

Oral History Interviews of the More Than One Struggle Oral History Project, 2007-2008
Oral History Interview with Lauri Wynn, June 9, 1995, part I

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Wynn, Lauri, interview with Jack Dougherty, June 9, 1995 (at Riverbrook Family Restaurant, Milwaukee).

[Note: Electronic interference, perhaps due to a nearby television broadcasting tower, caused long segments of sides B and C to be unintelligible on the tape.]

JD:My focus is on different people who try to improve education for African-American kids in Milwaukee in the late 1950s, 60s, 70s, and even 80s. And how people's approaches might have changed over time, how things changed in the city and other people's politics and everything else. Sometimes it's helpful for me to first start this way, to tell people how I read about them in the newspapers, the UCAG, United Community Action Group, but I wanted to back up a minute to learn how you were coming into that. You got into Milwaukee, about mid-60s or so?

LW: I came here in 1965 from Chicago and my husband was transferred. I taught in Chicago and came here as a teacher and I was assigned to an inner-city school, it was all Black students.

JD: Now I get different, is this 20th Street School or 21st Street?

LW: I started at 20th Street School, which is now Phyllis Wheatley, and then I moved within about a year to 21st Street School, so 21st Street School is where most people associate, that's where I was during the bulk of this time, because it really was in leaving 20th Street School that I began to be involved in the education part of the community, which really started with the Board of Governmental Operations, BOGO as it was called at the time, a committee of the Legislature, which offered money to the inner-city. When I say 'offered it,' there it is, to be divided into parts, one of the parts was recreation, the other area was education. It was clear at the time that, they really didn't give a hoot what you did with it, and if you messed it up, well you decided this is what you want to do, so. We of course, the group at the time was a group of inner-city people, most of them parents of children in the Milwaukee schools, who felt that the school system itself was getting into big trouble. The thing we were interested in at the time was there was an influx of Black youngsters that was coming into the city and not just from Chicago, but from the southern states, Arkansas, Mississippi, and I can't remember the other place, but at any rate, they were coming in, and they were not people who were totally ruled, so the parents had a level of expectation and they thought they were coming to integrated schools, which these schools were

not. Now that's the key, what we felt, which may be different from what is being vocalized now, but what I think you will find is a basic, underlying thread that runs through African-American's concern about education is that their children will be educated in schools that will allow them to socially and economically advance in this country, and in this country you are required to assess the educational skills, the social skills, and know the nuances that will allow you to move in and out of both communities. So you are required to be bi-cultural...[interruption]

LW: And that is an underlying thread. Now you will hear now about choice schools, and I don't want to get into, except as a parent, because I understand the period that you...

5:00 JD: Sure, well no, it's important for me to get a sense of how it's all laid out there.

LW: We at the time thought that there had been so much resistance to the 1954 Brown versus Topeka that not to discuss that, as we moved toward programs, because you see the BOGO money was not a massive amount of money, I don't recall just what the figure was, but in that we, one of the things was that the youngsters, they were not in integrated schools, and they were in classes that were too large to meet their needs, and that their language skills were critical to their success. We developed a program which eventually became called the Interrelated Language Skills, and it was ILSC, Center. I was a negotiator and we required certain things, in negotiating we have to, I was the one who negotiated, the [teachers'] union and I were very friendly at the time, or I should say the Executive Director, Jim Coulter, was very busy at the time, and he thought, 'Well hey, go on. If you say something it won't be opposed to what we say.' And so that's how we proceeded. They of course, the union, and the school system, and the UCAG, met on a regular basis. The union had representatives there, mainly Coulter, and if there was something when he was busy, he would say to me, 'You're not going to be too far from what we're interested in.' Because we were concerned about low class-sizes, which is of course a basic teacher union tenet, and where we veered, the union and UCAG, was that we believed that anyone that was going to come into the Center, that the teachers should be interviewed by a psychologist, because we felt that we knew that there were certain things that they might not even know they have a serious problem. And so after all of these discussions and what-not, [unintelligible] just threw his hands up and said, 'Oh, what the hell...it's not a big thing.' Well that was all we needed because it allowed us to break that ice. It was done because of the relationship that he and I had. We selected with the approval of the union and the school district, Dr. Ernest Spaight who of course has since died, and he was the person who sat in on the interviews. Now one of the significant differences between ILSC and anyplace else is that we wanted buildings that we could house these centers in, we wanted only 10 children per class, and we wanted teachers who had some specific skill in language arts with an emphasis on reading. We wanted them to be able to speak and talk about what they had to do, the freedom of the classroom, and we wanted it to be racially sound, integrated, and we did not want these schools

deep in the heart of the inner-city. We wanted fringes, if we could find them, areas where both races were comfortable in going to. And so one of them ended up on the southside, we weren't really excited about that, because the southside was not pleasant for us, just going across the viaduct at that time caused some real serious problems, and we're really talking now about '67, '68, and so this was after the so-called riot. There were still some real negative, not that there [unintelligible] were on the southside, just that Blacks at that time never, and still don't, feel welcome on the southside. So the schools were set up, we did secure a school, Jefferson, which has since burned down, it was downtown, which was an ideal location, and that really was the larger one, and then we had MacDowell, which was a, then there may have been some integration busing sort of situations that some people of our group had participated in a couple of years before this, and they felt that being at MacDowell was very important and one that they insisted on. When MacDowell opened it was going to be a school that was integrated, a lot of people were arrested and what-not, so we had MacDowell and later we had Parkman, and a southside school, I can't remember names...

10:00

JD: So we're talking Jefferson, MacDowell, Parkman, and one other on the southside...

LW: But not all of those happened at the same time.

JD: Jefferson first?

