

- Courtney Waters:* We are interviewing Miss Sue Reid Williams. It is July 28, 2009 at 10:00. I just want to thank you, Miss Williams for participating in our interview. And I guess we want to start with some basic questions about your life and where you grew up. So, before that, could you tell us what your name is?
- Sue Williams:* Sue Reid Williams. Mrs. Robert Williams.
- Courtney Waters:* Okay and what year were you born?
- Sue Williams:* 1924.
- Courtney Waters:* And where were you born and raised?
- Sue Williams:* In Memphis, actually I was born at **Gardly Ramsey** Hospital, which is now being torn down, but I think that's **Memorial** Memphis.
- Courtney Waters:* Yes, thank you. What was your occupation?
- Sue Williams:* Advertising. I was, for the longest time before I retired, Advertising Director with Julius Lewis. That, too, is no longer in existence.
- Courtney Waters:* Oh, wow. And who were your parents?
- Sue Williams:* **Sue Rupes** of Memphis
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- and Neil Gordon Reid of Kentucky.
- Courtney Waters:* What were their occupations?
- Sue Williams:* Well Mother was a homemaker and Daddy was mostly a salesman, but ended up as office manager. In fact, he was in the old Armstrong Furniture Company, which is now the Lowenstein Building -. Well, it was the Lowenstein Building as built, and they just restored it. It's the one at the corner of Jefferson and Main. I played in that when I was little.
- Courtney Waters:* Did you have any brothers and sisters?
- Sue Williams:* Nope.
- Mackenzie Zalin:* Now we're gonna talk a little about your experiences growing up. What was the neighborhood like that you grew up in?

*Sue Williams:* Really pretty much like it is right now. It's pretty much the same except that it was probably a little safer for kids to play out after dark, up and down the neighbors' yards.

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*Mackenzie Zalin:* And did you grow up in the Evergreen neighborhood?

*Sue Williams:* I'm living in the same house I grew up in.

*Mackenzie Zalin:* Oh, my goodness. Wow.

*Sue Williams:* My grandmother built it in 1910.

*Mackenzie Zalin:* 1910. So roughly when did your family move in?

*Sue Williams:* When they built it in 1910.

*Mackenzie Zalin:* Same time. My goodness. So what was your home life like growing up?

*Sue Williams:* Wonderful. I lived with my parents, my aunt and uncle, my grandmother, most of the time a great aunt from Mississippi was also visiting us. And we had good neighbors and school, I enjoyed thoroughly. I really did. I liked school. I went to a small private school.

This was just at the beginning of the Depression, so I got through two private schools and then a public school. Although my daddy said it was time that I got out and saw the real world, anyway,

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but Miss **Ella Cook**'s was a small, private school, five years. It's under the parking lot at Mississippi Boulevard now. I mean, that's where it stood.

Then Miss **Mushinlips** was the next one and it was even smaller and it was on **Idlewilde** in a house. We were all in the living room. I think there must've been about 12 or 15 of us. But those were good basics. I got through high school and then college a great deal of what I learned right there.

*Mackenzie Zalin:* What were some of the other activities you were involved in, in childhood?

*Sue Williams:* Playing. We didn't do things like we do now. I keep wondering when do you get time in the summer to just go out and lay in the

grass and look at the sky and make clover chains and just play? I mean, you know, when you're really little, we played with our dolls and then we had little clubs

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and we just went over to each other's houses and put on -. We actually put plays and made funny things we sold to the neighbors for a nickel or a dime, you know, big money those days.

You didn't – I'm reiterating what I said. You did not do as many organized things. I mean, Sunday school, but we didn't go on tours or – at least I and my friends didn't. We didn't go on things that were so structured. It was just looser. You had to use your mind, entertain yourself. Nobody was going to entertain you or tell you how to do it.

*Mackenzie Zalin:*

What were some of your memories associated with the Depression? You talked about going to private school at that time. Does anything really stand in your mind, particular experiences?

*Sue Williams:*  
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Now the Depression

didn't hit our family as hard because we had two men in the family and they were both working. What did, and it was later in the Depression, it actually hit me. People came by and asked for food. Well that just was what people who didn't have jobs did. They came by and asked for food and you gave it to them. Until, and we had a cook, who lived in a house in the back yard, and she lived on what we did. I was not really aware of hunger until I saw her crying.

She had given a sandwich to a man and his child and wife were on the street and Naomi was crying and she said, "Grown people don't worry me, but I can't stand to see children hungry." And that was the first time it really hit me that those people were hungry. I mean, I had just

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accepted that they came by and we gave them food, but it hadn't come through in a sense of sensibility sort of way that people were hungry and that was, I guess, the thing that really made me think that there were people out there hungry.

*Mackenzie Zalin:*

You talked about your experiences in private schools. What was your high school life like and subsequent education? How did that differ? Did you go to a public school for high school?

*Sue Williams:*

Oh, I went to Central.

*Mackenzie Zalin:* Central, yes.

*Sue Williams:* I still feel that **slub**. You know Central is the high school that has an H on its sweaters because was the high school and in fact, my mother had gone to Central. And the woman, Miss **Anna Moller**, who was Assistant Principal when I went, called -. I was a much **more quieter child**

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and kinda shy. And she called me down to the Principal's office.

