

Copy of WilliamsMatthew 20190607

SHOLOMO LEVY: Hello, my name is Sholomo Levy, and I am with Mr. Matthew Williams, and I will be interviewing him as an oral history project for the "Voices of the African American Diaspora: The Black Experience of Bethlehem." This is part of the Lehigh Valley Engage Humanities Consortium. We are here today at the Bethlehem Area Public Library on Friday, June 7, 2019. Mr. Williams, thank you for being with us.

MATTHEW WILLIAMS: Thank you for having me.

SL: Can you please say and then spell your full name?

MW: My name is Matthew Williams, M-A-T-T-H-E-W W-I-L-L-I-A-M-S.

SL: And when were you born?

MW: I was born October 24, 1964.

SL: Did you grow up here in Bethlehem?

MW: I grew up in Bethlehem all my -- until I was, like, maybe 26, 27 years old.

SL: [00:01:00] Who are your parents?

MW: My parents is [Wayman?] Williams and Annie [Batrlick?] Williams, which my dad they call Wayman "Bub" Williams.

SL: When did they move to Bethlehem?

MW: Let's see. I was born in '64, so I think they moved to Bethlehem in '62 or '63.

SL: Where did they come from?

MW: Elizabeth City, North Carolina.

SL: Do you know why they relocated here?

MW: Better opportunity. My dad and my mom -- well my dad used to say he used to come up for picking crops, and then his sister was up here. He lived with his sister, and then he moved up with my mom, his wife.

SL: Who was his sister?

MW: His sister was Vivian Butts, and her husband, Earl Butts.

SL: She was already here in Bethlehem?

MW: Yes.

SL: Do you know what she was doing?

MW: She was a [00:02:00] police officer.

SL: And you had other family members who then moved here?

MW: His sisters and his brother, and then eventually his mom came up after that.

SL: And your parents were related to them?

MW: Yes. My dad became a preacher. First we lived on the south side of Allen- --Bethlehem, I mean, and then we moved to the northeast side, and then we moved to Bethlehem Township.

SL: Describe, I guess starting with south Bethlehem first, and what was the neighborhood, the composition of the community like at that time?

MW: Well, south Bethlehem I really don't remember because I was really young, but my dad would just tell us stories if we rolled by there, he would say, "Well this is where Washington Junior High School was," you know what I mean? "But now it's buildings or apartments," you know what I mean? But, you know, [00:03:00] he said, "This one used to be here, this used to be there, but it seems like it's mostly the same, but certain things are not there no more," but the Bethlehem Steel has always been there.

SL: What was the first area that you remember living in Bethlehem?

MW: The first area I remember is the northeast Allen- I mean Bethlehem. It was the projects. Clearfield. I remember Clearfield, [Fritz Drive?] and Marvine. That's where I remember my young adolescence.

SL: Can you describe that for us?

MW: Red brick buildings. Red brick buildings, and most of my relatives or cousins, or aunts and uncles lived right around there, so it was like a close knit, we could walk to their house. That's how close it was.

SL: And what was the composition of the community at that time?

MW: Back then there was not [00:04:00] many Hispanics. It was more black and white.

SL: And what elementary school did you attend?

MW: I went to Marv-- we lived -- Marvine Elementary School was right behind our house, right next to the Boy's Club.

SL: And from there?

MW: From there, my dad built a house in Bethlehem Township in 1974, and that's where -- we moved there, and my parents still live there now.

SL: Where's that house located?

MW: Bethlehem Township, which is off of Stefko, in between Stefko and Roller Park Road. They used to call that the Bethlehem Annex, but that's where they still are now.

SL: Were other black people buying homes and building homes in that area?

MW: In that area? There was only two families, when we moved there in 1974.

SL: [00:05:00] Do you recall any of your early childhood experiences in school?

MW: Marvine, I believe, was the nice school, as far as growing up, because one thing -- my brothers and my sisters were in the same school, and my cousins, and then when we moved we had to walk to school, which was a lot further, but there wasn't too many minorities. I think altogether the most minorities was my brothers and sisters. We were the most. Because I had four brothers and four sisters.

SL: What were their names?

MW: The oldest one is Gloria Williams. My next brother is Wayman Williams III, then it's me, then my sister [Harrah Hill?] Williams, then my brother Mark Williams, and then Julia Butler Williams, [00:06:00] and then Timothy Williams, and then Angela Williams -- Angela Williams McNeil, and then Danny Williams.

