PR: Alright, so today is February 27, 2018. This is Paul Ringel here with Hank Pressley to do a follow-up interview for the William Penn Project. So Hank, I know you've done a couple of interviews already with Erin Flynn.

HP: Yes

PR: I just had a couple of other questions. So the first question I wanted to ask you was, your parents moved here from South Carolina when you were a newborn, right?

HP: That's correct. I was four weeks old.

PR: OK. So why did they move here? Or why did they leave South Carolina, let's start with that?

HP: Well, the reason that they left South Carolina, during those times I think the overall idea was to find a better life. Theyw ere farmers, sharecropper farmers. They were both born on sharecrop farms, and so I was also. So it's the promise of a better income and more consistent income.

PR: OK. So were they born in South Carolina?

HP: Indeed they were.

PR: OK, and what made them come specifically to High Point, do you know?

HP: Well, High Point was actually in the route to where they intended to go. They intended, initially, to go to Richmond, Virginia. So along the way, my father came up first, and along the way he found work in High Point. The High Point Regional Hospital was being built at that time, and so he got a job as a laborer building the foundation. And so upon completion of that, I guess he impressed some of the people there and they offered him a job at another place and he accepted it. And so he went back and packed everybody up and up north we came.

PR: OK, and I know there's, what, eleven of you, is that right?

HP: Eleven, however I was the seventh.

PR: So you were the seventh, so it was mom and seven kids including a newborn. Six girls, right- all your older siblings are girls?

HP: Five. Five older girl siblings and my brother.

PR: OK. I thought he was younger than you, but I got that flipped.

HP: No, he's older.

PR: OK. So he moved here, he came here on the way to Richmond, got a job, stayed. What kind, did he keep doing that type of physical labor work?

HP: No, it wasn't quite as physical. He actually got a job at an industrial manufacturer. Actually bedding, a bedding manufacturer. It was Carolina Springs, was the corporation. And theyw ere one of the larger producers of bedding springs at that time.

PR: OK, and so did he work like, is that like an assembly line job?

HP: Assembly, hmm, that's a good question, I don't know exactly what he did. It was somewhat like, I suppose it was an assembly line.

PR: OK. And your mom, I noticed in the interview you said that both your parents worked. So what kind of work did your mom do?

HP: Initially, my mother was a domestic.

PR: OK

HP: Yes, she worked in the homes of other people, and she also worked as a short-order cook at the old Biltmore Hotel.

PR: Oh. Where's that? Here?

HP: It was here. It was one of the old historical buildings. It would have been right across the street from the train station, where the train station is now on High Street. So there is actually a furniture exposition building that's standing there now, kind of a space-age looking building. But yeah, the Biltmore Hotel, I suppose it was the preeminent hotel during those days, and she worked there for some time.

PR: Interesting. Same Vanderbilts, like connected to the Biltmore in Asheville, do you know?

HP: I'm not sure, that's a good question.

PR: Interesting. Maybe I'll do a little digging. OK, so the next question that I had was what church your family belonged to.

HP: The church, almost as far back as I can go, we were members of the Church of Christ. Now prior to that, however, that's an interesting question because our initial home in North Carolina was in the parsonage of a church.

PR: Oh.

HP: And it was apparently we had relatives, we definitely had relatives here, and they connected my mom and dad with this minister at a church on Kivett Drive, and I don't recall the name of the church but I believe it was a Pentecostal church. And some of my first memories were sitting in that church, and I can remember the dusty floors, the dusty podium, what is it the pulpit, and the people playing instruments, and the shouting and stuff on the floor there. Seeing the dust rising up. So we initially lived there, and I believe we lived there for about two years.

PR: OK, so you did have family here. Is that why your dad stopped here in the first place?

HP: That was one of the things, yes. He stopper here perhaps just to get a feel for the area, but yes we had relatives here.

PR: OK. Did you say that after you moved out of that, did you move towards, did you move onto a farm? 'Cause you talked a lot about gardening.

HP: Yes. When we left there we moved out to Upper Guilford County , actually on the edge of Guilford County and Forsyth County.

PR: Oh

HP: And it's still there, the area. It was what you might call subsistence farmers. 'Cause my dad still worked in the industrial plant, and my mom was occasionally working as a domestic, but I can recall we grew hogs, chickens, and had a huge garden. And our neighbors on either side of us had hogs and cows, we traded pork and milk and things.

PR: So it really is subsistence.

HP: Oh yeah. So it was, we lived there on that place until I was in fourth grade.

PR: So a bunch of your older siblings commuted down here to go to William Penn from up there.

HP: Exactly. They commuted, they were part of the children who were bused, they were bused for segregation. They were bused past perhaps places that were closer to them but they had to be.

PR: Right, I knew that the country kids got bused whereas the city kids did not. So you lived out near Forsyth County until you were in fourth grade. And then did you move back into town?

HP: That's right, we moved back into town. As a matter of fact it was in this neighborhood. It was right up the street from this school. And we lived there from the time I was in fourth grade through eighth grade. So it was about five years that we lived in this neighborhood. And then we moved whenever I was in eighth grade, we moved out toward the edge of town going back out towards Greensboro. So it was on the edge of the city limits. So it was actually, it was out of the city school district, but it was still where you went.

PR: Right. So did you get bused at that point too?

HP: Well, no, we weren't, inasmuch as we were still in the city.

PR: So you walked here from up there? How long a walk is that?

HP: About two miles.

PR: Oh, OK , I would have thought farther.

HP: No, not at all.

PR: It's still a pretty good walk.

HP: It's a pretty good, well I said two miles, that's a pretty modest estimate, maybe two and a half.

PR: I was thinking it might be more.

HP: Actually, it's right where the 311 bridge crosses Kivett Drive. Our street was New Street, and so Brentwood Street is still there, and the next street going east was New Street. Now they cut the end of it out to bring the 311 bypass bridge across. So that's where we lived, and we generally would either walk up Kivett Drive, or there was a huge woods that's a residential area now.

