GLORIA RHODES (GR): We are here in the University Club Room at San Diego State University with the Honorable Leon Williams, who will be giving us a brief oral history of his experiences in San Diego for our program Creating Community, The African-American Experience in San Diego. My name is Gloria Rhodes, I’m the outreach librarian at San Diego State. Today is October 28, 2008.

Good afternoon, Mr. Williams, it’s a pleasure to have you here.

LEON WILLIAMS (LW): Good afternoon. It’s pleasure being here. I’d like you to know my beautiful wife over here too.

GR: And hello Mrs. Williams. Mrs. Margaret Williams is with us as well. And we are delighted to be able to record lived history of two of the most outstanding African-American citizens here in the beautiful city of San Diego.

MARGARET WILLIAMS (MW): You are so sweet. Thank you.

GR: Okay. What I’d like for you to do first, Mr. Williams, is to tell us a little bit about your childhood days. And then we’re going to fast forward to your experiences here at San Diego State University, which was then San Diego State College or….

LW: It was San Diego State College when I was here.

GR: San Diego State College. But I think your childhood experiences have paved the way for your experiences here at San Diego State.

LW: Well, that’s a long…. I could take all day doing that. But I guess the essential part of what might be important would be I was born in Oklahoma, and I lived
there until I was fourteen years old. I guess perhaps the most important part about that time of my life is that—of course I was the oldest of a large family, and the stock market crash of 1929 kind of turned things around in Oklahoma. My parents were kind of knocked off their track in terms of their trajectory. And so things were not so good there. I guess what I remember most positively is that of all the people, all the adults, that I knew, and my parents’ friends and acquaintances, they were all I guess what I would call really solid people. They always did what they said they would do, at least as far I could tell as a child. And they were goodhearted. I never saw friction or mean spiritedness among any of those people. They were cooperative and helpful to each other. And so that’s kind of what I remember mostly from there. I remember being very ambitious about getting further education. We lived not too far from the University of Langston. So that was my fall-back position. I thought, “Well, if all else fails, I can always go to the University of Langston.

GR: Okay. That’s in Oklahoma, right?

LW: Yeah, in Oklahoma, not very far from where we lived. But we did move to Bakersfield in California. One of my dad’s brothers lived there, and he kept telling my dad—they were close—to move. And I was so anxious to move to California. “C’mon! Let’s go! Let’s go!” So finally we did. And that was a great point for me. Now, I don’t know if there’s something else that you want to know. I don’t want to make it too long.

GR: So you’re here in Bakersfield, California. So how and why San Diego State? How did you hear about San Diego State College?
LW: Well, I really didn’t come here to go to San Diego State. My ambition had been to go to UCLA, because those were the days of Jackie Robinson and Kenny Washington at UCLA. And then every day at high school the coach would tell us about all that’s dramatic, and Bakersfield, California, would have these dramatic plays of Jackie Robinson running across the football field, and I’d say, “That’s my school!” But then I was a pretty good student in high school. I mean, I was a darned good student in high school. They gave us some kind of a test upon graduation as seniors. And so before I could enter UCLA, I got a job offer here in San Diego, and in those days it was 1941, I got a job offer for about a dollar an hour, job at North Island Naval Air Station. And I talked to my dad and everybody, “Well, gee, that’s pretty good. That’s almost better than goin’ to college right now. You can always go to college later.” So anyway, I came down here to do that. And I was going to night school when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and of course the war started, and that changed everything.

GR: Right. You were going to night school where?

LW: At community college. Well, then it was called J.C., junior college.

GR: Right. Exactly.

LW: So then I went off to the military, to Australia and New Guinea.

GR: And what year was that? Do you remember the year?

LW: 1943.

GR: And after you got back here?
LW: Got back here, I worked at North Island and went to some more school. And then I left and went to San Diego State full time for two and a half years. And I got my B.A. degree and I got admitted to....

GR: What was your B.A. degree in?

LW: Psychology, with a minor in English. And I was admitted to Claremont University for a Ph. D. in psychology, but the Korean War broke out. So I decided not to go to work for my Ph.D.

GR: And when you were here at San Diego State College, can you give us a glimpse of what life was like on campus at that time?

LW: Well, in those days, as you can imagine, they had not been.... Although we were.... I was a member of a group of people who.... Even restaurants were not integrated in those days. There was a lot of racism in San Diego. In order to break the segregated restaurants, there were two groups of people, one led by a fellow by the name of Manuel Talley [phonetic], Fellowship for Reconciliation, was a dentist here in San Diego, Jack Kimbrough [phonetic].

GR: I’ve heard of him.

LW: Yes. As a matter of fact, have you got some of [these] records, because he’s a member of the Boulé [Alpha Pi Boulé], and I was a member of the Boulé, and he was the first president of the Boulé organized in San Diego. But he had a group of people, and like we would go mixed groups of white kids and Mexicans and black kids and Asians, we’d go to the restaurants and they wouldn’t serve us. But if we just occupied the space, it was not unlawful then. The law was on our side, but it was just the practice of Jim Crow in the restaurants, so we would sit in
restaurants and they would lose business. And eventually, that was one of the things. That was a precursor, really to, I guess, the sit-ins and the civil rights movement in the South that became dramatic. And I sat here wondering…. One thing that got me into public service that I wondered about so much, how those kids could tolerate the hot cigarettes on their necks, and their dogs and all that. And I thought, “Well, if they can do that, I can do what I do,” what I had the chance to do later—serving on the city council for truly no pay.

GR: So that’s when you really got that, I say “bug,” to make a difference, to make a change, during that time frame.

LW: I think I always had that. As I mentioned, in Oklahoma, we always had the desire to be part of the effort to create a better society. So that just stayed with me all my life. But the most motivating thing, I guess, was what was happening in the fifties, and later in the sixties, when the civil rights movement became intense.

GR: Right, more of a national….

LW: More of a national movement. But we had, as I said, in San Diego, we were a group of people who were working a long time back in the forties and fifties and into the sixties too.

GR: Okay. Let’s go back to your experiences here at San Diego State. Were you involved in any organizations? Did they allow blacks to become a part of the campus? Or how did you….  

LW: Well, for the most part, black students—and there were not very many—I think there were about eight or ten of us when I was here….  

GR: Eight or ten blacks out of how many students?
LW: Well, about 5,000 then. There were Hispanics and Asians. But we were not allowed to participate in the student government, much of the real activities. We were kind of on the fringe of campus life. I was a member of the Psychology Club, I believe, because I was a psychology major. And I was a member of Toastmasters. We kind of organized it ourselves. And there were a lot of white kids who participated with us too. We had an organization called Intercultural Organization, which was made up of multi-ethnics. I was chair of that at one time. And we had a Spanish Club, and I participated with the Spanish Club, and occasionally with something called, I think it was le cercle français, the French Club. And sometimes we participated with them. But for the most part, we were outside of the student government.

GR: So when you say “participate,” exactly what was the role, what did they allow?

LW: Well, we just had socials, or we’d have a get-together, things like that. And just kind of communicated and talked about things, student life, and life in general.

GR: Okay. So after your experience here at State, after graduation, what road did you….

LW: Well, I became a social worker, because as a psychology major, as I said, I was going to…. I was a psychology major. One, after I didn’t go—you know, I told you I was going to go to Claremont, but after the Korean War came, and I was working at North Island, I was back over there with a B.A. degree, but I was just going there for the semester because I graduated in February. And so I was going to go the following September, but the Korean War came in the meantime, and I
said, “Well, I won’t do that.” And so I stayed in San Diego, and then I was hired as a social worker, the county department of social services.

