



Tim Curtis:
WAACA Oral History

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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

Doug Shipman: I'm Doug Shipman, director of Windsor Historical Society. Today is the 11th of March 2021, and I'm conducting an oral history interview with Mr. Timothy Curtis. Tim, if you could just, as I said, give your consent for the interview. You can just say, "I, Timothy Curtis, give my consent to have this interview conducted."

Tim Curtis: Yes, okay. I, Timothy Curtis, give my consent to have this oral interview recorded.

Doug Shipman: Thank you very much, and we'll get started. So, as I mentioned, it's great for us if we can start with some of your earliest memories. Could you tell me a little bit about your childhood and your family background?

Tim Curtis: Okay, yes. I was born in 1948, and I lived in Washington DC. I grew up in Washington DC and went all the way through high school, and I lived in DC until I left for college. I know a lot about the Washington area, and what life was like in particular in the [19]50s and [19]60s in Washington where it was, even though it wasn't supposed to be segregated, it actually was by fact, not by law. So, I lived in an all-Black neighborhood through high school and when I say segregation, the neighborhood was segregated, the schools were segregated, and just the general working areas and living areas. Not so much the working areas but the living areas; the churches, the schools, the neighborhoods, in particular. I grew up really in an all-Black environment until I went to high school [in] ninth grade. Then I went to an integrated parochial school, and it was one of the first Catholic high schools in Washington that was integrated.

Doug Shipman: What high school was that?

Tim Curtis: It was a Catholic school that was Archbishop Carroll High School in Washington DC, and that was my first experience with living and working and studying with white people and white teachers. Actually, in [my] elementary school, also a Catholic school, it was all nuns and the nuns were African American. The priests in the parish, however, were white.

Doug Shipman: Could you, just backing up to your family a little bit, tell me a little bit about your mother and father and any siblings that you had growing up in the house with you?

Tim Curtis: Okay. Yes, I lived [with] both parents. They were together. I had a brother and sister. We were all nine years apart. I was nine years apart from my brother. I was the second person born, second child, and nine years after I was born, my sister was born. So we were all nine years apart, and we pretty much followed a similar path as far as education. We went to Catholic elementary school and Catholic high school. Both my mother and father worked for the U.S. government. My father worked for the post office. He was in the military. He served in the Marines at the end of World War II and the beginning of Korea. When he left the military, he got a job in the postal service. My mother worked for the U.S. Census Bureau, which is located in Suitland, Maryland, and that was her job until she retired. My father was in the postal service until he retired as well.

Doug Shipman: Great. I have to ask, are your siblings still alive? I'm guessing your parents –

Tim Curtis: Both of them are still alive. Since my brother recently – let me see. I'm 72, [00:05:00] so he recently had his 81st birthday. We were both born in September but nine years apart. And, of course, my sister is nine years younger than I [am]. They both live now in the Metro Area as it's called. In other words, they're living in Maryland even though we all grew up and lived in the district proper. But they both live in the DC area, and I was the only one who left. But we keep in contact.

Doug Shipman: What about your parents? I'm guessing perhaps they have passed at this point, or are they still alive?

Tim Curtis: No, they are deceased.

Doug Shipman: How long ago did they pass away?

Tim Curtis: I'd have to check the numbers on that one. I'm not really sure. In the [19]80s, so it's been a while. My father was a deacon in the Catholic church, and he was in the first graduating class of deacons in Washington. Before the deacons arrived, the idea of having a deacon was either going to be a priest and that was it. If you were married, you couldn't be a priest. But he was married, and they opened up some of the duties of a priest to the deacons and my father went in that direction. My brother is also now a deacon. So, I'm the only one who's not doing that kind of thing. I went to politics instead, so kind of like they do in royalty: you either go into the royalty or you go into the church or you go into the military. That kind of thing.

Doug Shipman: That's right. There used to be a pattern, right? The first-born son would inherit the estate, the second-born would go and I forget which was which, the priesthood, and the third-born would go into the military because there was nothing left for him to do.

Tim Curtis: Exactly.

Doug Shipman: That's great. [laughing] Well, can you tell me a little bit about growing up in Washington DC? What did you do when you weren't in school and what was it like growing up, as you said, in an all-Black environment?

Tim Curtis: Well, it wasn't something that I paid a lot of attention to in terms of feeling that I was missing out on anything because we grew up in a close-knit family with relatives. So, it was just in the neighborhood. It was interesting as we moved into the middle class. The Black middle class has always been historically a little lower than the white middle class. But it was still the middle class and we moved twice. We moved from a house that we rented when I was first born, and my parents bought their first house. But then as we were sort of like chasing the American dream, as they say, and going into the middle class, it seemed like we were chasing white families too because we would move in and white families would move out.

Tim Curtis: So what might have been a diverse neighborhood when we first moved into that section of DC, lower DC, would be diverse. But as time went on in a rather short period, white families moved a level further out. [They were] still in DC, but further out of the city towards the Maryland and Virginia suburbs. Then when I was in college, [my family] moved to an area of DC that was also much closer to Maryland and again another racially diverse neighborhood.

White families started to move into Maryland and so the area that we did live in, which had been diverse with a number of white families, usually older white families, became primarily African American.

Doug Shipman: And you saw this happening around you as you lived there?

Tim Curtis: Right. I think the most telling event was when we lived about twelve blocks from the capitol on East Capitol Street. That was our first move, and then that was like around 12th Street. We then moved up to 31st Street, so it was still a lot further out. I do remember one day my mom [00:10:00] came in when we had first moved to 31st Street and she was saying that our neighbor was moving. She was an older white lady and she had told my mom that they were moving, which was really upsetting to my mom because they'd gotten to be friends. But she was telling my mom that it wasn't us, it was any other groups that might come in after us, meaning other Black families. And so there has always been this fear of, "If it wasn't my family, it was because we tended to bring along other groups that might be more of a threat," I guess you might say to property.

Doug Shipman: Very interesting. Did you have a lot of friends in the neighborhoods that you lived in or were your friends mostly at school or a combination?