I was petrified. I had just started. What had I done? I went down to the Principal's office and Miss Anna said, "Sue, I just hope you're a better student than your mother was." I was really glad and actually, I was. Mother had fun in school.

*Mackenzie Zalin:* Do you remember segregation or issues of race impacting your educational experience at all? Was that a consideration at Central?

*Sue Williams:* No.

*Mackenzie Zalin:* No.

*Sue Williams:* It just wasn't. I mean, Booker T was green and gold like we were and let's see, there was -. And I honestly don't remember what the other big African-American school, at the time was, but it had the same colors as **Pick**, and you know it was just a comparable, they were each other's main rivals just as

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we were, but we weren't rivals this way. And we had a cook and she was black, but she was also part of the family. I know this has been said a lot of times and it's not meant - I say it because it was true. There was just a lot of love. It was a much more, and maybe it, just looking down, maybe family.

Well parents were down on children, so I don't get into a big **sweat** over that, because it wasn't meant that way. I mean, I know that **Elanora** who helped raise me, she would've died. You know she would've put herself in the street in front of a car just as much as my mother would and I would run into her arms just as much to Mother's. So without any sense of what was right or wrong, it was just

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in my recollection, in a way I felt is was just a lot of love. I didn't know what was out there. I didn't know what was happening to other people. That was outside my realm.

*Mackenzie Zalin:* Did religion play a role in your life growing up?

*Sue Williams:* Mm-hmm. I went to, still do, go to Evergreen Presbyterian. My mother taught the kindergarten or cradle role, that's even smaller, I'd say. And I went right on through there, joined the church, started teaching Sunday school classes when I was in my teens, I think, and taught any kind of Sunday school classrooms. I quit teaching the children when it became an arts and crafts type teaching. I'm a talker. I don't draw on walls.

*[Laughter]*

*Mackenzie Zalin:* Did you have any role models growing up, people you really looked up to

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outside of your family, perhaps?

*Sue Williams:* Oh, one woman I dearly loved outside my family was Miss **Carolyn McGee**. She was – I love tall people because I was growing up to be tall and I liked anybody, I think looking back, you know, tall people were wonderful. And Miss Carolyn McGee was an old maid. I guess she would be the first to tell you. She lived down, just outside of Como at McGee Station in Mississippi. Como was about 40, 50 miles south of Memphis. Certainly I understand it's getting to be a popular bedroom community to Memphis, now, that it's building up.

But anyway, it was just a sleepy little country town then. And she lived on a plantation with a house that had been built just at the time of the Civil War. And Miss Carolyn had a sign on the gate as you went off the highway, it said, "Keep out Bad dog, **worse on ladies.**"

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*(Laughter)* She was my grandmother's good friend. She was the first person I visited when I went and spent a night away from home. You may have to cut some of this out, because I'm going on so long, but she did not have electricity. She had lamps.

And we stopped on the way down there and got what I still remember as the best meal I ever ate in my life. We got a box of foil covered chocolate kisses and she had fresh milk and she let me eat all of the kisses and drank all the milk and that was my meal. I'd never had a whole chocolate meal before or since and I loved it. And she lived in a big -. It was built, you know, four rooms, central hall and a back porch.

They had a carriage on the back porch. It'd been sitting there for 100 years I guess. You know, the chickens not only

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nested in the carriage, they came in, because she put the feed on the dining room table, there would be chickens and everything else. I mean, this was not your *Gone With the Wind* type. It had gone with the wind. But she was herself. I mean I remember asking her, and I think this is where she told me to be yourself.

I said, "Miss Carolyn, if you could have a really fine painting over that fireplace, what would you like?" And she said, "I think I'd like a field of poled Herefords on green grass." This was so different from portraits, scenes. Here's somebody who could say and think what they wanted to and she did.

*Mackenzie Zalin:*

So after Central High School, did you attend a college or university?

*Sue Williams:*

I had a scholarship. I had the **Pagian** Scholarship.

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The Bookstore Scholarship from Central, which was about \$160.00. It wasn't the full \$200.00. And it would take me, at that time, Memphis State. When I took the tests, I did take one of the tests which would've helped me come here to **Rhodes**, at Southwestern at the time, but unfortunately, out of five subjects or something I took, any how, I took the one I did the worst on, so my Rhodes test grades were not as good as my overall testing grades were and so, I didn't come here, although I would've been delighted to.

*Mackenzie Zalin:*

What did you study in college?

*Sue Williams:*

Oh, I was gonna be a writer and I was going to study journalism and English. I had to take a science. Well obviously I was not going to take Biology because you had to cut up things, so I had to Chemistry,

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which was even worse because then you blew up things. And somewhere the first day I was practically in the laboratory, they told us to put the windows down. I put my window down. Somebody over there did not put their window down and consequently, something caught on fire and we had smoke and I thought, "This is not for me."

And the professor after that said, “Well why don’t you just go over and help people set up their equipment?” I didn’t have to do anything else but set up equipment and work on the answer. So I dropped at the – we were on the quarter system in those days. One quarter of Chemistry was my science. But I was strong in English and history, arts, that’s the side I like.

*Mackenzie Zalin:* So after college, did you get married?

*Sue Williams:* Oh, no. I was one of the oldest old maids in Memphis. I didn’t get married

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until ’64. I was still in my 30’s I made sure for another month or two. (*Laughter*) No, I went to work. I started in retail at Goldsmiths in their advertising department and stayed with advertising departments. If I could get another \$5.00 a week – I think I started at either \$14.00 or \$16.00 a week. I can’t remember.

