

Interview of Mr. Marc Willis. Interviewed by Joshua Jeffries and Stefan Borst-Censullo, of the Crossroads to Freedom Project, Rhodes College.

Mr. Marc Willis is currently CEO of Soulsville U.S.A in Memphis, Tennessee. The youngest child of prominent Memphis Civil Rights Attorney and politician A.W. Willis, Marc Willis recalls growing up amidst his fathers then bustling political career in the late 60's and early 70's. Furthermore, Mr. Willis explains how growing up amidst the Civil Rights Movement influenced his current career choice.

This interview was conducted in 2007 to be included in the Rhodes College Crossroads to Freedom Digital Archive Project.

The transcripts represent what was said in the interview to the best of our ability. It is possible that some words, particularly names, have been misspelled. We have made no attempt to correct mistakes in grammar.

Joshua Jeffries: – want to say thank you, Mr. Willis, for allowing the Crossroads team to interview you for our project and we're just gonna start off by getting your name for the camera, so if you could please state your name.

Marc Willis: Marc, M-A-R-C, Elton Willis.

Joshua Jeffries: Okay and where were you born and raised?

Marc Willis: Memphis, Tennessee.

Joshua Jeffries: Memphis, Tennessee. And what's your current occupation?

Marc Willis: I'm the CEO of Soulsville.

Joshua Jeffries: Okay. Who are your parents? Can you tell us a little bit about them?

Marc Willis: My mother is Ann and back then she was called **Annie Laura Irving** but Ann Willis, born in Columbus, Mississippi, and my father is A. W. Willis, Jr., who I think was born in Birmingham and spent some of his formative years there but ended up in Memphis.

Joshua Jeffries: Okay and what type of work –?

Marc Willis: With his family as a kid.

Joshua Jeffries: Okay. What type of work or occupation did your mother have?

Marc Willis: She did a couple of things. She was an educator.

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Marc Willis: She did some fund development or institutional advancement and stuff like that.

Joshua Jeffries: So there's a broad range of things, so it was in the public arena.

Marc Willis: She did a couple – I think – the institutional advancement, I think she did that at a couple of places, at what was Shelby State, which is Southwest Community. She worked at Le Moyne College for a while and then she did some teaching. Those are the things I sorta remember.

Joshua Jeffries: Okay. Did she teach grade school or college?

Marc Willis: Yeah, grade school.

Joshua Jeffries: Okay. What school did she teach at?

Marc Willis: I don't know.

Joshua Jeffries: You just know she taught.

Marc Willis: She taught. I don't know. Probably all over but I don't know.

Joshua Jeffries: Okay. Could you tell us a little bit about your father and what his occupation was?

Marc Willis: He also was a journeyman. He was a – went to law school as an attorney. He was a civil rights attorney and actually was a part of six landmark cases in the city and the state for civil rights.

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Marc Willis: He was a state legislator and he was a businessman, realtor, a developer, and ran for mayor once, didn't win, so I would say those are things that he's done.

Joshua Jeffries: Okay. Did you have any siblings growing up?

Marc Willis: I have four siblings.

Joshua Jeffries: Four.

Marc Willis: Older and I'm the baby, the youngest, so I have a sister and a brother, brother and a sister. The oldest is **Rosalyn** and then **Fombie** is the next oldest. He was born Michael Alexander Willis

but he changed his name to Fombie and then Archie III and then Stephanie and then me.

Joshua Jeffries: Mm-hm. Can you tell us what – did you grow up in Memphis, first of all?

Marc Willis: Yes.

Joshua Jeffries: Okay. What neighborhood did you grow up in?

Marc Willis: I grew up in south Memphis for a few years. We lived on Mississippi Boulevard not too far from Le Moyne College and where this project is located, Soulsville.

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Marc Willis: And then moved to I guess what you would call Midtown, maybe Cooper Young, but on Parkway, South Parkway, sort of in between Cooper and Airways.

Joshua Jeffries: Okay. And can you explain to us – sort of give us a picture of how life was growing up with your siblings and your parents, sort of how your house and any sort of thing, how it was growing up in those neighborhoods.

Marc Willis: Well, for me, it was probably pretty good. I mean I don't have many bad memories of anything. I do remember my parents getting a divorce. I was very young and I remember when they told us that and sort of my reaction to all of that.

I wasn't sure I understood it but through the process, I got it and understood and – but I mean as a kid, I mean I was active and, you know, happy most of my recollection.

Because my father and parents both, but my father was heavily involved in the movement here, the Civil Rights Movement here, so I grew up seeing a lot of things.

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Marc Willis: I was younger and my older siblings, you know, saw it from a different perspective, but as I was – I remember Black Mondays and I remember – to some degree, I remember National Guard. I remember just the size and scope of that and probably didn't understand it. I remember important people coming by our house.