GR: Were you the first African-American social worker in the county?

LW: Yeah. And I became a supervisor within about three years, and then after I didn’t go to Claremont, I worked for a master’s degree in public administration on this campus with Dr. Kitchen [phonetic]—not this current Dr. Kitchen—and a professor by the name of Richard Bigger, and there was another one I think—two or three others. I worked for a master’s degree. So I got a job as a social worker. And then when I was working for this master’s degree in public administration, then I was offered a job in the sheriff’s department as administrative assistant to the sheriff in San Diego County. From there I was….

GR: How long did you work at the sheriff’s department in administration?

LW: Nine years.

GR: What were some of the things you were responsible for as an administrator?

LW: Well, I did a lot of things in the sheriff’s department. I created a…. Well, at that time all the patrol cars were leaving from downtown San Diego, driving out to the backcountry to patrol the backcountry, which it’s a big county, you know, 4,300 square miles.

GR: Yes, it is.

LW: And so they were wasting a lot of time, and I established substations in the east and a substation in the north. By the way, they’re still there, and became bigger and better.

GR: Right!
LW: We had deputies. In those days we had deputy sheriffs keeping records, and I established records clerks, and I established court clerks, and I established bailiffs. Instead of just using regular deputies, we had a special class. Oh, a lot of things like that.

GR: So you really shaped the organization from within.

LW: Yeah, I had to change it substantially, and change the concept of what the sheriff should be doing, and create a lot more efficiencies. And then I was offered a job as—after the Civil Rights Act and the War on Poverty—what’d they call that?—the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, signed by President Johnson—I was offered a job to direct a program under the Urban League’s control, called the Neighborhood Youth Corps. And that was in 1965, and I think I started January 1966, as director of that program. And that was pretty active in the community in those days, you know. There were a lot of things going on with that Economic Opportunity Act. Hispanics and blacks were beginning to feel that we could be part of the society. Always before that, there was a thing that the government was of, by, and for, quote, “the man.” It was always that notion of “the man” controlling everything, and the blacks and Hispanics….

GR: Meaning the white man.

LW: Meaning the white man. And the system, the establishment, those were the things that we had to struggle to open up, and to create a space for ourselves in. And that meant not only organizing ourselves, but addressing what we called the establishment, in such a way that we could be heard, could become part of it. And in those days there was a lot of talk on the part of members of the city
council and other people. “What do those people want?! What do they want down there, or over there?” It was a matter of we want the same things anybody else wants: we want a good education, want to take care of our children, want health care, a good house and a good job and so forth.

GR: You’re sounding like a presidential candidate now! (laughter)

LW: Those are the things that we were talking about. I should tell you something else before that. After I decided not to go to Claremont for graduate school, I applied for—because I had a psychology major—I applied to both the city and the county departments of personnel to be a personnel technician. So guess what happened? The city personnel department said, “Nah.” I got to have one of the highest grades on the test. “Nah, you wouldn’t fit in.” And the city personnel department, county personnel department, “Wouldn’t fit in,” same thing.

GR: I guess that was the norm, back in the day.

LW: That was the norm, “You didn’t fit in.” But anyway, on the civil rights thing, we were pretty active with people like Tom Johnson, who’s now deceased, and John Johnson and Carroll Wayman [phonetic], who I think was adjunct professor here at one time.

GR: Yes, exactly.

LW: And there were a number of others of us. And there were a lot of Hispanics, too, whose names you would recognize. We were all kind of addressing the system.

GR: And this was in like the sixties?

LW: That was in the sixties. And then about ’68, I think there were several vacancies occurring on the city council, and I was pretty familiar, because we had this….
We had what we called city community dialogs, and there were a group of us who would meet with the city council members and the mayor and the city attorney and other city officials, and we met in city hall. I’ve forgotten how often it was, but we had a regular thing going, so I got to know council members and the mayor pretty well. And in ’68 when there was a lot of upset going on there after Martin [Luther] King, [Jr.] got killed, and Bob Kennedy got killed. There were some real upsets, and at that time I was acting director of the Urban League. So there was a group of people…. They called it…. I’ve forgotten now.

MW: BOMB.

LW: Yeah, it’s called BOMB. They called themselves BOMB: Black, Oriental, Mexican, Brothers. It was a group, and they had a nominating conference. As I say there was a vacancy on the city council. And in those days, the council could appoint, didn’t have to have a special election. The council could appoint for a vacancy—or select. The council would vote and select somebody. Anyway, this group BOMB had this conference, and they nominated me to the city council for selection to be a member of the city council. And that was in 1968. And I was interviewed by the council on November something of 1968.

GR: Okay, you were interviewed?

LW: Yeah, I was interviewed by them, along with many, many other people. So they selected me and I was sworn in, in January of ’69—sworn in as a member of the council for the Fourth District.

GR: You were the first African-American city council…. Well, it was black back in the day. Right? Or Negro?
LW: Right. Well, they said black and Negro and all that. But black we considered okay. We considered black to be okay, but Negro was kind of a put down.

GR: So the accepted term was black.

LW: That was preferable among black folks in those days. And so I was sworn in, and when I was sworn in to the city council, the council had one staffer. I had one-half of a clerk, that’s all—one-half of a clerk.

GR: To work with you?

LW: To keep my records and to do everything.

GR: So you had a clerk part-time, a half-time clerk. Okay.

LW: So one of my first fights was to (chuckles) get some staff. And I was a friend with the city manager then, Kim Moore [phonetic], an assistant city manager, and he lent me a couple of staff members. There was an assembly member by the name of Mervin Diamond [phonetic]. Do you know Mervin Diamond? He’s an assembly member right now. No, he was a state senator.

GR: What was his name?

LW: Mervin Diamond. He was in L.A., but he arranged for me to have a couple of staff members, who were in a foundation that he had. So they came down here and helped me a little bit. But the real problem, the real issue was that I had a district. In those days, the districts were composed on the basis of registered voters, not population. That was a city charter provision. So because I had what was then called Southeast San Diego—which included all the way down to the Mexican border—San Ysidro—that whole area was part of the Fourth District. So I had well over 100,000 people in my district. And other members had
65,000-70,000 members. And my district was the greatest problem, because these were the blacks and the Hispanics, and they wanted [recognition], they wanted to be responded to. So their attitude was, “You’re down there, man, you take care of it!” And the other members of the city council were all white, and things were okay with them. So they said, “Well, now, we’ve got that unrest over there, Leon, so you’re here now, you take care of it!” So that was part of my…. How am I going to take care of all this stuff? I had to keep my job as director of the Neighborhood Youth Corps, and that was okay, that was cleared up with the city attorney and the federal attorney general. They cleared up that. Conflict was not an issue. So I kept that job for a while, so I had the full-time job over there, and I had a full-time job on the council. And the council pay was $5,000 in those days.

GR: Per year?!

LW: Per year!

GR: Ohh-kay.

LW: But it was a twelve-, fourteen-, or fifteen-hour [-a-day] job—especially for me, because I had all these problems way down in the south. And I had all these people who wanted something, wanted the government to recognize them. And so I used to have meetings over in the community, in people’s houses, and try to encourage people to participate—you know, community people in my district. And they would say, “Well, I’ve gotta work.” The problem was, how do you take some time off? I said, “Well, you know, if you don’t come down and help to defend your area when an absentee landlord wants to convert that corner lot to a service station, gets a condition of use permit to change that to a service station,
and your house is across the street, what do you do? Can you take some time off to protect your house?” Those were arguments I had to make in the community to get people to participate. But it was also a problem of participating, of being listened to, because in those days other members of the council didn’t have much respect for black people. I’m just telling you the way it was. The respect level was pretty low for blacks and Hispanics. If they had come down to address the council about an issue, it wasn’t taken nearly so well by most of the council members. I had to really be….

