

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

LATRELLE MCALLISTER  
JUNE 25, 1998

PAMELA GRUNDY: --with Latrelle McAllister and her memories of West Charlotte High School and it is the 25<sup>th</sup> of June 1998.

So, you started by saying you grew up just a few blocks from the school?

LATRELLE MCALLISTER: About three blocks.

PG: Lived there ever since you were born.

LM: Ever since I was born, within shouting distance. Had the opportunity to play on the playground just below West Charlotte. Really, all my life, really, looked forward to going there.

PG: Oh really.

LM: Yes.

PG: On this playground would there be kids in the neighborhood?

LM: Neighborhood children. There's a community center just below the school. So, we would play there. I went to Girl Scouts right across the street from West Charlotte High School. Just this long--. Well, all of my life was a part of our heritage, a part of the neighborhood. And, actually, most of my friends' parents went to school there, too. It was just for me a no-brainer, as they say, that that is where I would go to school. When integration came about—I believe in 1971 or 1972—some of the young people in our neighborhood went to West Mecklenberg. But, as fate would have it, I was on the dividing line, I guess, for West Charlotte. I think Senior Drive was the dividing line. So, there was never a question about where I would go to high school.

PG: So you didn't worry that you were going to get transferred out somewhere else?

LM: That's right. That's right. My house—at least the—. I guess, maybe the several homes that were, I guess, just north of Senior Drive were always in the West Charlotte school district.

PG: What years did you attend school?

LM: I was there from 1976 until 198--no, I'm sorry—from 1973 to 1976.

PG: Okay. So you were there right in some of the earlier years of the period of integration, then?

LM: Yes, yes.

PG: And where did you go to school as you [microphone obstructed]. Where did you go to school before West Charlotte?

LM: Okay, well, because my mother was a teacher I didn't have the benefit of going to the neighborhood elementary school. I went to school with her. I went to Druid Hills elementary school. University Park was right behind our house, really, but—. I could jump the fence, cross the fence and just go, maybe, three or four blocks. But, I went across town with my mother who taught. I spent one year at J. T. Williams Junior High School and two years—I was bussed to Wilson, which is now Wilson Middle School. But, it was Wilson Junior High at that time.

PG: What was that experience like?

LM: Oh, it was great. I enjoyed it. It was, as I remember, a fairly long bus ride, but it gave us an opportunity to socialize. And, for me, it was important because I got the opportunity to establish relationships with young people in my neighborhood. I hadn't had that experience in elementary school. I really enjoyed it. It was fun. We were pretty wild. We probably would have been most bus drivers' worst nightmare. But, it was fun.

We walked to the bus stop together, came home together. So, it was interesting. And, it gave me a different--. A chance to talk with folks with different orientations. Not just of different races, but different economic classes, but really different orientations. So, I enjoyed that experience, as well.

PG: Do you remember any of those people, in particular, or are there any particular memories about that?

LM: Oh, in terms of the people that I was bussed to at Wilson?

PG: Um-hmm.

LM: Oh, yes. In fact, we have maintained, I guess you would call it, acquaintances, throughout the years. We've attending weddings. Unfortunately, we've attended funerals. We see each other in town in a department store. So, there were some close bonds and friendships built there; in fact, some of those—just a few of those people—came to West Charlotte from high school. We just had our twentieth class reunion last year. Well, actually, it must have been year before last now.

PG: It passes.

LM: Um-hmm, it does pass. So, some of those folks were there as well.

PG: But you look forward to returning to West Charlotte, obviously.

LM: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. My husband and I were talking about an article that appeared in the paper, I guess about three weeks ago, about the coaches at West Charlotte recruiting students. There was an issue as to whether or not the coaches were recruiting students for their athletic ability or if students really, naturally, wanted to go there. For me, it was a desire. It was part of a rich heritage in the Charlotte community.

There is an extensive alumni association. People who were my father's contemporaries were members of it and it's a very active group. So, people who graduated from West Charlotte thirty years, forty years before I did still get together and socialize and do fund raising.

When I was in junior high school I participated in a march. It was my first civil rights protest. They were considering closing West Charlotte due to integration. We have pictures of us marching up Baysford Road to--. And, it was the whole community that gathered around and the House of Prayer's church band came, as I believe it. We all gathered around to rally around our neighborhood school. That was very important. It was a very important part of it. And so, that was important. I think that had I not been assigned there I would have sought to go to school there.