I remember some of the marches and me marching and being tired and, again, not probably comprehending all of what it meant but understanding some of it, and so all those kinda dynamics working. I remember those pieces, but as a kid, I mean I was just happy and rode my bike and –

Joshua Jeffries: Being a kid.

Marc Willis: – you know, had friends and, you know, trying to break my limbs, things like that.

00:04:45:00 BEGIN CLIP 2

Joshua Jeffries: All right. What school did you go to or what schools did you attend?

Marc Willis: The first school I went to was Stafford, which is in south Memphis. I went there for, I think, two and a half years and then went to Catholic School which is on the edge of the U of M campus, one of their guinea pig schools for the education department.

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Marc Willis: And we had different reports cards every reporting period. It was always some experimental report card, but developed some lifelong friendships at that school. And then I went to White Station – what was the White Station Junior High and then White Station High School.

Joshua Jeffries: Okay and what type of extracurriculars –?

Marc Willis: All band.

Joshua Jeffries: All band.

Marc Willis: All band all the time.

Joshua Jeffries: What did you play, you know?

Marc Willis: Played trumpet.

Joshua Jeffries: Trumpet. And how long did you stick with band and what sort of – what type of groups did you play with?

Marc Willis: I mean, you know, there were friends and we tried to do the garage thing on some level.

Joshua Jeffries: Yeah, we tried that.

Marc Willis: Yeah and, you know, you might – I don't know if we really got bookings but you might play at a party or something, some sort of school kinda thing, but most of the ensembles that I participated in were formal ensembles that either the school district was offering or some program like that.

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Marc Willis: I was in the Memphis Youth Symphony for a year and a half my – towards the end of my – as a junior and a senior, but the school, White Station, had a concert band, some sort of semblance of a marching band, more like a pep band.

We didn't do much marching which, for me, was fine, but we would play at the football games and that – sort of a smaller version of that, actually got to play for Lady Tiger basketball games for a couple of seasons and we had a jazz band at White Station and all those bands were very active band programs. So I mean I was practicing –

Joshua Jeffries: Almost around the clock.

Marc Willis: Yeah, you know, as much as the football team was practicing or the basketball team. We practiced every day for about 90 minutes or so after school and in addition to that in band class, and so I did that from junior high all the way to high school and then there were other things. Like we had – back then, we had All City. We had All West.

Joshua Jeffries: They still have those.

Marc Willis: All State. I was – I didn't win but I was a nominee for the McDonald's Jazz Band.

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Marc Willis: It was like two people per state and actually a very good friend of mine beat me. Well, I say beat me. He actually got it. He's a guitarist and we're great friends today. I met him through that process and we're great friends today. He's a better musician than I am. He was very good; still is. And so I did things like that.

Joshua Jeffries: Okay. What inspired you to sort of being involved with music so heavily?

Marc Willis: I don't know. Part of it is growing up, again, with the siblings and my parents. My parents were music lovers and they had records. My siblings all love music and tried their hand at some instrument.

But I think the thing I remember the most is just the diversity of music that I was exposed to at a very young age, from rock and roll to gospel, soul, funk, lot of jazz, so I just grew up listening to all that and I just was sorta fascinated.

[00:08:02]

Marc Willis: I remember my – the first year at White Station Junior High School I was not in the band. I was out the first week and some kinda way, wasn't able to work that out, so I missed it, but I remember being so intrigued by band as a course and thinking that let me make sure I'm understanding in talking to whoever is doing the registration.

If I sign up for this course and I don't play, you're telling me I'm gonna learn how to play an instrument and so the eighth grade here, I did. We had a new band director, who was a great guy, Dr. Hillier, who was a whiz and became a mentor and a great friend. Started with him and on trumpet.

He was a trumpet player, too, and I think that's part of the connection and I think because I started as an eighth grader, I was a little bit more serious than like the other beginning people that I was around because I'd just starting playing, buzzing the mouthpiece.

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Marc Willis: And I remember, you know, putting the mouthpiece on the – the first time you put it on the horn, you're like you're ready. You don't know what you're doing but you're excited. And just being fascinated by that process and I practiced.

No one had to tell me to practice. I just did it. I enjoyed it and became good and so my ninth grade year, I actually played with the high school band and I spent – like I said, spent all my time playing in the band.

Joshua Jeffries: Okay. Since you were so involved in music, how did that balance out with your academics, especially in thinking in middle school and high school?

Marc Willis: I was a good student but also knew sometimes that I probably could try a little harder at different times but I enjoyed school, though. I definitely enjoyed school. I don't have any bad memories of school. I have friends who just, you know, "Ah, school was bad for me."

