

## ORAL HISTORY OF THOMAS WILLIAMSON, JR.

Second Interview

August 5, 2014

This interview is being conducted on behalf of an oral history project of the Historical Society of the District of Columbia Circuit. The interviewee is Thomas Williamson, Jr. and the interviewer is Precious Boone. The interview is taking place in Tom's office in Washington D.C. on August 5, 2014. This is the second interview. Good afternoon, Tom.

Mr. Williamson: Good afternoon. How are you?

Ms. Boone: I'm doing pretty good, doing pretty good. So last time we talked, um we ended with your high school graduation and you were on the brink of going to Harvard. And so this time, I'd like to talk a little bit about your college experience and also when we ended last time, you were talking about how, particularly in high school you didn't have very much interaction with other African Americans and I found that kind of interesting and I suspect once you went to Harvard, that kind of opened up. So I'd like to start there. First, what lead you to decide to go to Harvard, as opposed to staying on the west coast?

Mr. Williamson: Well, I was being recruited to play football at several different schools. And in the end it came down to a choice between Harvard and Stanford and my mother actually had an unexpected influence on me. When I was being recruited at Stanford, they said they would offer me an athletic scholarship, a full ride to pay for my tuition and room and board. In the Ivy League, at schools like Harvard, they don't actually have athletic scholarships; they do have financial aid, but it's not tied to whether you're playing in a varsity sport and my mother was

adamant that she did not want me to go to college on an athletic scholarship. I tried to persuade her that actually you both have status in your school and you're...it's more likely the coaches will pay attention to you if they know they're paying for you to be there. And so I was thinking, you know, maybe she doesn't understand what a good deal it would be to be at Stanford and the coach who was recruiting me at the time, it was a very persuasive member of the coaching staff at Stanford, who later went on to be one of the most prominent football coaches in America. His name was Bill Walsh. And he later became the head coach at Stanford and then he later coached the 49ers to several Super Bowl wins. But anyway, as I thought some more about my mother's wishes, I, you know, I said well maybe there's more to this than I was originally thinking because the point she was trying to make was that she did not want me to be participating in intercollegiate football just because I was concerned that if I didn't do that, it would be a heavy financial burden on the family. She said, "Its fine," you know, "if you want to play, but I want you to be at, you know, a university in the position to take advantage of the full range of educational benefits." And at Harvard, they don't have athletic scholarships and also I thought about it some more, the Ivy League schools don't play post-season games. So that means the season ends after your last game which, for Harvard, is always the Yale game.

Ms. Boone: Okay.

Mr. Williamson: And that means you're not practicing in late November or December getting ready for some bowl game...

Ms. Boone: Okay.

Mr. Williamson: At the end of December or January 1. In addition, it's changed a little now, but back then, the Ivy League schools did not have spring practice whereas at a place like Stanford, to keep your scholarship you'd have to come out for spring practice unless you were in another varsity sport. And so it wasn't the only thing that influenced me, but it was a significant factor that I thought I would be able to take greater advantage of all the resources that the university offered if I went to Harvard than if I went to Stanford. It was also a little bit of a sense, even though I think young people exaggerate this, that Stanford was 50 miles from my home and I said, "Well I really want to get far away," and Harvard was 3,000 miles, but that...if I had gone to Stanford, I doubt they would have spent their time hanging around Palo Alto.

Ms. Boone: Okay. Did your dad have any opinion one way or the other?

Mr. Williamson: No, he was neutral. He was neutral. His philosophy was that he wanted me to choose the college where I thought I would be happiest. My mother was a little more assertive about that.

Ms. Boone: I think that's interesting because I think my mother, when I went to college, she didn't know how to direct...she just let me make all the

decisions there, but your mother seemed to really think through what the college experience was going to be like for you.

Mr. Williamson: My mother, she did not attend college herself, but she had some very basic, very sound values. So my mother was kind of the opposite of a soccer mom. She never got a driver's license, so we never were driven anywhere by my mother. My brother and I both played a lot of sports throughout our junior high school and high school years and indeed my younger brother, in his senior year; he was the leading scorer in California in high school football. He scored 25 touchdowns in eight games.

Ms. Boone: Wow.

Mr. Williamson: But my mother never cared whether we won or lost and she would come to the games sometime. I don't know whether she actually shouted. The only thing she cared about was whether we...she did not want us to be injured and she made it very clear that if playing any of these sports, be it football, basketball, or track for me, was going to cause my grades to go down, then that would be the end of playing sports.

Ms. Boone: Okay. Sounds like my mom, actually. So what activities were you involved in at Harvard?

Mr. Williamson: Well...

Ms. Boone: Or tell me a little bit, back up a little bit, about the transition to Harvard. Like after you made the decision and going there, what were your first impressions about the school?

Mr. Williamson: Well, I partly went there because the school has such an iconic reputation and I would say in 1964 when I started was the end of what I call the “token Negro era,” where if you were able to excel, your community and the white community seemed to expect that part of your job was to be a positive example for your race, if you will. And so I, you know, I went to Harvard thinking I don’t know if these people are really going to be as friendly and as enjoyable to be around as I would like, but I feel like I should try to do my best to be a credit to my race.

So I was kind of relieved actually when I first got there, I was worried because of something I had read in the handbook or whatever they send to you, where they said there was a student radio station and they played classical music. And I liked some classic music, but I was not really knowledgeable about classical music or a regular fan. But when people were moving in, it turned out for those people who had record players, which is what we had back then, the first thing they would move into their room would be their sound system. They would...the record player and the speakers would be connected and out of those speakers came a very, in the first day there, what was

coming out was Motown and rhythm and blues and so I said, “Well maybe these people will be alright to hang around with.”

Ms. Boone: Okay.

Mr. Williamson: And then for me it was, you know, a much bigger place than the small town where I had grown up, just town of 12,000, the high school had about 200 kids in a class. So, you know, Harvard we had...there were 1200 guys in the class and 300 women over at Radcliffe. So that seemed like a much bigger universe. I was personally very excited about being able to meet people from all over the country, you know, there's a lot of brouhaha about affirmative action these days in connection with race. But back then, there wasn't affirmative action on racial grounds, but Harvard had decided that it wanted to have more of a national student body instead of just people from New England and the New York area. So that students were being admitted who were very smart, but there were other students who had higher scores from New York City or the New York City area and various prep schools that had a long tradition of sending people. Now there didn't seem to be a lot of excitement among white people that kids were being admitted from Idaho and Wyoming and South Dakota who maybe didn't have, you know, I mean they're plenty smart, I don't want to suggest that...

Ms. Boone: Yeah.

Mr. Williamson: Because people came from other parts of the country, they weren't as bright, but the places that were really in the business of producing Harvard freshman were these prep schools on the east coast and some of the big city schools in New York or around New York and around Chicago.

Ms. Boone: Okay.

Mr. Williamson: So to me, it was really stimulating and fun and interesting and educational that I was meeting people from, there was a guy from New Mexico in our dorm who had been a rodeo champion or something, state champion there. There was a really...there were a couple of guys actually from Idaho; I think they were both maybe from Borah High School. There were of course kids from other parts of California since California's a big state and I didn't know everybody there. And there were students from the South. Now, we're talking about how was I making the transition, that things open up with my going to college in terms of becoming acquainted with the...then we always said Negroes, Negro students. First of all, there weren't that many.

