



Lenworth Walker: WAACA Oral History

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Interviewer: Sulema DePeyster

Transcriber: Sulema DePeyster

This interview is part of a series conducted with former members of the Windsor Afro-American Civic Association. The content of this transcript has been edited for clarity purposes.



WINDSOR
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Sulema DePeyster: Okay, so I'll start by saying hello. My name is Sulema DePeyster. I am the Community History Specialist here at the Windsor Historical Society, and I'm here today on June 20th, 2022 to conduct an oral history interview with you, Lenworth Walker. If you could start by introducing yourself and giving verbal consent?

Lenworth Walker: I'm Len Walker. Donate all the money that you have to me. I'm willing to accept it. [laughing] Just kidding, just kidding. I'm Len Walker. I'm currently a Windsor town councilor. I've lived here for over 25 years, and I give consent to the recording.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay, great. So can you start with your childhood and where you grew up?

Lenworth Walker: I was born in Saint Andrew, Jamaica. Saint Andrew is actually a parish, a miniature state, and I grew up in a section called Havendale. I had a wonderful childhood; mom, dad, grandparents, aunts, a large paternal family, maternal family. Happy, wonderful problem-free childhood.

Sulema DePeyster: What was your neighborhood like growing up? Did you stay primarily in the same neighborhood as well, or did you move around at all?

Lenworth Walker: I stayed primarily in the same neighborhood where I grew up.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay.

Lenworth Walker: But my childhood adventures or things that stick with me are my summer vacation trips that I took to the rural parishes. The places where my father grew up and where my mother grew up. Those were adventures out in what I termed as this large jungle. It really isn't, but those were wonderful times.

Sulema DePeyster: What did that look like? So you were exploring the parishes? And what were you doing there? Were you visiting for the day or was there anything else that you did?

Lenworth Walker: We did a lot of stuff. So I'd alternate spending time with my maternal family, my cousins and aunts, and then I'd alternate with my paternal family in another parish. But growing up in what we call more of a housing environment, and by that I mean a more traditional city type.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay.

Lenworth Walker: It was the suburbs. Growing up in somewhat of the suburbs back then [and] going out to the countryside offered a rather unique experience. An experience to go fishing, thinking I'm Tarzan. I could climb trees and falling and breaking just about every bone. I'm getting sprains [and] fractures. Just the whole idyllic, surreal type of lifestyle. I still have fond memories. I wish I could go back and do that again.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, yeah. I bet. [laughing] So what about school? Which schools did you attend?

Lenworth Walker: Initially, my kindergarten years were at a Catholic school. It was a Catholic priest, and now that I look back at it, it was more for people who could afford to send their little

kids there because then you got into the Catholic doctrine. It was different and it was concentrated on a lot of educational stuff. So from that I went to John Mills Primary School, which was public school.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay.

Lenworth Walker: It was there that I skipped a lot of grades and I was at some point tested. I don't quite remember how I got tested, but I was tested and was really a gifted child. And so I got accelerated to the point where then I could apply for not the traditional high school, but back then it was a boarding school. The name of school is Jamaica College. It was designed for [00:05:00] the kids of maybe foreign diplomats. For example, I went to school with the person who was in charge of the Police Department at the time. Members of maybe say the US embassy at the time. We were in high school and these kids were driving cars, they had chauffeurs, that kind of stuff. And I started off at a very young age, but then it changed because not only are you the bright kid from your public school, but now you're competing with all these other kids who are super smart. It is no longer that. With the government changing and saying everybody deserves a chance, it is now public school. But I still maintain contacts and Jamaica College [was] designed off the British school system. It was all boys, and you were segregated by what is called houses. They still have them in British boarding schools anyway. So you were in one house, which is actually an entire year group of students, and from there you moved onto I guess it would be senior year. Senior year, you'd change the name of the house, but you kept the same colors. The best way without taking all day to explain it is exactly what the British private school systems do today. That's the environment I had.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay. And so was there a tuition for this boarding school and how was that covered?

Lenworth Walker: Most of the other kids whose parents were wealthy, their parents paid. I did an exam early and I passed that with flying colors, so my tuition was paid for.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, okay. And was that a four-year high school?

Lenworth Walker: Yes. Let's see. You're asking me to go back and remember, because right after you went to university. Yes, yes.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay, and what about your fondest memories of school? That could be all through kindergarten to high school.

Lenworth Walker: My fondest memories of school are what I still do today or what I did when I was attending University of Hartford, [which] is debating college professors because I thought I was smarter than them. They would actually enjoy [debating]. Some of them lost debate battle. Others kind of set me straight saying, "This is how you need to prepare next time." Strangely enough, I never took part in the debating team at Jamaica College, even though everybody thought I should. I was busy doing everything else my parents told me not to do. Partying.

Sulema DePeyster: Partying a lot, you said?

Lenworth Walker: Now you know when parents are in bed and they leave the cars out. We had the luxury of cars and I knew how to drive, and I was the favored guy.

Sulema DePeyster: [laughing] So can you describe your closest friends from that time?

Lenworth Walker: Some of my closest friends are like one guy I went to school with. We grew up in the same neighborhood. He's a CPA. He's in Florida. He's lived in Florida for many, many years. We still keep in touch. Another person who was a close friend of mine today lives in Windsor. I'm pretty sure he's a priest now because three years ago, he was studying to be a priest. He's a priest in the Catholic Church and that now I understand why because you never got in trouble with anything. So he was going back there praying for us. [laughing] Yes, I met his kids, his wife, and everything.

Sulema DePeyster: And was this the person that you grew up with, or was that the first person who became a CPA?