I enjoyed school. I would say that when I got to high school – you got to keep in mind that back then ninth grade was junior high and high school started in tenth grade, but even though you were earning credits as a ninth grader.

00:10:05:00 BEGIN CLIP 3

Marc Willis: So when I got to the tenth grade and you started signing up yourself, I always signed up for band and built my schedule around band, but I was in the honor's program and so that, you know, sorta laid out the schedule for me, I guess, on a lot of levels.

But I mean I'm sure from the academic standpoint, you know, some of that processing that goes on in music probably helped me but I wasn't in tune with that at the time but I get it now and, in fact, use similar models at the Stax Music Academy.

But for me, it was something to do with the inspiration to, you know, get through the day so I could get to band practice.

Joshua Jeffries: Mm-hm. Did religion play any role in your life or what role did religion play in your life growing up?

Marc Willis: I grew up going to church and going to Sunday school, reluctantly.

Joshua Jeffries: Whole nine yards.

Marc Willis: Yeah.

[00:10:59]

Marc Willis: And I was in the youth choir for several years and didn't quite take to that and it's funny because I think the reason I didn't take to it is the practice. It wasn't so much like singing or performing or singing in church or singing the material, but choir practice was after school on Friday.

And so I would get home and you would have a – my sister and I would get a ride with like the lady that did the choir who lived not too far from us, Miss **Whatley**, and I just – you know, just – nothing to her but inside just had this edge like, “Why am I going to choir practice on a Friday afternoon?” And just – I just don’t think this is how we should be doing it.

So I think that actually later changed to Saturday morning which is a much better – and, you know, you would have some alternating Sunday, you know, that the youth choir would sing and so I did that for a few years and I got into playing, you know.

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Marc Willis: So I guess it was early on, sorta elementary, but when I got into playing, I didn’t sing at all, not in school, but grew up going to church on most Sundays and my mother would have it no other way.

Joshua Jeffries: Okay, so when did you graduate from high school?

Marc Willis: 1982.

Joshua Jeffries: 1982. So what did you do after high school?

Marc Willis: Went to college.

Joshua Jeffries: What college or major?

Marc Willis: Berklee College of Music. It’s in Boston, Massachusetts in the Back Bay. But, yeah, I went to – it was – I applied to probably three or four other schools. I applied to Berklee. I wanted to go to Berklee and so I applied, got everything in.

I got my acceptance letter during the semester break of my senior year. I was absolutely no good for that second semester. You couldn’t tell me anything.

I literally carried around on certain days a copy of my acceptance letter in my back pocket and when the teacher got on me about something – “I’m going to Berklee. I mean just, you know, back off.”

[00:13:02]

Marc Willis: And that was sort of my attitude, but I wanted to go there and my sister turned me onto it. She had read about it in – I think it's Duke's *Music is My Mistress*, Duke Ellington's autobiography, where he talks about the great learning that goes on. It's a great place for contemporary music and jazz, which is what I was interested in and so I wanted to go there.

When I got my letter, I was done. I called up some other schools and said, "Yeah, cancel the audition. I'm straight. I'm going to Berklee." I mean I wasn't mean-spirited or anything but this is what I want to do and so I'm done. Thank you, though, for your time.

And so I actually went to visit it that spring and was coming – it was during the Mississippi schools' spring break, so it was very warm outside to say the least, probably warm, very warm. Let's say it like that.

And going to Boston on some, you know, three-hour plane ride and there was two feet of snow on the ground when we got there and I remember digging my hands in it going, you know, "This is – okay, this is gonna be something."

[00:14:00]

Marc Willis: And went there that fall and had a great time. It was a great decision.

Joshua Jeffries: I want to take a step back a minute. You said that, you know, your father was A. W. Willis, you know, prominent civil rights attorney. You mentioned earlier that he would get you involved in the movement. Could you talk a little more about what that meant for you and what sort of things that you would get involved in?

Marc Willis: Well, I think generally speaking our family just had that sense of pride that comes from being engaged in the struggle and those lessons. I mean and I wouldn't always understand them. I know that just from thinking back logically.

I remember some of these things and I remember thinking at the time that some of this made sense, but I'm sure that I wasn't – you know, I didn't get it. I was very young and I remember being involved in politics from a kid's perspective.

I mean not, you know, really doing the work but being in campaign headquarters all the time.

00:14:57:00 BEGIN CLIP 4

Marc Willis: It seemed like that was on some level – and I’ve never mapped it all out chronologically and I would love to – you know, I don’t want to do it but if someone mapped out the campaigns during some of these years because it seemed like politics was always going on and that we were always at a rally, a _____ party for some candidate and passing out fliers.

I remember stuffing doors with fliers as a kid. I mean you just – yeah, you take that side of the street and, you know, the grown folks are looking out for you but I remember that very vividly and very clearly.