GR: So you’d have to really be the voice of the community.

LW: I had to have tremendous persuasive power, because one vote didn’t mean anything. If they weren’t convinced, well, they’d just do whatever they wanted to do. And so….

GR: So what were some of the major…. I mean, I know it was a hard time, but with your leadership, what were some of the significant accomplishments that you can look back and say, “As a result of me taking the voice of the community to the city council, this changed,” or “we increased this amount,” or “this was built,” or “this organization was formed”?

LW: Well, one thing that I think I’m most pleased about was…. Downtown San Diego was all dead, and the whole notion of all development was to be north of I-8. That’s where most of the value was going. And my district was downtown in that day too. I had downtown as well as all the southeast and all that. So I used to look down on downtown from my office, and it was so bad and so ugly and
nobody wanted to be there. So I came up with the idea of…. I had a few white friends, like George Scott, who was a merchant in San Diego, has a store…. 

GR: Walker Scott Store?

LW: Walker Scott Store. And a few other people, like Hamilton Marston [phonetic]. They’re both deceased now, but he had Marston’s Department Store, and that was one of the high-class stores. They were friends of mine. And League of Women Voters kind of came to my….

GR: So they all were a part of…. (recording paused)

LW: Well, downtown was dead, and was dying more. Everybody moved out. The Union Tribune moved out. I was the lone vote against the Union Tribune’s condition of use permit in Mission Valley, because I wanted them to stay downtown. And the Veterans’ Administration moved from downtown. Everybody, everything was dead. And so I wanted to keep downtown alive, so we created the concept of…. Well, first we had redevelopment, all the city council members adopted something to improve the Horton Plaza. And that was kind of the old configuration of Horton Plaza. But we then….

GR: Okay. So not the Horton Plaza as we see it today.

LW: No, not as we see it now. But then after a lot of those people left, we had a new city council, and Pete Wilson came, and we created Center City Development Corporation, and George Scott and Hamilton Marston helped me to persuade the other members to vote for the Center City Development Corporation which really created what you see downtown now. Because downtown was absolutely a place you didn’t want to be. You didn’t want to be there, not even in broad daylight.
There was nothing there. There were peep shows and stuff like that. It was ugly
and run down and nothing. So that’s number one.

GR: So the City-City….

LW: Center City Development Corporation.

GR: Center City Development. The purpose was to wipe out the blight of downtown,
and to rebuild it.

LW: Rebuild downtown and create an interesting place. And then after we did that….

GR: They’ve done a good job!

LW: Yeah, they’ve done, I think, a very good job, considering. There are things that
could be done better, or could have been done better, but it was 49,000 times
better than it was! And then after that we created SEDC, Southeast Development
Corporation, to move some of the development out in the eastern area.

GR: Okay. And the population for that area, of course, was Hispanic and black at that
time as well?

LW: Hispanic and black, pretty much, at that time. And the reason is because, of
course, if you take…. As I said, we were struggling against that whole pattern of
movement was somewhere else, and all the goodies would be somewhere else,
and in those days segregation hadn’t gone entirely, and restrictive covenants had
been ruled unconstitutional in the fifties, but other devices were used to keep
people from moving. And of course you couldn’t expect the average person who
had just a working job to buy a new house out in the suburbs somewhere. And
then if they did that, what’s the city going to do with all this land over here that’s
run down? So my focus was with the city, largely on trying to retain and maintain what we have.

And another thing, Balboa Park. All the buildings in Balboa Park were being abandoned. And my thrust was to recreate that.

GR: What buildings were in Balboa Park at that time? I mean, like the museums and everything now?

LW: The museums and the other buildings, like on the Prado, all those buildings on the Prado, and the Organ Pavilion. The [unclear 33:19] was falling off the Organ Pavilion. They were going to tear down the Ford Building and all that stuff. And so I was just very much against all that. I said we need to maintain and keep these things. So I believe I inspired the city council and city staff and the community people, because people, like I said, George Scott, Hampton Marston, and there was a woman…. I can’t remember her name now. She became very active in Balboa Park. They created the Committee of 100, and they started doing a lot of things there. So a lot of those kinds of things, southeast development, southeast area, a lot of unpaved streets, got a lot of streets paved. And senior citizen centers, and parks, and….

GR: How long were you on the [city council]?

LW: Fourteen years. And so we got parks, and….

GR: So there were no such things as term limits?

LW: No, there were no term limits then. If there had been, things would have been very different.

GR: Right. You’ve done a lot. Or you did a lot in that time frame, absolutely.
LW: And I don’t know, there’s so many things like that, unless you can have something specific.

GR: Let’s look at the community in terms of the schools or education. What was that like for not only the college student, but the elementary, junior high, high school student? Was there anything to do? What were the conditions of the schools?

LW: Well, there were a lot of problems with the schools, like Lincoln, for example, and Morris [phonetic]. There were student uprisings, and I would often find myself in that situation.

GR: What were the issues that were related to students, what, walking out of school and things of that sort?

LW: They were dissatisfied with the way things were, not being fully recognized, and being upset about what was happening in the South.

GR: Right. Were they getting the second-hand textbooks and things of that sort as well?

LW: They were getting second-hand textbooks, and the grounds were not maintained, and there were a lot of things like that. One thing I did was arrange with the school district to close Lincoln High School. Forty-ninth Street was a through street through the campus, and I arranged a trade so Lincoln High School could—created one pad of land, so that the school had land on the north side of Imperial Avenue. The City had land on the south side over there, so we traded that land, so that the school could be on the south side of Imperial Avenue, all that land over there. And Forty-ninth Street was closed, so it became a much bigger pad.
GR: I was going to ask something that’s probably going to be crazy. The schools were segregated?

LW: No, no.

GR: They were integrated then?

LW: They were integrated, but they were where most of the black kids went. Facilities weren’t as good.

GR: Okay, sort of sub par.

LW: Yeah, all sub par. And I guess some of that still goes on. But the best teachers would always migrate. They had those agreements that they could move where they wanted to. So younger teachers would be here, the less competent teachers would be where the black kids were, Hispanic kids. I think that’s still going on to some extent, at least. But that was a real serious problem in those days. We had some black teachers. By the way, when I graduated from San Diego State, I couldn’t get a job. There were no black teachers then in the school system, so that was not a possibility. But later, as a community person, I worked hard with especially a superintendent by the name of Will Crawford, and I’ve forgotten the name of the following [superintendent]. They had the notion that black people couldn’t be a school principal. I was very involved in getting the first black principal.

GR: Who was the first black principal?

LW: Ernie Hartzog [phonetic]. And Rob mentioned that Carlin [phonetic] case. Ernie was part of that Carlin case. There was a fellow by the name of Larry Carlin. I knew them very well through that Carlin case. But Ernie, after he was principal
of Lincoln, moved to Portland, Oregon. But he was the first black principal we had in the school system.

GR: Was he a native of San Diego?

