# Willie Edwards

## Interview Summary

Interviewee: Willie Edwards

Interviewer: Shantel Hudgins and Alanah Daniels

Interview Date: Tuesday, October 30, 2012

Location: Downing-Gross Cultural Arts Center, Newport News, Virginia

The Interviewee: Mr. Edwards was born in the coal-mining region of West Virginia in 1931. He grew up there in a large family with nine other siblings. In 1950, he joined the National Guard, which marked the beginning of his thirty-year career in the military. Mr. Edwards moved to the Hampton Roads area of Virginia around 1977 and retired as First Sergeant in the Army in 1981. In his retirement, Mr. Edwards taught school at Surry High School and later served as a volunteer coordinator with the United Way's Retired Seniors Volunteer Program.

The Interviewers: Alanah Daniels and Shantel Hudgins are both students attending Christopher Newport University. Alanah Daniels is a senior majoring in Spanish at Christopher Newport University. Shantel Hudgins is a junior majoring in Political Science at Christopher Newport University

Content of the Interview: The interview focuses largely on Mr. Edwards' childhood and his experiences in the military. He describes race relations within that institution, as well as his perceptions of the civil rights movement. Although he was abroad during much of the time that the movement was taking place, he was aware of the changes that it brought. He also discusses his thoughts on the progress and status of African Americans today.

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Length: 1 audio file, Windows Media Player file, approximately 74 minutes

## Start of Recording

SH: This is Shantel Hudgins and my partner is Alanah Daniels. Today is October 30, 2012. We will be interviewing Mr. Edwards. This interview is taking place at the Downing-Gross Cultural Arts Center in Newport News, Virginia. This interview is sponsored by Dr. Laura Puaca, director of the Hampton Roads Oral History Project and professor of history at Christopher Newport University. Good afternoon Mr. Edwards. We will be asking you questions on your life history and we would like to start with your childhood. Where and when were you born?

WE: I was born in Hemphill, West Virginia—McDowell County. I was born to the parents of Aubrey and Aliver Edwards on May 7, 1931. I grew up in the coal-mining area. I graduated from Welch High School ( ). From there, I became involved with the National Guard. I was drafted into the service.

AD: What were race relations like in the town where you grew up? Do you remember any events that galvanized the community?

WE: Other than knowing that there was a boundary between two races of people, a conflict never really arose in my area. There was only one source of income and that was coal mining so, subsequently, we got along well. We realized that there was some

difference in the upbringing of the races of the people we knew and they knew. But we got along pretty well.

SH: Can you describe your childhood? What was your everyday life like?

WE: I had a normal life. I grew up in a family of six boys and three girls. We all had our normal chores. The boys took care of the coal and the wood. The girls took care of the housework. It was typical for growing up in the coal-mining area. Nothing extraordinary, but we survived.

AD: What was your family like? I know you said you had five brothers—

WE: Six brothers and three sisters.

AD: Six brothers. Okay. And what was your family like? Was your family involved in the community?

WE: Yes. We were involved in the church. We all grew up in churches. We knew what it was all about.  It was a typical upbringing for the coal-mining area. We were no different from the average person who grew up in big cities other than we were, I guess, more disciplined in our area. We didn't have all of the luxuries of the children who grew up in the big city, but we had fun. We made most of the things that we used and we were very well content with this. I can hardly remember any times that there was any disparity between what we had and what someone else had. It was always fun. We grew up in a neighborhood where we all got along and basically you had your quarrel with your friends, but it was for a day.

SH: I see you speaking about the church playing a part in your family life. Did it have a big influence on your life during your childhood and can you explain how it impacted your life?

WE: Oh, of course. We grew up with believing and we had to believe because the family said you had to do this. We went to Sunday school every Sunday and we stayed after church. There was no getting around that. And as I grew older and held a job, I would make sure that I had a sufficient amount of coins to go to the movie after church on Sunday. That was basically it. I can remember so vividly how I would take my little week's earning to my mother on Saturday and say, "Here's my earning. It's yours." The next thing I wanted to do was go to the movie and she would say to me, "Bill, it's your money and you can do whatever you choose." And she always made sure that I had a sufficient quarter to take in a movie and a bag of popcorn and a candy bar and a soda. It was a good life and a rough life, but we survived.