PR: Just kinda walk through the woods.

HP: Mm-hm.

PR: So is that the neighborhood that you mentioned to Erin that you integrated a neighborhood?

HP: Yes

PR: So were you the first black family in that neighborhood?

HP: We were not the first; maybe the third. And as I said it was outside of the city limtis, and it was quite rural. It seemed very much a great departure from living in the city.

PR: Right on Washington Street.

HP: Exactly. And there were families out there that actually had wildlife.

PR: OK. And how did they feel about the integration process? Was there tension in the neighborhood?

HP: Oh, there was, absolutely there was tension.

PR: Was there violence?

HP: No, there was no violence. There was the occasional incidence of something perhaps being thrown into your yard. I can recall walking home one night from a friend's house where I was egged. Bu they didn't stop and bother me, they just drove by and egged me. And I had a rather unfortunate situation, the summer, I believe it was the summer the girls were killed in Birmingham, Alabama.

PR: So that was '63, right? That was right after the March on Washington.

HP: Exactly, in 1963, that very same summer. This was a year after we moved to that neighborhood, and my mom sent me to the store. I can recall she was cooking, and she needed a box of pepper, black pepper. And I can remember the yellow box of Sauer's Pepper. It's about three-quarters of a mile to the store, out to Green Street. And on my way back I could see it, this huge cloud of dust coming from a house that was way back off the road. And It was red dust, and there's this red dirt driveway, and I finally saw a white '59 Chevrolet speeding up the driveway. And as the car got to the road, I could see the guy. And as he turned onto the road, I had just about gotten directly in front of the driveway and he passed by and he shoved a pistol out of the window. And I'm 12 or 13 years old, the guy's kidding, he's playing. And he shot. And I can still see that barrel barking out that flame. And it was a silver-plated pistol. Obviously he missed, but I can see the guy's face, and it's like the guy shot at me! So this was 1963 as I say, and I can recall running back home. Wow. And my mom says, "What's wrong?" And I told her, and it was almost as though she would not believe it. She wouldn't accept it. She would not accept that. And you know in retrospect I concluded she must have been trying to deflect it so that we would not have problems.

PR: Yeah

HP: You know, it's like this didn't happen. And I think that for so much of their lives they had been conditioned to do that. So it's like perhaps some other kids who was in my class who had been reared in the city or something like that, their parents might have said "Hey," they might have taken a different route. But my mom never told my dad. She never told him.

PR: And obviously never told the police.

HP: Oh no.

PR: Were there any black police officers at that point yet?

HP: Yes, there were. There were two or three black police officers at the time, and pretty much the entire black neighborhood knew them, because for the most part they could only be policing the black neighborhoods.

PR: Right. So she never told them either.

HP: No. Never did.

PR: Could you have identified the guy?

HP: Probably not. Probably not. I can remember that he was a young guy who was a scruffy, and he looked like he was 300 pounds. He was very greasy and grimy. You know, he fit the profile.

PR: Do you think that had something to do with you moving into that integrated neighborhood?

HP: Oh, for sure.

PR: So why do you think your parents, who were so hesitant to stir things up, do you know why they moved you into that integrated neighborhood?

HP: Very good. I think that was probably because it was in the open, you know the familiarity, particularly for my dad. My mother was a bit more cosmopolitan than was dad. Because it was a rather small home too for the size of the family. So my father I think seized upon the opportunity to get something that was pretty cheap, and something on which he could do farming.

PR: Alright so you think your father wanted to be rural, and this was just an opportunity and they were willing to take the risk to have that opportunity.

HP: Yeah, I think so. And they did have, although they were very passive whenever it came to the societal things that were going on, they were rather comfortable living around white people, because you know as farmers they had regular dealings with white people in South Carolina. Be it not as equals, they were somewhat comfortable moving into that area.

PR: So that kinda leads me to my next question. They were very, you called them passive when it comes to social issues. And yet two of your sisters were among the, you called them the 11 in the first…

HP: One. One of my sisters.

PR: OK, so one of your sisters.

HP: And actually there's 26 students, it was February 11th.

PR: Oh, OK. So maybe that was a transcript error. So you had one sister, 'cause I know I've seen the picture of her sitting at the counter, you had one sister who was in the 26. I know you were younger. What class were you here? I know you didn't graduate from here, but what class were you?

HP: I was in the class of '67.

PR: So you were '67.

HP: Mm-hm, and she was in the class of '60.

PR: So when the marches happened you were ten or eleven or something like that.

HP: So let's see, she was seven years ahead of me, so yes.

PR: You would have been about eleven. So did she talk…which sister was it?

HP: Mae, Mae Ella Pressly.

PR: And which, do you know if she talked to your parents before she did it?

HP: She did not, because it wouldn't have happened.

PR: OK

HP: It wouldn't have happened had she talked to them, because my dad would have been, he would have gone nuclear. He just would not have allowed it, even if he had had to lock her down.

PR: So do you know what made her decide to do it against your parents' wishes. Have you ever talked to her about it?

HP: Yeah, briefly. She was a person, as an adult, she was not one of those people who talked about it a lot. She did it whenever it happened because it was the thing to do. I think she saw it as being something, a cause that was greater than herself, because that's the type of person that she grew up to be. She was, as a church member, she was one who really, really sacrificed for her church and for her congregation. I think that her life was shaped somewhere before we got here. Because she would have remembered being a younger child in South Carolina. And I think that perhaps she might have had a different perspective on black-white relationships while she lived there than did my parents. So whenever the opportunity arose here, and I've never heard her say this exactly, but knowing her, that she would have been one of those persons when approached to do it, would have said yes.

PR: And so what did your parents say after the fact?

HP: Well, you know, they were not very, very verbal about it after the fact. It's almost as though they kept the younger children shielded from it. I don't know if this is what they thought, but it's almost as though if we don't talk about it, it didn't happen.

PR: Kind of like the shooting.

HP: Yeah, yeah.

PR: Interesting. So did she continue to do this?

