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William E. Kelley (October 15, 2021)

Jayson Smith

NARRATOR: William E. Kelley

INTERVIEWER: Jayson Smith

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JS: And we can start this interview.

WK: Okay.

JS: So, I'm just going to start off with, please tell me your name and where you grew up?

WK: William Kelley from the class of 1960 and I grew up in Watts, in Los Angeles.

JS: Were you born in Watts?

WK: Well, I was born in downtown LA at what was then called Queen of the Angels Hospital, which you can probably see if you get on the Hollywood Freeway, off the Harbor Freeway, and it's a great big building that's still there, but it's no longer a hospital.

JS: So, born in downtown LA, moved to Watts?

WK: Well, no, my family lived in Watts long before I was born. I'm the fifth of five children. My dad was an LA police officer and they had lived in Watts, since, oh, the early twenties, 1920.

JS: Oh. What was that like, growing up a child of five, with a parent in the police force?

WK: Well, my dad was a policeman. My mother was a domestic; she was cleaning white people's houses. And she continued to do that even while I was at Whittier, and I'm very grateful to both of my parents for what they did for me. And when I say I was number five of five, my nearest sibling was eleven years older than me. So, yeah, growing up as

KELLEY

the baby in the family, I wouldn't object to being called spoiled (laughs), but my sisters deny that.

JS: So, you were like the literally baby, though?

WK: I was.

JS: Yeah. Wow, that's interesting. I myself am a middle child, so—

WK: How many siblings do you have?

JS: I have one older, he's one year older than me, and I have a sister, she's five years younger.

WK: Okay.

JS: So, it's just us three. But yeah, growing up in a sibling household, it's an interesting thing to experience, huh?

WK: (laughs)

JS: You mentioned that your father was a police officer, did he go to college?

WK: No. He, let's see, he was born in, I want to say, 1898, maybe 1897. He was born in Alabama, but his mother was a teenager when he was born, and we don't know who my paternal grandfather was—my father's father. We don't know who that is. Through DNA tracing I've got a couple of clues, but not enough to be conclusive. But anyway, when my grandmother, his mother, was about thirteen or fifteen—somewhere around there—she moved to Omaha, Nebraska and that's where he grew up. And in fact, he was drafted into the Army for World War I, went to boot camp, and served on active duty for about a year, but he never left the states because the war was over in about 1918, I think. So, he never had to go overseas. Then, he was a fireman in an all-Black fire battalion in Omaha, Nebraska. And in 1922 or so he married my mother, they had my brother—my oldest

KELLEY

brother, who's now deceased—he was born in Omaha. And then they moved to Los Angeles about 1922. And so, I think my oldest sister was also born in Omaha, and then the other three, including myself, we were all born in Los Angeles. And they lived, as I said, in different parts of South Central LA, but for most of my parents lives they lived in Watts—110th and Grape.

JS: Oh, I don't know the Watts area that well. I kind of grew up in Culver City, so I am from Los Angeles, as well, but like I never—my family just, we never lived in Watts. My mom used to live in Watts when she first moved to California, around the 1990s during the Watts Riots.

WK: Ah.

JS: And so, that happened and she was like, yeah, I'm not raising a family in Watts.

WK: Okay. Well, just to give you an idea of where it is, I'm sure you know where Alameda Boulevard is?

JS: Yes.

WK: And the one little, what is that—the highway, the Gardena Freeway or the Torrance Freeway—the 105, maybe?

JS: Yeah, I think so.

WK: Anyway, Alameda, it goes east, west all the way toward the ocean. And then (pause), I'm sorry, it's Imperial Highway I'm thinking of. Alameda goes north, south. So, I was very near the intersection of Imperial Highway and Alameda, just maybe five, ten blocks away. The nearest high school was Jordan High School, but for reasons I can't fathom my parents decided that I should go to Fremont High School, which was some distance away, but I managed to have an old beat-up car to get to school every day, as soon as I

KELLEY

turned sixteen, anyway. I'm going to get up and get a drink of water. Let me clear my throat. Don't go away, I'll be right back. (pause) I'm back. Let's see if that helps. I've been told that I have the voice of a radio announcer.

JS: You do! It's very soothing.

WK: It doesn't sound like it when I'm horse like that though. Maybe I'll get my bass timbre here back in a second.

JS: How did your parents not going to college affect you going to college?

WK: Well, I left off part of my dad's story. He did attend one year, or maybe a partial year, of a college that I think was in Tennessee, and he studied, I think, animal husbandry. But he didn't finish. My mother grew up in Broadwater, Nebraska, which is far western Nebraska, and she moved to Omaha to take care of a relative and that's where my parents met. And she attended what was called a normal school, which I think might be the equivalent of a junior college; I'm not sure. But of my four siblings, my oldest brother, Leroy, Jr. attended one year at the University of California, Berkeley but was drafted for World War II, so he didn't finish. When he came back from the war—he served in Africa and in France—he came back to Los Angeles and he followed in my father's footsteps and also became a police officer in Los Angeles. And when he retired, he retired as an inspector of homicide. Never talked about his work. And one thing I remember my dad telling me very clearly was, *son, don't ever be a cop*. It's tough work, it's tough work. I have two sisters, then. The oldest didn't go to college, but the other sister who is now ninety-four and doing very well living in Laurel Canyon, she went to UCLA and became a schoolteacher in LA. And then my nearest brother, Sam, was in the Merchant Marines for several years, and then he eventually lived in San Francisco for several years and died

KELLEY

an early death, probably due to his occupation. He worked in a paint manufacturing plant. We're pretty sure that the odors and chemicals of making paint is what caused him to have a heart attack and die in his early fifties. So, then there's me, and I don't think there was every any doubt in my mind or in my family's mind that I would go to college. And I chose Whitter, I think I told you, and maybe only of three—there's one in Chicago and one in Massachusetts that offered all of the academic courses required by the YMCA for certification to be a YMCA professional, and that's what I wanted to be. I was very active in the Y as a teenager. I used to love to go camping in the Sierra Nevada mountains, and as a teenager I'd be a counselor, camp counselor, for grade school boys, up in the mountains near San Bernardino, and still continue to go backpacking and fishing up in the mountains with the Y myself, with my peers. And that's pretty much what determined that I wanted to be in the YMCA profession. And then I got that fellowship to go to Sweden after graduation, and then came back to LA and worked for two years before I nearly got caught up in the draft and ended up volunteering for the Navy, going to officer candidate school, having a three-year obligation as a commissioned officer, but deciding to make a career of it, and ended up serving on active duty for twenty-seven and a half years.

