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Otis R. Anthony African Americans in Florida Oral History Project  
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**Otis Anthony:** This Otis Anthony interviewing Dr. Sandra Wilson. The time is 11:00 AM, and the date is May 14, 1979. Okay, tell me a little bit about yourself, where you are from and where you are going.

**Dr. Sandra Wilson:** I'm from Hillsborough County in Tampa, Florida. In fact, I tell everybody that I'm now working five minutes away from where I was born. I was born in my grandmother's house on October 31, 1943. I'm at the midpoint, that big thirty-five. I'm a Sunday's child. I was born on a Sunday morning about a quarter of nine, if you are into days of the week and that kind of thing. Did you want to know some other basic?

OA: Yeah, other basic.

SW: I'm married. I married three years ago, and when I got married I acquired a husband and two children. The oldest is twenty-three and he he's in the Air Force in Japan; he's a medical lab technician. The youngest is twenty-one, and she is right now getting started with Delta Airlines in a sales reservation training program. My husband is P.L. [Paul L.] Sheehy. He has an intercity practice. He used to in obstetrics and gynecology and now he's in family medicine. It's very interesting, when he got into—in fact, that's who you should be talking to; you should be talking to him, not to me. When he got into family medicine, it was not a vogue thing. It wasn't the popular thing to do, but he did it because he wanted to and felt that the community needed it. So that says something about—

I got married late, and I got married when I wanted to, to whom I wanted to, and I'm very happy about it. And one of the things that drew me to my husband was the fact that, first of all, he's a good Christian. I'm not a frantic [fanatic], but religion plays a very important part in my life, and he had strong Christian underpinnings. He's a humanitarian, he's a very selfless person. He puts everybody else ahead, and I was particularly impressed with his commitment to do for others—and to be perfectly honest, if I had not had an understanding person with those capabilities, I probably would not be married.

OA: It makes all the differences in the world.

SW: Yes, it does. It makes it nice to go home. And also, you know that I am a community-based person and I spend a lot of time in the community, and I try not to neglect my family. There are some times that are family times that I don't let anything interfere with. But when I am away a great deal of the time, my husband does understand, because he has similar interest and concerns.

OA: Okay, that's beautiful. I want to get into that a little more too, because I'm going ask you about Dr. Sandra Wilson; the woman, and family relationships and career. Give me your position and title.

SW: Okay, my title is Dean of Arts and Sciences, Ybor Campus, Hillsborough Community College, Tampa.

OA: Tell me a little more about your educational background?

SW: All right. I was going to school what I call BI—before integration—and I graduated in 1960 from Middleton High school. I spent one year at Fisk University in Nashville. When I went to Fisk, I was sixteen, very much of a mama's and daddy's girl. I hated Nashville. At that time, I was not sophisticated enough to realize how important the quality of education was, and I must say that some of my most challenging academic experiences were at Fisk—contrary to the fact that people probably felt that when I was in Ohio at OU [Ohio University], because it was an integrated institution, it was more rigorous. It was rigorous in that it was a new educational environment to which I had to adjust, but in terms of the stimulation, some of my most stimulating experiences were at Fisk.

I spent a year at Fisk, and although my father had sworn that he would not let me go to school in Florida, I was so miserable that I begged and begged and begged, and when I came home in June, after being one year at Fisk, they expected me to go back, and at the end of the summer I was plotting and planning and I got a change to go to Florida A&M [Agricultural and Mechanical University] in Tallahassee. And that made a lot of difference to—as I said, I was quite young, and I needed the security of knowing that I could go home whenever I wanted to. And frankly, we could not afford—it was a sacrifice for me to go to Fisk, and we could not afford for me to be running back and forth.

Well, be that as it may, I went to FAMU and I found it enjoyable. I learned at that point that teachers, instructors, professors provide a learning environment. But you really learn yourself; nobody can make you learn, you know. They're there to guide and direct and to offer assistance, but I decided at that point that my learning would be self-directed, that I would take responsibility for it. And for that reason I felt I got an excellent education at FAMU.

At nineteen I graduated from FAMU, couldn't get a teacher's certificate and decided to go to graduate school. I had asked—well, I really didn't have senior year; I guess I had a kind of junior and senior summer. I have always enjoyed learning, and I took as much as I could, as fast as I could, and when I knew anything, I was in the middle of what should have been my junior year and I was accumulating credits so fast I recognized that if stayed in summer school I could graduate.

So I did, but the second year that I was at FAMU, which would have been my junior year, I was a student counselor in a dormitory and somebody said, "You know, you really do such a good job as a student counselor. I saw a graduate program some place in Ohio and they're looking"—at that time, they were quite pointed about it—"they were looking for blacks to come." And I'll never forget, it was just a little piece of paper taped on the counter in another dormitory. Way back then, when you went in and out of the dorms you had to sign out if you were going off campus or if you were going to be out after hours, so somebody had seen this information while signing out.

I wrote, very confident that they didn't want a black Southern girl, and I was kind of taken with myself and said, "I'm going to apply for this to just show that they don't want me." Well, that must have been January or February of my junior year, and we established a correspondence and when I knew anything they were asking for transcripts, and I was writing back saying, "I really don't have a transcript because I haven't graduated yet," but they said send what you have.

So when I graduated—it seems to me that I graduated on a Thursday or a Friday, I can't even remember. I graduated in the summertime, but in less than a week I had arrangements for an assistantship, and in fact, it was about a week later I got on a plane and flew to Cleveland, and was met in Cleveland by a friend of my mother's, and went on to work my way through graduate school.

OA: Okay, this school was what?

SW: Ohio University. Athens Ohio, not Ohio State; it's Ohio University, and they brag about being the oldest university in the Northwest Territory. It was founded in the mid-1700s. Also, to show you how naive I was, when I was reading about OU. They said ten thousand students and I thought, Well there I was at A&M where there must have been about—I guess a couple thousand, and there had been eight hundred at Fisk, and I thought, There is no school in the world with ten thousand students.

But I got there and surely enough there were ten thousand students, but I didn't get lost, I think because there was a camaraderie with the other men and women who work in the residents hall program. That's how I put myself through school, working in the dormitory. And also, my graduate program was small. And I'm saying that—I think because we put such a big emphasis on family and communication and interaction, it's not a dependency, it's just an appreciation for interaction. I think it's important to blacks to go someplace where they're more than just a number. And I have to make it clear and say that if I recall, there were very few blacks who were in this graduate program, and so it was not a matter

of having an all black program, but it was a matter of having a program that was small enough to know and meet other people.

