

A Community Remembers
Interview: Rebecca Wooden

Laura Browder: Rebecca, I'm gonna ask you--

Rebecca Wooden: Ok.

LB: ...to hold this.

RW: Ok.

LB: ... and I'm gonna... set this one up as well. There we go. We're good. And let's just start by you telling me your name so I can keep everyone straight on the tapes, and tell me something about how you grew up and what your family is like.

RW: Um. Well, my name is Rebecca Wooden. And, um, I'm from a family of six... children. Um, so I had a very large family. Three boys and three girls. And, um, you know, I guess my family is considered--was considered a traditional family, I thought. Um, but a family that was poor [chuckles]. We didn't have a lot of money. Um, family that didn't have a lot of money, and so, um, I would say that we struggled as a family. Um... but I think that... um, what I liked about my family was that we had both parents, you know, for quite a while in my family, until my father, and you know, you parents separated. Um, but, you know, very, very--good family. We were very close, my kids--I mean my brothers and sisters were very close. Um, my grandmother even, you know, lived with us for a while--a while. My grandmother and my grandfather, they all lived, um, with us in the same house for a while. So that--

LB: Your mother's parents?

RW: My father's parents. So that made for a very interesting life. Um, I grew to ver--you know, very--be very close to my grandparents. Um, but that was temporary... so, basically, you know, I would say that my family was large. Um... we had a lot of fun. Um... I don't think we were a hugging type of family... but we were very loving family. We still loved each other. Because, um, everybody was basically very close, like in age. And I'm the youngest of the family. So, um, my--my brother is the oldest. And so I think, um... you know, I think we had a pretty good family. You know? To start out with. [Laughs.] It didn't stay that way, but to start out with.

LB: When did things change?

RW: I think things changed when my parents split up. Um... and... so, when my parents split up--split up, back in the day, you know, in *that* day, you really didn't have a lot of divorce and separation. My parents didn't div--my parents did not divorce. But... um, they separated and they never ever divorced, until my father died, even though they never stayed--lived together. They actually stayed married. So my father passed, like, a year ago in November. So, um, they were still married. Even though they didn't live together. Um, but basically, you know, it's a--it was a very, very good family. But things changed when they split. And so--

LB: And you were how old?

RW: I was about... I think about eleven or twelve. And so it was really not very heard of, you know, to have a divorce... back then, which I appreciate because... you know, nowadays you have a lot of single, um h--you know, families. Um, but I did grow up in both families, so I feel like--I mean with both parents and I--I feel like that was a bonus for me. But when it happened, um... I think I was kinda glad at first because [laughing] my father was not a very good father at that point. Um, he grew to be a good father later. But I think at the point at which, you know, they had problems that he wasn't a very good father, so I was kinda happy, because it caused my mother a lot of grief... you know, with him being, um, in the family. So... um... basically, they went their separate ways... um, I think he was h--um, with us for a little while when we moved from Southside to Highland Park, but then... um... he... they basically split up then.

LB: So that was a big change. And moving from Southside to Highland Park -- what brought that about?

RW: Um... actually, I'm sorry, it was moving from Highland Park to Southside. I'm sorry.

LB: I'll ask the same question [laughs].

RW: Yes. [Laughs.] Moving from Highland Park to Southside was interesting... because, um, that was when I got to go to George Wythe, you know, eventually. Um... it was, you know, it was a... it was a nice... place, but it was a kind of small place for all of us. Kinda tight. But that was the point where my father had left, you know. By--when--by the time we got to Highland Park, he and left. So, um, he was there for some period of time... but then, um, at some point he left. And then it was my mom and all of us. So what happened was my older siblings, you know, especially the sisters, took care of me or made sure that I had what I needed. You know, back in the day your mom doesn't tell you things that you need to know as a young lady. So she would, like, "Tell your sister to help you with this" and get to--you know, sister help you with that, so... It's, um... you know, it was different growing up, I think, but I didn't know any different. It was a--to me, it was--it was ok. I do remember... being poor [laughs]... because [laughs] we ate stuff like, uh, flour cakes? I don't know if anybody... really eats flour cakes, but... we had flour cakes, where you just make flour, water, and you put it in the pan and it's almost like a pancake. But it wasn't any pancake mix, it was a pa--it was that kinda cake. And so we also had, um, you know, we did the bananas on the bread, you know, with the, um... peanut butter and things like that. That's what we ate. Things like that. And bologna sandwiches. We ate a lot of [laughing] bologna sandwiches. But we survived! And my sister... it was the sister in the middle... she became the cook. And she can cook today. So she's the best cook in the family. All of us cook pretty well. But somehow she was the one that cooked... you know, she was the one that cooked more than anybody. So she especially, you know, she became very good at it. And so she would make something out of nothing. My mom was a great cook, too, but my mom for some reason... worked a lot. She worked a lot and she also spent a lot of time away, so...

LB: What--what did she do for work?

RW: My mother, um, actually was... was, um... did not complete high school. And so, she was--

if she had completed high school, she would have been what I am today, a counselor, cuz she's a great listener... great problem-solver... um, but she was like a domestic person. Back in the--in the--that time. And she did, like, cooking, you know. Things like that. Working dietician, you know, dietary, you know, that kinda thing... is what she did. So she did a lot of that.

LB: What do you remember about the neighborhood where you grew up?

RW: Boy. Mm--

LB: Or *both* neighborhoods.

RW: Well... one of the neighborhoods I grew up in was, um--I lived in Church Hill. Also--

LB: Oh, that's where I live.

RW: Yeah, when I first came up, it was in Church Hill. I love Church Hill. Because, um, I was probably about maybe five... or something like that, or six. I lived right across from the park. Chimborazo Park. And back then, they had spring water! I mean that spring water was the best water you could *ever* imagine! It was free! [Chuckling] you just went over there and got your spring water. I remember that and I also remember playing softball. We were very close. I mean, at--I knew *everybody* on the block. It was just like back in the old days, you know, you knew all of your neighbors. All of your neighbors got together and played games. You know, spin-the-bottle, all that crazy stuff. Um, we had a great time, you know, in, um, Broad Street. That was when my father was going well. Um, we had a beautiful home. Um, wood floors... in the home, and at that time, that was--my grandparents were living up in the top floor. And my parents lived down on the first two floors. And, um, it was just a gorgeous home, you know. He worked hard. He worked at, um, Cookie Compan--Cookie Factory. And, um... he really did a--a really good job, you know. So, um... it was--it was--it was fantastic. I mean, Highland Park... you know, I had--I went to Highland--to--the schools in Highland Park, I mean, in that--that area... when I was in, like, a teenager. So, um... that was like, uh, like I said, a smaller home. And, um... we basically... you know, you just grew up during that time. You know. You went through your teenage years during that time.

LB: So that was before George Wythe.

RW: Yeah, that was all before George Wythe.

LB: And where did you go to school in Highland Park?

RW: Um... in Highland Park I went to, um, East End. It was called East End Middle School. And... what is it--it's a--Franklin Military now.

LB: Oh, ok!

RW: It's Franklin Military School now. So it was East End Junior High. And... I liked East End because I was active in all of the clubs. I was in... you know, their yearbook, whatev--they--I

think it was the editorial... kinda thing. Newspaper. I was in, um, I think I was in the choir. I think I was in the National Junior Honor Society. Things like that. Um... I really enjoyed East End. It was nice. And I had some great teachers over there.

LB: Was that a segregated school at that time?

RW: Um... at that time, yeah, because everybody just... you didn't know any different. You know, you just all went to the same school. And... that was... the school I went to. You know, from my neighborhood.