Tim Curtis: I had some friends in the neighborhood, but most of the friends in the neighborhood went to public school. So the friends that I did have were family. I had aunts and uncles and cousins all living nearby, and so when we did socialize, it was really with family in different parts of DC. A few neighbors were friends. But, like I said, since a lot of socialization for young people was done through school, and when I went to an integrated high school, the students came from all around DC and Maryland and Virginia, I inevitably got close to most of them.

Doug Shipman: Can I ask, why did your parents send you to the Catholic school as opposed to the public school?

Tim Curtis: Two reasons. One was the state of the public school system in DC Again, it was neighborhood schools, so therefore you couldn't just go to any school. Our neighborhood school was a decent public school and a decent elementary school, but there was always the thought of troubles and things that were going on: fights, which I don't know that was necessarily the case. But that was what the feeling was. But that was one reason that we were able to get a better education and a more quality education by going to parochial schools. But also, the religious piece was very strong. I mean that was a huge reason right there because, like I said, my father was strong in the Catholic church and actually, the church was a family too. As a matter of fact, we socialized with different types of organizations and activities centered on the church. So it was the religious aspect, but also the feeling that going to an integrated school translated into a better education and more quality for the education. Even though they had to pay for that. [In] public schools, you didn't have to pay.

Doug Shipman: Well, I was going to ask, was it a financial hardship to send you and your siblings to Catholic school as opposed to the public school?

Tim Curtis: I never felt it. I mean, I never knew. They just assumed that that's what I was going to be doing. That's what they wanted me to do, and so I never felt like I was wanting anything financial. They wanted to send me to the school and then I took the testing or whatever and got in and that was it. Actually, I went to the same Catholic high school that my brother did nine years earlier.

Doug Shipman: So what was it like? You indicated as you graduated into ninth grade, it was your first kind of mixed-race experience. How was that for you and how did you feel that you were treated in that newer environment?

Tim Curtis: It wasn't anything that I could recognize that there was a big difference, at least with my classmates. I know the one major difference that everybody knew was that even though it was an integrated high school, the school itself was not all that integrated. In other words, we had levels, we had groups. There were ability groupings, sections, and the upper sections were predominantly white. It started to become more, I guess around the middle level, a little more diverse. And then when you got down to the lowest levels, that was primarily Black. So there was still some segregation even within the school system itself, and I'm sure that that was [00:15:00] one way to keep white families from leaving the school system, knowing that they could probably have their child in a more white section. We knew this was happening, we knew it was that way, but it wasn't like I was missing out on anything.

Doug Shipman: Did you feel that it truly was based on ability? Or did you feel that there were any other factors involved in that, to your point, of trying to keep the white families in the school and so on?

Tim Curtis: That never really crossed my mind as far as racial separation by design or even by ability. I knew that I had reached a level, like we had sections A through H, I think, or something like that, and I was in section D and that was where you started to see more Black kids. When they got to A, B, and C, C was the science level. The feeling was a lot of Black kids couldn't do science; they couldn't do physics or chemistry very well. They could take a course, but then you had to get a certain grade level in order to get into section C. A and B were just honors-type of program levels, and you just simply didn't find too many Black kids there either. But, I mean, the education I got at the D level and actually, I was in C for a while. I looked back at some old high school books and I found that I was in 4C, so I had gone from B to C by the time I graduated. I mean from D to C by the time I graduated. But again, we thought there was a racial issue going on because that's just how it was in Washington, and then we just sort of went with it and accepted it and did the best we could with it. Besides, I was getting a decent education out of it. The teachers that we had, that I had, were fine.

Doug Shipman: What was your favorite subject?

Tim Curtis: Latin. I turned out to be a language teacher. Latin was my favorite subject followed by European history. I didn't like American history that much. I thought it was kind of boring. They called it civics and civics was boring. Laws and stuff like that. American history would have been more exciting, but it was government and civics that we were taught. But no, Latin I liked. I thought it was funny that one of the white students would copy my homework, and he

was in like section A or B or something. He would copy my Latin homework because he kept telling me there were so many other things he had to get done, that kind of thing. And he wound up getting the Latin award at the end of the school year. I thought that was kind of amusing.

Doug Shipman: Based on your homework.

Tim Curtis: Based a lot on my own. I mean he did a lot on his own, I'm sure, but it was just funny that I was helping him out and he wound up getting the award. But we both got A's, so it's okay.

Doug Shipman: What was the transition to college process for you and your family? Did you look at a bunch of different schools? I know you ended up going to one particular school. I learned about that yesterday from your wife a little bit. But can you talk about that? How'd you pick where you ended up?

Tim Curtis: It was a fairly easy decision. I got plenty of applications sent to me from schools, particularly schools that were just starting up, like Creighton [University]. But Creighton was out in Omaha, Nebraska, [and] I didn't want to travel that far. They sent me an application and a few other schools that were smaller schools that I hadn't heard of. So, I knew I was going to go to college no matter what, but I didn't want to necessarily live at home. So a school like George Washington [University] or America University or Catholic University, for that matter. My parents would have loved [it] if I'd gone to Catholic [University]. Georgetown was out because Georgetown was in a white neighborhood and it primarily [00:20:00] catered to white students at the time, particularly the law school. So, I didn't even think of going to a place like Georgetown or even applying. They didn't think I'd make it. I wound up going to the University of Scranton on a recommendation from a parish priest.

Tim Curtis: The priest had graduated from Scranton as well and told my father about it, and that was pretty much a done deal [laughing] right there since my father was very much into the church. Even before he became a deacon, he was the head of the altar boys. So he knew the priests and respected them a lot, and when this young priest told us about Scranton and that I should go and check it out, I didn't. We couldn't travel. I mean, nowadays you can do all types of visitations and visits to various schools. We couldn't afford to do that and so it was all by paper. But we settled on Scranton, even though they didn't give me a scholarship. They didn't offer a scholarship, but a school nearby actually did, King's College in Wilkes-Barre. But my parents just said, "Where do you want to go?" And I said, "Well, I heard a lot about Scranton," so that's where I went. I got accepted and they helped pay the early bills, even though I could have gone 20 minutes down the road. I won the full scholarship or a partial scholarship at King's, but it was Scranton because of the recommendation of the local priest.

Doug Shipman: Did Scranton have a religious affiliation?

