

**Name of Interviewee: Carole Layne Willis**

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**Additional Materials: 18 Photos, TV34 Interview.**

**Date: 04/06/2018**

**Interviewer: Donald J. Sullivan Delaon, Jane Eliasof**

**Location: First Montclair House Community Room on 56 Walnut St, Montclair, NJ**

**Introduction:**

Dr. Carole (Layne) Willis, of Trinidadian and Barbadian descent, was born in Montclair. She lived in town until she was nine, and then her family moved to Arizona to accommodate the health needs of one of her sisters. Dr. Willis returned to Montclair as an adult to teach at Kean University, after teaching in England and obtaining post-graduate degrees at the University of Wisconsin. The family still owns the home she was raised in on Elmwood Avenue.

She shares the history of her maternal and paternal grandparents' arrival to the U.S. and Montclair, including displaying her grandfather's passport from 1918 which he used when he entered at Ellis Island.

Dr. Willis recounts her childhood in Montclair, her school years, church involvement, and play activities. Her family had attended St. Mark's Church and as an adult she attended St. Peter Claver.

Dr. Willis earned her degree in Curriculum Development and taught at Kean University for 32 years before retiring. She recounts her active involvement in the development of the Montclair Public Schools' magnet school system, as a member of the Montclair Board of Education, in response to the court order to integrate the district. She details the focus on innovative curriculum which helped make the magnet system a success. She weighs in on the importance of grant funding to keep the magnet system fresh and relevant.

She also discusses the racial differences she saw in England, where she lived and taught 1963-1968, and the U.S. as well as the different approaches to teaching between the two countries. While teaching in England, she noted that race did not play a factor in the classroom. The environment was completely different. She learned a lot there and applied her learning to her approach to teaching back in the United States.

The interview concludes with her thoughts and quotes on what makes Montclair special to her.

**Timestamps:**

[01:05]: Dr. Willis begins by sharing some items, including a Spring 2013 article from the *Montclair Magazine* (pg. 42) featuring four different families including hers (this was scanned). She also shows her father's passport; he entered the U.S. from Barbados in 1918, 100 years before the date of the oral history interview. Interviewer reads from the document, "*The*

*declaration of an alien about to depart for the United States. I, Alleyne, a subject of Great Britain and bearer of passport 224 dated July 5<sup>th</sup> 1918 issued by the Governor of Trinidad”.*

[03:00]: Helena Dylan (Layne?), Dr. Willis’s paternal grandmother brought Dr. Willis’s father, St. Elmo Layne (born the 9<sup>th</sup> of June 1911) and his sister, Dorothy Layne, to the U.S. Her father was 7 years old, his sister Dorothy was 4.

[03:43]: Dr. Willis mentions that a maternal uncle was the first relative from that side of the family to arrive in Montclair, as early as the turn of the (20th) century / 1890s. That uncle had dreams of becoming a violinist in New York City; that career goal did not come to be, but he worked for the train service in Montclair. He was first to settle in Montclair and his other siblings came later.

[04:21]: Dr. Willis’s grandmother was still in the West Indies at that time, but after being widowed, came to Montclair and stayed with her favorite brother, James Leach. After getting settled in Montclair, she sent for her children a year after. Dr. Willis’s maternal grandmother came in 1913. This side of the family was from both Trinidad and Barbados.

[04:57]: Dr. Willis talks about her childhood and her parents’ jobs. Her mother was a stay-at-home-mom born in South Orange; Dr. Willis was the youngest of three children in the family. Dr. Willis’s father was an airplane mechanic, grew up in Montclair, attended Glenfield School (class 1924), and graduated from Montclair High School (class 1930). Her parents got married, living in an apartment on Miller Street at first and then the couple bought a home on Elmwood Avenue in 1937. He was 26 years old when he bought the house and that is where Dr. Willis and her two sisters were raised.

[05:41]: The family still owns the two-family home with Dr. Willis’s daughter living there with her children. She mentions that at one time, her grandmother had lived in the first floor unit and her family on the second floor, so five generations have lived in the house.

