

Interviewee: Hank Pressley

Interviewers: Erin Flynn and Allie Lerner

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Location: High Point, North Carolina

**Erin Flynn:** Where were you born?

**Hank Pressley:** I was born in Laurens, South Carolina; I was born on a cotton farm. My parents were farmers.

**Allie Lerner:** Were you raised there your whole life?

**HP:** No, no. They moved here whenever I was four weeks old. They moved to the suburban areas of High Point. We grew up in the proximity of High Point the entire time, although it was on the north end of town.

**AL:** What are your parent's names?

**HP:** My dad's Jim and my mom is Luella. She's a pretty cool person. My mom is still living, my dad passed away a few years back.

**EF:** Did you have any family that attended the high school [William Penn High School]?

**HP:** Yes, my six older siblings all graduated from William Penn.

**EF:** Oh my gosh, that's a lot.

**HP:** Yes, I'm the seventh of eleven kids.

**EF:** Were there girls and boys?

**HP:** Well, there were five girls, then my brother then me, and then four more girls. So we're right in the middle.

**EF:** Where did you attend elementary and middle school?

**HP:** Elementary school, Florence Elementary 1 through 3, then Alfred J. Griffin for the fourth through the sixth grade. So the middle school that exists now was an elementary school at the time. Whenever I was in elementary school the transition began. Whenever I was in fifth or sixth grade they began working on the gymnasium and all of the L buildings and wings and stuff to add on. I went to junior high school at

Penn Griffin also. Our school system there was no such thing as middle school. It was elementary, then junior high school, then high school.

**EF:** When did you start attending William Penn?

**HP:** My tenth grade year which was the fall of 1964, so '64-'65 was my sophomore year. That's only two or three years ago eh? (laughs)

**AL:** Can you describe your high school life? Like who your friends were? And other things?

**HP:** Sure, my friends were largely athletic people. Half of them were academically gifted also. So I had a pretty broad group of friends with whom I associated, I was not what you call an overly athletic person, but I grew into becoming an athlete. At the beginning I was just kind of nerdy I guess. Having grown up in the far reaches of the county, there were very few of the urban things that inner city guys did, we didn't do them. So it's like we threw rocks, and we trampled in mud, and we chased cows and hogs and things pigs and chickens, they (the inner-city kids) were playing basketball in the city. We didn't do that.

**AL:** Did you do anything outside of high school? Did you work or have outside activities?

**HP:** During high school I worked as a grocery store bag boy. And in those days whenever you'd go to the grocery store there was a kid there who put the grocery's in bags and put them in the cart and took them out for you, so I was one of those kids, and I worked at one of the famous grocery stores of the area, it was called the Big Bear Super Market.

**EF:** Did all your friends go to the same high school as you? Or were some at a different high school?

**HP:** All of my friends were here [William Penn High School]. At the time there was only one black high school, and this was the black high school. This was the magnet, so to speak, for all of them black kids in the surrounding areas, and that is the surrounding areas of High Point, Trinity, Archdale, some of the outskirts of Winston-Salem and areas some what close to Greensboro but not all the way over that way. This was the place where all the black kids came.

**EF:** OK. Did you have a best friend?

**HP:** Yeah, I had a couple of best friends, my two best friends in high school were probably James MacAdoo and Stanley Sims.

**EF:** Did you meet them in high school or had you known them previously?

**HP:** I met them in junior high school. We all came together from different areas. MacAdoo came from the Leonard St. district. Leonard St. School was an elementary school, actually the police department is in it now. And Stanley came from the Parkview area but of course I'd known Stanley since sixth grade, but seventh grade is whenever most of us who went to high school got together so it was our junior high school and we were tracked. And some of the kids, you all are tracked somewhat too [directed to Allie]. In junior high school, it was ability grouping, so in seventh grade you were in the first group, second group, third group, fourth group.

**EF:** So almost everyone at your junior high school came here [William Penn/Penn-Griffin]?

**HP:** Yes, very much. Almost everybody. There were a few people who moved away, but virtually everyone came directly from beneath the hill to up the hill. And the great thing about it is most of us had older siblings up here also, so we knew a lot about the school, we knew the history of it, we knew the names of the teachers, we knew the principal, we knew all of the stories and stuff, so there we were.