SL: And did you mention already what your parents did for a living?

MW: Well, with the nine kids my mom had, when we were kids she didn't work. But my dad, he was a carpenter. Also, he worked at the Bethlehem Steel, but most of his life he was a carpenter. He retired as a carpenter.

SL: And what middle school did you go to?

MW: Middle school, which was called junior high school back then, is East Hills Junior High School, and from there -- which is right next door -- I graduated from Freedom High School.

SL: Can you describe your life during those high school years?

MW: [00:07:00] Well, one thing about the middle school, or the junior high school, the most people that went to the school, after a while we took a bus to junior high school and high school. So the kids in the neighborhood, we all knew each other because we always took the bus all them years, so the transition to high school was easy, but we

still were a minority in junior high school. But when we went to Freedom, students from the south side were there, which is more mostly Hispanic and some blacks, so it was more -- I got more integrated with other minorities when I went to Freedom. But as far as -- there was a segregation between minorities and the whites, but since I grew up with the whites [00:08:00] because of where I lived, I had no problem. And with the minorities, just getting to know them, I had no problem with them either. Me and my brothers and my sisters, we had no problems, you know what I mean? Every now and then there would be something, but it really wasn't nothing really big.

SL: Were there different perceptions about the two schools, Liberty and Freedom?

MW: They didn't like each other. Sports, it didn't matter. They didn't like each other, but since we were so far apart we really didn't deal with the kids itself. Now me personally, with most of my cousins going to Liberty, I hadn't -- if I went to Liberty for something, a dance or a game or something, I had no problem because my family was there. [00:09:00] And it didn't matter if we didn't see each other once a year -- it didn't matter. We were still family.

SL: You mentioned taking a bus. Was this during the period of bussing where they were bussing black students to integrate certain schools?

MW: For me, it was my neighborhood that -- that was the way it was, was bussing. But I think on the south side of Bethlehem, that's when they started doing it because I remember my dad said he used to go to Liberty, too. I think a certain part of the south side started going to Freedom to integrate, which was -- people from the south side had problems from the whites that were on the northeast side, or more east side of Bethlehem, or the Township, Bethlehem Township. That's what it mostly was, and the city of Bethlehem.

SL: How did the black students, as far as you know, feel about being bussed to the white [00:10:00] schools? Both schools were predominantly white, but whether they went to Freedom or Liberty?

MW: The ones I've talked to, I think they really wanted to go to Freedom -- I mean Liberty -- but they just couldn't. They just couldn't, or they would have to get somebody's address to go to Liberty, but after a while we had fun. It was nice. We congregated in almost like one area, and everybody looked out for everybody else.

SL: What were some of your experiences and activities in high school?

MW: In high school, I played golf and chess. Me and my brother, we were in the top ten chess in the whole Lehigh Valley or East Penn Conference. And We were the only blacks that were there. Between Allentown, [Duriff?], Easton, [00:11:00] Liberty, all that. To me, it was fun.

SL: How did you get into chess?

MW: My dad taught us, my uncles played, and it was fun, and it was easy for us.

SL: And what were some other activities that you had?

MW: I played golf between-- in high school and in college. My dad taught me how to play, and watching my uncles -- because they used to go hit golf balls, and then we would go and watch them hit golf balls, and hit golf balls ourselves, but when they hit them, we had to go get them. And they let us hit the ball after a while, but that's where we-- that's why I started to learn.

SL: Was it a popular sport among people of your age, and particularly for black kids?

MW: Not at that time. They made [00:12:00] fun of me, but I didn't care. I liked the game. I loved the game.

SL: And what year did you graduate?

MW: I graduated in 1982.

SL: And what did you do from there?

MW: From there, I went to Northampton Community College, which they used to call [NACAC?] back then, and then in 1985 I started working for Pennsylvania Power and Lighting, and I've been there since.

SL: Before we get there, describe Northampton Community College at that time.

MW: Northampton Community College -- I loved Northampton Community College. It was close -- it wasn't close to my house, but I took a bus, and we were there. Some of the kids I went to high school with, they were there, you know what I mean? And I went to learn, you know what I mean? It was easygoing. Classes were small, plus since I played golf, some of the teachers I had, they played golf too or [00:13:00] he was my coach, so I would get out early sometimes to go play golf, but it was a friendly atmosphere, plus some of the teachers, I went to high school with their kids. I thought that -- well, NACAC I call it -- is one of the best.

