

**Arleane Wilkes
Narrator**

**Justin Cummings
High Point University
Interviewer**

**November 18, 2014
At the High Point Public Library
High Point, NC**

JC: Alright, we're here with Arleane Wilkes. My name is Justin Cummings and we're going to be doing an interview today. First off, how are you doing today?

AW: I'm fine thank you.

JC: Good. Lets start off at the beginning then, I'm aware you went to William Penn, but what schools did you go to before hand?

AW: Oh, Fairview Elementary, in High Point.

JC: What grade did it go up to then?

AW: Oh we only went to seventh grade there.

JC: Only seventh grade?

AW: Started at William Penn in the 8th, and it went from 8th to 12th grade.

JC: Oh ok 8th to 12th. That is lot different from now, now we have middle schools thrown in there. That's interesting. What year did you graduate?

AW: 1961

JC: Cool, so did you participate in any of the sit-ins?

AW: Yes, I was one of the 26 that began the High Point sit-ins, at Woolworth, in downtown High Point.

JC: How many did you say there were? 26?

AW: It was organized by Andrew McBride, Lynn Fountain, Brenda Fountain, and Maury Andrews. Actually we started out with 50 people, we met at Peer View Congregational church, on the south side, and we ask reverend B. Elton Coss, who was a freedom rider, to be our advisor. After, he told us this would be a non-violent

protest and took us through the different demonstrations to protect ourselves, in case someone tried to hit us. On February 11th only 26 people decided to participate and we met at YMCA on 4th street, a little before 4 o'clock, right after school. Reverend Coxs went over the instructions again, we had prayer, and we took our books because school came first. If we have any activities, at all, that was first. So each person took a book or homework that they might have to do. It was about 4 o'clock when we got down to Woolworth and we split up into groups. Reverend Coxs had told us he would give us a signal when to take seats. First we just walked around the store like we were shopping and there were a few vacant seats at the counter. He gave us the signal and we took the ones that were available and some of the people who were sitting there, the whites of course, they left. Only one man refused to leave, he sat and finished his meal. So we asked for service and the waitress said she could not serve us and we asked why, so she went and got the manager. He asked us to leave and we wanted to know why we couldn't be served, so we sat there and he called the police. The police came and they just stood around, and as time grew people were getting off of work, more of a crowd began to build up, especially young white males. They started agitating and we didn't want any problems so reverend Coxs tipped his hat and that was the signal for us to get up and leave. In the mean time they had started putting baskets on the counters, closing it off. So we left peacefully, went back to the Y, and decided what time we were going to go the next day. Next day they had roped off the seats, the counters were full of different baskets, and what ever, and we just stood there for a while. Tension grew, the mayor asked us if we would suspend our demonstration, they formed a human rights commission, and they asked for 60 days so they could try to work out things with the stores. Mcglennon was the drug store and they decided to do a test run, but Woolworth refused to do it. So our protest continued at Woolworth and this went on for days and day. Actually, after that we went to Paramount Theater. This is a theater where whites sat on the bottom and blacks had to go upstairs to sit. We protested there and the evening time we would be out there on the picket line, about 4 or 5 young ladies and about 3 or 4 young men and of course those rebel risers would come by and it would be cold and they would throw water on us, but we stayed there because we paid our money and why shouldn't we be able to sit down stairs. Why did we have to climb all the way up stairs to enjoy a movie? After this I left, I was asked by the NAACP to go to Raleigh, North Carolina, at Shaw University, where Ella Baker was the director of SCLC, Dr. King's organization. She was so impressed by the sit-ins that had taken place and how well they had been carried out, she asked the students to come together and discuss. This was an Easter weekend and they had expected maybe 100 students would show up, but once everybody got there, there were over 300 students that showed up and white students came from the north to participate.

JC: Wow!

EW: At this time, as young people, they did not really want to be apart of SCLC, NAACP, or CORE, these were the three major civil rights movements. So while we were there, SNCC was organized, the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee,

