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Otis R. Anthony African Americans in Florida Oral History Project  
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**Otis Anthony:** What I basically want to do is start off by getting some basics, just whatever you want to tell me in terms of your present personal life—you know, married, children, that kind of thing; basic biographical data. Then I want to talk a little bit about your education. And, well, just— The theme of the article is success. And what I'm talking about—the maximization of potential—individual blacks who've maximized their potential in life, received some fulfillment; job satisfaction, security, this kind of thing. We're gonna cover a little bit what would be your advice to others—generally, others and young blacks, on how to be successful. What is your philosophy? What were some of the motivating factors? Some very kind of brief things, with a different twist from what I was doing before. Okay?

**Charles Wilson:** All right.

OA: Okay, this is Otis Anthony interviewing—is that attorney?

CW: Charles Wilson. I am an attorney, but—

OA: Okay, I like attorney for right now. Interviewing Charles Wilson. It is now 2:35 and the date is May 16, 1979, and we're at Jim Walters Corporation, in his office. Okay, give me a little background on yourself.

CW: Well, my name is Charles Wilson. I am a graduate of Florida A & M [Agricultural and Mechanical] University with a bachelor's degree. A graduate of Howard University with a law degree. I was admitted to the Florida Bar in 1952. I practiced law in Pensacola, Florida for a number of years, a solo practitioner. I worked as an assistant attorney general after that for a year.

OA: That was in Pensacola also?

CW: In Tallahassee.

OA: In Tallahassee. Okay.

CW: And following that, I worked for seven years with the United States Equal Employment Opportunities Commission in several capacities, but the last capacity I held was associate general counsel for trial litigation, nationally. And during that time I was awarded the United States Civil Service League [Award] for sustained excellence. They give ten awards each year to career executives, and I was one of those ten in 1972.

I have been with the Jim Walters Corporation since June 1973. And through a series of various assignments, I have reached the point where I'm now a vice president of the corporation with the responsibility for managing the legal department. This department is composed of some eighteen lawyers, in house, and, of course, we have operating relationships with retained counsel that would probably number in the hundreds—you know, throughout the country. I enjoy my work, as you can see.

OA: You speak about it so modestly.

CW: It's an excellent corporation, as you probably know from other publications; it's very high on the Fortune 500.

OA: Okay. Go right ahead on—I just want to make sure I've got the—

CW: And I just find it a very challenging and rewarding career.

OA: Okay.

CW: I enjoy it thoroughly.

OA: Tell me this, you married? Children?

CW: Well, let me skip the first part of it and let me get into the children. I have a son who is scheduled to graduate from law school on Sunday this week; Sunday coming up.

OA: Oh, beautiful.

CW: This will be his second degree from Notre Dame University. He did his undergrad work there and he is scheduled to receive his law degree from Notre Dame on Sunday. I have daughter who is scheduled to receive a college degree from Marquette University on the same day.

OA: It looks like you've got a problem.

CW: I call it a high class problem.

OA: Yeah.

CW: And, you know, this is basically what I'd like to say about family.

OA: Okay. That's beautiful. Okay, let's get into the theme of success, all right, sort of as I defined it for you here, the ability to maximize your potential. Tell me this, what were the motivating factors in your life? Things that you can remember. Was it a certain philosophy you came about? Was it the family, or a teacher (inaudible)?

CW: Well, it had to be a combination of things.

OA: Okay.

CW: First, I believe that in my high school and college days there was probably a greater effort on the part of educators to identify—to train and stimulate—young blacks than I think I see today.

OA: That's interesting.

CW: Most of the principals and teachers I knew were always lookin' for a superstar, or sometimes they had trained a superstar and they were always lookin' for another one. And they tried to take a personal interest in developing and training and inspiring people to strive for greater heights and greater achievement. Now mind you, this was within what I consider to be the very poor, the very disadvantaged people.

OA: Umm—okay.

CW: And I'm not sure with the way schools are organized today that the young black gets singled out for—gets sought out and singled out for that kind of development.

OA: Okay.

CW: And I don't mean that as a criticism of today's schools, merely an observation. I don't think I've got the answers. I guess when I look at and I review my lifelong friends—let's say from high school and college—I suspect that I've got an awful lot more of them that I am proud of than I have that I'm not. I mean, I can point to some of the most economically deprived people that you could ever imagine or perceive who are doing extremely well today merely because of education and diligent application and striving. Of course, those who came along with me had gained a tailwind, I guess during World War II because then you came back with the GI Bill and it provided the economic opportunity for people to do an awful lot of things that we might not have been able to do or would not have done.