Tim Curtis: Yes, Scranton is a Jesuit college. The Jesuits have always [hidden] behind the name of a town, whether it was San Francisco or Detroit, St. Louis or Scranton. You look a little harder and you realize it was a Jesuit school. But it was the University of Detroit or the University of Cincinnati or the University of San Francisco and, of course, the University of Scranton.

Doug Shipman: I didn't realize that. That's very smart of them. [laughing]

Tim Curtis: It was very smart on their part until you got there and you realize, "Who are these people in black robes? I don't understand." And also, back at the time, the schools were not co-ed. They were all male. At least I'm not sure if all of them were all male, but I know that Scranton was all male. They always had a sister's school, which was all female, and that's where my wife went to school at Marywood College [*now Marywood University*].

Doug Shipman: Did you know what you wanted to study when you first began or did your choices evolve as you experienced more of college life?

Tim Curtis: No, I had a pretty good idea because, like I said, I fell in love with Latin in high school. I did take a French course, two French courses actually, and no Spanish courses because then there was also a certain stigma about taking Spanish back then. If you weren't in a certain level grade, you could take French at the upper levels. But if you couldn't, then you would take Spanish. So, there was a stigma about that, which was totally off base, but that's how it was back then as far as academics. But no, I also realized that I couldn't use Latin a whole lot, though it gave me a firm grounding in English. But I wanted to have a language background that I could use once I graduated from college. So I took French. I was a French major all the way through with a minor in philosophy, which at a Jesuit school is pretty easy to get [laughing] because there are certain course requirements that you figure, "Well, I might as well just take two more courses and I can get a minor in philosophy." So I did that.

Doug Shipman: Was that school integrated as well or like your high school experience?

Tim Curtis: It was like over 90% white. Even though there was a rather large African American population in Scranton proper, it was primarily a white gold mining town. So I was one of maybe ten. [00:25:00] I'm trying to even remember how many. I think it might have been a 1500 student population from freshman to senior at Scranton, and I think there might have been ten of us. I know that a friend of mine from Carroll High School also applied and got into Scranton, and he couldn't handle it after a year because of such isolation from other people of color, from Black people. So, he left. After his freshman year, he went to Syracuse.

Doug Shipman: How did you deal with that, being one of ten African American students in your class?

Tim Curtis: For me, I was kind of an introvert anyway, so I didn't really socialize. I did have white friends that I did socialize with. I still do on Facebook. As a matter of fact, I have a couple that I befriended. I was also able to get home to family, and I was there only for three years because my junior year I spent in Europe studying with a junior year abroad program. So, I was there for three out of the four years. But like I said, being an introvert and having just a close circle [of] friends, I was able to survive. Plus, I met Cheryl, my wife, when I returned from New York. So my senior year was about as good as it was ever going to be, and she went to a predominantly white college herself.

Doug Shipman: So where did you go when you went overseas for your year abroad?

Tim Curtis: I went to Belgium. It was a program that the University of Scranton had with the University of Louvain. There was a Flemish-French component to the University. I could've gone to any place. I could've applied to any place, but they had a direct exchange program as far as courses so that any class that I took over in Belgium would automatically transfer as part of my coursework for Scranton. So I didn't lose a year. I didn't have to worry about losing a year. They accepted all the courses that I took. The courses were French and philosophy, so that turned out to be my major and minor. It worked out okay.

Doug Shipman: Do you feel that your year in Belgium shaped your perspective going forward in any significant ways?

Tim Curtis: Yes, it did because I wrote for the university newspaper. I interviewed people and had different types of news articles. When I went to Belgium, they asked me to report and write editorial columns. About three or four, I guess one per marking period, about my experiences in Belgium and what it was like looking at the U.S. from the outside about the issue of race. And it was 1968, and that was a big year for civil rights and Vietnam protests and all kinds of other things going on. I saw that, yes, there was racism in America, and I was looking at it from that perspective, but there was also racism in Europe. It was on the Africans as opposed to African Americans, or it was on Muslims in Europe. So, there was still racism. But the people that I met from Belgium, in particular, even my landlady, looked at me differently than someone from what back then was the Congo because there was a huge very bitter war between Belgium and the Congo. They fought for independence from Belgium, and it was bloody and there was still a lot of animosity among Belgians to Black Africans. But for me, for whatever reason, because I was American, there wasn't that level of animosity. So, I wrote about that.

Doug Shipman: Very cool. Were you involved in any of the social justice or other types of things on the college campus back at home when movements of that time period [were] so turbulent?

Tim Curtis: Yeah, actually even in [00:30:00] Belgium, there are a number of school groups and church groups who wanted to get the perspective of an African American because they were talking about racism, in particular. It was still a very huge issue in Europe, and so there were a couple of groups that I was a part of there. Even though I tried to explain that just because it was only my perspective as a Black person, that doesn't mean every Black person agreed with me or that I was the representative. They understood. But it was a good group, an enlightened group of young people that I met over there. Then when I came back, I did take part in the Vietnam War protests on the college campuses, the sit-ins and teach-ins, and those types of things. So, I became active there as well.

Doug Shipman: Because you were a draft age, were you able to avoid being drafted by being in college, or was there a concern that you might be drafted?

Tim Curtis: There was a concern. When they first started, you could get deferments because of college. But they eventually did drop that. Or at least by the time you were a senior and you graduated, you couldn't continue that deferment into grad school. So you couldn't be in school beyond the four years that you graduated. I didn't know what my number was. Everybody had a

draft number and mine, I think, was in the 160 range. I sort of knew that after I graduated in 1970, I probably would be called up. A lot of people, some of them were my friends, though not that many that I can recall, but some of them [went] to Canada to escape the draft. I was in ROTC because back then, it was a requirement to take an ROTC course. It wasn't something that I could avoid, and that's when I actually got to learn and like military history. It became very intriguing. I realized that map reading was not my strong suit or even firing an M1 rifle, but I could take it apart and put it back together again with the best of them, I guess, and clean it. But it was interesting because even though we took the courses, and we did the marching to practice the drills – I guess not the marching but the drills by day – after school we would have teach-ins against the war. It was just one of those things where we lived sort of like a double life where we had to take the course and put on the uniform.

Tim Curtis: And then sometimes, even still in uniform, we would have the videos of Jane Fonda as part of the teach-in. So yeah, it was a really intriguing time, to be sure. And then after I did graduate in 1970, I took a year to learn Spanish at Fordham [University]. It was a summer course and so I stayed in the Rose Hill Campus in the Bronx for a year. My wife happened to live in the Bronx at the time, so that was quite convenient. She lived with her sisters. While I was at Fordham, I did get [the] notice of my draft to come for my physical. My mother mailed [the notice] to me, and there was a direction that said if you are no longer close to the place where you should come for your physical, you could ask to have your physical transferred to another location. So that's what I did. I went to the draft board in the Bronx with my paper and I asked that my physical be shifted from DC to New York. It was during that time when they dropped the draft. So, they ended the draft. Even though my freshman year in college, I did have open heart surgery. So, if I was going to be drafted, I would probably not be put in a combat unit. I would probably be put in a different unit. [00:35:00] But I would have been drafted in some way shape or form to be put to use, but it never happened. So, I didn't get into the draft. I didn't get into the military at all.

Doug Shipman: I have to ask about the open-heart surgery. You glossed over that. May I ask? And I don't want to get into personal medical things but –

Tim Curtis: No, not at all. It was just [that] my father had a heart murmur, so I had it too. It was known that it was probably connected genetically to my father's heart murmurs. So that was well known. But then when I tried out for the [varsity] football team in high school, they took a deeper look at what was causing the heart murmur, which is interesting because they said if I had been playing football at the public school, they wouldn't have even caught it as far as the ability that the doctors and the quality of care, I guess. But they wanted to check to make sure that at that level of competition, they would check that out completely. And that's when they found a little hole in the heart, which they called an atrial septal defect or ASD, as it is commonly referred to. If I tell a doctor I had an ASD, he would know or she would know exactly what I was talking about. So that had to be repaired. So, it was open heart surgery, and it was repaired. But that ended my football career, and it probably stunted my military career, if I was planning on teaching at a war college somewhere or whatever. So, it was just routine. I mean it wasn't routine surgery, but it was just something that I guess is very common. It is common nowadays

too and back then to repair it was open heart [surgery]. I think they do it a little bit differently now so that it won't be quite as invasive.

Doug Shipman: It sounds very dramatic, so I hope you don't mind me asking.

Tim Curtis: No, at the time it was pretty dramatic, even though they said don't worry about it. They asked me what I wanted for the meal before the surgery, and it felt like I was like on death row or something. So I ordered a turkey sandwich which I thought, "Why would I just have a turkey sandwich?" But that's what I wanted at the time. But I came out and survived quite well.

Doug Shipman: That's great. So the draft was discontinued, and it sounds like this was around 1971-72 roughly. Then what did you do after your time at Fordham?

Tim Curtis: I got married in 1972. My wife graduated in '72, so I was waiting for her to finish her studies. It was funny that a priest that I knew, actually the priest that got me really interested in philosophy, a good friend, got me interested in going to Europe. He wanted to secretly marry Cheryl and I while she was still in college. We said no because my wife wanted a big wedding for her mother. So that was fine. But anyway, we did get married in '72 and at that time, I was teaching in East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, [Notre Dame High School]. Because it was Catholic, you didn't need a teaching certificate and I didn't have a teaching certificate. I wasn't in education at the time. I was just a French major, and so I got the job. So Cheryl and I first started out in Pennsylvania and I think I stayed there for two years until [1974]. Then we moved to Massachusetts because I got a scholarship to UMass Amherst as a teaching assistant. I also got a similar type of offer from the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, and we had to [decide] whether to go from Pennsylvania up to New England or back down to where the family was [and] still is in that area.

Tim Curtis: I thought it might be kind of cool because my wife is from North Carolina [00:40:00] and I was from DC, and if we went to Charlottesville, we'd be kind of in between the two families. She didn't like that. Plus, we had heard all these wonderful things about New England, and this was a way to see New England and not have to pay a whole lot to do it because I was in school with the teaching assistant scholarship thing. So we went to UMass, and I forget for how many years, but quite a few. Cheryl actually got into the doctoral program at UMass in education. I got my master's in French at UMass as well. And then I think we stayed there and acquired a whole lot of really nice people, a lot of friends, through UMass. Actually, we see them once a week now on Zoom. We still socialize, and so we stayed there until I believe it was 1984. So we came there in '76, I guess. And so from '76 to '84, we were in the Amherst area before we moved down to Windsor.

Doug Shipman: What made you choose Windsor?

Tim Curtis: Well, two things. One, I was teaching in East Hampton, Massachusetts. So I went from East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, to East Hampton, Massachusetts, and my wife was finishing up her doctorate at UMass. We would have stayed there, actually, if we could find jobs. But there weren't any, as far as teaching jobs in an academic area where there are five colleges. It is saturated, so we had to find someplace where my wife could get a job herself

to use her degree. We had two choices. One was Cape Cod Community College. She got an offer from there and she got an offer from the University of Hartford. Even though we went to Cape Cod and it's a beautiful, nice campus, we felt that going to Hartford, we would be much closer to the friends we had gained in Amherst.

Tim Curtis: So, we started looking around for someplace between East Hampton where I was teaching and the University of Hartford where she would be teaching. We wanted a town that was diverse, and a town and not a city. Therefore, it wouldn't be Hartford and it wouldn't be Springfield or Holyoke. We looked at two towns that were diverse and those two towns were Bloomfield and Windsor. We just picked Windsor pretty much on a whim, really. I mean we thought both towns offered what we wanted. I think one of the selling points was that Windsor was right on 91, Interstate 91, and so I could travel right up to East Hampton very easily and she could travel down to [the] University of Hartford easily as well. So, we settled on Windsor. It was the diversity piece and also just the ease of keeping our jobs. And now I'm teaching at another east. I was teaching in East Granby, so every teaching job I had had the word east in it.

Doug Shipman: Great. How was your transition into Windsor? You selected it for some very specific reasons, and did it live up to your expectations? In terms of how you felt becoming a part of the community here in Windsor, did that go well?

Tim Curtis: It went well. It was the diversity that we were looking for. The neighborhoods that we lived in were always diverse, quite diverse, and the schools were diverse as well. So, it lived up to that expectation. It was only a little bit later that we learned about what every town has, which we had even in DC, that there was a level of racism that included redlining and things of that nature that even Windsor had. But we never really thought about it. The neighborhoods we were able to purchase a home [in] were wonderful and we had wonderful neighbors. So yeah, the diversity part was what we were looking for [00:45:00] and it was affordable. It turned out to be fine. The friends that we had, most of the neighbor friends that we had, were mostly white still. But there were some Black neighbors as well. But that really wasn't as much of an issue for us because we could always travel south. I mean my wife had relatives in New Jersey as well as North Carolina, and I had relatives in DC.

Tim Curtis: We made at least two or three trips a year just to visit family. We didn't feel isolated, except in terms of we wanted to get a little bit more of a feel of the Black community in Windsor, and we weren't really sure how to do that. Even though we knew that there were a lot of Black people in town, we didn't belong to a church, which would have been one way of doing it. The Black church, like Archer Memorial or Bethel or First Cathedral or Metropolitan in Hartford. So, there were a lot of Black churches, but we just really weren't churchgoers, so that was one avenue that wasn't open for us. I did find, I think it was in the newspaper, about the fact that – we were always civic-minded – I noticed that there was an ad in probably the Windsor Journal about WAACA, the Windsor Afro-American Civic Association. [WAACA] was an organization that emphasized African Americans getting together and getting involved in the town. Not just meeting, but also helping to integrate the town and

pushing African Americans to go into political life or civic life. So, I saw the ad and I went to the first meeting and joined at that point.

Doug Shipman: So, WAACA was already established before you came into town. Interesting. Who were some of the first people you recall meeting in WAACA when you went to the first meeting and became more active there?

Tim Curtis: Some people that I'm sure you know. Florence Barlow, Vivian Cicero, and her husband Stan. Guy Jacobs, who was on the Town Council at the time. There are a few other people too: the Battles. Iva Allison was another one that we met early on. Those are the people that I remember, and we liked them, they liked us, and so we started going to the meetings regularly. They got me interested in moving into the political realm and to run for office since I was talking about that. They were really a strong force in pushing me to go in that direction.

Doug Shipman: So, your new friends and WAACA kind of encouraged you to consider running for Town Council?

Timothy Curtis: And the Board of Education.

Doug Shipman: How was that, running for office in Windsor?

Tim Curtis: It was something that I wanted to do, and I didn't mind the door knocking or the flyers or anything, and leaflets and the phone calls. And so it was fine. I went to a couple of the Board of Ed meetings, and I made a couple of statements because, at the time in Windsor, there was a busing issue, which is interesting. It always interested me because I knew that there were busing issues in places like Boston that were integrating. [There was an] attempt to integrate the schools in the Boston area, and there were issues in Windsor now as well that I found out about. Because the closer you lived to Hartford, the more diverse. Though some people thought it was mostly Black people but it really wasn't. But if you lived in Wilson or in the Deerfield area, that's where you found a good number of the [00:50:00] Black people. And the further north you went, like into Poquonock, the neighborhoods were white and the Poquonock school was white. Windsor avoided the issue, as they used to have two middle schools. Sage Park was the new one and then the LP Wilson was the older one. And so, they avoided getting into the whole idea of racial balance, which was the big issue back then, by just having only one middle school and one high school. So, there wasn't a choice that people had to make.

Tim Curtis: They had to make [a choice] between elementary schools, and it was a huge issue. Eventually – even though there were mostly democrats in town as far as the majority of voters – because of the busing issue, that actually changed the Board of Ed from democrat to republican. They didn't want to make any major changes, even though there was a court order pending on Windsor to do some integration. But they didn't think that. So the republicans said, “No, the kids can stay where they are, they [don't] have to move.” So, they won. What they wound up doing in order to deal with the pending court order was they closed one of the schools; the one in Wilson, Roger Wolcott. And so the easiest way to integrate was to make sure that the kids in that area didn't have a school to go to, so they had to go someplace. And so that's

one of the ways that the town did have the schools more integrated: by moving [and] filtering the kids. Of course, Wolcott was the smallest school population-wise.

Tim Curtis: But yet, they had needs that were significant funding-wise. And so there were a lot of complaints about how much money was going into a school that was only a little bit more than two-thirds the size of some of the other schools. They wanted more and more of these educational services that were needed, and so one way of dealing with it would be to close the school. And that's when I got involved in the Board of Ed around that time. I was PTO co-president at Wolcott at the time when they were thinking about closing schools, and I know that we joined forces with some of the parents from Poquonock who wanted to keep Wolcott open for their reasons. [laughing] We wanted to keep Wolcott open for our reasons, but we joined forces for that. But we didn't win. They did eventually close Wolcott.

Doug Shipman: That's so interesting. So, WAACA was sort of a source of encouragement, it sounds like, for you to get into politics. Was WAACA a political base as well? Was WAACA a vehicle for organizing people to vote for candidates or was that more through the party system? How did that work?

Tim Curtis: No, I mean we talked about it at meetings, but it wasn't really. There might have been. I can't really remember whether some policy statements came out of WAACA or not. But a lot of people I think in town didn't really give a lot of faith – or not faith, importance to WAACA in the membership and what WAACA did. It was okay because it was really an area for African Americans to get together and talk about issues and then join forces, I guess, with other town organizations and movements or whatever to get things done politically.

Doug Shipman: What are some of the other things that WAACA did? I've heard about things like scholarships and other things. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Tim Curtis: I know that the push in WAACA was to make Windsor look more diverse, even though there was diversity. The idea was to move WAACA members into civic life, and so it wasn't really an organization [00:55:00] that came out with certain, that I can remember, anyway, major political stances except for the Shad Derby. One of the things we noticed with the different [Shad Derby] princesses that were taken by the various organizations in town – True Value or the women's club or various other stores and businesses, realty areas – the person chosen was a young white girl and there weren't any Black girls involved. So WAACA did, for a while, promote Black girls themselves to be a princess and to go through the process of voting for the Shad Derby Queen. So, the idea was really more to integrate businesses as well. It wasn't something outside of Shad Derby and politics. There wasn't really a major push, but we see that there were some changes going on in Windsor as far as the jobs that kids got. For the longest time, if you went to Geissler's, the checkers and the packers were young white kids from Windsor High or from Loomis. There weren't any Black kids. But over time that changed, and I think WAACA had some impact on that as far as some of the members of WAACA getting their kids to apply for those types of jobs.

Doug Shipman: It sounds like there was some fundraising involved in what you all did for WAACA. I think there was a financial component to the Shad Derby Queen process as

well, and I'm told there were some scholarships provided through the high school. What kind of fundraising did you all do?

Tim Curtis: It was raffles, that kind of thing within WAACA primarily. I can't think of anything else. There was a dues component to being a member of WAACA, and so that helped to fund the Shad Derby Queen component and the scholarship component. I really can't think of any other things that WAACA [did], even though I know there were other things that we did. We would show up, for example, in the Windsor Journal as far as supporting different types of activities where we would join with established organizations and say that WAACA supports this or has contributed to this particular group or that particular group.

Doug Shipman: How long were you involved with WAACA overall?

Tim Curtis: Let's see. We moved into Windsor in '84. I probably got involved in WAACA around '86 or '87 because of school issues. We were members until it essentially dissolved. I don't think there was ever a formal ending to WAACA, but people simply started to not come to the meetings. People either moved out of town, people got older, [or] people passed away. There weren't any new recruits, and the younger people were not joining organizations like WAACA. We had kids who were used to a more diverse community, and so an organization that primarily catered to just African Americans was not something that young people were that keen on anymore. They were [keener] on church organizations like Archer Memorial and being part of the Black church more so than the Black civic organization.

Doug Shipman: And so, I know you said there is not a firm date [01:00:00] when WAACA ended, but do you recall more or less when it sort of stopped functioning?

Tim Curtis: I honestly don't. I think someone like Florence might be able to tell you more about that, since she was with the group that long. I know that there was a break towards the end. It was because in our bylaws, [it stated that] it was open only to African Americans and so there could be white people who might be allies or friends of WAACA, but they could not be members. And the big issue was the fact that it was a civic organization that was really discriminatory against white people. We couldn't let that happen, at least that was the fight. That was the issue because I mean Guy Jacobs was on the Town Council and I had been voted into the Board of Ed, which was in the 90s. I forget exactly when. But the optics were definitely wrong to have people from a Black organization now into politics in a diverse role and still could bar white people from being a part [of it].

Tim Curtis: There was a white person who didn't challenge it. He just wanted to be a part of WAACA. The fear at the time was that WAACA would be taken over by white people. More and more white people would say, "Oh yeah, I'd like to join WAACA." And so the voice that WAACA had of just African Americans would be lost. It's almost like the fear of white people when Black people moved into the neighborhood. Here there was a Black organization that white people were interested in becoming a part of, and we thought that we would lose our voice. I mean there was really only one person who was interested that I can recall, and so we changed our bylaws to say that it was open to Windsor as a whole. A number of people broke away from WAACA at that point. They decided that they didn't want to be a part of WAACA because the

original intent of having a civic organization solely for African Americans was now lost. And the person who joined was a really great guy. I mean it wasn't an issue, but it was about that time that we lost some membership.

Doug Shipman: Who was that one white person?

Tim Curtis: Oh, sure. It was Jim Mason. Jim Mason was the person, and he has always been civic-minded. He has passed away. But he was a contributing member of the group, and it was kind of interesting because it was a feeling, the fear, that white people would really want to join WAACA, and white people really didn't. It wasn't like that. They weren't panting and saying, "When are they going to open their doors to us?" So that fear was unfounded. Jim was fine but, like I said, the group really broke at that point. Many of us stayed, but a number of people also did not. They left the organization and eventually some of them actually moved out of town. Not because of that but just because of job movement and things like that.

Doug Shipman: So, you ran for Board of Ed and served on the board. How long were you on the Board of Ed?

Tim Curtis: I was there [for] three terms, which is six years. I'm thinking in 1990. I don't know. I'd have to check the records, '91 to '95 or '97. I think I was there through 1997, I believe. I could be off by one term, but it was three terms. At that point in time, the fear was that there could be no more than one person of color, African American, who could win because the election was really five of one party and four of the other. So, it was always going to be close. It was never a supermajority. But the fear was if more than one [01:05:00] Black person ran for office for a particular party, that particular party would lose the majority. So, I was the Black person on the board when I went on. Guy Jacobs was the Black person on the Town Council. I think that at the time, I said that I was thinking of leaving the board after six years and people wanted me to stay involved. [But] Board of Ed issues were really tough, and so I said I really needed a break. They said, "Well, how about joining the Town Council?" Because [laughing] we do potholes and buildings and that kind of thing and not the really gut-wrenching stuff about the education of a child.

Tim Curtis: So I said, "Yeah, but Guy is the current member of the Town Council. I'm not going to challenge him." The idea would be the town committee would vote for the five people that they wanted. So I could run and then the committee would determine who the five would be. But the feeling was that I might defeat Guy because I happened to be a little more liberal than Guy. Guy was very conservative. So they convinced him not to run. Essentially, they convinced him that it was time for him to leave. I don't know who did it. It might have been some people in WAACA, I don't know. It wasn't me. I never talked to Guy about it and Guy never knew that I was thinking of running. At least I don't think he did. He probably was told that I was thinking of running. But he, for whatever reason, agreed not to run. So, that particular mini-crisis was avoided and right now it doesn't matter. I mean, take a look at our Board of Ed. It's extremely diverse. Not the republican side but the democratic side, and the same goes for the Town Council. It's diverse as well. But back then, the feeling was one Black person only and preferably male.

Doug Shipman: I was going to ask you more about that because I'm new to Windsor. But I have lived in several towns in New England and in Connecticut here and have watched the politics with interest. I was told when I first got here, "Oh yeah, there's always been just one person of color on Town Council at a time." I think Randy McKenney maybe had been in the council seat before Nuchette Black-Burke was elected.

Tim Curtis: Right, they came after I did. So, it was Guy then myself. After me, [it] was Randy and Nuchette.

Doug Shipman: And now there's a Black man from the republican side that has been appointed to fill a vacancy.

Tim Curtis: Right. He was a Democrat.

Doug Shipman: Okay, I didn't know that.

Timothy Curtis: He ran as a Democrat and won. Lenworth Walker ran as a Democrat, and he ran with me. So, he and I were actually Democrats on the Town Council at the same time. After I left, he fell out of favor and decided that he still wanted to run. That happens at the town level. Sometimes you just go where there's a vacancy. Democrat or Republican, it doesn't necessarily matter a whole lot, and we've had that. I served on the Board of Education with a republican, Betsy Kenneson, and then I served on the Town Council with Betsy as a Democrat. [laughing] I think they call them Windsorcrats or something like that. Or 'Republicrats', I don't know. But that's the way it is at the moderate level when you are a town person in a diverse community like Windsor.

Doug Shipman: So you and Len Walker served together on Town Council at the same time?

Tim Curtis: Same time, yes.

Douglas Shipman: So, there were actually two people of color on council for at that point?

Tim Curtis: Right.

Doug Shipman: When were you on council roughly or for how long? [01:10:00]

Tim Curtis: I was there for 10 years, so five terms. I was deputy mayor for all those terms, and I wish I could tell you. I know it was in the mid-90s. I think my last term was over in 2001 or 2003. I really would have to check the books on that one. I know it was the early 2000s when it was my last term, and I think Len Walker came on for two terms while I was there.

Doug Shipman: Do you feel that things have changed in Windsor now that the town would not find it unacceptable to have more people of color serving on town council?

Tim Curtis: Oh, yeah. The town has changed. I don't think that there's that issue anymore. I mean Len Walker is now a Republican, so we do have a Black person there. But there was also a woman who was on the Town Council back when I was on the Town Council. Sonia, and I always forget her last name, was a Republican. But for the most part, the Republicans have had a very white slate and Len just simply stepped into that position because of the vacancy. But, for

the longest time, the feeling was only one Black person could get elected. That's not the case anymore.

Doug Shipman: That's interesting how that perception has changed. I did wonder, again, as the new person coming in, and I had seen the demographics for the town of Windsor before coming here on paper and the percentages. And I said, "Well, how come there aren't more people of color on Town Council if the town is, I think right now, about 48% white?" So actually, 52% identify as people of color in various categories. So, why aren't there more people of color on Town Council? Why do you think that is? There are still, even today in 2021, two Black people on Town Council and the rest, the majority, are white.

Tim Curtis: Well, I've always felt that politics has been very slow to change, to keep up with the politics of the times. I mean if you take a look at Bloomfield, it was the same way. If you take a look at Hartford, it's pretty much the same. Politically, there's been some movement, but it's behind the demographics. That seems to always be the case and a number of people aren't always that involved or interested in politics, which can be very frustrating. [...] I know that there are some statistics out there, but I haven't really gone into it too deeply. But people who moved from Hartford into Windsor, particularly in the Wilson area, they're still more tied to Hartford politics than they are to Windsor politics. They know much more about what's going on in Hartford politically than they do [about] what's going on in Windsor, and that's the same even with my family in DC. They know much more about DC politics even though they live in Maryland. But they know more about the mayor and all the other issues that are in DC than they [do about] where they now live. Though they're beginning to get more politically involved and that was good to see.

Doug Shipman: Well, you have an amazing legacy. You described yourself earlier as kind of an introverted person, and yet you've run for office so many times and held office. What other things have you done in Windsor? I think you were on the Historical Society board for a while as well. Were you?

Tim Curtis: Yes. I've always been involved in civic stuff. Primarily with Windsor, it was the politics. I was on [01:15:00] the Historical Society for a few years. There's been some participation in things like conversations on race [with the] types of groups that I joined and was a participant more than an organizer. There probably were some other things, but I never was part of any of the boards or commissions other than the Town Council and the Board of Ed. Those were the areas that I was most involved in. The rest of the time, I was taking up teaching and I was teaching outside of town. So that's where my direction went and any type of activities that were Windsor-oriented really was directed towards the politics part, town committees, the type that thing. I was town committee chair of the Windsor Democratic Town Committee. I think for two terms I was the town committee chair.

Doug Shipman: So, are you retired from teaching at this point?

Tim Curtis: Yes, I retired seven years ago. So that was [around 2012]. Since then, I am now a docent at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum in Hartford, and I've been doing that for six years.

Doug Shipman: What kinds of things do you do there?

Tim Curtis: I give guided tours. I signed up for different tours from school tours as well as adult groups. Before COVID really shut down a lot of public buildings, I would do about four tours a month. Now I'm doing two, maybe going up to three soon. But it would still be the type of thing that was teaching. I mean I was a teacher and as a docent, it's a lot easier because it's only an hour as opposed to a full school day of teaching. But I was still being involved with people, having conversations, and education, that kind of thing. So, [being a] docent does take up a bit of my time as well now.

Doug Shipman: Well, I think you deserve to be retired after such a long career of public service and teaching, which is definitely not easy.

Tim Curtis: Yeah, I know. It's about 35 years of teaching.

Doug Shipman: People don't appreciate how much work also goes into serving on Boards of Education, Town Councils, and so on.

Tim Curtis: That was one of the reasons why I left the Town Council after my terms: because my teaching. As time went on, there was more accountability as far as what we were doing in the classroom. We had to make them work on the collaboration piece, the writing down things that we did in the classroom that day, what's coming in tomorrow, [and] what the lesson plans are going to be. We had to put it online, so there was a lot of work. I wouldn't say paperwork because it was computer work. But we had to do rubrics and a whole bunch of other really important things. But it was just so much work. I used to be able to leave school somewhere around 3:30 or so at the end of the day and still have homework, lesson planning and stuff, but I could leave school by 3:30. But as time went on, it was closer to 5 to get done the extra work that we needed to prepare for the next day. And then it started interfering with [Town] Council. You know, the reading that I have to do in preparation for the Town Council, and so I approached burnout and I had to give up one job. [01:20:00] So I gave up the one that didn't pay, [laughing] and I kept the one that did.

Doug Shipman: Tim, do you think that an organization like WAACA could ever exist again in Windsor or be started up again?

