



THE ALEXANDRIA ORAL HISTORY CENTER
OFFICE OF HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA
CITY OF ALEXANDRIA



Oral History Interview

with

Charles Wilson

Interviewer: Yahney-Marie Sangaré

Narrator: Charles Wilson

Location of Interview: Alexandria, Va 22314

Date of Interview: 05/24/2024

Transcriber: Yahney-Marie Sangaré

Summary:

Colonel Charles Wilson was born and raised in Chicago, Illinois. With 32 years on active duty in the Air Force, including being a member of the Tuskegee Airmen, Wilson moved to Alexandria in 1983, where he quickly became a prominent figure in the community. Wilson was named a Living Legend in 2023. Wilson speaks about his experience growing up in Chicago, including his relationship with the Jewish community in Chicago and attending a Jewish middle school. He also speaks about his time in the Air Force and in various civic organizations in Alexandria.

Notes:

This interview was conducted for the “The Law of the Land, The Law of God: Blacks and Jews in Civil Rights Era Alexandria, Va” internship project in July and August 2024 by Yahney-Marie Sangaré. This interview was conducted during the Alexandria City High School’s Senior Experience Week.

Table of Contents and Keywords

Minute	Page	Topic
00:00:51	3	Family, Growing up in Chicago
00:07:39	5	Interactions with working for Jewish shop in Chicago
00:12:21	5	Family's role in Chicago community
00:18:20	7	Chicago social culture with different ethnic groups
00:20:57	7	Experience at Chicago schools
00:27:06	8	Analysis of T.C. Williams and Alexandria City Public Schools
00:32:31	9	Teachers in Chicago, Chicago high schools
00:35:11	10	Time working as a paper boy
00:38:26	10	Selection and attending Jewish middle school
00:50:33	13	Reflections on Crane Tech high school
00:56:57	14	Perceptions of Jewish folks and other Whites in Chicago and interfaith, interracial relations
01:01:56	16	Experiences at Baptist church in Chicago
01:05:00	16	Time in juvenile detention
01:09:19	17	Political activity and Civil Rights Movement in Chicago and Illinois
01:15:57	18	Experience at Southern Illinois University during the Civil Rights Movement
01:34:56	20	Joining ROTC and time in the Air Force
01:55:55	24	Transitioning to working at the Pentagon
02:02:51	24	Impression of Alexandria and Cameron Station
02:09:18	25	Time on the School Board and in various committees
02:23:04	27	Comparing Chicago to Alexandria
02:29:24	28	Final thoughts on Black-Jewish relations in Alexandria
02:35:47	29	Closing thoughts

General	African American Alexandria; Black History; Civil Rights Movement; School Board; ROTC; Veteran experiences; Tuskegee Airmen; Air Force; Military; Interracial attitudes; Interfaith attitudes; Black-Jewish relations;
People	Colonel Charles Wilson; Walt Frazier; Charles "Chico" Vaughn; Claire E. Freeman
Places	Chicago, Illinois; Carbondale, Illinois; Waco, Texas; Alexandria, Virginia; Richard T. Crane Medical Prep High School (Crane Tech); Nicholas Copernicus School; Woodlawn, Chicago; Fort Worth; Greater Harvest Baptist Church Chicago; Southern Illinois University

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:00:00] It is Friday, the 24th of May, 2024. And we are at Alexandria Knolls West in Alexandria, Virginia. What's your name?

Charles Wilson [00:00:11] Charles Wilson.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:00:15] What's your age?

Charles Wilson [00:00:17] 82.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:00:19] And then just state the date again.

Charles Wilson [00:00:22] September 6th, 1941. The year of our Lord.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:00:31] And then it is May 24th. We are at Alexandria Knolls West. Where were you born?

Charles Wilson [00:00:49] Chicago, Illinois.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:00:51] What was it like there?

Charles Wilson [00:00:54] Yeah. Well, what I remember is the cold winters, the rain, and the wind. They call it the hawk. I didn't know any other place. I'd never been anyplace warm. During my high school graduation, my dad took me to the football game to see the [Chicago] Bears up in Soldier Field. Soldier Field was located right on the lake where those cold winds come across. We were in nosebleed seats way up high. So that's when I thought, "I'll never come back to Chicago in the wintertime again."

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:01:56] It's cold up there. So, who is in your family?

Charles Wilson [00:02:00] I have three sisters and one brother. Two sisters died. But my brother's only 14 months younger than me. Yeah. When we were both teenagers, we both had low draft scores, and he wanted to join because of Vietnam, fight the war. And he wanted me to go with him. But, I said, I don't want to be an infantry soldier. I'm going to fly a plane and be safe, and he was on the ground. We wound up both in Vietnam together. Because I had finished school. He'd already had four years of military service. He was a marine and never respected Air Force guys because we had air conditioning and hot food and [because of] the combat zones.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:03:08] What was your brother's name?

Charles Wilson [00:03:09] Harold.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:03:11] Harold. And then your sisters?

Charles Wilson [00:03:16] Diane. Gloria.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:03:20] And then for your parents. I know you eventually lived with your grandparents as well, yes?

Charles Wilson [00:03:26] Right.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:03:26] But your parents; what were your parents like growing up?

Charles Wilson [00:03:31] My dad was a musician, and my mom; she was very smart. She was a hospital technician. Surgical technician. But neither one of them made enough money. Since [our] parents, especially our dad, couldn't take us to church on Sunday morning because he was working late at the night club, our grandparents took us, my brother and I, and said, we can come back when [our parents] they learn to take us to church and give us an adequate religious training.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:04:17] What nightclub was it that your father played music?

Charles Wilson [00:04:22] Delilah.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:04:25] Did you ever get the chance to watch him play music?

Charles Wilson [00:04:28] I watched him perform, but we weren't allowed to attend a nightclub when he performed.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:04:38] Around how old were you when your grandparents took you and your siblings in?

Charles Wilson [00:04:45] I don't know exactly. I think it was two or three.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:04:49] Was is it in a similar neighborhood?

Charles Wilson [00:04:55] You know, our grandparents were more affluent and educated, whereas my parents didn't have that opportunity growing up in Chicago.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:05:14] Was it still in Chicago that your grandparents lived or another side [of Chicago]?

Charles Wilson [00:05:17] Yes. Yeah, a different neighborhood.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:05:20] What neighborhood?

Charles Wilson [00:05:20] At that time, it was called Inglewood. Inglewood, now, you wouldn't recognize it. It's now a ghetto. But at that time, it was a more integrated neighborhood with middle-class-income folks. And my dad owned the apartment building where we lived in. So, the problem was that they were so strict, we were the only kids that had to be in when the streetlights came on. We were the only kids that could not talk to any kids whose parents smoked or drank.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:06:07] This was when you were with your grandparents.

Charles Wilson [00:06:09] Yeah.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:06:10] What neighborhood did you live in with your parents in Chicago?

Charles Wilson [00:06:16] It was called Woodlawn. And we moved a lot. But basically, Woodlawn is like the Woodlawn in East Los Angeles, very dangerous.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:06:36] You sort of explained your parents' jobs. So, your dad was a musician. Did he also do something else?

Charles Wilson [00:06:45] Yeah, well, he had a business on the south side of Chicago where he worked for the Jewish auto dealers by preparing the new cars for sale. Back then, the cars came with a cheese wax on it and that had to be taken off, and the hubcaps were wrapped in paper inside. So that's what we did. So that's why I came in contact with so many Jewish businessmen in the Chicago area.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:07:31] Would you say that was like your first interaction with Jewish people in Chicago?

Charles Wilson [00:07:39] No, actually. At 14 years old, I got a job sweeping the floor at a five and dime store, and they liked me so much that I was hired to sweep the floor, and then I became an inventory assistant; you know, bringing in the stuff and counting it, and, eventually, they made me assistant manager. They kept me from 14 to 22. I was going to school in southern Illinois. They said, "Whenever you come back, you got a job, and [when] you get a break, like a week during Christmas, you come here and work." They kept me until I graduated from college, and they helped pay for my college. I was not the kind of person who was expecting to go to college, but they said if you help us get some things around here that we need help with, we'll help you with college. I didn't think about that. But I thought, "Well, I'll just get me the money for college, and I'll use it to buy a car." But, as it turned out, they said, "You get accepted to college, and we'll help support you." I thought, well, I wanted the money more, I'll just tell [the university] to give me the refund. The college says, "We won't give it back to you. We give it back to the person who sent it to us." So, I thought, "Well, I'm still smart. Maybe I'll just go to a class and sign up and then cancel and ask for a refund." But then I started liking learning. I started getting compliments and folks saying, "Hey, you're a brilliant young kid, coming from where you come from." So I stayed and graduated, and I became the commander of the ROTC. The only Black person to ever do that, because Southern Illinois is kind of rural. Illinois is a blue state, but it's blue only because of the Chicago area. Down south, it's similar to down South Virginia. Up here in Northern Virginia is progressive, but downstate is rather conservative. So most of the guys down at that university come from the conservative rural parts, and they're not used to having Black folks, except for the basketball players and football players.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:11:35] So when you went to-- This was Southern Illinois University?

Charles Wilson [00:11:38] Mhm.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:11:41] Your employers at the shop -- those were Jewish people who employed you?

Charles Wilson [00:11:42] Yes.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:11:42] How did you come to work for them in the first place? I know you started when you were 14.

Charles Wilson [00:11:52] My dad, he was already working for them, and familiar with the Jewish families. So, he just said, "I got a kid that's smart and needs some help." They said, "Well, send him by." They just hired me even before they saw me. They said, "This is Wilson's kid. Take care of him."