Ms. Boone: Okay.

Mr. Williamson: They were only three percent of the class, 36 guys, in my freshman class out of 1200. At Radcliffe, there were only three black women and actually I happened, today I was over at the Barnes and Noble bookstore, I ran into the one black woman in the class of 68 at Wellesley. A good old friend named Diane Renfroe, who,

coincidentally, she and I had been on the same plane flying to Boston to come to college. So first the numbers were not that great and then I was in a sort of peculiar situation because I had grown up in an all-white community, I was actually more accustomed to dealing with white people than black people. And in some ways my, I think, my readiness to connect with white students caused some of the black students to be wary of me. “Why is this brother so comfortable talking to white boys?”

Ms. Boone: Right.

Mr. Williamson: I was thinking, oh wouldn't it be great to not have race be the defining characteristic for who I am because we were the only black family in an all-white community, then race inevitably does become the defining characteristic. And so I was really more focused on other interests, like I went out for the football team. It turned out that I had a very disappointing freshman season. Back then they had freshman teams that were separate from the varsity which is too bad they stopped doing that, but the coach of the Harvard freshman team was an elderly white gentleman from Virginia and it became readily apparent that he was not that interested in having black players play on the team or be a starter.

Ms. Boone: Were you the only freshman player that was black?

Mr. Williamson: No, no.

Ms. Boone: At that time? Okay.

Mr. Williamson: There were several others, but he clearly was not enthusiastic about having us around. Now this experience was very humiliating for me personally because I'd been recruited by these other major schools and I thought geez maybe Harvard would be pleased that instead of my going to a Stanford or a UCLA or someplace like that or Brooklyn. I was coming to play at Harvard, but nobody seemed to notice that I was not getting much playing time. Actually, the lowest point in my athletic life was when we went to our first game, an away game at Tufts and back then, you played both ways, meaning you played offensive and defense.

Ms. Boone: Okay.

Mr. Williamson: So they took fifty players. There were eleven players on a squad of football players, so that meant four teams of eleven and six leftovers.

Ms. Boone: Okay.

Mr. Williamson: And I was listed on the depth chart as one of the six leftovers.

Ms. Boone: Oh.

Mr. Williamson: So that was pretty depressing.

Ms. Boone: Oh yeah.

Mr. Williamson: And by February when it was cold, I was lying in my bunk bed saying you know, maybe I should have gone to Stanford. I would be warm and I didn't know for sure that I would make the team, but I said, "I know the coaches would have given me a chance to play because I would have been on scholarship." And it caused me to be a somewhat

unpleasant person to be around because it was so disorienting for me to not have football as an activity that was satisfying and rewarding for me. And then people have a lot of attitudes or make assumptions about Harvard students and there's no shortage of pretentious Harvard students, but there are a good number who I think, once you get there, you say, "Whoa, I wonder if they made a mistake by admitting me." And so, you know, when you get your first grades, you're very anxious...

Ms. Boone: Yeah.

Mr. Williamson: When you're being evaluated, you wonder, because so many students were the top students at their high school, where are you going to fit in in a community of people who were all like you. So where you grew up, you could count on certain kids who you knew from the third grade, they weren't that sharp. You'd be able to outdo them. Show up at Harvard, I wonder if there's anybody here I can, you know, outdo.

Ms. Boone: How did you do academically your first semester?

Mr. Williamson: I did fairly...I was on dean's list, you know, I had a...what, in retrospect, was a funny experience in the first class I went to. It was a French class and even though I didn't want to be a French major, I had studied French for six years in high school and gotten a high achievement score and I had passed the French requirement. Nevertheless, I took this intermediate literature class French because in the back of my mind, I said, "You know, just in case I happen to flunk

out of this place, I want to pass at least one course and I know I won't flunk a French course."

Ms. Boone: Okay.

Mr. Williamson: Just we would read a play or a book and then we wrote a paper. I had to write nine papers in French my first nine weeks in college.

Ms. Boone: Oh.

Mr. Williamson: But the ironic thing was that the teacher asked the students in the class on the first day, who has actually, you know, visited France and there were about 12 or 13 guys in this class and about half of them put up their hand. And I could tell these guys were well off, preppies. And so I just kind of took a deep breath and so okay, well they've been to France, but I've studied a lot of irregular or, you know, kind of conjugations of a lot of irregular verbs. Let's see what I can do.

Ms. Boone: Okay.

Mr. Williamson: Then the professor invited each of us to breakfast to get acquainted and so a couple of weeks into the course was my turn and he said, "Well how things are going in the course?" I said, "Well I think things are going fairly well except for one thing." He said, "Well what's that?" And I said, "You know the guys who said that they had been to France and visited or toured there? I can't understand their French when they speak in class. So I'm wondering, you know, is that reflecting on some deficiency that I had." He paused for a moment, he

said, “The reason you can’t understand their French, Tom, is because it’s so bad.”

Ms. Boone: Okay. [Laughter]

Mr. Williamson: As it turned out, two of us from public schools that we got the highest grades in the class.

Ms. Boone: That’s interesting.

Mr. Williamson: But it was a lesson for me and it’s a lesson, actually, I often share with young people how you can make all these assumptions and create a reality that is a false reality because your assumptions are so wrong. I had one course where I got a D, I think, on the first mid-term. I had never really seen that part of the alphabet before. [Laughter] So that was kind of alarming. And then I somewhat over-reacted. I just started studying my brains out.

Ms. Boone: Yeah.

Mr. Williamson: And so by the end of the year, other students were coming to me, the word had gotten out that if you want to talk to somebody who knows what’s going to be on the exam, and what you better be ready to do, then you should go see Williamson I overcame that. And then the course that I actually learned the most in is the course where I got the lowest grade of my college career, I got a B minus in the course, but it was literature textual analysis course. It was a very close study of how poets and authors use words. They knew that you would probably do

poorly at the beginning so instead of your grade being your average, your grade was what you worked up to over the course.

Ms. Boone: Okay. Interesting.

Mr. Williamson: I still think about lessons I learned in that class and, as I say, I didn't receive a high grade, but I learned a great deal. Another thing that happened freshman year, actually, it's reminiscent of some issues on Harvard's campus today, which I'm sad that those issues are still present. But you have to remember 1964, when I came, was the year that the Civil Rights Act was passed and that meant there were a lot of white people who thought that "Okay now that the Civil Rights Act has been passed, we don't have any more racial problems," which was, of course, grossly simplistic and wrong and led to a lot of conversations. I don't know if you've heard about this campaign called, "I too am Harvard," where there are black students, in fact the sister of one of our godsons, who's one of the leaders of this, talking about how there are white students who perceive the black students as inferior or as not belonging. That sadly reminded me of an incident when I was a freshman. There was this course called Nat Size Six. An evolution course, where other students were actually coming to me to be a tutor for them. There was a friend of mine, a classmate, who asked me to come over to his room to help him get ready for the final exam, a guy named Lenny Saphear and his roommate was a guy named Chris St. George. There I was sitting next to Lenny when Chris

walked into the room and he knew that Lenny actually tutored some of the local high school kids, black high school kids at Ridge Tech and so when he comes into the room, he says hello to me and asks me if I'm one of the high school students that Lenny was tutoring. It put Lenny in an awkward position.

