

W: You know, it's funny. I'm, I'm glad you said peer pressure. No, because my little group—Danny Rosen and myself, my brother and his friend, Jimmy—we were the group. My mother wouldn't let us go to Pitt Park. We used to go up to a park called "Coolidge Park", which was off—on the other side, where Conte is now—Conte School is. So, a funny story. I came back after my freshman year in college, and went to a party. I guess this is pretty revealing about peer pressure. Went to a party with my sister. They thought I was my sister's boyfriend. So, that's how seldom seen I was, I guess. All right. I said—well I had my hair really cut close at that point. Anyway, they didn't know who I was—out with my sister. So, when I came back to

Pittsfield to look after my father, people said “Who’s the new guy in town?” Because I left in ‘62, and didn’t come back until, oh, 2003, I guess. Except for holidays.

J: Right. Right. Right.

W: Did that.

J: So, when you’re in high school, do you remember thinking about what you were going to do after high school?

W: Yes.

J: When did that start?

W: Yes. Well, my mother always insisted that higher education, wasn’t enough—wasn’t an option. It wasn’t a debate. We were all going to college—and graduate—and do well. We did. The college prep course at the high school program. I never had **Mr. Carey [Edward Carey]**, the English teacher for English, I had him for home room. But I had Miss Hoffman[Margret Hoffman]. I can’t think of her first name—English teacher. Excellent teacher. Very encouraging to all students. I didn’t like poetry, but I started reading it. She’d ask me to read, then she’d ask me to interpret. I got into it. I really did. Had another—had Mr. Kerry’s brother [Clarence Carey] for history. He is one of the reasons why I minored in history and majored in political science when I went to college. He had kind of a dry wit. But I enjoyed history. I enjoyed competing with the guys who were in engineering. They were going to go off to MIT or RPI, so we had good competition in history. English, history, geometry—oh, I didn’t like geometry, but I got through it. Trigonometry—I never saw why those areas of math would be beneficial, all right. I learned later on that they were beneficial. Although, I don’t know how often we use trig or geo—well, I guess we do, I mean, but more architects and people who are going off to engineering

school, as opposed to liberal arts. But I'm still—but you needed a well-rounded education, and we got it at Pittsfield High. So, I'm—

J: Yeah. Yeah. I wish they had told us these things about how you would use this stuff, because I think more of us would've paid more attention.

W: I think you're right. I know you're right.

J: Like architecture, etcetera. I remember asking specifically, "Why are we doing algebra?" And the teacher being rather annoyed that I asked in front of everyone, like I was being a wise guy.

W: Yes. Yes. Point made.

J: Yes. So, so back to—so high school. Do you—now what about the racial makeup of the faculty? Was there—did you have—

W: There were not any black teachers at Pittsfield High when I was there. Ms. Hart, Margaret Hart, was the—not fine arts, the—crafts, she taught crafts at North Junior High. And she just died a few years ago. I wish I could—I wish I could've seen her before she died. But she was kinda, kinda crusty. But I—years later, I found out she was an activist, and very concerned about the community and what have you. But as a teacher—and of course, back in those days, as a teacher, I guess you were supposed to for the first two months, never smile. That, that kind of an adage, right. You know, keep the kids in their place. Well we get to when I became an assistant principal, I'll tell you a story about not smiling, but I'll wait. I'll save that.

J: I'm eager to hear.

W: But high school was good. I had a cousin, Mitchell Edmonds, who's passed on now. And he was working at First National, helping people with their groceries, putting their groceries in their cars, and getting good tips. And so, I was looking for a job, because I wanted to go to college and knew I needed to save money. And so Mitchell was graduating high school, and he told me he was leaving, and I should come up and apply. And I did. And I got his job. Well, I spent one winter out there, and the tips were drying up and I said, "This is not going to work." So, I went inside and there was a cashier by the name of Nelly. I can't think of her last name now. And I asked her, "What do you have to do to work on the register? Become a clerk?" She said, "You have to ask Mr. McCormick." He was the manager. So, I did. And they sort of looked surprised. And I remember later, Nelly telling me that when they asked Mitchell if he wanted to learn how to be a clerk, he said "No." So they made the assumption—I don't want to say that, because I can't say what was in their heads—but they did look surprised when I asked about becoming a clerk. Long story short, I became a clerk. And I did that for one-and-a-half years, and saved my

money. Good experience. Typing. I learned how to (do) a little bit of, I don't know, not very nice I guess. But what I used to do, I memorized—the old fashioned cash register—and I memorized it. So, when somebody would come through with their groceries, I never looked at the register. I would just *schoom chee choo*, and a person, a person, the customer, would go and I got a kick out of that. All right. Wasn't very nice—but that's what typing early helped everything out. So, it was a good experience. And I'm glad I did it. You know.

J: It's interesting.

W: And in 1962, graduated. I'll never forget, I got a scholarship up from a package store. And it just comes back to me like yesterday. And they called my name, and I went up, and they named the scholarship, and people started laughing because it was a package store, right. I went up, got the check—it didn't bother me.

J: Right.

W: But it's funny how things come back to you when you have to talk, isn't it? And I went off to college.

J: So, where did you go?

W: Howard University down in Washington, D.C. My mother—well, my father wanted me to stay locally. And I had a cousin who went to Monson Academy, and he needed someone to take to his prom. And my sister, a year younger—we had met him, his family had come up from Virginia, years before. So anyway, he took my sister to his prom, and he was going to Virginia State, historically black college. And he was talking about black colleges, which I had never even considered. And he mentioned Howard University. Washington, D.C. So, I said to my mother, “Oh, that sounds good. I think I want to apply.” And my father said, “No.” He didn't want me to go south. We had a dentist by the name of Earl Reeves, who said to my father, “Don't let him go south. It's 1962.” Excuse me. But, my mother said, “He wants to go. Let him get away. Good experience.” My father acquiesced. To D.C I went.

J: So, tell us about it. Tell us about being at Howard.

W: Well, that was a good experience. The funniest—the funniest thing though, my mother—we went down—my mother and I went down. Took the Greyhound. I leave the terminal. Cabs are right lined up. I get in. I say, “Howard University.” He said, “Yes sir.” So, we start driving, and I see all these black people. Because on TV, whenever they talked about Washington D.C, you never saw any black people. You know, you saw Congress. You saw white folks visiting. You didn't see black folks. Well, I was incredulous. I said, “What in the world is this? Washington

D.C? Are you—” I’m going. He said, “Yes sir.” So, that was a really eye-opener for me. All right. And I got to Howard. And really met—I thought I was pretty smart—I met black folks who were really smart. From Houston, Texas; Chicago; San Francisco; the Caribbean; parts of Africa. So that was a good experience for me. But then the story that I tell—I had been there about a month, and I decided to walk around. So, about a half mile from campus is a street called “U Street”. And I went down there about twelve-midnight. You know, nobody’s telling me what to do. I can go and come as I please, right? So, I get down there at twelve-midnight, and you would’ve thought it was twelve-noon. I couldn’t believe it. All these people, all lit up. I mean, I—my sister said, “They must’ve known you were not a local.” Because I’m sure I had to walk around, right? But great experience. Great experience.

J: What was U Street like? When you picture that evening, what do you see?