AD: I know you said that growing up you knew there was a boundary. But do you recall any memorable events about segregation growing up and could you tell us more about it?

WE: I probably could relate more about life in the service. But I knew we had a small place where we would go to dance and, right next to it, was the white dance hall for youngsters growing up. Most of the times they would venture over to our side where we were and joined in on the fun we were having. Fights were very seldom. Quarrels were probably every now and then, but nothing to the point where it caused a racial conflict and ( ). It was all because we had one employment and that was coal mining. Everybody looked the same when they came out of the coal mines. They might have went in looking a different color but, when they came out, they were all dusted with coal. So it was no difference. I think that played a major part. I know that a white man stayed next door to us and we got along well. Sure, we quarreled and we had some difficulties with each other but that was life. You have to really have experience living in the coal mines area to

be able to get the full impact on growing up in the community where everybody did the same job and had no other choice of income. That wasn't different.

SH: What was your first job and what did you specialize in? Was it a diverse field?

WE: My first job as a youngster?

SH: Yes.

WE: Growing up, I always wanted to be independent. I liked good clothes. I liked to look good. So I started to work in a cleaners. I would clean up the cleaners before going to school and, coming from school, I would stop and sweep up. And, from there, I would go home. But I learned a trade while out there. Pressing clothes and sewing, that was my first job. That took me on from there to the service.

AD: We'll transfer on to your life in the service. What motivated you to join the military? I know you said it was a draft.

WE: After graduating from high school, the Korean War was going strong during that time. When you became eighteen years of age, you had to sign up for the draft. There were no ifs, ands, or buts about it. All eighteen-year old males had to sign for the draft. Again, as I stated, there were not many jobs around there to do so the majority of male teenagers joined the National Guard. We would go to learn the basics of what the military was all about. About six or seven months after being in the National Guard, we were drafted into the service. The whole unit was drafted into the service. We got to see other parts of the world. I can remember, after taking basic training in Fort Pickett, Virginia, the war was still going strong and we were shipped overseas to France, to a place called Lopaliesse, France. There, we loaded ships to Korea and that was the start of my entry in the military.

AD: Did anything motivate you to stay in the military?

WE: Absolutely. As I said, I came from West Virginia and there were no jobs. My motivation was, after spending the first two years in the service, I had gotten to see the world and I realized that there were other things other than the coal mines. My father had always told me he would never take any of the boys into the coal mines. After returning from France, I realized that the sewing machine and the printing of clothes was not my life mission. So, after about six months in the civilian life, I realized that I needed to get back into the military and to find out what it was really all about. And that's what I did. Motivation came from knowing that there were no jobs in the coal-mining area. I knew that the military had a place for me and that's where I figured I would go.

AD: How long were you in the military before you re-enlisted?

WE: Two years. During that time it was two years with a three year reserve obligation. So after I was discharged—I really wasn't discharged. I just moved back with a reserve obligation. After five or six months, six months at the most, I returned back to the service.

SH: What kind of treatment did the military provide to black soldiers versus white soldiers as to salaries, benefits, and rankings?

WE: Well, first of all, in the military at the time, there were all-black and all-white units. In the National Guard, we had First Sergeants who were black and officers who were white, or the majority of them were. When we came back in the service, we were still in units that had not been integrated. So, subsequently, there were some times when I can sort of recall that there were some interracial problems. But they covered it up pretty well. It wasn't anything to the point that we had riots and anything of that nature. There