Ms. Boone: Yeah right.

Mr. Williamson: He knew who was being tutored by whom.

Ms. Boone: Yeah exactly.

Mr. Williamson: This was before there was affirmative action or anything like that. It was just, to me, an example of how the stereotypes, the racial assumptions, are much deeper than any current program or much deeper than affirmative action strategies. We've had this sort of problem in America for a long time. By the end of the year, I had had a pretty successful academic year. My high school girlfriend, this was another reason why I went East, she made up her mind early on she was going to Smith and that partly influenced me too. But she decided to get rid of me in the middle of freshman year and so there I was: had not gotten much playing time on the football team, it was cold, my girlfriend had dumped me and, you know, I'd gotten a D on this mid-term. So I had to rally from all that. There was an incident. You're talking about what started to bring the black students together. As I said, this was the end of the token Negro era, it was just before the beginning of the Black Nationalist era, but there was a gentleman who

was then, I think in graduate school. He later became a dean, a long-term dean at Harvard and he was a member of the glee club, Harvard Glee Club. They went to do a concert in Atlanta and the people in Atlanta said that, Archie Epps was the name of the black guy, that Archie could not be allowed to perform with the other white members of the group before a white audience. The head of the glee club, the faculty member who was in charge of it, agreed to exclude him, Archie Epps, from performing. So that was publicized in the *Crimson* and as black students, we came together, it was mostly freshman, to talk about what we should do to protest or challenge this. We were all, of course, very unhappy about it. We didn't really come up with an action plan then. There's something that I'll tell you about later, about how much things changed three years later when Dr. King was assassinated. But it did bring us together including oh he gets along with the white guys, Tom, showed up as well, although I didn't play a leadership role. I was somewhat frustrated, disappointed in myself that I didn't have any better ideas about what we should do. I later learned, though I've never confirmed this story, but I was told that in the 50s, the football team came down to, took the train down and played the University of Virginia in the early 50s, and there was a black guy on the Harvard football team. They said, "Well, you know, whatchamacallit there, he can't play on our field." My understanding is the football coach said, "Then, we're not playing, we're getting back

on the train and going back to Cambridge.” I need to run that down, see if that story is true because that certainly was the right thing to do.

Ms. Boone: Yes. What groups did you gravitate towards then? I know you studied a lot and then you did football. Did you gravitate towards a certain group of students? Were you more of the sports group? Who did you hang out with outside of academics outside of studying and playing sports?

Mr. Williamson: There’s a premise in your question that there was some time and energy left after I finished playing ball and studying.

Ms. Boone: Gives you an idea of what I did in college.

Mr. Williamson: I didn’t really hang out.

Ms. Boone: Okay.

Mr. Williamson: During the football season, it was very demanding. My sophomore year things changed dramatically. At the varsity level, there was a different coach. I wasn’t a starter as a sophomore, but I was moved up so I practiced with the first team and then I played special teams and I was clearly being prepared to be a starter as a junior.

Ms. Boone: Okay.

Mr. Williamson: So the football got resolved in a way that I was pleased with.

Ms. Boone: Okay.

Mr. Williamson: I got into a major that’s called Social Studies.

Ms. Boone: Okay.

Mr. Williamson: At Harvard at that time, it was called a limited honors major. Everybody in the major was expected to write a thesis and do an honors course. It was an interdisciplinary major where you took history, economics, sociology, and most places they called it political science. At Harvard, they called it government courses, but you could organize your study around problems of industrial nations, problems of developing nations, and international relations.

Ms. Boone: Okay.

Mr. Williamson: I chose problems of developing nations and then used that as a kind of cover to create my own African studies program.

Ms. Boone: Interesting. Okay.

Mr. Williamson: Now there wasn't an African studies program so it meant I would have to find courses where I could end up writing papers about whatever issue you were supposed to address in the course. I would write about African countries. There were a few African courses and I got acquainted with Martin Kelson, who I believe became the first tenured African American professor at Harvard. He was an Africanist and he became a very good friend. There was a club or a fraternity that most of the football players belonged to, I didn't join that. My view was, I liked my teammates, but I got to see plenty of them during the football season and there were a lot of other people who I wanted to meet and interact with during the rest of the year. So I didn't join that. I eventually was invited to join a very sort of elitist club that was at least

ostensibly based on merit, rather than your social standing or something like that. At Harvard, they don't have fraternities, but they have something called final clubs where it's mostly students who came from wealthy families and society families who would be invited to join. I was asked to be in one of the final clubs, but I didn't have the money or the time to go and hang out at the clubhouse. I wasn't really interested in drinking and playing cards, which is what they spent a lot of time doing and there were other reasons why I didn't feel it would be a comfortable fit. However, there was this thing called a Signet Society where it was a kind of lunch club. When you were a member, you were entitled to a certain number of lunches at the clubhouse that were better than the lunch that you could get in your dorm. They would invite people who had distinguished themselves one way or another as undergraduates. So you would have the editors of the *Crimson* newspaper there, you would have people from the Loeb Drama Center. There was something called the *Advocate*, actually a literary magazine, not a lawyer magazine. I got in because I was social studies major. I didn't know when I applied to social studies that that was viewed as a prestigious thing to do. I was looking for a vehicle to study about Africa.

Ms. Boone: What prompted that? Had you always just been interested in Africa or was there something that happened at college that sparked that for you?

Mr. Williamson: You know, that's a good question. What prompted that? I think it was a growing awareness of race consciousness and understanding that the American system, if you will, did not value people of African ancestry based on that heritage. It only valued you to the extent that you could show that you were better at being a white person than they were. I remember my first couple of months at Harvard, everybody has to take a basic writing course, because they know most people just aren't trained that well. I wrote an essay about a game that used to be played, which I was afraid to think about in a focused way, when I was growing up in Piedmont where somebody would say, they'd point to the fence on the other side of the playground and they'd say, "Last one to the fence is a nigger baby." I was the fastest kid on the playground, so I was always the first one to the fence, but what I wrote about was the realization that I was still the nigger baby. So I think in my own mind, I was saying the way the white world has tried to shape my values and my sense of self-worth was not going to work for me. I need to come up with my own way of doing that. I realized that there was something instinctive about saying, you know, these people or this society doesn't really value your heritage and your ancestry. And so you can't count on white America to both introduce you and encourage you to appreciate that heritage. So even though I was this black kid who had grown up in a very conservative white community,

I said I need to begin a journey to find out who I am on my terms, rather than their terms.

Ms. Boone: Was there press about some of the independence movements in Africa in the mid-50s?

Mr. Williamson: Yes. It was a really exciting time. That's a good point that you make. It was also exciting to think about studying countries that had recently thrown off the colonial chains and become independent. So Ghana, I think was 1957, Nigeria may have been 1960s, 1964. So I was also very curious about the opportunity to learn what was involved in anti-colonial struggles and what was happening in countries that were newly experiencing independence.

