

00:00:00:00 - 00:00:00:19

Tonia Merideth

Good afternoon.

00:00:00:20 - 00:00:01:13

Charles Williams

Good afternoon.

00:00:01:15 - 00:00:19:02

Tonia Merideth

Thank you for joining us for an oral history interview for the Virginia Museum of History and Cultures' Exhibit, "A Better life for their Children: Julius Rosenwald, Booker T Washington, and the 4978 schools that Changed America." My name is Tonia Merideth, the oral historian. Would you please state your name and the school that you attended?

00:00:19:04 - 00:00:25:14

Charles Williams

First, I want to say thanks for coming. My name is Charles Williams, and I attended Cape Charles Elementary School.

00:00:25:16 - 00:00:32:18

Tonia Merideth

We'd like to get a little bit of background about our narrators. Could you please tell me about your family, where you were born? Your parents?

00:00:32:20 - 00:00:52:22

Charles Williams

Okay. I was born here in Cape Charles, and I was born - I'm one of seven kids and I'm at the end of the line. I'm about number six. And my mother had six boys, so she was a tough, little short lady. My mother's name was Lillian Williams, and my father's name was Albert Williams. And I was born right here in Cape Charles.

00:00:52:25 - 00:01:00:14

Tonia Merideth

Thank you. Can you tell us any childhood memories, experiences that you remember growing up in the community.

00:01:00:17 - 00:01:19:22

Charles Williams

One thing I was really - this really sticks with me a lot - is that I was really excited about going to school. Like I said, I was at the back of the pack, on the end, right? And here in Cape Charles, everybody walked to school and the kids had to go pass our house to go to the school, because I lived on Mason Ave, right.

00:01:19:24 - 00:01:36:28

Charles Williams

It was exciting to see the kids going right, when you see kids going, you want to go to. So I was excited about starting school at that time, at the young age of six years old. And living in Cape Charles was different than living in the county, because we had street lights (laughter).

00:01:37:00 - 00:01:43:12

Tonia Merideth

Okay. Anything else that you wanted to add about your childhood growing up, experiences?

00:01:43:14 - 00:02:07:17

Charles Williams

Well, actually, one thing about Cape Charles as a kid, I didn't realize at the time that how much we were segregated against whites and blacks at the same time, because the community I was in basically with whites...I mean with blacks. And we just basically stayed together, right? So it was good at the time. And I didn't get into a lot of the things about black and white at the time.

00:02:07:24 - 00:02:25:28

Charles Williams

And my mother and father were very good at that, they shielded us from it; told us the dos and donts, what not to do, like that. So I didn't feel bad about it. The things that reminded me that is was black and

white is when I went “downtown” cause they had water fountains that said “black” and “white” and they had bathrooms that said “black” and “white” and I remember asking my mother and father why I couldn’t go in that bathroom, you know, and why I had to go around to the back door and things like that. And that was a growing up experience, right. And as a child, you didn’t - I didn’t feel the gravity of it until I got older.

00:02:43:26 - 00:02:49:04

Tonia Merideth

Do you remember what your parents said to you when you asked why you couldn't go in? Do you remember what their response was?

00:02:49:05 - 00:03:08:29

Charles Williams

Well you know, my parents back in those days, it was different. You didn’t get an opportunity to ask a lot questions. It was their way or no way, you know. Now sometime my father - my father didn't take no prisoners. It was just, he didn't. That's it. Don't ask no question. My mother, she would say “no, you just can’t do it” right - sometime she’d tell me later on why, but an instant answer most of the time it was “no, just go do what I say do.” You didn’t have all these options of what and how, when. None with my grandmother.

00:03:22:19 - 00:03:28:17

Tonia Merideth

Can you please tell me what year did you attend the Cape Charles Elementary School and how many years did you attend?

00:03:28:20 - 00:03:50:15

Charles Williams

Well, I graduated in ‘64, I entered in ‘57. I went there for seven years. I really enjoyed going there because that's all I knew. I didn’t have anything to compare it with. To me, it was your friends you get to play with and things like that and it was fun at the time.