LW: No, he was not. I think he had come from Pennsylvania, if I remember correctly. But I knew him very well, because he had been part of the neighborhood youth group program. I was director of the Neighborhood Youth Corps, as I told you. And he had been one of the people I worked with in the school system, because that Neighborhood Youth Corps program was aimed at giving young people a job where they could get on-the-job training. And that was one of the things I did there in the sixties before becoming a council member.

GR: Okay. So after your council days, which was fourteen years on the council—and thank you very much!—what did you do after that?

LW: Ran for the board of supervisors. I was elected to the board of supervisors in, I think it was June of ’82. Yeah, June of ’82.

GR: And as a board of supervisors member, what were your responsibilities?

LW: Well, I didn’t take office until January of ’83, but I was…. You know, the county government in California, and in most states, especially western states, county government is very, very, very heavily involved in governance, providing services. So the county—and many people don’t know this—the county provides health care and welfare services for everybody in the county—all the record-keeping and the tax-assessing and collecting, and weights and measures on all the gas pumps, and all the weights and measures, that’s a county function. The courts and the jail are county functions. And as I said, health care. Hazmat, any
hazardous waste. All that stuff is county. So the only thing that’s different within cities, the county doesn’t have land use. You know, the cities have land use jurisdiction. And the unincorporated areas of the county, the counties have land use jurisdiction. That is, they decide on zoning and issuing permits for housing, and for all kinds of things. That’s county, in non-city areas. And in San Diego County, the greatest population that’s not in the City of San Diego, is in the unincorporated areas of the county, like Spring Valley.

GR: Is Ramona unincorporated?

LW: Ramona’s unincorporated. Fall Brook is unincorporated. Lakeside’s unincorporated. You know, there’s just masses of areas. Alpine is unincorporated.

GR: Uh-huh, Jamul and [unclear 41:52].

LW: Jamul. All those areas are unincorporated area, and therefore [under] direct county supervision. And so as a county supervisor, I was involved in zoning issues all over the county. So I used to sometimes go drive way out someplace and look at a piece of property that somebody wanted to rezone, or if there was controversy over it. And I had to vote on it, so I had to go find out what it was like. So I did that too. But also, I was involved in issues in the community, like health care issues. And we had very significant issues. I remember one in particular. It was mostly arising in the inner city area of San Diego, low birth weight babies, for example. And that’s a county responsibility. When the baby’s born, and the mother’s had no….

GR: Prenatal care?
LW: No prenatal care. And maybe you could provide prenatal care for $700-$800 per child, or per child birth. And if you didn’t do that, there were complications, which often…. And we were part of that time having maybe eight or ten of those a week. And they could run from $25,000-$150,000, and those were burdens of the county. And so I had a struggle, for example, to get….

GR: Because of the medical care, the cost would be to keep those babies….

LW: Medical care and the postnatal care, like in the children’s hospital or something like that. So I had to prevail upon other members of the board of supervisors to provide what they called in those days perinatal care for these, in many cases young; in many cases unmarried, girls. And that was a struggle to convince them that it’s worth it to spend taxpayers’ money to give that care, because state law requires after the thing…. It’s a requirement of the law, you can’t turn somebody away from medical care. “Let’s do this in advance, to prevent this subsequent cost, and provide care for somebody.” Can you believe this? The way I persuaded some of those members, “Even if you hate those kids, you ought to at least protect the taxpayers’ dollars.” That’s the level of argument, sometimes, I had to sink to—or to rise to—to convince them to do things.

GR: In order to get something.

LW: And that was repeated many times with other members of the board of supervisors. And in the council days, the same kind of thing.

GR: Are you the only African American who’s ever been on the board of supervisors?

LW: Yes. Ever in the history of the county.

GR: What is wrong with that picture?!
And that goes back to 18…. Well, you know.

That’s amazing!

No.

You don’t think?

Well, I mean, considering racism as it was in this country, and as it still is to some extent…. You know, I want to tell you a little dramatic thing. I think the last time I was elected to the board of supervisors…. And you were elected how many years?

I was elected three times, to four-year terms.

Twelve years you served?

Yeah. I was elected, as I said, in ’82, and I guess ’86, and…. No, I don’t remember. But anyway, the last time I was elected, which was, I guess, 1990, the guy who ran against me—one guy ran against me—he didn’t have much of a prayer—he was the guy who’d served with me on the city council, by the name of Mike Schaeffer [phonetic]. Mike Schaeffer ran against me. He was in the metropolitan jail on election day. He was convicted of being a slum landlord.

You know, he had a lot of property, and he was under court order to do something, and he was in federal prison, metropolitan correction, on election day. And it was only he and I on the ballot. But he got 40% of the vote.

Oh my goodness! (laughter)

I got 60%, which was a win, a big win. But what percent of a vote for somebody in jail! That tells you something about where we were then, and probably where
we still are, to some extent now, in terms of ethnocentricism or lack of it, a lack of inclusiveness of all ethnics.

GR: That’s a very powerful statement.

LW: There’s so much, Gloria. You know, my head is full of things and incidents in history. I don’t know how to tell it, unless you ask the question, and you don’t know the question to ask, I guess.

GR: Right. But I know that we’re up to the board of supervisors, and after the board of supervisors…. You know what I want to talk about? Your mentoring. You were on the city council, you were on the board of supervisors. How did you reach back and see people who you felt could make a difference, who could carry on your legacy, or you pass that baton. Because I’ve heard some wonderful things of how you have mentored.

LW: Well, there were a lot of young people, a lot of them were black. But I had Hispanics and Asians and white young people as aides, after I overcame that struggle and got a staff. That was a long story about getting a staff but I did have eventually about, I think, eight staff members. But all the council members had, because it got more complicated as we moved into the seventies. Government got a lot more complicated then, than it was. It was no longer that little sleepy place down there at city hall. People got involved, and it was more. So all the members, after I persuaded the council to establish staff members for the council…. And by the way, that was done by the city attorney interpreting the city charter, that the charter provides for department heads having at-will employees. So they interpreted each council district as a department, and that
way each council member could appoint his or her own staff members under that provision of the city charter. But I always looked for young people, instead of older. So I got William Jones as one of the first ones.

GR: What did he do?

LW: Well, he was an intern at first. There were so many young people. I had a girl by the name of Roslind Winstead [phonetic], who’s very active in the community now. There were so many others, whose names I now….

MW: Wes Pratt [phonetic].

LW: Yeah, Wes Pratt was one of them. He came here. And Tony Young, as a matter of fact, who’s currently a council member, was an intern. But he was with me when I was on the board of supervisors.

GR: Is William Jones the one who has the Linda Vista development at Linda Vista?

LW: No, he has his own development company now.

GR: Right. But I mean he built those….

LW: Not Linda Vista. In Mid City. They call Mid City along University Avenue around Fortieth and somewhere around in there. Oh! You mean Linda Vista! Yeah, you’re talking about the project down at the…. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah!

Yeah, he did that. Yeah, yeah!

GR: Right, by USD, the university.

LW: Yeah, yeah, yeah, USD, yeah, yeah, yeah, he did that. He still runs that.

MW: City Heights.

LW: Yeah, City Heights. Yeah, he did City Heights. Linda Vista and City Heights.

GR: Okay.
LW: And I had other young folks too.

MW: Kaleem [phonetic].

LW: Well, Kaleem came with me later. [unclear 51:08] But Patricia McQuader [phonetic] was an intern with me before she went to law school.

GR: She’s Solo Turbines’ attorney, right?

LW: She’s at Solo Turbines. She’s now my…. And she was a port commissioner, yeah, yeah.

