George M. Williams, Jr.
Interview Summary

Interviewee: George M. Williams, Jr.
Interviewers: C.J. Priebe and Charles Dailey
Interview Date: Friday, October 26, 2012
Location: The Paul and Rosemary Trible Library, Newport News, Virginia

THE INTERVIEWEE: George M. Williams, Jr. was born in Louisburg, North Carolina, on December 29, 1940 but has lived in Newport News, Virginia for the majority of his life and has personally experienced the city's changes throughout the years. After graduating from Huntington High School in 1959, Williams worked for Newport News Shipbuilding for forty-two years and five months before his retirement. An active member of his church, Williams is also an avid reader who has a great interest in historical subjects such as African-American history and the civil rights movement.

THE INTERVIEWERS: C.J. Priebe is a senior at Christopher Newport University, currently completing a degree in History with minors in Film Studies and Religious Studies. Charles Dailey is also a History major at Christopher Newport University and is presently seeking his Master's degree in teaching history. They are conducting this interview under the auspices of the Hampton Roads Oral History Project, created by Dr. Laura Puaca. The primary function of the project is to accumulate interviews from around southeastern Virginia into a collection that can be saved for posterity and future learning.

CONTENT OF THE INTERVIEW: This interview addresses such subjects as employment, activism, housing, and education, with particular attention to Williams' personal experiences in Hampton Roads. The interview also touches on events that are both locally and nationally significant, such as Jim Crow laws, the *Brown* v. *Board of Education* ruling, the Norfolk 17, the Little Rock Nine, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The interview also discussed African-American role models, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X. Some attention was also paid to prominent members of the local black community, ranging from Ella Mishaw and Daddy Grace to the Five Keys.

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Length: 1 audio file, MP3 format; approximately 95 minutes

START OF INTERVIEW

CP: This is C.J. Priebe, my partner is Charles Dailey. Today is October 26, 2012. We are interviewing Mr. George Williams. This interview is taking place at the Paul and Rosemary Trible Library 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. Williams.

GW: Good afternoon to you, too.

CP: We are taking what is called a life history, and we would like to begin with questions about your childhood.

CD: Where and when were you born?

GW: December 29, 1940, Louisburg, North Carolina.

CD: What do you know about your family's history here in the Hampton Roads area?

GW: Well, my father came here originally seeking work at the Newport News shipyard. Once he was hired and employed there, he sent for my mom and later on, after we moved here, we had another addition, my brother, to our family. So that's how I got from Lewisburg to Newport News. I went to elementary school at the John Marshall Elementary School and started first grade there. From there I went to Dunbar Elementary

School, and from there I went to the great Huntington High School, which was the all-black school in the city of Newport News at that time.

CP: What were race relations like while you were growing up?

GW: Well, the races were separate. You know--

CP: Separate but equal--

GW: Separate but equal. But it wasn't equal. It was separate. But the colored or black folks in the city of Newport News did have an advantage over other cities mainly because of the shipyard. When the shipyard came on board and, say if they built a rec center, they built two, just alike, right across the street from each other: one for the colored, one for the white. The swimming pool was the same thing. We had a lot of things that poor people just didn't have. Even the whites in the country and the mountains, the Allegheny Mountains, [didn't have some of these things]. We were very blessed here because of the shipyard. They employed a lot of black folks at that time. I'm a retiree of the Newport News shipyard. My father worked there and so did my uncle. My children would come home from college during the summer and they would work there.

CP: What about the neighborhoods in regards to the racial composition. Could you tell us a little bit about your neighborhood growing up?

GW: Well, my neighborhood was all black folks actually. I lived on 22nd Street and Madison Avenue. My parents paid something like six dollars a week for rent, and my kids always were kind of like, "Huh, dad?" We had outdoor plumbing. We did not have indoor plumbing or electric lights. My mom told the guy, this Jewish guy, who ran a grocery store right across the street, "Mister boss sir, my boy is getting ready to go to high school." This was 1954. And she said, "We need electric lights." We had kerosene

lamps. He said, "Okay," so he sent a contractor in. We didn't have any outlets or anything, and they just ran a wire right down the middle of the ceiling with a screw-in bulb and a string. You didn't have an on and off switch on the wall. That was it.

CD: What did the rest of the neighborhood look like, as far as--

GW: Some had it and some didn't. But the house I lived in was a long row house. Of course, they call them condominiums now. They got fancy. But it was a row house. Everyone lived there. No one had electricity on the block, and we had outdoor toilets.

CD: What about in the white neighborhoods, were they all--

GW: Yeah, the section then that you would call Hidenwood was exclusive. Stuart Gardens was for all whites. And they had electricity, the whole nine [yards]. Colored people at that time were only allowed down at Stuart Gardens if, say, my mom was doing "day work." That's what they called it. My mom would go in there and clean house, wash, stuff like that. But after that, you had to get out of Dodge. You had to come back to your section and basically that's the way it was.

CP: Interesting. So that brings up a question about transportation. What was the transportation like for your mom going in and out of work?

GW: Well, we would ride what you called the CRT Bus Company. They operated the public transit at that time. Of course, that was segregated. All whites sat at the front of the bus. All black folks sat in the rear of the bus. We didn't have it quite as bad as the deep South wherein you have to go on, drop your money in the box, then you'd get off the bus and enter at the rear of the bus. But we could drop our money in and then walk through to your section. Then they had the area, just like Ms. Rosa Parks was caught up in, called "no man's land." If that area was vacant, you could sit there. But if a white person got on

the bus, you had to get to the next best seat and move to the back. We paid the same amount of money as the car fair, something like five cents, but that's the way it was.

CP: Okay, so were you active in any church or other community groups while you were growing up?

GW: Oh yeah. I'm a big time staunch member and still am a supporter of the Boys and Girls Club. Well, actually with the Boys Club at that time, no girls were allowed. We were at 629 Hampton Avenue in Newport News and I joined in 1952. We had a black and white TV with a coat hanger for the antenna. That was our game room. We had checkers, dominoes and, at that time, ping pong. But it's now called table tennis. That was the essence of our game room and we were glad to get that. It was rough in there. It was tough. It was really tough. Actually, I didn't even let my mother know that I was going to join the Boys Club, because she did not want us—me and my brothers—to join. But I went there and became one of the legions there. I was on the counsel there. I was president at that time of the Boys Club Counsel. So I'm real affectionate to the Boys Club, the Boys and Girls Club now as they call it. So, I had a good time there.

CD: So as time went on in the sixties, did local church and different civic organizations get involved with the civil rights movement here in the area?

GW: Yes, actually when Dr. King came to Newport News, he spoke at the First Baptist Church of Newport News. It was located on 23rd and Jefferson Avenue. The church got him here and the late Mr. Solomon Travers was instrumental in having Dr. King come and speak to the community at that time. The place was packed. The church was packed. But mostly all of our activity was in our neighborhoods. We had a place called the Taborian Hall. There was a lot of activity in there, a lot of gospel singing, a lot of church

service. But the churches were very, very involved and you had two Evangelists in the city of Newport News. You had Daddy Grace and you had Ella “Lightfoot” Mishaw based out of Washington, D.C.. Both of these guys were based out of Washington, D.C. and they are still standing strong as ever today, as we speak, October 26, 2012. And they started back in the twenties in Newport News.

CP: Okay, so could you start telling us a little bit about Huntington High School and what it was like when you started to go there.

