

Interview with Mr. James "Coach" Wilson

Date: May 16, 2001

Interviewed by Dr. Rosalee Martin

RM: Would you tell us who you are, please?

JW: I'm James Wilson. I currently serve as the athletic director and associate professor in physical education, Huston-Tillotson College.

RM: Thank you so much. I've asked you to come for this interview so that we can talk about life during the fifties, especially in the area of education. Would you tell us where you were, what schools you attended?

JW: In the fifties I was attending high school at [L.C.] Anderson High School. That was the old Anderson High School that was located on Pennsylvania and Comal [phonetic] at the time. The area has since been rearranged, and, of course, the houses and so forth that existed are now part of the school ground of the Kealing Junior High School. But I was graduated from Anderson High School, where I participated in basketball, participated as a member of the dance group, as being one of the fellows who would hold up the young ladies as they twirled and so forth. In the parades that we would have, I served as the clown, as I was pretty good with gymnastics.

RM: Talk more about curriculum at Anderson High School and extracurricular activities.

JW: Well, I guess we had the basic curriculum, which dealt with English and your sciences and your math. You had physical education, of course. It was required that you took physical education during that time. We were required to dress out in the physical education area. We had very good teachers. We had parents who respected the teachers. We had teachers who lived in the neighborhood and would often see your parents or someone in the neighborhood and tell them about your actions at school, if you misrepresented the home there or what have you. So we were close-knit. Of course, everyone kind of wanted to do well as students going to school at that time.

RM: You talked about the teachers and the parents living in the same community. How did that really influence you in terms of wanting to learn?

JW: Well, all around the neighborhood there were teachers, so you saw that teacher, and of course you wouldn't be out in the street just playing, knowing that you had assignments that you had to turn in or to have a report due or something like this, because they would see you. So you would work on that assignment that you had.

But you had help from the parents because the parents were very much interested in your going to school, because they didn't have the same opportunity that we had. I think my parents went as far as the third grade because of their living conditions. They were from the country, and most of the times they worked in the fields until late, and they would go to school, and when it was time to go back into the fields to pick pecans or whatever they had to do, they did that. But they never wanted us to miss school. So if it were raining, if it were snowing, whatever, we had to go to school.

Of course, we walked, because we lived within a radius of the school that was no more than about five or six blocks, and of course we walked to school every day. We didn't have a bus nor did we have the car to take us because our parents were going to work. There were times that we would be dropped off at school if the weather was real bad or something like this.

RM: And you're talking about segregated schools?

JW: Yes. That was separate schools. The two schools in Austin at that time when I was a student was Anderson High and Austin High [School]. Of course, Austin High School was for the whites and Hispanics, and Anderson High School was for blacks. So we didn't have any contact with them through activities, through sports or anything like this.

The only time that we were able to probably be in competition with them was on weekends when we would go out to the university to Intramural Field. Right now it's the field with the parking lots and the dormitories, but there was the old Intramural Field, where we'd go out on Sunday evenings or Saturday evenings and play football. We could do that and have no problem. We got along well in doing so. We had a good community of participants that would get together and go out, and we would play against UT [University of Texas at Austin].

RM: So would you say that the resources you had at your school, Anderson High, were they equivalent to those that they had at Austin High?

JW: I never entered Austin High, the school. I never went in there, but I know that we didn't have the same equipment that they had. Our books seemed a little old, and we saw some names in them that were not surnames of blacks, you know. So I imagine some of the books that were used at Austin High eventually came down to Anderson High.

We had teachers that were interested in you. At that time corporal punishment was in use, and, of course, they would send you to the coach, and they knew your parents. The coaches there would drive around at night. You had a curfew if you were on the team, and they would drive the streets at night, those that were available to us. Because we stayed on this side of I-35, with the exception of the group that stayed out in St. John's or at Clarksville.

