GLORIA RHODES (GR): It’s December 22, 2008. I’m at San Diego State University, Library and Information Access, with Reverend George Walker Smith. We are getting ready to do an oral history interview, where we will learn about Rev. Smith and the many contributions he has made to the San Diego community and beyond.

Good morning, Rev. Smith.

GEORGE WALKER SMITH (GWS): Good morning, Gloria.

GR: How are you this morning?

GWS: Fine.

GR: Okay. First, thank you very much for coming to our campus to conduct this interview. And what I’d like to do, is as much as possible, just let you talk about your experiences from your early school years, and bring it forth to San Diego, when I believe it was 1956 when you and your family moved to San Diego—and in what capacity. And then we will just take it. So I’m going to do free flow, which means I’ll let you talk, and if there’s something I don’t understand or I think the people would like more clarification, I’ll stop you at that point and say, “Can you explain that a little more?” So let’s begin, and tell me all about Rev. George Walker Smith.
GWS: Well, old George was born in Hayneville, Alabama, 1929. That’s fifteen miles south of Montgomery, Alabama, in a county by the name of Lowndes County, one of the poorest counties in the whole country.

GR: That’s Lowndes?

GWS: Lowndes, L-O-W-N-D-E-S. And in that particular county, it was amazing that African Americans outnumbered whites seven to one. Yet at the time, they were in a very subservient position: sharecroppers and service workers. And when I say service workers, domestic maids and domestic butlers. I myself did not get burned with the sharecropping bug because my dad worked for the folks who owned the plantation, and I was taken as a little boy, prodigy, for their youngest son. So I had a relatively easy life.

I started school at age six because there was no kindergarten during those days. You were half grown when you started school. We, as African Americans, were only allowed to attend school, at most, six months out of the year, because you had to take time off in the spring to plant crops, and you had to take time off in the fall in order to harvest the crops. In this little town of about 1,200 people at most, there was no school other than this one two-story shack, for black kids, from grades six through nine. And if you went to high school after that, you had to leave home and go to high school, because there was no high school in the county that you could attend. So I went through the ninth grade, which was quite a feat itself. I was never in the eighth grade, and that’s a long story, I don’t know whether you want to hear it.

GR: Yes, I think it would be interesting!
GWS: I'll tell you anyway.

GR: Right! Thank you!

GWS: But I was in the seventh grade. The principal of the school was also the math teacher, and one day she came down to my seventh-grade class and she asked the teacher if she could have me come with her. So I went down to her eighth-grade class and they had a couple of math problems that they couldn’t solve. So she said, “I have a seventh-grader here who can solve those problems, since none of you can.” So I started working on the problems. The first one I put up on the board, and immediately solved it. The second one, I worked until school was out, but I didn’t complete it. So that day when I went home, this is the first time I had any real encounter with prayer. Before going to bed—in the country, you know, you went to bed at a very early time—I said, “God, give me the answer to that problem.” And about one o’clock that morning, the answer to that problem came to me. I got up, lit the kerosene lamp, and was writing out the answer to the problem when my mother said, “George, what are you doin’ up this late?” I said, “I’m solving this problem.” Solved the problem, went back the next day, and went to Miss Addie’s [phonetic] room and put the problem on the board. She said, “That’s right!” So she, I guess, assumed that since I could do that, why go through the eighth grade? So the next fall, when I went back to school, she said, “George, I’m putting you in the ninth grade.” I finished in the ninth grade, head of the ninth-grade class.

I was all concerned about going on to high school. One day the owner of the plantation called my dad and me down to his house, and he said to my dad,
“Well, George is too damned smart not to go on to school. You go see Knight,” who was a farm agent, the black guy who worked with black farmers to help them increase the production of their crop. So Dad went to him, and he made it so that I could go to a high school fifty miles away, which was founded by the Presbyterian Church way back in the 1860s. I stayed there for three years, graduated valedictorian of my class. My scholarship was $100. I took that little hundred dollars and sent it off to Knoxville College in Tennessee, another Presbyterian college that was founded for black kids in 1875.

