

Benjamin F. Wilson '73  
Dartmouth College Oral History Program  
Dartmouth Black Lives  
November 03, 2022  
Transcribed by Emilie Hong

WILSON: We're in business! It's recorded!

HONG: Does it look different? Okay, perfect. Okay, okay, I'm gonna start with the script. Um. So, hi, my name is Emilie Hong and I am at Silsby Hall in Hanover, New Hampshire and I'm doing a Zoom interview with Ben Wilson. Who is—where are you?

WILSON: I'm in my guest bedroom and my home in Washington, D.C.

HONG: Okay, perfect! [laughter]

WILSON: Emilie, which is your class at Dartmouth?

HONG: Dartmouth Black Lives.

WILSON: No, no, which is your class? What year?

HONG: 2025.

WILSON: Ah! So we're only separated by 52 years[laughter]

HONG: [laughter] Yea, only 52 years! Perfect! So, I'm joined today by Ben Wilson, who is at his home in [Washington] D.C. Um today, is uh... Tuesday, November 3rd, 2022.

WILSON: Actually, it's uh Thursday, and it's November 3rd, yes.

HONG: [laughter]. Oh yes it's Thursday. November 3rd. Time doesn't exist for me right now uh, but yes, it's Thursday November 3rd. This is an interview for the Dartmouth Black Lives Oral History Project. Ok. So hello, Mr. Wilson, thank you so much for joining me today. First, I'd like to learn a little bit about your childhood. Can you please state when and where you were born?

WILSON: Yes, I was born on the campus of Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana and I was born on June 29, 1951. My father was a graduate student and he and my mother had been married, not very long. And I arrived.

HONG: Okay, [laughter] perfect. And can you tell me the names of your parents?

WILSON: My father's name was Harrison, Benjamin Wilson, Junior. And my

mother's name was Anna, Williams Wilson.

HONG: And so the next question is, what was it like growing up in their town, but from what I understand, you didn't actually grow up in Bloomington?

WILSON: No, I did not grow up in Bloomington, are you asking me what it was like for my parents where they grew up?

HONG: No, for you, where you grew up

WILSON: Oh for me! So no, I didn't spend a lot of time in Bloomington, Emilie. When I was six weeks old, my mother and father moved South to Jackson, Mississippi. My father became a professor and a college coach at Jackson State College now Jackson State University in Jackson, Mississippi. My mother was 19 and after having me she would finish college and earn her master's degree. And uh, but I'm told Emilie, that they were actually packed their automobile and packed it to the gills, there was barely enough room to move and I was in a basket at my mother's feet. This is before seatbelts, and uh, and they drove south from Bloomington to Jackson.

HONG: And what yea—

WILSON: And in terms of my life growing up there, we lived on campus my first nine years before my parents bought a home and um, and it was, and they. I enjoyed my life growing up, it was fun to be on the campus, there were always activities, there were musical concerts, there were athletic contests. My, my Nursery School was on the campus, I attended the lab school on the campus, through the eighth grade, but it was a rigidly segregated society. And there was a day, when there was a state fair that, they called the "colored day", when the black people would be allowed to come to the state fair. The zoo had a "colored day", the newspaper had a colored section, and so, very rigidly segregated, we knew (inaudible)

HONG: Wait, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry. The wifi just froze up? Would you mind repeating from, um, I think the last thing I heard was the newspaper had a colored section.

WILSON: Yes. The newspaper had what they called a "colored page" and uh, it was news about what was going on in the Black community. And so I was explaining just how rigidly segregated my hometown was. And, I had to learn those rules. When uh, my Mother would take us shopping downtown, uh, you know, she made certain that we drank plenty of water before we left home, she didn't want us to drink from the uh, segregated fountains and, uh we pretty much stayed close to our neighborhoods. And uh, and when we did that, there weren't any instances of conflict. And uh, but that was the South, the Deep South in which I grew up and uh, there were instances, I was not aware of them

at the time, I would learn later learn many of these things, but when I was not yet four there was a fellow by the name of George Washington Lee, a Black man who was murdered for registering to vote and encouraging others. Two months after my fourth birthday, Emmett Till was murdered and his body mutilated. His crime whistling at a white woman. And his story of course, has been made into a popular movie that's out now. When I was eight, there was a guy named Mack Charles Parker in Pearl River County, Mississippi, he was accused of a rape he did not commit, and he was lynched, taken from the jail. There was no mythical Atticus Finch to defend him. When I was 12, and now we're talking about something I do have a firm recollection of. Schoolchildren, high school children, young people were demonstrating in a park in Birmingham, Alabama, and the then Police Commissioner, a guy named [Theophilus Eugene] Bull Connor, a name that shall live in infamy, turned fire, hoses and sicced German shepherds on those young people. That summer of my 12th birthday, Medgar [W.] Evers, who was a civil rights leader in Jackson was murdered, his, his uh, assassin was not held accountable for 31 years, and that fall. And uh, not that fall, the following. No, yes, that fall, four young girls, age 11 to 14 were killed when a bomb in their Church, in Birmingham went off. And finally, that that next summer of my 13th year, James [E.] Chaney of Meridian [MS] and Andrew Goodman and Michael [H.] Schwerner of New York were found buried ignominiously in an earthen dam. Again their crime was urging black people to vote and exercise their civic rights and civil rights. And uh, so that was the Mississippi in which I grew up at that time, uh, after Brown versus Board of Education in 1954, which was the Supreme Court case that required the integration of public schools. White citizens councils and the state sovereignty commission started. And yet in the face of all of that, my parents believed, like Sam Cooke said in that song, that a change was gonna come. They prepared us for that change, Emilie and the change came, and they wanted us to be ready, when that change came. Um, I would hasten to add because it relates to what I did with my life's work, uh there were a number of attorneys who lived in the Deep South, who in the late 50s and early 60s began challenging that segregated legal system. And I was a great beneficiary of their courageous work and I'd love to tell you about them, but I want to make certain I am going in a direction that you wish to go. So please, go ahead. [laughter]

HONG: [laughter] Absolutely, I definitely want to go in this direction, but I do want to stop you to just catch up on some details and just hear some more about certain things you mentioned. So just like, you know, for a timeline basis, do you have a year for when you moved to Jackson [MS]? And—

WILSON: Yes, I was six weeks old, so it's August of 1951. So what happened Emilie, it's an interesting story. My father was in graduate school in Indiana and the president of Jackson State College was coming and they were throwing, like a cocktail party, for him. And my father learned that one of the teachers, who was also a coach, was not going back to

the college. He was going to take the year off to pursue his master's degree at Indiana. The college president wasn't, was not aware that he was losing this person. My father was, and he and my mother got dressed up it was the first time apparently, she was without me in my first six weeks of life. And uh, and they introduced themselves. The president was informed by my father of this vacancy he had, and of course, he suggested that he would be perfect to fill it. [laughter] And uh, and somehow the president after confirming that this uh professor was no longer going to be available hired my father, and uh, said, "Well can you be there at the, at the end of the month in August?" And of course he said yes, and the rest is history!

HONG: And was there, were there any other ties to Jackson, uh that motivated him?

WILSON: None whatsoever. You see, my father at that point had earned a master's degree and he had finished college in 1950 and at that point he was maybe 25, was 25 years old, in 1950, 26 in 1951, but he'd been in the Navy and in the second World War, he enlisted spring of senior in high school and, um, so he didn't begin college until after the war in the fall of 1946. And, so upon graduation, there weren't a lot of opportunities. He could have become a teacher at a high school, but he, his aspiration was to teach at a college and to coach at a college and, uh, and when he learned of this opening at Jackson State, he was all over it. And uh, so that was it, but it wasn't like he had a ton of choices. I think there was a high school in Evansville, Indiana that offered him a job and indeed he was just about ready to accept that even though that's not what he wanted, when he learned of this other opportunity in Jackson. So no, they had no ties, no connections whatsoever. And you have to understand, my mother was from Kentucky, Frankfort Kentucky, which is where she was raised it's the state capitol. My father, while his people were from Kentucky and Virginia had been raised in Upstate New York and a town called Amsterdam, near Albany, Schenectady, Troy, and the Capital Area. So, they did not really know of the social mores of the Deep South. And so, on that first trip they took, they knew they could, they didn't have a green book, you probably saw the movie, The Green Book. And, so they would know of a safe place to stop. But their first stop was in Nashville [TN], my father was uh, was an athlete in college, so he'd been to Nashville for games and he knew where to stop there. And then a friend told him where to stop safely in Memphis [TN], which would be their final stop before arriving in Jackson, but, you know the fear was not to have a, have your car break down in the middle of nowhere, in a society that would not likely take kindly to them. So uh, they wanted to be sure, they got safely, apparently, particularly with this little baby. Yours truly. [laughter]

HONG: Okay, that's such a compelling story. [laughter] Um, I was just curious like, you know with Jackson State being an HBCU and you talked about like staying in your own neighborhoods, like how did, like the

presence of growing around growing up around that kind of environment, especially with like the kind of activism that was happening at HBCUs like affect you growing up?

WILSON: Well, it affected me greatly, but you have to understand that activism would not arise until I was 9 or 10 years old. So, 1951, Brown versus Board of Education, has not, uh, that decision would not be reached for another three years. And uh, so there was not significant activism. Jackson State College had been a school that trained ministers. It was a seminary in Natchez [MS] and it moved to Jackson, uh, just after 1900, and, but after the Baptist Church withdrew its financial support around 1940, the college sought to become a state supported school and it became a school for training negro teachers in 1940. So, um, but really the activism began in the mid to late 1950s. You will recall Dr. King, further east in Montgomery leads a boycott in 1955 and 56. The Little Rock cases integrating the schools began in 57 and 58. The integration of the elementary schools and New Orleans was 1960, Ole Miss was integrated in 1962, University of Alabama, I believe the following year in 63, and University of Georgia around 1963. So a lot of the activism does not really commence until the late 50s and early 60s. And, uh, but I do remember vividly young students from Tougaloo College and from Jackson State, who sat in at lunch counters, and they had condiments poured over their head, they were beaten, they integrated the bus stations at the Greyhound bus stations, they called themselves Freedom Riders. They went to all white churches and attempted to worship. Again, they tried to challenge all the customs, um, of the day and I had great admiration for them.

HONG: Yeah, I guess another, I guess another way that like I'm curious about hearing is like, did you feel like, even with like the activism coming later, did you feel like you had a good sense of community after which you could build upon that? Or like, what was it like growing up, um (inaudible)

WILSON: Well, I had a very supportive community. So, as I mentioned my nursery school and my elementary school was right there on the campus of the college. So, um, it was close-knit, the professors all knew each other, our, their children knew escorted, um, uh, so yes I uh very much had a strong sense of community, we were active members of our church. Um, there was a very small library there were two Black libraries in the town, [George Washington] Carver [Library] which was larger and a small library which was probably not much larger than your dormitory room at Dartmouth. And, I would spend many a Saturday sitting in that library reading books, and, uh I loved reading. And uh, so I felt I was nurtured, I learned how to play my clarinet, and later the alto saxophone the man who was the band director at the college, Mr. Davis, had played with Cab Calloway [III]. Bill Davis knew music, uh, there was another professor Alec Brown who uh, taught me about protons, and neutrons, and atoms. And uh, uh, there was another professor in English, Richard Jefferson, was an expert on

[Geoffrey] Chaucer. And uh, so, I had these, uh, very unique opportunities to be exposed to others who were educated in addition to my parents, and they were always encouraging me. The people at my church, not all of whom had a significant amount of education always encouraged me. And I recall when I started going away to school and I did in the ninth grade, I remember that final few Sundays at our church the elderly women would come up and give me a hug and encourage me, tell me how proud they were, and, and knew that I would represent them all in Massachusetts, which is where my school was. And uh, so, um, so no it was very nurturing, but we had to stay within certain bounds. And uh, so once we moved into our homes on Pittsburg Street, just one block over was a white neighborhood. And as though there were an electric fence there, Emilie, we knew not to go there. So I never turned my bike at the end of my street and rode left. Because that was taboo, and um, uh, there was a bakery, uh, and I remember my mother would send me to get the bread, you could get a day old two loaves of bread for 25 cents, and uh. But one day there were students demonstrating there, and they were severely beaten, and I remember my mother was upset that I had gone to that bakery, but she was unaware that there was gonna be a demonstration, but the violence was on the television that evening. And uh so, those were all very real things.