**AL:** You said you'd grown up in a rural area. Did that affect things for life for you or make you see things differently?

**HP:** It probably did. Well, today I spend a lot of time gardening, I like to fish, and I'm an outdoor person, and some of the things that I do as a teacher probably are a direct result of my having a good relationship with nature. So I think that probably having been reared those first few years in a bucolic or rural area probably had a positive effect on me.

**EF:** Were you involved in a church youth group or anything in high school?

**HP:** Church youth group? No. The only thing that I was involved in that dealt with the church was scouts, and I was in cub scouts briefly but it was, the Cub Scout troop, was sponsored by one of the churches and its one of the churches that's right up here on Washington St. too.

**EF:** What did you and your friends do outside of high school?

**HP:** Gee. We clowned around; there were very, very few things to do. There were no youth group type activities. We had a club though that was called Gray Y, and Gray Y was a relationship between the YMCA or the YWCA and the schools, and they would send representatives from the YMCA over to the schools to recruit kids to be associated with the YMCA, so that was one of the things that I might have done for a short period of time. But I can't think of any other clubs that kids in the city had that they could be associated with. Some of the kids in the county may have well been connected with 4H, and we went to school with county kids also, we had kids that came from Guilford County, from Forsyth County, from Randolph County, so many of

those kids were still farm kids. And so we living in the inner-city viewed them as country people, country bumpkin type people, but we all came to school together.

**EF:** Did you go to any movies or anything like that?

**HP:** Oh yeah, oh yeah. Movies were great, there's a movie house right here on Washington St. whenever you leave the school go up to the right, it's maybe less than 700 steps going that way. It's the Ritz theater, it was cool and we would all go to the movies, many of us, and that was one of the things we would talk about every Monday, the movies that we saw, because there would always be a double feature on Sundays. You could go to the movies with 25 cents and actually get you into the movie and buy popcorn. If you had another 25 cents, you could also get a soda and two scoops of ice cream, all of that for 50 cents. Unbelievable and a double feature movie.

**AL:** Is there anything specifically that you would attribute the lack of activities for you all to do outside of high school?

**HP:** Yeah, well it was just simply a lack of funds allocated to the black neighborhood. The city simply did not spend a lot of money on the black neighborhood. Most of the things that we did were related to self-help type things. Some of the kids would get together and play baseball, but it wasn't a baseball league. There were two or three and maybe four baseball teams that you could play on, and if you didn't play on one of those teams you just didn't play. Today we have about 50 baseball teams in the city, and it was a time where it was just not necessary for city powers to spend money on the black neighborhoods.

**EF:** Did things begin to change while you were in high school or not really?

**HP:** No things never... well one of the big things that was important was when a white baseball teams came to travel to play us up in Washington Terrace Park right down the street here. And they came to our park, and we played them, so the act of a white team coming to play against us was pretty significant. Did things change? Largely, no. I was a part of the last civil rights demonstrations, so my junior year one of my friends and I decided we were going to march in the civil rights demonstration and we made the trip, you've made the walk [directed at Allie] on two or three occasions over the years and hopefully we'll do it again in February, We left from here back in that day and walked down Washington St. to Centennial all the way down on Main St. and the idea is civil disobedience. It's not what the people wanted to see us doing, but it's one those things where you don't want us to do this but were going to do this until we get our rights. And that started being done whenever some of my older sisters were participating, but my junior year I think was the last year that it was done and very shortly, it might have done a little bit after that, but very shortly after that some things changed. What could we say changed I can't remember, but I can remember close to my home walking down Kivett Dr. there was a place that was called the Barbeque Shack, a restaurant. And there were the cooks who were black women and they cooked, you could smell the barbeque, but black people couldn't go into the place. And

there was a sign on the door, and I can remember it verbatim, it says “ We serve whites only, all others will be prosecuted for trespassing.” And that was one of things that just stuck out, you walked past that thing everyday and there it was. So things were just really even a little bit more regressive than perhaps than what is portrayed to be on television, because many of the people who are making these documentaries really haven’t felt the gravity of what it was really like.

