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# Willie Thomas

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Interviewee: Willie Thomas

Interviewers: Mark Naison, Lisa Betty

Session 1: March 9, 2018

Transcriber: Katherine DeFonzo

Mark Naison (MN): Okay, so, welcome, this is the Bronx African American History Project interviewing Willie Thomas. Could you please tell us your date of birth and then we'll ask you a few questions about your family.

Willie Thomas (WT): Okay, so, my name is Willie Thomas. My date of birth is October 2, 1954.

MN: Um hmm, and where did you grow up?

WT: I grew up in Harlem, 112<sup>th</sup> Street and Lenox Avenue, in what is now Dr. Martin Luther King Towers.

MN: Right, uh huh, so this was, was in...in a high rise building?

WT: Yes, a NYCHA development.

MN: Oh so it was a NYCHA development, okay. How many buildings was it, or was it a single building?

WT: No, so Dr. Martin Luther King Towers, then it was called Steven Foster, it's ten developments. Six of the development goes...

MN: So you grew up in what was called the Steven Foster Houses in Harlem at that time?

WT: Yes.

MN: What are your memories of life there? Was it a, a good place to grow up?

WT: I actually moved from the Bronx to Harlem and I remember that day very vividly. Although I couldn't have been no more than three years old [MN: Um hmm], Harlem was just something that was magical for me at that, that point. What I remember is, like, pulling up on 112<sup>th</sup> Street and this big truck that had all our worldly possessions, and I looked up and I'm like, wow, this is

Harlem. Just hearing so much about Harlem, the magic of Harlem, and I found that it was all so true, that Harlem just had a magical air about itself. And I lived in, previously I remember living in Walker buildings, and then all of a sudden I'm like, the big buildings, fourteen story, thirteen stories, and the world just got so big. It was playgrounds, traffic, and I mean, I might have knew about three or four people at that age, but now I may, I'm in this big building with, like, over a hundred families, and I'm like, I got a lot of friends that I'm looking forward to making.

MN: Uh huh. So it was exciting?

WT: Yes, very much so.

MN: Uh huh. And was it at that point the safe place to, to live?

WT: Yeah, it was, it was still community.

MN: It was a community.

WT: It was a community, people looked out for each other. You know, everybody...so things that was going on, you know, just to keep, I mean if people was having problems paying rent, right, families were to get together and have a rent party for that particular, that particular family that was struggling at that moment. And I remember a few times my family was the host of rent parties for a neighbor. Yeah, so yeah it was very much a community, it was very much people looking out for one another. Everybody was, right, their brothers' and sisters' keepers.

MN: Wow. Now how many other siblings did you have at that time, any of the children in your family?

WT: So when we moved there it was, I had two older sisters and two younger sisters, and I was the first man child. [MN: Uh huh] And later on my mother gave, my mother and father gave birth to a, another brother so, in total it was six of us.

MN: Uh huh. And did your family stay in that development for a long time?

WT: My family stayed in that development up until two, three years ago [MN: Wow!] when my mother made the transition [MN: Oh] from this world to the next, but yes, right.

MN: So you're, that's a, from 1957 to 2014.

WT: Yes.

MN: Wow. So that's a story in itself. That's an oral history in itself.

WT: Yeah, so we, we've seen a lot. I've seen a lot. I know a lot. I like to say that my... that development, that NYCHA development is stained with my sweat, my blood, and my tears.

MN: Uh huh. So a lot of who you are was shaped by that experience.

WT: Yes [MN: Uh huh], very, very much so.

MN: Uh huh. Now, you know, so you're coming of age of Harlem in the 1960s, which must have been pretty exciting. How aware of [were] you of the sort of political ferment going on? You know, like 1964 you're ten years old and there's the Harlem uprising.

WT: And I remember it like it was yesterday... I mean, you couldn't, I mean you couldn't...you couldn't turn a blind eye to it. And it was so much going on in my life at that, that point in time. I remember being in the fifth grade and teachers directing me to certain cultural programs. And so I would very much aware of the contributions that the Harlem Renaissance had made. James Baldwin was one of my favorite writers, Langston Hughes as a poet, Zora Neale Thurston, as a writer, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and I simply...

MN: So black consciousness was alive and well in your schools and in your atmosphere.

WT: Well not until I actually got into the, like, the fifth grade, I'mma say. I did have a teacher of color when I was in the third grade. Most of them was female, most of them was white and Jewish up until that point [MN: Um hmm]. But my third and fifth grade was females of color [MN: Uh huh] who really pushed me. In fact in the fifth grade, my teacher then who I remember, her name was [Francine?] Carter, she encouraged us to like form what we called then, and I was the chairperson, or president, I can't remember, but I, I headed it up with the young Negro civil rights workers. [MN: Wow] And so a group of us, all in the fifth grade, and she encouraged us, motivated us to take a, a active role into what was going on in terms of the, the civil injustice, racial injustice, and the discrimination practices out there that was going on in this country.

MN: Wow.

WT: And so we would write letters to like the state senators, and the U.S. senators, state senators, you know, just like, and I can't remember what my writing was at that time, but it was something to just like, we thought this was unfair, that as young people of color, we deserve our opportunity to have fair education, to...to be able to work wherever we wanted to, shop where we wanted to.

MN: Wow. Now, were you aware of Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam as you were growing up?