OA: It does make a difference, historically.

CW: So you've got to put this in historical perspective. I mean, almost everybody got drafted, and almost everybody spent some time in the military, and almost everybody had some funding opportunity to go ahead to college, colleges that we might not have attended but for the economic assistance of the government. And so that was an

interesting development.

A good friend of mine who retired recently—I won't just call his name, but you would recognize the name. Plus, this is a Tampa person who points out that busing is not new, that he was bussed out of the state for his graduate work. Well, I was bussed out of the state for my law degree. The University of Florida did not admit blacks to its law school. And they provided for me and my contemporaries the difference between what it cost at the University of Florida and what it cost wherever we elected to go, including the transportation.

OA: That's unusual.

CW: But what I'm saying is that I'm not sure that the group of people that came into maturity at the time I did was as greatly discouraged by the disadvantages of race and the disadvantages of poverty as we are today. I mean, we were poorer and more discriminated against, but more determined not to become a part of the institution of poverty and low opportunity.

OA: And you think those teachers make that difference in you?

CW: Well, there were a lot of people. I mean, there were—in almost everybody's neighborhood, in everybody's school system—you know, the old professor had an awful lot of respect. I mean, by golly, if your high school principal saw you in the pool room, he had the authority to chase you out and your parents wouldn't go out to reprimand him. You know, and you had to give that old Professor So and So that respect. You know? I mean—now, I guess maybe a lot of parents would go out and want to carry the principal before the school board if he tried to correct or demean—I mean, so you had that kind of thing, you know. You knew that they had your interest at heart. Yeah, I think that had a lot to do with it.

OA: Okay.

CW: And you see, you had the role models.

OA: That's right.

CW: You had the black principals. You had the black coaches. You had the black bandmasters. And so you had somebody who had at least some status, some stature, some credibility and who could demonstrate to you that, no, I have passed this way myself and if you follow in my footsteps you can have the kind of housing I have and automobile that I have and composition and title and respect and credibility yourself. We may well get lost in a multicultural situation where you don't have anybody specifically charged with the responsibility of taking the rawest of all the raw materials and converting it into a product—

OA: I like the way you put that.

CW: You know, that is marketable. I mean, regardless of the quality of the high schools that you talk about. We came out of those high schools and we went to our Florida A & M, Bethune-Cookman, Edward Waters type of places, but when we graduated from those places we could go to graduate schools anywhere in the country and earn graduate degrees. So something has to be said for systems of recognitions and award and personal interest and—I guess the first generation of college in a family probably needs a kind of transition like Florida A & M, Bethune-Cookman, Edward Waters. You might well—I think you might well need that.

OA: Okay. All right.

CW: And what they have to be challenged, I think, to continue in the tradition that they have had historically and not simply— They've got to take the position you've got to teach, not just hold class. So I don't know. I didn't intend to lecture that long, but—

OA: No. No—

CW: I didn't even plan to get into it.

OA: That's okay. That gives me a lot of insight. Well, let me ask this, why the decision for law school? Why not doctor, dentist, whatever?

CW: At the time I decided to go to law school, I really thought it would be valuable training for me. I had not really made up my mind that I was gonna practice law as such. No. There again, I had some eligibility remaining, GI Bill. I felt that it was important to buy all the career development education I could with my entitlement. And this was, perhaps, a good way to do it so I went ahead.

OA: Okay. That sounds good. All right, the transition—EEO to private corporation, why? What was that like? What was the adjustment like?

CW: Well, the first thing, it required a learning process and a re-orientation in terms of how the world's put together.

OA: Okay.

CW: I would say this, it did not require any change in my philosophical commitment, because the corporation is just as interested in compliance with the law and conformity to law as the government thinks it should be. The difference is in the question of perception. I have never been asked to do anything or to take any position or to advocate any cause that was inconsistent with—

OA: Hmm. Let me say something to that. That's particularly good for me to hear. I think one of my fears—it used to be one of my real fears, one I've sort of hurdled now—has to do with whether I'd be able to maintain my philosophical outlook and commitment. As a matter of fact, part of this whole interview—one of my own selfish motives for being involved with this article has to do with the fact that I'm at a very delicate point in my

own professional growth, and those kinds of questions are the kinds of questions that I need answers to, you know, in terms of the corporation, because that's where I'm headed now too.

