RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH M. WILMA HARRIS

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

FANTASTIC TRANSCRIPTS

Molly Graham: This is an oral history interview with M. Wilma Harris. The interview is taking place in Springfield, New Jersey. The date is September 26, 2015. The interviewer is Molly Graham. I can't believe how fast September has flown by.

M. Wilma Harris: I know. The whole year. Because three months from Thursday is 2016. Three months from yesterday is Christmas day. Yes.

MG: First, what does the M stand for?

MWH: Margaret, which was my grandmother's first name, but she didn't go by her first name either. Don't ask me why, but it's Margaret. Out of deference and love for her, I sign everything with the M. Wilma.

MG: I like that. Wilma, can you tell me when and where you were born?

MWH: I was born during a hurricane in September, 1944 in Paulsboro, New Jersey, which is in Gloucester County, nineteen miles north of the Delaware Memorial Bridge and nineteen miles east of Philadelphia.

MG: Can you describe Paulsboro? I've never been there before.

MWH: You're lucky. [laughter] Describe how? When I was living there, there were about seven thousand people. The primary employer was Mobil Oil. I would say at that point it was maybe ten percent black. My parents were the first black family to move into the block where we lived. So there was a mass exodus tout de suite. Then right across the street from where I grew up, there was a field. They built houses there after World War II. They're still there. Three of the original ten families--I can't believe--are still there. They're now very old. The high school had sending districts. One township was very, very rural, Logan Township. Then there was West Deptford and Gibbstown. There were about a thousand students in the high school. My graduating class had about two hundred. As with much of South Jersey, the town was very narrow-minded. My graduating class, we had our fiftieth reunion three years ago. Probably eighty percent still live within twenty miles of where they were born and went to school. They haven't been exposed or seem to have very little desire to be exposed to anything outside their world. I saw another person from South Jersey, not from my town--Paulsboro is not unique in this regard--and I said, "I'm going to the southland on Sunday, tomorrow. One of the good things is that I can leave the south." It's one thing to go for like four hours and say, "Thank God I don't live there anymore," because it's just so non-progressive in terms of its thinking. Now it's down to about five thousand people. It's heart breaking because when I was a child, there was a downtown and people could do those things you were talking about with the Westfields and Summits. Then they built interstate 295, which meant that people didn't have to drive through town and shop at the drug stores or the other local businesses that had an adverse effect on the economy. There are lots of boarded up buildings and few businesses now. I still own a house down there, which I'd probably lose money on if I ever thought of selling it. [laughter] Like, "Take this." But I have no intention of selling it in the short term, but it's sad. Don't seem to be a lot of

dreams. There's no hunger to get out and see what's the world's all about. So that's where I was born. You want to know when? I told you where.

MG: I think you said 1944. You say Paulsboro is sad now, but was it sad then when you were growing up there?

MWH: Yes. I knew it was narrow-minded. I knew that it was biased. I knew it was bigoted. It didn't matter whether you were black or white, I knew that my goal was to get O-U-T. As my cousin puts it: "You left for Douglass and never looked back." [laughter] That's true. Yes. So it was sad on a personal level, but not systemically. Now everything about it is sad. Now it's all sad. I'm sure there are individuals who may feel trapped and have no idea how to get out of there. Sad is the word for it. Boarded up buildings and torn down buildings.

MG: What examples do you have from growing up that made you think, "These people are narrow-minded?"

MWH: [laughter] I never went to an integrated movie theater until I went to Douglass and I was seventeen when I left town. The blacks sat in the balcony at the Hill Theatre and the white attendees sat on the first level. So that's all that I knew, but it didn't make sense to me. Like, "Why can't we all sit in the movie together?" That's just an example. Black girls couldn't go in the white Girl Scout troop. Then, my mother's church was in Swedesboro. That town you may have heard of. Okay. It was a town founded by the Swedes in the eighteenth century. Her church--and it still exists today--had a very--in my young mind--strange, which has been reaffirmed in my old mind, as a really dangerous mindset of how they valued people. It was all superficial. If you were pretty, then you were good and you could do good things and if you weren't pretty by their definition, we don't want to have anything to do with you. I'll give you an example. You had to be fair-skinned. You had to have long hair and you better be svelte. You could have two of the three and you could be okay, but don't have the trifecta. So being fat, black and having short hair made me a loser. As an example of its manifestation, which I think may have been one of my drivers over the years, there was a Baptist Young People's Assembly. For four years, teenagers--I think from fourteen to probably about eighteen [years old]--would go away for a week on a different state college campus [to] Glassboro State, which is now Rowan, one year and then Trenton State, which is now College of New Jersey one year, to Montclair State and then back to where you started. You would get a certificate and you would learn different parts of the Bible and things like that. You'd get to meet new people. The churches sponsored young people to be their representatives. Well, my mother's church, God-forbid, would not sponsor me, so my parents had to pay out of their own pocket, so that I could get that kind of experience and exposure. Is that what you meant by examples? The church did not want a fat, black person with short hair as its representative.

MG: Yes.

MWH: Okay. [laughter]

MG: Can you tell me a little bit about your family history starting on your father's side? Yes. I was looking at that picture.

MWH: On the table when you come in are pictures of my grandparents and my parents and me, lest one forgets where they come from. My father was born in Philadelphia, I don't know how or why, because his parents were from Virginia. I don't know what they were doing in Philly in 1917, but that's where Daddy was born. They moved back to Essex County, Virginia soon after daddy was born. The oldest of six children--because the Depression came, I don't think he went to school more than fifth grade because he had to help on the farm. My grandparents, all four of my grandparents, were sharecroppers. Daddy worked with his father, who I didn't know--he died when I was maybe two or three--until 1937. In 1937, daddy and his first cousin, who lived on an adjacent farm, came to Swedesboro because there was a canning factory there and the canning factory needed laborers. Now Del Monte; it was the Hurff factory and then Del Monte bought out Hurff. The factory's no longer there. It was there that he met my mother. I have one aunt left. Daddy had three sisters and two brothers. He was the fourth to be deceased. His one sister was murdered and the two brothers died relatively young. Then one aunt died last November. Daddy died in 1990. Very wonderful, kind human being. Very principled. Very ethical. Valued work. He taught himself electricity to supplement the family income and did electrical jobs. People liked when Mr. Harris came to do the electrical job because he cleaned after he had done the work. So their house looked better after it was finished than when he started. His name was William, hence Wilma. When I was younger, and he would go to do the electrical jobs during the summer, I would go with him and pass him tools. I was a contributor in that way. A good, kind, kindhearted soul. My mother was born in Swedesboro, New Jersey and moved seven miles away to Paulsboro, which is like as far as she left the area, in 1945. Daddy moved back to Virginia, I'd say, probably by the time he was three, because his next sibling was born in Virginia. She was four years younger than he, so sometime in his early life. His formative years were there in Virginia. My mother was the only girl, the middle child of three. She had a three year older brother and another brother who's like a year and a half younger than she. Oh, I didn't tell you what daddy did. He worked at Campbell Soup in Camden making cans, the factory is now a park or something. Mommie graduated from Swedesboro High School in 1935. She was the only black girl in her graduation class. She may have been the only black girl in her class because it wasn't expected that girl children got education. She wanted to be a secretary, but her father said, "I'm not wasting money and sending a girl child to secretarial school." Mommie believed in education, she'd always say "no one can take away what you know." Be that as it may, it was foolish, foolish. My mother was devoted to her mother, who was a saint, absolute saint. Mommie met Daddy at the canning factory and they got married in 1941. He went off to World War II in 1942 in the segregated US Army, which was really the Air Force, but it didn't get to be the Air Force until like '47. [Editor's Note: The US Air Force was established as a separate branch of the US Armed Forces in 1947. Prior to that, it had been subordinate to the US Army as the US Army Air Forces and, prior to 1941, the US Army Corps. World War II era veterans tend to use all three terms interchangeably.] Then, my maternal grandfather passed away in February

of ’45. He was the chief sharecropper. He managed all the other sharecroppers. With him gone, they didn’t need to live on the farm. They lived on a farm. That’s how we moved to Paulsboro, which was the first and only house that my mother ever lived in with inside toilets. [laughter] And it wasn’t that long ago, but be that as it may. My grandmother lived with us until she passed away in 1952 suddenly, which was very--I couldn’t prepare myself. At eight years old, what do I know? We shared a bedroom and every night I would go to sleep holding my Mom-mom's hand. Yes, she was just very special. Probably one of the best cooks I ever, ever knew. No one of her grandchildren picked up--no, that’s not true. My younger cousin picked up some of her cooking talent.

MG: What would she make?

MWH: My favorite was a jelly cake. It was that homemade jelly--and I’m not a dessert person. Maybe I was then. That’s what I’d have for my birthday. It was like [inaudible] yellow cake with jelly between the layers, and very, very good. I would be the one to lick--whatever you call it; I don’t even know--the mixer things, the things that go around the mix.

MG: The beaters.

MWH: You see how much I know.

MG: That was my job growing up, too.

MWH: I was slightly spoiled by her.

MG: Was this your father’s mother?

MWH: No, my mother’s mother.

MG: My father’s people were still in Virginia. Grandpop died maybe 1947. Then my grandmother died like 1950. So I didn’t get to know any of my grandparents very well at all, other than Mom-mom who lived with us after her husband passed away in ’45. My mother made her living pressing dresses until I graduated from college. Then after I graduated, she did what she always wanted to do, [which] was raise kids. [laughter] My mother loved, loved, loved children. My parents had ten foster children. They adopted two of the ten, who were wretched. [laughter] That’s all I can say, the two they adopted were wretched people. Be that as it may, adopting the two was what she wanted to do and no one would deter her because it was such a noble venture. [points to picture] The young woman there, with the man with the bowtie, that’s my god-sister, one of the first of the foster children. Most of the foster children were wonderful, but there’s drama--and I’m not a drama person--around the two that she adopted. Both wretched, wretched human beings. They would steal--and I’m being random, so I apologize. The last five years of my mother’s life I had to lock her bedroom. In my car, I kept her jewelry and then when I'd go down to Paulsboro, I would get what she needed out of the trunk of my car because otherwise she wouldn’t have had anything. Really just not nice people.

There's a difference between living and being alive, and she lived. My friends called her "go-go girl." My mother just enjoyed being around people. She was absolutely, absolutely wonderful, active in her church, with those weird people, up until she had a stroke in January of '06, but didn't suffer long and passed away in March of '06, because she would not have been happy being bedridden and not being able to get her nails done on one week and get the hair done the next week and let's go here for dinner or let's go there. If there was a program or something on campus, she would come to New Brunswick with me. I have no siblings, in case you haven't picked that up. They didn't know why, I don't think, but they were supportive of whatever it was I wanted to do, whether be on a debate team or managing the basketball team. I'm sure they said, "I don't know why she wants to do this, but I guess it's okay." [laughter] Like, "Okay. Fine." The people at church couldn't understand why Gladys and William were wasting their money on me, which is why living well is the best revenge. [laughter] That's a little placard that I have. What can I say? My parents were awesome. I really, really stepped in the gene pool and lucked out on that one. As I may have mentioned, Daddy died in 1990. It's hard to believe it was twenty-five years ago. Every weekend from then until my mother passed away, I went down to Paulsboro to be with her. We had fun. We had fun. She loosened up a little bit. [laughter] She became less Baptist. I think having those heathen children may have helped also, because there were times where she could have been--there were times when she was judgmental and then when her own children did those same kind of things, maybe it's not so bad. There may have been advantages to her adopting them. That's a slim one, but be that as it may.

MG: How did your maternal grandparents come to settle in Swedesboro?

