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INTERVIEWEE: Melvin Swann

INTERVIEWER: Michael Sistrom

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MICHAEL SISTROM: Okay, Mr. Swann, I wanted to begin if you will tell us your name, how old you are, and where you were born.

MELVIN SWANN: My name is Melvin Chester Swann Jr. I go by Mel. I was—I'm seventy-two years old, and I was born in Alabama City, Alabama.

MS: I'll figure out the math [chuckling] what that translates you to. What years did you first come to [J. C.] Price [Junior High], as a teacher and then an administrator?

MCS: I first came to Price school in 1960—in January of 1960, mid-year. And for the remainder of that year I taught the sixth grade. And then the following year—I was a substitute that year, for the remainder of the year, then the following year I was hired as a fulltime teacher and I taught science—earth science and life science—at J. C. Price. I taught there for six years, and I was made assistant principal. I served as assistant principal for three years. After the retirement of Mr. [Abraham] Peeler—

MS: So this would have been—sorry—1966-'69 you were assistant principal?

MCS: Let me—I can give you all of that. [shuffles papers]

MS: Anyway, Mr. Peeler retired in 1969—

MCS: Right.

MS: —and you took over.

MCS: I was—I was assistant principal '69-'71.

MS: Oh, okay. I'm sorry.

MCS: I mean principal ’69-’71. I was assistant principal from ’66-’69. And I taught from ’60-’66. I taught earth science. I was department chair. I also was assistant football coach, head basketball coach, and baseball coach. [MS laughs] From ’58-’59 I taught one year in Hertford County [North Carolina] before coming to Greensboro.

MS: So that was your—that was your entre to North Carolina?

MCS: That was my entre to North Carolina—in Winton, North Carolina, C. S. Brown High School.

MS: Was that—I want to talk about some of the—later about some of the various activities that went on at Price—but was that at all unusual for a teacher as yourself to be wearing so many hats—as chair, as teaching multiple subjects, as coaching three different teams?

MCS: Not too—No, people did what they were asked to do or what they liked to do. Not too unusual. I—Of course I was not department chair initially, but as time went on I—with seniority and so forth—I became department chair. I played sports, and so the coaching was a pleasure to me. My friend and coworker was the head coach, so I assisted him in football. And then I coached basketball and baseball. So it was just part of the duty there in working with the young people in that community.

MS: Just to continue your biography before we talk more about your years at Price, after you left Price, what did you do after that?

MCS: After I left Price I was asked to come to the central office, and I served as director of student affairs—the first director of student affairs. This was the year—Well prior to my last year at Price, the system desegregated the staff. We had had an all-African-American staff at Price school, and they decided—the board decided to integrate staff. During that time we received about five or six white teachers. Then the next year the student body—

MS: In 1971 then the student—okay.

MCS: Right. And that was the year that they closed Price as a junior high school, and it became an elementary school. Now Price school was an elementary—had an elementary department and a junior high department. And at one time, when I first came to Price, we had fourth through ninth grade, and then later the fourth grade was moved to David D. Jones. And I was told that prior to my coming, many years earlier, Price school had grades one through nine. Of course at that time they didn’t have kindergarten, so it was first grade through ninth grade. But at David D. Jones—an elementary school which is a

stone's throw from Price school—was built, then gradually various grades were moved to that school.

MS: We've noticed that, and we're curious about that. I'm glad you cleared that up, because we noticed when the third grade seemed to actually come and go—

MCS: Right.

MS: —in earlier years, and then obviously the earlier grades got lopped off.

MCS: That's right.

MS: And we were just curious when and why that happened. So it was because the Jones school opened?

MCS: That is correct. And then the fourth grade went, and so during my tenure there, there was grades five, six, seven, eight, and nine.

MS: And was that—Was the ninth grade an addition—do you know—later? Because before we thought it only went up to eight.

MCS: No the ninth grade was there.

MS: From the very beginning?

MCS: See during that time, ninth grade was a part of the junior high schools, and most of the models of the other junior high schools in the city were grades seven through nine. Some years later it was a decision to move the ninth grades to high school—

MS: And make it sixth through eighth.

MCS: —and then the sixth grade, and change the model from junior high to middle school. And so those grades were sixth, seventh, and eighth, which meant that elementary was kindergarten through fifth grade.

MS: So from it's opening, Price had a ninth grade?

MCS: Yes, yes.

MS: Okay.

MCS: I believe. [chuckling] I believe it—Yeah. In fact I'm sure it did, because the ninth grade was not in the high school until later.

MS: Okay. So obviously they would have had it. Before they could go to Dudley [High School], they had to go to ninth grade—

MCS: Right.

MS: —at Price. So back—You were saying you were at the central office in 1971, and then from there—?

MCS: From the central office I was—I'll have to go back and review some of this because [shuffles papers] I can give you those dates. I was director of student affairs from '71-'75, and my responsibility was to see that students got a fair shake in their integrated setting. In other words, there were students at school A that were moved to school B, and my responsibility encompassed all of the student activities, except athletics—cheerleading, clubs, all of those kinds of activities. And we formed what we call student affairs committees at each elemen—at each junior high school and at each high school. My responsibility was primarily at junior high and high school level. And I held that role as director of student affairs from '71-'75.

And in '75 I was made assistant principal for pupil personnel services. And pupil personnel services involves guidance, school social work, some thirteen programs and exceptional children, and also school nursing and psychology. And I held that responsibility as assistant for pupil personnel services until 1979. And in '79 I was made assistant superintendent for professional support services. What they did at that time was to combine pupil personnel services and instructional services together, and they called it professional support services. So I had all of the central office staff, with the exception of personnel and finance and those other insular areas. So all the instructional directives, all of the pupil personnel directives, I was responsible for.

MS: That's an enormous responsibility.

MCS: Yeah, it was. It was. But I had good people working in those areas, and it worked out quite well. The real I guess problem or difficulty initially was those two areas were sort of competing for funds, prior to their coming together as one group. And so we had to sort of change the mindset that we're all one now. Of course, we did that. I took them I took the whole staff down to Quail Roost, which is the conference center for UNC Chapel Hill, and we spent a weekend down there with some facilitators getting us into—instead "us", "we" kind of mode. And it worked quite well.

MS: And then after 1979—?

MCS: After ’79 I was made assistant superintendent for elementary schools and community services. I had thirty-two elementary schools I was responsible for, and all the community service activities that were involved in the school system came through my office. And I served in that capacity for—that was from the—professional support services was from ’79-’82. That was three years. And then from 1982 to 1990, which was eight years, I served as the assistant for elementary schools and community services.

MS: And you finally retire and take a rest? [laughter]

MCS: Not yet. Then in 1990 I was made associate superintendent for administration and management. Now that was until 1993. Administration and management involves all of the areas of—service areas of the school system, with the exception of personnel and finance. It involved the schools’ cafeteria programs. It involved transportation, print shop, the construction, all of the areas other than personnel and finance. And I had two directors, one was for administration and the other was for management. And we served in that capacity for two years.