PG: I talked to a couple of people who said that there were ways to get to go to West Charlotte even if you weren't particularly assigned.

LM: Yes.

PG: Well, I'm interested in this march because that was, I think, a time of a lot of stress and concern for people. Did the question of closing, as you recall it, did it come up very suddenly and people had to respond quickly? Or was it more sort of a growing sense that this might happen?

LM: Well, I think, perhaps for the adults it was a growing sense because a lot of the historically black schools had been closed. But for me, certainly, I wasn't aware of the politics of it. But, it was important to me to preserve that as an opportunity for me to attend school there. So, I imagine that we--. Many of the schools set in the ward had

been closed. Many of the schools, elementary schools that had been--. And, of course, there were older schools. It may have not been a case of a black/white issue.

But those schools perhaps weren't maintained. The facilities weren't in as good a shape. As we sought to have equity in the school system, we wanted to have schools that were, certainly, equitable in terms of facilities, as well as teachers and supplies. One of the things, I think, our march helped to do was, perhaps, to call attention to the fact that there is a rich heritage. There is a broad base of support for this institution. And we began to get for the high school, I imagine, more resources to help to keep it growing and keep it viable. That was important to the community.

PG: Did you have a sense that people in the white community really didn't understand how important a place like West Charlotte was?

LM: I'm not sure about the white community, but I think, certainly our sense was that the school board, the administrators, didn't understand the value that the school had. I mean, I grew up being able to hear the band practice. I grew up watching the band go away. I grew up seeing the football team come back to the games after the victories. I grew up with people whose parents had been athletes, whose parents had been scholars there. Because my mother was an educator I knew people who taught there. And so, it was just such an integral part of my life that I'm not sure that the administration thought that there was that much attachment to the building. And, perhaps, there wasn't that much attachment to the building. You remember, West Charlotte—. When my father attended West Charlotte it was where Northwest Middle School is now. So, it probably-. Had they offered to build a brand new school and campus somewhere in that proximity

people would have gone with that. But the idea of closing the school down all together certainly wouldn't be accepted.

PG: No. When you were growing up did your parents and the other graduates of West Charlotte, was that something that was always important in their lives, that they talked about or--?

LM: Well, they did. I think part of what happens anyway in the black community is there is a strong oral history. So, I did get a lot of what happened, their antics, their experiences from my parents and my friends' parents. Actually from my father. My mother's not a native Charlottean. But, from my father and his brothers and sisters who attended West Charlotte. So, I did get a strong sense of what <sup>went</sup> ~~when~~ on there, the quality of the education, the quality of care from people.

In fact, I'll tell you an interesting story. One of the people who had been one of my father's teachers, Miss Marjorie Belton, was my guidance counselor. It was, I guess, to me a very memorable moment, because as outgoing as I am now, I was a very shy teenager. I had my father walk me to school the first day. He took my hand and placed it in Miss Belton's hand. That was a very historic moment, but it also--. The symbolism went further than that. She took his gesture of his entrusting me to her very seriously. In fact, helped to mold my academic career there at West Charlotte. That was very important to me, too.

PG: Now how did she go about doing that?

LM: There were--. I was interested in having fun. I was interested in being part of the band and part of the flag girl team. My father had always stressed that while he

wanted me to have good grades, he wanted me to be well rounded. That was wonderful because it took some of the academic pressure off.

So, while I did well in school, I was not as focused on creating an excellent GPA as I was in terms of being immersed in a lot of different things that I had the opportunity to be immersed in. She always made sure that I took care of the academic part. She encouraged me to apply to <sup>Exeter(?)</sup> Exater Academy. I was accepted there. She encouraged me to apply to Governor's School and I was accepted there. She encouraged me to apply for the Morehead Scholarship to Chapel Hill. I was a semi-finalist for that, actually, a finalist at our school. And, submitted my name, I think, for several awards. I was an all star scholar. I wanted only to go to Chapel Hill after--.

I kind of tend to be single focused. As I began to look at what college I wanted to go to I only wanted to go to Chapel Hill. We hadn't heard from Chapel Hill and we hadn't heard from Chapel Hill, so she said, "Latrelle don't you think you really ought to apply somewhere else?" I said, "Where Miss Belton, where else?" She said, "Well, I know someone at State." So she made a phone call and got me accepted into North Carolina State. And, just continued to be—to create opportunities for me that have been very helpful to me.

