

Interview conducted on March 1, 1976.

I: I'm interviewing Willard McRae, Administrative Director of Middlesex Community Mental Health Center. Good Morning, Mr. McRae. First of all I'd like some background information. Could you tell me why your family moved here? I understand you are a native of Middletown. What your life was in the beginning?

A: Well, let's see. My folks came from North Carolina and I don't know the exact date that they moved here. My father had been, had worked in New Haven prior to World War I and then went into the Service and after that came back to this area, I think. I think he first came to the New Britain area. At that time there was a brick yard and I think that's where he worked first and that was in the early 20's. And let me just say this, what you have in Middletown is direct migration, people coming from a particular area or a particular state to Middletown. And usually that was to be with relatives or friends, that is, a relative returned to the South and brought back his friends and relatives because there was employment in the area; and so I assume that my father followed somewhat that-- he either came with a friend or he came to this area because he knew something about Connecticut from his prior working experiences and then moved from New Britain to Cromwell, I believe, and then finally to Middletown, and we've been here ever since.

Q: So in your early life you lived in Cromwell?

A: No, no. Let's see, I have, let's see, my oldest sister was born in New Britain Hospital when apparently my family was living in Berlin or somewhere at the time; and then the rest of us were born in Middlesex Hospital so that I was born in Middletown since my family was living here, and we've been here ever since.

Q: So you attended Middletown schools?

A: Right, yes.

Q: What was the school system like? How did they respond to you?

A: Well, the-- that's a difficult question. I had a sister who was pretty bright. Well, I was the youngest in a family of five children and I guess my older brothers and sisters were about two years older than I am so that, and then there were three of us, we were about three years apart, three or four years apart, something like that. My early memories of school is that, you know, I was the younger brother of my two siblings and the third child was the one that was a couple of years older than I was. He was really pretty bright so that my brother had the ability but was more mischievous and I suppose the school system kind of waited to see where I would fall, more like my brother or more like my sister, you know. My early experiences of school were pleasant, I guess. Most of my school life was fairly pleasant. I don't know that I can really

Q: Well, tell me something, when did you first realize that you were black?

A: I don't know. I suspect that I've always known that. The black population of Middletown was very small but there were black churches and there were, well, in my youth I guess there was only the black church as an institution, a black institution. And at that point, you know, we studied, to a limited degree, black history. Most of it centered around the AME Zion Church and its heroes and then, I guess, I'm trying to think of

when the Christian Endeavor started. That was an evening youth fellowship group and I imagine that I was in early adolescence, I guess, when that started. It was started by Reverend Babbidge. I don't know if it was started by him. I guess it was always part of the AME Zion Church, but it was certainly revived by him and had some impact on my identity and, well, I guess, that had to do with my age at the time that I was old enough to be a part of that. And there we studied about what it meant to be black, who were the black heroes, what led to the various racial problems of that time. And then there was the NAACP, and I participated in that, so that you know my folks were from the South and they talked about the differences between the blacks in the North and the blacks in the South and the whole Negro NAACP advancement that those in the South were, you know, black undertakers there, black businessmen, black everything there as opposed to what existed in the North. I think that when my sister made her decision to go to college she chose Hampton Institute because she wanted to be a part of a black community.

Q: When you say your sister, you're referring to (Vivian)?

A: Yes, right, right. And so I think that my folks brought, you know, awareness and a sense of our heritage which we couldn't see in Middletown because there were no models. The only professional person () was the minister and most of them were only professionals on Sundays; they had jobs other times.

Q: Can you tell me something about your post secondary education?

A: Yes, I went to Central Connecticut State College. That's what it is called now. At that time it was called New Britain State Teachers' College. The decision to go there was a very simple one. It was the cheapest one in the area and, you know, I commuted and worked nights and went there during the day. One of the things, I guess, that was unfortunate about that is that I had very little opportunity to interact with students on the campus. I went there sometimes to take my first class and I stayed until my final class was over. I came home and went to work, so that I don't remember too much about college life as I never participated to any great extent in college life. It was simply a matter of going there, taking courses and coming home and working and studying and, you know, doing the same things each day; and that's about the extent of it.

Q: Throughout the years, and throughout your college career, what sort of activities were available? What were some of the activities you participated in with black (students)?

A: I had a very active high school, you know, extra-curricular-activity life. But in college, well, you know, I didn't have the time to participate in anything. There were a number of activities. I always remember, I remember one classmate who participated in student government and probably some other activities. I think that there were, let's see, there were only, I'm sure there were not more than seven or eight blacks on the campus at the time that I was there and that was from 1951-1955. And there were some female students who lived there. I don't know what activities they were in. I remember in my freshman year that there was one black woman, Wendy something-or-other, I don't remember her name now, who was very active in a lot of activities but I saw her very rarely. I just knew that she was active in things. And then this one classmate that I had and the other male students who I remember participated, or didn't participate really,

were doing the same thing that I was doing. They were coming there for classes and going home to work and studying and that was the extent of college life.

Q: What about black people in Middletown as far as activities other than the church and religious activities? Were there other social activities?

A: Well, no, not until rather recently. The only organizations that I remember as a young person are the ones which I have mentioned, the church, the NAACP. In my church, there were a few churches, and then, oh, about twenty years ago, I guess, a group of black women organized the (Socialites) Social Club which, you know, contributes to some of the, I guess, black charities in the community. And there have been a number of attempts at starting male black clubs but I don't think there's been a sustained, well, I guess there has been a sustained effort, but I don't know of any black male club that's twenty years old. Well, let's see, there probably are three or four black clubs now with a small membership and then, I guess, there are a couple of, or not a couple, a few people in town who belong to the Masons, but I assume that they meet somewhere else. I don't think there's any chapter or union, or whatever they call it, in Middletown. They're probably associated with a group in New Britain or Hartford or someplace.

Q: I don't like to skip around, but are you familiar with the problem with the Elks Club? Would you like to comment on that?

A: Well, my position, I wrote a letter to the United Fund and in that letter I said that the, I asked the United Fund to consider the fact that the Elks Club had a policy of quote, "White Males Only" for membership, so I asked them, I pointed out that I felt that this was inconsistent with any policy or practice of the United Fund and I knew that it wasn't the practice of the United Fund because it goes to the entire community for its funds. And I felt that it should hold its annual meeting, which is a celebration to some degree, at a location which adhered to the same principles and policies and practices of the Fund. That was my position. I went on to say that I felt that it was the responsibility of any public or quasi-public organization or any individual elected to public office to act affirmatively. Now that was the extent of my involvement. The question has come up that, and I'm asked what have I got against the Elks? I don't have anything against the Elks; that's not the issue. The Elks are not violating any laws. The issue is the kinds of decisions that elected officials of public organizations, or quasi-public, any organization that goes to the entire community for its funds, or says it is serving the entire community, ought to act affirmatively. By that I mean it should not place itself in the position of being aligned with an organization that doesn't adhere to the principles that it espouses. That was my position on the United Fund dinner. That was my argument in the position statement.

Q: Well, currently, by being administrative director of this Mental Community Services Center, as well as being a Councilman, have you been more or less a stepping stone for other black individuals? When I say that, I mean--

A: Well, back in the 60's Edgar Beckham and I started a tutorial program because we were concerned that so few blacks were going on to secondary education and post-secondary education. So we tried to offer some program that helped those people who needed to develop better skills so that school would be more of a success experience.

And we tried to motivate those who had the ability to reach out for something better than just a, well, I don't know if I should say better, but something that was more commensurate with their skills, that if they had the ability to go on to higher education we thought they should do that; and we tried to find the resources that would enable them to do that. And shortly after the tutorial program began, Reverend Babbidge and Mrs. Babbidge spearheaded the effort to develop a Greater Middletown Negro Scholarship Fund. So we went to the community and we raised the money and we gave scholarships based on need, and I think this has made a crucial and critical difference between most other scholarships. We really didn't care how bright a student was or how dull he was really, so long as a school accepted him, we were willing to help him meet his remaining financial needs. For example, we found that some schools could provide complete tuition and living expenses for students but they didn't have any money for books, so we provided the books. O.K., so in that sense, yeah, I think I've had a real impact on the increased number of black students, or people, who have gone on to college.

Q: Tell me, when you were in high school, did you attend Middletown High School?

A: Yes, Middletown High School.

Q: How many blacks were there?

A: Well, oh, less than ten, probably one-half of that, probably less than one-half of that, but I just don't remember, four to six.

Q: How many students out of 140 high school students, something like that. Of those four to six students, black students, how many attended college?

A: One.

Q: That was it?

A: Yeah, right. If you have a motivation you get an inspiration from your home and they wanted you to do something.

Q: What happens to these other students?

A: Well, they go to work. No, wait a minute, there was one other male who went, two other males who went to, three males, all of them, I think, went to, well, I think there were two other males who graduated with me. The third one, I think, dropped out of school but, anyhow, two males went into the Service and I'm not sure whether one or two females went on to school at that point or whether, I say school, or either in business or nursing. I don't remember that after twenty-five years. But, anyhow, eventually one of the females did some post-secondary work either in business or in the health service or someplace. I don't know exactly.

Q: So by the time you were of college age, had the revelation of being black and encountering obstacles as far as continuing college, had that made an imprint on you?

A: Well, the obstacles were, the major obstacle was no money or, at least I won't say no money, but certainly--

Q: But your race was an obstacle? Is that what you're saying?

A: Well, you know, I applied to a college, got accepted and went. Now I don't think it was entirely by accident that there were so few black students on campus, so that I'm not saying because I went that's evidence of a free and open society. I'm sure, you know, out of a student body of eleven or twelve hundred, I think, I can't remember a time when there were ever any more than one-half dozen or so black people on campus. So that says something about opportunities, about the kind of guidance that was going on in the schools; admissions quotas and everything. I don't know, but I'm certainly, I'm certain that at the time there were in the whole State of Connecticut, there were more than six or seven blacks who could have matriculated in a state, at a state teacher's college.

Q: So what was the level of your relationship with classmates, with professors, the administration? How were you viewed? Were you patronized? How did you deal with them?

A: Well, that's a--you know, my interaction was minimal. I went there to classes, came home and went to work. My--I had a very positive and strong relationship with one professor who was in Sociology. I remember now you asked me about some activities, but I do remember doing some special community projects surveys and around particular issues at the time for samplings to predict the way in which the City of Middletown would vote in presidential, the City of New Britain, I'm sorry, would vote in the presidential election. I guess that's about the only extra activity I remember being in. I had a very close relationship with the Sociology professor. The others, I guess, just knew the students in the class. I can't say that I had a relationship with any of the others. I got to know the chairman of the Social Science Department because I had to go in there and chat with him, you know, about course programs or planning; but I don't remember any other, yeah, I remember one positive relationship that extended beyond my college days and that was with the Sociology professor.

Q: You mentioned both. What was the level of political activity in Middletown?

A: In Middletown? Well, I think that the great awareness of the political process and the impact of politics on the black community came about in, oh, 1960, or someplace around there, when urban renewal was occurring and, you know, the impression of the black community was that suddenly this decision to literally do away with a great deal of black housing was made without any plan for relocation, and at that time Mayor Cubeta was running for mayor on the Republican ticket. I don't remember who the Democratic candidate was but, anyhow, Reverend Babbidge had come to town and he had been active in politics in New York. So he organized the black community to register Republican and to vote for Mayor Cubeta who had made the promise that if he were elected he would open up some temporary housing that had been closed. The temporary housing was known as Veteran's Terrace and it was, oh, just up the street from the low income project that is known as part of the Long River Village now. Anyhow, he had made a promise to open up this housing that had been closed to house the blacks who were displaced. I say blacks--there were no white people left at that point. The solution which the Democratic administration had proposed was to erect what was known as Tent City with some, you know, uninhabitable tents, really, in the spring of the year when the public playground is a marshland. You know, these tents were erected on some wooden foundations, maybe

six to eight inches off the grassy area, which was not much more than slop at that time of the year, to house families. This was the only solution. No families moved into those tents because they doubled up with relatives and some of them lived in the church and just did whatever they could until better housing was made available. But I think that was probably the real beginning of black participation in the political life of the community and since then, I guess, since then there have been a few blacks who served on, you know, commissions or committees. You got very few until probably the last four or five years. I think that number has increased considerably and now, of course, you have Barbara Davidson who is on the school board and I'm on the Common Council. We were both elected in 1971 for the first time. Prior to Barbara's election to the school board, I guess, Dr. Bridgeford had been elected a few years before that and he was replaced by Ernestine Brown who, you know () on the Board of Education ().

Q: Tell me, currently there are approximately 30 black teachers out of 387, and in the system there is one black principal--I believe there is a black principal. In your eyes, is this an improvement over the years? Do you think it could be improved upon? Are there efforts being made to improve these figures?

A: You know, one of the--obviously there is more opportunity, probably for ()here is a ready market, or had been a ready market, for upward mobility and I think that the teaching jobs are held by many people in the second generation people. I think in some ways you have to view the blacks' coming up from the rural South as a, in the same way that we viewed the first generation immigrant candidates in Middletown, so that many of their children have become teachers and thereby, you know, enhanced their economic positions. Now, I guess, you mentioned that there were probably thirty black teachers. Now, I don't know how many of those are local, probably very, very few; and that's very disturbing to me because you know there have been a lot of black students who have gone through the system, some have graduated, some hadn't, through the educational system. But I really think that the system, Middletown's educational system, should have produced a lot more black professionals, or black teachers in this instance, than it has, and that's pretty disturbing to me that most of the--that in order to acquire black teachers, which I think are essential to the educational system, Middletown has had to recruit from other communities and because it hasn't produced its own, there's something that needs to be improved. There's something wrong with an educational system that can't produce, or doesn't produce, an X-number of teachers.

Q: Tell us something, by being a member of the Middletown Council, what political implications or restraints are you encountering, or have you encountered, over the last few years? Now, what I'm saying is there a Party, well, bi-partisan influence--

A: Well, I suppose that, well, I guess my allegiance is really to those things that I believe in and I haven't been subjected to any pressure to modify those beliefs, but you act consistently with those beliefs. You know, on occasion, they haven't been the same beliefs as the party, but that's, you know, that's the way it has been. I don't see myself as a real political person so that I measure what I do by the impact, the political impact, that it might have. I try to do what I believe is best for the community and if that's consistent with the political party's views, fine. If it's inconsistent with the political party's views, then, I guess, I have to assume responsibility for that, but that's the way I choose to

behave.

Q: Are you familiar with the Wesleyan Upward Bound Program?

A: Yeah.

Q: Now, have you worked with the program? What is your opinion of the program?

A: Well, I was one of a few people who sat around the planning session some nine or ten years ago and, you know, encouraged the development of the Upward Bound Program. The Upward Bound Program was a kind of a logical outgrowth of the tutorial program. It provided staff and other resources to be the kind of thing that Edgar Beckham and I were trying to do with volunteers; so I was very much in favor of Upward Bound. Clearly there was a need and I've supported it since its beginning. I have been very close to Upward Bound, their advisory board, I guess () program and played a much more active role in recruiting the students, identifying the student who (). But I was much more active that way.

Q: What transitional () was Upward Bound ()?

A: Well, I guess you'd have to talk to Peter (Brundage?, Babbidge?) to really get the answer to that. I don't know how to respond to that question. What I remember about it, you know, continues to hold and that is that it tried to discover those students in the town, low income students, who had an ability that was perceived by someone else other than the educational system of measuring "IQ", quote unquote, and I try to turn that student on to higher, to attaining higher, educational goals. I assume that that's still true but I don't know how, I'm not, I don't have any idea of how the students now, and their backgrounds, compare to the original students. I would hope that the students who are now involved in Upward Bound come with a more adequate formal kind of background. I would hope that the educational system has been more responsive to their needs. That's all, but I don't know whether they're better prepared at the time they get involved in Upward Bound and the other students by being better prepared in the formal sense. I think that the students who selected for the original Upward Bound had the potential. I don't think that their skills have been honed sharply as they might have been had they had a different kind of experience.

Q: Well, maybe you can enlighten me from a political and social point of view? Would you see the goals and objectives of Upward Bound being completely and totally altruistic, or are there political and governmental implications as far as the funding, etc, of Upward Bound?

A: Let's see. There are a lot of parts to that question. I suppose there is a little bit of everything that you mentioned. A little bit of altruism, a little bit of political reality. What were the other things that we mentioned involved in a program of that size? Why don't you reword that?

Q: What I'm saying is that government funds for programs such as Upward Bound and many programs like this across the country, it gets to the point where these people employed by this program, or what have you, they depend on this for their

salary, their livelihood. Now what happens in the interim as far as Upward Bound being for the students and then becoming a livelihood for so many people? Where is the emphasis being placed?

A: Well--

Q: Is it still with the student, or is it still with maintaining employment for so many thousands?

A: It's both, and it has to be. The people who are employed in Upward Bound, I'm sure, would fight as hard as anyone would to maintain, you know, the employment so that's a, that's no different from any other program. I still think that, well, I know, I don't think I know it, because I do interact to some degree with the students who are involved with the local Upward Bound and with their parents and I think that the students involved and the parents or the families would come see Upward Bound as providing the missing link between the student fulfilling his potential and the students not fulfilling his potential. But I think the political reality, the economic reality that you mentioned, would be present in this program as in any program. You know, I think it's naive to think that employment, or that the people involved in these programs, don't have some kind of personal investment, that it is their means of sustaining themselves. I don't have any more to add on the Upward Bound Program. I think it's a pretty good program. I think it has obtained its goal in Middletown. I think that there are some people working there and I guess when I respond to the economics of this I think I'm talking more about the program as a national program. I think the local program employs, you know, very few people, and I'd be hard-pressed to believe that the two or three people who are working for Upward Bound in Middletown couldn't find jobs in other places at comparable salaries. So, I think that nationally, yeah, but more so than locally.

I: Fine. Thank you very much for your answer.