I don’t remember all the people that were on the ballots and the sample ballots and the literature, political literature, but I remember handing it out and walking the streets, sorta that grassroots sorta thing. I remember my dad had – I think this must have been the year he ran for mayor.

We had a Plymouth sort of blue and white-ish. If one of my siblings says it’s a different color then believe them ’cause I was younger, but I think it was sort of blue and white.

[00:16:00]

Marc Willis: And it had the speaker on the top and back then sort of one of the techniques was to drive through the neighborhood and either someone or in some cases the candidate themselves would be on the loudspeaker, you know, saying what they believe in and encouraging people to come vote and that sorta thing.

And I remember riding in the back of the car and just thinking it was the coolest thing and there was a guy that worked with my dad on a lot of things and we used to call him Cool Jack and they used to just say, “Cool Jack.” And I just wanted to go in the car with him and get on the speaker. I don’t know what I was gonna say but I just wanted to do that.

I remember – I have a few just sort of snapshots in my head of National Guard and, again, the sort of the size and scale of that. You know, I was a kid so that machinery was impressive to me and that sort of thing and, you know, not necessarily clued into why

they were there or what they were – or why they were doing what they were doing.

[00:17:00]

Marc Willis:

I remember a few of the marches. Probably most of the marches I remember were after King were assassinated. My brothers and sisters were in some of those other ones and some of the ones that – the one that turned ugly- but I remember marching after he was dead and lining up, you know, and marching.

Again, I was a kid and somebody had my hand, but I remember those things and understanding, again, a little bit about that and what was going on. I mean I think essentially, you knew that, you know, all this is about black folks having more, but all the details of it, I'm positive I wasn't quite in tune with.

But I had a sense of – and that just comes from being around it and your family trying to teach you no matter what age you are, giving you some words that, you know, things aren't the way they should be and they're gonna fight until they are. I have siblings that – one of my brothers in particular integrated Bruce Elementary and I don't remember him riding in the National Guard's car or the sheriff's car to go to school but that happened.

[00:18:04]

Marc Willis:

And so I've learned more about that, you know, now than I remember then but all this was sort of going on and so my recollection is just being around the energy and sort of what was going on 'cause there always seemed to be something going on, that we were either going to some place for something that was going on or something may have been going on in our house.

Just seemed like there was always this activity, again, and this political activity as well and, you know, I'd love to, again, see that all mapped out 'cause it could – you know, all this could have been separate by four years but that's not how I think about it at all, that this was a very common occurrence of all these things sort of happening and, again, as a kid.

Joshua Jeffries:

Okay.

Marc Willis:

Should I look at you or should I look at him?

Stefan Borst-Censullo: When you left for college, did you notice any difference between the segregation that existed in the City of Memphis and the lifestyle within Boston?

[00:19:01]

Marc Willis: When I got to Boston, what I had understood about Boston going up there was the reluctance for that city to get with bussing and it's national news all over the country, obviously. I remember in the town – the part of the town that the school was located things being very cool and our school was actually an international school to some level.

They attracted kids from all over the world and so I remember thinking – and they were close to sorta downtown – that this was a microcosm of things working. But what people used to say to me, native Bostonians, is you stay outta certain neighborhoods.

And so Boston is sorta defined by these neighborhoods and so there's the Irish section. There's the Italian section. There was the black section, you know, so – and today, there's, you know, heavy Latino section and those kinds of things and so the neighborhoods are defined by that.

And we never really ventured into – I mean the things that we needed as students were accessible because, again, there was a large student population and all those things sort of worked and so I remember that, I remember that, you know, there were places that I shouldn't go.

00:20:06:00 BEGIN CLIP 5

Marc Willis: And I remember thinking that that was a little crazy because in the city that I came from, I felt like I could go anywhere and probably did, you know, not just 'cause I could prove it but if I had some business there.

And going to the schools that I went to, my dad and the family fought so much for desegregation and my junior high and high school experiences were integrated experiences, so I mean you knew – I knew white people. I knew white kids and studied and that kinda thing so, to me, it wasn't the experience of probably my older siblings.

It wasn't my experience that this shouldn't be allowed or any of those kinda things and so when I got to Berklee and people were

saying, “You know, you really don’t want to go into those neighborhoods,” that was a little bit – but I guess it just didn’t – it didn’t bring me down in the sense because everything that I needed to access, I accessed.

[00:21:00]

Stefan Borst-Censullo: With your involvement within music, how would you say that the history of music, specifically within Memphis parallels that of the Civil Rights Movement? Is there a relationship between the two?

Marc Willis: Oh, yeah, definitely. You know, we talked earlier about growing up with music and I mean freedom songs and gospel songs and all that. I mean the songs you sing in church are probably even a little more relevant than, you know, yes, we’re – you know, as a race we’re not probably where we want to be.

