WHEN RACES COLLIDE: WILLIE STEWART AND THE VOLUNTARY
DESEGREGATION OF TACOMA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

An Oral History

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by

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On the heels of the Brown v. Board of Education decision and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Tacoma School District took voluntary measures to desegregate a select number of schools with high non-white enrollment. The district superintendent, Dr. Angelo Giaudrone, drew attention to the de facto segregation, and primarily focused on two elementary schools: Stanley Elementary, with a black population of 64 percent and McCarver Elementary, with a black population of 84 percent. In 1963, a subcommittee was formed to analyze and study the de facto segregation and provide recommendations for potential solutions. On July 8, 1966, a plan was announced by the school board for an optional enrollment program that relied on closing McCarver Junior High and to provide limited open enrollment to students affected by the closing. The district hired its first black principal, Willie Stewart, in 1970 in order to bridge the divide between the school district and the black community. Stewart led the summer counseling program to work with families on the transition between the closing of their neighborhood school and their new school of their choice. According to the United States Commission on Civil Rights a decade later, the summer counseling program was pivotal to the success of the voluntary desegregation program in the Tacoma School District.
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WHEN RACES COLLIDE: WILLIE STEWART AND THE VOLUNTARY 
DESEGREGATION OF TACOMA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

One of eleven children, Willie Stewart was born December 25, 1935 in Columbus, Texas into a sharecropping family. “We were sharecroppers. During my time with family, we were in a situation where the farmer kept three-fourths of his products and then they gave one-fourth to the owner in exchange for being on the property.”¹ Stewart spent his formative years in Columbus, farming and attending school with an all-black population of students and teachers. “The only white contact [was] when I would ride the bus, because blacks were not allowed to drive the bus. It had to be a white bus driver. So, all of my teachers were black, all of my school mates were black, [and] all of the schools we were in competition [with] were all black. There was no association [with whites].”² Growing up in a segregated school system Stewart recognized that black professionals “could pretty much only do [four] things: teach, preach, or run a tavern or a funeral home.”³ His schools were given out-of-date curricula, passed down from white schools, so in college he needed to take a higher number of introductory classes in order to match the higher levels of education that blacks in big cities, like Houston, Dallas, and Galveston, received.

After high school, Stewart was continued his education with the aid and support of his older sister and her husband who lived in Houston, Texas. After receiving a grant from a local group of women in Columbus, Stewart moved in with his sister and brother-in-law to attend Texas Southern University, a historically black college, where he obtained his bachelor’s degree in

¹ Willie Stewart, interview by Katherine L. Jennison, Tacoma, WA, May 4, 2017, transcript, Tacoma Community History Project Collection, University of Washington Tacoma Library, Tacoma, WA.
² Ibid.
³ Ibid.
teaching. The time he spent at Texas Southern University and his experience with his professors and support staff foreshadowed his own philosophy of education when he started teaching.

“…[A]ll of your professors monitored your schedules [and] made sure you succeeded. If you had a problem, you could come to the office anytime for assistance. So, it was a rich experience.” After he graduated college, Stewart taught grades 9-12 for one year in Yoakum, Texas, where he met his wife, Fay, for the first time. “[S]he was in college at Prairie View. I roomed at a home that was three doors from where she lived… We had dated a couple of times.”

On August 5, 1958, the army drafted Stewart after being refused a waiver due to his residence in Colorado County, Texas: a smaller county. “[M]any of the guys who were in school with me were not drafted because they were able to get a waiver because that draft pool was in the larger cities.” The army granted a seven-month delay for his training in order to finish the school year. “I was processed in Arkansas at Fort Chaffee. That’s where the induction station was and everyone from that whole army division was placed there. Then, out of that they determined where you would go for your training. Some went to Kansas, some to Arkansas, some to Texas, and they sent me to Fort Lewis, Washington.” When Stewart arrived in Tacoma he recognized that this was the first time in his life that he had “any association with a person that [didn’t] look like me.”

In May of 1960, Stewart was hired by Tacoma School District and assigned to Gault Junior High to teach life science and physical science. “Gault scared the hell out of me. All the white folks, and I recognized that this is the way the world is.” Stewart credits the warm reception he received from the personnel department as well as the support and love from both the faculty and

4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
students at Gault as being the reason that his first year transition was smooth. He recounted his first year experience:

There would be many black students who would just come to my door and peek just to make sure. A couple of them even wanted to touch my hands to make sure I was real. It was a culture shock for the black students as much as it was a culture shock for me to be in that environment…. Many of the white students had never seen a black teacher. So, I developed strong relationships.9

Stewart taught at Gault until 1966, when he was promoted to assistant principal. He stayed at Gault for three years until he was hired at Lincoln High School as assistant principal. A year later (1970), he became that first black principal in the Tacoma School District.10 Stewart reflected on the first time he heard the news:

So, I came down to [the Central Administration Building] and the mailbox was on the first floor. Angelo Giaudrone, who was superintendent, and his assistant [Joe] were walking the halls and they stopped me and said “Willie, what do you think of the new principal at Lincoln High School?” I said, oh I have a new boss? The superintendent looked at Joe [and said], “Didn’t you call him? Well, you’re the new principal!” It shook me. That’s when I really became nervous. I’m thirty-four/thirty-five and there’s only two or three members on the staff younger than that. I had to calm down, call my family, and then I went to the school. I said [to Maxine, the office manager] I want the records of all the staff. So, I concentrated on memorizing all the teachers there and tried to get a little something about them – name of their spouse or kids. That’s what I did the summer of 1970.11

At the same time Stewart became a building administrator at both Gault and Lincoln, the school board for the Tacoma School District began implementing their voluntary desegregation plan at McCarver Junior High and McCarver Elementary School. A part of their desegregation transition included hiring Stewart as principal at Lincoln. “[The school district] wanted to show that their

9 Ibid. Stewart also told a story about his first “back-to-school” night, “I had an overflow crowd in my room every period. At the end of the session, this white couple sat outside of the door and they said we’d like to come in and visit with you. [They said,] I just want you to know, our daughter was very emphatic that if they didn’t go to all of the classes they had to come to your class. They said you have to go to Mr. Stewart. And he said, ‘what shocks me about this, I’m so thrilled, I’m thrilled for my daughter, but she never told me you were black. We just saw it the first time we saw you.’ That same girl, we won the sweepstakes….in the science fair.”
11 Willie Stewart, interview by Katherine L. Jennison, Tacoma, WA, May 12, 2017, transcript, Tacoma Community History Project Collection, University of Washington Tacoma Library, Tacoma, WA.
commitment was to have upward mobility among African Americans and I was chosen to be a principal in 1970 because they felt I was a person that could blend the black and the white community.\footnote{Ibid.} In the 1960s, the city of Tacoma was battling racial tensions, and most predominant in the form of housing discrimination. Stewart recalled times when the Tacoma police chief came to him as early as 1969, during his first year as principal at Lincoln:

One pivotal moment was in [1969] when they had the riots in the Hilltop area [and] buildings were burned. There was a strained relationship between the police community and the African American community. At that time as an educator and administrator at Gault Junior High, the police chief asked me to be a liaison between the police department and the black community by introducing them to key people so they can have conversations about [reducing] anxiety to reduce conflict.

In 1967, the Tacoma School Board heard a proposal for an open-enrollment plan directed at aiding housing discrimination by assisting non-white students to attend any school, in the Tacoma district, of their choosing.\footnote{Jim Metcalf, “5-Point Open School Enrollment Proposed,” \textit{Tacoma News Tribune}, March 24, 1967.}

On the heels of the \textit{Brown v. Board of Education}\footnote{Brown et al. v. Board of Education of Topeka et al, 347 U.S. 483 (1954). Chief Justice Warren wrote in his opinion of the Court, “Does segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race, even though the physical facilities and other “tangible” factors may be equal, deprive the children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities? We believe that it does.”} decision and the \textit{Civil Rights Act of 1964}\footnote{Civil Rights Act of 1964, Public Law 88-352, 78 Stat. 241 (1964). Title IV of the act is title, “Desegregation of Public Education” and authorized the Commissioner of Education to “conduct a survey and make a report to the President and the Congress, within two years of the enactment of this title, concerning the lack of availability of equal educational opportunities for individuals by reason of race, color, religion, or national origin in public educational institutions at all levels in the United States, its territories and possessions, and the District of Columbia.”}, the Tacoma School District took voluntary measures to desegregate a select number of schools with high non-white enrollment. According to a staff report by the United States Commission on Civil Rights, rhetoric surrounding the city’s communication and practice on race discrimination in employment, housing, and income included discussions on how it was affecting...
the quality of education for all students. The district superintendent, Dr. Angelo Giaudrone, drew attention to the de facto segregation, and primarily focused on two elementary schools: Stanley Elementary, with a black population of sixty-four percent, and McCarver Elementary, with a black population of eighty-four percent. In 1963, a subcommittee created by members of the Tacoma Teachers Association and the Association of School Administrators was formed to analyze and study the de facto segregation and provide recommendations for potential remedies; however, the subcommittee was cited as producing poor results in the first year. After pressure from the local National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the subcommittee reevaluated its recommendation and looked for ways to balance the distribution of the district’s resources. The subcommittee’s recommendations included, “the formation of a school board policy on equal education opportunity; educational improvement; compensatory education; multietnic curriculum; and interchange of students,” as well as the closing of two inner-city schools in order to disperse the student populations district-wide. With the support of the superintendent, the school board adopted a new policy titled “Equal Educational Opportunity” in order to solidify their commitment to addressing de facto segregation within Tacoma.

