



**Berkshire Historical Society at Herman Melville's Arrowhead**  
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**Invisible Community Project**  
in partnership with  
**Housatonic Heritage Oral History**

**James Williamson**  
**Recorded: March 24, 1998**  
**0:00:00 to 1:25:18**

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**Elaine Gunn:** Elaine Gunn speaking. Today's date is March 24<sup>th</sup>, 1998. I'm at the home of Mr. James Williamson, in Pittsfield. Mr. Williamson has kindly consented to being part of our oral history project. History project for the Invisible Community.

Thank you Mr. Williamson, for allowing me to interview you.

**James Williamson:** You're certainly welcome.

**Elaine Gunn:** I have a number of questions. [0:00:33] seem to understand the kinds of questions that I will be asking you today. We'll start with your family background, if that's alright.

I'll ask you just to talk a bit about your parents. Who they were, where they were born. If they weren't born in Massachusetts, why they came to Massachusetts. And when they came, if you remember. Or if they told you at any point. And perhaps a bit about your grandparents, as much about them as you can remember.

0:01:01 I'll stop there, and then we'll continue on. If you want, just talk a bit about your parents and your grandparents, please.

**James Williamson:** OK. Some of this may be a little bit scratchy, because my memory is not as good as it used to be. And those things [0:01:18], of course they weren't really that important to me, and I don't have a record here.

My mom, however, was I believe born in Pennsylvania. At least, I know she and her family came from Pennsylvania. The Pennsylvania area. She came to Pittsfield, I would guess, when she was a little girl. Again, I don't know the year.

My dad I believe was born in Danville, Virginia. Then he moved as a young man to Greensville, North Carolina.

0:02:02 Then he came to Pittsfield from Greensville. Now I would guess that he came to Pittsfield somewhere in the 30s—I'm sorry, 20s. Somewhere in the 20s.

My grandmother, on my dad's side, whose name was Viola McCain, she came and lived with us. I remember her living with us as a very young child. I don't know where she was [0:02:41]. And I'm not too familiar with any facts concerning my dad's dad. My grandfather.

On my mom's side, my grandmother's name was Mary Moore. She had a sister that was living in Pittsfield as well.

0:03:05

I'm trying to think of her name. She would have been my great aunt. Her name was Jasper, Mrs. Jasper. Not sure of her first name at this point. She had two sons—I mean, two children. Calvin. I'm sorry, I only know that she had one child, Calvin. And Calvin had two children. Which was Bettie, was his daughter. And he had a son, and I believe his name was Calvin as well.

Let's see, did I cover that.

**Elaine Gunn:**

Do you know why your parents came to Pittsfield?

**James Williamson:**

I don't know why my mom's side, but I do know the paternal part. My dad came to Pittsfield, to seek work.

0:04:00

At that time, he and quite a few of his peers came to Pittsfield. In fact, in those days, a good deal of the men, the black men, who came to Pittsfield, came from the same town, Greenville, North Carolina.

**Elaine Gunn:**

In the 20s, you're talking about the 20s?

**James Williamson:**

In the 20s. And it was interesting that so many of them came from the same small town, Greenville, North Carolina. I think what happened is, they came to find work, and they found work, a great deal of them, at the Wendell Hotel. That was the most popular and largest hotel in the area, at that time.

I remember my dad telling me about, he and his friends, how one came up and found work and liked the area. Then of course, got in touch with his friends, and then they came up. So ultimately, there was quite a few of young black men who came up at that time.

0:05:02

That's why—what I remember, is my dad coming up—I also remember that my dad roomed—what happened in those days is, these young black men who came up, generally stayed in the homes of black people who were already here. I think that's how my mom and dad got together.

My grandmother Mary Moore, sort of liked my father very much, thought he was a great guy, and I think that was the impetus that got my mom and dad together.

- Elaine Gunn:** Were you born here, in Pittsfield?
- James Williamson:** Yes, I was. My entire family, myself and my brothers and sisters, were all born here in Pittsfield. I was born July 12, 1935.
- Elaine Gunn:** 19, wait a minute.
- James Williamson:** 19—
- Elaine Gunn:** Not 95. [laugh]
- James Williamson:** [laugh] Certainly. 1935
- 0:06:02 Wish it were 95. 1935, July 12<sup>th</sup>, 1935. In St. Luke's Hospital, which was on East Street at the time.
- Elaine Gunn:** So you've lived here all of your life.
- James Williamson:** All of my life.
- Elaine Gunn:** Except the time that you were in the service. Which we'll get to, in just a minute.
- James Williamson:** Yes, I've done some travelling. There was a [great? 0:06:19] period that I did some travelling. But essentially, I've been here all of my life.
- Elaine Gunn:** You mentioned siblings.
- James Williamson:** Yes. My oldest sister, and oldest in the family, child in the family, is Rosemary Viola. The next oldest, another sister, was Lilian Marita. Then, the next sibling would be Charles Edward. Then I was the fourth, in age category.
- 0:07:05 Then after me, came my brother Robert Allen. Then my brother Clifford. I believe Clifford is Clifford Allen. My brother Robert, I'm not sure of his middle name. Then my sister Elizabeth Sharon.
- Elaine Gunn:** So you have a rather large family.
- James Williamson:** Yes, two of which were deceased at a very, very young age. [0:07:36]. Robert died when he was 15, I believe. He had a problem with epilepsy and he was not able to attend schools and ultimately, he had to be sent to Palmer State Hospital. He died there.
- 0:08:02 I recall going to his funeral, in the Palmer area.
- Elaine Gunn:** Sad.
- James Williamson:** My brother next to me, my older brother, he died when he was 6. He drowned behind our home, in the Housatonic River. We

lived on [Derring?] Street, and the Housatonic River was right in our backyard, behind our backyard. He died, and I remember it was three days before they found—they had to lower the water, and dredge the river, and they found him three days later.

He was 6-years old, and I remember that very well. I was 4-years old. I remember that so well, because the day he was missing, sometime in the evening—I would guess it was getting dusk, it was really dark, and the police came to the house.

0:09:00

And he and I would dress exactly alike, baseball cap on. We just had some new clothes that we were sporting around, and mom dressed us both alike. So the police came in, and they looked at me. And I remember them shining a flashlight on me, so that they could get a description of my brother. Of course, at that time they didn't know that he was in the river. So, I remember that quite well. Again, three days later...

**Elaine Gunn:**

Horrible, horrible.

The rest of your siblings, are they living here in Pittsfield, or have they left area?

**James Williamson:**

Presently, I have four remaining—four of us are [0:09:45]. Two of us are living here. My brother Clifford Allen, and myself, are living permanently in Pittsfield.

My sister Lilian Marita is living in California, and also my sister Rosemary is living in California.

0:10:05

**Elaine Gunn:**

May I ask this question, was Man Williamson related to you at all?

**James Williamson:**

No, he wasn't. It was interesting, because there were three James Williamsons. We were all about the same age. In fact, I think we were the same age. There was probably a year either way between all of us. All our families came from North Carolina. Two of us had the same mother's name, Katharine. It was quite a thing.

At one time, Man Williamson, which, he was James Irving. He and his father, and his grandfather, lived on Circular Avenue. The other fellow, James Leroy, lived on Circular Avenue. And I lived on Circular Avenue. So we had five James Williamsons living on Circular Avenue.

**Elaine Gunn:**

Isn't that funny.