You have to cut me off when you want me to move to something else, because I talk too much.

OA: No, this is working good. I want to ask you this, I want to know what undergraduate and master's degree was in?

SW: Okay. I was a liberal arts major as a undergraduate. I get chills up and down my spine when I hear people say, Don't go into liberal arts, because you can't do anything with it. And I think that that's the best thing that happened to me. I think that a liberal arts degree gives you a broad base of training. It helps you learn how to learn, it helps you develop problem solving skills, it gives you an appreciation for people in cultures, and I prophesize that while we are in a technical age, when we get into the twenty-first century were going to flip flop, and more and more emphasis is going to be human relationships. I really believe that, and how people relate and cope with the technology. We kind of do big swings and big flip flops, where it's kind of all of one thing. But I think that the twenty-first century is require us to have balance. We're going to have to balance off the humane with the scientific.

So I'm all for liberal arts education. I got a BA [bachelor of arts] degree from FAMU and I graduated first in my class, and I went on to Ohio University and I got an MED, a master degree in education. My area of specialization was guidance and counseling. Although I had a general liberal arts degree, my special area of emphasis was English.

I was about to say something else about a liberal arts degree, it makes you more inclined, I think, to be willing to take risks if you have been educated well or if you've learned well, and to find alternatives. Except for my undergraduate career; then I guess in a sense there too—I had decided in high school that I wanted to be an English teacher. I enjoyed that, I enjoyed literature. But I was also very impressed with Ethel Ruffin, who taught me English—and it's awful because I don't think I've ever said this to her, and I probably should write her a note and tell her. But I really that was the pivotal point, studying with her.

I really never got the specialization in "English education," because I didn't stay long enough to get my education requirements. In fact, there were people who fussed at mother, who said she should never have let me leave college until I got English education, because I would probably never be anything, because I couldn't teach or something like that—which gets me to something else.

I was never, ever told that I couldn't be anything. I was encouraged to do everything—in fact, I guess it could have worked against me. Surely I must have—I had to have been aware of segregation, segregated facilities, but there was a emphasis in my family on working on what you could change. And so the things that I could change for myself and my capabilities—I was allowed to read. I read incessantly. My mother, who I see as being

fairly conservative, allowed me to read—well, I guess she didn't allow me; the books were just there, and I read all the time.

I think I was ten or eleven when I read *The Foxes of Harrow*, *Forever Amber*, all the things that would have been looked at, *Our Native Son*—wait a minute, not *Native Son*, *Strange Fruits*. Things that were seen, I'm sure, were not considered appropriate childhood reading. And to be perfectly honest, I remember reading some of that stuff and not understanding what I was reading, but you know, I was just so taken with reading and characterization and character development that I loved it.

My grandmother had kept all of my—I even remember reading some of my uncle's European history books that he had in college; my grandmother had kept all of my uncle's books. My uncle was killed—well, he died as the result of war injuries in World War II. And so I just read everything that I could get my hands on. I also was encouraged to question, and very seldom was I told, "You have to do this because I said so." I got a good explanation and that meant a lot too. But where was I? We were talking about—

OA: We were going into the rest of your education. Don't feel bad about any of this; I'm getting something from all of this. About your education—you finished your master's.

SW: Oh, yeah. I remember. What I said about alternative life styles and not planning. I thought I was going to be an English teacher, and after I didn't get all of these education courses that everybody told me to get and I didn't get, I thought, "Well, maybe when I go to graduate school, I should get my master's degree in English." But this particular assistantship was for people working in the residence hall, and I thought, "If I'm going to be working in student personnel, maybe I should be getting a degree that is related." I believe in making use—talking about the teachable moment, I believe in the learnable moment, that you learn for everything.

So I thought, "Well, I've got some English; why don't I switch into another degree?" So I started working on a degree and got into counseling and found that extremely rewarding. Well, after that, I decided I'm going to be a counselor, so I got this master's degree, came out, worked one year. The year I came out was sixty-five [1965], and that was the year for the big thrust for school desegregation in Hillsborough County.

I was what was called the special counselor, which meant that I was suppose to help every single little black child who was in an integrated environment adjust. Now, can you imagine? I think there were about a hundred and twenty schools, and at that time ninety were being desegregated, so I was kind of on-call for ninety schools. I did that, and at the end of the year, that program was phased out. And I had been told earlier in the year by the then-director of guidance that it was her regulation that people who were not married couldn't be guidance counselors. And she had also told me that she did not think that people who didn't have classroom experience should be guidance counselors.

Well, in the special government program that was waived, but when I found out the program was going to be phased out, I went to see her to see about the possibility—that's

not true; when I was looking for a job with her in September she told me she wouldn't hire me, and somebody else later contacted me later about this government program and said it's something separate and apart, come on into this program. Well, at the end of the year she called me and offered me a position as a counselor and I said, "Oh, I'm so sorry; you must have the wrong person because I'm not married and I've not been in the class room," and I refused the job.

OA: Right on.

SW: So then I called Ohio, where I had been two years before and said, "You got some opening in student personnel?" and they said, "Yes." I went back to Ohio where I had done my master's work and I worked as a resident director. I had the largest dormitory for women on campus. I had over five hundred women and a large staff, and that was a good experience for me.

I was very close to my grandparents, and that year my grandfather became ill and, although nobody said to me in so many words, you know our great sense of family—and I guess that's kind of hung a lot of us up, because we do put family first, and I think that's important. I'm sorry but that's important for me. I resigned in late May and came back home. I was home ten days and my grandfather died.

So then I stayed to be with my grandmother—oh, I forgot. The summer of sixty-six [1966] I got involved with Upward Bound, and then the fall of sixty-six [1966] I went back to Ohio, and the summer of sixty-seven [1967] my grandfather died. I went back to work with Upward Bound and while I was working with Upward Bound, I learned about a program called the High School Equivalency Program that was taking place at the University of South Florida, and I was hired as resident counselor in that program. It was a program to help migrant youth to break that cycle of poverty. You bring them out of the migrant area into USF, help them to get a high school diploma, motivate those who wanted a more formal education to—you know, like in the environment of a college—to do that, or whatever they wanted to do with it.