LB: And what do you remember about Richmond as a whole... growing up?

RW: Um...

LB: Cuz it's changed so much.

RW: Oh, gosh.

LB: [Laughs.]

RW: Well... when I was little, I remember... that... this is one thing that sticks out in my mind. I liked the draw back then and--and--when I was a little girl. And so, um, I drew an octopus... why back when, I must've been about seven, I don't even know. But of course, you weren't allowed in the stores, you know, blacks weren't allowed in stores like Thalhimers and Miller & Rhoads... And so one of my pictures was on display and I remember that my mom couldn't take me... there... cuz she couldn't go in. And so, cuz I--I wanted to see the picture on display and she said we couldn't go there. So that's one thing I remember. Um, but growing up in --in Richmond... I mean, to me, I didn't know... how it was that it was... you know, different or segregated, you know, not really, until it was brought to my attention. I really didn't... know anything because you went to school with the same people. So you didn't know how a different culture, you kn--you know... how it would be with a different culture. So, um, it was to me--it was fun! It was... just fine! You know, um, I knew, like I said, we didn't have any money so... my school probably, now looking back, was probably--didn't, you know--was never a great school. Um, some of my teachers weren't that great [laughs]. A couple of them weren't that great. I don't wanna say they weren't all, but a couple of them... um, you know, weren't that great, but... overall, I think I got a--a great education.

LB: And did you stay at East End until you went to George Wythe? Was that right when you moved to Southside?

RW: Um, I stayed at East End... until, yeah. That was my middle school. And then, um, we had to go to ninth grade... Actually I didn't go right to George Wythe. I went to John F. Kennedy... for one year. So when the desegregation started, I went to... um, Kennedy. And, um, that was the school that was in my neighborhood at the time... because I was in Highland Park.

LB: And how was that? How'd you like--

RW: Kennedy was nice, um... It was a new--fairly new school. Um, Governor Holton's daughter went there [laughs]... so... that was fantastic, you know. I, um, you know, think about them now, I didn't know Anne Holton, but it was the one under, now I can't--I can think of Anne Holton's name, but I can't think of, um, the younger ones that, um... that I went to school with, but she was the one always in the pict--in the paper. Um... so... it was... she was like anybody else, but it was fantastic to see her and, you know, all of her entourage, you know, with the governor coming to school... to bring her, and... I felt... good! You know? I felt good, I was on the cheering squad there. Um... I was active in a lot of clubs.

LB: What clubs did you belong to?

RW: I think at that time... for--mostly cheerleading was the most thing. Um, and the Honor Society. Those were the two things--I think I may have also been... in the French Club, I think. And that was about it. You know, but those things kept me busy along with doing a lot of homework. I did a lot cuz I was in the honors and... advanced classes, so... I stayed really, really busy. But, I liked, um, Kennedy. Um... you know, but I didn't really have a lot of qualms about leaving it. I just... I just thought it was a nice school.

LB: When you think of Kennedy, what sticks out in your mind? You know, what--what memories...

RW: [Chuckles.]

LB: ...kind of pop up, because you've got such an incredible memory.

RW: Yeah.

LB: I mean, you really do--

RW: Really?

LB: ...I mean, I interview people all the time and you remember some many details, it's great.

RW: Well, that's great [laughs]. I'm--I don't feel like it sometimes.

LB: [Laughs.]

RW: [Laughs] um, but, the biggest thing I remem--remember about Kennedy, my world revolved around cheering, so... um, I just remember trying out for the cheering squad. I remember my first tryouts and... you know, I remember working so hard on my cartwheels and my round-offs and... I had, um, like, my neighbors were also... um, a part of the cheering squad, so my next-door neighbor, my--well, she was across the street. Her--she was on the--the senior's cheering squad? And so--the varsity cheering squad. So she recruited me and her sister... to be on the junior cheering squad, so, um... I just remember the tryouts and everything. That was really exciting to me. I also remember.... you know what else I remember? I remember that... there

were some great people. Um, you know... cuz it was--it was integrated, so... I actually had... a lot of help [laughs] from, you know, my white peers. Um, so math was a [laughing] struggle for me, so... I, um, actually had--I cannot remember the young man's name, but he was in the my math class, he was a white guy, and he... helped me with my math. I think it was, uh, maybe algebra I... something like that. Um... he just... sat down with me and he was very... willing. And so, and--just capable and he just helped me. So I remember that. And my teachers were great, too.

LB: And was--are--was Kennedy... majority black at that point because I remember it was such a big deal when Anne Holton went there.

RW: Yeah.

LB: Right? Was that... basically a black school by that point?

RW: No, Kennedy was integrated.

LB: I mean--

RW: It was--

LB: Cuz I know it started off white... and then--

RW: It was white. Yeah.

LB: And so were you in the minority there? Or were you in the majority--

RW: At Kennedy... Ok, at Kennedy, I think that there was... a pretty good mix. I'm not even remember as well as George Wythe, but I'm remembering that it was a mix there. But I'm not sure how the mix was--

LB: Right.

RW: ...which way it was.

LB: Right, right.

RW: I just remember that... there were whites there, and I was in classes with whites, and... um... you know, and it was only for one year--

LB: Right.

RW: ... so it was my freshman year of high school [laughing]. So your freshman year of high school is kinda vague.... Um, I just remember that--that--that young man helped me with my math. And, um, I remember my math teacher, he was a really cool guy. Um, and those are the th--the rest of it is kind of a blur, like I just remember it being, you know, a--a mix of--of students--

LB: Mm hmm.

RW: ... but... no--nothing else really in particular other than that the cheering was my life... That was my life, that was what I enjoyed the most.

LB: And then you moved to Wythe -- did you stay on the cheering squad there?

RW: I immediately jumped on the cheering squad, really tried out, made it [laughs]...

LB: You know who I'm gonna interview soon is Ms. Mims (?).

RW: Oh! That's gonna be nice.

LB: I know.

RW: Yeah, Ms. Mims is great. She is wonderful. She--she was one of the ones that... you know, championed the calls for the cheerleaders and she kept us all together. She had her little girl there... you know... we--when she was little, she used to bring her around.

LB: I didn't know that.

RW: Yeah, she--you know, used to be on the--with us, wherever we went. *Cute* little girl. Of course she's grown now [laughs].

LB: [Laughs.]

RW: ... Like to see what she looks like now, which I'm sure she's beautiful.

LB: So tell me more about Wythe. Tell me what you remember, tell me what it was like starting there, your first day...

RW: Well, it was funny because a lot of the people were already there, and I came in the tenth grade. So... coming in tenth grade, I think I lost a little bit of ground--

LB: Yeah.

RW: Because people had started their cliques, you know and getting into, you know, friendships with people. Um, but, I was just a very active person so I got in on the cheering squad, I was at the SCA, I was on the Honor Society, I was in the French club, I was in *every* kinda club... that you can imagine. I was, you know, secretary for the SCA.

LB: What's the SCA?

RW: The Student Council.

LB: Oh, ok.

RW: Yeah. So, um, I mean, it was... to me, I just jumped... right in with everything. But I did notice that--I was in the honors and advanced classes, so... my classes, I was the only... black person in many of my classes, and a lot of my friends... were in some of the other regular classes... and all... and ar--in other different classes. So I didn't see them until lunchtime. So I basically was the only person in a mi--and I didn't understand that. I was in--I guess I came in from Kennedy with these classes and they... put me in those classes, and... I think I would try to get out of them and my counselor would say, "No, this is where you belong, you have great scores," and I never--I don't know what my scores were. But, "You have great scores and you, you know, have done well. You can do this." You know, I would struggle [chuckling] and then really try to get out cuz I was in advanced classes, and they weren't easy. [Laughs] they were not.