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:12:21] So you mentioned kind of a lot about your dad having this connection to the Jewish community in Chicago and then also within the African American community. You mentioned that your grandfather owned the apartment complex that you all lived in?

Charles Wilson [00:12:36] Not an apartment complex. He owned a building. He had about eight rentals. You know, not a condominium, but a small apartment complex. And he was an engineer with a major publishing company. So I had the experience of, at least for a few years, growing up in an affluent, educated home, and then having to return to the ghetto where my parents didn't have the money or the education or the kind of environment that I was used to. So, I'm kind of a hybrid.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:13:28] Do you remember around how old you were when you returned to live with your parents again?

Charles Wilson [00:13:35] Nine, I think. My grandparents died in an auto crash. That's why we had to return to the inner city.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:13:49] And then what were your grandparents names?

Charles Wilson [00:13:52] Henry Parker and Pauline l'Ouyer. Pauline was from New Orleans.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:14:05] How do you spell her last name?

Charles Wilson [00:14:07] It's French sounding. There should be O-U-Y-E-R, I think. You don't have to be perfect on it.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:14:21] So then what kind of role overall did your family have in the community when you were growing up? How did people view you and your siblings and your parents?

Charles Wilson [00:14:29] Which culture?

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:14:30] You can talk about both.

Charles Wilson [00:14:33] Well, with the grandparents, of course, we had a big room. Both of us had our own rooms. We had plenty of space, a big yard, [and] nice neighbors. My grandparents were civic minded. They always went to vote and participated in PTA [Parent Teacher Association] and stuff, like middle class folks do. With my parents, my mother was working two jobs. My father was working two jobs, and we didn't have that kind of access or that kind of involvement in the community and stuff. And, eventually, my parents split up, and we had to move to the projects.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:15:41] Around how old were you then?

Charles Wilson [00:15:47] 14, I think.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:15:48] 14. So around the same time you started working for the shop.

Charles Wilson [00:15:50] Right.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:15:54] How long has your family been living in Chicago? I know you mentioned your grandmother was from New Orleans, right?

Charles Wilson [00:16:02] Well, there are two sides, you know. The paternal side: they had been in Chicago I guess since 1915. My dad was born in 1921, and my mother was born in 1924. But my maternal grandmother lived to be 106. And I remember her. She outlived three husbands, and she had a new, young boyfriend when she was 85.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:17:03] Did she also live in Chicago?

Charles Wilson [00:17:04] Yeah. Her side of the family, the maternal side, all of them were there. My father had seven siblings, so we had a big family there. We weren't as well off as the other Wilsons who remained-- I guess you'd say religious and involved in the community and neighborhood. Our family was the youngest of the Wilsons, and not as established.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:18:10] Chiago was obviously a very large city environment. To what extent did you see segregation in different or specific areas, or how did that kind of systemically operate?

Charles Wilson [00:18:20] It's a good question. Chicago is not a melting pot. It was more like a salad bowl. Different ethnicities lived in their own neighborhoods, and their own neighborhoods probably each had a Sears and Roebuck and had their own community paper and did not like strangers coming into their neighborhood. So, if you wound up in an Italian neighborhood or something, there'd be trouble. Even Hispanics: the folks from Puerto Rico had their own neighborhood, and they didn't even get along with the folks from Mexico. And there was a big Polish section. The ones from Russia and the Polish Jewish. So, they kind of stuck together. Even though it had such variety in the city, [between] those different [there] wasn't much interaction. And, the politics, they had one family that ruled, called the Daley. Bill Daley. His son, his father, his grandfather, all became the mayor and ran the city until a Black man was elected, Harold Washington. And he was criticized for having the machine take care of things.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:20:10] Did you have access to public facilities growing up in Chicago?

Charles Wilson [00:20:13] Well, there were buses. I was pretty independent. I could get on the city bus at age seven and go to the library.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:20:28] In places like the libraries, would you see diversity within there?

Charles Wilson [00:20:36] No, because in each neighborhood, they had their own library and their own people who attended. Pretty much like here. In Annandale, you the one library that is mostly Korean, you know, down Little River Turnpike.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:20:57] What was your education like? I know eventually you went to the Jewish secondary school, but where did you attend primary school?

Charles Wilson [00:21:06] The first was Lawson. It was in the ghetto. We moved, and it was Gregory. When I was with my grandparents, I had a nice school, nice neighborhood we walked to. That was Copernicus. It's spelt like the guy in the sky. Copernicus. You heard of that?

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:21:34] Yes.

Charles Wilson [00:21:34] Okay. I'm surprised I remember this, too. But. That answers that question?

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:21:50] Do you remember what it was like at the different schools? What the resources were, what the teachers were like, how you felt there?

Charles Wilson [00:22:01] I'll give you the experience. I remember one teacher, and she was a very young, White teacher at Copernicus. All the boys in school, we had little wire hangers. We bent and put rubber bands on them. And we used to play shooting with spitballs. But, sometimes, guys would get serious and use paper clips, and paper clips hurt when you pull it back and, you know. Well, in the class, I usually was quick to finish my work. The rule was when you finish your work, you were supposed to put your head down on your desk and be quiet, but as a kid with ADHD, it was hard for me to be still and be quiet. So, I finished early. I was smart enough to finish because my dad, who worked at this publishing thing, brought home these pictures, and I knew geography, and stuff like that really helped me. But, the teacher said, "Somebody tried to hit me with a spitball who was finished." It [had] missed me; I ducked, and [it] hit the teacher in the butt while she was writing on the blackboard. So, she asked, "Who did that?" Nobody snitched, generally. So, when the teacher asked who did it, the people turned and looked at me. Yeah, because I probably would have been the most likely, but I didn't do it. I told the teacher I didn't do it. She said, "Well, who did?" I said, "Well, I can't tell you. I'm not a snitch." "Well, if you're not a snitch, you must have did it. Let me see. Empty your pockets." And, of course, I had the thing. All the boys had them in their pockets. So she said, "Don't lie," and I said, "Well, I'm telling you the truth." So, she sent me to the principal, and they put me in Special Ed. They said, "This guy, he just won't be still." When the Jewish school wanted to pick somebody to go to their school, one of the teachers nominated me, but the principal said, "No, this kid's in Special Ed, and he's a little guy. Yeah. They'll kick his ass, and tease him, and he might be crying. Not the Wilson guy." [*Laughter*] Yeah. But, that was [an] experience that affected me because it made me understand how so many kids are wrongly judged as being stupid when maybe they are gifted in some way. And maybe if they had a chance, equal opportunity. When I was on the [Alexandria City] school board, I used to hear about the achievement gap, and I always said, "It is not achievement gap; that's wrong." Achievement is a symptom of the problem. The problem is an equal opportunity gap. Opportunity gap should be what they say is causing this stuff. Like the military, for example. If they see someone with potential, they'll give them prep school to bring them up to speed where they have the ability, but maybe not the experience or the understanding. So, I'm a very strong supporter of this idea of achievement versus opportunity.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:26:46] Looking at the schools you went to, especially when you did the transition from Copernicus back to where you were living with your parents, would you say you saw a difference in the way the teachers treated students or even the way students viewed themselves?

Charles Wilson [00:27:06] Yes, yes. The teachers in the big cities have a hard job. They have to manage classrooms as well as teaching. And sometimes managing the behavior of the kids takes away from what they should be doing creatively to create learning. The types of teachers you have at inner city schools are different than the types of teachers you have at the more affluent schools. The same here in Alexandria. My kid went to Jefferson Houston, and, you know, Jefferson Houston, 20 years ago, was on probation; it wasn't even accredited. We had good teachers at Jefferson Houston, but you didn't have the resources that you had at the others. My kid was in the fourth grade [when] they opened Tucker [Samuel L. Tucker Elementary School]. You know Tucker? Over here? See the West side people used to go on the bus and go to the east side because they wanted to have a little bit of affluent kids at Jefferson Houston because Jefferson Houston kids, you mostly have kids on welfare and kids that are poor. They didn't have many white kids at Jefferson Houston because of the neighborhood. So, I wouldn't let my kid go to Tucker since I lived on the West side. I was here. So with Tucker, he [the kid] stayed, and he graduated from there, and he went to Hammond [Francis C. Hammond Middle School]. And then...

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:29:52] T.C. Williams?

Charles Wilson [00:29:53] T.C. Williams, yeah. So, what I've learned is, 50 years ago, maybe 60 years ago, you hear about Thurgood Marshall and Jefferson Houston, the lawyer who got the Board of Education decision turned. They went to the high schools like Dunbar [Dunbar Vocational Career Academy in Chicago, Illinois]. You know, a lot of these inner cities attracted smart Black teachers. They cared about the learning. They were creative. They just cared and did better. But, when integration came, those good teachers could now go into good jobs. Integration helped take those teachers away, where a lot of the brilliant folks were. [Before integration,] the best job they could get was a high school teacher or teacher. That's what I think happened. T.C. Williams is a two-tiered system, and 20% of the T.C. Williams kids lived in multimillion dollar homes, and 80% of the people just barely scraped up and were in crowded two-bedroom apartments with a half dozen kids. The teachers we have now just don't have the same zeal for education as those teachers we used to have who couldn't go get engineering jobs and stuff like that.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:32:20] And did you experience that? Did you have a lot of highly qualified Black teachers at your different schools?

Charles Wilson [00:32:29] No.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:32:31] What were your teachers like, demographically?