She lives not far from here now. She lives just right around the corner from Johnson C. Smith University where I work. I go and visit her often. I've established a friendship with her sons and take my son to see her. She's still, after twenty-one years, a big part of my life. The reason I think that's important is from what I understand, young people today in schools don't get quite that much nurturing and that much understanding

and that type of guidance. She, to me, was the epitome of what a guidance counselor really is. She guided my academic career.

PG: Well and it seems like she accomplished that under some fairly difficult circumstances perhaps. Or my sense from looking at the paper and all was that that was a pretty turbulent time especially the early '70s.

LM: I don't think, as young people, we experienced that or had a feel for that. That's perhaps one of the things the administrators did very well. We were really insulated. We didn't feel that turmoil or that stress or tension. I'm sure she knew what was going on and worked accordingly. But there was never--. We were allowed to be teenagers. We were allowed to be high schoolers. So, we didn't have that burden on us. It was a--. I think that's important, too. But one of the things that--. There are a lot of excellent scholars. West Charlotte has produced a lot of folks that have gone on to make great contributions to the community. They certainly have produced their share of excellent athletes, as well.

PG: It seems like the athletic teams are an important symbol of the school.

LM: Yes I would think so. But, I think that's important in terms of--. Well, a lot--. That's a hallmark of a lot of colleges and universities. So, it was another way for people to establish, put their mark of excellence on something. So, that was important, as well.

PG: I'm interested again in the, sort of, period that you went to school, '73 through '76 in a couple of things. It seems like that was also a period where the student assignments were still changing. Did the student body at West Charlotte change related to that?

LM: It did. It did. As I mentioned earlier, part of the folks in my

*possible* —in fact, some of my close friends—went to West Mecklenberg for one  
the later two years. So the student assignments  
ome unrest. Not necessarily on our campus, but I

apart of was the Boston exchange. We had an  
can't remember exactly—perhaps there were three  
ne to school at West Charlotte for a period, I think,  
s from our campus went to school there. Because  
Boston had—  
chmark for success in terms of integrating school  
systems. So we were able to get the opportunity to share with them their successes and,  
hopefully, learn from those mistakes that they made, as well. So, that was one important  
program.

I don't remember-- In fact, one of the things, I think, that we had, or at least in  
my experience—was a closeness between the black students and the white students. We  
just had a great time catching up with one another at both our ten-year and our twenty-  
year reunions. Maybe it was because we were involved with one another in extra  
curricular activities. Maybe it was because really the-- I guess there really wasn't a  
tolerance for anything other than working together at West Charlotte. Maybe that was it,  
I don't know. But we seemed to all get along quite well. So, that--.

I don't remember any-- I really don't remember racially motivated outbreaks.  
There were conflicts between black and white students. Most often those were not rooted  
in racism. They were rooted-- Sometimes they were drug deals. Sometimes there were

other skirmishes about issues outside of school. But I don't remember any truly racially motivated incidents. Now, I'll have to remind you that my memory isn't very good, but that just wasn't a sense of what I had, a sense of discomfort about where I was or what I was doing. It was at that time predominantly black anyway. Perhaps white students felt that. But, certainly we didn't.

PG: Did you have a sense that having black students and white students at the same school getting along well was something special? Did you feel that or was it just something that seemed normal to you?

LM: I think, perhaps, from--. Because keep in mind, a lot of time a teenager's view is a very unrealistic view anyway, I guess I really didn't have the expectation that it would have been anything other than what it was. That it would have been conflictual. Because I certainly felt that those students who were bussed there had the same quality of education that they would have had in their other schools. I certainly felt that they had the same caring and conscientious faculty and staff, just support team there.

It's a beautiful campus. The neighborhood was considered a middle class neighborhood. A lot of the white students came from Myers Park, so certainly, there wasn't a comparison there. It was a well-kept, established middle class neighborhood where people cared about what went on around them and in their community. So, I saw no reason for the students to be threatened or feel as though they'd been cheated. But, perhaps, maybe they did not get to experience what I got to experience--. Perhaps they didn't get to experience going to Myers Park and finishing at Myers Park where their brothers and sisters and parents finished they may have felt short changed in that respect.

But, we certainly had no expectation of it being anything other than it was. I really don't sense there would have been much tolerance for that.

PG: Were you, as you were growing up in, sort of the sixties, were you very aware of segregation and that kind of thing? Is that something that was part of your world or is that something that you didn't know anything about?