W: I see people dressed—it probably was a Saturday night. And some people are dressed up, some are not. I’ll never forget. Some fellow walked up to me—why am I remembering this—some fellow walked up to me and said, “Did—did you get that number?” I said, “No, I didn’t.” So, I got back to campus and I said, “Some guy asked me about did I get the number?” And he looked at me and said, “Where are you from?” I said, “Pittsfield, Massachusetts.” They said, “Well, I guess you never heard of the numbers?” I said, “No, I haven’t.” Well, I guess that’s what he was talking about. Funny. It’s—the laugh—the look on your face.

J: That’s a great—it’s a great story.

W: People still laugh at me when I tell that story.

J: Well, I wouldn’t know. Number, number, it could be any number—telephone number. Who knows?

W: I didn’t know what he was talking about. So, anyway, that was a good experience. And I had some good classes. I joined a fraternity—Omega Psi Phi fraternity incorporated. Had a good two years in the fraternity. But, you know, when you wake—when you’re in college, and wake up, and look at your dresser, and there’s no money there, you know, that’s a real drag. My first, my first year, I had two roommates. One was from Houston, Texas; the other was from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. And they could read and study with music—I couldn’t. I called my mother and

father and said, “That’s it. I gotta have my own room.” So, I got my own room. And—why am I telling you that?

J: Money.

W: Yes, money. So, I’m in the fraternity, and we have a dial on the middle of campus. And I met this fella who worked at the Library of Congress, and he wanted to pledge to the fraternity. And I said, “Well, where do you work? What part?” He said, “In the book division, where we shelve books.” I said, “What do you have to do to get a job there?” He says, “Come down. Take the test. And if there’s an opening, you can get the job.” Next day, I was down there, took the test, and got the job—shelving books. And I’m telling you, having that check every two weeks was—I mean, I’m an atheist, but, but it was a godsend, all right. Anyway. Something about not having to call home and ask for money. I was on my own. In fact, when I came back, my father said to me, “You know, son, we always wondered why you never called home. The only time you called home was after we called you to tell you that the dog had died.” I had a dog named Tippy, who died after, I don’t know, ten or twelve years. And I got all upset because they should’ve called me so I could come home. And I called back, and we talked about it. You know, I got past it. But I said to my father, because my mother had passed on by then. I said, “But pop, you and ma taught us to be responsible, to be self sufficient, to take care of things.” I said, “We learned well.” I don’t he quite accepted it completely, but he thought we should’ve called—I should’ve called to ask for advice or discussed issues—didn’t do it.

J: Right.

W: But, the example that they set—my mother being at home, which was very fortunate for the three of us. My father, working like a horse. He worked at the laundry. He also cleaned offices. I’ll tell you a quick story. One Saturday night, after supper, he said, “Let’s go.” Because we all joined in after a while to help clean the offices. And we got, as I used to say, we “poked out our mouths”. And I’ll never forget, my father looked at the three of us and said, “After working all day, do you think I enjoy going down and cleaning those offices?” We never had anything else to say. Because we soon realized who Santa Claus was, all right. If we had ever—my brother and I—my brother, sister, and I, talk about this periodically; if we had ever come down to that living room and had a piece of coal or an apple in the stocking, we’d have been in a state of I don’t know what. We’d have been shocked, all right. That room was full every Christmas. Why? My

mother didn't work, because my father worked the way he did, all right. And that was a good lesson that we learned. You know, money doesn't grow on trees, and you had to work hard.

J: How do you think your parents got the way they were? I mean, they were—it sounds like they were so stable.

W: Interesting. My mother's father—they used to be called—it used to be called "Wendell Hotel". And my mother's father was the head bellhop. That was a big deal then—nice uniform. They were still called "boy", but it was, that was—you were considered an important person among black folks if you were the head bellhop. But he was very responsible. A church-going person. Respected in the community. My father—the story is, is that his mother and father died when he was four or five. And he was pushed off to an uncle and treated badly. So, at fourteen, he left. Just, just took off. And this—he was in Georgetown, South Carolina, I guess anyways. And some engineers in South Carolina got a job at the G.E. And this one engineer—well, all five of them—missed southern cooking. And my father was working at this house, for this family. And the lady said to my father, "Would you like to go north," Because my father learned how to cook. He was about sixteen or seventeen at that point, I guess. No, maybe a little older. Maybe eighteen. "—And cook for my son and his fellow engineers?" Pop said, "All right." On the way, he stopped in New York and some fella he met said to him, "Oh, don't go up there. Stay here. And we'll find a job and hang out and have fun." Pop said, "No. I promised her that I would go and work for these engineers." And that's what he did. So, my father—my mother's father and mother had a big house, and they would take in boarders. So, when my father got into Pittsfield, he had to have a place to live. He lived—he moved in there. And my mother was the youngest of four—four—five. And her mother was very protective. So, my father used to say he got a—never ever got a good look at her, at my mother, because she was always flashing by. But finally, he did. He liked what he saw, and she liked him. And just as in— this is great, I love this—just as in the movie "The Godfather", the first one, where Michael is courting Apollonia. And they're walking up this road, and then all of a sudden, you see all the people behind them. Well, well, my father would take my mother to the movies, one of her brothers would sit in the back row. Let's see, it was, it was John, William, Lucy, Jimmy, and my mother. There were five of them, yeah. And she was the youngest, all right. So, I like to tell that story whenever I get a chance, because, to your point about the influence that my parents had on the three of us, and what was it in their upbringing that made them the way they were. My father played in a band, and one night he came home with beer on his breath, and my mother said, "What is that?" "Well, I just went out with the boys for a beer." "That's unacceptable." You'd have to know my mother.

So, he stopped doing that. And so after they finished their gig, the guys would say, “Singleton, where are you going?” Pop goes, “I’m going home to my family.” And that’s what he did.

J: Strong characters.

W: But, but, at the laundry, his boss was Bill Roche. His son runs Roche Mortuary, in Lenox, I guess it is. Anyway, he would get my father a bottle of whiskey for Christmas. And my father would bring it home and put it in the pantry. And it would sit there. Come about this time of the year, April, you know how kids are, we’d look and there would be no bottle. And so we’d say, “Ma, what happened to that bottle of whiskey.” And she’d say, “Ask your father.” So we did. So pops said, “No, I drank it.” We said, “You drank whiskey?” He said, “Yes, for medicinal purposes.” We didn’t know what “medicinal” meant, right. But here’s the kicker, he was never sick. We never saw him sick, until, you know, he was in his eighties. So, apparently it worked.

J: Wow. Whiskey—it was the whiskey. A little whiskey helps.

W: Yeah, I guess it does.

J: As long as you don’t do too much. Hm, well those are great stories. So you were away at university and you, and you—how did you decide what you wanted to do for work? Did that—you were working at the Library of Congress?

W: Yes. Right.

J: Interesting job.