GW: Well, in the city of Newport News you had two high schools. Newport News High School for the whites and Huntington High School which, ironically, is named after Collins B. Huntington, who founded the city of Newport News. A lot of people find that ironic because he was a white guy from New York. But he started the whole city of Newport News. He came in as a railroad tycoon. Huntington High School was rated one of the top high schools in the county, especially for black high schools. They only had two principals there when I arrived in 1954. They had Professor Palmer, who had a big disagreement with the school board in Newport News. Mind you, they didn’t have any black folks on the school board. He had spoken to the school board about getting equal pay for the black teachers. You know, we weren’t paid the same. And he felt as if they were deserving of that because, believe it or not, most of the black teachers at that time had degrees. They couldn’t go to UVA, Christopher Newport—which wasn’t around then and if it was they couldn’t have gone there—or William and Mary. So they all went off to schools in the North and they got their degrees from there. But a lot of the white teachers at Newport News High School didn’t have a degree. They had a certificate. Yet they were paid more than the black teachers by the city of Newport News. When we were in high

school, even in elementary school, we had a teacher live right around the corner from me. Her name was Ms. Inettie Banks. She was the only person in our neighborhood who had a high education. And I can hear my mom say now, something would come up, and my mom would say, “George Jr., what did Ms. Banks say?” So whatever Ms. Banks said, that was it. That was the Gospel because everyone in the neighborhood looked to her for guidance, instructions, and opinions and she gave that to us. She was my fourth-grade teacher at John Marshall Elementary School. She taught me the fourth grade and she’s still living. A little slow now, but she’s still around.

CD: Do you see her?

GW: Yes, yes actually. Mrs. Inettie Edwards. She’s an Edwards now. And Ms. Pat Holman--. I’m seventy-one. I’ll be seventy-two in December of this year [2012] and I belong to a senior citizen’s group with them. If anyone would have told me back in 1959 when I graduated from high school that I would be involved in a senior citizens group with those two ladies--. They taught me in high school. Well, Mrs. Edwards in elementary and Ms. Patricia Holman in high school.

CD: As I always say, time is the great equalizer.

GW: Oh yes, it is. Yes, it is. But Huntington was just a great school and, like I said, everything then was segregated. I mean we couldn’t compete in academics with them or sports. All of the state tournaments and competitions were held at Virginia State College in Petersburg, Virginia. Most of the state competitions for the white school, which was Newport News [High School], were held in Richmond, Virginia. But there was no interplay between the two. After ’64, ’65, that’s when they started. The great football coach at Huntington, Thad Madden, had a great rapport with the coach at Newport News

High School. They would sit down and talk but the two teams just couldn't compete. That was the unwritten rule.

CD: Was there a lot of pride in Huntington High School among the student body?

GW: Oh, it was unbelievable. And I know I couldn't wait to get there. That's why I told you how my mom told the guy that owned the unit that we lived in, "My son is getting ready to go to Huntington High School. We need electricity here," because everybody looked forward to going to Huntington High School. It was rated one of the greatest high schools in the country. Eventually Carver [High School] came on board in Newport News and they were the two [all-black high schools]. But Huntington started in 1919. I've got the book here. [*Huntington High School, Symbol of Community Hope and Unity, 1920-1971: A Pictorial History of Huntington High School Newport News, Virginia* by Hattie Thomas Lucas] You can see how the people are dressed. That's in the library there. They've got all the old teachers and all. And the lady who wrote that book taught Home Economics at Huntington. You know, the teachers then had certain restrictions. They couldn't be married.

CP: At the time that you went to Huntington High School were you aware of the *Brown* v. *Board of Education* ruling?

GW: Oh yes, oh yes. We discussed that. 1954.

CP: Was it something you discussed in the class or at home with your family?

GW: Both. My father had passed away by then, so it was just me and my mom.

CD: Were you aware of Governor Almond and all the turmoil?

GW: Yes, because we played all of the black schools in Norfolk and Portsmouth: Booker T. Washington in Norfolk and I.C. Norcum in Portsmouth. And that year, they shut

everything down because of the integration policies of Governor Almond. He was the guy behind all of that. But then they had the Norfolk 17 and they came on board and disputed that stuff. Those kids had a rough time. But it never happened in Newport News and I think one of the reasons was because of the leadership and the shipyard. It played a big part.

CD: Were the sides strictly divided along racial lines?

GW: It was divided along racial lines. Also, you had the whites develop a group called S.O.N.S., Save Our Neighborhood Schools, and they picketed and protested and all that because that's when they initiated the bussing program.

CD: I was involved in that in 1971 and was bussed to Stonewall Jackson Elementary.

GW: Down on Huntington Avenue.

CD: Looking back, it was a great experience although, at the time, I remember it was very divisive.

GW: Well, you also have to remember the City of Newport News merged with Warwick County in 1958. Newport News didn't have school buses. I never rode a school bus in my life. We walked to school. We walked a distance, too. All the school buses were in Warwick County because Warwick was country. It was real rural. So when they consolidated in 1958, that's when Newport News got buses and started the bussing program in the 70s.

CD: Were you familiar with the controversy here, the Shoe Lane controversy?

GW: Oh yes. Actually, I had looked into buying a house on Prince Drew Drive.

CD: Is that right?

GW: Yes, my wife and I. Actually, we came up and we looked. You also have to remember that a lot of the colored people at that time were here before Christopher Newport ever even thought about coming here. I had several friends of mine—several of them are deceased now—who worked at the shipyard with me. They were there way back on properties that had been handed down by their families. And some of them just came in and bought property. But like I stated, my wife and I came up to Prince Drew Drive and we looked at buying a house there, but we settled for a house in Stuart Gardens. That's when the white flight started moving this way [up the Peninsula]. They were giving those houses away in Stuart Gardens. I'd be at work at the shipyard and guys would come in and say, "George, do you know anybody that wants to buy a house today in Stuart Gardens?" And I'd say, "No, not really." Then the next thing I know, I'm buying one. I bought my house in 1970 for $12,500. That was a steal. Because of the white flight, everybody was moving out. It was lot of controversy. And then the sit-ins at the lunch counter down at the F.W. Woolworth on Washington Avenue--. That got to be hectic. But the kids from Hampton University--Hampton Institute at the time--spearheaded that. We didn't have a college or anyone there, so they came out and sat there. Of course, it was going on all over the South. You know, it originated in Greensboro, North Carolina. The kids from A&T State University--A&T College at that time--they were the ones that were instrumental in doing that. Then it went to Tennessee. You had the kids there at Tennessee State University, Hampton [Institute], and all your predominantly black colleges. That's where the thing started. They would sit there at the lunch counter and they wouldn't serve them. I got a little brave myself. I went down there one day from the shipyard and I sat there for lunch. And the lady came and she said, "I'm

sorry sir, we can't serve you." You could order to take it out but you couldn't sit up there and eat. You had the same situation on Washington Avenue right across from the shipyard. There was a place on the corner called Gus's. The window's still there where you could order and they would serve you through the window. But Gus got smart, and there was another business there too. They allowed the colored guys to come in. But the old rope thing--. Have you heard about the rope?

CP: No, I don't think so.

GW: So the rope is what divided the two. They had a place on Pembroke Avenue in Hampton called The Sports Arena. That was a very nice place for entertainment and all. Ray Charles came here--now he's a blind man--he came there and evidently someone told him about the rope. All the whites were sitting to my left and all the colored people here, and they ran the rope right down the middle.

CD: Did you go to see Ray Charles?