Ms. Boone: That's interesting. Okay so your first year of college had some disappointments, but you came out on top, did well. Did you go home for the summer and did being out East make you feel a little uneasy at home or different?

Mr. Williamson: Well, I didn't feel uneasy I had grown up in Piedmont. I did go home, been living there since I was five years old. That summer, the father of one of my friends from high school was an executive with the telephone company, he had gotten me a job working as a fray man where you connect telephone lines inside the summer after senior in high school, and he arranged for me to have the same job summer after the first year in college. I slipped back into a very familiar routine except my high school girlfriend, she was home too. She was not

having anything to do with me. So I had to try to figure out how to get a date with somebody new or a couple of people, so that was interesting. And then I had to mull over this part of my life that had been such a central component really was football and how hard was I going to work to try to prepare to try out for the varsity when I knew that the freshman coach had not given me much of a chance to play and I'm sure that he had not ranked me among the more promising freshman. I'm going to try this, I've invested a lot in football. In my town, that was a big sport growing up, but if it doesn't work out, I said I'm not going to just hang around and sit on the bench. I think it's unfortunate how many college athletes have to spend an enormous amount of time practicing and preparing and then they don't get any recognition or real opportunity to play on the game days. Many of them feel they don't have much of a choice because they are on scholarship. So I said, if this doesn't work out, I think I'm going to go out for the school newspaper. I was interested in maybe being a reporter.

Ms. Boone: Okay. Good. Interesting. Okay so I'm going to jump ahead a little bit. You mentioned this briefly, but the death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968. This is your senior year, what kind of impact did that have?

Mr. Williamson: Well that had an enormous impact for me because there was this overwhelming sense of grief and shock and frustration with white

America, that our beloved hero had been felled by an assassin's bullet. I think that it shocked us because in a way, when we started as freshman, we were aware of the atrocities that had occurred in the south when we were in high school. Medgar Evers in Mississippi and the four little girls blown up in Birmingham and you had Little Rock when we were in the sixth grade, you know, the idea that they had to bring United States Army, the 101<sup>st</sup> airborne to allow black kids to go to high school and then Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Civil rights demonstrations had become kind of main stream and accepted so that the idea that there was this kind of hatred that would inspire somebody to kill Dr. King infuriated us, frustrated us, saddened us. I was a senior and by then, through the Rhodes Scholarship, that's announced in December of your senior year. And I was you know, finished now with my football career. And I think mainly because of football, I was pretty well known among the black students. One of the things you're skipping over, the black Nationalist student movement exploded in the mid-60s and so we went from people, you know, having pressed hair and nice little parts and things to the big old bush or Afro and saying "I'm black and I'm proud." The class behind me, they really played a leadership role in nurturing that identity, although it created a lot of friction on campus because then we were young people and somewhat immature. So there were a lot of discussions about whether so and so is black or

not. So it was particularly ironic because many of the leaders of the student movement on these Ivy Leagues campuses were these light-skinned Negroes talking about. “Is so and so black or not?”

Ms. Boone: We still have that today.

Mr. Williamson: But what that meant actually was that a schism had developed among the black students between those who were the Afro black students and those who were not an Afro and there was a social split. Now I wasn't really part of the black social scene. By then I had reconciled with my high school girlfriend and that, particularly as this nationalism stuff was exploding, it made it more complicated. When I came, people thought, when I was a freshman, that I was the almost the height of progressive liberal activity to be involved in an interracial relationship, but that kind of got moved aside when the “Black Pride” came in. Then brother and sisters were supposed to maintain solidarity. I was playing my sport and studying a lot and I would go see my girlfriend from time to time at Smith or she would come down. Both because I was involved in a relationship that I took seriously and also I was used to being a football player, but I wasn't used to being a player.

Ms. Boone: Okay.

Mr. Williamson: I used to envy in college these guys who would talk about rap. I didn't have a rap and it wasn't until later I learned that actually sisters had heard so many of these raps, they were really tired, but I didn't know

that. I remember going to parties and seeing somebody just start saying, “Hey baby,” and just kind of, I don’t know, “Hey,” or just put the hand up or something and then expect a girl to come.

white boys said you’re supposed to go up and introduce yourself and start. I decided I’d just be cool. One way to be cool is you don’t expose yourself to people finding out how inept you are, just kind of stand around and look cool. The big drawback of that, of course, is that means you don’t really meet anybody.

Ms. Boone: Right.

Mr. Williamson: But you’re cool.

Ms. Boone: Yeah.

Mr. Williamson: Some people thought I was not so friendly because I didn’t seem to know how to socialize casually and readily and I didn’t in a lot of black settings. I had my own attitudes. People were talking about how they were so black and proud and they wanted to identify with their African heritage. I was studying about it, okay. If I wanted to be unpleasant, I could say something like, “Well, so you’re really into Africa, it’s like can you tell me like the names of three tribes, doesn’t have to be in the same country, just for the whole continent.” There weren’t very many black people who could tell you the names of even three African tribes even though there are hundreds of them, hundreds. So I had my own ambivalence about that, but there were certain people who, they understood what my limitations were. There was a guy

named Elvin Montgomery, he was from New Orleans and he was very much of the black community. I don't know if his father had been a minister or what, but there were a lot of things that I needed to learn like I had never heard the expression "high yellow" until I got to Harvard. Because where I grew up, we had these different shades in my family, but we were the niggers in town.

Ms. Boone: Yeah.

Mr. Williamson: That's who we were. It was very dismaying to me, even though there was a lot of Black Nationalism stuff that was going on, there were also these were other traditional, certain types of traditional black folks who would discriminate or make disparaging remarks about other black people based on color and hair and stuff. That was all news to me because if you're the only black family, you're the only black family. But anyway, come senior year, there was this split in the black community, but after Dr. King was killed, the leaders of Afro, a guy named Chuck Hamilton and Jeff Howard, came to me. They were a year behind me, they were juniors, and so as I said, the nationalist thing really came with the class behind me, not my class so much. They said, "We need to try to seize this moment, to change this university in major ways, and to do that, we need to have all the black students united and we think you're the person who can bring everybody together."

Ms. Boone: Interesting.

Mr. Williamson: And their thinking was, they knew me, not everybody liked me, but a lot of people respected me. You know how black people are, they may think you're kind of a nerd, but, if you're out on the field, outdoing white folks, they'd be up in the stands cheering.

Ms. Boone: That's our guy.

Mr. Williamson: That they know that you're actually getting better grades than the white folks, they kind of like that too.

Ms. Boone: Yeah. Yeah.

Mr. Williamson: You may not be down...

Ms. Boone: But you're ours.