GR: Right.

LW: I can tell you this, as quiet as it’s kept, she’s now my step-daughter.

GR: That’s acceptable! Okay.

LW: She was very instrumental in arranging it.

GR: I heard! “Hey, Mom, I know a nice…..” No! (laughter) Okay, we were talking about your political involvement. Then let’s look at your transportation. After the board of supervisors, you did the Metropolitan?

LW: No.

MW: (whispered, inaudible)

GR: Oh! Okay.

LW: When I first was a member—this is true now, and I haven’t said this as part of the record anywhere—when I was first a member of the city council, when Frank Kern [phonetic] was still mayor, back in the early days, we had a conference with some of the legislators. And Jim Mills was a state senator, I believe, at that time. We had a conference with him. And when I got on the city council, I always had the notion of compact city. And I had been, when I was a youngster before World
War II, and even after, we had the streetcars in San Diego. Of course we had them in Bakersfield too. But I knew about streetcars and I knew the bus system, and people could go all around to then-developed parts of the city on buses and public transit. So that was my idea when I got on the city council: we should try to maintain, as I said a little bit earlier, as compact a city as possible, and we should provide public transit if possible—you know, transportation. So we had this conference with members of the legislature, and one of them was Jim Mills, and I was talking to him hard about—and I don’t know if this is part of the record, so…. I don’t know if Jim remembers it. But about we ought to have some kind of a tax system. Automobiles are running away and creating a lot of problems. We should tax gasoline and automobiles some way, to help support some kind of a transit system. Jim Mills went to the legislature and did that. And I think they call it Senate Bill 101, about 1975 or somewhere around there—’74—that created the Metropolitan Transit Development Board in San Diego. And he created a North County Transit District, which we have there now.

GR: Right, exactly.

LW: And he provided some money for that gas tax and some sales tax, I think—sales tax on gasoline as well as gallonage.

GR: Who developed….

LW: Jim Mills. He put the legislation…. But I had been one to talk to him about doing it.

GR: Right. So you planted the seed, basically.
LW: Yeah, I planted the seed to him. And I also talked with him a number of times in Sacramento. And so when the thing was organized….

GR: Who was Jim Mills?

LW: Jim Mills was a state senator at that time. He was senate president pro-tem, they called it, by that time. And he [unclear 55:12] the legislation, and then that legislation provided for the city council to have four members, and for there to be some other members. There was somebody from the surrounding cities of San Diego.

GR: And this was on the board?

LW: On the board of the MTDB, Metropolitan Transit Development Board. So I was one of the original board members. When it was organized, I was an original member. And in order to get started, we cast around all over the place. We had some consultants and fellow…. I can’t remember the name now, but we had a General…. I can’t remember his name. But we had a lot of conferences and we talked about what kind of transit system could we have, how could it be….

Because by that time they’d gotten rid of the old streetcars. And buses were on their last legs. The city bought the private bus company. And we talked about all kinds of things. We decided to look at different transit systems. We looked at some in Pennsylvania and in Massachusetts and in Canada—Calgary and other places in Canada, I think. And we took a trip to Europe, I believe, in 1976, where we looked at transit systems in Switzerland, Germany, and the Netherlands, and Britain—London, I think. And we came back here, and at that time we were trying to decide what should we do. And there was a flood, and the railroad
decided to—I think that was ’77. Anyway, there was a flood, and the railroad wanted to abandon the right-of-way. So we had a chance to buy that railroad that went down south to the Mexican border, and went all through out into the desert. So we went through the process of acquiring that railroad. That’s a long, complicated process, no need to talk about that. But we acquired that railroad. Then we went through the process of evaluating what could we do with the railroad. And then we started looking at where… We were aware of the fact that…. Because there were a lot of people saying transit was not feasible in San Diego, because everybody’s married to their car and not gonna get out—so on and so on. So we gotta do something with the money we have. We gotta do something that’s dramatic enough to take notice. And that railroad south was just the right one, because we figured—experts and consultants determined that we could have transit between here and the Mexican border, between downtown and the Mexican border, would be sufficient to justify. So that’s the first link that we put in. And it turned out to be dramatically successful. Almost what they call in transit parlance…. It’s cost recovery from ridership. There’s a term for it. I’m blocking right now. I’ll find it. But it’s the percentage of the cost of operation paid for by fares. So that turned out to be like…. And the average in the United States, and other parts of the world as a matter of fact, is something like 30% or less, cost recovery from fares. That one was like 75% or 80% recovery.

GR: So from ridership….
LW: Ridership, the fares returned about 80% from the cost of operation, which was dramatically high. So we had good argument then to do something else. So we upgraded that line: first one line, and we upgraded to two parallel lines.

GR: Are we talking trolley?

LW: Trolley, for the trolley, because that’s what we started with.

GR: What was the trolley—from all this visiting places, the trolley was patterned after some other city’s transit system? Or just a combination of whatever worked for San Diego?

LW: Well, it was kind of a combination. They were operating very successfully in Switzerland and in Germany. And in the Netherlands the trolleys were quite successful. But of course different developmental patterns. So we were conscious of our…. You know, we were a sprawled development, and you can’t take a trolley to all these houses sprawled all over the hillsides. So we had to find a place to take it where people will ride it, where they can drive to it, and walk to it and so forth.

GR: When was the first trolley?

LW: 1981. I don’t remember the exact date, but the first operation was ’81 from down….

GR: And where was it from?

LW: Well, to the Mexican border. We started off calling it—they dubbed it “Tijuana Trolley” right away. And so we said, “No, we can’t have that!” So Maureen O’Connor [phonetic] came up with the idea—she was on the board—she came up with the idea of calling it the San Diego Trolley and painting it red. That was
Maureen. Maureen said, “Let’s paint this thing red, Leon! We gotta paint this thing red!”

GR: And she named it, and it has been San Diego Trolley?

LW: Has been San Diego Trolley, and it has been red ever since.

GR: Good idea! Did she have a reason for it? Just it’s visible—red?

LW: I guess so. I don’t know what…. She came up with that idea.

GR: Okay. And so from the trolley experiences and everything….

LW: Well, we kept expanding it, as you know. I think that was about eleven or twelve miles, or something like that. And now it’s almost sixty miles, and we’ve expanded out east, because we had that railroad right away—what we call the Orange Line now, which goes out through—from downtown it goes down, I think, Commercial Street, and it goes out and goes all the way to El Cajon.

GR: So while we’re on the trolley, how did San Diego State—let’s bring it right now, right here. How did this happen? It’s great, absolutely!

LW: Yeah, I know.

GR: Students, teachers, librarians, everybody rides the trolley.

LW: I had been a student here, and when I was a student here, parking was a problem.

GR: Wow, we’ve had it for a while, huh? (laughs)

LW: So when we were coming…. After we built what we call the Orange Line, we came down to Old Town and built what we call Mission Valley West. We were headed up here, and we were wrestling with whether…. And most of the board members wanted to stay on I-8, go down there and build something down there on the north side of the campus for access to the trolley. And having been a student
here, and being a strong advocate of mass uses of transit, if we go on the campus of San Diego [State], right on the campus, [we] have a much better chance to attract riders. We put it on the fringe, it’s gonna be a fringe thing. It’s not gonna be in their face. We gotta put it in their face so you can’t miss it. And so I prevailed upon the board of the Metropolitan Transit, which by that time had been expanded to fifteen members. I prevailed upon them to put it on the campus. So then we went….