Now, Clarksville was located on the west side of town, where Mocpac [phonetic] is located now, just east of there. The kids there had to be bused to Anderson High School, and the kids from St. John's had to be bused, and the kids from Creedmoor, which is out Lockhart Highway, were bused into school, but they had to be bused because that was the only school for blacks. So they passed the high schools coming in to Anderson.

RM: So are you saying all your elementary, junior high, high school education was actually in segregated schools?

JW: All were segregated. They had about five or six elementary schools at that time because that's been some years back, when I was in school. So we had about five elementary schools throughout the city. From there, there was one junior high school, and that was Kealing. So once you left elementary school, you came to Kealing, and from Kealing you went to Anderson. Now, Kealing is in that same area, but they took on the land that was vacated by Anderson because Anderson, in the year 1953, left its old location to go out to another area that had more land, and they had a football field there.

RM: So the new Anderson is actually the third location of the school named Anderson High.

JW: Right. L.C. Anderson was the person for whom the school was named. While I was there, Mr. W.B. Campbell served as the principal, and his daughter taught here at Huston-Tillotson College. Then they moved from there. I was a member of that last graduating class to be at the

old Anderson. We were graduated from there, and we were the first class to march from the new Anderson. We used the gymnasium for the baccalaureate and commencement exercises.

RM: So we're not talking about the new Anderson now?

JW: Not the one that's located on Mesa.

RM: Okay.

JW: When integration came about, they closed the old Anderson and made it sort of an area for the community to come in and have recreation. So volleyball and so forth was used there for the gyms, and I think later on the Austin Community College used it as an ACC site for classes to be offered. But they closed that school and they went to the new Anderson, which is located on Mesa.

RM: How would you describe life during that time in terms of the major institutions, family, church? You talked some about the schools. How would you discuss and define how life was?

JW: Well, as far as the churches were concerned, most churches were in walking distance. They were community churches. They served a community. We had far fewer churches than we have now. You would have some to crop up every once in a while, but they were community. You could walk to church.

Rosewood Projects served several of the churches because it was completely black projects, you know, subsidized by the government. But Mt. Calvary was around, Greater Mt. Zion was around, up on the hill Mt. Olive was there. So you didn't have a lot of churches around. Pilgrims Rest was up the street there, so you didn't have a lot of churches. So the people could walk to those churches, because everybody didn't have cars anyway.

The bus was our means of travel. But just as you know about Rosa Parks, when we got on that bus to go to wherever we had to go, whether it was work, to church, or to town, the back entrance, the door where you exit, from there back basically is where the blacks sat.

Of course, we knew the people who drove the bus, and sometimes if no one was on the bus if we were going across town, maybe at the university to do work, then, of course, we could sit up close to the front, but, now, if anyone came on the bus, we'd have to move on back to the back. I guess it was something that we accepted because it was all we knew.

RM: So the church was also a pivotal place for a community to center around, along with the school?

JW: Yes, and probably that was your best place for visiting people who were not in your immediate neighborhood, as both parents usually worked. The ladies, for the most part, had domestic work that they did. Of course, they had to come home and try to prepare for the family. If you had older sisters or something like this, of course, they could help.

But we stayed in the neighborhood. We basically had curfews. We usually had to be in no later than nine or ten o'clock, according to your age. But you didn't go anywhere without permission, basically, in our neighborhood. You didn't go anywhere without permission. And if your parents were away, then anybody in the neighborhood could reprimand you for what you did without, you know, the parent coming home and getting on them or anything like this.

When they came home, it was reinforced, what they said, and they would feel that you were probably making the family look bad by what actions you took. So the parent would take care of you, whichever one was there. Then if it were the mom who was there, then when the father came home, then he was told, and maybe we couldn't go to the movie next week or something like that.

Movies were cheap. As a youngster, I only had to pay a nickel to go to the movie. Eventually, they moved up to nine cents, I believe, and I thought they were trying to break us then. [Laughter]

RM: Let's move you to no longer a student in the public school system, but graduated. What did you do then?