It went up in small increments. I think the first raise was \$2.50. That was pretty good. But then you could eat cheaply. You bought clothes cheaply. It’s all relative. It goes in the same, I don’t know. I didn’t study economics obviously, but it all works out the same.

*Mackenzie Zalin:* Mm-hmm. What was your spouse’s occupation?

*Sue Williams:* He was trained as an architect at Auburn and became a city planner.

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He was in World War II and after – he was with the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne, if I may say so, and went from England – well, he was in every major battle except when they were in Anzio and he was not in that one. But I mean across Africa through Sicily, through all of Europe and in fact, we went back and traced some of that after we were married. He wanted me to see it. He was an architect until World War II, but that wasn’t very long and after the war, he was impressed with how they had to rebuild cities. He saw what happened in England and he was very impressed with their plans.

So he went into city planning which is a branch, in a sense, and he became a planner and then for many years worked with the Federal Housing Administration before it became HUD. It was not a political organization.

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It's much more politicized now, but back then, it was more of an insuring organization but made sure that if you bought a house that had an FHA mortgage, it was not going to sink because of flooding. It wasn't going to fall down because it hadn't been built properly. So he enjoyed doing the planning for subdivisions and covered Mississippi at one time, part of Kentucky and part West Tennessee.

*Mackenzie Zalin:* I'm fascinated by the fact that you retraced his journey through Europe. What was that like for you to share in that?

*Sue Williams:* Oh, it was really moving in many ways. He had kept a diary, not only did he have to keep the records because of his position in the unit. I don't remember the numbers, like S2 or something of that sort, where he had to keep track of who was where and what,

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in other words, how many people survived a jump, that sort of record. And he kept his own personal notes **in his purse** in this little diary. And so we had that with us. And so when we went back, we went to England, Holland, Belgium, France.

He said he wasn't going back through Africa, that I wanted to go back there, I could do that one on my own. It was an eerie place. North Africa was very eerie at that time. Everybody disappeared, sort of and you know, that was not where he was going. But, we would read the night before, his notes, and look back. We stayed with a family in San Mere Eglise, which is the first French city that was -.

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Well it was the first city, that we won back. I can't think of the word. Pushed the Germans -.

*Mackenzie Zalin:* On D-Day.

*Sue Williams:* - people out on D-Day and they had the milestone, which I remember and which moved him very much because of course he hadn't seen that. They had the Mile Marker No. 1 there and all the way to Paris, there are mile markers as the cities were freed from occupation or whatever. And they had a ceremony and all the young people in the town had armloads of flowers and they took it up and put it the mile marker. And I looked over and I could see he was not one to weep, but he teared up.

He was very good looking, six foot fellow, but very mild mannered and the last person to be a paratrooper you would ever imagine. Of course he was in the Engineers, so that was his field.



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But that impressed me enough that when I don't make a -. When I go to the cemetery, he's buried in Elmwood as is his own family, but I always get some red, white and blue flowers and I walk up and I put them down like they did at the mile marker 'cause that was such -. I hate to say that was more important than our wedding day, but it certainly – D-Day was certainly a defining day in his life.

*Mackenzie Zalin:* Getting back to your husband, did you have any children with him?

*Sue Williams:* No. He had a son by his first wife but there's no connection there.

*Mackenzie Zalin:* Alright. Courtney's going to ask you some questions about the Civil Rights era, through the '50s and '70s and a little bit about Evergreen.

*Sue Williams:* Okay.

*Courtney Waters:* Let's just talk about the entire period.

*Sue Williams:* '50s to '70s.

*Courtney Waters:* Mm-hmm.

*Sue Williams:* We have several months, I think.

[Laughter]

*Courtney Waters:*

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What was it like for you and your husband during this time? Did you feel any turmoil at all? Did you find it in any way difficult?

*Sue Williams:* Well we weren't married 'til the mid '60s. No, I can't say that I did. You're gonna find that I'm somebody that lives off in a world that doesn't seem to be there for anybody else. I was busy being at home. I quit work. I had been working for nearly 20 years. I went home to be "Sadie, Sadie, married lady", and I'm trying to learn how to boil up a stupid egg. Haven't learned it yet, but I have problems with eggs. But, you know.

And my mother was not too well, so I had a household to try and feed and instead of worrying about Civil Rights, I was worrying

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about how to get three kinds of vegetables on the plate at the same time, hot. You know, I don't think I was living in an

outside world. Now I can tell you the night Martin Luther King was shot. I remember that. Even I can't – that came through and I don't mean that in a -.

Oh well. *(Laughs)* You know, I guess I may – I don't mean to say I'm making light of great things, but you sometimes have to. But a friend and I were having supper at – if you want to know that one, because I think that's when it kind of hit. I was not going down town, by the way, during the turmoil down there. I was just like, "Why go downtown? That'd be silly." So, it was just -. So, anyway, Robert was coming in on a plane and I did call home. Without cell phones, one found a telephone somewhere and called home and I just said, "Mother, we're gonna have to pick up Robert and if it gets

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really – they were saying there might be riots. Y'all lock the doors and stay in and we'll just stay at the airport 'til it's safe to come home."