Lenworth Walker: No, these are people I grew up with. Like Greg was in Florida, the other guy lives in Windsor. We grew up [together]. Occasionally, we get together, but not as often as we should.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay, and in that neighborhood that you grew up, what was the environment like and the dynamic between your neighbors? Were you close at all?

Lenworth Walker: Yes, we were. Nowadays I hear people saying it takes a village to raise a child. Our street was a small street in Havendale, and we knew every neighbor and every neighbor knew us. [00:10:00] So something happened anywhere back then, you just talked or visited with neighbors, but we all knew [each other]. It was a really nice time. Today I understand the neighborhood dynamic has changed, but back then it was different. You didn't dare do anything that you shouldn't do without somebody, some nosy neighbor, snooping and telling on you.

Sulema DePeyster: What was the name of that street?

Lenworth Walker: I have to go back and remember. I'm going to look it up because I'm going to call my cousin now and ask him and they're going to [say] the same thing. What was the name of that street? I understand it's changed, but I'll find the name and I'll get it to you, okay?

Sulema DePeyster: That'll be great. So what about when you grew up? What did you want to be?

Lenworth Walker: I actually wanted to be a doctor, and I thought I would be very good at it because in studying biology, what we had [was] a different US system. So we had O-Levels and A-Levels.¹ My O-Levels were off the chart. I was pretty good at human anatomy, that kind of stuff. But you know that my dad thought that I would be that, my mom thought I would be that. But when you start growing up, you say you know more than your parents and you want to do

¹ O-Level (Ordinary Level) and A-Level (Advanced Level) are two components of standardized exams in the United Kingdom for the General Certificate of Education.

things. So I went off and did the army cadets and got out of the house and saw all the fancy pretty cars and everything else and did my own thing.

Sulema DePeyster: So you had mentioned the University of Hartford. When did you decide to move to the U.S.? Is that part of that decision or was there another thing that influenced that?

Lenworth Walker: I moved to the U.S after the 1980s election in Jamaica. It was very violent. It was a complete change in ideas for government. It was new and it just got out of hand where a new government wanted to install new things. The government wanted to be closer to the ideology of Cuba and in the middle of the battle of that, everybody got involved. Then it just got violent, so I decided my father was already here. Most of my paternal cousins were here, and maternal family that were here and they kept saying, "You shouldn't have gone in anyway. You shouldn't have done this. Get out of it." So I started visiting Hartford in [19]79, [19]80, [19]81, somewhere around there, and then at some point I made a conscious decision. I need to change my life. I'm not 19 years old anymore. I needed to get something more stable, and the violence was just too much so I got out of that. Now when I got here, I obviously started off doing a few odds and ends jobs and I realized rather quickly that I needed a formal education.

Lenworth Walker: Back then, [I had] my O-Level, which is called GCE O-Level, my certificates. I applied to Greater Hartford Community College. That was on Woodland Street. It is now Capital Community College that's down in the old G. Fox building downtown, and one of the first things I encountered that was different was they didn't accept my credentials back then. And I thought, "This is interesting." So wakeup call. Len Walker, you're going to have to do a lot more. And so I had to go through the screening tests, English proficiency, math that I could do with my eyes closed. But they thought, "Oh, if it's too difficult, wait." I was sitting there going, "I don't belong here." So then I had to start the whole process all over. So I actually did my associates degree there and halfway through that, I joined the Phi Theta Kappa society. But one year, I took a full course load while I was working two-part time jobs and trying to raise a family. That was brutal. By the way, that was the first time [00:15:00] I ever got an F in English [Composition].

Sulema DePeyster: Oh wow. There [were] a lot of other factors to consider during that time, you know, so it does make sense.

Lenworth Walker: No, but I will take it to my grave why I got an F because knowing me, I argued with the professor and told the professor he was an idiot. That didn't go across too well. Here's one of the [reasons] why he graded me an F. The word check as in a checkbook, the British spelling is C-H-E-Q-U-E. I wrote that. He crossed it out and told me it's not a French class, and there were several other words. The punctuation and the grammar [is] somewhat different. How we use conjunctions, that type of stuff, and it twisted everything. So what I did is I said I can't beat this guy. He already told me he's going to flunk me because I called him an idiot and I had to explain something. So I just decided you can't beat them, join them, and so I got books and I had to relearn [and] reteach myself how to do it one way. I did it over and I got an A for it. I got out of Greater Hartford with pretty decent grades.

Sulema DePeyster: So you secured an associates degree from Capital Community College and then went back to University of Hartford?

Lenworth Walker: Right. Then I went to University of Hartford for four years.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, okay.

Lenworth Walker: Because capital only does two years.

Sulema DePeyster: And what was your program there? What degree did you want to acquire there?

Lenworth Walker: At U of H?

Sulema DePeyster: Yes.

Lenworth Walker: Business administration with a minor in [computer sciences].

Sulema DePeyster: What was that experience like? Was it very different from Capital Community College?

Lenworth Walker: Yes, different. They spoke to you as if you were adults. I kind of breezed through that, which I normally did anyway. I rarely ever studied stuff, but it was much more challenging. Not as challenging as the courses I did in grad school, but it was more challenging, and by then I had gotten a promotion through Hartford Hospital and I was the Assistant Director of Security. So I had a lot of responsibility and I also realized I wasn't going to make it beyond the director if I didn't get like an MBA. So I knew the path I had to follow.

Sulema DePeyster: So you were working at Hartford Hospital, and this was while you were pursuing a degree at the university?

Lenworth Walker: While I was doing everything, yes, and raising a family and everything.

Sulema DePeyster: So was this a part-time position and it became a full time position afterward?

Lenworth Walker: I worked part-time for about 3 months and then a full-time spot came up and I got that. And then I worked my way up from regular officer to assistant supervisor to supervisor. And then I did all three shifts and then I got to the assistant director, and I was running a pretty large crew basically doing everything.