What I did was to get people out of the fields and off the migrant track. When I was doing that, I got a phone call in sixty-eight [1968] saying that we're going to begin a middle school program for Hillsborough County Board of Public Instruction and would I be interested in a position as a pupil personnel specialist in that program? I'll tell you why religion means so much to me. There are lots of times that I didn't think that I should—if it had been of my own will and volition I would not have gotten these things. It was almost like, although I worked hard, there still seemed to be like a golden thread that was weaving through my life that, you know, whenever the pattern was getting kind of dull that golden thread popped in.

OA: You know I really—I wonder if people understand that.

SW: I just know. I can't possibly—case in point and I don't want this to be a part of the interview; this is just—I don't care if it is on the tape, just that you don't need to include

this in the text. But this morning I got this phone call saying that I had to go to San Antonio tomorrow. Now, evidently, this has been something that has been set for several months and we were notified late, so I said to the girl, "There's no way I can go San Antonio tomorrow."

She said, "If you don't go to San Antonio tomorrow, we won't get any grant money, and think of all those people in Early Childhood Education who can't be trained because you have given up the grant money."

I just said a prayer. "Lord, you know I can't go to San Antonio tomorrow." She called back and she said the meeting has been changed to next week. Not that I think that I'm so important—I don't mean it like that—but I mean, every now and then something intervenes, be that as it may. That is just one little example.

OA: I'm glad to hear somebody else say that.

SW: But for this particular thing, when I went back to the Board of Public Instruction, the girl called me up, a girl who is working as a part-time secretary. If I told you her name and would know her and I don't want to embarrass her. But she called me up and said, "You are going to kill me. My boss told me call you yesterday and tell you that you have a nine o'clock appointment with an assistant superintendent about a job."

I said, "You're kidding."

She said, "No. Did somebody contact last week to ask you if wanted to work for the county?" I said, "Yes," and she said, "I was supposed to let you know."

At this point it had to be about 8:15. I was at the University of South Florida with no clothes on, I thought *Oh*. So I said, "Are you sure?" And she said, "Well, I'll tell you what. I'll call up and tell them that I told you 9:30."

So I showered quickly and drove into town to get interviewed for this other job. I got the job and went back and worked at Booker Washington [Junior High School], and at that time, Booker Washington was termed the worst junior high school in Hillsborough County.

OA: This was for the pupil personnel?

SW: Specialist, pupil personnel specialist. But it was so rewarding because I saw teachers, and other support people there, who really wanted kids to have a good education and who really wanted learning to take place.

So I went in as a part of a "special team" to help beef up the good things that were already going on at Booker Washington. I stayed there about two years. That program ended; once again the little gold threads start weaving. I thought, Gee, now is the time for me to go back to graduate school. I had decided I wasn't going to really get into English, I



was enjoying the counseling. "What you need, Sandra, is a Ph.D. in guidance and counseling." But I did not want to leave my grandmother who was here in Tampa. So I went out to USF [University of South Florida]; they said, "You know, we have no doctoral program in guidance and counseling."

Well, in the meantime, my little brother Darrin had been identified as a gifted child. We never thought he was gifted, because the way he behaved at home was the way the rest of us behaved at home. He was very verbal and asked a lot of questions and very bright and was reading—well, we learned on his fourth birthday in March that he had been reading since before Christmas, and we didn't know that. He had been kind of reading on his own. We said, "You know how to read?" He said, "I knew how to read before Christmas."

Anyway, that was not—we felt that this was a child who was getting a lot of adult stimulation, and who had been kind of parented-teachered by my grandmother, who spent a lot of time with me. And I thought, "He's just smart because of my grandmother's influence, but he's not exceptional."

Well, we discovered later that Darrin was very, very bright, and in interacting with people at USF in the gifted department, somebody said, "I understand that you are interested in a doctoral program."

I said, "Yes, but I'm not interested in gifted education, I'm interested in counseling." Well, there was no program in counseling, but I thought, "It's time for me to go back to graduate school."

At the same time I heard about something called the TTT Program, the Trainers of Teacher Trainers Program, and the whole idea was to identify people who were change agents and public school systems and bring them into a training program so that they could really identify the competencies and the skills that people needed to be effective trainers of educators. But it was trainers of teacher trainers, so in effect, we were being trained to train teacher educators. I made an application for that when we got out of school in June, because once again, this little two-year government program had ended, and somebody said, "We'll find you another job if you want one, but you can't do anymore of this."

So I heard about this TTT Program, struggled out and got my application blanks—in fact, I think I got an application blank from somebody who said they didn't want theirs, and it was said to me, kind of—"How did you get this application blank; you weren't on our list?"

So I said, "The person who had it doesn't want it, and I wanted it and I filled it out."

Well, I later got a phone call saying, "You weren't selected for this program, because your file was incomplete."

I said, "That's not possible."

"Oh, yes, it is, and you weren't selected."

So I thought, Okay, so I wasn't selected. I didn't have anything, but I was determined that I was not going back to work in the county, and that I was going to school. This must have been about June or July. In the meantime, I had friends in the school system who kept calling me. "Don't you want to be a dean?" No, I don't want to be a disciplinarian, I want to go back to school. In late July or early August, I got a phone call saying, "You know the program that you weren't selected for? Well, you're selected."

So in August of 1970, I got started in this Trainers of Teachers Training Program. I was almost simultaneously admitted to do doctoral work in gifted education, and was excited. Because in the special training program I was getting administration and supervision, but I was using my elective hours to get my background in gifted education. Okay, so here I've gone from the English to the counseling to the gifted. When I did the whole gifted bag, I thought, "Now I know what I'm really going to be. I'm going to be a gifted educator."

Got out of gifted education, there was no job that I wanted in gifted, so I started volunteering some time at the Tampa Urban League. And they later said—well, there was later on opening for like the deputy director. At that time, the title was called Director of Training and Staff Development—or I think it was Administrative Assistant or something, but we called it training and staff development.

So I went to work. I had been volunteering at the League for quite a long time, but when the deputy director left in November, they said, "Why don't you come on for pay as deputy director?" I thought okay, because I really enjoyed that work. It was a place where I could use a lot of my talents. I liked people, I liked training. The executive director of the League was more of the social worker type. I was not very good at intervening in crisis cases; I'm more of a developmental person than a remedial person. She was good on the crisis part, and I was good on the developmental, and it was an excellent team approach.