One month after the policy’s adoption, the NAACP requested a federal investigation into Tacoma School District’s potential violation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. According to the Tacoma News Tribune, a letter by James H. Patterson, education chairman of the Tacoma NAACP, submitted a letter to the New York legal division urging that an investigation take place immediately. Patterson wrote, “To date, only suggestions for aiding the disadvantaged child in

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17 Ibid, 5.
18 Ibid, 6.
his own local have been adopted. All suggestions involving any ‘mixing’ by race for special
citywide programs or for rezoning or closing of racially unbalanced schools have been ignored.”

The staff report by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights cited that no federal investigation took
place and that the district took action within one year after James Patterson and the NAACP made
their charges. Stewart affirmed that the NAACP was taking action across the nation, “That was
universal, it wasn’t just Tacoma. They did it across the country to point out that they were
emphasizing de facto segregation in the south and de facto segregation in the north from housing
patterns.”

On July 8, 1966, the school board announced a plan for an optional enrollment program
that included the following components: “(1) choice of any junior high school in the district for
those sixth grade pupils in the McCarver area; (2) choice of any high school in the district for those
ninth grade pupils in the McCarver area; and (3) encouragement for any student in the district to
attend McCarver Junior High provided such transfers reduce the degree of de facto segregation.”

During this time, only a limited open enrollment was implemented by district administrators for
students within the McCarver boundary area. During the 1967-1968 school year, a citizen’s
committee (appointed by the school board) proposed to extend the open enrollment district-wide,
but was rejected by the school board, citing concerns over the higher than anticipated enrollment.

This decision did not come without tension. The NAACP criticized the decision not to expand
open enrollment across the district as an “appeasement intended to pacify the racially isolated
(white) schools.”

In 1967, the school board decided to expand the limited open enrollment to all

20 Ibid.
22 U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 8.
23 Ibid.
students from McCarver Elementary, Stanley Elementary, Central Elementary, and Bryant Elementary schools as well as McCarver Junior High to allow them to attend any alternative school of their choice.\textsuperscript{25} Due to opposition from Frank Russell, president of the local NAACP, who called for district-wide open enrollment, the limited open enrollment only lasted until April 1968.\textsuperscript{26}

In April 1968, the school district continued to address issues surrounding de facto segregation by developing a five-point plan, which called for the closing of Central Elementary and McCarver Junior High, with a combined black population of 75 percent, and transfer of all students to district schools of their choice beginning in the 1968-1969 school year.\textsuperscript{27} “The first phase of the desegregation of schools was to close the junior high component of McCarver and take all of those seventh, eighth, and sixth graders and put them in the other ten junior highs in Tacoma.”\textsuperscript{28} Other components of the five-point plan included converting McCarver Junior High into an elementary magnet school, and student transfers for Stanley Elementary sixth graders to any district school of their choice in order to avoid overcrowding.\textsuperscript{29} According to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, the five-point plan demonstrated a “clear momentum towards full desegregation” once the 1968 school year began, and they cited the summer counseling program as “contributing the most to the successful desegregation of the public schools” through their work with families in 1,500 homes between 1966 and 1969.\textsuperscript{30} The \textit{Tacoma News Tribune} affirmed the success of the program: “Parents and students involved in the Tacoma School District’s summer effort of relocating central area students into other schools almost unanimously accepted the

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{25} Ibid.
\bibitem{26} Ibid.
\bibitem{28} Stewart, interview, May 12, 2017.
\bibitem{29} U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, p. 10.
\bibitem{30} Ibid. p. 10-11.
\end{thebibliography}
program.” The paper quoted Stewart for his role in its implementation and reception, “[A]bout 95 per cent extremely positive reactions to about 5 per cent mildly negative to extremely negative.”31

During Willie Stewart’s transition from assistant principal at Gault to principal at Lincoln, he was appointed to oversee the summer counseling program referenced by the U.S. Commission’s report. According to an article in the Tacoma News Tribune, the program specifications included, “87 staff members, $12,000 in local financing and $103,000 in state funds appropriated to the district.”32 Stewart recalled the process each summer:

The process was simply this: to get the list of the students who were going to junior high because they were removing it from McCarver. We would meet with the ten principals of the junior high schools and talk about numbers that they can receive so there can be balance of the students. Well, that was threatening to some principals, not because they didn’t want the students, but because they didn’t know how their parents would react to students. This is the same community that voted for [blacks] not to be able to buy houses in their neighborhood. Now you are going to tell them they are going to go to school in their neighborhood. So, that required some foresight in terms of working with the counselors to work through that and for the superintendent and school board to back that.33

With uncertainty on how the black students would be treated in other schools, Stewart worked with families to determine the appropriate school based on their student’s needs as well as provide reassurance for a positive learning experience. “We made it convenient for the buses to come right through the neighborhood, [so] it wasn’t inconvenient to get to school.”34 Stewart often rode the bus with students, and explained that because buses were not a part of district operations (city buses), all the drivers were white. According to Stewart, the biggest hesitancy for black families was the loss of historical lineage with their neighborhood school. “I’d have to work with the family, whose school is no longer there, and the principal by convincing them that this was the best

33 Stewart, interview, May 12, 2017.
program and most viable option for these kids based on where they lived.”\textsuperscript{35} Stewart was often a liaison between the black community and the school district. “When there was a decision to close McCarver…. I was asked to be the person to stand between the school district and the black community to accept their students being bused between their home and different schools throughout the city.”\textsuperscript{36} When asked to look back on the effectiveness of the voluntary desegregation plan, Stewart said, “I wish there were have been more African American counselors, but we used everyone we had; we just didn’t have enough. We could have used a two-year education process, rather than one year. Many teachers had never talked to a black student, so those were some of the apprehensions.”\textsuperscript{37} Stewart thought the district could also have improved their plan, by having high school regional meetings with schools and the community as well as separate meetings for the black community to help with the transition with the loss of school lineage. Stewart led the counseling program for two years before stepping down to focus on his duties as principal at Lincoln.

In 1972, according to the \textit{Tacoma News Tribune}, the schools district declared an end to de facto segregation in fifty-eight school buildings; with all buildings at or below the forty-percent threshold for black student enrollment.\textsuperscript{38} The article reported Stanley Elementary School the only remaining school with forty-five percent black population, but the overall district average was between thirty-three and thirty-eight percent. Angelo Giaudrone, superintendent during this time, commented about the resilience of the Tacoma community during the implementation of the desegregation program: “If any of us had doubts and fears about others and their potential for

\textsuperscript{35} Stewart, interview, May 12, 2017.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
human understanding, let us remind ourselves that we as a district have moved ahead, and that this community is not in turmoil (and) is not torn by dissention.”

Willie Stewart came to the city of Tacoma at a pivotal time in its community history. He broke a barrier as the first black principal in the Tacoma School District, as well as his reserve unit, “I was appointed as the first military reserve officer in a pay scale in Pierce County.” His influence was not confined to the borders of the school district where he became assistant superintendent of personnel in 1978, but also within the army unit he served in. He recalled, “We were able to use the military program for affirmative action and equity to get more persons of color into leadership roles.” Just as he pushed for affirmative action in the military, he also pushed for the same equity and opportunities for blacks in Tacoma Public Schools. When asked about why he took the role of assistant superintendent of personnel:

[So] I could hire persons of color…. I was looking for sources for the persons who could do the job. That’s why I was going to the historically black colleges and universities because they trained teachers. I went out to the officer’s club at Fort Lewis and McCord, because most of the black officers in the air force or the army had gone to all black schools. We felt that we should hire aids, teacher assistants, and we had some very talented teacher assistants so we worked with the district to get some funding to send a group over to Central Washington [University] during the summer and then they would take classes during the year to become teachers.

After Stewart retired, he ran and won a seat on the school board in 1999. He served one term (six years) before deciding to spend more time with his family and focus on other community volunteer work. His volunteer work included the Boys and Girls Club that he referred to as his “heart and soul,” as well as other organizations such as the Tacoma Athletic Commission, Shanaman Sports Museum, Tacoma chapter of the National Football League, and Urban Grace Church. Every

39 Ibid.
40 Stewart, interview, May 12, 2017.
41 Ibid.
Sunday morning, Stewart organizes a free breakfast at Urban Grace Church for anyone in the community, including many homeless men, women, and children in the downtown urban area.

The perception that the voluntary program to end de facto segregation in Tacoma succeeded was due, in part, to the resilience of the community to work through its own racial divide. But, much of its success was also owed to the school board and administrative officials, like Willie Stewart, and programs like the summer counseling program. The program’s success can also be attributed to Stewart and the district leadership in demonstrating a commitment to future student and staff success’ through humility. Giaudrone reflected on the voluntary desegregation plan and what it meant for future generations as well as what was still left to focus on, “[N]either you nor I can afford the luxury of self-congratulation. There is too much yet to be done…our responsibility calls for a daily commitment on our part in all the days ahead.”43

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Willie Stewart, interview by Katherine L. Jennison, Tacoma, WA, May 12, 2017, transcript, Tacoma Community History Project Collection, University of Washington Tacoma Library, Tacoma, WA.
Willie Stewart

Date: May 4, 2017

Interviewed by: Katherine L. Jennison

Place: Tacoma, Washington

[Narrator]: I’m really excited about this. I hear about you a lot, I hear your name, about the things that you have done, but the more I research you the more I realize that you are way more interesting and it’s very much a privilege that I get to do this. I want you to know that. So, yeah, let’s just get started, cause this is very much you. Literally, my first questions is I want you to tell me about your parents.