JW: As a high-schooler, I played basketball for the college. I was not able to play football because my parents were afraid, as I had had surgery early on, that I would tear stitches. So I played basketball and won a scholarship to Huston-Tillotson. As a matter of fact, I had a scholarship to several schools, but chose Huston-Tillotson because it was home and I knew people here. I knew that I wouldn't be hungry because I could always go home.

I enrolled at Huston-Tillotson College and played ball here, and that kind of helped take care of my tuition and fees and so forth. Because I stayed in the city, I didn't have room and board. I had a full scholarship offered, but the president at that time said he felt that every student should make a contribution to his education, and so we had to pay a minimal amount to go to school, which was only \$12.50 a semester. So that was the first year.

Then my coach asked me thereafter if I would pay a little more where he could bring in some more athletes, and I agreed because I was in Austin and could find work, and I would save my money and pay off my tuition when I came to school at the beginning of the year.

RM: Did you become a teacher?

JW: I have always wanted to be a teacher. As a youngster growing up, our neighborhood was filled with youngsters about my age, so we would play school between the houses. With my having older brothers and sisters, I had to call out the spelling words and this type of thing to them. So I kind of felt that I wanted to be a teacher, and that's what I pursued once I got to college.

Upon graduating from Huston-Tillotson, I took a job in Smithville Independent School District as a teacher and realized that I wasn't as smart as what I thought I was. My first day in the classroom, I didn't do my lesson plan as I should have, and I ran out of knowledge there after about ten or fifteen minutes. So then we introduced ourselves to kind of know what each had done, what their hobbies were and this type of thing. But the next day at school I went home and prepared and realized at the end of the day that I did not even complete my work plan that I had.

So I taught there for three years, and it was a very, very rewarding experience in that I had students who were very, very smart. One young man served during the hurricane season, and he was only an eighth grader, but he could work the Morse Code and so forth and kept Austin in touch with the people on the coast about the hurricane and what it was doing and so forth.

And then I had students who were unable, really, to spell their own names. They, too, had a lifestyle something like my parents. They worked, being in the rural, in the cotton fields probably

until late October, and then they would go back in December and begin to pick up pecans in the bottom and so forth. Many times they would miss school to go ply in the fields for our counterparts. So I saw that that was a real need, to visit in the neighborhoods, and I did this, to meet the parents and let them know that there was a better life if those kids were to stay in school and do their work.

RM: Did you ever teach after desegregation?

JW: Not in a desegregated school. When I was in Smithville teaching, there was the colored school, as it was called, and the white school. So all the teachers there were black in our school; all the teachers there were white. The superintendent there even taught the biology course, and that's what I taught, biology. Sometimes he would come and visit, and, of course, the principal there would want him to go and visit all the teachers. So he'd come and question some of my students.

RM: I want to bring you to the present and looking back at those experiences that you experienced in desegregation and look at integration and what integration has done for our young people, both positive and negative.

JW: On the positive side, probably you were exposed a little more to better equipment, better facilities. You were in the same classroom environment as those that you would compete against possibly for higher education. So you kind of had an idea about what was going on.

On the negative side, I think probably because you lost that sense of community in having to go across town or something like this, the parents were no longer able to communicate with your teacher. I don't know, and I just can't say this for real, is that how much they really cared about you learning. Because as I visited my wife when she taught, a lot of times I saw those kids in the hall when I would go by to visit, and there's not much you can learn from yourself sitting in the hall. So if someone would try to counsel them and even visit the parents—and that's one thing about the church, if that community was still there, then this could be brought up in the church through some ministry, that you could have that ministry where kids not being able to get along or understand what this person is saying to them. I don't know if they had any fears or anything like this or that this person—because they weren't used to seeing it because they were all in one area, basically.

When you went to the stores, then you saw the white person because they had stores in your community, for the most part. But I think once you're educated, then it kind of helps to do away with ignorance. You learn that people are not what you were told they were, and all people are not bad and all people don't mean you well, you know. So you just have to decipher for yourself what the outcome is going to be.