GW: Oh yeah. And like I said, we had our own entertainment, like the Jefferson Theatre. That was the big time place. It was something like the Apollo Theatre in New York. They called it the "Chitlin' Circuit." That's where all of the colored actors and people would come to entertain. We had a place on Jefferson Avenue called J.B.'s Diner. He was ahead of his time. Fabulous place, all the entertainers: Joe Tex, James Brown, and Ruth Brown from Portsmouth. Her brother runs a barber shop there on High Street now. He's still in business.

CD: Did you see all these performers?

GW: Oh yeah.

CD: Who were some of the others?

GW: Of course you know we have the local group, The Five Keys.

CD: One of them is still alive if I'm not mistaken--

GW: That's Bernard. He's the only one who is left. They originated at the same church I was talking about where Dr. King spoke, First Church [shows pictures]. The only courses [electives] that they offered us in high school were brick masonry and auto mechanics. That was it. The Newport News High School had sheet metal, all skilled stuff. So when those guys came to work in the shipyard, they were already advanced more so than us.

CD: Were there a lot of folks that went up North to pursue a higher education?

GW: Yes. I had a classmate of mine, James Williams, who is a professor at MIT. He still works there. That guy was unbelievable. He's a Rhodes Scholar and a good friend of mine. We still communicate. He left the area because of that. My wife's aunt, same thing. Most of the people once they finished high school--some of them would go to college maybe a year or two years--but you couldn't get a skilled job anywhere. So they migrated up to Philadelphia, New York, and D.C. But even D.C. was segregated, although D.C. was built by the slaves. The Capitol, the Rotunda, all that was built by the black slaves. D.C. was segregated tremendously. One thing that you could say was that, in the South, you kind of knew where you stood. In the North, they kind of camouflaged that. We had a baseball park that's still standing, War Memorial Stadium down on Pembroke Avenue. I can remember my dad taking me out there--I don't remember whether it was down the third base line or the first base line--but the colored people had to be there on one of those lines. My dad loved baseball and my uncle too, so they used to take me and my brother out there to the stadium. The shipyard built that stadium. Jackie Robinson played there.

Willie Mays played there. This was back in the day when baseball was big, the golden age.

CD: Do you know [Bernard West from The Five Keys] personally?

GW: Yes. His nephew was a classmate of mine.

CD: Every now and then, they'll be something in *The Daily Press* about him.

GW: This is my original application from the shipyard [produces a document]. When I first got hired they gave me that. And you can see that's the department I went in in 1959. That was my hiring rate, $1.52 an hour.

CD: Which was maybe good money at the time?

GW: Oh, sure. I mean gas was only twenty-five cents a gallon. You could get a two-liter of Coke for fifteen cents. This is a waiver [produces a document] that my mother had to give me. See, I wasn't old enough to go to work at the shipyard. I hadn't turned eighteen. I didn't turn eighteen until December of the same year, 1959.

CD: How many people were employed by the shipyard at that time?

GW: I don't really know. It's always been the largest employer in the state of Virginia. I would say maybe 18,000 or something like that.

CD: Not far off from what it is now.

GW: They've got about 30,000 now.

CP: How did Newport News Shipbuilding deal with segregation in the workplace?

GW: It was segregated. The water fountains, the bathrooms, and all--. It's just ironic to me that, in the shipyard, they would have a square box that had water spigots on each side. The water coming up through the spigot was the same water, but they had signs. You had colored water and white water, that's what we called it. And the bathrooms were

the same. You had colored bathrooms and white bathrooms because you couldn't use the same bathrooms.

CD: What was the ratio of black employees to white employees?

GW: Well, it was about even, the reason being that all the manual labor jobs were done by the black employees. Very few jobs were skilled for black employees. Chippers, riggers, transportation--. The early days of transportation were done by a mule and a wagon, and you know who operated that. A guy had to work like my father. I mean, he wanted to take care of his family. It's not like today. A lot of these guys today could care less and I've had them tell me--I was there for forty-two years and five months, that's how long I worked there--and they said, "Man, I couldn't be nowhere." "Well," I said, "first of all, if you wanted to do the right thing, take care of your family. You do what you have to do." I enjoyed working there, although the early days were a little rough as far as the segregation. But you've got to be somewhere, and the shipyard wasn't a bad place to work, although the pay scale was different. They had two pay scales. I was hired at $1.52 [per hour] on the application. You would have been hired at $1.73 [per hour]. That was the pay scale in 1959. They were not going to pay me the same thing they would pay you. I could have had a degree from Harvard, Yale, anywhere. They were not going to pay me for that. And to surprise you or not, a lot of the whites who were there only had a fourth or fifth grade education. But they still were paid more because of that. I'll never forget the area I worked at when I first went in there. We had this guy from Ahoskie, North Carolina. He looked like he was white and they all thought he was. But on his application he was hired the same as me, as a laborer. All black folks were hired as laborers. No skilled positions at that time. We had men in there when I went in who were

a little older than me and who had finished most of the predominantly black colleges like Hampton University. And you know what they were doing? The white guy, you would have been the mechanic. I would have had a broom and a shovel and I would come in and sweep up, with a college degree. I've got several of my friends--. Most of those guys are now in their eighties. I'm seventy-one. They're in their eighties now. But they say the same thing, "You have to do what you have to do." That's what happened in the military before they integrated in 1948. I had one good friend of mine and I had an uncle who was in the Navy. You know, you couldn't do anything but cook, wash the ship down, and stuff like that. I guess you know the story about Dorie Miller. He was the guy who was forbidden to operate a machine gun on board the ship. So during the war, when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, he ran and got one and started shooting. They wanted to court-martial him.

CP: What ever happened to him? Did he get away with it?

GW: Yeah, but he was not supposed to do that. Now I mean you're in the Navy, Army, Marines, whatever. You're serving the country but you do not get your due process.

CD: It must have been terribly frustrating.

GW: Oh yeah. My uncle used to tell me about it. He was in the Navy. The Navy was the worst. Do you know the first guy who got kicked out of the United States Military Academy? They set him up to fail. And he eventually had to leave. Sometimes it bothers me, especially when a lot of young people just don't know. I have a grandson in elementary school and I go over and speak to him a lot and they just don't have a clue. And a lot of them will tell you, "Man, that's old time stuff. I don't want to hear that. It's not like that now." So I said, "Okay. That's fine".

CD: It's not that long ago. You're living proof of this. You look at books and it seems so long ago. But you're part of this book.

GW: Also on Washington Avenue--. If my mom or dad took me over to the shoe store to buy a pair of shoes, they wouldn't let you try the shoes on. You know what we had to do? Before we left home, my mom would take my foot on a piece of paper and she would outline my foot. And we would take that in. That's how they measured to get your shoes. My mom wanted to buy a ladies hat and tried it on, it was hers. We've come a long way, but we've got a ways to go too.

CP: How would you describe the shift over time at Newport News Shipbuilding, your treatment, the pay, and job opportunities within that company?

GW: Well, all of that started moving after the civil rights bill was passed in 1964 [The Civil Rights Act of 1964]. That's when everything started moving.

CP: Was it slow?

GW: It was slow at the beginning. You began to have black foremen. The Apprentice School--. At first, blacks weren't allowed to go to the Apprentice School. I want to say they started a year or two before I got there to accept blacks. But they've been open since 1919. [Newport News Apprentice School started July 1, 1919]. You couldn't be a member of the Apprentice School program. And Hampton Institute, at the time, was a big help to a lot of guys. They would go there at night and prepare themselves for the shipyard and places like that.