**EF:** Did you know anyone that was involved in the sit-in?

**HP:** Oh yeah, one of my older sisters was one of the original 11

**EF:** OK. Was that a big part of the high school? Were a lot of people involved?

**HP:** No they weren’t. You know ,this area was not one of the more liberal or militant areas. We for the most part were a very passive group of people, so it’s like “well this is the way it is and its going to change in time we hope” and that was pretty much the way that people felt. But there were some people who were connected to more militant groups, and they brought the militants to us and we became a part of it. Let’s see, I have pictures somewhere. I thought I brought them in here today. We were not the people you see on television who were meeting all of the time and considering social unrest. I don’t have those pictures with me right now. But some of the things that we did wound up being impactful.

**AL:** So you would not consider the civil disobedience a large part of your life?

**HP:** Oh no, not a large part. It was almost as if though it was something that just happened for me. It wasn’t something that I planned on doing for years or planned on doing for months. What had happened was my friend and I, it was my first job, I was working at the grocery store and generally get paid on Thursdays, so it’s like we were leaving here, “ I don’t have to work today let’s go pick up my check.” So we went by there, and the checks weren’t there so we came back this way and as we were coming back this way because both of us lived south of here [William Penn/Penn Griffin High School] or East of here as we came by here we saw the groups milling around and gathering for the march. And we were going “oh yeah, that’s right they’re having a march today, so let’s join them.” So we joined them and we marched. And it’s like that was my experience at being a part of the civil rights demonstrations. It was just a serendipitous type occurrence for me. Now for my sister, I truly don’t know, but it’s like her having been one of the original 11, she must have been one of the people that was somewhat part of planning. And if not part of the planning she would have been one of the very first recruits or something. Those days are, there not very, very, very many instances that you can see in the news paper or anywhere that those events occurred here.

**EF:** So were there any school buses allocated to transport you or did you have to walk?

**HP:** School buses? Yes there were school buses, but only for county people. This is really the cool thing, well it's really almost ironic, today there's a big clamor about busing kids for the sake of integration. People don't want their kids on buses to go across the county just to go to school. But in those days, black kids were put on buses and there's a school right here and they drove miles and miles and miles and miles to get them to William Penn rather than integrate the school here. They put black kids on buses and they drove them for dozens of miles just to make them go to this school here. So that was the way that there were buses in those days. Any other person who rode buses for the sake of going to school rode buses at their own expense, the city buses. Because there were kids who lived on the other side of town that got here the best they could, we're talking about people for who it would take perhaps 45 minutes to walk that distance. Some kids would walk that distance because they didn't have any money to ride the buses. Other kids, well it would cost something like 10 cents to ride the bus. So you could get on the bus and 10 cents, and if the bus did not carry you all the way it would be 5 cents for a transfer so 15 cents one way, 15 cents that morning, 15 cents that evening, that's 30 cents, that's pretty expensive in those days to travel.

**EF:** To go see a movie.

**HP:** Yeah, that's right.

**EF:** So did you walk to and from school?

**HP:** Generally I walked to and from school, generally I did. Whenever it rained my dad brought us, my dad worked at night, but generally we walked, and a long ways it was too. , It's probably a mile and a half, maybe probably two miles to school for me. It's not a huge distance but it was significant. I can remember walking in the rain from school, walking in blizzard conditions, whenever school would let out because of snow. I can remember walking in snow up to my knees.

**EF:** Would you walk with your friends and your siblings?

**HP:** With my friends mostly. Whenever we would leave home, but then again my parents probably made sure that my younger sister rode to school everyday. My brother and I, and perhaps my older siblings, were left to their own devices to get to school and come back unless the weather was bad. If the weather was bad dad would bring us.