00:03:50:18 - 00:03:59:00

Tonia Merideth

So do you remember what a typical class day was like? When did schools begin? When did it end, and what happened during that that class day?

00:03:59:07 - 00:04:20:07

Charles Williams

Well, when school started, we walked to school now. There was no school bus. And by me living on Mason Ave - at the time they called it Front Street - and the school was over the hump. So I had the shortest distance because Cape Charles is eight blocks wide and six blocks deep. So I only had to walk six blocks up to get to school, I was on the very end of the block so it was just a matter of going over the hump to the school, like that.

00:04:20:09 - 00:04:36:10

Charles Williams

Now that was a good experience because it seems like you get a chance to play and talk on the way to school. Then when I got there it was like, the principal was very mean. It's like business as usual, you know and the classroom, it was two grades per classroom, basically.

00:04:36:13 - 00:04:55:04

Charles Williams

And I can remember the first grade and the second grade, because that's when you learn to spell your name. The teacher was Mrs. Ames, she was really good. But everybody was stern, there was no "yes or no" - it was their way. But I liked recesses. You know, getting out and playing like that, right? But I used to hate come in.

00:04:55:06 - 00:05:04:06

Charles Williams

I thought I could playing a little longer. The bell would ring, they had a little bell they would ring when it was time to come inside. But I was good over all compared to what I know. Yeah.

00:05:04:08 - 00:05:13:19

Tonia Merideth

Do you remember specific experiences with any of your teachers?

00:05:13:21 - 00:05:39:29

Charles Williams

You know, back in those days and times, they whipped you. I mean, they had this yardstick, right and it was just like - and by me having five other brothers right - we was kind of bad. I mean, we had a thing we would try right, that didn't go to well at school. So I can remember, at times when you do something wrong the principal would take you to the office you would hold your hand out they had a ruler that would hit your hand like this, right so my brother and I would miss and he would swing so hard he'd smack his leg, I thought that was funny. (Laughter) Things like that, 'cause they didn't take "huh or no or I'm not going to do this," right.

It just didn't happen. But overall, to me the school day was good. I got to play, I got to meet my friend and I got to learn stuff at the same time.

00:06:03:10 - 00:06:08:15

Tonia Merideth

So do you remember the names of your teachers?

00:06:08:18 - 00:06:38:15

Charles Williams

Yes, the one that really sticks in my mind, Mrs. Ames - like I said earlier, she was in the first - because there were two grades - she was first and second grade. Mrs. Brown, which is third and fourth grade. I remember Mrs. Brown because Mrs. Ames was just really straightforward. Mrs. Brown I remember her because she had a brand new car. I can remember, she came with a brand new - its like a orange color Pontiac, like. So boy that was just fabulous.

00:06:38:17 - 00:06:54:14

Charles Williams

And she was nice and friendly at the same time. And Mr. Nottingham I had when I was sixth and seventh grade. Right? He was more straightforward, stern, but gave good advice, you know, and easy to talk to, you know?

00:06:54:16 - 00:07:00:26

Tonia Merideth

Do you remember the materials, the books, workbooks, anything from school? Do you remember anything about...

00:07:00:29 - 00:07:17:17

Charles Williams

Yeah, But the books – the books were used. I mean, it was like, broken and ragged. I think I was in fifth or sixth grade, something like that - was the first time I saw a new book. I think at the time - that was getting towards a '60, '62 and, and they were complaining about about racial equality and things at that time, right and so they start doing a little more for the schools and things like that.

00:07:17:17 - 00:07:35:14

Charles Williams

The books we would get at the beginning of the season, you would think you would start the year out with a new book and you get a book that's all written on, somebody put notes into it, derogatory things between the books or the backs were torn off, and you're thinking "what's this" - it came from the other schools.

00:07:39:02 - 00:07:40:13

Tonia Merideth

Did you know that at that time?