LB: No, I get that impression from a lot of people--

RW: Yeah.

LB: ...I've talked to.

RW: Yeah, they. were not and... um, they--I had to actually have a phone tree with my white classmates. You know, and I had a [laughs] person who was called my twin -- she was white. Um... her name is Nancy, and she was born on the same day as I was. [Laughs] so... Nancy and I... became... phone mates. And then she would call... other white peers... and then report back to me, and then we would--she would help me with my studies. [Laughing] Cuz I was in, like... oh, man, trigonometry--trigonometry [laughs], I was in calculus, I was in physics, I was in all of these courses that I was--kept thinking, "How do they think I'm supposed to do this." And so, um, my counselor kept saying, "You can do it." And then I would just... get on the phone tree with my colleagues, my--my, um, classmates. Nancy was the main one, and she would help me. And she would, you know, just say--she would actually help me with my homework. And then I would understand it, and then I would be able to go on and do it. There were many times that I would understand and do just as well as anybody else on it. So... I learned... very well. But what was interesting was that... I didn't experience--I didn't see racism in that setting. I'm sure it was there, but I went with my lunch, you know, the people that I was used to -- my classmates I was used to -- at lunchtime, but then, in the... my classroom, I was the--bout the only one or two... of the whole class. But I wasn't mistreated. Um, I wasn't... called names.

LB: [Coughs.]

RW: I wasn't called names. Um, so, um... I don't know, it was just... now, there were some that probably didn't want to help me [laughs]. Because, I required some help. But they, you know--but I never saw anything overt... that, you know, wasn't called--you know names and things--you kn--you hear stuff--

LB: Yeah.

RW: ...like that. Never experienced anything like that. And I had another friend, and you

probably will interview him, Doug, he--Doug was just... it's--I can even say enough about Doug. Doug... was *out...standing*. I don't know if you gonna interview him... He's in California--

LB: I know! That's the problem.

RW: Doug was... he would make me cry. I mean, just because, he... crosses the line of a human being. Um, he... went beyond--I mean there were times when... I didn't, you know, my math teacher [laughs] ... wouldn't... know how to teach it enough so that I could understand it. But--but Doug... when the teacher would leave the room or was absent, *he taught the entire class*.

LB: Wow.

RW: He taught the entire class. He did not care... He did not--he was unselfish. Selfless. So he would, like--if I didn't understand it, he would say, "Come here." And we would sit down together and he would say, "This is how you do it." He would explain it, and when I would finish, I would go, "... Wow--how--why do I understand it so well... when [laughing] *you* explain it, but I don't understand it when, you know, when the teaching is going on." So... he was an asset... at that school. He, today, he has not stopped. You know, he's still very involved. So I do remember that about him. So *I know* he's gonna be blessed.... Yeah.

LB: I've heard so much about him.

RW: [Laughs.]

LB: And so were you involved in, um... mainly cheerleading -- any other...

RW: Um...

LB: ...things that kind of filled your life? What do you remember most about those years?

RW: About my high school at Geor--high...school years at George Wythe?

LB: Yeah or just your, you know... your time growing up.

RW: Um...

LB: In and out of school.

RW: Well, let me see. I just remember, well, when I was younger, it's just--it was just--a lot of fun because... when I was, um, younger, I hung with, you know--during my middle school years, there were times when I would go--it was just so freer then because you didn't have to worry about, like, who was gonna hurt you, what time of night it was, I could go out... and walk, like, for a mile or maybe two or three miles, at least two miles. You know, to my friend's house... alone. I was--probably no more than... ten? And I could just go all the way to her house, pick her up and then she and I would walk back, and then when she would--well, we'll walk her back again and then I would walk home. And it would all be, probably just before dark. And... no one

bothers you. So I remember, it just being peaceful... it being the kinda place that you could just enjoy. I mean, Church Hill... to me was... just the kinda place that... you--you would like your children to experience. You know, where... you can just sit outside and you can enjoy the sights... and no one is... doing anything that will disturb you. Um, everybody's coming together. Um, those kinds... of things I really remember. Um... I mean, so many memories I have, mean my high school prom, you know. You remember that.

LB: What do you remember about your prom?

RW: [Laughs] well, I went to my junior class prom and my high school prom. Um... well, both of them were very, very nice. I mean, you know, with--I went with... [laughs] who *once* became my husband, not my husband now, but y--became my husband. Um, we were class couple. And you might know him, too, Randall (?). We'd be--we were class couple. And so... we would've went to the... junior class prom and I remember having on, um... for my high school prom, I had on like a blue and white... and um... my--had my hair done up. My--that day, my sister had--I told her to do my hair cuz she could do a nice French row, she had my hair all twisted up and it was just so beautiful. And he had on his tux and, you know, little--the blue shirt. Um... I just remember in my junior prom, that was when I met him. Because in my junior prom [laughs], um, it was so funny because... as young people, you go to the prom to have a good time, to see who's there, what they have on, and that kinda thing. So, in my junior prom, I think I was with someone else. I went to the prom with someone else. And... he was there. The person that, you know, that would eventually be my husband -- we're not husband--you know, we're not married now. But he would eventually be my husband. He... was at the junior prom with someone else and I was at the prom with someone else. But for some reason at the prom, we connected [laughs]. So... you know and so, or maybe I connected [laughs] I don't know, it was just like--I--he was a friend of mine... And we spent time... talking, you know, like study buddies in the--in the library. I do remember a lot of that, too, we had *a lot* of study halls [laughs]... at George Wythe. We had nice study halls in George Wythe where you really were supposed to be studying but you were really talking instead of studying, having a good time, cutting' up. So that's the kind of thing--that's where I met Mark, you know, the study hall. He was all around--um, taking pictures. But, um, at the pr--the--the--junior prom... I was with someone he was with someone, my--my husband-to-be, at that time. And so, um... well, we were g--boyfriend and girlfriend. We became boyfriend and girlfriend because... that was what happened then. You know, it was like... wait a minute, I've been meeting, talking with him as a friend... but then he became something else after that. So then, um, it was so funny, I'll never rem--forget it. After the prom and I kinda knew I felt different, I didn't know he felt different... so when you're a young person you kinda say silly stuff, so I was, like, "Wha--what would you say to someone," I asked him. I said, "I have a question." He said, "What is it?" I said, "What would you say to someone... if they're--if you like them... but you don't know if they'll like you, but... you think you like--" [laughs] [I get far?]. ... that's what I said. He said, "Well I guess you just tell 'em." [Laughs]

LB: [Laughs.]

RW: So I said [laughing], "Well, I'm telling you now."

LB: [Laughs.]

RW: So that's--that was how that started out. Um... but we had a great time at that--at, um, *both* proms. It was very, very nice.

LB: Now, when you think of those years... are there any interactions that you had--I mean, certainly with Doug and Randall, but other interactions with students or teachers or administrators that stand out in your mind?

RW: Um... well... see, the thing about it with... all of the interactions I had... were... at... after s--after hours, ok? Cuz with my--my peers... because like I said, everybody I was with was my white classmates during the day, my... the black classmates at lunchtime and after hours... and so during the week I spent all of my time trying to get my academics.

LB: Yeah.

