



A. C. Wharton, 2008

Item Type	Moving Image
Publisher	Rhodes College
Download date	2025-02-13 12:39:39
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/10267/33659

Holly James: – sharing your story with us. And can we just get your name and occupation?

A. C. Wharton: Sure. I'm A. C. Wharton, Mayor of Shelby County, Tennessee.

Holly James: All right. And what were the names of your parents, and their occupations?

A. C. Wharton: Well, my mother, Mary Alice Seay, she's age 91. She still lives in Lebanon, Tennessee, 30 miles east of Nashville, over in the Cumberland foothills. She was mainly a housewife, but she did a lot of work in the home. People would bring shirts and laundry in, and she would do that at home, and iron clothes. And oddly enough, my mom was a – or is a barber. She doesn't cut hair. She learned to cut hair – she had a lot of brothers, and eventually, she attended Tyler Barber College in Nashville, Tennessee.

[0:01:02]

A. C. Wharton: But before she could get her license, the college closed there and moved down here to Memphis. She then worked in a hospital as a maid for a while. The family then went into business, in the grocery business, and she maintained that – one time, we operated a restaurant, and she operated that with my dad. But just all sorts of things, from raising children to raising cabbage and green beans and chickens and ducks and whatever.

My dad died roughly five years ago. Started out as a farmer, sharecropper, to be specific. They moved to the City of Lebanon, the Town of Lebanon, moved off the farm, the year I was born, at which time my dad, he had always wanted to get into business.

[0:01:57]

A. C. Wharton: So he bought his first grocery store and a small restaurant that I was referring to earlier in discussing my mom. They operated that store for a while. At the same time, he was working as a janitor/night watchman in a clothing manufacturing plant, manufactured overalls, and – plant, rather – overalls and blue jeans. He did that while he was running the store in the daytime. Worked at night. Small farm. Always had some type of livestock around, cattle, sheep, whatever. So he just had a number of things.

He ended his career running our own grocery store and restaurant supply business, which is still there in Lebanon, Tennessee. So

just a varied occupation. Did everything to make ends meet, which he had to do because my family was always an extended family.

[0:02:56]

A. C. Wharton: Because when my grandparents would fall ill, back then, you did not have nursing homes, or black people, quite frankly, didn't really have hospitals. We'd have to go to Nashville. So people would come to our home – matter of fact, our home was more of a hospice. All of my maternal – well, my maternal mother died in my home – in my – my brother and I would have to vacate the bed, and it would turn into a sick room.

My maternal mother – grandmother, rather, came to live with her in her last days. My maternal grandfather came to live with us in his last days, and died there. And my paternal grandmother also came to live with us and died. So there was always an extended obligation on my dad's part.

[0:03:58]

A. C. Wharton: So my dad and mom had to work two or three jobs at all times. That's why it took so long to tell you what they did. But they did – they did so much. My mom I believe had maybe a seventh, eighth grade education. My dad had a third or fourth grade education. But they had a little bit, but they did a lot with it.

Holly James: So were you raised in Lebanon your whole life?

A. C. Wharton: Yeah. I was raised in Lebanon. I left there at the age of 18, when I went off to college at Tennessee State in Nashville. That would have been in 1962. I haven't really been back there to live since then. I left to go off to college, then to law school, then worked in Washington, DC. And then came back to the south in 1973, and I've been here since then. But to answer your question directly, yes, I was raised in Lebanon, Tennessee.

Video Cut 4:56

Holly James: So what was your childhood like, being around all these people all the time?

A. C. Wharton: Well, rich, although by today's standards, in terms of material goods, we did not have that much. But it was a – a rich and adventuresome life in the sense that we didn't have all of the laws that restricted children from working. When I came up, you could

work doing anything. If you were old enough for a driver's license, you could drive a tractor trailer, you could do whatever. We didn't have all of these, you can't do that, you might get hurt, which if I might editorialize, I think our youth would be much better off if we got rid of some of these laws that – you know, you can hang out on the street corner till 10:00 at night, but you can't work in the cookie shop till 8:00. So that's just my editorial.

But we were able to do everything, from shearing sheep to herding goats to butchering hogs. You name it, we did it.

[0:05:59]

A. C. Wharton:

And we didn't have the dangers that we had. Now there was nothing for my friends and I just to get a fishing pole and get on the side of the road, and hitchhike, and go to a creek somewhere, and all we had to worry about is getting stung by a wasp or bitten by a water moccasin or something like that. But we didn't have, oh, somebody might kidnap you. We didn't have all that.

So it was just a – it was – by your standards, by today's standards, it would be boring. But to us, it was rich and adventuresome. We ran a grocery store, so I worked in that. And I learned so much from the old men who would come, particularly on rainy days, when they could not get into the fields, or on snowy days.

[0:06:56]

A. C. Wharton:

They would come, and we had a stove there, and they would sit all day long, chewing snuff and chewing tobacco and spitting, and telling stories and tales. And I would just sit and listen. So it was – it was a rich life, quite frankly.

Tiffani Smith:

So what was school like for you? Did you a lot of activities?