MWH: How did they get there? I don't know how they got there. I can only surmise that it was because there were farms; it was very rural. Where they lived in Virginia, King and Queen County, even now looks very rural. My grandfather was the oldest of fourteen or sixteen or some ungodly number of children. I don't know if he was the first to come to Gloucester County and say there are jobs here, but most of his siblings settled in the same area. Mom-mom was also from King and Queen [County]. I have no idea how they got here. I can only surmise it would be employment opportunities. I don't know how long they were there. I know they were they were there in the '30s. No, they had to have been there before that because mommie was born in Swedesboro. They were there at least in the teens. I don't know. They got there. [laughter]

MG: Did they ever tell you any stories about growing up in this time period? It's post-reconstruction, and then there's the Depression. Do you know what that was like for them?

MWH: Yes. It was harder for sure on my father than it was on my mother. Because they were on a large farm and my grandfather was the lead sharecropper, my mother was never, ever hungry. There was always food. Relatives who lived in Philadelphia would come to visit in the summer, so that they could pick up veggies and fruits and go see the country cousins and see what we can mooch from them. Daddy, I know that it was rough because he would talk about his mother preparing salt fish and how he hated it because

they had it so often. Apparently, salt fish must have been easy to acquire and inexpensive. He never talked about what it was like. I'm not sure he even had neighbors. I remember going to Virginia when I was three or four. I do know my mother often referenced--she and her mother, Mom-mom going to church, walking to church obviously and seeing crosses burning in Swedesboro. I didn't hear that from Daddy. That's the extent of it. They didn't talk about being a child, little people. Little people, children--no.

MG: Was there Klan activity in South Jersey at the time they lived there?

MWH: When I went to college in the early '60s, the largest Klan chapter in the United States was in Burlington County, New Jersey. I don't know if it's lost that status, but my guess is it's probably in the top ten. [laughter] I think most people think of New Jersey as northern, Trenton and above, but there's some really, really backward, incestuous areas. It's like, "Oh." I don't live there, you see. [laughter]

MG: Was your family fearful of the Klan?

MWH: My guess is because they were so faith-driven that they didn't believe the Klan would hurt them; that God would take care of them. They were "law abiding." I put that in quotes. I don't think they would have done anything to really piss the Klan off, if you know what I mean. Did they know what to do and what not to do? Probably. Like, "Don't do this because this will aggravate them." They may have had stories of "Remember what happened to so-and-so, so-and-so? So you don't want that to happen?" I wouldn't say fear as much as knowing my place not to aggravate them. Since they had hoods on, for all you know, the Klan member could have been someone you were sitting next to in school or someone that you were cleaning the house for. My grandmother also cleaned houses for the wealthy white folks besides working in the field. I'm not sure I'd use fear as the adjective.

MG: Your grandparents grew up during that post-Reconstruction--

MWH: They were way post-Reconstruction, because my grandmother was born in 1892--this is on the maternal side--my grandfather, 1890. My father's side--and they were also born in the South--like, 1888 and 1893. Reconstruction had been in the 1870s, so they were like--the quote/unquote "good" part of Reconstruction was over and they had gone into the retaliatory *Ferguson vs.*--

MG: *Plessy*. [Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) ruled that state-sponsored segregated schools were unconstitutional.]

MWH: Thank you. I just went blank. 1896. I knew all of [inaudible] second one. Just before that was kicking in. No post-reconstruction. I think it was really the Depression that had the greatest impact. Even now, I don't waste food because you don't waste food. If you're going to put it on your plate, you're going to eat it. The value of saving,

because you just never know. I think the Depression had a much greater impact on their behavior than Reconstruction.

MG: Did your father ever tell you about his World War II experience? Was he in a segregated unit?

MWH: Of course. No. But it's interesting that you ask that because--what was the man's name? After the war, one of the men he knew from the war, moved to a little quote/unquote "town," a hamlet outside of Swedesboro, because that's where we all went to church. (Campy?) was his name. But he was white, so I don't even know how he met (Campy?). But no, he didn't talk about the war at all. Everything was segregated because everything was segregated. So when they went from one base to another, it would be on a segregated bus or train, but I will tell you [laughter] what I remember from segregation, which impacts me today. Before you would go anyplace, the last thing you had to was go to the restroom. Even today, the last thing I do before I go anyplace is go to the restroom because those "For Colored Only" toilets were so disgustingly filthy. They were the only option and you wanted to avoid using them at all costs. You wouldn't want a pig to go into those. Now, my grandmother and my mother had such a clean house you could eat off the floor. To have someone go to a bathroom that looked like that--I'm not Hattie Homemaker as I told you--but I remember them being gross. So we always had to go to the bathroom before because I'm sure they never cleaned "for color only" restrooms from the time they built them. I can't imagine what it was like serving your country and having to go to shitty shitholes like that. The whole concept is repugnant. He didn't talk about the military at all. No combat, because I don't even think black soldiers were allowed to fight, except the Tuskegee Airmen, which was a totally segregated troop. No.

MG: Did he go overseas?

MWH: Stayed domestically. Domestically, in some godforsaken places like Alabama and Mississippi. [gasps]

MG: You mention on your survey that both of your parents were democrats and they supported Franklin D. Roosevelt. I'm curious about some of the conversations you had in the home.

MWH: There weren't really conversations except you knew--and I'm sure that I just answered that because I just knew. I just knew that Herbert Hoover in their minds was the cause of the Depression. FDR brought jobs for people and that was a good thing. The Republicans favored the rich and the Democrats were pro-union. Both of them, the jobs that they had were union jobs. I don't know what the unions did for them other than reduce their pay for the union due. But that's okay. They felt security job having the union. They didn't need me to intellectualize why you are doing this. It was security for them. We never talked politics per se. I remember--and it wasn't at home--I was a junior, sophomore, I was in high school. Sophomore--the Nixon-Kennedy debates. [Editor's Note: The Kennedy-Nixon Debates took place in 1960 and they were first

presidential debates to be televised.] It was interesting how people were concerned about Kennedy because he was Catholic and that the Pope was going to run the country if we elected a Catholic. My parents were ostensibly--"It doesn't matter because Nixon is part of Eisenhower and the Republicans." The religions concerns that many had about a Catholic president, perish the thought, were not a factor because of the perception--and rightly so--that the Republicans could care less about the working poor. But then it was working poor aspiring to be middle-class. Now, there are no--yes, there might be working poor, but they're aspiring to be less poor because there is no middle class. We owned a home. We had one car, which we all shared, which is why the roads are so screwed up now, because everybody who's over sixteen has a car and they're all out there at the same time tying up the highways. That's another story. [laughter] It was just one car. But the things that people assumed the middle-class would do and have. When you send your child to college and that child does not come out with three hundred thousand dollars of debt to get an education. It was more by inference and what they perceived the behavior of the Republicans to reflect that meant that there's no game in town other than the Democrats and they didn't miss an election. I love my father, but he was a wacko; he liked jury duty. I said, "How could you like jury duty?" But he liked meeting people and felt it was a right that people had fought for. There certainly were interesting people who would be on jury duty. Anyway, yes, they were democrat. They would attest to it themselves, but it was never explicitly said. There have been times when I have voted Republican. [sighs] Not often. [laughter]

MG: Do you want to talk about that? [laughter]

MWH: Yes, I do. Yes, I do. Tom Kean. Do you know Tom Kean? He was our governor in the '80s. You should read up on him sometime. He was so supportive of higher education. His son is now my state senator; I'm in this district. I shared with the younger Kean how much I respected his father's commitment to higher education and access and affordability and all the things that are really important. After being governor, he was president of Drew University and retired from there maybe ten, twelve years ago. But that same focus on education because of the residual effect that it has on the overall economy. So yes, I proudly voted for Tom Kean and would do it again, if I had a chance. I too would say, if I had to declare, I would declare Democrat, although I try to be independent in my thinking. When I look at the things that are important to me, ninety percent of the time, they align with the Democrats even though I'm an independent in my mind.

MG: What issues are important to you?

MWH: Higher education. Not the big brother, but how can you can be the richest country in the world and have so many homeless? How can you be the richest country in the world and have so many functional illiterates? Ninety-seven or ninety-eight percent of Costa Ricans--this poor little island country--are literate. How can we deny that we're not screwing up the environment when the glaciers are melting? No one will be listening to this in two hundred years because we all will have self-destructed. They're the things that are important. Social justice type things. I don't make generalizations, so I get upset

when people say "all" or "none." Yes, there are some bad cops; there are some rogue cops out there, but we need to do something as a society to make guns not so easily acquired. Yes, they do this background check, but I'm not sure what they're checking because there are a lot of wackos out there with firearms. Whether it's the man who shot the man and woman who were interviewing on live television or the one who goes into a movie--there are really disturbed folks out there. The government is the most--if they worked for corporate America, they'd all be fired. I was tied up yesterday, so I don't know why [John] Boehner is resigning. If the job got too tough, he knew the job was tough when he took it on and he should fulfill his commitment. It's not a popularity contest. You do what's right. They're the things that are important [to me].

MG: Can you tell me again how your parents met?

MWH: At the canning factory. When daddy came up in '37, that's where mommie was working and they met. It's a good thing. [laughter]

MG: They were married in 1941 before the start of the war.

MWH: Yes. We have a wedding picture you can see it on the table on your way out. It is so cute. They were twenty-four. Oh, God. [laughter] So cute.

MG: At that point, did he know he was going into the Air Force?

MWH: It was not voluntarily, because they had a draft then. Uncle Sam wants you. He didn't know when they married and didn't go in until '42. He went in '42 and came out December '45.

MG: Do you know what your mother did during the war years?

MWH: I believe she continued to work at the canning factory. Then when they came to Paulsboro in '45 is when she went to the dress factory. I think that's the sequencing of it. Yes.

MG: How were the conditions at both of those places?

MWH: The canning factory? I have no idea, except everyone seemed to work there and everybody seemed to know everybody. It seemed very congenial. It was large. I mean, there would be truck after truck after truck lining the streets, especially this time of the year or a little earlier, of tomatoes. It was like guaranteed employment during the summer months. I think--and why do I think this? I think some people just came up during the summer and then went back to Virginia, because most of the black people in that Gloucester County area were from Virginia. One of the stops of the Underground Railroad. Was about two miles from Swedesboro. If you haven't heard of Swedesboro, I'm sure you haven't heard of Repaupo, which is as big as this table. [laughter] The dress factory was a sweatshop. The pressors were paid piece work and all of the women, except

me, developed lung cancer. My mother, who never touched a cigarette, was diagnosed in 2000. I believe it was the mix of steam and the fabric that caused the cancer.

MG: There are too many towns in New Jersey.

MWH: 564. Too many small towns. I'm going to digress. When I was in graduate school, it was a program, a masters of governmental administration. I should have kept the book--*Regionalization 1985*--because the author felt, just as you did, not just in New Jersey, but throughout the country, there were too many towns and we could not sustain ourselves financially with each having its own fire department, its own police department, its own schools, etc., and regionalization was going to be necessary. Ta-da. Now, in 2015, they're saying the same thing. Some have merged, like Princeton Borough and Princeton Township, but that took like, twenty years to come to pass. Yes, they are too parochial--because I don't want to give up my fire department. I don't want to give up my police department. This is the high school that the mayor went, so we can't merge it with another one. They can't financially support it, especially in South Jersey where there's not pharmaceutical industry, which is like, the biggest industry. You don't have the tax base to support all of these services. I'm off my soap box. Go ahead.

MG: I also wanted to ask you about your relationship with your grandmother, who lived with you.