SL: Do you remember any of your advisors?

MW: Mr. Stanton, Mrs. Gavin.

SL: Frank?

MW: Yep, Frank Stanton. Mrs. Gavin.

SL: Sharon Gavin Levy?

MW: That is correct. Sharon Gavin Levy. Let's see. Ron Graves. Am I correct on saying that?

SL: But they were there at the college?

MW: Yes.

SL: And about how many other black students were there at the time?

MW: Well, some of them from Liberty, Eastern, you know what I mean, in from Freedom, and some of the minorities as far as the Hispanics, they were there, so sometimes it seemed like it was just like high school all over again. [00:14:00]

But one of my best friends I had there was from Philadelphia. He went to the funeral service. He was one of -- I don't know how, but we became best friends.

SL: And they had a golf team?

MW: Yes they did.

SL: Can you tell us about that?

MW: I was on the golf team. I was in the top seven, and we won the EPC championship when I was there. Traveling, which was an experience for me because I really didn't travel with a team like that. I mean, I traveled with the family, but as far as traveling with a team of seven to ten guys and the coach, it was great.

SL: And y'all were the championship team?

MW: Yes, we were.

SL: Were there any other black members of the golf team?

MW: There was one more guy. His name is [Vetnor Wright?], and that's the only one there was, and three other guys came from here, and three other guys came from maybe like New Jersey or something. But [00:15:00] we had a nice, good team.

SL: What was social life for young black people in Bethlehem in the '80s and '90s?

MW: For me, since my dad was an elder, a pastor, when I was younger I didn't really go out too much, OK? But once I got of age and started working, my family, my cousins and my uncles -- if I didn't know the people, my cousins or uncles knew them. So if I were -- if they were good with them, they were good with me. I think we -- everybody had respect, OK, to a certain extent respect. My cousins -- if I was somewhere I wasn't supposed to be, they would tell me, and if I was somewhere and people knew who I was, whose family I was, they said, "You're not supposed to be [00:16:00] here," or, "Don't do that," or, "I'm going to tell your relatives." I mean, as far as aunts, uncles, or my dad. So that was kind of a fear.

SL: Now, were you a typical preacher's kid?

MW: When I was younger, I was a typical preacher's kid.

SL: Explain what that means.

MW: You can't go anywhere. You can't do nothing. I mean, to a certain extent, but going to family functions, going to church, just about at least three times a week, but family functions is where -- that's family.

SL: And what church did your father pastor?

MW: He pastored Holy Pentecostal Church of Jesus Christ. Holy Pentecostal, I'm sorry. That's the other church that we used to -- also we used to go to the church on [Fourth?] Street, on the south side of Bethlehem.

SL: How many black churches were there in Bethlehem at the time?

MW: Well, we were a Pentecostal church, so [00:17:00] Bishop [Door?] and Elder Young, they both passed away, but those are the two churches we mostly went to. Bishop Door was on the south side of Bethlehem, and Elder Young was in Easton.

SL: So you only kind of stayed within other Pentecostal churches?

MW: Yes.

SL: You didn't visit Baptist churches?

MW: No. If I don't really remember -- or we would go every now and then, or if we went to funerals or weddings or something, then that's where we would go.

SL: And just describe your father's church and what it was like at the time.

MW: My father's church, we first started out in Allentown when I was younger, you know what I mean? It was a storefront, you know what I mean? And we used to go to a lot of councils and revivals in other states, you know, Maryland, New York, Philadelphia, Camden, New Jersey. It was a [00:18:00] learning experience, you know what I mean? It gives me respect for other people and try not -- try to do what's right.

SL: You mentioned you would go to church three times a week. Were you involved in clubs, activities within the church?

MW: Let's see.

SL: Describe the kind of typical week, you know?

MW: Typical week, they would have youth councils and stuff, or the youths would go somewhere, and then the adults would be in the other room, and we would have Bible studies, you know what I mean, arts and crafts and things like that, which was -- when you're young, to be with younger kids, it's a nice thing to do. And my thing was always respect.

SL: Were you involved, like, with the choir or youth groups?

