

START OF TAPE ONE, SIDE A

JOHN W. LOVE, JR.  
February 17, 1999

PAMELA GRUNDY: This is Pamela Grundy, and I am here interviewing John W. Love, Jr., in Charlotte, North Carolina, and we are talking about West Charlotte High School, and it is the seventeenth of February, 1999. Well, John, I just thought I would start by asking you what is your first memory of West Charlotte? I know your parents went there.

JOHN LOVE: Oh my goodness. What is my first memory of West Charlotte? I would have to say my earliest memory of the school is long before I ever even was of age to go to the school, because my parents went to West Charlotte and aunts and uncles went to West Charlotte, and, obviously, my parents' closest and dearest friends went to West Charlotte, and my parents were, and still are, very, very social. Big picture takers, the whole bit. My first real memories of West Charlotte are actually from the yearbooks that my parents had. I always looked through those, and I always flipped through those, and considering the fact that I was born my parents' senior year of high school, it's like my memories of West Charlotte and the whole vibe of West Charlotte, and what that all means is so entrenched in who and what I am, from the very beginning. So cognitively, I would have to say it's from at a very early age me flipping through the yearbooks of West Charlotte Senior High School with the same fervor and excitement that you flip through family albums. And, what, two, three years old?

PG: That is an early period of time. When you say sort of the vibe of West Charlotte as being part of you, can you describe that?

JL: You know it's really interesting because when I think about the African American community at large, or people of the African Diaspora, the history, the culture,

in so many ways is so dissipated. And it's so much about putting pieces together in order to create a through line, as opposed to an emotional/psychological through line that just exists from being there. And so when I talk about the vibe of West Charlotte, West Charlotte as a high school is pretty entrenched in the community that it's in, and I come from that community and my parents come from that community and the whole west side kind of thing. So, really the vibe of West Charlotte is really about pride, and it's about a real sense of pride. It's about a sense of belonging, a real sense of belonging. It's about a real sense of ownership in something in your community. And schools when they're at their best are actually about achievement. So you've got more than a symbol. You've got like a living kind of ritual, or living shrine to achievement and then to the achievement of a people, and then to the achievement of a very specific group of people in a very specific community in a very specific part of the country, and it goes on and on and on like that. So, not to be clichéd, but it's actually about pride, and on a deep, deep level, pride and belonging.

PG: Is this something that you thought about at the time you were going to the school, or is this something you've come to think about later as you've reflected back?

JL: We all knew that we were lucky to be there, and for most of us we knew that we were going to go to West Charlotte, because there were people in different parts on the west side of Charlotte, which is basically African American that were bussed to different schools and that kind of thing. But there were also people that did whatever they could so that they could be, or that their address could look that it was in the right neighborhood to go to West Charlotte, and so we knew that we were fortunate to be

there. And the school has always grown with the community in very interesting ways, too, with the whole bussing thing, and integration thing, and all of that. And all of that happened when I was in junior high school. But we heard about it, and I had, once again, my uncle was there during that time. At the time we knew that we were a part of a legacy that we actually wanted to be a part of, and it was very exciting. So we did think about it. And then in retrospect when I've talked to friends of mine that were in school when I was in school, we just sort of look back and say, "Yeah, we were right."

PG: You mentioned that there was this time when you were in junior high school when this early bussing began.

JL: There was some kind of exchange thing that happened at West Charlotte with students from different parts of the country, but, actually, when bussing began, the first year of bussing, I was in the third grade.

PG: What did your uncle talk about? You mentioned he was there at West Charlotte at the time. Did he talk to you at all about what was going on there?

JL: He talked to me about it, but the entire community was talking about it, too. I mean having very young parents and then my uncle was my father's youngest brother so he was young, too. So in a lot of ways a lot of his friends were my friends, and so everybody talked about it, and everybody talked about just what was happening, and what was changing, and dealing with the white people, and dealing with the white people in ways that were very different. And then, I think it's one thing to be bussed out of your neighborhood into a community and you deal with the integration process in that way, which is what happened for me in the third grade. I was on the west side and then I went to Rama Road. But it's another thing, it's a very interesting thing to actually still go to

school in your neighborhood which pretty much a homogenized African American neighborhood and the integration sort of comes to you. So that was an interesting kind of phenomenon, too, as opposed to going away, because during bussing for the people that lived in the neighborhood of West Charlotte and that also went to West Charlotte, they didn't have to do the whole long bus ride thing.

PG: Well, what was it like when you were in third grade when you were younger and you got bussed out to these other schools? What was that like for you?