MS: It sounds like the superintendent and the school board was sending you around to fix a lot of problems. You’d get one department running well so they’d bump you up and have you go fix another one.

MCS: Right. And then in 1973 we had consolidation, and—it was 1972, actually. The new board was elected, and I was named director of transition. [chuckles] And my responsibility was to lead and to set up the reorganization for the consolidated school system. This involved Greensboro, Guilford County, and High Point school systems coming together as the Guilford County Schools.

MS: Was that a pretty—would—I guess would the *Swann [v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education]* decision—no relation—that would—Charlotte-Mecklenburg consolidated pretty early, but was Greensboro one of the earliest places in North Carolina—

MCS: One of the earliest.

MS: —where consolidation occurred?

MCS: One of the earlier ones, yes. One of the earlier ones. And it was decided the—I think Greensboro and High Point were sort of willing. I think Guilford County was a little

reluctant to join that. But a bill was—was introduced in the legislature that set up the merger, and so it happened. And my responsibility was to—well I had two responsibilities. I was still working as social superintendent for administration and management in the Guilford—in the Greensboro schools, because the superintendent at that time, P. Eberhart, asked me to kind of stay on because we want to finish together and so forth. Yet I had another office downtown that I worked out of that office with the new board. And we were responsible for the organizational charts for the new organization for the school system. Of course the board would have to approve of it.

I had to—to set up a skeleton administrative group. In other words, the assistant superintendents in the other systems we had to—I had to bring them in and give them various assignments in terms of the organization for the new school district. We had to re-codify all the—[pause] the administrative regulations, because you had three sets of administrative regulations, [chuckles] and we had to bring that into one. We found out in looking at that that some school systems included in the administrative and board policies things that were school law, and so we could eliminate those because they were in another document as school law and didn't have to be in those. So we had something like six-hundred or more policies and regulations, and we got that down to less than a hundred. And—

MS: Wow, a bureaucrat who manages to eliminate rules and not make more. [laughter] That's got to be an exception. I just want to make sure I get the date right. You said 1972?

MCS: I'm sorry.

MS: Did you mean 1992—

MCS: That was—

MS: —when consolidation happened?

MCS: —1993. It was in 1993.

MS: In '93 they consolidated. Okay.

MCS: Yeah, in '93.

MS: Still pretty early, right, because I believe Durham was late nineties and they were just transferred later.

MCS: That is right. We were one of the earlier systems. And—Well that actually was in 1992, because in ’93 that’s when the consolidation actually took place.

MS: But the decision had been made in ’92.

MCS: The decision was made in ’92, and all the organizational kinds of things were being done in ’92. And that’s when I was working back and forth between Greensboro and the new system, and attending two board meetings a month, two—you know because the new board operated just like a board, they just didn’t take over the system until the next year.

MS: So probably perhaps not the only motivation for consolidation, but was that a response to white flight out in the county schools?

MCS: Well that was some of it. The other thing was it—It was felt that economics played a part in it in that instead of each school system, you know, ordering materials and so forth, that we could consolidate that. And there were so many things that we could consolidate. For instance, we downsized in a sense because we had three personnel departments—we had three of everything, and we had to bring that down to one and reassign some people. Retirements helped in some instances. But it was a tedious task because some people did not get the positions that they had previously, but we had to move through that.

MS: I guess I want to—before we lose that train of thought, backing up a bit to 1970-’71 when desegregation occurred, of course you were you’re right in the thick of it. You’ve gone from Price to the central office.

MCS: Right.

MS: What effect do you think desegregation had on Price school, on students, on faculty, you know both good and bad? Were there new opportunities forged in them getting to go to so called “better schools,” and what was lost in the process?

MCS: Well what happened was all of the junior high school teachers were transferred to other junior high schools. So that was pretty much—and it was more of a junior high school than it was an elementary school.

MS: Before 1970?

MCS: Before that time. So the only thing that was left were the elementary grades, and so—and many of—and then consequently some of the elementary teachers had an opportunity to go other places, and when the school system—when that school was reorganized it was

reorganized, I think initially—I'm not sure if I have my facts straight. I think it was a magnet school at that time. So that meant that some people had an opportunity to transfer out. So there were very few people that were left in that school that were there previously. Maybe one or two or whatever.

MS: And what would you—how would you take that as—is that a detriment, was that a loss in your opinion?

MCS: It wasn't a loss because what we tried to do is to leave documents, to leave information about the history of the school and all of the previous kinds of things. I met with the principal that succeeded me, talked with her, and sort of laid the foundation.

MS: Was she a white principal?

MCS: Yes.

MS: And so presumably—she obviously wasn't from Warnersville

MCS: No, no.

MS: So she wasn't part of the community—

MCS: She was not.

MS: —as previous. Okay. So do you think—did the Price school maintain its community character that it had before, after 1971?

MCS: To as certain extent. I think Price school always symbolized a place in that community. But see at the same time some other things were happening. Redevelopment took place. And when redevelopment took place, many of the people that were so-called natives of Warnersville were scattered out in other communities, and some of those people never really got back to the Warnersville community. They landed in other communities and just stayed there while the redevelopment was taking place. So in a sense I guess the whole dynamics of that community changed, to a certain extent.

MS: And really the two are coincidental that their occurring at the same time.

MCS: Right. Yes, that is correct. Yes.

MS: And in the—in your—what would you—What happened to the quality of the education that these students were able to get if not at Price any longer? Do you think that was a benefit? Did they get access to better education—

MCS: I'm not sure—

MS: —going someplace else?

MCS: —that the education was better, but it was—I think we tried to make sure that the quality, you know, was maintained. But I'm not sure it was any better than it was before. I do think that perhaps prior to desegregation there was a maybe more of a nurturing environment that took place at Price school. The teachers took more than just a surface interest in their students. They knew the families, they visited the homes, they had taught brothers and sisters, all of those kinds of things, which I think helped to bond the students and the faculty together. And so I think that was lost because many of those people were in other environments later.

MS: Either teachers who weren't part of the Warnersville community now teaching there, or those teachers—

MCS: Were somewhere else now.

MS: —out somewhere else. Okay. And you're right in the thick of that as principal at Price when this is happening. Do you—what was that—Do you recall what the process was like? What did the Price parents, what did the Price teachers think about the prospects of desegregation?

MCS: It was it was traumatic to some certain extent. We had closed school—the last day of the students had taken place. And that weekend—in other words, that last day was on that Friday. Well that Saturday I was at home with my family and we were eating and watching the news on television. And that's when it was announced that the desegregation plan had been approved and that—then they ran down some of the schools and the changes and so forth. Well when I got back to school on Monday, my teachers were on edge, and they thought that I had known that all of this was going to take place. [chuckles] Because see we had faculty meeting—see we had work days after school closed, and we had a faculty meeting. So I told them, I said, "Look, I am as shocked about this as you are, and I know as much about it as you do." I said, "But I am leaving right now. We are we will have the meeting in the next couple of hours when I get back. I am going down to the central office, and I'm going to talk with the superintendent to find out what's going on."