and Stockely Carmichael was elected president. As you know, SNCC went to work in Georgia, Mississippi, and they did a lot of work with voter registration and sit-ins in Alabama and went to Chicago and other places. From there I came back home and after that I was home maybe a week or so and CORE called. They asked me if I would go with reverend Coxs to Statesville, North Carolina and be apart of the freedom riders there, because Statesville did not have a black university or college. They just had a high school and the students had started a demonstration but mostly they were concerned with Howard Johnson. They had been trying and trying to get Howard Johnson to integrate their motel part. So I went, there were a couple Asian fellas that came down and some more people from CORE came. One evening about 40 people were arrested including reverend Coxs. When we had demonstrations there always had to be someone on the outside because the FBI would contact us. So we had to be able to say how many people you think were in jail and different questions they might want to ask. So I was an outsider and reverend Coxs was a participant who got arrested. When we had people in jail there would always be a protest march to demonstrate that they shouldn't have been arrested, because they are just trying to carry on a peaceful demonstration to change the system from where it was. Each night the community would meet at a church and reverend Lee was the pastor at the church we were at in Statesville, and the community, we would go down to the jail house protest the people that have been arrested. Monday night we had went and all of a sudden we were sprayed with an insecticide and nobody panicked nobody started to run away, we only began to pray and we all stood there. The newspaper and Reverend Lee and Coxs protest to the mayor why this took place and the police chief said they always do that on a Monday night spray. First he had denied that it had taken place, and then the mayor came out and said the same thing and they apologized for what had happen. This went on for weeks and each person had to go to court of course, being apart of the sit-ins. I left there and they asked me to go on to Chattanooga, Tennessee, I don't know if you have heard but William O was a white postal worker and he was a member of CORE and he had decided he wanted to protest the injustice of African Americans and the way we were treated. He had plans to walk from Chattanooga, Tennessee to Montgomery, Alabama to protest the treatment, but CORE asked him not to do it because they figured it would be a dangerous situation. He insisted, and he left Chattanooga and he only got to Gaston, Alabama, about 11 miles from Chattanooga and he was killed. After that CORE and SCLC, Dr. King and Jim Farmer who were the chairman of CORE, they decided to try to continue his walk. The first group went to Gaston they were arrested, charged 200 dollars each and spent 30 days in jail. I went on the second group, just 2 females and 5 males, and 3 of them were from Gaston, Alabama. We only took about three or four steps, and we were arrested, but we weren't charged with anything. We spent 5 days in jail, and each one of us had to go to court separately. The judge turned us loose and advised us not to go back on the highway because it was a dangerous situation. While in Gaston, there were like students from High Point and they were trying to integrate the stores and lunch counters there, and they asked would we stay and help. First, CORE had field secretaries one was Mary Hamilton, Jerome Smith, and Marvin, and they were from New Orleans. Jerome was also a freedom rider. Mary Hamilton was field secretary and she took the state

of Alabama to court, Supreme Court, because when she was arrested and went to trial they called her by her name Mary Hamilton and she refused to answer. She said, "There is a title to my name Ms. Mary Hamilton". She won the case in the Supreme Court.

JC: Good for her, that is awesome.

EW: Anyway, we stayed and met some of the locals in Gaston. First, we had to go to Birmingham, to meet with Dr. King and Reverend Abernathy. Surprisingly they were at the Gaston motel, I don't know if you know anything about him. He was one of the richest black men in the United States. He owned restaurants, motels, beauty shop, insurance company, so he had this whole complex of a business there. His motel is where Dr. King and Reverend Abernathy and members of SCLC had been staying and just a month before that, the room that me met in, that's the same room Dr. King and them were in when someone bombed it. No one got hurt. Anyway, we met with them and it was decided that we would go back to Gaston and help them with their protest. The young people, I saw from 14 maybe 17, they were willing to work and fight for what they believed in. A part of organizers, there were days that we didn't get to bed to maybe 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning, but those young people they were there at 6:30 in the morning, willing to participate. Of course, where ever we went they had to go through training, (to) know what to do and how to protect themselves and contact people in case they got arrested or what ever. They were there and I remember one young lady who was in charge of a group of protesters. I was the watcher for this group and they went to the store and the minute they saw them coming the manager locked the doors and they couldn't get in. Back in the old days they had these awnings that they could just roll out, to keep the sun from shining inside. They were protesting under these awnings, walking back and forth with their signs, and the manager noticed that they were in the shade. So he rolled it back and, her name is Faith, Faith looked at the manager, cause he was inside the store, and she turned and she looked at the sun and she said, "Aint gonna let no sun turn me around, I'm going to keep on walking for freedom and justice." Alabama in that time during the year, June, July, it was 90's in the morning. We stayed there all the month of June and there were many people arrested. One thing about the black churches and the businesses they helped a lot, they would house us, feed us, do our laundry, they would take us wherever we needed to go, they were there for us.

JC: So it was a whole community thing?