MWH: Oh, Mom-mom? [laughter] She was my angel. She was my protector is what she was. When I did something bad--a prime example and I remember it: I wasn't supposed to eat in the living room and she let me eat in the living room and spilled something; I think it was milk. I was just as klutzy then as I am now--like the potato chip that just fell on the floor. So when my mother came home from work, she was ready to spank me. "Don't hit the baby. It was my fault." [laughter] There I was smiling, knowing that my mother would not defy her mother under any circumstances. So she was very, very protective of me. Her other two grandchildren lived a block away, but I know I was her favorite, because she would see me every day all day. My mother encouraged me to be independent, which I think she lived to regret, because she was so close to her mother and didn't want me to be a similar situation, but she didn't have to tell me to be independent more than once. I'll give you a bad Wilma story. We didn't have school buses in the town--seven thousand people--and the grammar school where I went was built in 1859 and had no indoor toilets. In the winter, you learned to go very quickly. [laughter] You ran outside to go to the bathroom, but I digress. First day of school, my mother told me, "Mom-mom is going to pick you up from school and walk you home." "She doesn't have to. I know how to get home." Well, what do I know? At that point, I was almost five. What do I know? So she insisted, but I decided I was going to leave school before Mom-mom got there. I knew another route home and I came home on my own. I think now they'd have an AMBER Alert. Mom-mom wasn't angry; she was just upset. She never got angry with me. She spoiled me mercilessly. I loved her beyond belief. I'm sure that if she had lived longer, I would not be a nice person because I would have been so spoiled that I believed I could do anything and my grandmother's here to protect me. That's not a good thing. So I just have eight years of wonderfully being spoiled. Then

after that, taking accountability for my own actions with a mix of lots of love was my life. I got the best of both worlds.

MG: You had extended family in the area.

MWH: My mother's two brothers. The older one lived a block away. There are his two children in that picture over there. My mother's younger brother lived with us until he got married six months or so after my grandmother died. He got married Fourth of July 1953. Then he and his wife lived with us for maybe another two years. Then they moved out on their own. My father's family I do not know as well. Two sisters were in the Philadelphia area. One brother was in the Philadelphia area. The other two siblings lived in Virginia all their lives--excuse me. The aunt who's still alive is in Richmond now. Nearby on my mother's side, yes; on my father's side, not.

MG: You had a couple cousins who lived in the neighborhood?

MWH: I only had two cousins on my mother's side and one on my father's side who lived in Virginia. Two cousins nearby, yes. One is seven years older than I. The other was a year and a half younger. My first cousin on my father's side died in 2004; she was a kind and gentle woman.

MG: You mentioned yours was the only black family living on your block.

MWH: At first. Then everyone exited. [laughter] The white families left Dodge, like someone was chasing them. By the time I was five or six--I'm trying to think of the last family to leave--maybe I was seven. The entire block was black, but all working class, aspiring to be middle class. An interesting, but related side story. As my mother got older and ill, I would work remotely sometimes and work from Paulsboro. The thing that hit me staying over during the work week was how quiet it was at seven o'clock in the morning. I said, "Mommie, you notice how quiet it is?" I guess she'd become immune to it. When I was a kid, people were getting up and going to work. There was a hustle. The men were going to work and everyone's mother worked. All the women were going to work and the kids were going to school and there was energy. Seven o'clock, eight o'clock was like a morgue. No one was moving, no one was doing anything, which is reflective of the town as I see it. Don't send this to the Chamber of Commerce. [laughter] They will ban me from coming across the bridge into town. But it was so conspicuously quiet, so lacking energy, so lacking energy to fulfill a dream, whatever that dream was. It just added to my overall depression about the area. You know what I mean?

MG: Yes.

MWH: It does sadden me, even though I speak so disparagingly of it. I don't know how it can come back. People my age, most of them are dead or dying. Their kids never had the dream and now their kids' kids don't have--how do you get a dream? How do you get motivation? How do you get inspiration? Anyway, that saddens me.

MG: Something else that's different about this time period is kids played outside.

MWH: Oh, yes. Now if you played hide and go seek, they'd think you were kidnapped. It was a totally different world. We'd collect our soda bottles, because you'd get two cents per bottle, and take them to the store and get candy and you'd share it with all your friends. You're just not sitting there fixated on a screen. Yes, we all played outside and we'd catch lightning bugs in the little mayonnaise jar. Yes, it was fun. It was fun.

MG: Did you attend church services regularly? I know your family went to a Baptist church.

MWH: Does the sun rise in the East and set in the West? [laughter] There was no choice, whether you wanted to or not. Oh, god. My mother's minister was horrible. One of my college friends, Trish Montgomery, who's coming to the conference, lived in DC and for Easter, you didn't have time off unless it coincided with Spring Break, so she would always come down to the house for Easter dinner. We knew Reverend Smith's sermon, because it was the same one that he had been giving for years. Trish only heard it like, three times. I had heard it every Easter of my life--awful. He was like the leader of the bigots in my mind because "fish rots from the top," as the old saying goes. If he had been more inclusive--and that's a 21st Century word--then I don't think the rest of the parishioners would have felt that it was okay to discriminate. So I thought he was awful. Yes, I went. Yes, you didn't miss service unless you were in a coma. [laughter] If they could get life support, [they'd] drag you there. I still see some folks who used to go to church with me every so often. My mother sang in the choir; my grandmother had founded the choir. My friends and I would sit under the balcony and we would talk and we would talk. My mother would give the evil eye from the choir left. They'd say, "We were always afraid Ms. Gladys was going to come out of the choir and [inaudible]." "You were afraid? So I was." Yes, we went to church all the time. I still do, but now I do it voluntarily because I'm getting a message that helps me live my life and keep me focused. I got nothing from my mother's church. Nothing. My friend Ikey, who now lives in Columbia, South Carolina, and I don't know if he knows--I've probably never told him; I should. The Sunday after I graduated from Douglass was the last Sunday that I had anything to do emotionally or mentally with that church. Reverend Smith would always acknowledge the people who graduated from college and they would get a gift from the church. No acknowledgment and no gift, and I walked out, and Ikey came with me. That's a good friend. Basically, I said, this is not what Christianity is supposed to be about. I don't like this. I'm not doing this anymore. Because then I was twenty-one and I could do whatever I wanted at twenty-one. So yes, we went to church, and no, I didn't like it.

MG: What about the school you attended?

MWH: What about it?

MG: Tell me about your experience with the teachers.

MWH: The teachers I loved. The teachers, some of them, I loved. [laughter] The teachers were teachers who had been taught to teach in [the] '20s, and '30s, and '40s. So they really wanted you to know stuff, not to think. You know the difference? 1492 Columbus came here and Marco Polo went this way, but it wasn't like, "So why were they out there in the first place?" They wanted to teach facts. They liked me because I could remember the facts and answer their questions. They could have an A student, like "See how many A students we have?" But they really didn't like asking the "why's." Some of them got really annoyed. In fourth grade, we had Ms. Bauer. It was her first year teaching. She never had a second year teaching. She went to work at Woolworth's after our class. [laughter] She was so insecure. There were maybe three or four people who wanted to know not just stuff, but why the stuff. So she gave up teaching. I would say yes, the teachers were fine. The kids I went to school with I still see some when I go to the "southland." It was okay. It was okay. I'm scratching my head because I'm trying to find a way to--my mother always said, "You have to be twice as good as the white student to get half as much." A diet of that kind motivates you and pushes you to achieve and overachieve and to believe that living well is the best revenge. One of my bosses at Prudential asked me, around 1999 or 2000, if I always had to overachieve. I told him, "I guess so." [laughter] But I could never be the captain of the safety patrol; I was the lieutenant of the safety patrol. Girls State is where--you know Girls State. Okay. I forget the name of the organization that sponsors it--the American Legion? [Editor's Note: The American Legion sponsors Boys State and Girls State, a summer-long citizenship and leadership program for high school students.]

MG: We can put it in the transcript.

MWH: I'll figure it out by then. In New Jersey, the New Jersey State Federation of Women's Club has Girl Citizenship Institute (GCI), similar kinds of programs. Both were held on the Douglass campus, but whichever group did Girls State, did not want a black student representing it. I'm referring to the Paulsboro chapter of that group so I didn't go to Girls State, but I went to GCI and truly fell in love with Douglass. So when I see the "Federated Ladies," I thank them. They still have Girls State. You play the hand you're dealt. You say, "Basically, it's your loss Girls State people and I will do whatever I can with and for the GCI talk." It was never in your face type [discrimination], but the subtle things. Like, you can't be the captain of the safety patrol; you have to be the lieutenant. We can't send you to Girls State, but you can go to GCI. Things of that sort.

MG: What is GCI?

MWH: Girls Citizenship Institute. You probably haven't heard of that because I think it's unique to New Jersey. I think. But that was a good thing.

MG: What other ways in school did you feel like you had to work harder?

MWH: I'm not sure. It may have been Wilma-motivated. Because I was an only child, I liked being involved in activities. Then, I'd be with kids after school. I was never

physically adept at anything. So I would be the manager of the basketball team and the hockey team, the one who cut the oranges and made sure they were ready at half-time, because someone had to do that function. I would act in or direct the plays at high school. I knew that I had to excel--that's my word--on multiple fronts. "Oh, well, she's just smart. That's nothing. Anybody can be smart." "Well, she can organize and have this stuff ready for the sports team." "Well, anybody can be organized." So it had to be the whole package. We used to have--I hope they do now, but I doubt it--debate teams, forensic teams, and we would compete at Temple University. So I liked doing that. I liked doing the research more than the debating. [laughter] That's just my thing. So implicitly, from the messaging--"you have to be better, you have to be better"--I knew that I had to be the whole package better.

MG: These all sound like things that got you out of Paulsboro.

MWH: Yes. It was part of the master plan. [laughter] Yes. I told you my parents were very respectful and law abiding and all of that. In 1996, I got inducted into the Douglass Society, which is like the Hall of Fame of alums. But be that as it may, I had never, ever, shared this with either parent. My father was deceased by then. But the guidance counselor, Ms. Boyer, who was supposed to be guiding people, said in her condescending, snotty way, "Wilma, I really think Douglass wants better than you." I knew not to be a wise ass. I said, "Thank you, Ms. Boyer, but let's let Douglass decide." I never told my parents that because if she was a guidance counselor, and she was white and she says this, then she's probably right. I didn't want them not being supportive based on what this woman had said. So little subliminal messages--but not so subliminal; in your face messages, in her case. You should be encouraging students and saying, "Well, this is what you need to do to ensure that they'll want you," as opposed to, "Don't even waste your time, waste your money."

MG: It's seems like you figured out how to navigate--

MWH: Life. [laughter]

MG: And white adults and their skewed expectations.

MWH: But not just as a kid, even in corporate America. [laughter] Yes. "Navigate" is a good word, because I never felt I manipulated anyone. Yes, navigate. I have to remember that. Yes.

MG: Were you starting to form your exit strategy out of Paulsboro and what you wanted to do when you got out of high school?

MWH: What I wanted to do when I got out of high school, was get out of Paulsboro. I never knew, even until I retired, what I wanted to do when I grew up. [laughter] Plain and simple. So yes, I decided that very early on, because why are these adults being mean to a kid who's done nothing to them? I don't want to live in that kind of a world. So how do you get out? That's why I think education is so important. You get a good education.

How do you get a good education? You learn as much as you can about as many things as you can for as long as you can, so that you can be adept in talking to anybody who comes along about more than just a narrow little niche. So yes, that was the strategy. That was the strategy. I still believe in continuous learning.

MG: What were your options after high school? Did the GCI program open your eyes to Douglass? Were there other schools you were considering?