MW: The choir, I did play the drums a little bit, which my dad taught me, plus I played in elementary school, [00:19:00] you know what I mean? And then when we used to go out of town for councils and revivals, they would have little things for the kids, and the parents would be in one spot

and we would be in the other. It was a great learning experience.

SL: OK. So what did you do after high school?

MW: High school? Like I said, I went to Northampton Community College. I went to votech for electrical, and then I got a job at Pennsylvania Power and Light.

SL: But what year was that?

MW: 1985.

SL: And how long have you been there?

MW: I've been there 35 years.

SL: Describe your career at PPL.

MW: At first I was temporary at Martin's Creek. Then I got a job in the garage in Allentown, and then I became -- then I was a -- [00:20:00] what was I? Oh, I went downtown to the general office, 9<sup>th</sup> and Hamilton, in the billing department. I tried being a lineman. It didn't work out too good then. Then I became a meter reader. Then I became a dispatcher, and now I went back to being a lineman, and I love my job.

SL: Describe PPL in terms of, you know, its racial composition, class dynamics.

MW: Well, my cousin, Reverend Melvin Tatum, he gave me the application and said, "Sign up for it." He was there for over 30 years, and my aunt Antonia Williams, which is married to Elmer Williams, my uncle, my dad's brother,

[00:21:00] she was there, and she retired after over 30 years. So it was like, OK, they're here. They've been here for so many years. I want to do the same thing that they did. I want to be there for years, and which so far I have been. But as far as where I'm at, being a lineman, there's -- there's got to be 24 other -- almost 40 linemen. There's three blacks, and where I work at, but two of -- only one of them I work with, and in Allent-- Bethlehem area there's only one. So it should be diverse more, but it's not.

SL: How would you describe both living and working here in Bethlehem in terms of institutions, banks, restaurants?

MW: Banks? [00:22:00] Banks were easier years ago, but now it's harder. How can I say it? My cousin, Joe Lewis, who passed away, he worked in the bank. I needed my first mortgage. He told me who to talk to, and they gave me my first mortgage, you know what I mean? So it was somebody I knew to get -- instead of the high interest rate, he helped me out, OK? And as far as restaurants, I really like to patronize -- how can I say this -- ethnic restaurants because the food tastes better. And usually the places I do go, I usually know the owner or somebody that works there.

SL: Were there many black businesses in the area?

MW: [00:23:00] The black businesses I know are construction. There's not too many I would say insurance companies, car dealerships. You might see garages, you know what I mean, but nothing that's -- I would think that that could grow to something really big.

SL: Were you involved politically with any of the organizations like the NAACP or anything like that?

MW: One thing about me, when I started for PPL, I worked the night shift, or third shift, or all three shifts, so it was always hard for me to get associated with a group because I can't make the meetings. Even now, being a lineman, I'm on call 24/7, so, like, my phone could ring [00:24:00] right now and it says, "Come to work," because when you're out of power, you don't want to wait.

SL: Exactly. Do you recall who some of the black leaders of Bethlehem were at that time?

MW: Esther Lee. She was my counselor when I was in school. The [Stathams?] -- I remember that name, my dad used to say. My cousin Willie Howard, Fred Middleton, which I went to school with his son, Burton. I remember that name when I was younger.

SL: What was he?

MW: I just remember the name. I know he was important. You knew people that were important because everybody would know them.

SL: And you've already described your religious life. Were you involved in any other clubs or lodges or theater groups?

MW: Not really. [00:25:00] Since I was working second and third shift, during my days when I wasn't married or I had no kids, or my kids older --- I mean younger, I mean -- to do something during the daytime, I would caddy at the Saucon Valley Country Club, which kept me in shape, and let me play their golf course, plus get paid.

SL: You mentioned your family. When did you get married?

MW: I got married in 2003.

SL: And what's your wife's name?

MW: My wife's name is Anne Carroll Williams.

SL: Did you have children?

MW: I have one son.

SL: And what is his name?

MW: Matthew Tyler Williams.

SL: OK. Describe what it was like raising a child here in Bethlehem.

MW: [00:26:00] Well, I didn't raise him in Bethlehem. I live up in Allentown right now, on the west side of Allentown.

SL: When did you move there?

MW: I moved there in 2001.