JS: (clapping) Thank you.

WK: (laughs) Watts was different when I was growing up than it was when your mom was there and experienced the awful riots. I was on active duty. In fact, I was stationed temporarily down at the Long Beach Naval Station when those riots occurred and I remember telling the officer that I was working for, who was my superior in rank, that I was going to go and visit my mother who was in Watts and not far and wanted to go

KELLEY

make sure she was okay. And so, I hopped in my car. He told me he didn't think it was a good idea. He didn't order me to stay away because I think he knew I'd go anyway. So, I drove up to Watts and I remember crossing the tracks, the railroad tracks at Alameda, where there were police barriers that had been taken down to block traffic, so I was able to cross Alameda and go to my mother's house. Just two blocks away there was a small grocery shop we used to patronize, owned by a very nice Mexican family. It was burned to the ground. Catty-corner from it was a shop owned by a Mexican man that used to cut my hair, a barbershop; it was burned down. There was a liquor store; it was still standing, doing business through the steel gates that protected the front of the store, and there were armed men on the roof of that liquor store to protect it from looters and arsonists. The only reasonable sized super-market was burned to the ground; it was down on Imperial Highway, near Wilmington Avenue. And so, that meant that people in Watts and Compton were living in what's now called a food desert, because there's no place to go shopping at reasonable prices. You know, the little mom and pop stores generally are more costly, had less variety, didn't have fresh produce, didn't have the refrigeration equipment to keep frozen goods, so people, if they didn't have cars, were really out of luck in terms of grocery shopping. My mother, by that time, was already a widow, but she was safe and the whole neighborhood looked as it always had. There was no damage at all on her street or even on the street next to Wilmington, two blocks away or one block away. But I remember that very, very clearly. So, I went back to work down at the Naval base, and she continued to live there until she died at the age of ninety-nine in the year 2000. She was about one month away from turning 100 when she passed away.

JS: Wow, that's a long time.

KELLEY

WK: Yeah, it is. Hopefully those genes carry over and I'm going to be around a while longer too. (laughs)

JS: Hopefully! What year did you start at Whittier College?

WK: The fall of 1957.

JS: Oh.

WK: So, I graduated in the spring of 1960, probably May of 1960. And you know, I wrote down something I wanted to tell you. I don't know what it's like at Whittier now, because I haven't been on campus in decades, but through the four years that I was at Whittier there was never more than a dozen Black students out of a student body of about 1100. Every year was about the same, some new, some had left, some had graduated, some had just left or transferred to other schools. And of that number twelve, I kind of think that the number of women was probably about five, so there were maybe seven men on campus at any one time. There were probably just a little bit larger number of Asian students, men and women, and maybe, again, twice that number of Hispanic students. So, socially dating the Black women on campus was kind of like dating your sister (laughs), it wasn't very appealing. But we dated across races. I had a very nice girlfriend that my mother would not have approved of. Although, as she became older and both of my sons married women who were white, she accepted them entirely and probably would have accepted whoever I married, but that's another story. But one thing that's very vivid in my memory about Whittier—I was telling a friend of mine who is on the board of trustees, Christopher Cross, from the class of 1957, that in my senior year I think it was, was the year that the Freedom Riders were active in the South and the bus counter demonstrations—lunch counter demonstrations—were happening across the South at the

KELLEY

drugstores that had lunch counters, and a group of us, white and black, decided that we would, in sympathy to those civil rights actions happening in the South, we would go into downtown Whittier and carry picket signs in front of—I want to say Woolworth’s; it might have been something else—and we were there for maybe two hours when it began to get a little ugly. People were throwing racial insults at us, calling us communists, and not threatening us, but I know that it made me very uncomfortable. And I went back to the campus and I immediately, I think, recognized that for the Whittier campus and Whittier College (coughs), excuse me, represented a refuge for us who were Black on that campus, and I don’t think we realized it.

JS: While you were at Whittier, were you involved in any extracurricular activities, you know, sports, clubs—I noticed that you were a Lancer?

WK: I was.

JS: Could you maybe talk about the experience that you had in the extracurricular side of Whittier?

WK: Sure. My freshman year I decided I’d play on the freshman basketball team, even though I didn’t know how to dribble, and I was a lousy shot. So, there were seven men on the freshman team, and I was number seven. And we got to maybe the last three games of the year before I scored my first basket. And several of my friends in the stands gave me a standing ovation for finally scoring a basket. (laughs)

JS: (laughs) I don’t mean to laugh.

WK: So, didn’t carry on with basketball. (laughs) It was clearly not something I wanted to do, or wasn’t good at. I did run track. I ran the quarter mile, 440, and I guess I was the fastest guy on the track team for a while, for that particular race, and I had run cross country in

KELLEY

high school, but I wasn't very diligent about that either. I had gone to another high school, my freshman year of high school, called Manual Arts. You probably know where Manual Arts is. And Manual Arts, at the time, had a requirement that you either stayed in the Junior ROTC, where a uniform, carried a mock rifle once a week, or you went to a sports team. So, I was too skinny to play football; I didn't know how to shoot or dribble; I didn't like baseball. I knew I could run, so I went out for cross-country. And I'll use the term half-ass to describe my diligence at being a cross-country runner. So, I typically would go to a meet and I'd come in in the bottom third. I'd finish, but not very well. Well, after one semester at Manual Arts I transferred to Fremont. They didn't have the ROTC requirement, but I wanted to do something sports-wise, so I went to the cross-country team. And Fremont and Manual Arts were, and maybe still are, in the same athletic conference. So, one day we had a cross-country meet, Fremont versus Manual Arts, and I looked around at the guys on the other team that I had just been on, for Manual Arts, and I thought, hell, I can beat at least six of these guys. So, we had the race and I came in like number ten or nine, or something like that, for the meet. And the coach said to me, "I've never seen an improvement like that from anybody in cross-country." (laughs) Next week I was back in the bottom third, because I just didn't care. (laughs) I just didn't care. I was also in the a cappella choir for three years, and that was wonderful. And it truly was the a cappella choir. Now, I was disappointed a couple years ago when I went to homecoming and the choir performed, but it was no longer a cappella. The director of the choir played the piano and they sang to that, as opposed to the really a cappella performances that we gave under the director, I forget his name, that was there

KELLEY

for many, many years. I was active in the student government, and I don't know if you know that I was the first Black student body president at Whittier College?