W: So, I majored in political science. Minored in history. And I’m going to tell this because people need to know that everybody has a story. They weren’t always successful at everything that they did. I made good grades in college and I went to law school. And I went to Howard University’s law school. And just as the movie—I can’t think of the movie but it’s about law school. I thought—and this goes all the way back to my childhood, I guess—that I could make it through law school by myself. I thought I was smart enough to do that. I wasn’t. Let’s say there were seven courses—I passed five, failed two. I was devastated. I was work—I had come home that summer, one of the few summers I had come home, and I was working at the Potting Shed, which is in Lenox. The Music Barn where you had Count Basie, and Brubeck and those people who would come. Up above was the Potting Shed, where you also had jazz groups, what have you, come. I was a waiter, started out as a busboy. The waiters were supposed to share their tips with the busboy. So anyway, one of the waiters left and I was able to get a waiter’s job. I’ll never forget, my brother brought my grades down to me, and showed that I had passed five and failed two. And I said I was devastated. I could’ve gone back, made a plea to the dean taken

those courses over again. But somehow I couldn't bring myself to do that. And to this day I don't know why. So, I had my pity party for about a week and went back to Washington, D.C after finishing at the Potting Shed. I didn't know what I was going to do. And my brother came to D.C also. And we were living together—he was working at McDonald's. And so he said, "Well, come down to McDonald's. At least you'll make a little money." My pride wouldn't let me do that, but eventually I did. So I worked at McDonald's for a couple of months, and I said, "I don't know what I'm going to do." He said, "Well, you ever think about teaching?" This is my brother now. I said, "Nah." He said, "Well, think about it." Thought about it. Went down to the education department, and as luck would have it, even though I hadn't had teaching courses, they were in need of teachers in Washington. And at the time, they needed a history teacher. So, I ended up going up to a place called Alice Deal Junior High, which was next to Wilson High School. It's on upper northwest Washington. Right up near American University. And many of the students then, their parents worked at the State Department, Pentagon. This is before they bussed black kids from the other side of Washington. And I guess I was maybe the fourth black teacher at the school. And it was great. Part of it, I think, was because I had had a failure, I was determined to be the best teacher I could be. And my brother will tell you that's all I did—I taught, came home, prepared, went to school, came home, prepared. So, I was always reading, all right. Because I wanted to bring the best that I could to my students. And I taught for six—seven years, in Washington. I turned thirty. And I said, "You know, I might want to get married. Maybe I'll think about administration. Hm." The principal at the time—there was a new principal. I've been teaching for seven years. And he left after three years to go to Long Island to become the principal of the high school. Well, I said just sort of half-heartedly, "Well listen, if something opens up, give me a call." I didn't think I'd ever hear from him again, all right. Well, what happened. They had an opening at the junior high. He called me. He said, "Come up and apply. I can't promise you anything." And now in the meantime, in teaching, I had become a union rep at my school, department chair of the social studies department. So I had a little bit of background in some leadership. So, I applied. They were looking for somebody because they were having union issues, right. And the union president, who struck, who struck an accord. Anyway, I got the job, right. So I was the assistant principal at the junior high for three years,

and then I went to the high school for seven or eight years. But the best part of my career was teaching, all right.

J: That seven years?

W: Yeah. That was the best part of my career. Unfortunately, when I came to New York—this is more than you want to know—

J: No.

W: It used to be Tier One in New York. They had just changed to Tier Two, and you couldn't bring your years of experience with you. I just missed it. But, you know, that's the way it worked out, all right. So,—

J: So where exactly were you?

W: Oh, sorry, in Long Island. It was Huntington, New York.

J: Okay. Yeah.

W: All right. That's just across the line from Queens.

J: Yeah.

W: All right. Back in the day, it was considered the wilderness, going out to Long Island, right. But, so I had a good experience there. I—want me to talk about my career as I—

J: Sure. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

W: So, after, well, I'll tell you this story. Well I was in Huntington, and I had a couple of girlfriends, and we broke up. And the social worker came down to—it was called Toaz Junior High School. And she said, "Will, I'd like you to meet a nice girl." And I said, "I don't like nice girls." And she got all worked up. I said, "Okay, I'll meet her." I met her. Her name was Deborah Revell. She was a speech therapist in Huntington. So we're sitting at the "Salty Dog", it was called. And so we're—I'm going through how I got to Huntington and I just happened to say to her, "Somebody called me. Nice woman, nice voice, welcomed me to the district, but never told me her name." She said, "It was I." So anyway, long story short, we ended up going together for fourteen years. We got married. We were married for three years. And sad to say she died of colon cancer at the age of forty-three. Needless to say, I was devastated. Angry. And people would say to me, "Well, Will," (when she was going through all of this) "how are you doing?" I

said, “What do you mean how am I doing? She’s the one fighting to live.” But of course, they meant well, because when someone close to you is ill, and terminal, all that has an impact on you. And I’ll never forget, after we buried her, she’d asked me to cremate—have her cremated. And we had gone to Hawaii years before, and she said, “I want you to take my ashes to Hawaii and spread them over the water.” Which is what I did. And I’ll never forget, I was driving back to work, and—you can edit this if you have to—and there was a bumper sticker on the back of this car. And through all of her illness and burial and ashes, I had never cried. And on the bumper sticker it said, “Shit happens”. I had to pull over because I was laughing and crying at the same time. I’ll never forget that, all right. So, and then, when she was dying, it was a sort of a joke—it wasn’t a joke really—she said to me, “You know, I’m not going to make it.” I said, “I know.” She said, “But I want you to find a nice girl.” And we had a good laugh about that, right.

J: ‘Cause you don’t like nice girls.

W: Pardon me? I know. I know. I know. So, I did. But that’s—I don’t know.

J: That’s jumping ahead a little.

W: Yeah.

J: Yeah. So, she was sick for a long time?

W: No. No, she—she—her father died of colon cancer, when she was nine or ten. And one of the reasons why we didn’t have children was because before we got married, she said to me, “I worry that I’m going to die.” (this is really kind of sad) “I worry that I’m going to die young, like my father did.” I said, “Nah, you’ll be fine. Look atcha.” She was—as I used to say in college—she was a fox. But—so, so, before we got married, she said, “Are—can you accept that?” I said, “Yes.” All right. So, sure enough though, a year and a half, two years into our marriage, she was having bowel problems. And anyway, it turned out it was colon cancer. And, the doctor said he could help her, but she’d have to wear a bag for awhile, at least. She didn’t want to. And our relationship was such—I, I guess I’m saying this because I, I to this day feel a little bit bad that I didn’t insist—but our relationship was such that if one said “No” it was “No.” And so we tried alternative methods. There was some success. I’ll never forget, she was really hurting, but this vitamin C drip helped her, and we went to a wedding. And people couldn’t believe it. She looked so great, like her old self, you know. But after that wedding, about a month later, she went downhill. And I went out to get some health food at an organic store, and I came back and she was gone. But fortunately for me, and her, she was having hallucinations. And she didn’t want her mother to come. And her mother kept saying to me, “If you need me, call me.” I said, “That’s it Debbie, I’m calling your mother.” Mother was on the next jet coming to Huntington—I mean, coming to Rocky Point, Long Island. So for that year, her mother was really great. And it was

really sad, because her mother had buried two husbands, and now she was about to lose her daughter, all right. And her mother's going to be eighty-seven this month. And she's still here. And she has another daughter, with whom she lives, in Columbia, South Carolina now. So it was a tough experience. But, what I found out, as sad as it was for me and her family—it happens to a lot of people, all right. But at the time, of course, you know, it's very personal, of course. But, I guess that's part of life, unfortunately. All right. I belong to an organization called "Life Extension", and they're trying to find ways to help us live longer, in a healthy way. I hope they hurry up.