And then when I got to Knoxville College, I never will forget, on the day that I arrived, a small group of us was on our way down to the gymnasium to play some basketball, as the brothers do. We met this white gentleman. We met him face to face, a doctor, he introduced himself and we introduced ourselves. I said to him, “Mr. Frazier, thanks a lot for the scholarship you gave me,” which was just $100. He was the business manager for the college. And Gloria, for the next four years, I never had one red penny to go into that business office to pay for my education. And I saw a lot of young men and women being sent home for nonpayment of their fees. And I wondered when the bell was going to toll for me, but it never did. Moved forward. I stayed there and had a marvelous life.

GR: So you were at Knoxville College for four years?

GWS: Four years. Majored in chemistry, minored in German.

GR: What year did you start there?

GWS: 1947, finishing up in ’51. And I remember on the day of graduation, as we all do when we’re graduating from college, we form according to our sororities or
fraternities singing goodbye, because most of you never will see one another again. So I was with my Kappa brothers, singing the Kappa songs. Mr. Frazier came over. He said, “George, congratulations.” I said, “Thank you, Mr. Frazier, and thank you for being so supportive of me these four years.” He said, “George, you know why it was that I was so supportive of you? The day that you came onto campus, I met you and Jeff Johnson and Johnny Davis and John Green going to the gym, and we stopped and introduced ourselves. And when you introduced yourself, you said, ‘Thanks, Mr. Frazier, for the scholarship you gave me.’ I said then, ‘That’s one young man I’m going to do everything I can to get through this school.’”

GR: Oh, fantastic!

GWS: He said, “Because I gave 286 scholarships that year, and only two of you—you and Mary Ardagardner [phonetic]—cared enough to say thank you. And when you told me that, I said, ‘Here’s a man that I’m going to support.’”

GR: Oh, that’s wonderful!

GWS: I have shared that experience with thousands of young people, and adults, but especially young people. I tell them that I got through college on two words—thank you.

GR: That’s powerful.

GWS: A grateful heart is the greatest thing anybody can develop. If you don’t have a grateful heart, you’re going to live a miserable life. Okay, so having minored in chemistry and majored in German—because my original intent was to go into medicine—but I knew that was a long shot, returning back to Alabama, a black
person couldn’t even look at a med school in Alabama. And here I was, as poor as Job’s turkey. So I began to teach school that fall, the fall of ’51, and hopeful that the door would one day open for me to get into some med school—Harrier [phonetic], Howard, someplace. But during those two years of teaching at Sunset [phonetic] High School, and coaching basketball, something happened in the community to have that upset me to no end. There were two black women that were slain. The first one was a young woman, pregnant, who went to the old country store to present her welfare check and pay her monthly dues.

GR: This was in Tennessee?

GWS: In Alabama. I’m back out of Tennessee now. She got in an argument with the storekeeper because he had put down something, saying that she got it, and she said, “No, sir, I didn’t get that.” So they got in an argument. He shot that woman to death, plus her unborn baby. And the sheriff didn’t even bother to come over to investigate. That was in the community where I was teaching school. And then about a month later—that was down in Wilcox County, Alabama—very soil-rich county, so rich they called it the Black Belt—there was an elderly lady who was a complete invalid, living with one of her relatives. Every Saturday night the community folks would put on a party, and since the Alabama River ran right through this area, they had all the fish you could eat, and they put on this party to raise a few dollars to give to this old invalid black woman—every Saturday night. The pulpwood—that’s the wood you make paper out of—it was harvested from young pine trees, and blacks did all that for $20 a week, cutting down pine trees six days a week. And so they needed some outlet on Saturday night, and they all
would gather, drink a little moonshine liquor, and eat them fish sandwiches, hot
dogs, and they didn’t even have hamburgers. So one night the sheriff and his
deputy and two highway patrolmen—what they were doing over there, I don’t
know—they raided the place, started beatin’ folks over the head and so forth, and
one of those dogs looked in the corner at the old invalid lady and said, “Honey,
what in the hell you doin’ up this late?!” She was unable to speak. “Oh, you one
of them [slaw?] niggers. Get in there and kill ’em.”