But I didn't have a lot of problems while in school because I worked. Of course, if you are educated, as I said a few minutes ago, then you've got something that they'll listen to. If your grammar's correct or something like this, they feel that you have just as much education as they, and they can listen.

RM: "Them" meaning—

JW: The white—our counterparts.

RM: Finally, do you have any reflections, any recommendations, or advice in terms of how we can continue to provide for our young people that sense of community, that sense of the importance of education?

JW: I think we have to look at it from two angles. One angle would be that that teacher-pupil relationship has to be one that we cherish and one that we should not fear. We need help, probably, from the parents. Along with the parents, somehow it should go to the church, because that's where you have your greatest audience of blacks, is in the church. It just should be stressed to them that there is a better life than what you can live, and everything that comes easy is not going to be as rewarding as that that you have to work for.

I think that we, as leaders, as teachers, have to realize that the influence that we offer, if it's sort of from a supervisory point of view, then it won't be as influential as that as if it's a relational type of influence, that "I do this because the teacher means well for me. They want me to do good. They want me to achieve." But now, if they do it just because you're a supervisor, then I would think it wouldn't be the best influence. If you can develop a relationship, if we can develop a relationship with those students, our students, no matter what their race, then I think that they would be willing to do whatever it takes to please you, because they would want to maintain that type of relationship with you.

RM: Finally—I said that before—but are there any things that you think that you'd like to add to this discussion, any areas perhaps we have missed or overlooked? We're really looking at the experience of segregated areas, East Austin specifically, how we crossed over to desegregation and integration. Anything else around that you would like to add?

JW: I'm not familiar with anything, probably, that we'd need to do, but I would say that as we grew up, there was one playground that we could go to, and that was Rosewood Park. As I mentioned to you earlier on, I worked in the east district, which is made up several neighborhood playgrounds, and was the first black to cross that line. But all other playgrounds were in the Rosewood District, no matter where they were located, if the population was black. So we had to cross many playgrounds to get to a Rosewood playground, and if you were a member of that district, then whenever you had meetings or whenever you had competition, you passed several other playgrounds just to get to your area. I think once we got the playgrounds integrated, then I think that that made for a better relationship among the whites and the blacks.

I think that athletics have played a very strong part in that. I would think, though, that as we talk to our students and as I talk to them in my classroom, that it's slim pickings as far as going on to the NBA [National Basketball Association], to the NFL [National Football League], to the major league baseball. I mention to them that it's better that you try to do your work where you can fall back on something, because if you are what you call a star athlete and you just tear a ligament in your knee or the rotator cup in your arm, then you're finished unless you have something to fall back on. Education is something that you can always fall back on. Where you can pull a muscle or hamstring or something like this in the leg. you don't pull muscles in the brain. If you've got it, it'll stay with you. Of course, that may be the key to your success.

Then I would say that you don't have too big an ego, that you trust in God and remain faithful to Him, and He'll see you through. The fellow told me once about ego, he said that that ego sometimes gets in our way. He just defined it as "easing God out," and when you do that, of course, if you ease Him out, then you're on your own and you don't have any source then. Everything He's saying, you possibly know, but if someone else is feeding you, then, of course, you get the benefit of what they know as well.

RM: Thank you so much. I appreciate you coming and sharing with us.

JW: Thank you. I was happy to be a part of the conversation. **[Tape recorder turned off.]**

RM: Would you tell me a little bit about just how living here, in terms of going to the store, shopping, were the stores segregated as well?

JW: In your neighborhoods, you knew the person who owned the store if this were a grocery store or anything like this. Many times, if you didn't have the money, you could go and tell them that you need this, and they would let you have it because they knew that they would be paid later on about it. Even during the time of the war when they had the rationing on certain items, if you had been that person in the neighborhood that was very respectful and mannerable and so forth, then sometimes you got a few perks.