Tim Curtis: I don't think so. I think it would require young people to do that kind of organizing and young people really aren't into doing that. If you have groups that have that need, and even though they do have group meetings through the schools, I know that there's one group that I think is called Future Teachers and another action group. These are all controlled through the school system. So, they have to have faculty advisors. They just can't start them up. But they deal with issues that WAACA did deal with, but the kids are different. Social media has taken over. Kids don't like the idea of coming on a Saturday morning to an organization meeting, which is when WAACA used to meet, like 10 o'clock. Kids don't do that anymore. They meet on social media and their friends tend to be more diverse as well. We got our kids into a school system that was diverse, and their friends are now diverse.

Tim Curtis: So, they don't feel isolated like Cheryl and I felt when we first moved to Windsor. So, I don't think WAACA would survive the way it started because it was needed at the time, but I think there are other groups. I mean you have groups like Black Lives Matter, those types of organizations. But even Black Lives Matter is a diverse group of people. A lot of churches are involved with that as well. So, an organization that is exclusively for Black people, I don't think that it could survive in Windsor, or anybody would even think of starting up in Windsor. But I would like to see what the young people think about their education in Windsor. But many of them leave. You know, they graduate and go off to college and some of them come back. We have two daughters and they both live in Vernon, though their friends are in Windsor.

Doug Shipman: If you had to characterize the kind of legacy of WAACA, from your experience, how would you characterize that legacy?

Tim Curtis: It was an organization that showed that Black people, families in particular, but the Black people could organize together and make an impact on the town [and] the community. That we could be social among ourselves and very supportive of ourselves in terms of what we do. WAACA was able to channel the interest that we have, whatever those interests were, to encourage us to get involved in civic and political organizations in Windsor. And that we could get together, as opposed to living in different parts of town. There's one area that we could always count on where we could get together. We could socialize but we could also talk about encouraging African Americans to get involved with Windsor, and that was the purpose of WAACA, and I think it served us very well.

Doug Shipman: I should have asked you this earlier, but where were your meetings when you would meet? You said [meetings took place on] Saturday mornings, but where did WAACA meet?

Tim Curtis: Most of the time, it was at L.P. Wilson. Any type of civic organization that was a town civic organization could have space in the building without having any charge. I think, for the most part, it was at L.P. I'm pretty sure it was at L.P. [01:25:00] Sometimes we met at people's homes. Like Vivian Cicero, we would meet at her house. Sometimes we would meet at Guy Jacob's house. So, we did have smaller meetings at various members' homes. But as the organization grew, it would be at a town building like L.P. Wilson.

Doug Shipman: That's helpful. I really appreciate you taking the time to kind of walk through that with me. So we are kind of at the end of the interview, but I did also want to give you a chance. I've been asking questions, but if there's anything else you feel like it's really important that this story [is] told or that this [is] conveyed, is there anything else that you would like to add before we end the interview?

Tim Curtis: I think that even though Windsor is a diverse town, it hasn't always been inclusive. We're still working on being inclusive and sometimes people don't understand what that means in terms of being, as they say, in the room where things happen. We take part but there's still an issue in Windsor about inclusivity. It has really improved as far as neighborhoods. Like I said, Poquonock used to be all white. If you were a Windsor teacher, every year you could ask for a transfer to another school within the district. And the place that everybody always talked

about, where they really would want to end their teaching career, was going to Poquonock because it was a very subtle town. I mean it's part of town with some really nice kids, that kind of thing. It was a very white part of town that's changed a lot since then. But there's still some work to be done. We haven't had a [Black] mayor, for example. Though we've had Black Board of Ed presidents, women as well. But there's still some control from the town, by the town, over the issue of race. Of course you'll see that the high school is becoming increasingly kids of color. I think the school system is now about 70 or so percent kids of color and when we first moved here with our kids, it was about 30%. So that's been the case with a lot of towns. They call them ring towns around Hartford or the Bridgeport area. So, that hasn't changed. People are still figuring it out. But it's a town that has a lot more going for it than many towns in Connecticut, and so I hope that we can keep that going, moving from diversity to being inclusive.

Doug Shipman: That's a great point to end on, I think. I really appreciate that and what we will do, our commitment to you, and I said the same to Cheryl as well, it'll probably take a few weeks for the audio tape to be transcribed into a written form. But we'll provide that back to you so you can look at it and review it and edit it. If you feel I really meant to say it this way, you do have the latitude to correct the record, so to speak, because these are your words. And then we'll make that part of our historical record. We will probably do some things with this once we have all the WAACA oral histories collected and any documents or photos we can collect that illustrate the history of WAACA. I would not be surprised if we did an exhibit about WAACA and probably some other things as well. So, you might find we put some segments of the oral histories up on our website for people to listen to from some of the past oral histories that have been done, and so we'll do that kind of a thing as well. So, you'll see this week. We don't yet know exactly how this will be done and what we'll do. We're working with Fiona Vernal at the University of Connecticut. We're working together on it, [01:30:00] and she's got a million projects going on too so we're taking it one step at a time. First thing is to do the interviews and talk to people. So, I sure appreciate you doing it

Tim Curtis: I appreciate you doing it as well.

Doug Shipman: It's very, very important and Florence Barlow suggested it. We were very interested, and one of the very first things I did when I got here was read Marcia Hinckley's thesis that she wrote about the experience of Black people in Windsor from colonial times up to the 1980s. This is fascinating, and she had written a little bit about WAACA. She said, "I'd like to learn more about that group. Are they still around? What are they doing?" Then I learned that it was no longer [around]. I think Florence is the one [that said], "Oh, no. No, honey, it's gone." [laughing] But we should capture that history.

Tim Curtis: Yeah, we never officially [ended]. But it is one of those things that we don't want to say this is the last meeting. But when you get to the point where only four people show up, you know it's the last meeting.

Doug Shipman: Yeah, yeah. Again, Tim, thank you so much.

Tim Curtis: Well, thank you.

Doug Shipman: I look forward to staying in touch with you and if you can sign the release form and send it back. You can scan it in and email it if that's easiest or mail it to us. That would be fantastic.

Tim Curtis: Cheryl is on top of that, so it'll definitely be done.

Doug Shipman: [laughing] Much appreciated. Well, thank you so much for your time today. We'll talk to you soon.

Tim Curtis: Thank you.

Doug Shipman: Bye-bye.