Sulema DePeyster: How long were you at that job for in total including all of those promotions?

Lenworth Walker: I worked at Hartford Hospital in its entirety for 33 years. I retired from there and then went back to do other work.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay, and assistant director was the final position before you retired?

Lenworth Walker: That was the final position, yes, because I stopped going to grad school. [I] didn't have a need to go back because when I went back, I met a young guy and I said, "Hey, can

I talk to the professor?" And he goes, "Which one?" Then I said, "The one for business. I used to attend here. I want to go back." And he goes, "I'm the guy to talk to." And I thought, "You look like my grandson. What are you talking about?" I thought he was joking. I said no so I didn't go back.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay, and did you say you did another job after retiring from Hartford Hospital?

Lenworth Walker: Yeah, I went to work for Loomis Chaffee, their campus safety team. I did that for five years, and then I went to Professional Security Consultants. I was recruited by them to do consulting and I gave that up too. I've had enough. [00:20:00]

Sulema DePeyster: And was that the final official job position? Is that where you had left off or was there another?

Lenworth Walker: Yes, that's the final.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay. So throughout these years, when did you find yourself in Windsor?

Lenworth Walker: I lived in Hartford through a little part of the 80s to the 90s. I got started. I had a partner and we were rehabbing houses and either selling them or flipping them and doing rentals with them. I did that and after a while, I got tired of that. I bought a home in Bloomfield and don't ask me the years.

Sulema DePeyster: [laughing] It's okay.

Lenworth Walker: It'd be hard to remember. I lived in Bloomfield for several years, and then got out of Bloomfield and moved to Windsor in 1996. And I've been here since.

Sulema DePeyster: What influenced your decision to move to Windsor specifically?

Lenworth Walker: The diversity. The quiet. Bloomfield had starting started changing because at some point we knew that Cottage Grove Road, as it is today, was not the way it was. It was double lanes on either side. It was not as built up as it was today. It wasn't so much a major thoroughfare. Well, the town needed to improve that whole Cottage Grove Road corridor to make it industrial. I was back up on Ellsworth Drive and then we were used to peace and quiet. But the neighborhood started changing and it's one thing when you're working. I was working some long hours. I was salaried and kind of got used to that after a while. And when you do all that, on the weekends when people are calling you, you just sometimes want peace and calm. We all need that to function, to replenish ourselves, and I didn't see that in the future in Bloomfield. Plus the schools had started to change to a point where I didn't say it was for the better because a lot of the grades and the graduation rates started to drop. Windsor was off the chart at that time, and the section of Windsor where I moved to offered peace and quiet. Not a lot of neighbors. You can hear the crickets, and that's what I needed. Long driveway, off the beaten path, and so I said, "This is where I'm going to be. And so as long as I'm living in Windsor, I'm going to be fighting for the quality-of-life issues." It's nostalgia. I want it to stay the same. It can change but give me my little peace and quiet. Keep my streets clean, pick up my garbage. I've talked to Dr. [Terrell] Hill, the school superintendent, a man that wants to do great things in town. Help our

kids, graduate our kids, and graduate them so that they have an education and they can function. So Windsor is it, and if I'm moving anywhere, I'm going to move to a much warmer climate.

Sulema DePeyster: [laughing] So at that time, did you have any kids in the Windsor education system, or were they older?

Lenworth Walker: Yes, my son.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay.

Lenworth Walker: My Junior, he went through the school system as well. He no longer lives in the states. He lives in Canada now and that's fine. He's doing wonderful, but he went through the [Windsor schools]. As a matter of fact, my memories of my son, who I call Jay, is when he was at Bloomfield High playing football. Now he wasn't the biggest, most muscular kid, but he had an attitude just like me. I can do it. And one of the biggest guys on that team, at the time I didn't know who it was, it turned out to be Dwight Freeney. Dwight Freeney, as you know, went to the Colts. [Bloomfield High] won all the football games. The coach would say, "Just give it to Dwight," and nobody could stop it. [00:25:00] He was just that big. So I remember that because in practice, Jay would want to tackle Dwight. And he said, "No, I can take him." And I thought to myself, "I'm going to bury my boy because Dwight is like a bulldozer." [laughing] I said, "Just drop when you see him. Don't touch him." The first time Dwight hit him, he never tackled him ever again. So Dwight would start running, he'd run away and say, "Dad, I feel bad I didn't tackle him." I said, "Son, you're alive." [laughing] But we had fun times.

Sulema DePeyster: Is Jay, that you referred to, your only son?

Lenworth Walker: Yes, my only son. I actually have a daughter in Florida, but she has her own life. Her mom has her own life. They're doing their thing and I'm doing my thing.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay.

Lenworth Walker: I've got two kids.

Sulema DePeyster: Let's see. So we talked about a lot of the jobs that you've had, and I did want to ask which one was your favorite out of all of the jobs that you've had over the course of your life.

Lenworth Walker: I think Hartford Hospital because Hartford Hospital gave me an opportunity. It was a major challenge, but it gave me an opportunity to demonstrate my other abilities besides being a security expert. For example, I got the portfolio of training for new hires. I picked up a lot of training. So on new hire date, if a presenter wasn't there except for like the surgery department, I could fill in. So I studied in a lot of different areas and also I went and I got my NFPA National Fire Protection Association certifications. So I know a lot of what the fire departments do as far as their knowledge, how sprinkler systems work, how you set up buildings, I can do all of that stuff. So it broadened my abilities a lot and I got the opportunity to attend a lot of courses. A lot of Homeland Security courses. I wore several hats. So they didn't just view me as the assistant director of security there, but I was working collaboratively with other

departments to do a lot of programs. And to do that well, you have to know what you're talking about.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay. So we can talk about community involvement now, and this could begin in Hartford. Did you do any community-based activities in Hartford before you moved to Bloomfield and Windsor?