But, now, if you were to go to town—when we say downtown, like downtown Austin and that—then if you wanted to try on some garments, you couldn't do that. If you were, say, at Scarborough's, you needed to measure your head before going down there if you wanted to put on a hat. You couldn't try it on. If you wanted to buy shoes, you needed to know your shoe size because you couldn't try them on to see how they felt.

So you could work there as a porter, and they had an eating place at the basement, but if you worked there as a porter, you had to leave and go on "deep six," is what they called it, about four blocks down where there were black establishments, eating establishments, to eat. So everybody who worked in town, then downtown, would walk down there during the lunch hour to eat. So you couldn't eat in the place where you worked.

I remember having worked at Reynolds Spendlin [phonetic], and there was this young man named—I won't call his full name, but his name was Charlie—and we were in different schools, but at the same classification. I called him one day, was talking with him, and the lady who was one of the workers in there, and probably the senior worker there, told me I needed to call him "Mister." So I didn't answer her, but I just hadn't planned to call him Mister. So what I would do is wouldn't say anything to him other than just starting a conversation instead of calling his name and addressing him this way.

But even if you were to go to a place like Kress or to Woolworth's during that day, you could order, but you had to go to the end of the counter to get your order. But if someone else came in and ordered that was white, then your order just got pushed back until they had the time to fix yours.

Even as an instructor here at the college, when we would go to a meeting, say, in Arkansas or Mississippi or something like this and we stopped along the way, we had occasions where we would drive up at a drive-through window to ask for some burgers to go, and they told us we had to come to the back. So we had to go park our car and walk around to the back and order, you know, where they take the garbage and stuff out in the back, from there, to receive this stuff.

So those were some of the things that we went through as blacks. Of course, traveling through the South with athletic teams, many —

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

JW: —fountains where we saw "White Only," and of course, it was ice water, refrigerated, and they had a little faucet for us, a little hydrant in some places, and then they had the little bowl, but it was just regular tap water.

On one occasion, I guess I had gotten a little brave, and I just told them that we were filling up, and I just told them, Well, I don't need any more gas," and I think we ended up paying about seventeen or eighteen cents because there wasn't much had pumped in there, but we could not drink water with the exception of using a cup, and the cup was one that looked like it had been around a mechanic's shop where you throw the bolts in it. It just had gotten greasy and dirty and so forth like this, so we just refused to do it.

I went to the next service station and ask them if—this was soon after integration, but some were still asking you to use the cup or what have you.

You didn't use restrooms. The restroom was "White Women," "White Men," and "Colored." It was late one night, we were returning from Jackson, Mississippi, and we stopped at some place in Louisiana, and it was like the morning hours, like 1:30, and this was an all-night station. So the fellows ran to the restrooms, and they just started using them all.

The man was pumping the gas, and he saw that, and he stopped pumping the gas, and he said, "I thought you said you were a college. Undoubted you're not, because you can't read. You have to come out of here."

So I apologized to him. The fellows were young, the athletes, and they wanted to create a little stink, but I didn't want them to do that because we were on foreign land. So we paid him, and we headed to the state line as quickly as we could get there, because we saw him get on the phone as we pulled out. So I don't know if he was calling the sheriff or what have you.

I've had tremendous experiences as we traveled with the teams. We've gone in places after integration had taken place just to buy some chips or something, and they didn't sell them, you know, but you could see the racks of them all over. But that was some of the things that happened with your shopping. You would just have to kind of know your size and this type of thing. Eventually it got to the place where you could.

Even in the hotels, we left to go play teams and we stayed in their gymnasiums. They'd get these Army cots, and they would put them there, and that's where you slept, because they didn't have the hotels that would accommodate the blacks, of course.

As you traveled, you would go to maybe a black neighborhood and you would want to find a place to eat, they wouldn't have enough food for you because you were traveling with seventeen or eighteen people and they were used to the regular persons who came each day to eat. And then, if they came, they wouldn't feed you immediately because they knew that we were just passing through, we were more or less transients, so they were going to feed the group that they knew were going to be back the next day to pay.