The country’s not where it wants to be or should be but “Wade in the Water,” for example, was probably way more potent then than it is now, and so you have to sort of pull on that for the song to relate to now and I would say some kids just growing up, my children, for example, just hearing “Wade in the Water” and trying to understand what that’s all about is not what it meant when we sang it.

And, you know, we used to sing freedom songs and have chants and both for your marching and to some degree at other programs. I mean you could go to a political thing and, you know, have prayer and then you end with “Kumbaya” and other songs and folk songs.

[00:22:03]

Marc Willis: But then the music that you bought in the store, there’s a significant amount of it that is conscious and about fighting for freedom and we own a lot of that music and I remember – clearly, I remember a lot of it sort of maybe more middle school, some high school, of people like Curtis Mayfield and to some degree some of the things Earth, Wind and Fire were singing about.

But I also remember a lot of Black Pride songs as well – James Brown. We have plenty of James Brown 45s, Aretha Franklin 45s and, you know, we had some Stax folks.

We had Motown folks and I remember listening to Stevie’s album or several of his albums. “Songs in the Key of Life” was one that

was very powerful for me, but “Innervision” was also very powerful for me. I remember when those albums actually – I was very – I was young.

[00:23:00]

Marc Willis:

I mean not very young, but this was early '70s. “Talking Book” and those came out and Stevie, of course, is extremely conscious and hearing those songs and making some parallel, making some connection with those songs, I guess, based on how I was being brought up and what I'd seen even as a smaller kid, younger kid.

And again, buying all that music and listening to it and that certainly contributed to, I think, wanting to do music. The interesting thing about it to me was – that sticks with me even today and the major that I even chose is you're telling stories through music.

And then this idea that this music, which is this thing that's just floating around in space, is making you feel a certain way, that combined with the lyrics, and it's funny because a lot of times I think the music would do it for me before the lyrics would. Now I have to focus on lyrics. I can hear a song and I may have some idea what it's about.

[00:24:00]

Marc Willis:

I could be wrong but, you know, it sets a mood. If it's a good song, it sets a tone. It sets a mood. It's got edge. It's got attitude. It's got something that may give you some clue about what it is and so now I sort of think about lyrics, but I think back then, I mean it probably came together for me a little.

But the more I've learned about music, probably the wider that gap became and I started paying attention to the music and what was happening musically because I knew a little theory. You know, a little information can be dangerous sometimes, so – and I'm understanding musically what's going on so that just sorta took me in a different path.

00:24:35:00 BEGIN CLIP 6

Stefan Borst-Censullo: Has music maintained that kind of political edge where it's something that – it's a tool that, you know, where people can gain a greater consciousness with?

Marc Willis: It can be. It comes, though, from – I think one of the things that’s sort of – you know, people say, and it’s true to a large degree, you know, music reflects the times and all of that.

[00:24:57]

Marc Willis: But I think a disconnect – I think there’s a disconnect generally speaking, music notwithstanding, between some of the generations of today versus some of the generations of the past, and some of that is – you can – if you do your – you know, bring out your data and you’ll see, you know, how some of the gaps are formed.

And kids are coming up with younger parents and younger grandparents and so that sort of legacy piece starts to sorta dwindle ‘cause the legacy is something that happened 15 years ago, which is different from my grandmother when I was born was, you know, 60-something years old, you know, and so my life with her was in her 70s and then that’s a whole – you know, it’s a generation that you’re – that the learning occurs.

So I think there’s a disconnect period, but as it relates to music, I think that it’s proven that a significant amount of the music that’s offered commercially is not of the ilk that we’re talking about and I think that on some level – and I won’t say it’s problematic, but I don’t think it’s desirable.

[00:26:00]

Stefan Borst-Censullo: The generational gap that you spoke of, was there – was it noticeable between the generation that you represented and the generation of the movement of your fathers?

Marc Willis: The gap or the – I don’t think the gap is there but I think the style is different. I mean there’s a different tone to when my father was my age versus when I was that age as a growing up impressionable junior high, high school. So the music – you know, the tone and texture of the music changes and had changed.

But I think that some of the fundamental things that if Stevie’s gonna sing about we haven’t done anything, the song about political leaders who haven’t done what they said they were gonna do to better the community, I think there’s an equivalent song that my father probably listened that had a similar message or a similar undertone.

And I think some of that or at least the prolificness of that, if that's a word, is what we're missing.

[00:27:01]

Marc Willis: So some – there may be two or three people – obviously, I'm making this up, but just in the scale – that are trying to go that way but I don't think it embraces – or I don't think the masses embrace that as a way of understanding, learning and communication and, of course, expression like it did for us.

I mean, you know, we balanced clearly love ballads, you know, and the funk tunes that had a message behind it and I think that's good.

