

**START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A****WILLIAM HAMLIN  
MAY 29, 1998**

PAM GRUNDY: Today is May 29, 1998, and I am interviewing William Hamlin about his experiences at West Charlotte High School.

So I guess I should start out by asking are you yourself a native Charlottean?

WILLIAM HAMLIN: I am a native Charlottean. I went through sort of a historical encounter. I actually started my preschool, elementary years in the old Myers Street School and, later because of integrations and some rifts there, I transferred into a new district. I went to Northwest and then later to West Charlotte. I have been a life long resident of Charlotte except for about a year when I took a job out in Memphis, Tennessee. So, Charlotte is my home --. For the time that I went away in college--.

PG: What neighborhood did you grow up in?

WH: Again, I grew up in several neighborhoods. As an adolescent, I grew up in the Brooklyn community, then later close to Third Ward. When I went to my middle school, junior high years as it was called in those days, I lived over in the Genesis Park neighborhood. We called it Kenney Street at that time. And, then later when I was in high school we moved to Biddleville. Those were the neighborhoods that I trekked myself through, or my parents trekked myself through as I was growing up.

PG: So, you knew about a lot of the city?

WH: I knew quite a bit about most of the city. In fact, my older brother went to school across town, Second Ward. And when we moved, the remaining children in our family, which are five, went to West Charlotte.

PG: Was the move related at all to the schools? You said something about changing schools--?

WH: Yes, it was. It was more related to integration. I was one of the persons along with Dorothy Counts and several other persons who went to the integrated schools when--. Dorothy went when she was in high school--. But I was supposed to go to Alexander Graham Bell Junior High which was across the street on Morehead where the central YMCA is located. Over that summer, my father and our family experienced a lot of racial threats and whatever. And my father sent us to South Carolina to be with his parents and then later to Richmond to be with my mother's parents. When we came back to Charlotte he actually had moved us from Liberty Street which was in the Second Ward area. Which was supposed to go to Alexander Graham Bell over into the district that included Northwest which fed into West Charlotte.

PG: Had you applied to go to Alexander Graham?

WH: Yes, I had through the NAACP. I think all of us had, actually had, to make application. And I was one of those persons that the NAACP put up to go to those schools. I don't know much about the application process. But I know that my mother and father were people involved in ensuring that I had the opportunity throughout, unfortunately, I wasn't able to go.

PG: What did you think at that time? Were you in junior high school at that time or middle school?

WH: Think about going to a new school or the integration process?

PG: About possibly being one of the first children to go to an integrated school.

WH: Well, I thought it was going to be exciting. I had received a lot of encouragement from then my elementary school teachers who felt that I could do work very competently at that time. I was sort of excited about the idea of maybe being a first. I did have some anxieties about it because there was a lot of talk in the community. I may not have had the full weight of knowing what dangers may have lied ahead. I was excited, but, yet, sort of skeptical on a low scale. Because I really wasn't familiar with what problems may lie ahead.

PG: Did you become one of these partly because you were a good student in school or was it due to your parents activism?

WH: I think it was more, not so much because of my grades in school, because in elementary school I was probably a B student. I wasn't really a good, good student. But I was able to conquer the work, or do the work. But it's more because I lived on Liberty Street. The school that I was assigned to go to was York Road Junior High School which is really in the southern quadrant of the city. I would have had to ride the bus. Whereas, Alexander Graham Bell was only a block and a half from my house. So, I think it had to do more with geography and because I had been a pretty good student it probably raised the possibilities that I could be a candidate and represent, at that time, my race well in a new situation, a new integrated situation.

PG: What did your parents do?

WH: My mother, at the time, was a cook in a cafeteria. My father worked for Union Carbide. He was a mixer helper in the battery room. For a long time I thought he was like a chemist but later he explained to me exactly what he did. And that was actually mixing the ingredients that went into batteries. That was his job.

PG: You said your family had certain threats made toward them. Was part of this related to their jobs at all?

WH: Part of it was related to his job. He did say that he had gotten some threats at home, I mean at work. But the threat that scared him most was the threats that we had begun to receive at home. The late night telephone calls, people riding by the house and that sort of thing. He shared with us later that during the period of time that we were in South Carolina, Newberry, South Carolina, and then later Richmond, Virginia, that people actually rode by the house. And he was at the front window, guarding the window, to ensure that no one would actually bring danger or harm to his family even though they did not know that his family wasn't there. We were not there.

PG: What was that period of time like for you? Did you know about most of these or did your parents keep them hidden from you?

WH: I knew about the anger that existed in the community, and my parents were very active, at that time, in the NAACP. And they ensured that all of us, including myself, went to NAACP meetings where these issues and challenges were discussed, and the rallies so that we could have a full understanding of what was going on and what really to expect as children.

PG: But did they really just decide that it wasn't worth—

WH: Right. My father himself decided that it really was not worth the threats that he had received and the danger it may place his children in to go in that situation. So, he opted—and ensured that we moved so that we wouldn't have that challenge.

PG: So what did you think about when you moved, going from Northwest to West Charlotte--? What was your attitude about going to West Charlotte at that time?

WH: I think that I was more afraid going to Northwest and then to West Charlotte being in that, in that, environment more so than I was at Alexander Graham Bell. And, I'll tell you why. Because, West Charlotte had a reputation of challenging its students and the Northwest--. They really had a real strong reputation of doing that. And frankly, I was a little bit fearful that I may not meet the mark. And, did have some periods of adjustment doing that. I was sort of glad to be there because not only did West Charlotte have a good reputation of challenging its students academically, that feeder area, Northwest-West Charlotte had a good reputation of challenging its students academically, but they also had a good reputation for athletics and some arts and some other things. So, I thought that it was like a step above. Even though I think in retrospect, if I'd have gone the route of York Road and then Second Ward I think I would have probably been challenged even more. Probably would have even fared better academically because I would have been with students that I had actually grown up with from elementary school all the way through.