MWH: In 1956 or '57, the next street over, the one where my cousins lived, lived one of my mother's friends, Mrs. Banks. She had two sons who went to Rutgers. I don't know why they came. I know it was in the fall. But I came up with Mrs. Banks to visit her younger son, Karl, on the Rutgers campus and loved it. It was very warm feeling and then there weren't thousands and thousands of students. It felt like a reasonable transition from a town of seven thousand people to higher education. Then we went across town. I saw Douglass. I said, "What a pretty campus." Women didn't go to Rutgers then, not until like, 1970-something. So Douglass was the only option. That's when I fell in love with the New Brunswick area and the Douglass campus. Also, it was far enough away that I wouldn't be tempted to go home every weekend, but close enough that if I had to, I could get on a little Trailways bus and go to Camden and go home. So that was the first time I saw the campus. I also applied--please don't ask my why, because even now I'm not sure--to Ohio State. Had I ever been to Ohio? No. Had I ever been to anything related to Ohio? No. I had no idea why I did. I would have died there because it's too--even then it was too huge. But fortunately, I got into Douglass. When I was irresponsible, which [laughter] was more often than I'd like to remember, my mother would threaten me that I would have to go to Glassboro State, which is twelve miles away from Paulsboro. She knew that was the last thing that I wanted to do. "Okay. I'll remember to do my chores. I'll remember to do this because God-forbid I had to go to Glassboro State." That's when I knew, after I saw that campus and it's still a beautiful campus. Rutgers, even though it's huge and getting larger, still, it has that eighteenth century feel to it on Old Queens. You're right. Livingston Campus didn't exist then, but does look like corporate America. Seeing the campus in 1956 or 57' was a pivotal point. GCI was just the icing on the cake.

MG: You were ten years old when *Brown vs. the Board of Education* took place. [Editor's Note: *Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka*, decided by the US Supreme Court in May 1954, legally desegregated public schools in the United States.] Did that change anything about your school? Was that on your radar?

MWH: Yes. It was on my radar. It was also signed on my mother's birthday, May 17, 1954. I'll always remember that. The schools didn't change. There were three elementary schools in town based on where you lived. It wasn't like one was devoted to the Italians and one was devoted to the blacks, and the other to the Jewish kids in town. The classrooms were always integrated. Then you bring me to another story. It'll connect. January 20, 2009, I did not go to work that day. That was the day of Barack Obama's inauguration, his first inauguration. I said, "What should I do?" I only had one black instructor in all of my years of education. I went on a mission to track her down.

[laughter] Nothing else to do on this day. I knew that she graduated from Bridgeton High School. I said, "Maybe they have a website." Long story short, I found the name. This woman lived in California. I called, got voicemail. I explained, "Hi. I'm trying to reach out to Ellian Williams. This is Wilma Harris. If you are the Ellian Williams who taught phys. ed. at Paulsboro High School in 1962, I just wanted to say, 'Hello." If you're not, I apologize." Well, the next day, at work, I heard from her. [laughter] So now, I communicate with her via email. But she is only seven years older. Then, she was only like twenty-four. It was like, "Oh, God." We thought she was old. [laughter] We didn't have black instructors. That's what all of that is to say. *Brown vs. Board of Education* didn't affect that, but that wasn't its goal. I only had one black teacher in undergraduate, graduate, K through 12, and she was a phys. ed. teacher, not even an academics school class.

MG: Were you also aware of the sit-ins and the protests?

MWH: Oh, yes. I was old then. I was like sixteen. They were like my age at North Carolina and Woolworths. I don't think I ever supported Woolworths after that because then there were enough little five and tens; I didn't have to support them. Yes, I was aware, but not active in.

MG: Did your parents align themselves at all with the Civil Rights Movement?

MWH: Not really. I think they thought it was risky. It was not one of those things discussed. I knew that their only child was not going to go on a bus someplace and potentially be killed. I was wise enough to not even broach that subject. Like, "You want to do what?" And why is that? Did I reap the benefits? Most definitely Did you see *Selma*?

MG: Yes.

MWH: Wasn't that powerful? I remember that. I remember those kids in the church that was blown up two days after my birthday in 1963. [Editor's Note: M. Wilma Harris is referring to the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing. On September 15, 1963, the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama was bombed by a white supremacist and four girls were killed.] I said, "This is really, really one sick place if you do that to kids in a church." There was no way not to be impacted by it. Even now, why would you do that to kids? Why would you go into a church in Charleston, South Carolina and sit there for an hour and then shoot nine people? [Editor's Note: M. Wilma Harris is referring to the mass shooting attack at a church in Charleston, South Carolina on June 17, 2015 that killed nine people.] There are evil people. Once we come to recognize that there is evilness--but you can't let the evilness become so all-consuming that it affects who you are--then we can maybe move on. A community of evils. Let them annihilate themselves.

MG: Send them to an island.

MWH: The island of evil. Because there really are evil people. So yes, I was fully aware because they were chronologically my peers.

MG: You arrived at Douglass in 1962. I want to talk about your experience there, but is there anything I'm missing about growing up, family life, school?

MWH: I told you I was boring. [laughter]

MG: I'm not bored at all. This is so much fun. How are you doing?

MWH: I'm fine. I said, "Why is she listening?" [laughter] Anyway, have some more potato chips. There are plenty.

MG: Tell me about arriving at Douglass and what those first few weeks were like.

MWH: You know what a house chairperson is? At Douglass, each residence unit had a junior or senior who was like the administrator. If there was information to be disseminated, it went through that person. If you needed someone to help you, that was their role. I'll get to the end and then I'll work my way back. My freshman year house chair was, Carol Spence. Just had her fiftieth wedding anniversary party and I went to it. She has been a friend for a long, long time. [laughter] Long time, long time. I was in Corwin, which were the little houses on Nichol Avenue. Most of them have been torn down now. I'm going to try to tell you how many people were in the little houses. Maybe fourteen or fifteen. Lived in a little house, which was probably best for someone who was an only child from a small town, as opposed to the new dorms, which is what they still call them, even though they were built in the early '60s; they're still called the new dorms, where there were like forty students living on a long wing, as opposed to a house type set up. Because my mother was my mother and grew up with the people who gauged everything on the surface, I went in a blue dress with gloves. [laughter] Because she thought that was important. With all these boxes and suitcases, I had this very pretty blue dress, by the way. My roommate was also from South Jersey. She's now in Arizona. Hopefully, I'll see her at reunion next year. The oldest of three children--her father was a minister--she was devout. She thought I was going to hell because once I got to college, I was free, so I learned how to smoke and I learned how to play cards. I was cutting class. All these things that people who go to hell do. [laughter] She was very concerned for me. It was the '60s and it was a cool thing to have a black friend. Everyone wanted to know who you are, because in my class there were five black graduates. Maybe six. Six, because two are deceased and now there are four--and someplace around here I have a picture of three of the four of us, because we are all together at something Douglass that was held at the Harvard Club. We were like a novelty. Truly a novelty. One of the requirements was you had to pass swimming to graduate. I'll get back to that later. Black hair is a novelty. There was one straightening comb that one of the students, one of the upper-class black students had. So everyone made sure that we didn't have a class after swimming class, so we could go and do something with our hair that was an absolute frizz ball after swimming class. [laughter] But more being a novelty than being overtly discriminated against. I would say, '73

when I worked at the college was when I sensed more discrimination on campus then I did when I was a student. I'm going to fast-forward just a bit. You know I worked at Douglass. One of my responsibilities was commencement. When Douglass had commencement outside and the weather was nice like this, everyone could come, the whole Milky Way galaxy could go to Antilles Field. But if the weather was rainy, each graduate got three tickets or four tickets, so it was limited. One year--I'm pretty sure it was '73--it rained. This white father had brought his mother for commencement knowing they didn't have a ticket for her and hoping the weather would be nice. When I tried to explain in my deanly capacity that his mother was not going to have a seat, without a ticket, because there are only a finite number of seats, [he said], "Then take it from some of those scholarship students." So we know what he was saying. "The ones who didn't pay the full freight, those minority type students," is really what he meant. I didn't sense that kind of overt discriminating communication when I was a student--it was more like, "Look, my best friend -- the black. Come meet this person," which can be funny. I'm not saying it was all insincere because it wasn't. There were some people who just generally liked the black person because they liked the person and they could have been green with polka dots, but for some it was like, "Okay. On my bucket list, I can now check off 'have black friend.' I've done that now." That was the--I just thought it was sad, but funny--issue then. Now, I am sure that things were said and things were done, but not by people whom I knew well, because they wouldn't even want to be bothered. Would I say that--no different than now. There are people who have preconceived notions and nothing's going to change their notion, but they have the good sense not to get in your face. But anyway, back to swimming. You had furrowed your brow. I think that today too many people go to college to get a degree and not get an education. I think a total package, you know how to save your life swimming if you have to. As much as I did not like having to take this class, I was cool with it because I said, "God forbid, I have all of this knowledge and all this insight and I'm stuck someplace and die because I don't know how to swim." What a waste that would be. I see it as all part of the package of being an educated citizen. That was why I wanted to get back to that.

MG: Tell me a little bit more about your roommate.

MWH: [inaudible] Lolly? That's what we called her. She [was] bright--very, very bright. She came to college at age sixteen from a small town, Linwood, down near Ocean City. I think she was a history major at the end. We both liked history and poli-sci [political science]. Would she be my best friend? No. But did we get along? Yes. She was a kind and thoughtful person. We had very little in common, other than history and liking history. She thought I had gone to hell in a hand basket. She probably was right. [laughter] She was very studious. The classroom was just an extension of my education in my mind. I just knew that we weren't going to room together the next year, but there was no animosity or bad feeling. I think she got liberalized her junior year. She studied abroad in Sweden. Then after she graduated--I don't know if she did this right away. After she graduated, some point shortly afterward, she worked in Florence, Italy. I think those kind of experiences made her more open. As a person, I really liked her. I'm not the easiest person to live with, so it wouldn't really matter. [laughter]

MG: The world was changing so rapidly at that point.

MWH: Later, it was changing very rapidly, because we hadn't really gotten into Vietnam when I was a student. They were talking about it. It was my junior or senior year that the Civil Rights Act was signed. I think it was my junior year. There was no affirmative action, which came like in '65. It was at the springboard of all of those things happening. You could sense the times, they were a-changing, but not sure how they were going to go, knowing that there was a need for the times to be a changing.

MG: Were the changing times reflected in any way at Douglass?

MWH: Sure they were. I'm sure. God. I know we had a bus that went to a rally for LBJ [Lyndon B. Johnson] in Woodbridge or Fords or something, because Goldwater was just so far to the right. [Editor's Note: Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater was the Republican nominee during the 1964 Presidential race.] Now of course, considering what's out there, he looks like a Centralist, be that as it may. There was a Rutgers chapter of the NAACP, but not Douglass because [it's] too small an entity. No. Nothing that comes to mind, other than the rally for LBJ and that was early '64. We didn't obviously have TVs in our room, but I remember the night that Sidney Poitier got the Academy Award and that feeling, just overwhelming pride. No different than what I felt Sunday night with Viola Davis. Some things don't change over the decades. There was no buzz about that. It wasn't the kind of thing that people talked about at the Student Center the next day. I would say--and when you talk to other people--it was totally out of it. It was pretty apolitical or at least the people I associated with. By the time I came back to work in '69, it was not. Because so much had happened in '68, someone should do a whole dissertation on that one year. Johnson saying I'm not running, escalation of activity in Vietnam, and the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King. By the time I got back, September of '69, things were hopping. That was the year that Livingston College opened. Livingston women did not like the Douglass women.

MG: How come?

MWH: I think because the Douglass women were perceived as middle class, bourgeois and the Livingston women were the real black women. They had done the struggle. Many of the Livingston women were from large cities as opposed to the suburbs. There was a class distinction. I wasn't a student, so this was from a different lens looking at it.

MG: How did Douglass woman feel about Livingston women?

MWH: Probably the same. Who are these hooligans over here? [laughter] Less so then than when I went to Douglass, but still more than with Livingston, many Douglass students felt Douglass was the "eighth" seventh sister. Probably don't know what the seven sisters are.

MG: Can you say it for the tape?