0:11:00

- James Williamson:** From three different clans.
- Elaine Gunn:** Because there's another family I wanted to mention, Waddell. He was not related to you either.
- James Williamson:** Of course, he wasn't related to me either.
- What has happened here in Pittsfield, is there's a real problem with the Williamson name. From that perspective, my sister married Charles Williamson. So that created a problem.
- Then I married Lois Fry. Then Charlie's brother, Peter Williamson, married Lois Fry's sister. It just got to be a mess. In fact, I am always asked, are you related to this group of Williamsons, or are you related—and rather than to try to explain all of this, we just said, we say yes.
- Elaine Gunn:** [laugh] Lot easier, isn't it.
- James Williamson:** It's a lot easier. Yes, there's three, actually three different families.
- 0:12:00 But, in a small town, in the black community, there was so few of us, that you either married one of the few of us here, or you didn't get married. You had to leave. Or stay single. There were not much choices.
- Elaine Gunn:** There was another—I thought she was a Williamson, but I don't know. A young lady who married Dr. Sullivan, who lives...
- James Williamson:** She was a Williamson. She was James Leroy's sister. It was either Joan or Ivan, Joan...
- Elaine Gunn:** I can't remember. I should be able to remember. She's close to my age.
- James Williamson:** Married Dr. Sullivan who became in the Carter administration.
- Elaine Gunn:** In the Carter administration, yes.
- James Williamson:** Her mother's name was Katharine Williamson, and later she married Patrick, and became Katharine Patrick. So the Williamsons and the Patricks are half-brother and sisters.
- Elaine Gunn:** That can be very confusing to me.
- 0:13:01
- James Williamson:** Exactly.

**Elaine Gunn:**

Was there anybody else living with you when you were growing up besides your family? Sometimes, I know in black families, an extended family member often lived with...

**James Williamson:**

Yeah, that was the case, when I was a young man. That's how it generally worked, when the parents would live with one member or another, of the family. Grandma was always around.

In my family, yes. My dad's mom came from North Carolina, or Virginia, or wherever. I would suspect North Carolina. She lived with us for probably about—well, I was very young, so the memories then are not what they are today, but I would guess, three or four years.

She died. And then, in fact, I remember when she died, because in those days, when you were sick, the doctor came to your home. She was very, very sick. Then I remember, they took her out in the ambulance.

0:14:00

But usually when they took you out in the ambulance, you were pretty far along the way. She died sometime shortly after that.

I also remember her, because she was such a great friend to all the kids. That's one of the things that we had as children, that most people, the kids today, don't have that advantage. It is an advantage. Because mom was the enforcer, and grandma was—

**Elaine Gunn:**

Smoothed it all over.

**James Williamson:**

—she smoothed it all over. She made the hurt go away. I'll never forget it. One of the things that I'll never forget grandma for, because—and I don't know that she was [0:14:43]. I think I would maybe do the same thing.

In those days, you had to go in the basement to get—people threw the coal and the wood in their basement. Through one of the windows, they'd shoot the coal in, and GE would bring and give people the chips of wood from their scrap.

0:15:05

The basements were dark. They were dirt floor. And very often, if they had a light in them, the lights usually didn't have any bulbs. I would have to go down in the basement, in that dark basement.

Well, in those days there was always this talk about the boogeyman. We were always being taught about, if you don't behave, going to get the boogeyman and the darkness. Somebody somewhere told me about the boogeyman downstairs.

So now, I had to go—my mom would make me go down and get coal. I was absolutely petrified. I wasn't [0:15:39], it wasn't

that I didn't want to go downstairs to do the work. I had no problem with that. Really had a problem with going downstairs, and I was petrified.

My grandmother realizing that, would sneak out the front door, go around the backdoor in the hallway, because you had to leave the backdoor and then go out in the hall and then downstairs. She would leave out the front, sneak around the back, and then hide in the entranceway to the cellar.

0:16:05

I came out to go down to the cellar. She'd take my hand, bring me down. Stay with me until I got the coal, and then she would send me in the kitchen. She'd go around the front, and come in the front door not to create a problem with my mom.

That was just so wonderful to me. So she understood. And I'm sure if my mom knew that I was really, really afraid, and was not just trying to get out of the task, she would not have insisted that I go downstairs. But when the parents spoke in those days, whatever it was, you just did it. There was no question, yes, no.

**Elaine Gunn:**

I remember that. [laugh]

**James Williamson:**

It was just simply—which in some cases, wasn't always the best. That was a great thing, where grandparents—they were there, and they sort of monitored the parents, and helped the parents raise the kids. Which was, some would use today.

0:17:00

**Elaine Gunn:**

Oh, absolutely. I agree. Absolutely, you do miss that today.

Are you, or were you, married?

**James Williamson:**

I have been married, yes. I was married. I married Lois Fry. We were married for probably about 23 years. We simply—it didn't work. We didn't have any—we had an amicable, if you can, and [0:17:30] special—we did have an amicable divorce. It was a no-fault divorce. We agreed that the children were more important than anything we had [0:17:44]. We made sure that we—and we're still friends now.

**Elaine Gunn:**

Is that Jenny's sister?

**James Williamson:**

No, that would be Louis Fry's and Katherine Fry's daughter. Jenny's sister is another generation, an older generation. That would be I think Jenny's aunt, or niece.

0:18:05

**Elaine Gunn:**

Niece.

And children. You mentioned children.

**James Williamson:** Yes. I have three—Lois and I had three children. Have three children. James, our oldest. And he's followed three years later, by Jaime or Jane. Then she is followed eight years later, by Katherine Elizabeth, who was named after my mom. And also, my wife's mom, because they both had the first name.

**Elaine Gunn:** The same first name.

**James Williamson:** So it worked out very well.

**Elaine Gunn:** I should say.

**James Williamson:** I told my daughter that she was named after my mom, and Lois told her she was named after her mom. So it worked out very well, we're all happy about that.

**Elaine Gunn:** So you are divorced, at this point.

**James Williamson:** Yes.

**Elaine Gunn:** Your children live in the area?

**James Williamson:** James lives here presently. He had left and he came back.

0:19:02 My daughter Jaime, who is the city counselor here in Pittsfield, the first black female city counselor, and the first black counselor at large. She lives here in Pittsfield, and she is in business. She runs and owns Jane's Appliance World. She went to Cali...

**Elaine Gunn:** Could you talk about Jane's Appliance World?

**James Williamson:** She went to California. Which we could talk about it later—I had a business called Appliance World. I simply was not going to continue. It had just grown too much of a hassle for me. I was having some difficulties, and her mother called her and told her. And Jaime wanted to be sure that the family tradition continued, so she decided to come back home, help me with the business. With the idea of continuing the business, which ultimately happened.

**Elaine Gunn:** So she was living in California, just decided after she finished school. Did she go to school in Pittsfield?

0:20:02

**James Williamson:** Yes, she went to school. No, she went to school in Hanover, New Hampshire. I think it was—what is it, Yale or what college is there?



**Elaine Gunn:** Dartmouth.

**James Williamson:** Dartmouth. That's the school that's on the Dartmouth campus, or near the Dartmouth campus. What happened, she had some very good friends here, in Pittsfield, in her senior year—her junior year. They were such tight buddies. And they moved away, they were going to [0:20:27]. So they moved away.

And he got a job on the campus of, did you say it was Harvard?

**Elaine Gunn:** Dartmouth.

**James Williamson:** Dartmouth campus. And they visited each other. And when Jaime, and this friend of hers—Jaime came home and asked if she could go and stay there, and do her senior year there.

I kind of didn't like that idea too much. But Lois and I talked about it, and we thought that this might be good for her, because Pittsfield was so limited, especially for black females.