WT: Yes. You know you couldn't have been coming of age at that time and not know of Malcolm X. At that time the Temple Number 7 was right there on 116th Street and Lenox Avenue [MN: Uh huh]. And I remember again clearly when the temple got bombed, that night. It was like, late at night, early in the morning, and you heard the explosion which woke me up. But also Malcolm, when he was 11, there was times when, and I still have this picture, where he did a speech right in the, right in the, in the development, right, right on Lennox Avenue and 114<sup>th</sup> Street [MN: Wow.] And we was all out there, I mean all my little friends, the elders, the community was out there come Malcolm was such a dynamic speaker and he had that type of impact on the community, so when he spoke, people came out.

MN: Wow. So this was a, an exciting time to grow up in.

WT: Yes, very... yes.

MN: So did you go to junior high in Harlem, or out of, out of Harlem?

WT: No, I... both of my elementary schools was right across the street, PS 170 which is no longer standing. And then I went to William [?] Elementary which is now Jackie Robinson Junior High School 13 which, which was located in East Harlem.

MN: Now I have to ask you a question about the Colum... were you aware of the Columbia strike when it was going on?

WT: I think I was where...anything that was, right, some people in my, and my mother used to say I was born to be a rebel, right, because any time there was some type of rebellion going on, it seemed to attract me.

MN: Okay so I have to ask you a question, this is some... and this is actually, I didn't expect that I would ask this. In...I was very involved in the Columbia strike, and at one point we had a situation where the football players and wrestlers at Columbia were trying to blockade the, two of the buildings. One of them was with the black students that occupied Hamilton Hall, and the other was, you know, Lowe Library. And I was part of a small group we called the SDS Goon Squad of radical athletes and a couple of neighborhood kids. But what got the football players to disperse is some... I had heard that five hundred high school and junior high school students from Harlem and the West Side marched in Columbia and confronted the football players. Was that something that you (were) part of? Did you remember, cause I know there some of them came from Brandeis [WT: Yeah]. Was that something you remember?

WT: So I, yeah I remember it very clearly [MN: Oh, Jesus]. Because news traveled real quick for whatever reason. It was, I mean, news just traveled real quick and, right, Columbia, right, they occupied Amsterdam, Saint Nick... Amsterdam and Morningside [MN: Right, yeah]. And so news came down to Lennox Avenue, right. And like then, we was all athletes then and we could run nonstop at full speed [MN: Uh huh (laughing)], so we thought, or so we believed. And so, no I said, and I'm thinking this is Columbia University, this is, this a college. And so we ran up there, and at that time police was all on the scene. And so, I guess we came up there with some ill, ill intent, you know, at a young age. Nonetheless with so much police out there that they had basically cornered off the area so we wasn't allowed to do anything other than like scream, holler and I think some of us might've threw some rocks.

MN: Okay, because that was a key moment, when they, that group of football players dispersed, and then it was just people were left alone in the buildings [WT: Yeah]. So, you know, Harlem was a powerful force in shaping what happened at Columbia and young people like yourself and the activism and the fear that if... peop... if black students were grabbed out of the building, Harlem would explode again [WT: Yeah]. Do you have recollections of the night that, what happened after Dr. King was killed?

WT: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Harlem went up. Harlem went up in, in flames. People... and my mother, I happened to be in the house that night, and my mother like blocked the door. She would not let me out. But the streets was up... in, in, in a uproar. Stores was burned. Gates was pulled down. At that time they had the, not the [riot ?] gates, what they call 'em now. They had

the old gates, we just pulled them together. And people tore them down, there was a place on 100...11th and...All your little stores that sold high-end clothes to black people, all those was like, right, just tore down, people were in there and, and took whatever they wanted to. So yeah, it was, what I'm gonna say now, ugly moment.

MN: Yeah, yeah. No I also have vivid memories of that, you know, from the point of the West Side where I was living then. So you became involved with the local Panther chapter in Harlem and the Young Lords?

WT: Yes, so again, it was just so much about my life at that point, you know, I remember, even before, you know I, at that time I was like sixteen then, when I became involved with the Panthers, but even going back when I was excited about the idea of Castro coming to Harlem [MN: Wow]. Right and staying up and you know at Theresa Hotel. And I remember going up there, just, you know, hearing that he was there, and wanting to catch a glimpse of him, knowing that he was a revolutionary. And he led a successful revolution down, down in Cuba at the time. And then, you know, the whole thing when Martin Luther King was in Blumstein and got stabbed and had to be rushed to Harlem Hospital. All this is very vivid in my mind, you know, and we, you know, we went up to Harlem Hospital, didn't make it to Blumstein. By the time, you know, we was up there, he was already being transported to Harlem Hospital. And so even when Malcolm was assassinated on that Sunday up at, at the Au, Audubon Ballroom... and just something about that: one of the assassins, Thomas Johnson, one of his, his daughter, right, me and her was real close friends.

MN: Wow.

WT: And we remained close friends. Well, at the time I, I actually didn't know that that was, her father was involved and got convicted of that. It wasn't until years later. But we was friends at that time, they had lived together. It wasn't until years later that she revealed that to me. I'm like, we've been friends for all this time and you never told me that? But anyways, yeah, so, around 1970s I got involved with the, the Panthers. And so I was very much involved. I mean that's a lot of my learning, I went, I would go up to the office on Seventh Avenue and I would, you know, do my part. I mean, most people don't give the Panthers, the Black Panthers credit for starting the free lunch program. And they don't know that part, you know, it's everything else, okay, you

know, right. Black Power. F to pigs. The violence that's often associated with the Black Panthers, but their social programs was the vanguard for a lot of the programs that's in existence today.