Lenworth Walker: Well, what I did when I was in Hartford, some of it I did as a part of the job. I got the hospital to buy into the concept of this is your home base. This is where you meet your customers. You need to take an interest in the neighborhood around your workplace. The hospital was buying up a lot of apartments at that time, and so I had to get involved with knowing the side streets, the neighborhood. But there was some blight. There were buildings that were in need of repairs, and so the hospital bought into that whole thing where if you fix up your neighborhood, it will really help you in the long run. And that's a tried and true and proven concept because a lot of the people who moved into the houses in the neighborhood uplifted it. And then we could hire a lot of those people into the hospital because they were close. In the event of an emergency or staffing shortage, they were close by next to you. So I got involved with the Spanish American Merchants Association, which is the Park Street corridor. I actually have awards from them for attending all their meetings, looking at their needs, and working with them and the city of Hartford government and then going to the hospital and saying, "I know you're in the business of helping people, but can you funnel a couple of dollars to show goodwill and to help improve the Park Street neighborhood and the neighborhoods around it?" [00:30:00] And then there became SINA [Southside Institutions Neighborhood Alliance]. I've got to look it up, but it involved a portion of New Britain Avenue. They got involved with the learning corridor, that magnet school. The hospital got involved in that. So the community projects grew and I was very involved in all of that. And for both and for those efforts, I have a bunch of awards. They gave me a bunch of awards.

Sulema DePeyster: Did you do any other community-based activities in Hartford along with SINA?

Lenworth Walker: I got involved with Big Brothers and did the best I could for some of the kids. I don't believe in bringing up their names or anything like that. While I was at the hospital was about the time I started getting involved with offering scholarships. So I offered scholarships. Today, I still do it. Not as much as I would want to do, but I offered scholarships. For example, one of my fraternities is Excelsior Lodge #3. Those are the Masons. I offered scholarships through them when I ran that place. I also offered multiple scholarships through the West Indian Social Club, and how I did the scholarships were what they refer to as the beauty pageant, which is actually not really a pageant. [It was] young people looking to go to college but demonstrating academic ability and people who could use the help. The way it works is I sponsor an entrance and then there are scholarships for that, and I pay for their portion of it. Then I got involved with Veronica Airey-Wilson in Hartford for her vinyl records group and their scholarship thing. I donated money for their scholarships too. So [in] several areas, I put scholarships out for inner city kids who need a helping hand.

Sulema DePeyster: I have a few questions based on that. First, was Big Brother a mentoring program?

Lenworth Walker: It was. It was an actual mentoring program. I actually did that to a good friend of mine. That's a long story. But anyway, yes. It was a mentoring program and you got to spend time, as often as you can, with these [kids]. I preferred to be with the young men because strangely enough, they were the ones that were getting involved with a lot more stuff out there rather than the young ladies, and that was just a fact of life. And so I actually got involved with a mentoring program with the former police chief of Hartford, Darrell Roberts, and I really had to get to work with him closely. I don't know if you would remember the year that there were shootings at the West Indian parade.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh no, I didn't hear about that.

Lenworth Walker: Yeah, well that year, I was president of the West Indian Club. [That is] one of the things I did in the time too. The shootings came about and it was just in broad daylight, in the middle of a busy parade street. It was unheard of, and it turns out there were these young men who actually walked past me at the curb in front of the [West Indian Social Club], and I said hi and they said hi, which is what I normally do. But times were changing in that I was doing courses on gang colors. So you look for the handkerchief, the shoe strings, the different things. But these kids just evolved where back then, you can know what your parents know, what adults know. So they changed. And you'll never guess what their uniform was. The uniform was a white T-shirt, blue jeans, white sneakers. You would have never thought, and that shooting, not only did it ruin a great West Indian celebration, [but] I had get involved. I felt the need to get involved with that because it started getting labeled as the West Indian [00:35:00] parade shooting. So you can see the negative connotations, and we had to get involved with the community and work around saying it's a celebration of independence. We had nothing to do with it, but the public perception and that negative term that stuck with that event did a lot of damage. We've managed to overcome that. The difference is now you can't march along the long route anyway anymore. You march from a short distance and you get to Bushnell [Park], and everything culminates there because you can manage it better. I was all over the place.

Sulema DePeyster: Did you have any other roles in the West Indian Social Club? Did you work your way up to president?

Lenworth Walker: No, I actually joined just as a regular member to observe, and then some other folks who knew me said, "Man, you've got a lot of talent. We could use your talent." So I think what they did is the very next year, they made me vice president. So when everybody waited, [they] just jumped me to vice president. I did vice president one year, and then the next year I became President.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay.

Lenworth Walker: So I didn't have to wait long to get there.

Sulema DePeyster: Were you involved in the Bloomfield community at all?

Lenworth Walker: Not as much as I was involved in Hartford. Not really. I knew the mayor. I knew the deputy mayor, Dr. Alred Dyce. As a matter fact, I owe her a phone call. She's moved out of the state, but I keep in touch with her. The superintendent of the schools, Paul Copes, I knew him then. But because I was working in Hartford, I did a lot of my community involvement mostly in Hartford. And then I moved on. So let me back up a second. I was master of the lodge at Excelsior Lodge, #3. That was the Main Street, Mahl Avenue community. So I had to get involved with that community and then work with the kids and the youth. I did the cookouts, [brought in] the young people [I was] mentoring. I still have pictures of a lot of the scholarships I gave to some of those kids. I mean, they're now grown people. But Hartford was the hub where I did most of my community work.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay. And what about your community work in Windsor? I know now you're on town council, but where did you begin?