A. C. Wharton:

No. School, again, by today's standards, we didn't have that much. I'll be very careful here. We had great teachers. They did the best they could with what they had. But in terms of extracurricular programs or equipment at the school, it was barely a building. Market Street Elementary, again, our teachers did their absolute best, but we didn't have the labs and the foreign languages, and all of the things, and field trips that children are blessed with today.

[0:08:02]

A. C. Wharton: We'd take one trip a year. The parks in my hometown were segregated, such as they were, so black kids couldn't go. So the most exciting day of the year is when we would all get on a bus and go down to Nashville. There was one black park, public park, in Nashville, Hadley Park. So we'd go down. So we didn't have much in the way of trips and extracurricular activities.

But again, we had – we had good teachers who gave us the basics, which allowed us to build on those basics, and it taught us just a love of learning, and just a thirst for knowledge. So they inculcated that in us.

[0:08:55]

A. C. Wharton: And so I find myself today reading and learning things that had I had the resources, I would have read and learned back in elementary school or high school, at worst. And that's one thing that I look at where I am today, and I'm fortunate. I'm thankful and grateful for that. But I just look back, and you know, sometimes it angers me. If I had had more opportunities, where would I be today?

And I don't say that just for my selfish purposes, but if I had had more in terms of learning exposures, I would have been able to give more, to teach my children more, to teach the young people that I represented when I was practicing law.

[0:09:54]

A. C. Wharton: That I could have done so much more if I had simply had more. The greatest gift you can give is knowledge and a sense of learning. I gave every bit I had, but it was so sparse. But I didn't stop there.

I read voraciously now, because I'm wanting to learn things that I wish I could have learned back then. And that's – when you really stop to think about the cruel racial history of this country, I don't get all uptight over I didn't get to eat in a restaurant, I didn't get to go to a movie theater, I didn't get to go to a swimming pool, I had to ride on the back of the bus. Those things were horrible. But the greatest travesty, and the one that I do believe has the most lasting impact is the denial of just an opportunity to learn, just learn.

[0:11:01]

A. C. Wharton: Because that goes on from generation to generation. And that's one of the things that we're suffering from in our cities today. Ignorance becomes generational, and it's passed on. The lack of respect for learning becomes generational, and it's passed on.

So while overall I had a good childhood, there are some things, particularly when it came to schooling, that have lasting negative effects on me to this day. And our high school, you may have noticed on the background materials that I filled out for you, you noticed the name of my high school? It wasn't a high school. It was Wilson County Training School. Think about that. Think about that. That name tells it all.

[0:11:55]

A. C. Wharton: The white kids in my hometown did not go to Lebanon Training School. They went to Lebanon High School. The black children went to Wilson County Training School. Now when you get ready to take a horse and teach him tricks, or a dog, you don't send them to high school. You send them to a training school.

And every time I see anything with the name of my school on it, it's like taking a knife and stabbing it in my chest, and just (twisting noise) twisting it around, because I thought, how cruel that was, that we didn't deserve a high school education.

[0:12:56]

A. C. Wharton: We needed training. Not an education. Training. And those are the things – I wish I could just tell you a lot of fond memories about my early education, but I can't. I loved my teachers, not everything they did, but it would be a lie. I would be betraying my conscience if I were to try to just say a whole lot of great things about it.

Video Cut 13:25

Holly James: So do you have any other memories about how segregation affected your childhood? Any specific occurrences?

A. C. Wharton: That was perhaps the greatest. You know, one of the most diabolical things about racism is – and is odd as it may seem – I know this going to be perhaps somewhat shocking and troubling to you. Your place in society becomes so well-defined you get to know it intimately.

[0:14:05]

A. C. Wharton: And there's a certain comfort in just knowing that this is my little box. I don't have to worry about what might be on the other side in that big white world out there. As poor as it may be, this is my cage.

You've seen animals, and I'm sure you've read of studies, where an animal becomes so conditioned to staying in a cage, and you can go and open the door and leave it, and the animal stays there. You may have heard the story of **Pi**. I don't know if you ever read that book. There was ol' comfort in knowing everything about the black side of town, and not having to worry about would I fall off the face of the earth, as Columbus and his counterparts – if you sail there trying to reach east by sailing west or vice versa.

[0:15:10]

A. C. Wharton: You might fall off the edge of the earth. You know, folks thought the world was flat. I didn't have worry about that kind of stuff, because I knew – I knew my little segregated world. We came to accept it, so much so, to show you how diabolical the thought process can become, there was a doctor there, a white doctor, who did treat black patients, but on certain days, certain afternoon.

And he built a new office on East Highway 70. And he had a little door that said white patients, and one that said colored patients.

[0:16:04]

A. C. Wharton: When I first saw that, I said, this is really neat. He really likes us. He's giving us a special – a special place here. And that just goes to show you how racism can warp your thought – your thought processes. But as the late '50s came along, and early '60s, and the civil rights activities started elsewhere, we started to get a taste or a bit of knowledge that this isn't the right way. That you've been labeled inferior, and that there was a negative to just being confined to your own little world.