**EF:** Was it a safe walk?

**HP:** Oh yeah, it was a very safe walk. All of the neighborhoods for the most part were black through which we came. However, the furthest distance that we lived from the school was after we moved in 1962 or '63, I can't remember, to where my mom's home is now. It's on New St. in High Point and it was, we were integrating a neighborhood that was totally white. And one day my mom sent me to the store, and

the store's a long walk, maybe about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile, so two ways it's a mile and a half. Well, on the way back from the store there was a man who spotted me, and I could see him driving down the driveway, his house was way up the rode it was like a big old farm up there, but it wasn't a farm it was just a big yard, and he comes peeling out of his driveway, dust and dirt flying everywhere, and he reaches out of the window and shoots at me – bang ! He missed me, but it was one of those situations actually I told my mother and I think it frightened my mother so much that she never told my dad. Can you believe that in a situation that when someone shoots at your child you never do anything about it? That was the way that it was, this area of the country was not pacifist, but it was very passive.

**EF:** Did you have other friends with stories similar to that? Or was it not really talked about?

**HP:** I don't recall any of my other friends who ever experienced that, and none of my siblings either. That was just one of those occurrences. I was in the wrong place, and it was just it could have been a very unlucky thing, and that very same summer just a couple months later, I think, was whenever the four little girls got killed in the bombing at that church in Birmingham, Alabama. So it was a time when people who were filled with hate, well be more specific, when white people who were filled with hate felt as though they had the latitude to hurt people anytime they wanted to without any reason, without anything happening. So we got through that. thank goodness.

**AL:** Do you feel that a more direct approach or taking more action or speaking about the things that happened would have made things become better faster?

**HP:** Possibly and probably, but the thing that would have likely happened in the immediate aftermath could possibly have been repercussion. It's like you're causing trouble were going to take care of you, and that's what my mother was certainly afraid of, I'm sure, because having been reared in South Carolina which is a much, much, much more regressive type situation than it was even here. It was just important to her not to make any problems, not to make any waves, because for her protecting her family probably meant just be quiet.

**EF:** So was there a lot of tension that was just unspoken about between the blacks and whites?

**HP:** Oh gosh, there was tons of tension, the tension was so thick generally speaking that you could cut it. You could almost see the tension, and it wasn't passive tension. There were acts of terrorism that actually occurred on a somewhat regular basis. There were very few if any murders or anything like that, but there were always instances of people telling stories about having been jumped by some guys or something like that and having to run. So it was a serious circumstance of people feeling as though "you're black and I'm white so that means that I can do anything that I want to, to you and nobody's going to say anything about it so you better watch

your step” so we didn’t walk through white neighborhoods, we did not do that. Obviously, we were taught to be more than respectful, and really to just keep your mouth closed whenever you’re around a policeman, particularly a white policeman, and we were taught that also at school.

**EF:** When the white baseball teams would come, would there be conflicts when that would happen?

**HP:** No, there weren’t. That’s amazing, that’s a good question, because it’s almost like sportsmanship prevailed then. It’s almost as though the beginning of kids being the peacemakers, and we see that still today but we never, and of course there were some circumstances where black kids and white kids got into scuffles along the way, but black kids fought black kids and white kids fought white kids also so kids fight kids.

**EF:** So was a lot of the conflict younger African Americans and the older white men?

**HP:** Yes, there was quite a bit, there was quite a bit. The older white men were the difficult group, and quite frankly still are, that’s where the difficulty in relations lies, I think. Those were the people who were likely to threaten a black kid. It wasn’t white women, it wasn’t members of the white clergy or anything, it was the blue-collar white worker for the most part. Many of the professional white men in High Point were very very very much gentlemen.

**EF:** So you didn’t really have any conflicts between people your own age of different race?

**HP:** It was very little, because there were very little times where we inter mingled. So it’s like whenever you have two distinctly discrete education systems. We had a black education system, we had a white education system. All of the black people went to the black system, and everyone that wasn’t black went to the white system. So you had the Hispanic, the Asian, and the white people going to the white schools, and the black people going to the black schools. But of course, there were very very few Hispanics in High Point, and there were almost no Asians. But those who did live here out of choice I’m sure chose to go to the white schools.