[06:03]: Asked what her family did for fun when she was a child, Dr. Willis notes that she lived in Montclair from birth to age nine. She attended Glenfield School and played with the friends in the neighborhood, riding bikes, etc. Her family also loved the beach and would go to Rockaway Beach, Coney Island. They also liked to go up to Eagle Rock [Reservation].

[06:42]: Dr. Willis explains that her family left Montclair and New Jersey. Her sister (Pat) was not well (*rheumatic fever; possibly caused by strep throat*), which starts an anecdote about Mountainside Hospital.

[06:50]: She starts talking about Mountainside Hospital where she was born and where her sister received extensive treatment. At the time of her birth, the hospital, which straddled the town line of Glen Ridge and Montclair, would issue two birth certificates, one from Montclair and the other from Glen Ridge; the maternity ward of the hospital was located in Glen Ridge. They no longer follow that practice. Dr. Willis is on the Montclair Township Planning Board and when issues of the hospital were recently discussed, the planning boards of both Glen Ridge and Montclair met together.

[07:19]: The doctors at Mountainside recommended the sunshine of Arizona for Dr. Willis's sister's health. Dr. Willis recalled that during World War II, when medicines for troops were prioritized, the family would have to get special permission to be issued the medicine that her sister needed for her rheumatic fever. The family moved to Arizona, but they kept the house in Montclair.

[08:10]: Dr. Willis's father stayed behind for awhile and was working at Wright Aircraft; his family took the Pullman train (a three-day train ride) out west and he followed. She recalls that they had a sleeping car and described the trip as "fun."

[08:57]: They visited Montclair often, but she did not come back until she got a job at Kean University; one reason she took the job was to come back to Montclair, which she always considered her hometown. They also had family in Montclair, as well as maternal relatives in South Orange, NJ and New York. One thing she noticed upon her return: no more trolley cars!

[09:37]: Dr. Willis talks about her immediate family being Methodist (her family went to St. Mark's when she was a youngster), but she married a Roman Catholic man in Arizona. When she moved back to Montclair as an adult, she began going to St. Peter Claver Roman Catholic Church. Other members of the extended family were Catholic.

[10:17]: Dr. Willis brought a book about Montclair churches to the interview, which included a 1934 photo of her Great-Aunt Ivy on the porch of St. Peter Claver; the photo was taken on the occasion of the church reaching 250 parishioners. St. Peter Claver was founded in 1931 by the Black community because they were not welcome then in white churches.

[11:28]: Dr. Willis starts talking about her piano teacher, Mr. Slammet (sp?), the long-time music director at St. Marks. He was very kind and she considers him to have been one of her most influential teachers; he was extremely well-regarded. Both Dr. Willis and her sister took lessons from him when they were children still living in Montclair on Elmwood Avenue.

[13:00]: Dr. Willis talks about the diversity at St. Peter Claver Church which offers mass in English, Spanish, and French Creole and serves a multi-cultural community.

[14:28]: She re-established the timeline of the places where she lived. She was born in Montclair, left for Arizona at age 9, as an adult taught in England for five years (where her children were born), returned to the U.S. to get her advanced degrees from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Then she returned to Montclair in 1974, taking a job at Kean University.

[15:00]: Dr. Willis talks about her degree in Curriculum Development/Philosophy in Education. She taught at Kean for 32 years and was also an administrator there; she retired in 2006. The thing she enjoyed most was being a faculty member.

[16:50]: Dr. Willis is asked about the magnet school system. The problem before the establishment of the magnet school system was that the schools in Montclair were fairly segregated. The shape of the town is rectangular; the north end of town was primarily white and the south end primarily Black.

[17:27]: Parents with kids in schools in the south end were concerned with the quality of the buildings, the quality of the materials and access to resources. These families went to court, and the court ordered integration. The town spent time figuring out how to integrate; none of the first plans – which included forced bussing -- were satisfactory. The plan in place when Dr. Willis returned to Montclair in 1974 was a “one grade out” system, whereby one entire class, for example a third grade from Glenfield (which was almost entirely Black), would transfer to Northeast. The third grade Northeast class would go to Glenfield. But no one was pleased with that method of integration; there was a lot of unhappiness about the schools and some people didn’t want to go to different schools. Many community groups were meeting to discuss an improved method of integration.

