

Interview with Dr. William Charles Akins

Date: May 24, 2001

Interviewed by Dr. David A. Williams

DAW: We're here this afternoon with Dr. William Charles Akins, and if he doesn't mind me saying so, he is an icon in this community. As we hear him talk, you'll understand what I mean. Dr. Akin, you came through the school system as a student during the days of deep segregation, is that right?

WCA: That's right. That's correct.

DAW: Tell us something about your experiences, what you remember about your coming through that system, what you experienced, the teachers and all of what you remember about it, please.

WCA: I am a product of Blackshear Elementary School during the days of segregation. Mr. F.R. Rice was our principal, and it was he who fostered strong academic preparation, and we had, I thought, outstanding teachers at that time. It was also he and Mrs. Rice that initiated the hot lunch program that came into being early on as a result of his initiative and his efforts. I recall that. We didn't have much contact with people of any other race, although maybe four blocks from Blackshear many Hispanics lived there, but at the time they were attending the regular schools in the Austin Public Schools.

And then on to Kealing [Junior High School]. Mr. T.C. Calhoun was my principal, who was an outstanding principal as well. Dr. Williams, one interesting thing I remember. That was during the time when teachers and administrators who wanted a graduate degree had to go outside the state to get a graduate degree. I recall hearing talk that Mr. Calhoun had attended the University of Michigan. Prior to that, Mr. Rice had attended Columbia. So there was not much mixing. So to speak, we were in our place.

Then on to [L. C.]Anderson High School, where I've always admired all my principals, and I wanted to be a high school principal because of Mr. W.B. Campbell, who had been an outstanding serviceman. We were in awe because he had been a captain in World War I, a big stately, handsome gentleman whose roots was in Austin. His father had been the minister of Ebenezer Baptist Church. So the Campbell family was really a great family.

He and Mr. B. L. Joyce--Mr. B. L. Joyce came through Tuskegee [University], and they were great disciplinarians at that time. We had very little contact with Austin High School, which were the two major schools at that time, Austin High and Anderson High. But we had very little contact.

But the university has always had some of their professors and administrators who wanted to have some inclusion. As I recall, being in the band, and I really had a good band, we were in the Prairie View League.

DAW: Tell me something about your achievements in the band. What awards and things did you win?

WCA: Our band was state champion several times in the Prairie View League. Mr. Joyce was an outstanding band director and a great disciplinarian.

The University of Texas at that time, I recall, the name of the director was Colonel Hurt [phonetic]. He and Mr. Joyce had somehow bonded and became friends. So Colonel Hurt would come over to Anderson to give us a clinic, to direct us and to critique us, and Mr. Joyce used that. Of course, his expertise, along with Mr. Joyce's great ability to direct and lead to guide us to several championships.

But that early I could see some inclusion on the part of the professors, many of them, at the University of Texas, although the law of the land was not that we would enter there.

DAW: Just because your teachers were like Mr. Joyce and others were caring enough to get other people and resources come in and give you all of the quality that they could in an education?

WCA: In an education setting. It was his efforts, I think. And then I had a lot of good teachers. I recall this one, and persons during my era will remember the name of Ellie Frasier [phonetic], who was quite a disciplinarian in her own right. She was small in stature—

DAW: This was on Thirteenth Street.

WCA: Yes. Small in stature, but an excellent teacher. At that time we didn't think so, but after we graduated we could see her fruits in what we'd learned, and she had been stalwart in helping us learn that. So I wanted to call her name off.

Then Mr. C.P. Johnson, whom I admired, he was a Morehouse[College] man, and I hadn't heard of Morehouse. I hadn't heard of--you know, colleges, the only one I'd heard of was Tillotson [College] and Sam[uel] Huston [College] when I graduated during that era, but it was he who brought us information relative to other historic black colleges. We admired his ability. He was a social studies teacher and very knowledgeable. He could get good student participation, and he brought us information, a dynamic fellow.

So I admired him and wanted to be a teacher and then, of course, wanted to be a high school principal. But we didn't know very much mixing by way of any one class visiting another class across town. We didn't seem to enjoy that because that didn't occur.

Of course we had--Anderson had a good football team, Mr. W. Pickford and Mr. Raymond Timmons, Mr. L.L. Jackson were the coaches along with Mr. Jack McDonald, outstanding community leaders and good teachers. So we had a good teaching staff. As a matter of fact, there was some study--I didn't read it but someone said that for a period of time there, of most of the high schools in the State of Texas, Anderson High School had the most Ph.D. graduates. Of course, I can't give credence to that other than what I've heard, but the academic setting was uplifting, and of course, the quest was to be the very best.