GR: You were the chairman of the Metropolitan [Transit Development Board] at this time?

LW: Well, I was vice-chair at that time, really, when we were discussing it. I became chairman before we did it, before we actually finalized and got the money and all that.

GR: How long was it on the table—I’m going to put it that way—as a discussion point?

LW: Oh, it was on the table for quite a little while. I don’t know exactly, maybe….

GR: Five to ten years?

LW: No, not that long. I think maybe more like—before the decision was made, like maybe three or four [years], because there was a lot of studying that had to be done.

GR: Exactly. A lot of feasibility reports.

LW: Yeah. And then we had a problem with the utility lines, and with the alignment through, and buildings. What are you going to do about the buildings shaking and…. So we had a lot of things to go through, to actually bring it on the campus.
We had to talk about how are we going to tunnel, is it going to be a cut-and-cover? So somebody came up with a new system of tunneling. You know, they used something like approximate to a backhoe, and you can go underground, you can reinforce it as you go. You do a little bit, then you reinforce. You do some more and you reinforce.

GR: And that’s what was done?

LW: Yeah, that’s what was done.

GR: Did you have immediate buy-in from campus?

LW: Not immediate, no.

GR: So you had to work with the CSU, or the campus proper?

LW: This campus more, I think. Now Tom Lauren [phonetic]…. I was just the chairman of the board most of this time. Tom Lauren and our engineers did the day-to-day stuff, because there was a lot of details that had to be worked out. I’m gonna tell you the truth, we did have some trouble with the campus [unclear 66:33]. They gave us some problems—gave us some real problems.

GR: Oh, okay. Why am I not surprised?

LW: Even though you wanted it, but you gave us a lot of problems getting it here.

GR: Okay. Is it because we wanted it for nothing?

LW: Well, I think you wanted it for nothing; you wanted it for no problems. And I was assured by one of your principal administrators that, “Leon, we know about trouble. We built the library. We know how to deal with [trouble].” I said “Okay, now.”

GR: (facetiously) There was trouble with that building? (laughs)
LW: And I said, “Okay, Miss (fakes a cough).” So we had this agreement, but when we got into doing it, it was a real problem. We spent many millions of dollars, more than we anticipated, to build it. We spent many millions more, like I think maybe $12 million to $20 million more than we anticipated.

GR: Why over?

LW: Because of the problems that were put in, some of those problems. We had to realign it.

GR: So logistical things that are….

LW: Well, yeah, some of the logistical things, and some of the actual basic planning had to be changed, like the alignment had to be changed. But it’s a better alignment, and we were happy about that realignment, because it’s better for us. But then during the realignment, there was some utility and stuff, and a lot of things that cost several million dollars, and the holdups, a lot of holdups. We couldn’t work at certain times, and a lot of things like that, that interfered with that.

GR: Right. Because activities on campus that prohibited some scheduling issues.

LW: Yeah. But see, I had been assured before that they knew how to handle some of those, and that the university would take responsibility for actually helping us to do the job for them, so when it really came down to it, the university said, “We’re not taking any disadvantages. You have to take all the disadvantages.” And so that was….

GR: Right.
LW: But we worked it through, because we were determined to have it here, if the university wanted it.

GR: What equates to success?—where trolley stops are?, the number of ridership?, or…? In other words, I’m asking do you think it has been a success?

LW: Oh yes, it’s been a tremendous success. I see it as an investment.

GR: Exactly. Yes, absolutely.

LW: And that was part of the argument. You have to see it, you can’t get the dollars back next year. You’re gonna get dollars back in convenience and community for fifty-five or seventy or a hundred and fifty years, if you do it right and maintain it properly. So that’s how I saw it, and that kind of helped convince the other people. That helped me convince the people in Washington to help us where the money comes. All the rest of the work that we had done had been local money, had been state and locally generated money we had. So then when we did Mission Valley East, we went to Washington. So we got many millions from Washington.

GR: Okay. And for this stop as well?

LW: For this, yeah. They came out. That’s why there’s a picture you’ll see there somewhere—it’s here somewhere—of the secretary of Transportation here signing…. We cosigned a check they gave us for $25 million. That was part of the payment for it.

GR: Oh, we saw that! Right. Exactly.
LW: Yeah. That was Rodney Slayter [phonetic]. And so it took a lot of energy to convince them that this was a model that could be used through the United States and the sprawl-type city. You can achieve some….

GR: And do people come here now? Is it a model for other cities?

LW: Oh, people come from the world. When I was still chairman, we had some fellow come here from New Zealand to see this system. Yeah. But you know, many cities in the world are not as sprawled as our American cities are. But the Australian cities are, and the New Zealand cities are kind of sprawled. The new countries sprawled out. European and Japanese and other places, they’ve got more central cities.

GR: Right, everything is right there.

LW: But part of the thing with Rodney Slayter and other people in the administration then—the Clinton administration—when we got the money, was that we can be kind of a model for where transportation can be used to aid all cities across the nation to help diminish sprawl, and to help improve energy expenditure and diminish our dependence on foreign energy and stuff like that.

GR: I wanted to see how we’re doing with time. Okay.

LW: (aside about appointment)

GR: You know, talking with you, I can see what a visionary you are. You were just way ahead of your time. Like every office that you’ve held, and every seat, you’ve taken it to the next level. And that’s absolutely amazing. I mean, I’m really in awe of someone who could sit there and say, “Okay, you know what? This is good, but we can go there.” And not only say it, but put the wheels into
action. And I guess I want to know, and I want people to, is there something that…. I mean, who instilled that in you, or is it something you just learned on your own? I don’t even know if you can answer it, but it’s just a wonderful attribute and asset and quality to have.

LW: Well, thank you. I think it’s only been in the more recent part of my life that I realized that is probably something that was different, but I don’t know where it came from. My dad, when I was a young kid, I’d say what about something, and he’d say, “Let’s go find out, let’s go experiment.” My dad would always say, “Let’s experiment!”

GR: Okay. And I’m sure that anthropology class that you took at San Diego State….

LW: That was a challenge!

GR: That one that talked about the hierarchical … what is it?

LW: The hierarchical [unclear 73:17] of humankind. They actually taught this. It was a book that I had.

GR: Please share that.

LW: They actually talked about the hierarchical structure of human…. The western Europeans were the highest evolved. And they had kind of the thin heads, and the kind of this. And they had round-headed Europeans come to the South. They had more round heads, and they didn’t have as much brain capacity. And then it went on to…. They had it structured so that the Australian aboriginals were the lowest, and they had the least brain capacity. (laughter)

GR: I think somewhere in the back of your head is, “I’m gonna prove them wrong!” (laughs) I know we’re also on time constraints a little bit, but I want you to let us
know what you feel is your most significant contribution. You could do it as a contribution to San Diego. And you could do it from the viewpoint of community, student, or incorporate or integrate all of those.

LW: I don’t really know.

GR: What do you want people to, when they think of the Honorable Leon Williams, what do you want to jump out at them? Other than being married to wonderful Margaret?

LW: Well, I don’t know. I think the physical things, probably, as I stated earlier, downtown redevelopment. And I think the trolley system, because I believe that if I wouldn’t have been there, then we wouldn’t have the trolley system at all. I believe that if I hadn’t been there, we wouldn’t have had, as I mentioned earlier, the revitalization of Balboa Park—the buildings and all those things. I believe that we would have even more sprawl, because I was very instrumental in causing the state government to adopt the SEQUA Act.

GR: The what act?