So I did. I went down and the superintendent, he must have known that I was very anxious, because I talked with the secretary. She went in to see him and he saw me immediately. Well he was more concerned seemingly about me. “Don’t worry. We’re going—you’re going to have a principalship at another—.”

I said, “That’s not my concern right now. My concern is I’ve got thirty-five or forty people back there wondering what’s going to happen to them. And I’ve got to tell them something, and I want to tell them the facts as they are.”

So we talked about it, and then I went back to the staff and called the staff meeting and told them what I knew about the situation. And it was very traumatic because we had been together as a staff through a lot of things. And it was almost like a family at Price school. And to show you the amount of cohesion that we had is as soon as we could in ’71, that’s when we formed the organization, the Peeler-Swann J. C. Price School Family, and started meeting as a group, because we did not want to lose that contact that we had with each other. And we met on a regular basis, at least twice a year, in the summer and around Christmas time, just to maintain the fellowship and to find out what each other was doing.

MS: So the teachers—

MCS: So there was a bond. There was a bond between the staff, and there was a bond between the staff and the students and the home.

MS: So were the—Were most of the Price teachers able to keep their jobs? Did they—

MCS: Oh yeah.

MS: —keep it at the same level?

MCS: No one lost their job.

MS: Were they demoted? Did they—

MCS: No. No one was demoted. No one lost their job. Everyone was—For instance, I did not have to take the job as student affairs director, the superintended indicated. In fact he even indicated the school that he would send me to because there was coming up a retirement. And he told me that I’d be sent to that school and there would be no problem and so forth. And then about a few months—few weeks later I got called to the central office and they received a federal grant, and they felt that they needed someone in the area of student activities to pull that piece together. And they made the proposal to me and I accepted it. And that’s how I got to the central office.

MS: You think—how did—you think—Did Price teachers fair about as well as say Gillespie [Park Elementary School] or Lincoln [Junior High School] teachers did or better? And if so was it because of your influence and the connection you had to the superintendent that you could make sure your staff got was taken care of?

MCS: Well that was my indication. When I first went down—that morning I told you I went down—that was my concern then that my teachers would be taken care of and they would be dealt with fairly in terms of their placements and so forth, and I was promised this would take place, and it did.

MS: And you think was the Gillespie principal doing the same thing? Was the Lincoln principal doing the same thing?

MCS: I don't—I think so. I think what they tried to do was to look at the vacancies. You see you also had—you also had students that were impacting other schools, which meant that these school enrollments were a larger so they needed these teachers at other schools to take care of the bulge in enrollment. And it was just a matter of where they were actually going. Some I think they called down and said, "We have vacancies here, here, and here," you know, "and where would you like to be considered?" Of course they would have to talk with the principal too, because you don't want to assign somebody and the principal not know about it. So there was a process that took place after that. And I think all teachers—there was an effort, let's say, to see that all teachers were treated fairly.

MS: That's—you know that's when the process is a done deal, as it where. Backing up maybe a year plus, how would you gauge the attitude—as best you can tell, of course—then from Price faculty, from Price parents, about the prospects for desegregation? Were they in favor of it? Were the skeptical about it?

MCS: I think they were in favor of integration. And I think they knew that there would be some areas where they would have to make some sacrifices. I'm not sure that the parents or the teachers—I mean the parents or the students felt that way, but I think the teachers felt that way.

MS: Why, do you suppose? Why were they in favor of it?

MCS: But I think I—well because, let's face it, there were things that other schools had through not only central office but through their PTA [Parent Teacher Association] groups and so forth that they could afford to do—for instance, textbooks, auxiliary and ancillary

materials and so forth. We were fortunate at Price because we had a principal, A. H. Peeler, who was, I think, far ahead of his time.

MS: Sure.

MCS: He sought other means. For instance we were one of five-hundred schools in the nation that the 3M [Worldwide] company furnished overhead projectors, and that was the state of the art at that time. In every classroom we had opaque projectors. We had other kinds of audio visual material, duplicating machines, and so forth and so on. And so Mr. Peeler was also on the cutting edge of audio visual aids. Price school was one of the first schools to have an FM—an operating FM radio station where students were able to hone their skills as radio personalities and so forth. And there were so many things.

There was utilization of the staff. For instance our elementary teachers were given time to work with junior high school students in reading. In other words, we developed a developmental reading program. And these students at—I mean the elementary teachers worked with them during this time. Some elementary youngsters were able to take French. We had a French teacher that was there for the junior high, but we were able to—through unique scheduling to make sure that some youngsters had a foreign language experience. The guidance counselor was there because of the junior high school. There were no elementary counselors during that time. But she counseled all students, even elementary students. There were some great benefits and unique opportunities because of a principal that had a lot of insight and a lot of creativity.

MS: And doing things that the district just wasn't doing or other schools weren't doing.

MCS: Right. That is correct. And of course he had the latitude to do that as principal.

MS: You think—I don't know was part—is some of it latitude in the relative kind of neglect? The fact that Price was a black school, did the district paid less attention to it? In all the bad things that went with that, but also the leeway you got, that you all had to forge your own path?

MCS: Well I think—I think that had been over the years. It wasn't a recent phenomenon. This is something that happened over a period of time.

MS: Since he got there in the thirties?

MCS: Yeah. For instance years ago textbooks from the other schools we got were the rebound textbooks and things of that type. But things begin to get better because as I said Mr.

Peeler was on the cutting edge. He was a very crafty person. He could get more things from central office than most because of the way he dealt with people.

MS: And did you pick up some of those skills as assistant principal?

MCS: A little bit. [laughter] I learned quite a bit from him, quite a bit. He was my mentor. I had two people really that sort of helped me along and helped me forge my administrative skills. Mr. Peeler who gave me the first opportunity to be involved in administration, and I learned by just watching and listening to him. And then I had a professor at UNC Chapel Hill when I was doing my graduate work. Lester Bowles sort of took me under his wing and he was very helpful.

But Mr. Peeler was a man for all seasons. He was just phenomenal. He was the kind of man—you would go down—for instance he asked me to take the intramural program in the after—in the afternoon, after school. We were granted the opportunity to have an intramural program so those students who were not athletes could have various kinds of physical activities. And so I went to him and said, "Mr. Peeler, I would like to have my vacant period at the end of the day and not where it is now, because that would give me some time to go over to the gym and to get things ready for the students when they come and so forth."

He said, "Mr. Swann," said, "that's a good idea." He said, "But the schedule is made." He said, "Now here is the schedule."

And he was also a master at scheduling. And what he did was took a piece of cork bulletin board and made grids, schedule grids. Now you pay money for these kinds of schedulers. Of course there are computers now. And then he had—he put different colors of construction paper for grade levels and for subject matters.

And he said, "Now here is the schedule. Here is the entire schedule." He said, "Now don't move anything. Now how would you work your schedule to get yourself free at the last period?"

I said, "Oh, I would move this class of Mrs. Barber here, and this one here for Mrs. Jones, and this one here and here, and then that would free me over here."

He said, "Yes, Mr. Swann. But when you move that, what you did you created a problem over here because then there's a class that's unscheduled. Now who's going to take that class?"