[0:16:58]

A. C. Wharton: That that other world out there has some better things which, being an American, are rightfully yours. And that's when the – the unease sat in, around my junior, senior year in high school, which would have been '60, '61, '62, during that period.

Holly James: So had you already been planning to go to college before that?

A. C. Wharton: No. Absolutely not. Excuse me for interrupting you. Back then, in the black family, if anybody – if there were girls and boys in a family, it was the girls who went to college. And since I had two older sisters – and I had good grades. I was salutatorian of my class.

[0:17:58]

A. C. Wharton: But I had two older sisters off in college. I had wanted to attend Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, because I believed that was the only vet school, school of veterinary medicine, that black people could attend. And that's what I wanted to get into, but I needed \$600 to get there. Six hundred dollars to get there and register. I didn't have \$600. Mom and Dad didn't have \$600.

So I had pretty much resigned myself to getting a job there in Lebanon. At that time, factories were moving to the south from the north, in large part because of – there was no union activity, and also low wages

[0:18:59]

A. C. Wharton: So when I began to hear that you can get a job in one of these places making \$2 an hour, that was just rich. Rich. Go there. Buy you a car. I'd made up – I knew what kind of car I was going to buy. It was a '62 Impala, two doors, white, red interior, 409 engine. I could just taste that car, and that was – that was heaven for me.

But fortunately, as is the case in most times in life, when you prepare and let folks know that you really want to improve yourself, something will come along. And at the last minute, my high school principal showed up.

[0:19:55]

A. C. Wharton: He didn't have a scholarship to Tuskegee, but he had a scholarship that would get me to Tennessee State, over in Nashville, Tennessee. I took a test down there, and again, because of the poor offerings in my elementary and high school education, I was so weak in the sciences that there was just – I wasn't going to be able to make it. That crushed me, but I wasn't going to give up.

So I was beginning anyway, because of an experience that I witnessed, to think about law. So I guess it was sort of ordained

that veterinary medicine may have not been for me. So I went into political science and then on into law school.

Video Cut 20:45

Tiffani Smith:

May I ask what that experience was that you witnessed?

A. C. Wharton:

Yeah. Well, my – sure. I don't want to take too long on it. My senior year – or I'll just say it while I was in high school, because I've forgotten exactly what year.

[0:21:00]

A. C. Wharton:

I had a job at a jewelry store cleaning up, cleaning the windows and things like that. And on my way to that job one Saturday afternoon, I came up on – and in a small town, if you are a junior, the junior's not placed at the end. It's placed after your first name. I came upon Bob Junior Peaks. His real would have been Bob Peaks Junior, but in Lebanon, it would have been – just like I'm A. C. Junior Horton. He was Bob Junior Peaks.

He was kind of given to the bottle, given to excessive drink occasionally. And he was staggering along College Street, which did not have sidewalks at that time. There was a big ditch.

[0:21:58]

A. C. Wharton:

And two cops came along, and they were very close to him, and I don't know whether he was trying to jump out of their way, or whether he stumbled into the ditch. But anyway, he fell into the ditch. And this guy, well, he's down there in the ditch. I mean, he got in there, and he just beat and beat and beat him. Just like beating a log or something, not like a human being. And the guy was totally helpless. He's flat out drunk. He's in a ditch. Posed no threat whatsoever.

But he just – it was just sickening. And all of the racial things he was saying at the same time. And the guy wasn't talking – the guy wasn't doing anything. The guy was drunk.

So that incensed the community. And let me – as an aside – well, it's not an aside. It's a critical factor.

[0:22:59]

A. C. Wharton:

One of the reasons things remained peaceful in Lebanon for most of the years along racial lines is because there weren't that many. See, once you hear – in Memphis, there was always a whole bunch

of black people. And the white power structure tended to view them as a threat. But they didn't view us as a threat in Wilson County, Tennessee, because there was so few of us. Just a handful of us. You go east in Tennessee, the black population diminishes until you get way over to the east end of the state – eastern end of the state.

But that was a fairly peaceful time in matters of race. But this incensed so many people that the leaders in the black community got in touch with some lawyers in Nashville. There was one lawyers who was the civil rights lawyer, Z. Alexander Looby, was one of the first black lawyers in the State of Tennessee, certainly in Nashville.

[0:24:01]

A. C. Wharton:

He was a man who had the courage to sue to desegregate the schools and all that, with many threats to his life, many attacks upon him and his family. So everybody said, well, we've got to get Attorney Looby here, Z. Alexander Looby. We've got to get him up here. We've got to get him up here to defend this man.

We heard he was coming. I had never seen him. But we just – we would go around and we would wonder what kind of car was he going to drive, and just – Cadillac. No, he's not going to have a Cadillac. He'll have a Buick. I mean, it was like the coming of a savior.

In any event, on the day that Bob Junior was to go on trial, we all waited around town.

Video Cut 0:25:00

A. C. Wharton:

Looking – we wanted to see Attorney Looby arrive, to see if I was right, that he was going to come in a Cadillac. Some said he'd be in a Mercury. Some said it would be a Buick. But it was neither, because he didn't show. He sent an upstart, the late Avon Williams, and if you look up his name, he became one of the first black State Senators in the State Legislature here.