LM: It was something that I didn't think about, but I was aware of it. It must have been 1962 or '63, my grandmother moved to California. And, my mother and I and one of her friends took the bus to California. It took us four days and five nights, a very memorable trip. We got off the bus in Jackson, Mississippi. A lady at the lunch counter didn't want to serve us. To really appreciate this story you'd have to get a sense of what a strong willed person my mother is. She's very strong willed and very outspoken and she would not tolerate not being served. She stood there with the bus driver's support until the lady at the lunch counter cooked us a hot meal. She didn't want to--. She wanted to have us eat cold sandwiches. My mother raised quite a ruckus in Jackson, Mississippi. [Laughter] So, when we got to California my grandmother almost had a fit. She said, "Oh no. Anything could have happen to you all." I remember my father and my neighbor's husband cautioning us, "Don't y'all get off the bus in Mississippi." They just might as well have told my mother to get off the bus and raise a ruckus because that's exactly what she did. So, that was my first sense ever of the difference of the polarization.

But, also, growing up my father had worked at a country club. He worked at Charlotte Country Club. He was a server and he talked to me about some of his experiences. My mother had worked at the Hotel Charlotte early in their marriage. So

they would share with me some of their experiences. However, because I grew up in a very rich community. Not rich in terms of dollars, but rich in terms of being the type of community that nurtures its children. It really--.

I know that it takes a whole village to raise a child is an African proverb, it could have been one that very well that was true of my community. I attended church. I attended school in predominantly black institutions. There was just a sense of nurturing. A sense of care and concern that, as a child, I just never grew up with a fear for, first of all, what might happen to me because of some racial issues. Nor did I ever suffer in terms of educational experiences or cultural experiences or those types of things that I feel really have enriched me. Part of that may have been due to my parents and their education, their orientation and their desire to have something better for me. But, I never had that.

My mother and I were at a teachers' convention when Martin Luther King was assassinated. As a matter of fact, my mother was playing pinochle with the superintendent. We were in his hotel room. The state superintendent--. I think it was E. Craig Phillips. I was sleeping in his bed and they were playing pinochle. We left his room and got on the elevator and someone told us that Dr. King had been assassinated. I remember my father calling and asking us not to come home because all the kids in the street--. You know there's North Carolina Center and Shaw and Livingston. So just a number of historically black colleges and universities, not to mention Smith, in that corridor between Charlotte and Raleigh. So, he said, "Kids are laying in the street protesting." And even there in Raleigh outside the hotel people were turning cars over, setting cars on fire. A lot was going on there.

But, again, I was sleeping in a white man's bed. My mother was playing cards with a white man and they were using me as, I guess, as a demonstration as to how early intervention would help children to read. I was there reading for teachers from all over the state, a mixed group. Even in what you would consider to be the most severe circumstances, I didn't feel threatened, nor did I feel frightened. But, again, like I said, I realize that I was fortunate in terms of my experiences growing up and they may have been different from others.

PG: Were you involved when these Boston students came to West Charlotte? Were you involved at all in the arrangements for that?

LM: No, no, I wasn't one of the exchange students. I was on the—I'm trying to remember. I think it was our senior year and I was active in student government. So, we did have receptions for them. But, I wasn't involved in that. We also had foreign students, had several foreign students. I remember, I think, from Norway; at least one student from Norway that I can remember. I didn't bring my yearbook to help me to remember some of these things, but we did have students from other countries there, as well.

PG: As you look back on your years there at West Charlotte—. You say when you were there you were a teenager and you were thinking about teenager sorts of things. When you look back on it now as an adult has your idea about it changed at all or do you look back any differently than you thought about when you were--?

LM: I would have been a better math student. I would have taken physics and calculus. Those are about the only things I would have changed. I really did have a very

good time. And especially now as an adult as a parent, I really appreciated being able to have participated in that experience.

I participated in the marching band. I got to travel a little bit with the marching band. I wasn't good at it at all, but I really enjoyed it. I got the opportunity to be a flag girl, to march in the parades. I got the opportunity to present the--. Oh, that was another thing. I forgot about that. I got the opportunity to represent the high school at the Citizen of the Year for the Daughters of the American Revolution. So, you can imagine that kind of shook things up when my mother and I went into the, I think, Myers Park Country Club. I think we were the only two black folks in there. [Laughter] And, I don't know that the Daughters of the American Revolution knew what color I was, either. That was Miss Belton's doing I'm sure. [Laughter] So, I did get the opportunity to have a lot of rich experiences that I really do treasure.