GR: Oh my goodness!

GWS: That was my second year of teaching in that community, so I went to my room,
and I wrote a long hot letter that I was going to publish in the Montgomery
Advertiser newspaper. That was the largest paper that covered that area. And I
was talking about the lack of black justice in Alabama. I guess once again God
intervened, because I was on my way to put it in the post office, and I know they
would have printed it, and I met the principal of the school and showed it to him.
And he said, “Please don’t send that to the papers. The Ku Klux Klan will come
down here and kill us, all of us.” So I said okay, I wouldn’t send it. But then I
began to think to myself, “I can’t stay down here. Uh-uh.”

GR: And this is about 1953.

GWS: About 1952 and ’53. My mind reflected back to the day I gave the graduation
valedictorian message from high school, and two white ladies who had supported
building the school, attended in the audience, and after my speech they came up
and said, “George, we’re gonna be praying that you come to the seminary.”

Preaching was the farthest thing from my mind. But I then began to realize I can’t
stay down here and live, because if one of these folks get me, they’d better kill me. The Presbyterian Church is a progressive church. They do believe in social justice. I think I’ll give the seminary a try. And so Irene and I talked about it, and we decided to go to Pittsburgh for theological training for three years.

GR: So you were already married to Mrs. Smith?

GWS: We got married in ’51.

GR: Okay. Right after school?

GWS: The summer I finished college. So I got to Pittsburgh and the first thing we did after we settled in was to go down and register and vote, because in Montgomery they wouldn’t let us register to vote. So when I got to Pittsburgh, I went down and registered to vote, and I said, “No way am I gonna register to be a Democrat, since Democrats were in control down there in Alabama.” So that’s how I became a Republican.

GR: Democrats were not in control?

GWS: [Beg your pardon?]

GR: Democrats were in control in Alabama?

GWS: Oh, they ran everything, during the days before the Dixiecrats and all of that jive. But my three years in Pittsburgh were very wonderful years, very demanding years, hard studies. But I had an opportunity to reach a lot of people, even as a student in seminary. When you go to theological school, especially the one I went to, Pittsburgh Theological School. They would assign each new incoming student to some church to do some intern work there your first year. So there were only two black churches in Pittsburgh, and by the time I got there, the professor in
charge had said, “Listen, I am not going to any longer just arbitrarily assign our black students to Bidwell, a ghetto black Presbyterian church, or” I forget the other one over in the Hill District. He said, “They’re Presbyterians, and I’m going to assign them to whatever church accepts them, white or any other one.” So he had a hard time placing me. There were two of us blacks in seminary: Virgil Cruz [phonetic], who came from Harmon, New York, where he and his family were the only black family in the community, and he was much lighter skinned than I was, so it wasn’t too difficult to place him. It’s just like Obama being elected president with his mixed blood, over again where I couldn’t be elected because of my blackness. So he placed Virgil very easily, but he couldn’t place me. The churches were afraid to accept….

GR: But they were black Presbyterian churches?

GWS: No, he was not going to send either one of us to the poor black Presbyterian churches, he was going to send us to a Presbyterian church, period. And so finally he got ahold of a pastor of what was then called the Third United Presbyterian Church, in the Squirrel Hill section of Pittsburgh, who took it to his session and all but one of those thirty-six elders voted to accept me. And usually, as an intern, you work with the youth. So they turned the youth program over to me, and you’re only supposed to stay in a church like that one year. But those students demanded that they keep me there all three of my years in seminary. Greatest experience I ever had in my life. That was a very wealthy church. On a Sunday morning you could count fifteen or twenty millionaires going in the door.