So many times we had to leave to go to a place, adding maybe a couple of hours for eating along with the time that it should take us to get there and finding a place to eat. But usually you were going to have to order from the back or you would have to have the school fix sandwiches, and you'd have sandwiches until you could get to the place where you were going.

The very first time that we had a very good experience that I can remember, we went to Jacksonville. Well, we stopped at Jacksonville [Texas] to eat, and it was early morning, and we were going to Little Rock [Arkansas]. I asked a black gentleman if there was a place to eat, and he pointed up to this place, and it was Satler's [phonetic] that's in Jacksonville. I drove up there, and I saw the place being a place like Luby's or something like this, and I said, "I don't know. I don't want to be the pioneer and get these people in trouble that I'm carrying to this game." So I drove around the corner, and I stopped at a service station, and I asked the white gentleman if there was a place where we could get breakfast, and he pointed to Satler's, of course, and then I drove on in. We ate as a team, and they were very nice.

Same thing happened in Jackson, Mississippi. We had been staying in a place when we would go there if they had the rooms, a little hotel that had different-colored doors. It was sort of like a psychedelic hotel with purple doors here, yellow doors here, orange doors here, blue doors here, red doors. So we would take some five or six rooms. Then we eventually got to stay in—the name of the one here at First Street.

RM: Sheraton?

JW: Sheraton. It was a Sheraton where we got a chance to stay in. I kind of called back to the school just to make sure that we were supposed to stay there, because it was something that we were not accustomed to. But things after a while really got better. As I said earlier, it's probably the results of athletics and the people bringing pride to your school through winning and so forth like this.

RM: Good. Thank you. It's real interesting. I'd like to sit with you again sometime.

JW: I stayed in a sort of an abandoned dormitory, and, of course, they had those rooms there that we had to bring our own sheets and pillows and so forth. We left there one day going to Holly Springs, Mississippi, where Rust College was located and Mississippi Industrial [College]. I stopped in Memphis [Tennessee] and bought the little pints of lemonade and orange juice, orange drink. They were only ten cent, five cent for the small ones. So we brought enough of it to just have something to drink as we drove along, because it wasn't going to be easy to stop at a store and go in there and buy and feel comfortable.

Somewhere in Mississippi, we got pulled over. We traveled in station wagons. So they said, "Coach, the trail car has been stopped by the Highway Department."

So I turned around and I went back. I asked the highway patrolman if anything was wrong. He said I needed to stay out of this. I told him that these were members of my basketball team and that we were en route to Holly Springs, Mississippi, to play a game.

He said, "This boy was speeding, and he almost ran a white lady off the road in a white car." I said, "Sir, the only cars that have been on the road today were this car that you've stopped here and the white car that I'm in there, and they were trailing me along with those trucks," because, you know, it was like this. I said, "So now, if I would pass a truck, I would wait on him, and then when he got around the truck, then I would pull back out." I said, "But there have not been any other cars on the highway."

So he said, "Well, he was running across that white line. They were throwing beer cans out the window."

I said, "Sir, we don't allow that nor do we speed, because I'm responsible for their lives." I said, "I did stop in Memphis and buy some orange drinks and some lemonade."

And you looked in the car, and all on the floor you could see all of these cartons. But he had to find some reason to try to intimidate them.

So he said, "Well, he was crossing that white line."

So I said, "Oh, my."

So he put him in the car, handcuffed him and put him in the car, George, who was driving the other car, and he went back over a little side road here that ran along the highway, just a dirt road, kind of red clay-looking stuff, and was going much faster than the speed limit. So I just had to kind of keep up with the dust. I followed the dust and followed where he was. He ended up on the countryside out here where a man had a house, unpainted, but was the Justice of the Peace and was out at that time in his yard feeding chickens, feeding the guinea. I guess you know what a guinea is. A guinea's a cross between a turkey and a chicken, and they're just like watchdogs. They make all of this noise when [unclear]. He had pigs walking around loose in the yard, had a cow over there by the fence, and he just kept feeding.