Charles Wilson [00:32:35] Well, they were different in different schools. Did I go over why I was picked to go to the Jewish school? There was one teacher, Ms. Franklin, who was a member of my church. She knew my grandfather and grandmother. And she's the one who said, she thinks I'm not a special education guy. I'm really a smart guy who acts up because I haven't been exposed to the things the gifted kids had, and she thought I was gifted and should go [to the Jewish school]. Miss Franklin was the only one, I think. You know, when I went to high school, I did have another teacher.

And he was also Jewish. Mr. Shapiro, who put me in a special homeroom class for brilliant students. But I didn't know I was smart until then.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:33:42] Until Miss Franklin?

Charles Wilson [00:33:44] No. Miss Franklin knew something I didn't. But it was Mr. Shapiro. After the Jewish middle school, that changed my impression and confidence in myself. And then when I got to high school, I was a top ten graduate.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:34:08] Did you go to a Jewish high school as well, or was the middle school--

Charles Wilson [00:34:10] No.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:34:10] So it was the middle school that was Jewish.

Charles Wilson [00:34:10] Yeah, but I didn't go to my neighborhood school. My mother said, "I don't want you going to the school in this neighborhood." So, I had to take a public bus to go clear across the town in Chicago to Crane Tech [Richard T. Crane Medical Prep High School], a technical school. At that time, Chicago had three tech schools, and what tech meant is that not only do you have to do college prep courses, but you also have to do vocational as well, like machine shop, auto shop, wood shop, [and] drafting. And the women had to take home economics, as well as Algebra II and Geometry and Trig [Trigonometry].

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:35:04] Was that an integrated school?

Charles Wilson [00:35:06] Yes. Somewhat. Then it was.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:35:09] What do you mean by somewhat?

Charles Wilson [00:35:11] Well, today it's all Black. Then people who moved in the cities, you know, gentrification. It was all Black. But guess what? It was Black, [then] it was White, and then Black, and now it got gentrified. The place where I used to deliver papers--Oh, I didn't tell you I was a paper boy at 11. Age 11. My route was from 35th & State to 39th & State. This was a terrible neighborhood. And, unlike today, paper boys had to collect the money for their papers. You had problems with guys trying to rob you and people who hid from you when it was time to pay.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:36:15] How did you come to be a paper boy?

Charles Wilson [00:36:20] To help my mom. I'd, you know, hear her going through the couch looking for quarters and change because one of my younger sisters, say, her baby didn't have shoes. And so I said, "Well, I'll go get a job," but the only job a seven-year-old can get is a paper boy.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:36:51] Who hired you as a paper boy? Because I know you said there are local newspapers, right? So this was the one in your neighborhood?

Charles Wilson [00:36:59] No. This was a Daily. In the neighborhood, there was the Chicago Tribune and the Chicago Sun-Times and the Daily News. The Daily News was published every day and delivered every morning. And that's the only one that had a lot of openings. Yeah. And because it was the only one where the paper boy had to collect the money for the paper, that made the job dangerous. But my mom told me to stop by and give the guy at the donut shop two or three papers in exchange for some jelly donuts, and when the guys come to rob me, give them a jelly donut instead. But I only had to collect on Friday, so that's when I had to do that.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:38:04] Did the jelly donuts work?

Charles Wilson [00:38:05] Yes.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:38:05] They did?

Charles Wilson [00:38:06] Yeah. They'd rather [have the donut] because I didn't have that much money. I mean, [as a] paper boy, what, I had maybe \$15, \$20 at most. But that was a lot back when I was a kid. \$20 was a day's pay for some people.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:38:26] So the process of you going to this Jewish school when you were in middle school, do you want to walk through that from beginning to end? How did the selection process start out for that? Why did they do this?

Charles Wilson [00:38:46] Well, the selection process was [that] they asked the principal of my inner-city school to send them maybe a few, three or , Brown and Black kids so that their boys could get acclimated to them. The homeroom teacher nominated me, I think, because she saw something in me, and she knew my grandfather. I guess that was it. And, the principal said, "No, this guy's in Special Ed." And, she said, "Well, I think he shouldn't be there. He's a gifted kid, but you can't tell at first. So, she said, "Why don't we test him?" The principal said, "No, it's a waste of time." And she had the balls to say, "Well, I'm afraid I'll have to go over your head. You may fire me, but I believe in this kid enough where I want to give him every chance." And I took some kind of intelligence test. I don't know what kind of test it was, but I did pretty good. And the principal was surprised, and they sent me over there.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:40:27] Who was your principal; what was he like?

Charles Wilson [00:40:30] [*Laughing*] I don't remember.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:40:33] Was he Black?

Charles Wilson [00:40:33] No.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:40:33] No?

Charles Wilson [00:40:33] No. See, the teacher was Black.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:40:41] Was it Miss Franklin who was your homeroom teacher?

Charles Wilson [00:40:42] Miss Franklin. Yeah. I'll never forget her.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:40:46] And then, the principal was a White man?

Charles Wilson [00:40:49] Yeah.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:40:49] Okay. Was that common to have White principals and administrators at Black schools in Chicago?

Charles Wilson [00:41:00] Maybe. If the school was in a bad neighborhood, the principal would be Black. But if it was fairly safe, the principal would be White. But the Black teachers, usually, were in ghetto schools, and they lived near the schools. Chicago was very much segregated, even though it was a northern city. It was worse than Alexandria.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:41:38] Because of the ethnic enclaves that you mentioned? People lived among themselves.

Charles Wilson [00:41:44] Yeah, not only that, but there's another thing about Blacks in northern cities. They were not afraid of White folks. And the neighborhood I lived in, they said White folks shouldn't even be hanging around after dark. You know, there's some cities where they say Black people shouldn't be in the dark. Do you know there was neighborhoods in Chicago that were too dangerous for a White person to be walking the street? Or even in the Italian [neighborhoods]?

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:42:17] That was when you were at Gregory that you were nominated for--

Charles Wilson [00:42:25] Yeah.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:42:25] --the Jewish Day School? Okay. And you were in fifth grade about to go to middle school? What grade?

Charles Wilson [00:42:31] Maybe seventh grade, I think it was seventh. And I'm not all that accurate about the details, but you can make them fit.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:42:53] Do you remember your first day going to this Jewish secondary school?

Charles Wilson [00:42:59] Oh, yeah.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:43:00] What was it like?

Charles Wilson [00:43:01] Well, the headmaster said he welcomed us praised us, said, "Well, being selected, you guys really must be special," and he said, "You guys will probably wind up at Yale or Harvard." And I didn't know about Yale or Harvard, but I knew about all the schools with good basketball and football teams, but I pretended, "Yeah." [*Laughter*] And, so I became a safety patrol guy. You know, you wear a thing, and you help people cross the street, and they made me captain of the safety patrol, and I stood out. I kind of got high off of the praise, which I didn't normally get, but

at this place, doing things and making things happen and being the first to do this or that, that turned me on.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:44:16] Do you remember the name of the school?

Charles Wilson [00:44:19] JPC. [Potentially a JCC, Jewish Community Center, potentially affiliated with the Jewish People's Institute]

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:44:21] Is that an acronym or is it just called JPC?

Charles Wilson [00:44:23] It is acronym.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:44:25] What did it stand for?

Charles Wilson [00:44:26] Jewish. Something center.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:44:30] Okay. I can find that.

Charles Wilson [00:44:32] You'll find JPC all over the Jewish lexicon.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:44:39] How did your classmates react? Had they really interacted with Black people before, or how did they sort of treat you?

Charles Wilson [00:44:49] Some of them treated me either very well or, "We really don't know why you're here." Like most places, the boys were educated boys. They're usually from high income families, going to this group. So, they were not the rabble rouser you find like in [unintelligible]. There was no violence and there was no intimidation. And even though I was the smallest guy, I had a reputation of being tough.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:45:50] So on that first day, there was no, like, police?

Charles Wilson [00:45:55] No.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:45:56] And then, for you, how did you view your classmates? You had been around Jewish people because of your father. But within the whole culture of the school, how was that for you?

Charles Wilson [00:46:07] I thought it was comfortable, mainly comfortable. When they asked questions, they'd point to [me], "Wilson, what do you think?" I liked that. Some of the boys were taught by their fathers, "You talk to this guy. You ask him questions, you get to find out what they think about and how they do it and what their background is." So, some of these kids were very active in getting to know me, getting to understand. And, again, I never had that kind of attention. So, I was high off of the experience at that school. It changed my whole outlook. And they were the ones that talked about college. "Where are you going? Where do you think about?" And I had to make up stuff. I remembered Yale and Harvard only because the headmaster mentioned it, but I thought, the only one I knew, I'll go to Tuskegee, because that's where the Tuskegee pilots were. But yeah, it was a growing experience. If you are an exceptional person, you stand out. You either stand out and get

credit for extra good or extra bad. So that's like Vanessa Williams, the first Black beauty queen. She said, "I won because I was different." Everybody there had talent. I had talent, but because I was different, I was noticed. I couldn't be ignored. I couldn't be the same thing. So that's true with anybody, and especially minorities that excel are given extra credit. Minorities that do something wrong are given extra punishment, more than they need.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:48:47] Did you observe that dual standard when you were attending the school?

Charles Wilson [00:48:50] No, I got wisdom when I got older because I read a lot, and I do a lot of seminars and workshops.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:49:18] I know you mentioned Mr. Shapiro, right? He put you in the--

Charles Wilson [00:49:24] He was my home room teacher.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:49:31] How was your experience in that home room class?

Charles Wilson [00:49:36] There were 20 of us, and all of us were treated special.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:49:44] How did that make you feel in contrast or similar to how you had been?