J: Yeah, you got—went through a lot. And that—and so you were in—you were teaching—you were administrator, at that point.

W: Yes.

J: And, so—

W: But my goal was to become a superintendent.

J: Okay.

W: I'll talk about that in a little bit if you want. So, a similar situation. The principal in Washington, who became the principal in Huntington, had told me about the job. He went on to become an assistant superintendent at Elmira. I said, "If anything opens up...because I'm tired of being an assistant principal, let me know." Well, nothing did. Then he went on to a place called Addison, which is near Corning, as superintendent. He called me up. He said, "I need an assistant superintendent. Are you interested?" I said, "Do birds fly? Do bees make honey?" He said, "Well, before you say 'yes', you better come up here and take a look at the place." Well, there's one main street, a couple of stores. And if I got the job, I'd be the only black guy in town. Well, that didn't bother me, all right. So, I guess—I guess they had one black teacher, female. And I guess they never had a black administrator. So anyway, I applied. I really didn't think I was going to get the job, all right. I went through a series of interviews, and then I met the board. It turned out the guy who was the favorite candidate by some of the board members, blew the interview. He just stiffened up and completely lost it. I went in, talked to them like I'd known them all my life—end up getting the job. So I was there for three years. My girlfriend, later to be my wife would come to visit. And they wanted me to stay. She said, "I'm not living here. I like Long Island." And I said, "All right." So, three years later, an assistant superintendent's job opened up in Riverhead, Long Island. And I applied, went through the whole process—I got the job. The night I interviewed with the board, they said, "You have any problem living in Riverhead?" I said, "No, really I don't. But," I said, "If you offer me the job, I'm going to ask my long-time, suffering girlfriend to marry me. And if she says 'yes', she works in Huntington and I'd be working in Riverhead—" And if you know Long Island, that's a long—from going to

Riverhead to Huntington. So I said that we'd have to compromise, and find a place in between. They just looked at me. I said, "Well, guess I just lost a job." Went home, to her house, her apartment. About an hour later, the superintendent calls me, "You got the job." Well of course, we hugged, and hollered. So, I said, "Debbie," she said, "What?" "I got something to ask you." "What is it? You got the job, isn't it great?" I said, "Will you marry me?" Well, her mouth opened up. She looked—she walked around her apartment for thirty minutes. Then she came and she said, "Yes." Called her mother. I called my family. So anyway, then we got married. Was raining like cats and dogs. Why do I forget—I forget the name of the place. And I'll never forget the maitre d' said, "Not to worry. Time for the ceremony. The rain will stop." The rain stopped. We held the ceremony outside. Went inside for the reception, downpour. Almost made me think about getting religion.

J: Twice now.

W: Yeah. So that's—

J: So, what was her name?

W: My wife? Deborah.

J: Deborah?

W: Yeah. Yeah. We called her "Debbie". I called her "honey bun". That was my pet name for her. So, from Riverhead, I was the assistant superintendent. And when the superintendent moved on, my wife was going through cancer. And people said to me, "Well, we'll consider you. But you're going to have to move to Riverhead." I said, "But I can't move to Riverhead. My wife is suffering from a terminal illness." So, they hired somebody else. And they had never had a black superintendent at Riverhead. And I always felt, rightly or wrongly, although that everyone seemed to be happy and satisfied with my work, that they weren't ready for a black superintendent. Because I always felt that they really wanted me there, given the circumstances, they'd have made me superintendent. Because previously, all the other assistant superintendents, the history of Riverhead was, they all moved up to the superintendent's job, unless they committed some kind of crime or something, and I found that hadn't happened. So anyway, they hired somebody else. I worked with that person. Had a good relationship. That person moved on. They hired another person. I said, "Well, I don't have a future here." So, that lead me to eventually apply for a superintendent's job in place called "Roosevelt" in Nassau County. And that's where I was superintendent for three years. That was a tumultuous experience. But we got through it. And I was trying to decide what I wanted to do. After I left Roosevelt, I worked for the New York City Board of Ed, on a special project. I also worked as a assistant superintendent

for personnel in Plainview-Old Bethpage. And then I also worked as a assistant superintendent for personnel in Uniondale. So, I'm, trying to decide what I want to do, all right.

J: So, but how old are you here?

W: I'm in my mid-fifties, now. I'm fifty-seven. And I go downstairs—this is late August I guess. No, early September. And I'm working out, and I come upstairs. I turn on the television, and a plane has flown into the—into one of the towers. I think it's an accident, right. So, I'm sitting there, and another one flies into the other tower. I said, "What the heck is going on?" And I didn't say "heck". My father calls me. My sister calls me. I said, "No, no, no. I'm Rocky Point." I mean this is New York City, and Rocky Point's way over here on Long Island. North Shore, Long Island. So, I say, "No, I'm fine." I went to bed that night, and I said, "That's it. I'm done." I called the retirement office in Albany and said, "What do I have to do to put in my retirement papers?" They said, they told me, "However, remember, you're going to lose some time because you couldn't carry those seven years of teaching. So, you want to think about that." I said, "Okay, I'll think about it." I went to bed that night, got up the next morning, and called, "I made up my mind. I'm done. Finished." So, I retired.

J: And it was something about the 9/11 that just—

W: That was probably part of it.

J: Yeah.

W: But I think I, I was ready.

J: Done anyway.

W: I was done. I think that helped me. I think it did. And so, I was living in this big house, by myself. I went to a workshop on baseball, and this guy giving the workshop, stopped me at the end of the workshop and said, "Did you ever play ball?" I said, "No." He said, "Well, we have a senior softball league. How old are ya?" I said—I was fifty-eight then. He said, "Well, you gotta be fifty-nine." I said, "Okay." He said, "But when you turn fifty-nine, come out." I did. I had a great time playing senior softball. I could still run. I couldn't hit all that well, but I could catch. The only negative part about it was, when I'd get home, I'd have to get out of my car like this...And then—this is more than you want to know, right? Then I'd go into the bathroom, run

hot water, epsom salt, lavender, and I'd sit there and recover. I was ready to go, two days later, all right.

J: That's great.

W: So, I did that. I got into martial arts. I was in my early-fifties when I started that. And the kids would look at me, "What's that old guy doing here?" But I enjoyed it, and I'm still in it. I—I got—I decided that I was too old for people to be throwing me around. I didn't mind throwing them around, but I was getting too old. So, I found a guy who was in my age bracket, and I take private lessons now for the past three years. And we talk politics and history and society in general, and then we train. So, it's worked out well for me. And I also take tai chi, tai chi at the Senior Citizen's Center, which is also a good exercise.

J: Yeah, for balance and all that.

W: Uh—

J: So, how did you go—how did you end up in Pittsfield again? What happened?

W: My father turned ninety, and we had a big party for him. Shortly after that, his health began to go south. And my sister had retired—was living in Pittsboro, North Carolina, with her family. My brother had retired—was living in Maryland, with his family. I'd retired, but I had no family. The funny thing about it is that I thought I would always come back to Pittsfield, but I certainly didn't think I was going to come back as a caregiver. So I was elected. So, we promised pop that we would not put him in a home unless we absolutely had to. So, I came home, and I took care of pop. And then after he realized I was no longer fifteen, we had a good two years, and he went onto glory. promised him that I would stay in the house. So, here I am.