Lenworth Walker: Well, a lot of the community work that I've done in Windsor, even though I'm in Windsor, it extends outward. Now I'm involved with doing things for the town, but I do that more now as part of my position in the Republican Party in Windsor. I'm the vice chair of the Republican Party in town, and so most of what goes on around us, the Democratic Party does the same thing. We look for means to give people scholarships and that kind of stuff. So that's basically what I'm doing now. However, now my problem is time. I can only do so much wearing so many hats, and I'm running a political campaign right now. So don't ask me where I get time to do anything.

Sulema DePeyster: [laughing]. Okay, I will ask more about your campaign after a few questions about other involvement, but I am curious to know what influenced your decision to become a part of town council.

Lenworth Walker: Well, I started off as a Democrat. I've always been a person who believes in [helping] people who have less opportunities. It's always been a part of my personality to just help. I was the person who saw broken bird and said maybe I can put a splint on it and get it to walk and do whatever. And plus, I was working in Hartford. So when I did the Big Brother thing, some of the things that I saw that these kids needed [were] what my son took for granted. He had the games. He had everything. He was complaining about how he'd have to do homework before basketball. These kids were worrying about trying to survive [00:40:00] and mom is out working. So I thought I can do more. I can offer more with whatever little time I had, and so I've always been someone to help uplift people. And so that's what started me off in politics in Windsor. I did that great, had my parting of the ways with the Democrats, and then I got involved with the Republicans and I haven't changed one bit. I'm still involved with promoting education and helping young people, especially young people who weren't born with silver spoons and who need someone in their life to say, "Don't make this mistake do this. Do this." I've had mentors in my life who would say, "If you take this path, it might look glorious for you, but what do you really want, Len? What do you want in the long run? And if you want something in the long run, maybe you can do this." A lot of these kids who have the attraction of the gang life are still out there. I don't care how people try to cover it up. Somebody needs to say to them, "Here is a different way." Understanding, at the same time, that there are challenges for these kids because

their neighborhoods aren't the greatest, and if they say no, then there are consequences. But if somebody is there, whatever we can do to help save a young black man from going behind bars, we should do it. I still maintain that to this very day.

Sulema DePeyster: That's good. Were there any people who specifically encouraged you to run for town council?

Lenworth Walker: Yes, from the democratic side because I was always at some of these events. So there are more than one. There are a couple of people, but I'll leave them out of it for now because they may not want anybody to know that they still support. [laughing] They actually don't. Yes, I've had people who encouraged me and said, "You know you need to [run]." Plus I've always said back when I first ran in Windsor that the West Indian community in Windsor is underrepresented. We had people who are out and about doing a lot of talking, but talking is not an effective means of representation. So you can talk all you want but if you're not sitting at the table, if you're not involved with the decision making processes, then I'm not sure how effective you are. And I'm going to sort of segue into what I did when I got on the town council while being a part of the Democratic Party. I got on the phone, stayed on the phone, begged for money, [and] fought to bring the West Indian celebrations to the Windsor Town Green. The only time it has ever happened and the single time it has happened is through me. I begged my colleagues for funding, walked around, called up corporations. [At] the time, a lot of people in town were concerned about this thing coming to town. That was conveyed to me because they were calling up town hall and voicing concern.

Lenworth Walker: I think Searles was chief of police at the time, and he said, "When you're going to bring this thing here, we have a lot of concerns. People in town have a lot of concerns. What can we do?" And I said, "Yeah, I'm glad you said what can we do. You tell me what you've heard and let me work with you." A lot of people don't know they flooded that town green and the areas around it. You had cops all around and wherever. And they said there were going to be shootings, that the whole town was going to get murdered, the place would be burned to the ground. Of course, I'm exaggerating, but they were really nervous and it turned out to be a beautiful experience. No problems whatsoever. So I pat myself on the back and I [think], "Great. Bloomfield has it every year. There's one in Hartford. When we get done with Windsor, we can move to East Hartford and get them to get on board too." Then I had a rude awakening the next year that came around and I wanted to put it on, and I said [00:45:00] to my fellow Democrat colleagues, "Time for you to fund First Town Downtown. These are the places. Where's the money for the West Indian celebration?" They said, "Put some brakes on it. Slow down. Let's talk." Now in politics, when your colleagues say to you, "let's talk," you know right off the bat there's more to that. And what that was is they said, "It's an election year. We think you should put it off until the year after because you know there was opposition the year before."

Lenworth Walker: Of course, I'm going to have dialogue. I said, "Was a cat hurt?" No. "Was a pet hurt?" No. "Were there any fires?" No. "Did anybody get hurt?" No. "Any crime?" No. I said, "Well, why are you telling me to cancel the parade?" And they said, "It's not going to happen. This is politics. We don't want the parade." So my thing is now do you tell the Irish they can't have their parades in Hartford? Nope. Do you tell my Spanish colleagues that their Park Street

parade can't be held? Nope. Do you tell the Italians they can't have their parade? Nope. So how dare you tell me that the West Indians, who make up a large segment of Windsor, can't have their parade? They never had an answer, and their answer was, "[Not] happening." And so that started a rift. That year I decided, knowing me with my fighting spirit, I'm going to put on this parade. I'll use my own funding. I'll get people to put fliers. I still have the names of the people who helped me. We worked and worked and got everything. Well, that was great, except we didn't get access to sound [or] audio equipment. So we didn't have microphones, we didn't have speakers, we didn't have wiring, [or] portlets, which we needed. Those were never delivered. Never ordered, I found out. Access the town hall for the bathrooms, that wasn't done. Public works that normally came out and emptied the trash and everything, that wasn't done. They cancelled every single thing for that event, so it flopped. So you can see what happened with that, which is why I said, "You say to the people that you're for them, you say to the Windsor community you want to help, but this is what you did to us? So you're not really representing, you're pretending," and that's one of the reasons that caused me to walk away. Since that day, there has never been another West Indian parade on the town green. Now, knowing me, that doesn't mean I'm not going to try, but I'm not going to tell them when I'll try.

Sulema DePeyster: When was the first and only West Indian celebration? What year was that?

Lenworth Walker: Stuff that I need to remember that I don't remember. I can find out because it has to be in the records somewhere. So you know what I'll do? Why don't I do this? It was on the town green, and it was well attended. I need to find out the street. Hold on, I'm just going to make some notes. And actually, some of the ladies who helped me put that on are still around. [inaudible] Doreen Richardson, who used to be on the Board of [Education] who's no longer in Windsor. She was one of them. There's a PhD lady. I can look up the names. I don't think I have documentation from all of that stuff from back then, but somewhere online it should be available and I'll look that up, okay?

Sulema DePeyster: Okay. That would be great. I think I had another question about that, but we could also transition into WAACA since that was, I'm assuming, prior to this experience. Or was this around the same time?

Lenworth Walker: [00:50:00] It was around the same time. Was it? You know, the strange thing is all of WAACA's records were sitting in my garage, every piece of paper, until the state of Connecticut that started saying, "You need to straighten out your tax paperwork." And then I had to get that to Vivian Cicero, and I never saw it after. So if I had those things I could find out all that, but I don't know what Vivian did with them. But I know she had to deal with tax papers. But anyway, it was either about the same time or sometime thereabout.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay.

Lenworth Walker: My deceased wife was the secretary for WAACA, and I was a member.

Sulema DePeyster: Did you also have any positions on the executive board, or was that primarily your wife?

Lenworth Walker: No. No, I didn't because back then if I remember, I was actually on the [town] council. Now that I remember, I was actually on the council. I didn't take any executive positions but I went to their meetings, and I was very involved with what WAACA was doing.

Sulema DePeyster: What was your perception of WAACA's impact on the town at the time?

Lenworth Walker: Well, I don't know if anybody else told you this, but I can tell you right now. One of the things that we wanted to do as Black people in Windsor was to make sure that we had a group of people who could meet to look at what our concerns with the town were, if our issues and our needs were being met, and if they were not, what was the best avenue to get those needs addressed. One of the projects of Vivian Cicero and I'd say for most of us was the Shad Derby Queen and the Windsor High School graduates. We didn't feel that the Black kids had a chance. We felt that their chances of becoming queen were less and we also wanted to help them with scholarships. So we would do things and put on events to raise money for those kids. Even if the child did not become a queen, I'm pretty sure we had a couple of names and we would do it our own way. We would say, "Here's a scholarship on behalf of the Windsor Afro American Civic Association." So quietly, WAACA helped to push to say, "You need to do more. We need to do a lot more and we need to do more as an incentive for these young women to get good grades, and to make sure that if they went to become Shad Derby Queens, that they were being judged fairly." So we didn't have posters marching in front of town hall, but we used diplomacy and I think it was effective.

Sulema DePeyster: Do you remember any of the events that WAACA held throughout the years?

Lenworth Walker: Oh my Lord. [laughing] That's a lot of stuff to remember unless I get the diary. Vivian is not around anymore, but [Florence Barlow] is a walking diary on a lot of what WAACA did.

Sulema DePeyster: Yes, she is. [laughing]

Lenworth Walker: I'm telling you that because I know. Florence was always the person getting around organizing. She'd be at 10 places at once saying, "Hey Len, you need to do this. And what about this?" So a lot of that, Florence can tell you what they did.

Sulema DePeyster: So you said you attended a lot of the meetings.

Lenworth Walker: Oh, yes.

Sulema DePeyster: Is there anything that sticks out about the meetings or anything that comes to mind? What [did] they look like?

Lenworth Walker: You have an agenda and you can raise any issues that you think needs to be discussed in the meeting. So while it was formal and it had structure, [00:55:00] it was what's going on in town. Is there something we need to know about? What did you hear? That kind of stuff. They were fairly good meetings. I can't remember all of the events but like I told you, Florence will. I specifically remember the Shad Derby Queen issues coming up and what can we do to provide scholarships for some of those young ladies.

Sulema DePeyster: What would you say you enjoyed about WAACA?

Lenworth Walker: I enjoyed the fact that it gave people an opportunity to sit outside of say a political town committee and to look at the town in general through unbiased eyes and say, "I don't care what side of the political aisle you're on." Granted most of us in there were Democrats, but we brought up issues that affected the Black community. I know there might be some people who were never part of WAACA have asked, "Is it time to revive WAACA?" But before WAACA disbanded, the conversation I was a part of was, "What can we do to ensure continuity of this group?" It is the same question Black organizations have all over, whether it's the Freemasons, or the Elks, or any other organization where Black folks used to meet continually to help and to provide resources. It always comes down to your membership. A lot of the Black organizations that are around are not attracting [young people]. Even if they do attract young people, they don't keep them engaged. I think not just for WAACA, but for a lot of the organizations I'm involved with, we need to do a better job or we're all going to go die along the wayside. If we don't attract young people and keep them engaged, it will never work. So we can just start writing the epitaph for a lot of these groups. In order for [young people] to be involved, and this is just my personal opinion. If you want your organization to continue and to grow, we and I as an elder, must ask our young people, "What do you want out of this organization?" We're not doing that. We're talking to these young people. Sometimes we need to stop and listen because if they're not interested, try as you might, they're not joining. And if they do join, after a couple days, they're leaving. Those are the message I need to send to everybody, and I've been talking about it. Folks don't want to hear about it.