Mr. Williamson: That's right. That's right. That's right. So I was sort of positioned in this kind of remote way, but a way that also by not being involved in social things, there was no history of so and so did this or that to her or lah-dee-dah. I didn't have any of that history. They had this one thing, he's still dating this white girl which was true, we were still dating, but they didn't know her very well. She was, in a lot of ways, she was a lot blacker than I was, and she's the one who said, "I'm coming down if Miss Stokely Carmichael's coming down." There wasn't a whole lot of receptivity to that, but in this moment they said, "We think you can bring everybody together." Because I had won the Rhodes and was in this major that was respected around the campus. I had some credibility with the faculty and the administration that we all had an interest in trying to organize and deploy our resources as

effectively as possible for the moment. Because this was a time when we had to decide, are we taking over buildings, are we going over to Roxbury to, mean to me it was always crazy for black people to be burning down their own parts of the community. If you wanted to burn down something because you were mad at white people, you should go burn down the white parts, but black people knew instinctively that was way too dangerous. That white America would let you burn down the black community, they were not going to let you burn down the white community. In fact, we'd spent time, as part of this Afro...patrolling in Roxbury because there were white kids coming in, trouble makers, you know, throwing Molotov cocktails and whatnot. But the big thing was, would I agree to be the head of this -- we had to create an organization. We couldn't call it the Afro Group because then that would bring that baggage, so we called it the Ad Hoc Committee of Black Students. In terms of group dynamics and group politics, since I was a senior and going to be leaving in a few months, whatever I was up to was not going to have anything to do with "How is Tom trying to position himself, you know, for the future here?" I was out of there. I'm going out of the country. And I said, "I'll do it," And there was a very poignant moment early on where a faculty member who had been a very good friend to me and had also been one of my professors in this major had asked me to speak at a service in memory of Dr. King in Memorial Church. But the black students had

decided that they wanted to do a separate service at the same time outside Memorial Church.

Ms. Boone: Wow. Why?

Mr. Williamson: Because they wanted to make a statement to the white community that our loss is much greater and more painful than anything that you can feel. One of the things that had spawned the Black Nationalist group was tension actually between white liberals and black liberals and radicals about who should be in charge of the tactics and the organizations of the movement. I chose to decline the invitation to speak to the broader university community inside the church. I was one of the spokespersons at the separate service outside and that led to a picture in the *Crimson* of our separate service. I thought for the role that I was going to assume it was important to send a message. I didn't know if I was going to be successful, but Tom is stepping up to assume a new identity in our community. And that it's very important for the university community to understand that we are a distinctive voice that has not been heard loudly enough and clearly enough in the past and we will fashion a strategy for how to honor Dr. King. We will take the leadership role in that and we will measure you by your willingness to commit to a direction we are going to define. So that was a long ways from saying well here I am at Harvard, supposed to be a credit to my race and let me see if I can show the white people that I can be as good as a white person.

Ms. Boone: No, better. Interesting. Okay. So Rhodes Scholar, how did that come about? What made you decide to apply? Was there a particular professor, you said Martin Kelson, was he your professor at the time?

Mr. Williamson: He was my thesis advisor and I had taken a couple of courses from him because he was one of the few Africans on campus. It actually happened not so much because of any individual, no, it was a whole -- it's really more that applying for Rhode scholarships was part of the culture at Harvard.

Ms. Boone: Oh okay.

Mr. Williamson: Just remember, it's a pretty elitist place in many ways. I love Harvard College and there are actually a lot of things about being with very bright people and having these extraordinary resources that I think are quite compelling. But I didn't realize until after I got there, I knew about Rhodes Scholars because when I was younger, I had wanted to go to West Point and there was a quarterback from West Point named Pete Dawkins who was an all-American quarterback, who was a Rhodes Scholar. So that seed had been planted in my mind, that that might be something I would like to do. Then when I got to Harvard I found I was focused more on my girlfriend dumping me and I got to make sure I don't get any more Ds on mid-terms. So I wasn't thinking about Rhodes Scholar then, but what happened, when you're in a culture...do you have any idea what I mean by it's a culture? There are 32 American Rhodes Scholars each year. When I was a

sophomore, ten of the 32 American Rhodes Scholars were from Harvard. So unlike most places where -- what's a Rhodes Scholar, it's like are you somebody from Mars or something? There were people all over the place who were Rhodes Scholars. And one of the reasons is that the school -- there were deans and house masters who would identify promising candidates and encourage you to think about it, particularly the master of Elliott House. He very much would try to get or hoped he would have students in the house, that's what we called the dorms at Harvard, where he would write these fabulous references letters for them. I'm trying to make my way, really dealing with things month to month or semester to semester. So enjoying my major, football got turned around. And Harvard is a place where they notice if you're a football player and you're doing well academically, people notice that and they start talking about you to apply and they almost make you feel like you will be disappointing the school if you fail to apply. And my senior year, by then I was thinking well something that maybe I do want to do, been given a lot of encouragement, but also I was thinking, gosh there's a lot of pressure because now I'm being made to feel like it's my duty. Also I was aware of the Rhodes Scholarship because in 1963 there were two black Rhodes Scholars, Stan Sanders who was a football player at Whittier College and John Wideman, he was a basketball player at Penn. That was really played up in the black press and *Ebony* and whatnot

because those were the only the second and third African American Rhodes Scholars. I didn't actually know at the time the first one was Alaine Locke in like 1906 because I actually stumbled a bit in my Rhodes interview where I made some smart aleck remark about how some questions as to whether it really is appropriate for me to be applying to a scholarship funded by someone who was one of the wealthiest business men in the history of South Africa, now an apartheid country. Then the committee informed me that in 1906 Alaine Locke was the first African American Rhodes Scholar and that Cecil Rhodes did not discriminate on that basis. So it was in my mind and, as I said, I knew people who had, by the senior year - I knew people that had won it. They had been in classes ahead of me. Bill Bradley garnered a great deal of publicity my freshman year. He was an all-American basketball player at Princeton and voted the top college player in the country. He was a white guy. He was a fabulous player. He later became a Senator. And so one was very aware of the Rhodes for all those reasons and then in my senior year, a guy who had been one of my freshman suite mates and also had been a football teammate throughout named Al Bersin and I were on the cover of the football program with the caption that said Harvard's leading Rhodes Scholar candidates.

Ms. Boone: Okay.

Mr. Williamson: Well it's not okay. That's a lot of pressure because it's very fickle how you actually end up getting it. There's no guarantee that you're going to be a winner. So now there are thousands of people in the community that think, well you're our two leading candidates. It turned out both of us did.

Ms. Boone: Yeah, I was going to ask.

Mr. Williamson: Alan is an amazing man. He was an amazing student and a great football player and he won from New York. I would have liked to have competed through California, but that would have meant I would have had to pay to fly home for the state-level competition which was \$400 or something whereas if I had stayed in Boston and competed through Massachusetts, you can do it through your home state or the state where you're going to college. It's \$0.20 each way on the subway.

Ms. Boone: Is the application process pretty involved, such as you have to have some kind of a proposal or plan of what you would do. How does it work?

Mr. Williamson: There are a number of things. You have to talk about what you have done in college. The Rhodes people are looking for folks who they feel will be potential future leaders and they interpret that as meaning you'll have more than just good grades, you will have been involved in extracurricular activities and the scholarship gets remembered because of certain athletes, although very few of the Rhodes Scholars are really

top athletes, but the ones who are remembered were top athletes like Bill Bradley and Pete Dawkins and folks like that. So my year, there were, I think out of the 32, maybe only a half dozen or so actually had varsity letters. But you have to talk about what you have achieved as an undergraduate and then you do have to describe what you would like to do at Oxford. For most of us, you don't really know enough about yourself and Oxford to do that in a definitive way, but you have to make up something that sounds interesting. And you write an essay that is a kind of life story essay to try to persuade the committee that you're an interesting person who is likely to go on to achieve important tasks and goals.

