

Interview with Gwyn Davis, Class of 1966

Dillon: My name is Dillon O’Gorman. I am sitting here with Gwyn Davis. It is Monday July 6th at around 3:15 in the afternoon. So why don't we get started- can you tell me a little bit about your life before William Penn, your childhood growing up?

Gwyn: Well actually, I lived right around the corner from Penn and Griffin. I lived on Underhill, which was around the corner, and you could see both schools from my house. I attended Griffin from first grade til seventh grade, and then went on to Penn after that. William Penn, it was just the focal point, because that was our only school, and we spent a lot of time there. You wanted to know before Penn, though, at Griffin. I think there was Mr. Yokely, Clarence Yokely was my principal. I can remember all of my teachers at Griffin, and the biggest issue that I remember, I was in fifth grade with Mrs. Simmons, and my mother's left handed, my brother's left handed, my dad was right, but I was left handed from first grade to fifth basically. I got to fifth grade and Mrs. Simmons said, "Uh-uh," and she switched me to make sure I would write with the right hand. I never told my mother til later. My mother told me she wished she had known because she would have made sure I stayed left. Now I write, when I write in the right hand, it's very small, and you can't read it. You can't read my writing. I remember that so vividly. I remember all of the students, as a matter of fact most of us, particularly in my area, were all in the same class, from first grade to at least sixth grade. And then, some went over to Boundary. There were some students that would go to Boundary, but the majority of us were at Griffin right on up to William Penn. What else would you like to know?

Dillon: So you lived right around the corner. One thing we've noticed is there was kind of a neighborhood battle between the South Side versus the East Side. Did you notice any of that?

Gwyn: Well, we kind of stayed on our side. In the early years, they went to the schools over in that area. Not really at Griffin or anything. Now, once they were of age and decided to go to Penn, that's a little different. Yeah, we had some issues, but to be perfectly honest, my boyfriend was on the South Side of town. So that was fine with me! Not really. There was, but that was mainly, I believe, in the higher grades, not necessarily in the lower grades.

Dillon: What are some of your other favorite memories, besides switching hands, but what are some of your other favorite memories growing up as a child?

Gwyn: Well, understand the community, if anything happened in school, your community backed you up. For instance, I was in the band also, at Griffin, and we had these band concerts, and we would travel to A & T for these things. Not necessarily concerts-. we'd have to play against other bands to win. And, we went one year to A & T, and we weren't exactly the best on the bus, but somehow or another our parents and the neighborhood heard about it before we even got home. I don't know how that happened. Somebody called someone, but when we returned that evening, not only did we get

chastised by our teacher, but the parents got to us, and the neighborhood! Because the neighborhood, we were the kids. We were supposed to represent our neighborhood, and we weren't supposed to do the things that we did. So, consequently, it wasn't very nice. That was when you could actually be spanked at school. We had, Mr. Haynes was my teacher, and he actually pulled out his ruler and each and every one of us got hit on the hand. But you know, every child needs discipline, we needed discipline, that's all there is to it. We could not run wild. And they didn't let us run wild. It was good. It meant that your whole neighborhood was behind you. And of course, with my mom being at Penn, that didn't help at all.

Dillon: So your mom worked at William Penn for how long, do you know?

Gwyn: I know she was there all during my...I guess she was there when I was in the first grade, all the way 'til, I guess, after going in to college. She was there, and I can't remember how long she was there beforehand. I don't know. But, I was born in '48. My brother was born in '46, so I know she was there before that time.

Dillon: What did your dad do?

Gwyn: Dad was the local physician. He pretty much delivered most of the kids in High Point, in the black community.

Dillon: That's cool!

Gwyn: Oh yea! It was cool in a way. In a way, because the thing about it was I guess he carried a lot of weight. A lot of the guys were kind of not wanting to date me, they were kind of standoffish a little bit because Daddy was no joke. Being the physician that he was, I have to admit he was a very good physician, but he was a disciplinarian, and you just didn't play with him. A lot of guys didn't really, they were kind of scared of him.

Dillon: Was he one of the most popular figures in the community?