And so I went through this, and he let me go through this exercise. [laughter]

MS: To figure out, "Don't mess with what I—."

MCS: And then at the end I said, "I see what you're talking about."

He said, "Now next year," he said, "you come in when we get ready to formulate the schedule and we may be able to work that out." He said, "But now the schedule is set."

One other thing he would do, you would come in with an idea—and he was very big on ideas—and you would share it with him. And he'd say, "Mr. Swann," he said—I've never heard him say, "That's a bad idea." He said, "You know, that has merit." He said, "Now take that idea and go back and sit that down on some paper and then bring it back."

And you'd go back and you started writing, and you'd get half way through and then you'd laugh. You'd say, "This is the craziest thing I've ever thought about." [laughter] And he would make you rethink things. And he was just that kind of person.

MS: Now that's an interesting—that's a somewhat different perspective on the man than we get from just reading, and particularly from students who are just in awe of him and in many ways just terrified of him.

MCS: Oh, yeah. They were really—I was on the end of the hallway and there were mostly female teachers down in that area. And one day one of the teachers called me—sent a student in to come and get me, said, "Come quick." So I went into the room and the teacher was having an altercation with a student. And so I came to the student and I said, "Look"—I knew her. I said, "Let's leave."

And so we are walking toward the door and this teacher comes behind us, you know, berating the student, and the girl turned around and lunged for the teacher. So I pulled her back, and of course with the young lady—she was about an eighth of ninth grader—and there are very few places you can touch, you know. So I grabbed her wrist and went down the hall. When we got out in the hall she was all right, but she—and the teacher followed us down to the office. So when I got to the office I said, "Mrs. X, will you go back to the classroom. I'm going to take her into the office."

Well we got into the ante office there and Mr. Peeler heard this fuss and he came out. He said, "What's going on, Mr. Swann?"

And I said, "This young lady has just had a problem with Mrs. Reynolds."

And he said—He looked at her. He said, "You sit down and don't you move."

She went [gestures]. [MS chuckles]

And then he said, "Mr. Swann, come in the office for a moment please." And he said, "Look at you." Well my shirttail was out and my tie was all around here and I was disheveled. He said, "Now is that worth it?" He said, "Next time she calls you to come down to her class, take your time going down there." [laughter] He said, "Take your time going down there." In other words, let her handle her own problems.

MS: [laughter] I want to come back later and talk about some of the legendary discipline, particularly male teachers at Price that we've heard about. But just back up—oh go ahead. You were going to—.

MCS: And then in '93, which was the first year of the merger, I was asked—I was asked to be deputy superintendent by the new superintendent. I had planned to retire. My plan was to retire before it got sixty. And I was planning to retire—

MS: So much for that. [chuckles]

MCS: —that next year. And once the superintendent was named he went back to South Dakota. And I got a call the next day. He said, "I've been checking on you."

I said, "Oh?"

He said, "I hear that you're going to retire after this year."

I said, "Well those are my plans."

He said, "I want to make you and offer you can't refuse."

I said, "Okay, make the offer."

He said, "I want you to stay on as deputy superintendent, and put down everything you'd like to see in your contract."

And I said, "Okay."

I said, "Let me see your contract because I planned to retire," and I said, "I know that if I'm going to stay longer than I plan to stay, I know I can't get the things that you get in the contract but I can get close." [laughter] So he laughed and made the contract available. So I sat down and I talked with some friends that I knew that were in administration and so forth, and I put down what I wanted.

And he came to Greensboro the next week. I picked him up at the airport down in Raleigh and he said, "Have you put that information together?"

I said, "Yes, here it is."

He read it and said, "Okay, good. I'll take it to the board."

So I stayed on four more years, to make a long story short. [laughter] I stayed on four more years as deputy superintendent. This is the first deputy superintendent that we had had in the system. I think Guilford County had a deputy at one time.

MS: And then somewhere in here were you also serving on the board?

MCS: How's that?

MS: On the school board.

MCS: What had happened—what happened I never served on the school board. Twice in between the superintendents I served as the chair of the administrative team. In other words, between the last superintendent and this superintendent here, we had an administrative team. My responsibility was to work with the school board. One of the other super—assistant superintendents was responsible for state relations with the department of public instruction, and the other had another responsibility, and they reported to me. And we just formed an administrative team, and I chaired that team. I did that twice, I believe, during—.

MS: That was—That's maybe what I was thinking of.

MCS: Right.

MS: Of course obviously you couldn't serve on the school board and be an administrator at the same time.

MCS: No, I couldn't serve on the school board. I served on the board at [North Carolina] A&T [State University] for a term.

MS: How—over the time do you think the school administration of schools both, you know, at the school level and at the district level, did it become integrated relatively, racially integrated, or were you—did you find yourself rather exceptional as an African-American working in such a high level in the district administration?

MCS: You're talking of black administrators?

MS: Yeah.

MCS: During that period of time, in my early years as an assistant superintendent, we had one minority assistant superintendent. That was Fred Cundiff. He was assistant superintendent for administration. And that year—it was back in back in seventy—in 1975—Julius Fullmore was made an assistant—and he had taught at Price school also—he was made an—but by that time he was principal of Hampton [Academy Elementary] School. He was made an assistant superintendent for elementary schools. I was made an assistant superintendent for pupil personnel services. Another minority was made director of federal programs. There were about three or four, and there was an effort during that time to make a definite shift in visibility for minorities in that area. And the same thing was happening throughout the state—Charlotte, Wake County, even Burlington. And of course we—there was no organization per say, but we knew every minority superintendent in the county. We'd go to the meetings and we'd get to know who was

where and so forth. Not all districts did that at that time, but most of your major districts—Charlotte, Durham, Raleigh, Greensboro, Wake County—did that.

MS: Would you say were former Price teachers atypically successful in becoming administrators, I mean with yourself and one other?

MCS: Yes. Julius Fulmore became a principal. He became an assistant superintendent. Spencer Gwynn, who was a social studies teacher, good friend of mine, he became an assistant principal at Grimsley [High School] and then later became principal at Lincoln Junior High and then a principal at Peck Elementary School. My assistant principal Wiley Yours[?] became an elementary principal. So yes, they were able to move. And I think a lot of it was because of the Price experience they were able to move into those areas.

MS: I want to jump back to the beginning of your experience at Price in the 1960s. But just to finish the tail end of it, do you recall when you learned that Price would close for good and what you thought about it? This is after it's become an elementary school, but it stays as a magnet school—as a magnet elementary for a while. But when you heard that Price was going to close for good, what did you think?

MCS: Well I thought that—First of all I thought it could be utilized. It could still be utilized, but that was not in the plans. But shortly after that—See what happens when a property like a school is no longer used for that purpose, it reverts back to the county, and the county had control of that facility. And shortly after that—I'm not sure whether it was a year or two, or—it wasn't more than that that it became a—the property of GTCC [Guilford Technical Community College]. And they utilized that building for training purposes, so it was still being used, and it still was called the J. C. Price building or facility at that time.