Well it turned out one of the men who was in his office was with him and so we had to take him home out in East Memphis, and then take my friend, Joyce, home and drive home. So, we were driving all over town and it was strange. There was no one on the street. I mean, in the town, now it was not downtown, this is from the airport, which is, you know where the airport is, midtown to near East Memphis and I did not see anything, like packs or things but I did see some patrols, but as I understand it, I don't think the National Guard came in 'til the next day. I'm not sure. But it was just strange to drive through Memphis with no people out there

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at all and get home safely.

But I thought of it, the unrest that was going on, and I saw it very clearly as a union situation. I did not see it as a Civil Rights situation. Having worked with unions in printing and **day tension** and all, they had tried to unionize workers in retail stores. I was and I guess you'd say still am, pretty anti-union. I will organize a thing like a neighborhood, but not in the same way that a union is organized. So, I was very much opposed to the idea of organizing municipal workers which could, you know, very tricky pile up the garbage and bring the city to a halt. That's one.

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That's the Achilles heel for a city, next to the police and fire, which have their own somewhat type of union. Garbage is extremely important to most people. And so when that was the key issue, it was very clever in my view, issue for the unions which were failing in strength and they had to find a way to build themselves up. And I know that the whole idea of being a big union conspiracy has been, were supposed to be the nuts who think that, and that may be true.

But about that time my mother was also in the hospital and there was talk of trying to unionize the nurses because I remember going down to the hospital and I said, "Sign me up and I'll come and be an aid or whatever." because the unrest was, in my view at that time, a union unrest. It was sort of the last big

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push. So as I say, I did not see – the Civil Rights issue was kind of an overlay, like "Hey, what's the best deal we going to get what we want?" And that would be, since the garbage people were all white, that's the logical argument and I won't press it any further.

I don't go too much, except that I was interested to read a couple of years later, among the ten most powerful men in America was **Jerry Worth**. He was the head of the union organizers in the city. \_\_\_\_\_, yep because when Memphis did break obviously after the terrible, you know, the assassination and all the aftermath of that. I mean, there was nowhere to go but

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where we went. And all the other cities rolled over then, in a sense. I was not -. I don't say this -. I wasn't very strong on let's go and everybody tell everybody that you're terribly sorry.

You know, I really wasn't helpful in the aftermath, if you look at it that way. I mean, I still treated people the way I'd always treated them, which may have been wrong, may have been -. I just went along being me. I think I have learned another side and I've learned whole lot more than I knew then, probably. I went through Leadership Memphis, now that's that I can see your eyes, but yes. As old as I am, I mean, I'm long past being a young leader

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in Memphis. And I had young friends, fortunately I've always been lucky that way, and they wanted me to try it because they had gotten so much out of it.

And so I thought, "Well they'll never take me, but it'd be fun to see." So I filled out everything, got as far as the interview and they said, "This is balanced by male and female and by black and

white.” And I said “Well is it balanced by age?” (*Laughs*) And I just got lucky. I just don’t think they’ve had many older ones the next few years. But anyway, I did manage to get in and that really was helpful, because that was so much later in life. I went in, in the class of ’96. Now I had been a widow since ’82 by then and the world had been changing around me, but again, just about like

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going into being married.

I was having to deal with being a widow, which is a whole different **quality**, too. But meeting the next generations, like y’all, or second generations, and seeing how people react to the same things, which obviously is not the way I react to them. I mean I’m gonna come from my background. If there’s one thing I learned, everything begins the day you’re born. To me, some of the young cute, darling girls in with it felt so defeated, or not defeated, but held back. Those, from my viewpoint, they were so far

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ahead of someone their same age when I was growing up, we just saw it.

And then finally it got through me, yes, from her point of view, she’s not as far as she’d like to be. It doesn’t make any difference what I sought, it’s what she seeks. And I began to see and to be able to hear stories that I didn’t know. You know, I don’t know, because I just didn’t know there was a whole set -. Doesn’t that sound stupid? That there was a whole second world, you know, there were two worlds in America that I didn’t know about.

One, I didn’t know about the really poor black side of Memphis, other than as a child, you took baskets from the church. And the other was the upper class black side, the social black side that I didn’t know about, either, which I have had the pleasure of learning a lot since then. But,

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I don’t know where I fit in your Civil Rights question because I just was going through in my own little cocoon and just being happily going on..

*Courtney Waters:* Were you involved in any kind of activities during this time and like EHDA, I know you mentioned earlier that you -?

*Sue Williams:* Yes, the only one that might be considered an activity and I didn’t look at it that way, either, was probably one of the first black and white activities, I guess you’d say, was we had a very short lived church and synagogue library association, which also had black

churches and members. And one of our meetings was at the Germantown

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Baptist Church. It was a black church, which just was fine. I mean, we had a common interest. We weren't trying -.

I didn't see it as we were not trying to do something other than made better libraries. I had friends who did different things, but that wasn't one of the things, 'cause I was church librarian, that was a major thing in my life, 'cause there Robert and I both worked on it. And that just seemed like the nice thing to do and I was sorry it didn't last longer than it did. But it did have a good cross section of **living**. But in the neighborhood at that point, had no black residents, I don't believe.

Courtney Waters:

Okay. What did you do for fun? Like Memphis Zoo, I know that was right around the corner.