J: So, there you are.

W: Here I am.

J: And you got pretty active right away. You were taking care of your father.

W: Yeah. No—but—well—I got active after he died. Because, while I was taking care of him, I would go to various businesses, the bank, what have you, grocery stores, and I wouldn't see any black people. And I—the day before he died, I went to a funeral. And a girl I had grown up with on King Street, was there. Her sister was my sister's best friend. And she was a couple years younger, this girl. Her name was Linda. And I had a girlfriend, but we broke up. So, I was looking for somebody—more than you want to know—I was looking for somebody who didn't

want to get married—excuse me—somebody who had children—they were grown. After my wife died, I found a nice girl, and we went together for nine years. But, she wanted to get married, which was perfectly normal. She hadn't been married, wanted to have children. I didn't. And so, we split. We're still friends. And then I came to Pittsfield, to look after my father. So, I'm trying to find somebody who meets my criteria, right. I know that sounds, whatever, but, anyways, that's what I was doing. I didn't want to find a woman who wasn't on my wavelength, all right.

J: Makes sense.

W: It's not that I'm the cat's meow, but, in a relationship I think I've learned how to act like a human being. And it leads to "let's get married." I don't want to get married. So anyway, I found somebody. And this—this is funny. I didn't think it was at the time. The day before my father died, I said I went to a funeral, came home, told my father that I had seen Linda and asked her for a date. He died that morning, okay. So, we buried him. I was scheduled to go out with Linda that weekend. Of course, we didn't do it. So after we buried pop, we went out. First date—you know where Mazzeo's used to be? That's where we had our date. So, now we grew up together, but she hadn't seen me in years. She had married, had children, marriage didn't work out. So we're sitting in Mazzeo's, and I'm running down what I want in a relationship. I don't want to get married. I want a woman who is financially able to take care of herself. Owns her own home. I had a litany of things. She subsequently said to me, "I don't know why I even sat there and listened to you like I did." But she did. But here's the part that I—I hope I never see the guy again, I might say something to him. I don't even know who he was—at the end, he, this guy sitting next to us, finishes dinner, gets up—I don't know the guy, neither does she—he comes to the table and looks at her, never looks at me, "Did you enjoy your dinner?" Because he had heard everything I said, right. She reminds me of that—Linda reminds me of that periodically. I say, "Yeah, well, later for him." But anyway, she and I have been together now for about, it'll be eight years this October, and it's been good.

J: Good.

W: I'm happy to say. Yeah. You have to ask her how she feels about it, but I'm happy to say.

J: So, but you—but about the NAACP, because you got involved—

W: Yes.

J: With that.

W: Yes. Yes. So, I would say to Linda, "You know, I know there isn't a large black population in

Pittsfield, and we have a growing African population, and a growing Hispanic population, but I don't see people of color when I go into these places." She said, "Well, what are you going to do, just talk about it?" I said, "No, I'm not going to 'just talk about it'." So I call a woman by the name of Joyce Armstrong. And she had been involved in the NAACP years back. And it had been active and had gone, sort of, defunct, for a few—many—years. So she went to church and said, "I talked to Will Singleton, and he wants to know what we can do about getting NAACP started again." She called me up. She said, "A couple of people are interested." I said, "Great, let's have a meeting." Had a meeting in the basement at Second Church.

J: Do you remember when that was?

W: Yes. It was the summer of 2012 or 13. One or the other. 12, I guess. And so, we said, "Let's do it." And people give me credit for coming up with the idea of reconstituting NAACP, but I didn't want to be the president. I didn't want to lead it. I just wanted to bring people together, because I was happy being a professional bum, all right. That was me. But I was selected, with Dennis Powell, to be co-presidents, to try to get the thing together. We called Juan Colfield, who was the New England-area conference chair for the New England area. He told us what we have to do in order to reconstitute ourselves. You had to have fifty members—a number of things. We did it. We got it together. He came. We had an installation. I was elected president. Had a body of officers, and we were off and running, all right. We filed a complaint with the federal government—EEOC—about we didn't think the city government had good intentions about making City Hall reflect better the diversity in the community. Turned out that Affirmative Action is like cursing your grandmother. The minute somebody, especially somebody white, heard Affirmative Action, they defined that as, "Oh, some black people wanting a handout. They don't want to work for anything." Because, as I've said to people, there was no "NAAWP". You know what that would stand for? So, found out, because we kept getting a runaround. And I get annoyed when I get the runaround. And I have another vocabulary that's not always great. So anyway, I called up EEOC, and this woman was very forthcoming, I have to say. She said, "Mister Singleton, the only way you're going to have a case is if you walk into a room and the interviewer looks at you and says, 'Doctor Singleton, you have a very interesting resume here. Yeah, Howard University, Georgetown, doctorate from NYU. Superintendent of schools. But we can't hire you because you're black.' That's the only time you'd have a case." I said, "Well," pardon the expression "what damn fool, would say that to my face?" She said, "That's the point. But unless you get that, you don't have a case. Nobody wants to hear about Affirmative Action." So, I said, "Okay." So we started using the word "diversity". And I spoke to the School Committee, made a presentation to City Council, and talked about the importance of diversity, especially today. And that—it wasn't so much a matter of—although it was important for black people, adults and children, to see black people in positions of responsibility, but I said, "It's also important for white people and for white children, because we live on a diverse planet, and it's important for them to see that people from different backgrounds are responsible for—that can

do the job. You know, the whole nine yards.” And I’m happy to say, as we sit here today, April 4th, 20—April 6th. What is it, April 6th?

J: Mhm.

W: —2017, when you go around Pittsfield and other parts of Berkshire County, you do see black people working in the stores, in the banks, finally somebody at City Hall again. So I’d like to think we made some progress, right. But—and I maybe jumping ahead here, but let me say this while it’s on my mind—we have a bigger problem than race. If we all woke up tomorrow purple, there’d be a problem. I’ll tell you a story. Four years ago, somebody did a study that let’s say there’d be fifty-thousand jobs forthcoming for Berkshire County over the next ten years, and the people in the room was held at the—what’s the name of the hotel there?

J: Crowne Plaza.

W: Crowne Plaza—that’s about to go under. And everybody goes, “Yeah, so?” So being the person that I am, I raised my hand. I said, “That sounds great. But has anybody done a study about how many jobs we are going to need?” He looked at me like I had three heads. He was all excited about a study that said how many would become available, but not how many we’re going to need. I said, “Come on.” Nobody said a word. They thought I was—but I knew what I was talking about because I’m not the only one that thought like this, it’s just that you don’t hear about it a lot. So, back to my point about the problem that I think we have. Technology is making us obsolete. People argue with me and they say, “But technology is creating more different kinds of jobs.” I said, “That’s true. But they aren’t going to be enough for the number of people who’re going to need them.” They look at me. I said, “That’s the problem.” I said, “More—yes, we went through this, what they call, recession. For some people it was a depression. For others, a disaster.” I said, “But, more jobs are coming back, but they’re lower paying jobs. And the cost of living keeps going up. What are people going to do?” People have heard me say, “When white people get a cold, black people get pneumonia.” A whole lot of white folks got pneumonia in this country—where does that leave people of color? All right. Race is still something that we as a country have a hard time dealing with, all right. So I guess my point is, that if we were all the same color and didn’t have any prejudices, we’d still have a problem with people being able to make a living, and, and getting out of poverty. I saw a movie, it was called “The Elysian Fields”,

where the fat cats are on a space station and the rest of us are down here. Is that where we're headed? I don't know.