**EF:** So are there any other stories you want to share with us?

**HP:** Any other stories? Well, I can recall specifically I think it was my eighth grade yeah, it was 1963. When I was in eighth grade we had the spelling championship here at Griffin and my best friend won eighth grade, and I was runner up, and so we were in the school spelling championship, and this kid in seventh grade won the school championship and I was runner up for the school. But the first place and second place people in the school went to the city championship, and it was right down on English Road at the administration building, and I won the spelling championship and it was the first year that black kids had been allowed to participate in it. And I can remember as though it were yesterday that when I spelled the final word, and it was abundantly



clear that there was nothing that anyone else could do, it's like the quiet that fell over the whole building until my chaperone said " He won, he won. That's it he wins." And that had a way of bringing some peace into relationship between black people and white people also, because I got letters from all of the principals of the schools around and congratulatory notes and so I'm sure there was a contingency from the white community that were supporting my trip to the state spelling bee and there were things like that, little bitty mall things that happened occasionally that happened to help or ameliorate the conditions, but that was one that happened specifically to me.

### Mr. Pressley Interview Part 2

**EF:** This is an interview with Mr. James Pressley and we are continuing from the other one. So it was interesting growing up in High Point I'm sure.

**HP:** Indeed it was.

**EF:** Yeah. So what were some of your favorite things to do when you were in high school?

**HP:** Well, in high school I played basketball, some football, baseball. I was a pretty good student so I enjoyed the academics; I enjoyed hanging out with friends occasionally. I'm from a very large family so I had a good relationship with my siblings so I enjoyed hanging out with them and of course family things church and a little bit of travel.

**EF:** For your sports did you travel at all?

**HP:** No, I didn't travel. I didn't play basketball in high school until my senior year. We traveled as far as Alamance County and that was about the distance.

**EF:** So did you ever follow the marching band?

**HP:** Yeah, actually during the parade route some of us who were not in band, and even before getting to high school, as a junior high school kid we would actually follow band because the band was the ticket, and particularly during homecoming parades. The homecoming parade would start from William Penn and go up Washington St. all the way up to Main St., and it would go down Main St. and come back around Russell St. and all the way back down Hamilton so it was a pretty good parade route and a very highly renowned, widely renowned marching band.

**EF:** We've heard that a lot.

**HP:** Yeah, they were really good, if you want to watch something that they were patterned after, if you ever get an opportunity to watch A&T's marching band, Florida A&Ms marching band those are pretty much along the same line.

**EF:** So what kind of classes did you take?

**HP:** OK, let's see, of course we took the requisite courses which were English Composition, English literature, I took all of the maths: algebra, geometry and trig. And let's see biology physics, general science and chemistry and world history, U.S. history, civics, that was pretty much the basic courses.

**EF:** So you weren't on any track?

**HP:** Well I was on an advanced track, I was always tracked with the advanced group, but were no AP English's or anything like that, there was no AP at the time. Every kid took the same course but you were grouped with different people according to potential.

**EF:** How did they determine that?

**HP:** Teacher evaluations, IQ assessments, and all that stuff, probably more IQ.

**EF:** So did you ever go to the A&W or the K&W?

**HP:** K&W, the K&W restaurant. There was a restaurant right up here that I tried to get a job, and that's the same restaurant, but I never did go there as far as having a meal because it was pretty much off limits.

**EF:** Is that where they had one of the sit-ins or protests there?

**HP:** No. The sit-ins were at F.W. Woolworth and S.H. Kress, those were what were called dime stores. Back in the old days they had these department stores that sold things at rock-bottom prices and they were called dime stores. So Woolworth was where the sit-in was.

**EF:** OK. What were some of the other things that you would do outside of school with your friends?

**HP:** Oh boy. Well we mostly just played. There were very few things, there were very few activities were available. We went to the YMCA and I was in Cub Scouts, of course before high school. But as far as activities, social things, there were very very few things. You would hang out with each other and you'd visit each other, and then you'd go home.

**EF:** So were you part of the walking bus when you went to school?

**HP:** The walking bus?

**EF:** I heard that there was a where all the kids would walk together to school.

**HP:** I have never heard of that term. The walking bus, I have never heard of that term. That's very interesting I can see how that could get a name like that but no. The walking bus. That may very well have been from the people who lived on the other side of town and traveled together, perhaps for safety or something like that I don't know. I never heard of it.