Charles Wilson [00:49:49] Well, again, I work harder for appreciation. I'm not really a people pleaser, but I do get high from specific accomplishments, so that makes me work harder to do things, make things happen.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:50:19] And then while you were there--

Charles Wilson [00:50:22] You didn't record that?

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:50:24] I did, it's all recorded.

Charles Wilson [00:50:25] Oh, okay.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:50:25] And while you were there, did you make any friends or connections that stand out to you looking back?

Charles Wilson [00:50:33] Not that I really remember. No. I remember connections from my high school honors class. That's how I went back to my 50-year high school reunion. And I found a significant fact. I was ranked number nine in my class of 450. And it was even: about half were girls and half were boys. When I went back for my 50th reunion, there were almost 100 girls, and there were 12 boys. In a 50-year reunion. Where are they? Well. So-and-so is in jail. So-and-so was shot by police. The other person is on drugs, and that is when I felt so sad. What happened to the men that grew up? I mean, the boys that grew up in that school. But surprisingly, the ones that were left were the ones that did good in high school. The top, the honors folks survived. Both the girls and the boys. So, what does that say about intelligence or family background or influence? It all has an effect. Like

you, growing up with educated parents with a lineage that goes back to Mali. You can look on Mali as a civilization. Thousands of years old. That was the, cradle of, civilized world. So that does something for your psyche, right?

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:52:59] Yes. Because your high school was majority Black--Or it was integrated?

Charles Wilson [00:53:06] Yeah.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:53:06] Yeah. What was the attitude of the African American students? They came from a lot of backgrounds. What was the attitude of the African American community towards education and school?

Charles Wilson [00:53:30] Since my high school took people from all over the city, people were there because they wanted to be there. They weren't there just because they lived in the neighborhood. So, they looked at education in a much more, positive manner than what normal neighborhood schools do. The exception was Dunbar. Dunbar was, like TJ [Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology]. You know this TJ here? Dunbar back then was in Chicago. Dunbar of Chicago was probably the smartest school with the best students in the world. But, you had to take a test, like TJ, just to get in it, and it was all Black, maybe a couple of White or mixed kids, but basically Black, with good teachers and stuff like that. Because they cared. So. But I don't know how that fits in. Does that answer your question?

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:54:53] Yeah. And then, in your neighborhood, with kids you grew up with, who maybe didn't go to your school, how did they view you and how did you view them; were the paths different because of your education?

Charles Wilson [00:55:07] Trying to act White. Better than us.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:55:17] How did that make you feel as a kid?

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:55:20] I'd pretend, you know. I wore a gang jacket just to fit in. But I took it off. [*Laughter*] Because I had two jackets. On the south side, there was a deadly gang called the Egyptian Cobras. And on the west side, it was the Apaches. So, I had an Apache jacket and an Egyptian Cobra jacket. And a sweater, a Crane Tech sweater. And I didn't have no other school, so I took it off when I'd go somewhere else. I was mobile because my dad lied and got me a car at age 15 and lied about my age. When I asked my dad, "What am I gonna do about car insurance?" He said, "This Jewish guy who gave you a car as an underage kid and knew you were 15 and knew your license was that; that's your insurance." [*Laughter*]

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:56:37] That's interesting. And was that the Jewish man that he worked with as well?

Charles Wilson [00:56:43] No. That was another guy. But yeah. They all knew each other on the south side. All the car dealers and stuff.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:56:57] Interesting. Growing up, and this might have changed as well with your experience, did you differentiate between like White Jewish people and other White folks? Was that different for you?

Charles Wilson [00:57:11] Yes. I thought so. I started out with a more favorable impression. Because I could speak Yiddish, too.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:57:24] Oh?

Charles Wilson [00:57:29] A little. And going to these bar mitzvahs, I learned I picked up enough Yiddish to act like a Jewish boy. And sometimes, at the bat mitzvahs, they'd say we don't have any Spanish kids in our picture. And so I had to pretend to be Spanish.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:57:57] So there were Italians as well. Those communities being different; to you, did they all read as still White or like how did you kind of view that?

Charles Wilson [00:58:12] Italians were aggressive and dangerous in Chicago, in my opinion. It was dangerous to be in their neighborhoods after dark. And if you wound up with a White girl, you could be shot or beat up or even killed.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:58:38] Did people still try to do interracial dating? In secret?

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:58:42] Yeah.

Charles Wilson [00:58:42] And did you ever see it between Black and Jewish communities? Was there interaction?

Charles Wilson [00:58:47] Moreso.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:58:48] Moreso?

Charles Wilson [00:58:48] Between Black and Jewish. The Jewish businessmen were different from Korean businessmen. They always hired people from their community. I remember that one bar mitzvah where the 14-year-old was learning, stuff from the Torah, and you were also given a financial planning thing saying, here's what you do. You buy a grocery store in a Black neighborhood or jewelry store or a liquor store and always hire somebody who looks like the people who are your customers. Unlike the Koreans who don't do that. I think I mentioned this yesterday. Okay.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:59:54] There was a difference between how like maybe the White Italians or the Protestants treated you to the Jewish community?

Charles Wilson [00:59:59] Mhm.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:59:59] Growing up, did your parents, because I know your dad worked with Jewish people, did they talk about that as well, or did you kind of just come to realize?

Charles Wilson [01:00:07] No, no, I mean, we didn't talk about it. You come to realize it. Yeah.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:00:18] What factors kind of influenced your perceptions of Jewish communities in particular growing up?

Charles Wilson [01:00:30] Well, I think my employer. And my Grandma. She worked for the president of Kraft Cheese. He was a Jewish guy, and he was my size. I mean, except he had a bigger belly than me. I was skinny, but I was the right height and [fit] the shoes. And this guy was a millionaire. So, I got some of his shoes, his clothes, his suit. So, I was going to school in \$300 suits that I got for free that my grandma got from this guy. Some of the people would think I was a showoff because I'd come to the school sometimes in a fancy suit that looked fancy. It looked expensive. But, I don't know. That's not relevant.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:01:56] I know your grandparents were very involved in the church. What did your involvement in the church look like?

Charles Wilson [01:02:07] BTU [Baptist Theological Union] on Thursdays. Baptists. And every Sunday. And I had to sing "Precious Lord." The preacher, I still remember Reverend [Louis] Boddie. He'd go like this, "Keep going, keep going." Because they want me to keep singing until the women got up and shouted and, you know, did the dance up in the front. I still remember the song. But after a while, I just got tired of it. I got tired of restrictions. But, down in the church basement, there's a lot of fooling around, too. Not me. [*Laughter*]

Charles Wilson [01:03:10] And did the church provide any resources to the community? What was the role of the church in the larger community?

Charles Wilson [01:03:17] Well, they did. This was Shiloh Baptist Church. They owned a building where they could let low-income people live for a while until they get situated. So that was good. And the preacher, he had two twin girls that were so cute. I liked going for that reason. Reverend Pelt. You know, I have not been able to remember that name, but all of a sudden, with your questioning, some of these names come back. I never could have remembered it just out of the blue. But you're touching something. Making things come up. You're asking questions that nobody asked me before.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:04:29] That's good.

Charles Wilson [01:04:30] You're stimulating my memory cells, maybe.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:04:33] That's good. Okay.

Charles Wilson [01:04:35] Now I'm going to have to pay you? [*Laughter*]

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:04:37] No! It's no money. All right, so going into high school. Okay, so you're about 14 and you're in high school, right? So you go through high school, you graduated. Did anything happen in between? Just in general. What happened around that adolescent age?

Charles Wilson [01:05:00] Well, I went to jail. I think I was 15. I remember, we were living in the projects, you know, high rise. And you can call it Cabrini-Green. People have really heard of that. It's the most notorious projects in the country, except some places in New York City. But the police

stopped us and arrested us, and we were riding in a big, black Cadillac: this 16-year-old driving the big black Cadillac, full of us kids. And we got arrested. All of us. The police, they separate you, and ask you questions, not in front of each other, but in different rooms, to see if there's any similarities in what you say. "Who got this car?" And, then we had this rule that you never snitch. You snitch, you're going to get hurt. I wouldn't tell who got the car, and nobody else would. And the person who stole the car wouldn't admit. He said he didn't know. I wound up in juvenile, because, well, one of the things, we had some jackets. They was gang jackets too. I wouldn't snitch, but I spent a week in juvenile. Called [unintelligible, Audione?]. I was really upset when my dad. I told my dad the truth. "I didn't do it, and I didn't know the car was stolen, and I shouldn't be in there. Why don't you tell him, and maybe he'll let me out early?" My dad said, "You don't want to be let out early. That'll be dangerous for you. They will think you are the snitch. You could get hurt. So don't leave before anybody. Let somebody else leave early, and they'll be suspicious." So, I was angry with my dad for a long time, and I never knew why he wouldn't get me out and [why] he told me to stay. So, I was angry at my dad for many years. But I found out from my uncle why. He was looking after me. That I wasn't mature enough to understand that I would have been hurt if I had got out before the other guys.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:08:49] Were you in school when this happened?

Charles Wilson [01:08:51] Yes.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:08:54] So then you go back to high school. Do you remember the year you graduated, your graduating class of high school?

Charles Wilson [01:09:02] '60.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:09:04] So kind of right in the middle of that Civil Rights Movement. What was it like in the school environment you were in during the Civil Rights Movement? Was there activity in Chicago? Was there activity you guys were paying attention to or talking about?