0:21:04 We thought that the experience would be good and healthy for her. So we went and checked them out, and they were very nice people. They were a white family, of course. We decided, yes. We thought the scholastic environment was perfect for her. So we agreed and she went to her senior year at Hanover high school. She graduated from Hanover high.

Then she went on to Mount Vernon. It's a private college for girls. After Mount Vernon College, she went to California, with family, with some of her mom's family, brothers, sisters, or whatever. She stayed there, and she got involved in the banking institution. She was doing very, very well. In bank.

0:22:02 But she decided that she wanted to be at home with her dad, to help her dad. She was always, always with dad. She was my first girl, and we had—I have a special relationship with all my children, but Jaime and I were so much alike, that it was just...

**Elaine Gunn:** Seeing that. [laugh]

**James Williamson:** [laugh] Yeah. She came back, and now she runs and owns, with her own money, I should say. Most people think that I set her up and gave her everything, but that is not the case. She used her own money. She did it all by herself. I certainly helped her wherever I could, but not in a financial way. She took the bull by the horn, and she created her own.

**Elaine Gunn:** You must be very proud.

**James Williamson:** Very proud. She's everything I ever wanted to be, and then some.

**Elaine Gunn:** Yes, wonderful. And the fact that she's able to—with elections.

**James Williamson:** Twice.

**Elaine Gunn:** In Pittsfield, Massachusetts.

0:23:01

**James Williamson:** And interestingly enough, she won it the first time out. Usually that doesn't happen. Especially for at large. Ward counsellors are something somewhat different. But at large counsellor, of course, represents the whole city. That was quite an achievement, for her. During these times.

**Elaine Gunn:** You said you have another daughter?

**James Williamson:** I have another daughter, Kathy, who—oh, what college did she attend? She attended the black college in Washington, which would be—

**Elaine Gunn:** Howard?

**James Williamson:** —Howard.

Kathy did very, very well. She looked into colleges when she was here in Pittsfield. She graduated from Pittsfield high school. She went all over the country with, there was this group called Upward Bound. She got involved in that program. She got involved with a bunch of—there was a group here who—they formed a group, and they went out looking at black colleges. She looked all over the country. She wanted to go to a black college

0:24:03

She had other options, but she decided on Howard. She went to Howard. When she finished there, she liked the area, and she stayed in Washington. Her mom lives with her.

**Elaine Gunn:** She still lives in Washington?

**James Williamson:** She's in Washington now. She's living probably right at this moment in Maryland, I believe, or Virginia. They're right next to each other, because when I visited her, I was in all three of them.

**Elaine Gunn:** I'm sure you were.

**James Williamson:** I didn't know that I had left, [0:24:32] city. So, I believe her home address is in Maryland. She's doing very, very well. She's managing a new and very upscale spa. She's doing very well.

**Elaine Gunn:** And your son lives in Pittsfield, you say?

- James Williamson:** Son lives in Pittsfield. He decided to come back. He was not here.
- 0:25:00 He lived somewhere in the south, I believe Georgia. He came back to assist his sister. So he is now working with his sister at Jaime's Appliance World.
- Elaine Gunn:** Oh, good.
- James Williamson:** Family again.
- Elaine Gunn:** Absolutely. Do you have grandchildren?
- James Williamson:** Not a one.
- Elaine Gunn:** Not a one, yet. Well, there's time.
- You and your wife then met here in Pittsfield, right? Because this was your home and her home.
- James Williamson:** Yes.
- Elaine Gunn:** OK. That often happens.
- James Williamson:** I met her when I came back from the service. I didn't know her before that. I didn't know her as a youngster growing up.
- Elaine Gunn:** Are you a religious person or spiritual? Do you belong to a church, or do you have any church affiliations, or any religious affiliations at all?
- James Williamson:** I would say I'm religious, probably very—I'm not a fanatic. By nature, I would say the situation that I'm in here in Pittsfield, I do not regularly attend church.
- 0:26:05 As a matter of fact, I go to two churches, when I do go, and probably am still a member of both. St. Stephen's, because my wife's family went to St. Stephen's. She's brought my children there, which usually happens. They go where the mom goes. And when I was coming up, I went to Second Congregational Church, which is considered a black church, if you will.
- I go to either. But those are the two churches that I've attended in Pittsfield.
- Elaine Gunn:** You must have some memories of growing up in first one church, then the other. Picnics or outings or things they used to have.
- James Williamson:** All of my memories in church, would be from Second Congregational, because I went there as a child. And I do have

some very fond memories. Of course, I recall Easter the most, because that was a special day for black families.

0:27:07

I remember that—and I never understood it—mom would call it the Easter parade. Everybody, it would seem, would buy new duds for Easter. All of the children would have brand new clothes, and their parents would have brand new clothes. All the girls had bonnets. Everybody was waiting to see what everyone else would look like.

They would go to church to show their wares, and the church was full. I'm not sure that there was one soul, [0:27:36 especially the tailor?], that didn't go to church. On Easter Sunday. That was really—that was an occasion.

**Elaine Gunn:**

It might have been, perhaps one of the few times during the year, back then, that black families bought clothes for their children, especially those [0:27:55].

**James Williamson:**

Given the circumstances of the day.

**Elaine Gunn:**

Yes.

0:28:00

**James Williamson:**

The economics of black folks in this area, certainly had very difficult time getting and keeping a job. Especially a decent job. Most of the jobs that the blacks were able to get, those blacks that came up with my dad, were menial jobs. Were the porters, and the janitors, and the elevator operations, and the shoeshine boys, although they were men. Those were those kinds of jobs.

They really didn't have the money, so it made sense that Easter was one of those times you would buy clothes, because it worked. And at Christmas, was another time, that people would try to save their money and buy clothes during the Christmas season. That just made sense, because they weren't able to buy clothes as needed. So it just seemed to work that way.

There were lots of things that happened, I think, that we did based on the economy, or our economy. Not the greater economy, but the economy of the blacks.

0:29:07

**Elaine Gunn:**

At this point, are you considered to be retired, except that you do go into...?

**James Williamson:**

What happened is, I retired from Appliance World, but I really didn't retire. But that's when Eagle wrote it up, retired, people have the idea that I retired from life. I'm too young to retire, at this point.

**Elaine Gunn:** I hope so.

**James Williamson:** When Jaime took over and created her own thing, then I moved on to the west side, which is the black community—or it's one of the black communities, or the oldest black community, if you will, in Pittsfield. The west side. I went there, under a grant. Came out of the Rodney King situation.

0:30:00 My task was to train, with the experience and the background I had being in business some 30 years, young folks in need. Not especially young, but people on the west side.

**Elaine Gunn:** Who were mostly blacks.

**James Williamson:** Mostly blacks and lower, disadvantaged people. The job was to help them, to empower them, through business. We were to teach them how to do a business plan, and actually how to eventually get into business.

**Elaine Gunn:** Has that been successful?

Because if you have one person who went through it and [0:30:47].

**James Williamson:** I think it was successful, but I have to say as most programs go, that the Federal government devises, they will take you from point A to point C or D or F, and then it's over.

0:31:06 What really happens is, there is so much more that you need to know, and so much further you have to go, to make the initial program make some sense, and be successful in that sense. But, yes, if we took them from point A to point C, and that was our charge, we did that, and we did it very well. From that perspective, it was very successful. We had the highest success rate that anyone in this area, or probably in most areas, have reached.

We went further than what the grant called for. The grant called for us to do the outreach, get the participants in the program, give them a 12-week course, end of story. There was some follow-up, but that was it. There was no means to help them get into the business, to support them further on, once the business started. That kind of thing.