00:07:40:15 - 00:08:03:16

Charles Williams

I didn't know. I didn't know it at that time, no. And I'm just thinking at the time, well, the books just was damaged, you know? But it came from other schools. Because normally at the beginning of the school year we would start out with fresh new stuff, and that wasn't fresh – or sometimes some of the books – if there were 20 books, it might have been 2 or 3 new ones in there and the rest of them ripped and torn like that.

00:08:03:18 - 00:08:10:03

Tonia Merideth

Do you remember any extracurricular activities that the school did, May Day, any carnivals.

00:08:10:05 - 00:08:29:01

Charles Williams

You know, definitely May Day? That was one event which I didn't like - anyway. As a boy I thought it was stupid to wrap around a pole, to be honest with you, I really did – just me as a boy right? But that was a big event, Mayday. I don't remember any field trips we went on. If the school did, I don't remember that.

00:08:29:03 - 00:08:44:21

Charles Williams

And I don't remember any times when we ever took group pictures together, things along that line, right. Of course, that was normal for me at the time because I didn't know anything about that. But then when you look back and it compare it with what other schools did, or you went and talked to somebody else,

00:08:44:21 - 00:09:07:04

Charles Williams

a lot of times my nieces and nephews would come from city, as you call it, and ask you, "did y'all take any pictures" or "don't your school do this?" If they didn't tell me, I would never know the comparison of the two like that, and it didn't make me feel like I was being left out, I didn't. It didn't bother me that much. I wish now that I had school pictures when I was a kid back then, like a small yearbook but we didn't have it, no.

00:09:08:19 - 00:09:16:14

Tonia Merideth

Were there any chores that were assigned to the boys or girls for you to do in school?

00:09:16:17 - 00:09:43:01

Charles Williams

Well, the older boys, the ones in sixth and seventh grade - the school had a boiler system built into it in the basement. Right. And I can't remember if it was was coal or was it oil anyway - that had radiators around the top and in the school and if the heat stop coming the boys had to go down and bleed the radiators and the older boys would go down and turn this knob to let the air out so the heat would come thru. And sometime in the morning, the older boys, when they come in in the morning that's their job to do, to go down and adjust the boiler. But the younger kids didn't do that just the older kids.

00:09:52:13 - 00:09:56:16

Tonia Merideth

And what about lunch? Was lunch provided?

00:09:56:19 - 00:10:23:12

Charles Williams

No we didn't have a cafeteria. (Laughter) But lunch was fun. But you had to bring your lunch. I mean, it wasn't a thing where you had to bring money for lunch. There wasn't a cafeteria in the school at all, it was basically a four-room school with an auditorium and an office and a bathroom. At lunchtime you would sit at your desk and eat lunch, your parents would pack your lunch for you.

00:10:23:13 - 00:10:26:00

Tonia Merideth

Do you remember what would be in your lunch?

00:10:26:06 - 00:10:45:18

Charles Williams

Actually to be honest with you, this is the part I really like – is that in my classroom there were a couple of girls that had a weak stomach – so like Aldapha Williams and LaTricia and you start talking and say “I just saw a movie last night where this guy got cut up in two pieces or got his head cut off” and then they would lose their appetite and I would take their lunch. (laughter) Lunch consisted of whatever your parents packed. But they always had nice lunches.

00:10:53:29 - 00:10:56:04

Tonia Merideth

Who was your best friend in school?

00:10:56:06 - 00:11:15:00

Charles Williams

In elementary school? I would say Michael. Michael, and for elementary school, Michael and then I think my younger brother, because he was right behind me.

00:11:15:02 - 00:11:19:15

Tonia Merideth

What was the typical academic year for the school, what month did it begin and end?

00:11:19:15 - 00:11:42:29

Charles Williams

In the fall, it began in the fall – (what did you have down here) It began August to May. We went to school in August. 'Cause I used to hate the fact, August – it seemed like the summer was gone and seemed like I just got out of school and they talking about going to school and I just got out in June, sometimes July and I have to go back next month, I felt that was short.

00:11:46:29 - 00:11:56:02

Tonia Merideth

So tell me what schools you attended after you left Cape Charles Elementary School and any higher education.