MN: Yeah, so I have a friend who's actually a professor at Columbia, wrote a great book about, Alondra Nelson, about the medical programs of the Black Panther [WT: Yes, acupuncture?] and how they became, pioneered all kinds of public health programs.

WT: Yeah. So I mean, I had little jobs with that, you know one, giving out pamphlets outside, standing outside, right, keeping people in line because there was long lines for the free lunch program. There was long lines for the [acupuncture?] medical treatment program. So, you know, that was part of my, part of my role as a young Panther.

MN: Now, so you're you know, now a young revolutionary rebel. Did you see yourself going to college at that point? Is that something you wanted to do?

WT: Yeah, at that point yeah, I did have, by that time. Because everyone talked about going to college as a means to enhance your social mobility [MN: Um hmm]. And so yeah, by that time. Earlier in my life, college wasn't on my radar [MN: Um hmm]. Nonetheless, I was one of the few people I grew up with that went straight through high school.

MN: So a lot of people dropped out?

WT: Yeah.

MN: Were there, among your group that you grew up with, were there a lot of people who never made it out of their teenage years?

WT: Yes. One of, one of my earlier recoll, recollections, recollections, recollections, was a young man of, we were close friends, he was 15 and it was tragic but he died of OD, you know on, on the roof of a desolated building, his bike still in his arm [MN: Wow.] And we, we was, and like, we had like...The generation that came before us, heroin was their drug of choice. [MN: Right, yeah.] And so we'd seen a lot of them fall victim to that. And we had, like, vowed that, look, we will not do that. [MN: Right.] And so we didn't. And so when Mike, when the word came out that Mike was on the roof of 56th, so it was a building on 112th Street called 56th, it's no longer there, was on the roof of 56th dead, it... it made us realize how vulnerable we was.

Until that point in time at least in my life and in my mindset, we was invincible. We was gonna live forever.

MN: Now what about Vietnam? Did that affect, did any of your friends end up being drafted?

WT: A couple of us, and I think I had like a hero. I'd always wanted to be a hero. And so when I was younger and coming up out of high school I'm like, I watched a lot of war movies, and I'm like maybe this would be interesting, may I could go over to Vietnam and, and be a hero. And so I was on the verge of, right... so they, they had the draft then, and right, I wasn't, my number was like 313 [MN: Yeah, uh huh. Right.] so I couldn't be drafted. But so I was thinking about enlisting in, in the army and I was, my, a young lady I was involved with at that time said to me like, the next day I was like making a decision, okay, I'm going to the recruitment, I'm gonna enlist. And she like, she started crying and she was like, "Willie, are you a fool? You talk all this talk about, right, the system is always keeping black people down. And you know, and you're gonna go fight a war for people who don't even care about you?" And that was like a wake-up call...contradiction to what I represented at the time. And that, that conversation changed my mind. So I, I didn't. But Vietnam was very much a focus. And then, you know, I went up to Riverside Church to also hear remembering Martin Luther King's speech.

MN: Oh that was an amazing speech.

WT: Yeah, so I remember being present. So all that played a part in my mind, my thinking, in terms of changing my mind.

MN: Now when did you start getting involved in youth work? You know working with young people like what you're doing now?

WT: I think it was always a part of me. I helped raise my, my younger brother and my nephews. And I, as the landscape of Harlem started changing and programs started closing, it was less and less for young people to do. And so I used to like organize bus rides every summer and I would take, you know, groups of young people like, just to get them away from the city. So we would go to Hershey Park, we'd go to Mountaintop Park, just to give them a day away from the city. I mean so many of the things I was exposed to, I'd seen that that was no longer in existence for the younger generation. And I think that's when I really took an interest in the life path that there

was, that was open for them. And then as I'd seen how there became like generation gaps. Right, this gap between my generation and the generation under me. The divide became bigger and bigger and bigger and became a big disconnect. And even today that disconnect where younger people don't have older people in their life to connect them with, particularly of a male figure.

MN: Okay. So that's a very interesting subject because there's a famous Biggie Small song called "Things Done Changed" where he's, you know, he talks about the people in his neighborhood who were older who talked about the barbecues and ringolevio and...but the reality of the crack years was something completely different. Can you talk a little bit about how that disconnect happened? Was it people of the older generation crashing? Do you think it was? Was it being swallowed up in the war? Was it the economy? What was going on?

WT: So it was a, a couple of things but drugs certainly played a major part in creating that divide. Then there was the economy. So many people come up and they have dreams and they want to make it and they want to like, have this impact. I mean, coming up from me, and everyone I knew that went to college had the opportunity and they had to write their little autobiography or biography, they were like, I want to come back and do something in my community. And in some cases the economy, right? In the 70s when the economy took a tank and Ford was the president and his message to New York, right, that was on the front page of the daily news was, Drop dead. That he wasn't helping New York bail out. Well, that impacted the black-brown community like it has never been impacted before, right. So jobs that was available for young men of color was no longer there. And so in the words of James Brown, it was escapism, what do we do? And I know so many of my, my, my people that I grew up with got involved with selling drugs as a way of surviving. But that also brought in more violence. And then when crack came along. There's this line in, in, in the movie [*Crooked? Clockers*] I believe in which, the actor said if God made anything better than crack cocaine, He kept it for Himself. Crack hit the, you know, the communities of Harlem, South Bronx, South Jamaica, Bed-Stuy, Brownville like no other drug before [MN: Mm hmm.] No other drug before. And then you had the whole crack epidemic in which crack babies was being born. And that created a divide because there were a number of studies indicating that, right, a crack baby, right, normally when a mother gave birth, the baby would hold the, the eye contact of the mother, but with crack babies that wasn't so. And so crack devastated the, the community, then created this great big

divide. So it was no longer a connection to the younger generation. And then you had grandmothers, right, that was raising children.

