

**Herbert Wiley  
Interviewee**

**Ivory Bridgewater  
High Point University  
Interviewer**

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**IB:** I am here, Ivory Bridgewater, here with Mr. Herbert Wiley from William Penn High School. Class, which class?

**HW:** Class of 1967.

**IB:** Class of 1967. I'm just here to interview Mr. Wiley to talk about his experiences in high school, and just different things. So Mr. Wiley, let's just get started. Could you tell me a little bit about your childhood and growing up? Did you grow up in High Point?

**HW:** Yes, I was born here in High Point, August 26, 1949. My family lived originally on what is Washington Street and we moved down to 406 Hopson (Hobson?) Street, where my father built a house and we had a home there, at 406 Hobson Street. I went to elementary school at Griffin Elementary School which is still here in High Point. It's part of the Penn-Griffin complex now. I went there for all of my elementary school, and from the first to the seventh grade. After the seventh grade we moved to Albany, Georgia. I went to school there for my eighth, ninth, tenth, and eleventh grade years. We returned to High Point 1966 and I started my senior year at William Penn High School.

Because I had grown up with most of the young people here in High Point, it was a family type atmosphere. One thing that segregation had that integration doesn't have, is a sense of family. Because they wanted to say that we were separate and equal, but really it was separate and unequal. And we had to overcome second-hand schoolbooks, less than Class A facilities or teaching techniques, and we were exposed to learning behind the curve as opposed to ahead of the curve. This created an atmosphere of "I've got to try harder to catch up, stay up, and get ahead". If you were black coming up, or African American or whatever they want to say, in the '50s and early '60s, the mind set was "I must be better" because our parents had come out of a time when they weren't allowed to be better. Our parents were only allowed to be what society said they were. Ours was the first generation to be exposed to an opportunity to exceed our conditions, our circumstances. The thing about a segregated society is that you are a victim of the circumstances of that society. We were the first generation who were given an opportunity to overcome those circumstances. With the 1954 school act of separate and equal being (pfft) thrown out, integration came. It came slow though, it came slow here to High Point because in 1967, you had some kids who had gone to William Penn going to Central and Ragsdale which were predominantly white schools. But the core of the black community remained at William Penn. And if there was really an advantage at William

Penn that we had, it was that we had teachers who really pushed education. This was during a time when education was the key to unlock the door to opportunity. It still is, but I don't think it's valued to the point where it was valued then, because when you don't have ten things in the cupboard as opposed to one thing, that one thing takes on more value. All we had was education.

**IB:** Yes.

**HW:** You know; you guys have access. You grow up in a society where you are exposed to all types of people, all types of things, it's much more diverse. So you grow up with a feeling of "I can because they are". See, we grew up in an atmosphere of 'we've got to try because we're being denied.' See, that's a totally different mindset. Have you ever been denied anything in your life that you wanted to do?

**IB:** No.

**HW:** So, you don't know that feeling. Well, I can't get admitted to that white school even though I have the grades. See, that's something that is totally foreign to you. You're going to High Point University, there was a time you could not go to High Point University. You see what I'm saying?

**IB:** Mm-hm

**HW:** So you had to take whatever opportunity that was afforded you, which was the historically black universities, like A&T, Winston-Salem State, Elizabeth City State, Norfolk. Those types of schools, I'd say "okay, I've got to concentrate on getting there". Therefore, the majority of the graduates from William Penn went to historically black universities, but they went. And we've turned out doctors, lawyers, teachers, politicians, whole nine yards. And we did it in an atmosphere that was separate but unequal.

You understand what I'm saying? There's a difference in separate and equal, that means that you are over here, but you have the same resources as the people over there. But we didn't have that, so we had to overcome the unequal to level out the playing field, so we could carve out a life for ourselves. There was a time that I couldn't live in a neighborhood like this, understand? Even if I had the money I couldn't do it. See how times have changed? So, the experience of going to a black segregated school, a lot of people say that it could be so negative, but for the time, for the circumstances, for where we were as a country, we use that as a positive. It is a frustrating thing to know you are as good, or better, but you aren't given the opportunity to show that, see, that's one of the things that segregation tried to do to us as a people. "Oh you can go to school nigger, you can learn how to read nigger, you can learn how to do this nigger, but you can't come in my community? You see? You can have a college education nigger, and you can come on my job nigger, but you're going to sweep the floor. Do you understand, in the context? I'm just talking in the language that was talked.