PG: That's the kind of experience your brother had?

WH: Yes. That's the experience my brother had. When he was--. We moved to West Charlotte, to the Northwest feeder group when I was in, the summer of my sixth grade year, or prior to going in the seventh grade. And, my brother--. That was in 1958. And he could have--. No, it was in 1957. He could have chosen to go to West Charlotte but he decided he really wanted to stay at Second Ward. That was the school--. He was a senior that year so most times seniors like to stay at the school they're in and he chose to do that. He was very active in student affairs and that sort of thing so he chose to stay there.

PG: Was part of the move to Biddleville related to your parents wanting you to go to Northwest and West Charlotte?

WH: No, I don't think it had anything to do with that at all. I think it had to do with the availability of housing. And, I think that in that quarter of town there were probably more houses available. Even though the house that we moved into really was smaller in square footage than what we previously lived in. But I think it had to do more with the availability of housing than anything else.

PG: Did your parents purchase the house?

WH: No. They did not purchase that house. But the next home that we moved into they purchased.

PG: So, you went to Northwest and you had a period of adjustment and then you went on to West Charlotte—.

WH: Now by the time that I got to the ninth grade I really had gotten to be real excited in being in that feeder group. I was really excited about going to West Charlotte. I really, really was. So, I was really anticipating that. I was really looking out--. They have a real good experience in high school.

PG: What sort of things was it that made you think this was going to be good?

WH: Well, I knew that there were going to be a lot of opportunities. As far as seeing some of my neighbors' children involved in the arts, being involved in the band, achieving in the foreign languages. Some summer days the kids would sit out on the porch and they would either speak Spanish or French. And I always felt, "Why am I not able to do this?" And, especially my older sister, she took, I think, French three years in high school. And she and our neighbors, they would just have good strong



conversations. And I wanted to be a part of that, so I knew that I was going to be challenged or opportunities were going to be placed in front of me that I really had not experienced before. So, I was really anticipating that, and seeing other kids around us really achieve highly and offered scholarships and the like, I thought that that was going to get me a good--. That would challenge me to do much better than probably what I'd done in junior high.

PG: That is exciting. At that point were you going to West Charlotte events such as football games and basketball games?

WH: Oh yes. Actually, I started going to West Charlotte High School, the football events probably when I was in the seventh grade, just West Charlotte events. Now, before then I'd been attending events in elementary school, at Second Ward, because my brother played on the football team. So I saw athletic events. But I started attending more West Charlotte events probably when I got in the seventh grade because they had a lot of plays. They had at least two plays per year at Northwest Junior High School, because we had the auditorium when they moved to the larger school. So I went to at least two plays a year. Naturally, I went to a lot of sporting events, football specifically. My sister was a part of the chorus at the time, so I would go up to West Charlotte to see recitals on her behalf. I had a neighbor who was a pretty good artist and I went up there to see some displays that he had drawn and that sort of thing. So I had begun to get a feel of West Charlotte before I got there, so that sort of heightened the anticipation.

PG: You just saw all the neighbors and the people that went? Were you within walking distance of the school?

WH: No. I really wasn't. To give you a good proximity, we lived off Oak Lawn Avenue, and West Charlotte is probably at least three miles away. I think if you would go by way of Oak Lawn and then Beatties Ford Road. But, the distance never--. We never even thought about the distance as far as coming back from school. Practically every day, we walked back home from school. It was just a conversational piece. You walked and you really didn't understand the distance you were travelling. That didn't hamper with us, or the challenge of the distance never really was a problem at all.

PG: What would you do on your way home from school? Would there be a whole bunch of kids walking back--?

WH: Always a whole bunch of kids. Probably at least--. If we left school at the closing bell, it was always at least five persons that walked together, at least five. Most of the time there was more than that because we walked in groups. You may skip ahead to the next group or fall back to the next group, or whatever, whomever you were. Then you always had the opportunity--. Or maybe there was a girl that you liked and you wanted to get with someone. You knew her or you wanted to make yourself available or vice versa. There may be a young lady that was interested in you. It was a fun time that we shared walking from school. But in the mornings we had a "special." We had a city transit bus that would pick us up and we could ride to school for a dime. Basically, in the morning, in the winter months, or when the weather was inclement, we rode to school. But in the spring or in the fall when the weather was very nice it was just another walk.

PG: That is neat. Your neighborhood, all the kids in your neighborhood also went to West Charlotte.



WH: All the kids in our neighborhood went to West Charlotte, all of them. We can consider ourselves being right in the middle of the West Charlotte feeder group. The only students that you knew of that didn't go to West Charlotte were students that probably were, like my brother, who had just recently moved in the area. And were probably seniors and made the decision they were going to stay at the school that they wanted to finish at.

PG: What did your brother think about you going to West Charlotte and being an enemy of the Second Ward?

WH: He didn't think too well of persons that went to West Charlotte. Naturally, he had a different like for his sisters or his siblings. But, even to this day Second ward is closed and West Charlotte is open. And he's had three children to graduate from West Charlotte and he still has not really accepted the fact that. "My children went there so I should really be a strong supporter." He had five children in school there. He was in the PTSA and that sort of thing. But he has never said, "Okay. I'm a Lion now." There's always been a rift, that I'm aware of, between Second Ward and West Charlotte. That just sort of mirrored or echoed itself in our family.