was a time when black soldiers would go to the Exchange and purchase items that they needed, and there was a time for the whites to go and purchase what they needed. We were separate but equal. That's probably the best way to say it. As time went on in the service, it got better. I can sort of remember coming back for my first assignment at Fort Monroe. Integration was just beginning. We had young white soldiers that came into our unit. The fourteenth car ( ) was all black, but we had white officers. The majority of them were white officers. The First Sergeant was white, a couple of Lieutenants were black, and a couple of them were white. I can remember very vividly the first couple of whites who came into our unit. I don't know but I guess that they were more afraid than anything else that they were not able to cope with being amongst blacks. So, subsequently, they went out and some more came in. It took a while for them to get accustomed to being around blacks and I'm sure that those blacks who went into other units that were totally white went through the same thing. It was a trial and error period. But it worked out to the point that, as time went on, we begin to get promotions just like everybody else would get. At other times it was probably was more severe. It was more segregated in World War II than it was in my era. We had some conflicts but it wasn't that bad. I can remember very vividly one day after we had finished basic training and I was coming from the "EX." I had bought quite a few items and both of my arms were filled up with bags and I was coming back to the barracks. There was a white Second Lieutenant. He still had fuzz on his face. I didn't know what it was all about. At that time, they were really strict on saluting officers, but I couldn't salute because both of my arms were filled with bags. I spoke, but that didn't do the trick. He wanted me to put my bags down and salute, which I did. I thought it was crazy, but I did it. I look back on it and I

wonder what happened to that lieutenant. But it was okay. We got angry with a lot of things that happened, but we smiled and worked hard and we succeeded.

AD: Do you recall when there was a period of short integration? I know you said it was kind of separate when you came in, but do you remember integration?

WE: Probably coming out of Fort Monroe. Probably in 1955 or 1956. I guess things began to integrate then. The Korean War had died down and we had soldiers who were coming back from Korea. They had to be integrated into a unit. I think around that time things began to change and integration began to take its course. That didn't necessarily happen everywhere in Virginia. I'm sure there are also bases in Alabama and North Carolina that went through some tough times. They had fights within the units and amongst each other. It was so fortunate I was not totally involved in the real hustle and bustle of integration, but it was okay. We had some tough times. We knew it and we had to do better than the average.

AD: Were you faced with any kind of discrimination while in the military? If so, could you elaborate on it?

WE: Well, I know there were times that promotions were not given to us. Not necessary given. We earned them. But we were not necessarily promoted as the others were. I know that was because of what was going on during that time. We didn't like it but, as time went on, it got better. I can remember that there was a youngster who I trained, and the next thing I knew they had more ranks than I had. But, we look back on it and it was a learning process. We learned from that. The average black soldier was not a hard person to deal with. He grew up with values. So, subsequently, we were able to overcome a lot of things, things put in our way. We often heard about black cats and different things. I

can remember, while in France, I was told that people downtown would tell you that at night time—. They had been told that, at midnight, tails came out of black soldiers. So we knew that it was the whites who had spread the word that that would happen. We didn't tear up towns because of hearing these things. We took it in stride. Sometimes, we kind of got hot-headed and we kind of retaliated, sometimes. But basically, it was there and it was something that I was glad I had an opportunity to go through, I should say. And the average man today should be faced with the same thing. We went through something things, some hard times.

SH: I know you were speaking about how you were traveling abroad to different countries while in the military. Were you treated differently while abroad than you were in the US?

WE: My first tour during Korea was down in a place called Lopaliesse, France. Prior to going overseas, we had this interview to tell us about how things were and how things materialize. We boarded a ship in New Jersey and, for fifteen days crossing the water, we were living close to other service people. On that ship, there was a mixture. One part was black and the other part was white. We ate at a certain time and they ate at a certain time. We pulled guard at a certain time and they pulled guard at a certain time. But I can't remember anybody getting thrown overboard. So, we made it in about fifteen days. After that, we came back to the states. The war had subsided. The next trips overseas were much better.

AD: Just to elaborate on that a little bit. Did you talk to the French people? Was it a different interaction between talking with the French versus the Americans?

W.E.: Well, the French were one of our allies during that time and they still are. We got along very well with the French people. Those who learned French in high school were able to communicate better than some of us who hadn't. Even though I took a couple of years in French, they couldn't understand what I was saying in France. It was just a different language. We took it name only in order to have enough credits to graduate from school. Some of the French people were kind of wishy-washy as far as the blacks were concerned. We had no throwing of rocks at our tents. We had no one who ran us in downtown. We had to travel together wherever we went during that time. We had to have at least a couple of guys together. Very little, to my knowledge, of anything really happened. You had to make sure you were back on base before twelve o'clock at night. You were checked in to make sure your name was checked in, as well as to make sure it was checked out when going out in the community. Towns were pretty well squared away, ones that the whites hadn't already indoctrinated about the blacks. I'm sure there were conflicts in some portions of France. We kind of stayed closer together and to ourselves because we were a complete battalion of blacks. So we were able to communicate really well together.