**IB:** Yes.

**HW:** My wife, had an uncle with a college degree. He fought in World War II and when he came home, even though he had a degree and was a skilled weldsman, person that welds, he could not get a job in his field because there were no black welders. You could be a janitor. Now this is a man with a college degree and a welder license. The only thing he could be was a welder. You see how far we've moved? We have a choice, we can be bitter as to the lack of opportunity that was afforded us or we can take advantage of whatever opportunity was afforded us, and make it better for the generations that are ahead of us. That's what we chose to do.

You are a product of that. Now, where are you from?

**IB:** I'm from Memphis, Tennessee.

**HW:** So you know! Memphis still is, you slice it down the middle. West Memphis is what?

**IB:** Pretty black.

**HW:** West Memphis has crime. West Memphis has poverty, has all of the ills of impoverished society. So here, because we were a small town and because we were segregated, it didn't matter if you were a black doctor or a teacher or a lawyer, you still had to live with the factory worker, the vagrant, or whatever because you couldn't separate. You see what I'm saying? You lived in the same neighborhood. You did everything together, but those were our role models. Now that we've gotten to the point where we can live where we want to live and go where our money takes us, we've left a whole class of people back there. You see? And we say either they can catch up or they can stay back, so *we've* become separate and unequal people ourselves. If you understand what I'm saying. You see it right in Memphis, the doctors don't live over there with the factory workers do they?

**IB:** No.

**HW:** So we as African Americans, we have created a separate and unequal society for ourselves. Ferguson, MO, that is a case of separate and unequal, people all crowded in one little area. You've got seventy percent black folk, and you've got what twenty percent representation on the police department, none on the city council. You see, that is where America is going, it's being polarized. It's no longer color so much as it is economics.

Our and my experience from going to segregated schools, now my father was in the military, so we could have gone to schools on post in Georgia, but he said "no, you're going to go to schools off post" which were segregated. And during 1963, '64, '65, at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, Dr. King was first put in jail in Albany, Georgia for putting a march together. So I saw up close the beatings, the marches, and just the degradation of black people, trying to hold them down. Some of that existed here, but not to the level that it did there. And when I came back here, my senior year in high school at William Penn, it was like it's always been here, nothing had changed. And in a way that was good but in a way that was bad because times were changing. The thing that we had to be careful of, and our teachers had to be careful of, was that they didn't become

wardens to keep us in line, but to open the door of opportunity. Some teachers did, some didn't. You may talk to somebody who says "oh, we had the best black teachers in the world" and some of those black teachers were just like some of these bad white teachers. We want to kind of glorify it when we're away from it, but if you look at it, you're going to have good and bad no matter what you do, in a integrated society, or segregated society. But, by the grace of God, there was more good then there was bad. There was a chance for opportunity and that is what drives the train. That's what a lot of young people your age today don't understand, they take opportunity for granted, they think that they have a right or

**IB:** A sense of entitlement,

**HW:** Yes, a sense of entitlement. A right. Do you know the difference in a right? You know what a right is? If you have a right, what is it to you?

**IB:** If I have a right, I am allowed to do something, I am able to do something.

**HW:** No, you're not. You have a privilege, understand the difference in rights and privileges. The Bill of Rights should be called the Bill of Privileges, because they are subject to change. The Constitution is subject to change; the law of the land is subject to change. Same sex marriage right now, before, North Carolina voted against it. What did the judges say? It's unconstitutional, they just changed the law. Now they say they have a right to be married, but it's really a privilege given to them by a law enacted by man. Only God can give you a right, because only God can give you something that man can't change. You remember that as you get older. You see, that's what we had to deal with, we were chasing we thought was our rights, but white folks were giving us privileges. "You used to couldn't go to school with us before. Okay, we are going to let y'all go to school with us, we are going to change the law". We think that it's a right but they're giving us a privilege. All of a sudden, you see schools segregating back again because of where people live, how they are bused. You have to pass a law to integrate. So do you really have a right? No, they giving you a privilege. Do you understand?

**IB:** Yeah

**HW:** So always know the difference in a right and a privilege. This country was built on privilege, not rights. And I love America, I went to Vietnam, I fought in Vietnam, I spent twenty-nine years in the military. I love America because it's the best place in the world for me to live, you understand what I'm saying?

**IB:** Yeah

**HW:** But I understand that the things that America allows me to do are not rights, they're privileges because they can be taken at any time if the law changes. So that's what young people, and I'm not going to just say young black people, but young people in general, need to understand because some of them feel so entitled, as though everything is a right.