[Willie Stewart]: Okay. My mother and father were teenage bride and groom. The first child was born and my mother was sixteen, and she was forty-three when the last child was born. She was thirty-eight when I was born. All the children delivered by a midwife and most of them by the same midwife. We were sharecroppers. During my time with family, we were in a situation where the farmer kept three-fourths of his products and then they gave one fourth to the owner in exchange for being on the property, and it was basically cotton for us and a little corn. Most of the older brothers were farm hands to the larger farmers. So, my date of birth was 12/25/1935, and most of my activity in terms of that life was from 1935 until 1953, which took me through my elementary, junior high and high school days. After that they switched my life.

[KJ]: Wow, okay, so you farmed and worked on the farm until 1953?

[WS]: Well, I worked on the farmed until about 1948. Actually, until about 1946 or 1947. Then we moved in town, but we still did farm work picking cotton.

[KJ]: What was your hometown?

[WS]: Columbus, Texas.

[KJ]: Is that where your parents are from? Were they born in Columbus, TX?

[WS]: They were born 14 miles west of Columbus. In a community called Weimar. Most of my brothers and sisters were born in Weimar. Just three of us were born in Columbus.

[KJ]: So both of your parents were born in Weimer and were high school sweethearts?

[WS]: No, well, no because she finished the fifth grade and he finished about fourth grade.

[KJ]: Can you...so part of my research is focused on civil rights in general, not that that is the only subject. There are lots of things that happened in your life that are very
Willie Stewart interviewed by Katherine L. Jennison

Willie Stewart
Interviewed May 4, 2017

Katherine L. Jennison

significant to you and your life, but can you tell me growing up in Texas what was it like for you?

[WS]: Well, let me put it in categories then. First, in terms of education, everybody was black; as a teacher, as a worker, etc. The only white contact there was in my whole [inaudible] is when I would ride the bus, because blacks were not allowed to drive the bus. It had to be a white bus driver. So, all of my teachers were black, all of my school mates were black, [and] all of the school we were in competition were all black. There was no association [with whites].

[KJ]: So it was like a mini district?

[WS]: That’s right. Also, in the school setting for education we very seldom ever saw new materials like a new textbook or any supplies. It was what had been used at the white high school and as they got rid of their stuff it was passed onto us. Now, the unique thing about that separat[ion], though, the teachers were well educated, the teachers really loved us, and primarily during that time any professional black could pretty much only do two things: teach, preach, or run a tavern or a funeral home. There were no other options in terms of professionalism, but most of the people did menial work, low level construction work like digging the ditches because they didn’t have all the machinery then. Working in the hay field, working in the cotton field that was the job market so education didn’t relate to that. Even for those who finished high school, only out of any class it was lucky to get one or two blacks from the class that was in a situation to get high education, so what most of them did they went into the air force, army, etc.

[KJ]: And I know you did, you went into the army.

[WS]: Yeah, but I also went to college first.

[KJ]: You went to college first at Texas Southern University?

[WS]: Right.

[KJ]: Okay. Can you tell me about being in college?

[WS]: Yeah. That was quite an experience. First of all I didn’t have any money and a group of women, though an organization, gave me $125, which would pay for my tuition for the whole year. I had a sister and brother-in-law who didn’t have any children, who lived in Houston where Texas Southern was located – 70 miles from my birth place. So, I was invited by them to stay with them and walk to school about a mile each day because they wanted to see someone from the family get an education and that is how I ended up with it. The interesting thing about Texas Southern [was] I had to take introductory English and introductory math because my school curriculum in high school, even though it was very good it wasn’t as good as compared to the blacks who had graduated from the big schools out of Houston, Dallas, and Galveston. They had a high level of education and you could see it. So, my first year I took the remedial class and then after that I ended
Willie Stewart
Interviewed May 4, 2017
Katherine L. Jennison

being cum laude in graduation, so it was a matter of not having the experience rather than
ability. But, all the classes were small, all of your professors monitored your scheduled
[and] made sure you succeeded. If you had a problem, you could come to the office
anytime for assistants. So, it was a rich experience from that point. But, also, I became
attached to clubs for the first time; the science time, the Baptist student union club, and
then eventually into a fraternity Alpha Phi Alpha. So, that gave me socialization [and] it
gave me support and whatnot. And then also why I was there I met an unbelievable man
by the name of Bill Lawson, who, if you looked on the internet, he was one of the fore
right persons in the civil rights movement in the Texas era. A Baptist minister who taught
me so much, extremely educated, in fact, his wife just died. He’s about 84/85 now.

[KJ]: Did you say Lawson or Larson?

[WS]: L-A-W-S-O-N. The experience was wonderful. I got a chance to go to all the
athletic events because my sister and brother-in-law didn’t want me working they wanted
me to really become a college person and that I will be forever grateful. And so, I
completed that and I had my degree in biology and chemistry, and with that I used it to
teach for one year, 1957-58. And then, 1958-60 I was out here in Fort Lewis, WA and
then after that my career in Tacoma.

[KJ]: Your first year of teaching, did you…well, I did have a question, was Texas
Southern University a black college?

[WS]: Oh yes, it was founded because of the civil rights movement.

[KJ]: Was it?

[WS]: Yeah.

[KJ]: Tell me about that cause I don’t know.

[WS]: Heman Sweatt made an application to go to law school at the University of Texas,
and Texas would not accept him, but offered him money to go out of state to law school
and they would fund it. He challenged that and it went to the Supreme Court, and the
Supreme Court ruled that Texas had the obligation to education all of its students,
including Mr. Heman Sweatt. And so what the state did at that point, [they] took the
Houston negro college and made it Texas State College for Negros. That was the title.
You cannot offer a law school unless you are a university, so therefore they created three
other schools: school of education and industrial arts, school of science and business, and
then the school of law. That all happened in 1947, so I’m in the class of ’53 so it was only
six years old when I first began. We had the founding president, R. O’Hara Lanier, is the
president at the time. So, everybody there, all the teacher were black, all the students
were black, all of our athletic events were against other blacks and other black schools.

[KJ]: Did Bill Lawson…when did you meet him? Was he a teacher?
[WS]: No, he was the advisor to the Baptist student union that was allowed to be on the campus even though it was a state school. And I was very active with that so he took us a lot of Baptist stuff.

[KJ]: Did you protest, did you work in the community?

[WS]: We just, at that time, we were not engaged in, there was no formal protest during my time in school, but we did volunteer to do things in the community. In fact, I never was engaged, my only civil rights engagement really took place in Tacoma, WA, never in the south because I had left before the activities began. And, even the civil rights movement, the visible action, didn’t come until the mid-60s.

[KJ]: With the Civil Rights Act.

[WS]: Yeah, well, 1954 was the civil rights Brown vs Board of Education, then later on in 64 and 65 you had the Voting Rights Act, but you had Martin Luther King and others who were at the forefront of some things and then when you had all of the protests from the colleges, going into world war, and sit downs and what not that just opened the whole thing up.

[KJ]: I will probably have more questions about Texas, however, we can get to Tacoma. So, you finished college, you taught for a year, can you tell me about your first year of teaching?

[WS]: Yeah, it was an all-black school; Asbury High School in Yoakum, Texas. I taught grades 9-12, basic math, algebra, life science, biology, chemistry; five preparations. And was the assistant football coach.

[KJ]: Did you like…

[WS]: It was great because I didn’t have anything else to compare it with.

[KJ]: That is very true. What made you…did you join the army? Were you drafted?

[WS]: I was drafted. In fact, many of the guys who were in school with me were not drafted because they were able to get a waiver because that draft pool was in the larger cities. Mine was in a small city, and I asked the draft board to bypass me over letter. You know, you are Texan, we are southerners, everybody serves the military, you must go. Your induction date will be December 5, 1958. So, I wrote back and said I appreciate that but would you be polite enough to make it in August, so when I separate in two years I can start a school year some place. And they consented and I entered the military August 5, 1958.

[KJ]: Was your draft card attached to you being from Columbus, or was it attached to you…
[WS]: It was attached to anyone who was in Colorado County. It was a country draft board; it was established by counties.

[KJ]: Did you travel around the south when you were little? Did your parents ever travel?

[WS]: All my travel growing up was going to the cotton fields and when I played basketball and football I was traveling to the different towns where we played.

[KJ]: Okay, so you were an athlete?

[WS]: Yeah.

[KJ]: I was an athlete. I played softball and basketball when I was in high school.

[WS]: Oh great.

[KJ]: You were drafted in to the army, were you immediately stationed at Fort Lewis?

[WS]: That’s correct. I was processed in Arkansas at Fort Chaffee. That’s where the induction station was and everyone from that whole army division was placed there. Then out of that they then determined where you would go for your training. Some went to Kansas, some to Arkansas, some to Texas, and they sent me to Fort Lewis, Washington.

[KJ]: So what was your immediate response when you got to Washington? Cause I can only imagine how different it would feel.