Charles Wilson [01:09:19] Yeah, there was a lot of activity. Part of it was political activity. Politics was always high in Chicago because they have a saying. They say, "In Chicago, we vote early and often." Many times, Mayor [Richard J.] Daley would send a bus, several buses, to the projects, and round us all up, and they would say, "After we vote, we're going to have a party," and they had barbecue ribs on the bus after we voted. So, the bus was a lot of fun. Singing and joyfulness and voting was a big thing in the projects. And that's why the Democrats ruled Chicago for so long, because they used the poor people, especially the Blacks and Hispanics, to vote for them. That's why Illinois is such a blue state. It's surrounded by red states, but it's very blue only because of Chicago and in spite of what's downstate.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:10:53] So you were in high school in the early 60s. High school and college. What did you do after graduation?

Charles Wilson [01:11:05] After graduating from college?

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:11:06] High school.

Charles Wilson [01:11:07] I went to SIU [Southern Illinois University].

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:11:14] So you're there as well during a lot of the major Civil Rights Movement; what was the conversation like there? What was the environment like during this?

Charles Wilson [01:11:22] Well, it kind of bifurcated. And there's the progressive on one side, maybe about 20%. And then on the other side, a lot of the White women who were free all of a sudden wanted to experience dating a Black guy. So the Black guys, especially the athletes, were inundated by curious white women who wanted to date them. Not for a permanent relationship, but just for the experience.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:12:06] Were there ever protests on your campus?

Charles Wilson [01:12:09] Oh, yeah. Remember the Little Rock Nine? Four of those little Rock Nines attended that school. They had a lot of attention and meetings and newspaper interviews and stuff. Walt Frazier was a star basketball player there. I want to tell you about this. When I first got to SIU, Black people could not stay at the new dormitories where they had the cafeteria. And so we couldn't get a meal plan or stay at the place. The only exception said that Blacks stay there who were, athletes, gifted athletes, athletes on scholarship. And Walt Frazier was highly recruited by SIU at that time. And he said, "If you don't let the other black folks stay here and have a meal plan, then, you know, I'm not going to come to your school. I'm going to go to your competitor's school." So they opened it up. But I was already a junior, and I had to walk a mile and a half to where I lived. I lived in a garage. It was owned by a preacher. But yeah, you had to go across the tracks on the east side. So, I did that, but when I first arrived, within the first month, I couldn't find a place to stay. And, my dad says, "Well, you can sleep in a car park." But I didn't have any money. He gave me \$30 and he gave me his buffer. Remember he simonized cars? And he said, "You take my favorite buffer, and you simonize cars, you do detailing for cars. If you get hungry and you paint a house, you will never go hungry. I know you. I could put you in New York, and you'll survive and prosper." And I did, but I had help. And I'd like to mention Buckminster Fuller. I don't know if you know about him. He invented the geodesic dome. And he wrote the book, *I Seem to be a Verb*. And he had a lot of inventions, and he's a Jewish guy. [Buckminster Fuller was Unitarian] He let me stay in his geodesic dome until I could find a place to live.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:15:55] How did you end up meeting this person?

Charles Wilson [01:15:57] Well, some of the folks told him that "there's this kid from Chicago who is sleeping on people's couches, and he can't afford a place, and because he's Black and not an athlete"- -Because people would say, "You're too short to be a basketball star." I'd lie and say, "Well, I run track." [*Laughter*] But anyway, I was able to stay in this house. It was four of us, and we stayed in this preacher's garage, and I got a job working at the cafeteria. The lady felt sorry for me, the manager. She was a student too. And she said, "You can take some meat home or anything you can put in your pocket, but I can't give you a bag of food. So you have to put it in your pocket, so nobody can see you taking food out of here. Even with that, if they think I gave it to you, they might think you're stealing food." So, I had to walk a mile and a half from my job at the campus cafeteria to my home. When it was warm, you know, I'd have some hamburger in this pocket, meat over here... In the wintertime, it wasn't much of a problem because I had a big coat with big pockets. I told my boss, I said, "Well, dogs are following me." And so, she said, "Well, I'll tell you what, just take little pieces of meat, and when the dogs follow you, just toss over the meat, especially if they're on the other side of

the fence. Throw it over to the other side of the fence; they'll jump over there and get the meat rather than following you." So, I thought that was interesting, but I felt sorry for myself at the time.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:18:29] So even when you were attending SIU in the 60s, the dining facilities were segregated as well?

Charles Wilson [01:18:37] No, because, Walt Frazier says, "I'm not coming unless you integrate."

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:18:42] And he did that when you were a junior, right?

Charles Wilson [01:18:45] Yeah. Walt Frazier is a famous basketball player. Who's the comedian who just died? Gregory. Well, he's a comedian. Yeah, but anyway, he was famous for coming there. One of the big things was [that] it was a big sin to park on the president's lawn. Dick Gregory. He was there, and he parked his car right on the president's lawn. Yeah, I was working in the president's office there, too. I had two jobs. The cafeteria and clean-up at night. I was so proud to see Dizzy Gillespie [Dick Gregory] do that. And I was proud of Walt Frazier. Yeah. And another famous guy: Shaft [Richard Roundtree]. He went to our school. He was there, and I used to cut his hair. He still owed me money when he died, and I think he still owed me about \$50. Shaft, he was a track star. You're just letting me go, right? And then you have specific things you want to target.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:20:42] I want you to be able to talk about some of the contextual stuff. And it also kind of allows me to know some of the context.

Charles Wilson [01:20:50] Okay.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:20:51] In college, were there any specific large events related to like civil rights or anything like that that you would like to talk about?

Charles Wilson [01:21:02] Yes. Like I said, I was the first commander of the ROTC. It was a land grant college, so all males except veterans had to take ROTC. They had to take the first two years. And then, if you wanted to stay, you do the advanced two years. There were probably only, out of 3,000, maybe 200 who were allowed to stay the last two years. Well, I did. As a commander of the ROTC, it was tradition to go to the homecoming game with the homecoming queen, who was White. And that was the history for a hundred years. But all of a sudden, you got a Black commander of the ROTC. So, they asked me if I understood how this would be troublesome, if we went to the prom together. And, I said something like, "What do you mean? What? Me?" And he came and saw me. "What do you think?" "It's not that my problem." I was very happy they were having problems. But they asked if I would pretend to be sick. I said no. "Well, you know, it's not us, but some of the people here would have some trouble if you and her went to the homecoming together." So I just let them stew. And eventually, they just canceled the homecoming.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:23:12] They canceled it?

Charles Wilson [01:23:12] They canceled it.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:23:15] Did you know the girl?

Charles Wilson [01:23:20] Not close. I mean, we weren't. I had fun at my college. I really enjoyed it. I think I had some resiliency. Like growing up and being a hybrid--This is important. If you have a person who has lessons from the ghetto and lessons from the affluent part, that makes him a hybrid person with multiple perspectives, large perspectives. Sometimes it gives me resiliency by having endured what I went through and by having experiences with engaged grandparents. And, intelligence: I had that, too. I think that created some synergy in me and my perspectives.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:24:43] Interesting. And when you went to this school, the other students there, especially other Black students, how did they view you? How did you view them?

Charles Wilson [01:24:55] Well, some of them thought that I was trying to be both White and Black at the same time. I was accused of talking White sometimes, giving speeches and stuff and [with] being in ROTC instead of on the football team or basketball team or track stuff. I was probably the only [Black] kid there on academic scholarship, which didn't help me much. So, again, going to a White school is instructional, dealing with Blacks. There was a basketball player named Chico Vaughn [Charles Vaughn]. He went pro. In high school, he was the star of the high school team, and the high school team won state champion in basketball just about every year. It was because of Charlie Vaughn, Chico we called him. Charlie Vaughn, he was dumb. But he was brilliant with the basketball. He could do anything with the basketball. All he really thought about or knew about was basketball and sex. That was his only concern. But he got in college because he was so good, and I wrote many a paper where the athletic directors asked me if I would help him with the paper. They were really saying, "Would you write the paper?" But they paid me. They said, "We can't give you money, but we'll give you free tickets that you can sell." 'Cus it was against the law to pay me. And they wanted probable deniability. Chico, he didn't graduate with a degree. He graduated with a certificate of attendance. Do you know what that is? "You were here for four years, and we appreciate your talent and scholarship." Most of the classes he took, they had, like, "Basketball with 101." "Basketball Fundamentals 102." "Scientific Basketball 101." [*Laughter*] And that's the courses. But he couldn't put a sentence together.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:28:31] So after university, what did you begin to pursue?

Charles Wilson [01:28:41] I was majoring in industrial psychology at the school, and I was running experiments. I had rats that I owned; the white and black rats and the other rats. And I was trying to do a study on which motivates more, hunger or thirst? And it came out that it was thirst. But, that was unfortunate, because I rented a big old house right across the street from my lab, because the rats had to be fed and weighed every four hours, even on weekends and holidays. So, I wanted something close by. I couldn't afford a house or live where I was working there. So, I rented this big house, and I actually made a profit because I had a lot of these White boys that were on sports teams that were supposed to live on base [campus], but they wanted some place where they can do secret stuff. So, I lived in the attic and actually made money. What was the last question?

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:30:11] Well, I'm kind of interested in the rats thing. I do want to ask, how did you get these White sport athletes to stay in the house? How did they find out about it?