HP: This was a one year, one event situation for her as far as I know.

PR: So she only did the first day.

HP: That's exactly right. There would have been other opportunities after that, but of course she'd move on, she'd gone to school after high school, so she was attempting to create a professional life for herself.

PR: But she was involved throughout that spring, because they did this more than one day.

HP: Exactly.

PR: OK. Now you said you went to the UCC church, the United Church of Christ?

HP: Not the United Church of Christ, just the Church of Christ.

PR: Oh, OK. Sorry. That was not Reverend Cox's church.

HP: No, it wasn't. Cox was, I forget exactly what denomination with whom he was affiliated, but it was… no, he was either, I think he was Methodist.

PR: OK. So she probably would have gotten this idea from her peers then more than from…

HP: Precisely. And Reverend Cox was also, you know he was a very young and attractive and, you know he was this exciting guy. And I think that girls just gravitated toward him.

PR: Yeah, I've seen the pictures. He was a hipster, he was a sharp-dressed man.

HP: Yes, and as a matter of fact my sister, who was just two years ahead of Mae, had a best friend who married Cox.

PR: Oh, interesting.

HP: Yes, so they had a relationship with him that went beyond his being a pastor.

PR: And he was a pretty young minister when he was here too, right?

HP: Exactly, exactly he was.

PR: OK, so when you marched, you said in the last interview that you think it was one of the last marches that happened here.

HP: I think it was.

PR: Do you remember, so you graduated in '67, was that in '67?

HP: No, this was in '66, it was the spring of '66.

PR: So do you remember what you all were marching for?

HP: Well, it was still the same thing. We had not achieved the level of public accommodations that we had sought.

PR: OK

HP: And Is ay we, I was not active in the overall civil rights movement, and I really don't know many of my classmates or my schoolmates who were. It was almost like it had disappeared after the protests and marches of the early 60s. So whenever it resurfaced it was like, "Oh, I thought things had gotten better." And things had gotten better as far as public accommodations were concerned, because I can recall as a child going to the downtown theaters, and having to sit in the balcony, And of course having different bathrooms and stuff. Whereas we were accustomed to going to the theater here on Washington Street, where everything's wide open. So things had improved, whereas we could mingle as far as the accommodations at the theater or go and sit down at the restaurant and get served without any problems. So whenever the movement resurfaced, it was kind of surprising.

PR: So in ’60 this was really driven by the William Penn students, right? The initial sit-in was driven by the Fountain sisters and the William Penn students.

HP: Right, right.

PR: In ’66 was this march student-driven or was this driven by, who started this process in ’66?

HP: I don’t know any student with whom I can connect it during that time. Because even in the years that have passed, I don’t recall having heard any student’s name who was a person on campus who was beating the drum. I don’t recall that. I believe this was actually Reverend Cox.

PR: Was he still her in ’66?

HP: Oh yes. Mm-hm. Yes, he was the guy at the front, and as a matter of fact he led us on this march too.

PR: OK

HP: And so probably Dr. Little was still pretty active in it too, I think that he was. But Reverend Cox, yes. And I say that he was still here. He was definitely still a personality here, and I don’t know where his residence was. But it’s like he would have had access because Dr. Little was still here, and Dr. Tillman was still here.

PR: And were they close, was that kind of the leadership coalition, Dr. Little and Dr. Tillman and Reverend Cox.

HP: Yes, yes. And the clergy in general, I think some of the larger black churches had ministers who were more socially aware than the community at large.

PR: OK. And when you marched, did you march down to the Woolworths again? Where did you march to that day?

HP: We marched from the campus, let’s see, I just want to make sure that I’m thinking about it correctly here.

PR: Need a pen? I have one.

HP: I have a marker, here it is.

PR: Want to borrow mine?

HP: Nah, thanks. I can remember.

PR: I just came out of class too.

HP: [laughs]. OK, William Penn campus was here, Washington Street here, Centennial here. Main Street here. Commerce and Russell.

PR: OK

HP: So there’s Commerce.

PR: And so the Woolworths is on Main Street.

HP: Woolworths is on Main Street, this is Washington Street. Woolworths would be right here.

PR: Between Centennial and, yeah that's what I thought. So is that where you marched? Where did you march?

HP: No, we marched here, all the way up to Main Street, and we marched past the Woolworths, the Woolworths on this side of Main Street.

PR: Right. So the Woolworths was already integrated at that point. Or was it not?

HP: It was, it was. Woolworths is on this side of Main Street, and it's still where the hotel is now. The Center Theater was on this side of Main Street. I can remember walking past the Center Theater, and past High Street first, that's where the Radisson, the Radisson's right here. We march past here, and we go back up to Russell, and this was the traditional path of our homecoming parade. So the band would always go here, and all of the kids would follow the band, they'd come back down to Centennial and back to the campus.

PR: So there wasn't a sit-in or anything, it was just a march.

HP: No, it was just a march.

PR: Was the Center Theater integrated at that point, because I've seen pictures of people trying to integrate the Center Theater.

HP: Yes

PR: So it was integrated at that point. So what was the march for?

HP: Well, the public accommodations, specifically what did we want? Well, there's still a problem with things, access to get things at the high school. And precisely what else I really don't know, that's a good question.

PR: But that was the last big march.

HP: That's the last one that I can recall, and I haven't been too far away from this area since then.

PR: So you graduated in '67. Where'd you go to college?

HP: I went initially to Carolina.

PR: Chapel Hill?

HP: Mm-hm. And I dropped out, and went back ten years later to A&T. So in these ten years here I was a firefighter.

PR: I wanted to ask you about that too. But Carolina, so how many black students were there at Carolina when you went there in '67?

HP: There were less than 200.

PR: So is that when Charlie Scott was there?

HP: Charlie Scott was a year ahead of me.

PR: I just read that book, I don't know if you've seen it, that new book about Charlie Scott and the desegregation of Carolina.

HP: No, I haven't. He was a year ahead of me.