RW: So, the times that I had with my other--with all of my peers--with my black peers, would be in the evenings we would play, you know, like, kickball, things like that. We would go out to the movies. We always went out to the movies, we went to see all sorts of things. We went bowling. We did *all sorts* of things, you know, all during my--my high school years. And so, um, we had like a, um, a group of people... that stuck together. It was like, you know, a lot of smart people hung together. I hung with a lot of the cheerleaders, but there was probably two of them that I really hung with, uh, on the cheering squad. So we went to each other's homes... we did things like cook together, we played together... we did all sorts of things like that. So it was a--it was a lot of fun.

LB: The only cheerleaders I've interviewed so far have been Elizabeth Bowles Salim and Valerie Perkins.

RW: Ohhh, ok. So, I mean Angela Bailey, was one of the ones I hung with. And Melissa Robinson, who they call Missy. She... was--I was really close with them. You know, so, all of us spent a lot of time together, you know. And--and I just--I--cheering I just loved. You know, because that was an opportunity for me to display what I thought what I was good at. doing a cartwheel and a round-off. You know, so when they ask, um... you know, when you introduce the people, the, um, basketball players or whatever. "Who wants to do one?" I was always the one to raise my hand. "I'll do it, I'll do it, I'll do it." So I would run out there and do it. One time I fell. [Laughs.]

LB: [Laughs.]

RW: I was, you know, probably hurt, but... you know, back then you don't think so much about it. You know. I felt bad, but then I was ok. But basically I did an excellent job, you know, and everybody always said, "You know, you do such a great job when you go out there" cuz you're young. You know. And it--it... was just a--a time I had going to the games, freezing, you know, homecoming, all of that... having on the pantyhose so you wouldn't freeze to death. Um, but it--it was... I mean, it's just so many memories I have.

LB: Well, keep 'em coming! [Laughs.]

RW: [Laughs.] I'm trying to think of some more.

LB: Do you know--I--a--also... there were teachers and administrators. Do you remember interacting with them, anything that sticks out in your mind?

RW: Um... well, Mr. Cowles (?). [Laughs] he was one of my history teachers. He wore a little bow tie. And... he was... really, really... just different [laughs] because... he just... he was very, very formal. Um... he knew his stuff... but he really just--he was very--he really didn't interact very much with the students. But I always thought it was strange that he just--everyday he would go home and--come back with this--you know, neat crisp little bow tie. You know. But he was just a very, very... I would say conservative teachers.

LB: Mm hmm.

RW: You know, I remember him. Um, some of them--my teachers names I can't remember too well. That's where, you know, I kinda mess up on. But, um, I knew my physics teachers--for some reason I can't remember--he... he was the one... I cannot remember his name, but he has the red hair. He was a lot of fun. He was the kinda teacher that... he would explain it and break it down. He would break it down so that you would understand it. And, um... and if--and a--and a lot of my classes, what I did, if I--I think I cut up a lot. Because when I didn't know something, I would just make a joke or something. You know, just to kinda take the pressure off.

LB: Yeah.

RW: Because the teachers would--oftentimes at George Wythe, some of them would be *so* serious. And I think that was one of the major differences in being in the black school, you know, and then being--coming to a integrated school. Um... was the teachers in the black school, were a little bit more relaxed and, you know... you could probably cut up a little bit. But in the other school situation, it was more conservative... and, um... but they allowed me to cut up [laughs]. Because my cutting up is not gonna be dis--wasn't distracting.

LB: Yeah.

RW: It was just... like, being kinda nervous because I don't really know this, but I'm gonna make a joke like I--you know, I--whatever little joke I would make. Um... but my--but the *white* classmates... later told me that they appreciated me... they said, because you just help break up the... you know, just the tension. Because when you're learning all of this, it was a lot we had to learn... and... you know, when the teachers teach like this... and you never really--give you a chance to just sit back and laugh or interact with each other. They appreciated that. Cuz they told me they appreciated that. They were like, "some of the things that you said--" and I don't remember what I said. I just remember that... it was a... just something I did [laughs].

LB: It's interesting that you talk about it being so formal there cuz when I think of the early '70s, I don't think of that as a formal period of time.

RW: Right

[Tone, followed by voice on intercom.]

RW: Ok. So... well... I think that... I think that for the white teachers, they seem to be a little bit--but not all of them! Because I had english teachers... that were just young. That was another thing I remember. Some of the--a lot of the teachers were young... when I was in--at George Wythe. And... we loved that [laughs]. The kids--I guess they like that today. Because you feel like the person is more used to your age--close to your age. I had a lot of young teachers in--at George--at George Wythe. And so *they* were more relaxed. The older ones, I guess, then, were a little bit more formal. Yeah

LB: I have to wonder if... you know, they were uptight about the integration.

RW: They could--

LB: ...the older ones. I mean, who knows?

RW: Who knows. It coulda been! You know, um... they never... to me, showed anything--never said anything... you know, they weren't gonna come and... you know, have a--engage in a... a long conversation. But then there were some that would. You know, so... like, Mr. Cowles would've been somebody who would've just been, this is the way it is... here's your, you know, work... turn it in, he would teach you and that would be it. But then some of the other teachers would, you know, would be more easygoing. You know, um... So I would say that Mr. Cowles was in a minority. I w--I think he was in a minority because most of the teachers... smiled and engaged, you know. And they were receptive... to... they--I didn't--I could not tell... anything that they did... that would've given me a clue that they didn't really en--en--you know, like the situation.

LB: Now when you think back on this time and... either at school or home or the community, anywhere in your life, can you give me an example of good leadership that you experienced, and an example leadership that wasn't so good? And it could be, you know--

RW: School, home, or anything?

LB: Anything. It could be out in the world [laughs]... you know?

RW: You mean, oh, back... in the day?

LB: Back in the day.

RW: Mrm. Leadership that was...

LB: Good or... leadership that wasn't so good.

RW: Mm. Wow. That's a tough one. Um... leadership that was good... I'm trying to think... y--wether it was my school or community... because in my community, I didn't really... you know, being from a poor family, um, I didn't really experience a lot of... good leadership, I don't think, other than I looked to the school... because, um... it wasn't that my parents really didn't--I wasn't involved in anything at home. You know, outside of my school... I didn't, um... you know, we--we went to church, you know, but... they didn't put me in boy scouts, girl scouts--

LB: Yeah.

RW: ...you know. I didn't get in those type of things, but--

LB: Or even if you remembered leaders in the community that you knew or... at school... You know, you know--

RW: Um...

LB: ... it doesn't even have to be in a formal setting, but you know what I mean. Individuals who you really said, "Wow... I admire what that person just did." Or, "Mm... I really don't admire what that person did."

RW: Well, I mean... at... if you--uh--well, let's divide it up in--

LB: Yeah.

RW: ...terms of if you talking about when I was young or in high school, middle school, high school...

LB: Anything... take it wherever you want to go.

RW: [Laughs.] Well...

LB: Or all of the above.

RW: Let me see. Cuz it's a *lot* in my mind, let me see. As far as, um, leadership in my high school days, um... I'm trying to remember. I mean I looked up to... you know, people like, um... I looked up to my teachers because, um... I know that a lot of my teachers would... give me their money. Like, when I was in grade school... if I couldn't afford to go on a trip, they would come out of their own pockets and pay for me if I said, "Well, my parents don't have the money to send me on a trip," they wanted me to go, so... they would... come out of there and they would pay for it. So, I... I thought that that was... outstanding. You know. So I looked up to--I think I looked up to most of my teachers as role models... for myself because--and--oh, and my guidance counselor. Um... she was a role model. You know, sh--um... in h--at my--at George Wythe. Because she was the one that, you know, kept pushing us and challenging us. And, um, she basically helped me with my classes... and she would tell me that that's nothing you can't accomplish. You know. So she would schedule me in the evening w--like I said, I would try to get out, she was like, "No, you can do this." And so, she was one that I looked up to... I think in--

-in my, um, high school career. Yeah.