JS: You were the first BSU president!

WK: Yeah.

JS: Good for you! That's an accomplishment.

WK: I had been the men's, what is it called—the men's president or something, my junior year, I think. But I have no idea by the margin that I won the election for student body president, but I served in that office my senior year and for that reason I gave up the choir and the sports team because I was pretty busy with student government. And also, my freshman year, I just didn't have the academic discipline that I should have had, and I nearly lost my scholarship, with poor academic performance, my freshman year. I did much better my sophomore year and my junior year, when most of my courses were in sociology or anthropology and courses that I really took a liking to. My grades shot up, as they did my senior year, and I ended up graduating on the dean's list, academically. I had been on the dean's list at the end of my freshman year, but that was the list you don't want to be on. (laughs) But I was on the good list when I graduated. I was also selected for the sociology honor fraternity, or whatever it is. I forget what it's called, Omicron something, but I was elected to that, also.

JS: Could you talk about your time as a Lancer? I know that you did join the Lancer Society.

WK: I did. The societies were really a big deal in that era when I was there and continued for a while after I graduated. Lancers, for example, I think there were ten student body presidents in a row, at least one or two—at least two—that I knew of after me. So, there were ten in a row who were Lancers. The Orthogonians were the jocks, largely football

players. Good guys, all, but they were football players. William Penn Society was, I think, more academically inclined. The Saxons, Soxons, whatever they were, I don't remember anything about them particularly, but I did have friends across all of those different groups. Yeah, Orthogonians dated Athenians and Lancers dated Mets—Metaphonians. We probably had ninety to a hundred members of the Lancers when I was there in my undergraduate years. And Orthogonians probably about that same number. And I don't know if you've heard it, but Richard Nixon was one of the founders of the Orthogonians. And here's a story for you, when Richard Nixon was vice president he was the speaker for the graduation of the class of 1959, and since I had just been elected student body president I was part of the official greeting party when his limousine drove up to the campus on Painter Avenue. And we met him, surrounded by cameras and news films, a lot of stuff, and I tried very hard to see if I could find a photograph or two of that, because I know that I was in some of the pictures that were taken of his arrival, but without success. But later, as we queued up that day to march into the graduation ceremony, I was given the privilege of being his escort and we had a chance to stand side by side for several minutes, maybe even ten minutes or so, and chat, and he made small talk with me, even advised me to go into politics—either party, he said. So, I was really conflicted when later he ran for president against John F. Kennedy, and I have to say that I voted for Nixon only because of that ten-minute conversation that I felt I knew him. But I didn't know him to come out with the kinds of racist views and statements that it was later revealed that he used to make quite often. But Lancers was a big deal. We had an annual dance called the Mona Kai, where they'd always decorate with beach sand and give it a Hawaiian theme. We had an annual trip down to Ensenada and we'd take dates

KELLEY

down there. It was always platonic. I mean the girls stayed with other girls. There might have been some hanky panky, but it wasn't widely known that that would happen.

JS: During your time at Whittier, did you dorm on campus or did you commute?

WK: I lived on campus for three years in Wanberg Hall and one year I lived in a house that was directly behind a house on Painter Avenue, sort of a second house behind another house that was on Painter, and it was directly across the street from the campus. And I had a roommate that I'm still in touch with occasionally. He's a retired realtor in Boise, Idaho.

JS: Oh. Could you maybe talk about your experience in Wanberg and your experience in that house, on what is that Painter and Earlham?

WK: Painter, right. Yeah, it was on Painter and I think there was an alley behind Painter, so it was on the alley. Wanberg, I think I had a different roommate of the three years that I was there. I think I lived on the second floor. I think it's only a two-story building. I lived on the second floor. I think my room was on the far western end of the building. There was a common shower room and bathroom toward the center of the building. Part of the discipline that I lacked my freshman year was I really didn't know how to use the library and did not take advantage of that asset. But again, my sophomore year I began to exercise better study habits. I don't think Wanberg had any positive or negative influence on me. Living in the house across the street, um (pause) nothing remarkable about it either, except maybe a sense of more independence.

JS: While you were at college did you have, like, a mentor or somebody who maybe guided you? I know that you talked a lot about you struggling your freshman year. Did maybe someone kind of step up and help you your sophomore, junior, and senior year?

KELLEY

WK: Not really. Although, I mean, especially my junior year I had a couple of professors that were really terrific and maybe they inspired me, but again, they were professors in my major interests: psychology, anthropology, sociology. One of the things that maybe influenced me negatively, not that these particular people I'm going to tell you about did anything negative, they were just more mature than I was. There were two fellows that were recruited by Aubrey Bonham, that was the name of the coach, the basketball coach—hang on, a loud car just going by the street below me—who he found, they'd been playing basketball in the Army and he recruited them to come to Whittier on athletic scholarships. And so, for three years or so Whittier was a basketball powerhouse in Division III. Won the league championship a couple times and Carroll Hooks and—God, I can't think of the other name right now at the top of my head. But again, these were sort of like Renaissance men to me. They were cool; they were performing academically—they were very serious about their studies. But they had discipline; they had discipline that I didn't have. I think that's because of their Army experience. And they could party, and they could handle it. If I tried to party like that I couldn't handle it, and didn't. I remember Carroll played the bass, I think, and they had a little jazz trio or a quartet that they'd perform on campus. He was a chemistry major. And Bill Harmon was the other fellow. Bill was majoring in kinesiology and went on to found a very successful rehabilitation therapy business in Los Angeles. He went onto Loma Linda University for medical studies. He wasn't a doctor. So, they weren't mentors in the sense that they were mentoring me directly, but subconsciously because I admired them and realized that they had traits that I needed to learn or develop, that certainly made me want to mature as I got a little older and began my second year. But also, the threat of losing that scholarship,

KELLEY

even though it was only five hundred dollars a year, in 1957 I think the median income in the United States was something like five thousand dollars a year. So, a five-hundred-dollar scholarship was major money, and especially to my working parents, policeman, domestic worker—I couldn't let them down and lose that scholarship.