Sulema DePeyster: Yeah, I think it is an issue.

Lenworth Walker: It is an issue and I feel very strongly about that.

Sulema DePeyster: It seems like it's constant and it is present in a lot of different organizations. [But] also, do you think there were any other factors besides the decline of membership and the lack of younger members in general? Were there any other factors that contributed to the decline of WAACA?

Lenworth Walker: I honestly don't think so. I've told my Masonic brothers. I said, "Look around." I am a bigwig in the Republican Party. I'll sit with my chairmen. I'll sit in a group with the administrator and say, "Look around." You could have \$20 million. The money will attract some people, but there will no longer be any continuity of your organization if you don't get younger people when your membership is getting up in age and they can't get around as much and they can't get around as often. You're on a road to closure, and we need to do a lot more. We could do a lot more outreach and there seems to be a disconnect between the elders in this village and our young warriors and our princesses. There's a disconnect, I think.

Sulema DePeyster: Were you a part of WAACA up until it disbanded? [01:00:00]

Lenworth Walker: Yes, yes. I told you I had all the paperwork here in my garage until I had to come get the taxes and all that stuff dealt with, and Vivian got them.

Sulema DePeyster: There are some other members who had stopped being involved prior to the official disbandment of the organization. So it is interesting to see the difference in sticking until the end and seeing that decline versus leaving before that happened. So that is very interesting.

Lenworth Walker: Well, the membership had started to decline. I think Richard Quintero was there. You could see that, and then you get to the point where you start saying, "Let's talk about who's ill or who's sick or who's in the hospital." And then you start going, "Where have I heard this before?" So it's time to bring in new membership, but this is not criticizing WAACA. You heard me mention all the other organizations I'm involved with, in particular the Black ones. It seems to be a common theme or a common issue that we need to bring in young people and unless a group of us gets together and brainstorms and then take the ideas from our brainstorm and come up with an action plan, we're not getting anywhere. We're not making any progress. It's good to talk. We can talk. We can have 20, 30, 40 meetings, but how are we going to get our young people involved? And I believe you identify them, put them in a room, and say, "This is our organization. Tell us what we're doing wrong. How can we get you to join us and become a part of it and active?" And we're not doing that. Some people are just too proud and just want to hold onto power and see the decline of the old Black organizations. They're going by the wayside.

Sulema DePeyster: This question doesn't have a concrete answer, but I'm curious to know about your perception of when WAACA ended. There's been a different answer from a lot of the people that we've asked, but what year would you say [WAACA ended]? Maybe not a specific year, but just a timeframe for when WAACA ended in your perspective.

Lenworth Walker: It is hard to guess because I don't specifically remember the year, but the meetings stopped happening. And then it just sort of fizzled away, and it was sad because WAACA offered a valid place in the community. They had good things to do, and when you're helping young people, especially with scholarships and keeping tabs on the town, holding town government accountable peacefully. It's a really good organization. I've had people approach me to say, "Why don't you guys start it up? There are conversations." I don't know who had those conversations. Nobody reached out to me, but I wouldn't mind having a conversation about reviving WAACA and how we dress it up. It'd be nice to keep the same name, but I would not be wasting my time if our young people are not included in the membership.

Sulema DePeyster: Based on that, would you say if it was possible for WAACA to be revived, the key component would be having young people involved? [...] [01:05:00] Not only in being recipients of scholarships, but also on executive boards and the decision-making process. That would be necessary for reviving WAACA?

Lenworth Walker: Absolutely. If we want our young people to be able to take over the reins and continue the good work that we've done, we not just need to put them in place and make them placeholders. We need to teach them what we know. Not just put them there but say, "How can we get this young person? How can we train the young person?" In other words, it's actually using the corporate method. If you want a chain of succession, you don't just put people in place, but you train them. Train a young child how to be a woman, train a young child how to be a man

and they'll do better. So that's what we need to do. Not just with reviving WAACA but with anything else. We've got to get our young people in place, and we need to teach them what we know and train them so that you'll be their mentor for a while, just like we do in corporations. So when that CEO goes out, the incoming one knows just about everything there is to know. And if they run into a problem, they can pick up the phone and call the former. That's what Black people need to do in order to be really and truly empowered.

Sulema DePeyster: So those were the majority of my questions about WAACA, but we can transition into now and where you're currently at. But we did talk about your transition from a Democrat to Republican in town council, and I'd like to know more about being a Republican in town council and what that looks like and anything else that you've accomplished during your time as a town councilor.

Lenworth Walker: Well, I tell people this all the time. If you're in politics just because you want to be in the position, all you have to do is smile. Just smile, don't get in any arguments with anybody. Just go along. You'll be elected year after year and you just don't do anything. Some of us are passionate about what we do or in it because you want to make change. We want to help people, and I fit into that mold. And so I've debated. I've gotten involved with telling people what my personal opinions are, that kind of stuff. On the democratic side, the Democrats have a lot of stuff that I like about helping people. However, there came a point in time where I realized that a lot of what you call helping people is not really helping people. You're making them dependent. And so from the Republican side it is help you to get to point A and then move on. Don't just settle for mediocre or little. Aim high, aim above, and that philosophy aligns with my personal beliefs. And so that's where I am. Well, I have a lot of friends who are Democrats who will tell you there was a point where I'd pick up a sign and I'd go protest all along. I've yelled about racism in Windsor. I've had people call me up on the phones [and say] there's some lawsuits going on. All that kind of stuff. And I found out that when I yell, the people who are actually guilty who are not yelling, they don't become the targets. You become the target. "Oh, there goes Walker. He's going to yell and scream and do whatever."