MN: Right, right.

WT: And then, you know, the term latchkey kids came about, right. We children was being just like, okay you go to that house and you watch TV, and you stay in the house until someone come home to prepare dinner for you. But there was no more connection with, you know, a generation that...that community...That sense of community was broken.

MN: So the way you grew up, with the sense of community and the elders looking out for the young people, by the 80s that was gone.

WT: Yes, yes.

MN: That must have been very hard for you to see.

WT: Yeah, and I mean it's still hard. It's still hard.

MN: So you still, still see the effects of this?

WT: Yeah, yeah, it's certainly the uh, certainly the uh...right, because it's intergenerational, right, I mean...I've worked with so many young people who might tell me stories about going to prison, right, to visit both their grandfather and their father, right, in a prison setting.

MN: So the, so the prison system had become an integral part of the community's expectation and culture?

WT: Sadly, I'mma say yes, right. Because for too many of our young people of color, going to prison was almost like a rite of passage.

MN: Now that was not true when you were growing up.

WT: Oh, no.

MN: When did you start seeing that that was a way of getting street cred and a reputation?

WT: By the mid-70s.

MN: By the mid-70s that was starting to...

WT: Yeah. I mean there was a time in people's life where you could ask a person, do you know anyone that's been in prison? And people would say no. The prison population in the United States have reached a point now where, where we incarcerate more than two million people [MN: Yeah.] We now, you'd be hard-pressed for someone to say, I don't know anyone, right, who haven't been arrested or went to prison. I think that when that became evident, I think it was with Jimmy Carter and, you know, his brother was in prison. When you like look at the president of the United States, and like he has a family member. But now it's like someone we went to school with, someone we grew up with.

MN: So the young people you're working with today, this is still an issue?

WT: The young people I work with today primarily are all on probation.

MN: Oh, so you're, you're, what's the age of the population you're working with?

WT: 16-24.

MN: And these are people on probation who have been released, or... from prison?

WT: Right, so they've been released back into community under community supervision. And so my program now arches transformative mentoring program, mentors to them using a cognitive behavior technique approach to get them to look at their behavior and their attitude, right, so that they will not continue to get involved with the crim, criminal justice system [MN: Mm hmm]. So 95 percent of our referrals come from the Department of Probation here in the Bronx.

MN: And are these women as well as men, or mostly men?

WT: Right. Women are one of... women is the fastest growing prison population, right, in New York as of right now [MN: Mm hmm.] So yes, I have, from the start of, right, the Arches. And the arches transformative mentoring program is only what, six years old now. It's new but it's ground...messengers that would go out and meet the young people where they are and be able to speak credibly, right, to what they're going through, just meant so much.

MN: Right. So they were people who had been through this experience themselves.

Yes. So I have a staff of four mentors and they all are incredible, incredible messengers because some of them have lived through the same experience. Some of them have been incarcerated. Some of them, right. And our young people today, and the young people of the Bronx is no different from the young people of Harlem, Brooklyn, or anywhere else. They have been traumatized by their life travels. Some of our young people, they have act(ed) out, gotten involved in the criminal justice system because of sexual abuse. Because of being raised in a single family household. Because of, right, the environment in which they grew up in. Some of our young people because of a need to like make themselves seem to be tough, right, because they was bullied [MN: Right.], they get into bullying themselves. And so they, they came into contact with the criminal justice system and, and our role is, right, to get them to take a look at their behavior and their attitudes and be there as their support to help them, like, navigate.

MN: So when you're doing this, is... I mean it's, we at one point here had a number of ex-offenders brought up here by a secretary was here from her housing project. And it was, their biggest issue was finding legal work. It was incredibly difficult. This was about ten years ago. Is, are, are you able, if people are able to grapple with their inner demons, find them ways of doing, making a living legally to at least support themselves.

WT: I mean I am very proud of the success stories we have had with working with young people. And so, just, if I, if I could just take a moment, a young man I carry his picture with me all the time. He was a young man. He was being raised by a single mother. Got into some trouble. He wasn't attending school regularly, right. So he was referred to me and my program. I worked with him. And then due to because of me working with him, one day he went out and he snatched a young lady's cell phone, pushed her down, shoved her down, snatched her cell phone, got caught. And so he was charged within the criminal ju..., criminal justice system. And so now he was mandated to my program [MN: Mm hmm.]. But that young man finished the program, and now he has enlisted in the army, right. And he's doing well, he's been in service now for seven months. And he's doing well, he's sitting [?] He's making it safe for us to sleep at night. I have a number of young people who is working, right. I have a young lady who is now pursuing her Masters Degree. This is her last year. She is going, graduating in June from John Jay College. I have another young lady who just went down to Virginia to attend Virginia State University [MN: Mm hmm.] So we've been able to transform the lives of a number of young

people by providing them with encouragement, motivation, connecting them with resources that initially they didn't believe they existed.

MN: Okay. So how do you connect in the beginning? You know, 'cause somebody... People build up defenses I assume [WT: Yeah]. And so how, you know, what's your way of breaking through the wall they've built around themselves?