MWH: If I remember all of them. Radcliffe, Mount Holyoke, Smith, Pembroke, Barnard, Bryn Mawr--and I forget the seventh. [Editor's Note: The "Seven Sisters" colleges are Wellesley College, Mount Holyoke College, Barnard College, Vassar College, Bryn Mawr College, Radcliffe College and Smith College.]

MG: Vassar.

MWH: Vassar. Thank you. Thank you. Sorry, Vassar. Douglass perceived itself as the eighth seven sister. So we were all that and a bag of chips. If we weren't poor, we would have been at one of those schools. To have that kind of a mindset and then have Livingston, which was focused on education, the urban experience, with the academics associated with how cities grew was like no, no. That's why I think there was a little friction [laughter] on both sides.

MG: How diverse was the faculty and staff at Douglass during the time you attended?

MWH: Cecelia Hodges Drewry, who's coming to the conference, was the only black professor at Douglass. Speech, I think was the name of the Department. She still performs. I'm not sure if Drewry's still teaching at Princeton or not. That was it when I was a student. When I came back to work, over that eight year period, obviously things got much better. But the faculty was just like being in high school. Like I said, Ms. Williams was the only black instructor I ever had ever--ever, ever, ever. So no.

MG: How did you decide to be a history major?

MWH: Because I liked it. Because I had enjoyed history. Back to my earlier point about being educated, I think it's important to understand where we've been to appreciate where we are and hopefully avoid some of the landmines of before. So that's why I majored in history. Fortunately, I was right. I didn't take any education credits, so I was hoping that I would be able to find a job as a history major with no Ed. credits, [laughter] and I was. That was a gamble, but the economy was much different then. Much, much different then. When I worked in human resources, I always wanted liberal arts majors, just because when you are a liberal arts major, you can think, you have some of the oral and written communication skills. When you do liberal arts you can kind of think with different parts of the brain. If you can do that, then you can probably do whatever you're doing in a financial services organization because we're not out here curing cancer or things of that sort. We don't need rocket scientists. [laughter] So I majored in it because I liked it.

MG: Talk to me about some of the classes you were taking or the professors that stood out to you.

MWH: Margaret Atwood Judson, who was a world-renowed authority on Tudor England, and very good bridge player by the way. She was just probably one of the best minds that I ever had. I'm trying to think who else. When you mentioned faculty, Dr. Judson leaps out right away. No others come to mind. I have to tell you, I had some

really, really good professors, but Dr. Judson just made it so real, made it come alive. She, as a world authority on Tudor England, had the letters that [Earl of] Essex had sent to Queen Elizabeth I and shared those with us. There's something special about using primary sources. She was so good. Now, I have to think of someone else. I did a lot of poli-sci classes. I would say they were all B+. As soon as you asked the question, Dr. Judson just leaped out. I didn't have her for class, but before the concept of social justice had a real name to it, Emily Alman. Emily Alman was in the sociology department. I didn't have any sociology classes, but Dr. Alman, like the Pope, had a vision of what was right and what wasn't right in an affluent society and how we should be treating people. So not from a classroom experience, but just from experience overall. I'm going to leave it at Dr. Judson.

MG: You were involved in student government.

MWH: Government Association?

MG: Yes.

MWH: You know that?

MG: You were a class officer. Yes, I did my homework.

MWH: [laughter] Yes, that was a long time ago.

MG: What was that experience like?

MWH: It was enjoyable because I got to meet a lot of people. The Government Association was like the student governing board, so I got to meet the administration, which I did as a class officer also, to understand what their role and responsibility was. It was the people meeting--I learned Robert's Rules. I also learned [laughter] that titles don't really matter. You have to know what the functions are. Specifically, as vice president of Government Association, it was my job to run the meeting. So there's a certain amount of control that you have with that gavel. If someone is going to go off the wall and you know they're going to go off the wall and they're going to go on a tangent, then you make sure you don't call on them right away to prevent them from hijacking the conversation. It may not have had title of president, but it had the ability to drive the process.

MG: How much interaction did you have with the men at Rutgers?

MWH: We had very, very few classes together. I'm not sure how you got to get a class across town, but I did have one with Dr. McCormick, not the last president, but his father, who was magnificent. He was very animated and knowledgeable. But I don't know how that happened. Each college had its own classes, its faculty and registration for those classes. Most of the interaction with the black men at Rutgers was more on the big-brother level, helping to make sure you don't fall into a landmine type thing. There, at

the time, were no all black fraternities. The black men who belonged to fraternities primarily were in Tau Delta Phi, Phi Sigma Kappa. There was one black male in Phi Sigma Delta. But only a limited number of fraternities had any black members. They would invite us over. Most of the fellows, I think, lived on campus. I do remember going to a couple of parties at someone's apartment. They were more, from my vantage point, big buddies than anything else. That was a good thing.

MG: Did you do any dating during college?

MWH: I'm shaking my head no. I'm sorry. [laughter] I forgot the microphone was one. You're going to hear all these potato chips in back--crunch, crunch, crunch. No, very, very little. But what we did--see, things I hadn't thought of for years. What we did do, to the dismay of the fellows at Rutgers, got to Albany Street, get the bus and go to Princeton, which did not make some of the fellows happy. Not just me, but there'd be maybe five or six black Douglass women. They had the eating clubs in Princeton. They may still. We would go there. I don't know who opened the Princeton door, but bringing up Princeton brings me back to one of my fondest memories of my four years. I mentioned Dr. Cecelia Drewry, the speech professor, who lives and lived at the time, in Princeton. She would invite the black Douglass students to her home for a home-cooked meal, knowing that the dining hall food was not what we were used to having at home, which was such a warm and welcoming type action. I'm not even sure if she's still on the faculty, but at the time she would invite us down. It may have been twice a year, but it didn't matter. It was a homey experience It was just special that she did that, which makes her a very special lady. At the end of April, she just did a Maya Angelou reading at Witherspoon [Street] Presbyterian Church, the Paul Robeson church. [Editor's Note: Paul Robeson (1898-1976) was an African-American singer, actor and Civil Rights activist. He was valedictorian of his class at Rutgers University in 1919. Paul Robeson's father, Reverend William Robeson was a former slave and the minster of the Witherspoon Street Church.] I went to see her at that. It's wonderful to see her because she's probably one of the fondest memories that I have from the four years.

MG: Are there some not-so-fond memories?

MWH: I probably have to think of those, because I probably blotted them out. [laughter] If there are, I have to come back to it because none leap out. You know how you talk of the highlights, meeting and knowing Dr. Drewry and the fact that she went out of her way to invite us to her home, it says volumes. I'm going to think if there are some not so fond ones. No. Some of my being bitchy, but they're not fond on a personal level, be that as it may. [laughter]

MG: Would you visit New York City as a Douglass student?

MWH: Not as often as I would have liked, because even then, when they had student tickets--I didn't have that kind of discretionary money. If it was extra money, it was going to buy a book or something that I wanted. To go into the city to see a play was like, "You really want to do that? You're going to live a long time. You can do that

when you get out. Save this little bit of money." When I came back to work at the college, then I would take advantage of it, because they would need an adult--I was only like, three years older than some of the students, but that's okay; I was an adult--to go with them. So I got to go in more often as an employee than as a student. But I would say--they're getting mushed together--rarely as a student. I can't think of one time in particular. I was going to mention--I can't even think of the play. When I thought of it the first time, I knew it was in the '70s. So it couldn't have been during my student tenure.

MG: Before we turned the tape on, we had talked about when you worked in the cafeteria.

MWH: Yes. I worked in Cooper dining hall my freshman year and part of my sophomore year. When you had breakfast [duty], you had to be there at seven in the morning to clean up garbage because that was when there was bussing. I did that for a year and a half. Then, I got sick and was placed in a job in the history department, cleaner work. [laughter] I did not have to carry a tray with eight meals on your right shoulder. I did basically support work--make copies, staple tests, things of that sort. By the time I was a senior, I was doing the first read of underclass student papers and things like that. The professor was Dr. Daniel Horn; he's since passed away. I worked on campus all four years. A year and a half in dining hall [groans], where I met awesome students. Working in the dining hall was like being a member of a special club. The other waitresses were hard working, bright women with a strong work ethic. I didn't like scraping garbage but I loved the people I worked with. The rest of the time was in the history department.

MG: Did you have that same feeling in college that you did in high school, where you felt you had to work twice as hard to get half as far?

MWH: To a degree, but not as much, because all of high school was driven toward the goal of not being there. The goal was more vague in college. I knew I had to graduate. I knew I had to graduate in four years because there was not money to say, "I think I'm going to go find myself and come back to college." I knew that I had to do well by the university's standards. It wasn't my wish list to be Phi Beta Kappa, because education was more than what I got in the books. So I wanted to make the most of that four year period. I think, and I could be dead wrong, that the faculty, because they were scholarly people, were more objective in evaluating who a person was - not about the superficial, but really who the person was.

MG: That makes sense.

MWH: It made sense to me. I didn't feel the pressure to excel by anyone else's standards. I felt the pressure to do the very best that I could do with my own mental limitations or whatever. Whereas, in high school, it was more the drive to excel and extend yourself, stretch yourself as far as you can go. I don't think I stretched myself that much academically at Douglass. Sorry, tape. [laughter]

MG: How would you spend your summers during your time at Douglass?

MWH: Usually doing nothing, because there were very few jobs in South Jersey. There were no fast food places. We only had one car. What do you do in Paulsboro? One summer I was ill. My summer before my senior year, I worked at DuPont in the next town from Paulsboro, DuPont's had a lab. This was summer of '65. I told them that I didn't know how to type, but they obviously wanted to have someone of color in their office. [laughter] I didn't mind being paid, because I had been honest and said I can't type. I took glee club instead of typing, my senior year in high school. But that's okay. I could make copies and things of that sort. I worked there. That was the only paying summer job that I had. I think it was sophomore year summer I was ill. The other times I just took care of the house for my parents and fixed my father's meals and packed his lunch. Bored to tears. Did some readings and things like that. Fun reading because you didn't have time to do fun reading as a student. I was always happy, whether it was K-12 or whether it was college, for September to come, so I could go back to school, because I liked school.

MG: It sounds like you formed some really wonderful friendships while you were at Douglass.

MWH: Yes. I'm not one of those friends who you hear from every month or with any regularity, but the feelings are--whenever I talk to someone, it's like I just talked to them. It makes me very happy to hear from any of my Douglass colleagues. But basically I'm a loner. There's one day this week, I spoke with Juanita Wade Wilson, one of the remaining black alum from my class. She lived in East Orange and now lives in Newark. We hadn't talked probably since July. Sometimes we ride together to programs in New Brunswick. I just like talking to her because she's such a good person. My house chair, who I mentioned had her fiftieth wedding anniversary last month. Then another friend, who was on Corwin with me freshman year and she was a sophomore. Then after I graduated and went to work in Trenton, she lived in Trenton. Now she lives in Princeton. She loved my mother almost as much as I did. I loved her mother almost as much as she did. That's Marilyn. This picture was with my mom and her. This is back in the '90s. I have very, very good friendship-type memories. My roommate, the devoutly religious one who I haven't seen, when I heard that her younger sister had passed away, I sent a card, because I like her so much as a person. We were different people in the year 1962, but that doesn't mean that I won't be delighted if she can come to reunion. Once you become my friend, you're kind of stuck. It's like having herpes. You have it forever. There's no medicine to get rid of me. [laughter]

MG: [laughter] I think Juanita's another person we're interviewing for this project.

MWH: Talk about an interesting background. Wait until you talk to her. She's a queen mother in some city in Ghana. Her parents lived there for like ten years. You'll love her.

MG: You can tell her that this process isn't too painful.

MWH: She was in Ghana for three weeks. She just came back a couple weeks ago. She's interesting. You'll enjoy talking to her.

MG: Good. What else am I missing about your experience at Douglass?