And Mr. M. L. Pickard [phonetic] in science, Dr. Early [phonetic] is a student of Mr. M. L. Pickard, because he was our science teacher. He was a man of great wisdom, and he had a lot of gems with him. He was a great wit. So we enjoyed him. But he would always say that you need to be the very best you can be, the world demands that.

I guess he could see, or they could see, that when we got out in the world to compete, to be professionals, that we had to really be good and to take good citizenship qualities. They were sticklers about being on time. We couldn't be late. The band practices were always on time. The graduation exercises, you'd step off on time. Those persons who were not there, of course, they weren't able to participate.

There was a great respect for the teachers at that time by parents. Of course, our parents told us that if the teachers say do that, that's what you do.

DAW: How influential was Anderson High School in the East Austin community?

WCA: Anderson was really the citadel for learning in East Austin. Many of our parents, of course, growing up in Austin, that was as far as many of them could go. To finish Anderson, you had really accomplished something. Of course, in my case, my father and my mother weren't able to do that because of economic conditions and so forth but always wanted me to surely finish high school and to go to college. Of course, I'm indebted to my parents that they fostered learning throughout their lives and in my presence all the time. They were good parents, but they were good like other parents in East Austin. But Anderson was the citadel for learning. It was kind of the hub of the community. If we had a band concert, we had good crowds. If we had a play, we had good crowds.

The rivalry, academic and athletic rivalry, between the largest schools in the State of Texas, we wanted to be among the best. The I.M. Terrels [High School] of Fort Worth, Wheatley [High School] in San Antonio was our arch rival. That was a big African-American school there. Yates [High School] in Houston had always had an enormous reputation, and of course, Corpus Christi had the Solomon Cole High School. Of course, we were all great rivals. Of course, in Dallas they had the Booker T. Washington High School and Lutheran. That was before Skyline [High School, Dallas] and the others.

That was an era, I think, of very sound preparation. Given much of the equipment may not have been available to many of us in our schools, but the interest on the part of the teachers, the quest to make sure that I teach well, and I disciplined the kids was at the forefront. So I think we received a good education. It may not have been that our science labs were equipped, but nevertheless, we were able to do some experimentation and grow and develop.

We wanted to aspire. It was something that I think is important, even now, when teachers would teach you to aspire to be the very best and to move on and to be able to take your place. In order to be able to take your place, because somehow or another they could see that integration was coming and they wanted you to be able to compete with everybody else. That was an important lesson to learn even then and now.

DAW: Dr. Akins you were an administrator, I believe, when the schools integrated, if I remember correctly, in 1971. After integration could you see and could others see some effect that moving Anderson and the students away from East Austin had on the community itself?

WCA: Well, it was very traumatic, because the community, for the most part, the parents, many of them, and the students did not want Anderson to close. And of course, there was a tremendous amount of protest. I think they were effective for a while because the word came down around 1968 -'69, in '69 that the school would be closing in about two years. There were several court decisions that changed. One was to bring the Maplewood youngsters into Anderson so that we could have some desegregation. Of course, that court order was rescinded by the same judge later on.

So finally the decision was made that Kealing and Anderson would be closed. Yes, it was kind of a sad moment because of all the admiration and all of the love that many members of the community had had for Anderson High School, which had been a great high school and had been,

for them, the institution of greatness that they had experienced. They felt that they were good, and they had a lot of pride in Anderson High School, a tremendous amount of pride.

DAW: Where did most of the programs and social events take place at this time?

WCA: Many of them took place on the campus at Anderson. Many of them took place at the Doris Miller Auditorium. Rosewood Park, of course, was also one of the great places for socialization for East Austin. The Friday night band concerts on Rosewood Park, Mr. Joyce would take us every Friday night to play throughout the summer.

DAW: Anderson High School.

WCA: Anderson High School band students would come. The softballs games there and the swimming contests and some of the contest and some of the others, the Juneteenth celebration and all, but the band participated because the band was an integral part of the community.

As a matter of fact, Dr. Williams, we used to march downtown for homecoming week. San Antonio Wheatley would be coming to play, and we would have a parade. We would march from the Capitol down Sixth Street all the way to East Austin, and that was the highlight of the fall season for us. So outstanding band, an outstanding school, and the people felt that when we lost that we lost a great deal that meant so much to our humanity.

DAW: That's interesting. After integration and you became, in essence, a crossover administrator, and yet I don't want to hit a sensitive spot, but could you just tell us the difference between your working as an administrator in East Austin at--was it Kealing?

WCA: Yes. I worked at Anderson.

DAW: At Anderson.