JL: When I was in the second grade, and we heard that the integration things was going to happen and everything, we were upset because we were sort of confused, and we didn't really know what that meant, and you know that you may go to school with your friends. You may not go to school with your friends. Different people may go to different schools. And so that whole thing. Just kind of the fear of the unknown. But once it happened, for me, I mean I'm a pretty adventurous spirit, and I would say that I'm somewhat of a survivor, so my whole thing was about just kind of sitting back and looking at the situation and then figuring out what was it, how did I fit in it, and how could I survive in it. And it brought up some really, really interesting issues. Issues of being separated into groups, academic groups like the fast reading group or the intermediate reading group, and the slow reading group, and invariably at that time say there were only three black children in the highest, quickest, fastest reading group, and I was one of them. So then you begin to deal with these issues of separation, perceived or implied elitism, tokenism, all that kind of stuff, and kind of feeling displaced. Kind of feeling like my black friends, or the other black people were, some were upset, some were jealous, some thought I was trying to be white. And then the white people, some

going, "Well, who is he? What is he doing in here?" that whole kind of thing. I feel really fortunate because I've always been pretty independent, psychologically independent, emotionally independent, pretty independent, and it served me well to be that way in terms of acknowledging feelings of loneliness, but also acknowledging that one has to endure and move on. And I was always pretty achievement oriented, too, so that helped.

PG: That was something you could focus on.

JL: Yes. Very much so.

PG: So did you stay outside the neighborhood for most of your schooling prior to high school, or were there years you were in outside schools and years that you were closer to home?

JL: Well, okay. Let's see, third grade Rama Road, fourth grade Pawtuckett, so both of those were away. Fifth and sixth grade University Park Elementary School which was in the neighborhood, and then seventh, eighth, and ninth grade, those were the years that Piedmont Middle Open School began. It was sort of a lottery, and it was optional, and it was the whole open education thing which my parents thought would be really good for my sister and I, which it was. Which to this day I say in terms of encouraging me to be responsible for my own learning was one of the most significant educational experiences I've ever had. And simultaneously the open school thing was also happening at West Charlotte. So it was that, and the Piedmont was a bussing situation, and then back to West Charlotte for tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade.

PG: Now, were you someone who had to maneuver to get into West Charlotte, or were you in the part of town where you were going to go?

JL: We were in the part of town where we were going to go so there wasn't like maneuvering that necessarily had to happen. But also [sound of someone walking through the room] smart. [JL laughs.] You don't need to explain that for yourself. Pam has a really smart cat that knows how to open the door and get out. So, no, we didn't have to maneuver, but then there was this other thing that was sort of going on. In lots of communities when you have generations of people that have lived in the same place, or families that have known each other for a long time, like I said, my parents got married when they were very young, but they also had the support of their parents and their extended family. So while my mother and father were working and going to school, my sister and I spent a lot of time with our grandmother, who lived in the University Park area, which is the West Charlotte feeder area and all of that. So for a long time our official address for school was her address. But when we moved into our house which was a couple of communities over, as far as West Charlotte goes, it still fit into West Charlotte. But as far as some of the other schools that we could have gone to, it didn't feed into those. So that was kind of a thing that was going on, too. It wasn't necessarily conscious. I mean when we were younger, it was necessity that sort of the home base in terms of school and what are we going to do with the kids when they get out of school and they need to go someplace where someone is going to be home quicker than we'll be home, and that was usually grandmamma's house. So, it was that. But, in terms of the West Charlotte thing, no, we didn't have to do the maneuvering.

PG: Had your grandmother gone to West Charlotte?



JL: No. But, actually, she did get her high school equivalent thing at West Charlotte, after the fact, which was really nice, because she went and took her classes at West Charlotte, I think and stuff.

PG: That is nice. Well, when you were coming back, this would have been tenth grade?

JL: Tenth grade, yeah.

PG: To come to West Charlotte, how did you feel about that? What was your state of mind then?

JL: It was great, but I always thought it was just so understood that we'd go, just in terms of looking at how the bussing situation was going, looking at how different neighborhoods went different places, so that had been established for a pretty long time. People would always get a little freaked out though when there would be like yet another rerouting of people. But it was great. I mean it was great to be there. And my first years at West Charlotte, well, my sophomore year at West Charlotte, I was enrolled in the open school because I'd just come from Piedmont and wanted to explore the whole open education thing on the high school level. But I also took classes in the regular school as well. And then my junior year and senior year I just took most of my classes in the regular school because the open school wasn't the same at West Charlotte as it was at Piedmont. Personally, I don't think it was as successful at least not for my purposes. So since I was going to be going to West Charlotte anyway, then I was in the regular school.

PG: Had you ever at any point during that time prior to going been concerned that the school might be closed by the school board?

JL: No, never. That never entered when I was there as a real concern, because it was entirely too vibrant. There was too much energy in the neighborhood for the school to, too much energy in the school itself. At the time also West Charlotte may have been like the only metropolitan sort of high school in that people from all over the city came to West Charlotte, and that had a lot to do with the open school component as well. And that's interesting that happens, too, because there were people from very moneyed parts of town that came to West Charlotte, and money talks and bullshit walks. And so, the money thing, yeah.

PG: How did all those different people get along?

JL: For the most part it was pretty good, and then there became sort of class issues and race issues, and sometimes there was overt prejudice or racism from both sides. But people pretty much endured. And I had great relationships there, great intracultural and intercultural relationships.