PG: Did you parents get very involved in school when you were--?

WH: Oh, yeah. My parents were involved in the school ever since I was in elementary school. My mother and my father, both of them, rarely missed a PTSA meeting. Even though they didn't have the opportunity to volunteer much as far as going on field trips and that sort of thing. But they were real, real involved in the PTSA and the fund raising and that sort of thing. My mother, even though she worked after hours in the fifth grade, she still was involved, baking cookies for special events--. Both of them

really showed us that parental involvement in school is absolutely a necessity. And even to this day, I've been real heavily involved in the schools that my children attended. Schools, specifically, West Charlotte since I've graduated and had children to graduate from there. And, I know, and I encourage persons who have children either in public or private school, "You need to make yourself available for your children, first of all, and then for other children secondly." If you want to be limited in that way.

PG: Did most children's parents get involved in the school or was there just a particular group that had the time?

WH: To be honest, I think that most parents did not get themselves involved in school. I really don't. I really don't think so. I can remember us going to PTSA meetings or student/teacher nights when we went through schedules and that sort of thing and not seeing a whole lot of parents there. On the other hand, I can remember seeing parents come up to school on days that their children had maybe been in some kind of mischief. I can't think of one time that my parents had to come to school for me. I had a sister that sometimes got in mischief. But, in general, parents around us did not participate in school that much. They really did not.

PG: Why do you think that was?

WH: I think they probably didn't know the importance of it, first thing. And, secondly, I think most of them, not being educated themselves, probably were either embarrassed or felt intimidated being around persons who were educators. In that day, a school teacher was a person who was held in very high esteem and you really didn't want to "challenge" them, so to speak. And, I think in some regards, they felt that, "Well, in

school the teacher took care of it." Many of them just didn't get involved for whatever reason.

PG: It sounds like what you're saying is that they wanted to make sure the children behaved; that that was something that was important to them, but then other things--. They would go if it was some kind of--.

WH: Event or whatever or some kind of problem in the school that may have required the parent to maybe get them back in class or talk with a disciplinarian about some concerns that were afoot. But, in general, I really can't remember parents going to schools in droves.

PG: When you were at the school, what kinds of things did you get involved in?

WH: When I was--. The first thing that I really wanted to be involved in was athletics, at that time that was like the doorway through for popularity, for recognition. So, I really wanted to be an athlete. But, I found that I really wasn't an athlete that could be competitive on the level that other kids were on. I did play sports. I played football when I was a junior and senior in high school. But I really was never a star or a starter kind of person. So, I was involved in athletics to a degree. I was involved in the photography club. I was involved in the chorus, boys' glee club. They combined the squire. I was involved in the Red Cross and the Civitan club.

PG: Sounds like there was a lot to do at the school.

WH: Yeah. I think those are the things that I was involved in.

PG: Did most of the students have a lot of activities like that? Was it kind of--?

WH: I think, in general, kids had a smorgasbord of things that they could be involved in. But, I think, they may have been involved in one or two things. Our parents

really encouraged us to be involved in things. In addition to school we were very active in our local church. So, those things sort of enveloped themselves together. It was expected, for our family at least, that you get involved in some things. But, I think, in general, kids probably maybe got involved in maybe one or two things. If you saw a kid that was involved in more than three things it was probably more the exception than the rule.

PG: Were there connections at all between your church and school? Were there cooperations--?

WH: Not between my church. I was attending and a member at the time of St. Paul's Baptist Church which was in the Brooklyn community. And, they had more of an alignment with Second Ward. So, consequently, there wasn't that much alignment between my church and West Charlotte. But, West Charlotte had some alignment with other churches in the neighborhood, especially when I was in school, that I thought were very meaningful and fostered the cause of both of them, religious and educational, too.

PG: What were some of those alignments?

WH: University Park Baptist Church, Greenville AME Zion Church, Brandon Presbyterian Church, Gethsemene AME Zion Church, Second Calvary Baptist Church--. I'm trying to think because the neighborhood's changed a whole lot. That's all I can think of right now.

PG: What was the nature of the connection? What sorts of things--?

WH: I think the connection was support from the stand point of having children who are participating in various activities, whether it be in drama or the chorus, singing or participating in the local churches. The close kindred that I'm most aware of is

probably that with University Park. Whereas, West Charlotte used a portion of their facility from time to time for assembly programs and for extensional programs when we had conventions. When we were hosting conventions or drama or any kind of event such as that University Park let itself be made available so the school could utilize its facility.

PG: Did you have a lot of these conventions where kids came from outside of West Charlotte?

WH: I think that we had more than the normal. I can't remember a year that I was at West Charlotte when we did not host some kind of state convention, basketball tournament, a choral competition, band competition, cosmetology competition--. I can't think of a year that we did not host something. So, somebody was always coming. I think it was in part for two reasons. Number one, administrators of the school were well known for organizing these kinds of events, carried them out very well. And then the school itself had a good planned facility. It was very spacious and that attracted a lot of people. A lot of buses could come. I forgot about the track and field events that they had. I can't think of a year from my tenth grade to my twelfth grade year that we didn't host events that involved other students throughout the whole state. And then some other social groups also used the facility for conventions. During that time there were not a lot of facilities that blacks could use especially in the public sector. So, what happened was most of the time when a school would host that school would also be responsible for putting up students. A lot of the students at West Charlotte had pretty decent houses and they could invite students to stay the night with them and that sort of thing. That was also a part of why, I think, they hosted a lot of statewide conventions.

PG: It must have been nice to meet kids from all over the state.