**EF:** Some of the other interviewees talked about that.

**HP:** Great, that's good. I look forward to finding out more about that.

**EF:** Yeah. That will be interesting. So what were your favorite memories from William Penn?

**HP:** Okay, William Penn, favorite memories. Well, I loved school, I loved all of my classes, I loved all of my teachers, I can remember as I said I was a pretty good student and so I got awards in geometry and biology and the like. I can remember the recognition for high achievement; those were good things for me. It was especially good because my older siblings and parents expected it, so it was pretty cool. Towards the end, my senior year, this was actually once I'd transferred from William Penn to Ragsdale, but still have a relationship with William Penn. I wasn't good enough to play sports at William Penn, I wasn't good enough to play basketball and baseball, but when I went to Ragsdale I made the basketball team. So having a relationship of communicating back and forth with my friends who were here were on the team here at William Penn, and I was on the team here at Ragsdale that was fun, and occasionally getting to see them on weekends and things like that. Between my sophomore year and junior year, the summer of 1965 it was, I was fortunate enough to go to an enrichment program at Palmer Memorial Institute, it's at Sedalia, and it was an historically really important school for black people and some of the more highly renowned black people in history attended that prep school. So the Ford Foundation sponsored an Upward Bound-type program, and there were three of us from the school who were selected to go to that and I was one of the people. So we spent six weeks at Palmer Memorial Institute, and it was a residential program so it's getting a person ready for university life, college life and we got a seriously in-depth education in humanities. And that was really one of the highlights of my high school career. It was really cool. If I can find a link that will connect you to some of the history to that I'll send it to you.

**EF:** That would be great, thank you. So at your high school was there anything like a college and career center that would help with finding a job or getting into different colleges?

**HP:** No, there was not a college or career center at William Penn. What we had was a guidance counselor, Mrs. Hughes was the guidance counselor here and she is the daughter of Alfred J. Griffin, the man for who the middle school is named. So she had a really historical connection to the community and was pretty well embraced as being an important person as far as placement in universities and recommendations

and all of those sorts of things. I didn't have a close relationship with her. My introduction to universities and colleges was basically something that was initiated by my family. I don't want to say that there seemed to be a group of favorites or anything in high school, but some people got more assistance from the guidance department than others, and maybe it's because I didn't need it, I don't know.

**EF:** So your family helped you, did all of your older siblings go to college as well?

**HP:** Not all of them, but my three, well the four siblings ahead of me did, so it was pretty much an expectation and whenever I was in junior high school, one of my sisters was in college, and when I was in high school two of my siblings were in college. One my siblings is a former instructor at North Carolina Central, so she and I used to compare notes over the years. My siblings were really probably more responsible for me having a desire to do well in school than anything else.

**EF:** So would they help tutor you at all?

**HP:** Oh yeah, I mean all through my life. I mean up until I got to the point where I didn't require it, but it's like I know for a fact whenever I was growing up in the early years, my older siblings were the ones who taught me everything. My oldest sister was twelve years older than I, I have one 12 years older, 10 years older, 8 years older, 6 years older, 4 years older, my brother's 2 years older so we were all 2 years apart. So the connection was there, there was a continuum, so the one would always connect to the one below so we were all very well connected.

**EF:** That's a big family.

**HP:** There were eleven.

**EF:** So they would help you with your different schoolwork, I bet you couldn't get away with much either.

**HP:** Well, it's like the expectations, I didn't try to get away with things. It's like you knew that you were expected to do well, and for the most part you we did because that was the expectation. So it wasn't "well we got to bring you back in line," it was just you toed the line and that's the way we were. It was family central, everything happened with in the family, everyone knew what was going on and everybody had their expectations and you just lived up to them, if you were a younger child.

**EF:** What different schools did they go on to after?

**HP:** Let's see, we had North Carolina Central, Johnson C. Smith University, Guilford Tech, at the time Guilford Tech started out as it was Guilford Normal and Industrial Institute or something like that, and so it was a school that was really big in preparing students in clerical work, and so one of my older sisters specialized in clerical work.