AD: Where else did you travel in the military? And as it got later into your service, would you say there was a difference of how blacks were treated while abroad in the military?

WE: Well, with time it began to get better. Integration was here to stay. There was no turning back. Truman said that there will be no turning back. Integration was here and it was going to be here. We might as well get used to it. Both sides of the water had to get used to it. There were no doubts about that. I spent about thirteen years in Europe. I was able to start to get in rank. As I stated before, there were times prior to that when others

were getting promoted because of the color of their skin. But, as time progressed on, we were able to go before promotion boards and we were treated equally in most cases. After a period of time, we were treated by our actions, not by the color of our skin. That was when integration was really beginning to take hold. They saw you for who you were and not necessarily what your skin color was. I spent, I'd say, thirteen years in Europe. I spent a couple of years in Vietnam during the war. I made a couple of trips back to Korea. So, I saw both sides of the water. It was a good experience.

AD: I guess we are going to bring it back to the US. Where were you stationed while serving in the military?

WE: In the States? I had very little time in the States. I spent about four years at Fort Monroe. Backing up from there, I took basic training in Fort Pickett, Virginia. I spent a couple of years at Fort Belvoir. At Fort Dix, I spent my first tour. I had a couple of tours at Fort Dix. In total, I spent about ten years stateside and about twenty years overseas. There were a lot of soldiers who spent a lot of time at Fort Eustis. But I only spent my last eighteen months there, prior to my retirement. Being stationed stateside was just not my thing. After I got settled down in the ranks structure, I was able to come from overseas back to the States. There were places that I really didn't feel comfortable going so I would try to go to my branch and get a change of assignments. That was another reason why I didn't spend too much time stateside.

AD: The other half of that question is how did it differ compared to where you grew up?

WE: I had paved streets. They didn't have paved streets in the hills of coal-mining areas. In the military, I learned a lot and I got to see a lot. I went to a lot of places. I had the opportunity to be involved in a lot of things and places that I know I would never have

been able to go to by staying in West Virginia. Minus the fighting and the war zones, it was a good venture. After getting married, I had my wife and my sons and we traveled overseas together. I went first and they came later. That was a good experience for us all, and especially for my son. He kind of grew up in ( ). He can speak a little bit of foreign language. It was just a good experience. In the modern times, it was good. I was able to see a lot and do a lot. I wouldn't trade anything for my thirty years of military service. It was just a good venture.

SH: Did the military tolerate any kind of movements or protests against discrimination? And can you speak more about that?

WE: Soldiers might have thought it, but they didn't tolerate any protests. There was never such a thing as a protest in the areas that I was in. Now, as I stated before, in Bragg and Alabama and those places down south, I'm sure they had problems or difficulties with conflicts between whites and blacks downtown. But the majority of the people in the military knew that the military tolerated no protests. The Commander-in-Chief was the Commander-in-Chief. Everybody respected the Commander-in-Chief, whoever it might be. Like today, the president of the United States was the man in my tenure. There were no ifs, ands, or buts about it. No one ever breathed anything against the president. How they got to be that way today, I don't have the slightest idea. But it is totally a disgrace. The Commander-in-Chief is the Commander-in-Chief and always will be the Commander-in-Chief, the president of the United States. Sometimes it bothered me to see the service people say things against the president. You see your servicemen today, and women, with tattoos from their head to their toes. There was no such thing then. It just was not allowed. I think the Coast Guard was the only one that had any type of tattoos

during that time. And the Navy, I should say. But the other branches of the service were not allowed a tattoo. If you had a tattoo, you couldn't get into the service. You were given a complete physical when you came in the service. And because it was back then, it was something against regulation then. You could just forget about it. You weren't coming in the service.

AD: I guess the next question to ask is, what was your rank?