LB: And then you became a guidance counselor.

RW: And then--I never thought I would because... back in grade school, I did... I was on, um, I was, like, on a--the--what do you call it--I was an advisor for the newspaper. We had, like, a little newspaper... and I had the, um, the column--the--the advice column. [Laughs.] I look back on this now, I had no idea that this was like a prelude to this. And so... it was a little column that the kids would be able to write a letter--write something--a letter in, ask a question. And I would be the one to answer it in the column [laughs].

LB: What kinds of questions did you get? How did you answer them?

RW: [Laughing] I don't know! That was back in grade school!

LB: I know [laughing].

RW: I mean... I'm sure they just ask questions like, what do you if a friend, you know, calls you a name. You know, they just did--

LB: Yeah! Yeah.

RW: ...sent me questions.. and I would answer, like, two or three in the column. Lord, most like [laughing, indecipherable]... So, I was the person that would be answering the questions.

LB: Wow.

RW: And so, that was to me a prelude to what I became. I never imagined that I would have become a school counselor... because... I was supposed to be a doctor, a psychiatrist... um, what else was I trying to be? Um, I wanted to go into science, I knew. But... of course when I started to think about *all* the work, [laugh] and all the classes. And I know... that math was really not a strong point for me? I said... I don't think you better do... that. So I chose this--uh--you know, to go another route so I went into psychology. And then from there, that's when... I made the decision.

LB: So were you in college when you made that decision?

RW: I was in college when I made it. Yes. Because I'd already gone through undergraduate school. I did--I went to VCU both times. So always--already gone... through, um, the v--psychology program. And, um... you know, of course I worked a few jobs that were... you know, relevant to the field of psychology but then you wanna make a little bit more money. So... um... at some point I decided to go back but... I was thinking, I want my summers off... [Laughing] you know, that sort of thing... that you think of... in addition to knowing that you like working with children. So that was why I ended up, so I'm sure Ms. James is very thrilled... [laughing] with me as a... counselor. So, she--she really helped me a lot. Um, also helped me with scholarships and things like that.

LB: Well that's great.

RW: Yeah. Yeah, she was real good.

LB: Do you remember seeing any leadership that you did not admire so much during this time?

RW: Um... hmmm. Well... that one's difficult because... I didn't really... like I said, the most... the most of--I judged... who are... leaders by... wor--my school. And... I mean, the only thing that I saw in my school was there--sometimes the teachers were not--very good teachers. And um... ss--that's--that's probably disturbed me, you know, that some of them could not teach the way I would have liked to be taught. Um... or to learn [laughs]. So other than that, you know, I felt like, I mean my principals were ok, but the principals I kn--were not the--kinds of principals like the--the main principals did not engage that much with the kids, and I wasn't a bad kid. So I wouldn't have been in the office. So I didn't get to know my principals, uh, really, really well. Um, now, Mr. Rogers, I think he was a--he was the short one, but anyway... I don't know if he's still living or not. But anyway, Mr. Rogers was--the moral one. He--he was, um--got around the halls more. So he engaged more with the kids. So I remember him. But, you know, other than that, I would say it was--if I had to say anything it would be some of the teachers that I felt like, you know... didn't teach as well.

LB: Now... how were the changes that were going on in Richmond at this point discussed in your home?

RW: Well, um, are you speaking of the changes like when we first desegregated or even before then?

LB: All of the above.

RW: Ok. Because, um... I mean... me being the age that I was... you know... my parents--I think they did a good job of not really talking about... very much other than, um... I would hear them say that you can't go here or you can't go there. But... since I was not traveling, you know, around... I only went with them. And they didn't take me places, you know, because they didn't have, you know the means, but... my father had a car and everything. So I mean, my--my family spent time when we wan--wanted to go on vacations, we would go visit... my mom's mother. But, you know, as far as... being--understanding, like... what it was like back then... I think it was kind of shielded because, you know, I didn't really understand that you couldn't do things--that it was black-white fountain, colored--you know, white fountains and stuff like that. We learned that in the books. And then we would have the Black History, you know, Month. You know, so... you studied about that in Black History. So that was real exciting because, um, everything came alive then because you--when you walk around the halls and during Black History Month, ev--you had all these exhibits, you know, the library came alive. Everything was... you know, really, you know, great. And you got to s--you know, understand... a lot of what, you know--the black history. but, um... as far as me, you know--like I said--

LB: Or just the--the changes because... when you're growing up, right, the fountains stopped

being segrega--

RW: Yeah.

LB: You know, everything--

RW: Yeah.

LB: ...everything was changing and the civil rights movement was in full swing. Did anyone talk about that at home.

RW: I mean, the only thing I do--I mean, I remember... you know, back in the day when we had the black pride, you know... you wore the afros... you know, and I'm black and I'm proud kinda thing. Um, I remember all of that and that seemed, I think that the--the period for us at that age because... we didn't feel too great about ourselves at one point, but I think that raised it. I--and--and I think... that... just having that "I'm black and I'm proud" thing, and wearing your natural hair... and all of that. And I--I couldn't get my hair to quite get as natural as I wanted. It would get... kinda like a--it would be a fro, but then it would be... uh, it would collapse [laughs].

LB: [Laughs.]

RW: ... after a few days and I always wondered what was wrong with my hair. Well... down the line, of course I have some other, you know... m--race in me. But... I was wondering why I just have to kinda curl it and twist it and do all sorts of things, um... to get it. But I think that's... what...

LB: How old were you then?

RW: Oh, I was in--at George Wythe. I was probably about in the... ninth, tenth grade.

LB: Yeah.

RW: Yeah. When you wore the big... afros, um... In fact... let me see... yeah, that would've den about... about '73? Yeah. '73 and we all wore the big afros and... all of us were, um, you know, on this black pride thing. And I think it did raise self esteem a lot. Um... and it made you feel like, well there's nothing I can't do. And I think that was what's... missing with a lot of, uh, people today because there is not--doesn't seem to be a pride about your race or anything. So... back then they taught us to be proud... of yourself in that you can achieve great things. And I think that's why my class, I feel like, is still so active today. Because we... got that message. *Good, better, best. Never let it rest. Tell the good best is better and the better best.* We got that message.

LB: Who were you getting the black pride message from at this point?

RW: Um. You mean back then?

LB: Back then.

RW: Well that was a big explosion--

LB: Yeah.

RW: ... because James Brown... made that song *I'm black and I'm proud*, and... you know that's what started it.

LB: Yeah.

RW: You know it was the song.

LB: So you remember... the music.

RW: *Oh yeah* -- the m--music was--was instrumental... in, um, the seventies. You know, the sixties, I'm a--I mean, I can remember back in the day when I was a little girl, my brother worked and I had to ask him about this cuz all I remember is the sixties music which I really love. I used to stand at the, um, at the m--record shop--record player... all day long, listen to all that music. And I know it! And you know I was like, "why do I know all this music, he's, you know--" cuz... to me, I w--I shouldn't really know all of that music but I know the music back from way back when. And he said, um--my brother said, he's my oldest brother. He said, "Well that's because every week I would buy a new record player... and you would stand there and you loved the music, you would dance and listen to the music." I said, "I was wondering how I got to know that music so well." So, you know, that was... how I got to know.... you know, and enjoy it.