Ms. Boone: Have you ever looked back at that essay like years later, have you looked at it at all recently?

Mr. Williamson: No, I never look back at that. Once started to read my undergraduate thesis, I was so embarrassed. I put that away.

Ms. Boone: Totally can relate to that.

Mr. Williamson: But for the times I knew my story would be an engaging one for the committee members who were then, I think it's still former Rhodes Scholars that, you know, white people were. America was really such a segregated country and had been for so long that even very well-educated and sophisticated white people usually had very little contact with black folks, if any. I think by dint of the civil rights movement, we were a popular curiosity among moderates and liberals, but that's

different from saying these are people who really know you and understand you. It also meant that there wouldn't be anybody on the committee who had an experience growing up and maturing like the one that I had. So in some ways, that gave me more control over where the interview was likely to go and also a greater sense of predictability of what questions they would likely ask and how they would be reacting to me because at that point, I was someone who presented myself as having been both nurtured and conditioned in my youth in the white world but was emerging as an African American man. There were a number of professors who said you ought to apply. The school, they said, encourages students to apply for the Rhodes and the Marshall and the Rockefeller and Harvard isn't that big a place, so that the message certainly got delivered to me that we expect you to haul in one of these prestigious scholarships.

Ms. Boone: And you did. Okay so tell me about that experience. Tell me about Oxford. Tell me about your reaction, your initial reaction once you learned that you did receive the Rhodes scholarship and you would be going to Oxford.

Mr. Williamson: Well I was very pleased and relieved because I thought I'd been put in a position where if I don't win this, people will think I failed.

Ms. Boone: Yeah [laughter].

Mr. Williamson: So I was glad that I didn't have to deal with that. My dad didn't really understand what it was. He was the first person I called. I said, "Dad,

you know I won a Rhodes and I'm going to Oxford and next year I can study for two or extend it to three years." And my dad, bless his soul, he's over at Arlington Cemetery, he's a Morgan State grad, he says, first thing he says is, "Tom, you know, we're going to have to pay for your brother and sister to go to college. So I'm not sure what you're talking about going over to..." "Dad, let me start again." [Laughter]

Ms. Boone: Yes. Yeah. Yeah. [Laughter]

Mr. Williamson: My dad was a college graduate. That helped to remind me and keep me grounded that I was living in a world that was so removed from the world of most black people that if you walked down the street or you were sitting in a barber shop and said "Hey, I'm a Rhodes Scholar," most people would have no idea what you're talking about. Whereas in white America, actually if you weren't from a prominent family or some sort of pop celebrity, that scholarship was considered so special that a lot of white people would say, "Whoa," or "Can I come over and shake your hand?" These people don't do that ordinarily for young people and particularly young black people. So it was a reminder of how separate the black and the white worlds were in so many ways. I wasn't that sure what I was really going to study and I had some ambivalence because I really did like speaking French and if I could have, well I could have, but I didn't. In my heart I thought it would be more fun to be a graduate student in Paris than in Oxford. I still think that's true although in terms of meeting other Americans who might

become good friends and interesting people later, being a Rhodes scholar at Oxford was very good for that, very good for that.

Ms. Boone: And so you studied Ethiopian politics?

Mr. Williamson: Well I eventually got there, yes. I was talking about getting to know people, you know, when we were setting sail on the boat that may now be just sent to salvage, there was an article about it in the *Post* on Sunday, the SS *United States*, and so I'm leaning over the edge and like a number of guys, you're waving to your...

Ms. Boone: Wait a minute; you took a boat to England?

Mr. Williamson: Yes.

Ms. Boone: Do they still do that?

Mr. Williamson: They did it for one more year and then airplanes just killed the trans-Atlantic passenger ships. It used to be a grand way to go to Europe and it was a great bonding experience. I don't know if you've ever been on a cruise ship.

Ms. Boone: I have, yeah. [Laughter]

Mr. Williamson: When you're on a ship, no place else to go. So I'm looking over the edge, waving to my high school and college sweetheart who was there on the dock in New York City. And this guy comes up and says, "Hi, my name's Bill Clinton, glad to meet you."

Ms. Boone: No... really?

Mr. Williamson: Yeah. I found out...

Ms. Boone: Are you serious?

Mr. Williamson: Yeah.

Ms. Boone: Sorry. You see he was a politician from the beginning, introducing himself randomly to folks.

Mr. Williamson: Well it wasn't random. I remember I was the fifth African American Rhodes Scholar. There was Alaine Locke, there was John Wideman, there was Stan Sanders, then there was a guy from Dartmouth, I think, in 65 or 66, I didn't know him-- never met him. I was the only one in the group.

Ms. Boone: Yeah okay.

Mr. Williamson: Bill was interested in meeting everybody, but he was -- well he was particularly curious about how this was going to work with me because we were all in the sixth grade when Central High in Little Rock was integrated and that was a big national news story. Everybody would say, "Well where are you a Rhodes Scholar from?" I said, "From Arkansas." So he knew that I would be wary of him, but he also -- Bill is very insightful, positive person and he said, "Well I know this guy, he's going to have some reservations about me, but I know I'm a good guy and I'm going to persuade him that he'll like being my friend." Which he then proceeded to do. That's when we first met on the boat and then Bob Reich, who I later worked when he was the Secretary of Labor. He and I had competed against each other in the middle Atlantic -- no, I guess it was the New England region. You first competed at the state level and there'll be somewhere

between 20 and 40 people at each state who'll be considered and they pick 2 and then you compete at the regional level where they'll be 16 and they pick 4 of the 16. Bob and I had met at the competition and so I was able to renew the acquaintance with him. So it was a three and a half day cruise.

Ms. Boone: Okay.

Mr. Williamson: We got acquainted. Bill played the saxophone for one of the dance parties that we had and I guess Bob got seasick. It was this ship that left in October. There were like 160 students on it, so we also put energy into figuring out if you could find somebody to get acquainted with who was better looking than you. So I met a very nice woman on the ship and we started dating for I guess a year or two or a year and a half. She was going to Trinity College, Dublin. So it was kind of cool. It was a lot of fun.

Ms. Boone: Yeah, so...

Mr. Williamson: But anyway, you asked about my major.

Ms. Boone: Yeah.

Mr. Williamson: I kept changing my degree program because I found when I got to Oxford I was more adrift than I had ever been in my life. Because Oxford allows you an enormous amount of academic freedom to figure out what you want to study and how you want to study. You could do an accelerated undergraduate degree, do it in two years rather than three or four years. You could do a graduate degree. So I started out

thinking I would do an undergraduate degree, it's called PP (politics, philosophy, and economics). This tutorial system is one where you meet with your tutor either individually or in a small group, two or three students, once a week, the tutor gives you reading assignments and you write a paper you turn in to the tutor. The lectures, they just have a calendar of lectures that you decide whatever lecture is interesting to you. It's not connected to the course, specifically structured with the course the way our courses are. It turned out that was too much freedom for me. I was used to being told okay, you pick a major and then here are all the requirements you have to satisfy and say okay I'll go do the program. Then I shifted to a graduate degree program, the equivalent of a masters here, but they called it a B-lit. I was going to do something about violence and political movements in West Africa. So I had written my undergraduate thesis on neocolonialism and Ghana so I already knew quite a bit about West African history and political and economic issues. But I really was having trouble getting myself focused and motivated. I had a little bit of fun playing some rugby for my college.