GR: Oh wow.
GWS: They paid $75,000 for a carpet for the sanctuary floor.

GR: Seventy-five thousand dollars?! Back in the fifties?

GWS: Yeah. In the fifties.

GR: Wow.

GWS: And a bowling alley underneath the church. It was just a marvelous experience. And then when I finished, they demanded that I be ordained in that church. And the most amazing thing, the one elder who had voted not to accept me there, his daughter asked me if she could sing at my ordination, [unclear 23:11], which was a revolution, you know.

GR: Right. Exactly.

GWS: And one Sunday morning, around May 15, 1953, in that church they took up an offering, and they took up enough to buy a new 1954 Fairlane Ford. That’s the best car I ever had, didn’t have to pay a dime.

GR: And they gave it to you?

GWS: Yeah. To come to California in.

GR: And what was the name of this church?

GWS: Third United Presbyterian Church. But during that time was during the time that you recall Emmett Till was killed.

GR: Exactly.

GWS: And that shook the nation. I had 187 speaking engagements to white groups in the city of Pittsburgh—service clubs and church groups and all kinds of groups on the meaning of brotherhood. And I never will forget one night in Aliquippa, Pennsylvania, I was speaking to their Rotary Club, and after I had finished, a
gentleman came up, well-dressed white gentleman, and he said, “George, I wish I could find 100 black folks who could speak like you have to us tonight, and I will personally pay the expenses.” He was the president of Alcorp, a national Alcorp Company. So that was a very [deptive? 25:02] type experience, and it caused me to dispel all the hate I had towards white folk down there in Alabama, because I had never seen them do anything but that which was bad to black people; and this experience in Pittsburgh, especially in that very wealthy white church….

GR: Right. You got to see a different side.

GWS: Got me to believing that there are good folks in all races.

GR: Very true.

GWS: And bad folks in all races.

GR: That is very true.

GWS: So after graduation, it was then where are you going to go? And in the Presbyterian Church, they don’t say, “You go here,” or “You go there,” or you wait for a call. They help you find a place to go. And it was very difficult then, as it would be now, to a certain extent, for a black graduate of a seminary to find a place to go—especially unless he’s going to go out there and open up a storefront himself. There were two offers that were on the table. One was pastor of the Sixth Presbyterian Church in Chicago. And no way was I going to Chicago with those violent gangs way back then: the Disciples….

GR: Black gangs?

GWS: Black gangs, on the south side of Chicago. There was the Stone, the Disciples, and all other kind of gangs. Down here in San Diego, at Twenty-second and
Market, there was a United Presbyterian Church there, and they wanted to sell, because in the late fifties, the suburbs was just booming.

GR: Where was the church?

GWS: Here in San Diego, Twenty-second and Market, [go] down past there, and you’ll see it. So they wanted to purchase the church and let me come here to be pastor, because there was no black preacher here in San Diego. But they had no money. And Irene, for those three years while I was in seminary, had worked for the women’s department of the Presbyterian Church, and they said, “Listen, we haven’t given George and Irene anything lately. We’ll give them the money to purchase that church so they can go to San Diego.” That’s how I got here. A lot of bigots in the community opposed my coming.

GR: So Pittsburgh Presbyterian gave you and Mrs. Smith….

GWS: No, the women of the Presbyterian Church, national women’s group that Irene worked for in the literature department. They gave the money to buy the church, so I told them that church was given to me—“I’ll just let you meet here.” So then with our new car, we set out coming to San Diego to start this church, which was at Twenty-second and Market, and all that racist stuff didn’t bother me. I’ve been exposed all my life to that type of stuff, all the way back to Montgomery. So I came here, and the national church sent out four college students with me that summer to start a vacation church school, and get the church on the way—two white young ladies, a white young fellow and a black young fellow. That started us on our way. So I began to work and develop the church there, which we gave the name “Golden Hill United Presbyterian Church.” And I said to them on
December 23, 1956, when we were organized, “I didn’t come way out here to San Diego to be pastor of no welfare church. I give you five years, and you’d better be self-supporting, because if I’m gonna go to the Presbyterian meetings of all the other Presbyterian churches, how in the world can I stand up and express myself, when them white folks were payin’ my salary. My pride won’t let me do that.” 