Stefan Borst-Censullo: What about political consciousness? Was there any difference between your generation and the previous one, specifically with respect to the Civil Rights Movement?

Marc Willis: Oh, yeah. I remember teaching a class once and lady maybe of my mother's age, and I was teaching in college and I don't know how old the lady was but she was clearly much older than me.

[00:28:00]

Marc Willis: And she – the class I taught was called Black Music in America, survey course, and I remember her commenting after, you know, being in the class for weeks, you know, and listening to me do some of the lectures and I'm engaging or tried to be engaging and asking questions and making people think about things in probably different ways than they may have thought about it, which is hopefully why they took the course to begin with.

And I remember her coming up and saying, "You know, I can't believe how you talk to white people." And I was like – I mean I sort of knew where she was coming from but my whole thing was, "What do you mean? I mean I'm teaching a class. There are white people in the class. There are black people in the class. I'm gonna ask a question and whoever answers, answers," just like – you know.

But what she was saying is this is a different time and so (a) here's this black authority figure in the class leading the class. That's different on some level and then challenging people not because I was black but because this is the content of the information that we're trying to provide in this class.

[00:29:05]

Marc Willis:

So let's think about it in this way. Let's think about the development of this music, which is, again, what the class was all about. But she was sort of taken aback by, I guess, maybe my energy about it but, you know, how I was able to do this and so, to me, that was a generational thing, very much so.

But I grew up in a house that said, no, you know, you're gonna be respectful. You're gonna respect your elders and people are gonna respect you and when they don't, you have something to say about it.

So I was respectful but I've never cowered in the corner because someone said something to me or particularly from a racial standpoint. That just wasn't how we were raised and so maybe her experience was different and so she was seeing that in me and just sort of thinking that, you know, maybe times were changing.

Hopefully, she thought that, that times were changing for the better. I hope she did.

00:29:56:00 BEGIN CLIP 7

Stefan Borst-Censullo: What in Memphis has changed?

Marc Willis:

Some things in Memphis have changed. My view is we've still got some work to do, but the good news is – and this is not meant to be a plug, but I mean when you engage a whole team of students to go out and ask questions, a diverse team of students to ask people these questions, and the people that are being asked the questions are a diverse group and they're reflecting and sharing, I think that's huge. I think that's huge.

But in Memphis, what's changed sorta slowly over time – and I remember leaving here in college and I remember getting to Boston and thinking about on some level the progressive nature of being in a big city and Boston is such a big town. I mean it is a town. You know what I mean? It – but it's a big one.

But I remember just getting there and I'd been exposed to D.C. and New York and L.A. and I'd had the good fortune of some of this travel and so to me it was all about getting out of Memphis.

[00:31:02]

Marc Willis: And I was gone – when I graduated from college, I came back home for a while and then I left again and was gone for about 10, 11, 12 years and coming back that time, I think what we had seen was, you know, a different political power structure.

Maybe it was a little bit more consciousness, awareness about what's possible for a group of people who just a few years ago in the big picture of things were, you know, largely being held back for some reason or another. I think some of that sorta lingers and I think that's a mode you have to break out and I think King getting killed here didn't help.

So we've had to deal with that, and so I think for some of my peers and even some of my family member who have lived in other places, I think the thing is that to sorta see Memphis evolve on this journey which, you know, if you had never left things may be timely.

[00:32:04]

Marc Willis: But from my standpoint, things weren't timely enough, but that were definitely headed on the right path, but we've had to overcome some of these obstacles. You know, just King and those kinds of things are huge, but we've just really sorta – in my view, sorta coming out of that.

Stefan Borst-Censullo: Do you think the black community still resents Memphis for what happened with King?

Marc Willis: It's hard to say from my perspective. I would – if I had to sort of suppose around that concept, I would say that black people are clearly – have not forgotten what has happened and I think that that's, again, very tough to overcome.

Where they hate it or where they're resentful, I mean those are additional emotions that probably factor into some people's consciousness but not everybody's.

[00:32:57]

Marc Willis: But I think clearly – I think there's, you know, a few people who are probably not aware of it or think about it or see how that has probably impacted the city and its development and its growth.

Stefan Borst-Censullo: You mentioned a different political structure. Do you specifically mean the introduction of a group like the Fords or other black – large groups of black politicians within the city politics?

Marc Willis: Yeah. Yeah.

Stefan Borst-Censullo: And how specifically have they changed the outlook and –?

Marc Willis: Well, you know what? I hold on to sort of fundamental things sometimes. We could get into a policy discussion but I don't really want to. What I would say largely is when people achieve then that now plots a new course.

If you're thinking about just sort of the fun thought of Star Trek or going to Gamma Nine, never been there. Plot a course. You find it. There it is. Now you send the message back to Star Base that here's how you get there.