LW: Jefferson first, and MacDowell. And then the Parkman thing, which was an all-Black area, and the other school, I want to say Field, Allen-Field, was in an all-white area. But they did not happen until the other business had begun. This, we did, we made the necessary postings and advertisements for the positions as teachers within the system, but it was not closed to them. And administrators, we did a nationwide, not a large one, a very small one, so we did secure people and we did interview them and the, as the director over each of their subjects, the problem, the confrontation that we had, and I'm moving quickly for you...

JD: I'm going to ask some follow-up questions, so do it the way you want to do it...

LW: ...we had one person that the psychologist and the UCAG did not agree upon, who was an existing administrator within the school system. We felt that this person did not have the, I use the word 'sensitivity,' because at the time sensitivity really meant sensitivity, and really was more of a curriculum, more of an administrative person and we were looking for a curriculum person, and I didn't want her. And so they picketed, when the buses were rolling when they began to bring the teachers in for training, and UCAG put pickets at MacDowell, which is where this person was to be assigned. The Jefferson School opened up with no problem, that is, teacher-training and what-not. People were arrested and went to court and what-not, and it was an issue that drew attention to what was going on. We of course were doing a lot of different things in there, but we were quite focused, we did not get off into this or that, we kind of stayed at this. And as we proceeded it got technical, and so that meant that the parents who were not education

people ended up relying on education people, it basically was me, now that I think about it, but they were always present, they were always present. They were very faithful, and I think about it now, it was just amazingly so, because we were negotiating sometimes 2 in the morning and what-not. Did a lot of things. Now the Superintendent at the time, Dr. Gousha, was, I want to say amenable, but [unintelligible] in the appropriate carriage, in other words, he let you know that he was willing to do these things, with nuances, but he maintained the distance the board and the superintendent required, in that he never, because, see if he had liked you too much, the Black community would have been suspect, as they are now with [Howard] Fuller, they're very suspect with Fuller, look, for some reason they [whites] all like him. On the other hand, he [Gousha] made no effort to feed you anything, but it was clear that this was a Superintendent who realized that education in the urban community was changing, and he was prepared to make some change. And that may have been the best [unintelligible]..he was a foreign person, because that's not what we had had [laughs.] Indeed, that's not what we had had. And so there was this watchfulness of him, because the union is always askance, but I picked up some clues, because I was going on some trips for the union as a representative, and he would let you go. I mean, you didn't even, his point was, she's the best p.r. [public relations] that we've got. Well they've never done that.

JD: This is?

LW: Gousha. And so he would pay me and let me go, put a sub in the room and let me go. And when there was some discussion about it, that was his response. So those are some of the things that I got. On the other hand, when we came to buildings and things, it was a battle. They gave up nothing. The reason we got Jefferson is because nobody wanted to go downtown, you know, they really weren't doing that much busing, and if they did bus, they bused all of the kids, all of the Black kids together and so they didn't, it was kind of [unintelligible], we've got to do something here....And they owned this very valuable property, where Juneau Village is now, but in any rate, in that area. So the school opened up, we interviewed, our youngsters were selected if they were 2 to 3 years behind in reading, and if the parent, not if, but, and a parent that was interested in such a program. At any rate they just weren't plucked up, there was a discussion with the parents, this is going to be a classroom where we concentrate on language skills, there will be 10 people in a room, there's going to be a teacher who's just going to do that, we're going to take a lot of trips, we're going to take the children to see a lot of different things, so there will be a lot of trips going on, we had money for that. We also had money for parents to come to meetings, and they came, in better numbers than you would imagine. So you would imagine that if you had a class of 10 kids and 5 parents showed up, now that's a big turnout ...[interruption] Now that was a big turnout. But still, as was always, [unintelligible] ...so that was kind of rewarding. However, parent involvement has never, ever, ever, in urban

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communities, been accepted, as people would imagine. I've come to the conclusion through the years that if you have a good program going on for inner city parents, they know about it. They may not come, but they know about it. And they come when they don't like it, and that is perhaps different than the watchfulness that the majority community displays in their youngsters. They watch over their education by physically being there, or by other means the school knows, they have their eye on them. It's the opposite, this is almost, participation by exception, which is not something, that's the best way I can describe it. However, the scores of the youngsters, each kid was tested before they came in, and we very fairly meticulous about that, and they of course were placed in classes accordingly, and the school was run by an administrator who was really, because of the size, everyone knew one another, and there was a warmth which was found, which these kids had never known. And the teachers of them, nobody had ever seen before, which was very interesting. The structure was not different from the school system, in other words there was a director, there wasn't a need for an assistant in most instances, and there was a curriculum person and what-not, and a teacher of the class. We didn't deal with a lot of aides because we felt that the class-size did not require that, and because there was no reason to spend money, we didn't know we would really need. Because just having 10 kids in a classroom was in itself revolutionary. So that's what we did, and as long as the money lasted, we did it, we had fights in between as the school system would do things we didn't think they should do, that sort of thing. And they ended up, in the end, adapting to the degree that they would admit that it was a better situation which they had not said before, and so we understood, I'm just saying we understood but this was not something that was going to be permanent, but I would say that some of the very strong believers believed that the whole school system should be like that, as true believers would. And fought with that sort of energy level, that if we could do it in this small number, you and could do it and spend money for what you want...So we had all of the serious rhetoric and apprehension and anger that most groups had in the '60s [laughs]. We even at one time, when they wanted a school on the southside, the Black Panthers came and they wanted a school on the southside, we didn't, the school on the southside was over there because of the hell that the Black Panthers raised, I'd forgotten about that, which was an interesting thing. They were very interested in community involvement and I really think that this was something that was set up and people were in and we were talking about children and what-not, it was really through their raising hell, that's how I recall it, that the southside school became a reality, but I should say to you, that was not what the UCAG wanted, I mean, that was not our preference, because they saw it, 'Go to the southside, what the hell are they going to do to you?' You know, and we saw it as a neutral zone that was probably going to be better for this third center. The compromise was that they did one over there and one over at Parkman.