While I was there at the League just settling in and really enjoying myself, I got a phone call from Eckerd College saying, "We are looking for somebody to teach management classes and to run a cooperative education program." Well, I really hadn't had the pure management, but I had managerial training and all of this administration and supervision that I had been talking at USF. So I thought okay, I'll come and interview. So I went and interviewed, never expected to get it, and the next thing I knew I was getting a call from Eckerd saying, "You're a finalist; would you come back and see the provost?" And before I realized it, I was being asked to give two weeks' notice to the League and come to work at Eckerd College.

Well, by this time, I had worked for the League from November 1973 to February 1974. I think it must have been February seventeenth or something, I'm not sure; it was about the third Monday in February that I went to work at Eckerd College in 1974, and I stayed

there until 1976. While I was at Eckerd—you really have to make your own job, and if you a job that needs to be done, you do it. I went there as Director of Cooperative Education and Assistant Professor of Management, and by the time I left, I had developed a program called the Career Services Program that involved not only paid work experiences, but nonpaid experiences as well. In fact, we handled placement, internships, paid and nonpaid work experiences, and I was called Director of Career Services. Well, when I applied for the job here at HCC—

OA: It's strange how your experiences fit in and how they all worked for you.

SW: But they were all unplanned.

OA: Yeah.

SW: And that's why I say a part of education wholly pushed to life helps you to make a change and be comfortable with, you have to have good decision making skills, you have to have a realistic self-concept, you have to have a positive self-concept. So when I heard about this thing at HCC it was called Director of Provost and Part-Time Students, and several people called—even students were calling me saying, "There's this new position opening at HCC, would you please apply?"

OA: This was in 1976?

SW: This is in—yeah, the spring of 1976. Well, I applied and was selected as finalist and was subsequently offered the job but said, "I can't take it now. I want to finish my contract here at Eckerd; can I come in July?" They said, "Yes." Well by the time I got here, a reorganization had taken place and I came not as Director but as a Dean of Evening Extension and Weekend Programs. Which was really primarily evening programs, and what is looked upon as continuing education in the community college.

OA: What was the title?

SW: Dean of Evening Extension and Weekend Programs. Well, I was that until 1978, and in July 1978 we had a reorganization and the position Dean of Arts and Sciences was created on this campus. And I became Dean of Arts and Sciences, which is a more traditional kind of deanship.

OA: All right, that's good enough.

SW: God, it seems like I've been talking on and on.

OA: Oh no, I'm going to use some of this also for my Black History Week.

SW: Oh, okay.

OA: Right now I'm still writing, and I got about three or four more publications.

SW: Okay.

OA: So either way it is good—

*Side 1 ends; side 2 begins.*

SW: The self-concept, a significant portion of that is the mirror of other peoples' reactions to you. I remember when I left sixth grade, Ms. Marian Logan, who was my sixth grade teacher, said, "I expect to see you on the honor roll at Booker Washington now." Okay, I didn't know what the honor roll was—well, I didn't see it as anything being particular or significant. I was encouraged to do my best, but I was not put under a lot of pressure at home. But people saying little things like that—it's amazing that children now decide whether they're going to school or not. While there was no pressure, it was always kind of expected that at the very least you would get a bachelor degree. You are going go to school.

I think it's important to have role models, and I think it's important to have people outside of the family concerned about you and interested in you. We tend to think that our family perception of things are skewed. And sometimes it's just nice to have a view from the outside. Certainly that has happened in my life, and that's been kind of a motivating fact in my life. I was just lucky enough to be surrounded by a lot of caring people who gave me something that I called unconditional positive regard. Now, that does not mean that they did not point up to me when I was wrong; it does not mean that they condoned every behavior of mine. What it means is that I was accepted as a person, I was valued, I was seen as somebody with potential who would ultimately contribute. Those things I got from a lot of people, you know, people outside.

I think it's also important to feel special within a family situation. I know my husband says that his parents were outstanding parents because his mother, especially, made each child feel that child was important. In my family I really think that, although my grandfather did not say so in words—and I guess of my family, my grandfather probably had the least amount of education. My grandfather really thought that I was special. Now that's interesting because I was a girl, and you would think men would be more interested in boys than the nurturing, but I was the first grandchild. And as I said, I was not showered with a lot of things. I did not have a lot of things, material things, lavished on me, but I got the feeling that if nobody else thought that I was important, the people that I lived with thought that I was a pretty important person. I still had responsibilities at home, but I learned to value myself very early.

OA: There you go, you learn to value yourself.

SW: Like you call, you know, we say in psychology, internal locus of control. I learned to look within for my own positive feedback and whatever. At the same time, it only takes a little bit for me to go a long way on. So that positive regard is important.

The other thing is, I think it's important to be involved in a lot of—if not formal training, a lot of structured training. That's why I participate in and go to many seminars, workshops. Because you always learn something. I learned something from you today. I don't think that if you are an open-minded person, I don't think there is ever a time that you don't learn; you always learn.

OA: You know, when you said, regardless of people's social style and economic status they feel good about themselves, that stuck with me. That's very true. On the surface, for some people, they would misinterpret that, but I knew exactly what you meant.

SW: You have to recognize that my great grandmother who lived to be a hundred and seven, who lived in Central Florida, who was half Indian and was reared on a plantation as it were—whatever you call them in Florida—and her maiden name was Rutledge, because that was the name of the White folks who owned her. Now my grandfather, who thought that I was so special, was her oldest child.

And I guess I'm saying all that to say—the little bit, you know, the few comforts that I may have now, I really don't feel that I have to apologize for that. Because in my own lifetime, you know I had to live with that, and I think it's a perfect example of anybody who really, really wants to, can find a way now. Don't misunderstand me, there are insurmountable obstacles and it may take you a little longer, but if you really, really want to—you have to learn, you always need to have something marketable.

Like I say to people, I'm always looking for a job. I'm always looking for new experiences, right now. I'm trying to plan when I'm going back to school for formal training. I want to be able to do something else. You know, never lock yourself into doing one thing. And it's just amazing; if you can sell yourself, people will buy you. If you have something marketable, somebody always wants it. As I say, it often take a little longer, it just seems to me—

Talking about having something marketable, during the Depression when people were jumping out of building and killing themselves because they had lost a fortune. My grandfather was in West Palm Beach, where a few of those who still had some money left were spending it and my grandfather was putting two children through college alone during the Depression. My grandfather had a sixth grade education.