Five years, we were self-supporting! And I came here at a time….

GR: How did you grow your congregation?

GWS: Well, first of all, through word of mouth and so forth, and through advertisement.

Herb Klein [phonetic], who was president of The Copper Press [phonetic] was a member of the La Jolla Presbyterian Church, and from Day One I had the support of that paper. And so a good marketing system. And some of your black folk would come down, and after they have service, they go about, “Who are them Negroes down there tryin’ to act white?!?” That never bothered me, never bothered me. So this city was just dying for black leadership involvement. And as you notice in my book, at one time, I was on the board of about fifteen or seventeen different agencies, because they wanted a black representative. But black middle-class folks were far and [few] between when I came here. You could have a meeting of all of them in a telephone booth, and have some space left. But as I served on these things, more and more….

GR: So you were basically on boards with all whites?

GWS: Oh, goodness! That’s all! Wasn’t nobody else, no Mexicans, no blacks. No I had a whole banner to hold up, but as more and more middle-class black folks came to town, I began to have folks I could recommend for some of these boards.
And that is what I would do. And then I got involved with the education system in 1963.

GR: How did you get involved with the education system?

GWS: At that time, San Diego School District had less than two dozen black teachers, and less than two dozen Hispanic teachers, and yet they were educating 99% of our kids. There was a group of us who joined with the League of Women Voters who got the city council to change the system of elected school board members, because it was unfair. Up until that time, your school board members were elected from La Jolla, Point Loma, and Mission Hills—nothing from south of [Highway] 8. So they put it on, and it passed. That’s when we got Districts A through E. And my district is District E, and this correlation of folk asked me if I would run for it. And one of the reasons, blacks at that time were far more together than they are now. Right now, their pronouns are “me,” “myself,” and “I.” “If you don’t get out of my way, I’m gonna stab you in the back.” But they talked me into running, and I told them, number one, I would run under two or three conditions: I would not run as a black candidate, because there are not enough blacks in this city to elect a dog catcher. I will run as a representative, representing all of the youngsters in this district, all the way from southeast to La Jolla, Terezana [phonetic], and all the rest. I would not go in debt running for no seat. Third, my campaign committee will be completely an integrated one. So I corralled folks from every segment of this community. It looked like the United Nations. We knew it was going to be a struggle. There must have been about five or six…. 
GR: And this was 1963?

GWS: 1963. Five or six who ran. I was the only black that was running. So I ended up coming out in the primary, and then you had to go citywide.

GR: So you were leading in the primary, you won the primary?

GWS: Yeah. And my opponent in the general election was a seventy-two-year-old blind white guy, head of the blind agency in San Diego. We had to do some fantastic planning in this campaign, not let my pictures go on the television, on my literature, sending out to [outstanding?] whites on television to testify on my behalf, San Diego [Boulevard?], and all of that strategy, I only beat that rascal by 411 votes.

GR: Wow.

GWS: That shows you how racist San Diego was.

GR: You beat him by 411 votes.