He was a little upstart rookie in Attorney Looby's office. So he sent him. And he came up in a little old Ford Fairlane, parked it way off on a side street over there. So they sort of let us down. He was a skinny guy.

Well, at the appointed hour, when the trial was to begin, you see, the black people had to come in kind of like a back door.

[0:25:59]

A. C. Wharton: But all the police officers and the white people went in the front door, in the little City court building, which was a tiny little building. So by the time they said, okay, the court's open, we went to go, and you couldn't get in. It was all white people, except for Bob Peak and Avon Williams, his attorney.

And I remember standing way back in a little hallway like, and I heard this little skinny black guy right there with all those hostile eyes, and cops with their guns on, and I remember him saying, "Your Honor, I demand a public trial for my client. Not just the white public, but for everybody."

[0:26:59]

A. C. Wharton: "I demand that we get a larger – we need a place –" And I just said, oh, God, they're going to kill him. They're going to kill him. He'll never get out of here alive. I was just, oh, God, why doesn't he just ___? They're going to kill him. They will lynch him. He's up here by himself.

But that judge – I think it's Judge **Barron**, I thought he was _____. He said, "Counsel, you're right. We're going to move this case over to the County courthouse," which they did, which is a larger place. That struck me, because I was short and skinny. My daddy was skinny. But then it occurred to me that to be strong, you don't have to be big in stature.

[0:28:01]

A. C. Wharton: That you can be strong even if you're a midget, if you've got courage and the willingness to stand up for what's right, and forsake your private safety for the sake of what's right. Avon Williams, lanky and skinny, but all of a sudden, he looked like a Goliath. And he looked huge to me, because I just couldn't – he didn't curse. He didn't flail out. He just spoke those powerful words, and he didn't quiver, and he didn't shake, and he didn't tremble.

[0:28:53]

A. C. Wharton: And I just said, Lord, if that little skinny guy can do it, I can do it. And it was just sort of an epiphany that it's how large you are up here that counts, and not how large you are here that matters. And it was just a new world that opened there. That's why it kind of hurt me when I found I did not have the right background to become a good veterinary student. But I did have the skills to become a good lawyer, or a political science major.

So it was just – in a way, I guess it was a – it was a blessing.

Video Cut 29:41

Holly James: Was there a lot of civil rights activity at Tennessee State during the time you were there?

A. C. Wharton: Yes, but – particularly my freshman year, '62. The sit-ins were still going on downtown at the lunch counters. I went down on Saturday afternoon, and it was just horrible.

[0:30:01]

A. C. Wharton: Everything that you've – that you've read. There's no exaggeration there. The kicking and knocking people off stools, pulling girls by the hair. Just sling you on the floor like you're a dirty dishtowel. Spitting on you. Those things were still going on. They opened up the counter shortly thereafter that, but yes, it was still going on.

Holly James: Did – were you involved with anything or any ____?

A. C. Wharton: I went down on Saturday afternoon. Let – let me go back to Lebanon. I remember once when they were – there were pickets going on in front of the Capitol Movie Theater, and it was at night.

[0:30:53]

A. C. Wharton: And I hope my mother never sees this, but we had some rowdies in Lebanon. We couldn't understand that non-violence stuff. We – we – we just couldn't understand that. We had not been given the philosophical underpinnings. We'd never heard of Gandhi.

And as is the case with most humans, although this might not be the Christian way of doing it, somebody kicks you, you kick them back. If they hit you, you hit them back. And in that crowd – I won't name any of them – we decided that our role would be that night to stand across the street and to keep the white rowdies off and to decoy them. And we had this scheme, which worked, that we would kind of mix it up with them in the crowd.

[0:31:59]

A. C. Wharton: Try to engage them in a fight. And our plan was to get things started, and then gradually retreat into our neighborhood, in unfriendly territory. And they fell for it.

But we felt that we were giving some safety to the children who were marching. It did work, by the way, because – and see, back then – this is nothing to brag about. You never heard any mention of guns and things. You know, when you had a fight, it was with sticks, rocks. We had rock battles and things like that, because there wasn't no streetlights.

And so we got them up in there and gave them a pretty good chunking with rocks and things. At least they weren't downtown. I think – I don't think that I can be prosecuted with that now. I think the time has run out. I don't have to defend myself.

[0:32:55]

A. C. Wharton: But everybody was involved in some way, whether it was giving money, going to the meetings, or whatever.

Holly James: Do you think that the country's involvement with the civil rights movement affected your education as far as classes?

A. C. Wharton: You mean at the high school –

Holly James: Or as – sorry. At Tennessee State.

A. C. Wharton: Well, it did, because again, Tennessee State was all black. As a matter of fact, if you do some legal research, you'll read of a case called Geier, G-E-I-E-R, versus State of Tennessee. A lawsuit was filed around that time to actually bring better courses to Tennessee State. See, Tennessee State was a four-year college. It didn't have – some PhD programs, maybe. But UT at that time only had a little downtown campus. It was in a building downtown.