HONG: So it sounds like this violence is things up that you both like witnessed firsthand, and, just like, there's just a sense of like fear in the out, outside community?

WILSON: Well, yes. Again, we weren't afraid as long as we stayed on our side of the fence, so to speak. And there wasn't always literally a fence, but we, but my parents educated me about what the boundaries were and I um. I can honestly tell you, I did not speak 10 words to a white child that might have been my age in Mississippi. But, when my parents were in graduate school at Indiana University, I would meet white children, other children of other races. And so, that educated me, when we visited my grandfather and grandmother in Upstate New York, there were all types of ethnicities. So in Mississippi, I thought there were two ethnic groups, white and black, [laughter] and, of course, and, and their little town in Upstate New York, there were Hungarians and Poles, and Jews, and Russians, and Lithuanians, and Italians, and Irish. And, said, wow, I didn't realize there were all these different groups. But I learned.

HONG: So, that makes a lot, just thinking about, like, growing up in the South as well, like obviously things have changed, but, like the place I went to high school, um it was like a Sundown town for a long time and it's still, the culture is very much the same and it's, not, not great.

WILSON: No.

HONG: So, very interesting to hear about it. Um, I'm interested in hearing,

cause, you've mentioned your mother a few times.

WILSON: Yes?

HONG: Especially with like, the water fountain thing, like making sure you drank water so you didn't have to drink from the segregated fountain. Like, it sounds like your parents, even though they didn't grow up in the South, they had a lot of awareness, and a lot of—I wouldn't say militancy, but there were very sharp and aware of like, what you needed to do. So, I'm curious, like hearing about, you know, that influence and how that came about.

WILSON: Well they wanted to keep you safe. So understand, my mother grew up in Kentucky which was the South, but generally a milder, uh, segregation than that of the Deep South, and Mississippi and my father went to college at a Historically Black College in Kentucky, Kentucky State College in Frankfurt. And so, you know they understood there were segregated rules there, so to speak, but not nearly as rigid, not nearly as stringent, as in Mississippi. And, I mean we, uh, we were told to go to the bathroom so we wouldn't have to use the bathroom, or segregated bathroom, when we were out, say shopping, downtown. Or even when we traveled, you know, we went to the bathroom before we got in the car, my father drove the three and a half hours to Memphis, he'd stop in a Black neighborhood and then we could go to the bathroom. Well if you remember being a little girl, [laughter] you don't always, you're not always able to hold, hold it if you will for three and a half hours, or a little boy. And uh, but, but we understood, and they were protecting us. And uh, they were seeking to avoid incidents. And uh, but my mother was uh, very encouraging, um, she'd been a very good student in high school, she was at the top of her class a segregated high school in Frankfurt, Kentucky, Mayo Underwood. And she uh, after she had me and she returned to college, she was an excellent student again, at the top of her class. But she, uh, she taught me, she encouraged my reading, she bought me books, encyclopedias, uh, uh, and I loved reading and she, she uh fostered that. And, uh, and my, she and my father were of one mind, they wanted us to have the best education possible. What, what you might find fascinating, there was an assumption, when I started going away to school that, somehow from Mississippi we were far behind. But because I was attending the lab school, I had this exposure to college professors, and my mother taught the sixth, seventh, and weight grades, about eight or nine, maybe ten or twelve students in each of those classes. And, the students in the upper grades wrote science papers, the topics of which read like a master thesis. And uh, and so, students from our school won national awards, uh, the same awards that students from exclusive schools in the South and north were winning. And so, so the point is, we, we had a unique, a unique exposure, the mother of one of my classmates was from Cuba, she taught us Spanish. And where the other kids were, did not, were not learning a second language, we were learning a second language. As I

mentioned, the gentleman who taught me to play clarinet had played for Cab Calloway, so, he knew everything about music, arranging, and, he shared that with us. And as you know, music has this language, you know, adagio, mezzo-forte, all the, and we were learning the language of music. And uh, the language of physics, uh, and um, I had a great interest in history and my mother and father both fostered that, so, I'm, I'm very grateful for my parents, they uh, they made a lot of sacrifices for us, or my brothers and me, and later my mother died when I was fifteen, my father remarried, and my stepmother, whose name is Lucy [R.] Wilson, uh, also made similar sacrifices and she had a daughter, Jennifer, and she and my father had a daughter, April. So there were three boys, with uh, my mother and father, and then, two girls. Uh, and then my stepmother's daughter, and, and the daughter, the baby that she and my father had together.

HONG: So okay, so interesting, I want to move on to your schooling in just a second but to me it sounds like you just kind of understood, um, like what your parents' intentions were. Like, am I correct in that or like were there ever—

WILSON: No, I did understand it. But they, they would repeat it many times. It was reinforced by aunts and uncles and grandparents, other teachers, people at church. And as much as I loved my parents, they were not unique. There were thousands of other Black parents who were raising their children the same way. I suspect, your parents were not the only parents who were encouraging you to pursue an education that, many of their peers were doing the same, and, and mine were no different. And uh, so my parents thought education was the uh, was the great equalizer, and they felt you could never have too much of it and uh, and they encouraged us.

HONG: Hm. So I—so when did you start? Did you go to like a Pre-K program or did you start straight at the lab school... or?

WILSON: Well, no, so there was a nursery school on the college campus and that was for age three, four, and five and the nursery school became a kindergarten, if you will. But again, because the three, four, and five year olds were all in the same room, as a three-year-old, you were learning what the five year olds were learning, right? And uh, I was bored to death with coloring books uh, [laughter] and so if they were learning to read or spell or add, you know, I learned how to do those things. And I had a cousin who was two years older, and she was more like a sister than a cousin, and I wanted to keep up with her. So I would learn the things that she was learning and she was kind enough to teach me. And, uh, so, that was, that was my experience. And uh, and then when I proceeded in the elementary school, again, I had very fine teachers, Lillian Lane was my elementary school teacher, she had beautiful penmanship. Uh, Lottie Thornton was my intermediate school teacher, she taught the fourth and fifth grades, and then my mother taught sixth through eighth. All, and so, first, second and third were in



one, classroom, four and five were in another, and six, seven, and eight were in a third. You know we had an Operetta basically, a school play, every year, we had a band, we had Spanish, we took standardized tests and we excelled on those tests. Uh, uh, there's a famous Stanford test, I forget what it's called, you might know about but they were giving it then and we took it then and and we were in various students competitions, spelling bees, um, I mentioned the Science Project which was a national competition, and book reports. I recall reading a book about uh Admiral Nelson, hero of Trafalgar and having to give a book report and I wanted to write out all my comments, and that was the first time, I was ten. I did an outline, my mother made me practice it and uh, and you know, so I had just a few notes. But I had to speak extemporaneously and field questions and most of the other kids were 8th graders or 9th graders. And, but she wanted me to have that experience and I was grateful for it.

HONG: So what was it—I'm just curious, what was it like having your mother as your teacher? [laughter]

WILSON: [laughter] Not easy. Because, uh, not easy. Uh, you know I was uh, at that point, let's see, eleven, twelve, thirteen. So you're going through puberty, you know, and uh you're liking girls for the first time, but, not, very awkward trying to figure out how to do that, handle that. And, um, and sometimes other children resented that, they felt like maybe I was getting special treatment. But, uh, I was getting special treatment at home but not at school.

HONG: Right. [laughter]

WILSON: And uh, and uh, and there was a desire to perform, to live up to my mother's expectation and not just be okay but to be the best. And uh, and so um. But I'm glad they, they had high expectations for me, and uh... it became what I expected of myself.

HONG: So it sounds like there's just like a lot of, I don't know if it was academic pressure, like obligation or if it came from, you know.

WILSON: Well, first of all, I'd liked school, right? I liked reading, I liked history, I liked math, I liked everything! And I was intellectually curious. But, you know, as you know, any time you take a test, there's a pressure, pressure to perform, pressure, pressure to succeed, but I was taught by my parents that pressure was kind of a natural part of life, and that I should embrace that, that it was a good sign that I had butterflies before performance in the school play, or before tests or before a sporting event, and that as long as I had pr, prepared, I would be fine. And they were right, they turned out to be right.

HONG: Hm. It sounds like you did so much at such an early age, I'm hearing sports, I'm hearing a play, I'm hearing clarinet, was it?

WILSON: Yes, all of those things. I had younger brothers. My brother Harry was three and a half years younger than me, my brother John was seven years younger, and then my brother Richard was 12 years younger. This was all before my mother passing, but my sisters were not yet in my life and I had to babysit them, right? [laughter] I knew how to change diapers, you know, I could fix breakfast and lunch, you know, all of those things. So we were self-reliant, you know, I uh, knew how to clean up the kitchen and the bathroom and make up the bed. All of those things, we, we were expected help our mother and, and because unfortunately, back then, disproportionately the housework devolved upon her. And uh, but we did, and then outside, when we bought a home, we had to cut the grass and (inaudible), Mississippi heat, and uh—

HONG: Rights. That's like— [laughter]

WILSON: But as a general matter, Emilie, a segregated life and idyllic life, again, as long as we stayed on our side of the fence. And uh, so, and it's when we went to Indiana or Kentucky or New York state, that we saw a broader world. And I think that was good for us and and we got an inkling of what we could do there. So my second spring of my second semester, my father left the college to work, complete, a draft of his dissertation, I think it was. And so I went to an integrated school for the first time in Bloomington, and, and that was a interesting experience, Emilie, a true story. The students in the class were teaching—cheating. Excuse me. And, and I did not cheat. And I remember telling my parents, I didn't make the highest grade on a test, but the students had cheated. And they went to the school and they told the teacher, the teacher said, "well, he shouldn't be a tattletale!"

HONG: Oh my gosh!

WILSON: And my parents said "yeah, but we also taught him not to cheat." And uh, I remember, I could read the entire book in our little book and the— there was a word that was supposed to indicate the sound that a crow makes, c-a-w, and I pronounced it as "cah, cah", she said it should be no "caw, caw". And so she stopped me. I could have read the entire rest of the book, but she really did not want to see me excel as compared with the other children. So, I encountered something I'd never known before, which was a teacher, who did not, not only didn't have a high expectation for me, but was simply, was actually trying to retard, uh, my performance. And my parents began teaching me about that. And, and again, their whole point was, don't let that discourage you, that should indicate to you you're definitely on the right track. If they don't want you to have it, that's precisely what you want. And uh, and so I, I learned. And I learned—so, that was that. But that was a good experience for me because I clearly felt very confident. I was not surprised that I was able to compete with the white students at my little elementary school, and I had an expectation of being able to do well. And in fact, a lot of the things they were teaching, I'd already learned at

the lab school. And so they were actually behind us. And uh, and, but my parents told me, “don't say that. Just—don't, don't”. All right. Please go ahead. I'm giving you more detail than you want. So don't, don't—slow you down. [laughter]

HONG: [laughter] I love, I love detail, this is why I blocked out a lot of time for this. So no worries. I'm just curious because, this also means a lot to me because I went to school when I was younger, kind, kind of similarly to you, like elementary and middle school in like a very diverse place, and then I went to high school in a very like, the later part of middle school and high school in like a very white place and like, I, you know, I feel like that for me built a lot of like character and a lot of, like, I really love the word militance, you know. But like a lot of understanding of, like, what I would accept and you know what I'm capable of. I'm like I'm curious to hear like—so you mentioned that a little bit, but just in terms of like how you deserve to be treated, what, were those things that you also gleaned from that experience?