GWS: [unclear 35:58] votes. And when I got down to the board of education, one of the members that were there while we were debating nominating board members of our district, he had opposed it. Dr. Frank Lowe, L-O-W-E, who’s now dead. He was on the board when I got sworn in. The first thing, I had already developed my agenda as to what I’m going to go after. I want more black teachers, Hispanic teachers in this district. So I knew I had to devise a method to get them. So I got a very conservative board to vote with me in authorizing the superintendent to establish an affirmative action plan for recruiting more minority teachers. Whatever reason the superintendent gave me for not having any more black or brown teachers than we had, was because they recruited 75% of their teachers
from out here at San Diego State. And I said, “Well, that’s the problem!” because that department of education at San Diego State didn’t even welcome black and brown candidates to become a part of your department. I said, “What you got to do is go where there are black and brown candidates, which means for black you’re gonna go south. And for Hispanics you’re gonna go to the southwest.” And we started doing that. Our recruiter, every spring, would go down south, visiting those black colleges.

GR: So you made a point of targeting the Hispanic and black colleges?

GWS: Yeah. And Bertha Pendleton [phonetic]—you know Bertha.

GR: I do! I want to interview her.

GR: She was in college with me at Knoxville College, and I knew her, a very bright girl. She was two years behind me. She was working for the Tennessee Valley Authority, but she wanted to come to San Diego and teach. So I had Dr. Croft [phonetic], who was the personnel director, to set up an appointment to interview her down in Tennessee. So she met him at Peabody College down there, he gave her an application right there. And you know, she came on to become superintendent of education.

GR: Yes! Exactly.

GWS: So you have to be aggressive like that. I stayed there sixteen years on the board, and during those sixteen years I served….

GR: So you were on the school board for sixteen years.

GWS: Sixteen years.

GR: And you were the first elected black official.
GWS: Of *anything* in San Diego County.

GR: That’s fantastic.

GWS: I was president of the board about four times. Then I went on nationally, to be president of what was then called the Council of Great City Schools. It was an organization made up of the twenty-eight largest school districts in the country, whose headquarters were in the Watergate Hotel in Washington, D.C. And as the president, I enjoyed my kingfish status, because when that limousine would pick me up at Dulles Airport for a meeting, to take me to the headquarters at the Watergate, the guy would get me out of the limousine, I didn’t have to check in at no desk, took me straight upstairs to my suite. That was good living!

GR: Now, you were the….

GWS: President of the Council of Great City Schools. And then after that, I became president of the National School Board Association, 94,000 school board members.

GR: What year was that approximately?

GWS: That was 1977. And *very* few black folks were on school boards during those days. But that was a great experience, because I got to visit every state in the union, giving an annual speech at the annual convention. We were headquartered in Evanston, Illinois, a very conservative town. So during my tenure as president, I got that board to move the headquarters from Evanston to where the action was in Washington, D.C. And also during my tenure, we chose a new executive director. But even more important was the fact that whereas those seventeen or twenty thousand [17,000-20,000] people at our annual convention, that many
attend, had not heard any nationally-known black speaker or entertainer. I started bringing in. Whitney Young was the first black I brought in. Alex Haley spoke at the convention where I was leaving the presidency. And I got black entertainers to come: Duke Ellington, makes all that money. We paid him $25,000 a concert. So that was a good experience, and folk began to talk about, “You’ve got to go for twenty years!” I said, “No, I’m tired. I am tired.” And at that time, the church was very….

GR: I was going to say, you were still heading Golden Hills?

GWS: Yeah, it was still Golden Hills at that time, but the session had given me an associate ministry so that during the week the membership of the church was covered. So that was that, and yet being involved in the total life of San Diego, which is the only way to go. And all the rest is history, etc. I had a lot of different experiences with different folk. Some of it you can get out of the little paperback book I put together.

GR: Conscience. When did you publish Conscience of the Community?

GWS: In the year 2001.

GR: Okay. And that book is about your life, it’s an autobiography?

GWS: Autobiography—part of it.

GR: What is the greatest change that you have experienced in San Diego from 1956 until now? I know there are many, many, many changes. I guess I want to ask what do you feel, as an African American, that we have overcome?