WCA: I was assistant at Anderson.

DAW: What was the difference in your authority there and your authority at Anderson, new Anderson, yet differentiate between old Anderson and new Anderson?

WCA: May I just preface by saying that initially upon the old Anderson closing down, as assistant principal at that time, I was transferred to Lanier High School. Many of the students who lived in the Booker T. Washington units were sent to Lanier, and I knew many of them. So my main role at Lanier was to particularly work with those students that I had previously worked with. Of course, they were hostile because they did not want to go there. And then there was hostility on the other part because many of the youngsters—

DAW: May I ask you a question [unclear]?

WCA: Yes, sir.

DAW: Why were they hostile?

WCA: They were hostile because they felt it was unfair, one-way busing. We're making the sacrifice. We're being taken from our neighborhood to go to a school outside of the neighborhood. So that took a while for them to make that adjustment.

By the same token, the skepticism on the other side, where, not knowing the kids, they were skeptical as well. Because the kids had been stereotyped, as we all have been, and even now, of course. So with that stereotype that they had of here are these students coming in, there were scuffles and conflicts and fights at all of our schools. But then, after a few years, that subsided.

DAW: One thing I've wondered about, although I was [unclear], but I've often wondered, as old Anderson closed, what role did our students play socially and politically, in the other schools? Did they work on the year books and newspapers and thing like that? What happened to that kind of thing?

WCA: Well, initially, the district had human relations committees on all campuses, student human relations committees, faculty, and parent human relations committees. Initially, of course, the kids felt left out. But after these committees began to work, more and more they would include those youngsters in the various activities. And we had some very smart and aggressive youngsters who would come and articulate their displeasure. Finally it was opened up.

Now, in some instances, because of the popular vote for a student council person, it was difficult for our youngsters to get in. We had to appoint representatives from the various classes as a part of the delegation so that they could be represented. We had quite a difficult time getting youngsters to be cheerleaders because, again, that was up to the sponsor. The grade level had to be fairly high, and the citizenship had to be fairly high. Then, the students were not known by the teachers who were voting on them. So we had to make several adjustments. The school district, I think, did an admirable job of trying to overcome those particular deficiencies. But you have to work through a lot of people.

Sort of like a company saying that, "I want all of the secretaries to be customer-friendly," but if you have a hundred secretaries, some of them are not going to be customer-friendly. Such was the case with our schools. Some of our teachers were not as open as they should have been. Some of our administrators were not. They had not been accustomed to working with minority youngsters, most especially African-American youngsters. Of course, they had some anxiety and they felt like the youngsters were not well equipped to learn. They felt like the youngsters did not have the social skills to be a part of the organizations. So we had to work through those feelings, and that took a while to work through that situation.

I've lamented over the years. I know how important it is for youngsters to feel that they're a part so they can be a part of the cheerleaders, they can be a part of the student council, they can be in other organizations, they can be a part of the National Honor Society. Well, initially administrators and teacher have to really work at making that happen. As a principal of Anderson High School, I had that problem. That was a great dilemma for me, being an African-American principal, because the sentiment in West Austin at that time was, "Let's give him a chance, but let's scrutinize him and let's watch him very closely."

When there was a scuffle on the campus, they would feel like I needed to discipline maybe the African-American youngster without disciplining the other youngster. We finally was able to convince them that when you have an altercation of that sort, then it takes two to tango, so to speak, so it must have been something that gave rise to that. So what we started doing was suspending both. Then when we would bring them back with their parents, then let's talk through it as to the cause and try to keep it from happening again.

I was under heavy fire and criticism because of that, but finally some sense of fairness prevailed, but only after much work on the part of the community, both sides.

We had some excellent persons that were of assistance to me as a principal coming from the community. Dr. and Mrs. Earl Marshall, I want to call their names, because they were the stalwarts. Their three youngsters came through Anderson while I was there.

Then Councilman [Jimmy] Snell. He was a city councilman at that time, when these youngsters came through, and they were very supportive.

Mr. Lawrence Brown, Mr. Brown was an employee at the IRS. He and his wife were just always there.

Then there were many ministers from the community that came to our rescue when there were major conflicts on campuses. That ministerial group, Reverend Reed, who was part of that. I wanted to call his name off. Reverend O.S. Davis, an old gentleman. Mr. Schuler [phonetic], Mr. Walter Schuler, he had a daughter there at the school. But these were some African-American community persons who came in to support and to work with the parents.