[18:26]: Pat Layne, Dr. Willis’s sister had also returned to Montclair and was a teacher in the district since 1963. Dr. Willis talks about a video that featured her talking about the evolution of the magnet schools. [*Our Schools, Our Town.*]

[19:22]: Dr. Willis became active in the community groups that were dealing with curriculum, her specialty. She was very pleased with the Montclair Public Schools Superintendent at the time, Walter Marks, who was very interested in curriculum and focused on making each school strong enough that people would want to attend every school in the district, regardless of location. She and others worked to make curriculum innovation the basis for a change in the local school system, and she talks about being appointed to the Montclair Public School Board of Education, despite having only returned to town a short time prior to this activity. But she was very involved and outspoken, and people asked her to join the Board. Mayor Grant Gille appointed her to the board after seeing her involvement in the development of the town’s approach to strong curriculums that catered to what parents were looking for in the schools (based on information gleaned from Living Room Dialogues conducted throughout town):

structure/back to basics for some in the south end attracted those parents to a school in the north end of town; parents from the north end who were interested in gifted and talented curriculum programs were willing to send their kids on busses to the south end of town. Montclair's approach to "gifted and talented" differed from other districts' approach in an important way: Montclair found the gift/talent of each child – that was the school's responsibility to discern what their gift was – it wasn't based on testing or exclusivity.

[20:00]: The Gifted and Talented Program had a very broad curriculum. They focused on the diverse types of intelligence, gifts and talents. Both the arts and academic programs were very strong. There was so much enthusiasm for the Gifted and Talented magnet that they split the program into two schools – K-2/Nishuane and 3-5/Hillside – and parents were very willing to bus their children for those magnets.

[21:42]: Grove Street School was the public school centrally located in the town and was already naturally integrated, so they didn't develop a new, special curriculum there and left it as a neighborhood school. In hindsight, that was a mistake, because the school lost enrollment as parents became more interested in the innovative magnet themes at other schools. A later effort to develop a special curriculum there was not successful in stopping the enrollment decline. Also at this time, the school district predicted declining school-age population, so the Grove Street School building was ultimately sold and became the [private] Deron School.

Overall, the magnet school system was considered a success in integrating the district; and most parents got their first choice of schools so it was considered a success for that reason, too. Dr. Willis noted that the magnet system also had an effect of integrating neighborhoods more, too. People also eventually came to appreciate the convenience of the bussing system, and the ability of siblings from the same family to attend the school best suited for them (not just a single neighborhood school). Montclair's magnet system is well-respected; other towns' magnet systems were not as successful because they may not have chosen their magnet themes well.

[24:08]: Dr. Willis shares one story in particular that makes her feel good about the success of the magnet system: a child with Down's Syndrome attended the Gifted and Talented School in Montclair but may not have been eligible to do so in a more traditional gifted and talented program. The student got the support she needed to be successful and was even featured in a documentary. She notes that success in the arts has been shown to positively impact academic performance as well. Dr. Willis is proud of her involvement in the magnet school system and its success, is glad her children benefited from the magnet system, and that it is still active.

[24:50]: She talks about missing the March on Washington [1963] to catch her ship (the Queen Elizabeth) for England, but her aunts and her sister marched, leaving from a bus in front

of St. Peter Claver. She had just graduated from college and was going to teach in London; her husband was bound for the University of London for his studies. Her aunt gifted her a button from the March which Dr. Willis still has.

[26:15]: Dr. Willis talks about the adjustment of returning to Montclair in 1968 and how much less racist England seemed in comparison. Both her children were born in the UK; she left the U.S. in 1963 and returned in 1968, “a very turbulent time to be away.” She talks about the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, his brother Bobby Kennedy, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

[27:25]: Dr. Willis talks about returning from England and going to school in Wisconsin as a grad student. She was there when the academic building was bombed; she was not in the building at the time; but her neighbor, another graduate student, was killed in the bombing. This was during the Vietnam War, and people were protesting the war – they would all go out each day at noon to protest and were regularly subjected to tear gas and would run away from it. The Students for Democratic Society was a radical group that was behind the bombing. A lot of research for the war effort was being done in Wisconsin and neither the SDS nor the police thought the math research building was occupied at the time of the bombing (SDS had warned the police of the bombing).