JS: Could you maybe describe the relationship you had with your peers?

WK: My peers?

JS: Yeah. Walk me through what maybe a normal day, or what your social life looked like during your time at Whittier.

WK: It was pretty good. I had a lot of friends. I guess I could say I was quite popular. I brought some of the energy that I had grown up with in the YMCA. I remember on one occasion in my sophomore year when we had a rally for the incoming freshman class in the old gym and I performed a stunt with them that they all enjoyed. We divided a hundred or so, maybe a couple hundred, freshman up in the stands above the basketball court. I divided them into three sections, and we did a thing where they were rubbing their hands together to sound like light rain, and then it would get heavier and heavier. Then they would slap their knees like rain drops. Then they would stomp their feet, that was thunder and louder rain, and we did that. It was sort of like a rally sort of a thing. And that certainly made me widely known to that particular group. As I said, I was active in student government. And I have to laugh when I think about it; I think it was my junior year, I was elected the prom king. [loud yelling in distance] I don't know if you can hear any of that out there or not. Somebody down the street, a street person, shouting at the top of his lungs, obscenities, about something. I couldn't make it out. My windows are open to a major north south street here in downtown San Diego. So, it's very quiet at night, but I'm also

KELLEY

near the airport, so you hear airplanes on final approach to the airport. Very seldom the wind changes and they take off to the east and it gets pretty loud, but once the sun goes down it gets quiet.

JS: Um, you were talking about—you kind of mentioned your experience out in student body and how maybe, like, your peers on that.

WK: Yeah, I just guess I could say I had a lot of friends. I feel I did. I know I did. And I think I was well liked and respected. (pause) Like I said, there are two members of the current Board of Trustees at Whittier College that I was friends with during our mutual undergraduate years, and one of them, Chris Cross, is still a very dear friend that I talk to quite often. Another member of the class of 1957 who is also on the Board of Trustees, who is here in La Jolla, recently had me to lunch at the University Club atop one of the tallest buildings in downtown San Diego—spectacular views of the city. [train in distance] There's also a train. The train tracks go along the bay. I have a view of the bay, but that's going to end very soon because they're building a five-story building directly across the street from me, so I'm going to lose most of my view.

JS: Oh, no.

WK: That guy is still shouting. [loud yelling in distance] I don't know if you can hear him or not, just obscenities after obscenity. [loud yelling continues] Can you hear any of it?

JS: (laughs) I don't know what he's saying, but I can hear his voice.

WK: Yeah. Ar, ar, ar, ar, go away! (imitating man outside) There's also a seagull that's on the roof across the street from me, or across the building from me. You can hear it, too. It sits on the roof up there, and calls, wa, wa, wa (imitating seagull). He comes there every day. I've decided that he is *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* reincarnated.

KELLEY

JS: Ah, understandable. Did you work during your time at Whittier?

WK: I tried a couple of times. I remember one—I don't think I lasted even two weeks—a place over in the City of Industry, or over in that direction. But I worked at night and the company—and there were only like three or four people working at the same time, but it manufactured the wax paper tents that they put over plants, like tomato plants. Instead of greenhouses they had these little plastic tents that they put over young plants. And it was a thing that, the wax paper came out, it was cut into sheets of a certain size, then wire and tape and glue and the machine would form them into the tents. And they take these piles of tents and stuff them into cardboard boxes that would then be sold to farmers, I guess. I didn't last two weeks at that job. I got a little money during football season being the announcer at football games. I think I got like a hundred dollars for each game and that was pocket money. It was great. I think I got paid for some work at the YMCA—the Whittier YMCA—doing stuff occasionally for them. Not much, but then again, pocket money. But no, I didn't work.

JS: How comfortable were you with the administration at the time?

WK: (pause) I think things have changed. I don't think any of us—white, Black or anything else—had any objection to anything that the administration was doing. I think the attitude was it wasn't our purview to have a say about what they were doing. But I don't think they were doing anything that particularly upset us or bothered us anyway. I just think at the time it wasn't something that undergraduates did a lot of to speak out against endowment investment policy and that sort of thing. We didn't do that.

JS: Do you wish you may—you did have?

KELLEY

WK: No, I don't think it even—it wasn't on our radar. At least not mine. But when I say our I think the majority of the student body would probably feel the same why I did. It wasn't something that we were aware of, how it might concern us. Put it that way.

JS: You mentioned that you had a pretty decent relationship with the professors within like the social science fields, so, you know, sociology, anthropology, psychology. How would you describe your relationship with professors outside of that—outside of those three topics?