MS: But you didn't think—I mean were—

MCS: I thought—

MS: —to see the school close, obviously?

MCS: Yeah, I thought at some point that it may be brought back online. I thought at some point, and I was hoping that that possibly would occur.

MS: I want to go back to the beginning of your entre into Price. What attracted you about J. C. Price? Why did you want to—Why did you want to come there from where you had been in Hertford County?

MCS: Well to be purely honest with you, I needed a job. [laughter]

MS: Well that's a good reason.

MCS: What happened was I—When I finished college, I got a commission as second lieutenant in the army. And I went—I had to serve a tour of duty. And once I served that tour of duty, when I came out, my parents had lived here in Greensboro. My father was a minister and a chaplain in the army and we lived all over the country, different places. And when—when prior to my getting out of the serve, they lived here. By the time I got out of the service, they had moved to Durham. So I came to Durham after I got out of the service and started subbing in Guilford County—I mean in Durham County.

Well Mr. Peeler was—knew my parents. I thought I wanted to go back to Baltimore. Baltimore was always sort of home-base for my family. That was my father's home. I was interested in YMCA work. I was going back to Baltimore to go into the YMCA. Well one summer, when I was in college, I worked at the YMCA here and got to know the people there, so I came over one day to talk to Mr. [David] Morehead, who was executive director at Hayes-Taylor Y, about YMCA work and what I needed to do. Coming into Greensboro I came down Benbow Road and Mr. Peeler was in his yard working. So I just pulled in because I knew him and knew he was a friend of my family and we started talking. He said, "What are you doing now?" And I told him all of the things I had been doing and what my plans were. He said, "I'm going to do something. I want you to—I'm going to send you an application, and I want you to fill it out and send it back to me as soon as possible."

So I did my business here. I went back and the next day or so I got this application and I filled it out, sent it back to him. The next Saturday I came—I was out somewhere and I came into the house, and my mother was in the living room talking to Mr. Peeler and his wife. On Saturdays he taught audio visual aids down at North Carolina Central [State University], and that's why he was in Durham. So when I came in we spoke and everything. He said, "Are you ready to go to work?"

I said, "Yeah."

He said, "Well I have an opening and it's for a sixth grade teacher. We had a teacher go out on maternity leave, and it's starting in January. Would you be available?"

I said, "I'm subbing now." I didn't even have a place to stay. I didn't know where Price school was. I knew Greensboro part of it because my parents had moved here when I was in college, and I came back and forth. But I never liked Greensboro, to be frank with you. [laughter]

MS: We'll erase that part of the interview.

MCS: So I came—I came to—came over, didn't even have a place to stay at first. I commuted for a week until I found a place to stay. And so that's how I got to Price school. The vacancy was in sixth grade. Well when the sixth grade teachers found out I had a science background, they talked to Mr. Peeler and made a deal. I taught all of sixth grade science, and they would take my class and teach whatever subject was appropriate at that time. And so that's what I did, and that's when I found out that elementary teachers, if there was any subject that they soft-pedaled it was science because most of them didn't like to teach it. [laughter]

MS: You think Principal Peeler had a hand in recruiting other teachers? Did he go out and grabbed the teachers he wanted?

MCS: Oh, yes. Yes, he did. Yes, he did. He was very picky about the teachers that he would—that he would select. And he was very good at getting people that fit in with the staff that he already had. He was almost like a coach that is looking for a certain kind of player to fit in with the players that he already has, and he was very keen at making that happen.

MS: How much guidance or supervision did you have in what you taught or how you taught it? Did you follow a standard course of study?

MCS: We had a standard course of study. But you had some latitude in—for instance I taught earth science. And I would—and life science—and sometimes I would have my class outside and we would do some things outside of the classroom building. It was my thought that, you know, the building was just to facilitate the process, and you could have school anywhere.

MS: Wherever you've got students and a teacher you've got a school.

MCS: Yeah, that's right. That's right. He gave you a lot of latitude in that, but you did have to pretty much stay within the parameters of the syllabus and what needed to be covered over a period of time a so forth.

MS: And you're getting this from the district or from the state or both?

MCS: Well the state has the state course of study, and within that course of study—for instance I—my style of teaching I like group work and peer learning, and that's what I did primarily. For instance—and another thing, every class that I taught had to have a live project, you know, whether it was a snake or—

MS: [laughs] I wouldn't have liked you.

MCS: And one group did have a snake called Jake the Snake. [MS laughs] And a hamster or whatever, and they had to take care of that a so forth. And we did mostly group work. We even had students that had to prepare portions of the lesson and give that portion of the lesson to their classmates. So if you'd come in my class, if you were looking for students to be in rows, and for them to be deathly quiet, you probably wouldn't like my class. [laughs]

MS: But Principal Peeler—

MCS: Oh, he allowed that to happen.

MS: —let you.

MCS: Oh, yes. Yes, yes, yes.

MS: Did you when you were teaching at Price, did you live in Warnersville?

MCS: No, I did not. Well there was one—I did not initially, and then I moved right on the edge of Warnersville. I found an apartment. I was living with a family at first in a room. And for a couple of years, and then I found an apartment. Well it was the second story of a house that the people made into an apartment, and that was right on the edge of Warnersville. But I went to I went to church in Warnersville. And which was St. Matthews, which was located there in Warnersville. And I was very active in the community—

MS: So you felt a part of the community?

MCS: —with the parents. Yes.

MS: Did you notice—so being—you know having come—not grown up there, but coming to be part of it, did you notice any difference in attitude that other black communities elsewhere in Greensboro and/or other students or teachers at Gillespie or Lincoln had about Warnersville residents and had about J. C. Price students? I've heard from the students' perspective that they felt because they weren't as well off as some of the other neighborhoods in Greensboro that they got looked down on, to a degree, by other students or other, you know, the other—

MCS: It's like Nazareth. It's like Nazareth. Nothing good can come out of Nazareth. I mean that was the thinking of the students in terms of the perception that they thought others had of

them. That was one of the challenges that we had as teachers was to try to change that perception, to let them know that you were just as smart, you were just as talented, you were just as gifted as any other students, no matter what school they attend or whatever part of the city or the community that they live in. And that was a—that was a challenge.

MS: I think it's—you know talking to some former students that ended up becoming—thanks to the work that you all did to instill that sense of self reliance and pride and even kind of wanting to show up those low expectations, that that became a strength that carried the students forward.

MCS: It was a strength. And Warnersville was a kind of community that before redevelopment everybody knew each other. And if a youngster was doing something wrong and another parent saw him, they could correct that youngster right there and make—call their parent and their parents would get them when they get home. I've had many parents to tell me when I call them about something they said, "You take care of him there. I'll take care of him whenever he gets [chuckling] when he gets home." So we had the support of the parents. They were not by any means well off, but they had great values. And we wanted more for their children, and they supported the school in that effort.

MS: So you think was there a real connection between the school and the community—parents in the school? What about teachers and Mr. Peeler out in the community?