LB: If you had to... make a soundtrack for your life back then, what songs would you put on it?

RW: Oh, man... [laughs]. Well... Let me see--that--that's a interesting questions. Um... I would probably have to put on there, um... oh, man, I don't know, I'll have to--think about that one. I would have to think about that one. I know, um, *I'm Black and I'm Proud* would have to be on there. Um... as far as... see I like all of the Temptation songs. You know. Um, *I Got Sunshine*... you know, those kinds of songs, you know. All of the OJ songs, you know. All of that music... is... just... I have to stop everything I'm doing if it's... on or whatever, I'm gonna sing it. So I think all of the music from all--the OJ's the Temptations, the Motown, Diana Ross and the Supremes... all of those songs, you know, mean a lot to me.

LB: Did you go out to nightclubs much?

RW: Um... I really wasn't a nightclub person. But everybody... went, did some of nightclubbing. You know?

LB: Did go to the Tee Pee (??)?

RW: I didn't do any of that. [Laughs]. No. Um... not really. I didn't do a lot of that. But, you know, I did it--you know, as I think an older teenager...

LB: Mm hmm

RW: ... I did some of that as a older teenager.

LB: Where would you go when you were an older teenager?

RW: Um... they did house parties back then.

LB: Yeah.

RW: Yeah. They didn't do... you know, we did house parties. We had--whoever said they were having a party... you went there and you had the strobe light on, you had the music, the lights low... you know, and everybody was sitting around having a good time. And that's... who we enjoyed, you know, our time together. Yeah, everybody would have a party. And... our parties were... just... *nice* because, you know, no violence. You know, everybody came to have fun, everybody was laughing, you had KoolAid, you didn't have, you know, all the other stuff. [Laughing] you know, so... it was just... just pure fresh fun. And that's what it was like, and you had your afro, you know, all of that, your music... you had your--your wide... you know, bellbottoms. You know, you're f--your platform shoes. You know, all of that was just really, really fun. [Laughs.] That was how we--we spent a lot of our fun. Our time.

LB: What do you think were some of your, um, personal turning points during this civil rights era in Richmond?

RW: Um... I think one of them was going to, um, an integrated school... Um... and being exposed to people other than myself... um, I think was a turning point, because... I didn't--you know, you--you were told... that... you know, these people were not gonna like you, they were gonna be mean to you, treat you bad, and I'm sure that happened in places. And so, when I went... I didn't know what to expect. And then it didn't happen to me... so I think that I gained from it because... I learned that... you know... people are--are, you know... people are people. And that you can--you can learn from someone, you know... *anybody*. You can learn from one person as well as you can learn from the next person. And, um, you know, I got to be close friends with people--even though those friendships didn't really stay--that's the only thing. Like, I had... but that's no different than... some of my black friendships because in high school, you develop friendships... but it has to be something really, really strong to make it last. So I'm--I'm--I'm not saying that--I mean, we have our meetings and all. And that's wonderful, but I can't say that we *go out*... and really do things other than. So... but I think the whole experience of being... you know, in the environment, in the culture... I think it--it changed me... to a person who could understand. Have a more sensitivity, you know, to people. And--and to be able to get along with people. That's what I think. I think that was one turning point.

LB: Were there others that you think of?

RW: Um... over my lifetime, you mean, or just... during my s--

LB: During that era, that--

RW: During that era.

LB: ... civil rights era.

RW: Um... I just think... as far as the--the civil rights movement and all, I mean, there was just so much that went on... you know, it was the Martin Luther King thing... um... you know, that was a tough time because we had a leader. You know, I felt like there was a leader... who could--I think that the b--African American people were looking for someone... that could... just dir--show them the way... a better way of doing things. And so, you know, with the Martin Luther King... he was our hero. So I just remember, you know, when he was assassinated, you know, and how it felt like... you know, our world was--was crumbling down. So I mean, I just feel like, that was--that was a special time. And even John F. Kennedy, president John F. Kennedy. That was a era that, you know, we looked up to a president who believed in us. So, um, you know, there were a lot of, you know... points in my life that, you know, that I--I kinda look back on... and think about and reflect on. Um, those are pretty much two of the ones, but, you know... I--that's pretty much it.

LB: If you think of other turning points for the community as a whole, what would you say?

RW: Um... well... the turning f--points for--for the community--I'm trying to think... you know, cuz I... basically... I think... one turning point was, of course... you know, when Thalhimers and Miller & Rhoads allowed you to come in... um, that was a turning point because... that was a place, you know, uh--you know, when you, of course, like, er--Woolworth's and all that where you couldn't go into... um... and now you were able to come into and... and purchase things. I just couldn't imagine what it would be like for me if I wasn't able to go in those places because... you know, when my parents... you know, lived through a time... and my mom doesn't talk about it but I guess, I could [laughing] interview her myself... and ask her about it, but... what would it really be like if you were--if I was, you know--couldn't able--wasn't able to go in any of the stores. I just can't even imagine... not... by the color of my skin... not being able to drink from a certain fountain and not being able to go in a certain store. Um... I can't even--I--it's unimaginable. And I don't know how people lived through that time. I don't think I would've been a good person to be there [laughs]. Because I would've questioned... I would've, like, what... what's... what's wrong with this pi--something's wrong here. So it would've been difficult for me, I think. But my parents lived through that. And they made it through and they're still... very strong people. You know, course, my father's gone on now. But, um, I'm--I just can't really imagine that, you know--walking out of here and... I'm going to go to the store tonight and--and if I couldn't go in there because of my skin, it would be really, really... um, unusual. Yeah.

LB: How do you think that... the--well, what do you think were the turning points... at your school?

RW: Mm. You mean during the civil rights movement?

LB: Yeah.

RW: Um... Well... You mean before... before or...

LB: When you were there.

RW: When I was at, like, George Wythe?

LB: Yeah.

RW: Um...

LB: Or Kennedy.

RW: Ok... Um... the turning points there... I don't know if--I don't know if we really made... a lot of strides there... because I think that there was still... you know... to me, there was still points of... segregation within the school. Um... I think that... you know, you had to take the, um--you had to take the stance that... you had to kinda like... make it a point of being open. You know, um, but I think that the experience... it--it was great because it sensitized people. So if you hadn't had the experience of... you know, being in a class with people or going to school with them... you would still walk away with those people idea... or mentality. You know, everybody had their own stereotypes of how each race was. And everybody was afraid to sit down, you know, with people. Because they would say, "Well, those people do this, those people that." And so I think that it was an opportunity for people to dispel the things that they heard and you know... and I don't know the long-range effects. You know, I know for *me*... I--I feel like I'm more open than most people. Um... but I don't know how everybody else feels about it.

LB: But you feel like that was what you... took away, that's kind of how the experience shaped who you are today?

RW: Yeah. I think... you know, that... I chose to go to VCU. VCU was a white school. I didn't wanna go to, um, a historically black school. Only because I'd been my whole life in a historically black situation [laughs].

LB: [Laughs.]

RW: And it's not like I turned my back or anything cuz... I don't. But... you know... it--I wanted... in fact I actually was gonna *go*... just because, um... you know, I was gonna go to Tennessee, and then I, you know, at the last minute, decided, "I'm gonna go to VCU. I'm gonna go right here at home." So, um... you know, I just--and then it was a great experience. It was a great experience, so... I just think that, um, it... it kinda opens your mind up. You know, but it can also work against you if you let it. Because you can say... that--you can feel inferior if you let it. Um, if you don't--and I think that's why it gets--gets back to the black pride. I don't think we have a lot of black pride because... you can--you know, the black pride... it's not shown as--like it was in my day. In my day... it was--you were *proud* to be a teacher, you know. You were *proud* to... you know, be whatever profession you were. You were proud to--y--you did what--it

was no violence going on. You know. It was a lot of things that weren't going on. But people lifted up... you know, the race. And so I think that's why... you know, that's what's missing today -- is that pride. You know, I think there's too much of pulling down... each other... um, instead of helping each other. So if you had the pride then you would be proud of who you are. *And* proud of the next person, you know, as well. And that... diminished them. But for some reason I think... you know, there's too much of that going on. So...