WE: I was a First Sergeant E-8 when I retired, the best rank in the United States Army. I really enjoyed being a First Sergeant because First Sergeant took care of the troops and the troops took care of the First Sergeant. In my two years in combat in Vietnam and my tour in Korea, I always said, "If you take care of soldiers, they will take care of you." And I can truthfully say that we had some rough times during combat but, being trained soldiers, they care of me ( ) .

AD: When were you promoted to First Sergeant?

WE: I retired in '81. And '79, '78—. Prior to my coming out of Korea, my last time there, the commanding general presented me with my First Sergeant stripes. Even though I was on the promotion list when I went to Korea, it was just so fortunate that I was promoted there. Coming back in 1980 to Fort Eustis, I never will forget General Smalls. He tried to keep me in the service beyond my thirty years but the Department of the Army said, "No, First Sergeant, you've got to go. After thirty you can't—." It was a good life. I had a good company at Fort Eustis. But it wasn't always good. It was kind of bottom of the totem pole when I got there but when I retired we were the top in Fort Eustis. There's evidence now. You can go to Fort Eustis right now and talk about 870th

Transportation Company during the 1980s. They would know First Sergeant Edwards had the best company.

SH: At the height of the civil rights movement in the 1960s, how did you feel about the civil rights movement happening in the US while you were serving in the military?

WE: Well, it was kind of a touch and go. We used to have classes in reference to the civil rights integration and what was going on. We had classes, sometimes all day long. We talked about the dos and the don’ts and why certain things were. It wasn’t always taught by blacks, necessarily. It was taught by whites as well because they went to school to—. Those who did not grow up in segregated areas went to school to find out what they could present to both white and black soldiers that would calm the fear between the two races. We learned. It was hard, I know, for everybody. The person who said it was easy-going, there was something wrong with him. It was not easy-going. It was a hard-boiled task that we had to go through, civil rights. Classes taught us a lot, the whites as well as the blacks. It wasn’t too hard per se for the blacks to tell another black what was going on. But that same black instructor had to go to the white soldiers and tell them the same thing the white soldier was telling to us. So, it was not an easy process with the classes. We grew up in the military knowing that blacks were treated different from the whites. We subsequently knew what we had to do. I always will believe that integration came from parents not telling the truth about how people lived. Equal. The color of your skin didn’t necessarily tell the world what type of person you were. That skin problem changed back when, during the cotton fields. It grew on until our strong women and men died. We kept pressing forward. We’re not equal now, but we are depending on the Almighty to make things right.

AD: I have a couple of questions regarding that. Where were you living at the time of the height of the civil rights movement? And when you were living there did it influence any of the people? Like, the natives of where you were living there? Like, the interaction between the American Soldiers?

WE: Every once and a while, you could hear certain clichés about black this or black that. I'm sure there was some from our side, white this and white that. It had a bearing to a certain extent but it had no bearing on the mission that we were confronted with. It was the same thing. We had a mission to do and we did it, whether it was white or black. I don't remember having a soldier with me in combat who said, "I'm not going to do that because you're my sergeant" or "Just because I have a black soldier next to me in my bunk, I'm not going to fight." If I did, the soldier was gone the next day, if we heard anything like that. It was different. I will not tell anybody, "No, it wasn't different." It definitely wasn't easy to get used to that white soldier. Again, I always refer back to the same thing. The average one of those youngsters who came out of school was confronted with the same thing: "How do I react toward this brother?" I venture to say the guys who came from the big cities had the opportunity to be more integrated than those who came from the South and my part of West Virginia, the hills. They had been around blacks more in the city, in New York and places like that. They had been killing each other for a long time in New York prior to civil rights. So, they grew up and faced the bullet, you know, with each other. Well, in West Virginia, it was something different. That's all it was. We had not been exposed to it. We just took it as it came and made the best of it.

AD: I know that you said that you guys took classes about the civil rights movement. Did they teach them in an integrated society or were you guys separate?

WE: No, no we took it together. As a matter of fact, that was the only way we were able to find out the reaction from both sides. Everybody was there. If the shoe was on the white foot, it was on the black foot. It was all being taught together. We had the opportunity to weigh the pros and the cons. It was all taught together, it wasn't separate. It was all done together.

AD: How did you feel about serving in the military during a time when the African-Americans were not treated equally and were discriminated against?

WE: Well, you took an oath when you came in the service. When you first came into the service, you took an oath. I remember in basic training, we had all black units. Once you came into the service, you were shipped off to whichever area you were going to for basic training, quite naturally being young and afraid of what was going to transpire. After going through basic training, you didn't have time when the evening was over. You were tired and confused. You were ready to find the nearest bunk. You really had no energy to do anything but get some rest and get prepared for the next day. You probably had to be there, I guess, to understand that. Here you are. You're in a different environment. You've got some different people. You're wondering if anybody is going to do something to you at night. We had double bunks. You probably had a white person sleeping above you. Or you were sleeping on top, and he was sleeping in the bottom bunk. It was something you wondered about. How was this going to affect my next day? But some of those guys turned out to be some of the best buddies you could ever have. But you know, that was life. There was a reason for it. I don't have the slightest idea in the least the reason for it. We have gotten closer together since that time. It's not done yet. It's more to come.

SH: I see you were speaking more about the housing between the whites and the blacks. Can you kind of speak more about it a little bit? Go into a little bit more detail.

WE: For the soldiers? Oh, we had barracks. We had the black barracks and they had the white barracks. They did their thing in their barracks and we did our thing in our barracks. It took a long time. When we got integrated then we could feel the difference. You could understand the difference. Prior to that, we had guard posts in the area. We walked guard around our barracks and they did the same thing around their barracks. There wasn't any difficulty per se, like finding weapons or anything like that. You had no live ammunition in there. You had the name calling. Sure, you had the name calling. Most of the time the First Sergeant—. Most of those guys were able to push conflicts. We all had the same type of bedding. There weren't any black beds or white sheets. We didn't have that at all. We had everything from the same supply points. I am not able to really say that it was different because it wasn't different. We had friends that helped to digest that, especially the guys from the north. They were probably the strongest guys I have ever seen. Being black and white, those guys didn't care, because they had already went through that. They grew up in that area during that time frame. They grew up in New York, living next door to each other in the same apartment building. So, it wasn't hard for them to catch on to it. It was so good to know that the draft took everybody. They didn't take you because you were black or because you were white. When you turned eighteen years of age you went down and signed up for the draft. When that letter came to your house, it was time for you to report to basic training. That's where you went.

AD: What were the changes that you observed in the military for blacks, from the time you joined in 1950 to the time you retired in 1981?

WE: Oh, so many changes. We saw from the Second Lieutenant to the chairman of the chiefs of staff. That was a four-star general. We saw the black privates to the Sergeant Major of the Army being a white person. So subsequently, things came a long way. There were stumps and bumps and things you never thought you would ever see, like a black general. What was that? What are you talking about? A black First Sergeant? A black Sergeant Major? We never thought that we were getting any of those. But as time went on, there were some struggles and some hard times and some unafraid people to take the initial steps. That brought us to where we were. I never visualized being a First Sergeant, but there I was.  I wouldn't trade anything for it. I have had some generals that I have been fortunate enough to work with. I've had both black and white generals that I have worked with. I helped them do a lot of things and I'm very proud to be able to say that. I see them every once in a while, and they never forget me because I was fair and I told them just like it was. We were able to overcome a lot of things and get a lot of things accomplished. They looked out for me ( ). It was a good life.

SH: What are your feelings about the state of progress of blacks in the US today?

WE: I probably could ask you that now. Look at CNU, for example. You have some some [black] professors there, right? Years ago, you didn't have any [black] professors there.  You have some younger greater schools. Some places you had black professors. I grew up in an all-black school. My professors and teachers were all black. As I went into the service and went to schools in the service, at the outset there were no black instructors. The longer I stayed, the more people began to realize that, in order for the

world to look at us as a people who really, truthfully cared about each other, we had to make a change. I'm thinking that's what really happened. The other countries around the world were fighting and doing a lot of evil things. We were supposed to be the leading country in the world and we were doing just awful things to one another. I think that some smart people realized that to include blacks, they had to make some changes. They did make some changes. I believe we were not able to, back in that time, look into the future and know what was going to happen. We were not that wise. The Almighty knew that there was going to be a change. He saw that down the road. He sees what's going to happen to you by the time you get out of school. It was all planned. It's hard to describe. I hear people like to talk about, "If I could do this, I would do it all over." No, you would not, because you wouldn't be the same person. The only thing I say is, "Make the best of what it is today." Once you've gone off the scene, someone can say, "Well, Willie Edwards was sitting down with two young ladies. They went through an interview. They talked about the racial issues, things that happened during his time." You can tell somebody what happened during your time. That's life. We can't look back, we have to look forward. As the president says now, let's go forward. Don't think about going backwards.