CD: Even Hampton Institute had the paper bag test.

GW: Oh yeah.

CD: There was a bit--

GW: Among ourselves? Oh sure. I experienced that firsthand. My wife looks like you [points to Charles]. My late wife, she's deceased now. When I started to date her, man, I caught hell. I was too dark. People in her neighborhood all looked like her and they were saying, "Where did this guy come from? Who is he? " My daughter speaks about it now. My wife's grandmother kind of spoke up for me. She would say, "He's a nice young man. I know his parents." My daughter always tells me, "Good thing Grandma Emma spoke up for you, or you wouldn't have gotten into this family." [laughter] And I say, "You're right." She's right, too.

CD: Was there a sense of unity among your co-workers with the situation with--

GW: Well, let me tell you. I went to a funeral service for one of my co-workers earlier this year. He was a white guy. His name was Jim Stanford. When I first came to work there he seemed to be a little different, a little more tolerant than the other guys. He'd come over and say, "George, come on sit down right here. Have lunch with me." I'd say, "Is it okay?" He'd say, "Yeah." So when he passed earlier this year, I went to his memorial service. I was the only black guy there. I went up to his family and I introduced myself, and I told his family that he was a good man. He was a good man because he treated everybody the same way. The black guys, the white guys, he didn't show any difference. He was from West Virginia. I said that, "I just wanted to let you guys know that." His wife was so thrilled to hear that. She gave me a hug. Her husband was like that. The pastor of their church, who was talking privately to me before I got a chance to say what I said, he mentioned that Jim was a good guy towards all people. And then when I told her how he treated all of us--. He was a good guy, a good guy. But you had some guys in there, to them, you still were a boy. You never became a man. You were always a

boy. And they treated you like that. You had a lot of them like that. It wasn't just a select few. There were several guys. The job I had as a material supply clerk, that was considered kind of an upscale job. After I was hired on initially as a laborer, I went to get a transfer. I went back to the employment office and the first thing they asked me was if I could give them a sample of my handwriting. They said, "I want you to script your name." I'll never forget his name. It was Mr. Edwards, Penn Edwards. He said, "Do you understand what I'm saying?" I said, "You want me to print my name and then you want me to script my name." Back then we called it locker writing. That's what it was called when it was cursive. And he looked at it and went, "I see where you went to Huntington High School." I said, "Yes, I did. I graduated in the class of 1959." He said, "A lot of you boys that come out of that school"--you're still a boy, now--"a lot of you boys coming out of that school are well prepared to come into the shipyard. I'm going to give you this transfer, but I don't want you to go back and tell all those guys you got a transfer because everybody would be there trying to get one." I went back and told everybody. [laughter] I told everybody. But that was the difference there.

CP: Regarding Jim Crow laws, could you give us some examples from around here and your life?

GW: Well, the Jim Crow laws were set up, like I stated earlier, so that there were certain opportunities and certain things you could do that still came under the umbrella of Jim Crow. We went from slavery to share cropping, from share cropping to Jim Crow. And now, I don't know where we are now, to be honest with you. But that's where we went. We could go certain places and do certain things, but also we knew our limitations. We knew our limitations. Just like going to the movies. Everything was set up as two. And

that was part of the Jim Crow situation, as they called it. You know, you weren't in slavery and you weren't in share cropping. So that's when they came and initiated the Jim Crow. To be honest with you, and my kids hate for me to say this, in a way, this is just me personally, integration hurt black folks.

CP: How so?

GW: This is just my opinion. We had the opportunity to ride in the front of the bus, we could go to the movies, go to the university and all. But, somewhere along the way, we lost our way. We lost our way. And that's just me speaking personally. I just thought that we had so much and if we could have held onto that--. Although things weren't separate but equal. They weren't equal. They were separate. And it came under the umbrella of Jim Crow. You look at our kids now. You look at our generation.

CP: There seemed to be a lot more inspiration, a lot more momentum at the time.

GW: Yes.

CP: Exactly.

GW: Yeah. I say that to a lot of people and they look at me like, "Huh?" My daughter's a graduate of Temple University. We went to JMU [James Madison University] and looked around and then went to VCU [Virginia Commonwealth University]. And I came home from work, and she said, "Dad I'm going to go to Temple." I'm saying, "Wait a minute, I work at the shipyard, your mom's a nurse, you have another brother and sister we have to support and raise. I don't have that kind of money for you to go to Temple, Cathy." She said, "Dad, its okay. I'm going. I can get a Pell Grant." And one thing that helped, when she came home from the summer and when all my kids came home for the summer, they worked at the shipyard. The shipyard had a program where they would hire employee's

children. And pay them good, too. But she and her brother were also glad to get back to school in the fall, I'll tell you that. They were glad to get out of the shipyard. I said, "Well, you can go, but I have to stay. I have tuition to pay." But somewhere along the line--. My daughter comes and asks me, she says, "Dad, what happened? What do you think happened to us?" I said, "I don't know. I've been asking myself that question." I got a rude awakening when I retired. I've been retired ten years now. My first week--mind you, I've been going to work every day for forty-two years and five months--I get up and see all these people on the street. "What's going on here?" See, I hadn't seen that because I'm going to work every day.

CP: In the middle of the day.

GW: Yes. They're not going to school. They're not working. So, what is this? See, when I was growing up, you didn't have that.

CP: Everybody had a job to do.

GW: Yeah. Everybody on my row house block, we were all the same. No one had electricity, we didn't have a lot of money. But we had a lot of pride and respected each other. Nothing like all that stuff that's going on now. And it makes a difference. We had this lady, she was a wash woman. People from Warwick County would come down in cars and bring her their laundry. She would wash and iron with a flat iron. Do you know what I'm talking about with those old flat irons?

CD: Sure.

GW: That's what she used to iron those clothes. And they would come back in a week and pick them up. She used to get me to go to that store--the guy who has the little store in our neighborhood who owned the house that my parents had-- and we would get stuff

like ( ) soap, Little Boy Blue, and Argo starch. Those were the things she needed. I was talking to my late brother about this. He's been gone two years now. He said, "George, you know what? You keep all this stuff in. I had forgotten all about that." Argo starch. And she was the lady who took care of all that type of stuff. We just had a close knit community. Like I mentioned, Mrs. Edwards or Ms. Banks at that time, she was the lady who everybody looked up to. And my mom, I can hear her right now: "George Jr., what did Ms. Banks say?" And whatever Ms. Banks said, that was it. That was the gospel. Then the churches here in this area, which we've got so many now it's unbelievable, were very instrumental in keeping us on the right track. And a lot of people now, a lot of young people, don't attend any church. They could care less about a church. And that's sad. It's really sad. You need some spiritual guidance somewhere along the line. But, you've got to remember that a lot of these guys out here now, and girls, are products of single parents. These young girls are babies having babies. It's something else, man. My daughter, Kimberly, is a police officer at the airport in Norfolk and she was telling me, "Dad, it's just a different story now with these young people." She has friends on the police force in Newport News. And you think the problem among the boys or men is bad? She said the girls are just as bad. Just as bad. It's unbelievable.

CD: Did you ever see Jim Crow come into effect with voting, either in local or national elections?

GW: Oh yeah. You have to remember, just like this voter depression they're talking about now, what it was called then was the poll tax. To be honest with you, to tell you the honest truth, my mother never voted in her life. Never voted. My dad, neither, because you had to pay a tax. What made it so bad was that, when you went to register, you had to

recite something out of the Constitution. And if it wasn't correct, then you were automatically disqualified. Just like the driver's test, you could come back the next day, and you'd do it over again. But it was up to the people to pass you or not, so you had no control over whether you were going to be a registered voter or not.