J: Interesting time we're living in.

W: Yes. All right.

J: I want to back up a little—

W: Yeah, please.

J: Because I want—this is all fascinating, and I'd love to talk more—

W: Nice of you to say.

J: No. No, it is. It's important. I'd love to know what you think we might do to sort of push forward on some of this—to help or—all of us think about this in a way that might be productive, even in our little community.

W: Uhuh. Well I wish there a simple answer. There isn't. If we keep—before I answer, let me say this—if we keep going the way we're going, we're going to have to come up with a system where people who are not working are going to have to get some kind of stipend. And that's going to go hard, and against the grain, of what we as Americans think of as “you work hard, you keep your nose clean, and you get your just reward”. That's the way my sister, brother, and I were raised, all right. But the jobs aren't going to be there. And on a bigger scale, unfortunately, in our country, we've made capitalism synonymous with democracy. We have got to come up with a system that does not base itself on maximizing profit. Because if you have a system that's based on maximizing profit, you've got what we got right now, where you've got a few people making most of the money. The middle class is fast-disappearing, in spite of what they say. And poverty is bad. I have a neighbor—this goes to my point about Affirmative Action, and how a lot of white folks see that. There are a lot of white people in this country, in my age bracket, who came up hard—excuse me. I have—I know white folks whose fathers left the family, whose fathers were alcoholics, beat their mother, beat the kids. The kids had mustard sandwiches on Wonder Bread, if they could get Wonder Bread. They don't want to hear anything about Affirmative Action. And but, but the problem for me is, when we were going through the Civil Rights Movement, and we were talking about bigotry and separation and segregation. But we don't talk anymore about what happened to the Irish, and the Italians, and the Germans, and the Jews—when they came to this country, and the way they were treated. We just have amnesia about that. I said, and somebody asked me to a speak at a church, and I told them I'd come back if they wanted me to explain what I meant when I said, “Irish, Italians, Poles—they became

‘white’ one day.” And you could see the “What do you mean ‘white’? They are white.” I said, “No. They became white, because they weren’t treated as ‘white people’ when they got here.” I said, “But if you want me, that’s a different speech.” I said, “You want me, I’ll talk about that.” All right.

J: I think that’s an interesting speech, and an interesting way to put it.

W: But, but, I think we’d go a long way coming together as a community if those ethnic groups would talk about what happened to them, and how they were able to make it. And the so called ‘do-gooders’—I hate that expression—but when they said, “Well wait a minute, the tenements that the Italians lived in. The signs that said ‘Irish need not apply’. Child labor. We gotta stop that, because it makes us look bad as a country, as a society.” All right. I would say, I had a—when I went to NYU, I had a professor named Henry Perkinson. Great guy. He’s gone on to glory now, too. And we used to talk about the kinds of things we’re talking about here. And we used to write essays, and he, and he must have been something, because there must have been thirty people in the class, and he would read each essay, and pencil in things, and commentary. And now I forget why I mentioned him.

J: About the Irish—just talk about, just talk about—if we would just talk about what happened to them.

W: Yes. Yes. And how—it’ll come back to me—but how they, how they made it, oh, I was talking about how it makes our society look bad.

J: Yeah.

W: When we were talking about how the Italians, Irish, and Jews were treated. One of the things that helped the Civil Rights Movement was that after World War Two, the English, the French, the Germans, the Russians—as devastated as they were—they were seen as colonial powers. They had abused people around the world. As Malcolm X said, “When you’re dribbling down the court, and you get trapped on the basketball court, do you just throw the ball away? No. There’s guard is coming alongside you—you pass the ball to him.” Guess who that guard was? USA. And those European powers passed the ball to the USA. That’s a whole ‘nother story. But the reason why I mention it is because the Civil Rights Movement was helped by the powers that be in our country, as well as well-intentioned people, saying, “We can’t go around the world talking about the ‘home of the brave, land of the free’ when we’re telling black people they can’t vote. When a family sees Uncle Frank Friday night, and Monday he’s hanging from a tree or they never find his body. We gotta do somethin’.” So not taking anything away from the black folks who even before the Civil Rights Movement was a movement, were fighting to get equal treatment, fair treatment, justice. But nothing ever happens in a vacuum, I guess. And because of

the need for us to have this image that we were different from the colonial powers, in fact we were the only—we were the first ones to say to the mother country, “Goodbye!” Good thing it’s not on video. And so we were able to say—able to say, “You can trust us.”

J: Interesting. Very interesting. So, jumping ahead a little bit one of the questions that we were asking all of the interviewees—I think Len came up with this question—is how do you think the—having the first African-American president has affected us as a country—you, as a person? I mean, what, what kind of effect do you think that Barack Obama?

W: That’s a good question. Well, I’ll say this: I’m glad that my father, who died at ninety-two, was able to see a black man become President of the United States. I wish my mother could’ve seen it, but she died years earlier. It was nice to see a black first family. Daughters—well-spoken. The all American look in terms of being articulate. You know the old story, “If you black folks would just learn how to speak correct English, get your educations, do the right thing, everything will be just hunky-dory.” Well, Obama went to Harvard. His wife—Princeton was it?

J: Yeah, I think so.

W: Or Yale?

J: I think it was Princeton.

W: One of them. Both attorneys. Children, going to private schools, up in deep Washington. Stayed out of trouble. Never heard anything about them getting drunk, or fooling around or whatever. And still, as far as I’m concerned, they were disrespected, all right. How in the world—and Bill O’Reilly says it was because of Obama’s policies—before Obama even had a chance to say anything about policy. Mitch McConnell said, “We’re going to make him a one-term president.” That was because of this...He and his wife represented everything that people who control our society say you’re supposed to do. And still, he was treated so disrespectfully. I disagreed with a lot of the things he wanted to do, but whenever people would say, “Well look at Obama.” I said, “Wait a minute, when did we elect a dictator? He can’t get Congress to do anything. They even said—the Republicans said he’s a one-term president. We aren’t going to—” I said, “It’s one thing to object to something, but what are you going to come up with as an alternative? Nothing.” So what happens—to jump ahead. He’s out of office. We’ve got Donald Trump. And the Republicans control everything, and they can’t come up with a replacement for the Affordable Care Act. What does that tell you? Because it’s such a disaster, what they were proposing. That even some of their own Republicans couldn’t go along with. Some had ideological things, like Rand Paul. But back to Obama. Jeremiah Wright said, “If you become president, if you run for president, I can’t support you. Because if you win, you’re going to be doing the bidding of the powers that be.” And people said, “How could he talk like that?” And he