Charles Wilson [01:30:26] I went to their fraternities, and it wasn't all white, but the White guys had a lot of money, and they could afford to pay me what I wanted. I gave them the choice rooms. I lived in the attic. I put the people that couldn't [pay enough for] it in the basement. But I was able to do the rats and do the studies. What I was studying was industrial psychology. I got to go to Chicago to

read my paper, and I had this professor Dr. [possibly George Franklin] McCoy, who was a popular psychologist. He was the grandson of a guy who writes books and stuff. He wanted me to stay. My degree wasn't like you get a bachelor's degree and you stop. I was already in a program that goes straight to a master's degree in industrial psychology, but I was broke, and I couldn't afford graduate school at the time. The Vietnam War started. I had a low draft number like my brother did. He enlisted right away. I said, "Well, I'm going to stay here and try and do the ROTC so I can be an officer instead of a ground pounder." But I did the psychology thing, and I got a lot of good feedback from the guy. The next thing I did, I decided to go to the Air Force and take a commission. We had a flight school at our college. When I graduated with a bachelor's degree, I just went to the Air Force. The first time they sent me to flight school, I went to California. I was there for two years. And then, our squadron was sent to Okinawa and Vietnam. So I planned to stay in the military for four years, and when my four years was up, I'd go back to school, get my PhD and do psychology and write books. But I enjoyed the Air Force. I got the jobs I wanted, and I wound up staying 24 years. When I came here, I was stationed right down here at Cameron Station with logistics. I got reassigned, and I was going to be a base commander. I wanted to go to law school; I wanted to stay here. So that's when I retired [from the military]. I went into financial planning. I became a stockbroker and a financial planner with aims to help my folks. To promote financial literacy for African Americans and other poor minorities.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:34:56] So when you did ROTC, did you already have some intention to--What was your mindset? You were drafted, but then--

Charles Wilson [01:35:12] No, I wasn't drafted. I did ROTC because when I got there [Southern Illinois University], it was cold, and I didn't have the clothes. They gave us a big wool coat they called the blanket. Big heavy coat. And that motivated me a lot. And the possibility that I could fly.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:35:45] What was your interest in flying?

Charles Wilson [01:35:48] Well, in Chicago, when I lived in a high rise, I lived near Meigs Field in Chicago. And when the planes were landing, I could see. I could almost see the pilot. As a kid, when I was like 10 or 12, I only had two things I wanted to do: be a Perry Mason and a pilot. I wondered if I could do both. A flying lawyer. But anyway, I could see them land, and I always dreamed that one day I'd do that. Wasn't serious, but I just dreamed it.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:36:41] Then the opportunity presented itself.

Charles Wilson [01:36:44] Right. The big incentive was they gave away that big and heavy jacket and coat in the wintertime, since I had to walk a mile and a half.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:37:05] So you did flight school in California? Where did you do--

Charles Wilson [01:37:08] In Texas.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:37:08] In Texas. Where?

Charles Wilson [01:37:10] Waco. In James Connally.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:37:18] What was flight school like? Was that integrated at the time?

Charles Wilson [01:37:21] Yes. They had few Blacks.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:37:26] It was majority White?

Charles Wilson [01:37:26] Yeah, they called it aviation. Because they trained navigators as well as pre.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:37:40] What was your experience with the environment and people there?

Charles Wilson [01:37:43] I had a mixed experience. When the cadets were there, they had one time when the military officers on the base were supposed to pick a cadet and take them out on a weekend for fun, because we had a lot of stuff we had to do, survival training and stuff. Well, there's a lieutenant that I guess picked my name, and I was sitting on the steps waiting for the guy to come and pick me up, and he was late. I was sitting there on the steps by myself. Most of the other cadets, their sponsors came and got him. They were gone. And, he asked, "You know where Cadet Wilson is?" I said, "That's me." "Are you the only Cadet Wilson?" "Yeah. I'm the only one here." I say, "Are you the one that picked my name? You going to take me out?" He said, "Yeah, but, there's--I didn't know. I didn't know who you were." [I] said, "What do you mean? You didn't know who I was?" "Well, I didn't know you were colored." "Oh. So you having problems?" But he got defensive. "Well, I had planned to take you to a place where I don't think you'd be comfortable or welcome there. It's at the VA [Veterans Affairs] party for the new VA thing in town and then going to a play afterwards with my roommate." In ROTC, you know, I couldn't make a fuss. I didn't want to make a fuss. I said, "No, forget it." You know? "Just go on. I'll occupy myself." But the barracks were empty and nobody was around. So I felt... Not--Well, angry, somewhat. I felt the racism. So, I just went out. I was not 21. I couldn't drink then, but [in] the summer, you can kayak. It was about a half an hour later this same guy came back with his roommate. Older guy, who used to be military. And he says, "I apologize so much for my roommate. He really has done wrong. So I'll take you. I'll take you, and I'll do the cadet thing." So, he took me to the same place that the other guy was going. It was a party for the new head of the Veterans Administration in Waco, Texas. Before that was a play. You have dinner and a play, and then, after, the party. As it turned out, the person was worried about me being uncomfortable as a Black guy at this party. But the party was for the new head of the VA, which was a Black guy. And there were other Black folks, not many, but there were doctors and stuff there. And this was crazy. I mean, people jumping in the pool with their clothes on and their shoes on. It was a wild ass party. But he took me, and he apologized over and over again for his young roommate. We attended a dinner play too. That was interesting. So that was a highlight.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:42:25] Amongst other cadets, they came from a lot of places. Did you observe different attitudes among them?

Charles Wilson [01:42:34] Not so much. I had my own squad, but I was a leader there. That's helped me, by the way. I don't know how much time we've got, but part of our training was survival. You know, pilots, they said, could get shot down over enemy territory. And you have to survive. You have to hide. You have to feed yourself. You have to become invisible. So, we had to kind of train what to eat, what not to eat. Well, I grew up in the city, right. In the projects. I didn't know. I'd never seen a real cow or bull. I just knew a bull had horns, and I thought a cow didn't. I was leader of my squad. I was the only city boy. Most of the other ones were country guys. Except one, from New York. He

was a Jewish guy, too. There, it comes up again. Well, anyway, we go down to the fence. I said, "Well, maybe we can go over there and get some milk from a cow. Do any y'all know how to milk a cow?" But it wasn't a cow. It was a bull. And they were going to let me go over there. But the Jewish guy from New York says, "You know--" [*Laughter*] "You probably a city boy, you don't know." But I say, "No," I'd never seen an upfront, real cow. Only in the pictures or in movies and stuff." And I thought that bulls had real big horns. Yeah, but the young bulls don't have them yet.

Charles Wilson [01:44:37] The other thing that happened, and this is interesting: Survival training, you know, you had to learn to do what you have to do to survive. If you get shot down in enemy territory, you got to survive. The main thing is to hide, feed yourself, and not get sick. So that's why I was thinking about getting milk. And they taught us what kind of bugs to eat and what kind of plants you can eat. Being from the city, right, I'm not used to country ways. So, I was leader of my thing and I says, "Well, if we had to survive, we were shot down in enemy territory, I would try to steal some food from the enemy." I say, "Well, why don't we get the instructors? Distract them somehow and steal their food. And they would probably be proud that we thought of that." So, I had the guys set a fire away from the trucks and the jeeps with this food. But the fire got bigger and stuff, and it actually got so close to where the jeeps were, and the food was starting to smoke. So my plan didn't work. But, when they put out the fire, they called and said, "Who done that? Who did that?" And again, same as when in school, when you hit the teacher, you don't snitch. And again, we didn't tell who did it. But the same thing happened, you know. They said, "You. Wilson. You from the city. And you're only one from the city. You're the one we think might have planned this, and you're the head of your squad, anyway, and it happened on your watch. So you're responsible." So I did admit. "Yes, yes I did. But you told us we're supposed to train like we would have to act, and that's one of the things I would have done if I got shot down in enemy territory and I couldn't tell the difference between a cow and a bull." [*Chuckling*] So, I thought they were going to drop me from the program, but one of the senior officers said, "No, don't punish him. Give him a credit. Because a lot of these country boys would not have thought about stealing. They probably would have relied on eating some worms or stuff. So, he gets high marks for being creative and having courage and then coming up and admitting that he did it. So that gave me enough points where I was appointed to the head of the thing. And again, I think it's the resilience. My ghetto big city background gives me a perspective that also goes along with being honest and straightforward. And having the courage to do crazy stuff.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:48:55] And amongst your squadron, it was numerous backgrounds. Do you remember kind of where people were from?

Charles Wilson [01:49:08] One of the guys was a White spoiled boy. His mother was there outside the gate. You're not supposed to have parents or spouses hanging around. But his mother was in the hotel right outside the base, and she would come in there and shine his shoes, and then shine his buckles and stuff and then leave. But this guy was a spoiled kid. He was a mama's boy. He didn't have a daddy. But anyway, I killed two rattlesnakes and, you know, part of survival, you put them in a canteen, put some salt in it, and boil them. And I said, "Well, we may have to do that, if we get shot down, cook an animal or catch an animal. So this guy, his mind wasn't where he could eat a snake. And he starts throwing up. It was 104 degrees in Waco, Texas. And they gave us salt pills to take because of the heat. So he suffered a heat stroke, on my watch. And they took him to the hospital, and he died from heat. That bothered me somewhat. That answers your question?

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:51:22] Were you the only Black person on the squadron?

Charles Wilson [01:51:24] Only [one] in my squadron. Out of 200 people, there were only three or four Blacks. See, the Air Force and Navy did not have Black officers until recently. The Army did. Yeah, I'm a member of the Tuskegee Airmen now, the group with the red jackets and stuff. My boss was Chappie James [Daniel "Chappie" James Jr.] a general who was a Tuskegee Airman, and he got me into the Tuskegee Airmen thing.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:52:22] There was a Jewish guy from New York as well?