[0:33:57]

A. C. Wharton: And opposed to giving certain master's courses and PhD courses to Tennessee State, guess what? They gave them to this little night school downtown. And of course, that litigation was only settled probably two or three years ago, just to show you how long it's been going on. We won a consent decree for the longest.

So yes, it did. Just as the courses and things that I was able to get in my elementary and high school education were limited, the resources were limited, there was a two-tier system of funding education at the higher education level. You should have seen the physical plant at Tennessee State. You should have seen the labs, or what they called a lab, at Tennessee State. And I have some of the same feelings about the education that I got there that I have about my elementary and high school.

[0:34:57]

A. C. Wharton:

I am deeply appreciative of everything I learned. I am deeply appreciative of my instructors who did their dead level best with what they had. But I still have a lot of hurt and anger in me about what I did not get, what I should have had. It wasn't because I wasn't able to understand those courses. It's just that those courses and things, those resources, were denied us. We were denied those resources for one reason, the color of our skin.

And you never, never, never – you don't get over that. Again, I – I want to make it clear. I do not speak disparagingly at all over my teachers and instructors, because they fought the good fight.

Video Cut 36:00

A. C. Wharton:

They did what they could. And it's a miracle that we achieved as much as we did. If you look at the salaries they were paid as compared with their white counterparts, and the opportunities they had for sabbaticals, and to go off and improve themselves, weren't nothing compared to what their colleagues had in the other universities.

So yes, it did affect – and – but you know, there's a positive side to that. Just as I have a lot of pain and hurt and anger over what I was denied, I have equally in depth pain and hurt and anger over our children, particularly our young black children now, who have every opportunity in the world to just get for the asking what I was denied because of my race.

[0:37:05]

A. C. Wharton:

And we're not doing it. We're squandering those opportunities. And as I said earlier, I don't – I don't really – I'm not mad at them, because I said a few minutes ago that the effects of racism become generational. I'm just fortunate that although my daddy had a third grade education and my mom had a seventh or eighth grade

education, they had a – just that undying thirst for learning, to improving themselves, and they knew the only way to do it was through education.

Every child these days does not have a mother, grandmother, granddaddy, grandfather, who has that quest for learning. They're basically raising themselves.

[0:37:57]

A. C. Wharton: And so when they're given these opportunities, they don't take advantage of them. But it hurts me nevertheless that there's – it's best described this way. When I came up, I had desire, but no opportunity. The table has flipped, and so many of our children have the opportunity, but they don't have the desire. And that hurts.

Holly James: So how do you think moving to the city in Nashville affected the way you thought about things? You said you were very involved your freshman year.

A. C. Wharton: Yeah.

Holly James: Was that inspiring?

A. C. Wharton: It was. You know, my – I'm just glad, and I would – I hope every child has an opportunity to maybe get away from home, get education, to meet other people. I was the only boy in my class that went to college. Stop to think about that.

[0:38:58]

A. C. Wharton: The only boy. Many of them are dead now. Some on drugs. Just – they're still there. They're on the corner, in Lebanon, never having seen anything other than Lebanon. But getting to Nashville, meeting people. I met a guy from New York my freshman year. I had gone to New York. We had a senior class trip that we worked and paid for. First time I'd been out.

As I went under the Holland Tunnel, something just hit me, and I said, I'll be back. I'm going to conquer this world. And so in my summer break during my freshman year, I met a guy from New York, and he said, "Come on. Stay with me for a summer."

[0:39:59]

A. C. Wharton: So I went to Brooklyn, the Blake family. Forever indebted to them. And I went back, and I could hit the streets in New York. Got – found jobs, two jobs. Worked, because I just felt that I could conquer this world. I may come from humble beginnings, but this world doesn't frighten me.

And going to Nashville had the same effect, because that's a big city compared to Lebanon. So it broadened my horizons. I met people from Detroit. You know, in Lebanon, you meet people from Legarta, Clayville, Tucker's Crossroad, Mount Juliet, Needmore, Noel Raney. All those places you've never heard of. And that would have been – that would have been my – that would have been my universe. That would have been my horizon.

[0:40:57]

A. C. Wharton: I never would have met people from LA. Never would have met people from Detroit, from Birmingham, and sit and hear them tell me of the better world that they had lived in, and that there are better things. And it just reinforced that burning within me that, I've got to get out of here. I've got – and it wasn't so much just a physical movement of the body, I've got to get out of here. It was a mental, I've got to get out of this cage that this racist neighborhood has tried to lock me in.

And I – I just had to – and it just – it just – by learning that the people from Detroit, from Pontiac, from Delaware, from Newark, that I could think.

[0:41:58]

A. C. Wharton: They may have known a little Spanish, but I could think just like they could think. They knew trig, because I didn't have trig. I didn't have algebra, and they would help me. But once they would help me, I could think. I had a brain just like theirs, although some of them had attended schools – all their schools were better, and they're integrated. But they would help me.

And I just said, you know, I'm not handicapped. I can – I can make it in this world. So it opened my – broadened my perspectives, extended my horizon and it was great.