CD: We took the literacy test in class and nobody was able to pass it.

GW: Oh yeah? Really?

CD: None of us would have been able to vote.

GW: Oh, why not? But, on the other side, you would have passed it.

CD: My test would've been different, or I wouldn't have had a test--

GW: Or you wouldn't have had a test. You would have passed it, regardless of whether it was the test, the questions, the answers, or whomever's giving the test. You would've passed it.

CD: Bringing it up to the present, do you see the recent [2012 Barack Obama/Mitt Romney Presidential election] voter requirements, special ID's, birth certificates, as an updated version of voter harassment?

GW: Oh yeah. No question.

CD: I think certain groups are targeted.

GW: No question. The voting, they call it voter depression--. I remember when they had a big massive voting drive to sign people up and a lot of people went and signed up. But that poll tax, that was the thing. That was the way the state of Virginia and the South ran, because you've got to remember the big Byrd machine ran everything in this state out of Winchester. And whatever they said, that was it.

CD: We've encountered Byrd in our studies.

GW: See, Byrd ran everything in this state, everything. You had to go through him to get whatever you wanted. If he didn't say "yea or nay," you can forget it.

CD: Looking back, the Byrd family was held in such high regard--

GW: Oh yeah. They had those big apple orchards up there in Winchester. Everybody now is talking about the cheap labor with the Latinos and all. See, back then, it was the blacks doing all that manual labor for little or nothing. They didn't even pay those people anything. It was just like another form of sharecropping and Jim Crow. That's all it was.

CP: Just in different forms.

GW: Right. That was it.

CD: What about housing in the area? Were there obstacles?

GW: See that area there [points at picture in book], they called that area "Bloodfield." It was called that because there was a lot of violence there. The houses were like shanties. They were just four walls, no electricity, no indoor plumbing. It was awful living conditions.

CD: What section of the neighborhood is that now?

GW: Downtown Newport News.

CD: The East End?

GW: Yeah, the East End. I'm glad you mentioned that about the East End. Back in the day when I was growing up, all that wasn't called the East End. The East End started on the backside where Huntington High School is and 30th Street on back to Williams and Oak Avenues. Where I grew up and all the way down to the waterfront was just called Uptown Newport News. Newport News stopped right there at 50th Street. There's a railroad track there. If you're on Jefferson Avenue--I don't know the last time you've

been that way--around about 35th, 36th Street is where Warwick County came in. And Newport News ran from that track, all the way back to the waterfront. That was Newport News. The East End was considered that part of Newport News. Most of the black folks who lived in the East End at that time were considered upper middle class, well-to-do people. My part of town where I grew up, we were considered not much. If you had a daughter, you probably wouldn't have wanted her to date a guy in the 500 or 600 block because you had a lot of stuff going on there on Warwick Avenue. You had a lot of houses of ill-repute, and that's where all your dignitaries--doctors, lawyers and judges--used to hang out and do whatever they were doing there. But I couldn't go there. I especially couldn't go in the front door. If I had business I had to go in the back door. That's one of the reasons they changed the name from Warwick Avenue to Terminal Avenue. They had that name recognition, which wasn't all that great.

CP: How would you describe law enforcement, in regard to the races?

GW: The first black policemen that were hired didn't have patrol cars. They just walked the beat in the black, colored neighborhood. They couldn't arrest you or you [points to C.J. and Charles]. If you had committed a crime or something, you had to get on the phone and call a white officer to come and make the arrest. That was a no-no.

CP: Were they armed?

GW: Yeah, oh yeah, they were armed. And they only patrolled the black neighborhoods at that time. You wouldn't see one up in Hidenwood or in your neighborhood. You would not have seen a black police officer. They were just confined there. But, one of those early officers rose to be the Chief of Police in Newport News.

CD: Do you recall what year?

GW: I don't recall what year. His name was Austin, Chief Austin. Chief Peach was the Chief [of police] for so many years, and then when he retired they elevated Chief Austin. George Austin was his name. I want to say this was the 1970s maybe, or 1980s, somewhere along that neighborhood.

CD: Did you see harassment from the police department?

GW: Yeah, because I had a good friend--a classmate of mine--who almost got beat to death by a white police officer. Never really found out what caused their confrontation. He had a hard time. I know when I was growing up my mother always put the fear in me. She said, "Don't get yourself in trouble, especially with the police department," because they treated us differently than they would you or you [points to C.J. and Charles], especially in the South. It was very real, very real.

CD: Isn't that something, because now that's who you would trust.

GW: Oh yeah.

CP: It's really switched.

GW: It switched, right.

CD: What about music in the 1960s, with Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On" when a certain political voice, a voice of activism came out, and then it rolled over to the 1970s and the blaxploitation period, when you had *Shaft*--

GW: *Superfly*.

CD: What did you think of all that? All of a sudden there are TV shows like *Soul Train* that counterbalanced *American Bandstand*. How was that accepted, what did you think of that? What did the community at large think?

GW: I can remember myself running home every day from Huntington High School to catch [*American*] *Bandstand*. That was on daily whereas *Soul Train* only came on once a week. And it came out of Philadelphia. You have to remember that [*American*] *Bandstand* was basically all-white, but the entertainers were a mixture. You also have to remember, in the early days, you can take Little Richard and "Tutti Frutti" and then Pat Boone who did the same thing. He came in [and re-recorded the song] and made a mint. Also back in the day, they would not put my picture on the cover of the album because if you come in and see it, you're not going to buy it.

CD: They might have two kids in front of a juke box or, for instance, Chuck Berry, where they'd have a basket of berries [Basket of Berries, 1959 Chuck Berry LP cover].

GW: Right. Not the picture. Not the picture of Chuck Berry. So all that went on, and the group there [shows picture of the Five Keys], was the first black group to appear on the *Ed Sullivan Show*.

CD: Oh, is that right?

GW: Yeah, they were the first [black] group to appear on the *Ed Sullivan Show*. And then everybody that night, if you didn't have a TV, you went somewhere, or to some other neighborhood so you could see that. Man, it was just quiet in our neighborhood that night.

CD: What year was that?

GW: I want to say '54, or '55, I'm not quite sure on the year. Yeah, they were the first group. Rudy [West] was a star offensive tackle for the football team. See, they left high school and went right to it. They won the talent show at the Jefferson Theatre and the winning prize was a trip to New York to get a recording contract. And they won it.

CP: Did that bring the community together? Was that the buzz of the town?

GW: Yeah, among the black community.

CP: How about the white community? Did they ignore it?

GW: We never knew because they did not acknowledge it. They never acknowledged anything about the Five Keys.

CD: So when film and music and different things started catering to the black population, they were enthusiastically welcomed. It was like, “Finally, our voice.”

GW: Right.

CD: “We’ve got a voice.”

GW: Yes sir, we finally had a voice. That was great for them. And they’ve had a couple of other groups. They’ve done well, but never the plateau of the Five Keys.

CP: Did you ever feel that the voice given to you at the time was counterproductive in any way? Did you ever feel that it was negative? Did you ever feel like it went against where you thought the movement should be going or where you wanted it to go?

GW: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. I think that sometimes you think that you’re beating a dead horse. You see where you wanted to go, but the powers that be say no.

CD: You just can’t get there.

GW: Right. You can’t get there. Yes.