gave a sermon where he said, “goddamned America”. And that’s what they played, but they tell the part about what he was talking about, like the way about slavery, the way the Native Americans were treated, or the indigenous population was treated. Because the Native—the indigenous population didn’t call themselves “Americans,” right? We have a tendency to say that, like, “Huh?” So that’s what he was talking about. Now for me, a lot of what Jeremiah Wright said in fact was true. We went through the disaster of the banks that were too big to fail, the companies, Obama did everything he could to save them. Wall Street—in spite of all the criticism that Obama has received—Wall Street did very well, all right. The fat-cats that were in his administration, they took care of themselves. He was a president—whenever he said anything about race, they jumped all over him. He couldn’t say the right thing, all right. But I do hold him, to some degree, accountable—for example, not saying something publicly, and doing more, to help, for example, Chicago. I mean what is happening is Chicago, it’s just an unmitigated disaster. And I always think back—this goes to a different time—but if you go back and look at the Italians, the Greeks, the Poles, the Jews, the Irish—when they got the vote, and they got their people in office, their people looked out for their community first, and then the rest of the country. If a black person gets a position like that, and he or she begins to talk about the condition of black people—which you don’t have to make up, it’s right there—well then you’re playing the race card, or you’re not the president of all the people. Come on. That’s what I mean about forgetting our history, all right.

J: Yeah. Well, the good news is he got re-elected.

W: Say that again.

J: He did get re-elected.

W: He did.

J: Enough people were coming out who actually believed that he was doing a good enough job. But you’re saying he didn’t go back and help his own people, enough?

W: I know—let me say this—he’s a politician.

J: Yeah.

W: But—and, and—he—I hoped he wouldn’t run for a second term, but he did. But after he won, couldn’t run again. So there was nothing stopping him from being more aggressive about what was happening to black people around the country, all right. He did say, when Trayvon

Martin was killed, “Trayvon Martin could’ve been me.” And look at all the—they came down on him like a ton of bricks.

J: Yeah.

W: Right?

J: Yeah.

W: So, I have mixed feelings about President Obama. Because I—to me, he had a no-win situation, all right. But I will defend him to the nth degree when people start talking about what he didn’t do. In turn, when a lot of the things that he wanted to do, he couldn’t get Congress to even begin to work with him.

J: Right.

W: So, I, I, I don’t want to talk out of both sides of my mouth, but I have mixed feelings about the president, and I’m happy that he and his family survived all of this, that he can relax, and the dignity—which is a word we don’t use very much anymore—the decorum—which is a word we don’t use very much anymore—that he and his family showed. And maybe it can be appreciated a little bit more now that we have the present occupant of the White House.

J: Hm. When that happened, it—well right after the last election, we actually, interviewed the last person for this project. And all of us, quite frankly in the room, were quite, quite surprised at what had happened—the election results.

W: Oh, yeah.

J: I think we were all sort of—we were all, you know, really blown away by what had happened.

W: Mhm.

J: Do you remember what your—.

W: I do.

J: Yeah.

W: You know, when you get to be my age, you always have a story. I was not surprised that he won. My brother and I made a bet. And our bet was that if Trump wins, he treats me to a

weekend in New York City. If Hillary wins, I treat him. He could not understand why I kept telling him, “Trump can win.” He said, “No, it’s all a sham, a farce—” And he used some other words too, “Hillary is in.” I said, “Leonard, all the things that Trump is saying, and is publicized, but his numbers don’t go down.” I said, “People are—when he says ‘drain the swamp’, people are fed up with the Democrats and Republicans, and Hillary is considered part of the establishment. They think that he’s rich and he’ll be able to stick it to ‘em and make a difference.” I said, “I don’t believe he’ll do that if he wins,” But I said, “There are a lot of people who are so fed up with all the yabba-dabba-doo that they’re going to vote for him.” Now assuming—which is very dangerous when you assume things—that there wasn’t some hanky-panky in those few votes that he got in those states that gave him the Electoral College. And even if there was, there was still a lot of people who voted for him and all the things that he says, okay. So no, I was not surprised. My brother thought that, that bravado—if that’s the word you want to use—was all to help make sure Hillary won. And I kept telling him, “No, that is Donald Trump. That is the way he is, and people are—” And, you know, even today, people look past it—the stuff that he has said. I don’t have to go into it, because we all know what it is. But they still say, “Well, just the first couple of months. Give him a chance.” They are not—maybe, maybe the disgust is growing, because his numbers have not gone up. So we’ll see. But to answer you question though, I was not surprised that he won, and as a result, I get a free trip to New York City.

J: Good. Yeah. So—

W: Which I guess can be taken with a grain of salt when you consider that he didn’t win right.

J: Yeah, well, at least there’s consolation prize, in a way. Going back to when Obama won the first time—do you remember your experience then?

W: Yes. It was mixed. Because I remember my father thinking, “That’s never going to happen. Certainly not in my lifetime, and not this time.” I mean look at what happened to Jesse Jackson. I mean, he had it. He appealed to the rainbow. Every—you know, a lot of people—Hispanic, white—but look what happened. I said, “Okay pop, but it may be different this time.” And sure enough, he won, all right. But—and I didn’t say this to my father, because I didn’t want to prick his balloon of happiness—but as I said earlier, I remembered what Jeremiah Wright said. And I was worried that if he tried to be the—to do the kinds of things that I hoped he would do—I didn’t want another JFK, okay. Because, as I said, I’m a nonviolent person, unless you try to hurt me. There’s no doubt in my mind, if somebody had killed Barack Obama, I don’t know what

would happen to this country, all right. I mean black and white together would've really done a number on this country.

J: Yeah, it's an interesting question. I mean, the fact that he got through it, and the fact that he did it so well—regardless of whether you think he accomplished enough or not.

W: Mhm.

J: He did it well. He did the job well. He was extremely competent and dignified. Is that enough for first African-American president, you know what I mean?

W: Yes.

J: I wonder—

W: It's, it's—that's a fair—

J: It's a huge accomplishment.

W: It's a fair point. Tavis Smiley, Cornel West—they feel that he could've done more. But even Cornel West said if he had done more, he would be in an early cemetery. So—you know, it, it's—it's difficult, but the times in which we live—somebody wrote a book, and he found out that I was a retired educator, and he asked me to review it. I said, "Be careful what you wish for." I reviewed it. I didn't like it. I didn't like the way—if I give you a lot of details, I'll reveal the book, I don't want to do that. But I didn't like the way the characters were developed. And I wrote him an essay—well, I wrote him a letter, not an essay. And I told him why I didn't like the book. And he had a fit. And he says, "What's wrong with this guy?" But it was a black author, about a black family. And it got back to me that he didn't like it at all. And we saw each other, which was mmm mmm—you know. Finally, I said—I saw him one day and said, "Come on down to the house." I hardly have anybody at my house. I said, "Come on in." So, we sat around the dining room table. And I told him why I said what I said. And he said, "But Will, you didn't have anything good to say about the book." I said, "I'll tell you a story about Dick Gregory." Dick Gregory gave a speech about the American—about America—and he was very critical. And a woman in the audience said, "Dick Gregory, can't you say anything good about America?" And there was a lot of rumbling in the audience. And Dick Gregory said, "Yes, I could. But if you go to the doctor, and I tell you that your heart's good, your kidneys are in shape, your brain," No, "Your, your liver is functioning like it should, and don't tell you that you've got a brain tumor, what have I done?" I said to this fella, "Our society is such now—and I'm of the age now—and I'm getting crusty, and I admit it. That I don't have time to talk about

‘good,’ if the brain tumor is killing us.” And I said, “What you have written, in my opinion, does harm to the black family.” He didn’t agree, but we agreed to disagree.