JD: I want to give you a chance to eat your pancakes, also I want to go back and try to clarify some things. When I've been looking through the Milwaukee Star and the Milwaukee Courier and some Journal and Sentinel pieces, and listen to you talk about the Interrelated Language Skills Center program, I try to get a sense of what's its real goal. I think I hear a lot of things, which is kind of typical for a lot of education programs, to have a lot of goals. I hear it's a program for kids who are behind in reading, it's trying to get some serious parental involvement or some sense of community control, I hear an effort to push integrated education beyond what the boundaries for it were at the time. Out of the those three goals, are there one of those that stands out, or is there something I'm missing?

LW: The one that stands out with me, would be that the schools should have a racial mix, and that the system would understand that there were people there who knew what was better, that there was not a community that was ignorant, of the things that the school system was doing, so it was an awareness thing too. And the awareness thing was education for everyone. I don't think the school administration believed that there were people [unintelligible], and I think the community people were kind of rolling and seeing, 'Look at this, we did that, we did this,' and so there was this enthusiasm building, which we believed and hoped could spill over into the general schools. For the other children, see, because everybody could not get in here.

JD: Sure, small program, but the awareness was going to be the big factor. Let me keep pushing at this, because I'm still trying to link things into what other people are trying to do around the same time. The integrationist aspect, you know, creating these small integrated settings. Were you successful at that?

LW: In the programs?

JD: Yes.

LW: Oh yes, we maintained a racial balance that was most acceptable.

JD: So, Jefferson Street School at the time, when it was first opening, roughly what kind of numbers were we talking about?

LW: I don't remember now, but bulk of the kids, we would include Hispanic kids and what-not, the bulk of the kids were Black, so...

JD: Same as Parkman, right?

LW: Oh yes, well what you've got in the Black part of town is the schools are Blacker. But the situation was, the kids with the worst reading problems happened to be Black...[unintelligible] ..so whites, I think, volunteered when it got, say, where they could see the kids coming to school. Because they weren't anxious to have busing to integrate.

JD: When I look back a couple of years earlier, say 1963, Lloyd Barbee is starting to make noise, to raise publicity about his take on educational issues. One of the quotes he keeps saying

over and over again is, 'Compensatory education is only half a loaf.' Did people at the time look at your program and say, 'This is compensatory education.'?

LW: Yes, [unintelligible] compensatory education.

JD: Why?

LW: Because the regular education needed some compensating. And Lloyd, incidentally, was a person that we spoke to all of the time. His area was a much broader, larger picture. And so what they had to say on integration was, not just say but action too, try to get special programs and this was supposed to make you happy and stay there, and that's really what he was saying. You can't give us [unintelligible]that segregation is for us.

JD: Exactly, exactly what he's saying. So I'm trying to put this in perspective. I know that in some people's eyes, this might have looked like a portion of the Black community accepting MPS's compensatory education....did it ever appear that way to people?

LW: No, it really didn't come up that way. One of the things was that, it really didn't affect enough people for there to be any overriding negativism around the program, and it took a lot of time, people don't stay angry too long, they've got to work to take care of themselves. Now you've got a huge [unintelligible] ...people get to know them, and eventually they respect them, because they stayed at, they stayed at. I think that, to that degree, people will tell you, 'If you've been doing this this far, hey, good for you.' And so we didn't get negative, you know, 'To hell with you, you're taking money from the white man.' Because the damn system was the white man. I mean, what are we talking about? Where are we going? That sure was the Black Panthers' view, I mean, but I think Barbee, who was doing all of his preparation and what-not, and his information that we received indicated that our program, and that's the other point to this, the stage was set for them to do something. The State Legislature was talking about, what does Milwaukee need and whatnot? You know, they feed the animals out in the field. So given all of that, the money, it was really being used as Black people said they wanted it used, which was the first time for that. So we didn't get that thing. Now the compensation thing was related, and always and still is, related to, 'let's fix 'em.' It's kind of like, getting part of the car tuned but not the other part. And they eventually get to the point where you waited too long. That's the way they are now.

JD: You've got to backtrack for me here. 'Where they waited too long...?'

LW: The MPS school system. In other words, this program was fine, it was very strong, it was not going to be able to be anything but a pilot program, and it was a pilot program in a lot of different ways, specialized curriculum and language arts, starting with kids like this, and the teachers that got there and only had 10 kids had thought they had died and gone to heaven. Except they had to work pretty hard. The staffs worked very closely together, and you couldn't last if you didn't work, because people did [unintelligible] that they had a small setting and they

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wanted to see what it could do, and so you had, people who had wanted to do things for years but had 35 kids, and couldn't do it, could do it now. And so that was really good. Then they had the money to take them to Chicago or to make sure they'd get to [unintelligible], you don't have the field trips now you used to have years ago. And the kids need it more now than those kids did then. But I think that the integration period, and Barbee's case, and Barbee was in the Legislature at the time too, and he was able to respond to what it is that the, what is that the [youth?] probably was going to do, because he knew us all. So it was [unintelligible]. I think that, well let's see, an integration program, they feared the integration, they knew it was segregation, they was just hoping that he wouldn't last to do it. That's a whole different thing too, because I did work with him with that and I did get the money from NEA to do a lot of that, and so everything kind of settled out right from that '60s period, where, and he had all sorts of statistics, and so if you were going to speak before something about anything, you could prove what the scores were, you could prove where the kids were, and so when we came equipped with all of that, which is something they had not seen before,

JD: They being?

30:00 LW: They being the Legislature or the school system, they had not seen, they had seen Barbee well-prepared, but they had not seen a grass-roots group, and then they had not seen a grass-roots group which had trained personnel within it, who also lived in the inner-city, and that was unusual.

JD: Had they seen many grass-roots groups that were made up predominately of women, Black women?