WK: Um, good. I think especially after my academic performance started to reform, and they knew that I was, I'll use the term, socially prominent, or well-liked, by the student body they had no reason to dislike me. I had no reason to dislike any of them. So, the few that I might interact with I got along with very well. I can think of like I took a course in—I think it was a required course—in geology. It might have been my sophomore year. And a young professor, I'd say in his late thirties, early forties, a very athletic man [phone rings]. That's my sister; I'm just going to tell her I'll call her back. I just found him sort of admirable as a man. He was athletic; he was fit. He was smart; he was a good instructor; he knew what he was talking about. Some of the famous names at Whittier of that era was Dr. Albert Upton who taught the English course for freshman called Elements of Communication—something like that. He'd been at Whittier for a long time. He was even Richard Nixon's professor. That was a course that I did not do particularly well at. We used the Herman Melville novel *Moby Dick* and then we had to, uh, we had to take sentences out of the book and, I forget what it was called, but we had to sort of analyze the language and say what they were. And there were a lot of junior and senior students who were like section leaders and we had sections, and that was a course that

KELLEY

particularly I didn't do well at. But I can't say that I didn't get along with Dr. Upton, I just had no contact with him other than him standing at a stage forty feet away and giving this lecture. There was a Dr. Narehood(?) who taught political science, very well-known and respected in that era. And I think I might have had one course with him, but it was the entire freshman class that took that course so no relationship with him either. But he later was the faculty advisor to the second Black student body president at Whittier College, Stan Sanders. And Stan was Whittier's first Rhodes Scholar. He was two years behind me, class of 1962. And he's still around. He's a semi-retired attorney in Los Angeles. He grew up in Watts like me. Went to Jordan High School.

JS: Ah. You two have a lot in common.

WK: Yeah. And we talk to each other from time to time.

JS: So, I have to ask, during your time did you experience anything that could be perceived or deemed as racially insensitive or racist?

WK: Not on the campus. I told you about the picket signs that my—I think it was my senior year; it could have been my junior year. But nothing that I remember, and I think I would, on campus. I do remember one thing that I took a little minor offense at. It was near the end of my senior year. The president of the college was Dr. Smith. I forget his first name. I know he meant it as a compliment, but on the week or so, or maybe even the day, of my graduation he said to me, "Bill, you are a credit to your race." And I took offense to that, not loudly or overtly. I doubt that he even was aware that I was offended. And the offense was that I didn't think that I was all that special, that were other Black students at Whittier and elsewhere who had excelled in different ways. And I guess I just didn't like being made to be felt, uh, made (pause)—to be described as exceptional. It bothered me a

KELLEY

little bit. But I'm not sure that that's a racial incident. Maybe it's a little insensitive on his part. But, you know, 1960 people weren't aware the way they are now. Should be, should have been, but they weren't.

JS: Do you think you would have said something about it if it happened to you, like, if you were going to college now and it happened to you when you were graduating?

WK: Absolutely. Absolutely. I would have probably had quite a bit to say.

JS: And I noticed that you said a lot of it was because you felt like you weren't anything special. Is that something you look back on and wonder why you thought that? Because, I mean, just from this interview you were the first Black student body president, you played track, you did a lot on this campus. Do you think looking back you questioned maybe that sense of, I didn't do much?

WK: Well, (clears throat) I did a lot and I know my family was very, very proud of me. I certainly was very proud of my own accomplishments. I had turned myself around academically; I had achieved the highest office in student government at the college; I had just been awarded a fellowship to go overseas to work for the YMCA. (pause) I don't know, I just had the sense that it wasn't appropriate, an appropriate thing for him to say.

JS: Understandable, and it wasn't. But outside of campus—you talked about how on campus it was pretty—you didn't feel like there was anything racist. Outside of campus you did talk about the thing that happened to you while you were picketing. Were there other instances of that while you were at Whittier?

WK: Well, no. (laughs) There was a drive-thru fast-food place down on Whittier Boulevard that was owned by Richard Nixon's brother. It was called Nixon's. (laughs) It didn't last very long. But we used to go there. There was a Black Angus steak house down on

Whittier Boulevard that on the occasion when maybe I felt a little flush with cash I might take a date there. And usually that date was a white girl. There was a, I don't remember if it was a Denny's, but it was some place like Denny's (clears throat) also on Whittier Boulevard. We'd go there and have no trouble, usually with a group of other students. That might be why. You know, I didn't go there alone or with just one or two other Black kids. There'd be a group of four, six, or eight. Maybe one of us would be Black, maybe two. But considering the student body of 1100 and only a dozen of us, that's not all that unusual. It would be hard to make up a crowd of us all agreeing to go someplace at the same time. One thing that I did remember saying—I never tried it, but I certainly did feel like I could do it—I remember at my class fiftieth reunion we were in Mildan(?) Hall because there weren't that many of us, like forty or so, and I was asked to speak. And there was one other Black member of my class in that group, Cecil McLean, who just passed away in March from Covid, had a very successful career as a teacher and principal in the LA public schools—Cecil. But I said to this group of classmates, “You know that while we were students here at Whittier neither Cecil nor I could go and get a haircut in the City of Whittier.” And some of them were appalled at that. Both Cecil and I lived in LA. Cecil lived over closer to Western Avenue and I lived in Watts. I don't know what the women did, they took care of themselves or maybe they too would find a Black salon to do their hair. I only remember one woman who wore her hair in a natural afro and that was radical then. She kept it short, but it was radical. But other than the hair issue—I don't know that we went off campus all that often. I mentioned the restaurants. We'd do that. And I wasn't of legal drinking age, so bars were not an issue. I did go to a bar in downtown Whittier on my twenty-first birthday, with Cecil, who was a couple of months

KELLEY

older than me, and we bought each other a drink each at this bar. They didn't think anything of it. They asked for ID, that was it. (laughs)

JS: Did you have someone—it seems like you and Cecil were close when you were there. Would you guys talk to each other whenever you felt like you needed to talk about something, whether it was something on your mind, something that bothered you? Did you have someone—

WK: Yeah, Cecil came in as a junior; he was a junior college transfer. But he was also the best man at my wedding. We talked about things. All of us did, I think. But I don't think there was a great dissatisfaction amongst us about being such a small minority on campus, at a majority white campus. I think we felt we had it pretty well. And as I said, I think the campus and the environment was a refuge that we didn't know we were in.

JS: You mention this refuge. What made you—like, it does seem like for you it did feel like a refuge. Could you maybe elaborate on how you made that, kind of, realization, that this was maybe a safe space for you?