J: Hm, interesting.

W: So—

J: Important discussion you had. Yeah. So are you—do you have—

W: Yeah. Nobody ever accused me of being opinionated.

J: Do you write?

W: Do I write?

J: Yeah.

W: No, and I wish I’d, I’d—my sister and my brother, my present significant other—I hate that term—my present sweetheart—

J: There you go.

W: Have encouraged me to do so, ‘cause I like to talk a lot if you get me started. But for some reason I haven’t. I like to read and debate and discuss more than I like to write.

J: Right.

W: All right. When I write, I can write, but I don’t, I don’t do it. I don’t know why.

J: Sounds like you have something to say.

W: Well you know what, that’s the thing about it though. I don’t think what I have to say—I mean, Noam Chomsky has said it. Jeremiah Wright has said it. Michael Parenti has said it. So, I

don't really—Studs Terkel has said it. There a lot of people who have written, what I call myself on my soapbox about. So, I don't really feel that I have that much to add, really.

J: Well, well—yeah.

W: What they write isn't talked about enough, so I try to talk about it more, I guess. That's what I mean.

J: Oh, ok. So that's your role?

W: I hope. I don't know.

J: Yeah.

W: That's what I do.

J: I mean, I just do want to put a plug in for writing it, because everybody says it differently. And like someone said to me once, when I was debating thinking about writing something that's

already been written about, “Maybe you’ll write it just a little bit differently, and someone will hear it.” You know.

W: Point made.

J: Anyway, it sounds like you have a lot to write—to say.

W: You know, when you just said that, you know what I just thought about? Don Mclean in the song “Vincent”.

J: Wow.

W: That “you’re not”—“and they’re not listening still yet”. It’s a, it’s a great song. I mention him—

J: Wow. About his brother, his brother, Vincent? No.

W: No.

J: Who are they talking about?

W: Don Mclean is a folk kinda—“American Pie”.

J: I know who he is. Yeah.

W: Yeah. Yes.

J: And who is Vincent?

W: Oh, Vincent Van Gogh. The painter.

J: Oh, right.

W: Yeah.

J: Oh, of course. Right.

W: Don Mclean performed at the Potting Shed in ‘67, when I was working there as a waiter.

J: Wow.

W: I haven't seen him since.

J: Wow.

W: But he said—but he went on, he wasn't singing—he hadn't written "American Pie" or "Vincent", but he went on to have great success. But that song's a very telling song.

J: Well, you—actually, it's a per—

W: Don't cut off your ear. But, you know—

J: It's a perfect example of—I mean, all the biographies that have been written about Vincent Van Gogh—all the things that have been written about Vincent Van Gogh, and he could've said, "It's already been written, so I'm not going to write it." Right?

W: Well, it's a great song. Great song.

J: Yeah, I forgot about that song. Yeah.

W: You can look it up on You Tube.

J: I will. I was going to ask you to sing it, but I'm not going to do that.

W: Thank you, thank you.

J: Is there one of—is there anything I've forgotten before we end this conversation?

Unknown voice: [whispering] Is he still president? (Wendy Germain, note added by Judith)

J: Are you still president?

W: No.

J: No—you don't have to whisper it. (to Wendy, note added by Judith)

W: As I said before, I know people think, "He's just trying to be modest." I really didn't want to lead it.

J: Right.

W: All right. So, I did two years. I think we got off to a good start. Had some growing pains, but we got passed that. Dennis Powell is now the president.

J: Yeah.

W: He's serving his second term.

J: Right.

W: And what we're hoping to be able to do is to bring younger people in. The old folks are great—I'm one of the old folks—but we want to bring in the younger people, and let them carry the ball forward, all right. As I say to the younger people, "Don't mess up, but we want to encourage you to—" and I guess they're entitled to mistakes, too, but I throw that in anyway.

J: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Any ideas of people you can—you're inviting—are you starting to invite, like, look around and say, "Hm."

W: Yes, Dennis, Dennis is doing that. We have some younger people coming into the NAACP as members. We're glad that somebody's running for the City Council so we have some more representation. Somebody's going to run for the School Committee.

J: Good.

W: But, but, but, going back to something I said earlier—diversity is important. Other voices are important. Somebody was talking about police brutality, and I said, "I am so fed up with if you talk about the abuse of one policeman, you're talking about every—all policemen." I said, "No, but the media has done that." They, they, they don't single out that one person. They make it appear like the complaint is about all policemen—no. But my point is if that you don't change the conditions—I said, "You can train policemen, but if they're going into a part of the community that is poverty-ridden, and people are angry, then they're going to begin to turn—change the way they see the people they're supposed to be serving." All right. "Godfather", the first movie, Michael is saying, "Why did you take the protection from my father?" And this policeman says, "I've dealt with punks like you all of the time." Bam! And he hits him. But the attitude was, "You Italian punks." All right. So that the policemen saw not a person, they saw an

Italian person, all right. Now this policeman was supposed to represent the Irish, right? And how soon we forget, right?

J: Right.

W: That when the signs said “Irish need not apply”.

J: They were the punks, right.

W: But you’ll get me started again.

J: No, it’s very interesting that you brought “The Godfather” up twice. I think that’s very interesting. There’s a lot of—my husband does the same thing. There’s a lot of that in that story that’s very illustrative.

W: I worked with an Italian assistant superintendent. She hated the movie.

J: Yeah. Yeah.

W: Because, it was like, “Let them kill each other.” All right. And her family had made a point of doing it the way I described it. You work hard, you go to school, you stay honest, and you make a contribution to your community, right.

J: Right. Yeah

W: So, she didn’t like the movie.

J: It’s a bit romanticized. The mafia’s a bit romanticized in that movie. And as half an Italian-American, I also worry about that, because it, you know, it’s too bad. But, anyway.

W: Yeah.

J: But then we have “The Sopranos” and you know, a lot of other, kind of questionable—

W: We have.

J: So, what else? I mean, we could go on for days. We’ve been here for two hours long—

W: Really?

J: Yes.

W: Oh, we have.

J: So, I—I mean, we may have to call you back when we've done all these other interviews, because there's a lot to talk about.

Unknown voice: I'd love to have him and Dennis come to— (Wendy Germain)

J: Yeah. Well, maybe—maybe one day, we'll have, like, a mini group discussion. That would be really interesting.

W: It would be.

J: And we can talk about—go back to some of the things you talked about. Because the next time I would love to talk more about this community, and what, you know, the work you did in City

Hall and that kinda stuff. And, and in general—this community, what you're picturing for the future, working with youth. It would be great.

Unk: Mhm.

W: Agreed.

Unknown Voice: It's a deal.

J: Okay. So, we will do it.

W: Done.

J: Thank you so much.

W: Thank you. I enjoyed it.

J: I mean, it flew. It flew. It's one-thirty, I can't believe it.

W: I can't believe it, either.

J: Can I buy you lunch downstairs?

W: Pardon me?

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]