Oral History of Joe Williams interviewed by Markayla Moore on 07/22/2018 in Huntington, West Virginia.

Interviewer: Great. Okay. What street did you grow up on?

Joe Williams: Pardon me?

Interviewer: What street did you grow up on?

Joe Williams: Well, I grew up in Boone County, West Virginia. I came to Huntington in 1963 to attend Marshall University. Although we've lived on Dalton Avenue for I guess close to almost 50 years. Most of my actual adult life has been on Dalton Avenue in Huntington, West Virginia.

Interviewer: What did your parents do for a living?

Joe Williams: Well, my mother was a homemaker and my father was a brick mason in West Virginia and sometimes, Ohio, Virginia, wherever he could find work. Back then a lot of the trade unions were segregated and consequently he couldn't belong to the unions and it made it very difficult for him to make a living for our family.

Interviewer: Where were your parents originally from?

Joe Williams: Well, my mother was born in our old home place, which is 101 years old up in Boone County, West Virginia. My father he was born in Anderson, South Carolina but he spent most of his life in Richmond, Virginia. He considered Richmond, Virginia his home.

Interviewer: What was your favorite place to eat?

Joe Williams: My favorite place to eat ... Well, I've been a vegetarian now for almost 40 years. Food doesn't excite me that much. We like to go to Outback. I like Jim's Steak and Spaghetti House. I love the spaghetti with marinara sauce. That's one of my favorites. Other than that, I guess I don't have any one place that I frequent on a regular basis.

Interviewer: What other relatives did you have contact with growing up?

Joe Williams: Well, I have a total of five siblings. I have three brothers, John, Edward, and Jim. I have two sisters, Sandra, who lived in the old home place in Boone County, West Virginia. She's a retired schoolteacher. And a sister Joyce that lives in Florida. She's a retired nurse.

Interviewer: What was your favorite place to shop?

Joe Williams: You said to stop or shop?

Interviewer: Shop.
Joe Williams: Well, growing up I didn't have a lot of clothing and so forth. A lot of times now I do my shopping online. I've never been into spending a lot of time or money on clothing and so forth. I like to look neat and so forth. I really don't have a favorite place.

Joe Williams: Now from time to time I will go to a mall and just see what's available. Clothing, just like food, is not one of the things that ... Other than shoes. I must say I don't know how many pairs of shoes ... The reason I had them when I was growing up sometimes I was lucky to have shoes. Often they were worn and sometimes we'd have to put cardboard in the bottom and hope it didn't rain because if it did then the cardboard became very wet.

Joe Williams: Sometimes the soles you [inaudible 00:03:52] and so forth. I probably have an affinity for shoes. That's based on the fact I didn't have a lot of shoes or clothing when I was growing up. My family had a lot of love and support. That overcame everything.

Interviewer: What is your fondest memory of living here?

Joe Williams: Well, probably my fondest memory is meeting my wife of over 53 years. That's my fondest memory. Of course, all my children were born in Huntington. Also, I was fortunate to run a golf tournament for 17 years, which became a very popular and gained a lot of national recognition called The Ebony Golf Classic.

Joe Williams: Because of that I was encouraged to run for city council, which I did. Consequently, I became a member of council and later became the mayor of Huntington. Thus far, the only black mayor of Huntington. I hope I'm not the last one in the foreseeable future. Those are some of the favorite things.

Joe Williams: You build on what you do. I was encouraged to help form a bank in Huntington, First Century Bank. Consequently, I ended up serving on bank boards in Washington, DC and Richmond, Virginia. Eventually became the chairman, president, and CEO of Consolidated Bank and Trust, which was purchased by Premier Bank, which is located here in Huntington.

Joe Williams: At the time it was owned by a lady by the name of Maggie Lena Walker. She's probably the first woman, I know the first woman of color, who actually had formed a bank and became its president. Maggie Lena Walker. A lot of people don't know about her. They know about Madam C.J. Walker but you need to look up Maggie Lena, L-E-N-A, Walker. She was quite a lady. Richmond, Virginia.