LW: SEQUA, the Environmental Quality Act, because before I got on the city council, the people just built buildings just going up pretty much. [What they called the Division of Highways then], just ran freeways through anywhere, without paying attention to what it was doing to the communities. The city was providing what was then called off-site development for developers. They were building roads into sprawl-type developments, at the general taxpayer’s expense. I think I was very instrumental in stopping that. They were building new developments in the school district. We’d constantly would permit new developments, and the school
district would have to build schools at the general taxpayer’s expense, without.…

And I think I was very instrumental in causing the…. We adopted a policy called 600-10, which required the developers to make a deal with the school district before we would give them a subdivision map.

GR: What’s the significance of 600-10?

LW: Well, that was just a policy that we had in the city. But I think that led to the state adopting—what do they call it now? I’ve forgotten it now. And the SEQUA Act came, and you had to take cognizance of what you were doing, the impact of that on the environment. I believe that came from input at the city council level.

GR: Was that the precursor to the Environmental Quality Act?

LW: I believe so. I don’t know for sure, because people took up things on their own.

GR: How about environmental impact reports that you have to do now when you have these big….

LW: That’s what I mean.

GR: That’s what this is?

LW: Yeah. I think that’s what led, basically, to restricted developments, and to…. I think the….

MW: Smoking.

LW: Yeah, Margaret reminds me, the No Smoking.

GR: Oh, yes, definitely.

LW: That was a major one, because when I got on the city council, I was a nonsmoker, and these guys used to smoke. All the members of the council smoked, and the whole council chamber was full of cigarettes and people smoking, and they had
these ashtrays on the back of every seat in the chambers. You’d look out there, and the seating was all stained with cigarette smoke.

GR: You’ve always been health conscious anyway, haven’t you?

LW: I couldn’t stand that in my nose! Somebody on the city…. They loved me on the city council—staff, you know, the city staff—they made me a little fan that could blow the smoke away from me. I’d set it up and turn that fan to blow the smoke away from me.

GR: So this was the forerunner of just no smoking anywhere.

LW: That was the first place I know in the world that we adopted no smoking, was right here in San Diego.

GR: Wonderful!

LW: We did it on the city council, and then Jim Bates was on the city council with me, and he supported me in that. And then he became a member of the board of supervisors, and he got the board to adopt a kind of a non-smoking [policy], but it was very, very minimal. And when I came on the board of supervisors, we changed that a lot, and we had a lot of resistance from the restaurant owners and hotel owners and other people there—especially restaurant owners, bar owners.

GR: Right, thinking that would drive customers away.

LW: Customers away. So we had to make exceptions for them, and certain times. And finally when the surgeon general came out with the report that linked smoking with health problems, that gave us real leverage. And so it was a woman who was with…. Debra was with…. What’s that group called? The Lung Association?

Yeah, I think the Lung Association.
GR: American Lung Association?

LW: American Lung Association. It was a woman by the name of Debra something. And then we got a doctor, I think it was Dr. Livingston here somewhere in San Diego. But anyway, I got a group of people like that together in my office on the board, and we began to draft something related to health. So we began to push the restaurant owners and bar owners and hotel owners with the potential for lawsuits for their own employees, when their health was damaged as a result of smoking [i.e., breathing second-hand smoke]. So that was the thing that gave us this first leverage, that really made them all pay attention to us.

GR: Great!

LW: So that was the ordinance that really became really effective, that the board of supervisors adopted, that put people at risk for…. Well, we knew they were at risk, but we used that as the leverage to get them to agree to no smoking.

GR: Because nobody wants a lawsuit.

LW: Yeah. So then unless they had a separate ventilation system, they couldn’t smoke. I’ve forgotten all the provisions of it, but that’s where it started. And then the state began to put some pressure on—the State of California—and then eventually I guess the feds put no smoking sections in the airplanes. Because I used to get on an airplane and fly to L.A. I flew to L.A. often, and I’d get on there and be holding my nose and saying, “I can hold my breath while we fly to L.A.” (laughter) I’d turn the air vent on over my head, and smoke blowing down, trying to [unclear 82:20].

GR: I can see you holding your nose!
LW: I was thinking I could hold my breath to get to L.A.

GR: So those were some major accomplishments.

LW: Anyway, I think the whole thing grew from that. From right here at San Diego, it grew all over. Jim Bates probably—I don’t know this for sure, I’ve not talked with him—might have something to do with the federal when he was in the Congress. I’m not sure if he planted any of those seeds there. I don’t know that. But it all started here, and with me.

GR: Right. Exactly.

LW: I couldn’t stand smoke.

GR: Well, I remember when I was at your home, and I was looking at all the letters and commendations, and every letter had one word in it that just I think kind of sums it up—ethical. You were just looked at as a fair, ethical person. And when you have those kind of characteristics and everybody says that about you. No wonder you have been so successful, because you have accomplished a great deal, and you’ve made some significant contributions. It’s not just little things—just wonderful things that will be here forever, in some way. And that’s wonderful.

LW: Thank you. Well I think that ethical thing…. And maybe it was in me, I don’t know. When I was a kid, I never knew … I didn’t know how to lie, you know.

GR: That’s a good thing!

LW: And I always thought I was crazy, because other kids look at me as if something was wrong. I’d say something, and somebody would look up, and I thought something was wrong with me. I was really sayin’ square.

MW: (inaudible)
GR: Right.

LW: And so I just had to kind of be by myself a long time. And I didn’t share what I’m feeling. But I also think my dad and my mother, I think both of them were remarkably…. (GR: Good people.) Yeah. Honest people. You know, I didn’t hear bad words about other people, I didn’t hear judgmentalism. I didn’t hear arguments or fighting. And I heard only…. If my dad borrowed something from somebody, he’d pay it back. And they were always that…. A handshake was okay, was enough. So I always grew up, if I say I’ll do it, I’ll do it. And if I say I won’t, I can’t, I won’t say I will. And what’s good for somebody else is also good for me, I guess. And I don’t have to take advantage of somebody else to be good for me. I don’t have to be better than anybody else to be good for me. That was what I always thought, and I don’t know where it came from. I really don’t know.

GR: And then, like Mrs. Williams was saying, you’re an eloquent speaker, you just command respect. Your presence is just very powerful. And I’ve heard people say that. It’s great when our students can listen to this tape and be able to see a person of color who has done so much in this community—and not only in the community, but in the state, and even at the national level and worldwide, when you think of people who have come here to get pieces of information from you, or that was started here, that you planted the seed for. That’s a very powerful testimony, so I can thank you.

LW: Thank you.
GR: Is there anything else that you’d like for us to know about you, about your experience here, before we end this interview?—for today anyway!

LW: Well, you might want to think of some other things. I don’t know.

GR: Mrs. Williams, can you think of anything?

MW: (inaudible)

LW: Well, yeah, that’s part of the record. I never lost a campaign, I always won.

GR: That’s wonderful. There’s not too many people who can say that.