PG: What was that like for you? Did you think that is was going to be surprising when you arrived?

LM: [Pause] You know, I think part of it has to do with the fact--. You know this is the same mother that went with me—that turned the place out in Mississippi. I don't think she thought about it or cared.

PG: Okay.

LM: One of the things that my parents--. And you know it's amazing, I was thinking about this recently. My father worked in a country club and that gave him a real good sense of how things were done properly: etiquette, foods. He'd always try to expose me to different foods and that kind of thing. I never felt out of place. I knew that I knew how to eat a full course meal and knew which fork was the right fork and which

fork--. You know, not to talk with food in my mouth and what to do with my napkin, so I didn't feel uncomfortable there.

I had a sense--. I just wasn't uncomfortable so we really didn't think about that. I think, probably we really didn't realize the impact until after we'd left. And I said, "They probably didn't expect me to be what I was." But, they were very cordial and hospitable. I don't think that there was any thought about taking the award away. But, we didn't realize the significance of it until after the ceremony honoring the award recipients had passed.

PG: That's such an interesting story. I'm interested--. You talked about being in the marching band. Again, one of the things that most people talk about in relationship to integration is that white marching bands and black marching bands, typically, have very different styles in marching. I know the music is--. Tell me a little bit about that.

LM: Part of it was with the marching bands at historically black colleges and universities it is more of entertainment. It's not so much the people who participate are certainly able to play the classics who know the classics and are excellent musicians. I was probably the exception to the rule. I wasn't a good musician. But, part of it is the heritage and the style that comes with the entertainment. A lot of the music is contemporary music. A lot of the--.

The steps are rhythmic and the precision comes from the rhythm more so than the execution of the marching. So, with the West Charlotte Lions the heritage was, how high can you get your steps and how white can you get your bucks? Your shoes.

So, that's a part of the whole ritual was you had to wear white bucks, suede bucks with red soles and then there was an art to polishing those. Because it was a disgrace that

you soles had white polish on them. They had to be red soles and white bucks and then the key was, those feet had to be flying. You had to have those knees high stepping. We always had to practice our routine so that when we got to the square you knew that we were there.

We didn't anticipate winning any band contest. We probably could have won some dance contests, but not any band contests. But that wasn't our goal. Part of it was to be there as a support for our team.

PG: So how did white musicians work their way into this? Did they have a lot to learn?

LM: No, I think that part of it was you just had a different style. As a matter of fact, by the time I got to school it really wasn't so much a black--. Well, I guess it was. Even at West Charlotte, I mean at West Mecklenberg where they had a black band director, there was more of a--. They had a more conservative style. It was more of a true marching band style. Later on, I think, West Mecklenberg began to take on some of those characteristics of West Charlotte. But, it wasn't necessarily because we had a black band director. West Mecklenberg did, too. So, it was an appreciation for both sides. If you were in our stadium you came on and did your halftime and then we went on the field with a fast drill and formations and everybody was up in the stands dancing.

Even to this day, people my age and older still go back to West Charlotte high school games. It's still part of the--. We go and take our kids. I imagine some of my classmates are taking their grandkids; so, that's still part of that coming back to the school. It's almost like a college homecoming really, a black college homecoming, or any college homecoming where people come back.

PG: I'm just going to go on for a minute about the shoes. I like that. Is this something, how to do the shoes--? Is this something that when you arrived at West Charlotte you knew about the people, you'd seen people doing or you'd heard people talking about these kinds of things?

LM: Well, certainly you knew about the appearance because the shoes were always white and pristine. People were always high stepping and marching. Then they had a move called the freeze. That's where we'd just stop abruptly in the middle of the street. Then what you'd do is bend down as far as you good and back, back up. The end result was the knee high and the toe pointed. While you didn't know that that was it. That was part of the uniform. I guess I didn't. When you got there, the band members--. The band members, the older band members--. It was kind of an orientation. Kind of, maybe, that the orientation that the band members, the senior band members gave to the younger band members.

PG: I guess I'm just still trying to think. How did--? I assume that there were white members of the band, or was the band pretty much all black, do you think?

LM: There were a few. There were a few, a lot of girls and cheerleaders and part of the whole entourage. But there were a few white members of the band. They assimilated. I think that they had fun as well as we did. Certainly, band was an option choice. So if they were there they wanted to be there. They took part in it just as anyone else did.