CD: Now we look back at some of these role models like Superfly. What kind of role model is that?

GW: I know. Superfly, Shaft. And you had the thing with the guy who played in *High Noon* and did the thing at the presidential nominations.

CP: *High Noon*, Gary Cooper?

GW: No.

CD: Clint Eastwood.

GW: They call his moves the Spaghetti Movies. And you call those black movies, at that time--. They were awful. Those movies were awful because, to me, they portrayed an image that wasn't productive for our young people. But it was the way of life. You go to New York [City], Philly, D.C., and the guy comes up in the Rolls [Royce]. He's got his fancy clothes on, the hat, the cane, and three or four ladies in there with him. That was the way of life for them. But it wasn't the way of life, or reality, or putting a positive message out for our young people. No, it wasn't.

CD: In pop culture, what were some of the positive, earlier images that you remember?

GW: Well, we really didn't have any. We had Amos and Andy, but we know how that was. That was blackface. We really didn't have any.

CD: There really wasn't anything.

GW: No, there wasn't. *The Cosby Show* was the first one.

CD: Do you remember the one show, the one with the nurse? Was it with Diahann Carroll?

GW: Yeah.

CD: *Julia* [The television show].

GW: You also had Jack Benny with Rochester. Rochester was a big character on the *Jack Benny Show*. You'd be sitting there watching it on a small black and white TV and there was Rochester. He had an active role on that show. Then, of course, *Amos & Andy*. I mean, that wasn't much. But the main show like I said, *Ed Sullivan*, tried to have a black

act on each Sunday: Peg Leg Bates, the Five Keys, Sarah Vaughan, Louis Armstrong of course.

CD: Probably, Harry Belafonte.

GW: Harry Belafonte.

CD: Paul Robeson was probably too risky.

GW: Yeah, yeah, yeah. You give a lot of credit to Ed Sullivan, because he opened the door for a lot of black entertainment on the show. Of course he was in New York [City]. I've been to that theater several times. It's right downtown. Most of the groups came out of Harlem because they were at the Apollo [Theater]. I don't know if you've ever been to the Apollo or not.

CD: No, I've never been.

GW: You need to get up there. That's a landmark.

CD: 125th Street.

GW: 125th Street, yes. That's it.

CD: Did you do a lot of traveling? Did you ever go down to the Deep South in the 1950s and 1960s? Did you go up North?

GW: I would go North. I just came back from Memphis [Tennessee] and Tunica, Mississippi. It was my first time there last week and I'm going to go back. I enjoyed it. It was tremendous. They took us to the Civil Rights Museum [Memphis], as I stated. They also they took us to the Tunica Museum . The tour guide mentioned how it took four hundred workers--he didn't use the word slaves--to do all this. And you picked it by hand. That's when Eli Whitney discovered the cotton gin, and was that. They went from there and everyone moved off the plantations but they had nowhere to go. No skills, no

money, no nothing. So if you owned the plantation, you said, "Okay, George, you and your family can stay here and work." And that's when the sharecropping came in. That's when that came in. I didn't really tour anything in the Deep South until last week. But it's amazing, a lot of history, good and bad. You had the good and bad.

CD: The National Civil Rights Museum is just amazing.

GW: That's why I want to go back. It broke me down. One of my former co-workers from the shipyard went on the trip and she was telling a friend of hers, "I've never seen George like that, he just broke down in there." Well, it was just unbelievable.

CD: The way they built it into the Lorraine Motel.

GW: Yeah, right, the whole thing. And then you go across the street to where you had the alleged--I use the word alleged--assassination. But we don't really know if James Earl Ray did that or not. There's still a lot of controversy.

CD: Some of the King family feels he should be exonerated.

GW: Yeah, and the window's still cracked, just like that. Still there, and that's where he put the rifle through. A direct shot right across the street to the Lorraine Motel.

CD: I think we've learned in the decades that have followed to question our own government, with JFK and Watergate. They've put all these doubts in our minds. Who do we trust? So many things we took as fact were just spin jobs.

GW: Spin jobs, right.

CP: Today it's hard to think about just how overt some of that oppression could have been.

GW: Right.

CP: Like you were talking about how the younger generation these days finds it hard to imagine that it was just so brutal, just right there in your face.

GW: Right there in your face. Correct.

CD: It wasn't that long ago. Like we talked about, the bussing and Save Our Neighborhood Schools. They still hadn't got integration right [by the 1970s].

GW: Right. Correct.

CD: As we learned in our class, in the 1950s, the NAACP brought more education lawsuits in Virginia than in any other state.

GW: Any other state, yeah.

CD: In fact, one of the cases in *Brown* v. *Board of Education* was from--. Farmville?

GW: Farmville, yeah. Well, they shut that whole school system down, too. All of the white kids went into private schools and the black kids had no school. They left the state. You know, they just exonerated them. They gave them some money and some other things. I think it was like that for about five years. They did not have any black students in any schools there in Farmville.

CD: Were you aware of what was going on in other parts of the state at the time? Was the word getting out?

GW: Oh yeah, oh yeah. It was being covered. Farmville and Norfolk were the two big ones.

CD: In class, we watched a documentary on the Norfolk 17 [*The Norfolk 17: Their Story*, 2009 WHRO]. It was heartbreaking.

GW: I was watching a show last week on Little Rock. They had Mr. Green [Ernest Green] on. He's looking good. He's my age. He's 71. He would have out of high school

the same year I was. He was part of the Little Rock [Nine] experience. He looks real good. And that was real traumatic, too. I wish that the people that were involved in Norfolk, Farmville, and Little Rock--. What would they have to say today? Do they have remorse for what they did? Do they still have the same views now? I would just like to see someone interview some of those people, if they're willing to do it. They may not be willing to do it. I would just like to get a response from them to see how they feel about how they treated someone. In the military, of course, they had the draft then. You could be drafted, go in the military, and be placed in a segregated unit, but yet your fighting for the United States of America. You're defending the country. So how can that be fair?

CD: There must have been a lot of anger, frustration, and confusion over "What am I fighting for?"

GW: Yeah, "What am I fighting for?"

CD: This has come up in more than one class, where they've speculated on the Cold War. How could the United States be so hypocritical to tell somebody else how to run--.

GW: I agree.

CD: Look at your own house [America]. It's in total disarray. How can you tell us how to live?

GW: You can't even take care of your own family. I agree.

CP: So you were talking about how the avenues of communication were pretty open. You were learning a lot of about the civil rights movement and what was happening in Virginia and elsewhere. How were you learning about that? Was it in newspapers? Were you learning this at church?

GW: Church and newspapers. I've always read a lot. My parents never read a newspaper, so I guess that's why I read so much. The library on West Avenue, we would go there. Now they have the Pearl Bailey [Library] in downtown Newport News. We go there a lot now. But the library on West Avenue is the oldest library in the city. It goes back to the 1920s, and I would go there a lot. Of course, there was some TV, but you didn't get it all. But like I said, the church and just reading and even the library at school. We didn't have a tremendous library there, but we always had Hampton Institute. We could go there and get a lot of stuff there. They always had a very good library.

CD: Did the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, like Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X, did they have a loud voice in the area?

GW: Oh yeah. The Malcolm X thing is still pretty strong here, believe it or not. Guys on the corner selling the newspaper, and they have a little temple on Hampton Avenue, before you get to Roanoke [Avenue]. I don't know the address there. I have a good friend--actually he was better friends with my late brother--his name is Leon Jones. His parents gave him that name. But he switched and now he's Mohammad Assadi, but I still call him Leon. He doesn't say anything. He'll say, "George, how are you doing?" I'll say, "I'm doing okay." And then you had the leaders of the churches here. You had Daddy Grace and Ella Mishaw. Those were the two big guys here.