**EF:** When you were in high school what were the different kinds of activities outside of school? You weren't a part of a church youth group or anything?

**HP:** No. I was briefly a part of the, what was called the Gray Y. The Gray Y club was something where the YMCA had a relationship with the school, and so they would send ambassadors or representatives from YMCA or YWCA to our school and some kids would connect with that. It was a social type thing, I think it was similar to 4H club. Do you remember the 4H club?

**EF:** Mm-hm, yeah.

**HP:** I believe we actually had a 4H club here too but I wasn't a part of that because I lived in the city. There were clubs. I didn't really participate in clubs. I don't know. I was pretty happy with myself, you know.

**EF:** Did you move around at all when you were in high school?

**HP:** The family? No, my family's home still is where it was when we moved in eighth grade. From eighth grade to present my families home still is where it was and we're talking about gosh that's 43 years year, I said 43 years, gosh no 53 years.

**EF:** So did Penn Griffin [this should be William Penn] help you at all to figure out you wanted to teach?

**HP:** No. I came to teaching pretty much circuitously because it was like I never had any desire or any plan to teach. I've really come to teaching kind of late. My first job was as a firefighter. I was a firefighter here in High Point for nine years. After that I was a quality assurance analyst for Miller Brewing Company, and for that I was a laboratory technician, in which I did evaluations on the quality of the product, I did that for about eight years, and then I've come to this [teaching] after those two careers, so I've been at this for 25 years. So I really never really knew what I wanted to do. I just enjoyed everything, so it was like it was difficult for me to pin point what I wanted to do, it really was. So opportunities would just avail themselves to me and then if I had a penchant to do it I would just go along with it. So whenever I became a firefighter I had no idea I wanted to be a firefighter. I just was told when I went to take the civil service exam and it's like whenever I talked with the secretary of the civil service exam, I said "I'd like to take the civil service exam", and he said "Which one? I have 127 of them." And a civil servant is just a person who works for government, and I didn't really realize that. So he says, "How old are you? How would you like to be a firefighter?" "I said I don't know." "He said I have this exam why don't you take it." So I blew the top out of that, so I accepted the position and I stayed there for nine years. That was really just a serendipitous type situation it just happened. I left that and went to Miller Brewing Company as a quality assurance analyst, and it almost just happened then because there was a friend of mine who had told me that a guy with whom we went to school had an interview with Miller.

You know, "Roland had an interview with Miller" its like wow they pay really great. I said, "Well, if Roland can get an interview I can get a job there." So I had an interview and boom got the position. It's nothing that I wanted to do it just availed itself and then after years of that, eight years of that or so, my wife was an educator and I had children in school, and it's like each year they were off for two months every summer and I was working. so I'd get two weeks off a year and they'd get two months off. So I said " You know we're going to have to change this," so that sort of pulled me toward education so I decided, I was forty years old, I became a teacher at forty years old so I did that and that's been it, and it's the best one that I've had.

**EF:** did you have any favorite teachers in high school?

**HP:** Oh yes. I loved them all honestly but its like the ones that stick out mostly were number one, Mr. Hawkins. Henry Hawkins, was my math teacher you know he taught me algebra, geometry, and so on. And he was such a charismatic educator, you know his personality was, he created learning environments because of the way carried himself and he talked. And he kind of liked me too, no kind of liked me I knew he liked me, because you know he called on me all the time and he would brag about me all the time, and it's like he was another father, yeah I loved him so much. And then there was Mrs. Kendall, she was my biology teacher and I only had her one year but its like she really impressed me the way she taught, and I loved the course work. And then there was Ms. MacDonald who was my tenth grade English instructor, and it's just I will never forget her and I loved English too it was great, so those were my three favorites although I loved them all. But in high school, oh but there was one other Mrs. Hernandez she was I don't know whether I can say she was a refugee but wasn't an exile, she was an immigrant from Cuba, she and her family and she was the first non-black instructor at William Penn and she was Cuban and you know in Cuba they don't consider race. She was Hispanic and she made herself right at home, and I learned Spanish so well, and I can remember that in high school she was the only instructor, the only teacher after I got to high school who came and visited my family, she came to my home. And I can remember her and her husband sitting in my living room, and my father and her husband having a beer together, and it's like that was just so cool, and those were my four that would have to be favorite teachers.