WT: Well, every individual is different. And so we do try to meet them where they're at and build that relationship, right. Letting them know that there's people that care about them, letting them know that, you know, giving them a sense that look, like, right, there's someone here that believe in you. You're not your worst person. You're not what people paint you to be like. People have expectations of you and you need to have expectations of yourself. So it take time to build that relationship. We do that in a number of ways, right. One, the young people will tell you in a moment we will recognize real. So if you're not real with them, they gonna be able to tell it like right away. You can't tell them war stories , right, because they gonna know you wasn't in that war. And then they gonna reject you. They come into our program with a lot of distrust, right. [MN: Yep]. On a lot of levels, people have let them down [MN: Right.]. Systems has failed them. People have came in their life and out their life. People have told them like, look, I'm gonna always be there for you. And with us, right, we celebrate all young people, right. We have a night every month we have a night where we celebrate the young people. If they have a birthday that month, we celebrate everyone that have a birthday, we celebrate them. If we, if they, if we had them enroll in a high school education program, we celebrate that. If they get a job, we celebrate that. So we let them know that we care about them and that we depend on them and that [MN: Mm hmm], that they represent our future and that's something that they, a, a message they hear almost every night when they come into, to our groups. That you are important to us. You are our future. You can be the next Michelle Obama. You could be the next, right, Barack Obama. You can be the next best thing that you want to be [MN: Mm hmm.].

LB: Can we pause for one second? I want to make sure that I transfer this over. The SD card, something is wrong with it that we have to fix, so I just want to make sure that we don't lose...

MN: Okay. But we got that?

LB: Yeah, we got everything.

MN: Okay, we got everything, okay.

LB: I want to make sure... [Video cuts of here.]

MN: Connected to your own experience, talk a little bit about your own incarceration and how you survived it and came out optimistic, loving, and able to help people. It's a tough one, but...

WT: No. It is, it is. So, as I was speaking earlier, I was able to go right through the New York City public school system basically with no problems, and I'm like most young people that I grew up with, we all had ambition, we all have, had our dreams and our goals. We wanted to do something, we wanted to leave our mark on, on the world. And in that, in that sense we were very competitive. And then life, reality set in, and things started happening to people. And by [the] time I reached my twelfth year in high school, most of the people I grew up with and had made that journey with: they wasn't there no longer, right. They had, like, gotten involved with the criminal justice system, was arrested, all right, gotten involved with drugs, dropped out of school for whatever reason. And I was able to, to go, and I had quite a few offers to attend colleges. And for a moment I decided like, okay, I need to like just take a pause and just think what my next steps was gonna be. So I didn't go right into college. I waited and I wanted to be sure, okay, what do you want to major in. And I was always good at being creative. So I'm like okay, you know, you learn something about electrical, you know, installations and wiring, and that fascinated me [MN: Mm hmm.]. And so I'm like okay, I'll take up electrical engineering. And so I, when I enrolled in school that's what I majored in, electrical engineering. I did three and a half years at New York Institute of Technology, [MN: Mm hmm] Howard and Greenville, Long Island. CW, CW Post Campus, and Hofstra's Campus, and you know I mean, I worked out with quite a few of the Jet players, right. Football was my, I played a number of sports, basketball, baseball, football, took up martial arts [MN: Mm hmm], I ran track, but football was my first love. And so when I was on the campus with the New York Jets I would work out with them. But the pressure of the times economically was weighing heavy, right, on me being able to finish school. And so I made a bad decision, right. And that bad decision led to me standing in front of a judge for the first time in my life. Having been found guilty of an A1 felony, which is the highest felony someone can receive, right. And the judge looking down on me and saying, right, for this crime of, right, felony murder, right, you are going to be sentenced to 15 years to life. And I'm like, life. And my whole life started flashing by, and I'm like, How did I end up...

how did I end up in this particular, right...Where did everything go wrong? This is not what I wanted, this is not where my life's supposed to be heading. But yet, that's exactly where I found myself. And so I was going into a whole different world, right. A world I had like only had heard about from the number of people that I knew that went through that system. And I didn't know if I was prepared for it or not. But I had this, this belief that no matter what I was gonna survive it. I was gonna survive it in a way which I was gonna be able to walk out of there with my head up, chest out, and still with a sense of pride and dignity. So I, you know I went in, I knew that there were still some things about, okay what do, I need to accomplish things in here. So I, I went and the college program was still very much alive in New York State. And so I ended up finishing up the necessary requirements to, to get my Bachelor's Degree. And it was unceremonial because I was the first one, right. Although the colored program was already in, no one went that far along in terms of, you know, credits. So in like a year, a year and a half I'd finished. And the, the chair of the department, right at Skidmore College, heading up the prison college program (reacting to phone ringing) Ooh, I'm sorry. [MN: That's okay.] ...she just met me in the hallway and said, Willie, Congratulations, here you go, your degree. There was no ceremony or anything. But I was, I was a role model then because now, right, other people see that, right, that you can finish school inside of a prison setting [MN: Mm hmm]. And so they allowed me to continue taking classes, although right, I'd met all the requirements for my, my, my Bachelor's, which was a Bachelor's, Bachelor's of Science and Business [MN: Mm hmm.] And so my, my, my thin, my thinking was, okay, you know, right, opportunity might present itself, I wonder [want to?], like, own my own business. So I'm like, you know, look, I make it out, I can open up my own business, I'd employ people. And you know, I'll still be doing something for the community. And then, they started a program, New York Theological Seminary started a Masters Program at Sing Sing. And they were looking for able candidates to come in and, right, you know, participate in that program. And they came up to Comstock and Comstock was known as Gladiator School.