GWS: Well, I think the greatest change, social change, in San Diego is the change that has come in housing, because when I came here, black folks were basically forced...
to live south of Market Street. Housing segregation was rampant, and you didn’t find any black folk living in most of these communities in San Diego County now. So housing is the greatest social gain that has happened since I’ve been here. And you have seen an increase in the black middle-class folks, which means blacks with more education and better jobs. That has been good.

GR: What about the school system?

GWS: I think basically the school district is not as good as it was when I came here. I dare not ought to say that I know the reason. I think you and I both can point to some reasons. All of it isn’t just the school district’s fault.

GR: That is true.

GWS: I still say, having been president of the twenty-eight largest school districts in this country, I happen to know that San Diego still has a better urban school district than a lot of those throughout this country. I have always said that in every school in San Diego, whether it be La Jolla or South E, there’s enough learning going on that no kid should be able to say “I can’t.” It’s up to the parent, them, and the teachers, to make that into fruition.

GR: I wanted to get back to your book. What inspired you to write the book? Did someone approach you?

GWS: Basically my white friends here in San Diego—not black friends—white. They said to me, “George, before you develop….” That was when I retired December 31, 2000. They had said prior to that time, “George, you need to put down some of your memoirs before you develop Alzheimer’s.

GR: This is retirement from the church?
GWS: They said “Listen. Nobody in San Diego who knows as much about San Diego as you do, because we tell you things we don’t tell each other.”

GR: Wow.

GWS: Yeah. And so it was my good white friends that kept prevailing upon me to do that. Your folk never asked about it. I’m sorry, but it’s the truth.

GR: I know what you’re saying, I do indeed.

GWS: So for the benefit of all, and I just hope that I could get black kids to read about how San Diego was, and some of the players that I used to have respect for and [unclear 48:06]. But we don’t even like to read, you know. We’ve got the television sets, and….

GR: Right. But that was one of the reasons I feel this project is so important, so that our young people can get to see the contributions that African Americans have made to their community. I don’t even think they have a clue how much of a presence it is in the community. So…. What would you like to see changed as far as African American youth in this community? There have been so many news stories about the negatives. I’m in church most Sundays, and there are a lot of positives going on, or at least the students, the young people are there, but you just get to hear about the negative part of the community, when they think about African-American students. Do you feel that there are things that can be done to increase the positive presence?

GWS: Well first of all, I, over the years, have grown tired of everybody looking to the church to solve all of our problems. I think most churches, if they have any
young folks in it—and there are too many of our young folk who do not even
dawn the doors of a church.…

GR: That’s very true.

GWS: You can’t hold the church responsible for those kids who on Sunday morning
should be at church, in Sunday school, and yet are outside roaming the streets.
That’s one of the great problems in our black community. When I was growing
up, and when you were growing up, people went to Sunday school and church in
our community, and those kids in those families who didn’t go were ostracized.

GR: That’s right. It wasn’t even an option in my household.

GWS: No option. And now you’re ostracized if you go.

GR: That is true, yes.

GWS: So that’s the major problem. And until we get that mentality turned around,
we’re gonna continue to have the problem that we’re having. At least they could
teach some kind of values, which they don’t seem to have now, which is acted out
in the violence, etc. So we can talk about the problem in church all we want to.
We can point out the bad. But there’s a reason for that, and that is the fact that
parental influence has not been collectively so positive that it had permittrated
[i.e., a portmanteau of permeated and penetrated] the minds of our young folk.

GR: That is true.

GWS: It was sad.

GR: So…. Is there anything else you’d like to add? This has been wonderful.

GWS: Not necessarily. I talk too much as it is!
GR: No you don’t! This is a wealth of information that people need to know, and you’ve made such a…. What is the one thing you’ve done that makes you the proudest?

GWS: I think serving those sixteen years on school boards, which completely revolutionized the whole thinking of that institution. And the advocacy I did on the behalf of youngsters.

GR: Alright, Rev. Smith, thank you so much for your time. It’s been great talking to you, and I’m always energized talking to you, because I see what a difference one person can make. You have definitely made a….