He said, "This boy was speeding."

I said, "Sir," I said, "we didn't speed." I said, "I was leading, and I'm not going to speed, because I'm responsible for these athletes."

He said, "Well, he was running across this white line." He said, "Teach this boy how to drive in Mississippi." He said, "That'll be \$62.50."

Our budget for meals at that time, because, as I said earlier, it was back in the day, was only a dollar and a quarter a meal, but he wanted \$62.50.

So I said, "Sir, is there any way possible that you could cut the price down some? Because we're on tour now. We've got to go to the other school." We would leave Holly Springs and go to Tupelo and from there to Dillard.

He never looked at me. He looked at George and said, "Boy, are you going to pay that fine?" He said, "If you don't," he said, "I'm going to put your behind," he didn't say that, "in jail." He said, "And I'm going to tie the key around a rabbit's neck, and I'm going to shoot at it." So he was telling George that he wouldn't get out of jail for a while.

So George told me, he said, "Coach, can you pay him?" And I paid him.

When we got to the next place, which was Holly Springs, I called back to Huston-Tillotson and talked with Mr. Bailey, who at that time was the accountant here and told him we needed more money and what had happened. Of course, at that time my wife was working at UT in the English department, and Dr. Kline [phonetic] was the chairman of the Division of English, or whatever it was there. He and [Senator and thirty-sixth President] Lyndon Baines Johnson were good friends, so he could call him. He asked if we wanted him to call him. I told him no—they had some kind of three-way hookup—that we had to be in this area for another three or four days, and I didn't want anything that would make anybody in that neighborhood suspicious of us being there.

So when we finally got back—George wouldn't drive anymore in Mississippi nor in Louisiana. When we got back to Texas, he would drive then. We had to drive ourselves. We couldn't travel by bus. We didn't have the budget to do that or anything. But that was an experience that we had, as well, while traveling.

And as I talk about these to people, this is when people say, "Could I sit down with you and write the book," or something like that.

RM: Thank you again.

JW: I guess my upbringing didn't allow me to hate people. You know, we were brought up in the church. I was always in and out of the minister's house, and our families, the families in the neighborhood, all were church-going people. And I find it very hard even now to really wish anyone ill. So no matter what you do, I just think that's something that the Lord eventually will take care of. So I don't hold grudges too much. I don't forget that you did something or said something, but I don't hold it against you. I would be just as nice to you as I would otherwise.

I guess because of my demeanor, I was well respected as a youngster in high school, as a teacher, as a supervisor, you know, as I went along. Right now I serve as sort of a commissioner for the interparochial softball leagues, basketball leagues, volleyball, soccer, and most of those that are involved with the participation are, you know, the whites. There are blacks that are in those schools, but it's a majority white, very majority white. They use our students here rather than UT students, for the most part, because they say that we seem to be more interested in the kids learning and we take time to tell them what they're doing wrong or what they're doing right or what have you. So I don't have any animosity or anything.

RM: We could do this again sometime. It would be a great series.

JW: I have been a first in the city of Austin in a lot of things. I mentioned that I was the first to move into another area of the playgrounds as the playground leader, the first black outside of the Rosewood District. Then they have the city league basketball, and I was approached by them having seen me on television talking about the teams and so forth, to play with one of their teams. So I played with one of their teams, and I was the first black there, and then we later picked up L.D. Washington and James Johnson. Those are the only ones I remember during our era that played in an integrated league there. A lot of the people that were playing were the coaches from the different high schools and some of the principals, it was just sort of an older group of participants having good fun and recreation. I eventually became the supervisor, assistant supervisor of all the playgrounds in the city of Austin, and I think that's because I was able to get along with all people.

RM: What a major change from the kids only being able to go to one playground to an African-American then supervising all playgrounds.