And we had parents on the other side. We had some ministers from the churches out there. One United Methodist minister, Jerry J. Smith, he was at Northwest Hills United Methodist Church, his son came through Anderson, Andy. He's a minister now, by the way, and we're proud of them. But he and Reverend Hereholtzer [phonetic], who was over at St. John's Church came. And there was a gentleman right at the Hillcrest Baptist Church that came in to be of assistance. Then Mr. John Scurlock [phonetic], who was a banker at that time. Mr. C.W. Heatherly [phonetic] was a construction magnate, so to speak, came in to be of assistance to me. A Southwestern Bell executive came in, Mr. Hanel [phonetic], Bill Hanel and his wife, the PTA presidents and so forth.

So finally, after about three years of working and conflict resolution, we were able to settle down and be a good school. It's a good school now. I think you have to go through those growing pains, and schools are having to do that now. You need to get your parents working with you, and sometimes that's difficult.

Students come in. Sometimes they're not the resources because of their background, no fault of theirs. Circumstances will cause them to be a little behind because of not being exposed, maybe, to the libraries or to reading or being exposed to some of the field trips necessary. So we have to try to work through that so that we can bring those youngsters on level, so to speak. But it's a never-ending quest that we must work with parents and young people to try to lift them so that they can be ready for the next level.

The competition, as you know, is so keen now. Our youngsters have to be able to produce. The powers-that-be, the big magnates from the corporate world, they feel like since we've been desegregated a certain number of years, you ought to be ready now. They don't see the fact that some of the problems that existed ten years ago or fifteen still exist now. So we have to work through that.

Going back to the question you mentioned, I mentioned my major role at Lanier, where they wanted surely for me to work with the African-American youngsters to help them and to try to keep the conflicts down and so forth, and I did that. But in the meantime, I also had the

opportunity to work with the Anglo youngsters and to meet them as well and to try to get those youngsters to reach some common ground, to at least know each other.

So I think that was a great benefit to me and an opportunity for me to meet Anglo youngsters, then to find out that kids are pretty much the same wherever they are. They need the nurturing, they need the love, they need the discipline, they need somebody to talk to. I found that that's the case even now.

So when you place them all together, there aren't many differences between youngsters because they all seek the same thing. Of course, it's important for us to try to give that and to supply that. Then when I went to Anderson as a principal, excited I was because I always wanted to be a high school principal. There were some people who came along with me to assist me who helped me get through that. My assistant principals, my secretaries, and they were personal friends of mine for the most part, and they had the same feeling toward education that I have, and I was able to survive it for almost ten years there because of those kind of people with whom I had to work.

DAW: There were two other steps that you made, too. Don't be too modest. There were two other steps that you made, too. Tell us about that. From principal?

WCA: Oh, well after that, yes, sir, I was fortunate. Dr. H. [Hobart] L. Gaines had been a great friend of mine, who had been the assistant principal at Anderson High School, started a football officiating chapter, and I wanted to be a part of that, and he chose me. He kind of took us up in his wings to help us, encouraged us to go to school to get a master's, and encouraged us to get the administrative certification. I want to encourage young people to do that now. If there's an opportunity to go on to graduate school, we want you to do that. Difficult though it might be, persevere and do it.

Dr. Gaines was a great friend and a great school man. Anyway, he became the first assistant superintendent in Austin for human relations, and he was the best selection that could have been made. We called him the boss man. The kids called him Big Daddy. All those names were befitting. He could stop the conflicts, the fights and so forth, and he knew how to talk with youngsters and with parents. He could be tough when he needed to be, but he had a tenderness about him that we found out about. But he's a great fellow.

Upon his retirement, after being at Anderson almost ten years I would have completed the tenth year but I was able to go to the central office and be an assistant superintendent, his successor. That was a good opportunity for me to learn further. The then-superintendent that brought me in was Dr. John Ellis, and he had a reputation of being very fiery and very aggressive but a good school person, and we were able to accomplish much during that time.

But then I had a chance to work with, I guess, seven superintendents since that time and I became an associate superintendent under Dr. Terry Bishop and remained in that capacity through our present superintendent, Dr. Forgione.

A lot of the work in central administration that I was asked to do had to do with being a liaison in human relations, going into communities to work with communities and parents to try to see if we couldn't work better together. Sometimes there would be some hostility because of an issue. I'd try to work through that issue.

Then, to make the connection between the school district and the community agencies, I was lucky enough to be a part of the first Adopt-A-School program. That was assigned to me to work with the Chamber of Commerce, and the person who was our director reported to me. And then,

the Keep Austin Beautiful, another connection with the City of Austin. The Junior Achievement Program, another connection with a community agency and the school district. The Urban League, another connection with the churches which I enjoyed doing very much.