[00:33:56]

Marc Willis: And, for me, that's what that much more represents, that you can – that there can be a black leader and black mayor, congressmen, state legislators. My father was a state legislator. He was the first black state legislator after reconstruction and I have pictures of him sitting at his desk.

And I can imagine that the first sessions of his term were completely overwhelming and I'm not gonna say he didn't have a friend and I don't know that. I'm sure that he did. In fact, he's – I think he's told stories about that and others have told stories, but to be the first one is tough.

And so then you look now, fast forward, and you've got, you know, the Black Caucus of the state legislators. I mean that's a whole other level, and so to me what that represents is a path towards success, not so much professional but just these are the choices. This opens up the options. From my perspective, we were not limited at all.

[00:35:00]

Marc Willis: But, again, I had the good fortune of having two loving parents who said that you can do most anything you want to do and that's what their whole struggles are about. We didn't grow up with any thoughts of limitations, none whatsoever.

I could go to school where I wanted to go, anywhere in the country. Now I had to get my lesson and nobody was gonna give me anything. I mean daddy made that abundantly clear. So did my mom. They made that abundantly clear, but you have choices.

00:35:25:00 BEGIN CLIP 8

I think back – I think now about some of the mess that we're in educationally, systematically or otherwise, and just that that was not where folks were, you know. Education was absolutely the ticket out of any bad situation or out period and I think that message has totally been lost.

So in some ways, that why I said when you asked the question about, you know, where are we now, I'd say we've got some work yet to do because we got high dropout rate and we've got a lot of kids that are confused about what their choices can be and what they're capable of doing.

[00:36:01]

Marc Willis: And to me, the progress that was made in having more black political leaders, religious leaders, and things like that is the progress that needed to be continued to be built on that I don't think we've done.

Stefan Borst-Censullo: So how should – with that in mind, do you see your role as an educator within Memphis as the ____ toward change or are there other options that the community can go through?

Marc Willis: My role?

Stefan Borst-Censullo: Mm-hm.

Marc Willis: I see my role as – I see my role sort of not as a professional educator but maybe a motivator to some degree, one to inspire. My work consists largely of helping young people.

A big chunk of the young people that we try to help sort of statistically speaking you might conclude, you know, their options are minimal. So we want to expand those options. We want to introduce and expose the kids that we're trying to serve to some options.

[00:37:02]

Marc Willis: And so I see my role as trying to create those options for kids and create those connections and exposure opportunities to something that they may not have otherwise seen or been exposed to and from that, then the next thing that we try to do is to connect that with people who have been successful in whatever they've done and you find that in many ways, not necessarily economical.

We're gonna expose you to that, too, mostly from a saving – you know, sort of savings and planning standpoint, but we spend a lot of time connecting our kids with people who are successful and we do that with white folks and black folks.

I mean we want them to understand the larger world because the larger world is shrinking, you know. Global economies and trade and all these things are out there. Foreign languages have to be learned for people to do business. So the less we're prepared for that, the greater the gap.

[00:38:02]

Joshua Jeffries: Okay. I think it's interesting, 'cause you grew up in such an interesting time period. You said your father had a very sort of socially conscious job being a civil rights attorney. You were sort of in the mix of the Civil Rights Movement.

Growing up and being so close to, I guess, civil rights and having your father being so actively involved and having the, I guess, most influential people, these sort of politicians and lawyers, at least that's how it seems from your childhood, what made you sort of decide to go into this sort public sector job and, I guess, make your mark on the city in the way that you do now?

Marc Willis: The thing that I got from growing up in the house that I grew up in, the home that I grew up in, is service. I didn't understand it in that way. I didn't come out saying, "My family's about service and I'm gonna be about service."

[00:38:55]

Marc Willis: But what I saw and what I witnessed is – what I saw and what I witnessed were my parents helping people, sometimes individually, sometimes in groups, sometimes with laws, you know.

That's what I saw and sort of seeing this all the time, even the example that I used of stuffing doors with ballots, was, you know, here's someone that is in need of support. We need people to do this work so we're gonna do this work.

Now my father wasn't – you know, he's strategizing somewhere, you know, and being a leader, from my perception, you know, being a leader, but my job was to stuff these doors and so I grew up with that. Never had any attitude.

I mean, you know, there are days that you didn't walk as long and there were hot days and things like that that just bother you as a kid but sort of inside, I've never had a problem with this sort of concept and so I guess I just carried that forward.

00:40:05:00 BEGIN CLIP 9

Marc Willis:

And some of my siblings are sort of the same – some of the same thoughts about seeing what we saw, having my father be a leader in the community to some degree. Then yes, there is something that happens to you that says – and it happens sort of genuinely. I mean you don't sorta plan for it and prepare for it.