PG: Was this something that you were actively seeking out at this time in your life?

JL: Actually, we didn't have to because by this time we had done the whole integration thing ever since third grade, so that wasn't something that we had to seek out. It was just about seeking out, dealing with the group of people that you liked to deal with. And in high school I was, and I guess all through my educational, primary educational life and secondary educational life, I was always pretty social, popular, that kind of thing. Not because I set out to be, but just because of my personality and how important it is for me to communicate with people openly and honestly and straightforwardly and all of that. So then I found myself being president of the student body my junior year, and



president of the senior class my senior year, and all that kind of stuff. There was pride about the school which was one thing, which was shared by everybody that went there, and then there was pride about being African American and going to the school and the neighborhood around the school. They were two different things, but for those of us that were African American we didn't really take the time to separate them out that much. But we were aware, because then we had the benefit of history and being part of a legacy, and having relatives or having parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, friends, neighbors who had actually gone to West Charlotte long before desegregation.

PG: Do you think that the students that came to West Charlotte from outside that community, to what extent do you think they understood that history?

JL: I think during the time a lot of them had no real understanding of that history, because it's sort of like, why would they? I think they were consumed with their own—people often times are much more consumed with, obviously, what's going on at the present and what's considered just recent or just past history, than they are with the real implications of what they're stepping into and the real history of any situation or any person or any whatever. This is a little tangential, but I talk to a lot of my friends and they talk about relationships. And I'm the kind of person, I'm pretty inquisitive, and I wouldn't say that I'm nosy, but in all relationships with people I think that what happens with a lot of people when they get in trouble is that they never asked enough questions so they have all these surprises. And just because you ask questions doesn't mean that you're going to get real answers, but people often times just don't even ask questions because they're consumed with what the most recent history was, or where they're coming from, or what they just heard about, or what they're getting from the situation at

the time right then and there. And I think that that's probably what was going on with a lot of people that came to West Charlotte from outside the community, because the school was also known for some other things that were pretty positive during the time that I was there. Athletics were really good. Academics on a certain level were good. Sometimes they fluctuated. Sometimes, some years they were really good and sometimes I read that they weren't really good. The racial mix was probably the most even, so that can be exciting if that's something that you're interested in. So there were those things that I think people were considering, or consumed by, or excited by, or scared of or whatever. But the history that, or the reality that they were going to be going to a school with people whose parents and possibly grandparents had gone to that school and helped to build that school, I don't think that was on their minds.

PG: And was there not anything done at the school at the time to attempt to talk about the school's history or explain this to people? Is that just not something that happened?

JL: I don't think so. I don't remember that. I don't think that that was a real concern for anybody at that time. You know it was really interesting. One of my most favorite teachers was Mertye Rice, and she taught my parents. It's funny because our, my relationship with her and my sister's relationship with her was, I mean our friends knew, and some other people knew, but it was kind of one of those unspoken, or unaggrandized pleasures.

PG: So in a sense would you say that those of you who were from the community and those students who were not in some ways were attending different schools even though you were there together? Is that going too far to say that?

JL: It's not. It might be. It's close to going too far. It's like if you take you and Peter. Peter is Pam's husband, and you take your culture and the way that you grew up and Peter's, and you both come together and you've created something or you're participating in something, so you're both participating in this house, or you're both participating in whatever. Well, on a certain level you all are participating in very different ways because you have these different histories, but then in another way, the way that you all actually participate together is what it is at that time and at that moment. And I think that that's what happened for us who were at West Charlotte at that time. Those that were from the community certainly came to the school with a different perspective than those outside of the community. But being there, being in there, dealing with each other—well sometimes, not well sometimes—working together, creating history by living in the present, that kind of thing. So that was very real and very shared and very specific and unique to us, which was something that, say, my parents were not necessarily a part of. You see what I'm saying?

PG: Um-hum. How do you think your parents viewed this transformation of the school that they had gone to?

JL: Actually, I think that they viewed it with a nice bit of interest, but I also think that they still had the ability to participate in the school, and I think if that had been taken away, if the school had changed so much or so drastically that, for a lot of people, it really just would have become some other thing. My father still goes to West Charlotte basketball games and football games. It's like a community thing. It's a community institution. He went to basketball games and football games and that kind of thing when my sister and I were there, but he probably would have gone if we weren't there, because

it's like in the community and that whole thing. It's so hard to explain because it's so natural. It makes so much sense. It's kind of like asking somebody, "Well, why is that tree planted there, and how has it affected you?" Well, it's like, it's always been there.

[JL laughs.]

PG: Do you still go to West Charlotte football and basketball games?

JL: No.

PG: Did you ever go?

JL: Yeah, I did. I did. I was in the marching band, too, so I sort of had to be there.

PG: You were in the marching band?