LB: How do you think... all the experiences of the civil rights era... changed your family?

RW: Mm... Well... [chuckles].

LB: Which it sounds like had a lot of people in it so you [laughing] had an opportunity to see a lot of...

RW: Yeah... I think, um... well... I'm trying to think how it really changed my family, um.... I-- I really don't know how to answer that one, other th--you know, maybe, can you clarify it a little bit more in terms of...

LB: Well... did you notice... you know, there was so much going on at that time--

RW: Mm hmm.

LB: ...and... there you were with your mother and... you still saw your father, right, even though he lived elsewhere.

RW: Right.

LB: And... your five siblings.

RW: Mm hmm.

LB: And I wonder if... all of the changes that were going on were changing people in your family, changing the family worked, whether it was... I mean, it could be anything. I like these big vague questions, you know, cuz--

RW: Yeah [laughs].

LB: Cuz then... [indecipherable]...

RW: Yeah, whichever direction w... Yeah, um... well... to me... we--I mean, with my family being the way it was, I'm the youngest so my... brother has a different experience from me, so, I mean, he went off to be--to join the--the milit--he had to, um, enlist in the military. So his whole perspective is so different from mine. You know, I am the--the first to... graduate from college in my family, so... um... I think that's the things that--that would change a family because... yeah, those are the kinds of things that change your family because... you know, for so many years, w--um, my family, um... with my mother being a domesticated worker... and not

finishing school, my mother was *adamant* about *all* of her children f--finishing school. I... you know--you were not going--I don't care what decision--you were going to school, and you were gonna finish it, and you were gonna do well. And she got six kids out -- for me that is commendable for someone who's eighty-two or -three years old? Wanted all of her kids to finish high school. That was her goal, six children, and each one did. Um... and so... those the kinda things that effected, you know, us, d--we--we lived by. And, um, but see, back then, like I said with my brother being the oldest... then he went into the military... and then my other brothers, to me... I think it opened up another era for us because... back then, I think you just... the expectations of black people were lower. Because they were told that, 'well, I guess you're gonna be a janitor or I guess you're gonna be this or that...' not to put down a janitor, but I'm just saying sometimes they were told that. But... my family, I think, one thing that they--they didn't go to college... you know, until I came around. My brother did get in some college -- my oldest brother. Um, and then later on, my oth--my other--another brother of mine went. But I was the first one that finished. And so it's like... it--it to me is just... pushing us out there further... because, um, we--we began to see that there's--there's something different out there. Don't be afraid, you know, you can go further. You know, you have to go further than your parents did, you know. And my mom is so proud because she never finished school. So she went on to, you know--she would vicariously live through all of us. 'They're gonna all finish, I never got that opportunity.' My mom was just, to me, special, because, like I said, had she finished school, she would've been the same thing I am. Because she can counsel you, she's so wise... you would never know she never finished school, but she can read like any--she does scrambles and word puzzles. I mean, it's just--I can't do that stuff [laughing] she does. So she's a amazing woman. My father finished school. And back then it was, um, you finished in the eleventh grade. He finished school, he became a barber. So he took up a trade to help take care of his family. Um, you know-

LB: Was this after he was working in a factory?

RW: He worked... Ok, so my father... when he finished school... he, um... he became a barber. Then later on, yeah, he went--he did, um--you know, FFV, you know, Cookie Company.

LB: Mm hmm.

RW: Um... he did a whole lot of l--uh, laboring-type work. But, um... yeah, he did those type of things. But he had finished school. And, um... so... my hat's off to him because... he did it. And he expected--he also... so they were both on the same page. They were like, "You're gonna go." And when I told my dad I was going to college, just like, "That is so wonderful." He--both of them were very encouraging... to all of us. You know, but my sister--one of my sisters--she became a secretary, but she's, like, now doing... very well. She went back to school herself... and got a degree--another degree in medicine. You know, but not to be a doctor, but, you know, in that... field. Um... you know, so everybody's doing well... you know, in my family. You know, pushing. Uh, I think that that helped us open up another world. I think that the civil rights movement was, you know, tough because we were trying to figure out who was going to lead us, you know, then when Martin Luther King... you know, was killed... then we were, like, well, what do we do now. But we still... are pressing on... I think.

LB: Now... how do you think all of these experiences shaped your community?

RW: Hmm. [Laughs.] To me, um... well, the community... still... has a long way to go. Um... because... the community... I think that it--that the *black* community has a long way to go. Because, um... it's... you know... the direction of the--the community, the black community and which way they should go... has a long way to go. Because it--it seems like, um... you know, they--they can kinda get caught up in or sidetracked. So... you know... that--that's what I think... about the community. Yeah, um, I don't know what else to say about it.

LB: Are there things that you'd like the generation of kids growing up in Richmond today to know?

RW: Um... in Richmond [chuckles]? Well... I think that I would say to them that I'm proud to have been a resident of Richmond. Um... I... consider myself to be [clears throat]... probably someone who is... maybe a little bit unusual or maybe unconventional in terms of... I like my--I like the pathway that I was set on. I don't--course don't like everything in the way that I did... because I had to learn, but... I like, like I said, the fact that... I was told that there was nothing I couldn't accomplish along the way, so, I think that--a lot of that came from my formal education. Is--in addition to the academics, you got... the fact that... you--you can accomplish anything. That--that you should aim high. And the fact that we were immersed in foreign language in--in elementary school, I think that's important today. Because--and we went to the orchestra, you know, we, you know, listened to Bach and Beethoven. I mean... I--if--when, back then, I was like, "Why are we listening to this [laughs]?" Cuz I was a little girl, I didn't understand... what was the purpose of that, and we had to go get dressed up. I remember wearing the little flowerdy (?) dress. They called me, I don't know, flowerdy girl, whatever they called me, but I had a beautiful little dress on -- we were going to the concert. They were teaching us culture... you know... back then. So I--my hat's off to my school system for... introducing us and allowing us to, you know, and be immersed in that kind of stuff because... *that*, I think, sets the tone for you later on. Um, where are you gonna go. And they were constantly asking you, "What do you wanna do?" and "Where you wanna be?" And they put you on the pathway. You know, of where you're gonna go. So, um, I'm proud of--of being a c--a resident of Richmond... and of... what I've done, you know, for the most part--of everything I've done. Um, because I took advantage of what was offered to me. Um... you know, the stuff that kids have today that is offered to them? I can't even imagine if I had had that? No matter--I'm--I can't even imagine where I would be now. I would probably be a doctor. [Laughs.] Cuz that's what I wanted to do. Because they have the technical center now and all of those things that they have available to kids now. So I just think that, you know, it's a wealth of information here. You know, we don't take advantage of what's here... the history that's here -- we could take more advantage of that. All of the museums, all of that, that we need to be exposed to. So I think that's--you know, I'm proud of that.

LB: Are there things that you feel that we as a community need to particularly remember that we may be in danger of forgetting?