MN: Oh you went to Comstock?

WT: That's where I got my degree at. Comstock, right. Gladiator school, right, where you did what the Romans do. It was nothing for, right...Things could be going just as smoothly and then at the drop of a dime everything is locked down, right. In Comstock I've seen, I've seen, I guess I could say I've seen it all. I've seen, I've seen correctionalists kill a prisoner, right. I've

seen prisoners kill prisoners. I've seen men rape other men. All the horrors of prison was right there before my eyes. And my, in spite of that, right, my feeling of, my confidence of surviving never wavered. I knew I was gonna make it out. I was gonna, you know, and so I...

MN: So, did you, was there a way you carried yourself that won respect and...in ways that kept you from being swallowed up?

WT: Well, the one thing about that life, right, I, I, I allude to that saying you have to do what the Romans do, right, you had to be able, no matter what, you had to be able to stand on your own square and defend yourself at any time. And once a person, once people know that you know, you was about [taking care of your brothers?], the respect came. And then I go out, your reputation precedes you [MN: Uh huh]. So it didn't matter, you know I had stayed in Comstock before the duration of my, my, my sentence. In fact, I mean, I've...I transferred to a number of facilities. And, but, getting back to your point. When they started the Masters Program at Sing Sing, the person that was heading that up, he came to visit me. He like, Mr. Willie, Brother, Brother Willie, right, we have a program that's designed for you, you know. You have your Bachelors, right, this program is made for you, it's what you're about, right, and you're going to have a brotherhood to stand by you for the duration of your incarceration [MN: Uh huh.] But I didn't believe I could study on a Masters level in, in Theology, right, because that wasn't my background, that wasn't my strength. And so I, I turned it down, like no, this wasn't me, and I stayed in Comstock. I stayed in Comstock and I worked in the law library, I worked in the pre-relief centers. I worked with Literacy Volunteers of America [MN: Wow] helping teach young people. I ran all the basketball tournaments in there. I, you know, so I gained respect by being who I was, and offering myself, pouring myself out into people that was less fortunate.

MN: Wow. Now you, it sounds like you were doing all this uplift, and...why didn't they release you early?

WT: Right. So I ran in, into a point in time when the country, worldwide, was like lock them up, throw away the key, right. We don't know what to do with offenders. I mean, when I went to my first parole board, I mean I didn't have an exemplary disciplinary record, but I didn't have a bad disciplinary record. You had, you know, you're gonna violate... I mean, if an officer came and told me to shut up, and I would say to someone that might have been younger than me, "Don't

talk to me like that," you could be charged with disobeying a direct order because you didn't shut up [MN: Uh huh]. I was a man and I was always gonna be a man. So, right, I did have to, disciplinary action for disobeying a direct order. One time I overslept. I got, you know, disciplinary action for that. So those, those were some of the things that I went through. So when I went to my first board, right, in spite of numerous, supp...I mean support across the board, from community leaders, politicians, prison officials. Just because I was convicted of an A1 felony, which was a violent crime, the parole board denied me release. And one of the parole commissioners said to me that, as a society we don't know what to do with violent offenders. We don't know if we should execute you, right, or, right, parole you, right. Unfortunately New York State does not have the death penalty any more. At that time New York State didn't have the death penalty no more unless you was convicted for killing, serving a life sentence and then you was convicted for killing a correctional officer [MN: Right.] So we're not sure what we want to do with people like yourself. And so I heard this over and over and over again. I went to, right, so deny me, hit me with two years, right. Went back two years later. Hit me with two more, went back two more, two more, two more, two more, right. It wasn't until my eighth board. [MN: Eight, gees.] But you know what there's something biblical about that because, right. Seven is the number of completion biblically, right [MN: Uh huh]. And then eight is the number of newness. So after seven denials, right, I ran a complete circle and then on the eighth one they decided that after twenty-nine years, after being one of the first persons in New York State to receive, right, a undergraduate degree, as a Bachelor's right, having graduated from New York Theological Seminary, maybe, just maybe, I was ready to make that transition back to the community. And so in 2006 I was released from Queensborough Correctional Facility into a new world, right, of cell phones, metro cards. I mean I still had a token [MN laughing] in my property. As I was arrested, you know they kept all your property. I still had a token that was maybe twenty cents, twenty-five cents. But now with metro cards and cell phones, and... so I had a lot of learning to do [MN: Right.] real quick.

MN: But, see, but somehow I look at you and there's coming out of you all this positive feeling. And how... that to me is, you know, cause that's gonna reach the young people. Once they saw what you went through, which, God knows, if anybody else could have survived without, you know, cracking, and you're coming out smiling, filled with love, and generosity. That... that's gonna reach even the hardest core person.

WT: Yes, for a number of years [MN: Jesus] I worked with Reverend Dr. C. Vernon Mason, most people know him [MN: Right] as C. Vernon Mason, he was a notable civil rights attorney in New York and in fact he defended one of the students at Columbia University [MN: Right, yes], right, during that time [MN: Uh huh]. I worked with him running a youth prevention program. And he was one that would tell, right, the young people like, this man can speak authentically, right, to your situation because he's been places where he don't want you to go. And when they would question me, and you know, because a lot of times I would wear a suit, tie [MN: Right], present myself well. I didn't want, like, the myth of the incarcerated person returning to the community, you know I wanted to offset that. And they were like, how could you speak to my situation. And I would look them in the eye and say, right: Because I did 29 years in New York State correctional facility. As a first time offender, right. And that's not something I want you to do. That's not something I want you to go through. And if I never had their attention before, when they heard that number, right, it made them stop, and then they had to assess, right: Is he real, is he telling me the truth? [MN: Mm hmm.] And then when I talked about my life in prison, right, they knew [MN: Mm hmm] I were telling them the truth [MN: Yeah.]. This wasn't TV, this wasn't no commercial. This was real life.