Sue Williams:

Oh,

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party. (*Laughs*) I mean, that's usually what we did. We had folks over for dinner and you went to their house for dinner and then you talked. As you can tell, talking is my idea of fun. I mean, I couldn't ask for anything better than a microphone and a listener and **looking like you're happy**. There was going to the movies was a big deal. From age one, I mean I'm now a Netflix fan. You know, movies were just big. We didn't have much money to go to the theater.

The **moat**, I'm now moving way back, but the summer months is open air theaters all of them **high school** operettas, where one is still musical comedies and that was within walking distance of the house when I was younger, now we'll park at the door. But, it seems to me that was the sort of thing -. Well we did go to the

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fair grounds maybe. That was one. And the Peabody roof, if you -. Now I'm jumping around in time. I'm going from 18 to 80 here in just -. But the skyway at the Peabody, you didn't have air conditioning in the summer so the skyway was perfect at night to go up and dance.

My father didn't want me to go, 'cause he thought it was public dance hall, but my mother managed to persuade him otherwise and I was about to die. And the **Claridge** had the same rooftop, but it wasn't as popular. Although it had good bands. I mean all the top

- I'm talking, I guess dancing was one of our things because that was the era of the big bands, when we were dating. And I was not all that popular, but I had a fair number, but I didn't date as much

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'til really after the war, so that would be in the '40s. But you want the '50s. I'm having trouble moving up to where you want to, aren't I?

Courtney Waters:

Well I know that you said that you remember yourself kind of living your own life during this time period, but looking back to you, though has segregation and integration shape any of these activities? Looking back, do you remember the influence of segregation on your activities?

Sue Williams:

Well of course you begin to see, I guess segregation moving out of eating areas, that was an early point, maybe a flashpoint, if you will, of places and suddenly there were, you were in a non segregated dining room or something, but I don't remember it being a problem. It just sort of was happening.

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I keep sounding like this old idiot that's floating along on the top of the world like, here's a wave and the world's going down and I'm on the Titanic and I'm saying, "Oh, come for supper tomorrow night." I'm sorry. I should be more serious.

It was a serious thing, but somehow, for some people, I guess, maybe we just went along. I think some of the people just went along nicely. There was a niceness -. Out of the Civil Rights there was a civility at the beginning. There is not, and this now I'll take on a path. If the world would go back to being civil, if we would just be, don't yell at people; talk about it. You know, if you have a difference of opinion,

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just don't yell it and for heaven's sakes **don't hairy**, as the phrase goes today. And I think there was probably that.

I mean, if somebody, I don't know, if you were sitting next to somebody black and you were white, you just went on and talked. And you say, "Excuse me" and you held the door and you did all these -. Poor man had such a time, that for awhile there, at the same time the Civil Rights was going on, you had the women's movement trying to hit the ceiling and I had men say, "Should I hold the door for you or not?" You know, are you gonna slam it? I said, "Hold it for me, honey." (*Laughter*)

But there were a lot of things going on at that time that I guess to be under that same umbrella as I say women. And now, possibly you could throw in the homosexuality issue

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that's come out, which could be classed a Civil Rights issue in on playing on the level field type thing.

*Courtney Waters:* And was there a time when you were working with Goldsmith's?

*Sue Williams:* Oh, no, no, no. I had left Goldsmith's two and a half years. If anybody who would give me \$2.00 more a week, I went to work there. I bounced all over Goldsmith's. I went to work for Lowenstein's, which is not there anymore. I worked with the Cotton Council, which has moved to Dallas. I mean, and oh that was fun. And I should've brought you my resume. I can't keep them all straight, but I finally landed at Julius Lewis and that was pretty much home for about 15 years. And that was an upscale -. Do you know where Office Max is now on Union?

*Courtney Waters:* Mm-hmm.

*Sue Williams:* That was Julius Lewis, with those great windows on the corner, which we had wonderful

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displays in. It was an upscale retail fashion, men and women's and a few gifts and we put on wonderful fashion shows. Needless to say, I was the commentator and got to talk. Didn't put the shows together, we had a wonderful woman who did that. And it was not the highest fashion but it was high fashion.

*Courtney Waters:* Do you remember campaigning for or attending any political rallies during this time, maybe a presidential election or anything like that?

*Sue Williams:* I remember seeing Eisenhower go down Union Avenue right after the war. I thought if he could pull all those people together in Europe, surely he could pull all of us together. That was my main thought. I actually made my first vote -. But anyway, I was working at the Cotton Council and my boss

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was insisteing that -. I don't know, have y'all heard of Dixiecrats?

*Mackenzie Zalin:* Yes.

*Courtney Waters:* Mm-hmm.

*Sue Williams:* And he said, "You need to vote for the Dixiecrats because they're taking the whole Democratic Party for granted. We'll break away and then they'll see us as something, too." And I thought, "Oh, okay. Sounds reasonable." I think I voted for that man and ended up standing -. Was he the axe handle man? I don't know, but heaven knows, but I bought the idea of not being taken for granted that the Democrats were just gonna vote and it made sense.

I would say, kinda like Reagan, the Democrats left me. Now nationally, I'm probably the poorest Republican they've got, but nationally, I still hang on as a Republican. Locally, I'm all over the place. Locally where I know people, I vote about whom I think

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could do the job.

*Courtney Waters:* Do you remember when you started hearing about other political issues like sit-ins or Civil Rights?

*Sue Williams:* Well of course I've heard -. Sit-ins.

*Mackenzie Zalin:* Lunch counter sit-ins at cafeterias?

*Sue Williams:* I'm trying to think. I knew what they were and why, but I guess if I knew about them, I probably just avoided any -. And I wasn't one to go "Oh, good. There's a march or a fight. Let me -." I wasn't manning the barricades at those days. My barricades have been somewhat different.

*Courtney Waters:* Did you know people who were involved, like maybe your neighbors and how did you feel about this?

*Sue Williams:* Actually, I don't think so. No, I think most of the people that I knew at that time were all pretty off in their little world.

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Until later, I haven't really been that much of a fighter. Oh, I guess it goes back. Suddenly it hit me, when you said that. I remember when I was graduating from, no, I wasn't graduating, my first year at Memphis State, the President, there was a big flap about the President and the students wanted him recalled, I think. He was pushed up to a higher job, as often happens in this world.

But at any rate, I went in and my friends who were graduating were terribly upset because if they were on the wrong side then they might not get to be teachers, etcetera, and that was with -. But anyhow, I went into the meeting and I voted to have him recalled. I raised my hand, but I did not go down and sign the paper. And I



went home and I told my daddy, very proudly, that I had voted but I said, "But I

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remember what you said. Ladies did not get their name in the paper except when they were born and married and died period."

And I said, "So I didn't go down and sign it." And it's the only time I ever remember my father really getting mad at me. Well he said, "Don't you ever vote for something that you won't put your name to and stand up for. Don't you ever do that again." And that made me come to and realize and maybe make me back off a little. If was gonna say something, then I had to say it as me and stand up for it, so I had to be jolly well sure that I wasn't just running around raising my hand to things, which may be why I was a little slow when coming around to this.

*Courtney Waters:*

I know you talked about the sanitation strike and how important garbage maintenance is for the city. Do you remember what it was like in Memphis during the sanitation strike

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before 1968 and the assassination?

*Sue Williams:*

You mean during the strike now? Do I remember when the garbage was piling up at the end of the streets? Yes, I did have a good sense of smell. And I remember the time saying, "Well I'll carry ours to where we need it" because I felt that the strike was wrong. I mean I did not think municipalities should be unionized. I thought that was going to lead to a great more difficulties down the line. Of course there were other difficulties, but I didn't see them as well. But I remember that much, but that's about all. We just had to pile it up down probably near **Poplar** some place.

*Courtney Waters:*

Well Mack is gonna ask you some questions about the '70s and some community concerns, I guess the Evergreen community.

[00:45:00]

*Sue Williams:*

Well I haven't stayed in any ere that you've asked me, so -.

*Mackenzie Zalin:*

That's fine. We're going to, since Evergreen's your expertise, we're going to conclude the interview with some questions. So talk about the I-40 Expressway controversy. What that the issue that really brought the neighborhood together in the late '60s?

*Sue Williams:*

Answer no. The first issue that I can remember, as far as bringing the neighborhood into an organized neighborhood, was when McDonald's wanted to build a McDonald's on the corner of Poplar

and Stonewall. There is now a gated community there, which was another story because that, in my view, that shouldn't be there, either, but that was what brought us together and that was, I don't do dates well. That's why I had trouble in history.

But we did get together on our street and we

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sent a telegram, in those days, to sign, to the city decrying this issue. And we actually had hired a lawyer and we actually beat them. And that gave the in, then, and this was in the '60s at least, because I was certainly with Robert, my husband, you know, when I was married and when I wasn't. And so Robert was there so that was in the late '60s or early '70s. And we beat McDonald's, beat down their choice of places to build, at least, build within a couple of blocks, but in a better location. And that was when I realized that you could take on city hall. See? I'm still there. The people could figure that out way back in the '60s.

*Mackenzie Zalin:*

Why did the neighborhood not want McDonald's to be on that particular place?

*Sue Williams:*

'Cause we are a residential neighborhood. Now it's a little bit of Poplar was still residential.

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Still a beautiful house there and we felt that if that broke that corner, the rest of the houses would all disappear and it would be -. Even the small places that were doctors, they were in buildings that looked like houses and we had tried to keep it residential and small commercial.

*Mackenzie Zalin:*

How would you describe the average Evergreen resident at this time, around this time of the I-40 controversy? What were your neighbors like? What kind of people were they?

*Sue Williams:*

Oh, what everybody in America is, is upper middle class. There's no lower middle class. (*Laughs*) Everybody describes themselves as upper middle class. But the houses range from two story, a few big ones. We have a mansion on over to Clark, to very nice bungalows. So, there were the same

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people whose husbands went to work. Most mothers stayed home, unless they might've been a teacher; that would be about it. Some people had to kind of go to work then. But you know what I mean, it progressed in that line, so that everybody was probably in just a fair range of just middle class professionals, not your blue collar worker, I would say fewer of those.

*Mackenzie Zalin:* Yeah. So during the I-40 controversy, did this change the dynamic of the neighborhood in this way in terms of -?

*Sue Williams:* Oh, definitely. Well first of all, when they simply came through and tore the houses down that is what really changed. They took out over 400 houses and churches in that swath, some of which has not yet been rebuilt.

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And when they moved those people out, those were our neighbors. I had one of my friend's mothers who moved to an apartment where she died. I mean from a nice charming bungalow, you know this was another dispersion and there was nothing they could do and they were bitter.

I knew people who were bitter 'til the day they died about this. It was that moving out and then we had left, I think there may be some pictures if you had that book on the neighborhood, certainly pictures -. It looked like something from World War II. There was just houses and the city quit taking care of it. They were not mowing it. I would hear "Don't bring up people they can't come up for their names", but we did a mayor who said, "We will take care of it."

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And then it was like a park. I mean, the trees, it was mowed between them, and then I really thought I hated to see anything happen. But the process of the fight going up, I wasn't in the fight, I have to say. Once again, I was busy off in my own little world. I wasn't in the fight. I came in when it begin to rebuild. That's when I sort of got in. I helped write some of the -. We all wrote the plans for how the houses were in. I was in on one of the committees to choose the developers. We had to work with the city planning office and began to understand how things worked there and I had had training sort of through Robert, who died before that all happened.

He died in '82 and it was going on in the late '70s. So,

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that was what I -. I was happy in trying to get it rebuilt and I think we had wonderful people to work with downtown, **Rising** City, and I think we had good people in the neighborhood who really pitched in. **Janice Falstites**, I know her name has probably come up before, but she really had vision. Janice was wonderful and she was my neighbor across the street who helped move me along. And we, I think, achieved what we wanted, which was to have single family housing back.

Fortunately for us, and we didn't know it. These things happen and you find out later, Milwaukee had tried to develop – I believe it was Milwaukee – had tried to develop a similar plot, long and narrow, with one developer and it had failed, so the city was willing to listen – they knew that – so they were willing to listen to us.

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We did not want one developer to make it all look alike. If you bought your house you could have anybody you would want build it. You didn't have to go through one person. It had never looked alike. The streets in Evergreen don't look alike. They don't look the same from one end of the street to the other.

*Mackenzie Zalin:* Was your house ever threatened?

*Sue Williams:* No, fortunately, it was at the other end of the block, but where I am today, because the railroad took my grandmother's house on Rayburn, so transportation has gotten to our family. I am not an enthusiast of the Department of Transportation.

*Mackenzie Zalin:* Speaking of transportation, did any of your friends and neighbors from the Evergreen neighborhood move east to Memphis, to the suburbs after the controversy?

*Sue Williams:* They did. You know, there has obviously been a white and black line east for a long time, so certainly they did.

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The problem was that what they were given for the houses in midtown was a little hard when they went out east to find comparable houses. I think they did, many of them did.

*Mackenzie Zalin:* Did anyone move because of security concerns and do you feel that was justified, of the safety of the neighborhood or was it mostly because of the -?

*Sue Williams:* Well it probably was. When the city was not, I think they did, and it wasn't so much the moving, well we'd already lost all that, but it was the coming in. You could move unless somebody wanted to buy your house. People didn't want to come in because that swath was not -. It was a dead hand on the neighborhood. There were rapes in there. It was just an un-. You know, it just wasn't a good thing to have -.

You know, if you were walking around with a gaping

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wound in your chest, people would kind of push you, go do something about it and don't sit at my table. And that was the way people were not gonna buy houses in there 'cause it was depressed. We put my -. The house I live in today was owned by four, they're brothers and sisters. I mean, it was a family thing and the price was so low when Robert and I put it back together, he thought we should've -.

We bought out the aunts and uncles and the price was so low for them because it was so depressed that it's amazing. I mean, houses there, I would say, were going for, in the '60s, were for under \$20,000.00. I mean it definitely -.

*Mackenzie Zalin:* What are some of the challenges you feel that Evergreen faces today?

*Sue Williams:*  
[00:55:00] Maintenance is always a challenge. I think that the other challenge

is complacency. If you don't have a battle going on, as long as you're fighting somebody over there, you'll be bloody over here. When menace over there goes away, then I forget that you're over here and I go back to my little world, which is obviously easy for me. But, I think complacency is one and I think that we had a couple of super opportunities. This property just to the south and to the west, we've got a crescent of pretty stable residential districts. And it's really a crescent with central gardens for us and **Vecka** holding it and in the center is coming back around all up to Grandview, up into this -.

[00:56:00] Well, what we're doing though is we're enfolding an area that's still not where it needs to be between us and downtown. And

there's a real, real, real area that needs the expertise from the neighborhoods that have done it, beats the push to the city, which right now is kind of in turmoil, so that it's hard to -. Things are level sort of stand still right now. They're trying to do some things that are good, but I think the neighborhoods could well come together. Well, we need to go back to having something like the center for neighborhoods, which we had. Again, this was a cross cultural thing where different neighborhoods could come together and you found that you wanted the same things.

I don't care if you in a neighborhood that was totally disorganized, unorganized, and could be one of the poorest neighborhoods, still wanted the same thing I wanted. They wanted to be safe, children play in the front yard. Have the garbage picked up,

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had their mail on time. Don't have somebody stealing the Social Security checks. Being able to sit on your front porch and not get shot. I mean, that's just the basic desire for most people. And you find that that's exactly the same. It don't make a difference whether you put up a six foot, eight foot fence. They have some expensive fences, especially what they want or whether you want it down right off the, come down the river.

Go down, what is it, some of those streets when you get down to the river, the Lauderdale. Give me a back street. I mean, a street. When I say 'back' a street you'd be scared to walk down, that you wouldn't take your little child by your hand and walk down it at 9:00 at night. I bet you want it open and clean. And they're all the same. If the neighborhoods would get back, I think having something like the center of the neighborhoods which is -. There was one.

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It's gone by the wayside now and let the neighborhoods that are successful, come together and show how they solve their problems and then they can mentor those areas. The neighborhood is a group of people who have the same interests. It's geographic in that they're next door to each other, but you can't just go in and say, "What's -." I mean, Memphis is street by street divided. And you can't go in and say "Look, you live on Stonewall." "I do, you live on Stonewall. Well we've got Chelsea, Jackson, Overton Park, Poplar between us."

Now there's a vast difference in all of the people who live on Stonewall in their finances and things. But if you had a place where you all come together and talk about it, again, talk. Simple. We can help the -. The ones who've managed to do some good things can help the ones who still don't quite know how.

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And that's what I think. It just takes neighbors being neighbors, showing others who to do it. And that's what I'd like to see. I think that's our challenge now is to help to organize. My theory is we came back from a real, real low situation. Well, so can you. You can do it.

*Mackenzie Zalin:*

Do you still feel that safety concerns are legitimate, that they're substantiated in Evergreen? Are you concerned for your safety in the neighborhood?

*Sue Williams:*

Well if you saw the bars on my house I guess you would say that I am. I think the police respond well. I think there is. I don't think

it's just Evergreen. I think there's a more pervasive climate throughout the city now.

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I think drugs have simply come into the city in so many places which particularly after the Viet Nam war, that's when that seemed to have spiked. We've got better lines into the east in Columbia to get them up here. And we are a good distribution spot for good things. We are also a good, I mean, what distributes well, distributes other things, too. And so we're a good center for drugs coming through and I think that has really hurt our population.

Courtney Waters:

We're going to end our interview with a few wrap up questions, just to kind of a culmination of everything we've talked about. So how would you compare race relations in Memphis from back in the time period that we talked about the '50s to the '70s and the early '70s to how they are now?

[01:01:00]

Sue Williams:

I honestly feel that there has been a deterioration in the last few years. I'm not sure why. I mean, when I say that, I can't pinpoint or say this is what. I thought things were working better at working towards solutions. Now it seems to me that they're not. Well, may I speak very freely, of the seventh district race. I went back and Googled the seventh district as we were talking about, the makeup is two to one black to white in the seventh district? That is where Harrington -. That's **Colling**, is that it? Seventh?

Courtney Waters:

I'm not sure.

Sue Williams:

It is seventh **Calling**, right, that Mayor Harrington **wants to run for**, which then he'll then go back and you say, then with that kind of a

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makeup of the district, then that is what is pushing your mayor to make extremely racist statements that are not helping the city one iota. But would help if you were going into a race where two to one black to white where that would be a selling point. So that you find, you have to dig behind things sometimes, but I think at the same time, it is hard for our city when the leading people in the city, not just the mayor, but I'm not trying to pinpoint that, but different ones of our leaders will play the race card, as they say, and I think it's being done more now than I felt like it was done even ten years ago.

Courtney Waters:

Is there any advice that you would want younger Memphians to know and if so, what would you tell them?

Sue Williams:  
[01:03:00]

Stay in Memphis. Don't go somewhere else looking for something or looking to solve things. Stay here. We need the best and the brightest. We need you. We need the energy. We need new people coming in with new ideas. I've had my ideas. They're not now gonna change a whole lot. I mean, I've done mine and as my daddy would've said, "I shot my wad". And we need ways of solving things or new approaches or sort of nuances.

It's not a brand new thing, but it's the way it's nuanced, the way it's turned a little. This is the year time will spend but it needs young people. You're the future. You're looking at the day. You're not even way out there. You're now. And that's what I would say is stay here. You're gonna find that right here in your own back yard,

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everything you ever dreamed of, all the things you want to do. Because we're as connected to the world as any, you know, what I buy, what I put on, everything, it's connected to the whole world.

You can make a difference in the whole world right here. But you can sure make a difference in Memphis. Memphis needs you. I honestly feel we're at a little bit lower ebb than we have. I don't think we're as respected as we have been. I just think that if you want to make a difference, and I don't care whether you're black, white, Hispanic, red, there are a few browns coming in from the Indonesia's. You can do it.

We are poised to be a global city. We are right here in a wonderful crossroads and we just need to quit looking at things maybe as narrowly,

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maybe you don't need to float like I did. Only Ali and I can float like a butterfly. *(Laughter)* But do get in there and find the area that is your expertise and you will be respected for it.

Courtney Waters:

Well thank you. Is there anything else that you feel like we haven't covered that you want to mention?

Sue Williams:

No, but I would like to than you and thank Rhoades for doing this because if you don't, you know, it's so trite, but if you don't know history, you're doomed to repeat it, that's been said. And yet, when you do know why people, you're more open to people if you know sometimes why they approach something the way they do. You know, if somebody comes in and doesn't like your dog and it turns out he got bitten last week, you understand that he's just not a



[01:06:00] dog hater. And so the more you understand, the more the college gives you these

opportunities, I think that's wonderful. And I thank you.

*Courtney Waters:* Thank you.

*Mackenzie Zalin:* Thank you for your time.

[End of Audio]