I mean but just in living your life there's something that's there that says you need to share this responsibility. You've seen it. You understand it. You get it. You need to do your piece. Again, never anything, that it just sort of happens and I've spent a lot of time volunteering and helping kids in ways that had nothing to do with music in the beginning.

I did a workshop class for a youth group in Massachusetts once on building a birdhouse and I enjoyed that 'cause I like working with wood a little bit, but I mean just it doesn't matter.

[00:40:57]

Marc Willis:

And so what I learned from that is clearly what I articulate today, that it's about mentorship and I had that. I had it with my brothers and sisters and these other people that were around. You've heard the phrase village raised, so all these people – Cool Jack, you know, would call me out if I did something wrong, you know, and other people that were just around.

All this busyness – Little Willis, that was me and so I would get knocked around if I needed to be by any of these people, and so what that does is I mean at some point you cross over and you say,

“Wow. That’s cool. Some – all these people cared about me however they got to that point, whether they were doing a favor for my father or my mother, but they cared about me and I know that now. I see that now and I get it.”

And so I think that’s absolutely had an impact on the work that I’m trying to do at Soulsville and sort of seeing that and understanding it and I guess being in this leadership position is of that same sort – I’m sort of – I don’t want to call it a calling or anything like that but I mean it’s something that’s inside.

[00:42:04]

Marc Willis:

And I never – I did – I mean my – I was telling a young kid the other day. I mean my plans have changed so much I can’t tell you, you know. I was telling someone. It was like, you know, I’m X amount, I’m not sure. It’s okay not to be sure.

The thing you need to do is take advantage of the opportunity that’s presently in front of you and then you just keep doing it, which is what my career’s sort of been, if you call it a career. I mean I’ve just had these things and I’ve tried to maximize that experience, whatever it was, from being a store – manager of a record store to this birdhouse building workshop that I did.

You know, all these things have gotten me to this point of saying, “You know what? There is something inside of me that says, ‘I enjoy helping people and I enjoy working with people and trying to share and guide and point.’” And I’ve learned a tremendous amount doing it which is, I think, the – sorta the thing. I mean you never stop learning.

Joshua Jeffries:

Okay. I have one final question.

[00:43:00]

Joshua Jeffries:

Since you work so – I guess so exclusively with youth or working with youth is a big part of your job what, I guess, message do you think that today’s generation can take from the Civil Rights Movement?

Marc Willis:

How much film you got? I guess one of the primary messages is – that I think has been lost – I really do – I think there’s two. The first one is sort of a fundamental thing, very simple, something your grandmother said. You gotta work hard and I think that’s lost.

I think we're all looking – with all the tools and all the instant this or that that we have access to now, I think people are looking for the shortcut more so. You know, probably have always done that but more so than ever before because of the tools, because of the instant – I mean the Internet provides a huge amount of instant gratification.

[00:43:59]

Marc Willis:

So going – getting up from my chair, getting in the car, going to the library – or bus or whatever to get to the library, walking in that huge facility, finding the section that you're looking for and then pulling out the cards so that they do look – oh, that's the wrong one. Then they go up and, you know, that's all gone.

So if I can get it like this, I mean I think that has impacted an ethic, a broader work ethic that sort of the message is, you know, you can get it quick. You can get it quick. You can get it quick. So I think that's one, and in the Civil Rights Movement, at least the pieces that I saw, there was nobody looking for, understood or even thought or assumed that there was a shortcut.

It was all hard work. It was long work. It took you away from your family at times. It put to some degree danger at arm's length in some cases, and so there's lessons in that, that we're gonna – we gotta get this done.

[00:45:01]

Marc Willis:

And here's the work ethic and the effort that it's gonna take, and so people were aware on – sometimes they weren't, but largely aware of the sacrifice that they were making, and it took special people to step up for that sacrifice, but to me what's the lesson in that is what it takes to get something done.

I think we've lost that and the other thing is just the value of education and, again, I think with all this instant, instant, instant, we just think that, you know, the hours of study, the hours of reading and writing papers, fundamental kinds of things, I mean why do I need that 'cause I can get all the answers I want with two or three mouse clicks.

You know, go to Google and just put in a question and you get some answer. I don't know if it's right or not but – 'cause I don't use it in that way but, you know, I think we've lost what education

can do, has proven to do for people, and that that coupled with, you know, you're working hard is how you achieve your goals.

[00:46:02]

Joshua Jeffries: All right. Well, we just want to thank you for taking time out of your schedule to interview with us.

Marc Willis: Thank you.

Joshua Jeffries: You've had some very enlightening comments and –

Marc Willis: Well, I don't know about –

Joshua Jeffries: – we're glad to get them on film, so thank you once again.

[End of Audio]