AD: What prompted you to move to Hampton, Virginia?

WE: In 1977, I came back from Germany. I was stationed at Fort Dix, New Jersey. My wife said it is time for us to get ready to get out of this military. I was in my last three years and she said, "We need to decide on where we want to hang it up." We saw some places in Jersey that we kind of looked at swiftly. My wife's parents were from Hampton. I had been in and out of Hampton for some time and I liked the area. The people were

wonderful. I said, "Ok, what are we going to do?" We came to Hampton for the weekend. We decided between Jersey and Hampton ( ). We had real-estate agents start looking in Jersey and one looking here in Hampton. We just about knew that Hampton was going to be the home place. We didn't give Jersey any serious thoughts. We got a call to come to Hampton to see a home. There was one shot and that was it. It wasn't a hard decision to make. That's where we wound up, in Hampton. It was not a hard choice.

AD: I have a part two to that question. Since living in Hampton, have you seen a difference in everyday life for African Americans?

WE: Yes, absolutely. A wonderful example of this is the churches. You never thought you'd see any whites in churches mixed with blacks. Growing up in West Virginia, everyone once in a while, somebody would come to our church just to be curious. It wouldn't about seeing if my soul will get right during the black church service. It was just curiosity killing the cat, so they could come to get a look at it. What I believe now, and what has happened here in our neighborhood and across the country, is that the barrier has just about been lifted—the religious barrier—and people come together because they believe in a higher supreme ( ). At times, people used to think that whites would come to the black church just to see the youngsters and the blacks would do the same thing. I believe right now their hearts have changed. I think they are sincere when they come to a mixed congregation. You can see it not only from the TV. You can see it by going. They seem to get along, I guess, ninety percent better than they did when I grew up. I think that is one of the greatest changes that have taken place.

AD: Would you say that change is fairly recent or would you say that it is something that grew over time?

WE: It grew over time. I think that happened. It grew from conversation, communication, and association. I think that's what happened.

SH: What do you regard as the unfinished legacies of the movement?

WE: Probably we'll never be able to achieve equality completely because there will always be some—. When parents, on both sides of the fence, black and white, fail to tell youngsters the truth about racial equality, it will always be that way. If you don't teach them at home that blacks and whites are the same, that there is no difference between the races of people, and that it's just the color of skin, then they grow up with an old, ugly envy because of that. You have to teach them while they are young that I'm no better than you. We were made by the same God. If I cut you, you are going to bleed red and if I cut you, you will bleed red. I have never seen any white blood and I have never seen any black blood. It has all been red.

SH: Part two to that question, what are the most pressing problems facing African Americans today?

WE: Well, we have some problems. We definitely have some problems. I guess fear of not getting credit for what we do. I guess that's probably our biggest fear. If I do a dollar's worth of work, I want to get a dollar's worth of pay. There are still some people who believe that you don't deserve that, per se. They do it in a sneaky way, but it's still the same thing: "I just don't think you qualify to do this." I think the women are making a stronger push towards this than the men are. The women today—. We have some educated black women and white women that will stand on top of the Empire State and

let them know that, “Here am I, you better recognize me, because I’m forced within this whole environment too.” I think we will have to press forward with the education we have and not just try to condense it to one group of people. We have to spread it out and let everybody know that “I’m just as educated as you are and we could work together to make things happen. Things will get better.” I believe that is what is going to have to happen.

AD: Is there anything else that you would like to contribute to this interview regarding your past experiences and everything?