Ms. Boone: I played rugby too. [Laughter]

Mr. Williamson: I was a winger and the problem with being a winger is everything has to work perfectly for you to get the ball in American football, they call your play, but in rugby...

Ms. Boone: It's, yeah, it's...

Mr. Williamson: What position did you play?

Ms. Boone: I didn't know what I was playing. I don't know.

Mr. Williamson: Were you the scrum or a winger?

Ms. Boone: I was in scrum. Like I was like in the...when we got the ball.

Mr. Williamson: Yeah, you were the scrum.

Ms. Boone: I had never heard of rugby before. I tried out for it, I figured I could get on the team because I had never heard of it and I did get on the team, but it was a lot more violent, a lot more action than I was expecting.

Mr. Williamson: It was rough. So I was kind of drifting around, but I found if I changed my degree program, then I wouldn't be held accountable for having to do anything for the prior term and Oxford has a nice set up, Oxford and Cambridge have eight weeks of school and six weeks of vacation, eight and six and eight. I think you were supposed to go off and study during the six, but the Americans went and travelled and so the first six week thing I came back to the U.S. because my college roommate was getting married and I came back and I met the mother of the girl I had started dating and then the second one she and I hitchhiked through Italy and Greece and Yugoslavia, what was then Yugoslavia. But I wasn't seriously into the books and actually one of the nice things about being a Rhodes Scholar is that nobody ever asks you how did you do at Oxford. Because if you were in the know, no one says were you a first, which would be like being a Phi beta in

campus or something like that. So then I got a summer job working as a consultant to the Peace Corps, evaluating Peace Corps training programs and a friend of mine, a wonderful man named Lew Butler, had helped me get that job, right down in San Francisco. And I told him I wanted to go to Africa because I had studied a lot about Africa and he said, "Well let me see if I can get you a job where maybe they'll send you over there." And sure enough, I was assigned to evaluate the training programs for Libya and Ethiopia. They did part of the training in the U.S. and they were supposed to do part of the training in country.

Ms. Boone: That's great.

Mr. Williamson: They never made it to Libya because that summer, while they were doing the training out at Utah and in Arizona, a young Air Force officer named Muammar Gaddafi deposed King Idris and that brought an abrupt end to the alliance between the United States and Libya. We had a big Air Force base there, Wheelus Air Force Base, and it meant the Peace Corps people didn't go, but the Ethiopian group did go to Ethiopia and I went there for two weeks, I think it was about two weeks, to observe the training program and then come back to the U.S. and write a report about that. So while I was there, I had been apprehensive about going there because I knew from my studies of Africa that Ethiopians looked down all the rest of Africa and actually all the rest of the world. They're very proud and haughty people and

they particularly looked down on people of African descent who had been enslaved because the Ethiopians had not been colonized. When the Italians tried to colonize them, the Ethiopians defeated them in the Battle of Adwa 1896 and so they look down on all the rest of -- they thought it was shameful that you would have half slave ancestors. That's who my ancestors were. I'm thinking when I'm flying over there. "Do I really want to be with these people who are going to be looking down on me?" What I didn't anticipate was that when an Ethiopian sees me, they're absolutely convinced that I must be an Ethiopian and you get a different welcome in countries where people think you look just like them. So I had a fascinating two weeks and I said these women are unbelievably beautiful. What am I doing in England with all of these pale people? I need to figure out a way to get back here. So that's when I went back and changed my degree program to a DPhil in Ethiopian politics.

Ms. Boone: That's so funny. It really is. Okay.

Mr. Williamson: The DPhil program made you eligible to take a leave of absence.

Ms. Boone: Okay.

Mr. Williamson: And I wasn't very happy at Oxford anyway. I made some very good friends, made some terrific friends among the Rhodes Scholar group and made some friends from some of the other countries in the commonwealth but I didn't -- I wasn't very successful in making good English friends, but at the end of my -- what is called the, I think the

first term is called a Michaelmas term, I worked out so I was now a DPhil candidate taking a leave of absence to study student politics in Ethiopia.

Ms. Boone: Okay.

Mr. Williamson: Even though I actually knew that would be kind of a dangerous thing to do because the Emperor was in power and the students were often being imprisoned, sometimes being killed by the intelligence people or the police or if they did -- the students hijacked some airplanes and the Emperor told his minions he did not want any hijackers coming back alive.

Ms. Boone: Okay.

Mr. Williamson: I lost my head. That's how I got to stay in Ethiopian politics because I wanted, before going to the country, I wanted to fit in to go back to Ethiopia and I wanted to know as much as I could about the history and the culture, politics before I went there.

Ms. Boone: Interesting. Okay. And then at what point...how long do you pursue the doctorate...or your doctoral studies, DPhil?

Mr. Williamson: It was just one term. The first term in the fall was called a Michaelmas term and then I took a leave of absence and the warden at the Rhodes house was very gracious to me because he actually offered to pay for me to study in Ethiopia while still having the rest of my scholarship at Oxford. I told him I couldn't accept that because the only condition would be that I would have to come back to Oxford.

Ms. Boone: How did you support yourself then?

Mr. Williamson: Well that's another story, but anyway, he was very gracious in saying to me that, for some Rhodes Scholars, one year is enough. But why he was extraordinarily kind was to tell me that if I change my mind about wanting to come back to Oxford, he said there would be no hesitation about reinstating my scholarship. It was very nice of him particularly since I said I'm blowing this place and going to where it's warm and there are all these beautiful women. He was a wise man, but I never did return to study. To answer your question, I had been offered a job to join the Peace Corps staff. I'd gotten acquainted with the Peace Corps Director when I was doing my evaluation, he and I got along well and he had an opening, a position to be the training officer and he thought it would be a good fit for me since I had been evaluating training programs. I didn't really know much about how to run a training program, but I knew a little bit. Unfortunately, he was a very left wing guy and he made the Ambassador to Ethiopia very angry, particularly when he gave an anti-Vietnam War speech to the Ethiopian University students. So around the time I was leaving Oxford, he was being fired from his position as the Peace Corps Director. I had been told I had to come through Washington to be processed and the Acting Director and the successor, who was going to be coming over, were both here in Washington. They interviewed me and I was a pretty cocky guy by then. I had a very good run of