Lenworth Walker: I stopped. I just totally stopped, and so I'll pick up the phone and call somebody and say, "This person is working for you. You're the head of it. How are you going to fix this? And if you don't fix it, you can rest assured at the next town council meeting, I will be commenting on it. Or these things need to happen. You have trucks and you have a dump, a literal dump, and a truck mechanic operating 24 hours in Windsor, and all the neighbors are complaining and all you're doing is talking. Well, that isn't solving anything because people want to sleep at night. So Mr. Town manager, why don't you start issuing fines? Fine the people who are doing it. We have ordinances." [01:10:00] "Oh, that's a good idea. I'll do that." Or another example. People are speeding all through town. Nobody cares what the speed limits are. I was working at Loomis. I worked the night shift. I'm getting off work in the morning and people want to go north on Palisado [Avenue]. I pull over because they're on your bumper, and Palisado is what, 40 [miles per hour]? I think it's 45 with some space, and they were doing 60, 70. And I thought we were having conversations about trucks, noise, trash, traffic. All the time, people talk. Just a lot of talk. That isn't solving the problem. So I'm driving through Windsor Locks. I

noticed that they have these speed warning signs and they're on a utility pole, on a town stop sign, or somewhere there. And I thought, "Why don't we do that in town?" Everybody says, "Not a bad idea." And I said, "Buy some portable ones," because over time, people get accustomed to seeing this speed sign. They'll slow down right there and then they'll zip after that. So that's what the town did. Moved everything around. All those signs were my recommendations. So I believe in solutions and not a lot of empty talk.

Sulema DePeyster: I guess this question is [about] what you currently do and how it relates to what you want to accomplish in the future. But besides town council, is there any other way that you are involved in Windsor specifically?

Lenworth Walker: Well, I'm currently running now for the 60th House District seat. That election is in November, and I want to do that because some of the issues that are facing us today, it's about dollars, dollars, dollars and inflation. Every time you go to the gas pump, we know what happens there when you fill your car up with gas. Unless you have an electric car. But then you still have to charge it, and if you use Flex then you still have to buy gas at some point. So those are the things, and I really want to give people relief. I want to give people relief not just immediately at the gas pump but with taxes, and I have a plan for all of those. I'll tell you a couple of simple things right off the top of my head that I've been thinking about. So if we reduce the income tax from 5 to 4% for individuals earning \$75,000 or less, or for joint filers earning \$175,000 or less, that's an immediate tax relief that people can use. It's not going to affect the revenues for the state because as of the end of May, the rainy day fund as you know it is about \$3.1 billion. So it's not going to affect the state revenues coffers by any means. And then there's this diesel tax. If you end the diesel tax through the end of 2022, it would have a significant effect on the cost of goods because those company owners that use diesel trucks, those people who are running the courier services for your mail or your Amazon, if they're using diesel, their costs have increased. So they have one of two things to do. They're either going to eliminate some of the jobs of some of the drivers they have, or they're going to find a way to increase the cost of delivery to you through Amazon or wherever.

Lenworth Walker: If you do that, then they're going to raise their prices. So that's where you get inflation bubbling. So cut back on the diesel tax, right? And let's look at the sales tax. Let's reduce the sales tax a small amount. Instead of 6.35%, drop it down to say 5.99%. Immediate tax relief. And now sometimes you want to go to the store to buy a prepared meal, right? There's a 1% tax at the register [01:15:00] when you buy a prepackaged meal. Why don't we just eliminate that? So I have other things that we can do, other things that we can work on that I think is going to make a huge difference to people's pockets initially. Not just talking about it. Everybody talks about it. And you can give child tax credits all you want. Everybody doesn't have kids, and so how much are you helping? What about our seniors? I could go on and on about this. Here's another one. So it's summer, inflation is about to kick into high gear. Come the colder months. What about if the state said improve the qualification limits for people to get fuel assistance? Energy assistance, whatever. That's going to make a big difference because if things don't flatten out, if our cost of living does not get reduced and we're in hyperinflation, we're in trouble come winter. If we care about people, we want to make sure that the families at least stay warm. So

those are the things that I'm looking at, which is why I want to move. It's time for me to get off the council and go to the state capitol and say to my colleagues there right across the aisle, "Here is what we need to do. We see you on TV talking. You talk a lot and that's great. But come up with some solutions."

Sulema DePeyster: So this is in regards to your larger future. I guess a short-term goal would be securing a seat for the House. Do you have any longer-term goals in the political sphere?

Lenworth Walker: Well, at some point if the National Republican Party wants to talk to me, I'd be more than willing to do so and actually think I owe them because they've given me a lot of support. When I came up with my ideas, instead of saying flat out no, they'd say, "Let's look at where you want to go and let's be realistic about it," and they've supported me 100%. They're behind me [for] most of what I want to do, so I believe that I should remain loyal and if they have jobs that they think I can fill, I'd be more than willing to look at that. I'm not sure I'd want to be saying no to a lot of stuff, unless I don't believe it. But if I don't, I'm going to let you know I don't.

Sulema DePeyster: I suppose this is my final question, but you said you're currently still living in Windsor?

Lenworth Walker: Yes, I am.

Sulema DePeyster: What has kept you in Windsor all these years?

Lenworth Walker: Wonderful neighbors. The diversity of Windsor. The town itself. There are more loving people than there are haters, and I've knocked on a lot of doors. I'm continuing to knock on a lot and a lot of us share the same issues – prices of stuff, gas prices, that kind of stuff. And if we just sometimes sit down and talk, we have more in common than we have differences. So it's a beautiful place. I love Windsor.

Sulema DePeyster: All right. Thank you so much, Mr. Walker, for sitting down and talking to me today. I appreciate you being involved in this WAACA project and I look forward to what we're able to accomplish in the future.

Lenworth Walker: Perfect. Thank you so much.