JL: Yeah, so I went. Some of my friends will go to homecoming because that's a big event, so they'll go to homecoming or things like that. People turn out for the big events. It's kind of like with the Johnson C. Smith University, because it's this fixture in the African American community on the west side once again. My father goes to Smith's games, and as a kid I went to Smith's games and so did my sister, and West Charlotte was like in the same loop as that.

PG: And did the community, you've talked about athletics, did the community come to other kinds of events, like plays, and things like that?

JL: Like plays and stuff at the school? That was less. Athletics was actually the way that a lot of people came together. No, I can't say that the community was really big or gung-ho about going to plays. Well, even when I was at West Charlotte, the school wasn't even necessarily that big about going to plays.

PG: I heard an interesting story about a production of *The King and I*.

JL: Yeah. When did that happen? Did that happen before I was there or right after I left? That may have happened right before I got there. Maybe.

PG: With *The King and I* where they had to cast two kings.

JL: Right. I remember that because that stuff would happen, too. Like there would be all these quotas and ratios about how many black people, how many black cheerleaders there were and how many white cheerleaders there were. How many black letter girls, how many white letter girls. And the thing is, is that when we were at West Charlotte, the ratio of black to white was forty-nine/fifty-one, depending on who came to school that day. People often times look at those kind of racial quotas things as being beneficial to black people, but at West Charlotte they were actually more beneficial to white people because there were many times when there might have only been one white girl on the cheer leading squad or things like that. But, yeah, there were these things. The homecoming situation would come up, but we didn't have a white homecoming queen and a black homecoming queen.

PG: What did you do?

JL: I mean it was just the homecoming queen. But I remember hearing about all of that in, say, the generation before we got there, and those kinds of things. Because I remember those kinds of things happened at other junior high schools when I was in junior high.

PG: What did you think about those quotas when you were there?

JL: It was so funny, because those quotas were a reality, then I accepted them as a reality. So after accepting them as a reality, I was acutely aware of how unfortunate they were because of how they had to be. But, and not necessarily because, because I

never looked at those quotas as being about creating a space for people who weren't as qualified. I always saw those quotas as being about creating a space for people who were qualified, but weren't going to have a space because of racism. So that was—no one has ever asked me that question. Yeah, but that's it. I mean that's, when I think back and I look at that, that was my perspective on those. Because being a high achiever myself, and people would ask me things about quotas, if I got something and a quota thing was in place, or if I got something and a quota thing wasn't in place, my reality was never that I got it because of a quota. Or, if there wasn't a quota I wouldn't have, that the quota made up for something in my performance that was lacking. I always thought the quota made up for something in the performance of the society that we lived in that was lacking.

PG: Looking back, do you think it was helpful to have those at that time?

JL: I think it was a transition, and I think at the time it was the best thing that the culture knew how to do, meaning America's culture. So, sure.

PG: When you say it was the best thing the culture knew how to do—

JL: Knew how to do. It was kind of like what I say about America. America to me is like a spoiled rotten adolescent that's got entirely too much money, especially compared to the rest of the world. If you look at the rest of the world and you say that some cultures are adult cultures and then some cultures are elders, America's like really, really young. And so in terms of dealing with difference and trying to deal with difference in somewhat of an effective manner, and trying to make people happy or not piss people off or, any of that stuff, given the history of the culture it was the best thing it could come up with at the time. My thing is, well, what would have happened if not? Because, really, the intent with all of that was one that was about people trying to tolerate



other people and live with other people and all that kind of thing. It's kind of like looking at a child and saying, "Were the terrible two's really necessary?" Well, yes they were because they're just a part of the process.

PG: Were there other kinds of things that were done at the school while you were there in an effort to try to make things run smoothly, to make people feel that they were being treated fairly, those kinds of things?

JL: Oh, there was always something like that coming up. Specifically, I mean I can't think of any right now. I can't think of any specific sort of things that were implemented, policies or whatever that were implemented to ensure that. But at the time the school was really about making, or creating a space or a place where people felt like things were happening fairly. But it's also high school. For example, I remember we had some problems on the senior class council. There were more problems between the students and, say, the teachers and the administrators and those kind of power struggles than there were between students being treated a certain way because they were black or white, or Asian, or Latin, or whatever. I mean it was kind of like high school stuff.

PG: Were you able to go to McDonald's?

JL: Oh, yeah. That stuff. Like, "Why should I get suspended for going to McDonald's?" Or, "Why can't I go off campus? It's right up the street." That kind of thing. So it was more that kind of stuff than anything else.

PG: Well, as president of the student council when you were, were there issues that you had to resolve? Were there situations that came up that you were challenged to find solutions to?