interviews ever since. The Bank of America one in high school where they discriminated against me and I didn't get picked for a scholarship. I was in senior year in high school. After that, every interview I did worked out pretty well. But I was a little bit too cocky for this one and they told me the next day that they were withdrawing the job offer; they did not want to hire me. So I didn't feel like I could go back to Oxford. I had left with some flourish about how I'm going to fulfill my personal destiny; you guys are just sitting around here in a decadent Oxford life. So that wouldn't be cool to go back and say hey I'm back. So I went home to California and moped around and felt sorry for myself. Then I came back to Washington and one of the guys who had worked with me evaluating Peace Corps training programs gave me a pep talk about how I said if you want to go to Africa, you are the sort of person who can figure out how to make that happen for yourself. And that placed me in an odd predicament because I didn't want to try to rebut that argument. On the other hand, it meant, if that were true, I'm supposed to take care of business. So I decided to take care of business and I got a job here in Washington for about six months and then there was somebody who I befriended who he hired me to work in Cameroon as a group leader for an organization called Crossroads Africa where they would bring American and African students together in a work camp and he wanted to hire me mainly because I was a French speaker and they had trouble

getting leaders who were French speakers. And then he said, if you want to go to Ethiopia, we'll get you halfway there. You can just send the students back and you can stay in Africa and make your way to Ethiopia. And so that's what I did. I showed up without a job because the Peace Corps had said we don't want you and the person who I thought was going to help me get a job didn't answer any of the letters I wrote to him. But, you know, it was going to be warm, all these beautiful women. [Laughter] I'll be okay. This is 1970, so I'm like 24 years old.

Ms. Boone: Did you have a master plan about how this was going to fit into your life or was it just this is where I want to be and I'm just going to get there and it wasn't a part of any kind of broader idea about what you wanted to do?

Mr. Williamson: It was the latter. I said I had been doing things according to the plan and following a very proper course for advancing yourself for the previous 23 years. This is just what I want to do.

Ms. Boone: Any feedback from your parents or your siblings or did anyone get afraid, like what's going on with Tom?

Mr. Williamson: Yeah my parents thought I had lost my mind. They said, "Well, if you're going to leave Oxford, shouldn't you just go to law school?"  
No.

Ms. Boone: Oh, so they mentioned law school back then?

Mr. Williamson: I had applied to law school before I went to Oxford because it was just easier to do all the junk that you have to do. So I had been admitted...at the time I thought I was going to Yale, but I applied to Yale and Harvard and Berkeley. So that was something they thought I was going to do. They were horrified and scandalized that I was dropping out of Oxford and that I had no plan except to say I wanted to go to Africa or Ethiopia and I didn't have a job in Ethiopia either. So it was going to be 10,000 miles away from them without any clear goal or refuge or anybody who I knew who was going to help me.

Ms. Boone: Is that what you needed at the time? It seemed like you were somewhat burned out.

Mr. Williamson: Yes, I was tired of academic learning. That was part of my problem at Oxford. Oxford is a wonderful academic center, but I had studied very hard in college and I think I was just burned out in terms of that type of learning.

Ms. Boone: Okay. Okay.

Mr. Williamson: When I got to Ethiopia, I had to get a job.

Ms. Boone: What did you do?

Mr. Williamson: Well there was this friend who owned a company who had told me he would help me find a job. I had written to him, but when you write letters or even when you send cables from one side of the continent to the other, you don't know if the person got it and when I arrived, I knew in Ethiopia it was a big deal to go to the airport and either send

people off or meet them and I had sent a cable saying I'm coming in, hope you remember who I am and remember you said you'd help me get a job. It was a red-eye flight from Ghana, as I had traveled after I had worked in Cameroon, I traveled around to several West African countries and was in Ghana and I looked around the airport.

Ms. Boone: And nothing? [Laughter]

Mr. Williamson: There was nobody there to meet me.

Ms. Boone: Okay.

Mr. Williamson: So I said well, you know, this is part of the adventure. Maybe people just say they're going to help you, but they don't really mean it. You have to learn to adapt to different cultures. This is where you said you wanted to be and you're now in Ethiopia. So I went to the hotel, taken this red-eye so I went to sleep and woke up and I said well, maybe it was before I went to sleep or I don't know if I stayed at a hotel overnight or not, I forget because I was mad that this guy.

Ms. Boone: Yeah. [Laughter]

Mr. Williamson: I did stay the night at the hotel because maybe it was a Sunday that I arrived. Monday night I said "Look, Tom, you are resenting the fact that your friend, later to become the godfather of my oldest son, that Dereje didn't meet you at the airport. So you think he's a dog, but maybe something happened. Maybe the cable never got through, so if you call him up and say, well here Gino, I'm here and I was just wondering if you remembered me." If he says, "Look, I don't

remember you, then would you please get out of my...,” then you’ll think the same thing you already think about him, but if there was some mistake or confusion, that can be rectified. If you don’t call, it can never be rectified. So I call him up, he’s profusely apologetic. He said, “Tom, I was having a party at my house,” and I knew he gave great parties. I sent my driver to the airport and told him to pick an American who would be coming in. I forgot to tell him that you--

Ms. Boone: That you were black. [Laughter]

Mr. Williamson: That you look exactly like an Ethiopian. So he came back, said, “That guy was not on the plane.” [Laughter] This time he sent his cousin over who actually had been in college in the States to pick me up, bring me to his house and I moved in with Dereje and then it turned out he hired me in his company.

Ms. Boone: And what was his company?

Mr. Williamson: It was called Alem Public Relations Consultants and he did a variety of things. It was advertising and public relations and also he had these contracts to train Peace Corps volunteers and he wanted me to run the division of the company that trained the Peace Corps volunteers. Now life is funny because when I got to Ethiopia, this is now September, because I had been rejected the previous December, and now the successor guy was in country running the program and he heard that I had shown up, he asked me to come to his office and he apologized for how I’d been treated before and said that that was a mistake and they

should have offered me the job and if I was willing to take the job now, he would be very pleased to hire me.

Ms. Boone: Okay.

Mr. Williamson: I said well, you know, before you guys were going to pay for my travel and everything to get here, but I've done that now myself and I want to have an experience where I'm not part of the U.S. government. So thank you, but I'm not interested. Then I go back to see Dereje, he says, "I'd like you to work for my company and run the training programs." In a lot of ways, it was different, but the functions kind of overlapped. I could have coordinated things out of the Peace Corps office or more directly out of Alem's office. Alem was the name of that company, Alem Public Relations Consultants. And I said to Dereje, I said, "Dereje, you know, I grew up in a white community, I've traveled, you know, all the way from the States to be here in Ethiopia, I want to immerse myself in Ethiopian culture in this environment and see if I can adapt and find a niche for myself. If I do what you want me to do, then that means I have to spend time negotiating with Peace Corps people and supervising a staff taking care of mostly white people. And, you know, I've already had enough contact with white Americans, I don't need any supplementary corps. So I don't want to do it."

Ms. Boone: Okay. You turned down two jobs in a week, I'm hearing with no alternatives. [Laughter]

Mr. Williamson: It was odd. It was the only time in my life that's ever happened. I was being viewed as the only person in the country who could do the job that they wanted to hire me for, both of the ones they hired me for. So I'm living in his house and he says, "You know, we have these fairly small contracts now to train these Peace Corps volunteers," and he was a real pioneer and unusual in that most Peace Corps training was done by U.S. consulting firms. Dereje had the vision to say you're coming here to develop Africa, then an African company should have the contract." When I evaluated the program, they just had the language training.

Ms. Boone: Okay. I'm going to pause this.