PR: OK. So there were not very many. Is that why you left?

HP: Well, you know I wonder sometimes. Probably. Because I actually lived in one of the athletic dorms. It wasn't that I was an athlete at the school, it's just that I didn't have any access to the more desirable dorms. All the guys that I knew wanted to stay in Morrison, some stayed in James, and there was a new thing that just opened up Granville Towers. They all were staying in that, but I would up in one of the athletic dorms, Ehringhaus. And it was just a totally white man's school. It was just totally, almost no women at all. And I look back, and I've tried to find the exact numbers, but I know that I was one of the first five or six hundred blacks admitted.

PR: You should look at the book, there are numbers in the book. Probably not for your year, but for Charlie Scott's year. So that was quite an accomplishment even to get in at that point.

HP: Well, you know, I wonder. I can remember between my sophomore and junior years attending an enrichment camp and visiting Carolina. And I suppose that's when I decided I wanted to go. And talking with the dean of admissions, and he was still there whenever I went. But talking about the possibilities. It was a highly desirable place to go, and I think that the population was probably around 16,000 enrollment. And as I say it's virtually all white males, and I didn't realize it until after the fact, because I did know a few girls, but I probably knew most of them. So Carolina was a cool place.

PR: So how long were you there?

HP: I was there that semester.

PR: Just that semester. So was it, and obviously if you don't want to talk about it, but what was it that made you leave?

HP: Well, whenever I came home, I just didn't go back.

PR: OK. So it was homesickness?

HP: I don't know. I don't know if it was homesickness or a lack of not belonging. I didn't feel as though I belonged, I know that. I didn't feel that good about it. And it was one of the things, as I said, I graduated from Ragsdale, and many of the guys I knew from Ragsdale, they became distant characters. They no longer were there with me or for me.

PR: OK. So Ragsdale was an integrated school, right? Or were you one of the first people to integrate Ragsdale too?

HP: Yes.

PR: So you were kind of a pioneer there. So you came to William Penn for seventh grade, I assume, or to Griffin.

HP: I came to Griffin for fourth grade. It was an elementary school.

PR: OK. And so William Penn started in seventh grade?

HP: Yes

PR: OK. How many years did you do at William Penn?

HP: Two. Tenth and eleventh. The black education system was 1-6 and 7 to 12.

PR: Right. So you were at Griffin from 4th grade through 6th.

HP: I was at Griffin from 4th through 9.

PR: Oh, OK.

HP: Because whenever I got to 6th grade, they decided that they were going to change it to a junior high school.

PR: OK

HP: And so when I became a 7th grader, it became a junior high school 7 through 9 and William Penn started in 10th grade.

PR: Oh yeah, Jimmy Scott was telling me that. OK. And so you got to Griffin from 4 through 9, and then you go to Ragsdale?

HP: Then I go to William Penn. 10 and 11.

PR: So you only did one year at Ragsdale.

HP: One year at Ragsdale.

PR: So what made you transfer to Ragsdale for your senior year?

HP: I didn't transfer. I was transferred by the, as I said where we lived, let's say this is Kivett Drive here, this is Brentwood, and this is New Street. We lived on New Street, this is Brentwood. And the city school district pretty much split Brentwood. I believe the people on this side of Brentwood were in the city school district, the people on that side were in the county district.

PR: OK. And at that point High Point was not part of the county districts.

HP: Exactly, exactly.

PR: So but why, I find it hard to believe that even in '66 they would have sent a black student even voluntarily to Ragsdale. What motivated that?

HP: Oh boy, it was not about voluntarism, it was either you pay a tuition to come back to the city school…

PR: To William Penn

HP: Or you go to Ragsdale.

PR: So they basically pushed you into an integrated school?

HP: Yes. It was "You can return to William Penn if you want, but your parents have to pay a tuition for you to come back."

PR: And so, that's really fascinating. They pushed you…so how many black kids were in your class at Ragsdale?

HP: There were a number of kids that had to go to Ragsdale or pay the tuition to go back to William Penn. There were some who paid the tuition. Their parents were able to, but being in a large family…

PR: Yeah, eleven kids.

HP: Yes. So it was a non-starter. You're getting a free education, get on the bus and go to school.

PR: It's so…so that's really interesting. I'm just wondering about what the motivation was there that they were sending…I wonder was that court-ordered? I'll have to do some digging into that. So you go to Ragsdale for your senior year, and how many black kids from Ragsdale or William Penn did you know that went to Carolina? Were you the only one?

HP: I was the only one.

PR: Do you know if there were other kids from William Penn who had gone to Carolina before you?

HP: Never

PR: Never. You think you were the first black…

HP: You know what? And I say that, but there may have been one. Mr. Burford's son may have gone.

PR: Oh, OK.

HP: Inman Burford may have gone to Carolina.

PR: Interesting.

HP: And I'm not certain of that.

PR: I've been trying to track him down, He's elusive. I have not been able to get an interview with him. I would LOVE to talk to him, so if you know any way I can get with him.

HP: OK, I'll check on that.

PR: So the other question that I wanted to ask you, and there's no clear segue to this, so first of all how involved was your family in your church? Was this a thing where you'd go to church twice a week, three times a week?

HP: [nodding]

PR: You were very involved in your church.

HP: Yes. My family was, my mother was our spiritual leader. My father was not a churchgoer while we were growing up. My father was a man of the world, and he was somewhat like the guy in Color Purple. He was a hard guy. And I was fortunate enough after he grew up and I was an adult when he finally grew

up and joined the church. He was a great guy. But yes, my mother was a great Christian. She believed, and she was a praying woman and she believed in us going to church with her.

PR: So you were one of those families that went, Sundays obviously, but also Thursday or Wednesday nights?

HP: Well actually, occasionally we would do Tuesdays and Thursdays. In those days it was Tuesday and Thursday and Sunday. And I can remember whenever they condensed those Tuesdays and Thursdays down to Wednesday, it was like a night off. This is the way it is now. But the really, and you know Hank Wall…

PR: Yes

HP: Hank and I were church members. We grew up together. Hank's family would have been there on Sunday morning for Sunday school, they would have been there for Sunday service, they would have been there for afternoon service and evening service. That's how many times on Sunday.