0:32:06 But we were successful in, not only getting them through the course, and having them learn how to run a business plan, we were successful in helping them right through the financing stage, right into business. We had, I believe, somewhere near 12 people who actually went into business. I know that, at least, 9 of those people were minorities.

**Elaine Gunn:** Good.

- James Williamson:** That was—I mean, there hasn't been 9 people in business in Berkshire County up to that point in its entire history.
- Elaine Gunn:** No, not 9 minorities.
- James Williamson:** Or Pittsfield, in its entire history.
- Elaine Gunn:** Or Berkshire County.
- James Williamson:** Probably Berkshire County. We put 9 people in, right away. Unfortunately, the program didn't carry on.
- 0:33:00 Or we were not able to stay with them. And that was a necessary thing, to help them through. The first five years of business are the most crucial.
- We actually—I think it was a sham, that we got them that far, and there was no more support. Because actually, I think in retrospect, we hurt them. I don't think that I would ever do that again. Unless I could carry it through its reasonable conclusion.
- Elaine Gunn:** And follow-up, because they were [0:33:33].
- James Williamson:** Set out there to—they didn't know how to purchase, they didn't understand so many things. Not because they were not bright, it was because we didn't have the time to teach them. They didn't have the experience. So that was not a good program.
- 0:33:58 One thing I think that happens, it did show, a lot of people, including those people who did go in and ultimately had to close shop, that they could do this. That it could be done. It showed the younger people. It gave them some hope. That yes, black people can be businesspeople. Yes, black people have the skills, can obtain the skills, and can do the job.
- From that perspective, it was very good. And some of those people who unfortunately didn't have the wherewithal to make it, to keep it working, may someday, down the road, I'm sure, many of them will. Do it again when they find themselves in a better circumstance.
- Elaine Gunn:** But they could then look at you, and see you were an example, of what a successful businessperson is, and does, and has, been able to do, in the city of Pittsfield.
- James Williamson:** I had special parents. I had special parents, and that was the key to my success. Because whenever I didn't know what to do, I would just refer to what daddy told me. And it always worked.
- 0:35:07 I love my dad, I respect him. And my dad and my mom both, they gave me a really good outlook on life. It just made commonsense, and I like people.

- Elaine Gunn:** Your dad, you said, worked at the Wendell Hotel?
- James Williamson:** My dad worked at the Wendell Hotel. For many years as a bellhop, I guess they were called. He worked at the Greyhound bus station, as a porter. Then he worked at England Brothers, I remember he worked at England Brothers, as an elevator operator. I remember he telling me that he made 16 dollars a week. Which was like, outrageous.
- Elaine Gunn:** For those times.
- James Williamson:** For those times, it was OK. From his background, it was OK.
- 0:36:00
- I always had a problem with those kinds of jobs. I asked my dad, “why you let these people?” Referring to, when he was shining shoes, or whatever, taking bags. “Make you look like you’re not important, you’re a nobody, and you’re a jerk.” My dad told me that, what those people feel or think, really isn’t the important thing to him. That he always does the best job that he can do, and that when his day is over, he takes his money and what he has earned, and goes to his house. And those people don’t exist anymore.
- 0:37:00
- Elaine Gunn:** I suppose they have to have that attitude, otherwise how would—
- James Williamson:** How could they handle it.
- Elaine Gunn:** —handle it, yeah.
- James Williamson:** Because I certainly couldn’t handle it. I was hurt and ashamed and embarrassed that my dad was doing those kinds of jobs, but then as any child would be, who grew up in my circumstances.
- Elaine Gunn:** He had to earn a living for his family.
- James Williamson:** He had to earn a living. But a young 10-year old child, doesn’t relate to that. But my dad gave me a good outlook on how to deal with people, and what the value of work ethic, and there’s just what you have to do.
- Elaine Gunn:** He lived long enough to see you with your success.
- James Williamson:** One of the things I’m so very happy about, is that he lived long enough to see me have an appliance store on the main street in Pittsfield. Not a small, little shop somewhere in the corner. But I was in the mainstream.
- 0:38:02
- He saw that I was equivalent to or superior—my business was more successful of course than some of the people that had been

in business for 40, 50 years. He saw that I was a smashing success in terms of where we came from. That, he was so proud, and I was so proud of him, and he was so proud of me. That's the one thing I'm so grateful for. That means more than anything in the world. My dad and my mom.

**Elaine Gunn:** I would think so.

**James Williamson:** They both saw their son—and incidentally, my parents, and I certainly understand this, they never dreamed—their dreams for me was, I remember my mom said that, if I worked hard enough, maybe I could be a carpenter. My dad said that I could probably have three or four fleet of shoeshine businesses. And that was reasonable.

0:39:00 But my mom, thank god, she said to me always, she always preached to me, you have to think big. Think big, think big. She said, if you want to reach the moon, shoot for the stars. Because if you come short of wherever you're trying to go, I mean if you come short of reaching the stars, then you'll probably be on the moon, and then some. She always told me, think big, think beyond what I think I can do. Just think big.

For me to go on North Street, and have that business and that time, was a big thing.

**Elaine Gunn:** Was big. Yeah.

**James Williamson:** Was way out of what was expected from a black person, at that time in Pittsfield.

**Elaine Gunn:** When did you open your business on...?

**James Williamson:** I went into the appliance business in 1967. That is, for myself. I went into the appliance business in 1960 for Harder Electric, and seven years later I opened up my own store.

0:40:03 I opened it up on Linden Street, which was off the North Street beat, by about three blocks. It was really in the residential area, but on a well-travelled street. Then, I did so well, that within six months I was doing well enough to go on to the main drag. I opened a place on North Street in 1967, '68, but it was six months after I got into business.

I had intended to go into business, simply to become a technician. Which I was for Harder Electric, and do the repairing. But I had worked myself into having the kind of reputation that people wanted me to fix, to buy—they wanted to buy from me. So, I had a good following.

**Elaine Gunn:** Following, clientele, obviously.



0:40:57

**James Williamson:**

I had the clientele there, so it just simply made sense. I decided to give it a try, and it just went so well, that it kept going up.

We finally—that was in 1967. In 1981, we were doing in excess of two million dollars. About 1984, we were doing just hundreds of dollars less than three million dollars gross sales. So we were much, much larger than even the people who we were dealing with. I don't think most people realize how well we were doing.

We were the biggest appliance dealer in Berkshire County, bar none. We were bigger than—and we had some mighty tough competition. We had days where we did—I think one of our record series, was 67 pieces. That's phenomenal to sell, 67 major appliances in one day.

0:42:03

That's just. We had two and three delivery crews. We really, we did a good job. I don't know that anybody could do that volume again here in this area. We did more than the other dealers, than any other dealer in the area.

**Elaine Gunn:**

Did you have difficulty with financing your business initially?

**James Williamson:**

So bad. It was terrible. What happened is, I had a good personal credit. I had good personal credit, because I was taught to pay my bills.

**Elaine Gunn:**

It's hard to keep. Parents.

**James Williamson:**

That's exactly right, it came from my parents. That got me the minimal—because remember, I was just going to fix appliances, so I wasn't thinking in terms of any large money. What I kept finding out, as I entered in business—

0:43:00

—and actually, I have to call a spade a spade. There was a lot of things I didn't know. I had no idea what a financial statement was. I didn't know what a balance sheet was. There was lots of things I didn't know. I knew how to sell something. Put the money in the cash register. Not spend it. Pay my bills with it. Pay for the product. And then still hang on to it as long as I could.

So I was very frugal, I was very well-organized that way. But I didn't—although my method was correct, it wasn't professional. And I didn't know what I was doing, even though I was doing the right thing, by luck.

I had a lot to learn. But after I did learn these things, I had a very, very hard time with the bank. What ultimately happened, is that, whenever I went to the bank and asked them for a loan, I

began to realize that if I asked them for 1,000 dollars, they would let me have 800.

0:44:00

If I asked them for 3,000, they would let me have 2. It would seem that whatever I asked them for, they would not give me what I needed, but they would give me enough to get in trouble. But never what I needed.

It was interesting how I finally overcame this. What I did was, is I decided that I was going to take on a very important franchise. I went to the bank and I told them that I was going to get the Maytag franchise, which is a really valuable franchise. It's pretty secure. I was told that, oh well—I'm sure they didn't believe I could get it, at that time. I wasn't sure I could either. But, I was told that if I got the franchise that they would finance that product for me. Well, they had already given—I had probably about 5,000 dollars borrowed from them at that point in time. So, I'd be looking for another 5.

0:45:00

So, when I finally did get the franchise, I went to the bank and told them that I had the franchise. They acted as though...

[sound cuts off]

0:45:23

...which of course, I know what to do now. I just simply took the agent's or the representative's word. So when I came back to him, he acted like he didn't know what I was talking about.

Anyhow, I refreshed his memory. Then I start complaining, and told them that, "everything I ask for, you never seem to give me. You made a commitment to me, and now you're backing out." I sort of forced him, if you will, to go along and give me the line of credit for the Maytag. That got me up to 11,000, I owed the bank, at that point in time. And I kept having difficulties.

0:46:06

So, what I did was, I walked to the bank and I said, "hey, every time I come here and ask for some help, you give me something shy of what I asked for." And I began to realize, it doesn't make any difference how much or how little I ask, of course I'm sure I could get more than 5 at one time. I should have asked for more, but that's just not the way I do business.

So, I said, "I've decided that, you don't want to work with me, I can't move forward, so here are the keys." I told them, "I owe you 11,000 dollars now, and I know very well that you can give me a decent size loan. I know also that you can give me a loan under your SPA program, and you'd be guaranteed 90%." I'm looking for 50,000 dollars now. I said, "90% of 50,000 dollars is 45,000 dollars, is what you could lose. The way it is today, you're going to lose 11,000, because I'm through. So, you have

a choice. Either give me a 50,000 dollar guaranteed loan from the SPA, or you can have these keys.”

0:47:12

Furthermore, I’m not sure that I—I had a problem with the person I was dealing with. Then they immediately brought me to another loan officer, senior loan officer. Who waltzed me around the bank. They listened. My perspective is, they only listened when they recognized the sense I made. Lose 11,000 dollars today, and that’s the end of that. Or maybe we give him 50,000 and he might be successful, and we’ll lose nothing. Or we’ll lose 5,000.

I just put them in a situation where it just behooved them.

**Elaine Gunn:**

Made sense.

**James Williamson:**

I got a loan in two weeks. I had the money in two weeks. That does not happen. And I didn’t know how to write a financial statement, and I got the money. But they knew that I had the ability and I just needed—and they did work with me.

0:48:04

That gentleman, that new loan officer, Stan Rather, worked very, very close with me, and he helped me. He did a lot for me, and I really appreciate it. And I’ve always paid him back. They never ever, ever had a loan with me, that I didn’t pay back prior to the due date.

It was a good relationship. Good deal for them, and obviously a good deal for me.

**Elaine Gunn:**

Quite the modern businessman.

**James Williamson:**

Well, [luck? 0:48:27]. Listen to daddy again.

**Elaine Gunn:**

Exactly.

Tell me about your school experiences growing up in Pittsfield. Where you went to school, and when, memories?

**James Williamson:**

From the beginning?

**Elaine Gunn:**

Well, some of your—the good and the bad, I suppose.

**James Williamson:**

Well, my earliest recollection of school was when I went the first day of school. First grade. I remember my mom took me in and it was exciting. All of us little guys were coming in, and gals. I just couldn’t imagine why these kids were crying, and kicking, and screaming.

0:49:06

Because the mothers were leaving. I was glad I could have—to get out and have some fun. And they were just—I couldn’t

imagine, what is wrong with these guys. That was the first thought.

**Elaine Gunn:** Where was it, which school?

**James Williamson:** I went to Briggs School, which is on West Street now. It's now apartment homes and houses. But it was from, what they call K1 I think today. It was 1<sup>st</sup> grade to 4<sup>th</sup> grade.

**Elaine Gunn:** Where did you live at this time?

**James Williamson:** I lived right across from Briggs. It was Dearing Street. Dearing Street faced Briggs school, so I just had to walk to the end of my street, and across the walk, and there it was. We lived just up the street from the school.

The second thing that I remember very well—of course, I remember the little square and the ABCs and the little numbers. Which got me off to reading.

0:50:04 Then the second thing that struck me, was little black Sambo. I will never, ever, ever, forget that horrible, horrible story that they taught us, as little children. I was in that class, and there were probably about three black children in there. I was one of them. James Leroy Williamson, we spoke of him, was one of them. And I'm not sure if I—Herbie Evans, was the third black—

**Elaine Gunn:** Tommy's brother.

**James Williamson:** —yes, the young Herb. We were the three. I don't recall any other black children in that—but there's three of us out of the whole class.

So, we're reading this story, of little black Sambo. And this dude has got multicolored clothes on. He had on yellow and red and purple and orange. He's got multicolored hats and multicolored—he looked so absolutely ridiculous.

0:51:06 And then, the lions start chasing him around. A tiger, I guess. The tiger starts chasing him around the tree until the tiger just got so—somehow the tiger turned the butter. Somehow this tiger turned the butter. Then little black Sambo's mother and father, who looked as ridiculous as he did, or worse, start eating, making this butter. Making some pancakes out of this [tiger? 0:51:34]. They were eating something like 167, or I'm not sure the numbers, but they were just an outrageous amount of pancakes. These three ridiculous black people were eating, after the lion chased them around, scared them to death.

It was a horrible story. It made me feel—and what it was doing, it was identifying with me. It was saying to me, that this is my

heritage. This is where I come from. This is who I am. This is my culture.

0:52:06

**Elaine Gunn:**

Even at that age?

**James Williamson:**

Oh, I felt it, I knew it. There was no way that you wouldn't know that. The teacher—I don't want to say the teacher, but I'm sure it was from the teacher. She was telling the story. She was teaching the class. I'm not saying it was—I don't know who is the [culprit? 0:52:27], if there is a [culprit?]. But that was the most demeaning thing to a human being that anybody could do, at that early age.

That's what stuck into my mind. That was horrible. It was terrible. So, so demeaning. That's the first time that I ever became ashamed of being black. That's what they were teaching me, to be ashamed, they were teaching. It was awful. Little black Sambo.

**Elaine Gunn:**

Now you went to Briggs school, and were these experiences, this kind of experience, it wasn't ongoing throughout the school year?

0:53:05

**James Williamson:**

I would say that it was ongoing. Different kinds of things happened, but they happened, and it was horrendous. The next major thing that I recall, and at that time, I sort of thought that it was the most wonderful thing that was happening, my fourth grade teacher—and I was a little hell-raiser, there's no question. A lot of us were. My fourth grade teacher told me, that if I would be good, and just not give her any trouble, I could do anything I wanted to.

I didn't have to do any work. I didn't have to do any papers. I didn't have to do anything, as long as I would behave. I took that deal, it was a good deal.

**Elaine Gunn:**

It sounded good then.

**James Williamson:**

That was an excellent deal for—I could go out and clap the erasers when I wanted to. I could sit up—in those years, there was a teacher's desk and another long table, aside of her. I could sit up there in the front, if I wanted to. I could do whatever I wanted to. And I did.

0:54:01

I bought into that, and I remember I used to write plays. I used to make, do stuff with my sports. Make basketball plays, because I liked basketball. And I also did theater plays. I did whatever I wanted to do. I did the erasers when I felt like it.

**Elaine Gunn:**

At what point did you realize that she was really doing a disservice?

**James Williamson:**

Down the road. Because what she did, was she took my foundation of education away from me. She moved me out to the next grade.

Doing that, I mean it was bad enough, because people in those days, especially poor people, who generally fits into the black [0:54:44], had severe problems keeping the kids in school every day. Sometimes, we could not go to school, not because we were sick, but our parents didn't have the money to clothe us, to give us clean clothes. All kinds of things coming from money problems. And other problems as well.

0:55:03

But in any case. So, when I moved on the next grade, I was lost. Because I didn't have that fourth grade background. I did some things on my own. I didn't sit there every single, solitary day and do nothing. But I was allowed—I didn't have to be accountable on anything.

**Elaine Gunn:**

Did the teachers continue to have low expectations, you suppose, for this...?

**James Williamson:**

Well, you said it, it took me a little time to understand it, but as I thought about this over the years—I liked the teacher. It's hard not to like her, although I know she did me a disservice. But I look at it from this perspective, her idea was, "well, he's not going anywhere anyway, if he's the smartest kid in this class. If I spend that kind of time on him, where's he going to go? With his father, and shine shoes. Be a bellhop." That was the name of the game.

0:56:00

Trying to be as kind as I can to this teacher, who I did like very much, I try to rationalize that's where she was coming from. But, it was sad. I now think that she had—I can't excuse her at all. Or the system. This horrendous thing.

**Elaine Gunn:**

But it was a system. Not necessarily this teacher, but the system itself.

**James Williamson:**

The system, I think that's what—little black Sambo. I didn't think that every single first-grade teacher had those feelings, or meant that. They knew it was happening. They knew exactly what they were doing. They had a job to do, and I think the system—it wasn't a book that the teacher brought in. And it's worse, when the system puts this on the group of people.

There's no way that anybody could tell me that they weren't aware that a 6-year old child, how much damage they were

doing to it. Reminds me of that Roots, they tried to break him. What was his name, Kunta Kinte?

0:57:00

**Elaine Gunn:** Kunta Kinte. Mm-hmm.

**James Williamson:** They wanted him to be somebody else. He said no. That's what they were doing to us there, breaking us like that. Get us early, break us early. They did. They broke your heart. And some people's spirits. They didn't break mine. But they broke the spirits of—to imagine that. To imagine what the rest of the population, how they would feel if that same thing was done to theirs. Revolution.

That would be outrageous, but people don't realize. Those kinds of things are so hurtful, that a young man—I'm 64 now, 63 I think. [laugh] I'm 63. I can tell you that I would not have repeated that story, not on tape, not anywhere, when I was 23. I wouldn't have done it when I was 43.

So, those kinds of hurts are so personal, so devastating—

**Elaine Gunn:** And long-lasting.

**James Williamson:** —and they're long-lasting, that you will never tell anyone. You get this terrible treatment, and actually you shout to the people who are giving it to you, because it's just so outrageous.

0:58:05

Young people are taught to be brave, and to take it. That's what we were taught, in those days. You have to be brave, and you have to take it. Take a little beating, because that's the way life is. And so, you tend to take that.

It's written in the book, it's written by adults, it's written by the system. You're 6-years old. It's in the book, got to be true. It's sad.

**Elaine Gunn:** Now, people your age, when you were going to school, did most of the blacks who were in your class, and along with you, did they graduate from high school?

**James Williamson:** No, no. Because that's another situation. I didn't graduate. Given the kinds of things that went on throughout our school years, it was pretty likely that you weren't going to graduate. What they did with the girls, most of the black girls, they didn't go to college prep courses, they went to home economics, they were called in those days. Because that's what they felt was their destiny.

0:59:10

To stay home. People of low-economic base, the females, it was a [0:59:20] I think, that it was not in the best interests of

females, because most females weren't working. Especially, black females. They were doing domestic work. That was the kind of work they normally got, if there were able to get any job. It was still the same kind of thing.

We got off the point, but very few black people graduated. It wasn't as important 60 years ago, or 50 years ago, that it is today.

1:00:00

My dad and mom, one went to the 6<sup>th</sup>—I've forgotten which, I think my father went to the 6<sup>th</sup> grade, if he went that far. My mom probably went, I don't know how far she went. They didn't graduate, because they were near their home. They had to work. They had to help the family, and that kind of thing. Education, because was not as important to them, they wanted us to learn how to read and write. And think.

But in terms of getting a diploma, it was more important, and certainly you can understand that, in that day and age, that you'd get a job. If you have a job—I know some of my friends got a job running an elevator. Billy Jones, I'll never forget that he got a job running an elevator. So, that was more important than going to school. He was making real money. He wasn't going to get any more anyway from where we were coming from.

**Elaine Gunn:**

From a high school diploma.

**James Williamson:**

Right, even if he got the high school diploma, in those days, he was still going to just run an elevator. There was no expectations.

1:01:02

I think the system was designed—I didn't understand then, I certainly understand now. The system was designed to discourage black people, minorities, disadvantaged people, from being educated. Because that's how you keep people down. Keep them uneducated.

That goes back through history. That's how you keep people under your control, is by not giving them—

**Elaine Gunn:**

Not educating them.

**James Williamson:**

—educating them. There was a law that blacks couldn't learn to be [1:01:31], for that reason. But anyhow, back to the point is, no, I didn't graduate, and not very many of the black kids that grew up with me graduated.

A lot of them did, and it depended on so many things. Some of the parents—even in the black culture and in neighborhoods, they were some blacks that were better off than others.



1:02:04                   And it seems to me, as I look back, those black families that were better off, that the parents had more, their kids seemed to graduate. Especially where the mother and father were both there. Because another thing that we suffered is, my dad, I don't remember when he left home, I think I was probably—I don't know, I was young. When you're living under those circumstances, and then without both parents—

**Elaine Gunn:**                   It's pretty tough.

**James Williamson:**           —you're in trouble. No, I didn't graduate. I don't know that anybody in my family graduated.

**Elaine Gunn:**                   You mean your siblings.

**James Williamson:**           My brothers and sisters. Yeah, all my kids went to college. Because there was a new day. But no, I don't think anyone in my family graduated from high school. But I may be wrong, my brother may have. In fact, I'm pretty sure they didn't.

1:03:02                   We went on later, all of us—we certainly, all my brothers, all my siblings, certainly, although they may not have the certificate, have educated themselves. I've self-educated myself. I didn't get it in school. I did it through reading and taking correspondence courses and that kind of stuff. Reading the newspapers and whatever method I could find to educate myself.

**Elaine Gunn:**                   Well, you're an example. A role model, because of what you've been able to accomplish in your lifetime, living here in Pittsfield, under such adverse circumstances and conditions.

**James Williamson:**           That's true, but the unfortunate thing is that, people don't know that's the story. They assume that I came from a certain kind of background and I went to—they have no idea that I didn't graduate from high school.

1:04:04                   They thought—most people think I went to college, and graduated from college. But I think that it would be more dramatic, and more of a role model, if people knew my background, my circumstance, the truth. Which we all—I wasn't about to tell anybody. That's the sad thing about it. Where I feel it's a story that should be told now.

As a younger man, and while I was going through those moves, it was a story to hide. I would never...

**Elaine Gunn:**                   All us have that. We all have the skeletons in our closets, those of us who were...

**James Williamson:**           Well, you want to be—you're poor. I never believed we were poor, realized we were poor. I was having a hell of a good time

when I was a very young person. I never realized that we were poor. Not less—and actually we were the poor of the poor.

1:05:00

I just—it never, ever, occurred to me that I was poor. No way.

**Elaine Gunn:**

I used to say that, everybody around us would be in the same boat as I was in.

**James Williamson:**

It was normal.

**Elaine Gunn:**

It was normal. Did you have to—as a teenager, sometimes children when they were growing up in families, just to help with family expenses, get little jobs. Did you ever have to do that kind of thing?

**James Williamson:**

From the earliest time that I can remember—we worked, as soon as we could. I remember working probably on [1:05:37] Bar. There was a bar in Pittsfield, [1:05:40], west side of Pittsfield. When I was 12, or younger. I remember younger than that. In fact, when I first started working, we'd make a shoebox and go up on North Street, and shine shoes. Everybody had their shoes shined in those days, so you'd make some good money.

1:06:02

For a child, I think we got a quarter a shine. That was pretty good. Maybe it wasn't that much, because we made—if you made 5 dollars, you had some serious dollars. You forget, but I think we made 10, 15, 20. We made some real good money, but we'd be out there from as soon as you can get up on North Street and traffic started, until it was dark. We were loving that.

And all of that money went to mom. All of that money went to mom. Then I had a paper route. I remember I used to get about 3.75 a week for that, I think. So I was really young there. All that went to mom. I remember my mom bought me a football, after I worked for 100 years. She said, [1:07:02] I want a real thing.

1:07:05

**Elaine Gunn:**

That's one of the games you liked to play.

**James Williamson:**

Yes, football, any sports. Football, basketball, anything.

**Elaine Gunn:**

So you played in all the sports growing up as a...

**James Williamson:**

Oh, yes, oh, yes. I loved that.

So yes, I worked. Then I worked at Newberry's, sweeping the floors, as a porter. The money always went home, until I got to be older. Then, of course, I got to share with them. But my mom always—she was fair, as fair could be. But I wanted to

give the money. But we didn't get much, we didn't keep much. That was the same with any of us who worked in those days. I think that's probably all the poor people.

I know [1:07:45] Santoro, he worked. He was proud, because he could make the money to give to his parents. That's what we did. That's what everybody did. You couldn't work—you had to pay an allowance—it wasn't called an allowance.

1:08:00

But if you worked, you had to pay so much for your room and board. Because you had a job. It didn't make any difference how old you were. If you were making money, you had to pay. No one ever had a problem with that, we expected that. We contributed. Everybody did. We weren't anything special.

**Elaine Gunn:**

Did you have chores to do at home while you were growing up?

**James Williamson:**

Bet your life. Oh, yeah. Remember the coal story?

**Elaine Gunn:**

Yes, I remember that.

**James Williamson:**

We didn't have to do any lawns, because no one had a lawn where we lived. So they didn't have to do any lawns. But not only did we chores—I did the dishes, I mopped the floor—we didn't mop floors, you'd scrub them on your hands and knees. There was no such thing as a mop. [1:08:44] But you had to get on your hands and knees and scrub the floor.

Oh, my sister had—oh, we all worked. The house. We all did the work. Not only did we work, my mom taught me how to iron, sew—I'm talking as I was a young, young lad.

1:09:01

Iron, sew, cook, clean, everything. She taught me—I could run a household when I was 12. I actually could physically cook food. I'm so thankful for that today, because I'm needing those skills right now. I have to recall. I haven't done that kind of stuff in so long, but thank god for mom, because all I need is a refresher course.

I'm now able to—I'm a bachelor now, so I'm learning how to clean the house again. And sew on buttons. And I'm surprised, I was cooking here the other day, and one of the young men, one of my son's young friends, asked me what I was doing. I was telling him, making mashed potatoes. He told me, he never had mashed potatoes from scratch. He says, "what are mashed potatoes from scratch?" He said he never had them.

1:10:00

What people do today is, I guess, everything comes out of the box. I said, mashed potatoes from scratch, doesn't everybody do this?

It's great fun. I'm just sorry that I didn't do it when I was younger.

**Elaine Gunn:** But you've taken some of those values that your parents had taught you. Were there others, other kinds of things that you learned, that you remember, that come into play now that are terribly important. That you [1:10:29] pass on to your own children.

**James Williamson:** Well, I guess we make choices. I think I had to make a choice to go on out and run the business and develop the business. All my efforts had to be put there, because I worked two jobs. I didn't just go in business. I had to work at the hospital. Worked at the hospital at night, then in the morning I started to do my business. I worked almost around the clock.

I want to give myself a break. I really didn't have the time to help my wife at home with her kids, the kids. My kids, our kids. But that's the greatest loss.

1:11:00

**Elaine Gunn:** But the work ethic you certainly have is [1:11:03] pass on to your children.

**James Williamson:** Oh, yes. And commonsense to be kind, to be fair, and be honest. If you're honest, and you're kind, and you're fair, that's it. Everything else is going to fall in line. You can't be a jerk.

My kids, they have a sense of fairness, a sense of honesty.

**Elaine Gunn:** Did you discipline them at all?

**James Williamson:** No. I didn't have to. I verbally disciplined them, from time to time. But if I said thus was thus, that's the way it was. I'll never forget, Jaime, my councilwoman at large—I guess she was probably 8—I really don't know, but she was very young.

1:12:00

She took a single-edge razor and cut the couch. Lois came to me and said, "did you see what Jaime did?" And I went to Jaime and she was arrogant about it. I had never, have ever, touched a kid. So we went upstairs in the bedroom up there, and I gave her first spanking, her only spanking. And she was breathing like she was going to die. I was spanking her, and I was crying. I'm crying, she's screaming. I had to come downstairs, and Lois had to give me a shot of rum. I was just—it wasn't worth it. It killed me.

But I had never had to—my kids always responded, thank god. I didn't have to.

**Elaine Gunn:** Were you disciplined?

- James Williamson:** Oh, yes. Everybody was in that—you got to remember too, my mom was a single parent. A single parent.
- 1:13:00 She had six of us, most of the time. We raised Cain and Abel, as we used to call it in those days. We had to stand in line and get our whoopings. Everybody. That was the way it was done in those days. There was no abuse. We all expected it, we all got it.
- If we raised hell at school, we didn't come home and tell our parents. We got punished in school, that was it. We didn't tell. Because if we told our parents, we got punished again by our parents. So we, no, no, no.
- Elaine Gunn:** That was our generation.
- You mentioned that you were making some mashed potatoes one day. Is that one of your favorite kinds of foods to make? Or do you have any favorite recipes or anything like that?
- James Williamson:** My background is such that we eat basic foods. It's what we normally have. And I didn't, although I knew how to do all of the cooking, I didn't—my grandmother—turkey, because of the festivity of the holidays, is something that I love to have.
- 1:14:08 Some southern foods. My family didn't really do a lot of southern foods. But I love fried chicken, southern fried chicken. I could never—Lois just, I don't know—she wasn't, her parents weren't from the south I don't think.
- But I finally learned how to do it, and there's a knack. I learned how to do southern fried, and French fried potatoes. Now, that's the worst thing in the world for me, but I love it. I love, I used to, rice and chicken and the collard greens. Look out. That is really good. So yeah, that kind of stuff.
- And when I was overseas, I went to England. I was in England for about three years.
- 1:15:02 I took a liking to rice and curry. I thought it was beef, it was lamb. Because London was a pretty international city, and so we got a taste of lots of things. And I loved that.
- Elaine Gunn:** When were you in the ser...were you around the Korean War?
- James Williamson:** Before the Vietnam War, and after the Korean War. When I went in, the Korean War was still on. It was over, but it was officially still on. So there was no war, during the entire time I was there. So I didn't have that. I went to the Air Force, so I never saw any action. I was in the peacetime, so I was fortunate.

- Elaine Gunn:** You have any hobbies at all? You've spent a lot of time working.
- James Williamson:** I haven't had much time for hobbies. When I was younger, I loved basketball.
- 1:16:01 I just ate, slept, and drank basketball. All kinds of sports. Except outside winter sports, because I was a little thin, and I couldn't handle the cold. So I'm not too fond of outside sports, winter sports.
- Elaine Gunn:** ...born and raised here.
- James Williamson:** I'm not fond of it. I was inside playing basketball when it was cold. But I was on the swim team and the basketball team, football team, baseball team. I [1:16:24] all the sports. I loved those [1:16:26], all of the things that the Boys Club—they saved me. That was a great organization. I spent most of my time there, as a very young person.
- Elaine Gunn:** I wanted to ask you to talk to talk about that a bit more. Memories you have of Berkshire County, the city. What the city did for you or didn't do.
- James Williamson:** I want to tell you a story, now that you mentioned that. We must have been about 12, 13 maybe. We formed a group. I was a captain, and I formed it actually. A group called the Rens. Basketball team.
- 1:17:00 I formed it after the Renaissance, if you remember the Renaissance. Pretty popular. Because Pittsfield, years ago, everybody used to go to Boys Club to see these professional people. Renaissance, who were just like the Globetrotters, probably a step down.
- We formed a group. We called ourselves the Renaissance. I was in the junior court, so I had to be about 12, 13. We didn't have any equipment. So I went up to England Brothers, went up on the third floor, I think, where they had the sports equipment. I went and I shopped—I was going to ask the lady how much they were. So then I asked if I could speak to the owner.
- She took me in this place, and I saw all these offices with glass doors, and [1:17:53] offices. On that floor. It probably wasn't, I don't what floor it was, but it was where the sports things were.
- 1:18:03 She asked me what for. And I said, "well, I want talk to him about purchasing these"—I didn't say purchase at that time. Getting the uniforms. She smiled, and she brought me in. I went in this big office and saw this man there. Introduced himself as Mr. England. He asked me my name, and I told him my name

was [Junior? 1:18:30] Williamson, which I was called at that time.

I told him my dad had worked there as a bellhop, or an elevator operator, some years—he told me, “oh, yeah, I remember your dad.” He told me he remembered my father, and he asked me what I could do. I said, “well, we have a team, and we don’t have any uniforms, and I’m wondering if we could get them on credit. Then, I would come up and pay you as much as I can, when I get it.”

1:19:01

We can work jobs, small jobs. We collected papers and bottles and did all kinds of things. I said, “we’d get enough money. We can keep paying you, I’ll keep paying you until paid up.” I didn’t really know what I was talking about. But, he said, “OK, I’ll tell you what.” He called the girl back, and he said, “listen, I want you to go out—how many you want?” I told him.

Well, he gave me six or seven. He told the girl. He said, “what’s the name of your team?” And I told him it was the Renaissance. He asked me how I spell it, and I explain what it was and why it was. He said to the girl, “also, make sure there are numbers on the back, and you add the Rens, put Rens on them, like they want.” He said to me, “and don’t you worry about it.”

So I came out of there, in that day, 12-years old, with seven uniforms for free.

1:20:01

**Elaine Gunn:**

Wow. It does say something about your business acumen.

**James Williamson:**

It says something about—I told him the [1:20:06]—I wasn’t afraid. I mean, I was going to pay for them, at least I thought. I could have never paid for them.

My mother said, shoot for the stars, remember? So I was going for the stars. I was up on the sixth floor.

**Elaine Gunn:**

Well, you were on your way.

**James Williamson:**

That’s what you do. Rather than sit there and say, oh, we could never have them. I never [1:20:33]. The other part of that is, Mr. England, what a wonderful thing—there are some nice people out there. And that had to cost him some money. He could well afford it, but you just don’t hand—and have all this stuff sewn on them. That was pretty good.

**Elaine Gunn:**

Pretty spectacular, at that time. What a wonderful story.

1:21:00

**James Williamson:** As I knock the people about the little black Sambo and the other stuff, there are these people who make up the difference. Although the hurt is there. It's too bad. There shouldn't be any difference to make up, but nevertheless. For every 1,000 nasty, harmful people, I run into one good person, makes up the difference. Makes up the difference, you feel all better.

It's always been that way in my life. I've always found that there's always somebody that's decent. Regardless of whatever is happening, somebody somewhere, and it keeps you going.

**Elaine Gunn:** Obviously, it does. Well, what an interesting life [1:21:47] in Pittsfield. Stories are wonderful. Can't thank you...

**James Williamson:** I love this town. I was born here.

1:22:00 I know the cracks on the street. It's my home. I've been all over the world. I've been everywhere, and when I say that, I'm not exaggerating, because with the success of Appliance World, we went everywhere. I've been to Paris, been to France and Germany. Rio de Janeiro. It goes on and on and on. If you knew the places I've been. Budapest, Vienna, all of them.

But, Pittsfield was always—it's home. It's the home of homes. It's the greatest place in the world, to me.

**Elaine Gunn:** Now, when did your parents die?

**James Williamson:** My mom died in about 1985. My dad died about, I'm going to guess, probably in there, about 1980. I've blocked that out. My father, I just couldn't accept his death, and somehow I've been able to block it out. I can't remember when he died. I can't remember—I just, I don't want to remember.

1:23:08 When my dad died, I wanted to tell him how grateful I was for what he did for me. How he raised me. I had a lot of things to say to him, and I never did. I just couldn't handle it.

After that happened, before my mom died, I went and I told her how much I loved her, how grateful I was, for her teaching me all the things that she's teaching me. I let her know that she was responsible for my success. I said all the things that I needed to say. So when she died, it was OK.

When my father died, it was not OK. Because I wanted to say so much more, I wanted to say something to him. I wouldn't respond when they told me he was dying, because I couldn't accept it. I wouldn't believe it. But I was getting older now, I knew that my father, he knew. Anything I said to him, he already knew anyhow.

**Elaine Gunn:** He had experienced your success.



**James Williamson:** Yes.

1:24:00

**Elaine Gunn:** We don't say things to our parents. In those days, you didn't grow up saying those things.

**James Williamson:** Exactly. That's what's good about the new world. Children can now speak. But I say that to all my—I don't have a problem, because I know all my children love me. If I died without them [1:24:25], I know they love me. And so that's cool. That's good.

But I recommend everybody talk to their parents, or the person who's living. Better if this person is living. That person dies. I've seen people die, and I said, "oh, I wish I had told them this, I wish I had told them that." And I do, I go out and tell people

1:25:00

**Elaine Gunn:** Well, this has been a great interview Mr. Williamson. And on behalf of the Invisible Community project, I'd like to thank you for allowing me this opportunity.

1:25:18

*Recording ends*