You know, I wanted to tie my dog up in my backyard, I can't anymore because they passed a law saying that I can't tie my dog up anymore, I got to put him in a fence. You see, it was a privilege at one time for me to tie him up, and now the privilege is gone. Are you following me on this privilege and rights thing? If you talk to your professor and you tell him now that I know the difference between a privilege and a right. I used to think I had a right, but no, y'all just given me a privilege.

**IB:** Yeah, it is true. It's subject to change.

**HW:** Because it's subject to change. See, a right doesn't change, okay?

**IB:** A right is constant.

**HW:** And only God can give you a right. That's only God, if you get straight on that in your life, you will go a long way because you will treat everything. The thing that people fail to understand, that black folk had to understand, is that we had to value the privilege because we didn't have the right. You understand what I'm saying? They gave us the privilege to have a school because there was a time when blacks were denied the right to even know how to read. They gave us the privilege to have books, and we valued the privilege, but see, when they signed the bill saying that it's your right now, do you see how we kind of just moved away from valuing it?

**IB:** Mm-hm

**HW:** Because people value privileges more than they value rights, that's why laws change, because I want to do something that I'm not able to do. Same-sex marriage, that's a perfect example. If you say everybody has the right to get married, yeah, that's fine, but don't deny me my right to say what I think it should be between a man and a woman, or I think it should be between two women or two men, because it's a privilege to be married.

**IB:** Mm-hm

**HW:** Now, which path are you going to choose? That's just like when we were going to high school, we were all given access to different paths, do you want to go ahead and seek the opportunity or do you just want to stop here after high school and just say 'I'm going to lay around'. You see the results of it in Memphis, Detroit, High Point, anywhere you go. So the experience in High Point, and you could talk to people who have more of the High Point experience as far as high school than I do, like I said I only had the one year and that's all I saw. I was concentrated on coming here and graduating, and getting on with my life. Whereas a lot of the people who I'd left here had been through the cycle here. A lot of them had very different experiences than I did, say in your freshman, sophomore, and junior year because we didn't have middle school. High school was tenth, eleventh, and twelfth. You had junior high school which was seventh, eighth, and ninth. So those people that did tenth through twelfth at William Penn will have a lot more to say about it than I will, if I'm just going to be honest with you, to me, in a sense, William Penn was very limited. We didn't even have a baseball team and different things, and there were a lot of courses that we didn't have access to. I came out of a high school in Georgia where

we had a student body of almost fifteen hundred. We had a student body here of maybe five hundred. You see the difference? I came out of one where we had a broad spectrum of programs to one where we had limited programs, but that makes William Penn an even stronger entity because the young people who went there had to overcome even more to be the successes that they are today. So my hat's off to them, because they used what was available. Now everybody didn't go off to college, everybody didn't make it, there's some people struggling because that's just how it is going to be. But everybody had an opportunity to learn. But I know you've never heard of this, but W.E.B DuBois, the talented tenth see a lot of black schools were structured under the concept of the talented tenth. Do you know what the talented tenth was?

**IB:** No.

**HW:** Take the highest ten percent of the kids who are going to school, those are the ones that are going to go to college. So, you take the, you put them in a college track and the other ninety percent, you put them into an industrial track, because you want them to go into the workforce, because we don't think they're able to compete at a college level. Now that's W.E.B DuBois, you look it up, the talented tenth, W.E.B. DuBois. Read it and when you talk to people, ask them the question, do you feel like you were ever involved in the theory of the talented tenth? Because right now, what do you think honors programs are?

**IB:** The talented tenth.

**HW:** (laughs)The more things change...

**IB:** The more things stay the same.

**HW:** We had the same thing at William Penn, they didn't call them honors courses, you had the classes that were advanced courses and you were in a college preparatory track is what they called it. They would identify which students were to participate in this through the testing that was done, that started in the third grade. So, when you got to high school, by the time you got to high school, you stayed with the same group of people until graduation because those people had been identified. I don't know if that happened in your school, it may not because of integration. But see, here, it was just a tight knit community.