Joe Williams: Really, all the people, most of the people in Richmond, black and white, they really respect what Maggie Lena Walker was able to do over a hundred years ago.

Interviewer: What stories did you hear about your ancestors whom you never knew?

Joe Williams: Well, I learned a lot about my ancestors all the way back to ... Of course, my ancestors are both from Europe and from Africa and Native Americans.
Joe Williams: One was [inaudible 00:06:37] who was an indentured servant and came from Haiti and eventually she was freed. I guess she was an indentured servant and however she was able to purchase her freedom. I learned a lot about my ancestors.

Joe Williams: Just recently I learned [inaudible 00:06:57] one of my white ancestors down in Leesburg, Virginia. I have another cousin, I’ve never met him, I’ve spoken with him, he’s a fourth cousin once removed. I may show it to you but we have the ... It's called a [inaudible 00:07:13] of the [inaudible 00:07:15] family.

Joe Williams: On the European side they came from England in I believe about 1680. He had traced all of ... This is on the Gore side. Traced them all the way up to my mother's name and all my aunts and uncles. He knew more about my family than my family did.

Joe Williams: Of course, a lot of times, especially during the days of slavery, they kept records of the people that sadly they owned. In many cases, they have records that we don't have in the black community.

Joe Williams: A lot of times records were kept in Bibles. It's my understanding there was a Bible and somehow it got out of our family, which traced all of our ancestors. It's all the way back to Haiti. It was always interesting in knowing about that.

Joe Williams: In fact, here we talk about the [inaudible 00:08:15] family. My grandfather Wallace William [inaudible 00:08:19] and he was a certified teacher back then. He taught school. He owned the grocery store. He had the first Model T Ford back in Boone County. He died before I was born. In fact, I never really got to know any of my grandfathers. He's a grandfather. Didn't get to know one of my grandmothers who was part-Cherokee supposedly. The only grandmother that I knew was on my mother's side.

Joe Williams: Those were the things where ... Although as years went on sometimes we had a very difficult times but we were proud. My mother was an extremely, extremely proud and intelligent woman. Although she wasn't able to go beyond the eighth grade but she was extremely intelligent. As was my dad from Richmond, Virginia.

Joe Williams: His family were contractors and brick masons. I used to love hearing about those things. It's always inspired me. In fact, we have a family cemetery up behind the old home place. It has about maybe 70, 80 graves on it.

Joe Williams: Sometimes my brother and I we'll go out and clean the cemetery each year. Sometimes I just like to go up and reflect on the price that my ancestors paid and the difficult times they had but still somehow they persevered and left a great legacy.

Interviewer: What was school like?

Joe Williams: Well, school, my first five years I was in an all-black school. First grade was in Douglas Grade School in South Madison, West Virginia. Then we moved to [inaudible 00:10:17] High School. It's a combination elementary and high school.
Joe Williams: My first five years was in an all-black school. Then I have to give Boone County credit. Shortly after the Brown vs. Board of Education decision in the next year Boone County began to implement integration to a degree in Madison because that's where a lot of the black people lived. Now we were about six miles out of Madison. The black and white they knew each other and played together and so forth.

Joe Williams: Then in the sixth grade I went to an integrated school, Madison Grade School. Now we were always told that we had hand-me-down books and so forth and so on. We were led to believe somehow that the white students were more advanced than we were.

Joe Williams: Well, the truth of the matter with me is it took me about three days to know somebody had, maybe not intentionally, lied to me. I thought, "Well, these students don't have a thing on me." Consequently, I made good grades in high school and then the National Honors Society. I graduated number 10 out of my class of 140 at Scott High School.

Joe Williams: Basically, we had some skirmishes and so forth. Don't get me wrong. At that time, that part of Boone County was far more progressive than Huntington, West Virginia because when I came to Huntington, West Virginia I was in for a shock.

Joe Williams: Number one, I was around more people of color than I had ever been. There were only about seven black families where I grew up within six miles of me. Number two, Huntington was definitely a very segregated city. It took me a while to get used to living in Huntington, West Virginia.