00:11:56:05 - 00:12:21:29

Charles Williams

Okay. When I left Cape Charles Elementary school, I was excited cause I got a chance to go to high school and that was like you know, like – died and gone to heaven, like that because there were so many other kids there and I was much older. Of course, the biggest thing for the boys was that it was more girls there. (Laughter) Another thing we got to ride a bus - the bus had to pick us up in Cape Charles and take us to the schools in Matchipongo.

00:12:22:02 - 00:12:40:09

Charles Williams

So you got a bus ride at the same time. So those are experiences I never had before, you know, and then go to a school - keep in mind like I said earlier, the Rosenwald school was a small building - one floor four classrooms. When we went to elementary school it was just huge, it was like going to a big city with all the other kids at the same time and that was really exciting, and it had a gymnasium, to have all the things we didn't have, basketball court like that so I was really excited about that there.

The school itself was really nice. I enjoyed being there right then again, at the same time, I didn't really again, I didn't know it when I went to there, that it was all black.

00:13:01:08 - 00:13:26:23

Charles Williams

It didn't bother me as much. But I realized that, you know, one thing that kind of stuck in my mind that in Cape Charles all the kids stayed in school and we called it the white school, right. And we had to leave from Cape Charles to go up to Matchipongo. I wondered why we had to go so far when there was a school right here in Cape Charles, right. But it didn't bother me cause all my friends were there, I was kind of comfortable but I wondered why I have to go this far when a school was right there in Cape Charles.

But when I got there I kind of enjoyed it, right – the school was bigger and it was more people into it. And it had a lunchroom you know, you didn't have to pack your lunch anymore. Those benefits really excited me about going at the same time. At the time I don't think Cape Charles school had a lunchroom, too. So I thought that was exciting.

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Tonia Merideth

So in thinking about the education that you received at the time, going to Cape Charles Elementary School, what did you think about the education at the time and what do you think about it now?

00:14:07:06 - 00:14:56:19

Charles Williams

Ok. At the time? At Cape Charles Elementary school, Right? At the time I thought it was good. Some parts unnecessary because I didn't quite understand where I had been prepared for, for the future to come. It didn't bother me as much when I was there, right. Then after I left there and looking back now, I realized that the school system itself was really put together with rubber bands to the point where they didn't quite understand all the needs of kids at that time.

00:14:56:21 - 00:15:13:22

Charles Williams

It was like a one tier thing. You either fit in to or you didn't. They didn't know anything about Special Ed/Special Needs kids because that was just above their pay grade at a time. And a lot of the teachers was fresh out of our college. Some had not quite finished it. There were taking summer classes to finish.

00:15:13:27 - 00:15:44:11

Charles Williams

I didn't realize at the time that the county was struggling to get teachers and to get black teachers at the same time because the whites would not teach at the black school so they did all they could to get what they could in the school at the same time. But I would notice that the teachers there were taking classes in summer school and I'm thinking "what you doing in school" and the would say, " I gotta go back to school" and I'm thinking, "why do you have to go back to school" and then later on I put it together, actually to get their degree evidently they had conditions where they had to get their degree in a certain amount of time.

00:15:44:14 - 00:16:22:09

Charles Williams

So naturally, they did the best they could, right? But they didn't bring a full-fledged ability to teach the kids at the school at the same time. And they didn't - looking back now - they didn't realize some of the drama that the kids was going through that played out in the activities at school, the response at school, the ability to learn, they just figured – the teachers just thought we should do what they say do.

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Charles Williams

But it didn't work out for some of the kids cause, I'm thinking after some of the kids graduated from elementary school some of them went on to high school and some of them just dropped out. Some of them stopped there because you have to keep in mind at the same time it is still a big pressure for the kids to work on the farm, to do something around the house to make money than to let them to go to school and some of the ones that lasted til the 9th or 10th grade, a lot of them didn't get past the t 10th grade because they older and it was bigger and the parents needed them to work.

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Charles Williams

So they did what their mother and father did. But that's one thing my mother told me is that its no option for me to drop out of school. She did not - my mother realized that some kids were doing it Cause she said if you are gonna do anything at all you are gonna go to finish high school. And thank God she did do that cause I could have easily fell into that, what others were doing, right.