CW: Well, what more commitment—what more consistency between my responsibility as associate general counsel for the EEOC and being able, at least, to become, again, one of these role models that reflects that you can move into a position of heading the legal department of a Fortune 500 company. Now isn't that consistency?

OA: That's highly consistent.

CW: And so what I'm saying is, is it a demonstration that if you had a position that was uniquely structured for a person of my ethnic persuasion? That would be one thing. But there is nothing ethnic about a department in a corporation in the Deep South that is multicultural in its composition and to have a black person head that department.

OA: That's right.

CW: And so I don't have any problem with the transition as it relates to a philosophical commitment.

OA: Okay, that's good. Did you ever [have] any thoughts about—you wouldn't be where you are today?

CW: I wouldn't be—?

OA: Any real doubts that you wouldn't be—any points in your life when you really doubted whether you'd be at this point?

CW: Oh, yeah. Most of my life I never expected to be who I am today. So I have to put it in reverse. I mean, ten years ago I never entertained any real optimism that I would be doing that. Oh, I mean—keep in mind one has to view a position like that as a very, very competitive, highly sought after position. When you talk about—the Fortune 500 in this country is basically where everybody wants to be regardless of their ancestral wealth, regardless of their prestige and power and position and that kind of thing. When you're talkin' about the Fortune 500, where do you go past that? You know?

OA: That's it, huh?

CW: Yeah.

OA: Yeah. Okay. All right. Well, that's awfully realistic because you hear some people say, "Well, I knew twenty years ago that I'd be right where I am today. I was determined from day one to be where I am."

CW: No way. No way.

OA: Yeah. Okay. That's good to hear to. What about goals? Are you— Is this the end? What about goals in terms of what would you like to see for you? What would you like to see, let's say, for this community? And—

CW: Well, as far as my personal goals are concerned, it's really to do an adequate and satisfactory job in the position I now hold. I'm not aspiring to anything else. I'm not looking for anything else. I'm perfectly happy with where I am. That doesn't mean that I'm lazy or resting on my oars, because in a position like this you grow every day in terms of adding to your competence, to your skill, your ability. And it's not a job where you— adequacy yesterday is also adequacy today. Law is a learned profession, but it is a learning profession. And it takes the same kind of ability and application to grow enough to meet the demands and the needs of the job to provide you built-in goals and aspirations within the context of what I'm doing now.

OA: Okay. All right. What about highlights? What would you say was the highlight of some of your contributions an your way to success? Any that stand out? The really satisfying moment that—

CW: I guess in different periods of my life, I have had the opportunity to make contributions at different times and different levels depending on sort of the need of the time. Turn off the tape recorder for just a minute. What I'm gonna say is not off the record, but I just don't want you to waste the—

OA: That's all right.

***pause in recording***

OA: All right, tell me a little bit about your leisure life, your hobbies, what you do in your spare time—if you have any spare time. What do you like to do?

CW: I have very little. I have very little spare time, so I don't do very much. I don't really have any outstanding hobbies.

OA: Okay. No outstanding hobbies. What would you like to do if you had time and the—the kind of things you'd like to get into?

CW: Oh, I don't know. I'm just—

OA: Any favorite sport?

CW: Oh, no. I just kinda like to putter around and do a little swimming and cookouts, and stuff like that.

OA: Okay, that sounds good. One other thing. Okay, in terms—any ideal goal that you may or may not ever have the time or the opportunity to do, that if you had the chance to—you know—like they say, "go back" into the community and put together something, any ideal goal like that you'd like to do?

CW: Not really. Not really. I've pretty well stated what my goals are to the extent that I can project in the future.

OA: Okay. All right. Any advice to others who want to be successful?

CW: I don't know that I have any advice to pass off, really. I mean, but I—I don't think there's any substitute for hard work and aspiration and abilities.

OA: I think that'll do it.

CW: All right, sir.

OA: Okay, I want to mention a couple of things. I couldn't get a hold of my photographer and I haven't had a chance to talk with you, but we may want to get a shot of you, if that's okay, for this article.

CW: Oh, I don't—

OA: I'll call you ahead of time and let you know.

CW: Okay.

OA: And the other thing is none of the articles—I'm interviewing about eight or nine different people, and it's not guaranteed that this aspect will get out—

CW: I understand.

OA: Okay.

CW: I understand you're interviewing a bunch of people and it's got to be edited and—

OA: Yeah, the whole thing—

CW: —so you may—

OA: —the whole nine yards.

CW: —you may omit half of 'em.

*end of interview*