UNIFIED COMMITTEE FOR AFRO-AMERICAN CONTRIBUTIONS
Great Mills High School Oral History Project

Stuart Wayne Newkirk
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Interviewed by Merideth Taylor
At his home in Lexington Park Maryland
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30 minutes, 35 seconds

[Begin disc 1, beginning of interview]

Merideth Taylor: So but you know, it wasn't – I think it was really good for them but they didn't all respond like, you know. It's great if a few of them though, if it actually –

Stuart Newkirk: Yeah, how many did they do? How many interviews?

MT: Oh, I think that, I think 14 or 15 maybe, which is quite a few. I mean there was sort of different – in -- there were sort of different -- some people that came in to talk to the after school group. And then there were some people that came into the school to talk and there were a few that talked to the whole class. And then there were the students that set up and the students that [indistinguishable]. There's a fair number, but some of them weren't very – a few questions, but we can you know kind of play it by ear too.
And why don't we start with your name (laughs) and just for the record, your name.

SN: Well, my name is Stuart Newkirk. I've lived most of my life here in St. Mary's County. I've been retired since I was 52, about five years ago. And live here with my wife and two sons and enjoying the county.

MT: That's great (laughs). So and why don't you tell us also just you know when you attended Great Mills [High School], what years you attended, and when you graduated.

SN: Wow, uh if I can remember that long ago. '60 –

MT: And if you could just start with "I attended," or "graduated from Great Mills" …

SN: Yeah, well I attended Great Mills one year before the county desegregated the school system, I think it was '65. My brother and I were the first, two of the first black students to go over to Great Mills. And I graduated in 1968. So …

MT: Ok, good, see you remembered.

SN: (laughs)

MT: Ok well talk to us about what it's like to go back into Great Mills High School to meet the students for the interview – how you felt about that, what it was like to be in the building?

SN: It had changed so much –

MT: If you could – and I'm really sorry but if you could say you know, "When I went back into Great Mills" or … for the interview for the students, or something to set it up for the …

SN: Yeah. When I went back to Great Mills for the interviews, it just shocked me how much the school had changed, how large it was. When we were there it was about 800 students or less, and it was just amazing how it had changed.

And what I enjoyed most about the interview is that the young people that interviewed me, they were white. And when I told them about the segregation in St. Mary's County and how we were treated, the expressions on their faces, they just couldn't believe it, you know? Like you know, that doesn't happen here. And I get that same reaction from my

sons too when I talk to them about segregation and where our races come from, they just can't believe it.

And I notice that now they're not teaching it in the school systems around here because I volunteered at my son's school and they're not getting a real accurate picture of where we came from. But I guess that's my job.

MT: Ok, that's great. So now thinking back to when you were there, you and your brother – so what, just tell us about your memories of, your experience when you first when to Great Mills, you know you had been going to a segregated or integrated school?

SN: Yeah, we were going to George Washington Carver and my father got this bright idea that he wanted to better prepare us for the real world and he wanted to send us to Great Mills. Of course we had nothing to say about it, so we were apprehensive, even a little frightened when we first went. And all of our fears were well founded (laughs) after we got there. I was an A-B student at Carver, but when I went to Great Mills my first year I fell off to D's and E's. And most of that was one thing that really surprised me, when I went to Great Mills we had new books. Now when I went to Carver we always had

[5:00] used books. And I didn't find out until then that the white schools would send their books to the black schools and the white schools would get new books. That's why we always had old books.

And it was quite an experience. I mean we had to go to the bathroom together, because people were always picking on us. Most teachers would sit me in the front of the class and people would throw at my head, throw you know, wads of paper and things at my head. It was quite an adjustment. It was quite an education.

MT: So the teacher put you at the front of the class?

SN: Yeah. I would always go to the back of the class and the teacher would make me sit in the front, I guess I was trying to disappear.

MT: What do you think the teachers were trying to do?

SN: In hindsight, maybe they were just trying to keep an eye on me, you know? Give me some type of protection, I really didn't know.

MT: So talk a little bit more about the teachers and the difference between when you'd gone to Carver and when –

SN: Well you know –

MT: -- did you notice the teachers were different?

SN: It's – the thing now in hindsight, now that I think back on it I had a history teacher, Martha Manly, I think – U.S. History – and she was the first one to ever talk about black history. Now I had gone to a black school all my life, but I never really studied black history until I got to Great Mills – and a white teacher was teaching it. Because now that I think back on it, the black teachers at Carver, the black school, they taught from the books that were sent from Great Mills and other schools and it didn't – they didn't cover black history. So she went out of her way and she actually discussed black history and really got me interested in it.