CD: Did Daddy Grace just die?

GW: No, he died in 1959. He's been gone. But, they have a new leader. The guy that succeeded Daddy Grace was Daddy McCollough. They all call them Daddy. And then you had Daddy Madison. That's the one you're probably talking about. And now you have a local guy. He's a graduate of Huntington High School, class of '68. He's the

leader of that church now. You know, they're based in Washington D.C. Do you know Mayor Joe Frank, the mayor of the City of Newport News? He mentioned that he goes to a lot of churches--he's Jewish himself--throughout the city. And he said, "I want to tell everybody, the people there at that church, the House of Prayer, they're doing the same thing they did in 1926. Nothing changed." You don't see any of the young men there with their dreadlocks and all this stuff. You don't have the britches hanging all off their butts. It's just all business. When the new guy came in--I was there that night--he said, "Folks, we've got to go back to the way Daddy Grace ran this church." And everybody's looking around like, "What's wrong?" He said, "I don't like what I see." The women had stopped wearing their uniforms. They wore these white uniforms, starched. I mean just so crisp. And they started wearing dresses and nice hats and stuff. He said, "When I come back through here, that's what I want to see." And guess what, when he came back, that's what he saw [white uniforms]. They started out on the corner of 18th and Madison Avenue. And Daddy Grace was Portuguese. He came from Portugal, but he lived in New Bedford, Massachusetts. That's where he started. He came here to Newport News, set up a tent, and the people just went crazy.

CD: That's a lot of charisma. He must have been very dynamic.

GW: Just like you talk about with the drum lines. When the kids came to Huntington, they already knew how to play the instruments because they learned from the House of Prayer. They were automatically accepted into the band. No problem at all. I don't know if you've ever been there for a service or not, but, man, I'll tell you, when they have a funeral service it's just like in New Orleans. After the service is over, they bring the body

out and they march down the street with the band playing. That's the way they do funerals in New Orleans.

CD: Yeah, they're somber taking them to the gravesite, and they celebrate their life afterwards.

GW: That's the way they do it at the House of Prayer. It's just a tradition that they've been doing. Everybody says, "George, are you a member of this church?" I said, "No." They say, "Yes you are, you're here all the time." I have a lot of good friends of mine that are members there. I just like to go down there. It's great, it's really great.

CP: We've been talking about a bunch of characters who have been really inspiring, on a local and more national level. These characters really bring charisma. Do you feel like, in regards to what you were talking about earlier, do you feel like that charisma is gone these days, or do you feel like it's being channeled in different ways?

GW: It's both. A lot of it has gone, and the traditional is just being channeled in a different way. To be honest with you, start with role models. See, I never considered anybody a role model for me. I looked up to my teachers in elementary and high school and people in my neighborhood. I knew better than to get into trouble because I knew I was going to get it from everybody in my neighborhood. And the first thing they'd say is, "George Jr., you weren't raised like that." But see, you don't have that today. You can't say anything to kids. You can see these kids doing wrong, and you know they're doing wrong. But if a neighbor would say something, their parents are going to jump all over the neighbor: "That's my kid, my child. You don't have anything to do with that." But, that was the accepted way and I appreciated it so much. I wish they could do that today, I really do. But I think a lot of the stuff that I grew up with, it's just a different world. I

hear that a lot of things are different. I say that is true, but it's different in a non-positive way. That's just me personally. That's the way I feel about it.

CD: I totally agree with you, the breakdown of family, the breakdown off community, the breakdown of values, the fact that families don't even sit around the dining room table anymore. That's just such a backbone of the family where you see each other at least once a day.

GW: I know when we're growing up--me and my brother, just the two of us--we would come in, like you said, and we would sit down at the table. But we could not eat or touch the food until my father did.

CD: Absolutely, and we would bless the food first.

GW: Bless the food first.

CD: And we would ask to be excused from the table. You never got up and just walked away or turned the TV on.

GW: No. And my kids get a kick out of it when I tell them that we had what we called Sunday clothes and school clothes.

CP: What was that?

GW: We had certain clothes we could only wear on Sundays when we went to church. They said, "Oh my God." And I said, "We could wear those shoes and clothes to school sometimes, but we had to ask permission." My daughter said, "What?" I said, "You'd better not put those Sunday shoes on." That's what we called them, Sunday pants and all. You would come home and say, "Mom, I need to wear my Sunday clothes to school," say Wednesday, and you had to give her a reason why, or you'd bring a note home from school. But the kids today, they don't ask permission for nothing. They just do it. They

just do it. And that's sad, just sad, it really is. I have a granddaughter who is a senior at Kecoughtan High School. She's graduating in June of 2013. I have a nine year old and he's just all about shooting threes. And I say, "Man, there's more to life than shooting threes." My son, Robbie, coaches AAU with Boo Williams and he said, "I wouldn't have you on my team, because there's more to life than shooting threes." That's all he talks about. But, to be honest with you, he's a pretty good little ball player at nine years old. I try to instill in him that there's more to life. You look at all these guys that make all this money and they end up broke.

CP: Exactly. Did you watch the documentary called *Broke* [Part of ESPN's "30 for 30" collection]?

GW: Yes, yes.

CP: That sort of the squandering of opportunity, it seems to be a theme. So do feel like there are any unfinished legacies of the civil rights movement?

GW: Oh yeah.

CP: Anything in particular?

GW: There's a lot. The thing that I would like to see completed or continued to be worked on is education for our young people and some of the old people too. That's my main thing, the education aspect: being positive, being a good citizen, and offering yourself something for this country to go forward. A lot of people sit around and talk about what's not happening and why it isn't happening, but you also have to position yourself to make these things happen. And it all starts with your education. If you don't have that education, you can just forget it. I think that's what we need to continue to stress, education. I have a pet peeve, another one, which really irks me bad. I have a lot of

friends of mine in the school system who say that before they even start class they have to discipline. You don't have time to do that. But when they leave home in the morning they come in with an attitude. See, if my grandson comes in and he's trying to do the best that he can do, does his homework, studies and all that, and the kid next to him says, "Why you doing that?" and, this is what irks me, "Oh, you're trying act white." I don't like that. I don't know if you guys heard that or not, but that's constant. If a black kid is doing what he's supposed to do, behaving himself, doing his work, and trying to be a positive person in school, and not creating trouble, then you're branded as trying to act white.

CP: So you're labeled that and it carries a negative connotation.

GW: Yes, yeah, and that irks me bad.

CP: Yeah, because it's seems like that would be directly negative if you're trying to advocate for positive change.

GW: You hear that a lot, you hear that a lot, "You're trying to act white." So my answer to that is, "What's wrong with that? You're wrong. They're not trying to act white. They're not trying to act Asian. They're not trying to act Latino. They're just trying to do what's right and be a positive person in the school system not creating any problems." It's like I said, teachers have to discipline before they even start their daily class and that's bad. That is really bad.

CD: Do you feel in the last election, with Obama being elected, do you think this was a major triumph in the civil rights final sort of--

GW: Unfinished business? Is that what you're saying?

CD: Yeah, as part of this thread of history that began in the civil rights movement that we're talking about. Is this a triumph of that?