WK: It just felt safe. You asked me if there were any racial incidents, any name calling, anything that might be construed as overt racist, or racism, (pause) I don't think there was any. (coughs) Things that one might take offense at if one wanted to at the time in the campus, and I don't know what it's like now, we dined at tables of maybe eight or ten and the dorm mothers—the older women, retired, older women that lived in each of the male dormitories, and the women's dormitories—would be at those tables with you. They'd sit at the head of the table and we ate family style. And I remember one of these old white women—and I don't say that derogatorily; I don't mean that at all. She *was* and older, white woman, who grew up in a certain era—she complemented me on my

KELLEY

manners and how well I spoke, which I thought, okay, thank you. I kind of took that to mean, you mean I'm not shucking and jiving or, you know, acting like an old Tom or something? That went through my head, but I just let it pass. I'm sure she meant no offense by it. At least I feel she meant no offense.

JS: What were these dorm mothers like? I've never heard of that term before.

WK: They lived in the dorm, they lived very quietly. We rarely saw them. I don't know what their role really was. But they lived rent free, I think; I'm sure they did. And they ate in the Campus Inn, and that was part of their compensation, if they got any money at all. There was also always a senior who was somehow or another the—we called him the dorm daddy. But he was, I guess he was there to make sure that we all behaved and didn't destroy the place, or if we did we could be held accountable. But I don't remember we ever saw much of the dorm mother in Wanberg Hall. I remember that she was there, but I don't think we ever saw her other than maybe just passing by. She pretty much stayed in her room, I think.

JS: So, it wasn't more like a watch out situation, she was just like a—

WK: Something left over from another era. Even in the late 1950s I don't think it had any useful purpose; it was just a holdover, some custom from the past that was difficult for the college to end.

JS: Earlier in this interview you mentioned how there was like a dozen Black students and maybe twenty-four or so Hispanics and a couple Asians sprinkled in the mix. Can you maybe talk about how the diversity of campus challenged your experience, or changed your experience?

KELLEY

WK: Well, it was different from my high school. When I went to Fremont, I'd say it was divided almost a third Black, Hispanic, and white. A few Asian students, not many at all. But Whittier was majority white, by far. Maybe, as I said, twenty, twenty-five Hispanics. Or maybe a larger number of that, but Hispanic certainly—I don't know. It wasn't a big deal. And again, half that number of Asians, and then the twelve Blacks. A lot different. Maybe because of my experience in the Y, where I'd had experiences with other races growing up as a teen, going camping, being a camp counselor, I don't think it affected me at all. I think I'd grown quite accustomed to it.

JS: Were you friends with—were most of your friends majority—like, I know that the school itself was majority white, so did you hang out with mostly white people, or did you kind of have a mixed bag of friends when it came to racial identities?

WK: Well, just by sheer numbers I'd say that most of my friends were white, but there was a closeness among the other Black students—us—and we did do things with each other or for each other, watched out for each other. But, you know, because the twelve Black students were twelve individuals. Each of them, each of us, had different interests academically, socially. Some were athletes, some were students. Mine was the choir and student government and academics, maybe. So, for us to get together, other than incidentally, in groups of other white students, was more common than anything else.

JS: Do you wish you tried more to maybe have more hang outs with them?

WK: No, no, because (pause) again, after graduation we all went in different directions. I was in Sweden the year after college, and then in LA for only two years. Then I joined the Navy and I was all over the world. Stan went to England on a Rhodes Scholarship and Yale Law School, back to LA, started a major law firm, found his own attorney law firm.

KELLEY

Cecil teaches school. Robert Watkins, another guy that was there, graduated maybe a couple years after me, he became a minister and lived in Ohio. And so, looking back I've only physically been in the presence of Stan once, Cecil twice, Robert once. I emailed with two of the women, and that's it. So, there's nothing to regret, it just that twelve individuals had different interests and different lives that we all lived.

JS: Can you talk about your day-to-day challenges that you faced at Whittier, whether they be social life, academic, outside life?

WK: Hmm. (pause) I had one pretty serious relationship with a girl, a white girl, for a couple years. She was very sweet. It was platonic. But I felt, I think by the time my senior year came around, it wasn't going to go anywhere and it was best to stop, break it off. And also, it didn't help being in the Navy and being on board a ship, because being at sea or being at sea for sometimes six months away from home, away from the States, and then just three or four days a week or another six months doesn't lend itself to having a string of girlfriends. (laughs) So, I didn't start dating until my mid-twenties. When I married, I was twenty-eight. That's not unusual these days, but it was then. Most men married earlier, I think. But it wasn't like a social challenge. Day-to-day, just go to class, laugh a lot. Whenever a member of the Lancer Society would establish a steady relationship with a girl he would give her his Lancer pin, a metal pin that had the Lancer emblem on it, and then with a little tiny chain the W of Whittier, and he would give that to his girlfriend. We called that pinning. It was pre-engagement. So, we would go, a group of Lancers, to her dormitory or wherever she was living, usually it was a dorm, and we'd serenade her with a tune that was the same melody as *A Sweetheart to Sigma Chi*, but the words were changed to "She's the sweetheart of a Lancer guy." And so, that would happen

KELLEY

periodically over the course of the year. And so, a group of fifteen, maybe twenty, guys would go and serenade this couple outside her dormitory. That was always fun. A group of four or five Lancers rented a house—I think they’ve still done this—near the campus and that became the meeting place for the Lancers. And if there was any place where one might snag a beer that would be the place. But I wasn’t into alcohol. I’d learned my lesson early on. Like I said, I knew that I couldn’t party and keep up with those guys who were more mature and knew when to stop. It took me a while to learn that lesson. So, day-to-day I don’t think anything remarkable.

JS: We’ve established several of your accomplishments. You know, you being first student body president, you coming back from getting on the dean’s bad list, your time on the track team. Would you count these as your biggest accomplishments? And if there are any more do you want to talk about them?