That's why I say I don't want to hear things like, "Well I didn't have a chance to go to school—go to night school. I don't really have the money to go USF." If you're in a social economic bracket that qualifies you for aid, you can come to school. But you have to be persistent. You have to really want to do it, you have to know you can do it, and I just think it's terrible for people who don't want to be persistent to criticize other people. Yeah, I knew her when we were both in the projects. Well, she got out, you get out of the project. I knew her when we were all there together, we went to school together. We all had average intelligence; what the teacher said to me, she said to you.

In fact, at this point—well, not so much now, but during the Lyndon Johnson era, the

great society time—about the best thing you could be was poor, black, and smart. You could get money to do anything. It's getting to be—with the (inaudible) backlash and everything, it's getting to be bit more difficult. But if you—and I contend that I am not smart, I really do. I don't think that I have capabilities that are way out of the range. I'm not a Darrin, for example. But I am a hard worker, I enjoy what I'm doing, and I'm determined to learn everything that I can. And I think more native intelligence, the proper attitude.

OA: Yes, self-acceptance, take responsibility for your own success.

SW: Really, the one thing that regret that I did not do, I think there are a lot of gifted children in the inner city who are not being identified and served.

OA: I believe that.

SW: And right now, my goal—I would like to eventually establish—not way off on Davis Island somewhere, in the intercity—something called like a family life education center, where you work with the entire family. I think that's something I enjoyed about the counseling and that was it was an holistic approach to human development. You weren't working with any one little part, you were working with the total child. In our culture, until we get—we don't do well when we are fragmented; we need a one stop shop. We need one place that the whole family can go to learn, to develop, to become, to socialize.

In a sense—I'm going to be honest with you, I work for an integrated environment. I think that is the only fair way, but we lost so much. We lost things that we will never recapture. And that was kind of the motivating force behind our founding SABLE, because truly, although our focus is on females, our entire interest is in the minority community, and the development of that community and the talents therein. And until such time as we come together in our community—

There's a quotation that I'm going to get if I can find it and give to you. It's a letter<sup>1</sup> that Fra Giovanni [Giocondo] sent on the occasion of Christmas years and years ago, and one of the thing that he says is that there are some things that nobody can give to you, that you have to give to yourself. These self-help programs, I think that we should have them. I think that we should take advantage of all that's there. But we also have a responsibility within the community to do some things there.

Fra Giovanni; it's called "Letter to a Friend," and he says, "I salute you, I'm your friend and my love for you goes deep, there's nothing I can give you which you have not got. But there is much, very much that, while I cannot give it, you can take." And I just happen to think about that. That's so true. There are things that we have to take that people just cannot give us, and I do believe that charity begins at home. And however much money is floating around at large in Washington, in Atlanta, in Tallahassee, in the local development offices here, there's some internal strengths and things that we are

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<sup>1</sup> Wilson is referring to the Christmas Eve letter to Countess Allagia degli Aldobrandeschi, written in 1513.

going to have to develop ourselves.

OA: Right on, right on. Let me tell you something. As a matter of a fact, that makes so much sense to me. I was talking with Betty Brown on Saturday. I can't think of anyone who's more alienated from just the whole idea of the individual, the development of the individual, the concept, being fulfilled and turning your talents into potential ability than I was.

SW: Everything for the group.

OA: Yeah, you know, but beyond that, it was mixed with poor self-image.

SW: I see what you are saying.

OA: And all that gets mixed up, and that is one of the reasons why life so electrifying to me now.

SW: Now, you've opened another door. Well, there are those who would probably call me a capitalist pig, because I'm encouraging people to identify their potential and carve out a niche for themselves. But what I have to say is that the group—and I'll be honest with you, I really don't think that I am bigoted, but I have a lot—and I don't think that I am ethnocentric—but I do have a lot of race pride. I have never wanted to be anything other than what I was. And I think that there are some of us who are really confused about what we want to be, and I don't think that it's a problem of the black man only. I think there are all, there are many ethnic groups that are just confused.

OA: Self-image.

SW: That's right. But my point is that if I get you together and you get me together and we get Suzie and John and Mary and Tom and Harry and Dick and Sally. If all of us get ourselves together, think of the force. I could just cry, you know I've heard, that's why I say we need a family life education center. Because I have a friend who went home and said to his parents, "Dr. So and So said that he would help me go to school if I could get some help at home." The father's reaction was, "So what else is new?" Where you are in families where people say, "I didn't get no whole lot of education and I'm doing all right. Why does he have to have—"

I just think that anything that's going, you cannot help other people without helping yourself. If you are pushing somebody up, as they move up you got to automatically move up with them. If you are pulling somebody up, that's just one more person up there with you to help pull somebody else up. I just cannot stand the crabitis<sup>2</sup>, and I don't think it's—it's not indigenous to our race. I think that one of these learned behaviors that we picked up in the sculpture.

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<sup>2</sup> Referring to the old saying about crabs in a bucket: If one crab is in a bucket, it will climb out, but if there are multiple crabs in the bucket and one tries to escape, the others will pull it back down.

OA: I like that very much. I used to hear people talk about that. I haven't heard that in a long time.

SW: And it's just killing us. You see, regrettably we have picked up a lot of negative things from the dominant society. Like introducing things into our bodies that are tearing them up. We used to be big things on health and physical ed and athletics, but then we were told that was uncouth or un-intellectual and so you know, we all got into books and let our bodies go. We are kind of now being told, you know, let's practice birth control—which I think that's reasonable, but I'm not the zero population among blacks. And so we have to weed out the things that are positive. There are lots of positive things in the dominant society, but there are things that are not for us that we need to take a look at and stay away from.

OA: Let's talk about lifestyle, your lifestyle as a person. What do you do for leisure time, what do you do to relax?

SW: I don't have any leisure time. What I call it—I have a hard time breaking up my work from my play, because I enjoy my work so much. That's the truth. A lot of things that I do are connected; however, my idea of a really good time is to curl up in bed with a book. I guess because I just go at such a fast pace and by the time I stop, I'm really drained.