PR: That's a lot.

HP: Yes. Then on Tuesday evening, then on Thursday evening. They were there all the time.

PR: So your family wasn't quite that…

HP: My family was not that. My family was there occasionally on Wednesdays, but all of the time on Sunday mornings.

PR: But it was still a big part of your family's life.

HP: Oh yes. Yes indeed.

PR: And who was the minister at your church?

HP: Whenever we were growing up his name was Clifford Davis.

PR: OK. And was he one of the civil rights…

HP: No, he wasn't. He was an evangelist, and a very prolific evangelist so he was all over the Southeast.

PR: OK. So the other question I wanted to ask you, a couple other questions. One was about working at Big Bear. I've had a lot of alums tell me that it was hard to get a job after school or hard to get jobs during the summer. But you never had a problem with that, or do you know that other people had a problem with that?

HP: I didn't know that, but I knew that there were desirable places to be, and the place that pretty much all of my friends wanted to work- the guys- was at A&P. And it was, the building is still there, it's on the corner of Washington and Centennial, the big building, was their grocery store. But most of the guys wanted to work at A&P, and they did. But I was able to get a job at Big Bear because one of my sisters, my sister who is two steps ahead of me, Ann, had a friend who worked there, and he was able to get me a job there.

PR: So were most of the kids who were bagging groceries, were they mostly black kids, or was it a mix?

HP: It was a mix.

PR: Well, that's pretty interesting, right, that there was an integrated workforce. Was that unusual?

HP: Unusual, no. Certainly not in this neighborhood, because where I worked at the Big Bear it was right by where the old fire station is on the corner of Wrenn and Washington, where the banks are. There's a parking lot there now, I believe. So that neighborhood pretty much was downtown. But in this neighborhood, as we get on down Washington Street and Centennial Street it was very much a black neighborhood, so all of the kids that worked there were black.

PR: Right, but in your store it was mixed.

HP: It was.

PR: Did you have any kind of interaction with the white kids who working there?

HP: We got along wonderfully well.

PR: Well, that's really interesting because you talked, and lots of other people talked, about how most of the time you guys just didn't have contact with the white kids, the kids who went to High Point High, but that's one place where you did.

HP: That's right. That's a good point, because we got along quite well, and I would even call them friends.

PR: But you didn't see them outside of work.

HP: No, no.

PR: Now that leads me to the other question which I had, which was about the baseball story that you told to Erin about the integrated, the white teams playing the black teams at Washington Terrace. How did that happen? When was that, while you were in high school?

HP: Yeah, it was the summer between my sophomore and junior years. I was fifteen, this was 1965.

PR: And you were on the black team?

HP: Mm-hm. Washington Terrace.

PR: Was that a High Point white team?

HP: Yes, it was a local team, and it wasn't an American Legion team, but it was probably one of the rec centers, and I don't recall which one.

PR: And how did that happen that the white team and the black team- did that happen once or did it happen multiple times that summer?

HP: I don't know how many times that happened during my time there that summer, because that was the summer that I was able to go away to the enrichment camp, to Palmer Memorial Institute. So I was on the team, well I was on the team even after I came back, but it didn't happen after I came back. So I was gone, I believe it was six or eight weeks.

PR: And where was that camp? Where is Palmer Memorial Institute?

HP: It's in Sedalia. One or two of the buildings are still there. Wow, what an awesome place it was.

PR: And do you know how, sorry I'm jumping back and forth, but do you know how the two teams ended up playing each other?

HP: I really don't know how that happened. Well, I guess 1965, things were changing,

PR: They were starting to loosen up a little bit? Was that the first time you know that it happened?

HP: That's the first time that I'd ever witnessed it.

PR: And they came to Washington Terrace?

HP: They came to Washington Terrace, exactly. And it was a really cool game, there was no tension. They brought spectators and stuff. I think that most of the people who were white who came to this neighborhood for whatever, they were pleasantly surprised. Because they'd often heard well, you've gotta stay away from colored town. That's what they called it. Yeah, you have to stay away from colored town because those boys…but they always enjoyed themselves when they came.

PR: And Washington Terrace was amazing from what I've heard.

HP: Oh yes, yes it was. It was almost like a mecca. I'm sure you've heard about how the buses from other towns as far away as Washington DC and Atlanta, they'd come in. It was really a great thing.

PR: I have heard that. Do you know how that ended up being here? I mean, why would such a wonderful park get built in High Point? Do you know the origins of that?

HP: No

PR: That might be a project for me to take on. I might have to take a look at that.

HP: Yeah, it's really amazing, because you look at Atlanta here and Washington here, and for whatever reason people would come. There was this huge dance pavilion they had, and it was over this Olympic pool.

PR: That might be something interesting, So I did want to ask you about Palmer Memorial if we have time, but I want to ask you about the firefighting first. So I heard this story about how you just fell into that, that it wasn't necessarily something that you were looking to do.

HP: Never did

PR: How many black firefighters were there in the city when you joined? Was Albert Campbell on the force?

HP: Yes he was. Albert Campbell was one, Al Barrier was one, John Jackson, two John jacksons, my brother.

PR: So Willie was already on the…

HP: He was.

PR: Do you call the fire the force?

HP: Fire department. He, I believe Willie joined in April and I in September.

PR: Interesting. So it was fairly integrated, or starting to get fairly integrated.

HP: [scoffs] I couldn't' say that, because there were less than ten of us.

PR: Out of how many? I'm trying to get a sense of how many people were in the fire department.

HP: I think it was something like 160.

PR: Oh, OK, so that's still pretty… I didn't realize it was that big.

HP: There were eight stations at the time, and you had to man each company with four people, and there were two truck companies, so ten.

PR: You have to have different shifts.