MN: I'm going to pay you another compliment because I'm thinking about the aura you do and the person who comes to mind is Nelson Mandela. Who came... my, my world-fame.. my, my all-time favorite movie is Invictus, have you...? [WT: Yes.] I'm a sports guy like you. When he figures out that the only way you can bring the Africaners out is for rugby, and you have to convince these people who they saw rugby as the enemy, the oppressors, the murderers [WT: Yeah.], but because of what he had experienced, they trusted him. And he also conveyed that aura of the positive, and I think, it just, as I said it's an extraordinarily powerful gift to people who are angry to see somebody who has been through more than they've [been] through and can set aside the anger.

WT: Nelson Mandela's a hero of mine. Watching his release from prison while I was in prison, right, and I remember when they took him back to his hometown and, I wrote about this in our prison newspaper [MN: laughing] how the young people that wasn't even born was out in the street shouting his name, celebrating his release, filled with so much hope because of who he was and what he stood for, and now that their hero was out they were just so filled with promise

[MN: Mm hmm]. And I remember in my own journey, my release, this young lady I knew who also, right, grew up with me, and when I'd gone to visit my mother in the same development, Martin Luther King, right, on, you know, the first day of my release, she seen me as I was getting out of the car and she came running, right, towards me and just jumped on me and, you know, I had to catch her, this is not like, you know, a child, you know. I had to catch her and she just wrapped her arms and legs around me and she said, "Willy, you're my hero." And I mean, I had this like, no, no, no. Lillian, I'm not your hero. I'm not, right. Because I believe I failed, right, a whole generation of young people. I failed, right, my family. I failed people that believed in me and trusted me. These was my feelings, right. This was my perception and I just knew like, and I wasn't always loving. There was a period of me that got me by with hatred and anger.

MN: That's inside.

WT: Right, when I was inside [MN: Yeah, yeah] , yes, right. I mean for the first seven, eight, nine years of my incarceration I lived on hate and anger. I would wake up six o'clock in the morning and do, right, one thousand push-ups, right, one thousand sit-ups, right there in my cell, in this little, you know, eight by eight container, right. Right, because right, I just, you know. That was my mindset. It wasn't 'til, right, I was transferred to Eastern Correctional Facility and someone, a correction officer, right, who happened to be a female of color, right, who like, I, she was my supervisor. I worked for her, I was her clerk. She, like, I would just come in every day and just go through the motions of doing what I had to do. And, you know, I make it a point to be good at what I do, otherwise I don't think I would do it [MN: Right.] So I would do my work both efficiently and effectively. And, right, for the rest of the day I would just be there, I wouldn't try to have a conversation or anything, right. In my mind, you represented the system, right, you was the enemy, right, and I was like a captive. And then one day she like, just came into my space and said, "Excuse me, Mr. Thomas, right, you need to let that hate go. It's killing you." [MN: Hmm.] And I have a response for it because I was like, I knew that was driving me, but I didn't know it was so evident to outside eyes. And when I went back to, to my cell I just gave it some thought. And then the next day when I reported to my workspace I'm like, "What did you mean by that?" She said, you don't look like a person that grew up in hate, but yet you know, you're letting this consume you. And I, I gave it some thought, right and my hate was [shown?] towards, right, people who I felt was betrayed me, right. Who testified against me,

people I grew up with, right, that took the stand, right, for no reason in my mind, you know, at the time and said, yeah, he told me he did it. Yes, I seen him do it. And in some cases, right, or in one particular case, one person actually lied, and I couldn't understand like, you know, I was like a brother to you, you was like a brother to me, right. Why would you lie, you know? Because if the shoe was on the other foot, and I mean here I'm not talking about being guilt or innocent [MN: Mm hmm], I'm talking, here is principle. If the shoe was on the other foot, there's no way I would lie and say something that I didn't know was true. I didn't understand that. And I remember in this one, in this particular case, I reached out by letter to the person and asked him, right, how could you lie on me like that? And his response was, I'm sorry, but I had the police hit me a couple of times, and slap me and knock my glasses off, right. I couldn't take it no more. You was always stronger than me. He wrote that letter to me in 1978. I still have that letter today [MN: Mmm]. Right. I have since sat and talked with him, right. Because I do believe that if I ask for forgiveness, I have to be ready to forgive [MN: Mm hmm]. So, I did go through a period of my time where hate and anger was my driving force [MN: Mm hmm]. But I'm so thankful that people came into my life, and I do believe that people come into your life for one of two reasons, is it to make you stronger? Or to test you? And when they test you, if you survive the test, you become stronger. And so those times when I've been tested have prepared me and made me a better warrior for, right, the ongoing battles that I fight.

MN: Yeah, wow. Lisa, Sarah, do you have any...?