[WS]: Well, it was nothing about Washington, it was about the military. So, you don’t have any association with the community at that point. It was a matter of making the adjustments to the lifestyle of what the military would be like, but in terms of a reaction to Washington it was negative because it was so cold and wet all the time.

[KJ]: I can see that.

[WS]: But, I ended up…you know…it was just typical all of us went through the same thing making the transition. Probably the biggest transition was the social transition. It was the first time any association with a person that [didn’t] look like me. So, that was a challenge too.

[KJ]: That makes sense because some of the research I’ve done has kind of shown that, especially within the Tacoma area, the black community really didn’t get, I guess, really didn’t rise until the army started stationing people at Fort Lewis…

[KJ]: So, that would…I mean that makes sense when you say that. Connecting to some of the dates that I’ve read. So, have you, at this point in your life, have you met your wife?

[WS]: I had met her, but no association with her.

[KJ]: What’s her name?

[WS]: Her name is Fay Neil. She lived in Yoakum, and she was in college at Prairie View. I roomed at a home that was three doors from where she lived. And so, I met her, really, I knew her and the really met her at the end of her college years. she was in college at Prairie View. I roomed at a home that was three doors from where she lived.

[KJ]: Where did she go to school?

[WS]: Prairie View A&M.

[KJ]: Prairie View?

[WS]: Yes, it’s another black school.

[KJ]: So, you met her the first year you were teaching or when you…?

[WS]: I knew of her the first year…yes, I would say I met her then, basically. But not in a relationship, just knowing her.

[KJ]: Okay, and then you moved to Tacoma?

[WS]: Right.

[KJ]: I mean, essentially…

[WS]: Yeah. We had dated a couple of times. So, I was in Tacoma for one year, 1960-61, and my mother said to me it was time for you to have a family. You need to have a wife, it’s a public school setting, and it’s not good to be a bachelor or her words “unmarried person”. So, when I was back home in 1961, [Fay] was living with her brother in San Antonio. So, we dated heavily for a few, couple of weeks, three weeks and we decided to get married. Then we came to Tacoma.

[KJ]: Where did you guys get married at?

[WS]: On the front porch of her house in Yoakum. It was a Sunday, August 13, 1961.

[KJ]: So, you still had your duties in Tacoma so did you have to come back?

[WS]: Oh yeah, sure. I was only ever going to support her was to take my teaching position here.
[KJ]: Yeah, tell me about that. So, you get stationed at Fort Lewis, were you active when you were stationed or did you…so were you active and then found a teaching position and so then you went on reserves?

[WS]: Pretty much right, you just hit it. When I was…in the spring of 1960, my mother, through her level of thinking, said it would be not wise for me to return to Texas because they were beginning to integrate the schools; even though the decision had been made in 1954. And in small towns where I had an interested, they were not retaining the black teachers. So, therefore, you should not come back and try to get a career in Washington, but she thought that it was Washington D.C. She didn’t know it was the state of Washington because she said to me I want you to stay there because you were close to the president. And so, I made application to teach in Tacoma and I came down for an interview in early part of May in 1960. And it was on this floor…

[KJ]: It was on the 7th floor?

[WS]: I believe it was. The person in this chair was a guy named Leslie Hoar. We talked for a good 30 minutes and I said to him, Mr. Hoar I really came down for you to interview me for a teaching position. He started laughing, he said well welcome aboard fellow Texan, you’re hired! And he said to me, I grew up in Terrell, TX, and I know what it’s like in Texas, it’s not like that here. In fact, I have two administrators that you are going to be working with coming to pick you up. And that was George Miller and Fred Heeney. I ended up teaching at Gault.

[KJ]: Gault Middle School?

[WS]: Junior High.

[KJ]: Was Leslie the director or was he….

[WS]: He was the assistant superintendent of personnel. It is amazing I ended up doing two other jobs that he had because at one time he was an assistant principal at Lincoln, so was I for one year, he was the assistant superintendent of personnel, so was I.

[KJ]: Did you keep in contact with him as you were going through the system?

[WS]: Yes, but he was really up in years. He retired and moved to a retirement home down in Olympia and then he died later.

[KJ]: So, tell me about Gault. So, you’re still kind of new in Tacoma…

[WS]: That’s right. Gault scared the hell out of me. All the white folks and I recognized that this is the way the world is.

[KJ]: So, back up a little bit. It sounds like coming from Texas, Tacoma was just a completely different reality?
[WS]: Totally, new world.

[KJ]: Tell me about that. Did you come in and think oh my gosh there has been a mistake.

[WS]: No, for three reasons; (1) it was the reception by Mr. Hoar, (2) the support of the two administrators at Gault, and (3) it was the students at Gault, they just loved me to death. I was the first black teacher in the system in terms of middle school and junior high. There were only three black men in Tacoma at that time: Ester Wilform was at the elementary level, Willie Muse was at the high school level, and I was the junior high level. There would be many black students who would just come to my door and peak just to make sure. A couple of them even wanted to touch my hands to make sure I was real. It was a culture shock for the black students as much as it was a culture shock for me to be in that environment.

[KJ]: Was Gault Junior High integrated?

[WS]: Yes. Tacoma schools have always been integrated. They were integrated but also segregated because there were limitations on where black could live. They could buy homes and live in Salishan, east side below Portland Avenue, or the Hilltop area. There were no blacks north of Sixth Avenue.

[KJ]: So, in reality it was a controlled placement?

[WS]: Yeah, it was de facto segregation. Many of the white students had never seen a black teacher. So, I developed strong relationships. In fact, I just talked to one of my students who is now 68 and was at Gault. He called me to get some guidance. It was a huge school, over 900 kids at that time. Great athletic programs. My first year there was a team that was undefeated in football, basketball, track, and baseball.

[KJ]: Did you coach?

[WS]: The second year I started coaching there.

[KJ]: So when you got hired at Gault you were a biology teacher, correct?

[WS]: Life science and physical science.

[KJ]: Do you remember any stories about just you and your relationship with you students that really…

[WS]: By all means, in fact, one of my favorite ones was we had a back to school night and I had an overflow crowd in my room every period. At the end of the session, this white couple sat outside of the door and they said we’d like to come in and visit with you. I just want you to know, our daughter was very emphatic that if they didn’t go to all of the classes they had to come to your class. They said you have to go to Mr. Stewart. And he said, what shocks me about this, I’m so thrilled, I’m thrilled for my daughter, but she
never told me you were black. We just saw it the first time we saw you. That same girl, we won the sweepstakes in UPS in the science fair. The other story, there were kids that would come up to try to get in trouble just to get the attention of me – the black kids, they just loved me.

[KJ]: What would they do to try to get your attention? Back in 1960, was a kid doing to try to get your attention?

[WS]: Peeping in the door when you’re teaching or else coming into your classroom knowing they were not students.

[KJ]: Do you remember, as a teacher, instances you knew that you as a black teacher were making an impact whether it was a white student or a black student?

[WS]: Yes. The mere fact that they all wanted, when I was coaching sports, to be on the team. The young ladies formed an intermural program just so I could coach them, so that was another level of appreciation. All of them made sure that parents came to back to school night. They involved me in the parent teachers association – they wanted me involved. I was one of the first persons to get a golden acorn – that’s recognition from the PTA for being outstanding.

[KJ]: When you first went to Gault was it predominantly white?

[WS]: Yeah. I would say it was at least 75% white. I think the anxiety was, if any, would be with the staff. But the thing that was great, one of the history teachers by the name of Dale Platt befriended me, [and] since I was a bachelor he invited me to athletic events. He picked me up and took me and made me feel a part of Tacoma. Several of the staff did that eventually, so there was no rejection, there was full acceptance. Gault was a unique place, and I think maybe the reason why was being we all bonded behind the challenge of the students – meeting their social needs, their economic needs, their educational needs, so we didn’t have a chance to focus on each other.

[KJ]: It’s refreshing to hear that you were focused on each other because I think it makes a huge statement. Remind me where Gault Junior High was located?

[WS]: It’s the corner of…you know where McKinley Avenue is? You go east on McKinley to 34th and when you get to 34th and McKinley you make a left and it’s between McKinley and Portland Ave. When you get to that street its three or four names because it kind of breaks into three streets. [Currently] the swimming pool is run by the city.

[KJ]: You became assistant principal at Gault before you moved over to Lincoln, correct?

[WS]: That’s right, 1966.

[KJ]: Were you only assistant principal for a couple of years before you went…?
[WS]: I was assistant principal for about three years.

[KJ]: Tell me about transitioning into your first administrative [role]?

[WS]: The teachers were fully accepting of me. They like my leadership in relationship to students; my firmness and yet flexibility as an assistant principal. It so happened that the [principal], I was only with him for one year because he took an assignment and went to Lago, Nigeria. Upon his departure they brought in a principal by the name of O.M. Peterson who had been over at Hunt, and he was sick quite a bit the two years I was there. So, I was pretty much running that school for two years.

[KJ]: They didn’t bring anyone in to do interim…?

[WS]: No.

[KJ]: So what was your decision to move over to Lincoln?

[WS]: [Oliver] Magnuson, who was the assistant principal at Lincoln, decides to take a sabbatical and go to Washington University to get a doctorate. He recommended to the superintendent that I should be his replacement at Lincoln. So I was at Lincoln as the assistant principal with Edroy Wilseth and Bart Niccols for one year, and at the end of that year I went to my military training in the reserves. I went to Albuquerque, New Mexico, Sandia Base. I was driving, and on that Monday night I called home as I usually do, and my wife said at ten o’clock tomorrow morning the superintendent would like to talk to you. No, that was in sixty-six when he appointed me assistant principal. But, in sixty-nine, I went for two weeks and came back and one of my roles as the assistant principal at Lincoln was processing the mail. So, I came down to [the Central Administration Building] and the mail box was on the first floor. Angelo Giaudrone, who was superintendent, and his assistant [Joe] were walking the halls and they stopped me and said “Willie, what do you think of the new principal at Lincoln High School?” I said, oh I have a new boss? The superintendent looked at Joe [and said], “Didn’t you call him?” “Well, you’re the new principal!” It shook me. That’s when I really became nervous. I’m thirty-four/thirty-five and there’s only two or three members on the staff younger than that. I had to calm down, call my family, and then I went to the school. I said [to Maxine the office manager] I want the records of all the staff. So, I concentrated on memorizing all the teachers there and tried to get a little something about them – name of their spouse or kids. That’s what I did the summer of 1970. Then I picked up the newspaper, [“First Negro Principal Named”].

[KJ]: I found an article that said that, and there was a different article that said that…

[WS] African American. Because at that time, “negro” was common. Twenty-five years later they said Willie Stewart was named the first African American – they switched it with the times

[KJ]: So, I found an article that credited you as being the first black principal in the state.
[WS]: That was an error. The first one was the principal of Lincoln High School in Seattle.

[KJ]: So tell me, after this, did people start to call asking for interviews?

[WS]: I should have kept the stacks of congratulatory cards. There were two people, who are not to be named, who were both principals, called me up and said they were unhappy with my appointment. [They said], “because of your age.” I said thank you. I said, why don’t you look at the ages of these two white principals, and then they never said a word anymore.

[KJ]: Were you the youngest principal at the time?

[WS]: No, there were two others. I was the youngest in high school. Both principals, later, came to me to be rescued.

[KJ]: In what way?

[WS]: One of them had a major grievance against him by a black family and he asked me to testify on his behalf in superior court.

[KJ]: Did the other one have to come to you for any assistance?

[WS]: Yes, he did, but all of the principal voted me as president of the administrative group.

[KJ]: Do you remember the organization’s name?

[WS]: Yeah, Tacoma Association of Public School Administrators (TAPSA).

[KJ]: Were you voted president of [TAPSA] the first year you were principal?

[WS]: No, I was voted [president] in about 1973. So that’s two years after.

[KJ]: Tell me about your first year being a principal. What stood out about Lincoln? Do you have any stories?

[WS]: Yes, because the first decision I made, which really make my career good. [Oliver] Magnuson, who had been the assistant principals, was returning to Tacoma Schools and they were going to sign him as my assistant. When they told me I was the principal, I was shocked, and then I asked who would be my assistant and they told me [Oliver] Magnuson. I told them that’s not right, [because] I replaced him. He should be the principal. They said no we have a special job for him coming up next year. I said what is that job? [They said] he’s going to be the principal of the new high school, Henry Foss High School. I said, if that is the case, why don’t you make it this way: “[Oliver] Magnuson, Principal Designee for Foss, Acting Interim Assistant Principal at Lincoln High School”. So, the staff at Lincoln that would be loyal to him not getting that job
would not be concerned because they know he is getting a greater job. Also, I knew that we would have to lose staff because teachers would want to go to that new school. So, their behavior was perfect for the full year. The thing that was amazing, one staff member [Oliver] wanted, at any cost, and this staff member said, “No I’m loyal to Mr. Stewart, I just can’t go.” [Oliver] came to me and said, “You know, he won’t go. I need him, and you know that I need him, because of the population of the students and he is so good with persons of color.” So, I call in the guy, and I said, “Now, I want you to go because the needs are greater there than here. I can handle this.” So, we became instant friends forever, even now. Even he and his mother had separated from conversation because he was African American and he had married a German woman. His mother is deep southern and couldn’t accept her son. It just so happened that I was in New Orleans, recruiting at two schools in Louisiana, and I called up his mother and talked on the phone. I said, “How can a person give birth to a child and not have love for them. You are going to let a marriage separate the two of you? Is that what you call Christianity?” She called him up and he went home to visit.

[KJ]: What was his name?

[WS]: Al Phillip. He was one of the first liaisons in the district. He is a retired soldier.

[KJ]: Was he the only black teacher?

[WS]: No, he wasn’t a teacher. He was a liaison and worked with the students in the community. We have liaisons now, we call them paraprofessionals. He knew all of the behavior that was going on in the community. But, I knew several other black guys, in fact, Aaron Pointer, of the Pointer Sisters, who was playing baseball for the local team here. He worked with me at Lincoln during the off-season. You’ve heard of the Pointer Sisters? [He] is their brother. He’s here now, he’s on the [Metro Parks] Board. He’s the Commissioner.

[KJ]: When you got to Lincoln were there any black teachers?

[WS]: One, Connie Lasley. She and another lady were the first two black teachers in the state of Washington. The other one was up in Seattle and she came from the University of Chicago and she was teaching at the age of sixteen. She was a math wizard.

[KJ]: You were principal at Lincoln for almost a decade, any good stories?

[WS]: I dressed as Gerald Dean and walked the hallways. I was the cheerleader for all of the athletic teams. In fact, I was on a plane about five years ago and a guy said, “I know you, you won’t know me, but I remember you in 1974 in Husky Stadium that you were the cheerleader for the Lincoln Abes as the won the state championship in basketball.” I said, I’m that person.

[KJ]: Did Lincoln have minority students when you started?
[WS]: I can just say this, we were 14% black, 7% Hispanic, about 3% Asian, maybe 1% bi-racial, and 70% white.

[KJ]: I know the time when you were transferring over to Lincoln was when the 5-point plan the district had come up with was really starting in 1968. I know that you were probably more involved with [desegregation] than any research I could find.

[WS]: That’s right. The first phase of the desegregation of schools was to close the junior high component of McCarver and take all of those seventh, eighth, and sixth graders and put them in the other ten junior highs in Tacoma. They had a summer program, working with those families to transfer their kids into schools and also get the receiving school to understand. So, I was hired as the administrator for that program. It was a summer counseling component. I wasn’t a counselor, but the counselors worked for me as an administrator.

[KJ]: So, you were the lead on the summer program?

[WS]: Yeah.

[KJ]: I had found this report that the United States Commission on Civil Rights wrote in 1978. It was interesting because I read through this whole thing, your name popped up when I asked about who should I interview, and I remember, when I went to look at articles it briefly mentioned you as the lead for the summer counseling program. This report actually credits the summer counseling program as what made the desegregation [in Tacoma] as successful as it was.

[WS]: And I agree.

[KJ]: Can you tell me about [the program]?

[WS]: We had the addresses and the names of all of the kids who had to be placed at other schools. We didn’t want to be disproportionate to any of the [junior] high schools, but we knew that the one that would be the most challenging for them to accept would be Meeker because of the great distance across the bridge on the hill. So, that left us to look at Baker, Gray, Stewart, Gault, Hunt, Mason, and Truman. We would meet with the parents and give them the options. Sometimes we would try to make it as close as their boundary. The unfortunate thing for some of them, you could take one block and you can have kids living on one block going to five different high schools.

[KJ]: Did most students chose based on the programs offered [at each school]?

[WS]: The programs were all the same. It was just a matter of feeling where they would be comfortable. There was nothing magical about one building over the other. I think that there was some reluctance about going to Truman [Junior High] and going to Mason [Junior High] because kids knew that it was predominantly white – almost 100% white –
and they may not enjoy that, but they ended up going there. Truman had a great receiving principal (Fred Haney) and Mason had a great receiving principal (Gale Nelson).

[KJ]: What are your thoughts on choice? What are your thoughts around the idea that these students could choose?

[WS]: We were convinced that they were not getting a quality education at the junior high component [at McCarver]. Plus, it was all black, and we wanted to comply with the U.S. commissioner and provide [students] a multi-cultural environment. We worked very hard with the families, it was not a piece of cake, it was challenging. There was someone who still wanted to stick in their community. We made it convenient for the buses to come right through the neighborhood, [so] it wasn’t inconvenient to get to school.

[KJ]: What made it difficult with families?

[WS]: Just the closure of McCarver, and some of the uncertainty of how the kids would be treated at the receiving schools.

[KJ]: Do you remember the family’s perspective on closing McCarver?

[WS]: [The parents would say], “My other kids went there, and the school is in my neighborhood.” Sometimes, [students would say], “I would like to go to the same school that my brother went to or my sister went to.” Some of them said, “Am I going to get to Stadium High School?” Because that was the primary school where most of the blacks went, so they wanted to have that continuity. The other neighborhood where most of the blacks lived was Lincoln.

[KJ]: Was there any backlash from families that needed to be bused elsewhere?

[WS]: I think after the first week the kids accepted it. Kids are more flexible than parents.

[KJ]: I know the country at the time was in a state of flux, with districts having to implement plans, whether they were voluntary, like Tacoma’s, or whether it was forced, so it makes me wonder how it was received by the parents.

[WS]: There might have been more reaction from white parents, not to me, but to the superintendent. You had some families who moved out over to University Place and some who moved out to Puyallup. But, something else helped too, the leadership of our superintendent and our school Board ensuring the quality of education for all students. [They] put solid programs in all of those schools, taking what was left at McCarver and Stanley making sure they had enriched elementary programs. In fact, they removed some of the elementary students from Stanley and made them go to elementary schools so white students could come into their inner city.

[KJ]: The report talked about, once McCarver became an elementary school, they essentially put a cap on demographic enrollment. I think for McCarver, at least, it was
40% as the cap for minority [enrollment]. Since you were an administrator at the time, do you remember any issues with white students come in and minority students staying?

[WS]: I would imagine you would have something, but there was nothing that was earth shaking. After I had done [the counseling program] for two years, the program was transitioned to counseling administrators because I had to concentrate on my work.

[KJ]: Do you remember any stories when you would into homes?

[WS]: I very seldom would visit a home. I would only visit a home when there was tension in terms of understanding the program, and I would go in and try to appease them and help them understanding the long term value. And, sometimes a black person just wanted to hear from another black person.

[KJ]: Were you ever pulled into any other Board related, policy, or administrative [action]?

[WS]: Oh yeah, we gave reports on where we were having challenges and where we were having successes.

[KJ]: What’s interesting about Tacoma is, as you read through some of the information about [desegregation], you almost don’t find anything that sticks out because it went so smooth.

[WS]: Very smooth. Tacoma is a small population. I think people keep forgetting. That was a stroke of genius of the superintendent and this Board to do it when the population is small [than] wait until you get a massive number.

[KJ]: There were statistics that attributed Tacoma [district] as being nine percent black or minority. I know that today, Tacoma Public Schools is 60% minority. It’s just interesting to know that at the time [desegregation] happened it wasn’t like we were talking about this giant amount of students.

[WS]: What makes it so different today is you have such a large number of culture groups here. So, there’s more acceptance. Plus, you have a large bi-racial group. You go into Whitman, Grant, Boze, Blix, or Lister and you see the United Nations.

[KJ]: What is your opinion on the state of Tacoma today? As far as the way that school are moving or neighborhoods are developing, do you feel like we are moving in a positive direction?

[WS]: I think we are in a positive direction, but my concern is that the increase in housing cost is going to force the marginal income people to become low income and that might have an impact in terms of the social structure. In the paper yesterday, they pointed out that many of the renters now are being evicted because so many people are coming from Seattle and other areas and they are willing to pay more per month for the same property.
[KJ]: For students to choose, you mentioned that one neighborhood street these students could be going to five different school, so I didn’t know if you thought that affected their identities?

[WS]: No, it didn’t. Now, it’s been so long ago that no one even talks about it or thinks about it.

[KJ]: That’s also a credit to how successful the program was.

[WS]: But, also says something about the people of the city of Tacoma. They kept passing the levies and kept passing the bond issues, so they felt good about it.

[KJ]: At the time, were you ever approached by the NAACP?

[WS]: I was a life member of the NAACP.

[KJ]: I know early on they were pushing the district to make some sort of [plan].

[WS]: Sure, that was the late Jack Tanner and the late Willie Mill. It was not a challenge for the superintendent, he invited Roy Wilkins, Executive Director for the NAACP, and gave him an award. He brought [Eugene] Breckenridge on staff to oversee equal opportunities [assistant superintendent of affirmative action].

[KJ]: I don’t remember if it was 1965 or 1966, the NAACP threatened a lawsuit. Do you remember why?

[WS]: They were showing the McCarver was disproportionate with students.

[KJ]: Was that because nobody was listening? It’s a huge step to threaten a lawsuit.

[WS]: That was universal, it wasn’t just Tacoma. They did it across the country to point out that they were emphasizing de facto segregation in the south and de facto segregation in the north from housing patterns. At that specific time, in the 1960s, the biggest problem was not the school districts but realtors and persons not willing to let blacks to buy homes all over the place. So, the way they dealt with it was to deal a lawsuit to get students moved, but now families live all over the city. I was a housing thing that really created the problem.

[KJ]: I know they put a lot of pressure on the school board at the time and the superintendent to put together a plan.

[WS]: You don’t get anything unless you asked for it.

[KJ]: The subcommittee put together the plan that was going to be put into place.
[WS]: Sure, there was involvement in the community. You can’t be unilateral. You have to involve your stakeholders. They went to the older citizens in town that they knew and they worked together.

[KJ]: Why did they go to the oldest?

[WS]: They had the knowledge. Not necessarily for what would be better, but they were respected in the community.

[KJ]: Did they bring any administrators from the district?

[WS]: Sure, [Eugene] Breckenridge was involved. He was the first assistant superintendent for affirmative action.

[KJ]: Did you work together?

[WS]: Oh yes, I was principal while he was [at the central administration building]. He retired in 1977, and that position was vacant, so they filled it with Tom Dixon from the Urban League for one year. After one year they found a person, because they asked me to do it and I refused.

[KJ]: Why did you refuse?

[WS]: Because I’m an educator for kids and running the school, not for an isolated [position].

[KJ]: Did it feel more political than you wanted?

[WS]: It had nothing to do with politics, it was just who I am. There were several of my friends that wanted the job, and I could name three other administrators who eventually retired who would have given anything to have been that person. But that’s just not me. In fact, the late [Alexander] Sergienko, who just died, he came many times and asked me, so did Jim Boze on the Board. So, they said, “Would you take the personnel office job?” And I said yes.

[KJ]: So, what made you decide on that one?

[WS]: Because I can impact people there. I’m hiring staff and placing the staff.

[KJ]: Did you stay assistant superintendent for personnel until you retired?

[WS]: Yes, for eighteen years.

[KJ]: You were an administrator longer than you taught or were an administrator, correct?

[WS]: That is correct.
[KJ]: What was the motivation to say [in this position] I can affect change?

[WS]: That I could hire persons of color.

[KJ]: Can you tell me about your experience finding black or persons of color?

[WS]: Even as the principal of Lincoln, I traveled to the black schools for two weeks every year. I would go to Chaney State, Virginia State, Hampton Institute, Jackson State, Alabama State, Tuskegee, Xavier, Texas Southern, and Prairie View.

[KJ]: Did you implement that?

[WS]: My predecessor had done that. He selected me to go with him to these schools. They were all black schools, with good staff. They wouldn’t do it now because the salaries are just as good there, now, and it’s not as expensive to live.

[KJ]: You were already doing recruiting as a principal, so what changed when you became an administrator? What were some other opportunities that you got to do?

[WS]: Well, it was the visibility of my position to the community – that was very important too. The other thing, too, there was respect for my ability to evaluate staff and to select staff. I had the personality and the flexibility that they enjoyed and I became the president of the Washington State Personnel Administrators. In 1989, I became the national president of the Association for School Administrators.

[KJ]: Do you remember any distinct stories while you were assistant superintendent? Challenges and successes?

[WS]: Yes, two of them. I would make recommendation to the superintendent and the superintendent would recommend them to the school board. At that time, you had to put ages and ethnicity [on the recommendations], so Jim Boze [board member] asked for the personnel items [at one particular meeting] to be put under discussion before voting. The superintendent looked at me, and Jim Boze said, “I just want to commend the assistant superintendent of personnel who recognizes that you can be over fifty-five and still get a job in this district.” One of the applicants was a woman of fifty-eight. She was a dynamic teacher.

[KJ]: What made you look at her and say yes?

[WS]: We interviewed her. I interviewed everybody. It was a secondary school and she was very dynamic. She had raised a family and relocated. Another [hire] would be the principal at Wilson [Dan Bessett] and Pat Erwin [current principal at Lincoln]. I hired [Pat] as a teacher in Tacoma. He was a bartender at a tavern raising four kids. I was visiting with his dad on the race track for the cancer relay and we were talking about families. He was saying how his son was and I said I’d like to meet him. He came down to the office and we chatted. He has a social studies background and we had a vacancy at Hunt, so I assigned him to hunt. In five years, he’s down at central over social studies.
My other story was in 1977, I get a call from a friend of mine at UPS [University of Puget Sound], and he said, “Willie, I have this dynamic guy in P.E. At all costs, you have to hire him – Dan Bessett.” I said to send him down. On that day a vacancy in P.E. developed at Gray Junior High, so I signed him at Gray and one of his first students was my daughter, Collette.

[KJ]: I’d love to hear about your activism in the community. Tell me about the Boys and Girls club?

[WS]: That’s my heart and soul. When I first started it was just the Boys Club, and then it became Boys and Girls Club. All of the Boards wanted color on their Board, and I was visible, so most of them invited me to serve and then they wouldn’t let me off. White’s ran [the club]. I fundraised and mentored, I still mentor. Many kids came through our club: Isaiah Thomas [professional basketball player], The Trufant Brothers – one played for the Seattle Seahawks and one for the New York Jets.

[KJ]: What is it about the Boys and Girls Club that energizes you?

[WS]: The growth and development of the boys and girls through all of the program. We have a reading, recreational, art, and dental care program.

[KJ]: What are some things that you are still doing now? What are some organizations that you are a part of?


[KJ]: It sounds like anyway that students can be involved, you were involved. So tell me about Urban Grace Church. I hear it’s been 20 + years that you have been serving breakfast?

[WS]: I started in 1995, so it would be in its twenty-second year now. I think I’ve missed six Sundays out of the twenty-two years.

[KJ]: Why did you start it?

[WS]: I was on the president of the church congregation at that time. We were trying to determine what we could do as a community outreach. We debated about doing a lot of things, and one of the people there, a cook at stadium high school, [suggested] a breakfast. The first Sunday we had about four people, six the next Sunday, and we said let’s give it a month before we make a decision whether it’s going to go. Then we picked up about fifteen and anywhere to forty and it then after that it never dropped below one hundred. Last Sunday [there were] two hundred eighty-four [people]. We were asking members of the church to contribute and I said my contribution, in addition to giving dollars, would be to go to the base and buy the food because it’s cheaper there. I would
get the meat and the grits. We just became a family. Whenever we have a fifth Sunday my fraternity [volunteers].

[KJ]: Alpha Phi Alpha?

[WS]: Yeah. I was the founder of that chapter here in 1969. [There were] seven of us [and] I was the only civilian. You had to have a degree and had to have been in the fraternity. There were no black fraternities up here, so these guys were all officers who had gone through ROTC. We formed our chapter, then after that we could induct others.

[KJ]: I have general questions that pertain to civil rights. You came to Tacoma around the same time as the Urban League starting, were you involved with them?

[WS]: Financially, you know, I couldn’t find housing my first year here; I had to live in a cubicle. No apartment would rent to me. So, it was real. No jobs were open to blacks. You never saw a black working in bank, as a clerk, or anything. It was through the Urban League and the NAACP, thought Tom Dixon, Jack Tanner, etc., they recognized that blacks had money so they wanted to open up and get it developed. I would go up to rent an apartment and they’d put up a “no vacancy”, [so] I’d drive around the block and [then] there’s vacancy.

[KJ]: Did you call them and say you wanted to come look at the place?

[WS]: No I would never do that because they would pick up your voice.

[KJ]: I can’t believe I haven’t asked you about being on the School Board.

[WS]: Well, I will tell you what, let’s have a second session. There are some areas I want to talk more in depth with; (1) the treatment by other schools, (2) the United States army reserves. There are some real strong civil rights stories there, I was the first black officer on payroll in this area.
[Katherine Jennison]: It’s hard to find questions to ask for you about civil rights because I know that you had a huge part, but it’s pretty clear to me that you didn’t care that your name was attached to certain things.

[Willie Stewart]: I was a part of something; I wasn’t the leader of it. I supported it. For example, I fought real hard through committee work and visitations to encourage the city of Tacoma to accept open housing in 1965, so a person could live anywhere in the community where they were capable of buying. So, I was with the group that pushed for that. I pushed very hard for people in the Hilltop area to register to vote. I stressed real hard for churches to show open leadership and concerns for the ethnic minority group. I encouraged First Baptist, at that time, which is now Urban Grace to reach out to communities with support. So, that was my way of doing civil rights. I was very active with the NAACP and went to their meetings and luncheons [as well as] signed petitions. The spokesperson was always someone else – Willie Muse, Jack Tanner, or Harold Moss.

[KJ]: Those are the stories that I want you to be able to tell. Tell me about pivotal moments or times that you were involved with the city.

[WS]: One pivotal moment was in 1969 when they had the riots in the Hilltop area and buildings were burned. There was a strained relationship between the police community and the African American community. At that the time as an educator and administrator at Gault Junior High, the police chief asked me to be a liaison between the police department and the black community by introducing them to key people so they can have conversations about [reducing] anxiety to reduce conflict. So, that was a front line thing. When there was a decision to close McCarver, which was a form of civil rights, I was asked to be the person to stand between the school district and the black community to accept their students being bused between their home and different schools throughout the city.

[KJ]: Was that a part of the counseling program?

[WS]: That’s right. [The school district] wanted to show that their commitment was to have upward mobility among African Americans and I was chosen to be a principal in 1970 because they felt I was a person that could blend the black and the white community.

[KJ]: Do you remember the process that you would go through for the summer counseling program?
[WS]: The process was simply this: to get the list of the students who were going to junior high because they were removing it from McCarver. We would meet with the ten principals of the junior high schools and talk about numbers that they can receive so there can be balance of the students. Well, that was threatening to some principals, not because they didn’t want the students, but because they didn’t know how their parents would react to students. This is the same community that voted for [blacks] not to be able to buy houses in their neighborhood. Now you are going to tell them they are going to go to school in their neighborhood. So, that required some foresight in terms of working with the counselors to work through that and for the superintendent and school board to back that.

[KJ]: What was some advice that you would give to counselors and principals if they were faced with that challenge of parents?

[WS]: Be a good listener, be patient, and be persuasive. If it reached a crisis, then I would be involved.

[KJ]: Did you ever hit a crisis level?

[WS]: Oh yeah, many times. Primarily, the principal may not understand that this kid might really want to come there. So, I’d have to work with the family, who’s school is no longer there, and the principal by convincing that this was the best program and most viable option for this kids based on where they live. Sometimes you just have to have a thirty-minute conversation or sometimes longer, but it was persuasive. The bottom line wasn’t whether this kid was fit, it was really whether or not the principal convinced and the community was convinced that the black kid would be comfortable in that environment. I often rode the bus and ride the route with the kids. There were interactions with the bus drivers too, because they didn’t have that many black students on the bus. At that time, we didn’t use school district buses – we used city buses. You had an outside group of drivers compared to your own drivers.

[KJ]: Did Gault accept students from McCarver?

[WS]: Yes, but that was easy because there were a lot of black students there already.

[KJ]: Outside of McCarver Junior High was Gault the second highest [black population]?

[WS]: Yeah, and then the next highest was Jason Lee and then Stewart.

[KJ]: What is your opinion on how well [the desegregation] was implemented? Were there things that you wished were different? Were there things that you were happy that happened?
[WS]: In retrospect, I wish there were have been more African American counselors, but we used everyone we had – we just didn’t have enough. We could have used a two-year education process, rather than one year. Many teachers had never talked to a black student, so those were some of the apprehension.

[KJ]: I know they had their three-year plan, but if I’m hearing you correctly, instead of McCarver closing immediately and dispersing all the students, you would have like to see that be a two-year process?

[WS]: That’s right. It would be one-year preparation and one-year implementation.

[KJ]: Did it seem sudden when it happened?

[WS]: Not to me, but to the community it did because they had not been educated. But, there might have been a reason why they didn’t wait for two years – that might have given them two years to build up resistance.

[KJ]: You say the community wasn’t prepared, do you [feel the same about] the district offices?

[WS]: They were ready. Both [black and white] communities were not ready.

[KJ]: Do you think that the administrative offices could have done things differently in the community ahead of time?

[WS]: Maybe some town hall meetings.

[KJ]: Was there any community outreach?

[WS]: There was community outreach, but there should have been town hall meetings in each of the high school districts. Also, [outreach] within the black community because the blacks really felt disenfranchised because “my brother went to McCarver, my grandmother went to McCarver.”

[KJ]: They lost their history. I think that is a perspective that some people forget. It’s not just a change, it’s also a loss of their past.

[WS]: What made this history different was the cultural group involved. They went through the same thing when they only had Stadium [High School] and Lincoln [High School], and then they opened up Wilson [High School]. That brought about a lot of students breaking connections like when they opened up Foss [High Schools]. It was different because it was people of color this time versus everyone being a like.

[KJ]: From the counseling program what were some of the psychological things that students of color [experienced]?
[WS]: Whether or not they were going to be accepted [or] be together in their classes. How can we identify with the community because [students] are bused in at eight o’clock and [they] are bused out at three [o’clock]. What relationships were they going to have with the school (i.e. after school activities). The district did some things to resolve that because they would have an activity bus that would come later so they could participate.

[KJ]: So, it seems like [the district] worked to accommodate those students the best that they could?

[WS]: That’s right. There were some positives. One black women I know was thrilled because when her kids were in the same school together they fought each other all the time. When they had open enrollment she had one at Foss, Mt Tahoma [High School], Lincoln, and Stadium. But, she lost identity because she couldn’t go to the [Parent Teacher Associations] of the four [high schools]. That was just one family. This mother made the choice for family unity. On the other hand, there were some students who were upset because there would be four students on a block all going to four different schools. [Many] thought at first it was more of the adults reacting to it than the students.

[KJ]: What is your perspective on school choice?

[WS]: If school choice is based upon a curriculum interest, [then] I’m more in favor of that than anything else. Also, for school choice to be effective, every school must have equitable equipment, services, and staff qualifications, so regardless of what bus you get on, at the end of that drive your needs are met [with] a sensitive principal and staff fully equipped. When they closed McCarver, they had less equipment, support services, and counselors. I’m convinced to this day that if school boards would look back fifty or sixty years ago, and made sure that they had equal equipment, teachers, and representation of color then de facto desegregation would have never taken off. But, it also would have required the bankers, realtors, and churches being honest. Just as we were busing the black students out of McCarver, the white churches were closing their doors and moving to the suburbs – white flight. There’s only one church in the Hilltop area that was built from the ground up by a black congregation – St. Paul. All the rest were blacks buying churches as the whites were leaving.

[KJ]: You said you experience discrimination in housing when you moved here. Can you tell me any stories about any racism that you did experience?

[WS]: I would approach an apartment and they would flip the sign to say “no vacancy” over and over. There were always white friends to the African American community that would just call and the apartment would be available.

[KJ]: Did the NAACP task you with any work to help with the housing issue in Tacoma?
[WS]: Yes, to get out the vote. I was never a point person for anything. You can’t have all generals you needed to have soldiers. I was on the first commission [in Tacoma] for human rights. In 1972, I was on the first panel – Tacoma Human Rights Commission.