[30:15]: Dr. Willis talks about “not having to think about being Black” during her time in London, which is different, even now, from the U.S. She talks about attending a racially segregated school – segregated by law -- in Arizona in 1948 and her school bus getting jeered at. But the school was very good. Integration in Tucson was just starting in her junior high years. But her high school was integrated.

[32:30]: She talks about teaching in the London for a diverse student body (including students from Africa, India, Ireland, the Islands, etc.) though they lacked supplies. The students in her London school were well-disciplined and her coworkers were very good. She had a class size of 50+ and they got along – there was no racial unrest. She liked that “if kids didn’t like her, it was because they didn’t like her -not because of her race or call her names.”

[36:00]: She talks about taking what she learned from her time in London and applying it to her teaching and work here in the U.S. Approaches to teaching in London/U.S. differed – with less emphasis on rigid planning and testing in London and more time for reflection on individual student needs. She emphasizes that she was an adherent to Howard Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences – using different methods to get subject matter across to different students. “Moving as the spirit moves you,” is the approach that she followed in London and tried to maintain as she returned to teaching in the U.S.

[37:03]: Dr. Willis tells us that her daughter is a math teacher in Montclair.

[37:26]: Some of Dr. Willis's direct quotes on teaching: "If you let kids do things in a different way as opposed to the same way, it's more helpful." "The teacher has to depend more on her art side of teaching. Yes, there's a science, but there's also moving as the spirit moves you."

[38:06]: When asked about the state of the Montclair public schools now, she replies that "we do a good job" but the district doesn't have the level of awareness and grant funding it once did which allowed the district to attract adjunct performing arts professionals to support the performing arts aspects of the curriculum. The district had a full-time grant writer early in the magnet program. She shares a picture of the 1977 Board of Education members and recounts the name of some other members: Jim Ramsey (Board President who would later become Montclair Mayor), Eve Marchioni (sp? - who would later be President of the Board). She talks about the board being "really into their job" and that they took their role very seriously, meeting weekly and sometimes until 4 am. This worked because they listened to each other and worked to develop decisions all board members could accept; things were passed by consensus rather than 4 to 3 votes. Keeping Montclair in the news with favorable press and by board members' active involvement in educational organizations at various levels, Dr. Willis says, helped win them grants bringing money to the district; Dr. Willis was very active in the state organizations such as the Urban Boards Committee (?), the Executive Committee of the New Jersey School Board Association, etc. She cites the value of school board members being proactive and involved and presenting at educational conferences as a way to facilitate grants to implement good ideas. She cites the good work of the Montclair Fund for Educational Excellence (MFEE) to help the schools to fill some of that funding gap.

[42:05]: She thinks the magnets have to change as times change, and they have to keep each school having special reason to exist and that each school has to maintain its ability to teach the basics and the extra things relative to the magnet. Dr. Willis thinks it is difficult to magnetize the schools – for example, every school now needs science and technology, which was once a magnet -- but that it is still important to maintain the magnets.

[43:11]: Dr. Willis answers a final question about what makes Montclair special (to her). She says she likes the people and the size of the community, and she cites her time on the Planning Board listening to residents and learning from them. As opposed to New York City, which she considers overwhelming, she likes that in Montclair you know who your elected officials are, she likes the small local businesses, the familiarity, and that her family was here.

[43:53]: "It's got everything ... it's got diversity of interest, nearness to things; it's also quiet." "It's just the right size community for me... and it has values that I kind of very much am in keeping with — maybe cuz I was raised here so they did a good job, right?"

“I came home and I kind of believe in what kind of community Montclair is!”

“It’s a welcoming community for diversity and if something needs fixing we generally will work on it, not always immediately, but we’ll work on it and try to get it fixed!”

“I love the community itself! It’s a good town!”