LW: And so far as I know, I don’t have any enemies, anybody [who] tried to take me down politically or otherwise. And I think the reason is because I always thought that every person had a right to his or her opinion. And if I didn’t agree with them, they were still okay. They had a right to their opinion, and so my approach was always, “Okay, let’s see what can we do? You believe this, so this is the problem over here, and we both want to solve this problem and you want to do it this way, and I think this way. So let’s weigh the equities, let’s weigh the advantages and disadvantages.” And that’s what we did on, say, for instance, on this trolley project here. The board said, “Okay, let’s look at it. Let’s see if we’re gonna pay twelve or fourteen million dollars more”—that’s what we thought at that time—“for it to go on the campus. Okay, what are the advantages we’re gonna get out of it?” And so everybody looked at it and it was analyzed, and then they took into consideration my view that this is an investment, you don’t just get [return on] it today, you get it over time, and reduce the automobile traffic, and a lot of the other things we achieve out of this, if we create transit riders, because that’s what they learn as youngsters. And so that helps us in the future. So we
put a lot of those things on the table. And then they say, “Well, okay, maybe it is worth that amount of money to do this thing.” So we did it. So it’s things like that.

GR: I have thought about naming this project “Generational Links,” something that I’m going to do as an outgrowth of these [interviews], and I think that’s a good—because you are linking generations throughout the community. What’s amazing, if people would step back and look at the things that have been accomplished, your visions, and how these visions have been brought to fruition, you couldn’t have done it by yourself, and you could not have done it with just the black population here. So the fact that you have been able to bring people of all colors, races, nationalities, cultures, to the table and marching in that same line, that’s phenomenal. I mean, you’ve been at this for a long time, when there was like one or two of us! Wow, that’s just…. To be able to walk that walk, where you have been able to bring them on board, that’s pretty amazing, Mr. Williams.

LW: Thank you [unclear 90:19]. She [i.e., narrator’s wife] keeps singing my praises.

GR: And I don’t blame her.

LW: We created a whole different attitude in the police, because they acted….

GR: When you say “we,” who [is that]?

LW: Me, basically me, and the city manager, and other members of the city council.

GR: But when you were in what [capacity]?

LW: On the city council. I got them riding bicycles that go out in the community and see what was happening. Get out of their car, instead of just riding around. And especially in Southeast, they would ride and kind of stop people on the street, and
jerk the hats on 'em and stuff like that. I said, “You’re a peace officer, you’re not an occupation force. You’re not Nazi troopers.” So I’d get the manager and the police chief in my office, and sometimes the mayor.

GR: So it’s a way of connecting with your people, connecting with your community, connecting with the constituents that you were trying to keep safe.

LW: I forced them to make more contact, more personal contact, to get out of the car and talk to people. I actually got one letter—this was years ago—from a sergeant. I don’t know if it’s in those files, I don’t know where it is. Got one letter from a police sergeant who told me how he appreciated…. He was not black, because black police officers were not predominant people in those days.

GR: But they did have some.

LW: They had some. Some of them used to cry on my shoulder a lot of times too—black police officers. But anyway, he wrote me a letter about how pleasant it was—or at least one of his experiences—when he had to get out of his car and go talk to somebody. It was down in Southeast San Diego at one of those places that had a liquor store down on Euclid Avenue. And he was describing how pleasant it was that he had done that. He got out of his car and actually talked to people as human beings, not as [unclear 92:39].

GR: Right. Only seeing the side of them where they’re creating law and order, rather than that human face that, you know….

LW: Just becoming part…. And my argument was always that most of the people see the police as adversaries, not as friends. And you need to be friends. You’re a peace officer, you’re supposed to help maintain peace in the community, not drive
around like you’re a suppressor of some kind. And I caused them to—we actually changed the color of the police cars. I don’t know if you remember in San Diego, it’s only about five or six years they went back to the black-and-white police cars. But we had tan police cars, and the police officers had tan uniforms, not the blue ones.

GR: Oh no, that was before my time.

LW: I changed that. I changed that to make them more….

GR: So you changed that from blue to tan?

LW: Yes. And it stayed that way for many years, until long after I left the city council. It’s only a few years ago they changed it back to black-and-white cars, on the theory that that was more authority. But my argument was precisely the opposite: You’re a peace officer, you’re a part of the community, you’re here to help people to keep things straight. You’re not just here to hit heads when somebody does the wrong thing. But anyway, that was all reversed.

GR: Okay. Alright. So I thank you, and if when we look at this transcript, if there’s some areas that we’re missing, I hope we can come back and ask those questions as well.

LW: Oh, absolutely. As a matter of fact, I just want to let you know this has been kind of nice, and there’s so much we could talk about, but unless you ask, unless the question comes up—Margaret’s kind of pointing out some things—but there’s so many things in my memory banks, that it would be interesting to know.

GR: Oh, absolutely. Right.
LW: Like for example, you can go in there later, but there was an organization in the city. This was my early days. There was an organization called the CIC, Citizen Interracial Committee, that was kind of acting to try to mitigate the problems in the community in those days.

GR: Was Carroll Wayman [phonetic] a part of that?

LW: Carroll Wayman was director of that. Has he told you about it?

GR: Okay. I saw some papers. I think Rob may have some tapes.

LW: Okay. And Carroll Wayman was the director of that. There was a woman on the board by the name of Donna Salk. She was the former wife of Jonas Salk, who created the Salk Institute. There were hearings, and Frank Kern was still the mayor. We were having hearings in there, and the purpose was to de-fund CIC. And there were people in there—about fifty or sixty people came to talk against the de-funding of CIC, among them Jonas Salk’s wife, Donna Salk, and a lot of other people. And when I found out anything, I got a call from then Congressman Lionel Van Buren [phonetic], and I went back to talk to him, and I found the phone was off the hook, and there was this police officer there. And I picked up the phone, and he said, “Don’t hang the phone up!” And I looked, “What are you here for?” And then it turned out, to my chagrin and absolute amazement…. You know the city council chambers, the central chamber, is surrounded by hallway, both sides of it, all the way around it. They had police officers all the way around that hallway, and inside they were having the hearings about de-funding CIC. And everybody in there was as peaceful as you and I and Margaret are now.

GR: Right. What was CIC?
Citizens Interracial Committee. That was Carroll Wayman. Now, I don’t know if Carroll Wayman knows that. I think maybe I told him. But I was the only person who knew that for years, because I didn’t tell anybody. The police officers were around the whole side, lined, maybe twenty-five or thirty or forty police.

Because they thought there would be some….

I don’t know what they thought. We had a manager then by the name of Walter Hahn [phonetic]. “What are these peace officers doing here?” (whispers) “Well, just in case.” That was the attitude.

Ohhh. Okay.

And that’s why you see me sometimes almost go to tears.

Yeah, exactly. I know you have to go, but now that you bring that up, just let me get this one thing in. You’re a member of Alpha Pi Boulé [phonetic]. What have the organizations—civic, social groups—what impact, if any, have they made in righting the wrongs or creating….

I’ve been a member for many, many years, but I always tried to persuade them to get involved and to do something to try to help me when I was on the city council to address something. These are guys who are my fraternity brothers, but this is the truth, they said, “Well, we don’t want….” Boulé is kind of a secret organization. It’s origin was back in Philadelphia when black men were really, really ostracized, and a black man couldn’t maintain his dignity. They couldn’t go to hotels, they couldn’t do anything. Say if somebody went to someplace else, they knew somebody they could—after it got started in Philadelphia. They had
the notion that they should not be—that was the tradition—not be known. And several judges were on there, and Earl Gilliam [phonetic] was a member of it.

GR: Right. Because I have a list of very prominent people.

LW: And they didn’t want their names to be out. Theoretically judges are not supposed to.…

GR: What was the purpose?

LW: Well, it was not an activist organization.

GR: Okay, it was more of a social.…

LW: Support professional men organization, not a social organization. They have recently changed. In recent years they have changed. Now they’re becoming a lot more social. But still not all the way like I would think.

GR: Okay. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]