LW: Quite frankly, most of our groups are made up of near women.

JD: When I've been looking through the papers, it certainly seems UCAG, mostly all women, a few men.

LW: Right, right, and most of the groups were. It's not because they've got time to volunteer, because many of them work, I think, when I think about it, probably only two people in it didn't have full-time jobs. So it was not a, but I think it was a hopefulness at that period of time. It was after the riot and people were damn mad..[interruption]...and I think they saw this as, 'We want our kids to be able to do better.' And this is the way, and see, none of our kids were even in the program, so we weren't talking our biological kids, we were talking about just, Black kids generally. Poor kids generally. And we talked a lot about poor kids. So that's where we were talking about the southside, poor families....

JD: Were you purposely talking about it in terms of poor kids to reach a broader community than just talking about Black kids?

LW: We would have to talk about 'poor' because people wanted it to be only Black.

JD: Which people wanted it to be only Black?

LW: Many people in the community. The reason why, 'Hell, our kids are not reading,' and this possessive kind of thing. And then you have to remind people that poor people, whatever their color, they're bad off. Which is what I think the Panthers were talking about, that's why they were talking about southside, see, so you, the point was well-taken, they were just were like Johnny-come-lately. Through all of us a class thing runs. You know we talk about integration, and it is integration, but the racial integration offers exposure for social and economic integration, and as far as I'm concerned, that is what is more frightening to the majority community than a Black here, a white here, a Black here, and a white here.

JD: How so?

LW: What you're able to observe from them, to learn from them, the nuances, the privileges, the detrimental behavior, the positive direction, the focus that is there. There is a lot to be learned other than sitting beside someone. And those are social and economic levers, you know, which I don't think people recognize or understand. It doesn't matter, now we're dealing with this program which allows kids to go to a suburban district. I always say to the suburban school districts, 'Black kids don't need to go to school just with poor white kids. Black kids need to go to school with all sorts of white kids. And white kids need to go to school with all sorts of Black kids. Because as adults, if they're in a profession, they're going to be serving all sorts of people. And they need to be educated in a racially iso...., a racially isolated education is a poor one.' And that's kind of what ..., so we were pulled, we had to pull up and remember that poor people were poor people, and we just happened to have a lot of them, because there were also a lot of white folks, standard poor people. And we didn't have Asians at the time, for that was not, but the Native Americans were another group too that we discussed and were, and let me see, Clearwater, I think he's dead now, there was also a Native American group that kind of watched... So the class thing was there.

JD: This has been helpful for me to basically shut up and listen to you for awhile, and I want to now try to do some follow-up things, try to make more sense of it in terms of what I've read. First, 20th Street School rings a bell with me because things were happening there in 1965. I was curious how you saw things. It was one of the places where people from MUSIC are chaining themselves to the buses I believe to stop the intact busing from happening.

LW: Now that was before I got there. Just before I got there.

JD: And another thing I saw going on was....

LW: MacDowell was where they were chaining.

JD: I think there were a few places, I think it was also 20th Street, looking at my notes from when I was reading the papers. Another thing that was happening there, this is 1967, is something called the United Community Improvement Council, brutality against children at 20th Street, this is after you left?

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LW: Well, not exactly. I was the one that told them about it. This came out of Christ Presbyterian....it wasn't Christ, what was it? Fellowship, Community Fellowship Church, 19th and Center. That's where the people were, Gloria Givens, right.

JD: That's one of the names, she was secretary of this UCIC group.

LW: Now there was a teacher, Willie Walker, who actually beat kids with a paddle, and this was physically abusive and I, they sent me over to 21st Street School, and this mother, my girls used to go to Brownies at that church and that's where I met her, and our children had gone to the school when I taught there. Now I lived at 17th and Locust, so I really lived within the community.

JD: I've gotta get this, so you're living at 17th and Locust about 1966, 67 or so?

LW: I moved there, when I came that's the first place, '65 to '66. And I would walk to school, I didn't drive then, and I would walk to school and pick up kids along the way...And then the Brownies you know, that's where she went, Mrs. Givens went to that Church. But anyway a kid was beat, you know, came home with his bottom all red, had been paddled by this half a paddle, she came to my house I think, because I was dyeing underwear, they used to do plays and the girls would dance and they used to give me the underwear and I would dye it with a color, so she brought some underwear there for me to dye, and she said, 'Do you know anything about this teacher beating the kids?' And I just thought, 'Who, Mr. Walker?' You know. 'That's the man,' she said.

JD: This is a white guy, Black guy?

LW: Black guy. And she says, 'Well, we're going to do something about it.' So Lord, I can't even believe I've forgotten that, we put a picket line up out there, the Superintendent [Vincent? too early for Gousha?] drove up in his car. I'm now at 21st Street [School], but I'm out there [at 20th Street School], but I've got to be in my room at 8:30. He called me over to the car, he said, 'Why the hell are we having this?' I said, 'Transfer that bastard to the southside and see if he beats white kids.' He transferred him that day to Fernwood [?] on the southside by the airport. And he taught out there, taught them Negro spirituals there, because he played the piano and sang, really a minister on the side, and he stayed there for years and years and years. But that's what he did, moved him right that afternoon, and that was it.

JD: Now, you're a new teacher at this time.

LW: I hadn't been here, I came here in '65.

JD: This is like '66, '67.

LW: Right, this is like the first semester....January, this may be like the beginning of the second semester.

JD: It strikes me as unusual that a new teacher, an African-American teacher, would be telling the Superintendent, 'You transfer so-and-so somewhere else.'

LW: See, all of that, all of the stuff, I told him, nobody heard him but me, I mean [unintelligible] you say something like that to the public.

JD: Sure, okay, so it's not public, it's a private, but still...

LW: And we also started with, we had begun some complaining to the school system, on different things.

JD: Such as?