JL: Yeah. My whole way of looking at it was, because, of course, I alone never made any decisions, and nobody in government does, but in terms of sort of being a leader in that particular situation, my whole thing was to lay everything out and assess what's fair and what's right given my own paradigm that I'm living in and existing in at the time. And then being brave enough to do what you think is right or fair. And sometimes people liked it, and sometimes people didn't, but I always knew that people enjoyed it when you tried to please them, but that was never the first and foremost thing, or first and foremost part of my agenda was to try to please everybody. Yeah, so there were things that happened, but in terms of policies that govern how the school is run, usually students are put in a very reactionary position because nobody really consults us about those things. Now and then we would act, especially as seniors, our senior year there were things little things, like how the invitations would look, and the design of them. Things like that, which is back to students trying to have a voice, and teachers saying, "Well, it's been done like this before, and we're going to do it like this now." Now what does come in is that when you come from different cultures, there are different aesthetics that you respond to. So I do remember conversations or voting things that would happen, and most of the white kids would vote for one thing and most of the black kids would vote for another thing, so it was very clear to me and to everybody else that that rift or disagreement or separation of the ways was just about coming from different cultures.

PG: What would be an example of something?

JL: I think there was one thing that happened even with the invitations. It came up about the invitations and how they looked, and one of the Caucasian students said,

“Well, I just think we should go with something more traditional.” My response was, “In whose tradition?” because there was that whole thing about the assumptions that this white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant aesthetic is the tradition for all. And so we were sort of (on it enough), and savvy enough to say no, no, no, no, no. There are other traditions. What are you talking about? And so things like that would happen, and then everybody would take a vote, and then we’d see what it was that we wanted. But that kind of battle was something that I knew would be going on for a long time when you talk about validating or invalidating cultures, or where people come from. So, yeah, those were actually, I think, the manifestation of a lot of the struggles. Whenever you start talking about the beauty aesthetic, from fashion to the way people wear their hair, to the way that people speak or talk or raise their hand in class, or communicate with somebody else, you’re talking about cultures, and how people were raised, and what they latch onto. And then you get into people being sensitive about, “Are you implying that what I do is wrong and has always been wrong?” And those are usually kind of core, hot bed issues when you start talking about any kind of difference. And when the whole desegregation/integration thing started, when you talk about the school arena, those issues never really had to be dealt with face to face in things that you take for granted, like how are the invitations going to look or who’s going to be the band at the dance? But then when you have these people from these kind of polar cultures being in the same place, and then you want everybody to feel like they belong, or everybody wants to feel like they belong and that they participate. But at the core it’s about being validated.

PG: You said you knew this was going to be a long battle, did you feel that this was in some ways a kind of battle to in a way educate people? Were you educating people, white students about things they didn't know?

JL: Hum. I don't know if I was that presumptuous. [JL laughs.] I don't know if any of us were that presumptuous. It was more than us feeling like we were educating. I think, for me, it was feeling like fighting for recognition that this is valid. But also, people would say when you're part of the dominant culture, or the culture that is considered dominant, then you often times don't necessarily have to understand what is happening with the culture that is not dominant. But, when you're a part of the oppressed culture in whatever way, as a matter of survival a) you learn to understand and figure out what is going on with the dominant culture, and then you also have no choice because the dominant culture mores and ways of being and thinking and doing are pretty much crammed down your throat twenty-four/seven. So, when you've got this integration process happening and you've got the ratio basically being fifty-fifty, the paradigm has shifted. So sometimes if things were a little more benevolent it may have been education and trying to teach and facilitate someone's learning about our culture. But often times it was a bit of a battle. And it was about standing up for what your culture is, or what it is that you believe, or your way of doing things, or you and your friends' way of doing things without apology.

PG: Do you think that in those battles or whatever you want to call them, that it was helpful to you to be at West Charlotte High School where your tradition was in a way the dominant tradition?

JL: Oh yeah. Very much so. Very, very much so. Because for a school like West Charlotte--say you take the band uniforms. You see any uniform that comes from any school and it says so much about the school to a community way beyond what the school is. But say you look at those band uniforms, and the present design of the band uniforms was based on the design of the uniforms that came before, which was based on the design of the uniforms that came before that, which was based on the design of the uniforms that came before that. Well, if you're a part of that culture then you have an understanding of the history of those uniforms and what it means, and your attachment to it is different. You see what I'm saying? So, you have a different kind of power. And you certainly have more of a leg to stand on just psychologically and emotionally if some debate happens about what the uniform should be. And if someone says, "Well, in the tradition of \_\_\_\_." Well, this particular tradition was not a white tradition. It didn't spring from that. It sprang from something different. And so usually people in our culture who open up their mouths and say that phrase, "Well, in the tradition of \_\_\_\_," it's not usually African Americans. So being at West Charlotte and the paradigm shifting in that way was certainly special.

PG: I think the UPS person. [Apparently in reference to someone outside]. We were talking about the band.

JL: Yes.

PG: I gather from everybody that I've talked to that the band was a very important part?

JL: Oh yeah.

PG: So maybe you could just talk a little bit about that.