Joe Williams: When it came to high school I was in the band. I was the head drummer and so forth. About the only travel that I ever was able to do when I was younger we went with the bands to Winchester, Virginia and Atlantic City for the Miss America pageant, and so forth. Overall, I really enjoyed my time in school.

Interviewer: What is the best advice a family member gave you when you were living in the house?

Joe Williams: Well, I don't know if they actually sat us down and said, "You need to do such and such" but honor, integrity was extremely important. What I learned and I had to learn it from my family was no matter what you do, do it the best that you can. I don't care if it's cutting grass, cleaning toilets, whatever. There are always someone watching you.

Joe Williams: I'm going to give that advice to you. They're making a decision about you. Now sometimes it's an unfair decision. Sometimes it's not correct. They're always making a decision.

Joe Williams: Number two, you don't have to have everybody on your side. If you have the number of people that you can count on the fingers of one hand and a couple of them are in position to affect change, to open a door for you, to give a piece of information that will allow you to go forward, you're probably luckier than most people.
Joe Williams: Just think about it. Five people outside your family that you can go to for anything and most people when I tell them that they said … I mean, people that I can really go to in good and bad times? Sometimes they have a hard time to come up with four or five.

Joe Williams: That was the thing that … You don’t have to have everybody on your side. No matter what you do, take pride in it. I can say this because I used to clean corn, I worked for a janitorial service in Huntington when I came to Huntington. I used to wash windows. No matter what I did I always tried to do it to the best of my ability.

Joe Williams: One thing, it’s like a building block. I came to Huntington and of course I met my wife. Ended up finishing college in 1978. Got a chance to help start a company called Basic Supply Company, which we still have. It’s going on 41 years.

Joe Williams: People are always watching you and somebody said, "Well, Joe, why don’t you do this?" We started the golf tournament, which it was to promote understanding, brotherhood, and spirit of competition among all people.

Joe Williams: Now this is 1971. That’s something that really hit a nerve with people and it became extremely popular. Like I said, we had people from 22 states, District of Columbia, Canada, Bermuda. We even had an article in a national magazine about The Ebony Golf Classic.

Joe Williams: People liked the idea of understanding. Oh, yes, brotherhood, sisterhood, yes. Spirited competition, which means I’m going to try to beat you when we’re competing. That kind of stepped by people because understanding, that would soften you up, brotherhood. I really felt that way and I really feel that way.

Joe Williams: Consequently, they knew The Ebony Golf Classic and they associated my name and others with The Ebony Golf Classic. Then they said, "Why don't you run for council?" I did that. Then mayor. "You want to help start a bank?" I said, "I don't have any money to help start a bank."

Joe Williams: Well, I have a good friend by the name of [inaudible 00:16:24] whose been somewhat of a mentor to me. He’s opened some doors. One thing led to another. Started the bank and then got a bank board in DC. Then in Richmond, Virginia. Just one thing it led to another. It was a building block. You don’t really plan. You just do the best you can in everything you do and God will determine which way you go in life.

Interviewer: What did you do on Christmas, Thanksgiving, or birthdays?

Joe Williams: Well, normally on Thanksgiving we have a family tradition and it started long before mom died. We all go to the old home place. Now this is a little five room house out in the country. We'll have anywhere from 35 to 55 people. My wife normally she tells each person what to bring. Has a pot luck. We serve dinner.
Joe Williams: Then at Christmas from time to time ... The last few years my wife has actually cooked dinner and invited family members in and so forth. Both holidays are things to be with family to the extent that you can.

Joe Williams: Now family, like other families, are all over the country now. It's kind of difficult. Overall, it means ... Thanksgiving, I think I like Thanksgiving probably even better than Christmas. Christmas has become so commercialized and we tend to forget the reason. As they say, the reason for the season.

Joe Williams: Thanksgiving is just a time you don't worry about gift giving or this, that, and the other. You just get together and enjoy family. You have a meal. Sometimes we'll watch football. Just get around and talk.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about the race in Huntington? Was it segregated?

Joe Williams: Do you want to say that again?

Interviewer: Can you tell me about the race in Huntington?

Joe Williams: The race? You mean as far as the race conditions?