WILSON: Not only did I, it's how I expected to be treated.

HONG: Right.

WILSON: And when that expectation was not met, my parents—now, understand, I'm 7 years old. They're explaining this to me. But their ultimate message wasn't that it was that—what I—their message was, not that this was not unfair. Forgive my double negative—they were acknowledging that what was happening was unfair, but they, their attitude was, you have to succeed anyway, you have to win anyway. And in fact, from my father, the unfairness of it should heighten, [laughter] should raise [laughter] your competitive level. And uh—

HONG: Right.

WILSON: And I've taken that with me my entire life. But I began learning that at age seven in Bloomington, Indiana.

HONG: Mhm.

WILSON: Fairview Elementary School.

HONG: Fairview, okay! [laughter]

WILSON: And I found that my class wasn't always fair! [laughter]

HONG: True! [laughter] Did, were you able to like, make, make friends since you said like this was the first time you integrated, you entered—

WILSON: Yes, we, I made friends. So when my parents weren't in grad school they lived in then what was called Hoosier Court. And there'd been trailers built for, uh, veterans after the war, and then there were

barracks that had been built during the war and afterward for graduate students. My father went to college on the GI Bill. And uh, so there were other young couples, White, Asian, all manner of people who lived in those married—student housing. And, uh, and I recall there was a family, I think they were from Iowa, and, and I remember I was at their house and they had a box of cereal. And I could read everything on the box of cereal and there were some contest. And I was a little guy, so I probably looked younger than I really was, but, they were like “man, you can read that?” [laughter], and their kids couldn’t read it, and uh, but um, but no, that um, but that was, those were really good experiences for me and the. And then when I was in Indiana, one year I was in the fourth grade. Indiana University had a great music program, a lot of opera singers come from there. And um, and so they had an opera that they performed and I was an extra in the opera. And so when I was a kid, when I had plays at school or at church, we would pretend to eat food, right? But in this opera, they had real ice cream every night, and—

HONG: Oh wow!

WILSON: And it was typically Neapolitan, I wanted to get them to order chocolate. And uh, but the opera ran every night for like ten days. And I can still recall, my father would pick me up and it was probably over at 9:00, 9:30, and we would walk across the campus together. My father was tall, he was 6’3” and a half and I was short. So, his normal gait, I was, you know, I had to take three steps to keep up with one of his. And uh, but I recall his saying we passed a law school in Indiana, “Man, it would be something if you went to school here one day.” And uh, but he was trying to plant that seed in my mind of uh, uh going to college and perhaps going to law school in Indiana. And uh, so I remember that like it was yesterday.

HONG: Mm. So, how, how did it happen then that you moved on to the next stage in your education? From what I understand you went to like a preparatory school?

WILSON: I did. It's in Western Massachusetts, it's called Wilbraham Academy. Have you heard of Friendly's Ice Cream?

HONG: [laughter] Yes!

WILSON: Okay. Well Friendly's Ice Cream is based in Wilbraham and uh, uh but it's near Springfield Massachusetts. And what happened was, there was a woman who taught English at Jackson State, Mrs. Tatum, and she went to Stratford, Connecticut. They do the Shakespeare plays every spring in Stratford, Connecticut like Stratford-on-Avon. And she sat next to the Dean of Admissions from Wilbraham Academy, my school, and he told her they were trying to recruit negro boys to come to their school. I don't think he was fully aware of it, but there had been Black students at Wilbraham, uh, before the Civil War. One of the slave

narratives, written by student, who was a shoemaker from Virginia, and he went to Wilbraham. His classmate became a minister in an African Methodist Episcopal Church, is one of the first black college graduates in America, went to Oberlin. And uh, and Oberlin grad, had the first black college graduates, and that guy ended up recruiting a black regiment in the Civil War. There had been Black students in the 20s, so when you would get a minute, I want you to look up the Wilkinsons in the Rauner [Special Collections] Library, one graduated Class of 1924 and another graduated Class of 1928. They were first cousins. And Robert Wilkinson went to Wilbraham and he graduated in 1920, and Bernie Wilkinson graduated in 1924. And they, they were from Orangeburg, South Carolina, and our families had a lot of similarities except their family went to college a few generations before mine. And their father was a guy named Robert Shaw Wilkinson and he was named for Robert Gould Shaw, the colonel in the Massachusetts 54th. Did you ever see the movie Glory?

HONG: No... [laughter]

WILSON: Well, well you gotta watch Glory, that's one of my requirements. And Robert Gould Shaw was from Boston, he led this all black regiment in the Civil War. And so this man was, his mother was from Boston, and I suspect in honor of Colonel Shaw. named her son Robert Wilkinson. And that man taught at a school that later became South Carolina State College. And have you heard of E.E. Just?

HONG: Yes.

WILSON: E.E. Just graduated from Dartmouth in 1907, but he was likely taught by this Mr. Wilkinson in the late 1800s and very early 1900s. E.E. Just went to Kimball Union and then on to Dartmouth, he was the foremost black scientist of the 20, 20th Century. Anyway, the Wilkinsons went to Wilbraham, they went to Dartmouth, and then Robert Wilkinson had a son who finished Dartmouth in 1950. But that son wanted to go to Wilbraham. Wilbraham had established a policy as a result of complaints by some parents from the South that they would no longer admit negro boys. And under the protest of this Robert Wilkinson Class of 1924, the school still upheld their segregationist policy, or their return to a segregationist policy. So now, in the mid-1960s, they are about to integrate again, and I am one of those little boys. So, that's a long-winded story—

HONG: [laughter]

WILSON: but the Wilkinsons are more interesting than the Wilsons because they had graduates in 1920. 1924, 1950, 1978, 1983. Wonderful people. And they've become friends here in Washington. But so, Mrs. Tatum said, told this admissions director, "I know just the little boy!" [laughter] And so they gave me the standardized test, and apparently, I did well on it. My father asked the head of guidance counseling at Jackson

State, "How's he doing on the test?" Of course, he shouldn't have asked him that and uh, the gentleman said, "Well, so far, he's doing well, he's got 'em all right!" Apparently, I did well on the test. The problem was, the tuition was \$2,700. With a PhD my father made \$8,400, and I had three younger brothers, and while my mother worked outside the home, \$2,700 represented, geez, about 15% of their combined income, before taxes. So I was not going. But an interesting thing happened, a student from another country could not get a Visa, could not be admitted, and they offered me a half scholarship. And my parents paid for the rest, and I had jobs at the school. So we visited my grandfather in Upstate New York. Had we known I had been admitted I would have gone to visit the school, it was only two and a half hours away. But now I'm back in Mississippi, my father opens the mail. He says he spoke to my mother about it, he says you're going to go to that school. And I was so disappointed. I wanted to go to my neighborhood, all-Black high school, the coach had my helmet, I was so ready. And uh, so within a week, I had to read three books, three novels. And uh, uh my mother took me downtown, she bought me an additional suit in addition to my church suit, and um, I got my own comb and brush for the first time, I didn't have to share with my brothers, and she put me on a plane. I flew to Montgomery, and what's that place called, Birmingham on Southern Airways to Atlanta on Delta to LaGuardia on uh Eastern Airlines, and to Bradley Field, they now call it Bradley International Airport, Hartford, Springfield on Allegheny Airlines. Most of those airlines don't exist anymore, or they have different names. And um, um and that changed my life, you know, really forever. Because it put me in New England, and uh, and now I was at this prep school and uh, and I was going to have really good competition for the first time and uh, and uh, I was excited about it, I had a chance to prove what I could do. And uh. So. So. that's what happened.

HONG: It sounds, like I can't help, but feel like it sounds a little bitter, bittersweet to me, like, you know, especially with—go ahead.

WILSON: It was bittersweet because I was leaving my home, I was leaving three younger brothers, I was leaving my mother and father, it's like going to college except I was 14, not 18.

HONG: Gosh, yeah.

WILSON: And uh, and it was a very quick change, so I didn't that is I'd only been home a week, and, and now I was about to get on this plane and fly off to the school. But um, all credit to my parents, I think it took a lot of courage—because I'd like to think they love me [laughter]—to uh, to let me go off to school but they wanted me to have the best education possible, Emilie, and they thought the segregated schools would be—I would find them very limiting—and I think they were right, I participated in a college readiness program at Jackson State. I was going to the ninth grade, all the other students were going to college, and I was able to hold my own not so much I think because I was all that smart but

really, I'd done all this reading. And so many of these other really smart kids had not had the same exposure I had. And so, so many encouraged, I think my parents, to uh, to have me have me go away to the school, they saw it as a, as a great chance. And so I'm grateful to them, I really am.

HONG: Mhm. Well, I'm curious to hear what it was like, especially like, even thinking coming from Texas to New Hampshire has been a huge shift, just geographically, but also like, I'd love to hear if you can address that first and then just like the culture of it, like you're—

WILSON: Well, I had some advantages because remember, my grandfather lived in Upstate New York.

HONG: Right. [laughter]

WILSON: So we would visit him every summer, and Upstate New York's not the same as Western Mass, but it's not that different, you know. And uh, so I had some broader experience than just my experience in Mississippi. I'd spent my summers at Indiana University when my father was in grad—father and mother were in graduate school. So I'd been in an integrated environment before, so this was not my first rodeo. And there were other hidden advantages. One of the first novels we read was *Drums Along the Mohawk*, have you ever read that?

HONG: No, no, I haven't.

WILSON: In any event it's the story of this young couple in the frontier in America was up there in Albany, not far from where my grandparents lived. And, there was a General [Nicholas] Herkimer who was involved in the American Revolution. There's an exit on the New York Thruway like four miles from my grandparents home, where general, called Herkimer, New York, named for this general. Uh, so here we are reading this novel, and, and they're talking about General Herkimer. And I tell my English teacher, "I've been to his home!" At Wilbraham they said "Oh yeah, sure. You're from Mississippi?" I said "I am. But my grandfather lives in Amsterdam and three exits over is Herkimer." You know, and he thought I was lying, and my parents took me to the general's home. You know. There was a church, you can see from the Thruway that was built in 1769, and that was the period of the novel.

HONG: And when Dartmouth was founded! [laughter]

WILSON: Excuse me?

HONG: And when Dartmouth was founded.

WILSON: Yea! And when Dartmouth was founded, how do you like them apples? [laughter] So I appreciate that irony, thank you for pointing that out. So, um, there were these assumptions that were made about me that were

not accurate. Have you ever read Malcolm Gladwell, David and Goliath?

HONG: No, I have read some of his other books though.

WILSON: Okay. Well, promise me you'll read the first chapter.

HONG: Okay.

WILSON: And are—you're probably familiar with the story of David and Goliath. And, uh. And Goliath was the original Big Man, 8 feet tall. And—but Gladwell says, there were three types of soldiers. There was an infantryman, which is what Goliath was. There was a cavalry man, who rode a horse or a chariot, and there were the archers, or the people with the slingshot, like David. Each had an advantage over the other: in close quarters, the infantry man was—wins. When speed was important, the man on the horse wins. And when distance was important, the archer, or the slingshot person, had an advantage. And in the biblical verse, he's, they were in the Valley of Elah and apparently Goliath says "Come onto me." And Gladwell says, he believes that Goliath was suffering from gigantism and could not see. And David's not stupid, he's not going to get in close quarters with this giant and fight him. He keeps his distance! [laughter] So when the king offers him his uh mantle, his uh shield, he says "No! No thanks. I'll stay over here." The other thing I didn't know until I read it again. This was not the first time David had used his slingshot. He used it to fight bears and lions. And so, the whole point here was, he was a shepherd. And so, this was one of the weapons he needed to protect his flock. And so Gladwell says in some sense, David had some advantages over Goliath. And the whole book is about a series of stories, about children who don't have anything but have an advantage over children who have everything, right? So, uh, you know, that's the story of immigrants in America who don't have anything but they study and they work hard! And the kids who're privileged don't work hard. And there's a story of a young woman who wants to be a doctor, she goes to Brown and she's in the final quartile of the pre-meds. She doesn't go to medical school because she can't get into this elite medical school and she becomes a writer. And Gladwell says that had she gone to the University of Maryland, she would have been in the top quarter and she probably would have become the doctor that she always wanted to become. There's another guy who was very poor, he goes to Hollywood, he makes a lot of money. His kids don't work hard, he did work hard, but they don't have his work ethic and so, Gladwell's theory is not having everything is a good thing. And his theory is that um. That what appears to be a disadvantage, can be an advantage. And I believe that applies to me. Your turn.