HP: There might have been 130 or so.

PR: Alright, but still, not proportional. So I guess the last thing I wanted to ask you was about Palmer Memorial and how you got the opportunity to go there and what it was like. So how did you get the opportunity to do that?

HP: I was just selected.

PR: By….Principal Burford?

HP: I rather doubt it was Mr. Burford, 'cause Mr. Burford and I didn't have such a great relationship. I think there's no question it was the teachers.

PR: OK. I'm sorry to interrupt, but that actually brought up something else I wanted to ask you. You mentioned in one of your interviews with Erin about tracking and kids being on different tracks. One of the things we've heard is that some of that maybe had to do with who the family was. So what do you know about the process? Like you said you didn't have a great relationship with Mr. Burford. Why was that?

HP: The relationship?

PR: Yeah, let's start with that.

HP: I'm not certain, but this is my perspective. Whenever I look back through the years, the people with whom he apparently had a good relationship versus those that he didn't, was I think that Mr. Burford was a person who was an elitist of sort.

PR: OK

HP: And kids who came from well-heeled families were more likely to get a better shake than those who were not.

PR: Did those kids get slotted towards college level courses? I mean, 'cause you ended up going to college, and you must have been a pretty strong student.

HP: I was an excellent student, and I can say that without reservation, but I had my family history before me.

PR: Right, yeah.

HP: All of my siblings before me were superb students, and I can recall whenever I first got to William Penn, you know you hear teachers talking, and I was walking past someplace, and I can remember one of the teachers saying "That's one of those Pressley kids." And so it's like I knew that there were expectations, and I lived up to them. I was an excellent student. But I was dark-skinned.

PR: And you think that made a difference.

HP: For Mr. Burford, yes.

PR: Well, that's interesting.

HP: Yes, yes indeed. Mr. Burford was brown skinned, and I think that he had a leaning to light-skinned boys.

PR: Just the boys, not girls?

HP: Well girls, but I think he preferred light-skinned…if a boy was going to be pushed, he was light-skinned.

PR: Well, that's interesting.

HP: And that appears to be what I've seen in retrospect.

PR: Do you think that's because he thought the kid had a better chance of success being light-skinned?

HP: That may be the case, but I don't know. It may have just been a personal choice too. I think that he grew up in an area where there was a historical preference for light- skinned people.

PR: Where did he grow up?

HP: I believe it was the northeastern sector of North Carolina. But if he didn't I know that he went to school there. Virginia Union. And I was thinking that he may have been from the Elizabeth City area.

PR: I think that might be right, actually. I'd have to go back and check, So do you think those kinds of factors affected people, where they got tracked, in terms of…

HP: I think that it may have, but I think that it probably didn't, because I can, whenever I think of my academic history, all of the kids with whom I was tracked should have been there. So I think that…

PR: But were there other kids that didn't get tracked where they should have been because of their families or because of…

HP: That may be so, but if it's true I can't say.

PR: OK. I'm just curious. This is one of the things that I'm interested in, who gets pushed. 'Cause there were kinds of vocational tracks too, right?

HP: Indeed

PR: One of the things that I like, somebody told me that there were kids doing physics and kids doing bricklaying in the same school.

HP: Yes, there were. And many of them may have been guided that way. And I think that's a good thing.

PR: Yeah, it's a good thing If you're pushing them because of their abilities. And I'm not trying to dig up dirt or anything, but I'm just curious about what the process was.

HP: I appreciate that, I appreciate the question because I think about it too. And not all of my contemporaries in conversation agree with me the way I think. Because I'm not a worshiper of Mr. Burford, or of the staff, or particularly of the guidance staff.

PR: Mrs. Hughes, right.

HP: Mrs. Hughes. And I don't think that they did a great job. As a matter of fact, I think they did a poor job.

PR: In what way?

HP: I think that their selections. I think that they were elitist. And it's like all of the evidence that I have from my observations suggests that they were. There were, as a matter of fact, I was there through my junior year, and there is not a day while I was there that the guidance office spoke with me about college. And it's like I was at the top of the class. And I don't say it in sour grapes.

PR: No, 'cause you turned out fine, but that is interesting.

HP: They never spoke to me about college. But I have to say, how did I get to participate in some of the really great during the school year opportunities? Because I did. I was sent to symposia. I was sent to workshops, I was sent to the enrichment school. So I don't know who those people were who fingered me to be that person. And I think it's probably my teachers, because I did not get the feeling from Mrs. Hughes, "Come on in, and let's sit and talk about it." It never happened. And even, one of the things, if I'm bitter about anything, it would be the fact that after I left, as I say, having perennially from the day I first walked into a classroom until the end of it, being at the top of the class, after that whenever I left and went to Ragsdale, I never heard another word from them.

PR: Yeah? The teachers or the staff?

HP: From nobody. I never heard another word. I'm really disappointed that I didn't hear anything from Mrs. Hughes and Mr. Burford, 'because one would have thought…

PR: When you got into Carolina, you would think that would be something they would be proud of.

HP: Yeah, yeah. Even, that or even during my senior year, checking to see with me if there's something we can do to help you, because you're probably not going to get nurtured out there at Ragsdale.

PR: Yeah, and we're going to run out of time. I may actually want to come back and have a second brief one because I want to hear about the experience at Ragsdale and I want to hear about Palmer, but it's 11:30 and I know you've got your students coming back in, right?

HP: They'll be back in about 25 minutes.

PR: Oh, you still have more time?

HP: Yeah

PR: Oh we can keep going if you have time. I thought you had to be done at 11:30. Well, so tell me what it was like at Ragsdale. How was it different? Was there anything that was…

HP: Well, it was a culture shock. It really was. Being the only black kid in the phyics class, and the only black kid in the trigonometry class. And it's like being, feeling as though you're under the microscope. And you are. It was different.

PR: How did the students treat you?

HP: The kids were great, particularly the girls. The girls were more receptive and just really accommodating. The guys largely were civil, if not totally welcoming and friendly and stuff. You never felt as though it was a problem.