**EF:** Were those your favorite subjects as well, or did you have a favorite subject?

**HP:** I loved them all. But, favorite subject I can't say that I had a favorite subject I loved school. I loved education, and that's true.

**EF:** Are there any other things you want me to know about William Penn?

**HP:** Well, William Penn is a special place for me because I knew so much about before I even came here. Having 6 siblings ahead of me who graduated from William Penn. I knew the alma mater, I knew the fight songs, I knew the teacher's names, it's like whenever I came in and I can remember teachers whisper, "He's one of those

Pressleys.” And I can remember there were so many years that I had been prepared to come into the school because I had been from that school down there [Alfred J. Griffin] from fourth grade to ninth grade, six years I looked up here at William Penn. And one of the things that I shouldn’t forget is every spring while I was at Griffin the North Carolina Symphony came to visit and they toured and visited school and they put on concerts, and that was one of the highlights of my year every year. And I love classical music still, and probably because I used to get that baptism of symphony music every year right down there in that gymnasium. That’s one of the things that I remember too. But William Penn, it’s been the central magnet for black education in this city since. This city, High Point, from my research, is the largest city between Washington D.C. and Atlanta that does not have a black school. And it’s just unbelievable that a city this size does not have a black university. There’s never been a black college, there’s never been a black school of higher education, so William Penn has been it, and whenever the school was closed in 1968, the magnet for black intellect just disappeared. So whenever this place opened back up it’s been a desire of mine that this thing rises back up to the level of a source of not of pride but of self awareness for the black community because this is it.

**EF:** On the weekends or after school would you run any errands for your family at all?

**HP:** Errands, well no. I had to do very little like that because there were so many kids in my family. I did things like yard work. I didn’t have to make beds or wash dishes or anything like that because I had sisters. But all of the yard work and anything like that, the washing cars and stuff like that, my brother and I did that, but my brother and I lived a very pampered life. Pampered lives I should say, because you know my sisters today still harp on him, and whenever I visit my mother now it’s like I’m still her little boy. It’s really cool, but you know my sisters still pick on me at that because we didn’t have to do a whole lot. So errands and stuff like that, nah. We didn’t have to do anything like that.

**EF:** So did you do any on our own, did you go shopping or anything on the weekends? Is that that something you would do?

**HP:** No. We didn’t have money, I didn’t have a car, I didn’t drive until after I was out of college, you know. I drove, I got my drivers license at 16 but it’s like I never had a car. Could I borrow the family car? No, because my parents both worked. There were two cars there, but they both worked and it would have been frivolous to ask to use the car, they just didn’t do that. So some of the fun things that the other kids did, my family didn’t do them. My family was very much more conservative than most of the kids with whom we went to school because we were from a farm background. My parents had been farmers before I was born in South Carolina, cotton farmers. So they had a much more conservative perspective on life because things were so oppressed and conservative in South Carolina than they were here. So whenever we moved here we were kind of living in the 19<sup>th</sup> century while everyone else was in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. So for me it was almost like getting caught up

with city life, and I'm sure it was that way for my older siblings too. But you know we were blessed, we were intellectually gifted or maybe I should say we were gifted, so that helped us. But some of the things that most of the kids might make reference to if you talked to somebody else, we just didn't do it.

**EF:** So would you walk everywhere?

**HP:** Absolutely. Walked. We walked pretty much everywhere. We lived for the most part we lived down Kivett Drive maybe 2 miles from here, and maybe a little bit more than that, and we walked to school and we walked home. If it stormed my parents would come get us, but other than that we walked to and from school. And we're carrying an armful of books, and I can remember my sisters would carry an armful of books all the way from home and all the way back. Talk about commitment, but that's the way it was. And in those days it didn't seem like that was a far reach because in those days that's just the way it was.