EW: They even put up their homes for bond money. Yep, they participated; this was something they felt they should do also, to help make a change. From there I went to Louisiana, the great state of Louisiana and worked on voter registration, because in Louisiana, whites, you know when you go to register to vote they ask maybe your fathers name or mothers name, if you were a citizen, or things like that. For the blacks in the state of Louisiana there were 5 pages of questions that had nothing to do with registering to vote. They had to answer and be correct, so we had to teach the black citizens of Louisiana the answers, make sure they cross their t's and dotted

their I's and answered each question correctly in order to register. I was in Plaquemines, Baton Rouge, and New Orleans. While we were in Plaquemines, and this was during the summer time, and then we had a lot of teachers, lawyers, and students to come from the north and California to help work on voter registration. White, black, and Asian, and we worked seven days a week, 6 in the morning to late at night. So we had decided to take a Sunday off, we were in Plaquemines and we were going to take the ferry to New Orleans just for the Sunday, just have some repairs. Two carloads of us, black and white. We left on the ferry, you know you can drive your cars on the ferry, and I was still downstairs and some of the members had gone up stairs on the ferry and when they got up there they saw, colored fountain, white fountain, colored bathroom, white bathroom. That wouldn't work. So the whites went to the colored and colored went to the whites and someone told the captain, I mean there were hundreds of other people on the ferry.

JC: Oh ok so it wasn't just you guys

EW: No, we were just two carloads, but you know people going from Plaquemines to New Orleans also. I mean, they were just regular people. There must have been hundreds or more people on there. The captain stopped the ferry in the middle of the Mississippi river turned it around and went back to Plaquemine's, and when we got back you know who was waiting for us.

JC: The Police

EW: Exactly, the sheriffs were waiting for us and we were arrested. Taken to jail, just because of that. Of course James Foreman and other members of SCLC and SNICC they came to Plaquemine to help organize the protest. Like I said, if any protestors were in jail they going to protest being arrested. While we were in jail, the food was terrible. They had these hard biscuits, muddy coffee, that's what we had for breakfast. For lunch they gave us some corn bread and beans that was the meal. Some of the workers that were in jail who helped serve, the black ones, they told us if we don't eat the food flush it down the commode because if we didn't eat they wouldn't bring you anything, so that's what we did. People from the outside would bring us food, they allowed them to bring in fruits and stuff like that. They would come every night, and we spent 5 days in jail. We could hear them singing and we were singing back to them. Then I guess they didn't like it because they went after James Foreman, they went from house to house looking for James Foreman. If they found him they were going to kill him. This was a small church, where they would have the protest mass meetings, behind that was a little parsonage. They rode horseback into the sanctuary of this church looking for James Foreman. The only way he got away was this black mortician lady, female, she took James Foreman to her funeral home and when they came to search her place. She refused, she said, "You do not have a warrant, you can not search my place." That's why they didn't find him because that's where he was and they put him, James Foreman, in a casket, and put him in the hearse and they drove him from Plaquemines to New Orleans.

Just to get away. They were just cruel they didn't care. So that was about all I did for civil rights, and of course went to the march on Washington.

JC: So this is all after you graduated, so how old were you when all this was going on.

EW: 18...

JC: 18, 19, 20 years old?

EW: Mhm, and you know after Dr. King was assassinated they had poor peoples camp out, on the Washington mall, in D.C. Of course, I went to training in Bellevue Hospital, in New York, and I did a little protesting there because a couple of doctors, nurses, and most of the staff would always complain about how things were at the hospital. Shortage of linen, food, and everything, so this brave Jewish doctor and his wife and a couple of other nurses would organize at the hospital and the administration saw and they came through and corrected and the things there. That's my part of civil rights work.

JC: Bellevue is in the city, right?

EW: That's right, that's where one of those Ebola doctors was taken, recently.

JC: Well, let's backtrack a little bit and let's talk about your school experience. I heard the band was really popular.

EW: Awh yea, we had fantastic teachers. You would learn, they taught, and they were very interested in each child that went to that school. The only thing is that back then we always got the old books that came from the white schools, we didn't have the uniforms or the instruments, but our parents and Mr. J. Y. Bell, was our band director, they came through and formed a band boosters club. They organized and they raised money for uniforms and instruments. Everybody loved the William Penn band. We had a nice choir and drama club.

JC: Were you ever apart of any clubs?

EW: Some, not the drama club. (laughter) We had a basketball and football team, in fact my senior year they won both championships, the basketball and the football team. There were a lot of seniors on the team that were my classmates.

JC: Did you guys only play black high schools?

EW: Yep, only black high schools. Just in the state of North Carolina. Carver, Atkins, in Winston Salem, and Dudley.

JC: Did that ever both you.

EW: No because we were a winning team. (laughter) Not really, just the fact that I lived on the south side of town and like I lived one block away from a white elementary school, but I had to walk three blocks to the black school, Fairview. The high point center in Ferndale they were closer to where I lived than William Penn. William Penn was on the east side and I was on the south side.

JC: So they were doing a whole lot of moving around.