GW: Yeah, it was a major triumph. But, then again we can look at what's happening now with the voter depression. A lot of people, whether you're for Governor Romney or for President Obama, a lot of the people just don't like the man. They don't like Romney, but they're going to pick Romney just to defeat Obama. You have to remember, before he was even inaugurated, they came out with "We're going to make him a one term president."

CD: That was the number one job. Not to do what was best for Americans.

GW: No, number one job.

CD: That was their main concern.

GW: Their main concern.

CD: Do you feel like this is racism?

GW: No question, no question.

CD: Do you feel like Obama being elected has opened up the wounds--

GW: Oh yeah. Just like a submarine where you go down below, the submarine just rose right back up to the top. Yeah, it's really sad. And I'm saying like, "Why?" You've got all these "he's not American" and "he's anti-American." So, I don't know.

CD: It's hurtful to watch.

GW: It is. I've got to the point where I try not to look at it. I don't get mad or upset. I just think, "Why?"

CD: I get sad.

GW: Yeah, I get sad for our country. We have a great country. But now the second guy just came out this week talking about women's rights again, about abortion and all this stuff. But how can you allow men to make decisions for women the same as if you're going to have women make decisions for men? I just don't see it, and I have two daughters myself. I feel as if they're going to do that--. The only male that should be making that decision is between their doctor if he's a male, the husband if there's a husband, and God almighty. That's it. Nobody else should have a say. They're making it rough.

CP: It seems like a general theme of people in our discussion: people deciding things for people that they don't represent--

GW: You're right.

CP: --that they don't know, or sometimes that they don't care about. Maybe they look or are different from them in different ways.

GW: Just like they constantly talk about jobs going overseas and all that. The problem I have with that is that these big companies and corporations are the ones allowing these jobs to go overseas because it's more money to them. And they're talking about hiring Latinos and all that cheap labor. But this has always gone on. Picking the oranges and the apples right here in the state of Virginia, of course, and in California and Florida has always been done by Latinos or blacks. And that's such a big issue, especially with the jobs that are being moved. If you own a company, you could keep that job here in the United States if you choose to. But you could see more money coming in overseas. They constantly talk about "We're sending jobs overseas. We're losing jobs." Yes, we are. But the owner of that company could stop that.

CP: Okay, so what would you feel like are the most pressing problems for African-Americans today?

GW: The most pressing problem that I see is crime in the black neighborhood. Black on black crime. It's out of control. You look at what's happened in Chicago. It's awful. All these people that talk about "the white man" and what he's done. Now, you do it yourself. I was on jury duty a couple years ago in Newport News and all they brought into the court were young black men. Then you've got their mothers and grandmothers in court saying, "Oh he's a good boy, judge." He can't be. I'm saying this to myself: "He can't be! If he's here facing the judge, he's murdered somebody." Like I said, when I first retired, the problem is that these guys stand on the corner and make their little money. They'll come home and give their mother and grandmother a few dollars. They don't give them a lot of money. But they accept their money and they're satisfied with that. That's the problem. As far as I'm concerned, that's the most pressing issue. And teen pregnancy. Black on black crime and teen pregnancy. These young girls out here ( ). I was talking to a young lady today. She was talking about her job and I said, "How many children do you have?" She said, "I have three." I said, "How old is the oldest?" "Four years old, and just had one four months ago." So she has three children and the oldest one is four years old. What is it like for her? I'm not saying she's dumb, but chances are--. What could she have done?

CD: That's putting a lot of obstacles in her path.

GW: Working people-- I'm retired now--but we're going to have to bear the brunt of raising those kids.

CD: The social system that's going to support and that infrastructure that helps the welfare system and the welfare state of our country.

CP: So, with the black on black crime and teen pregnancy specifically, do you feel like there is some sort of connection between that and the civil rights movement? Have you been able to draw parallels to find out how those things have come about?

GW: Well, I think it all started back in the 60s. That's when we started to move away from our upbringing and parenting and all that, because a lot of guys who went to war in Vietnam came back. It was a mess. I think that started a lot. And again, I'll go back to what I said about integration: I think it hurt us. We lost a lot, we gave up too much. Just to go to the movies or me sitting here with you two guys, that wouldn't have happened before the civil rights bill. There's no way. And I think that's part of the problem, a big part of the problem. I get a lot of people saying "No, George." I'm just telling you from my personal feeling and experience, I think we lost too much. We had ninety-six all black high schools in the state of Virginia. Today, we have Booker T. Washington in Norfolk--saved from name recognition--I.C. Norcum in Portsmouth, Maggie Walker and Armstrong in Richmond, and that's it. All the other black schools were delegated to middle schools. My school now is a middle school. Of course, they did away with Newport News High School. That's nothing. That's not even there anymore. This just goes to show you: ninety-six all black high schools in the state of Virginia at one time, starting back in the 20s and they're all gone now. Even when we went to high school and even in elementary school we strived to be good, because our principal used to tell us--. He would say "George Williams," and I would say, "Yes, sir." "You can't get to Hampton like this, or you couldn't get to Morgan." He would always say the black

schools because we couldn't go to the white colleges. He said, "You've got to do better." But today, principals and teachers don't have time for that. And we knew better. I knew if I got in trouble at school what would be waiting for me when I got home. Oh, I knew what would happen. But, now, these young kids' parents ( ) will come over and they're angry with everybody but who they should be angry with, which is themselves. They want to curse the teachers out, curse the principal out--

CD: It's the system.

GW: Yeah. And the kid is right there listening to all that. That's what bothers me too.

CP: They see that as acceptable.

GW: Right. They think that's the way it should be.

CD: I don't know what it's going to take to turn this around. So, I guess we're winding down here.

CP: Yeah, I was going to ask you one more main question. Where would you say the civil rights movement would be today without that much integration at the same time? What would be different? What would be the same? And how do you see the world being different today?

GW: I think if it hadn't happened, we would still be in the Jim Crow era. And we all know what Jim Crow was all about. It said, "You're equal, but separate." That was the Jim Crow doctrine, and I think we would still be there. Schools, rec centers, and all that would be different.

CP: Very interesting. Would you have anything else you would like to contribute, anything else that you've wanted to say but we haven't asked--

GW: First of all, thank you guys for allowing me to come and share this with you. I really appreciate it. I just hope that we can come together as one in this country: no black, no white, no red, no green, no brown. We're all Americans and I know that a lot of the whites who sympathized with the civil rights movement were killed too. The two Jewish kids, and that guy Chaney [James Earl Chaney], Ms. Viola Liuzzo from out in Detroit--they talked about that in the tour down in Memphis. So I always tell people, "Without them, we wouldn't be where we are today." A lot of people don't agree with that but I do. They have this thing about what Obama said, "You didn't build this" or "you didn't make this." We would not have been where we are today without that help. You have to remember, right after slavery we had nowhere to go. We couldn't read, we couldn't write, we had no land of our own. We were promised a mule and forty acres. Of course that didn't happen, but you know [laughter]. I just wish we could come together as one but, with the philosophy that's being spread and preached today, it's going to be hard. And one thing that's happening is the money situation. It looks like the poor are getting poorer and the rich are getting richer, and the middle class is just stuck in the middle. It's just not happening. Again, that's just the way I feel about it, but I'm hopeful and believe that it can be done. But it's going to take a lot. I may not be here to see it, but we'll get there. With the help of the good Lord. We definitely need him.

CP: Every little bit counts.

GW: Yeah.

CP: And I think that this project can only be good. ( )

END OF INTERVIEW

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