MT: So the teachers at Carver, they didn't focus on –

SN: No.

MT: -- on black [indistinguishable] …

SN: No. George Washington, Abraham Lincoln …

MT: Just what was in the books?

SN: Yeah. I had no role models, you know, that looked like me.

MT: What were some of the most positive and most negative experiences that you had with teachers in the classroom? That was obviously one of the positive.

SN: Yeah, quite honestly, I can't remember having any bad situations with teachers. For the most part at least, they gave me the impression that they were doing their job and trying to protect me. It – all the negativity came from students.

MT: Can you talk a little bit more about that?

SN: Well you know, a small segment of them, they were extremely hostile. It wasn't all of them but a small segment of them were extremely hostile – made it difficult to go to lunch, made it difficult to go to the bathroom, made it extremely difficult to just sit in a class and focus on what the teacher was saying. Not many came to our defense to help us either, we were really on our own.

And we went through this for about a year before they integrated schools. And by then they had started to kind of accept us, you know, we had been there awhile. And then they integrate schools and they bring all these other black students over. And then we're kind of like caught in the middle. You know we've established some relationships, so our black friends think that we've sold out … and I was glad to get out of high school and just leave that whole mess behind me. It was not an enjoyable time. I learned a lot about how to interact with people. And now that I think back on it, that was an extremely important thing to learn.

MT: That's what your dad had in mind (laughs).

SN: And it worked, it worked.

MT: What about – there were quite a few other black students though? Did you have – how did you relate to them?

SN: Fine. [Lorraine Bailey?] was there. She was the only female and there was my brother and myself. And we didn't see much of Lorraine, she just kind of disappeared. I guess she was going through her own drama. I don't know if her story was similar to ours because she is a girl, it might have been different, it might not have. And I've never talked to her about it.

[10:00] I've seen her occasionally in the park, but we've never discussed our experiences there. So I don't know.

MT: What about extracurricular activities? Did you participate in extracurricular activities?

SN: I didn't participate in anything. I was so glad to get the hell out of there at three o'clock, I didn't want to go back. No, I didn't participate in anything, didn't volunteer for anything – I was just glad to get out. Dreaded going in the morning, glad to get out in the afternoon.

MT: Well you indicate that you did form some friendships or relationships, friendly relationships with some of the other kids before the other kids from Carver all came in. What were those relationships like?

SN: Well I wouldn't – yeah I wouldn't call them friendships, they were just (laughs) … it's kind of hard to define it because we weren't friends. I mean we didn't go to lunch together or talk to one another after school. It was just they didn't make my life difficult and if I saw them in the hall they would speak. That's just about the extent of it. I didn't have any friends there. We were like we had been dropped on an island …

MT: That's pretty clear. What about you were talking about getting together with, the feeling that you had to meet with your brother to go to the bathroom – could you talk about any incidents where you actually felt threatened, physically threatened?

SN: Oh we had been shoved and verbally threatened. Usually the teachers and Mr. Moses, the vice-principal, would monitor the situation. So it never really got out of hand. So we were protected, but we've been shoved and threatened and called names and it – it's impossible to concentrate on your schooling when you're going through that everyday. And I mean it was an everyday thing.

MT: It sounds like you really did feel pretty threatened if you had to meet to –

SN: Oh yeah.

MT: -- and you didn't want to be alone, at all, so …

SN: You learn to take people's threats like that seriously. You know, you don't wait to see if they're serious (laughs). I learned that a long time ago. You know, people calling you degrading names and then they threaten you. You take them seriously.

MT: Were your friends outside of the classroom, did they – did you have friends in the community, did they all go to other schools? What were your friendships like in the community?

SN: Well we lived in Carver Heights so all my friends went to George Washington Carver. And I would only see them in the afternoon, you know after I did homework and things like that. But I never discussed with them what was going on, you know at Great Mills, and in my life. We never talked about it. They never asked, and I never brought it up.

MT: Could you talk to a bit about why you think your grades changed?

SN: Well part of it, a big part of it –

MT: I'm sorry, could you say, introduce the subject of the grades again, "I was an A-B student …"

SN: Oh yeah. I was an A-B student when I was at Carver, but when I went to Great Mills my grades fell off drastically. A lot of it was because of the distractions that I was subjected to. You know the harassment, the name-calling; it's hard to focus in a class when you have to go through that everyday. The other part is they were teaching things that we didn't – I had never even heard about. In history and chemistry and math, algebra. They were clearly at a different level than they were teaching at the black schools. So I started out already behind and then with the distraction of you know, name-calling and being picked on, you can't concentrate in an environment like that.