[KJ]: Can you tell me who else was on it?

[WS]: Father Pitch, from St. Patrick Church, and Victor Lyon, long time realtor. In fact, I’m the only one that’s still living from that group.

[KJ]: Tell me what kinds of things you would go to with this commission?

[WS]: We were a body to receive information and process it to the city. We dealt with policy and we were kind of a hearing board for the public. We would transfer the information to the mayor and city council. We were trying to address public housing accommodation, and Victor Lyon was very good for that because he was one of the lead realtors in town and Jewish.

[KJ]: Do you remember any specific policy the Human Rights Commission influenced?

[WS]: We developed them all. We did a lot in the area of jobs. We couldn’t do a lot in the private sector, but we would make statements to unions to open up their journeyman’s program [to minorities]. We didn’t have blacks as carpenters or painters because they could never get into the union. You’ll always find someone that says this is the right thing to do. Some of the other things we did was work with people to identify their skills. Our leadership was able to get a clerk in Sears.

[KJ]: You spent a lot of years in administration as the assistant superintendent of personnel. Tell me about your philosophy for hiring when it comes to equity – what were you looking for?

[WS]: I was looking for sources for the persons who could do the job. That’s why I was going to the historically black colleges and universities because they trained teachers. I went out to the officer’s club at Fort Lewis and McCord, because most of the black officers in the air force or the army had gone to all black schools. We felt that we should hire aids, teacher assistants, and we had some very talented teacher assistants so we worked with the district to get some funding to send a group over to Central Washington [University] during the summer and then they would take classes during the year to become teachers. So, we were able to get minorities that way. But the point was, we had a superintendent that believed in it and he educated the school board. Not only [Angelo] Giaudrone, but you had [Alexander] Sergienko and Dele Cross and they all believed in it. We had a personnel director at the time that was really dynamic, Trygve Blix, [and] Blix [Elementary] is named after him.

[KJ]: Do you remember what the teacher demographics was when you became assistant superintendent and then when you left?
[WS]: I don’t remember the statistic, but I know we increased it. We had a good number of black principals and assistant principals.

[KJ]: Where has Tacoma gone, in your eyes, from when you left?

[WS]: I think they’ve advanced, but the demographic of the city and district has changed. If there is any shortfall within the district, and there’s always been even when I was here, it would be the absence of the African American male principal.

[KJ]: What about your opinion or your insight on curriculum?

[WS]: The biggest thing that’s helped curriculum has been technology where they don’t have to rely on textbooks for everything because by the time your print one it’s out of date. With technology they are able to bring a lot of diversity into the game.

[KJ]: Last time we spoke, you seemed to have some army stories in mind.

[WS]: The biggest thing for civil rights was when I was appointed as the first military reserve officer in a pay scale in Pierce County. It was such a volatile thing that one of the officers left the unit because he couldn’t accept the fact that I’m an African American, he’s a second lieutenant and I was commissioned as a first lieutenant. He didn’t have any respect for my education or background. For my position I was able to get several other black that were officers into pay slots. The other thing about the military was you still had a lot of blacks that were in, but they weren’t getting promotions. We were able to use the military program for affirmative action and equity to get more persons of color into leadership roles. They had the ability but it was just the good old boys game that left them out. What we don’t want to forget is that every segment of society is still America. We may call it military, a university, or a public school but they are still the same people, so the challenges are the same. You had a high number of blacks not getting promoted, going to prison, and getting article fifteens, which will impact your [military] promotion really fast.

[KJ]: How long were you in the reserves?

[WS]: Thirty years. I went from first lieutenant to colonel six – that’s one level beyond a general.

[KJ]: We you ever called for any particular situation?

[WS]: No, we were hospital. We were a thousand-bed hospital, so when you mobilize a thousand-bed hospital then you have a major crisis that you need a thousand beds for a thousand patients. The thousand-bed hospital was only activated one time and that was for the Iraqi situation. We were loaded with nurses, physical therapists, occupational therapists, dentists, nutritionists, and I happened to be in administration. When that unit
retuned they had so many problems that they dissolved the unit. Many doctors lost their practice while they were gone – and they were only gone for about four months.

[KJ]: Did you chose to be with that unit or were you assigned?

[WS]: I was assigned to that unit when I first got out as an enlisted person because when I separated I had to be in the reserve unit for two years minimum and then inactive reserve unit for four years. When I was performing as an active reservist, the commander said I was good and that I need to stay in the reserves and go for a promotion. I always had a paid position, but it was enlisted [rather than reserved].

[KJ]: Do you have any other stories?

[WS]: I think an interesting story was coming from Lincoln High School as principal to this building as the assistant superintendent. There were those who were upset that I had received a promotion because they felt it should have been a lesser position – not the top position in personnel. There were others already in personnel and I was brought in over them. I’m sure that part of the decision was having an African American in a high visible position.

[KJ]: Did any animosity hinder you?

[WS]: I think initially, but after they got a chance to meet me and work with me it worked out fine.

[KJ]: No hiccups?

[WS]: Well, you always have those – at any job. Same thing when I went to Lincoln, there was a guy that said I was too young. After a couple of years, they called me up and apologized. They are just people and they still react that way to persons now – they react to females in positions. What’s important is make sure that you can perform. Performance is what removes doubt and questions.

[KJ]: I’m running out of questions.

[WS]: I think you’ve done a good job. I think one of the things in the process of my visibility by being in the community so much is that it served as an enabler. For example, [a company] wanted to employ some blacks so they would call me up because they felt that I had credibility and I would recommend someone who would do the job. I didn’t recommend on the basis of skin pigment alone. Can you go to work on time? If a person reports to work on time the rest will take care of itself. We had a couple of principals that said they needed and English teacher or a math teacher and they knew I knew their school and their needs. There was another principal who I knew what he was going to ask for when he came down, so I didn’t let him come down much. He was the vainest of persons. Age doesn’t dictate your ability to perform – either end of the spectrum.
[KJ]: Who do you try to be for others and why do you think they continue to reach out to you?

[WS]: They know I care. They know that I will tell the truth and they can trust me. They know I have a passion for them, as well as the job – it exudes. I’ll tell you a story, I had a woman who was from the Philippines, an elementary principal in Tacoma, and I didn’t work with elementary principals so I assumed she was okay. A neighboring district was in need of a person of color, and she had been a student in that district, so they quickly hired her and it didn’t work out. They released her back to Tacoma and the people over Elementary Education, who had the authority to recommend her wouldn’t recommend her. I was very upset with them, personally, because if she had those weaknesses then why did they let her go out to other districts – why didn’t they train her. She came in and she cried. I said I have a teaching position and you would be at this [salary] level. She was still crying and said she was going home, and I said “let me just tell you something, if you go home and stay then you get zero dollars. If you come in and teach, you get roughly $50,000.” Two years later she’s got a principal position again. I had one principal who only wanted young staff, so I told him to look in the mirror – one of these days when you look in the mirror you are not going to be as young and spry as you are now, and you are going to wondering how people treated me. It so happened in his own career he was pushed aside because of his age, and he came to me. Age discrimination is real – they will lie about it – but it’s real. What made education so different today is the number of jobs of high salary at the beginning phase. If a teacher would settle down and think in terms of medical, built-in retirement system, family leave, vacation that it might be worth taking a job that’s ten thousand less because, in reality, you’re getting more than ten thousand.

[KJ]: I feel like I talk to more people that somehow you touched in many ways.

[WS]: I’m still doing it. I was on the School Board for six years. [I ran] because I wanted to be involved with the schools, effect policy, and wanted to work with the superintendent and get a chance to be with the schools on a different level.

[KJ]: Did anybody encourage you to run?

[WS]: Couple of blacks from the community wanted a black on the School Board.

[KJ]: You only served one term.

[WS]: Because of my wife’s Parkinson’s. It was not best for my family situation.

[KJ]: What were some policies while you were on the School Board that you were a part of?
[WS]: The sabbatical leave policy and the suspension policy. What we did was we made sure there was a level before there is a final exclusion that there would be at least two board members to hear the case.

[KJ]: Why did you feel that was an important change to make?

[WS]: It would help [the board] to understand our students and the families at another level and to support the school district so we were feeling the same thing they were feeling. Also, the opportunity to look at contracts with minorities. I wanted to make sure that there might be some ethnic minority vendors who were competitive. We were concerned about quality bids because the lowest bids are not always your best bid. You don’t learn about how a district operates being a principal or employee, you learn when you’ve been in all the positions. I wanted our School Board to reflect our community, so we had a Hispanic, an African American, a Japanese, and three females.

[KJ]: Do you still work with the School Board?

[WS]: Yeah, I’m on the citizen audit committee. I review the budget. There are six of us on there. [I’ve served] about seven years now.

[KJ]: Do you want to discuss U.S. politics?

[WS]: It’s sad right now. I’m concerned about our nation because what gains were made we are going to lose. We are caught on two divides – either conservative or liberal when it’s neither, its respect for each other. [President Trump] spends more time what [President Obama] did, rather than decide what he’s going to do with a positive program. People are insane over the future of health care in this country. There are a lot of people who are in limbo, and I have a great empathy. I go to get medicine worth three or four hundred dollars and I pay zero because I’m a retired soldier with health care for life. But, I can’t just be comfortable because I’m comfortable, I have to be concerned about others in that situation.
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