Video Cut 42:40

Holly James:

Did you ever talk with them on the reasons why they had come to Tennessee State from all these other places?

A. C. Wharton: Yes. Many of them were there because their mothers had – see, again, colleges for black people were hard to find just about anywhere at that time.

[0:42:57]

A. C. Wharton: So many of them came because they had had older brothers or uncles or – who attended. And that's still the case – that's still the case now. And then the big city folks wanted to get their children out of the big cities. They thought Nashville was a small town and sent them there so they wouldn't get in trouble. If they only knew.

But yeah. They were the motivations. And smaller school. Tennessee State was large, maybe 5,000 at that time, but compared to say a Michigan State or places like that. And then it was rougher getting in those schools, too, quite frankly.

Holly James: And where did your sisters go to college at?

A. C. Wharton: My two older sisters attended Tennessee State for their undergrad, and other places for their advanced degrees. My brother attended Tennessee State for his undergrad, and Howard University for his medical degree.

Tiffani Smith: What were their names?

A. C. Wharton: Mary is the oldest. She lives here in Memphis.

[0:43:55]

A. C. Wharton: Just retired a few years ago from Memphis City School. Ruth, who just retired a few years ago from the LA – Los Angeles school system out there, assistant superintendent. And Kenneth, my brother, who's a practicing OB/GYN in Chicago.

Holly James: So what's –

A. C. Wharton: And I have one sister who's deceased. She was a village clerk in Mount Prospect.

Holly James: Okay. So what inspired you all to go to grad school after college?

A. C. Wharton: Well, we knew then that while a college degree was good to have, we knew just through common sense that a college degree – matter of fact, I truly feel now that our State Constitution ought to be

changed so that we in government have a responsibility not merely to see that every child gets a college – a high school education.

[0:44:57]

A. C. Wharton: It ought to be a college education. If you look at – if you want to call it demand inflation, it has eaten away – I would dare say that the equivalency of a high school diploma, if you go 40 or 50 years back, a high school diploma these days is about worth what a eighth grade certificate was 40 or 50 years ago. So inflation, knowledge inflation, has eaten up the benefits of a mere high school education, and that the mandatory target now ought to be a high school – excuse me, a college education, because that's what it takes. Just the basics.

And as demands increase, it's going to require more than a college education. Some specialty.

[0:45:59]

A. C. Wharton: Right now, it used to be teacher education courses were all four years. The more advanced schools of education, teacher education, are going to five years, including a year's practical. So we knew that while we were proud of what we had, that to live in the world that we faced, that you have – that you couldn't stop there.

And I'm ever convinced of that, so much so that my boys, two of them are practicing law already. My daughter-in-law – my wife's a lawyer. We just – you just have to have it, so . . .

Video Cut 46:45

Tiffani Smith:

What was Ole Miss like for you? The experience.

A. C. Wharton: Ole Miss, if you recall what I said a few minutes ago about how there was a certain comfort in Lebanon in my little segregated world there, when I went to Ole Miss, the fraternities and things were segregated.

[0:47:08]

A. C. Wharton: Most of the social clubs were segregated. So there was a certain comfort. I wasn't afraid when I stepped on campus, because I knew what to expect. I didn't expect to check in my dorm room and then go down to the mailbox and have an invitation in there from Tri Del and all of the fraternities to come by their frat house to take a look at them. I didn't expect anybody to invite me to try

out for Colonel Reb or the pep squad. I didn't expect that. So I didn't go around, oh, they didn't invite me. I mean, I knew.

[0:47:57]

A. C. Wharton: So there was a certain comfort in that. But as the time passed on, we did set out to change some of those things. And oddly enough, I must say there was a certain honesty about the University of Mississippi. They didn't fake it. I mean, it was obvious. They knew that they had a system that was morally indefensible. Forget about the legal side of it. And that they needed to set about doing something about it.

I was the first black student to serve on the student judicial council. And there were a number of things that they did try – you have to understand the history of the Ole Miss Law School. I ended up there because Dean Josh Morris, who was from a wealthy – he was a lawyer, of course – wealthy family in Mississippi, just saw what was going on throughout Mississippi, and said it wasn't right.

[0:49:02]

A. C. Wharton: He had the wisdom and foresight to see that there are a number of ways to deal – well, we could just have demonstrations and riots and things like that. Or another way would be to try to reform the system itself, the justice system itself. And he was convinced – his theory was that it – you're not going to change Mississippi by having freedom riders and civil rights workers to come in every summer and then go back to Yale and Berkeley or MIT. That you had to have people who knew the law, loved the law, respected the law, who were indigenous to the area.

And that's why he wanted to get a crop of lawyers right there in Mississippi. So he went to the – I believe it was Rockefeller Foundation. It may have been the Ford Foundation. And got money to recruit black students all across the south to come to Ole Miss Law School. So there was a sense of change boding in the air when we got there, because of what he – what he did.

[0:50:01]

A. C. Wharton: A real – real pioneer. So much so that after I finished, I became the first black to teach at the University of Mississippi Law School. Taught there for 25 years. Could have taught full-time, but I had another job up here, so I taught full-time. So there was – while there were some stark racial conditions, there was always that

sense, that feeling that they're not trying to defend this, they're trying to change it, which was in fact the case.

Tiffani Smith: How did your parents feel about you being in school far away? Like did they give you any advice, or what was their –

A. C. Wharton: It was – parents loved us then, but as I said earlier, there weren't that many dangers in the world. And they came to expect that to be anything, you had to get away from the home.

[0:50:55]

A. C. Wharton: Anything that they felt was going to improve you, they'd say their prayers, and they were at peace with it, because they – they knew we weren't going off to gamble or have a party or something. We were going off because we wanted to make something out of ourselves that we could not make at home. So they were comfortable.

Video Cut 51:15

Holly James: You mentioned after you left Ole Miss, you – well, you stayed there for 25 years to teach?

A. C. Wharton: Right. No. I left and went to Washington and worked a couple of years, then came back to Tennessee in '73. They called me in '74 and said, hey, would you – well, they called me before then, while I was in Washington. I said, well, I've got to pay off my law school loans. My wife and I had borrowed money to go to school, so we had to pay that off. And we got better jobs in Washington.

So I turned them down when they first called. But after I got back, they called again. And I said, no, can't do it. I got a full-time job. Then they called back and said, hey, we're going to do something we've never done. We're going to let you teach a course at night. They'd never done that before.

[0:51:59]

A. C. Wharton: And they wanted me to do it for one semester. And I said, okay, I'll do it, one semester. Of course, back then, I was much younger. Had a Volkswagen. Gasoline, maybe \$0.50 a gallon. Speed limit was 75. I could jump in my VW Bug and be on the Ole Miss campus in one hour, and spend \$1.20 worth of gas.

So it was easy, and I did it for 25 – 25 years. Supposed to been this one semester. But I enjoyed it. Taught John Grisham. He was in one of my first classes. Matter of fact, if you read his book,

I think it's *The Rainmaker*, I'm the geezer law professor, because I taught a course on elderly law. He called it law of old folks, geezer law was his name, and I became the geezer law professor. If you read that book, that's me.

[0:52:54]

A. C. Wharton: So I enjoyed it. The students kept me young, because they didn't accept things as they were. They were always asking why. But a pleasant experience.

Tiffani Smith: Did your lessons go outside of the classroom, like more than just the books? Like did you give your own personal –

A. C. Wharton: Oh, yes. See that was the thing. Matter of fact, my evaluations were among the highest, because many of the teachers were – had gotten their master's of laws or whatever, and had not really practiced. But I was a practicing attorney, and had practiced, so I was able to breathe some life into those dry pages, those rules and things, and to really let the students get a feel for how it is in the world. They really enjoyed it.

And of course, lawyers always have a whole bunch of stories and jokes we can tell. So this was a night course, and being able to tell stories and jokes kept them awake and all. So – and they did take it outside the courtroom.

Tiffani Smith: Where did you practice, and what kind of law did you practice?

[0:53:57]

A. C. Wharton: Well, I – when I finished Ole Miss, I went to work for the EEOC, Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, in Washington. Obviously, employment discrimination cases. I left there, went to the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights, which I traveled around the country filing lawsuits to get black folks and women hired onto police and fire departments. They just weren't hiring women and African Americans then.

And then back here to run the Legal Services Program, a program which – and it still exists today, to provide legal assistance to those who cannot afford it in civil matters. Evictions, accidents, divorces, things like that.

Tiffani Smith: When did you decide to finish teaching, and what did you do afterwards?

A. C. Wharton: Well, see, I was teaching and practicing at the same time. So it was all the same thing. Even when I was Public Defender, or Legal Services clerk I was teaching in the evening and I was in private practice.

[0:54:58]

A. C. Wharton: I was just like my dad. I had three things going at one time.

Tiffani Smith: And what did you do after that? Like after you finished practicing – when did you become – like when did you come to Tennessee?

A. C. Wharton: Mayor. Oh, all this was in Tennessee. See, I was in Tennessee practicing up here, running Legal Services program, Public Defender, which is a part-time job. So I had a private practice, Public Defender, and I would go to Ole Miss and teach at night. I did all that at –

Tiffani Smith: That's a lot.

A. C. Wharton: Yeah. Did it all at one time. That was from roughly '74 to '99 that I taught. And then, of course, I continued to practice in my private practice and serve as Public Defender. And elected to this position in August of 2002, at which time I had to give up all the other jobs.

Tiffani Smith: You did a lot, a lot, during that time period. Were there any significant experiences that stick out to you, dealing with maybe issues with racial issues?

[0:55:56]

A. C. Wharton: Yeah. Well, right next to your campus over there, I – the closing of West Drive all the way to the United States Supreme Court. See, West Drive used to come all the way into Hyde Park, and you could walk through there. But the residents of Hyde Park said they couldn't – they said – I think it was – they had some reason – obviously, they didn't come out and say, we don't want these black folks coming through there.