JL: Yes. The band, I mean before integration and before desegregation, the band was really the bomb. It was really it, and then afterwards things changed. So, a lot of the thing about the band now, and even when we were there, was based on nostalgia, because as far as I was concerned the band wasn't really that great when we were there. It wasn't really that exciting, but the history of it was still something that a lot of us were still working out of. One of the interesting things that happened was our band teacher when I was there had actually just gotten there because he used to do the band thing at Johnson C. Smith University. It was just really kind of interesting how things went back and forth. At one point he had asked me to be the drum major, and I told him no.

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JL: Basically the whole thing with the band was when I told him no, it was a real indication to me what I felt about the band at that time, because to be asked to be the drum major of West Charlotte's band and you say no.

PG: Were your parents shocked?

JL: I don't even think that they know that I was ever asked because I don't think I told them. I was doing enough stuff anyway, but that was very specific to those years, too. There are just, even within the history of anything, there's some years when the band is really good and then there are some years it is not. There's maybe one year when the drum major is great and one year when they're not. And I think that for me during my junior and senior year in high school, or in sophomore year also, the band wasn't this huge, huge priority at the time.

[Long pause on tape.]



PG: It's not—well, we're just going to have to have to go with it.

JL: All right.

PG: Well, tell me about your memories of the band when it was really something.

JL: The most vivid memories of the band when it was really something was the way that the band would show out at the square on the Thanksgiving Day parade. Because the band just got down. The drum major got down. The majorettes got down. The band got down. I mean it was just funky and jamming and it. And very exciting. For me—this might be a far fetching kind of analogy or juxtaposition, but when you think about the energy at carnival and you associate a certain kind of energy with Latins and the Brazilians at carnival and that whole thing? Well, with the band that same kind of energy and the association with a kind of vibrancy of African Americans, it was the same thing. And I think when the band was in its heyday is when it expressed that kind of energy in a very undeterred way. If you want to talk about the purity of something, straight up, no chaser, no excuses. This is what it is, concentrated.

PG: So you think that with integration that that changed?

JL: Yes. With integration a lot of things like that changed. When you take one element and you combine it with another element you might come up with something that is fabulous and wonderful, but you don't have the first element in its pure form or the second element in its pure form. And it's just different.

PG: Were there some other places where you think that happened?

JL: Specifically? Specifically in just what is the manifestation of what is the culture of high school. Like I said before, from first about how the prom is done to how

it's decorated, to who's the band playing, to whether or not it's a band or a DJ, or a band and a DJ, to maybe even the food that's served in the cafeteria. You know what I'm saying? To the school dances that happen after school, to the events that are planned for the school either by the students or by the teachers, to the way that the award ceremonies are done. All of that kind of stuff. It just changes, and participating in the world changes you with those kinds of things. So that's kind of what it is. I'm not necessarily big on things staying the same and not changing. I love the fact that things change and that one thing affects another, vibrantly. But I'm also really big on people at least trying to have an understanding that it wasn't always like this, and trying to have an understanding of the significance of the different elements and components of any organism, be it a school, be it someone's personal history, be it the state of the American theater, be it film. Whatever.

PG: Did you, or do you ever wish at all that you had been able to go to West Charlotte when it was all black?

JL: Hum. I think—no, I never wished that. The fact that West Charlotte existed, and the fact that it was all black, and the fact that my parents and relatives were there when that happened, I feel like I benefited from that. But I also feel like I benefited from all of the positive things that happened when West Charlotte was integrated. So if I had felt like I missed something, then maybe I would wish that I was there when it was all black. But I don't feel like I missed anything. I feel like I hit the mother load.

PG: Well, what did you gain from going when you did?

JL: I think I gained a more realistic sense of how the world works outside of my own community that I grew up in. I think I gained a sense and skills about how to deal

with a variety of different people that are coming to a situation with a variety of different issues, agendas, needs, wants, desires, that whole thing. I learned the importance of remaining true to self, and remaining true to my ideals and ways of doing things and things that I knew or felt were right, of questioning but not totally dismantling it every minute my moral compass, if you will. And being brave and challenging the things that need to be challenged or need to be thought about. All of that kind of stuff. The lessons were pretty huge. Maybe those same lessons would have been learned at any high school, but I didn't go to just any high school. I went to West Charlotte, and it was really a positive experience. I have so many friends from other places in the country and other places in the city even, and all over the world, who had horrible, and horrific high school experiences. But that wasn't the case for me. One could play the magic "if" game all day long, but in terms of my reality when I was there I knew that it was special. I knew that it was great. It also helped to set me up for other incidences in my life. There have been times in my life when I've been involved in something, and I've actually taken the time to say, "Man, this is great. This is really cool. It could be so different right now. And I'm so appreciative that it is what it is right now." And I think positive experiences allow you to do that. When you have this cachet of negative experience upon negative, experience upon negative experience, upon negative experience upon negative experience, you don't get any breathing room. And you feel like you're forever, if you're trying to get over it, and trying to be productive, and trying to endure, and trying to rise above, you just don't get a chance to relax into something being good and then appreciating the fact that you're there. And West Charlotte facilitated that for me. And during those times when things aren't good, and things don't

feel good, and life isn't great and fabulous and wonderful, it's in my cellular structure that really positive experience with no excuses. Because even within that positive experience everything wasn't great all the time. But over all, the over all patina of the experience, if you will, I have to say without any hesitation was really fabulous and really, really wonderful. And I've realized that there are a lot of things that I can't say that about.