RW: Mm. Well... we... you know, I mean, we need to be... we need to remember... everybody that was a pillar in the community. Um, we need to remember, um, you know, like all of the slaves, you know... that had a part in building things in the Richmond community. I think there

needs to be h--of the *history* of Richmond... publicized, out there. There's stuff I don't know. Um, there needs to be photographs, you know... that--you don't see that very often. You don't see what... was Richmond like, you know. Um... what... you know, what was going on. I think that that needs to happen more. You know, what's going on in Richmond and what went on back in--in those days. And what was the... civil rights like here during that time. That would be interesting to know. Because there--there're lots of pictures and I wish I had pictures back when I was in school--I wish somebody could dig up, you know... cuz we took pictures but I don't know where they are. You know, you took pictures when you were in school and things like that. Um... I would... would love to see those kinds of--of pictures, you know. But, you know, that's what I would like more people to know.

LB: Yeah, it's--it's so interesting to me that, you know, people in Richmond, they talk about the Civil War all the time, but civil rights? People don't really talk about that era.

RW: No. They don't talk about it.

LB: Why do you think they don't talk about it?

RW: Um... Because it's... I think it's--it's not... it's something that when you talk about it... you don't really know... what to say... in terms of what--whether you might say something hurtful or... or what. Um... I'm not sure why people don't talk about it because it was important, you know, and it was... if it had not been for going through it, we would not be here. We would not be able to, you know, go with freedom, you know, to places that we're able to go to. Um... I don't even know why my parents don't talk about it. It's like... they really, uh, you know, went through all of that. You know, and... they don't talk about it but certainly, the young people don't understand it. Because they didn't experience--they even more remote from it. Removed from it--than... than I am. You know, at least I know, you know, that my parents couldn't do things, and they would tell me about it. But they don't have anybody to have a voice for them. They don't have a Martin Luther King. I had a Martin Luther King... who I know led the people, you know, to different places and stood up for civil rights and nonviolence and... I understand it, but... Martin Luther King may not mean the same thing to young people that he means to me. You know, President Kennedy doesn't mean the same thing to people. You know, Abraham Lincoln, you know, all of these people don't mean the same thing... to people. So... I think that we need to... you know, continue to immerse people in it. Um... I would like to see, like I said, I would like to see something during, like, Black History Month -- something about Richmond during the time... needs to be, you know, brought out. I like it. When I see it in the paper, I just read it and devour it because it's... just not there. You would have to go to the museum to see it. You know, and I don't know if it's in--people really understand the connection--there is a connection... between where--the way things were... back then, and the way they are now. The opportunities that we have are as a result of going through all of that. You know, the things that we do, you know... the opportunities that we have are a result of those things that p--we went through and my fa--you know, and our parents went through... so that we could have better opportunities later on. And, you know, we need to, uh, you know, the--somehow continue to--to--you know... beat the drum about that. Because basically people don't really recognize or understand what it means. And it's almost getting lost... you know... the--*I have a dream* and people hear that, but they're like, what is Martin Luther King talking about? You know? He dreamed this. You know,

having a better day, so that people could go into the stores and they could do things and they could, you know, achieve, and they wouldn't have to be judged by the, you know, content of their skin--the color of their skin, or the con--by the cont--but by the content of their character. They... you know, Martin Luther King had a dream so that... you know... and--and we latched onto it. And I think that's what's the--that's what's missing because... we latched onto that... we were like, "This--I *want* that! I want a piece of that. I wanna go there." And so... we just... we don't h--where is our spokesperson today? You know... I don't know, we just--it's just not the same. And I think that kinda pride is missing. You know, in the people. You know, it doesn't matter what race you are, everybody needs to be proud... of who they are and--and why they're here... and what purpose they have in their life and where they're going and where they're headed. Everybody needs to be proud. Everybody needs to be working for a purpose. You know, and I think, you know, that would be good. That would be good for Richmond.

LB: I'm gonna just ask you one last question

RW: Mm hmm.

LB: ... which is -- I've been struck doing these interviews about... how many... people like you who grew up during that era... go involved in education. Either--

RW: Mmm...

LB: ... guidance counselors, teachers, or even just mentoring youth today--

RW: Mmm.

LB: ... and that's very... striking to me. Do you wanna say anything about that?

RW: I'm amazed--well, I think that... I think my high school prepared me for... my... future. Because, um... you know, you don't really realize... the messages that you're getting. Um, I think that when I was in elementary school, you know, that was good. Um, my teachers were more or less nurturing me, you know... and giving me the academics, but when I got to high school, I think... that was when... it seemed like the community rolls up in the school to say... "We want better for these kids.... They gotta go to college. They gotta l--you know, learn, and we gotta provide them every opportunity that we have." They poured out for us. And they expected--the expectations were high. Just what I'm telling you, it's like you couldn't settle for... these days, a kid says, "I'm not doing well in geometry." You get out [laughs]. But... I'm saying I'm not doing awa--you stay in! You stay in, you go to [laughing] tutoring... you do what you need to do... you get on the phone... that was how you made it. You weren't let out. You weren't--you didn't have a easy way out. And I think that's what's, you know, also missing--is different. Because they--the spect (?)--the bar was high... and we rose to it. And so I--I like the fact that I came from that kind of, you know, expectation. And... as far as education is concerned, all I knew... is, I was going to college. I didn't know where I was gonna end up. I knew I was going to college because that was the message that... is drummed in your mind when you're in that... we, you know, like I said, my parents never went to sch--to hi--to college. My dad graduated from high school. My mother never finished even... grade school. You know...

middle school, much less grade school. So she barely finished grade school. So, she didn't know to--that I would--she didn't have the message to be able to tell me, you know -- from experience - - "You're going to college." But she said, "My kids are gonna finish high school." So she wanted us to finish what she didn't. My dad had finished, so, yes! When I said college, yes! So... I think I had the kind of culture in my high school that eh--you're going. And then I had the home life that everybody said, yes. And, um, you know, and that's--that's what you need today. You need... to have the bar high. And people w--need to step up to the plate... and you know.... And I don't know how, um, you know, education was not expected for me. Um... I just knew that for someone to be a psychiatrist... um... you know... I wanted to go to medical school. Um... but then when that didn't happen, then I wanted to--thought social work. And when that didn't happen, so... um... you know, I did a few things, you know... working in nonprofit agencies and things like that, and then I just went back to school... you know... to--to be into education. Mm hmm.

LB: Is there anything I didn't ask you that you would like to--to say.

RW: Trying to think.... Um.... I really... I--I think I pretty much [laughing] said it all... for, um, for what I wanted to say. I'm trying to--let me think for a minute.... You wanna say something?

LB: While you're thinking, I'll ask one more question.

RW: Ok.

LB: When Zwelethu Mthethwa, the photographer, comes to take your picture... where would you want to be photographed that's--

RW: Mrm...

LB: ...really evocative of that time... in your mind.

RW: Ooh. [Laughs.] George Wythe High School. That was... that was pretty much it. Um... I mean, you know, I can't think of any other p--I can't think of any other place... that... captures... the essence of... where I was, you know, with my life, you know. Then George Wythe High School... um... that's where I cheered, that's where I spent nights painting posters for the games, you know... That's where I had my classes, my teachers, you know. That's where I had my start in life. That's where I knew I was going to college. So, you know, I can't think of a better place, you know, than that. You know, in the halls of George Wythe. I don't s...I mean, if I was... you know, reflects that era? That's... it...

LB: Yeah.

RW: ... for me. That would be it for me.

LB: Well, thank you... so much, Rebecca. You've been... such a great interview.

RW: Ok. Thank you. Appreciate it.