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LW: Well UCAG, we were arguing about, what was our [unintelligible] leading to? North Division [High School] was terrible, we didn't like that. And the kids were fighting on the way home from school and the police would stop them and we didn't like that. So I mean there were just a whole lot of different things to argue about. So I would speak before the school board on occasion on items, so that's where he got to know me from. And the UCAG was kicking in...

JD: About the same time?

LW: We had formed, but the money hadn't come, and we were just kind of bitching about this, or this is wrong, or what-not. But the business of the school, I must have been at that school, 21st Street, about a semester, I'd been gone from there.

JD: So you got involved because you knew what had been happening there...

LW: She asked....right....I wasn't at the building, right. But my children, they got all the [unintelligible], in this organization, this must have been the second day when he [the Superintendent] drove up, but there was no discussion about it, it just ended.

JD: Yeah, because it vanishes from the newspapers.

LW: What he did, it's just what I told you, he was a Superintendent [Gousha?] who understood urban education had to change and he was prepared to change. And he did it without talk, without discussion, nobody knew that man was over there. And once he [the teacher] was gone, that was their issue. See they had a single issue, and [snaps fingers] the group didn't last really much longer after that, that was their issue. It was organized through the church, for education, but once they had this big key issue, once they got it, then that was traumatic, it was over.

JD: Let me push on a bit further to get a better sense of how you and this UCAG group ended up getting together. Is this something that someone said to you, 'Hey, Lauri, come on over to this meeting tonight'? Or something that...

LW: Yeah... I have to tell you....

JD: What people come to mind?

LW: Carol Malone, who just died last year, and she was a paper person, she knew all the news. She would call, or get a press release, something was happening, see that was really key, because we would be places and people would say, 'How the hell did they find out about this?'

JD: And that's because Carol had the press releases.

LW: Right, she had the press releases and she would tell us what-not, and so this one could go, that one could go, we didn't have a bunch of people there. I was the speaker for the most part, and Flo Seefeldt and some other people....

JD: You just said another name I might have missed?

LW: Flo Seefeldt, she was interesting because she was a Black poor woman, had a lot of kids, and she married a white guy, and so she was kind of like a weird combination, and she was not very well educated, that was something else about that group. Everybody went back and got a degree, almost to a person, that was involved, almost to a person. Lady Byrd got a degree, her daughter Agnes Gayfield got a degree, Ethel Scott is dead now, got a degree, it was just amazing. Ron Grace is an attorney I think. You know you look back over the years....

JD: Flo Seefeldt...she's with UW-M, right?

LW: Flo Seefeldt, I think she may have an Associate's, I don't think it's a degree, but she worked at UW-M.

JD: So she was in that environment in any case.

LW: Yeah, she worked at UW-M, I don't know what title universities come up with, I don't know what she did. Dr. Spaight really became a very good friend, and he died.

JD: Sorry to, let me keep asking about this because it's also very important to me.

LW: Ask whatever you want.

JD: Spaight is a good friend to the group? to Seefeldt?

LW: No, he was very aloof, very big man, anyway, he was a tenured professor, he was in the Chancellor's office, he was head of social affairs, and he was just one of these formidable people, no playing. But the group really interested him...[unintelligible] he would be there, not chit-chatty, anything like that, just.....he would say to someone, 'Have you ever thought of going to school?' And they would just be so flattered, because he suggested that, and low and behold you'd find out that they were taking a class. It was that kind of interesting kind of thing. But not a hug me, or what not, but very very straight, so when he said something..

JD: ..you listened.

LW: Right. And then Lloyd Barbee was, very fast moving, as he is, and didn't have time for a lot of silly conversation, so he might say to me, 'I don't have time for this. I have to go.' And people never got angry, whenever Barbee would speak [unintelligible] go. He was [claps hands rapidly], and everybody saw him as being on-target, doing something very important that nobody else could do. So it was, there were some role models that were there that were very encouraging, and then I had five children, and I taught, and so when people say 'I have kids,' I say, 'Don't tell me that. I've got as many as you've got, I've got more than you've got.' So the kid thing did not become a thing in the group.

JD: This is interesting.

45:00

LW: No beefing about kids.

JD: Because everyone had them.

LW: Everybody got them. We got to go. And because they had kids, they had real strong feelings. Some of the kids were not going to ever benefit from the program.

JD: This is also interesting to me. You said your kids weren't in this program [IRLSC].

LW: No, nobody, none of our kids could be in the program.

JD: Did you set that as sort of a rule for yourselves?

LW: Right, our kids didn't need it. We were talkers, movers...this was some, this was...

Oral History Interviews of the More Than One Struggle Oral History Project, 2007-2008
Oral History Interview with Lauri Wynn, June 9, 1995, part II

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
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Archives

Wynn, Lauri, interview with Jack Dougherty, June 9, 1995 (at Riverbrook Family Restaurant, Milwaukee).

[Note: Electronic interference, perhaps due to a nearby television broadcasting tower, caused long segments of sides B and C to be unintelligible on the tape.]

[Side B]

LW: ...these other people, we'd cuss anybody out about this, and I think it was that daring spirit that caused them to kind of sit back, because there had been busing incidents, they did have people up in there that they realized were not getting anything out of this, do you know what I mean? I could have lost my job...

JD: That's what I was wondering about...

LW: But, it was a question of going so far that they couldn't do anything [unintelligible]. In other words, I just went so far that I, my room was fine, was work was fine, but I just stepped out so far that they couldn't do anything with me.

JD: Interesting strategy. Your kids. What schools were they going to?

LW: Well, I had two children who at that time were coming out to Samuel Morse at 84th and Hampton. There was a program that allowed you to transfer kids only on the 5th of May, only one day, and they could go there, so they went to Samuel Morse and both of them graduated from junior high school there. And the other three, at this time, were at Elm, which was not a specialty school, just Elm School over on 27th and Garfield. And I lived at 25th and Brown.