PG: There are certainly a lot of people who can't say that about their high school education, so really that's a wonderful thing for you to say, when some people talk about desegregation and the sort of hopes that people in the community have, what desegregation could accomplish.

JL: Yeah.

PG: One of the things some people talk about is the idea that by desegregating the schools that the city could somehow create a larger community. Is that something that you ever thought about, and do you think that that happened?

JL: I think that, yes. It is something that I thought about because we were in the midst of that. Because that statement and statements like that, the one that you just made, were bandied about the whole time. And this whole thing of sort of the only metropolitan high school and all these people from all these different places in the city coming to this school, it did happen. I don't think it happened in every way that people wanted it to happen, but on some level it did happen. That level of it happening wasn't sustained, but it happened. It never became static because life isn't static. Things move, change, mutate, transform, metamorphoses, all of that. It's like glimpses of things. It happened in some ways. It didn't happen in others. And then the paradigm would shift

and the way that it didn't happen before, maybe it happened that way thirty percent, or thirty percent more. And in the ways that it had always happened, maybe it went into the negative fifties. You know what I'm saying? So, yeah, it did. Then when you do that you're talking about whose communities, because you are talking about children when you're talking about high school, and you're kind of using children as pawns in this reaching out to different communities. Well, the reality is you took them all, and you put them all in the same group of buildings, and they dealt with each other from six-thirty or seven o'clock until three, four, five o'clock depending on who stayed after school and who got there early. And they dealt with it. So just by doing that some kind of relating, interrelating, community building is going to happen. Now then you get into the thing of well, in the larger society what were your expectations of that? What were you looking for? What did you want to happen? Because something happened. Now were you so fixated on what you wanted to happen that you didn't see what actually happened? And so in terms of that, at least when I was there, it happened. And I don't think it could have been predicted how it would happen, but it did happen.

PG: Did that happening at West Charlotte have wider ramifications for the students' lives or for the city itself, or was this something that happened ( )?

JL: I think it did. But I think it did in very, very subtle ways that I think are really, really hard to measure. But in terms of maybe shifting just the ease and the comfort in which someone deals with somebody that's different from them, someone that was affected by that West Charlotte experience, which, in turn, affects the way that that other person deals with somebody else, and it affects the way that other person deals with somebody else. And I think it's kind of like anything in life. I mean, especially when

you're in high school and when you're that age, anything that is happening to you at the moment feels huge. But then you've got a lot of people feeling huge all at the same time, and then you realize that in the larger context of the culture that you live in, aw well, it's not that huge. And then in the larger context of the country, oh well, it's not that huge. And in the larger context of the world, it's not that huge. But it is because it's all about who is shining the light on it, and whether or not a light is being shined on it. So, for example, I would say that West Charlotte may be accredited with some things or affecting a certain kind of change that could have very well been happening in many other communities, but nobody was shining the light on it, or nobody is shining the light on it now. So I think it did have an effect. Example, like you know, you look at what's happening with all of the morality issues and arts debates in the city. And you say the effect that it's had. Well, yeah, events have happened, and they've gotten national exposure, and obviously city-wide exposure, but in terms of affecting change, how does one really measure the effect that it's had. Because it becomes dissipated. The more people you deal with, the more dissipated it becomes. But it's still there. And that's kind of how I look at the West Charlotte thing. I hope that wasn't too, I don't know.

PG: What you're saying is that it was affecting individuals.

JL: Yeah.

PG: I was intrigued when you were talking about having the light shine. Did you feel that people were watching? Did you feel that the school was a place that people outside the school were watching to see how well things worked?

JL: I think, obviously, in the beginning with the whole desegregation thing, definitely that was going on. By the time that I was there, I think people were watching



for the things that people, or communities, or organizations become noted for as in, "What is West Charlotte's football team going to look like this year? How good is their basketball team going to be this year?" And if the year before the academic thing was really high, well, "What is it going to be like this year." And because the open school and the open school concept was something that was new to Charlotte and not pretty widespread, well, "How is that doing?" But people only care about something when somebody tells them that they should care about it, or if it's new, or if it's newsworthy, which is sort of a product of our culture. So I do think that there were people watching, and I think that they were watching for different things because they had different agendas. Some people were watching to say, "See, yeah, this works." And some people were watching to say, "See, I told you. This doesn't work." But I think the people who were consciously watching were watching to prove a point. And that's whether they were parents, or people within the community of West Charlotte, or people outside the community of West Charlotte, or city officials, or business people. They had an agenda about how they were watching, because they were hoping to gain something from what would be revealed.

PG: Did you ever have a sense that, speaking about people looking for a particular agenda, that there were people elsewhere in the community that were critical of West Charlotte?