MCS: Well we were in—always in the community because that community it was the school, the church, and the community center. Those were the sort of institutions that kept Warnersville—the glue that kept them together. See the interesting thing, Warnersville went through sort of a metamorphosis. At one time Warnersville was the community, was the black community. Ashe Street was the street. The funeral homes were there. The churches were there. The stores—Some stores and entrepreneurs were there. The doctors were there. Dr. [William] Hampton of Hampton school had his office there, and others. So at one time Warnersville was—and Ashe Street was the place. But over a period of time, people began to move in other sections of the city and Warnersville sort of deteriorated to a certain extent.

MS: Though still in your time would you call it—meaning in the 1960s—how would you describe the kind of cohesiveness of Warnersville as a community, in terms of—you mentioned the community institutions, but do you recall the black businesses that were there?

MCS: Well some of that was gone, but the churches and the school and the community center still held strong in that community.

MS: I've have heard from a couple of students nostalgically recalling the Sweet Shop.

MCS: Oh, yeah.

MS: Going by and being able to smell the smells wafting over the campus.

MCS: The Sweet Shop and there was Tom's Take Home [Restaurant] [chuckling] and a couple of others, yeah. A gentleman, Mr. Black[?], who lived to be hundred, had a store there in Warnersville. There was it was a thriving community at one time.

MS: And this would be even in your day?

MCS: We came—I came on the tail end of some of that, yes.

MS: You mentioned being very involved in the community and other teachers at Price like you were. How involved were Price teachers and/or administrators during the movement years, the black freedom struggles, in Greensboro during the 1960s?

MCS: Very much involved, very much involved. Many of the teachers were a part of the sit-downs or the sit-ins, and they marched and did a lot of things. It was interesting. We were down on the [Jefferson] Square, and everybody—it was adults, primarily—and everybody sat down at the middle of the square.

MS: This would have been Jackson Square[sic] in like the spring of 1963, those mass demonstrations?

MCS: This was on Elm [Street] and Market Street, in the middle of the street. And so I was sitting there and a couple of Price people were there. I can't think of who said it, but somebody said, "You know what?" Said, "We can't go to jail. Mr. Peeler and those kids are going to be waiting for us Monday. We've got to—." [laughter] So as the police encircled us, we just sort of got up and moved out. We knew Mr. Peeler, regardless of what our intents were—intentions were in terms of civil rights, we better be there for those kids Monday morning. [laughter] And so we got up. But he was very supportive in those efforts. At the height of that, I was principal at the height of a lot of that.

MS: You're talking—I mean you're there—.

MCS: And Lewis Brandon was on the staff, and Lewis was very active in the community. In fact, I got a call from the superintendent's office, and they accused him of being out

somewhere doing his civil rights things. And I said, "No. Mr. Brandon is in his classroom." And so well they said—well what happened was he had loaned somebody his car, and his car had these speakers on it. And they thought that he was there, but he was very true to his profession and he was in his classroom. But he was—Lewis was probably one of the most active ones of our staff in terms of the civil rights movement.

MS: And did that—Did he professional price for that? Did he eventually cost him his job, or am I wrong about that?

MCS: I don't know. No, I don't think so.

MS: Well I guess—but do you think—Was Principal Peeler and then yourself getting pressure from the district administration, who were probably getting pressure from the city to—

MCS: Never got any real pressure.

MS: —have your teachers—?

MCS: The only time that it was in question is they—I'm not sure who called, but someone from central office called and wanted to know was he there, that they thought he was out in the community with these speakers. I said, "Well no, he's not. He's in his classroom. I know he's in his classroom, because I was—."

MS: Do you think—were you conscious when you were—even before that as a teacher that Principal Peeler was getting pressure under running interference? You know when the movement is getting started and they're trying to pressure to keep teachers from being involved, did they try to use the leverage they had of this being a public school to try to get him to get his teachers to stay out.

MCS: Well as long—Mr. Peeler was more—he said, "On your own time. When you're in school, you're here for a purpose, to teach children. But on your own time you can be involved in whatever, at whatever level you feel that it's important." I don't ever remember him making any statements to the contrary.

MS: I just could have—and maybe again if I had evidence of—

MCS: Now he may have been under some pressure, but he—

MS: Shielded you all from—

MCS: Right, right.

MS: So did you get the impression from him that he was supportive of the movement?

MCS: I think he was. He—Mr. Peeler was a very complex individual, and he was a stickler for rules and order and things of that nature. His main concern was that school, and that school was able to run successfully. And that meant you take care of the kids. But I don't ever remember even thinking that he was under any pressure, because I don't think he would have allowed himself to be under pressure to do that. He was a man that had a way with words and a way of making others think about the situation. And he was he was not a—what—You know what an Uncle Tom is? He wasn't an Uncle Tom. He was—now some may have thought that, but he had a way of getting what he wanted from the other side. [laughter]

MS: So you yourself—you said you were very active in the protests, you participated in them.

MCS: Yes.

MS: And Price parents as well? I mean was the Warnersville community—

MCS: Yeah.

MS: —actively involved in the—?

MCS: Yes, yes.

MS: What are some of your memories of Price school—memories of the school, memories of teaching, any—you've already shared some stories about adventures in the hallways, but—or in the front office—but do you have any other memories of the school?

MCS: I guess my memories involve just the relationship that I had as a teacher with other teachers, the relationship—even when I became principal of the school. And it was probably rare to be promoted from within, and I think Mr. Peeler had a great deal to do with that, with my succeeding him as principal. I think my fondest memories is that the teachers, even though most of them were—see I was thirty, thirty-one, and most of the teachers were—a lot of them were my parent's age. [laughter] But they accepted me and respected me for the position that I held. That was very—you know very gratifying, I think.

I think the main thing about Price school were the students and the relationship we had with the students. I still see many of those students today, and that come up to me

and talk about the old times and I kid them. When I introduce them to someone or I see them, I just tell them, "We were in school together." [laughter] And many of those students have risen to really outstanding positions. For instance Janice Gillius[?]—she's Janice Brewington now—is the provost at North Carolina A&T State University. Another young lady, Barbara Watson, is a professor, a doctor, in the area of psychology. You know, just so many have done a lot of good things in the community and working in important jobs all over the city.

MS: Would you credit some of the education they got at Price to that?

MCS: Oh, sure. Surely. And they do. They do. They that's when they got their basics from, and they'll tell you that. They'll tell you that, and they're proud of it, too.

MS: It seems like you hear from students the education at Price is very broadly defined. I mean in addition to your teaching science, what else were you teaching students?

MCS: Manners, decorum, you know, things of that nature, just how to be a successful person in your life. For instance, I had a young lady, she was in my homeroom, and in the morning you could—you better not cross her in the morning because she was just on edge. During the day—she would leave homeroom. She would come back to me for another class, a science class. Midday she was fine, just happy-go-lucky and everything. Come back at homeroom time, at the end of the day, and she was all puffed up again. And I said, "Something is not right here." So I went to her home to visit early one morning, and I saw what the problem was. There were six or seven of them in one of the apartments there, one bathroom, one kitchen, two bedrooms, and she had to—and I use fight as a broad term—to fight for space in the bathroom and to fight to get her breakfast, and by the time she got out of the house she was just fired up, you know. [chucking] And that came to school. During the course of the day she settled in and was doing all right. Then she got ready to go back to war. And these are the kind of things that the teachers took seriously and looked at each individual child and tried to respond to their needs.