PG: They maybe learned a little more perhaps than people who'd been used to that all their lives?

LM: I imagine that growing up going to the Carousel Parade may have experienced it or understood it. One of the things that was great about West Charlotte, is that it was I thought an environment where people were allowed to be themselves. When I was there there were several components. We had what was called an open school, which is really a precursor to the magnet school.

Because some students were there in the open school you could come and work at your own pace. That was a program that really attracted some bright students, because they could finish high school quicker. If they worked at a slower pace, then they could work at a slower pace. There was also a program there called a "hang on" program. It was a program for students that had been identified as potential dropouts. It used challenge courses, rock climbing, esteem building things to keep students in school. So there were those programs in addition to our regular programs. Then there would be vocational program; they were called at the time. There was tailoring and cosmetology. I think maybe nutrition, food and nutrition. I can't remember exactly what all the vocational programs--. And, and auto mechanics. There was an auto mechanics program there. There was something for every type of student there.

When you think about it, most of us that grew up in the seventies were rebels anyway. So, those students, probably, were at a time--. White students as well as black students were really, probably at a time in the culture where doing something different was okay with them. That was the norm. The norm was to do something different. We grew up in the time of the streakers.

I remember we had three kids that streaked across the, what we call the quadrangle, the open area in the middle of the campus. Those were white students. The

white students participated in our antics just like everybody else. For them it was a way to be a part of the athletic tradition, to be a part of the team and go on team trips and that sort of thing. Like I said, I think band was an option. You could take band or P. E. Who would take P. E. when you could have all this fun taking band. It was great.

PG: I'm also interesting--. You mentioned that it was in some ways a particularly good time in terms of people being able to do new things, and, sort of, try new things. Do you think that in later years society of the school changed and made it maybe more difficult or different for students who were trying to do some of these things?

LM: Probably. But, that's okay too, because one of the things, I think, that's important for a school to survive is that it has to prepare students to go out into the world that exists. Certainly our times changed. We're over the seventies. A person who--. If the school had not changed the way it approached educating students then those students wouldn't be successful. I think the school is successful because it is able to really have a sense or a finger on the pulse of what it is. What the society is and what the conditions are in society for grooming and teaching students to be successful in that society. I think it changed. I'm not sure that it has changed in negative ways. I think that the community still embraces it. The alumni association still actively supports it. I think we're all proud of that heritage. However, we realize that it must change to be able to prepare students. I think when I--. This is certainly my personal experience that I got more rigorous preparation in the liberal arts areas. I imagine now there must be more emphasis in the technical areas. It would have to be for students to be successful, I think.

PG: Have you remained involved? To what extent have you remained involved?

LM: I haven't become a member of the alumni association. Part of that is that you have to keep in mind that my perception of those folks was that they were older folks. We have--. My parents--. My best friend and I, our parents have actually been--. Actually, her mother asked us to join. We've resisted that because we still view those folks as old folks. But this year we're turning forty and we've decided to commit to joining the alumni association because we're now joining the ranks of old folks. It was just one of those things, it wasn't time. We were fighting it all the way. We were just too young to join the alumni association, but I'm sure that we will. I look forward to it.

I've just been involved to the extent that I've gone back for mostly football games. I've used the--. I try to take my son up because he skates a lot. His grandfather teaches him to roller blade or allows him to roller blade up the parking lot there. In fact, he's been teaching him to drive since he was three. He takes him to the parking lot and lets him drive along like he did me. He sits in his lap and he's learning to drive a car there at West Charlotte. Hopefully, he'll get the opportunity to attend, too. We'll span sixty years if he gets to go to West Charlotte. We would have spanned sixty years with our family in the West Charlotte tradition.

PG: That is a long time. As you look, you're thinking of joining the alumni association and thinking about possibly having a child there someday, what would you like to see for West Charlotte in the future? As you look at the future, what would you like to see happen at the school?

LM: I'd like to see--. I'd like to see the school offer a variety of programs where students can really find out what it is they're good at, and, therefore, determine what it is they'd like to do when they grow up. I think it should continue to be an institution where

students are allowed to experiment: to test themselves, to test new ground. I'd like to see it continue to be an institution where students are pushed to determine, or really discover what their limits are. One of the things I think was really important for me was that no one there ever accepted that what I did or what I wanted to give them was good enough. I really didn't know what my limits were, what I was capable of. But, people always pushed.