WH: It was. Many of the kids that we met probably were on the same kind of track that we were on. Most of them were involved in some activities. And eventually, later, some of the kids, I know specifically I met at least one or two persons when I went away to college who had come to West Charlotte for some kind of event. We were parallel in some regards. It was always nice meeting other people from other locales in the state and seeing how they were doing. And either bragging or challenging one another about what the best school is or was. And saying what our school had to offer versus others. And who had been successful from our school and who had been successful from yours. That was a good forum for a good dialogue.

PG: ( ) You talked about doing the bragging with sports but it can also be said about other things as well.

WH: I think those other areas don't get the attention that others, the sports, would get just because sports just draw a larger crowd. The arts and academics don't seem--. They're not as glamorous. But, those opportunities for co-mingling students just--. It was very, very helpful.

PG: At the point when you were going to Northwest and West Charlotte was then--. That was your earlier experience with intended integration. After that, was that not something you and your parents thought about at all for the rest of your school career?

WH: No. It was something that we didn't think about anymore. In fact, we sort of--. After the initial students went to West Charlotte, the integration thing sort of slid itself back. I think it sort of slid itself back. There were still issues going. Along where there were other students who went to Myers Park and some of the other schools around.



But, I don't think it was the big issue as it was in 1957, '58 when the Supreme Court ruled that integration would be the order of the day. So, it sort of slid itself back and then there began to be a lot of other challenges that caused it to be back on the back burner. For me, that really was my, an option that my family or myself was considering from that standpoint from that point on.

PG: Did the students talk among themselves at all about integration or anything like that? Or was that simply not an issue--.

WH: Yes, we did talk about it. Our dialogue was basically centered around the fact that we were just as good as any other students at Charlotte-Mecklenberg if we were given the opportunity to compete. There was always an itching that we wanted the opportunity to meet our counterparts, whether it be in academics or sports, or whatever, head to head, to sort of see who was best. I guess that was the only way that we thought we could get some parity. You had to have a competitive, an event that would generate an outcome as to who is the best now. So, there was a lot of talk about, "Boy, I sure would like to see us sing at a competition that involved them. I sure would like to see them debate with us. I sure would like to see them compete with us athletically." That was basically the dialogue we picked up. We just wanted the opportunity to show that we were as good as we knew we were.

PG: Did that opportunity ever come around at all, or the possibility of that, when you were in school?

WH: No, not during the time that I was in school. No, it didn't. I think the first time that I can remember of a sanctioned athletic event was after I was in college. I think my sister was in high school at the time and West Charlotte played Myers Park. That was

one of the first sanctioned competitive events that we had. And that event, I think it took place at Myers Park.

PG: Was that a basketball game?

WH: It was a basketball game.

PG: I spoke to Charles McCullough for that end of the project and I believe he mentioned it was quite a sensation.

WH: Right. It was. I think everybody was anticipating seeing this first time that people would go, the athletes would go head to head. But, in other venues, no we really didn't. We really didn't have the opportunity to compete in other avenues. So, consequently, we never really got to know really how well we were. Or how good we really thought we were. We never really got that opportunity. That's just the sign of what the time was all about during that time. I think it was on both halves. Some people not wanting it to happen and whatever.

PG: What did you think when ( ) started happening in Charlotte? And then sort of later on being in the '60s--. You were back living here?

WH: I was back living here. I was really glad to see it happen. I was really hurt to see all of the daily riots that were happening in the school. That was really hurtful from two standpoints because I thought that the opportunity was there for us to really embrace one another. But, I was so hurt that people were not willing to step up to the plate even though the city officials, board of education said, "This is a Supreme Court order of the day." But that activity sort of showed that there was a silent rejection of what was going on. And that was being played out in the minds and eyes of the children who were in school at that day. Regardless as to what the Supreme Court says, "We

don't want to be here and we're going to show that things are not going to work." That was really hurtful to me.

PG: Were you connected with West Charlotte at that time? Were you going to the games and--?

WH: Yes. I was still going to the games and during that period of time the participation dropped off. I think that there was a general fear in the community that, "We don't want to be in an environment that's going to put the races together in masses and may cause something", so attendance was not really well. Then, the competition level wasn't that great because there was a lot of shuffling in schools. You went through a period--. Are you familiar with the debate that's going on about recruiting now in high schools? Well, that happened back then, big time. Some of the star athletes were born to the integrated schools--. What that causes is the athletic level in a lot of the black schools to be lower. So, I guess it's in the media now, but it's something that's been occurring for a long, long time. It also is a mirror of what our society calls for on the college level, in the pros. If you've got the wherewithall on a college level to recruit the best player you're going to get it. If you've got the wherewithall on the professional level to get the best player, you're going to get it. I think it just, sort of, mirrored itself all the way through.

PG: I've heard other people say that surprisingly it was the best athletes who got accepted to go to the white schools in the early--. That that was--.

WH: That's true. That's exactly right. It was the black, the better black athletes who went to those schools. I think that that was not only just in Charlotte. I think it went right over the nation. I'm really surprised about that.

PG: Then did the situation change? There was a period of real turmoil.

WH: And then, I think, in the later '70s things began to start mellowing out. There was an initiative throughout the whole community that, "We want to make this situation work." In talking with children of affluent parents, at the time, their parents really made a sacrifice. They said, "Look. If I'm going to be a leader in Charlotte/Mecklenburg, I'm going to lead not only in the white community but I'm going to lead on social issues. And they derived in a way mechanisms by which their children would be bussed just like any other kid and they were going to be going to those schools. And, I think that's when it began to turn the corner. Because it showed whether you were at the top or the bottom, everybody was going to be affected by integration. I think the mood began to change even though there was some other resistance in other quarters of the community. I think, at that point, we began to turn the corner.