MS: I don't suppose there was much you could do about that.

MCS: No, there wasn't much you could do. But what I would do in the morning is I'd sit and talk with her a little bit; ask how—"How did it go this morning?" and let her walk through some of these things, you know, and tell her that she needed to perhaps help her younger brothers and sisters get ready, and help them do some things, just talk through some of the things, because this was the kind of thing that she never talked to her parents about.

MS: And I think—I mean that certainly speaks volumes, I would say, in the regard to which these students held their teachers, particularly we're talking about teenagers, you know.

MCS: Right. And I refer—

MS: And they respect you enough and trust you enough to—

MCS: And then I referred them to the guidance counselor, you know, and told her about the situation, and she worked with her also. And each time we would see something in a student one way or another, we would try to intervene and to work. Even if the student showed promise in an area, we would try to give him or her more opportunities to shine and to do more things.

MS: And you—I mean you have such a breadth of experience in the schools, is that—you think that kind of personal connection, student to teacher, has been lost or was there something unique about Price and that time?

MCS: Well I haven't been in touch in a long time, but I would suspect some of it has been. Some of it has been. I'm not too sure that the staffs of today are as close as perhaps we were at that time.

MS: And you think is part of that the community—that you were part of the community?

MCS: That's right.

MS: The school was the community and the community was the school.

MCS: The community was a part of the school, that's true.

MS: Do you remember many of the extracurricular activities at Price? You certainly were very involved in sports. You had members of the athletic teams, of the academic competitions, of the —

MCS: Oh, yeah. Well we had—we had—we had a band, a junior high school band. We had cheerleaders, we had the majorettes, we had clubs, we had a photography club. Mr. Peeler was an excellent photographer and that was one of his hobbies. In fact he taught me how to develop pictures and to take pictures. There was a photography club. There was a radio club where students learned how to make—to utilize the FM radio and so forth. We had an announcers group where kids would come to the office and make announcements over the PA and so forth. There were a lot of club—literary club with the

librarian, student assistants in the office, in the guidance counselor's office, and library assistants and things of that nature. So anything you had in any other school we tried to provide for those youngsters and we had all of the—

Here's something Mr. Peeler did: we did not have a football team in the black junior high schools, the two, Lincoln and Dudley—I mean Lincoln and Price. Menden—well I don't know if Mendenhall [Middle School] was in existence then, but the other junior high schools, Kiser [Middle School] and so forth, all of them had football teams. So Mr. Peeler went down to the superintendent and said, "I would like to develop a developmental football program." He said, "We need for you to provide us with the equipment and the pads and so forth, and we will just develop a developmental—we won't play anybody, we'll just develop the skills." And we did that. And when we needed a scrimmage or whatever, Lincoln would come over or we would go to Lincoln, but we didn't play any of the other junior high schools. And then Mr. Peeler went back. He said, "Now that we have a developmental program and these youngsters need to—I mean have learned the rules of the game and the skills, we need competition." And that was the beginning of the integration of the junior high football team where we played Kiser, we played Mendenhall, and we played Jackson [Middle School], and we played all these other schools.

MS: And this precedes, obviously, broader integration of the schools or even integration of athletics at the high school level.

MCS: Right. That is correct.

MS: Peeler got his—got his foot in the door.

MCS: [laughs] That's the kind of guy he was. He was very sharp, very crafty, an excellent, excellent man.

MS: Do you remember—you mentioned the band. Do you want to talk a little more about your memories of the band? That's certainly a highlight when we've talked to other people there.

MCS: Yeah, the band was really the highlight. We got band uniforms and so forth, had a band director. We had one of the best junior high school bands around, and had a lot of students involved in it. We had a dance, dance group. Had a choral—choral group. All those kinds of things we had. Every outlet that we thought that was needed for the youngsters' growth and development we provided for them.

MS: I guess and that kind of answers the next question. What was the—you know from the teachers' prospective, what was the point of all these activities?

MCS: To—exposure. You know a lot of the youngsters have not—did not have those opportunities, and parents in some instances could not provide those opportunities, so the school went beyond reading, writing, and arithmetic, to expose youngsters to other kinds of opportunities. And we felt that was part of their education of being a rounded person. And for us it was natural. It wasn't anything over and beyond. At some other school it may consider it, but for us it was natural.

MS: Do you remember the—we've seen a picture of the PTA pageant. Do you recall that?

MCS: Yeah.

MS: What was that?

MCS: I'm not sure when that took place, but—

MS: Or it was an annual thing, it wasn't just a one time.

MCS: Yes. And they would name a queen or a—I've forgot what they call the person.

MS: It seems like in the picture it looked like a grand event.

MCS: Yeah, it was. It was.

MS: Do you remember the school code?

MCS: Yes, I do. I've got a copy of it here.

MS: [laughter] You still carry it with you?

MCS: Yeah, I've got a copy of it here.

MS: I notice because it spells out J. C. Price.

MCS: J. C. Price. Yeah, I've got that. We also—Shelton Williams[?], who was the band director, also wrote a school song.

MS: Do you remember the song?

MCS: Yeah.

MS: Can you hum a few bars? [laughs]

MCS: I've got that too.

MS: Yeah? Do you remember the tune? We've only seen it written down.

MCS: [singing] Price school to you [hums] we love you, love you, tenderly. I think is the way it goes.

MS: Maybe we'll get people to sing it or something.

MCS: Yeah, we will. But I've got the words here.

MS: Okay.

MCS: And when we had the reunion we sang it and he played it on the saxophone. That was his instrument.

MS: Mr. Williams did?

MCS: Yeah, Shelton Williams.

MS: Because he had gone on to be director at Dudley and then A&T.

MCS: Right.

MS: And we're actually interviewing him, so we'll certainly have to talk to him more about that.

MCS: He'll play it for you.

MS: [laughs] Okay. I'll make sure to have him do that. Do you recall the—what the disciplinary standards and disciplinary methods at Price? We've heard some—Mr. Gwynn[?] has told us about them, and some of the students who were on the receiving end have told us. [MCS laughs] What about you yourself? Did you have particular techniques with a paddle or otherwise?

MCS: Yeah, we did a little paddling during that time. It was interesting that it wasn't malicious. In other words, a lot of times we'd give a youngster an alternative. "You get two licks or you're going to have to stay and do such and such and such a thing, clean the blackboards or whatever, whatever, whatever."

And a lot of them said, "Mr. Swann, I'll take two."