00:17:09:02 - 00:17:34:11

Charles Williams

And then when I got to high school, you know I really enjoyed being in high school, right. But the teaching overall: the curriculum was better. But it still wasn't up to par. It was still a lot missing. Some of this I realized some of the subjects and things they were teaching us wasn't quite really preparing us for the overall journey in life

00:17:34:13 - 00:17:56:04

Charles Williams

but then if you left there and went anywhere else then you realize I - ok, well - I didn't get all the things I should at that school, you know, that's all they offered us at the time. But I mean, I guess they did the best with what they had. I'm not criticizing my school, but that's just what happened.

00:17:58:04 - 00:18:09:06

Tonia Merideth

So what do you think of the efforts to collect the memories and legacies of the students who attended the Rosenwald Washington schools?

00:18:09:08 - 00:18:42:25

Charles Williams

Okay. I think it's a very good idea. I'm kind of, I should say, cautious, I want to make sure they collect all the correct information and that they portray the school in the right light. One of the issues I've had with it is that make sure that - if you going to say there's it's going to be a Rosenwald school that you get a chance to show the public the way the school were.

00:18:43:02 - 00:19:12:24

Charles Williams

You know and it's a lot of people want to see it. I mean, case in point, a lot of my friends, black and white, never been inside that school before. I got out of a lot of white friends that had never seen inside the school and were born and raised here at the same time. So I'm thinking if you're going to ask them to contribute to the way to school was, you make sure you put a segment in the back so that it can actually see it the way it was - not...because I believe history should be told in anyway - not to blame anything like that, that's just the way it was.

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Charles Williams

I think as we see understand that we can do a better job going forward, you know, so I think that I pray that the school not only, you know, do that - I know that they have to make that the building sustainable

– make it sustain itself - but at the same time don't leave out the actual history in the school and don't wash that over and get bogged down with up being a venue for whatever and miss that part because this is a very important part of history.

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Charles Williams

I know now prayerfully this document here that my grandkid sand my great-grand kids you know, because I know they got other things on their mind. But I do know from my own experiences they will come back. One of the things I had in mind when I left here at 18 years old, I wanted to get it first thing smoking going north and never return.

00:19:59:22 - 00:20:21:28

Charles Williams

And If it hadn't been for my mother, coming home to visit I might have done that. But now, I realize now that – wow , where was my head at. This is home and this is where my roots at and it is very important that the story get told properly here. As long as its done properly I'm fine with it. And I pray for this part to get done properly.

00:20:22:00 - 00:20:27:06

Tonia Merideth

And so after you graduated from high school, what did your path take you?

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Charles Williams

You know, like I said earlier, one of the things I said earlier that I graduated on Friday, right. I wanted to leave that Friday but my mother wouldn't let me but Monday morning I caught the first thing smoking going north right, because I wanted to see the world and I wanted to do something different, ok. I knew - I had quite a lot on my plate at the time because my mother was much older, and the way she worked here doing stupid labor work in somebodys kitchen - that was not for me and I wanted to be able to provide things for my mother so I didn't have the chance to play around as you want to call it right, my grades weren't academically strong enough to go to college and plus my parents didn't have the money no way so I had to figure out a way to leave here and be productive at the same time right. So at 16, 17 years old, my friend of mine, that his parents live in Washington.

00:21:20:18 - 00:21:40:04

Charles Williams

We went to visit the city up there. Right. And I got this idea that I wanted to join the police force and they had a cadet program where I go to school, learn law enforcement and get paid - the part that caught my mind was the getting paid part.

00:21:40:04 - 00:22:01:21

Charles Williams

Because, I had to hit the road running as you call it, I didn't have free will to go three years, four years before I got a solid, basic income. So that fit my purpose. So we started that, I think in the 10th grade I took a test for that. I went to physical for that, right. So when all my friends were getting letters from accepting colleges right, I got acceptance letter to the police academy.