PR: So you were on the basketball team, right?

HP: Yes

PR: Did that make it easier, or did that make it harder?

HP: I think it made it easier. Definitely made it easier.

PR: How many black kids were on the basketball team?

HP: Two seniors, two juniors, and a sophomore. Five.

PR: Out of…

HP: It's almost half.

PR: Twelve on the team, or fifteen?

HP: It was twelve or fifteen.

PR: Did people resent you guys for taking the spots?

HP: You know, I'll bet behind the scenes there was some resentment. Particularly one of my friends that went to Carolina, who was in line to be the starting point guard, he got booted by this transfer from Dudley who I guess was better. But he seemed to handle it and take it quite well. He's grown up to be a pretty successful attorney too. But I think that he had to really feel bad about it. 'Cause he is a pretty good ballplayer. But I wasn't a great player, matter of fact I couldn't even make the team at William Penn. But I can remember I was long and skinny, and arms down like that, and coach said hey, you can help us.

PR: So did the faculty treat you?

HP: Let me think of one faculty member that was really accommodating.

PR: So the faculty were much worse than the students.

HP: Yes, yes.

PR: Were there any black teachers that were brought in with the black students?

HP: None

PR: So there were no black teachers. Do you have any idea how many kids went in with you that year, ballpark? Are we talking like fifty?

HP: Oh, no, there were far more than that. We're talking about all across the county now. North Carolina, for some reason, got ahead of the curve. They realized that something was going to happen as far as the integration thing was going. As a matter of fact, a few years later, I know that the impetus for integration across the country actually originated in North Carolina. I know that one of the U.S. federal judges, I think his name was McMillen, this was about 1972 or a few years later.

PR: Are you talking about the Swann v. Mecklenburg case, or is that a different case?

HP: Yes

PR: Yeah, that's the Charlotte case.

HP: Mm-hm. Exactly. And so I think that probably lit the fire for, I believe it was what, the Fourteenth Amendment?

PR: Yeah, I don't remember the details of the Swann case.

HP: But at any rate, we had a pretty broad diverse group of black kids coming in. Most of us didn't know each other. There were some from Dudley, there were some from some other place, and of course those of us from William Penn. And there may have been some from as far out going towards Burlington. I can't remember for sure.

PR: So but the teachers were not accommodating.

HP: No

PR: Did they make it harder for you?

HP: I don't think so. And I say that, but there was one teacher, Miss Boone, was my physics teacher, and I can recall a very unflattering thing that she said one day after a test. She was calling out the scores, "So and so made this, so and so made this," and James proved what he could do, he made this. No, I didn't prove what I could do, but it was very much a put-down. And that was pretty much the only thing that she said during the year that spotlighted me. It was never anything about the great things that I was doing. But all of the other teachers were OK, but they were not accommodating, they were not embracing.

PR: Were you unhappy to leave William Penn? Did you think being at Ragsdale made it harder for you?

HP: I know for a fact I was unhappy. But I found some comfort in being at Ragsdale because the accommodations were great.

PR: You mean, like the physical school?

HP: Yes. Yes. That and the supplies. Great books, great athletic equipment. One of the things that I can recall, it's how much I improved my vertical jump in that one school year. And it was because of the equipment that they had.

PR: Wow

HP: And I was just thinking, if they had had this stuff at William Penn, wow, what those guys would have been. One of the guys you know, I know, Randy Reid, would have been an outstanding player at Ragsdale. Hank Wall would have been an All-American at Ragsdale, or even if they had had that equipment at William Penn. Ragsdale had great stuff, but it's like the tension was always thick.

PR: Yeah, and for your senior year…

HP: Yeah, and I can remember one day we were at the end of the day, waiting for the buses. The buses come around the big curve, and some kid behind me says "Here comes the nigger bus!" And you live with that. While there were some good things, there were equally as many [pause] rough things.

PR: So tell me a little bit about Palmer. You went to Sedalia, you got chosen by your teachers. And it was a 6 or 8 week program. What kinds of stuff did you do there?

HP: It was definitely an emphasis on the humanities.

PR: OK. Was it an integrated program, or was it all black kids?

HP: No, it was all black kids. And it was from a program that was called Upward Bound, from the Ford Foundation.

PR: Yeah, I've heard of it.

HP: And I can recall the guy who headed it, his name, I'll never forget him, was Mr. Albert Boothby. He was from Connecticut or something. I've tried to locate something about him. I found something, just a blurb about him. It was- wow- probably the best period of time in my childhood. Because it was living away from home for the first time, and it was just the exposure to things that you've never thought about.

PR: Like what?

HP: Oh wow, theater. Well, universities. All kinds of stuff in entertainment, going to this place, that place, all kinds of cultural things. Art shows, those kinds of things.

PR: Did they take you to universities? Did they take you to Chapel Hill?

HP: Yes. So as a matter of fact, we had a college day. And all of us, we were all either rising juniors or rising seniors from all across North Carolina and lower Virginia. We had a college day, and so we had a list of colleges and universities from which we could choose, and I chose Carolina because I'd always wanted to, and a friend of mine, as a matter of fact my best friend from William Penn, was chosen to go too, and we went to Carolina. I loved Carolina basketball before that , and going there and walking around the campus was like, "Whoa, this was it. The die is cast."

PR: Did your friend go too?

HP: No, he went to Alabama State.

PR: And what's his name?

HP: His name is Stanley Sims. His sister, his younger sister, was mayor here.

PR: Bernita

HP: Bernita, yeah. He stayed at William Penn, so it's like the kids at William Penn, that's one of the things that I missed, being in that conversation for your senior year, where are you going to go? Are you going to get a scholarship? I would have been able to get many scholarship offers had I been ehre, but it's like I missed out on all that.

PR: Do you think you would have gotten into Carolina from William Penn?

HP: If I'd wanted to. Yeah.

PR: So you don't think that being at Ragsdale made it easier to get into Carolina than coming from an all-black school? I was just curious.

HP: I don't think so, because I'd had the opportunity to talk to Dr. Bernard, the admissions guy. And part of it was if a student's personality or total person looked good enough, we'll call him in and talk with him. And I felt good about talking with people, at that time. Yeah, I would have been able to go, at that time, where I wanted. And I possibly could have gone to some places that were more prestigious than Carolina. Like one of my friends, Gerald Truesdale, who got the opportunity to go to Morehouse on a great scholarship. And I would have been one of those guys. Would I have accepted an opportunity to go to Morehouse instead of Carolina? Probably. But being at Ragsdale for my senior year, I never did get to talk about all the HBCUs.

PR: So my last question, then, is how do you think the closing of William Penn affected the black community here. Do you think it had a really negative impact? What do you think the impact of closing the school was? Were you around? I guess this is kind of a second question. Were you around when that was happening? I guess you were at Carolina, at least for the fall, but were you around with the debate? Were there people that were really upset? Was there anyone who tried to keep it open?

HP: You know, whenever that decision was made, it was almost like it came out of nowhere.

PR: It came out of down high?

HP: It was like I never heard a discussion about it. It happened, and it seems in retrospect that there was a similar dynamic that was trying to take place in Greensboro, but they didn't let it happen. And it may have been that it was more visible in Greensboro and not here. There might not have been enough black people in the loop here to make a difference. But in Greensboro, with all of the black higher education institutions over there. I don't know how it's affected High Point that William Penn was closed. I don't know if it has negatively impacted it, I don't know that. Because William Penn was, I think most of the people who have done well from William Penn have done it not because of reading, writing, 'rithmetic, but have done it because of what we were talking about- the trade school. So those people who learned to drive nails and pour concrete and lay brick have done reasonably well.

PR: So did that happen when they went to Andrews or when they went to Central?

HP: I think that it was over after that, so that's a good point. It may well have affected it adversely in that respect, because those kids who might have been geared or steered towards those professions didn't get that.

PR" And I've been wondering also, I've talked to some other people about the lack of black teachers. I know that Mr. Burford went to Andrews, and there was a pretty big controversy about that, I think, right?

HP: Mm-hm.

PR: But he ended up going to Andrews. But how many of the teachers from here went to other schools? I know in a lot of cases when they desegregated schools the black teachers lost their jobs. Do you know what happened here?

HP: I don't know how that looks. I know there were some teachers who went to Central and some went to Andrews. But as far as the number of them, I really don't know. I surely don't. That would be interesting to know, start another conversation, perhaps. There were a number of teachers who, once it closed, some of them I think actually came here too. Because this was a middle school at that time.

PR: So they taught at Griffin.

HP: Yes, I think some did. As a matter of fact, some of them had come from William Penn, also, whenever William Penn lost seventh and eighth grade, seventh, eighth and ninth grades.

PR: So Griffin stayed open, but Penn closed.

HP: That's right. Griffin has never closed from 1953.

PR: So, I know you don't have the nostalgia for William Penn that some of the others do. Do you think that kind of the loss of the institution in the middle of the community has been part of the reason that Washington Street kind of fell onto tough times after, or do you think that was larger forces like desegregation?

HP: I think that, I don't want to use the word loosely, the move toward gentrification that really was in the works a long time ago, even back in the early 60s. I think that this part of the city as a connector to Greensboro, it's like some people thought that this lessened High Point.

PR: Well, and your family moved out, right? You guys didn't live here anymore. You moved out towards Greensboro.

HP: Yeah, yeah, and also some people thought that, you know this is a very small street, so it's like if this is one of the primary ways of getting from High Point to Greensboro, it's like well, we don't really want to go through there. And the other route was over Lexington, Montlieu, and Five Points, those were really the only two ways to get to Greensboro from this side of High Point. If we could change the look of Washington Street and make it a little bit more welcoming, that might bring more real big business into the area. And I don't know if that was really the plan, but I would think that someone would have had that conversation. So the closing of William Penn, I honestly just don't feel as though it had the negative impact that some of my classmates or schoolmates might have suggested. 'Cause if you ask them how, what would have changed.

PR: They talk about loss of community a lot.

HP: And I just, community. I can remember, whenever I was in eighth grade, I was a participant in the citywide spelling bee. And this was the first year that black kids were allowed to participate. And I won the city spelling bee. And not a school, not a black school in the city acknowledged it, or recognized me, or called, or sent a letter or anything. Not even the principal who was at the school.

PR: So you think that the community was more of a nostalgic look back than what it actually was at the time?

HP: It was. And it's great to be able to talk about I can remember this, and there were some awesome things, that I think that any person, a person who grew up in Spanish Harlem would say the same thing. As awful as we think it was, or as awful as it actually was, from my perspective there was never anything besides what we were talking about, the trade school. Stuff like that awesome that came out of William Penn, except having the friends, obviously having great friends in the school. The teachers, I loved the teachers, the teachers were awesome.

PR: So why do you think the teachers here were so particularly good? Were these kind of overqualified folks who weren't able to get jobs elsewhere?

HP: I don't think that they were overqualified. I think that they were just teachers that were the embodiment of that old Latin phrase in loco parentis. I think that they embraced it.

PR: I know a lot of them had graduate degrees, and I was wondering, one of the things I'd like to do is compare- did the teachers at High Poitn High School have the same level of education as the teachers at William Penn did.

HP: Well those people who took those graduate degrees took them with the intent of still remaining in education, because it was like being an educator was very much being at the pinnacle of the professions for a black neighborhood. So what else would one do if one did not practice his professionalism in education? There were a few attorneys, there were a few medical professionals and what not.

PR: I was just wondering if some of these people could have been teaching t colleges under different situations.

HP: That's a good question.

PR: I'm just curious. Alright, I know you have to go, and I actually do too. I have a noon meeting. So this was great. Thank you. Thanks for taking the extra time.

HP: Well, I appreciate you coming out.

PR: Oh, my pleasure.