JL: In parts of the African American community on the west side, or in parts of Charlotte's larger community?

PG: I would probably say in parts of the white community in particular, or in the African American?

JL: People that were critical? I think so, yeah. Because I think people often times just don't understand. For example, there was an incident that happened at school, and a parent, she just kept putting her foot in it every time she did something. What I mean by that is she said these incredibly racist things. What it was really about was about power. It was about the fact that her son was going to this school that wasn't really being run by people that looked like her, and she had issues with that. The school was being run by people of color, and it had great successes. It had its failures, too. Actually her son was doing great at school. He was doing well at school. He was a friend of mine, very athletic, in all the advanced classes, all that. And this one incident happened, and she kept on and kept on, and it was like, "Oh, so this is about power." So you kind of get to see what makes people comfortable. And some people aren't comfortable with change, especially if that change means that it's affecting the way that they see themselves, or the way that they see how they can affect things, or the way that they see how they're in the catbird seat. All of that kind of stuff. And I think that for lots of people in the white community that was the case.

PG: Were there students at West Charlotte whose parents felt that way, who were uncomfortable with how their parents felt about the school?

JL: Oh, yeah, but then with students that age, that's not really anything that you talk about. They just kind of rolled their eyes if their mother's name comes up or their father's name comes up, but they don't mention it, and just go on and do their school thing.

PG: I guess that's true about many young people, they are uncomfortable with their parents about many things.

JL: Exactly. Exactly. But I think that when you're in the moment of living through anything you might be able to step back and say, "This feels good." Or you might be able to step back and say, "This has never been done before." And so on that level it's important. But you never know what kind of importance and the specificity of that importance that other people are going to apply to it later. You know what I'm saying? You never know, and you're not even really living in that. You're living in the moment at the time, and it is the reality, so this is what it is. And so you don't really take the time to say, "Twenty years from now people are going to be talking about what was happening at West Charlotte when I was there." Because what you're doing when you're in that time is you're just trying to deal with life right now.

PG: It's like the Bill Clinton phase of worrying about the future.

JL: Yeah, which is really interesting because as America gets a little older, or gets a year older or whatever in its adolescence, gets a day older in its adolescence—Clinton's thing is really about an obsession, about how things look, because he's simultaneously obsessed with what he's doing and then how it's affecting people. And he's got enough history and enough knowledge of history to know that people look back and say certain things about the president. But you know what, he can't even really affect that because he cannot predict what people are going to say about him. You have to get in there. You have to do the best you can. You have to go for what you know, and then you have to sit back and watch the movie, because that's what history becomes. It's funny, too, when you talk about history and you being an historian yourself. People talk about revisionist history, and it's funny because with history people don't realize that the operative word in history is story. It's somebody's story. It's called his-story. It ain't

called her-story, our-story, the-story, and oftentimes the his in history is, we know who he is, but he's very specific. But the thing is with history, it's when you get more information the perception of the history changes. And a lot of people are very resistant to that. They're really, super, super resistant because they think that if they have participated in creating the history then this is it, and it goes down in time forever, and this is the myth that I want out about me, or this is the illusion that I want to be there. And then you get more information, or different information, or information from a different perspective, and people will accuse one of being revisionist. Well, sometimes revising is good if you have more information.

PG: Well, I have asked you about many things, and you have been very gracious to speak to all of my questions. Is there anything that is important about West Charlotte and your experience at West Charlotte that we haven't talked about?

JL: I guess the most important thing about West Charlotte and my experience of West Charlotte is, and I think I hit on it in the very beginning, is that for all human beings, whether it's high school or whether it's a club, or whether it's some organization you're a part of, or whatever, the bottom line for me, it always comes down to, for human beings and us on the planet, it always comes down to love. And feeling loved, and one's capacity for love, and one's capacity to express love and give love and share love. And when we use words like dignity, respect, community, all of that stuff, it's really about love. It's about love and belonging, and feeling like you belong to something, and feeling like you're a part of something, that's about love. When people talk about patriotism in America it's about feeling as if you belong. Now, when you feel as if you belong, as if you have a reason for being there, you feel protected, and you feel

encouraged, thriving, existing, living vibrantly, you feel encouraged to do that. And that's what I think the legacy or history of West Charlotte provided for so many people. And while that's big and specific for those people and for West Charlotte, it's just one example of how that can happen in so many other different ways in the human drama, if you will. So simultaneously it's common and uncommon. And it's not about the building, or it's not just about the building or the campus of West Charlotte. It's not just about the community. It's not just about the fact that it was a bunch of black people. It's not just about any of that. Those are particulars and those are details of something at the core. And at the core was, and why it's so special is that you have evidence of people belonging to something, and being a part of something, and not having to make excuses for it, and you can see how the human spirit thrives off of that. And that's basically it.

PG: I think that's a wonderful ending. I won't ask any more.

JL: Okay.

END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE B.

END OF INTERVIEW.