JD: Okay, so they're in the neighborhood district school at that time.

LW: Right.

JD: I've got to ask why these two kids, why did you get a transfer for them to go out to Morse?

LW: Because the junior high school was absolutely terrible, they fought all the time. They would have gone to Wells Junior High School, which was terrible for any of us. As a matter of fact, they [the children] would take the dog that we had and tie him to the fence and leave him there all day, and then, they'd walk up to school and they'd tie him up, and then after school they'd go home.

JD: So your kids would take the dog with them to school for protection?

LW: Right. I did that, I didn't want to do it at first...we really, 'The hell with this.' So I, I had put in for the transfer in May, there were no vacancies. Then in September I started, I started calling them about this thing. And then they told me that the only place they had a vacancy was out there, well that was a hell of a ways, and there were no buses, so you had to, your kids had to learn how to take the bus all this way, through white land. I don't mean yellow buses, I mean city buses. And so, I was able to get them in.

JD: How did it work out? For them?

LW: Pretty good, pretty good. Once, no, I forgot this, Groppi was marching, we marched with Groppi, because we wanted to know what he was whether he was a leader. Then I had Illinois license [plates] still, I would go across the viaduct and count the demonstrators and come back and tell them, you couldn't do it if you were Black with a Wisconsin license, and I had the same dog in the car. But anyway, after that kind of calmed down and they were out at the school, a teacher, my daughter would not say the Pledge of Allegiance, my son would. So I had to come out to school, so I said, 'Why won't you say it?' 'Well it's not all true.' So I said, 'Well Thomas, why did you say it?' 'Well, it's almost all true.' So I said to the principal, 'What can I do? This is the best I can do.' So then within a week, Cynthia [?] was in the office, the oldest daughter, because she, a teacher had said to her that she was a 'Groppi Grape.'

JD: A 'Groppi Grape'?

LW: A 'Groppi Grape.' Grapes are black, see? And then that 'Raisin Man' was jumping around something. Anyways, grapes are black, well that made her mad. I didn't understand it, of course, 'Groppi grape?' Me, see I'm teaching so I can't be at these places all the time. So I had to deal with the telephone and what-not, back and forth, so she managed that. And then he, they wanted to promote him, and he was not reading well, and I insisted that he be retained. I don't want him to go up if he's not reading at that level [unintelligible]. So then I asked them to test him. So when I find him in this program called 'Special B,' which really would be like an LD [learning disabled] class now. Special C was retarded, and then they had this Special B which was just starting up. So after they tested him they put him in there. Well that just upset him, made him angry, made him angry enough, he insisted that, they didn't let him go to gym with everybody else, he wanted to go to gym with everybody else. In the end they ended up taking him to gym with everybody else. One little girl would throw up and they'd put her outside, he said 'No, she shouldn't be outside just because she threw up.' And he was doing little things in the room and I was really proud, but I couldn't get them to do anything about it. But, it made him work harder to get the hell out of there, he's told me since. Somebody told him he wasn't college material in this testing, and that motivated him and now he has three degrees, one in agronomy, one in horticulture, one in social welfare, planned to go to Africa but [President] Reagan changed

the program. He's the one that's responsible for the median strips and the forestry in all the northside area, he's with the city now. But that motivated him.

JD: And your [other] kids, went to Elm Street school, you said. How did that go?

LW: Elm Street School worked out pretty well until they were ready to go to high school. I wasn't going through this again. But in the meanwhile, the Catholic church closed just about all of their schools.

JD: 1969 or so, yeah.

LW: And those, this is really key, those Black parents from those schools organized an organization called the Federation of Community Schools. And I joined that group, really because they had, some of them were involved in UCAG, and they were going to negotiate with Archbishop Cousins about keeping the schools open and what-not. So in this meeting, I said to him...

JD: To?

LW: Archbishop Cousins [laughs].

JD: Okay, so you're talking to the Archbishop now [laughs].

LW: 'If you're not going to use the buildings, why not let us use them?' And he said, 'For what?' 'For schools!' And so it had been discussed on the side, but they didn't know what to do. He said, 'What do you propose?' And I said, 'Well, we have to think about that.' And we went back and everyone was all excited and what-not, and we met the next time and got the buildings for a dollar, but we'd have to pay our part of the heating and utilities and what-not. But we got the buildings. Now Boniface they were tearing down, we got St. E's, St. Elizabeth's, St. Francis, now none of these things lasted too long, St. Gaul's, and St. Michael's. There were seven, I can't remember, but at any rate, St. Francis didn't last long, St. Michael's ended up being Urban Day, and St. Gaul's is where my children went.

JD: Now this is Martin Luther King Community School? Because I saw your name on a list for the board of directors.

LW: I was president of that. Now the two older ones, Hillary and Spencer, graduated from there..

JD: Okay, I've got to back up here. Five kids: Hillary, Spencer....

LW: No, let's rank them: Cynthia is the oldest, then Thomas Jr., then Spencer, then Hillary, and then Aaron [?]

JD: Okay, Cynthia and Thomas went to Morse, after Morse where did they go?

LW: After Morse, she went to West [Division High School], and he went to Washington [High School].

JD: That was another transfer in arrangement?

10:00

LW: Yes, but West was our district. And Washington was one I had to apply for. He could get to Washington from there, see that was the other thing, you could get to a whole lot of different schools if you were out there than if you were in. So he went to Washington, and he graduated from Washington, but my daughter [Cynthia] didn't. I took her out of, I went over there one day because my keys were gone....[unintelligible, interruption]..took her out of there, ...[unintelligible] pink pussycat lying in that locker, I happened to come up with my keys and saw her, we took her and we sent her, you won't believe this, to Augustine Academy in Campen, South Dakota.

JD: You're right, I don't believe that at all. Why there?