Now another thing—one thing that I did, it was a little unorthodox, and word got around: I came in the room and—I was out in the hall and I came in the room and these two guys were fighting, going at it. So I took them and I asked Mrs. Barber, the—or Mrs.—the media specialist to look in on my class; I gave them an assignment. And I took them over to the gym. In the gym there is a room where the mats are kept. And the wrestling team would practice in there sometimes. The room was very warm because it was near the boiler. And sometimes they would practice in there so that they could sweat and get their weights, you know. And the room was like a padded room. The mats were on all walls and there were mats on the floor. And I took these two young men over. I mean they were really going at it. And when we got over, we had—I think it was in the winter time. They had to put on their coats, so when we got over I said, "Keep your coats on and your hats." I said, "Now you guys wanted to fight and you were going at it just tooth and nail." I said, "Okay. Go on and fight." And they looked at me. I said, "Fight." And they made some effort. I said, "That's not fight. Now you guys were about to knock things over in the classroom. You disrupted everything. I mean and you come over here and you're making love to each other [MS laughs] you're not fighting."

"Mr. Swann, we're not mad anymore."

I said, "Well you were mad over there." I said, "Now I'm going to tell you something. You didn't fight and we're going back to the classroom. And if I hear anything else about this, I'm going to tell the class that you came over and made love to each other instead of fighting.

"You wouldn't do that Mr. Swann!"

I said, "Yes I would. Now when they ask you what happen, you say, 'It's a private matter and leave it alone.' You understand?"

"Yes sir."

So we went over, and it was interesting. Everybody was saying, "What happened?"

"It's a private matter. It's a private matter."

[laughs] And never had any problem out of them again.

MS: So you used a psychological technique. [laughter]

MCS: Never had any problem.

MS: But you—you said you swung the occasional paddle?

MCS: Yeah, occasionally. And we would keep youngsters after school, and then I would take them home.

MS: So you took them so their parents would see—

MCS: Yeah, I took them home.

MS: —you delivering.

MCS: Yeah. I'd take them home. Put them in the car and take them home.

MS: And what was the reception like when you dropped them off on the front porch?

MCS: "Thank you for bringing him. I'll take care of him, Mr. Swann." [laughter]

MS: You didn't have to worry after that.

MCS: Right. We had—we had—I remember once—I was principal at this time. And there's always a student that's going to tell you everything. And this young man, he stuttered. And he came and said, "Mr. Swann," said—and he named the students. He said, "They left campus."

I said, "Left campus?"

He said, "They're going to the store to buy their lunch."

I said, "They are?" I said, "Where did they—which way did they go?"

He said and he showed me where. So there was an incline. The school set on a hill and the street was down here. So sure enough I looked out the window and I saw them coming back with the bags of stuff. So as they came up the walkway, I peered out of the building. And they—oh my god, they, "Oh, Mr. Swann."

I said, "Come on, let's go to the office." And I said, "Put your food up there." I said, "Now you know better than to leave." And the thing about it it was some of our better students. Some of our student council people, some of our better students. And I said, "What gives here?"

They said, "We're supporting the cafeteria strike." I said, "That's very admirable of you to support the cafeteria strike. But when you support an effort like this, it must be sacrifice. Now you could have made the decision not to eat lunch at all, but you broke a rule. You left school to go and eat lunch." I said, "I'm going to call all of your—"

"Don't call our—"

I said, "Yes, I'm going to call your parents and tell them what happened." And I called each one's parents and I said, "They bought this food."

They said, “Mr. Swann, give that food away. Don’t give it to them.”

And so they had the food. And they said, “Well we got ice cream and it will melt!”

I said, “So be it.” I said, “Now [tape error] lunch or buy your lunch like you had planned, or you go to the cafeteria and don’t eat lunch.” I said, “You could support the strike.” And this was my student council president. I said, “That’s great. That’s great. Support them. But you’re going to have to sacrifice to do it.” And so they learned the lesson. We had nobody else leaving school after that.

MS: Were they supporting—Were the students supportive of the strike?

MCS: How’s that?

MS: The students were supportive of the strike?

MCS: Yes, they were supportive of the strike of the cafeteria workers. And I said, “One way you could have supported the strike is to go down, sit at the table, be quiet, but don’t eat, don’t buy anything, or bring your own lunch. Bring your own lunch from home.

MS: You’d been at a sit-in. You knew what real protest was.

MCS: Well each—we tried to take each incident, whether it was negative or positive, and make something positive out of it, a lesson out of it, to let them know that there’s a right way of doing things, there’s a wrong way of doing things. You can support certain things without breaking the law. That’s what we tried to do.

MS: Any other recollections or memories of your time at Price?

MCS: There’s so many. One of the things that we tried to do is to let the students see us as people. For instance, we would have talent show contests, talent shows, and the faculty would participate. They’d sing the songs. In fact we even had a faculty band. I played the drums, Shelton played the saxophone, we had another teacher to play the bass, and we had about six or seven of us. And they just went wild. They just thought it was the greatest thing in the world that we were trying to play these instruments. [chuckling] So that was one remembrance that I have.

MS: So that sort of family connection between students and the—

MCS: Yes.

MS: Was it—[laughs] I'm just wondering if it was difficult for Mr. Shelton—or Mr. Williams to have you amateurs playing along with him.

MCS: He helped us a lot. We had practices. [laughter] We got through it.

MS: And what about—what are your memories of when Mr. Prince—when Mr. Peeler retired? You know we've read some of the letters that students were writing him. Very warm letters and respectful letters, but you could sense in their some sort of anxiety about what was next, and of course doubly for you because you were about to take over for him. What was that process like, knowing not only knowing that he's leaving but you have to step into his shoes?

MCS: Well you don't step into Mr. Peeler's shoes. I mean he cast a long shadow. But I think that—see I was his assistant principal for two years—three years, actually, before that. And one year I was on leave because I was given a grant to work on my degree, and I was back and forth to the school. But actually three years as assistant principal. And I learned a lot from him. And really when the time came I didn't feel like I knew all the answers, but I felt that I was ready because he prepared me. And he endorsed me, and that endorsement meant a lot, I'm sure, to the administration. And it meant a lot to the faculty and staff of the school. And it was almost the singlest[sic] change—change over with him. They had a reception for him, and at that reception they had me and my wife and he and his wife in the receiving line. And it was sort of like a change of the guard so to speak.

One thing that he never did and I invited him many times and asked him—. One time he came over at the end of the school day and I had my window up in my office, and he talked to me through the window. He never did come back, never set foot in that school while I was there as principal.

MS: Why do you think?

MCS: I think he felt that it was my time, and that he was—[tape error]—monument or something that would have a brief history of that school where people from years to come could see what happened here was significant.

MS: On the site?

MCS: Yeah.

MS: What about—

MCS: And not just a—you know you've seen those markers on the highway. Not just something like that, something much more than that. And we didn't—we hadn't talked about what specifically, we just knew that we wanted the school to be remembered in some significant way. That's the way we put it. And we were open to ideas and so forth.

MS: Well I hope—you know that's one of the motives of this project is that we can begin the collection of this kind of material that can then build—can perhaps turn into an exhibit at the [Greensboro] Historical Museum or you know—

MCS: Right.

MS: —some permanent—and resources that future researchers can use. Anything else to add? You wanted to—

MCS: No, that's about it that I have here.

MS: Okay.

[End of Interview]