MT: How about in terms of how that might have affected your relationship with your father? And I mean how – could you just talk a little bit about how you felt about the decision of your parents, I shouldn't just say your father –

SN: Oh it was his decision (laughs).

MT: -- the decision of your parents to send you to the school? And how you

[15:00] felt about it then and how you feel about it now?

SN: I was extremely angry towards him for a – when he made the decision to send us to a white school, and in fact he did it to all the children that were in school, it wasn't just Charles and I. He sent my younger brothers to – I started to say Fort Knox – to the school up at the park where the personnel office is now …

MT: Frank Knox.

SN: Frank Knox? That's closer than Fort Knox anyway. And he did it to all of us and I really disliked him (laughs). And we never – when we got home in the evening he never asked us how things were going and you know give us a pep talk. Nothing like that, just this is the way it is, and you got to learn to deal with it.

Then like I said, I really had some real negative feelings toward him. But now I look back at what he's been through and I have a much better understanding of what he was trying to do and he was trying to prepare us for this white world as he saw it. And really it hasn't changed very much but that's what he was trying to do. He said these are the people that you are going to have to interact with and deal with and you can't just say that you know I'm black and I've been treated this way and you know feel sorry for yourself. He was never that kind of person and he didn't let us become those type of grown-ups. So now when I look back on it, I'm glad he did it.

No I don't think I'd be retired now if it weren't for him. He prepared – he prepared us to do well in this world.

MT: So it seems.

SN: And that education that was our footstep up. I wouldn't trade it at all. I mean then I would have traded it for anything. But now I see the advantages in it.

MT: Well, you know you say that it hasn't really changed that much but how shocked you know, even your children were when you talked about it. So even talking about it now in the context of today and what has and hasn't changed a little bit.

SN: Well you know I think – racism in this country has just become so sophisticated, I think our young people are just oblivious to it. They don't know when they're being mistreated. I think a lot of them don't have a clue when they're being treated differently. We had a – my oldest son, he was in the fifth grade this year, his teacher was talking about Abraham Lincoln and the great job he did in freeing the slaves and he came home all excited and was telling me about it. And I said well you know Abraham Lincoln only decided to free the slaves because he wanted to keep Europe out of the war. And he knew

if he made it about slavery, Europe wouldn't enter the war. And so he wasn't doing us any big favors, you know, he had ulterior motives for doing this. And thought about and he said, "Well that's not what [Ms. Kelley?] said." And then I went in the next day and spoke to her, and I said you know I want my children to have an accurate picture of history in this country, not that slanted, you know view. So whenever the get something in school about history or something like that I try to sit down and give him an accurate picture of what's going on, not the slanted one they give you in school.

And a lot of young black kids just don't know anything about their heritage. They don't even know about my generation. And like I said my kids can't believe some of the things that I went through in school. But I tell 'em about it.

MT: What do you think about this – the fact that so many of the schools, not here in the county, but some of these schools across the county are basically resegregated at this point and the Supreme Court in fact just made a decision that none of the school systems could use race as a – (laughs)

SN: (laughs) You just proved my point there.

MT: -- to assign students at all. Even if the whole point was to try to keep …

SN: … get some balance. But you know I believe this country is extremely racist. I believe we've gotten a raw deal.

[20:00] I won't argue with anyone about that. But I argue that as a race its time that we stop trying to use that as an excuse for not doing better.

I see too many young people having babies. I volunteer at my son's school and there's not enough minority parent participation in raising their children and you can't keep blaming that on society. At some point you have to have some buy-in as to what you're

responsible for. Because everything isn't the man's fault, it's just that simple. And if you go through life trying to find other people to blame for what's happening to you, you'll never change. It'll make you weak and dependent. And like I said, I believe this country's racist, I believe we've gotten a raw deal, but where do we go from here?

I saw this lady, I was working in the office at Park Hall, and this lady came running in and she had two or three kids with her. And she was late for – the kids were late for school. It was – school starts around quarter to nine and it was about ten. And she ushered the kids in and she said, "Who's your teacher?" And this was the middle of the school year and she was asking her kids who was their teacher. She didn't know where to take her children to class. The middle of the school year. Now whose fault is that?

So I think we're going to have to – like Bill Cosby said recently in the press, we're going to have to take some buy-in as to what's happening to us and what we're not doing about it. You just can't keep sitting around saying I didn't get a fair share. He's right. You didn't get a fair share, what are you going to do about it? And I don't see enough of us willing to take responsibility for our lives and do something about it.

MT: Well in the – a lot of people are saying now as well that a lot of was lost through integration, you know that whole thing with the black schools where teachers were very nurturing and supportive and that sort of thing – but in terms of, and we've already talked about this, but what was lost and what was gained, you know that going to school in a diverse situation maybe, you know is it more advantageous to white kids, is it more advantageous to black kids, is it both, is it neither?