GWS: One thing I’d like to say, Gloria, is this. I think that everybody, I don’t care who you are, how learned you are, or how ignorant, you have a story to tell, and you should put it down, no matter how crude and rough, or how smooth it is.

   Everybody has a story to tell.

GR: And someone can get something from that story.

GWS: That’s right. Because my philosophy is this: if you cared enough to write it, I should care and respect you enough for you to print it.

GR: Uh-huh. Now, when I attend functions and you speak, and you’ve gotten so many honors and awards. What award means the most to you, and why?

GWS: Hm. Oh, God.

GR: While you’re thinking about that, you have a couple of favorite jokes that you either begin with or you end with, and I’d like to hear one of those.

GWS: I don’t even know what you’re talking about!
Do you know the jokes? The one with after a while it’s just like the parts of the pig. And then the other one was the pancakes.

Oh yeah! I think that one of the true honors—and I’ve gotten so many of them things. You look at the office now, [that just sent to the other one (?) 54:18], all that stuff, which Irene says, “I wish this was money, rather than paper!” But I think when Steve Webber [phonetic] gave me that honorary doctorate, because he let me know that the first one was given to John F. Kennedy, and the next one to Shirley Chisholm. And I said for him to even identify me on the level with those people, it said something.

That is definitely an honor, yeah.

And I guess the second one was the thing that you were out there at USD.

Leaders of Education.

The other Saturday night, yeah. I think what they inscribed on that thing said what has been my forte all my life here in San Diego.

Uh-huh. I’ll have to read that. You were the first local person to receive an honorary doctorate from San Diego State, is that correct?

That’s right.

And what year was it? I can always look it up.

[unclear 55:30]

But that definitely is…. Saturday evening, Irene and Carolyn was taking all the pictures, and we had came upon such a beautiful portrait of Colin Powell with Irene and me.

Oh, wow!
GWS: Down here at Maury Wax’s [phonetic] house. I had forgotten all about it. So I told Irene.…

GR: Oh, wonderful! Can we have that for our collection?

GWS: Ask her about it.

GR: I sure will.

GWS: I’ve been married to that woman so long, I don’t [ever fail to] ask her permission for nothin’. But I’ve had a lot of great moments in my life too. A lot of great moments.

GR: Okay. Fantastic.

GWS: I’ve been the kind of person who doesn’t like to get involved in nothing without doing something about it. I mean, too many people want to swim, but they don’t want to sink [unclear 56:47]. And back to my story about all that stuff that hangs on the wall: A friend of mine who’s from North Carolina, he and I used to sit around in early years at the time he was passed up at Long Beach, and I was down here. Soon after I got here, we would be talking, and he’d say, “George, I don’t care whether I ever get a doctorate degree. Do you?” I said, “No. It may be nice, but I don’t care. For what?” And so finally Sterling College out in Sterling, Kansas, gave him an honorary doctorate degree. And I said, “Hey St. Paul”—that’s his name—St. Paul Eps [phonetic] is his name—his son conducted—you probably saw some of his work—he conducted at the Old Globe—Sheldon.

GR: Okay, I’ve heard of it.

GWS: Sheldon Eps. But anyway, I said, “St. Paul, I thought it didn’t matter to you whether you got a doctorate degree or not. I thought we had agreed that that’s the
case.” And he laughed and said, “George, you know I look upon this doctorate
degree just like I look upon the tail of the pig. It may not serve any purpose, but it
sure tickles the heck….” (laughter) I thought that was a good one!

GR: A very good one! Well, thank you, we will end on that note. And thanks for
giving us a glimpse of what you have done in the community. This will be made
available for our young people, for our old people, for scholars, for anyone who
would like to know about the African-American presence in San Diego.

GWS: All I want to say is everything I’ve said is the truth.

GR: And that’s all we care about. I appreciate it.

[END OF INTERVIEW]