My English teacher, Mr. Neal, was an advanced placement English teacher. We were studying Shakespeare and Chaucer and I walked to school. I walked two blocks, but I was late every day. I had this habitual habit of being late. I inherited that from my mother. Actually, that's probably a learned behavior, I'm sure, because I've worked since then to get rid of it. He'd always say--. He'd call me Miss Sunshine. He'd say, "You know Miss Sunshine, the early bird gets the worm." He wouldn't tolerate my lateness. He would not tolerate the fact that I wanted at first to get my father to write my papers. [Laughter] He wouldn't stand for it. He wouldn't accept it. In part because of him and in part because of my father, I'm an excellent writer. It has helped me a lot in my work and in my college career.

So, I'd like to see them have a staff and faculty that's dedicated to understand where high school students are, understanding that they really don't know who they are themselves and helping them to open the door to see who they can be.

PG: Another thing that I've been talking to people about related to West Charlotte and related to the future is that West Charlotte is very interesting because in Charlotte, a place where buildings are constantly torn down and new things are built and old things are put away. It's really one of the oldest institutions in the city that's still in,

more or less, of the same place. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about why that's important or if you see that as having that there in the same community as important.

LM: I do see it as important. However, one of the things that I'm constantly reminded of is that a lot of times we hold onto things that are comfortable to us. So, if-- I certainly would like to see West Charlotte continue, but if it comes to the point where West Charlotte would move to another location and by doing so would provide a wider range of opportunities for students, I think I'd be receptive to that. I don't think I'd be receptive to it going too far. But, I think I'd be receptive to that because part of the greatness is not so much in the location. It's moved from its original home on Baysford Road to where it is now on Senior Drive. The degree to which it survives especially in the next century and beyond is to the degree to which it's able to keep up with technology.

Quite frankly, as a parent I want my child to go to an environment that's comfortable, where it's pleasant, where they have nice surroundings. Those are the kinds of situations that we try to put our children in. So if it gets to the point where maintaining that structure itself is cost prohibitive, if it's not in the best interest of the children that attend there, then I would—. I don't think I'd have a problem with that. But if they tried to close it down, I'd march again. I'd hold that banner high again. I really would.

PG: Have you ever been concerned again at any point, since that first march, it might be closed?

LM: No, I haven't it. That's ironic. I imagine we should have been. I think, though, with the alumni association and the broad grass roots support, I just didn't see that happening.

PG: I've had a couple of people talk to me over the past couple of weeks to talk to me about--. That they are a little bit concerned with the, sort of, backing down now on bussing. With sort of a change in the situation and a real jump in the percentage of African American students at West Charlotte. They're sort of concerned that that means—or that that might signal a potential of lessening of broad support for the school. Is that something that you have been noticing or have heard people talk about?

LM: Well, I haven't noticed it. I haven't heard people talk about it. But, I think certainly that's a concern. I think one of the things that happens as a result of that is that folks like us then need to try to address that concern. I don't know to what degree the alumni association has done strategic planning and to what degree they've been involved with the school system. I would see that as an integral piece. However, once you--.

If you establish yourself as an institution of excellence, people will come to you no matter where you are and no matter what the circumstances are. I think that if we continue to have the expectation that the academic achievement of the students graduating there is high and that those students are competitive with other students throughout the country, then there shouldn't--. I guess I don't foresee the school's immediate demise. I really don't.

PG: Is your son in school now?

LM: He is.

PG: Where?

LM: He's ten. He's at Eastover Academy.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

LM: Well, you know, part of--. From an adult's perspective, from a person who grew up in a predominantly black elementary school where the teachers that I still see and interact with still come up to me and hug me and call me "Precious" and tell me I'm beautiful. Even thirty-five years later they still see their role as affirming me and nurturing me. They still have that role. I don't know that my son will have that at school.

There is probably in the black community, and certainly in our household, an ongoing debate about the degree to which integration helps our children or hurts our children. We don't know. I think that as long as there's some mechanism for keeping the resources, the resources equitable, then the make-up, the racial make-up of the school really isn't as important. However, one of the things that I think is important, though, is that students do have the opportunity to exposure to cultures outside their own. That's--.