Gwyn: Yes, very much so. He was president of a medical society, North Carolina Medical Society. Very much so... there are probably some articles in the newspaper you can find about him. His office was on Washington Street, as a matter of fact... is it still there? I can't remember. It was right beside, it used to be St. Mark Methodist church. It was when Washington Street was really in its heyday, his office was right there, and my grandmother's house was right next door.

Dillon: Now, I know a lot of business shut down as--

Gwyn: Renovation happened.

Dillon: Yea, so did he move his practice?

Gwyn: No, no. But, daddy died when I was about twelve. He died, I wanna say in 1963, I think. He was in a car accident. He had a heart attack coming back from a conference, driving from the airport to home. There was a bridge right there on Old High Point Road, which is totally different now than what it used to be. It had just a little bannister, just a wooden... down over there. But he had a heart attack and went off into the water.

Dillon: I'm sorry to hear that. So your mom pretty much just raised you on her own?

Gwyn: Yeah. Tough woman. Tough woman.

Dillon: So then you moved on to William Penn. What are your favorite memories of William Penn?

Gwyn: Gosh! There are a lot of them. The teachers were amazing. I don't think we thought so at that particular time. I think anybody, when you're in school, you're not exactly thinking highly of your teachers because they pushed you. And of course, they did. They really did. My biggest memory, one of the memories, is that I had a teacher, and I think she was my English teacher. We had to learn these poems, or she wanted us to learn these poems. And to this day, I remember: *Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered weak and weary, Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore, While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping, As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door. 'Tis some visitor,' I muttered.....*The Raven. Edgar Allen Poe. To this day I remember most of that poem because she drilled it into us, and we had to do that.

Dillon: Do you remember who the teacher was? What her name was?

Gwyn: Ms. Newsome, if I remember correctly. She was my eighth grade or ninth grade teacher, one or the other. I also remember, mother was a biology instructor. She and Mrs. Kendall, both of them were biology instructors. And you were in one of their classes. I was not in my mother's class, I was put in Mrs. Kendall's class. But, my brother was in her class! And, bless his heart, he thought he could get away with anything. She flunked him.

Dillon: Really?

Gwyn: She sure did! She said, "No, if you're not gonna do my work, I'm sorry you can't do that. Now, it was only, she flunked him for the first semester. He decided he better do some work, so he did make it out. But she did! I guess he thought she was not going to flunk him, but she sure did.

Dillon: Was that typical of all the teachers in the school, or was just because he was related?

Gwyn: Teachers were tough on us, because they wanted us, like I said, to succeed. So, all of them made sure that we had our work done. That said, if they figured you were going

to become a professional or go into a different direction they made sure...because I remember I didn't want to take physics. I had no desire to do that, but that's what I had to take. They told us what we were going to, what classes were going to take. And that's what we did. We never objected. That was not what we were supposed to do. We had a great deal of respect for our teachers, and especially Mr. Burford. I'm sure they've told you about not walking in the halls. That was his big thing. "Where you going young lady? Why are you in the hall? Do you have a pass?" We respected all of them because they deserved it. They were there for us.

Dillon: What was your typical day like, or your typical schedule?

Gwyn: At Penn? Gosh. Basically, I don't remember all our classes, whether it was English, or whether it was biology, or physics, or whether it was chemistry, whatever it was, English lit. But our last period, and that's why I liked it, our last period was always band. Mr. J.Y. Bell. Oh my gosh, we loved him! He was our band director. So, the last class was always band because that's when we had to practice. And, everybody, no matter what grade you were in, your last class, that's what you were in. You were there that last period to go to band practice. And we all looked forward to band practice. Always. Playing outside, marching. It was the Marching William Penn Tigers. It was good! And Mr. Bell didn't play either. If you didn't get something right...we'd all be sitting in the band room, and he was always on the percussion wall, back there in the back. Something between the bass or the sousas. I remember one day, they just didn't do what he wanted them to do, and he knew they knew the music. He took the eraser off the board and threw it at them! We learned because he was a perfectionist and he wanted all of us to perform in the same manner. So that was Mr. J.Y.

Dillon: What instrument did you play?

Gwyn: Flute.

Dillon: And how old did you start playing that? In Griffin?

Gwyn: In Griffin, mmmm. Mr. Bell also WAS the band director at Griffin, and he started us out in Griffin, and he decided which instruments we should play. I wanted to play the clarinet. "No," he said, "you're a flute player." I went "okay! If you say so!" My brother played the trumpet, cornet, and he picked his out too! We had no choice in the matter. He started us there at Griffin and he groomed us so that when we arrived at Penn, we were good. We were good. And I can remember, one of the other flute players, Barbara Carter, as a matter of fact, her brother is president at Johnson C. Smith, Ronald. He was also at Penn. When I was at Penn, she was at Griffin because she was two years behind me, and she was so good, I have to admit, Barbara was good. Whenever we had a concert, or anything we had to do, he would bring her up from Griffin to play with us at Penn. She was good.

Dillon: Did she ever take your spot on the line or anything?

Gwyn: Of course. When I left! But she was also, in the marching band, she was also a majorette. So, sometimes she was a majorette and sometimes, in the concert band she was always playing the flute, but our marching band, she was a majorette.

Dillon: You kind of touched on it a little bit. What was the dynamic for you in school with your mother there? Were you treated differently by the staff or anything?

Gwyn: No. Mother didn't work that way. Mother had a personality, I have to admit, I think everybody loved her. She was just... she could talk to anybody, about anything, and make you feel like you were the only person that has anything to do with her or whatever. You were just great. She just made you feel good. But she had professionalism; a great deal of professionalism, between...because she taught biology. She also taught physics, and she taught home ec because while we were there, one of our home ec teachers turned ill. She became ill, and mom filled in for her, so she taught home ec. Mother grew up in the country, and so she could cook, and sew and do all that. I can't do all that.

Dillon: She never taught you?

Gwyn: I never stayed around long enough! I was not in the kitchen, did not want to go in the kitchen. I'm sorry, that's not me. You had to take home ec. One of the things you had to do at Penn was to take home ec, or auto mechanics. I took home ec. To this day, I think about what I made. I made an apron. I use it as a dust rag. It was not pretty. Not pretty at all. It just wasn't my forte. It was not what I was supposed to do. We weren't really able to walk the halls so you weren't really going from class to class unless it was absolutely necessary that you went somewhere. So, you went to your class and then when the bell rang you went to the other class. There wasn't a lot of time to spend lollygagging in the halls. They didn't really allow that. You were there to obtain your education. Then of course at lunchtime you were fine. That's when we really socialized.

Dillon: There was a patch of grass, kind of outside where you could sit. Did you like to go out there at all?

Gwyn: All of us did at some point in time, just to get together, because that's when we usually saw each other. Now the band members, we saw each other every day because we were in the band. It was good. It was good. The other thing that I think, when I talk about respect, we never talked back to our teachers. I am appalled when I hear the kids now say something back to the teacher after they're told them to do this and they say, "why? What for? Why do I have to do that?" It never even crossed our minds to say anything to our instructors. If they said do something we did. If they say jump, we just say how high? Period. That was it. And that was the one thing that got my mom. When she went, she had to move from Penn over to Central, she was appalled. She didn't realize, the students there had no respect for their teachers whatsoever. None. And, she didn't appreciate that. In her particular class, if you did cut up in her class, or didn't pay attention, she'd send you out, you just left, you know, "you need to leave." You did not stay in her class. You had to go to the principal's office or someplace, you just were not going stay in her office, in her room because she was there to teach. And that's what she meant to do. And

she was a good teacher! She loved, oh, she loved her science! At Penn, when you had science fairs, she would take her students to the science fairs, and many of them won first place. She loved it. That was what she adored. But she did not like Central.

Dillon: Did she teach home ec as well at Central?

Gwyn: No. No; only at Penn. Only because the teacher became ill and they needed somebody to fill in. I don't think she was the only one. I think there was somebody else too. I can't remember. That's too far back.

Dillon: At the time, obviously there was black and white relations, but was there a difference in how you were treated as a female growing up in the school area?

Gwyn: At Penn? No. Mmm-mm. We were fine. Not to say, there were arguments, not to say there weren't fights or something, but understand at that particular time, there were no guns, knives, or anything of that sort. They were always fistfights. If someone had an argument, you went outside and you had a fistfight. Now, most of the time, it didn't happen on... I didn't see it on campus. It would be in the streets. Now think about it because my house was right on the corner, fistfights would be right there. So, I could stand on my porch. But they were few and far between as far as I was concerned. Now, I don't know about what took place elsewhere. I had no idea. I was one of those goodie two shoes.

Dillon: With your mom there, you'd have to be!

Gwyn: Now my brother may have been a little different. He had to feel his oats. He had to be tough.

Dillon: Now, William Penn was obviously really strict and they raised incredible people growing up there, but did you notice any violence other than the fist fights? Was there violence in the halls, or drugs, or alcohol, or anything like that?

Gwyn: No, no, no. I never saw it. Those around me didn't see it. It might have been someplace else, but not so far as I know on the campus. I don't know if anybody else has told you, had they discussed it or not, that was there on campus. I don't recall that being there.

Dillon: Well the reason I ask is, you know, researching other all black schools in the South, there's different dynamics at each school. So I was just wondering, but it seems as though in every interview, we find that William Penn was--

Gwyn: Penn was different. And you have to understand it stems from the top. Your principal sets the stage. He sets the tone for the school, and everybody respected Burford. And we just would not do anything. I'm not saying that Burford had a heavy hand, but you just liked the man, and you just didn't do it. So, no, we didn't. So far as I know, we didn't have that around.

Dillon: So, we'll go back a bit to the black and white relations. What was that like for you growing up? Did you notice a change in the time when schools were desegregated?

Gwyn: Well, to be perfectly honest when that happened, I wasn't there. I was gone, and I think Barbara's class, Barbara Carter's class was the last class that was at Penn, if I remember correctly. I was already gone. But, understand that it was also the mood of the country. That was during the Civil Rights era, and I marched. Oh, I was there! Mother could not march. The teachers couldn't do that for fear of losing their jobs, and they needed the jobs. But, we did! My friends and I, we would go to the church, we would get all of our information, our instructions, and then we would go march. And I went right down there like everybody else, two by two, going to march in front of the theater. I remember the theater because I remember that was when a man spit on me, and they looked at me going, "No, Gwyn. You can't do anything!" And I went, "UGHH!" You know, that was not nice, but yeah, we did. At that particular time, the main theater, of course we had to go to the balcony. However, we liked the balcony, because we'd throw things down there, down below. Oh it was perfect. Perfect! I would throw wrappers and all kinds of stuff down there. What can I say? Yeah, we did.

Dillon: Can you tell me a little more about that march? What was that like?

Gwyn: It was awesome. Reverend Cox. God, I haven't thought about him in ages. Reverend Cox, Brenda Fountain, these are some of the leaders. We would gather at St. Mark Methodist Church, which was my church, and they would talk to us, and they would let us know why we were there, what we were supposed to do, and then we, you know, everybody would sing the songs. That's the one thing that the black community will have. We will have our songs, and of course we would sing our songs to pump us up and get ready, and then we would leave from there and walk down to downtown. It was surreal. It was amazing to be a part of that; something you just don't forget. You really don't forget that. And then, this has nothing to do with Penn, but I attended school at Spellman in Atlanta, and I was there when Martin Luther King died. That will be imprinted in my brain forever until I close my eyes because I was there. I saw it. He laid in state on my campus at Spellman. I would drive out, because I had my car at that particular time, drive out to the airport and pick people up. They had no clue where they were going to stay. They just knew they were coming in. They had set up the Y, and I took them to the Y. That was an amazing time, but I know you wanna talk about Penn, but I just had to think about that. Can't forget that. Let's go back to Penn.

Dillon: We can talk about that a bit towards the end, after Penn. What do you think the lasting identity of William Penn is? You know, its legacy.

Gwyn: For some reason, I just wanna think, as far as education, foundation of education, because they laid that foundation for all of us. They knew what we wanted, or needed to have, even though we had secondhand books. Our books always came from Central because they belonged to somebody else. So, we never got new books. They were always the old books. I think eventually we did get some new books, but most of them were

secondhand. But, we devoured them. We basically, you know, that was...because we wanted to learn. That was it. We wanted to learn. The teachers there drilled into you that you needed this education in order to get anywhere, and I think that's what they did. I'm grateful for it.

Dillon: What do you think it means to be a student of William Penn? The children now don't really have that pride with their school, I think, the way you guys did.

Gwyn: It was an honor. It was definitely an honor to be a part of William Penn. To this day, I think when we return for our reunion, we'll always sing our Alma Mater. It meant something to us. Sometimes tears, you know, you start tearing up because there's so many memories that you have of the school, it's almost like I can't even put it into words, the feeling that you had for that particular school. So, when we saw, I was so devastated when they decided, at one time, they were just gonna let it sit there. I went, "how can you do that?" That school has so many memories. You think about the auditorium. We spent so much time in that auditorium! I think the chairs now, they have little-- Have you been in the auditorium? Have you been in the school?

Dillon: Mm-hm. We haven't had a full tour of the school since--

Gwyn: In the auditorium, there's seats, and I can see those seats to this, right now, but they put little plaques on them [for] those people that wanted to donate, and I've got one in there. I think I have two seats; one for my mom, and one for my grandparents, if I remember correctly. I can't remember anymore, but there's a plaque on there that has their names on them.

Dillon: Was that something recently that was done?

Gwyn: This was done several years ago when they were renovating the auditorium, and I can't remember when they renovated it, but they renovated the auditorium because it dilapidated. It was falling apart. So, to help with the expense, they asked us to donate to the renovation, and by doing so, they would put a plaque on the chairs, on the arm of the chairs. I need to go back and see because I'm pretty sure I had two, but it's been a while and I don't remember anymore.

Dillon: You were obviously upset when the school closed. What was the impact on the community?

Gwyn: Nobody wanted to be bused over to any other place. We wanted to be Penn. It's just like... here in Charlotte, one of the schools was West Charlotte. As a matter of fact, we used to play West Charlotte. William Penn played West Charlotte High School here in Charlotte. And everybody here wanted to go to West Charlotte. My daughter would tell me, "Momma, if I can't go to West Charlotte," you know, "I'm not going to any other place. If you move, I'm not moving. I'm staying right here, because I wanna go to West Charlotte." So, that was basically in Penn. Everybody wanted to go to William Penn. *Everybody* wanted to go to William Penn. Most of the time it was the only place you

could go, but that's it. When they decided they were gonna close it, the neighborhood was very upset! The black community was going, "No! How can you do that?" But, that's what they did. Who was the Dean then? Superintendent? Dean Pruitt? Was it Pruitt? See I don't remember. But, they wanted all of the kids to go over to other schools, and it wasn't right. It wasn't right, but we couldn't say anything. There was nothing we could do basically. And then, they decided to make it historical because it was. It is a historical place. And then, I think, now, it is a school now, it's back to being a school attached to Griffin because now, I went back, what is it?

Dillon: Penn-Griffin.

Gwyn: Yea, Penn-Griffin. So, that was new. That was different for me. It is what it is. But, we weren't happy at all about that. There were so many memories that we had for William Penn that we, all of us shared. Most of us shared those.

Dillon: So you weren't allowed? Was there any, what's the word I'm looking for... Was there any fight to keep to school open by the administration, or by your mom and the rest of the teachers?

Gwyn: You know, I'll be real honest with you I don't know. Now, I'll tell you, I didn't finish at Penn. When my father passed away, I was getting of age. I was of age, and I was getting to the point where...you have to understand Dad was my heart. I was Daddy's girl. So Mother decided to send me off to school, I went to a private school, for two years. My last year. My junior and senior year at Oakwood in Poughkeepsie, New York. So, I didn't finish up with everybody. However, I always returned to Penn, to reunions and so forth, and my class. I'm still part of that class. The Class of '66, always. As a matter of fact, I just returned from Maryland. Every year, we have a fish fry up in Maryland. It was last weekend. So, I went up there for the fish fry. I was just seeing pictures from my classmates and everybody at the fish fry. We do get together, and we'll always do that.

Dillon: Did you ever, obviously it means so much to you now, did you pass that legacy on to your children?

Gwyn: Well, they don't know that much about Penn. You know, they grew up here in Charlotte. The only thing I know, I think my daughter feels the same way about West Charlotte, the way I felt about William Penn. Always, and she returns for their reunions, but they don't really know that much about High Point. Now, my daughter spent a great deal of time with my mom as she was growing up. So, I don't really know what was passed on from my mom about that.

Dillon: Are you afraid the legacy of Penn might be lost on the people of the future?

Gwyn: No, I don't. As long as we return because when we return for reunion, we bring the kids. So, they also know about Penn. My two, however, I haven't brought mine back. I didn't bring them back. We would return to High Point, yes, and they know where Penn is, and they know that was my school, but by the time, when they... it wasn't a school. It

was kind of lost. It wasn't something that I could say, "Oh, let's go over to the school, and I'm gonna show you where I went, and my classes and the band room." That sort of thing. It wasn't there! So we couldn't do that. That was lost to us. I'm not going to say we hated it. Hate's a very strong, strong emotion, but we disliked it. It hurt us more than anything else.

Dillon: So you have some bitterness or sadness about the school closing?

Gwyn: Oh, definitely. You know, I wish they had kept it up. I wish they hadn't integrated. I wish we had kept the school the way it was. Most of us feel the same way. I'm sure, did Hank say the same thing? And, I can't tell you what any of them did once they figured out, once the Dean decided we were gonna close, once the school board decided they were going to close the school. And they may have had that in the newspaper. Glenn [Chavis] can probably tell you more about that than I can.

Dillon: Is there any other questions that you think I would've asked, or anything that you wanted to say? You know, one last final word about Penn?

Gwyn: Dear William Penn. I am thankful and grateful that I had the opportunity to attend the school. It's something that I will never ever forget. And, I only hope that other students will feel the same way about their school. I don't know if that happens nowadays, these days, I don't think so, but it was something we will always remember. I have another thought. I remember when Kennedy was shot. We had, what was her name? One of our teachers, Mrs. Hughes, heavy-set lady. I can remember, we were all, for some reason we were in the auditorium. I don't know what we were doing, whether it was something had happened, some program. I don't remember what it was, but I remember Mrs. Hughes, tall, heavy-set, ran down the hall. Now that was a sight to see. She ran down the hall and ran into the auditorium to inform us about that. Everybody was like, "what?" But, we knew something was wrong when we saw her running because you didn't see Mrs. Hughes run. She was not a runner. But I remember that. That was another impression. The band concerts we had in that auditorium, that auditorium meant a lot to us. I think I still have some pictures of our concerts with the whole band. My brother had a solo, and he's in his white jacket with his trumpet, and you know, he had the solo in there. That was good. Those are good memories, very good memories at Penn.

Dillon: Tell me a little bit more about the band.

Gwyn: William Penn Marching Tigers. My band, gosh! Hank didn't tell you about it?

Dillon: Oh he did!

Gwyn: I was getting ready to say! He should've definitely told you about it because you know he was percussion. You know, he played!

Dillon: Told me about the snake [walk] you guys did? Where were you? I think it might have been Lexington? I forget where you guys, you did a march and you did the snake for the first time...

Gwyn: Now I'm not sure what year that was. I might have been gone by that time. I don't remember that. I just remember being at William Penn. We practiced down, behind Griffin. There was a field behind Griffin and we practiced back there. The other thing is that, one thing that we did, we marched from Penn to High Point College because that's where our game was. It was there at High Point, well High Point University now. But we would leave our band room, line up, and march down Washington Street, then down Underhill Street, which passed right by my house. I couldn't get on right there. I had to still go up to the school, but we would march and everybody would follow us to the game. That was music, that was the band, that was Hank, that was Gary, his brother. We would march all the way there in our uniforms, and march all the way down Washington Street, down Underhill, because that road wasn't there that separated Underhill to Montlieu. It wasn't there yet, so you could easily get down there, and that's what we did. And the kids would follow us, the adults would follow us. It was just a wonderful thing. The band was magnificent and they played well, without a doubt. We always won our competitions. I remember one time, I was late. I didn't make it up to [the school] on time, but I knew that they were passing by my house. So, I had on my uniform, and Mr. Bell was already gone, he didn't know I did this, he was already marching. He used to march beside the band, or either in front, beside, whatever it is. He passed by, and I was able to get in, in line, and I was able to march on, but I didn't do that. I only did that one time.

Dillon: What do you think would've happened if he saw you?

Gwyn: I might've not played. I might not have played that day. He would've sat me out and said, "No, mm-mm, everybody else was here on time, you can go next time."

Dillon: Well I guess that's all the questions I have for you. Thank you for sitting down with me!