WE: I have had a good life growing up. My childhood and upbringing hasn’t always been easy. But I do believe that the military taught me a lot. I learned a lot, too, from my parents about the right and wrong side of it. Most of all, they instilled in me the belief that everybody was equal. During my time, you have to treat your fellow man right and I believed it. If we all could just treat everybody right and believe in the things that we say —. We don’t just say it because they are pretty words. We say them because they are there. But believe it, believe it. If you say that “I love you,” just don’t say it because it’s a pretty word. Say it because you mean it. I think that’s what I have learned in my life and in the military: to be honest with what you say and mean what you say but treat your fellow man right. I think that we, in this great country of ours, have to learn how to respect the other races of people. And, I venture to say, we have in this country now probably fifty percent of people from other countries. They respect themselves more than we respect ourselves. It shouldn’t be that way. We should be able to relate to one another to the point that we are inseparable. We should be able to say, “Boy, those families sure do stick together.” Subsequently, if their family sticks together, their whole race of

people sticks together. You look at the Chinese and the Japanese and how close those families are. I think that we are going have to do that in order to be able to grow in grace and be able to see that young person grow up in admiration of the Almighty. We have to look at that person. We have to make sure that that person knows when you're doing something wrong. You tell them in a way that is not belittling them, but so that they can grow up by believing what I said or Joe said. Live the same life that you talk about. I think that we have progressed a long way in this country of ours and there's yet still much more to come if we work together from both sides of the fence. We have to be concerned about the hereafter. We are here today and gone tomorrow. So we have to be able to take our fellow man along with us by expressing those things that we see as being right. I take as a good example my job that I have right now, which I have been working at for twenty-one years. I use to work five days a week but, as I began to get older, I realized that there other things that I have to do in order to help someone along the way. I spent a lot of time in my church. I sat on the deacon board at my church. I'm the finance chairman. I attend Sunday school every Sunday. I do these things because I know I need to set examples to let others see that there are things that we have to do in this life. Whether we like it or not, we have to do positive things in life. I do a lot of things as far as the Exchange Club. I know the Exchange Club caters to our young people in high school. I brought them to that because we do so many things for our high school students. In each one of our schools, every year, we honor a student by giving them a scholarship of two thousand dollars. Every year I enjoy that because I know it's right. We do it on an integrated basis. It's not a black organization. It's an integrated organization. We do that. I belong to the American Legion because we do that. This is a body that's comprised of

ex-military people. We look for things that can help another veteran, whether you're white or black, whether your family is in need. We do something to help them. We honor them every year, a couple times a year, for the sacrifices that they have made because I know it's right. I spend so much time doing things that are good for our society. I encourage others to do the same thing because it is right. I think that we'll just pool our thoughts and resources together—both sides of the fence, black and white—we could be a wonderful country.

SH: Do you know anyone else who might like to participate in the Hampton Roads Oral History Project?

WE: I had recommended my pastor who is retired now, Dr L.T. Daye, Sr. I will check with him tomorrow. I had put his name in before mine. Somebody is supposed to have interviewed him. Iwill check that with him tomorrow night at bible study to see if he was called to do this. I know he was given the information. Somebody called me and asked me about someone. I told them about my pastor. There was a form before, or questions we had to ask him, but somebody told me to disregard that. That's when he said, "Well, okay, I will try to see if I could do it." I will double check with him tomorrow night to make sure. By all means, he has been around a long time. He was here in Newport News during the civil rights struggle. He did a lot of things. This is somebody you really need to interview. He had a couple of children who went to Shaw University, I think, during the integration period. I'm sure that he has some good information that he could pass on to someone. I'm sure without a doubt. I will make sure that I will converse with him tomorrow evening and get back with you.

AD: This concludes our interview. We want to thank you again. This is awesome information.

WE: Thank you, young ladies, for allowing me to vent a little bit on some of my experiences. I started talking about the military and beginning to see things that happened back then. It's good to know that there are young people who are doing things. I think it's amazing that both of you are able to sit down and do this. Not just me, but those other people that will be looking at this. It's just amazing. Somewhere down the line my grandchildren, or your children might be able to go to CNU, or wherever this might be archived, and be able to look at that, and see who those young ladies were. It's amazing. I thank you ladies so much for the opportunity and for the time spent. You seem to be very knowledgeable. I wish you all the luck.

**END OF INTERVIEW**

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