PG: And, it seemed like--. I mean, West Charlotte became a symbol of that.

WH: It did. It really did. I think it had--. There are two ingredients. Number one, West Charlotte was known to have a superb staff. Unfortunately, just as we began to integrate many of those persons in that superb staff were also shifted to other schools which caused for a revamping of the staff at West Charlotte. I missed my thought.

PG: You were talking about revamping the staff of the schools.

WH: Right. So, we went through this period where a lot of the veteran staff was gone and now you're dealing with a nucleus that you're trying to blend together along with parents who really, really want it to work. West Charlotte was sort of made to be the model from the administrative standpoint to say, "Oh, yes, it can work." The resources began to be placed at West Charlotte to make it work. To make it attractive to

students from whatever economic rim they came from to say that, "I can send my child to this school and get a quality education just as well as I would sending them to Myers Park or some other high school." As a result of that then other resources came in. Not only do we want our children to compete academically, we want to bring back the athletic competition level that was in days of old. So booster clubs and the band and all these other activities began to get a new shot of energy. Specifically, new uniforms, new instruments and whatever to say, "What you were in the past we're going to recreate that." The pride in the school started coming back at that point.

PG: Did you take any part in these activities during this time? Were you part of it?

WH: Well, no, I wasn't, because that was in the early '70s. I was newly married. I didn't really have any children. Well, I didn't have any children in West Charlotte or my youngest child at that time was probably maybe two, well two years old. So, I really wasn't dealing on a high school level much at that point. And, I was young and married. I was less than twenty-nine. There's not many twenty-nine year olds that you know of who are going to go back to a high school and say they're going to be involved or really be accepted to be a person who can really contribute. So, I didn't, not until my kids got to be old.

PG: So, you sort of observed this from a distance?

WH: I sort of observed this from a distance and had a keen interest because that was the school that I had attended.

PG: What did you feel about it at the time when all of these things were going on? What were your emotions or your thoughts related to West Charlotte and to--?

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WH: As we began to turn the corner in the progress business--. I really did begin to get a wellspring of pride at seeing what was going on. Because I knew that the nucleus was there to turn it back to where it was. Viewed from the black community seeing it inching itself back to a point that now is being accepted in the community in general. That was really a good feeling.

PG: Were you ( ) the alumni association formed in the early '80s. Were you part of that?

WH: I wasn't in the formation of the alumni association, but I watched it at a distance. I tell you how I really got involved with the alumni association. Reflecting just a little bit. My parents had encouraged us to be involved in our school. My wife and I--. All in middle school my wife was really heavily involved. In junior high she and I both were involved in the parent teacher association, and other activities, mentoring and that sort of thing. And, when I went to West Charlotte--. West Charlotte has a reputation of trying to seek people who have been active. And when my daughter was in the ninth grade, the summer before she went to West Charlotte--. I can't recall who it was, but somebody called me and said, "You've got a reputation of being involved in school and we want to know whether or not you'd be interested in working with the PTSA at West Charlotte?" And, I said, "Well, that sounds pretty good." And, I started working with the PTSA when my daughter was in the tenth grade. When she was in the eleventh grade I was nominated to be vice-president of the PTSA. I had a project, we had a project that we wanted to raise that year \$15,000 for the PTSA and I took that on. And, I said, "Where can I get this money from?" I just sort of threw out all kind of opportunities and



one of them was the alumni association. I went to the alumni association and asked them to get involved with our telethon. Not only did they get involved with our telethon by calling parents, calling other alumni to get them to contribute money to the school, but they contributed a sizeable amount of money to the school, or to the PTSA. And, I said, "Wow. These people are really committed." So, I started attending the meetings and I got involved. I saw how committed people were who didn't even have children or grandchildren at the school, but who were committed in ensuring that West Charlotte would have as many opportunities available for its students as it possibly could. And, if the parents couldn't provide those opportunities the PTSA would say, "We'll see what we can provide." And, I thought that was just admirable. I said, "Wow. I want to be involved with these folks." And I got involved with the alumni association that way. And stayed involved until today. I mean, I'm still involved. But, because of the alumni association I still have an involvement with the school. In fact, I got a message yesterday from a person who wants us to look at another issue that's appearing. That's how I trekked and got reconnected. I like the goals and objectives of the alumni association because I feel that they're very noble and I hope to continue to be involved for some time to come. I think that the cause there--. It means a whole lot. I was past president of the association and we had some concerns about four years ago. No, it's been longer than that. (My kids are older now.) It was during the time that my middle child was at West Charlotte. We had some concerns about the chemistry building. The PTSA and the alumni association lobbied the board of education and we got a new building up there. They found money that had been appropriated in previous bond issues. And, I said, "Wow, all you've got to do is get involved and there may be some avenues that can be

opened up." I thought that was real neat. My daughter had graduated from West Charlotte then and my son-- Well, she was really a science kind of person and I can remember her saying, "Dad. We just don't have what we need." I remember her chemistry teacher teaching chemistry off a rolling cart. And, I said, "If we don't have a need for a chemistry laboratory I don't know what we got a need for." So, we got involved. And, she never could take higher levels of chemistry because they didn't have the facilities to teach it.

PG: It seems that, to keep the school ongoing, it really does require this kind of ongoing--.