We contended – I mean, you come right out of Vollenline there, and then you dead end right into that. And it was such a slap in the face. But my, my, my, times have changed black folks live in Hyde Park now. But that was my case. I won it in the court here, but it got away to a conservative Supreme Court, and they reversed it. Those are some of the things – that was perhaps the biggest

case that I was involved in along the racial – there were many other cases, but that was the largest.

Video Cut 57:00

Tiffani Smith: Do you feel like the Avon Williams you saw when you were younger?

A. C. Wharton: I did at that time, because again, I would go – there was a principal of a school once, she said – I think she was testing me. She said, would you come to my school and speak? I said, sure. She said, third graders? I said, yeah. She said, really? I said, yeah. She said, you'll speak to some third graders? And I said, sure.

As skinny as I was, as skinny as I am, you see, when you're a little bitty child, everybody's a giant. You can be four feet tall, if you're looking at a child who's two feet tall, you're big, and they look up to you.

[0:57:55]

A. C. Wharton: And so I've just loved – and I do it now. And – because I think I stand tall. I think I stand tall, as Avon Williams did, in their eyes. And I inspire those kids to do what they think they could not do.

Tiffani Smith: How does your – how was it coming into the Mayor Office? Like what changed for you? What was different for you?

A. C. Wharton: Well, coming into this office, you're coming into a political world. When you're in the practice of law, you have rule books, and the judge can make people follow the rules. Excuse my grammar. Ain't no rule book in the raw world of politics. Might makes right. The winner makes the rules.

And so I had to adapt, which I think I have done. The challenges are just huge. I mean, they just never, never, never stop coming. And – but I think I've adjusted quite well.

[0:59:02]

A. C. Wharton: People just don't understand how vast the challenges are every day. You've got to know something about everything. Hospitals, police department, sheriff's department, jails, agriculture. Every day, it's always just something new. Earthquakes, tornados. You name it. It's just – you've just got to – every day just got to learn so much.

Every day – it's not cumulative in many ways, because every day you have to start all over on something new, a new challenge.

Holly James: What made you choose to become Mayor?

A. C. Wharton: Well, this is going to sound kind of hokey. I was really blessed with the ability to communicate across racial lines and across generational lines. I view that as a real treasure, a needed asset here.

[0:59:55]

A. C. Wharton: And I just said, maybe I can add a little bit of something to reconciliation, and through reconciliation, we can start making some progress in this town. That was the main thing. I was not a financial genius, not a business genius, but I thought, and I'm convinced, that I had a pretty good reading of the people. I would like to feel that – you've heard the old saying, I was country when country wasn't cool? I would like to feel that I was post-racial when post-racial wasn't cool, when Senator Obama hadn't come along, because I saw the world as a post-racial world, and I still see our town as a post-racial town, if we're going to get over these things and thrive.

Tiffani Smith: How much do you feel has changed from then to now? Or do you think some things are still the same?

A. C. Wharton: Oh, some things are still the same. But I think there's been a whole lot of change. Years ago, everything down at the County Commission just broke down on stark racial lines.

[1:01:00]

A. C. Wharton: And there's still differences. There's still Republican, Democrat, but not as prominent as it once was. I think I've been able to bring just a little bit of hey, let's try to see things through the lenses of each other's eyes. And I think – I think I've done a lot to bridge those gaps.

Tiffani Smith: Why do you think there's a separate between county and city, or there's so much difference between the two?

A. C. Wharton: Suspicion. I think the county areas and the smaller towns feel that Memphis is so big that they'll just stomp them if they come together in one government. Once we get over that, I think we'll be able to eventually pull the two together. That they don't have to

give up their identity, their government, their mayors, their council. They'll be able to be what they are now, but we can still come together under one umbrella.

Tiffani Smith: Okay. Well, do you have any advice for people now, living in this time period?

A. C. Wharton: Take advantage of all the opportunities, and don't be satisfied with – you – every stage in life as a plateau, and not the mountain peak. I don't care how many degrees you have. Just remember that if you don't run fast, somebody's going to catch up with you and pass you. I live by that whatever it is. Just learn, learn, learn, learn.

And if you're constantly learning, you don't have time to sit around and hate, because you – you're seeing the better things in life. And you don't – you don't feel that somebody's getting ready to take something away from you, because you know you're always getting better. You don't become suspicious. You don't have, well, we had these jobs before women came into the workplace, or we had these jobs ___ Hispanic people came in here, or we had these before black folks started getting these jobs, and they just— things are going down.

[1:03:01]

A. C. Wharton: If you just say, no, let's make the path larger. Don't think we have to push people away from the table. Just put more food on the table. And then you don't have to get into this, I would have two pieces of pie if you hadn't been in here, or I would make more, if she hadn't gotten hired here. Let's just make it bigger, so that we can all work and live and play.

Tiffani Smith: Well, with wrapping things up, I would like to thank you on behalf of Rhodes College for allowing us the time to share this interview with you.

A. C. Wharton: Thank you, and I want to say thanks to Rhodes College, not only for what it does within the classroom, but for what it does, and in my opinion, and what it does as a good citizen, not only for its immediate neighborhood over there, but for what it does to bring about enlightenment and understanding amongst all peoples in this area.

[End of Audio]