MWH: It was boring. [laughter] Seriously.

MG: But it seemed meaningful to you, because you stayed on as an employee later on and you're so involved in the alumnae network.

MWH: Because I believe that who I am today is because of my parents, their faith, their hard work, and having a degree from Douglass. Truth be told, I'm not so full of myself [inaudible] good and wonderful. "Oh, oh." They all came running after me. "No, no." But in 1966, in New Jersey, having a degree from Douglass, when there were few black alumnae, meant a lot. Like [gasps] "You're a Douglass grad?" "Oh, yeah. Right." I know how to play bridge; I know what fork to use. I can tell you how to do that, but that's different. It meant a lot. I know it opened doors. I'm very appreciative of what opened the doors. Having an attitude of gratitude. You want to give it back as best you can. Yes, that's why I'm active. I have the time. I have, right now, the energy. I don't know how much longer I'll have the energy for that. So yes, that's why.

MG: Is there anything else you wanted to tell me about your experience at Douglass? What was graduation like?

MWH: Magnificent. Absolutely. I can't believe you asked. Yesterday, we were talking about the 250th anniversary of Rutgers, because I was the bicentennial class. We graduated at the football stadium. Traditionally, Douglass had its own graduation on Antilles Field, but because we were the bicentennial class, we had a convocation that previous Sunday at Douglass and then Wednesday, June 1, 1966, one of the most beautiful, sunny, low humidity days of the millennium, was our graduation. Hubert Humphrey [Vice-President of the United States from 1965 to 1969] was the speaker. I had been on the bicentennial committee. Walter and Meany--AFL-CIO. Meany and--it begins with an R. [Editor's Note: M. Wilma Harris is referring to Walter Reuther and George Meany, former presidents of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL–CIO).] They had been on the committee. So that was really an exciting experience. What saddened me was that I knew I was saying goodbye to some people I would never, ever see again. Because they had their own lives. The only thing that had connected us was Douglass and a few bridge hands over the period of four years. So that was sad knowing that it was really not au revoir, it was goodbye. But it was an absolutely beautiful, beautiful day. One of those things that I keep is all my diplomas at the foot of the steps, so when I come downstairs every day, I can look at them and remember. So Mason W. Gross--do you know who Mason Gross was?--was such an excellent leader. Then Ruth M. Adams was the dean of Douglass. I look at that and I say, "That's what education is all about." Her specialty was English. I want to say Victorian, but it doesn't matter. She was brilliant. She was funny. She reaffirmed in my

mind--really was the first affirmation that you can be really bright and funny. There was a perception that the real academics were very proper and all that. She was a hoot, an absolute hoot. He had been host of a TV show, *Two for the Money*, back in the '50s, which didn't fit my mindset of what a university professor and president would be about. Just having them as my academic role models. Then having the wonderful bicentennial commencement, I can hardly wait until this year's commencement to see who we're going to have as a speaker and what they're going to do. Now, since it's a university commencement, I don't know what they can do to make it any more gala than it already is. That was commencement.

MG: What was your plan for after graduation?

MWH: I knew I was going to work. I even planned on working and did interviews and things of that sort. My girlfriend Donna and Debbie, her roommate, and I were all about the same size. We had one interview dress. So we couldn't have interviews scheduled on the same day. [laughter] But I had planned to work. I started with Department of Labor and Industry, the State of New Jersey, in Trenton, as employment interviewer. Did that for about ten months and absolutely hated it. Not the interviewing part, but the fact that it was a numbers game. When an employer sent a requisition, we had to send people to them. We could check off that we had sent someone to the Molly Company. Even though people we sent weren't qualified to do the job, they got this false hope they might be getting a job. We could say we sent them to the Molly Company. It was not what I thought it was going to be. But what really, really turned me off--I didn't and I still don't wear a watch. We worked 8:30 to 4:30, but I didn't need a watch because at 4:20 all the women I worked with had their purses on their desk ready to leave. God forbid someone stayed until 4:35. They probably would have been burned at the stake. They went through the motions. I know things have changed over time, but they didn't do a lot for the reputation of state employees, of just being there to get their paycheck and not really caring about what they were doing. I moved to Trenton after graduation. My mother had a cousin who married my father's cousin. I stayed with them for a couple of years. Then I got my own apartment in Trenton. I stayed there a year. Then I came back to college to work.

MG: You also went to University of Pennsylvania.

MWH: Oh, yes. That's when you're young and you can work all day and get on a train and go to graduate school in Philadelphia. Don't ask me to do that. Yes. Have you ever heard of Fels-Naptha detergent?

MG: No.

MWH: Samuel Fels obviously had lots of money. He set up an institute at the University of Pennsylvania. I want to say this may have been the early twentieth century. Anyway, Samuel Fels believed that the quality of local and state employees was not what was needed. Hello. If he were alive now, he'd probably be saying the same thing. He set up an endowment, I guess, that if you could get admitted to Penn, you could get a master's

degree free. Like, hello. Even then, Penn was pricey because the tuition at Douglass each semester was two hundred dollars, which was a lot then. But Penn was seriously expensive. So that's how I went to Penn. I worked and then I would get the train and did that from '67 to '69. Then I was at Douglass the last two years. So I would drive to Philadelphia from there. It was only two or three nights a week.

MG: What was the degree you were pursuing?

MWH: Governmental administration, because that's what Samuel Fels felt that we needed improvement in. It was interesting because now I have some friends who have MBAs. The course work was similar, except the focus was government versus the business sector. The budgetary concepts were the same. The statistics were the same. The issues were different, affecting government versus what was affecting business. That's what it [inaudible].

MG: Do you want to say anything else about your experience at the University of Pennsylvania and the classes you took?

MWH: I have no idea what the classes were that I took. Mindless. I mentioned the book, *Regionalization 1985*, but I don't even remember what that course was. What I remember--no, I don't remember. The thesis was tied to what was happening in the United States. Remember I talked about '68 being a pivotal year. I remember that being a lot of the core of it, but I forget what the thesis was. It was one of those things that--it was a wonderful opportunity to have a degree from Penn, but it was such a drag to work all day and then to go to Philadelphia and then to do the papers and what not. I have greater appreciation for students who are commuters because you never feel a part of the institution. I get communiqués from Penn. I say, "Okay. Fine." I have no feeling whatsoever. I just have a piece of paper that says in 1971 I got a degree from there. That's unfortunate.

MG: Do you think that would have been different if you lived on campus and participated in campus life?

MWH: Probably. Probably, but you couldn't do that and work. The whole thing was based on being a state employee, so it became a catch 22. Either you do it the way Mr. Fels had set it up or you pay for it yourself, and you say, "I don't think so."

MG: Do you remember the Newark and Plainfield Riots in '67?

MWH: I was in Trenton then. Trenton was not as impacted, but I certainly read about them. I had friends who lived in both cities who were devastated, not only materially, but emotionally because many of them had lived there for most of their lives. I was not personally impacted by it. A lot of good came out of it, in terms of opportunities and increased awareness, but when you go through both towns, they have never really bounced back as commercial entities. People closed up their businesses and left, rather than rebuilding and running the financial and emotional risk of it happening again. I

wasn't in it, but there was no way not to have known about it and to have felt some of the emotional impact of people who lived there.

MG: How did the position at Douglass come up?

MWH: Oh, golly. I was minding my business one day. My senior year, we had begun an active recruitment of black students. Maxene Summey, Lois Wright, Cheryl Portee, the class of '70 had a good core number of black students. Really, really sharp, sharp. Most of them, I believe were going to be living in the residence hall. The number of black students increased in 1967 and 1968. During winter 1969, Dean Trayes who was Dean of Students, called and asked if I would ever consider something like being one of the residence counselors. Unless it requires physical danger, I'm not one to say no to experiences in life. If you want me to go hand gliding, that's a no, but if you want me to try something reasonable--yes, why not? Because I felt that even though I was only three years older than they, I could help with their transition, certainly help if they had academic type questions, help with navigating through the system. So I thought, "Yes." The rest is history, as it goes. [laughter]

MG: You were there for about eight years.

MWH: I was in residence for three years. Then I said, "Enough of this." It was like 24/7 even though I had a graduate assistant, the students needed me 24/7; I was too young for 24/7 in a residence hall. I left residence in '72. Then I lived in East Brunswick and worked as Assistant Dean of Students for two years or three years. Then Associate Dean for three or two; I'm not sure how it splits out. Then in 1973 I came back to that apartment I was telling you about, which made it much easier, because even though you're still doing 24/7, you have your own home, not with 200+ students and can walk to your office. It was wonderful because residence education was really meaty then. Maya Angelou and Dick Gregory came to campus and met with the students and spoke. We had dinner with Julian Bond and Alan Ginsberg. I had to take Alan Ginsberg home to his father's house in Paterson. It was really a wonderful, wonderful opportunity that the students had and I had as an individual. I forget which year; we tried to get Anais Nin to speak. She was in Paris and was hoping to have some engagement in the States. I don't know what they did with the letters, but she and I had a correspondence for a year--what she was working on, and I would tell her what the students were doing at the time, but it never materialized that she could come. Great, great, great. I loved working there. I loved my students. Last night I had dinner with a class of '79 graduate. She was a sophomore when I left working there. I see a lot of my ex-students, too.

MG: Who was the dean when you were assistant and then associate dean?

MWH: When I came in '69, I believe Paula Brownlee was acting dean of the college. Then Margery Somers Foster came. Dean Foster left in '75 or six. Then Jewel Plummer Cobb came. She was the first black dean of Douglass. Jewel was dean when I left. She lives in Maplewood right down the road, but apparently she's been very ill. When she first came back from California, she and I would have dinner every so often. I met her

daughter in law at a memorial service at Douglass back in the fall. Basically, Foster and Cobb.

MG: Tell me about your relationship with other administrators, in terms of program planning and policy?

MWH: At Douglass?

MG: Yes.

MWH: Oh, fine, because we were primarily on the second floor of College Hall. My best friend was the Director of the College Center. There was synergy among the different functions. Jan Yocum was assistant dean of students. She had responsibility for housing. I'm going to do the latest backwards. I was the associate dean of students. Nancy Richards was dean of students. The first two or three years, I was assistant--there were two assistants and I don't remember who was assistant with Jan at the end. I was assistant dean with Jan, who's still at housing. Nancy Richards was associate dean of students. Marjorie Trayes was dean of students. When she retired, Nancy became dean of students. No, I'm missing a period in there, because Eleanor Jaquinet some point was dean of students after Dean Trayes and before Nancy. She was not a very effective dean of students. That's all I can say. [laughter] I don't know what her problem was, but she was not good. At some point, and she may have only stayed a couple of years, and then Nancy. When Elli was there, we all had to work together to undo her craziness. With Marjorie Trayes, she was an institution. We worked together because we wanted to work together. When Nancy was dean of students, it was the same thing--we were like a little club. There were no major policy issues with which there was discord. It was rough financial times for the state of New Jersey, but nothing that was unique to our little group.

MG: Did student life on campus change in the years you were there as a student to an employee?