Interviewer: Yes.

Joe Williams: Well, it has improved. I stated in this magazine ... My wife and I were inducted into the African-American Golfer's Hall of Fame the month before that down in West Palm Beach. I said Huntington was the most segregated place I'd ever been. Yes, Boone County was segregated and where I live technically it was segregated.

Joe Williams: Most people were middle class or most people probably lower middle class. We all had to depend on one another. Now I'm sure that some people thought that they were better than others. Technically, maybe they thought that.

Joe Williams: When I came to Huntington it was so, so segregated. You probably heard of the fights that people of color made in just being able to go to restaurants and being able to go to the movie houses and sit in where you want to.

Joe Williams: Fortunately, it changed thanks to people like Professor Phil Carter, who is a professor at Marshall. Insisted that things changed. Maybe when we lost the football team and the fans maybe God was sending us a message. I think things did get better. Still, to a great extent Huntington is still very segregated especially when you look at the various communities and so forth.

Joe Williams: I think the community I live in now it's probably more integrated than just about any community in Huntington and the Huntington area because as a rule we are very accepting people. Maybe it's because of what we've had to endure over the years. As long as you're honest and halfway decent we're very acceptable.
Joe Williams: That's not the case in much of Huntington. In fact, a lot of the realtors will lead even people of color away from the so-called black community. They'll definitely lead many of the white people, professionals, coming into town. They'll lead them away from school, even schools where there may be a significant number of black students.

Joe Williams: Maybe it's ... Well, I was going to say it was hidden. It's not so hidden. We still have a long way to go. I think that's one reason that Huntington has not progressed to the degree that I would like because we haven't had very many progressive thinkers in Huntington. That's the reason the mall, for instance, [inaudible 00:21:36] that's the reason the mall is 10 miles out of town and they call it the Huntington Mall. It could be better. Let's put it that way.

Interviewer: What did people do for fun?

Joe Williams: Pardon me?

Interviewer: What did people do for fun?

Joe Williams: For fun?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Joe Williams: Well, when I first came to Huntington as far as the social there were a lot of social clubs. 8th Avenue, there were quite a few businesses on 8th Avenue. I remember when my wife and I were dating we'd go to the Bison's Club. It was a club that was well-run and so forth. It was a nice place to go. You didn't have to worry about your safety and so forth.

Joe Williams: That has changed unfortunately. When so-called integration came in many of our people deserted not only our communities but deserted our businesses. The old saying that they felt that the white man's ice was colder. It's really been a detriment.

Joe Williams: In my opinion, we've never had true integration. We had assimilation. If you're willing to assimilate in the other culture to a degree then you may be accepted to a degree. Personally, my brothers and I we grew up near a little golf course. We all learned to play golf. Some better than others. Unfortunately, I'm one of the others. That has really helped us along the way.

Joe Williams: I would encourage any person, male or female, in this day and time if you're going to be out in the business world learn the fundamentals of golf, learn the basic rules of golf. You don't have to be a professional but a lot of times they have what they call a scrambles, captain's choice, you've got maybe four people on a team. Everybody hits the ball. Then you pick the best shot and from that point on you hit again.

Joe Williams: You get to know people. A lot of people who play golf are in corporate America. It's really helped my brothers, especially one who became the senior vice president of Novo Nordisk, one of the largest pharmaceutical companies in the world. He just retired a couple years ago.
Joe Williams: You have to be prepared. I mean, he wanted to be a doctor. You have to be prepared. If you prepare yourself and you meet the opportunity then you have a chance for success. You've got to have preparation and opportunity to have success.

Joe Williams: If you have preparation in my opinion and never get the opportunity to show what you can do then you can't have the degree of success that you could have. Or if you have the opportunity but you didn't prepare yourself to take advantage of the opportunity you'll never go but so far. That's in my opinion.

Interviewer: Do you remember at times when money was tight?

Joe Williams: Pardon me?

Interviewer: Do you remember when money was tight?

Joe Williams: Yes. Now. No, when we first got married money was very tight. My wife worked and I have to give her all the credit whenever she worked at Maidenform. Then we used to clean offices in the evenings. Money was tight. We had four children. We were married two and a half years before we started having children.