HONG: Great. That's—that is a very motivating story. [laughter] Yeah, I, I mean I'm just curious to hear like more about like, even just like your life, like your experiences. I noticed that you said you were working a job? You



worked when you were there?

WILSON: Yeah, so when I say job, I worked in the kitchen, and the dining room, right? You know had—does Dartmouth still have green coats or gold coats, students who work. Well, I think they do, because you were helping a student who was working in the dining room, weren't you?

HONG: Yeah. I work at the cafés, actually, so, yea.

WILSON: Well, back then, everybody, in my day, everybody ate in the dining room. We didn't, you know, have other eating options.

HONG: Oh wait, was it just the Commons?

WILSON: Just the Commons.

HONG: No! [laughter]

WILSON: Thayer Hall. And so—and so, so at my prep school they had a kitchen like that, and I would wash dishes. And then they had what we called a spa, where there was a lady who lived locally, she would sell snacks, you could get a hot dog or a hamburger or chips or cookies, and she opened it on Sunday morning and she opened it everything—every evening for a half hour from 8:00 to 8:30. And so she would, I would come down there and work for her. And she didn't pay me but she let me take a burger and food. And I was always hungry. [laughter] And uh, and uh so, so I had jobs when I was there. And uh, uh but again that was my—that was my experience. And at the school, I—you know, I started off very well. And, but then I had to work harder. At, at the prep school, they were not interested in your simply regurgitating the facts and memorizing everything. And I had a good memory. They wanted to know the whys, and uh, they wanted us to be critical thinkers. And so that was a transition that I had to make. And I, I remember I came home, I had these grades. Uh I remember, I had a 75 E. E meant was excellent effort. That was highest effort, but it was a 75. Well, the school's grading scale was 0 to 80. Not 0 to 100. You know, they were hard graders. I don't think my mother understood that. And she was very disappointed, and “You have to do better.” So I started—I would get up at 4:30 in the morning. And uh, and I would study when others were sleeping—and my grades improved. And uh, uh, and then from my 10th grade year on, I, you know, was a top student thereafter. But one of my disappointments, my mother died when I was in 10th Grade. And, for the first time, when I made the highest honors, which meant I had a honors grade in every course. And, there were only like one or two other students in my class who done that. But she was in a coma. And I never got to tell her that I'd finally done what she wanted to see me do. And, but like all children, I wanted my parents to be proud of me. And once I figured out, kind of—not the game, but the rules, if you will, of engagement—and I put in

that extra work—

HONG: Right.

WILSON: I was pretty good.

HONG: That's, that's a lot of, I mean, how many hours extra would that be if school started in the morning, like—

WILSON: Well, the thing is, because we were away in school, you had to be up for breakfast, 7:30 or 8:00. But it was, it was extra two or three hours in the morning. And, uh, but once I became a better student, learned how to study, learned what the teachers were looking for—you know, it's like playing the piano. It wasn't nearly as difficult, once you know some of the basics. And uh, so, so that's what happened and uh.

HONG: Um I want to revisit more about your mother if you're comfortable in a second.

WILSON: Anything you'd like to ask, yes.

HONG: Perfect. But I—just for now, while we're still talking about the school, I'm curious like, were there uniforms, and like did you still play football?

WILSON: Not uniforms, but the, but the, you had to wear a jacket and tie or suit and tie every day.

HONG: Wow, yeah.

WILSON: So I had two suits and one jacket. And um, so that was a routine. I had to learn how to tie a tie, I didn't know how to tie a tie until, uh, and one of my father's students taught me how to tie a tie. And, it's like anything else, once you're used to dressing up, you think it's normal. (Laughs)

HONG: Right.

WILSON: And it wasn't a big deal. And uh...

HONG: And from what I understand, like you played football your whole life? Did you continue—

WILSON: Oh yeah. In high school, I played football, basketball, baseball, ran track. And at Dartmouth I played football and ran track. And my brothers were really good. [laughter]

HONG: Yeah.

WILSON: And, but I was on a Dartmouth team that was the best, best team in Dartmouth history. We were undefeated, we won the Lambert trophy. We were rated 14th in the country, ahead of USC and Notre Dame.

And we had a really good team. And uh, and I made friends among my teammates, they were good students, and we became friends for life. So I speak with them almost every day and uh, these uh, men from Dartmouth. And uh. So I'm very proud of that.

HONG: Yeah, awesome! Okay, I just want to move back onto, like, the more personal stuff if you're okay with that.

WILSON: Sure!

HONG: This—so that happened when you were away or were you able to visit home?

WILSON: So, I—um. This was Spring Break at my prep school, and they called to tell me that my mother was in a coma. And um, so we had to make emergency, um. Travel arrangements. I was not going to go home, it was expensive to go home. I was going to stay at the school over the spring break. But I flew home. And, um, and my mother was very much in a coma. She would not regain consciousness, uh her breathing was labored. And um, it was, it was difficult. And I remember my mother was in the “Negro” section of the Baptist hospital. And the federal facilities were not segregated. And I had an aunt who was a nurse, and she said “You should have your wife taken to the veterans hospital. And there the care was better and it would not be segregated.” And, so, she was there. And, but what I remember vividly the day I was told that my mother had died. I remember going outside. And, um, and traffic was moving, the world did not stop. And I was disappointed that the world did not stop, didn't they understand that my mother had died. And uh. But that was a powerful lesson, that the world doesn't stop for anyone. And uh, uh, and even if it stops, it's only a pause. So that, that was, that was, you know, the great challenge of my life certainly up until that point. And um, um and I remember coming home that summer, and my brothers, my three younger brothers and my father were there to meet me at the airport. And my father's, my brothers had on their short pants, but they'd worn them a season too long. Their shoes were overwrought a little bit. My father had combed and brushed their hair. But for the first time I realized—I mean, I knew my mother was gone, but I realized her presence wasn't there. Because my father did as well as a man could do, but he, he couldn't do the things that my mother could do. So there were things that I took for granted, Emilie that. And I was not a boy that noticed things, I took things for granted. You know, I—“It's breakfast time, we're going to have breakfast”, “It's lunch time, we're going to have lunch!”, you know, “I gotta go to school, what are—where are my clothes?” And—but now I understood that my mother had really been responsible for all those things moving so smoothly and so swimmingly. And um. I knew that she was the one that had insisted with my father that I go away to the school. Because she wanted me to have every opportunity, and that's why I was so greatly disappointed, even to this day, disappointed that I, I had not achieved the academic success at that school while she was living so

that she was aware of that. I was, I was improving, but I hadn't quite reached the goal that I knew she had for me. And um. So. And I made a vow, there are people who have come to me to try to, my mother always wanted me to do the right thing and Emilie I resisted the right thing as often as I could. But sometimes, when people come to me to ask me to do something, I will say yes. Because I'd like to think my mother's spirit is speaking through them, particularly when what they're asking you to do is a good thing, is a right thing. And so it's my way, small way of hopefully honoring her, and remembering her. And, um, so for example, about 15 years ago, several lawyer friends came to me and they said, "Hey Ben, we should organize the diverse lawyers in these law firms in Washington D.C. and I said, "Well, I've done this before and it didn't work." They said, "What do you mean it didn't work?" I said, "Well, I'd host a first meeting or a second meeting, but no one else would host the third, and my wife says, 'It's not potluck, if you're doing all the cooking.'" But again, they reminded me of my mother. So I called a group together, about 15 people, probably 12 or 13 men. And I said, "If we do this, will you host the second meeting, will you host the third, will you host the fourth?" And they said, yes. And I said, if we do this, this is not going to be like the church where the women do the work and the men do all the talking. We're going to take turns doing the fun stuff and the stuff that's not so much fun. And if we acknow, recognize a man for his excellence one year we'll recognize a woman the next. And uh, but we're going to take turns as it related to gender. And, um, so I hosted this meeting, I thought we might get 20 people. We got 95 people.

HONG: Wow.

WILSON: And I had—you'd call it PowerPoint today, I'd call it a slide show. So if we were in the H's, Emilie Hong's name would come up. It would say where she went to college, where she went to law school, and what her practice was and the name of her firm. It'd be up for 15 seconds. And whoever next is in that alphabet, their picture would come up. So while people were drinking and eating, they would say "I went to school with Emilie! I know her, she's from Texas, we went to—I knew her! We!" You know, that type of thing. And, and so what happened is, we learned no one knew everyone, everyone knew someone. And then people in Baltimore invited me. And then Wilmington, Philadelphia—I sound like Amtrak—Toronto, all across the country. And then I developed a newsletter— goes out to 6,000 diverse people each week. So if someone wins a new case, gets a promotion, I want someone other than their mother to know about it. So, "Emilie Hong named Attorney General!" And all your friends in Texas will get the newsletter. And um, and then we had job opportunities included, and then various fundraising activities. And it's made a difference in a lot of people's lives. I get calls from young people like you all the time about law school, about this, about that. I take them all because I felt like that's the type of thing my mother would want me to do. So, that's it.

HONG: So it sounds like your mother's spirit really lives on, in like generosity, quality in many ways.

WILSON: Well, I certainly wouldn't attribute generosity to me but I would attribute it to her. Yes. [laughter] Absolutely right.

HONG: [laughter] Right. Right. Well, that's a beautiful thing, um. Thank you for sharing that with me. I appreciate that a lot.

WILSON: Sure, sure.

HONG: Okay perfect. So I think we touched on your career a little bit. I want to get to that, but first, just thinking chronologically let's move forward to your time at Dartmouth a little bit?

WILSON: Well certainly, well I liked Dartmouth immediately. You asked me before about the ABC program, A Better Chance. I was not a part of that program, but some of the other Black students who attended my prep school and other prep schools had been a part of the program. And they told me about—there was one guy I mentioned to you, William McCurine, who later became a Rhodes scholar at Dartmouth, he graduated in '69, I graduated in '73 and I knew this guy must walk on water. But our paths did not cross. But, as I mentioned, he was a Rhodes scholar. And now, when he was at Harvard Law School, he was a third year and I was a first year. And I went to a party at Wellesley, and he and his wife were like, house parents, in the, one of the women's dorms. And I met him and he was a wonderful guy, and I felt connected to him. But at Dartmouth I made friends from the very beginning. Um, the Black students sat together in the Commons, but I had friends from all groups. And um, one of my suitemates was a guy named Freddy Fu ['74]. He spells his last name, F-u, and Freddy was from Hong Kong and he and I became fast friends. He was one of the leading orthopedic surgeons in the world, and when my daughter, who played basketball at the University of Pennsylvania, tore her ACL, my wife was not satisfied with the university doctor. She says, "I looked up your friend Freddy Fu, he's one of the best in the world!" She says, "I looked up this doctor with the Baltimore Ravens", dark, handsome fellow, Black guy. She says, but he studied under Fu, "You know Fu, call him, if you know him so, so well!"

HONG: [laughter]

WILSON: Well I hadn't spoken to Freddy in 30 years. I called him, he took my call, and my wife staged whispered, "Ask him if he'll see her!" I said, "Well, she's at the University of Pennsylvania." He says, "Actually, I'm going down there, they want me to take over their program, but I'm not going to do that." I said, "Well, would you see her?" He said yes. And then she says, "Ask him if he'll do the surgery!" I said, "Would you do surgery?" He says, "Yes, if you'll bring her to Pittsburgh," I said "Well, my wife's from Pittsburgh, we'll bring her." And he did the surgery, he

had this innovative surgery called “Double-Bundle”, and there was a big article about him in the Pittsburgh Post Gazette, and about my daughter, and a quote from me, and the surgery he performed, uh. He was a head of the Pittsburgh Symphony, his daughter and son went to Dartmouth, and he died, tragically this past spring. And uh, I have other classmates, one of whom went to Wilbraham with me, went to Dartmouth Medical School, others who were in my suite, we remained friends for life, they were all white. And then there were my teammates, and the ones I was closest to were Black, and we remain friends for life. And there were other students, non-athletes, who I also befriended and made friends with, for life. And so, my younger brothers, Harry [‘77], John [‘80], and Richard [‘85] all went to Dartmouth. Uh, they all played sports. I try to come back and offer, for particularly African-American students, I would organize panels if you wanted to be a journalist, or doctor, or a lawyer, or go to business school, whatever. And uh, and then later I was asked to run for the board by the Alumni Council and I was on the board for eight years, headed the Audit Committee, my wife and I contributed to this E. E. Just fund, we believe in that and we wanted to see greater diversity in STEM. And when I met these wonderful students from Dartmouth were about 50, most of whom were Black, and I remember the professor said, “Well, this is Mr. Wilson, he's on the board of Dartmouth. He's going to offer wisdom!” All these kids were smarter than me. And so I then said, “Well look, I don't have a lot of wisdom for you, but tell me about you. Tell me where you went to high school, where you're from, and what's the great thing you're going to do with your life?” So one student said “I'm from Birmingham, Alabama, I was raised by my grandmother and I want to find a cure for breast cancer.” And the next kid says, “I'm from Brooklyn, New York and I want to find out how to store solar energy, so we have energy when the sun's not shining,” and each one had a greater dream than the last. And I was so excited. And so, I encouraged the board, others to contribute to Just. We had a significant gift of, I think 20 million dollars, made a couple of years ago. And uh, and you see Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Stanford, they don't have an E. E. Just. Now, Tuskegee [University] had George Washington Carver, but he's the only one that was a bigger deal than Just. And, my deal is we should make a big deal of that. And, and we are, and, and so I'm very proud of that. But history was my major, Jim Wright, who just died, had been the president of Dartmouth for many years. I don't know if you saw that. He was my history professor, I was his senior fellow, he was my advisor. I graduated Magna Cum Laude, Rufus Choates Scholar, Phi Beta Kappa, all of that stuff.

HONG: Wow, so impressive!

WILSON: Yeah. Well, again, this is all post, you know, my mother. And uh, um. But I had great professors at Dartmouth, they encouraged me, I had great classmates, I learned from them. It was a terrific experience.

HONG: Mhm. Right. So I—well, I mean there's so many points in that, but I'd

like to get more to, but I guess we could start with, you know, what we have in common, the history major. Was there anything in particular that like, pushed you to do history? Or, I mean, I've realized, you have a great memorization just from our conversations so—

WILSON: Well, I think what I wanted to understand was why people did what they did. And so, I was interested in American history, the Revolution, the Civil War in particular, and um where our ideals as a country came from. Um, but I had an interesting experience. Did you ever watch Ken Burns' Civil War series?

HONG: Uh, like snippets of it, yes.

WILSON: Okay. Well Shelby Foote, is this elderly gentleman from Greenville, Mississippi, he's kind of the star of the whole program and is one of the great historians. And, I was in Memphis [TN] about 20 years ago, and all these old men like me were crowding around him like he was a famous baseball player, right? And uh, uh, and I was standing back from the crowd, I was hero-worshipping too. But I didn't think there was anything special about my questions, and he answered every question and at some point, everyone's gone. And so I then go up to him. And I've read everything he's written. And you could press a button, if you said "Shiloh", he could tell you, if you said "Gettysburg", he could tell you, if you, didn't matter, you said "John Bell Hood", he could tell you. There's high schools in Texas—Cleburne! Uh, uh, he could tell you. Fort Hood is named for John Bell Hood in Texas. But that's not what I wanted, I knew that stuff. I wanted to know why they fought I wanted to know why some poor white farmer would fight to defend slavery. Why would some immigrant boy from Germany who lives in Wisconsin march a thousand miles South to Mississippi to fight in the Civil War. And I'd actually read a lot of books, a lot of diaries, so I had some sense of why they did that in a way that he d. So it was a fascinating—and then, my theory was the South did not have to fight to preserve its way of life. I think they felt. They did, you know, 10 of the first 15 presidents were from the South. Most of the Supreme Court Justices were from the South, so they had rigged it, if you will, from the beginning. And they now knew that, if slavery was not expanded West, they would no longer have that special control. And Lincoln almost baited them into the war. And I believe that Lincoln really felt it was wrong, I think Lincoln felt he had a great moral purpose. And uh, um, and so, when he made it clear that he was not for the expansion of slavery, the South knew it would know, it would soon be out voted by Free States in Congress. And um. And, but when they lost that war, they still got what they wanted. They didn't have slavery, they had peonage under sharecropping. And um. So, but in any event I like telling the stories, I like formulating a story, and these were all skills I used later when I became a lawyer. Writing, writing persuasively, and telling a compelling story.

HONG: Mm. Okay, perfect. We'll move on to law school in just a second, but I

wanted to bring up some things—I think we talked about in the pre-interview. Um. Yes I heard that. I remember you mentioning that you were the vice president of the class, um, and that you were involved in the AAM. And I'd just be really interested in hearing about like—first of all, how the first thing happened, and then hearing more about what life was like here as a Black student.

WILSON: Well, I met a lot of students, and I was friendly with everyone when I got to Dartmouth. And—so I think it's because I was known by others. That's probably why I was elected the vice president. And, at the AAM—um, for me, it was a cultural affirmation. It was an opportunity to learn from students who were older. We had amazing speakers come to campus. W.E.B. Du Bois came to campus—

HONG: Oh, during your time?

WILSON: Julia Bond came to campus, Percy Julian came to campus, and I got to meet these people. And, it confirmed for me that there were possibilities for me, they were human, just like me. And uh. So, uh, but what I would also say was that there were other Black students at Dartmouth who were excelling academically, Will McCurine ['69], Jesse Spikes ['72], Willie Bogen ['71], my teammate on the football team, were Rhodes Scholars. I had four other Black classmates who were at Harvard Law School with me. There were students going to Harvard Business School, to the leading graduate and professional schools all across America. And they were my classmates, and they were talented. And uh, so, you know I wanted to excel, and, and there were a lot of positive examples of students ahead of me at Dartmouth, and my peers in my class. And uh, and then I had again, professors who were encouraging, Jim Wright was one of those. And I had great admiration for him.

HONG: Mhm. Right. So, it seems like—well, obviously, you came to Dartmouth like, well, like a few years after really, like the peak of like the Civil Rights Movement. Um, and so at this point—

WILSON: The civil—the major civil rights battles had happened, but—

HONG: Right.

WILSON: But the war in Vietnam is going on,

HONG: Right.

WILSON: There was the invasion in Cambodia and Laos in the Spring of 1970. Uh, co-education was announced in 1970. The end of the Dartmouth symbol, uh, rededication to Native American students. Uh, the advent of the basic computer language and the Kiewit Computer lab. We were one of the first schools where every student had access to the use of a computer. We didn't have personal computers, but we could go to the



lab. We were one of the first schools to have Language Study Abroad. Uh, I was a student teacher in Richmond, California, which is near Berkeley, right? And San Francisco and Oakland. And that's when the Black Panthers were out there. And uh, so it was a tumultuous time. Um. Um, you know? [The] Watergate [Scandal] is about to begin.

HONG: Yeah!

WILSON: So—all of those things happen. I remember [Richard M.] Nixon won his second term against George [S.] McGovern. And New Hampshire was then, as now, was a place for presidential politics, every four years. And um, so we were, uh, we're in a prime position to observe all of that. And uh—but what I found at Dartmouth, I, I uh learned from my classmates, I learned from my professors. And it was a community where we were a big deal. You know, at Harvard, sometimes the professors want to go to Washington to testify. Or they're focusing on the book they're publishing, but less on the students. At Dartmouth, everything revolved around the students and I thought it was a cool thing. Even the town revolved around the students. [laughter]

HONG: Right.

WILSON: And uh. So, I liked it.

HONG: It is, it is very, it's, there's a lot of academic support here. Um. And I was just—like, so when you talk about, like all of these events, like I often feel like, you know, Dartmouth—it can be easy to forget that there are other things happening just because, like, everything is made for you here, and it's so isolated. Like, how did you feel those events like affecting your day-to-day when you are a student?

WILSON: Well they affected me greatly! You may recall, in 1970, the students at Jackson State were shot on their campus, and the students at Kent State [University] were shot, during the protests in Vietnam. I remember writing to alumni because we were against the expansion of the war in Vietnam, and um. Um, and there was a lot of controversy about co-education. Many of the current students did not want that to change and alumni were very much against it. I wanted co-education—

HONG: Right! [laughter]

WILSON: And uh, and um. For all the selfish reasons. But uh. Uh. So, um, so no, I felt I was very much in the middle of things that were going on, even though we were kind of isolated and very much in a safe place, relatively speaking.

HONG: You could still participate by writing letters and protesting.

WILSON: And we did, and we did.

HONG: Right.

WILSON: Absolutely did, yes.

HONG: You know I was actually, I read like about a year ago, and it's just coming back to me now, this article about, you know, especially like Black male students pushing for co-education because there were no prospects in the area! [laughter] Was that something that you can relate or talk about?

WILSON: Oh very definitely! I mean, so, first of all, I didn't have—I had a car my junior and senior year, right? But—or maybe it was just my senior year. But if you didn't have a car, you had to have a friend who could drive you to Smith or Wellesley, or if you didn't have a girlfriend back home, who wanted to come see you, that, you know, that was a pretty lonely existence. My first Winter Carnival, the most popular song was “Bridge Over Troubled Water” by Simon & Garfunkel. Man, that was the depressing! [laughter] And uh, and uh. Another popular song the next year was “Rainy Night in Georgia”. That was depressing.

HONG: Oh! [laughter]

WILSON: But uh. But, um—so there were a few women, maybe 75, who were, who came on the campus my freshman year. And then my senior year, the first group of freshmen women enrolled at Dartmouth. And they had it tough, and uh, some were sexually assaulted, many were resented, some were resented by many. And my hat goes, I tip my hat to them for what they endured, those first few classes of women. It was very, very tough. And, but they were pioneers, and they certainly stuck it out. And—but it was not easy, and. It was not...

HONG: Were you able to like make friends with many of the women in the new class? Or, what was that dynamic like?

WILSON: No—so I was a freshman, and my experience was the women who were transferring to Dartmouth were upperclassmen, and they were not interested in some 18-year old kid [laughter]. I was, I was interested in them. And, by my senior year, you know, the freshmen, they—those young women were freshmen. And so I had friends, I had friends, but by your senior in high school, your senior year in college, you're kind of turning your, your vision and your attention on to what's next.

HONG: That's fair, that's so fair. Right.

WILSON: And I was already. Already doing that. And um, uh. I was—I was a senior fellow, and so my Winter quarter I was not on campus, I was writing my senior fellowship. And I think I mentioned it to you in an email, I think it's in the library somewhere. But it was about, um. Hm. What did I write about? I—so my class was the first class where about 10% of that class were African American. And, and I wrote in that kind

of stories about ten of my classmates, you know? How was it they came to Dartmouth, what were their dreams, what were their ambitions, what were their goals? And, uh, um. And it was fascinating because I'd visited their homes in Boston and Baltimore and Louisville, and across the country. And what I found in Washington—my family lived in Nashville at that point. But when I went to my classmate's home, their photograph would be on the mantle. They were the s—they were the—they were the stars of their home. They might just be another guy that I kidded, you know. But I realized they were beloved in their home. And each family had a dream for their child. So it was humbling for me to learn of, about others, and make it less about me and more about them. So I really enjoyed that, and um. I don't know how it stands up. If you really get bored, you will have to read, uh four or five pages and see what you think. But it's in some—

HONG: Oh I will!

WILSON: —place in the library where they keep all the senior fellowships, and mine would've been, you know, '73.

HONG: Right.

WILSON: 1973.

HONG: So, did you not—did you feel like you had any of that like—like I feel like I have a lot of obligation to my hometown to, you know, represent, you know, the people. Did you feel that when you were at Dartmouth, or was it, kind of just a—

WILSON: Well I always feel that. But, what I felt like I had to do first was to prepare myself, prepare myself, prepare myself. And, um, and that's what I did. And, uh, and my parents. You know, my father would remind me, you know, "Look, you're smart guy, but you'll be a lot more valuable once you complete your education, a lot more helpful."

HONG: Right!

WILSON: I think he was afraid I would be deterred. And uh. But, um so, so yes, it wasn't. So I still follow my hometown of Jackson, Mississippi. Very closely. I watch the news and they're having trouble with their drinking water. Um. They're having, they have a lot of issues there. Very high crime, highest murder rate per capita of any major American city. And uh, so, yes, I follow it with great interest. And in fact, I tried to help them for free but I couldn't get anybody to return my call or return my, respond to my letters. And I'd represented other cities across the country who had similar issues. But, um. But I have great affection for my hometown, yes.

HONG: Right. I just—I have a couple more questions about Dartmouth

because honestly, I'm very curious because it's only my second year here, I still have a lot to learn.

WILSON: Ask anything you like!

HONG: I mean, I am curious to hear about like, the gendered experience. Because I didn't learn about the transfer students until this year, like even with you know, woman entering like did you feel like there was a palpable difference, especially um, like in the classroom, or like, with Greek Life. I learned later that there was like an all-Black cheerleading squad that came probably after your time?

WILSON: After my time, my brother was here for them. Yes.

HONG: Yea, but especially with their positions, yeah.

WILSON: Yeah. So, let's see. As it relates to the gender experience, I would simply say that I think women were often treated as second-class citizens early on at Dartmouth. I think men felt threatened that they would take some of the seats that they had, and uh, or that their friends coming in future classes would have. I think some of the old alums were kind of proud. Well, "We made it without women!" and you know—

HONG: Oh, gosh!

WILSON: —And, and what I would say, respectfully, is that I think I needed to grow in my understanding and appreciation of women and their dreams, and their ideas. So 18, 19, 20, 21 years old. And, and so I feel like those women and the other women I met at that point in my life, they taught me a lot more than I could ever teach them. And largely about what their expectations were and what they were looking for. And curiously, not a whole lot different than what I wanted. And, and I needed to understand that. And, and you can only understand that if you listen, and speak with other people. And, but if I had it to do all over again, I wish I'd been more caring, and more interested, and more inquiring about what their experiences were. And I think I was thinking largely about myself, to be honest, and uh—

HONG: It's hard not to at this age.

WILSON: Huh?

HONG: It's hard not to at this age.

WILSON: Well it's hard not to, but, um. I think your generation does a better job of that than mine. And and I think women generally do a better job of that than men. And... just an opinion.

HONG: Yeah. [Laughter] And then I had a couple more questions about um,

the AAM.

WILSON: Sure!

HONG: So first of all, I was wondering if you ever. I don't know if you guys actually had Shabazz at the time?

WILSON: Yeah, El Hajj Malik El-Shabazz temple is what they called it.

HONG: Yeah, okay. Okay, you did? Okay, I'm just curious like where you lived, uh, when you were on campus and like whether it was like. Because like now, a lot of, like—

WILSON: I lived close to, to the AAM. I lived in Brown Hall, the Choates, which is literally right next door to the AAM. And uh, uh. Listen, for me, my most fun at the AAM were the parties. Right? And my practice was to study until 10:00, 10:30, 11:00. The party didn't get started until late. And then, you know, once I knew I had my work done, if this party was Friday or Saturday. Then I felt like I could enjoy myself. And uh. But, uh, um. But yeah that, that, you know, for me it was social opportunity. So when we had parties, and there were women on campus, campus—

HONG: Right.

WILSON: —that's generally, when the parties took place.

HONG: Haha, right!

WILSON: So we'll see. I was—I had a great time and you know, a lot of it is, I certainly was awkward. I was young, you know, learning about myself. And uh, and there's a maturity that comes about from your freshman to your senior year, and a confidence, and. But, I think there's a process, and I think you have to trust the process. About growing up, and about finding yourself. And uh, um. I'm just grateful I got through it without hurting myself or others too much.

HONG: Right. You know that's so—it's so funny that you say that because now um. The AAM doesn't really quite have—many parties a term, like I think there's usually one or two. And it's actually, you would enjoy this. A lot of people enjoy going to the. It's a frat called GDX, it's like where the most of the football players, um—

WILSON: Right?

HONG: —join, and they usually host like after games, and they'll play more of like hip-hop and like R&B music, and people tend to enjoy that, um. So it's really funny to hear how it— [laughter]

WILSON: Well see, and that's the thing. Dartmouth was more rigidly segregated

and so we were on the football team but we generally didn't go to their frats, you know? And we generally weren't members. And so, it was different then. And uh. But I'm glad it's different now. You know uh, listen, your. I'm old enough to be your grandfather. And so, uh, your experiences in the South, while similar, are not going to be the same as mine. And that's good! You know, I think history, it's important to know history, but it's also important not to be a prisoner of history. So, um, there were young men at my daughter's high school that were being recruited by Dartmouth—White, Asian, but they didn't want to come to Dartmouth because there weren't many Black players on the team.  
[laughter]

HONG: Mhm.

WILSON: And so they weren't saying, "I don't want to go because they're on the team. I don't want to go because they're not on the team!" And so the point is that—

HONG: Right.

WILSON: Students, like you and a different generation, they want a diverse environment. And, they're seeking that out. And I think in my era, there was a lot of fear, and. There was fear, and, and it took time.

HONG: Mhm.

WILSON: [Yawns.] Oh, oh excuse me.

HONG: Sorry. I know we've been going for a while!

WILSON: It's all right.

HONG: You just have so many, so many interesting stories. I think. Okay, we'll wrap up Dartmouth, I just have one more question. I asked you this during the pre-interview, but um. We talked about like A Better Chance, and I was just wondering, like, I think for you, it was more of like the Wilkerson's. But, what kind of factors influenced you to come to Dartmouth? Um.

WILSON: Well, I didn't know about the Wilkinsons when I was applying to Dartmouth. That's something I learned after—

HONG: After—

WILSON: —after the fact. But. I knew people like them existed. But, you know, I didn't know! And—excuse me, I have the hiccups. So what influenced me was learning what the Better Chance program was like. [pause] It was rural, and that attracted me. I felt like I was going to spend most of the rest of my life in the city.

HONG: Right.

WILSON: So I thought it would be nice, uh, to be near the Connecticut River, to be near the Green Mountains and the White Mountains. So—that's all. I, I uh—Dartmouth looked like what a college was supposed to look like from a Currier and Ives postcard. And uh—

HONG: Right!

WILSON: But, to be honest with you, I don't know that I knew a whole lot more than that. And uh. I didn't know a whole lot more than that, but it's one of those decisions that I'm so glad that I made. It was a good decision for me. I came close to going to Williams College. And my dad's says, "I bet you want to go to Williams because you think you're going to be a football star." [laughter] He says, he says—

HONG: You're still a football star! [laughter]

WILSON: —"your value is from the neck up, not from the neck down. And uh, uh. I hate it when my father said that, but he was correct. And uh, and he said, "By the way, I've never heard of Williams, but I've heard of Dartmouth and I know about their coach." And uh. So—um, that's all. I, I just—there was an English teacher at my school who had attended Dartmouth. And, and I mentioned there were several students who'd been in the ABC program and they spoke so highly, not just of Dartmouth, but these upperclassmen who had encouraged them. And, and so I said, "I'd like to be in a place where there's that type of positive reinforcement." And it turned out it was really true, when I got here, they were like that. And uh, so I appreciated that.

HONG: That's great. Okay, awesome. We can move on to the next stage, but is there anything else that like you were involved in here that like, were important to her that, we're missing?

WILSON: No, I think what I would say. Listen, I love Dartmouth. I urged my brothers to visit.

HONG: Yeah! [laughter]

WILSON: They visited, they loved it, they all came. And, and they all excelled, each in their own way. And, um, so, it's, it will always be a special place for me. And, and again, I attribute that to my professors, to my classmates. They made it special for me and the other. Yeah, the other students. Okay, go ahead, next!

HONG: Okay, next [laughter]! Sorry, there's so many stages! Um, but now moving forward to Harvard. I'm interested in like, what pushed you to get a J.D. as opposed to like a Masters, or other forms of higher education. We talked a little in the pre-interview, but what drew you to

Harvard—

WILSON: Right.

HONG: And just what to were expecting going into that.

WILSON: Well. So, several things. First of all, my mother wanted a minister. I did not think I would be an example. I thought a minister should personify good, and I resisted good wherever I could—

HONG: Okay! [laughter]

WILSON: I think I could have been a good emergency room doctor. I may have told you this story, but I dated a young woman who was pre-med and uh, and she was in Nashville one summer, in Meharry Medical School, which is a Black medical school in Nashville it's there. And when we would go out, sometimes we'd go to the emergency room on Saturday night at midnight, you know. And, today, the patient's you might call them homeless, they didn't use that word then and there was a woman there. And the emergency room physician was questioning her and they couldn't figure out what was wrong. And, the doctor was using all the correct terms for the various body parts and functions. And after they failed, and it's like, 20 minutes of questioning, I said, "Ma'am can you pee?" She said, "No, I can't pee." I said, "There's your problem right there!" [laughter] And so, I liked that experience that I had in that emergency room. But the law was competitive. I was argumentative, I liked writing. I wanted to be not an observer or commentator on life, I wanted to be in the middle of it and I thought the law would allow me to do that. And um—so I chose Harvard because it was considered the best law school in America. And uh. And I worked very hard at Dartmouth and uh, and I wanted to ha—in fact, I knew when I went to Dartmouth that I wanted to go to Harvard Law School. And uh [laughter]—and the question was, could I get in? And so, so, I'll never forget, we used to have the post boxes over at Hinman. And I—

HONG: Mhm.