00:22:01:24 - 00:22:20:19

Charles Williams

You know, I graduated in June. I had a letter to start the police academy in August. And the difference is that they were going to college and they wouldn't get paid, I was starting as soon as I was sworn in I was getting paid. Right? And I thought that was the biggest thing, my career started basically when I left here at 18 years old. I went to Washington and joined the Metropolitan Police department, and I thought this again.

00:22:20:19 - 00:22:50:09

Charles Williams

Right. That was the best thing that ever happened to me per se, the standpoint of having benefits and being financially stable. Right. So when I left here at 18, when I got 22, I came back here and I bought my mother's house and I paid cash for it, and that was some things I wanted to - it helped me to achieve the goals I want to achieve in life, right that I got tired of my mother struggling and trying to pay rent somewhere else here, and I gave her a deed to a house at 22 years old, you know. And I spent my 20 years and two days on a police department with them, and it was a great career.

00:22:50:09 - 00:23:11:12

Charles Williams

I got to learn a lot. I think in six months I got to meet President Nixon. And it was like - from a country boy going on to a big city and everything happened at one time right, and then Washington, I didn't

know it at the time Washington is famous for, you got to make it here because we make the money here, we actually print the money here (laughter).

00:23:11:14 - 00:23:40:23

Charles Williams

So I had a good career there. That's when I met my wife and I had my kids there, right. And I managed to accumulate a good foundation for my kids and my family at the same time. And the point I was getting to earlier - and my, my mindset about Cape Charles slowly began to change. You know, I was constantly coming back to visit my mother and then I realized at the time - especially after I retired from the police department right.

00:23:40:25 - 00:24:05:25

Charles Williams

that I had more roots here that I didn't realize, I had more questions about some of things we talked about earlier. I didn't quite understand about the elementary school over here, why I went here and there. I didn't understand why I couldn't go over here. So coming back home, answered a lot of those questions. Believe it or not, a lot of places I could not attend or go in when I was a kid coming back here growing up I didn't get to go into it because, we were just restricted. Some of the houses here, some of the buildings were just off limits to blacks at the same time.

00:24:30:26 - 00:24:49:20

Charles Williams

My mother was still living and I was coming back and forth here right and I think, towards the last five or six years of her life I was here 28 days out of 30 days back and forth with her, and then I realized you know that this is really my home at the same time. Of course, my mother passed right, and it really hit me hard because I wish I had made the decision to move back home while my mother was living, right.

00:24:49:25 - 00:25:13:16

Charles Williams

But I made the decision to move back home and it was one of the best decisions I ever made. Not only just for me, is for my my kids at the same time, they could see their roots, where their grandparents lived, right. And of course, my kids get a little teary-eyed when I say that about death and I tell them we all gonna die at some point right and all my family is in the same graveyard and this is where i want to be at, and they say "daddy, dont talk like that" and I say well its gonna happen.

00:25:13:21 - 00:25:37:02

Charles Williams

So all my roots and family stuff are back here and I'm just so glad that I did move back here. I'm still learning a lot about the county here, the roots here, the historical part here, which is really true and I think this is really my roots and I come back here to sort of understand what my purpose in life is

00:25:37:06 - 00:25:46:17

Charles Williams

and I learn more about that by being here in some way - I mean the the Washington area was fine but that wasn't home. This is home.

00:25:46:20 - 00:25:53:09

Tonia Merideth

Before we close, is there anything else that you would like to add to the interview that I did not ask you?

00:25:53:12 - 00:26:16:13

Charles Williams

No, you did a good job of asking that questions. The only thing I want to say is that I pray that this video and this here really gives people an opportunity to see inside of Cape Charles here and the community here and realize its a great place to live and a great place to raise kids at the same time and I wish I had learned that earlier but it is thank God for that and

00:26:16:17 - 00:26:18:28

Charles Williams

Thank God for you guys coming and taking time to do this.

00:26:19:04 - 00:26:20:26

Tonia Merideth

Thank you so much for participating.

00:26:21:01 - 00:26:22:21

Charles Williams

You are more than welcome. Thank you.