EW: Another thing, south side kids, we didn't have public bus service, and you know how Guilford County they pick up kids. So we had to ride the public bus to go back and forth. So that was another thing, like kids today they have buss to pick them up. On nice days south side kids would walk home, and the first place we would go was in the back door of Woolworth. They had the peanuts and the candy on the left side and then we bought our school supplies, we did that and why couldn't we sit? We had to stand you know if we wanted to eat anything. You know, we spent a lot of money in those stores.

JC: So they made you go through the back, you couldn't use the front door?

EW: Oh no, no, no that was just because it was closer to the back. We would go in the back and out the front.

JC: You talked about how caring the administration was and everything, did they ever participate in any of the protests with the students?

EW: What teachers?

JC: Yeah

EW: Oh, no. They probably would have gotten fired. They backed us in the way that they could and they encouraged us.

JC: I actually have a scanned photo here I got from the library, Mr. Burford. I here from the previous interview that he was quite the influential figure in the community.

EW: Yea

JC: I'm sure he was a bit older when you went there. That (picture) was '45.

EW: Oh, yeah he was. He was still there when I was going. Ms. Wilson and Ms. Oakley, she wasn't at another school not William Penn. Those are the only one I remember. (referring to the picture)

JC: Do you have any stories about him by any chance?

EW: Oh no, all I know is that he said he was going to baptize us with knowledge, and that he would do. Like I said, we had very good teachers, caring, and if we did something wrong they would call our parents. Back in those days if a teacher called you in trouble!

JC: Do you have any brothers or sisters that went to William Penn?

EW: Well, my brother lived in South Carolina.

JC: Seems like you did a lot with civil rights, so I just wanted to thank you for all your work. Make it possible for kids like me to go to High Point University, so thank you.

EW: Well, that was High Point College back in the day; we used the High Point College stadium for football.

JC: Mr. Crawford was telling me something about that, would the marching band march all the way from William Penn?

EW: Mhm, white people, black people, all loved the William Penn band. Christmas parade, and we would go to different places, Thomasville. In Thomasville the joke was, it's not as large of a city as High Point, by the time we start walking we would finish the parade. That was a joke, because when we got back to the end, which was a cemetery, everybody was tired. They never said that again because that was a long parade. Anyway, then we have the choir and the band; they would have different concerts and stuff. We would go to Winston Salem State and there was State College and A&T, for different programs, and participate in their parades for homecoming.

JC: Sounds like a real source of pride for the community.

EW: Aw yea, good things came out.

JC: We are actually working with some students at Penn Griffin High School right now, I don't know if you know, but they turned it into a performing arts school. The girl I'm working with actually wanted to ask you about the proms and graduations and how did that stuff happen?

EW: Of course, when you become a junior, the junior took care of the proms for the junior and seniors. All of our proms were held in the gym on campus, and it was nice.

JC: All the girls dressing up, all the guys dressing up?

EW: Yep, yep, and afterwards everybody goes to different places. Mostly to different clubs and things like that after prom. It was just nice very nice.

JC: I heard back then they were called sock hops?

EW: Yep, yep

JC: So you guys met at Greensboro a lot?

EW: Yes, we had two or three place we would go, especially after a football or basketball game.

JC: Was graduation also held at the school?

EW: Yep, they had it at the school. The class I was in, 1961, was the largest class that they had, had.

JC: Do you know roughly how many students?

EW: Between 95 and 100, we were the largest class. Usually they would have graduation in the gym but they did in auditorium for our class. That was a good time because we took our test early, and we had days off from other students. So we would just mess around on campus.

JC: Well you talked a lot about civil rights, but what did you do afterwards. Like what was your profession?

EW: Medical and Clinical technician, that's why I got my training at Bellevue.

JC: Did you stay in the city for a while, or...?

EW: Yeah I just came back to High Point in 1999. I retired from Bellevue after 33 years. Talk about a training place, that was a training place. You learn and you say a lot at Bellevue. Bellevue was the first to have ambulance and a lot of things. This Asian doctor was the first to reattach limbs at Bellevue; its over 200 and 50 something years old. You learned a lot and saw a lot. It still is one of the places that if something happens to the president in New York or something, that's where they would take them.

JC: Did you start a family while in New York?

EW: No, no

JC: Just focused on your work...well do you think I missed anything?

EW: No, that's about it. Except for, the sit in is now February 11th; we have a banquet and student summit. That takes place on February 11th; we always have a prayer visual, down at the hotel where Woolworth is. If you look in the back of the Hotel

you can see a monument of the sit-ins that's back there. We go there every February 11th, to have prayer visual.

JC: Just wanted to thank you again for your time. This was very valuable, also thank you for all the things you did for civil rights, I personally appreciate it.

EW: Thank you, and you take care.