SL: 2001. So prior to that --

MW: Bethlehem. Bethlehem -- it seemed like it got more Hispanic, but the black people that I grew up with, and then that my cousins knew or went to church with, even though we were older, it was still respect between each other because we knew each other's parents or their cousin or aunt, uncle, whatever, so to me it was respect for the other person.

SL: Could you just briefly describe, you know, the transition as the Hispanic population grew, did that happen gradually or really quickly, and what kind of social dynamics did that transition period happen?

MW: [00:27:00] I think it was -- by the time I got out of high school and college and I lived on my own, it seemed like it was rampant because it's not the ones I went to school with, which did speak English. It was more Hispanics that could not speak English.

SL: OK, let's pause here for a second. OK, Mr. Williams, if you could elaborate a little bit more on the period in which the Hispanic population really started to grow here in Bethlehem, and what that change was like, particularly for African Americans, and from what you observed with the white population?

MW: Well, after I would say when I was in college, and then after college, [00:28:00] when you used to go by the projects, it was mostly Hispanic, and most of them did not know how to speak English correctly or good enough, so I think that separated us from the ones I went to high school and college with. So it seemed like it was a barrier that you wish that wasn't there, so that maybe we would come together more, but it seemed like it put us apart further. But the ones I went to high school and college with, we're still friends today.

SL: Were they coming from different countries?

MW: Different countries, New York -- because it seemed like the blacks and Puerto Ricans that lived in the projects when I was a kid or a little older, their economics got better, so they moved out, and now influx of other areas came in, and [00:29:00] it changed it.

SL: Do you know what countries they were coming from?

MW: Well I believe it was Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic.

SL: How did the white community react to changing populations?

MW: Well, to my -- there wasn't too many whites in the projects back then, only a few. Not too many, and working with so many whites like I do back then and now, they didn't like it because they said, "If you can't speak English why are

you here?" And they still feel that way now because I work with them.

SL: So before Hispanics arrived, were the projects mostly black and white?

MW: Mostly black and white.

SL: And then the white population really dwindled, and the black population got smaller [00:30:00] as the Hispanic population grew larger?

MW: Yes.

SL: That's interesting. Looking back at all this now, how would you say Bethlehem as a whole has changed from the time that you were growing up here?

MW: To me, Bethlehem has always been quiet compared to Easton and Allentown. It's more home feeling, you know what I mean? People know each other more, you know what I mean? You go to a store and it's not really crowded, and it's a nice area to live in. You know, you have yards, you -- I mean, you do have the projects, but still when you have the projects there's a yard or there's a field. You know what I mean? It's still a sense of home, you know what I mean? Even when I was a kid and lived in Bethlehem Township, we all -- the kids got together and we played. [00:31:00] We used to go to our grandmother's house in the projects when we were older. You went over there, and you played in the

backyard at the playground, and who was there? My cousins, and their friends. We all seemed to play together and get along, you know what I mean? Now I see it still being that way in some places, but some people are more together, plus the older population is not around anymore, so now that brings an influx of younger people in that don't have this sense of family and togetherness.

SL: So you think the black population has changed in Bethlehem in the sense that when you grew up here, it was still black, but you had more intact families?

MW: I think you had more intact families years ago, because I remember names now that -- the Bakers, the Tarboros, the Youngs, [00:32:00] you know what I mean? People like that, the Egglestons, you know what I mean? The Williamses. Everybody knew somebody in that family. If you knew one, you knew all, no matter how old you were. From the oldest to the youngest. You went to school with them, you went to college with them, you hung out with them, and as long as you said you know somebody from that family, well so called you were good.

SL: And now you think the kind of black community isn't as cohesive as it was then?

MW: Well, kids are moving out, the younger kids or the grandkids are moving out, and now what? You know, you

don't -- you might be related to the Egglestons or the Williamses, but now you have a different last name, so no one knows. You know what I mean? The family's not -- some families ain't together like they used to be. You know why they had 20 of them, but now only five live here. You know what I mean? But the five that are here are still close together. To me, [00:33:00] I'm close to my family as far as if any of them call me up and say they need something, I'll run, you know what I mean? Or we can't be -- we don't talk for a year, but then again we could talk the next day and it would be like ain't nothing no different. We still have stories from years ago that make us laugh.

SL: Well Mr. Williams, thank you so much for your time. This was very helpful and informative, and we thank you, and if you have anything else that you remember, come back and share it with us.

MW: OK. Thank you for having me.

SL: Take care.

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