SN: I think, I don't think this country is going to go far in the world if we can't find a way for all of us in this country to get along and accept one another. I think diversity is good

across the board. I, my wife and I have talked about this, I have some real strong feelings about why black families don't function as well as they should and about why black men as a whole don't function and stand up like they should. And I think it goes back to when we were brought to this country and subjected to slavery. I think black men have been conditioned not to become close to their families because of slavery. Its kind of hard to you know, hug your children when they could be sold the next day. It's kind of hard to get attached to your wife when you know the master can call her down to the house and do whatever he wants. You detach yourself from those situations and I felt some of that at Great Mills in order to get through – I had to detach myself from some things just to get through it. And if you have a man who is subjected to that and he detaches himself from his family, I mean that disrupts the whole family, and it takes generations to overcome that kind of damage to a family structure. And I think black people as a whole are still suffering from some of that – the detachment that we have towards one another. And its – I don't know what we're going to do to get past it. But I still see it, you know – people having children and just walk away from 'em, not that other races don't do that too, but it hurts us. It hurts us a lot more. (long pause)

MT: Yeah, so …

[25:00] Well it's hard to resist getting into a conversation, (laughs) but this is not about me. Well I think all of those comments are – it's really terrific to have that and very clear, and it's a really valuable perspective. It's different and I think people, especially let me tell you –

SN: And I'm not a republican.

MT: (laughs) But I had some people who – in your interview you mentioned that about this -- it might have been somebody else, but it might have been you – that about not learning about black history in schools. Some of my colleagues who are black just couldn't believe that, they thought that you must have said that wrong.

SN: No. No.

MT: So, its (laughs)

SN: (laughs) You know and its –

MT: And that idea that the black schools were more … so much was lost from going to the white schools.

SN: When you had this ceremony at the library and there was a gentleman there that went to [Benjamin] Banneker [which nearby school?] I think. He was maybe several years ahead of me, black gentleman. He was there with a former sheriff. And he made a statement, he said we got the same education, we had the same books. And then I thought back and said, now how can he have a different understanding of what happened when I know we didn't have the same books? But in his mind, he remembers having the same books as the white schools – but that's not true. But that's how he remembered it. I don't know why he remembered it that way, cause it definitely wasn't true. So we all walk away from these situations and you know, we remember it differently.

MT: That's right. That's why they're oral histories – they're histor*ies*, not one history. And that's the thing about oral history, it brings out different – because we're talking about memory and perception. So it's not trying to define what the exactly what happened necessarily.

SN: Well you know with me I know mine are going to be different than some of my black counterparts because my change was drastic. I mean I went from a black school to a white school when they're, when we were still segregated. So I believe me, I remember the differences. It was like being thrown out in a river. You know you've been in a 90 degree temperature and then they move you to Alaska and throw you in a cold river, it was quite a transition. And a lot of it I remember it like it was yesterday.

MT: You were dropped on an island or something.

SN: (laughs) Yeah.

MT: What about your memories compared to your brother's? Do you talk about it? Do you think you have a similar …?

SN: Yeah we've talked about it, in fact we'd come home and talk about it. So yeah, our memories are quite similar. In fact the way we perceive things now are quite similar. I'm sure if you talk to him, some of the things I said about our race you'll get from him, too.

MT: Ok. Well I think unless there's something else you can think of to say about your Great Mills experience …

SN: It helped make me what I am today (laughs).

MT: That's true (laughs).

SN: Yeah, I guess I can't have too many bad feelings about it.

Aaron Brusset: I have a question. How, so, your being forced into the, into Great Mills affected your relationship with your father, how did it affect your relationship with white people, or with racism in general?

SN: (laughs) There was a period of time that I really hated white people. They had a black militant group here in St. Mary's County. It was like the Black Panthers, I joined that.

Quite angry, quite angry. I eventually grew out of it. And you know, walking around with anger serves no purpose. I did better once I accepted it and tried to understand why they felt that way. And most of them had just been taught, they'd never had any kind of relationship with a black person. It was just based on what they'd been taught. So I got past the anger.

So that's one thing that my father always instilled in us, too

[30:00] – it serves no purpose to get angry. You make real bad decisions when you're angry. Try never to make a decision when you're angry, (laughs) you'll always regret it. So I got past it. I even got past my anger towards my father (laughs).

MT: That's maybe most important.

SN: Yeah it was a good thing. He knew what he was doing.

MT: Ok, great, thank you so much.

SN: Oh, ok. [30:36]

[End disc 1, end of interview]