JW: I had a young man who worked at Metz playground, who was white, who was attending the University of Texas, but he was from El Campo [Texas]. When I called the meetings and we met, and, of course, it was integrated and very few blacks, and I was in charge, and he really gave me a stern look. About the middle of the season we had a party and got together, just all the playground people. He said, "Mr. Wilson," he said, "I'd like for you to know something." He said, "I didn't like you when I first saw you, because I'm not used to a black being my boss." He said, "I'm from El Campo, and, of course, that's a little rural area, and there are no black bosses there." He said,

"But if I had to work for anyone else," he said, "I'd want them to be just like you. I'd want you to be my boss."

So it was just a change to know that if you treat people right and fairly and you support them because they will—he was with another playground, and I had worked at Civitan. Whenever he played, I would go by and see if he needed help with transportation or I would be there to cheer his team on as they played. He, along with a fellow named Vivien Lee [phonetic], who played for the New Orleans Saints eventually, out of Bastrop [Texas], and went on to Prairie View [A&M University], and I became real, real good friends. We'd go eat together and everything else. But he was just brought out of an environment into a new culture to see that things can go along smoothly if you work at it. I guess it's a matter of your working at things.

That's one of the things that I would like for our students here to kind of really see, that if you prepare yourself in the classroom, basically it's only fifty minutes, if you do your very best for fifty minutes, that you can really be successful. Fifty minutes is not a lot of time, because if you go to the movies, it's going to be longer than that. So it's just a matter of putting out and not trying to fool somebody or not just trying to get by, but to do your very best.

This is how it was as we were students here. You and I could be classmates, and we could go and study together, but when the test came, I wanted to beat you. It was friendly, but I'd see what you had. If you had, say, an eighty-eight and I had eighty-five, I'd say, "Ah, you're going to have to do better. You're trailing now," or something like this. We'd study together after class if we had an assignment. A lot of times it's easier to learn from each other than it is from the teacher, because you have certain fears from the teacher. You may have a question that you'd ask a friend that you'd be afraid to ask the teacher for fear of embarrassment or you'd think that they would say that you ought to know this or something like this.

Well, I appreciate your having asked me to come.

RM: Thank you. Sounds good to me. [Tape recorder turned off.]

JW: to shop, and then they could just get it on their name. They signed a thing, and then when the harvest season came in and they made their sales and so forth, they paid the people then.

He came and he spoke with my wife's class when she was teaching at Andrews Elementary School. I took him there. Then I took him to a place to eat hamburgers. Well, he hadn't been out to eat hamburgers at ninety-five at that time. He died at ninety-eight or ninety-nine, one of the two.

He plowed his own garden. You know, he got behind this little thing and he pushed it, and it was built like this at that end. I don't know what you call it. But he plowed his own rows and so forth.

So I had a tiller. So to save him, I put my tiller in my little pickup and I went out there, and I tilled the soil, and he was amazed just to look at that tiller plow up that ground. But now, he built his own house. We built our own house. We had a carpenter who was kind of—but we built our house. The older generation knew how to make do. They would improvise if they had to.

RM: Like Booker T. Washington.

JW: Yes.

RM: But something has been lost. We keep on talking about the strength of the older generation and your generation and even my generation, but something's been lost between generations of young people.

JW: You probably were told that you had to go to church. And if you don't have God in your life—

RM: A spiritual base.

JW: Yes. You don't have a spiritual base, you sometimes look for the quick dollar. So you tend to—"When I'm older, I won't do this. My parents made me go to church. When I'm older, I won't do it." As you say, with the younger kids—but now, our parents were young when they had us, but there was, I guess, a spiritual base, as you said.

RM: Or maybe a greater support system.

JW: Yes. We just don't have it anymore.

RM: I mean, my kids are doing well, and your kids probably are, but there's still something that's missing when you look at the large population of young people and parents who are just mistreating their kids and who have other priorities than their children.

[End of interview]