Charles Wilson [01:52:24] Yeah. He was the one that explained about the bull.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:52:42] And you were the leader, was everyone pretty respectful of that? How did people behave in response to that?

Charles Wilson [01:52:50] Well. I guess behind my back, they probably wondered why I was there, and why I was so good. And why I was so aggressive with the White boys. One reason is where I went to school, I had four years of junior ROTC. So, four years experience made me stand out anyway. And most of these White guys never had any experience with ROTC. Well, I come in there with four years worth of knowledge. And I was also a senior ROTC guy in high school and leader of the drum and bugle corps.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:54:06] Was there anything notable you wanted to mention about the military as well? Before we move on to when you started working at the Pentagon.

Charles Wilson [01:54:15] Well, the military is the Pentagon. But, yeah, the military: I find that I would not have survived if I were an army officer or a naval officer or a marine officer because of my personality. Because of my kind of obstinate stubbornness and creativeness. Because the Air Force is the only service--it's the newest started in [19]47--that is not burdened by 200 years of tradition. The army values loyalty above all. The Marines, it's about physical fitness. The Navy, it's about invention. The Air Force is the only service that appreciates intelligence and creativeness. And that's where I would fit best.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:55:37] So when you transitioned to working at the Pentagon—because you were in Cameron Station?

Charles Wilson [01:55:44] Yeah.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:55:53] How did that come to be?

Charles Wilson [01:55:55] My boss was a Black woman. A young black woman and a Republican. [Claire E. Freeman] She probably was only 30, 35 or so. Her parents were from California, and her parents were Republicans. They supported Ronald Reagan. And Ronald Reagan called up Caspar Weinberger, who was the defense chairman at the Pentagon at the time, and told him, "There is this Black lady who was the daughter of some supporters, and I want you to hook her up with something. Nice job." This happens all the time, but most of the time they get a GS-10 [General Schedule Pay-Scale] or 12 or 15 or a political appointment. When Caspar Weinberger got a call, he made her Assistant Undersecretary of Defense [Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Civil Personnel,

Policy and Requirements]. The youngest Black woman ever to have that high position. And she came over to Alexandria, to Cameron Station. It was Women's Day, Women's Month. My boss [Tony Hudson] called me and said, "There's a bigwig coming over there, and it looks like we don't have the auditorium full. I want to get that full. Make sure it looks like we're supporting her program. You get that place filled up." I didn't know who it was, but I found out my boss, who was a Black senior guy who was kind of sickly--I love helping out. I guess my personality is such--I'm good trouble, in a way. I like good trouble. And I would help when I [would] hear someone disrespecting my Black boss, I'd get on their ass. He told her, that boss, that this guy Wilson, Colonel Wilson, is one of the best assistants you can have. I didn't know who she was. I just knew she was the lady who was doing this speech on women's history. And she came, and she asked me something about, "Look, I heard about you from Tony Hudson, and I hear a lot of good things. If I ask you to come to the Pentagon, would you come? And I said, "No, my general extended me here for another six months. They said I've been away from the Air Force for too long." You know, Cameron Station wasn't an Air Force base. It was Army Materiel Command. She said, "Would you come?" And I said, "Well, I got extended, and I don't--" And she says, "I didn't ask you about the procedure. I asked you, yes or no, would you come?" [Chuckling] And I said, "Well, yes, ma'am, I would come. If it happened, sure." So, two weeks later, I had orders to report to her at the Pentagon. So that meant I could stay here three more years. And usually, military people don't stay anywhere for six or seven years. That's unheard of. Especially colonels and majors and field-grade officers. So I took care of her very well. She was a kind of lady who was smart as hell, but she didn't have a lot of experience. So I ran a lot of interference for her. I was like her bulldog, you know? You read about [Michael] Cohen? The guy who helped [Donald] Trump, who was his fix-it? I was a fixer for the senior Black guy at Cameron Station. And I became a fixer for Claire Freeman, who was the senior Black lady at the Pentagon. So, I like to fix things. I like it when someone says, "You can't do that." It excites me, somewhat. And I get motivated. And I think that's a continuing drive I have. I like challenges. That's what a lot of this is about, I guess. I didn't think about this before, but you're making me think about why. With these questions.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [02:02:15] Themes throughout.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [02:02:43] Do you remember when you arrived in Alexandria, Cameron Station?

Charles Wilson [02:02:47] April 1983.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [02:02:51] How did you first find it when you got here? What was your impression?

Charles Wilson [02:03:08] When I first got assigned to Cameron Station, the general who hired me said, "You know, we're going to have to have some officer who's close enough to walk to Cameron Station if the transportation is closed. And I think you're the one. So, we have to have an [officer] on duty here 24/7, seven days a week. And you're in charge of making sure that that officer is there." So I got put in charge of having a duty officer, and every time the general was not there, somebody has to be there. So if someone calls in. For example, with logistics, we had a ship out there taking guns to a place. And all of a sudden, the ship's oil is starting to turn to jelly, and they said, "We got a ship. We're due in port to deliver these weapons, and we can't get there because our fuel is too cold. It's turning into jelly. We need to talk to the general and ask them what to do." Well, I had a friend in fuel, so I called him in the middle of the night and said, "This is what happened." He says, "Tell the ship

captain to turn the boat around and head for the sun, and the fuel will warm up, and it'll thaw out, and it'll work. You don't have to wake up the general. You tell the ship captain that." So I did. So, the general found out, he said, "Very smart, you know? Taking initiative. I really liked that. But, what made you think of that? Do you know about fuels?" I said, "Well, you know, I fill my car with gas." I didn't tell him I have a friend who's a fuel specialist that I called up and got some advice, but that way, I didn't have to call the general.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [02:05:37] Was there a difference between the environment you saw at Cameron Station versus places you had been stationed in the past? Or in Alexandria in general.

Charles Wilson [02:05:46] There's difference in Alexandria. I always got involved in politics and education. I told you I taught Personality at Park University. I was doing that in Illinois. I was doing it at their campus in Illinois, and here at the Altima building. The differences I found [were that] this place in Alexandria was receptive to listening to different points of view and the progressive nature of the place and the people I met. The Black folks. I can mention some names if you want some names. One was Jim Cisco, who asked me to join the Board of Directors for the Cameron Station Credit Union. I did that. I did that for ten years. For Lynnwood Campbell, who convinced me to run for School Board along with--I'm forgetting the names--Ferdinand Day. You heard of Ferdinand Day?

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [02:07:42] Yeah, I've heard of Ferdinand Day. You knew Ferdinand Day?

Charles Wilson [02:07:45] Yeah. The school, [Samuel L.] Tucker School is named after him. Him and another Jewish guy [likely Norman B. Schrott], I don't remember the name, starts with M, Montrey or something like that. They thought I would be a good guy because they'd never had a Black man elected to the Alexandria school board. There were Black men on the school board before, but never elected. Alexandria was progressive; they always accommodated the Black population by giving them a person, a Black person, on the school board. And they'd been doing that all the time. But then the White folks said, "Make him get elected, and maybe it won't be easy for Black folks to win an election for school board anymore." So, I was the first Black, me and another woman. We were running, and we said--we didn't want to split the Black vote. So, "I'll back out, and I'll run next year, and you run this year."

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [02:09:14] What year was it that you were elected?

Charles Wilson [02:09:18] 2003. I ran in 2000, but I lost. And then I was reelected and served a total of ten years on the School Board, and twice as Vice Chair.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [02:10:36] How were people different in Alexandria than in, for example, Chicago? Obviously, time had also passed. But in terms of, for example, White people, your interactions with Jewish people, if there were any, and even within the African American community?

Charles Wilson [02:10:50] Yeah. Good question. Yeah. Well, first of all, White people are different when you have visibility. And I had visibility as an adjunct professor, and I served on so many boards, like I was Vice Chairman of the Virginia Northern Virginia Hotline. I was just a member, but I raised the most money, and they made me Vice Chair. It was not so much a governing body, but more of a fundraising body. But I was good at fundraising. So, I knew a lot of people; I got involved with a lot of people. Gwen Lewis [Gwendolyn Hubbard Lewis], for example. Gwen Lewis, she was on the

school board, and we were on there together. She got me involved in her charity. The parent teachers-
-That's the one you were involved in.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [02:12:18] PLTI [Parent Leadership Training Institute]?

Charles Wilson [02:12:18] Yeah. Yeah, she got me involved in that. So, I got a lot of visibility, a lot of people, and a lot of appreciation for the work I did with that. And then I had another charity where I'm the treasurer in the Concerned Citizens Network of Alexandria. I'm the treasurer of that charity. So that's why, I guess, I was nominated as a Living Legend [of Alexandria], because I've done a lot of stuff, so my perception is maybe not the same as somebody else. I've got a lot of visibility. I get a lot of attention. When I call City Hall, I get instant help. And, so I'm treated more like a famous White man instead of just a Black kid. So, my perception is a little bit different. If I had been just a quiet person here, it wouldn't have been the same, and I would not have had as much say. But I give a lot, and I've gotten a lot back.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [02:13:50] When you were in Alexandria in the 80s and 90s, what do you recall in relation to, if anything, tensions or major events that you think back to?

Charles Wilson [02:14:08] Okay, I have plenty of examples. You remember Rebecca Perry, who was the superintendent of schools. Do you remember her? She was a tall, blond lady and she got arrested for drunk driving and stuff. Well, Rebecca Perry, I remember, we were at a meeting. It was called a roundtable meeting where we were listening to the citizens and stuff like that. And our discussion was, can we have summer sessions at Tucker [Samuel W. Tucker Elementary School] and Mount Vernon [Community School]? Rebecca Perry said, "I'm having conversations with these parents. And I would appreciate it if you would not stay." I was curious. I was curious as to why she would not want me to stay there in the room, sit at a table. I say, "Well, yeah, I'll leave." But I really didn't go far. I stayed around the corner, where I could hear what she was saying. And what she was saying, I became very proud of her. There was about six White women at the table who said, "You know, you're one of us, and we don't want to have summer sessions at Mount Vernon School because we go to trips. We go to Europe; we go to cruises. And frankly, the only people who need to anything in summer school are these colored kids. We think you're one of us. So we want you to tame down this summer school stuff. I know we have it at Tucker, but we don't want it at Mount Vernon, because this is where us affluent women are." I struggled not to run in there. But I was more curious as to how Rebecca Perry would respond to that. I was proud of her because she said, "You guys expect me to cater to your 20 folks, your 20% of the affluent, White folks, and disregard the other 80% who want and need this school? And it's free?" So, that's when I became Rebecca Perry's friend and supporter. Because it showed me something about Alexandria: that 20% of the Alexandria population live in multimillion dollar homes. She [Perry] was a fighter. Even though she grew up in Virginia and was a Southerner, she had always been [a] straight up progressive lady. And, after that meeting, that meeting where she put down the White ladies, the prejudiced folks with their holier than thou attitude, she was arrested for drunk driving. And, as it turned out, well, she was driving the car, but she only had one drink. I went to the place and found out how big the wine was and found out that she was telling the truth. She just had one glass of wine. But that was after this long meeting with those people. She hadn't eaten. And I told you, she's tall and skinny, and tall and skinny people that don't eat a lot, they have problems when they don't eat. So, the thing is that the policeman was waiting for her to come out. They'd already been called by somebody that was in there drinking, and they're in Theismann's. You know, the restaurant there at the corner? Theismann's Restaurant. So, I was a big

supporter of her when they tried to fire her. They did manage to fire her, because five of the conservatives were against her, and four of the liberals. I was one of the liberals and three other ladies. At that rate, it told me something about the city and the people and influence. And like I say, when you have a city where 80% of the people are poor and 20% of the people are wealthy, the big disparity [is] between affluence? You have a school district that will cater to the loudest, the richest, the smartest people. And that's the 20% of those women who do that. And that's the way that Alexandria will always be. And if you have a school district where the average is pretty much the same, where you only have a few rich or a few poor, the majority will be the norm, but Alexandria has, of all of the areas here, the worst discrepancy. It's not like an average. The average is skewed by the top 20%. The millionaires. We got more millionaires in Alexandria than the South. They, fortunately, are progressive. They tend to be progressive, like Arlington. But Arlington doesn't have the poor people because of their housing. But what allows us to have poor people in Alexandria are places like this. Condos all over the West End. And those old places, where it used to be the projects, the Berg. So, this town is populated the way the town is populated. It makes a difference on its society: how it operates and how things happen.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [02:23:04] Thinking back to your childhood in Chicago, how does that compare to what you've seen here?

Charles Wilson [02:23:22] What I just said. When you have this kind of disparity that's not averaged out over a lot of people, it'll be different from Chicago, where they'd have rich, and they'd have poor, too. But, it's not small enough to be as pronounced. We're spread out over a big city of how many million people? Five million in Chicago. And again, things have changed. But I think Alexandria has changed too. Alexandria is unique in some places because Alexandria has had more free Black slaves than any other place in the South. Did you know that there was a general here who said [that] any Black people who escaped from Mississippi or the South and got to Alexandria, they could be free if they serve in the Union Army? And that they would get their freedom? That really didn't happen like it was supposed to, but that was the promise. And that attracted a lot of people from places. Now, Chicago is different because most of its citizens came up along where the Mississippi River rose from Mississippi and Tennessee and the South. I think more than half the people in Chicago have roots in the South. And when the car got prominent, that's when people left Tennessee and Mississippi and Louisiana and went north for jobs in the factories and in the automobile plants. So, did you know Memphis used to be majority Black? And so did Mississippi, and a lot of the South was majority Black. But the Blacks left. There is a movement of thought now that says, if we have a number of these Blacks go back to Charlotte and Memphis and Jackson, Mississippi, we could control the politics in the South again.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [02:26:43] Where do you see the African American community in Alexandria now? Both in how it may have changed, and also maybe how it is staying the same.

Charles Wilson [02:26:58] I'm not hopeful because unfortunately Black folks are leaving Alexandria. They're leaving Alexandria for better schools. Cheaper housing. The Black population of Alexandria is decreasing.

Charles Wilson [02:27:39] I think Alexandria will be 80% White again in the next 10, 20 years. Like Arlington is becoming. Maybe even [Washington,] D.C. In many places in D.C. There's something I saw on my phone. I just got it. I didn't know where it came from, but it said the states with the highest

Black populations, and why they got there, and where they were before. I'll send that to you. I think it was really interesting. Oh, and the Black lady who, hired me at the Pentagon? Her Master's was in City Planning and Sociology. Urban Sociology, by the way, similar to that. I'll give you a name if you want to Google her. Yeah. Claire Freeman.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [02:29:03] If at all, how do you see or what have you noticed or reflected on with Black-Jewish relations in Alexandria and Northern Virginia? And you can even call back to your time in Chicago.

Charles Wilson [02:29:24] Yeah. Well, I think that we have a decent relationship between Jewish and African American relationships. I would point out folks like Lonnie Rich and Mark Eisenhower. But I think it's more helpful here because we know each other. We've grown up together. The people in the Berg, the projects that the Black people lived in, were full of folks like Lynwood Campbell and the mayor, Bill Euille. You know, the cooperation between the Berg and the Jewish community was very good 20, 30 years ago. And the Jewish folks, this is taken from me, they made Alexandria blue. With the help of the Black folks, the educated Black folks and Jewish folks. They still make Alexandria blue. Same thing with Arlington.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [02:31:32] I just want to make sure we're covering things. So you moved to Alexandria. I know you have children, if you want to talk about them.

Charles Wilson [02:31:41] I'll just mention it. I don't want them to be contacted because they're shy. My oldest is Angela. She's an associate professor at Kennesaw State University. She used to be a tenured professor at Iowa State, but she moved to Atlanta to get married. My second daughter is Assistant Superintendent of Schools in Belleville, Illinois. And she also has a practice. She started out with [being] Superintendent of Special Education. She now has a practice with speech. Not a doctor, but a specialist, she is partner in a doctor's firm. A specialist in whatever it is, I can't pronounce it. Some kind of facial speech. My next son, he's a fifth-grade math teacher at the same school district as my daughter. She got him a job. And, my son, the youngest one who went to T.C. Williams, he's got an MBA from the University of Virginia. He currently is an executive at Google and previously was a consultant at McKinsey, the big consulting firm. McKinsey almost drove him crazy. You know what McKinsey is? They're one of the hottest. But McKinsey only hires the brightest. And they are looking for Black folks who are smart and got MBAs. He left McKinsey. Because he says he had no life. And he took a \$30,000 dip in pay. McKinsey was paying him 150K right out of grad school. I want to see it in writing. But he says there's a reason that McKinsey [pays so well]. They hire the best, but they drove him crazy. Because it's worse than being a military officer. You understand how that works where there's so much competition among the brightest and the smartest?

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [02:35:29] Just thinking about, your time in Alexandria, your time in Chicago, etc. What would you do the same, and what would you do differently if you could?

Charles Wilson [02:35:47] Well, the same thing I would do [is] I would come to Alexandria again because I've made lots of friends. I've got a lot of joy in giving and getting back as well. And, I think, right now, I'm overtaxed with all my charities, and your stuff, and especially the Concerned Citizens Network. And I'm treasurer now for three things, including Concerned Citizens, the Tuskegee Airmen, and this building and the next building. And so, that's what I'll do, now, is cut back and learn to say no. Give me the question again?

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [02:37:00] How would you do things similarly or differently?

Charles Wilson [02:37:05] The next thing, differently, I'd go to law school. I stayed here and didn't go to law school because when I applied to law school. I said, "I'm a minority, and I want [financial aid]." They just said, "If you're a retired colonel, you're not a minority, and you don't have any financial problems." Which was true. But, If I had to do it over again, I would pay for law school, because I then went to George Mason [University]. I passed a test for George Mason and Howard, but Howard got rid of their night school. George Mason, they said since I was not paying tax here since 1983, I had to owe back taxes to get in-state tuition at a law school. So I didn't do it. So I regret worrying and being concerned about the cost and not about the outcome.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [02:38:31] Do you have any other final thoughts you want to share?

Charles Wilson [02:38:35] Yeah. I would have invested differently. I would have started investing in AI [Artificial Intelligence] when it was new. And the other thing, I would have, instead of buying here or at High Point, I would have bought at Watergate, where they have an indoor swimming pool, indoor golf, resort-like living, and surprisingly low condo fees. And I asked, "Why are your condo fees--You got all these amenities. Plus, you know, a bus that takes people to the metro and to the hospital and to the grocery stores, and that's all free. How do you make all this stuff free? And still have low condo fees?" And I found out it's because they got 6,000 people paying. And in a place like this, you only have 150. So, when you spread out a big expense over more people. The law of finances is what I should have known.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [02:40:12] And then, just in case it didn't register the first time. Today is May 24th, 2024. It is 1:14 p.m. We started two hours and 40 minutes ago. This is Colonel Charles Wilson being interviewed by Yahney-Marie Sangaré for an oral history project conducted as part of senior experience.