WK: I don’t think so. I think that’s pretty much it. Whittier means a lot to me, has meant a lot to me. You talked about your aspirations to be a college admissions counselor, I don’t know that a college major is all that significant until one starts to do things like go to law school or med school or something like that. I think with a liberal arts education—I sound like I’m somebody working for Whittier College now (laughs)—you can do almost anything. And so, I don’t think anybody in the Navy would believe me when I say this but having had the experience of working for the YMCA really stood me in good stead when I was stationed at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland—sort of like the dorm daddy in Bancroft Hall, which is where all the midshipmen were in company, so about 120. It was all men then. This was in 1960—72, 1972. I was there from 1970 to 1972. But you had somewhat of an ethnic mix, young men from all over the country. We

KELLEY

had a lot of academic pressure, maybe some social pressures too. Away from home, sometimes for the first time. And I was to be sort of their role model, maybe a little bit of a mentor and a counselor, somewhat of a confidant, maybe, sometimes. And so, having learned to work with the people, learned to work with groups, stood me in good stead for that two-year tour. And I left there and that's when I went off after that, excuse me (clears throat), to the Naval War College to study military history and strategy. That was a one-year course and then I went off to be the executive officer, number two officer, on a destroyer. And when I left that job is when I went to live in Taiwan for two years. And there, living in another country, another culture, and being able to feel welcome in another country, and even making an effort to try to learn some of the language so that after a year or so I was comfortable getting in the car with my family and driving any place on that entire island and get directions, find a place to eat, a comfortable place to sleep, find somebody that spoke a little English. Me with my pidgin Mandarin. (laughs) So, I think Whittier and the courses that I took helped me with those kinds of things, and I hope that's the case for you, too.

JS: I hope so, too. You went to college from 1957 to 1960, right?

WK: Right.

JS: During that time the Civil Rights Movement was big. Can you maybe explain how that affected your outlook on life after Whittier?

WK: Hmm. Yes, specifically I finished high enough in the officer candidate course that I was able to pretty much select what kind of ship that I would go to, what job I would have on that ship, and what home port that I could select. And I specifically told the Navy that I didn't wish to be stationed anywhere south of the Mason Dixon line, because I knew that

I couldn't take it. There's no way that I could serve in the south and be turned away from something, or some place, because of the color of my skin and not raise some kind of a ruckus and get in trouble, or maybe even put myself at risk. Later, when I had command of my first ship, it was built in Bath, Maine, but it was stationed in Mayport, Florida, which is a port city on Jacksonville, Florida, which is certainly south of the Mason Dixon line. And I had no particular trouble there—had *no* trouble there. But on the other hand, I was kind of in a bubble and so was my family. We lived on base. We didn't live out in the civilian community. I've known Black friends in the Navy who have grown up in the South. Several of them went to Black colleges and universities. I didn't have that experience. So, there college experience was different from mine and I respect that. I spent several years working at the Pentagon and for all of those years, which probably totals eleven or twelve, I lived in Vienna, Virginia. Vienna, Virginia is a town within Fairfax County. Fairfax County is probably the most prosperous county in the state of Virginia, a suburb of Washington DC, about fifteen miles west of the Washington Monument. There was a section of Vienna, Virginia that was—it wasn't a ghetto, but most of the residents of this one section of the town were Black. And many of them made small fortunes selling off portions of their land to developers who built houses for white folks in that neighborhood. And in fact, the first house that I bought for my family backed up to one of those neighbors and the school that they went to was named after the woman who was the principal of what was then an all-Black school. Her name was Louise Archer. I remember that my realtor suggested that I talk to a military guy, an Army guy, who lived on the same street where I was thinking about buying, and he made a comment, something like, "Your kids are really going to enjoy this little Black school

KELLEY

that my kids go to, that they will go to, if you buy that house.” He didn’t know I was Black and I didn’t know that Louise Archer had been a Black school back in the days of segregation, and that wasn’t that many years ago in Virginia. But both of my sons went to school primarily in Virginia, but they also attended school in Coronado—Coronado High School, here in San Diego—and Coronado is a city in and of itself where there are several multi-million-dollar homes (coughs) and it has this mix of Navy brats and the kids of wealthy people from Coronado. But it turned out to be an especially good school for my oldest son, who had to finish with a GED because he goofed off in high school. But as a result, they both have friends that they went with to high school in San Diego and in Virginia. And my oldest graduated high school in Virginia and came out—he was here in San Diego with me for a while. And then he graduated from the University of San Diego, which is a Catholic university here in San Diego. And he started out working in retail, expressed an interest in getting a certification for some part of Microsoft’s software programs, ended up getting hired by Qualcomm, and is now a senior field engineer with Microsoft, travelling all over the world—

JS: Wow!

WK: —for Microsoft. So, he’s doing very well. I have two grandkids here nearby, twenty minutes away. They were here just the other day visiting grandpa. And I have two other granddaughters in Virginia. One is a high school senior, and one is a sophomore in college. I don’t see them as often, but we do have email contact with each other and Facebook, or Facetime, so that’s good. I want to be sure I’ve answered any questions you might have and also invite you to call me back—you have my phone number. If you have any other questions to wrap this up?

KELLEY

JS: I was just going to talk a little bit about maybe the current state of the world at the time, because you also went to college during the Cold War.

WK: Sure did.

JS: And so, you know, you went to college during the kind of resurgence of the Red Haze and the communist craze that America was going through. Could you maybe talk about that?

WK: Sure. (clears throat) During the Iran Iraq war the president was Ronald Reagan and the Iranians were attacking oil tankers carrying crude oil or gas, natural gas, out of Kuwait and Iran through the Straits of Hormuz, which is still an issue to this day. The Straits of Hormuz is a very narrow body of water that they literally have established traffic lanes for ships going in and ships going out. But the whole thing at one point may be, I don't know, maybe less than ten miles wide. So, it's really a choke point. And if Iran wanted to they could choke off all of that oil coming out of the Straits of Hormuz and have a very devastating effect on the economies of Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab Emirates. So, Ronald Reagan decided to put American flags on eleven Kuwaiti owned tankers and assigned the US Navy to escort those ships from Kuwait out through the Straits of Hormuz. One other Navy captain from Norfolk, Virginia was the first captain appointed to command that operation for three months. When he left I was designated to take his place, and this is while I was Commander of Destroyer Squadron 23. So, I can brag that for three months I commanded the largest Naval convoy since World War II. And what we did differently from what my predecessor had done—they were worried about mines that would explode underneath the ship when it passed over—my predecessor had put one of the destroyers in front, where if a destroyer struck a mine it would probably kill

members of the crew and certainly do a lot of damage, maybe even sink the destroyer, where a tanker is usually double bottomed. There's no one living in the forward part of the ship. And some of these ships are giants. I mean, they were like 800, 900 feet long and displaced 50,000 to 60,000 tons—huge ships. So, I put the tanker, the lead tanker, in front and the destroyer behind. And if the tanker hit a mine, it would just blow a hole in the front end of the tanker. The tanker would just keep going, but nobody would be hurt—most likely—and then the destroyer could react. And in fact, the night that I arrived at the airport in Kuwait the US Navy had caught the Iranian Navy red-handed, laying mines in the approaches to the harbor at Beirut—not Beirut, not Beirut, that's Lebanon. My mind has gone weak here. Um, gosh, and my son has been there twice. Anyway, where the Navy based its ships in that harbor. It may come to me in a minute. So, that was one kind of a—not a Cold War thing, but of the Cold War I knew in 2000—no, 1990—that with the collapse of the Soviet Union that the Cold War was over. And the Navy and other armed forces were going to start shrinking in size. So, even though I was a pretty high-ranking officer the Navy was going to start culling senior officers because there was no need for us. And I was a generalist; I was not a specialist in engineering or procurement, logistics, or any of that stuff. So, I decided to retire and that's when I went to work as a civilian in Washington DC. But today I'm appalled—I don't know if you took me up on my invitation to look at my Facebook page, but the ship I was first commanding officer of, the USS Clark, has a Facebook page on which many enlisted men who served on the Clark are on that page and some of them were what we called plank owners, like I was, and that's the members of the first crew to ever serve on a ship. They're called plank owners. I received a letter in the mail from one of these fellows who

KELLEY

had tracked me down somehow, through various media or whatever, and sent me a very complimentary letter that simply said that had it not been for me he would not have remained in the Navy and achieved the highest enlisted pay grade that he did because of my influence on his career, and that other members of the plank owner crew had been speculating about, wondering where I was, how I was doing and what I was doing. So, I went back and said, “You found me; here I am and here’s my Facebook page.” And I’ve already signed up for the Clark page, but I’ve not posted a lot to them and I’ve even deleted some of them because so many of them have expressed pro Trump, pro right-wing, pro Q-Anon conspiracy theories, and the like, that it just disgusts me to think that—because these guys now are late fifties, early sixties. They were eighteen, nineteen, twenty-year-old kids when we served together. And some of them had such nice things to say about me that it was very flattering, but I’ve not reacted to many of the things that I’ve seen from them because it disturbs me quite a bit. I certainly am a democrat; I supported Joe Biden and Kamala in the last election. I posted a picture on Facebook some time ago of what I believe to be what the Trump Presidential Library would look like, and it’s an abandoned, burned-out adult bookstore. (laughs) I’ll send it to you.

JS: Oh my gosh, that would be funny.

WK: This big lie stuff—it was a presidential coup, no doubt about it, what Trump did and his henchmen, and it’s still going on, and I do agree with the people who have called him a threat to democracy. I believe it really is. And I just got a letter from the Democratic National Committee seeking a donation (clears throat). I sent it back to them in their postage paid envelope and I scrawled out—I put zero in the amount donated and I said, “I will not donate to your committee until you succeed in getting the filibuster ended in the

Senate,” because that’s what’s blocking the Voting Rights Act. Clearly what’s happening in the States are a version to Jim Crow, voting laws. The whole filibuster came from the Jim Crow era. It was established by the likes of Strom Thurman and other Southern senators to prevent Black folks from voting. It’s a Jim Crow law and it’s got to be stopped.

JS: It must feel weird, you know, looking at the laws that are being passed in certain states, or even like the federal, and kind of knowing that these laws existed when you were in college and out of college and during that era of your life where you grew up. Like, these laws are kind of coming back in a slightly different form.

WK: You know, I just remembered something. I think it was during my junior or maybe senior year, and this had to do with the YMCA. For some reason or other they wanted me to go to someplace in the South, and I think it was farther south than Richmond, Virginia. It was like Charlotte, or no, more than that. It was down in Georgia, maybe. And one other fellow was going, he was white, and they told him that he had to be the driver and we shouldn’t drive at night. I don’t remember where we stayed, but we must have stayed in a motel or hotel and didn’t have any trouble that I recall. The one experience that I remember, at the time I was a smoker—I stopped thirty years ago, but maybe that’s what’s going on with my throat these days. I hope not, but maybe—I was a smoker, so we stopped at a grocery store, and I went to the counter and I asked for a pack of Salem’s. Two addictions, nicotine and—what’s the substance in cigarettes that—menthol—so, both are addictive, and I was addicted to both. And the clerk—all I said was, “I’d like a pack of Salem’s please.” The clerk got the cigarettes, took my money, looked up at me and gave me my change, looked at me and said, “You have one of the

KELLEY

worst California accents I have ever heard.” (laughs) I wasn’t aware that I had a California accent, but to him he heard it and he nailed it. (laughs)

JS: I think we’ve reached the end of the interview.

WK: Okay, well like I said you’re welcome to call me back. I’ll try to remember to send you a picture of the Trump Library. (coughs) Pardon me. And nice to meet you, Jayson.

JS: It was nice to meet you too. Thank you. Thank you for taking the time out of your day, out of your life, to not only email me back and forth and talk to me so we could establish this, but then to also participate in this.

WK: Glad to do it.

JS: I know I did ask for you to take some time out of your life to talk about your experiences and I hope you understand that it is important that we talk about our experiences. They help people after us maybe navigate whatever life they want to navigate. So, I do thank you for participating in this.

WK: More than welcome, I enjoyed it. Take care.

JS: I’m going to end the recording.

END OF INTERVIEW