MWH: Oh, god. Yes. The world changed. I really swear the students were much more mature than we were. [laughter] Hands down. Maybe that's just my perception. There was no more curfew. Things like curfew were gone. On Sunday, when I was a student, your father or brother--like a blood relative--could come to your dorm room, but three feet had to be on the floor. By the time I stopped working there, men were allowed in the dorms. The drinking age in New Jersey was twenty-one when I was a student. Then it became eighteen. Then it went back to twenty-one. I'm not sure when. But during the time I worked there, one of the great revenue producers was the pub. We had a pub in the college center and people drank beer and wine. Students on campus had beer and wine and didn't have to go to the local watering holes (Pizza Mill or Mosco's). So those were clear evidences. Then, I'm not sure when--there were more classes that Douglass women took at Rutgers and Rutgers women took--no, Rutgers students irrespective of gender, took at Douglass. That was really the death knell to the honor system, which was part of the culture when I was a student. Whenever we took an exam, we could do it anywhere. You could do it outside. You could take the exam back to your dorm. You

could do it anyplace, because you signed an oath, "I have neither given nor received information on this exam." Signed your name and it was as good as gold because you signed your name. Now, if you have students from other colleges where they don't have an honor system, you're at an inherent disadvantage if you're not cheating and everybody else can and feels free to do so. So the honor system went away. You asked for my most unhappy memory at Douglass. See, I blocked it. I'm sorry for not being sequential, tape. February 1963, there was another black student. Lovely, lovely person. She went before honor board, which was like the student-run judicial system--Dean Trayes was on it--and the black student was expelled. That night her parents were called and told to come that night and move her stuff out of the dorm she was in. Maybe this is systemic of the whole world then. She was sick. She was a kleptomaniac and she had been stealing from her roommate. The reason I say she was sick, among the items that she stole from her roommate, she gave one back to her as a Christmas gift. She didn't even realize the depth of the sickness. Her name was never mentioned again after that February night, it was like she never existed anymore. I don't think Douglass handled people with mental or emotional problems well. She was so bright. With the proper care, or maybe if she had a single room or whatever, but--my word--the treatment that she received and her poor parents getting a call in the middle of the night, "Move everything out," and her roommate, who absolutely adored her, didn't come back to Douglass after freshman year because she was devastated that she was a part of this. The only reason I know anything is members of her family had a relationship with my mother's first cousin, who was dean of students at an HBCU [Historically Black Colleges and Universities]. That's where she went and eventually got her degree. My cousin knew her and so I got [snippets] from that. But that was probably the darkest day, her expulsion.

MG: Was that something that changed by the time you were Associate Dean of Students? Were there more counseling services available to students?

MWH: Honor board was one of those things that no one talked about. There were no reports submitted. I don't know. I do know that the third floor of the Willets Health Center was where students who were having emotional issues would go. But I don't know if there was a psychiatrist or someone there to help them or they just went there, like Cousin Crazy that you put in the attic until they feel better and then maybe the family will know what--yes, that was the darkest day. See, I told you I probably blocked it. When I mentioned the honor system, that's when it came back. Never saw her since.

MG: Did you have that kind of role when you were an administrator?

MWH: Honor board was not one of my areas of responsibility, fortunately. Because my experience with that student was so unpleasant, I probably would have erred on the side of being too lenient. I'm sure there were cases where it warranted harsh action, but no, I didn't, fortunately.

MG: When did you earn your honorary degree?

MWH: When? 2006.

MG: Since I brought it up, maybe we could talk about that now. How did that happen?

MWH: [laughter] You're like thinking, "What the hell did you do to get an honorary degree?" Is that what you're trying to ask?

MG: I'm curious how you earn an honorary degree.

MWH: Okay. Oh, God. This is more information than you need, tape recorder. You're not from New Jersey. New Jersey used to have state scholarships. In 1978, they moved from state scholarships to tuition aid grants, TAG. The board that oversaw the development of policies and procedures for state administered grants was the Student Assistance Board. There was one Board for grants and then there was the authority for loans. I don't know what its name really stands for. The authority did primarily loans and bonds and all that craziness that people do with bonds that I just [whistles] glaze over. My girlfriend Marilyn, the one from college, who lived in Trenton, and she knew that they were setting up the tuition aid grant program and knew what I thought of education as a salvation for modern society, and asked if I would want to be considered for the board, which I was on from '78 to 2012; I was a charter board member. Probably the best work I ever did was my work with the board. Off and on, I was either chair or vice chair of the Student Assistance Board until '99. Then under Governor Christie Todd Whitman, it merged; we merged grants and loans together. Then the person, who had been chair of loans and I, would alternate being chair and vice chair. On the Student Assistance Board--and I'll just go back to the first one where we did grants--there were representatives from the community colleges, from the state four-year degree granting institutions, the community colleges, independents, NJIT, and the university. There were six or so public members appointed by the governor. The reason I got the honorary was because of the work I did in being the volunteer who spearheaded tuition aid grants that provided access and affordability for hundreds of thousands of students in the state of New Jersey. The best work I ever, ever did. Such satisfaction that brought. That's why I got the honorary doctorate.

MG: It's wonderful that even though in 1977 your career shifted a little bit, you still were doing so much for so long as a student advocate.

MWH: That's what I love. [laughter] At Pru [Prudential], when they pissed me off, I would tell them--I said, "This is what I do. This is not who I am. Please don't get these two mixed up at all." This is what I do and what I love to do is the student advocate piece of it. That's the certificate for when I left higher education. That one's from Governor Chris Christie for the work with HESAA (Higher Education Student Assistance Authority), and the one over the Victrola is when I left Student Assistance Board. That's why. I can't think of his name--the president of St. Peter's--had been a representative from the private sector on the Student Assistance Board. Everyone doesn't want state money to go to students who want to go to a private sector school; everyone doesn't want to go to the state university or a state college and you have to have choice, but it has to be affordable. I understand those concepts, but it certainly is hard getting it through

someone's head. "Well, the independents, they get money. They can do this, that, and the other. How come we (the non-independent institutions) can't get all of the tuition aid grant money?" Excuse me, it's not about you. Because the tuition aid grant went to the individual. So you, Molly, would get the grant and how you use it within the New Jersey higher education system is the choice piece. We just have to make sure the policies are such that we have access and choice for our students. Anyway, that's why I got the honorary doctorate-- three decades of volunteering to provide assistance for students.

MG: That's great. What got you into the insurance work?

MWH: Why did I leave Douglass?

MG: Maybe that wasn't the best way to phrase that question.

MWH: No, no. People have asked me that.

MG: What happened?

MWH: I know you're going to think this is nuts. My mother thought I was nuts. Because I loved working at Douglass and my students too much and I was afraid, totally afraid, that one day I would wake up gumming my mashed potatoes in a rocking chair in a nursing home saying, "I wonder what it would have been like if you had ever worked in the corporate world." I never ever, ever want to leave this earth wondering "what if?" So I left, knowing that there would still be opportunities to do what I love, but I just did not want to sit there gumming the mashed potatoes wondering. I knew at that point that I would know short term, like within a year, year and a half, if this was something that I wanted to do. If it wasn't, I could always go someplace else and do the higher ed. thing. So that's why I left, because I loved it too much. I could have done it forever. Forever.

MG: Looking back, was that right decision?

MWH: Oh, yes. Totally, totally. Because you take a vow of poverty [laughter] when you work in higher ed. It may have changed over the last forty years. So yes. I was able to do the things I wanted to do for my parents while they were alive because I was making more than minimum wage on an hourly basis. [laughter] I met some wonderful, wonderful people in the private sector and I had a new knowledge and new skill sets. New skill set like real time management. We were driven by deadlines. More strategic thinking in terms of not just that task that we had to do--have to have commencement. Well, what is it that you want this commencement to be? What is the messaging? I learned new skills and I like learning. Yes, I'm very glad I did and I'm glad I went with Pru because there are some wonderful people there and Prudential does good things in the communities where it does business. As an organization, it has a good social conscience. I wouldn't be happy if I had worked at VW [Volkswagen], that lies to pass tests that people could die behind. It'd be like, "Ew, I was part of something like that." So yes, no regrets whatsoever. I'm glad I did it. I'm glad I didn't do it sooner because I got enough of the higher ed. experience to know that I did love it.

MG: Was it a big leap for you in terms of that skill set? If you threw me into an insurance company--

MWH: Why?

MG: Because it's not something I've done before.

MWH: Haven't you done new and different things?

MG: You're right. You figure it out.

MWH: Because we do not cure cancer. I know that University and Pru, very often they [say], "God, you have to know this, you have to know that." Not really. Because I like being at the top of my game, behind the record player are certificates because I got professional designations--charter property 2nd casualty underwriter (CPCU), charter life underwriter (CLU). So then I know what they're talking about, so it would be really kind of hard to bullshit me on those topics. Even though I hadn't worked it, there's enough knowledge out there, the theories and whatnot, that you could apply to how that company does it.

MG: Were those professional development opportunities to help hone your skills?

MWH: Yes. God, it was so awful. Both (the CPCU and the CLU) are like ten part tests and you had to learn all this stuff. Talk about seriously boring. Boring.

MG: I read about those tests. They sound like nightmares.

MWH: They are.

MG: You have to get every question right. There are 999 questions.

MWH: They must have improved it, because in the '80s, they were essays. It was awful. But not being an insurance person, just like you said, was it difficult? "Oh, well, she was in academia. What does she know about any of this?" So, no credibility. So it's important to stay at the top of my game. So I learned it from the book. I may not have underwritten anything, never planned to, and I may not have written a physical damage claim and never planned to. At least I understand the theory and the component of it. Same with HR. Human resources is an art. It's an art of looking at what the strategy of the business is and how can you help that resource, the people resource, help the business be successful. Duh. It's not rocket science, but there are certain underlying theories behind that. So that's why I have the SPHR [Senior Professional in Human Resources], which is also a strenuous test which I took in 1998. I did a bad thing. You have to recertify every three years. The '03 to '06 period, one of those, I didn't keep records. I did not have records and I had to take the test again. So you either show that you have sixty hours or you have to take the test. I said, "Never. Never, never again. Screw up."

I had to redo this test. I have another re-upping in June of ’16. So I have to get my act together sooner rather than later. So yes, it was not that difficult a transition, to answer your question. TMI [too much information].

MG: Tell me about your career at Prudential and the different roles you had and things you were responsible for.

MWH: Boring. Okay. I started in human resources. I worked primarily in our eastern region. So not in the corporate office. PRUPAC [Prudential Property and Casualty Insurance Company] was a subsidiary, wholly owned subsidiary of Prudential that was sold in 2003. I worked with PRUPAC from when I joined in 1977 until 1997. So I worked in Human Resources, then called Personnel, supporting our field claim offices. That’s where bodily injury and property damage and personal lines claims are handled. We didn’t do commercial lines at all, like commercial buildings and things like that. It was individual homes, individual cars. I did HR work until early 1988. I said, “I need to get on the business side. I talk all of this stuff. Can you put your money where your mouth is?” This is what you’re supposed to do. After hearing me kicking and screaming, they said, “Okay. We’ll give her a shot at managing a claim office,” which I did from ’88 to ’90. My claim office was responsible for Monmouth County and Ocean County, and I loved it, absolutely loved it. We had an office that was outside of the corporate office building in Holmdel, so you had your own little fiefdom. We would do stuff, like first day of fall, first day of spring, we’d have exercise classes and bring in healthy food; healthy food wasn’t that common then. We'd go to the senior citizens home down the street and visit the seniors. [laughter] Then from 1990 to ’95, I had responsibility for the whole region, everything except claims. So the underwriting, the customer service, commissions, records, all of that was under my bailiwick. Then times got tough and we had to downsize people. That was not pretty. That was not pretty at all. Because a lot of people had come straight from high school or straight from college and part of Pru’s reputation had been they never let anyone go even during the Depression. So people had an entitlement mentality. “Hey, I come here. I don’t steal from you. I should have this job for life.” We had to downsize. A lot of people were shocked. We had a wonderful tuition--they still do--tuition reimbursement program, but people didn’t avail themselves of it, because why do I need to? I’m here. I’ll be here forever. So that part was painful, but not as painful as it could have been if individuals had tried to develop themselves and still had to be let go. Hey, that’s the price you pay for having an entitlement mentality. So from ’95, '96 or whenever I stopped doing that until maybe ’97, I went to PRUPAC’s corporate office in South Plainfield and did underwriting training and stuff like that. It was a hodgepodge. Among the hodgepodge was the job I liked least at PRUPAC. For about three or four months, I was chief of staff to the president, who was very low maintenance. He needed a chief of staff like I needed another hole in my head. He did his own thing. I said, “Can I help with this? You want me to present this?” “Oh, no. I’ll take care of it. I’ll take care of it. It was just before he was going on Christmas break and all of his direct reports got their Christmas gifts. We came back after Christmas; he was gone. He had gone back to Newark. He never told anyone that he was leaving. Didn’t say goodbye [inaudible] anything. That’s not why I disliked the job. I didn’t like being a mouthpiece for someone’s ideas I didn’t necessarily agree with. If ever offered, I

wouldn't be a chief of staff again. I know that's not who I am. From '96, seven until late '97, I was back in Holmdel. I had HR staff and we supported the corporate office of PRUPAC. So twenty years with one company is enough. I came to the Prudential Corporate Office in Newark in fall of '97 until I left in 2013 and moved to Springfield in the fall of '97. I supported various departments, the actuarial, agency distribution, lots of stuff. But at the end, my client group was HR. So I was HR for HR. There are specialties like benefits, compensation, health and wellness, diversity, things of that sort. So for those staffs, I was their HR consultant. Does that capture [inaudible]?