Joe Williams: Then when we did we had four children in 22 months. We had twins and then a month later we had a daughter and then a month later we had a son. Things were tight. Money was tight.

Joe Williams: One thing about ... Money never separated us as man and wife. We always been supportive of one another. I've been blessed that I married a woman who is everything that I could have ever asked for in a wife.

Interviewer: What's one of your fondest memories living here in the 1950s? How was it different from the '70s or the '80s?

Joe Williams: Well, of course, I didn't live here in the 1950s. I didn't come to 1963. One way from what I've heard, though ... I used to come down with the band because the [inaudible 00:26:22] used to be here in Huntington, West Virginia. I don't know how we lost that. They came from all over the state.

Joe Williams: I really enjoyed, although it was segregated, I would stay with my cousin who was a barber. Then they had little clubs for teenagers and so forth on 10th Avenue. I really enjoyed that.

Joe Williams: But not growing up in Huntington my wife probably could tell you more about the '50s. She spent I think half a year at Douglas. She knows a lot of people that I don't know. Once Huntington was very, very segregated.

Interviewer: Is there anything else you want to speak about? Like your family or anything before time is up.
Joe Williams: Well, I'm very proud of my family. Like I said, we were poor in the sense of economic things but we were very lucky because we had loving parents. We knew our history. We knew about our grandparents and in spite of everything how they were able to succeed.

Joe Williams: We came from a very proud and very independent family. We didn't think anybody should take care of us. They didn't. I don't think I remember getting [inaudible 00:27:54] I don't know whether there was such a thing as welfare when I was growing up or not but if there was we didn't get any of it.

Joe Williams: There were times when there was very little food to eat. I guess the one thing that's sad to me now as an adult and as a parent that when my parents couldn't give us all that they wanted to I know how that must hurt them as a parent. That's the one thing that's sad to me.

Joe Williams: Number two, we did not have adequate healthcare. I know with me, my teeth and so forth ... We never went to the dentist. If you had a toothache you either suffered or maybe you would get it pulled. My mother, I can remember her at night groaning and moaning with a toothache because we just didn't have money. We didn't have insurance.

Joe Williams: I'm an advocate of national healthcare. I think a great nation will provide for all of its citizens. I said a great nation, not a nation that says it's great. I mean actually a great nation will provide for its citizens when it comes to healthcare and just the minimal needs one needs to reach his or her potential.

Joe Williams: It's just like ... I guess I'm pro-life but not just pro-birth. So many people in my opinion are hypocrites. They want to insist that children be born but then they don't want to do anything to help them to have a chance to reach their potential.

Joe Williams: Also, I'm pro-life for me and mine but I'm pro-choice for a woman. If they ask me my opinion I oppose abortion but I oppose even more men, especially, telling women what they can do with their bodies. I oppose that even more than I oppose abortion.

Interviewer: Are you still in contact with any of your siblings?

Joe Williams: Oh, yes. Yes. All of them. One brother lives in Charleston. One is in Boston. He just came down with the multiple ... It's some kind of bone cancer. We flew to Boston a month ago to be with him. He seems to be doing better. He's taking a treatment. I see my sister about every two weeks.

Joe Williams: In fact, my brother and I we take care of the lawn up at the old family place. The sister in Florida whenever we're down that way we stop to see them. We contact all of them probably at least a month. We have a very close family. We just came back from a family reunion up in Tappahannock, Virginia. We had about 80 people.
Joe Williams: We're a pretty close group of people. In fact, we're going to my wife's reunion first of August. Then my family in Richmond we started having a reunion a couple of years ago. I didn't know a lot of my people in Richmond. We're just beginning to know them.

Joe Williams: No, we're a very close-knit family. We even have a family investment group that we started 30 years ago. God, no, 35 years ago. We bought some stock in the banks and so forth. We made some good investments and bad investments but if something happens to one then there's some resources that other family members could help out without hurting their own households. Somewhat like a rainy day fund.

Interviewer: Well, that is all the questions ...