See, we saw something you'll never see again. Families going to the same school, there's fourteen in my family and seven, eight nine, nine of us graduated from William Penn. The others because of their age they went to integrated schools. But, you see, if integration hadn't come along, it would have been a family of fourteen in the same school. So you build within it, but the kids that you go to junior high with and then to tenth, eleventh, twelfth grades were basically the same group of kids, because of the talented tenth, the testing, the advanced courses you took and all of that. And I guess it worked, some people would say 'Well, I have a problem with it' but that's what they are doing now. That's what AP courses are, that's what the weighted averages are. How is

something going to have a 4.5 or 5.0 on a 4-point scale, that's like saying give 120 percent. Where are you going to get the other twenty percent from when all you have is a hundred percent?

That's the mindset that was built into us. You have to do more because of who you are and what you are, 'you black, you black in America.' If you're black in America, if someone runs the race in ten flat, you better run it in 9.9, you understand? If somebody hit 350, you better hit 351. If somebody catches 200 balls, you better catch 201 balls, if somebody makes an A, you better make an A plus. You understand the concept I'm telling? And see, that in itself was not bad because for the individuals that were exposed to that at school and at home, because one thing our parents would always tell us is 'you got to be better', and that's what drove us and kept us moving forward, those of us who did. If you talk to people in my age group now, they'd say 'yeah, my momma and daddy always told me you need to do more than I do'. And your parents should be telling you that, they should tell you 'no, you don't settle for what we did. You need to do more.' Nothing changes. If you come from a stable home, with parents who care about you are going to do with your life. I had a son, I told him the same thing, 'you need to be better, you need to strive harder' but the thing that we have to do is provide the support for them to take advantage of the opportunities. That's what is killing us as a community now, there is no such thing as a bad child, it's bad parenting, bad homes, bad environment. What we've got to do is try to create more support for them to take advantage of the opportunities that are out there. You come all the way across the country went to college at High Point University. If you look around over there, there ain't many of me here. But see, that can be a positive if you allow it to be a positive, or a negative if you allow it to be a negative. So the thing you have to do is say what do I want it to be, a blessing or a curse? You should want it to be a blessing. You see what I'm saying? When you go through, try to make sure somebody else sometime come back through. That's what we were being taught in school. You're paving the way for the next generation and the only way the next generation is going to benefit is that you try to do something positive and give something back. That was the message I gained from growing up in a separate and unequal society.

You got any more questions?

**IB:** I think you got all of them. I guess my last question would be, do you feel that growing up in your time as opposed to say now; do you feel like the position now you're in came from what happened in the past?

**HW:** Yes, it did.

**IB:** Did pressure make diamonds, I guess, in this situation?

**HW:** If you have any intelligence, if you have any drive, if you have any sense of who you are, you take every experience you go through in life and you try to use it to your advantage. Now there are plenty of people use being black as a disadvantage, they feel an entitlement, forty acres and a mule- keep waiting. If you ain't gotten it by now, do you

think you're going to get it? Reparations, do you think you're going to get any reparations?

**IB:** Not unless we take it.

**HW:** That's not reparations, that's booty, that's bounty, when you going to take it. See, reparations are something that somebody gives to you.

**IB:** Ain't getting that.

**HW:** Yes, all the experiences that I have had in my life have shaped me into being who I am because I will not let the negative experiences outweigh the positives. I have been called nigger, I have drunk out of the colored only water fountain, I had to ride in the back of the bus, but you know, here I am, I can ride in the front of the bus, I can drink out of anything I want. I can go anywhere I want to go. So God is good. So why am I going to dwell on the fact of what I used to couldn't do and not rejoice in the fact of what I can do? Do you understand what I'm saying? Can I put it any clearer?

**IB:** That's clear enough.

**HW:** See, I'm just straight-forward. I can't dress it up for you, I can't paint you a pretty picture. It is what it is. You can either be a victim of your circumstances or you can control your circumstances to not be a victim. That's just how life is. I'm sure you know people who are victims, even at your age, even in your age group. You know people who, every excuse is a reason. What is the difference between a reason and an excuse? Alright, you gave me the excuses to why you can't do something, now what's the reason. 'I don't have a car,' you can walk. 'I don't have no money', well, you can work. You see what I'm saying? You using an excuse to become their reason, and that's something, thank God, was drilled into us because of segregation. Don't let the excuse of not being able to be with them be the reason that you don't succeed. You can write that now. That will last forever. Don't let the excuse of not being able to be with them be the reason that you don't succeed.

Is there anything else?

**IB:** I think that's it. That was perfect. I did complete my interview with Mr. Herbert Wiley. Thank you for listening. This has been Ivory Bridgewater from High Point University, and this completes the interview. Thanks

**HW:** Signing off.