LW: Because I had to get her away from that bunch, and there no place I could get her to, because it wasn't the 5th of May.

JD: You've got to back up and tell me, I know I've seen things in the paper, maybe Carol Malone wrote things like, 'the day is coming up.' This May 5th thing.

LW: If you didn't do a thing you couldn't do anything. It closed. It was the enrollment day.

JD: What kinds of circles of people knew about this?

LW: Carol tried, we tried to tell everybody. But people would have, if you've got to send your kids from 1st Street to 84th and Hampton in the '60s, you was alone. You would get some people who would go some places, you know, but I didn't want [unintelligible] to have to do that at this time, and they kind of needed a kind of closer thing, and what-not.

JD: Cynthia is out in South Dakota. Thomas is at Washington. Now we're talking Spencer, Hillary, and Erin/Aaron [?].

LW: They're at Martin Luther King School.

JD: Instead of Wells Junior High School?

LW: Well by that time it had changed to Fulton, and that was just a no-no. Aaron, who was just in 3rd grade at that time could have stayed at Elm, but he would have been there by himself, to come home alone, so that's why we sent him with his brother and sister. And so they graduated and by the time they graduated, I had been elected President of WEAC [Wisconsin Education Association Council], and so I was going to Madison, so I took the three bottom children with me to Madison, and they went to Madison Memorial, and Hillary graduated from Madison Memorial, Spencer graduated from West in Madison, and Aaron went to, where did he go? We lived over near West Town, Parker Village we lived, but the name of the high school, I think it was Roosevelt....now both of them, everybody went on to college, Hillary is now a doctor, Spencer is now the coordinating supervisor for Westside conservation, start buildings and what-not, and Aaron came back and went to Madison High School here and it just was not a good situation, and he was really, this kid did not want to go to school, there are always kids who do not want to go to school. So he ended up getting his high school equivalency, HGD whatever

it is, and then finished and went to Marquette for awhile, and he did not complete, and he is now working with an industrial company and does telemarketing on equipment, people sold things, well that's about the bunch.

JD: So how long did your three youngest kids spend at MLK Community School?

LW: Two years.

JD: Is that as long as the school lasted?

LW: No, because I was president after they left.

JD: Okay, so the reason you were pulling them out of there was because you were in Madison.

LW: I was going to Madison, well they had graduated, and they were going,but I had been elected president even though my kids had graduated, so I would come back to the meetings. But I was on the road with WEAC anyways, back and forth, so [unintelligible]...but it worked pretty well.

JD: Let me back up, we got talking about kids because some names came up of people who got involved in this UCAG, and I'm just curious, if you had to rattle off a list of names of people you remember being involved in UCAG, who would be on your list?

LW: Amanda Coomer, who is still alive. Agnes Gayfield, who is still alive, she's a character, I've got her number....Cynthia Pitts if you can find her, and Flo Seefeldt. Lady Byrd is now incapacitated, she's a character....Carol Malone, Ethel Scott is dead, Velma Coggs, who was not very active in it, but was active to some degree. Two or three people whose names I don't recall who were friends of Carol, because the committee, I ended up dealing with, the people I named were people who were committee people,go through the bunch, there was always an alternate if somebody didn't come, we tried to have never less than three people, so that really meant you had to keep moving, and then we of course had to negotiate, if it was during the day, which it really was a lot of times, it would be because Gousha would let me out of the classroom, and Carol, is was a [news] story, basically, and Amanda, I think she, she is at SDC now, I can't remember where she was then, she already had her degree, but I don't know where Ron Grace is, an attorney?...

JD: When I was looking through my list of names, certainly this is just what I saw. Is there anyone you would add to that list, or anyone who doesn't belong on that list?

LW: No, I think all these names belong.

JD: Or is there anything else I should know...

LW: Audrey Davis is dead....a lot of dead people on there....Jeannette Bryant is going to be very hostile. Jeannette was a teacher at Fulton, and there's another girl, but she's going to be very hostile, when I say hostile, I mean, she's just hostile, not hostile to anybody in particular. [Unintelligible]. But then she was a person that did not want to give anything ever, and you

15:00

20:00

never got a point, and she was good for the group, because it really meant that a compromise, she was so extreme that a compromise that people could agree to....Now Cynthia Pitts has a consulting business now....she was married to Orville Pitts, but she now uses the name, I want to say the name Bryant...Amanda should know where she is. Judy Conway is a white girl, I don't know where she is....I think Judy got involved from another organization that she belong to, and then she got involved with this one.....I want to think it was a group that had something to do with education, Amanda might know. Nancy Stuckert was Dr. Stuckert's wife, at the University at the time, now she has moved away. He did the computer work for Lloyd Barbee for the case. Now Kathryn Able I don't know who that is. Margie Reed is in town, she's a strange one, she's in town....not so active. Lady Byrd is Agnes Gayfield's mother, Agnes's name is not on here. She was a fiesty community person, and she ended up getting a job as a teacher's aide at West Division High School, and she went back and got a degree. Ethel Scott went back and got a degree too. Lady Byrd, a real character, she would have been a good interview, but she was much much older at the time, had to be sixty-something. Anges Gayfield...now tell her that you talked to me...Bernice Rivers, taught school with Jeannette Bryant, Bernice went on this bus, she was on the bus that we blocked, see we suggested that people who were members not get in this, because of situations like this.....This was when we had hired teachers [Jefferson Street], and one of the people that we didn't want was going in, that was MacDowell, not it wasn't, it was Jefferson. And Bernice had applied for this thing.....and so she met the criteria....she was upset because we were blocking the bus....we had to make some display, well come to find out, she was a little off, and I can't remember just what happened, anyways her behavior was not acceptable, and they transferred her, out to, if you were Black and in trouble, they'd send you to the southside, they sent her out there to [long unintelligible section due to interference]...by the way, what happened to her, they wanted to make an issue, and people weren't willing to get into, do any damage to the program....and now that I think about it, she wasn't on the bus, she was outside the bus, what was she doing?..... [long block of interference from the nearby TV broadcasting tower].