MG: Yes. When did you retire?

MWH: March of 2013.

MG: Not that long ago.

MWH: Correct. Do I love it? Yes. Why do I love it? Because I like doing what I want to do when I want to do it with those with whom I want to do it. You spend all of your life going places, doing things you don't want to do. Now I don't have to do it. When I go out to dinner, it's because I want to have dinner with that person and it's wonderful.

MG: That's the dream.

MWH: You have dues to pay. You're far too young; don't even think about it. One thing that I have been doing since I retired--I had never ever, ever taught. Have you heard of Corporate College Services?

MG: No.

MWH: That's okay. Corporate College Services is an entity that develops relationships with corporations. In this case, they have relationships with Mercedes Benz USA, Subaru, PSE&G, and Prudential, that I know of for sure. These organizations have tuition refund programs. Corporate College Services has curriculums that are approved by accreditation organization. Corporate College Services is like the liaison for employees to get either an undergraduate or an MBA degree working with the employer and the degree-granting institutions. So this year I've only done one, but last year I did three classes for them. That was fun. The students at Mercedes Benz are so sharp. They work; they're all full time employees. One night a week from five o'clock to nine o'clock, they have class. They have a wazoo load of homework, which the instructor has to read and grade. Then they have a final project. That's been fun. But this year's been too crazy and I don't want to short change the students, so that's why my bag is there. Whenever I'm ready and if there's a need, I can go back to class. Corporate College Services develops all of the outlines and syllabi. They get those approved, so you don't have to do the design of the class, but you don't deviate from it because it's been approved by the accreditation organization. Corporate College Services is not degree granting. The student can get a degree from Thomas Edison State College, Excelsior

College and a few others. The role of the instructor is to add real life examples and experiences to the theory, making it real.

MG: What are the topics you cover?

MWH: I taught HR Management three times, I think, and Leadership once.

MG: You were also on the Board of Directors for the Douglass Alumnae Association.

MWH: Yes. I still work with them, even though I'm not on the board now.

MG: I saw you were on the board from 1996 to 2000 and then from 2000 to 2004.

MWH: You can serve two consecutive terms. Then you take a breather if you feel so inclined, you can go back on the board if the nominating Committee nominates you. Do you need more ice?

MG: No, I'm perfect.

MWH: Then on back again. [laughter] Yes.

MG: What was that experience like?

MWH: Yes. I do enjoy it, but I find it frustrating because the Board moves too slowly. [claps hands] Let's not talk about it. Let's just do it. That's my problem more than their problem that I get impatient. They do good things, but let's just do it faster. I'll be dead and we'll still be talking about this.

MG: How did you feel when Douglass was incorporated into Rutgers University?

MWH: Not well, to answer your question because it has been such a wonderful training ground, a training ground for leadership for women. I'm afraid that's been lost when you're part of a larger institution. Although, Douglass DRC [Douglass Residential College] is only like, two thousand students, it's different when you have your faculty and your faculty is just focused on you. But we really haven't had our faculty since 1980 when we ran into the fellows concept. I was saddened by it, but I was also realistic enough to know that this is the twenty-first century and I don't drive a stick shift with the H on the column anymore, so we have to move on. I'm afraid that the students aren't getting the education. They're getting a degree and it's hard to put the words to it, but I think something is lost. I think there's still a Douglass Difference, but I'm not sure it's as evident as it was. Maybe the students have to work harder to find it, but if you want to be different and have something special, it shouldn't be that you have to work to find that difference. Sad. But I still support it. I still support it. It saddens me.

MG: Rutgers has gotten a little bit better in terms of diversity.

MWH: Oh, God, yes. Couldn't have been any worse.

MG: Can you talk to me about that change?

MWH: In terms of administration? Just look at the direct reports of Dr. Barchi. Duh. There are women there. There are people of color there. Enough said. You look at the faculty. The chancellor for Newark is a woman. The chancellor for Camden is a woman of color. The senior academic person for the university, Barbara Lee, is a woman. So yes, has it moved--oh my goodness, it's nothing like what it is now. The dean of the honors college is an Asian gentleman. Hello. Who would have thought? Still lots of room for improvement, especially within the faculty.

MG: What about the student body?

MWH: Have you walked around campus lately? Have you looked on a bus? I think the data indicate 25% people of color. It's awesome. Now, are they learning from the other students and are the other students learning from them? If someone gives me an affirmative to that, then I say, "Yes." But if you stay in your own little niche and don't broaden your learning, that would be a concern. They say you're supposed to have friends from every decade. My former teen friend who's now twenty, went to one of the state colleges. Her roommate was going to be someone she went to high school with. I said, "Why are you doing that? You already know this person. You know where her head is. You should be rooming with someone who comes from a town you've never even heard of, so you could learn." I don't know if that's happening at the university, but I hope not, because if the whole idea of diversity is so that everyone can learn from one another to value the similarities, which outnumber the differences and to respect the differences. If you're isolating yourself from that kind of learning, then it's diversity only for the name of diversity. I'm off my soapbox. [laughter]

MG: It's funny to me that you didn't think you had much to share in this interview or you didn't think it would be very interesting.

MWH: I still don't, but that's neither here nor there.

MG: From where I'm sitting, that has not been the case. You've had an incredible career and have been honored so much for your work in the community. According to my notes, you were a 1996 Distinguished Alumnae at Douglass; you were one of six Women of Achievement in New Jersey. You have a Meritorious Service Award. That is very impressive.

MWH: It's not the kind of stuff you talk about. [laughter] It's like, okay, fine. So be it. Most of that goes to the tuition aid grant student assistance, helping the students of New Jersey. That's the feel-good part of what I've done.

MG: I want to ask you also about the Black Alumnae Network.

MWH: BAN.

MG: That might be a good resource for this oral history project. I was curious about your involvement in that.

MWH: Way back when, as the numbers of black students were increasing on campus, there was the feeling, and justifiably so, that there were things to learn from alumnae that alumnae could learn from one another. Because when I went to school, you knew all of the other black alumnae because there were so few they could sit around this table. So Juanita, with whom you'll be speaking, Evelyn Field and I don't know if she's on the list, founded the Black Alumnae Network.

MG: Maybe we could add her.

MWH: She's been very ill, but she's better now. If I hadn't spent so much time with you, I was going to see her today.

MG: Sorry.

MWH: Hey, you didn't say "keep talking." No need to apologize. Just felt it was necessary. Adelaide Marcus Zagoren, who was the executive director of the Alumnae Association was very supportive of that. BAN has had its up and its downs, but most organizations do, especially as the younger alum are finding their own niche in life. Our current president, I just found out this week, is in Washington now. She has a new job in Washington. So that may be a challenge. But through all this, you should have picked up, I'm not a joiner, more of a one-on-me type. I don't belong to clubs and things like that. I still see alumnae. Last night, I had dinner with (Rhonda), [class of] '79. On Tuesday, I had lunch with Karen from '73 and (Cheryl) from '89. BAN provides that kind of vehicle for you to get to know some of the people, the ones I mentioned mostly had been students of mine. But if you want to, you can interact--I'm not good at groupie kind of kumbaya stuff, but be that as it may. BAN, I think has done good things. It has a fellowship and things of that sort for graduates, for people who want to go on and do graduate work. They've had wonderful social activities. Back in the--decades kind of mush together--'80s or '90s, Crossroads Theater downtown, we'd use that for a fundraiser. Set up the fellowship for Julia Baxter Bates, who was the first known black alumna of Douglass, graduated in the class of '38. They've had trips to Martha's Vineyard, so neat things like that. The alums can get to know each other and interact. We had a meeting in June, sometime recently. There were like twenty people there. Many of whom I had never seen before, so that's a good thing.

MG: Forgive me if this is too personal, but did you ever come close to getting married or get married?

MWH: No. [laughter] No. Independence can be a positive, but it can also be off-putting. "I can do it myself. I can do it myself, I don't need you." That's been a downside. It goes back to my experiences at my mother's church, where I felt the message was "You

better be independent because who in the name of the heavens is going to marry you." So I said, "Fine. If I need to be independent, I will be independent." The real question is, I think--and I keep asking myself was there someone that you could have loved that you regret that you didn't love and marry. As long as that answer stays "no," then I'm satisfied. [laughter] Were there people I really, really liked that I had a good time with because if you knew they weren't going to marry you from the time you were like ten years old then they could become your good buddies. I had and I still have some good male friends. Some of them I can call to see if they can bring my computer downstairs, the kind of things you'd ask a brother to do. Unfortunately, in our society, people are all over the place. It's not like everyone's still in the same geographic area. That's the sad part that you don't see your female friends or your male friends as much as you'd like.

MG: Talk to me about going to reunions.

MWH: At Douglass?

MG: Yes.

MWH: I'm working on my fiftieth as we speak. We have a teleconference Monday night. They are enjoyable. They are enjoyable because I see people I haven't seen. I see people with whom I have fond memories. You see how long it took me to remember a negative, my most negative experience. We started some outreach to get people psyched about coming to the reunion. We called back in the winter. We took people whom we knew and when I got on the phone with those people, it was as if I had seen them three weeks ago. You didn't miss a beat. "Remember such and such. Remember when we were at Nelson Dining hall or whatever it was?" There are positive experiences. Am I glad when they're over and I can come back to my little comfy niche? Yes. But for the time, it's an uplift. This has not been a particularly good week. I'm co-president of my class. My co-[president's] spouse died yesterday. So that's going to a put a damper on it. But you kind of get to know their friends and their families. You may only see them once every five years, but when you do, you're happy to see them. So I enjoy the reunion for that reason. Does it change my life significantly? No. Is it two or three days that I enjoy? Yes. I don't know what people's expectations are of reunions, but that's what it is for me and I enjoy them.

MG: Is there anything I've neglected to ask you?

MWH: Oh, you've asked me more than enough. [laughter]

MG: You've been so generous with your time. I'm sorry I took up so much of it.

MWH: I'd rather once and done. [laughter]

MG: One and done. I get it.

MWH: No more. "Molly who? Oh, you have the wrong number." [laughter]

MG: [laughter] Well, I really appreciate the time you spent with me. This has not been boring at all. I've really loved talking to you. You're a lot of fun.

MWH: That's different than talking about yourself. I can be funny and fun, but this was--why is she asking these questions? Nobody cares. [laughter] Why do they care?

MG: The good news is you don't have to do this again.

MWH: Right. That's why once and done. Remember you said we can do it and then come back. [shudders] No, no.

----------END OF INTERVIEW----------
Reviewed by M. Wilma Harris 9/12/2016
Reviewed by Maura ElMegeed 11/1/2016