I still enjoy reading. I don't get a chance to read as much as I would like. I enjoy reading, I enjoy all kinds of music, and though my husband was somebody who leaned primarily toward arias and light opera, we both have gotten very much into the old jazz musicians, the old timers like [Count] Basie, [Duke] Ellington, and Fats Waller. I'm not into contemporary that much; my children are. But leisure—and I love theater. I like films, but I like live performances better.

So right now, I'm working on the board of directors for New Place. And that's why I said my play is so tied up with my work. I'm chairing a gala celebration on May twenty-eighth to try and do some fundraising. We are interested in the arts, and when we get a chance to—we try at least once a year to have a kind of like a open house at home or somewhere to encourage artistic talent and development.

But basically it's reading and music. Oh, last summer, I went on this rampage and decided that we were getting ripped off in stores and that I was going to learn to sew. So last summer I started sewing. But that's just a minor interest, because you have got to put up the cutting board or put up the machine and you're talking about a long span of time.

My other big problem is that I am a person of extremes. Usually I'm very, very busy or not busy at all. If I get involved in a project I'm a starter; I like to start things up. Last summer when I started sewing, one Friday night, I went home, fixed my dinner, cleaned the kitchen, set out the sewing machine, and when I stopped it was 6:30 Saturday morning. So I don't—and I like to sew like that. I like to do it for long periods of time, so I don't get a chance to sew as much. But that is a skill and a talent and a hobby that I'm



developing. And I think I like the music and I like the reading because that's quick leisure time. If I only have like an hour or thirty minutes, I can read for thirty minutes. I'm finishing now *Beautiful, Also, [Are] the Souls of My Black Sisters*, Jeanne Noble's book. Did you see that when she was here? It's an excellent book, you've got to read it.

OA: Jeanne Noble?

SW: *Beautiful, Also, [Are] the Souls of My Black Sisters*. There's probably a copy of it downstairs in the library. She traces the history of—kind of black women in white America. It is extremely well done. It has a lot of compassion, it's easy readability, but it is a scholarly work. Some of her chapters have a hundred and some citations, footnotes, documentation, so it's respectable. But I'm reading that.

I also like to write. I have not done a lot of writing, but that's one of my back burner things. I've been doing some writing in my head, and I will probably do a volume of religious writings, as a first thing, if I ever get around to it. Because I do think—I am so happy with my Christianity—and I don't mean like, "Oh Lord," but I mean I think that part of my happiness and my fulfillment, the greatest part, is that I can see a direct relationship between what I believe as a Christian and my life. I really do, and so that's a part of it, too.

OA: Let's see. Tell me some of the interesting things that you have done in terms of community service. We may have some of it already. Anything else you want to mention? Like for example, I think you all had a program for welfare mothers, or something like that.

SW: Okay, I'm working. Hillsborough Community College really did not see the need of a women's program, because they said that there were facilities for helping women through a number of vehicles in the college. You see, my point is that if you have enough problems and enough hurt, you have to have special attention sometimes. I'm all for mainstreaming after the healing, and I think that a lot of us, we need places where we can be healed. And I see a lot of pain now associated with what's called a displaced homemaker.

So Sybil Barnes and I initially—and then we sought the help of Helen Gordon Davis and some other women—decided that there were a lot of women who needed healing. And if the college would not fund the program, if they would just give us the facility we would run our own program. Sybil had a Saturday program here anyway, and the facility was open. So then I started running workshops for women, and based on those workshops that we did we demonstrated the capability to be able to help women, and I wrote a grant for Hillsborough Community College called Project Eve. And Project Eve is up for funding again.

Also because I think that basic education, early childhood education, is a foundation—I think the earlier you can turn children on to learning the better off they can be. Because I believe in that I wanted to do something to upgrade the capabilities of paraprofessionals

working with children in the early years. And so I got a grant to do CDA training, Child Development Associate training. And we have twenty people involved in that training program on a continuing basis from September to August every year. And every year we get a new group to train them to be childhood, child associates, early childhood education practitioners. And SABLE, the organization that I mentioned, is going to get into—

OA: What does that stand for, or does it stand for something?

SW: That's an acronym made up from the letters of our names, but it stands for—in addition to initials from our names—success, achievement, brilliance, leadership, and excellence.

OA: There you go.

SW: Success, achievement, brilliance, leadership, and excellence, and we're going to—we have been doing—we have a couple of social activities, because I think that's important.

OA: Is this just females only?

SW: Yes.

OA: Okay.

SW: It's female, but also each year we have a program to—number one, we honor role models and communities, and then we honor senior girls with high scholastic involvement. And then in the fall, we honor just "good girls" so that we try to do it all. We are tentatively planning, if we can get approval to do it, some continuing workshops in achievement motivation for youth. But that's something SABLE is very—in fact, we really formed it in a car between Tampa and Miami.

OA: That's how great things start.

SW: It must have been in 1976; we were incorporated and chartered in 1977 and we're getting ready—on June 17th, we're going to have our next honors and awards program. Some of the people we have honored have been Mike Rodriguez for his contributions in field of music. We've honored James Gardner, Chairman of the Board of Regents. We've honored E.L. Bing<sup>3</sup>.

So you know, we try to find people who are achievers in their own right, particular people who—well, let's face it, we don't have any Huttons and Woolworths and Onassis. And all of us are struggling, but what we're really trying to say is, look these are the people who were in your community. When Gwendolyn Brooks<sup>4</sup> was here—well, you

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<sup>3</sup> African American educator and activist in Hillsborough County. Bing was a county commissioner and was heavily involved in school desegregation.

<sup>4</sup> African American poet, later Poet Laureate of the United States.

were here. She was so impressed by our organization, Gwen Brooks is now an honorary member of SABLE. So we do all that we can. You said this is going to come out in August?

OA: August.

SW: This may or may not be in it. But we're probably, we're probably going to honor Ms. Elsie Turner. Do you know who she is?

OA: No.

SW: I think she was out of school by the time you got there. Our plan is to approach Ms. Turner about being an honorary this time.

You know, the only thing that frightens me, Otis, is that there is so much that I think that I have the responsibilities to do, that I want to do, and I simply don't have the time. My husband and I have talked about my taking a leave here and doing some community things that I want to do. To be perfectly honest, I know that there are other people who are capable of doing the job here, but I wonder if they are willing to it. If I felt that there was an humane, sensitive person who really wanted to do this kind of work, I guess it [would be] kind of a matter I have to decide whether or not I can do more to help children by working here doing this, or do more to get out and do community based things that I like to do. And right now I am not convinced that I can leave and have the assurance, you know, that will go on. As I said, I want to make it clear that there are plenty other people with the capability, but I'm not sure about the interest and the commitment.