WH: It does. It really does. That "undergirdiness" of the community and interested persons in general, the parent/teacher association, the teacher lobbying, the students identifying concerns and addressing them. But, in general, everyone working for the good of the whole is the ideal situation that you can have to push a school to excellence and to maintain it there also. Obviously, you're going to have some concerns along the way. But I think, in general, in general, if you have all of those elements working, if it falls through the net in one form it will be caught in another and eventually those concerns will be addressed. And the students will be the better off because of all of the involvement.

PG: I don't want to take up too much time but I've got a couple more questions. You say your children went to West Charlotte? How is the school different to them, their experience, than from your experience back when you were attending?

WH: I think their experience as far as a pride in the school was the same as mine. They really, really enjoyed it from that standpoint and still brag about the school even

today. In contrast, the education opportunities were quite different, those that were available to me and those that were available to my kids. Example: In high school, I took algebra I, algebra II. And the highest math that was offered, and that was only to a very select group, was trig. Now, the math levels are much higher than that. All of my children took trig. Two of them took calculus I and II. So, that's the difference. When you talk about the foreign languages. You may be able to get to French III. And French III, I think, does not include--. Or a foreign language III--. Because, all three of my kids, my son and my oldest daughter, took Spanish. My youngest daughters took Latin. Anyway, I think that the foreign language IV, when you move into that level, it's all--. The conversation in that class is all in that foreign language. There is no other language that's available. If you use English while you're in that class, you are subject to a failing grade unless it's an excusable dialogue. Whereas, when I was--. You, basically, the only thing you got into maybe was French III or a foreign language III. And that maybe included writing. That was a big difference. That's a big--. I think the levels of course offerings and the preparation that one may receive to go on in higher education are much greater now than when I was in school. Even though, we felt that we were just as prepared as our counterparts who were in white schools. But, in retrospect now, I understand that we probably were not as prepared. Because those higher levels were offered to them then and they weren't available to us. I think the educational opportunities are much better now at the school than it was when I was coming up. I think that the pride in the school is still the same.

PG: What about in terms of the size of the school? Because, you talked about when you knew all of your neighbors who went and it was a much smaller school at that

point. And then it got bigger and I took in, I guess, kids from lots of parts of the city.

Did that make your case experience different?

WH: First, when I went to West Charlotte, I thought it was the hugest place in the world, because at that time it had about--. It had at least eight buildings. I said, "Golly, eight buildings?" And, I'm coming from Northwest and Northwest had three buildings, the main building and then an annex and then the gym. But, eight buildings, it was like going to a college campus. And then, I began to hear the school ground being referred to as a campus. So, that was new to me. I think it enhanced my kids because what I considered big, the school was much bigger when my kids were through. And then when they went away to college I think they were really ready for the campus atmosphere. Then you had many buildings and the buildings were divided in disciplines such as the way they are on college campuses. You could begin to see the parallel. I think that kind of experience enhanced then and prepared them more physically for what to expect on a college campus.

PG: In terms of [subject coughs]. At the same time, of course, the school was also integrated when they went.

WH: Yes.

PG: And, they had contact with black students in a way [subject coughs]. And, I guess, some students from some other ethnic groups and backgrounds in parts of the city and what not. Was that difficult for them?

WH: I don't think so for my kids. For that era that children went through that trek. Because, I think my daughter, my oldest child, was in the second class that began a fully integrated school. So, she didn't really--. It wasn't really a difference to her. It's

what she saw at elementary school and what she saw when she went to kindergarten. That's what she saw in kindergarten and what she saw when she was a twelfth grade student. Nothing really had changed. Whereas, in contrast, it would have been a real change for me because I had had a segregated experience. And for me to go to now an integrated experience where I may have been purely in the minority it would probably have been a tremendous challenge for me. But, as far as they were concerned it wasn't any difference. Plus the fact that all of them had multi-racial friends. And then they were involved in other activities where they co-mingled all the time. It really wasn't a big difference to them.

PG: Were they involved in activities that were multiracial outside of the school as well? Would they go to other parts of the city or was it mostly at the school?

WH: I think mostly for my kids it was mostly at the school. Even though, both of my kids were involved in Boy Scouting, Boy Scouting and Girl Scouting. They were also involved in children's theatre. They were involved in classes at Discovery Place and the Nature Museum which were culturally mixed. But, I think, in general, their involvement interracially was basically at school.

PG: You had said you thought many people in Charlotte saw having integrated schools as being very important in bringing people together. Do you think that that's fulfilled that promise or the hopes or [Telephone rings. Recorder is turned off and then back on.]

WH: Your question again?

PG: Oh, I was saying--. Asking the question, if you think integrated schools in Charlotte fulfilled the hopes that people had and the expectations?

WH: I think there was a false sense of hope and achievement that integration could bring. I think that it served as a good vehicle and the best vehicle for bringing the races together. So, I think it really served that purpose. But, a segregated mentality is so engrained in our society, the American society and the world in general, that I don't think that we're ever going to be fully integrated and maybe we shouldn't. I think the respect of another's beliefs, another's culture background and the acceptance of people, in general, may be more important than integration. Obviously, we are going to have a multi-cultural society somewhere in the future. But, if you look at history there are cultures of people that have never integrated themselves. Cultures of people who share the same skin color who never integrated. Persons who share the same kind of religious beliefs who have never been integrated. So, I think "full" integration, I don't think that's ever going to occur. I think that the most important thing is that we respect another's culture, belief, and them, in general, as an individual, respecting the difference from us is way more important.

PG: Is this something that you've always thought or is this a thought that you've come to over the years?

WH: It's a thought that I've come to. I know that I was a part of this belief that if we could all integrate that there was just going to be a natural exchange of knowledge and resources and that sort of thing. But, our society is very witty. And, as new demands come upon us for changing we find new ways to entrench ourselves in the old. So, my hopes--. I evolved to that point. I know that I was caught up in thinking, "All we got to do is integrate and everything will be equal." It's not so. And, I don't think it will be so.



PG: Is there any sort of one big thing that happened that you observed that helped you change or has it been just a gradual sort of observing of many things?

WH: I think the thing that heightened me to it--. My oldest child was a part of the academically gifted program in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school, and I saw her being alienated out of some opportunities. Even though there are some rules that say that there's going to be equal access to all. Individuals have a way that they can eliminate you if they want to. And it can't be blamed upon "racialness" or whatever. And, I know that she competed academically just as well as others, but I know that there were some opportunities that weren't made available to her. I'm not bitter about that, but that's; those kinds of events are what made me understand that we were not going to ever have full integration, full diversity. We're not going to ever have that fullness because there are going to be some people who are going to cleave to the past. And they are going to do everything in their power and they're going to use as much wit as they can to keep it from occurring. And what that's going to do is delay it. And then you're always going to have someone else who is going to pick up the banner and is going to run with it. So, that's what sort of changed my mind.

PG: Did you have travel opportunities, scholarship opportunities or classes?

WH: Yeah. I think that, in general, my son was not strong in academics, but my daughters, oldest to youngest, were. And there were a lot of opportunities that they were involved with, but those activities they never were dismissed from anything like that. What I saw was attitudes in individuals. That's what I saw and that's where I saw the institutionalism being heavily entrenched. And that's what made me know, "There's going to be some people that's going to hold on." And, then there's going to be some

people on both races that are going to hold on. My statement is not made one-sidedly. I began to understand that there are going to be people who just don't want to change. They just want it the way it used to be and they hold onto it. And, then another thing, too. I didn't begin to really understand the desires of individuals to have their children go to private, church related schools, or schools that dealt, basically, with a given culture, and I began to understand that. In some regards I think that the reason for it is in error. But, by the same token within our society, I think we have a right to educate our children in the way that we feel is best. Now saying that, when my children went away to college, all three of them have gone to all black colleges. And why did I make that choice? All three of them could have gone to some of the greater universities if they wanted to. But I made that choice because of this. I felt that in the environment and in the culture in which you are in you increase and heighten your learning opportunity when you don't have to deal with other peripheral items such as racism. That's what I began to understand some parents chose to send their kids to private schools or Jewish schools or religious schools or whatever. Some of it has a racism basis, but our society demands that we have a right to educate our children the way we see fit if we can afford it. I chose for them to go to-- Well, I didn't chose. All of them had the opportunity and visited colleges. But, I know that the basis of a lot of their decisions was based upon what their parents wanted them to do. I accept the responsibility for that.

PG: That must have been hard for that to happen to your children at your school, at West Charlotte.

WH: Hard for me to accept that?

PG: Yes, well, maybe not.

WH: No, it wasn't. Because, I knew--. When you've been a victim of racism. When you have been discriminated against subtly and you don't have any recourse, you begin to expect this as a standard. And, if you're a wise parent, you prepare your children to deal with that. Not taking away from them their ambition, but helping them to understand that there are some persons who are dealing with things that may negatively affect you. And, you're going to have to develop within yourself the where with all to overshadow their desires to pull you back. So, that was a part of my indoctrination in them. So, it didn't surprise me.

PG: How did you reconcile these things happening with your support for West Charlotte?

WH: You learn to take the bitter with the sweet. You know that in a situation there's going to be some winners and there's going to be some losers. But you look at the situation, "Is it for the greater good? Is the support that we're trying to get for the greater good?" That's the summation of what I found. Even though, at some point, I may have realized that my child was not treated fairly in this particular situation, I have to draw back from it and say, "What's the greater good? Me taking it personal and saying, 'Because my child didn't get xyz, I'm not going to do xyz?' Or am I going to be an example to them and say, "In spite of you not being given this opportunity we still are going to support. And, I guarantee you, in the end, we'll all be better off." So, that's the attitude I had to take and that's the attitude I still have today.

PG: I wish more people would have that attitude. That's unique. What's your hope for West Charlotte in the future?

WH: I really want to see the balance of the student population more reflective of the general society. I think one of the--. What I'm saying is that I think West Charlotte is too black now and that's going to hurt in the long run. I would like to see the lines for populating that school rejoined so that it can be more inclusive and can be more multi-cultured. I don't want West Charlotte to be a black school. I know that if it's going to survive it can't be a black school. And, I mean from the standpoint that the student body is a majority black and increasing. If you don't have buy-in from all over the community, in general, people sooner or later are going to say, "You know." And, this is based on historical deep-seated hidden beliefs that it was all black and it's not going to be too good. And I think that we have to play that out. That's not to say that something all black isn't good. But when you deal with those kinds of attitudes and those kinds of beliefs my hope is really that we dismiss that. We dismiss the racial--. That we make it more culturally diverse. So, I really would like to see the numbers change. And, I think that will enhance. That's what my initial hope, numerically, is. But, from an institutional standpoint, ten to fifty years out I want kids to continue to be standing in line to go to West Charlotte because they know it's the best. Not best because it's got the best athletics. It's the best offering. And, that's the feeling that I had. I'm sorry. I had that feeling when my kids were in high school. I just felt that we had the best. When you consider the fact that out of a graduating class you may have students who may gather in excess of \$11,000,000 worth of scholarships in a year and nobody in the school system is competing with that. When you consider that fact that you see a line of athletes who have gone through West Charlotte and are now in the professional ranks. When you consider the fact that you had musicians who are now making the occupation who have come

through West Charlotte. My hope is that ten to fifteen years out from there that people will still have--. I knew it was the best then and I know it is the best now. Why? Because they've got the track record and because, more than anything else, I feel a part. I really feel a part of that situation. It's a medal on one's chest when you look in Sunday's paper and you see how many graduating classes are having reunions. What is that saying? Kids and students that went there want to have the opportunity to get together again. They had a positive experience. You watch the paper if you get a chance. When they list the reunions see how many are classes who graduated from West Charlotte compared to other schools. Have you had the opportunity to look at that? Take a look at that. I don't know what the numbers are. I'm close to it because I'm part of the alumni association and I hear, "The class of this is having a reunion. The class of this--." I hear it all the time. It may be that we have a structure by which we get that information. But, I'm also seeing it played out in the daily news and announcements going out. And, when you have people who have been out of school ten, fifteen, twenty, and in some regards, fifty or fifty-five years, and they say, "Hey, I still want to get together with folks who went to high school with me." That's saying we really enjoyed our experiences there. And I want that same kind of activity to carry on in the future. And you won't look at the class and say, "Was John Jones a black or was he white?" You'll forget what he was because you had such a good time with your schoolmates that race really wasn't an issue. That's sort of my hope. That may sound like a utopian dream but that's something that I hope personally.

PG: It's important to have those dreams. Let me ask you just one more question. And, this has just been wonderful. I just appreciate it so much. Another thing that seems

to me to be important about West Charlotte is that, here Charlotte is a city where history often doesn't seem to matter; things get torn down. And, I think, West Charlotte, I believe, is the oldest standing high school that we've got in Charlotte or it's close to being. It's still in the same neighborhood where it was. A lot of schools aren't like that. What do you think the significance of having an institution that's been there?

WH: It's important, very important to parallel in our mindset. I also understand now why some people support and further the cause of neighborhood schools. It is important to have an institution, a landmark, in your community that you can come back and say, "That's where I went to school." That's really important. In some regards, that may be one of the few things that can keep memory for persons who've attended the school. I think the stability is really important. And I think it's really crucial in preserving the history. You may have gone by a historical marker that may have had a significance at a given day, but it's hard to reach it in the past at a bronze plaque. It's difficult. But when you've got something physical that you can see your memory begins to go back in its recesses and pull things out.

Let me share with you--. Two weeks ago up at the Latta Plantation they had a presentation on African Americans at Latta Plantation. They had some persons who came down from Williamsburg, Virginia, that actually did a demonstration. It wasn't so much about Latta Plantation but it was showing how slave life was depicted. I went with my daughter who will be a junior in college. She and I went up there to see it because I'm a history buff. I like to see stuff like that. We went into the house when we got there and they were cooking in the adjacent kitchen. Have you ever been to Latta Plantation?



PG: I've seen it. I can't remember if I've been in the house or not, but I've been to the park.

WH: They have a--. I think that is one of the oldest structures in Mecklenberg county and its right adjacent--. They cooked in a separate house behind the place. And when I got there I could smell the hickory wood. I didn't know what they were cooking, but just the aroma of smelling the wood burning. And then I went in and I saw what they were cooking. I toured the plantation. They had some displays. They really began to kick into my mind, "How was it really like in slavery on the Latta Plantation in that day?" I use that analogy and that example to show how important it is to have a structure. If you have a structure you have something that you can reach back to. But if you only have a plaque it's hard to imagine what it was like. It's hard to be challenged to go back and get the history. I think the permanency in a community is real, real important. And, I think that with West Charlotte and Northwest being in their same cities over these years has contributed tremendously to the preservation of the history of the schools.

PG: Well, this has just been wonderful. I appreciate you so much taking the time. Is there anything else you'd like to say about West Charlotte, or about schooling in Charlotte or anything that we haven't covered that you think is important?

WH: I think the leadership of a school is most important. And, I think that the school board has recognized that. One of the things that has made West Charlotte strive for greatness was its first principal, Clinton L. Blake. And, I think, along the line we've had principals who've had a desire to achieve greatness in their administration of the school and not just accept mediocrity. And I think the school board, in itself, when they recognized that, and I think they recognized that at West Charlotte, they have been very

selective about who they put there. Along with stability, as far as the centers of the building, stability in the leadership is also crucial. You changing principals frequently, persons using the school as a career track, that's no good. Leadership--. They have to have a desire greater than, "I'm here for a short while and I'm out of here." They've got to have a bigger desire. So, I think, the preservation of the school is also rooted; that the preservation and the continued success of the school is also rooted in the school board's and its administration's ability to put the right person at the helm of West Charlotte and other schools to create a kind of superb environment where everyone is motivated and not threatened and brow beaten to do an excellent job.

PG: People seem to be pleased with this new principal.

WH: I think so. At this point--. Last year we went through some turmoil with the principal. And, I think Ken Simmons is an excellent principal. I just think there were some political things that occurred that lessened his stock and made him not be the best person to be at the helm at that particular time. But, I think that he's an excellent administrator. And, I think the school board, through Dr. Smith, recognized that they had to have a person of equal and superior quality of Ken Simmons like other principals. And, I think Mr. [Jerry] Cline is doing an excellent job at this point of pushing the goals and objective out there at the school and getting buyin from his staff, collaborating with the community, ensuring that the students are accountable but also involved. I think he's doing a good job.

PG: I'm hoping to talk with you some more. I would like to, if possible, involve some of the students at the school in this project to do some history gathering and that sort of thing. I've contacted him briefly. I've been waiting until school got done which I

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW