

Alyce Fordham Willis interviewed by Jenay Jackson, April 26, 2005
Transcribed by Elaine Smith, March 2008, for the Special Collections Research Center,
Earl Gregg Swem Library, The College of William and Mary

Jenay Jackson: Test.

Alyce Fordham Willis: Right.

JJ: Okay, Miss Willis if you could please state your full name?

AW: Alyce Fordham Willis, Alyce is spelled ALYCE.

JJ: Okay and if you could please share with me your affiliation to The College of William and Mary?

AW: I am the widow of the first black student to be admitted to The College of William and Mary and the mother of the first, second generation black student at The College of William and Mary.

JJ: Okay. Can you please share with me your personal, educational background?

AW: I am, I finished high school, Richmond County High School in Warsaw, Virginia in 1942. I received a Bachelor of Science degree in business administration from Virginia State College, now Virginia State University in 1947. I received the honorary alumnae award from The College of William and Mary in 2004.

JJ: Okay, if you could please share with me your husband's, I guess, historical information, where he grew up and his educational background.

AW: My husband grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He was born May 28th 1922 in Pittsburgh. He attended Perry High School, graduated from Perry in 1941, that was in Pittsburgh. He came to Virginia State University on a football scholarship in 1941. He went into the Army in 1942, returned to the university in '46, and received a BS degree from Virginia State University in 1949. He enrolled at The College of William and Mary in June 1951. He attended four summers and received the MED degree in 1956.

JJ: Can you share with me factors that contributed to your husband's, your late husband's decision to apply for the graduate program at William and Mary.

AW: Hulon had graduated from Virginia State University in June of 1949. He enrolled in graduate school at Virginia State immediately afterward. He was pursuing a course in education, but he really wanted to major in physical education since that was his undergraduate major, and he had planned to teach physical education. Virginia State University did not offer that course of study. He did not apply for graduate aid; now the state of Virginia had a graduate aid fund. They paid money to their black students who wanted a course that was not offered at Virginia State University, and many of them went

to Columbia, NYU, Cornell, other universities in the north. Hulon really did not want to go that far from home. There was a, in 1951 there was a case before the Supreme Court in one of the other states, in one of the states, I'm not sure which state it was, and they had decided that it was unconstitutional for a graduate student to be denied admission to one of the white universities when the courses the person needed were not offered by the black university in that state. At the same time, Gregory Swanson, who had also attended Virginia State University, applied to the University of Virginia and he was admitted.

JJ: Okay.

AW: Under that Supreme Court decision. We knew once he was admitted that other schools in the state would not be too far behind. We had started going to Williamsburg to visit friends who had gone to Virginia State. They lived on Braxton Court, right adjacent to the University, to The College of William and Mary. So each time we went to Williamsburg we went over to the college, strolled around the grounds, often went into the Wrenn building and we thought it was the most beautiful building we had ever seen. It was just so historical, and thought that it would be good if Hulon could go to school there. Uh, we decided to send for a catalog. Once Gregory Swanson was admitted to UVA, we sent for a catalog and an application. I was able to get Hulon to fill it out, although he said, "This isn't, this doesn't make sense, it doesn't make sense, we're not going to, I'm not going to get in." But I insisted and, of course, a photograph had to go.

JJ: Oh wow.

AW: Uh huh, so he went ahead and sent in the application and, on the later part of March he received a letter from Dr. Nelson Marshall, who was the chairman of the graduate studies committee, and it informed him that he had been admitted to candidacy for the MA degree with the class entering in June of '51. Well when we got the letter, we were really stunned because we hadn't heard anything for a while and all of a sudden the letter came and afterward, we said, I actually said, "I bet that photograph fell off and ..."

JJ: (laughs)

AW: ...because he just, you know, they didn't, there was no fanfare or anything just the letter saying that he had been admitted. And, um, of course we did go over, back to Braxton Court and made arrangements for him to stay with Miss Gwen Skinner, who ran a boarding house. Of course, the neighbors in Braxton Court were really delighted. Then on May 1st, the newspapers, radio stations announced that William and Mary College had admitted its first Negro, they gave his name and then we knew that there was not mistaken identity in the letter of admission.

JJ: Okay.

AW: We were happy; Virginia State University was happy that one of their students had, one of their graduates had been the first to be admitted and, um, The College of William

and Mary was 258 years old at that time and had never admitted a black student previously. So, I think that will cover what made him apply.

JJ: Yes, thank you. Can you share with me some of his perceptions of the college, I guess, during his tenure here and possibly after completing his degree?

AW: Now, Hulon grew up in Pittsburgh and until he came to Virginia State University, he said that he had never seen a black school nor a black teacher. He came from a very large high school, I know that there were more than 200 in the graduating class; there were only three blacks. Of course, I always asked him what happened to the rest of the blacks, because there were many more in the community, but evidently they dropped out along, somewhere along the way.

JJ: Okay.

AW: On the football team there were only two blacks and Hulon was co-captain, so it was his belief that he was more probably comfortable with his white professors than they were with him, since for most, it was probably their first experience in teaching a black.

JJ: Right.

AW: Now, his experiences in the classroom were excellent. He faced few challenges. Most of them were curious to know how he happened to be there, wanting to have information on his background. Why he choose William and Mary. He developed a close friendship with a classmate, Joe Agee, and also with a professor named Dr. Howard Smith. They kept in touch with each other over the years. Dr. Smith, uh, had, after he graduated Dr. Smith had him return each year to speak to his freshmen class.

JJ: Um hmm, can you please spell for me, excuse me, Joe's last name.

AW: AGEE.

JJ: AGEE?

AW: He coached there, I believe, he retired maybe about two years ago as a coach at William and Mary. And when Hulon died in 1989, they both came to his funeral. Now, when Hulon arrived on campus, the black employees said that: "We've been waiting for you for a long time."

JJ: Aww.

AW: They greeted him with great pride and joy and supported him 100 percent plus. So at that point, Hulon said that he knew that he had to succeed for them if for no other reason. So, while he was there he earned seven As and three Bs and graduated with a GPS of 3.6. Um, during, while at William and Mary he became a member of the Order of the White Jackets, Kappa Delta Pi and we were, when he was invited to become a

member of Kappa Delta Pi, one of the members told the director that he refused to be a member of an organization with a Negro, he was told that they regretted to lose him and Hulon was initiated on August 13th, 1956. During football games, we were seated in the stands with the student body rather than in the end zone with the other black spectators. Mr. Rockefeller sent word that Hulon was to be admitted to facilities that were open to other William and Mary students. Do you need anything more?

JJ: Um. I think that's good. If there's anything else you would like to add.

AW: Let's see. I believe that would about cover that.

JJ: Perhaps you could share with me your personal perceptions of the college, um, during his attendance. It sounds like you were very supportive of him. Were there any instances where perhaps you regretted his decision to attend? Or you thought maybe there was a...

AW: Oh no, in anything that you read that he wrote, he will say it was Alyce's, initiation, initiated it and motivated me to attend.

JJ: Okay.

AW: Uh huh. We were two acting as one. But we just, we liked to visit Williamsburg, Williamsburg is, we liked historic things and that was one of the reasons we fell in love with the city. And it was an environment in which we believed that he would succeed, he was a very visible person, a very involved person. And he could hold his own in almost any situation.

JJ: Okay. Can you share with me any of the activist involvements of Mr. Willis?

AW: Yes, after he, afterwards he worked with the alumni, the Richmond/Hopewell and Petersburg alumni network. He worked with the parents association. He was a member of the parents, the association of parents' steering committee for seven years. And he also worked with, he went down and spoke to various groups on the campus. He was a karate, he held 10th degree black belt in karate and he did go down to talk with the Delta Sigma Theta sorority members on one or two occasions.

JJ: Okay. I would also like to know some of the factors that contributed, we're kind of transitioning to your children, Hulon Jr. and Kim. Factors that contributed to their attending The College of William and Mary.

AW: Uh, Kim, they both looked at private schools and public schools before deciding to apply to William and Mary. I know Kim had looked at Sweetbriar, although I don't think she was too, that desirous of attending. Hulon Jr. had looked Randolph Macon, but I believe that because their dad had made history at William and Mary they both decided that they would prefer to going to William and Mary. And of course, Hulon became the first second generation black to attend when he went there.

JJ: Okay. And you shared in a previous email that your daughter Kim transferred after two years.

AW: Oh yes, well Kim majored in sociology and she lived in a Spanish house for one year; she was a member of the lacrosse team, Delta Sigma Beta sorority and was sweetheart of Sigma Phi Epsilon fraternity. Most of her experiences were good; she enjoyed many of her professors who treated her as any other student. However there were a few who she describes as racist. At age nineteen she said she expected to have a pleasant college experience and not the challenges that she faced. One professor had a preconceived notion that blacks were inferior. She grew up in a nurturing community on a college campus, and challenged some of their stereotypical and off base theories. She had a professor to ask her what was an "alley apple" and whether or not she had ever shot crap. Now she said, she said, no, she knew she hadn't shot crap, but she had never heard of an alley apple. And he seemed to look surprised that she didn't know so she said a white male student told the professor said, "This young woman didn't grow up on the streets, I grew up on the streets in Philadelphia and an alley apple is a brick." He said, that she hasn't been exposed to that type of thing. On one occasion, the same teacher was lecture, decided to give a lecture on black dudes, and she asked him what a dude was. And he posed her a question and said, "What do you think a dude is?" And she said, "I don't know, it's your lecture, not mine." And she said, was about this time she had experienced one or two of these types of things and she decided she did not want her college career to go in that direction. And she decided that she would stop, would discontinue there, well she hadn't made up her mind really until she came home, she was sick, and we had to put her in the hospital. And, of course while she was at William and Mary she found, received a lot of warmth and comfort from the black employees of the campus, the families in Braxton Court, but she did not necessarily get it on campus. So our family physician, Dr. Charles Town suggested that we take her out and bring her on here. We were, we understood her need to leave, we didn't question it. We talked with Dean Sadler and he was very helpful and supportive and that was when we brought, she came to Virginia State University. She got her bachelors degree here, and went on to Howard University and got the masters degree.

JJ: Okay. And can you share a little bit about your son's undergraduate experience? I know that he graduated in 1977.

AW: Yes, now I talked with him about it and we were very pleased when he decided that he was going to enroll at William and Mary. He, um, as I said earlier, he was the first second generation black to attend. He majored in sociology. He joined Sigma Phi Epsilon fraternity. He lived in a frat house. He was freshmen representative to the student government association. He was a member of the karate club. He found many of classes, several of his classes challenging. He worked in the city of Williamsburg and, on the police force. He joined the police force, so that was something new. His father was involved in, with safety and security. He did not know, we did not know that he was interested in it. So that was a surprise to us. I did, Hulon Jr. will be, expect to be a narrator so I don't want to get into any part of his story that he might wish to tell.

JJ: Okay. Thank you. Do you have any personal impressions of your children's undergraduate experiences, maybe some things that you could provide insight on?

AW: Up there?

JJ: Of their undergraduate experiences. As a mother.

AW: Um, Kim had to send, they had to exchange photographs before, with the roommate, her roommate was white, the roommate's family was a little surprised that she, that their daughter had to room with a black. They got along very well but she admitted later that they were surprised and they wanted to make a change but it just didn't happen that way. And her roommate came here on weekends occasionally. The students at William and Mary enjoyed coming to Virginia State University because we had one of the finest bands in the land.

JJ: (laughs)

AW: We play for national football league teams on one or two occasions during the winter. And they enjoyed coming here because it was music that was unlike the William and Mary band.

JJ: Right.

AW: So they found themselves during football season, they found themselves here on one or two occasions. After Kim became a Delta she brought her Delta friends here on occasion, also. Hulon brought his, well he had one friend that he brought up, brought for a weekend. Of course we were a little disappointed when we found that he hitchhiked, but he said that, you know hitchhiked. That students hitchhiked. So occasionally he would hitchhike home.

JJ: Wow!

AW: Yes. He got an apartment in the city during his junior year, I believe it was. Now when he was in the frat house, on one occasion, he was there, we did not go to Homecoming that year because both of us, Hulon and I both had surgery that year and he was in the frat house and one of the parents said to his son, "What, who is the, who is your Negro friend?" And he said, "Oh he's my buddy, his name is Hulon Willis." And he said, "Hulon Willis? Now I don't think there're too many Hulon Willises and I was in high school with a Hulon Willis." It turned out that one of Hulon's teammates from 1941...

JJ: Um mmm.

AW: ...had a son at William and Mary and he and Hulon were in the same fraternity.

JJ: Oh!

AW: Now, George was living in Georgia or Florida at that time, and he said, so he called Hulon over and I said where his father was from? And he said Pittsburgh, he said Perry High and he said yes. So they got on the phone and they had not been in touch with one another during, from 1941 to 1974, it was 1974 I remember because that was when we had the surgery. So we arranged to meet during the next, at one of the next football games.

JJ: Okay.

AW: Each one, Hulon and George each had a copy of a letter that they wrote to one another in '41. Each one had saved it and they brought it when we had that meeting on that occasion, so afterwards we did stay at the same hotels when we would go back to games. Later on when they moved out of the frat house Hulon and George's son were apartment mates.

JJ: Okay. Thank you. I guess my final question has to do with William and Mary today, in 2005. Your overall impression of how the college has tried to promote diversity in the last ten years perhaps. If you have any insight about that.

AW: Um, I don't worry [inaudible] I know that they have the Step Program, they have hired a special assistant director of admissions to help with the black, the black student enrollment; they have attempted to hire more black professors and administrators, professors at any rate and, uh, they are not staying, some come but they don't stay too long. And, uh, there are programs provided by the Office of Multicultural Affairs, also HWA is attempting to do what they can for the promotion of diversity. But, there is room for improvement because we don't see the numbers, the number of blacks at William and Mary increasing.

JJ: Right. Okay. Do you have any final comments, Mrs. Willis just about the legacy of African Americans at William and Mary or perhaps your desire for the college in the future?

AW: Yeah, I would, I certainly want blacks to continue to attend. We're going to do everything in HWA to make that possible and, uh, what I would like to see is for the black students to feel as comfortable at William and Mary as they do at some of the other schools. I know our children, our friend's children, or Kim's friend's children are not going to the white schools as they did earlier, as many so many of them that happen [?] University, Howard University, Tuskegee and maybe not Tuskegee, but some of the other schools.

JJ: Um hmm.

AW: But we certainly want it to continue because we got, it was difficult and I know that I helped in getting it integrated that first time and certainly I want to see it go on.

JJ: Okay. Well thank you very much.

AW: And if you want, Kim says that a joke, she says jokingly that after what she went through with some of her professors she's now ready to stand in line to collect her reparations.

JJ: Alright. Is she there with you now?

AW: No.

JJ: Okay, if you could please tell her hello. I'm a soror [?].

AW: Alright.

JJ: So I would love to speak with her.

AW: Did you say you're a soror?

JJ: Yes ma'am.

AW: Oh, Well then you're my soror. I went in in 1949 when Dorothy Hite was president.

JJ: Oh, wow, well thank you, what an honor. I really appreciate that I'm just speaking with you, soror, thank you so much.

AW: Thank you for giving me the opportunity.

JJ: No problem and I will be in contact with you.

AW: Alright. Thank you.

JJ: Thank you, bye.

[interview ends, but audio goes on for some time, clearly recorder was left on by mistake]