JD: ...Ron Grace is the only man on this list.

LW: That's not unusual.

25:00 JD: You told me that it's not that women had all this free time being at home, that wasn't the case, so why was it? Why were all of these women involved?

LW: Well I think you'll find that, they say the troops in the Black church are not....

[long period of interference]

LW: ...I mean he might mention somebody else's problem, but he still was dealing with his problem [Jake Beason?]......

30:00 [long period of interference]

LW: ...that in my mind, it was hard....it would have been hard for them to put them on another task.

JD: I want to go back to your 'spokesperson' and 'statesperson' in this group. Was Flo Seefeldt the spokesperson initially?

LW: Yes.

JD: Who was the 'statesperson' early on?

LW: I think it was Cynthia Pitts.

JD: As the group went on, didn't Carol Malone become the chief spokesperson of UCAG?

LW: Yeah, see she was the credible spokesperson, because she had a pen in her hand, and she didn't necessarily go places to speak, she was not at the negotiating table, I was, but she was working with that pen in the [news]paper. She would make, she knew ahead of time what was in place, that's how we knew how everything was, so that made us more and more credible. Then you had a group that had enough educated people in it, that they couldn't wait for them to decide they don't know what they're doing....And that was what gave the group, power is not the word, because we didn't have power. One time we kept the school board in a place until 2 in the morning, negotiating, and I tell you, he's in town, Dr. Charles Jackson, he was the Black psychologist for the school system at the time, and he, I saw him at a banquet in town and he said, 'You know, that was brilliant. Never saw anything like that before. How did you all do that?'

[long period of interference]

35:00 LW: ...and the whole town was changing, and it was after the riot and you didn't know what was going on. In answer to that, I think that women in the Black community...have had taken the time to do something, it's the something, now it's changing now, but then that was their, relaxation, or their opportunity to get to see other women, and even if they worked, this was an important thing, they said 'I got to go to a meeting.' And you'd go to the meeting, and then you'd use the telephone a lot, but when it was time for the meeting you'd be back at the meeting. And so, as it relates to the men, I don't think, it's not that they don't think education is important. I think that the organizations, as they are designed, did not give to some men the power that they thought they needed to have, where [unintelligible]....the leader would pop up, eventually, and if the leader's smart he lay back in the woods and watch everybody else and surface at the right time. And it takes time. Maybe women are more patient, I don't know, but it's time, and time is money, and so then there were more Black men working than there are now. Now I guess you could get a whole bunch of them. But I think that if you kind of look through community groups, if it an organized group by men, then they're there. If it is a group that's organized by women, they are scarce. If it is a group of both men and women, once the women find out they're doing

most of the legwork, they [unintelligible due to interference]...what happened there was there was so much going on, you want to go see your buddy, you're going to the fight, you work, you're going to watch a game...but we didn't start out with a lot of men, so we didn't have many to lose.

JD: I want to ask a couple of more things...around 1969, there's another group I see your name associated with: PIE, Participation in Education.

LW: White group.

JD: How did you get involved with this? Were you pulling away from UCAG?

LW: PIE was a group..... was Conta in PIE?

JD: [reading some names]

LW: I remember it, but I don't remember much about it.

JD: It's important to me that you remember a lot more about UCAG than PIE.

LW: [interference]...Odel Johnson, I think he's back with SBA [Small Business Administration]. I can't remember what church that Father was from....It wasn't a long-lasting group.

JD: Certainly 1971,72, 73, I can see you're moving up in WEAC. As you're getting more involved with WEAC at the time, is your involvement with UCAG diminishing some?

40:00 LW: Yes, but so was UCAG. That's what I was saying..[interference]..the centers and they were working, so when I went to Madison in '73, I came back here and was vice-president of the MLK board, and I asked the person who was still dealing with the advisory boards of the Centers, and at that time the Center had narrowed itself, I want to say to Parkman, was dealing with just Parkman, because Jefferson was moving, and MacDowell and Parkman, and Fields. I did that from '73 to '75.

JD: I've only read the papers up to '73 so far, so it might be....

[long period of interference]

Oral History Interviews of the More Than One Struggle Oral History Project, 2007-2008
Oral History Interview with Lauri Wynn, June 9, 1995, part III

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Wynn, Lauri, interview with Jack Dougherty, June 9, 1995 (at Riverbrook Family Restaurant, Milwaukee).

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[Side C]

JD: Is your approach to finding and improving the best education for African-Americans, has it changed with the times or has it stayed the same?

LW: Say that again.

JD: Your strategies for getting the best education for African-American kids, for yourself, your kids, other African-American kids, has your approach changed with the times, or has it stayed the same?

LW: Well I think it's changed. I understand the outcomes of a good education versus of the outcomes of a poor education because I have children that have accomplished some things with the combination that I had but not the intensity of the education that I had.

JD: The combination?

LW: In other words, I went to integrated schools, and then I went to a Black college. They did the same thing. But their integrated school education was not of the caliber that mine was. And when they went to the Black college, it was not of the intensity that mine was. We were at a period of time that you were still striving, you....now, people can stay in school five years, we would have thought you were a criminal to stay in school five years, and people get loans, we didn't get any loans. [Interference]...as my daughter went to graduate school, that whole process, she overcompensated, because she had not had the science background that she thought she needed, but she did it. Her thing was that she did not want minority MCAT scores..[interference] ...she said, 'They're called minority MCAT scores.' So she got a master's. Now her scores were all right [interference for a long period]

JD:...very interesting. I learn a lot about people when I ask about their kids....

[discussion of upcoming interview with Mrs. Coomer]

[interference again; end of intelligible portion of tape]