During the central office reign, I had an opportunity to work as assistant superintendent for business affairs, which would include the finance, construction management, food service, and transportation, that end of it. Then I got a chance to work with the--I wasn't in curriculum either of those times. It was always community-related or business-related, which turned out to be a kind of perfect fit for me and what skills I had.

But you get a lot of help from a whole lot of people, and I want to say that. I say to youngsters, you don't make strides without getting some assistance. We stand on a lot of shoulders. You and I were talking earlier today about James Farmer and all the work done by those patriots is the reason why we have city managers and mayors of cities now, because these persons paved the way.

DAW: Some of those are from old Anderson.

WCA: Some of those are old Anderson. So we're proud of the work done. I want to say this about old Anderson, there was a pride generated that if you were from Anderson High School, you were from a good high school. Now, you may have been a C student, but you were from Anderson High School and you were from a good school. So that--that was a tremendous amount of pride.

DAW: And then, Dr. Akins, and wrapping this up finally, two questions I want to ask you, number one, is, can you name some of the outstanding individuals who were students at Anderson High School, who went on to high acclaim? And then, tell us, lastly, what happened in your life as a crowning achievement to your education program approximately a year ago?

WCA: Dr. Williams, I'm so proud of a former classmate of mine, Dr. Charles Early, who became a city councilman for the City of Austin and who is an outstanding young man, Huston-Tillotson College graduate, Anderson High School graduate—

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

WCA: --speak highly of all the time is now the tax assessor for Travis County, Miss Melda Wells Spears [phonetic]. One of the brightest architects in our city came through Anderson High School. He's now the president of the BLGY Company, Mr. Bennie Hawkins [phonetic]. Sterling, outstanding people.

Our present city councilman is a graduate of Anderson High School, Councilman Danny Thomas [phonetic]. So really we've been taking our place. One of the great United Methodist preachers, and I love to hear him preach even now, although he's near retirement, Reverend Zan Wesley Holmes [phonetic], who is a minister in the Dallas area, former legislator, and presently a professor at SMU came through Anderson High School.

There was several--Dr. Bennie Hammond, a Ph.D. and doctor of dentistry, who teaches at the University of Pennsylvania, who came through Anderson High School. I can't call them all. Those were just some of them that I've been associated with, but there's so many others. We're proud of them. Dr. and Mrs. Gerald Marshall, an Anderson High School graduate. I just want to say [unclear]. Dr. John King, former president here, an Anderson High School graduate. So we

have so many that we can be proud of, persons who have taken their place in the community, who are just stalwarts and great community patrons and citizens of the world.

DAW: There were also some great athletes [unclear].

WCA: Oh, yes, and of course, not long ago they had a book signing for Nightrain Lane [phonetic], who was a great pro. Then there was some of the others who--Brady Keys [phonetic], a young man who played professional ball, I think, with the Pittsburgh Pirates, I believe. And then there were several others who were outstanding. Of course, Mr. Lonnie Jackson was one of the outstanding coaches here, a graduate of Anderson High School. He was on our coaching staff at Anderson and then became an administrator. But he, too, was a great--and just a great person. We have those graduates out there that our chest comes out, and we're proud of them. But that's what Austin is about. Austin, I think, is about achieving. Austin is about making sure that the people who we serve, whether they are adults or children, are served in the very best manner possible because of the inspiration they receive from the L.E. Frasier and the W.B. Campbells and the B.L. Joyces.

Dr. James Hill, who is the vice president of the University of Texas at Austin, is an Anderson High School graduate and also a graduate of Huston-Tillotson, one of the early doctoral students from UT, and now when I look at one of the programs from the University of Texas I see his picture, and it makes us all proud. And then there are others that we could talk about.

Now, the other thing that you mentioned, the other question, at a school board meeting, and I can remember it was April the 13th on a school board night, 1998, to my surprise the school board nominated and approved the naming of a new high school in my honor. That was a great surprise, but it was a great humbling, a great feeling of accomplishment that I'll always remember, and it's been so good for my family. I never thought that that would happen. In the quest at Anderson High School, both Andersons, and all of the adversity that you go through at the time, you never know that the result of people's sentiment of appreciating your efforts it would come to that, but I'm grateful for that, the W.C. Akins High School.

DAW: We're very proud of you.

Thank you, Dr. Akins, for coming and sharing with us these memories, and I'm sure as people view this and listen, they will learn quite a bit, and the admiration that we have for you will always grow, and the other people will come to know why we admire you so. Thank you for coming.

WCA: Dr. Williams, thank you very much for allowing me to share and my compliments to you for putting this project on. It's really a great, great project that will be here for many years to come for people to enjoy and to learn from.

[End of interview]