LB: Yeah, so I do some of this work. Well, I used to do some nonprofit correctional-type work... [?] and support students because there's an NYU prison education program where they can get an Associate's Degree [WT: Yes]. And then I helped out with, at Horizons with the youth there, did some programming down there with them. And I have an uncle that was incarcerated for twenty-something years and now is deported. But my question is with the probation process, just when I'm meeting people, knowing, you know, what my uncle went through with his probation, his probation was deportation, but then also meeting kids here and meeting adults going through such incredible programming, but knowing that when they go outside, outside of the prison process, outside the prison is another process they have to go through. You can't... you know, they say, okay, you can't connect with anybody that has been formerly incarcerated as well. Well, if you live in a certain neighborhood [WT: Yes] or if you have certain family members,

that's like... it's very difficult to navigate within those boundaries. So how long was your probation period, your period of probation, and then how did you kind of get through all those hoops, and you know because they try to reincarcerate people? That's the highest rate of reincarceration is probation.

WT: So when I was released I was released with the stipulation that I would have lifetime parole, probation I would be on. Which, again was challenging, right. Because I am a grown person. I had curfew, I had to be in, right, at 9 o'clock at night. I couldn't leave the house until 6 o'clock in the morning. So, right from those hours I had to be in. They mandated me although inside I, I train people in the AVP, alternative to violence program, right. I train people in aggressive replacement techniques. I did re...reentry programming. I've helped people get ready for job programs, right, I mean. And I was even successful in getting a couple of people, getting their case reviewed and reversed, right. And so...

LB: While you were incarcerated?

WT: While I was incarcerated. And when I came out one of the, I had a job already lined up for me and I was going to be outreach for a good take in program back into facilities, right, cultural programs, educational programs, athletic programs, like taking basketball teams inside the facilities and let them play against other basketball teams inside, you know. But when I came out parole mandated that I take, right, an aggression replacement training program, which to me was like: the irony of it, is like, I train people in doing this [Laughing]. And what was further just crazy is like I went to a place in the Bronx, VIP, right, the VIP program, who had an aggression replacement training program going there for people coming back home. And I walk in there and the facilitator was someone I trained on their side. And so he thought I was working with an agency and I was like coming in to monitor to see how well he was carrying out the principles of aggression replacement. And you know like, "Oh Willie, how you doing?" I'm like, "Okay, you know." He says, "Wow, what they have you here to monitor me?" I'm like, "No, did you look at your roster?" And he's like, "No." I'm like, "I'm here in the program." He's like, "No." And I'm like, "Yeah." So I had that stipulation. So it, it, it was hard. And I think two years, no excuse me after three years I applied for early discharge. By that time I had received a couple of citations from the New York City, the New York City Council for outstanding citizenship with my work with young people, with my work in the community. And so the...Inez Jenkins who was a city

council member awarded me with a citation, right. And then C. Virginia Fields. I was honored by Charlie Rangel. And so, right. they denied me early release from parole and told me to reapply again in two years. And so two years later after thirty-five years of being out in the community, again doing this work, living an outstanding life, no violations, never missed a curfew, right. I knew I had, cause I'm like, I'm not going back. I was like, I'm not going back. I had to pay thirty dollars every time I went to parole, there's a fee, right. I made sure I had my money order, here go my thirty dollars, right, they would take a urine test., right, you know, come on, here go my urine test, my thirty dollars. So after five years I was discharged from parole.

MN: Five years.

WT: Yeah. So no more supervision. It was just like, I'm out, I'm out. I go see my parole officer. And she's like, "Willie, I'm sorry, I should have called you, right, but you no longer have to report." I'm like, "What do you mean?" She's like, "You've been discharged, right, from parole." So, I mean, that's where there was light for me. I was committed not to give them any problems. And then, right, after working with C. Vernon Mason I worked with IKEA, I was on the board of directors with IKEA Interfaith Coalition of Advocates for Reentry and Employment. I helped set up a lot of prison ministries within the faith community. I had a number of faith communities sign on to our Restoration and Rights Platform. IKEA also was successful in getting Governor Pataki, right, the first pro-piece of legislation that he signed was just a rewriting of correctional and saying that the, the goal of New York state was rehabilitation. And so we was able to argue that if the goal of New York state is rehabilitation, then when does that start? And it should start from the moment a person is received into the system. And so if so then we need to improve our educational [MN: Mm hmm.] programs. We need to restore college. We need to, right, put in some real vocational programming that when people come out they can get jobs within the sectors that's hiring. So we was able to make that argument and then I was offered a position with Fifth Neighborhood, right, where I'm doing my work at today. The mission of Fifth Neighborhood is to end poverty, right. So it's a grand mission, right, end poverty, right, eradicate poverty, right, and so by working with young people and keeping them out of the correctional facility, right, helping them get jobs, right, we are working towards that goal, right. And I feel like we, I mean last year we served 12,000 people in different programs. [MN: Wow.] Because we work with people from entrance to senior citizens, across the board. And I mean that has

nothing to do with my Arches Transformative Mentoring Program, but what we find is that a person grandmotherly assistance their mother might need a high school education program so we get people internship, pre-internship positions. We have job readiness programs. And we and a number of community schools, helping young people get their high school diplomas.

MN: Wow. Well we've been at this a long time. And I think we have something on camera that is a lot of power. I want to thank you for joining us but most of all thank you for being you and for being somebody who is changing lives all the time. I'm, it's, it's very moving to me. I'm just proud that we all were able to do this, you know, and... I just want to give you a hug, because I think... [The two hug.]

WT: Thank you, thank you for letting me tell my story.

MN: Jesus. Yeah, I mean, yeah.