OA: That's interesting. You never stop making critical decisions, do you?

SW: That's right. It's a continuous thing, which is something else. I was self-conscious in all the other things, but I mention this unconditional positive regard, and knowing that somebody care about you. But also I had to be responsible for my behavior. If I did something wrong, nobody would run around bailing me out. I remember taking a Tennessee self-concept scale and there was a question that said something like, "If you got into trouble, do you think that your family would support you?" And my answer to that was yes, I think that I will always have the support of my family but that support comes only after I do what I'm supposed to do.

OA: See, that's the whole thing. Sometimes when I talk with young people, I always say we have an illusion that freedom and integration and this whole bit, that there is no responsibility. You always have to be responsible for managing your life.

SW: That's right. And it's perfectly okay to make mistakes and to say I'm sorry, but you have to know, you have to learn from that.

OA: Okay, just a couple of other things. I want the advice to be the last thing. Let's talk about Sandra Wilson the woman. Let's see now—how should we put this? How do you

view yourself in terms of today's 1979 concept of the woman and so forth, the change in role of a woman in today's society?

SW: I hope this won't be misunderstood. But I always think that I've been one who was stepping to the beat of a different drummer. Gee, I guess it would just be to brash to say that I'm ahead, but—

OA: How relevant is all of this with women's liberation and everything to you? Have you always had that sense of—

SW: I hate to say anything, but it's almost irrelevant. I mean, I see that it's—well, I think it's very important for women who, in fact, need to be, you know, but I don't—that's another problem with American society. When a wave of something comes through, you think everybody needs it. Like, everybody did not need the miniskirts. Those of us who were fifty pounds overweight and thirty years older did not need a miniskirt.

I think that this whole idea—I'm more for human rights and for civil rights and I think that if you start treating everybody like a human being, giving everybody an opportunity, then women's rights and all these other vested interest group automatically comes in. What—as I said, I know this is going to be misunderstood, but what most of the women I think are looking for in the whole women's liberation movement is something that I probably had before I went to college. I'm not talking about equal pay for equal work, because I'm for that because I still don't feel I get equal pay for equal work here. In fact, when I came, the first year that I was at the college there was—but my counterpart on another campus made several thousand dollars more than I did. But the excuse being, "Well, this is your first year, you start at step one; this person has been here such and such number of years, so he starting at step so and so." But the point is that we were doing the same work, and that was the first year. Well, that's neither here nor there.

With regard to women's liberation, I am for equal access and equal opportunity and equal pay for equal work. But in terms of the emotional hang ups and all of the hatred—and believe me, the movement is being stymied, because there are so many angry women who hate themselves. As a black woman, I cannot get in the streets and fight with my white sisters when I know that they're working against me to do me in and to do black men in.

As I said, charity begins at home. There's liberation within my culture that I think needs to be embraced. Because whether they want to admit it or not, the women's liberation movement is a white women's movement. And if we jump on the train, we are likely to be able to ride, but the conductor, the engineer—everybody who is responsible for the train—is white. Let's look at it. It's primary a white women's movement. The tenets—

*pause in recording*

SW: I'm sure that something good is going to come out of it. It could move a little faster, as I said, if people can deal with their personal anger somewhere else. I think there are

women who are well motivated, who really are trying to do something good that needs to be done. But as with everything else, I think that there are other women who are propagandizing, who are using it for their own personal things. And all of the laws in the world—all of the legislation does represent laws, all of the commissions—all of these things will not change the way that you feel about yourself nor will they change the way that people treat you. Now when you can—I guess I'm saying that to say if doors are open for women unless you're willing to step through them, if someone legislates that you are treated fairly, if you don't demand that you get that kind of treatment, it's not going to work for you.

It seems to me that antecedent to this women's liberation needs to be personal liberation, and I see a lot of women in there who are not personally liberated. While I understand—I don't understand. While I understand the feelings, I guess I cannot sympathize based on my own personal experiences, because I was never treated like that. I am sure that my marrying late had to do with the fact that I did not want to get involved with someone who was considering treating me other than the way my husband treats me now. Which is what people out in the streets are burning bras and going on for. But I contend that you are treated as you demand to be treated and as you think you deserve to be treated.

OA: A lot is in the way you treat yourself.

SW: And believe me, if things change tomorrow, some of—if the movement end, if [they] get every single thing, if they—let's say if we took an infinite population of men and women and matched them up and made sure that they were treated fairly. If we establish all the commissions that they wanted to establish, if we establish all the women's programs that they and I guess you are saying, Sandra, it's incongruent for you to say that you question your participation of the women's liberation movement and yet you are running a women's program. Well, I see it as something different. You see, I see that personal liberation, where people get self-help through education, and hopefully that when people leave there, they will have basic skills as well as an assertive attitude that will take them through. When some of these conditions take place, some women will still not have personal skills. And I don't know whether I answered your question or not.

OA: No, you've answered my question. And again, you and I are talking, so I understand you. See, it amazes me when I hear something like this. I had a similar experience and this was what the movement here was like with black folks. You know, a lot of people are aware on many levels of organization experiences that I had while I was working for black folks, but I did a lot of things, went to a lot of places with a lot of people, did a lot of things. And one of the thing that continues to bother me, and I just couldn't get it off my mind. There was something missing and I couldn't understand it.

SW: I think it's because we are afraid, and we will never be mobilized as a respected entity until we get it. Because you see, when there come to be more and more Otis Anthonys and Sandra Wilsons, then people will not, I am sure—and I don't mean to be vulgar, but I'm sure that behind closed doors people just look at me as crazy nigger. You know, "She doesn't know anything, she was suppose to be doing those things, and she

was suppose to be saying those things, she doesn't know any better." But you know, I simply think that I'm acting like everybody ought to be acting.

I think the other thing too is that we have to develop an appreciation for different people and what they can do. There are some things that I can't do that I probably could never learn to do, there are other things that I could learn to do that I don't want to learn to do, and I have to learn to appreciate the reciprocal talent in somebody else so that we learn to complement each other. I think that—because years and years ago, the progress of one, most of the time, had to take place at the expense of someone else. We're still very fearful, and we look askance at success. And there's kind of a lack—let's be honest, there is a lack of trust. But if you have your own head screwed on straight, you are likely to be more trusting of other people.

Now, something else I enjoy very much is being a woman.

OA: That's an interesting statement.

SW: Oh, yes, I wouldn't be anything else for anything in the world. I guess as a—I don't know that I really see myself in the world of work as a woman, I see myself as a productive human being. It's not that I want to deny my femininity, I'm glad for that. But I don't think that we single out men and say, "Look at that man doing a man's work;" we say, "Look at that worker." I see myself as a worker.

But apart from my work, socially, I see myself as very much a woman. And there are people who would say that I was denying my femininity, just as there are people who would probably say that if I said I saw myself as a worker and didn't say a black worker, that I'm denying my color. I think that work is something that is bigger than both of those things. The other two variables cannot be dismissed, nor should they be. But while I'm working, like I said, pressing on to a market of higher calling, I'm working into bigger sphere, a sphere that transcends. I don't even see myself as a Floridian or—you know, I guess I'm a universalist. I just see myself as a part of the whole big universal machinery trying to get a job done.

Now, one other thing that we have to learn is to play roles. And I don't mean to be a hypocrite—and I'm espousing hypocrisy—but talking to you now is different from the role that I played if talking to a student, is different from the role that I played if I was with a colleague. Oh, about different roles—

OA: You want to incorporate this as part of my last question, anyway?

SW: Oh, yes, that can be one. Number one, get a strong religious foundation. And I think number two would be the good self-concept. Number three would be the family life. Number four would be the all the stuff that I said about education, and then number five would be the role development.

But I sincerely believe that if you are a Christian, all things are possible. I think that if

there are things that you want and you don't get them, then they are not for you to have. And I guess it's kind of funny—here's a woman who been talking about independence and taking responsible for your life and then came back and said, "Turn your whole life over to Jesus." But my husband has a expression that says, "You should work as if everything depended on you and pray as if everything depended on God." And that's kind of my thing.

But we have to learn different models and learn that there are different behaviors. I had this thing with Darrin. Darrin had been reared with adults; we never talked baby talk to him, and his English was impeccable. After—I would say less than six weeks in public school—he picked up—not public school, in formal education, because he was in a private school. He picked up all the expressions, all euphemisms—you know, everything, making substitutions.

And I recognized how important it was for him socially to communicate on that level. And socially I certainly don't speak as what we use to call acrolect all of the time; sometimes I speak basilect<sup>5</sup>. But I finally said to Darrin, "Darrin, the way you are talking to me is fine on the playground and with your friends, but I don't understand that and when you're addressing me, I don't want you to talk to me like that." And I said, when you talk to teacher in the classroom, so that there was kind of a real tie-in. Not that this child could not relax. But when he was young, I wanted him to make sure that he learned the language pattern that was valued.

Now the interchanging of speech patterns is just one portion of role development, and I see that as being fairly important, knowing when and how, because unless you play different roles, you can't communicate with all kinds of people. And as long as we live, there will be a diverse population which to deal. Now I remember when you went through a period of time where people said, "Oh, such and such person is just trying to talk proper." But if that person needed somebody to intercede for them with the powers that be, or if that person wanted somebody to be a buffer or forerunner, they went to find the person who talked proper, who could communicate with other people who talk proper.

OA: Well, there is utility in everything.

SW: Sure it is.

OA: And that's part of all those things.

Any other advice to young blacks? The way I got this advice thing—the way I kind of outline this, advice for others, and that is anybody in general who wants to be successful, and advice to give to young blacks.

SW: I guess in general, I would say that it's—I really think integrity is very important. It's

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<sup>5</sup> In linguistics, the acrolect is the "correct" or prestige version of a language, whereas the basilect is the version furthest away from it.

difficult, but I think it's very important. I also think it's more important for people to respect you than to like you. I really do.

OA: I like that one. That will keep you out of a whole lot of jams.

SW: Uh huh, and some consistency too. If people—you've heard people say, "You know such and such is kind of peculiar, but you can always count on them." And that is a form of integrity.

And then, you know, where you said just for young blacks, I think that prayer is so important. That's something that I have been handling with my husband's children, particularly the one who's away. You need to keep your hand in the Lord's hand, and as I said, I don't think that I'm a fanatic but that is important. I think that we need to stop pretending that we're so educated we don't need religion. I find that really distressing. In fact, the more education I have received, the more I recognized how important religion is and how powerless I am. I really can't think of anything else.

OA: Yes, religion seem to bring humility.

SW: Yes, right, and the thing too, I guess—the other thing, too, is I really believe in this, the first two commandments, (inaudible) and thy neighbor as thyself. If you care about other people and help other people, you automatically help yourself. In fact, sometimes I'm so tired but it seems that the more I do for other people, the more I get done for myself.

OA: I just read a book. You ever heard of Zig Ziglar<sup>6</sup>? That is so amazing. Everything you said here today, he has this in a book.

SW: Oh, you're kidding. You know what Sybil says to me?

OA: This is the most inspiring book I've ever read in my life.

SW: Really, Sybil says to me, "Sandra, the stuff that you send up in these bull pits and in these workshops and say to people—you could write it down, you know. You should write it down; people would pay you to get it."

But it just seems to be common sense. It's a part of—to me it doesn't seem worthy of translation into writing, because it's something that I grew up with. To write this stuff down for me would be almost like saying air is to breathe and water is drink. It's so much a part of my nature that I just think, "God this is so glaring, everybody knows that and does that." In fact, sometimes I hesitate to say things.

OA: I mean I've heard it, and I seen—

SW: We were talking the other day about how much you has grown—and remember

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<sup>6</sup> Evangelical Christian motivational speaker.



when the thing with *Roots*<sup>7</sup> started and I said in that meeting that I was so impressed, we need to do more of that too, remember when we had the *Roots* thing down, we need to talk to each other and listen. We don't communicate, we really don't.

This is not for you to use, but here is a vita if you need to check dates or anything that you may have.

OA: All right, I appreciate that. Well, that's it.

SW: Well, I really enjoyed it. I don't care if none of it gets written down. I've had such catharsis and preaching and beating on the desk.

OA: Yes, we needed that.

*end of interview*

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<sup>7</sup> The television show based on Alex Haley's book *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*.