WILSON: —remember I went to the men's room and locked myself in one of the stalls and I opened up my—and I'd gotten into Michigan, I'd gotten into Berkeley, and I'd gotten in Penn, I got—all these places—Cornell and Stanford. But I hadn't heard from Harvard and I—got in. And uh—if anybody was in the bathroom at that time, they must have thought that there was a crazy man. [laughter] And then, of course, when I came out of the bathroom I acted like I knew it all along. But I'm excited. And, listen, I met my wife on the first day of law school. And, I liked her immediately, she's very smart. And uh again, I was awkward. And I was going to give her a tour of Cambridge, all I knew was where Harvard stadium was. And she was smarter than me. So when she realized—she couldn't see very well. But I had good vision, I saw her, and I could read the signs, you know, a mile ahead. But once she saw



through me and realized I didn't know anything about Cambridge, she still liked me enough to go on a second date. And uh, and uh—but again, she had a lot of ambition. She'd worked very hard at University of Pennsylvania, she graduated in three years, and she had a lot of pride. She was hard-working. I had a rival, who later wrote—a man for Senate in Indiana, he wrote speeches for President [Ronald W.] Reagan, and. At Dartmouth, I would study, and then I would stop. I'd say “the hay's in the barn, I'm gonna wait for the exam.” But she had a way of studying all the way up to the last minute. And she said “Betcha Ruzhthoven's starting”, my rival. And uh, so that I went back and studied some more. I always benefited from that extra studying, she was right. But uh, my wife is from Pittsburgh, she grew up on the hill. And uh, working-class family. Her father was a demolition, construction, foreman kind of guy, and. But she had a great, great ambition, and, and again she was tough. I knew she was tough and I knew, Emilie, life would be tough, and I would need a spouse that was going to be tougher than me because I didn't think I was tough enough! [laughter]

HONG: Yea, 100%! [laughter]

WILSON: And she was. And, uh, and uh, we took the bar, the Georgia bar. We were scared to death. It said 1972, 42 Blacks took the bar, 42 failed. 16 were later admitted when they filed a lawsuit. So there was great concern that there was bias. And, we took a bar review. course, we studied, we read the materials. We'd come in on Saturdays and Sundays, they had a new thing called “videotape” and you could watch the lectures over again. And, and I remember we passed. And we were so elated. And, because what happens you finish law school you think “Okay I'm done!” but no you got to study for this bar exam, right? My friends who were planning a wedding, buying a house, buying a car, those that were distracted, they did not pass. But, we were not distracted—we got married that August—but the exam was a late July. So we totally focused on the exam, we took practice exams, and, and we passed. And I'm so, so grateful, and uh, so, very grateful. And then we did something smart. You could, if you made a certain score, you could wave into D.C. without having to take the exam. And we said, if we didn't live in Georgia, where would we want to live? And we said, D.C.! That's where a couple could uh, find jobs! And, and that was good because it meant I didn't have to take the exam again.

HONG: Right.

WILSON: And, a year later we waived into D.C. But I started in a firm, Spaulding. That law firm produced the Attorney General Griffin [B.] Bell, produced the President of the ABA, Jimmy Carter was advised by a guy named Charlie Kirbo, the secretary of the cabinet was at that law firm, so they were very well situated. One of my first pro bono cases, they—was on behalf of former Governor, now, candidate, Jimmy [E.] Carter. And a prisoner had been killed at the state prison. They said, “If you handle this case successfully and you keep it out the paper, we'll get you a

picture with the next President of the United States. Well, we won the case, but I never got my picture, and years—

HONG: No!

WILSON: —Years later, I had a cousin who became the mayor of Atlanta and I saw the President there, and I told him the story he says, “You want your picture?” I said “No a handshake’ll be fine.” And, but my wife worked at a firm called Jones Burton Howe, it merged with Alston & Bird. And that had been Bobby [Robert T.] Jones’ firm, he was a famous golfer. He was like the Tiger [Eldrick T.] Woods of the 1920s and 30s. And uh, and this was the time of the Masters which is like the Tournament of Roses Parade in Pasadena [CA]. Big deal! And so when she’s—my wife’s not a sports fan—and so they told her, “This is Bobby Jones’ firm!” She says “Bobby Jones, who’s he?” And they said “The golfer!”, she said “Who’s he?” [laughs]. So, went up there.

HONG: Right.

WILSON: You know. And uh. But it didn’t work out for me at my first firm. I remember, they put—had more red ink on my brief than anything. And it was uh... pretty devastating for me. And, so there was criticism of my writing. So I responded to that by publishing six articles in one year. And writing to publish is harder than, you know, writing a brief.

HONG: Right.

WILSON: And uh—and I publish art, they sent me to tax, which was like going to Siberia. So I wrote about something I knew nothing about that that I thought I could teach myself that way. But it was smart because those articles I used as a writing sample when I went to the Department of Justice. And have you ever seen someone play the piano without the music? I wanted to be able to play that well. Or, [Wardell] Stephen Curry [II], dribble the basketball with his head up. I wanted to dribble without even looking at the ball.

HONG: Right.

WILSON: And so I wanted to went to the Department of Justice, they put me in the deep water I knew I would drown—or I would swim. I didn’t drown, I wouldn’t call what I did swimming. But, but I was able to handle myself, you know, I could—

HONG: Right.

WILSON: In court. I wasn’t afraid. So then when I went back into private practice, I had more experience than people who had never been in the government before.

HONG: Mhm.

WILSON: And then, I joined my current firm, they were an environmental boutique. And, one of my first big cases was for New Haven [CT], and my opposing counsel was a good old boy. And he basically said [with a strong Southern drawl] "We're up North, but you know what it's really like," and he said [reassuring drawl] "The judge wants to see you tomorrow!" Turned out, it was a lie, the judge didn't want to see me but he wanted me to go see the judge. They wanted to take the mayor's deposition, he was Italian. He wanted to embarrass the mayor, he wanted to suggest that he was a mafia guy and the mayor wasn't. And, and you're not allowed to take the deposition of a public official like that, unless they have knowledge unique to them. What this guy didn't know was, I'd been to, to Yale before. Because when I was at Dartmouth, we always played Yale at Yale because they had a big stadium. So I knew where the law school was. And I read my cases and I beat the pants off that guy. And uh—

HONG: Wow!

WILSON: And uh... and it went like that. The other thing that happened, in the private practice of law, it's not only doing good work for your clients but you have to have them in the first place. And so, how do they choose you over somebody else? And in D.C. every six or seventh person is a lawyer. So, I wasn't better looking than those other guys. I wasn't smarter than those other guys. And they'd gone to good schools too. But what I learned was—well there's an old story I tell. In fact I'll ask you this question, you want to be a lawyer. Denzel Washington made a movie in our neighborhood, and my wi, wife and the other middle-aged women in the neighborhood made cookies for Denzel. Do you have any idea why she didn't run off with him? You're grown up, come on, you can tell me!

HONG: [laughs] Y—your wife?

WILSON: Why didn't my wife run off with Denzel Washington?

HONG: [In a sarcastic tone] She loves you. [laughs]

WILSON: [Blows raspberry] Have you [laughs]—you go to the movies? So look at him and look at me. No, he's better looking. Next?

HONG: I don't—I don't know, I don't watch a lot of films!

WILSON: Well, the answer is, he doesn't care about her. And I do. If he did, I might've been in trouble. See the moral to the story is—Denzel better-looking, Denzel smarter, Denzel more fun! But he doesn't care about her. And I realized, that if my clients felt I cared about them, they'd choose me, even though Emilie's a better lawyer! Even though

Emilie's smarter and Emilie's better-lookin'!

HONG: Mhm.

WILSON: Why is that? Because they want somebody that really is going to fight for them, for whom their case is a big deal. So, I can't be better looking than Denzel but I could care more. He can't out-care of me. And uh—so, it turned out, I was good at getting clients, Emilie. So I became the chairman of my firm, not because of my intelligence, not because of my good looks, but I had clients. It made my operations interesting, right? Made my jokes funny. [laughs] But uh—I'm like an actress lo, no longer beautiful. If I don't have clients, I don't have work. And, so, so there were people that I met along the way, and I befriended, and they chose to give me a chance. And that's how I built the practice that I did. And I turned out I was a pretty good environmental lawyer. And uh, I was a deputy monitor on the Volkswagen Dieselgate Scandal? They were cheating on their emissions. So I was going to Germany, and São Paulo [BR], and Moscow [RU], and Shenzhen [CN], and Mexico City [MX] where they have facilities. I went to Spain. Barcelona. I was a court-appointed monitor for the Duke Energy ah, ash spill. When you burn coal, the residue is ash and it got into the Eden River. Duke, Duke is a big name as you know in North Carolina, and they had to clean that up! And I had to make him clean it up. So, I helped New Orleans when they were going through [Hurricane] Katrina, with the drinking water, and the waste water. So I had some really amazing clients, amazing opportunities. And I'm great, very grateful for those. And uh, my wife became a partner at her firm, Sidley & Austin, and she worked on some of the big cases of all time. And uh, she retired 15 years ago, told me to support her in the manner to which I had become accustomed. And we have an adult daughter, a grandson. That's my life!

HONG: [Sighs] That's perfect. Well, I still have to ask you more questions because I'm so curious. [laughs]

WILSON: Ask me anything, go ahead!

HONG: Yes. I—like I think it's so interesting that, you know, eventually you found your work to be in environmental justice.

WILSON: Yes.

HONG: And I think like, that's something I was very interested in high school because of how it intersects with um, you know racial justice and like, structural inequality. So I was wondering, like, I don't know much about the other firms you mentioned but like, what was your trajectory like, like, what were the motivations between, behind joining an environmental firm?

WILSON: Well, I needed a job.

HONG: Okay, okay.

WILSON: And they were the ones who gave me a job. I wrote 400 firms. I had two offers. One, offered me more money than my firm offered. They offered me like 25% more.

HONG: Wow. Mhm..

WILSON: So you should say, well, and the firm. I joined, said, "If you join us, you've got three years to build a practice. If you do, you stay, if you don't, you go." So one firm said, "We'll pay you more money and you don't have to build a practice." The other firm said "We'll pay you less, but you have to grow your own."

HONG: Great.

WILSON: So, guess what I did, I did the harder thing. "Mr. Wilson, why did you do that?" I'm glad you asked me that question! [laughs] I did that because I never wanted to be dependent on someone else. So my, after I left the Department of Justice, I joined a small firm. Our number-one client was a Puerto Rico Aqueduct and Sewer Authority. The old men didn't like going to Puerto Rico, I didn't mind. The people looked like me, I could speak a little Spanglish, and they were very nice. And um, environmental meant there. weren't many people who looked like me who did that. And so if I was pretty good, I would be remembered. And back then, African American lawyers and large firms—they did Public Finance work. So there was a Black mayor in Chicago [IL], and Atlanta [GA], and Washington [D.C.]. But those guys were all older than me, I was the kid! So I was going to get that work. So when I was doing environmental, environmental wasn't considered sexy, right? But guess what? When you tear up a block in Dallas [TX]? It costs two hundred thousand dollars to put the boc—block back together. How many blocks are there in Dallas, Texas?

HONG: A lot. Quite a few. So many.

WILSON: A lot! So, two thousand, three thousand—multiply that by 200,000 dollars. Now! It's a big deal. And, um. So—so, I wanted an opportunity. But if you wanted— really want to know, my why, f you go to the Environmental Law Institute website, my speech is on there, from last Tuesday. Listen to it. But at the end, I talked about some of the things I told you about, you know, Emmett Till those terrible things. I talk about the lawyers who made a difference in the late 50s and early 60s who were from the South. And then, I talk about my students at Howard [University], and one of my students said "Mr. Wilson, why should I care about environmental? Isn't that an issue for white people? What does that have to do with us?" My daughter calls that a teaching moment, and I said, "Well, you remember [Hurricane] Katrina?" They

said, she said "Yes?" I said "You remember that famous photograph of the buses lined up? But they couldn't take people to safer and higher ground because they did not have bus drivers and they did not have keys for the buses. I believe that had you taken my class on environmental justice, and had you worked for the mayor of New Orleans, those buses would have been gassed up and you would have had drivers and you would have had keys." All of a sudden, the light bulb came on. And then I talked about this famous case called *Citizens to Save Overton Park [v. Volpe]*. They were taking the Interstate 40, which goes from North Carolina to California, through a park in Memphis. And uh, we talked about NEPA [National Environmental Policy Act], we talked a difference between environmental impact statement, environmental assessment. We talked about standing, and my professor at Harvard had asked those same questions. But then I asked the question of the Howard kids that the, professor, at Harvard, did not ask. I said, who wrote the opinion for the majority? And the students are flipping pages. And one of them proudly said, "Thurgood Marshall!" And then I asked them the question at, at and Howard it's like asking "Who's buried in Grant's Tomb?" I said, "Where did he go to law school?" And they proudly said, "Of course, Mr. Wilson, he went to Howard!" I said, "Yes, I wanted you to know that America's greatest civil rights lawyer made one of the great decisions on environmental law. So, I want you to know you have a role to play." And then I close my speech—so you don't have to listen to the whole thing—is about climate change. I said, "Everybody knows that's a major issue of the day, right? You guys know that the arctic ice cap is melting, glaciers are melting, the "father of waters" that [Abraham] Lincoln said, "goes unvexed to the sea," the Mississippi River is drying up! They can't move goods, you know, soybeans from Illinois or Iowa. That was America's first interstate, was that river. In Europe, they had record temperatures. In Southeast Asia, the monsoon season, impec—impacts, the economics of that region the same way the hurricane season affects the gulf. And in California but wildfliers—fires (sticks out tongue) are devastating. And you're from Texas, you remember that winter storm, your parents sure do, last winter, that was devastating! And so. But then I said, "but there's an issue within the issue of climate justice," excuse me, of climate change, "and that's climate justice!" I said, poor communities, communities of color. They don't hear about adaptation! They don't hear about mitigation. And that has to change. And then, I began my speech, telling my story that, my parents are in a car. Or, I don't tell them, they're my parents. I said "a young couple's in a car and they're driving South to start a new life. The car is packed to the gills and a bouncing baby boy's at the feet of his mother." And I say "I was that little boy." Now I'm at the end of the speech and I said "I've been asked a bunch of rhetorical questions." I said, "Do you believe in the rule of law? Do you believe environmental law's important? Do you be—still believe that you will think globally and act locally? You know, doesn't the environment still matter?" And I said, um, "Some of you are asking me, 'Why am I asking this question? Why is it so important? Why is your—'" Oh then I tell, "I have a grandson!" I

said, "He's 20 months old! In a few years, he's gonna say "Grandpa! What did you do to address the greatest challenge of your time, climate change and climate justice?" And I said, "I want to be able to look my grandson in the eye with a good answer." But I said, "The reason I'm asking you these questions and the reason I want you to be able to answer my grandson's question for yourself, is that somewhere tonight—in Accra in Beijing and Berlin, and Kiev, and Moscow and Sao Paulo and Shenzhen and Washington, D.C., a young couple is planning to start a—a life tomorrow. They packed their car to the gills! There's no place to sit a bouncing baby girl strapped to the back seat. And by the year 2040, she will be 18. I said "Let's resolve tonight that the companies on whose boards we sit and that we represent and the agencies we lead and represent will keep their promise to be, to address climate change by 2040. Let us resolve that by the time she's 28, that we will have, be climate positive! Because that little girl and her family are counting on you." So I wanted them to know they have a role. So if you promise me, if you'll listen to that speech—and it's at Environmental Law Institute, you'll see it. It's about 12 minutes. It explains my why.

HONG: I did actually read it through this morning—

WILSON: Oh yea excuse me okay I stop, I stop stop stop. And I made to listen to the—

HONG: No! No it's okay!

WILSON: —whole thing. No, it's not. I'm sorry.

HONG: No! No, it's great. [laughs] It's why I wanted to have it in the interview. Um.

WILSON: Okay. But that—hopefully that explains my why.

HONG: Right.

WILSON: And uh. That's what it's about. And uh. That's what it's about.

HONG: Yeah! I guess just like--before I'm kicked out of this room—just like moving on to like the last. Um, you know, the last stretches of this. I want to hear just like a little bit about like what it's been like settling, because I assume you've been in D.C. for how many years now?

WILSON: Uh, since 1979, so let's—43 years. Yeah,

HONG: Right. So you've been in D.C. for 43 years, you've been married to your wife for just about—

WILSON: 46, 46.

HONG: Forty six?

WILSON: And I've known her for 49!

HONG: Oh wow, oh!

WILSON: Met her the first day of law school.

HONG: Aw! Yeah, I just want to hear more about like, what settling in there has been like. I know that D.C., it was known as Chocolate City, it is like gentrifying, of course, but you know, finding a community here and like being closer to the South and—with such a, you know, in such a powerful place, how that's been.

WILSON: Well—it's been good for me. So, did you ever see the movie Philadelphia?

HONG: [laughs] No! No, I need to watch more movies.

WILSON: Okay, so I want you to watch Philadelphia.

HONG: Okay.

WILSON: So it's. Do you what it's about?

HONG: No!

WILSON: It's about a lawyer who contracts AIDS at the beginning of the Epidemic.

HONG: Oh wow.

WILSON: And Denzel Washington plays, plays his lawyer, and he suing his law firm, which wants to fire him because he has AIDS. And the scene opens, I don't know if you've ever been to Philadelphia before, but it shows the neighborhoods of Philadelphia. The most famous building, a city hall with William Penn, you know, with his Quaker hat on [laughs]. And they show various neighborhoods. But as, you know, any city is a city of neighborhoods. Right? and Washington, you've got your Georgetown, your d—G.W., or Howard, your American, your Catholic universities. You've got Embassy row, right? You've got Capitol Hill. You've got the city government. You got Case Street, you've got all these lawyers, you got public interest. Uh, so what I would say, I think it's a great place. I would only encourage you, you'll find what you want. And I hope I—nothing I've done, has discouraged you. Sometimes I can—you can look at me at the end and say, “Oh gosh, how did he do all of that? I'll never do that.”

HONG: Right.



WILSON: No, you won't do that at, you know, 19 or 20. I didn't do it at 19 or 20. In fact if you listen to my story closely, I had some failures along the way. If you read my speech, somewhere, in there I said, [laughs] "Life for me ain't been no crystal stair. When I wanted to quit, she said, not yet. When I wanted to—uh... uh what was it. When I wanted to give up, she said next time. When I felt like my ship would never come in, she said your day will come." So your day will come and you will acquire these skills gradually. If you remember kindergarten, you couldn't have done algebra, right? [laughs] But there were these stepping stones. You're able to do algebra and a lot more! And, you'll find that you're able to do this. And so I would only encourage you, if you can, try to get an internship program—at the Department of Justice, at a law firm, at a federal agency. See what that's like, right?

HONG: Mhm.

WILSON: Consider, if you're unsure about the law, being a paralegal for two or three years at a firm and say, "Hey, I see these young people. Do I think I would like this?" Now, I must tell you, there's nothing. Nothing, that you will ever do, where you don't have to pay dues. Right? So, if you've ever had a friend that's a figure skater or a ballerina, there's all this work where no one sees them working, right? And there's this pain that they go through, right?

HONG: Right.

WILSON: And so there's a lot of sacrifice. And—and the law's like that, but any profession's like that, teaching's like that. And, but you have to remember, "What's my purpose? What's my goal?" and the goal is to help your clients achieve their goals. The first question I ask. My clients is, how do you define success? Not how do I Define it? What do you want, right? And then I ask them that question over and over again because that will change. Yes, so and about what they want and so these are But it's really it's really, really important that we focus on what our clients want and then how do we get there? How do we achieve that?" And uh, so being a good listener, I think is extremely important, to make certain you're not playing God—you're doing, you're helping them achieve their goal. Now, you want to help them think through the goal. Sometimes their goal is stupid! [laughs] Doesn't make any sense, you now?

HONG: Right.

WILSON: Uh—and yet, in the end, you still have to do what they want you to do. And—but you don't want to—except violate the law. And so, so again, I would only encourage you, Emilie. You're a bright young woman, you're gonna learn stuff. All you need is to experience. And uh. Everybody needs experience. And, and everything you do is an experience. Your successes and your failures. And uh—and you won't have a lot of failures. [laughs] But I would only encourage you. Ask me anything you

want to ask now—

HONG: Well I think—

WILSON: —about yourself or about me. Whatever you want.

HONG: How about, I'll ask one last question about your life and then I can stop recording and then we can talk a little bit more . But I just—one more thing that I wanted to touch on is that, you know, we talk about like, defining success and like, you know, a sense of purpose? And like, I just wanted to hear a little bit from you about like, what teaching at Howard has meant to you, um, just thinking all the way back to where you grew up.

WILSON: Right. So—so that's a great question. So, I have a theory, in Black America, the most influential single institution is Howard University. Actually they're number two, I think the army's number one because they're more black people in the Army than there are at Howard.

HONG: Right.

WILSON: But if I wanted to, so, for example, there are more black PhDs from Howard than Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Stanford, combined. That doesn't mean they're better. It just means—who's producing them?

HONG: Right.

WILSON: And so, but if you look through history, Charles [R.] Drew developed, the blood bank, Alain [L.] Locke, Rhodes scholar, English Professor, Ralph Bunche, who earned the Nobel Peace Prize in 1950. Uh. These professors that are coming to Howard now, there's a Black woman who's a graduate of Dartmouth, she's come up with these... innovative surgery—for babies! And her medical school didn't think she was good enough to be in the surgery program, and now every medical school in the country wants her. She left Dartmouth medical school to come to Howard. So I wanted to have an impact. I got tired of going into law firms where, I was only one who looked like me. Right? Where I was on big cases and there're fifty lawyers in the room and I'm the only one who looks like me. And where I've enjoyed personal success and financial success, but I don't see anyone else who looks like me who is having a similar experience. So, in the time I've taught at Howard—seventeen years and I teach for free. That's why they like me. [laughs]

HONG: Wait, for free?

WILSON: Yeah, I make a lot of money—I made a lot of money in my practice. But I've had close to three hundred students who are now practicing in law firms. In the federal government and state and local government, and public interest firms, public interest entities, addressing environmental

issues. So I feel like that's a tremendous impact! And um, a tremendous impact. At the dinner the other evening, I had students from my class! And so about 30 of my former students were there. Mostly young women, but some young men, and they're all flourishing, they're all making their mark, right? Some will do greater things than I've done. Right? I hope they will. And, and I expect they will. But the point is, the point of teaching at Howard was—I didn't want my legacy to be about "He had success. Rest in peace." I wanted to see if I could help others have success. And uh...to me that's a part of a legacy I would like to leave. That's why I started the Diverse Lawyers' Network. We have 6,000 people get our newsletter each week. They're not all Black, some are Asian American, some are, Latinx, some are Middle Eastern. They're all diverse! Everybody has a dream. Yours may not be exactly like mine, but it's close! And so , uh... so I promote everyone! And, and everyone diverse. And I'm not against people who aren't diverse, (laughs) you know, there're young whites, men and women in my firm, who I promoted. I left work for them, so they start off with a big head start, much more of a head start than what I had! And uh, the difference is, I make certain that diverse attorneys are also getting that head start. And uh—so—so that's why I teach Howard. And I want EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] to be more diverse, and they're going to be. I want the SEC [Securities and Exchange Commission] to be more diverse. I wanted my law firm and other law firms to be more diverse. You know? So, um... so, that's it.

HONG: Okay. Perfect! Well, thank you so much for your time—

WILSON: And I try to teach my students how to win. You have to understand, I told you, my wife stays with me because I care about her. My clients come back because I win. Not because I tried hard, but because I win. And so, I fight like hell to win. Right? And uh, and I don't do it alone, I do it with other people. Okay? So, Dartmouth helped me develop skills. Introduced me to others, professors and classmates, who inspired me. And uh—it provided, provided me a foundation of life learning. And. It's uh, it's like a person that's still a part of my life! And I'm very grateful for that. And uh. And I, speak to the students I teach at Howard for the same reason I'm speaking with you! I think you're more than worth the investment, because I think you're gonna do great things. And uh. And I can live a little longer through the good that you do. Very selfishly. So.

HONG: Oh—thank you!

WILSON: All right. Thank you. Now, were there things that you wanted to ask about your career, anything you wanted to talk about? And if you need to go, I understand, we can do it another time.

HONG: Oh no all good, let me—I'm gonna stop the recording right now and hope that it saves— (end of interview)