I work in human resources and a lot of the issues that I see in my job come from cultural clashes. Not necessarily racial clashes, but cultural clashes. I was brought up differently from you and so I see things differently than you. I approach problems differently. I communicate differently. I think that integrated situations are beneficial to African American children because it gives them the opportunity to develop those skills that they need as they work and live in the society at large. So, I think there's some benefits to integration, although, I'm not sure--.

My husband and I have chosen not to put our child on the bus. We take him to school. But there are children who have to get up as early as 5:15 to do that. And for those parents who aren't able to get their children to school in any other way, I imagine that is a concern for them. So, from a humanistic standpoint I really don't advocate

children having to get up that early and have maybe three, four hours of their day spent on a bus. I think that there are a lot of bright minds in the education community and I think there are some ways to come together and partner to solve those problems. I think those problems are those that are easily attacked. But, like I said, I just don't know. There's still some debate about the benefits of it.

For instance, if in school, especially elementary school, if I got in trouble--. If I got in trouble on the way home, or if I got in trouble in the community at large, I could be sure that my mother would know about it or my father would know about it and that something would be done about it. There's not that type of support. There's not that village that we talk about that's important in raising and nurturing and shaping young minds. Perhaps a part of the movement away from bussing is the movement toward establishing those villages where we can nurture our children. That's probably not a bad approach. But, I do think that there's value in exposure to other cultures.

PG: Another thing people talk about is—granted, it's sort of a pro- or potential advantage of this bussing and integrated schools—that the sort of village that you talk about, this ( ) community. The idea that by integrating schools you could expand people's sense of what their village was or what their community was to a more citywide community rather than a neighborhood community. Do you think that that happened with your experience with integration, in general? Do you think that is a dream that really is impossible or do you think that could happen?

LM: Oh, no. I'm certain it gave me a broader exposure. I'm certain that it did. I think that was beneficial for me because I had been in a situation where I was sheltered from a lot of things. So, I certainly think that was an excellent growth experience for me

in terms of being exposed to--. Even, just people from different neighborhoods or different socioeconomic status. That was important. All of that I think is very important in building, not only appreciation for people's differences, but tolerance for those differences. When you look at our society a lot of the problems a lot of times—not just our society, but the world at large—a lot of the problems that exist come because people haven't developed tolerance or appreciation for the differences. Really, actually, pass that valuing the differences that other people bring.

PG: How did you learn to do that at West Charlotte? How did you learn the value differences?

LM: Well, I guess, because we had--. It was such a melting pot of Charlotte. We had people from all levels; I guess, socioeconomic levels. We had students with all types of interests and orientations. We had some of the brightest students in the city and we had some of those students who had been identified as, actually, failing. We were all together in some form or fashion.

We had times when our school was showcased for the positive things that it did and that was the time that we had the opportunity to come together and have a sense of pride. So we had a shared vision and, maybe, some--. And we were really, to some extent, stake holders, because we were there because we wanted to go there.

So one of the things we wanted to do was make the university, the university, the high school look good so that it would continue to survive. I do think that students had some ownership there. That helped us to come together around a lot of different issues, I think. I did learn to value that.

That was a lesson taught by the teachers. It was not only taught in terms of your interpersonal relationships, but in terms of the material that you were exposed to. If you were--. I didn't take drama, but especially in English and literature, we were given an exposure to a broad range of literature with the understanding that maybe it wasn't something that we liked personally, but that it is something that we should learn to appreciate. And, learn why others, perhaps, appreciate it and why we should value it as part of our culture.

So, it was in the curriculum. It was emphasized by the faculty there at West Charlotte. It came, probably, as part of our experiences because we were such a diverse group of students. It was a large group. I think we had probably about fifteen hundred students all together. My high school class started out with five hundred and sixty-five students, I think. And, I think, we graduated five thirty-five, or something like that.

PG: That is a lot of--. Well, that's pretty much what I've been interested to know. I really appreciate your taking the time. This has been real wonderful. Is there anything else that you'd like to say about either West Charlotte or about the situation of the schools today or about the future, or anything else?

LM: I'd like to say, I guess, that as a parent--. I have a hearing impaired child. Actually, that's a euphemism, I have a deaf child. He has a lot of struggles behind him, but he has a lot of struggles before him. I am interested in having a community that's responsive to the needs of students, primarily, and their parents. I think that the legacy that West Charlotte gives us is that it has been that institution. So, that's why I'm very proud of it. In closing I'd just like to say, "Go Lions!"

PG: Wonderful.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW