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Invisible Community Project
in partnership with
Housatonic Heritage Oral History

Rev. Willard Durant
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0:00:00 to 2:14:28

- Zed Pine [sp]:** This is February 18th, 1998. The project is *The Hidden Community of Berkshire County*. We're talking today with Reverend Willard Durant in Pittsfield. Where are you from?
- Rev. Willard Durant:** I'm originally from Ansonia, Connecticut, which is about two hours from here. That's where I was born and raised. I first came to Pittsfield around 1957. I was just coming up from Torrington, Connecticut. I lived there at that time. Some friends of mine just were going up to Pittsfield, and we decided to take a ride. Until then, I never heard of Pittsfield.
- 0:01:01 But I'm from Ansonia, Connecticut. My father was a pastor there. We had eight children in the family. He had always had small churches. So we were living in Torrington. He was assigned there by AME Zion Church. That's where I come from. Actually, when I first came to Pittsfield, just came up for a drive, met a few people, found it a *nice* community. Close to the lakes. I had never lived in a community that had two lakes. Where we were was a very small town. And it was just nice, to come up. It was about twice the size of the town I was from, so I thought I was coming to the city! [laughs] [0:01:54] And I came up and found I liked it, and had [sp] another opportunity [0:02:02].
- 0:02:04 In fact, when I finally located to the city, I decided that if I ever got married, there's only two places I wanted to raise a family: it was Pittsfield or Torrington, Connecticut [0:02:17]. But since the young woman I met after coming to Pittsfield was born and raised here, it just seemed after living in Connecticut for a year after we were married—we got married in 1958—that it was a—we moved back to Pittsfield and decided to raise a family here.
- Zed Pine:** How old were you when you first came here?
- Rev. Willard Durant:** I think I was 22 when I first came.
- Zed Pine:** Had you already decided to enter the ministry?
- Rev. Willard Durant:** Oh, no. Oh, no. Oh, no, no, no, no, no.

Zed Pine:

[laughs]

Rev. Willard Durant:

No, actually that was the furthest thing from me. I had no— first, I had no intention of going into the ministry.

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When I was in the service, I knew that something was in me, in reference to that, but I put that off. I thought that was just something that was past and gone. But it was only after I married and we had one child that I realized that in fact there was a calling to the ministry all my life, and I needed to pursue it. It's strange how it happened. I was sitting up on West Street, M & J [sp] shoeshine parlor [sp]. I was there with a guy by the name of Jim Johnson who owned it, and who I was there covering that night for. I had had this dream the night before, and it was really troubling me. I was sitting there by myself, and it was about 8:00 at night, just waiting to close the place.

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I had this dream, and the dream was troubling because I saw myself running. It was like I was running but never stopped, and I would stop for a moment and see something and get running again. Then I come to this old building, and there were stairs going down. As I went down, I saw a big piano, just an old one sitting there, and the back was out of it, and I could look in, and there was like a huge TV screen. I began to look and I could see figures, and these were biblical figures. They were talking but you couldn't hear [0:04:39]. I had no idea what that was, but I just looked at it, and moved again, and went through the building, and noticed that there was crack [sp] and different things [sp] happening in the building, and I came out. But for some reason, that dream wouldn't leave me. That night, I was sitting there and this guy by the name of Carlton Edmonds [sp], who has from Pittsfield, who has passed since, he was about—I guess he [0:05:04]—he stopped there, and we were talking.

0:05:09

For some reason, I shared with him the dream, and he interpreted the dream. He says, "Let me tell you what I think this dream is saying to you." And he began to go through about the community being in disarray, with the House of God being in place but yet there was no one working on building [0:05:29] and said "I really believe that you have a calling in your life to pursue that, and if nothing else, you need to at least take the next step. Just be in prayer about it and do it." So I said, "Oh, yeah." But he went up and he bought me a Bible. I remember it was a Scofield Bible. He went up to the newsstand that was on top of North Street, and came down and says, "Young man, here," and he gave me that. Okay. Then I began to read more. I've always liked the Bible, but I really got into it, and the Scofield Bible is [0:06:00] read, and it's a teacher's Bible is really what it is.

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But it was from that, and from that moment on, I knew that I had to begin to pursue [0:06:10] far as pastoring or whatever I was going to do was in the ministry. That's in fact how it began for me. My father, as I said, in the past, 30-some-odd years in the AME Zion Church. But I just never thought that was for me. So I was moving in other directions. I had been active here. After I had gotten married, I had gotten active and involved in the community action when the War on Poverty started, when they were trying to bring about change and talking about people being involved in decisions that were affecting their lives. I was concerned about that, because being here, and being relatively new to the community, I knew I needed to do something. I knew I was going to raise a family, so I started going around to community meetings, just listening to what people were saying, some of the things that sort of disquieted their spirits, and we were talking.

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And from that, I began to get more involved with the—Family and Children's Services had a couple of social workers in the area who were going down and convening meetings, and one of them, this guy by the name of Bill Ross, who also ran for School Committee years ago—won, and was on the School Committee—the first Black man to serve on the School Committee. But he was doing work in the community at that time, and so I sort of got to know him, and through him, I began to look at the community in a different way, from just looking at what I was bringing to the community, or what my concerns were, and you'd begin to just share those. He just began to give me a new perception on looking at the community and what we can do.

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That's really how I got started, anyway, being active in the community, and that's really how it started for me. But it's never stopped since. It's like there's just something that's in each person, and you wait for that moment when someone can show you something. What it was, I remember once, he was just talking about having visited some of the homes, and he was talking about walking into the particular house of this woman who had a few children and whose place was unkept.

Zed Pine:

Was this Mr. Ross?

Rev. Willard Durant:

Yeah, yeah. He was talking about all this. But what he was saying is that the only indication he could find in that place that there was some hope in this woman [0:08:45] he looked and he said there was this beautiful plant that she was nurturing, and he said when he saw that he knew there was hope. That if she was interested in that, that somehow or another, he could reach her.

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And the amazing thing is that he did. But it's developing that other eye, to look at people and things differently than what you

first see. Really try to look beyond the surface. And as he shared that, just seemed to make more sense. Then I begin to look at things differently. Whatever I saw, I looked for—I'd listen for things that weren't being said, looking for things that you really didn't see but try to look a little deeper than that. See what's there, what's bringing forth, what's causing it. And that's really how it began. That's really how it began. From that moment on, that's when the Community Action Agency began to come to the forefront. I was working at General Electric at that time, and getting involved, and got on the board of the Action for Opportunity and trying to get involved in dealing with the housing issues and employment problems and a lot of things.

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But after being involved like that for a year, I finally came out of General Electric, told them I needed a leave of absence for a year, and began to work for the Community Action Agency, just doing neighborhood organizing and things like that. And from there, after I began getting involved at that level

[break in audio].

Rev. Willard Durant:

Anyway, so that's my—that's the way I got started getting involved. It was through that, my involvement there, that I also began to get active as far as the church is concerned. At that point, there was some movement in the city to—as a matter of fact, Reverend Fanny Cooper was involved in getting a new church started and wanted to establish an African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church here. She had come out of the Clinton AME Zion Church in Great Barrington.

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She wanted a small church here, and they started getting people together to talk about establishing a church. And since I was from an AME Zion church in Connecticut, which my father pastored, I just got involved with that. And through my involvement there with the various pastors who were here trying to develop the church, I got involved and let them know that I was interested eventually in getting into the ministry. Then about six months or so into that, they had a way where you could come and do a whole four-year course of study [0:11:43] denominations since [sp] we have a college in Salisbury, North Carolina and others. And that's really how I came. I came through that door. I came through, first of all, just getting a certificate in fact to preach. So that's what I did.

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Then I was under the tutelage of the pastor, whatever pastors were assigned, in the course of it. I guess it was about six years before I received my first ordination, then four years after that, my second ordination. We have these steps. One is a deacon. The second one is the elders. But it took me about 12 years to

finally receive that final ordination so I was the elder in the church. That's how it came out.

Zed Pine: Is it sort of like doing an apprenticeship rather than going to seminary and coming out a full-fledged preacher?

Rev. Willard Durant: Right, right, because I sort of had a family, and I wasn't sure in fact how I was going to do it. But I also knew that my love at that point in my life was really early childhood education.

0:13:00 And I'm not sure why. I think it's because of my involvement with the Community Action Agency and getting involved with Project Head Start that was really dealing with enrichment and learning for kids, trying to get away from the old standard things and developing that enrichment [0:13:19] for the whole kid. I began to see things in there that I wanted to get information on, so I made contact with someone at UMass, and at first I ended up doing some studies through the School of Education there. What I had intended to do, in fact—and I had prayed about it—what I really wanted to do, I wanted to continue with that [0:13:44], and then serve in any capacity I could as far as the church. But at that moment, when I began to realize what was happening to children [0:13:55] we needed to do or we could do. So I had a chance to leave here and getting involved in the Head Start program at the campus of the University of Massachusetts.

0:14:07 From there is when I really, really, really began to further my education. I had taken courses through Springfield College. I had taken some courses here at BCC. But it was only when I got out of here and went to UMass and got—I guess you could call it a fellowship, but I actually got a scholarship to UMass—that's when I really started the formal education, moving beyond that. That's what it was. From there, things just escalated. No doubt about that. And that covered everything. It really did.

Zed Pine: I wanted to ask you about—you said there was a pastor here named Reverend Fanny Cooper.

Rev. Willard Durant: Yes. She wasn't a pastor at that time.

Zed Pine: Oh, she wasn't.

Rev. Willard Durant: Not at that time. At that time, she was a layperson who was attending Clinton AME Zion Church, but up here, and thought that this—the Episcopal [sp] was large enough for another church, to establish another church.

0:15:11 She had gotten hold of the presiding elder from the AME Zion Church who was stationed in—he was in the Albany district,

and he came up to take a look at the possibilities. They started having meetings, and that's how [0:15:31]. But she wasn't a pastor. There was no AME Zion church here at that time. She was just one of the laypeople.

Zed Pine: And she remained so? She never became a pastor?

Rev. Willard Durant: Yeah, she's become a pastor. Matter of fact, she—

Zed Pine: Oh, is that right?

Rev. Willard Durant: She received her first ordination the same time I did. I think that was '72 or '74, something like that. That's when she received her ordination as well.

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Zed Pine: Did she stay in this area?

Rev. Willard Durant: Oh yeah, she's still in the area. Matter of fact, she lives down on John Street, here. Yeah, Reverend Fanny Cooper. But she helped get this church started, but she *also*, I guess about ten years ago, started a small mission up in North Adams. Again, the same way—just wanted to see the AME Zion church just spread, because there's so many needs. As far as the minority community is concerned, she just knew that we need to plant more churches up here, and that's what they did. Yeah, that's what she does. That's what she's been doing. Very open, very open [0:16:53]. But anyway, so that's basically how we got started. But for me, the thing was that once I went to UMass and started studying early child education, just how children learn, and then began to get a grasp of all the various educational not only programs but the very basis of it, the different models they had in early childhood education that really affected a child and the way they learned.

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So you get to study those to find out, what was the impact as far as our community is concerned. And studying that, we found that there are things that really need to change. So from UMass, when I was at UMass, through the School of Education, we came *back* to Pittsfield a few times to put on some things at BCC, to explore what we were looking at as far as educational models, what was here, what were the other choices for children, and really came back and wanted to change it.

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Wanted to change it. Because the model here at this time, it was the Burchelle's [sp] model. [audio cuts out]

Zed Pine: Let me backtrack a little bit and ask you about your early life. So you were raised pretty much in Ans...?

Rev. Willard Durant: Ansonia.

Zed Pine: Ansonia, Connecticut.

Rev. Willard Durant: Right.

Zed Pine: You were part of the church where your father was the pastor.

Rev. Willard Durant: No, he wasn't the pastor of the church.

Zed Pine: Oh, he wasn't?

Rev. Willard Durant: No, he was stationed somewhere else.

Zed Pine: Oh!

Rev. Willard Durant: He lived in Ansonia, because he also worked in Ansonia, but he was stationed in Archer Memorial, in Hayden Station, which is in Connecticut. I had not—until I came to Torrington, my father had never been my pastor.

Zed Pine: Oh, I see.

Rev. Willard Durant: He had never been my pastor until we got older, and when I moved to Torrington, that was when I was with him.

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Zed Pine: So he then took a church in Torrington?

Rev. Willard Durant: Right, right. And by then, I had come out of the service. So when he was coming to Torrington, I said, "Well, let's go."

Zed Pine: What branch of the service were you in?

Rev. Willard Durant: Air Force. Air Force.

Zed Pine: So you joined up?

Rev. Willard Durant: Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah. I wanted to get away. I wanted to see the world, and I thought that was a good way to do it. I think most young men did that, at the time.

Zed Pine: Did you?

Rev. Willard Durant: Yeah. I did a lot of traveling, you know. I went to Germany, France, and North Africa, in four years. It was really good duty. For me, it was really—just so nice, a lot of things.

Zed Pine: Like?

Rev. Willard Durant: Well, like, wherever you go in life, wherever you go, I've found that if you really respect other people, and are open, you can get along anywhere, basically. And it's really enjoying other cultures.

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When I was in Germany and France, I had a chance to go to Paris and go to [0:20:10], to go to Cologne, Germany, and just to be involved. I just found that there's such an openness, that if a person is open to life, then life is open to him. And I just really enjoyed it. During that time, that's all I was doing. I wasn't pursuing any other things. I wasn't thinking about going to college after and using the GI Bill. I hadn't even thought about that. No idea. But that's all it was.

Zed Pine:

So then you got out when you were 22?

Rev. Willard Durant:

Mhmm.

Zed Pine:

And that's when you came up here to visit with some friends?

Rev. Willard Durant:

Yeah, they were Torrington, and they came up here at that point.

0:21:00

Zed Pine:

And you looked around, and it looked nice, or what?

Rev. Willard Durant:

It looked—again, it was really nice. It was a nice, open community. They were doing things here! They had a St. John's Hall, old building that's boarded up now. They had a Masonic Hall. St. John's, Masonic Hall. And they used to have the Hall open, and they would let the youth use it for a youth center. So anything—youth dances and all were taking place now, and they would bring in other groups like from Albany to come in and put on shows and things there at St. John's Hall. And so I just liked what I thought I saw in this community at that time, that they were trying to respond to the needs of the kids. They had a number of organizations working besides the NAACP. They had a few other groups that were putting on cotillions, for young girls, and getting them to come out to parties and stuff.

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It was just nice. They had the Ebony Club, one group that was established here, and were trying to work with youth and getting them to just develop as far as the whole cultural awareness is concerned. There were a few others. But there were just adults who were trying to do things here. And that's how it was. A lot of possibilities, really. So when my wife and I did get married—and as I said, we lived that first year in Connecticut—when she said she'd like to go back to Pittsfield, I was ready. You know? And that's what we did.

Zed Pine:

What kind of work did you do for GE?

Rev. Willard Durant:

Well actually, I worked for the load ratio company. It was higher-power transformers.

- 0:23:01 I was a machine operator. That's what I did. One of those third-shift things. [laughs]
- Zed Pine:** So that was '58 when you moved back permanently to Pittsfield?
- Rev. Willard Durant:** Right, right. No—'58?—'59, when I moved permanently.
- Zed Pine:** And then somewhere in the early '60s, you mentioned that it was about '63 when the War on Poverty started.
- Rev. Willard Durant:** Yeah, yeah.
- Zed Pine:** Was there a lot of poverty here?
- Rev. Willard Durant:** Oh! There was—yeah. There was a lot. In fact, that was before urban renewal and all of that stuff came to light. And I think at that point, I think about 80%, maybe even higher, of the minority community, lived right here on the west side, and there was just—there was a lot of poverty here.
- 0:24:01 I'm not sure what percentage worked like at General Electric, but very small, and the ones that were there were primarily working as far as custodians [0:24:10]. We had a few—actually he didn't work at GE, he worked in another company, E.D. Jones', that's what he did. But most of them, that's what their jobs were. So it was a time when you had menial jobs. That's what we did. We did whatever we could. And that's what I worked, for a while, at E.D. Jones', and then General Electric [0:24:44]. Then I came right—I knew I wanted to come into the social service field, and work with families. And that's when really my whole life began to change, was working through that, and community action agencies, and listening to families who were going through a number of things, and needed help finding housing or finding jobs.
- 0:25:09 And we began to organize people around what their particular needs were. That's how it all started. Just happened to be at the place and time, I guess, where people were just exploring, trying to find out what they could do. I just got involved in it. There was really no magic. And I look back and I still—I'm still not sure how all this happened. But again, I think it's just being open, and when an opportunity was there to move forward, I just did it. But I ended up just wanting to—again just tried to see what we could change as far as my own family life was concerned, and our community.
- 0:26:04 And working with them, I just got more and more interested in what is happening, and trying to get organized and begin to change some things ourselves.
- Zed Pine:** What kinds of things were you looking to change?

Rev. Willard Durant: Well, one of the things—when urban renewal came in, they just disrupted the whole community. I mean, at least you had to understand that this was a low-income area, and with all that was going on, we still had a sense of community at that time. Urban renewal really destroyed that. I mean, that whole—you had people being totally uprooted, sent on the other side of town. There were no real plans as far as really enhancing the lives of the individuals here. When they started talking about building housing, they wanted to build the big projects for low-income people. And actually that was the first issue that we began to fight against.

0:27:00 We told them we weren't going. We were not going to accept it. If they could build something other than *project* type of housing, then that's what we were interested in. And that's the whole idea of scattered sites and smaller sites being developed. And that's when we moved [sp] it, you know. And I'm still—and I'm really glad that happened, because I'm *sure* if they would have built those regular project housings like there were [0:27:26], it would have really made it much worse for this community. So it was going from there, and getting involved as far as education and employment programs and, you know. That's just how it happened for us. Just small steps, a lot of little things that took place. And that's really all it was. That's basically all it was, just a series of small steps, to watching things happen, and hopefully make it more opportunistic for people to get involved in the decision-making process, and attending council meetings and School Committee meetings.

0:28:18 Through that whole process of time, and just being involved and, from UMass, working in the School of Education there, and traveling throughout New England, doing workshops on involving parents, in parent involvement in the whole Head Start community action program, that's really where that focus came for me, as far as really trying to change something in the community. That's what it was. That's basically all it is, you know. I was able to, from University of Mass, get involved in the program at Goddard College out in Vermont, and received my master's in education through them.

0:29:10 As soon as I did, I came back to Pittsfield, to in fact work in the community [0:29:16]. And it was there that we began to work on housing again, helping people to purchase housing and become first-time homeowners. And we did that. So that's basically what it was. Through that, there's a lot of good things that happened to me, as far as having opportunities to travel across the country, to do some consulting work on involving parents in schools and involving parents in your community and getting them ready, through parents then to get more involved in things in their own communities. And as a result of that, everything happened. But that was basically it.

[break in audio]

0:30:31

Well, I think the first spark came from Bill Ross.

Zed Pine:

Was he in church work?

Rev. Willard Durant:

No, he wasn't involved in church work. He was involved—he was on staff at Family and Children Services. He was a social worker there.

Zed Pine:

I see.

Rev. Willard Durant:

But that's basically how it is. But what happened once I got involved in the community action agencies and working on trying to implement new programs as far as housing was concerned—well, that's what I did for a while, was just work in the whole field of housing, helping people find new homes.

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Talking to the Housing Authority, the Pittsfield Redevelopment Authority when they began to try and find new ways of providing housing for people. Just doing that. Probably getting into Head Start, because at that point, Head Start and Community Action Agency were together. I had a chance, through the Head Start program, to get involved outside of this community, of going other places and getting other kinds of training, then I was able to [0:31:53] move ahead. So I guess it basically was Community Action Agency programs, and that's really how I got started to at least do the things that I was interested in doing.

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That's what I did. I look back at my resume sometimes and I wonder how all that happened. You know, really! I had a lot of opportunities. Going to Washington D.C. to help them set up the first National Head Start board. I was called to be one of the consultants to go to help them set up, and I did. Another guy, by the name of Peter Snyder [sp] who lived in Middlefield, the two of us were brought to Washington to help set up the first Head Start board. It was amazing! It was amazing. All through UMass. He was at UMass at the same time. We went up and did it. So I've just been involved in a lot of things.

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We came back, went back to the community action agencies, again just continuing to work in the community to set up neighborhood organizations, helped to develop neighborhood centers until the Urban Coalition came into existence. Then we worked through the Urban Coalition to find monies at the time when Dr. King was assassinated. Helped locate money to set up neighborhood centers in each of the three areas in Pittsfield. They had three target areas. One was in the north here, and one was in Morningside, and west side. They set up neighborhood centers, just to organize people, and getting them to begin to

deal with, to begin to voice their concerns about what was happening to them as far as education programs. Then through Head Start, began to prepare a lot of single mothers to get involved, more involved, in their kids' lives, and setting up workshops for them.

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So that's basically how it happened. You know? [laughs] But as a result of that, I eventually just began to—actually what happened, when I went there, I pastored a church in Amherst for a year and a half while I was there. There was an AME Zion Church there, too. I had pastored solely because the pastor there was getting his doctorate and he needed his time off, to finish doing his dissertation. The bishop at that time found out I was in Amherst, and asked me if I would take the church, pastor on assignment for a while, so I did. [0:34:49] there for the year and a half, and then came back here, and continued to do some things until we got the church situated here. And that's how it worked. We bought a little place and had a church up here for a while.

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It's an old synagogue on Linden Street, and that's where we are right now. It's an old synagogue on Linden Street that we purchased and began to worship out of there. [0:35:15]. But it has been a lot of years now, and I don't know where the time went. I don't know where the time went. It's been good. It's been good for me.

Zed Pine:

What changes did you see occur as a result of the War on Poverty and community action? Do you think there were lasting effects?

Rev. Willard Durant:

As far as lasting effects is concerned, I think the individuals involved in that, their whole sense of worth and of value, of seeing themselves as productive members of the society then—that they didn't have to wait, that right then they could have a voice in what was happening to your children, that they could have an impact as far as what was happening, as far as the housing and other things in the area.

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There were problems back then, like everyone else, with law enforcement and everything else, that's related to the low-income and Black community, and we really felt that those in power were not sensitive to what the low-income needs were. People, many of them just needed an opportunity to develop whatever kind of skills, their potential, to participate into the community lives. I saw a lot of changes there. But it's almost like for the individuals who were getting involved in it, many positive things happened in their lives.

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But there was no *change* in the mold itself. You know what I'm saying? It's like, it's always the exception. People who are

really involved, they would benefit, but they're more or less the exception. But just people normally, there weren't any real big changes that happened. Not a lot. But as a result of that, I guess it's a sense—during that period, there was more sense of community because people were working together, and they were trying to change some things, and some things have changed. As far as even the education, various educational models and all in the city, they did change. And they did start getting more involved in the community. But I look at it now, and it almost seems like we're going backwards again. It seem like we're going backwards, because instead of really staying involved in the political process, we haven't.

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We really haven't stayed involved in the political process. You have a few, but there's still a very limited number of people.

Zed Pine:

Why do you think that is?

Rev. Willard Durant:

Well, I think for the most part, I think the community still really feel isolated from those who are making those decisions. There was a time when people wanted to hear what sort of—what the concerns were. During that period, there were some monies available to bring about some changes. We tried different things. But it seemed like it was all soft money. There was no hard monies there where you can apply and go over—it's all short-term: "Whatever you need to do, we'll do that." Then no real long-term planning.

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Like in any city, here you have planning boards that look at the whole—they look for a comprehensive plan that will deal with all aspects of the community and community life. That just doesn't seem to be there anymore. And I think that's still why so many of our kids, if they do go ahead and get an education, they continue to move out of the city, continue to leave. Just not feeling like in fact that they really have a sense of community, and that this is their community. It's just not there. It's just not there. And they continue. They continue to work. There are groups now that are trying to make a difference as far as the community is concerned.

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But it's one struggle after the other. We just have not solidified as a community. And how to get back to that, I'm not sure. I don't know how to get back to that. Not as far as the political aspects of it. I don't see it happening.

Zed Pine:

What do you mean, "political"?

Rev. Willard Durant:

Well, I mean staying politically involved in what's happening as far as the schools are concerned, or getting involved and attending City Council meetings and voicing your concerns, or

even giving ideas or listening to ideas, something we can enhance this community with. It just hasn't come together.

Zed Pine: People aren't doing that?

Rev. Willard Durant: No. No.

0:41:00

Basically I think it's just a lack of real leadership. A lack of real leadership. And there's got to be a base for it. What happened is that even within the community, in a lot of ways, it's continued sort of like—to compete with each other, more than coming together and saying, “No, no, look, let's stay together. Let's get this thing done.” It seemed like one thing after the other happens, and we'll try something new, so it just doesn't progress. There's not a lot of progress that's being made.

Zed Pine: What do you attribute that to? You said you came here in the late '50s and you were attracted by the community, and now you're here, almost 40 years later, and you're painting a different picture.

Rev. Willard Durant: Well, it is, but I think part of it had to—the whole sense, again, of a sense of community, what I saw, again, there was a sense of community.

0:42:05

People were all—they worked together. And then you say, “Well, this was called the ghetto.” But when you have things in common, when there's the same issues you're dealing with, it's a lot easier to stay organized. But once you start splintering people and sending this one over here and this family over here, you lose that sense of community.

Zed Pine: You're talking about physically moving?

Rev. Willard Durant: Yeah, physically just moving.

Zed Pine: And part of that was the urban renewal?

Rev. Willard Durant: Part of that was urban renewal. One thing—the urban renewal, I guess people expected more from urban renewal than what really happened at the growth of that. Because when you're moving people, you have a chance to really do some miracles in people's lives, because you're not just dealing with the fact that they're moving to different homes, but you have a chance to look at the other kind of services that ought to be available to help people begin to deal with the other problems in their lives.

0:43:20

But when you're just talking about housing, you have a better place, but if you don't have the skills to in fact advance and get other kinds of jobs, then nothing can be changed. Nothing really changes. And I think that's still where we're at, basically.

- Zed Pine:** So you're saying the economic conditions haven't improved?
- Rev. Willard Durant:** Not really. Not really. I mean, now understand what I'm saying. I'm saying it really hasn't changed to any great extent, because as far as the number of our youth that still can't find jobs, the number of single-parent families, that is still high.
- 0:44:12 I don't have a percentage now. I did have a—I have it somewhere. So what I'm saying—things still haven't come together as far as the minority community is concerned. And we can't point outward to that, not all of it. You have to look inward as well. Again, it's trying to come together. We were hoping that even with this church, with the AME. Zion Church and Second Congregational Church, and we have another small church, the Church of God and Christ, there were three [sp] times we've tried to come together, not to create one congregation but just to get more [sp] focused, and what happens is that there's such a change in leadership, with people coming in and out—[0:44:55]. And when you start a neighborhood development corporation—that looked like it could move ahead and do some things, and for a while, that moved [0:45:09].
- 0:45:10 They had applied for, through the city OEC [sp] the grant to start helping people set up new businesses, because we didn't own our own businesses within the neighborhood. After about a year of working on that, there were about 12 to 16 small businesses that were started in the neighborhood [0:45:33].
- Zed Pine:** When was this?
- Rev. Willard Durant:** This was three years ago, I guess.
- Zed Pine:** Oh! Okay.
- Rev. Willard Durant:** Three years ago. That's when Berkshire Enterprises brought some of their staff and they hired a couple people to work with them, to try and get something started. And it went for a while, but without kind of—well, the initial funds that they received, then they were going to take small loans from the bank to try to get businesses started.
- 0:46:03 But without—they just didn't have the expertise, or no expertise available to them, to help them maintain their businesses, so a lot of them started—a few of them are still [0:46:16]. Like the guy still has his little barber shop up on North Street, and another one has a shoe repair business over here. You know.
- Zed Pine:** George?
- Rev. Willard Durant:** Yeah. Not George. No, no, no, not George. George has been here. George has been here for a while. As a matter of fact, he

just opened up on North Street. He told me he's not on Melbourne [sp] Street anymore. He's coming around to the front. Oppman [sp] up here, on the upper part of North Street, he has a shoe repair shop there. The guy's right across the street that has the barber shop. But there's not—and there were other things that were started. My wife had started a store for a little while.

0:47:00

But what I find—it takes a lot of time, and when someone's talking about starting a business—my wife started that store and when she realized how much time she would have to spend sitting right in that little place waiting for people to come, after about a year she was tired of that. [laughs] She was tired of it. And that was doing relatively well! She didn't lose any money. I mean, she paid up her loan, and—someone from New York City heard what she had here and came down and bought her out.

Zed Pine:

Oh really.

Rev. Willard Durant:

Really. I mean, she had built up *such* a connection as far as in the business world, for African artifacts and things, they came from New York City and she sold the whole thing out to them. [laughs] We kept a few things for our own. So it was something that—it was good if you had it for a second. If I was where I am now, where I was retired, I could have went over to the store and at least kept it going, but I didn't know I was going to retire.

0:48:07

I just decided at the last minute it was time for me to retire. I was *tired*, so it was time for me to retire. But that was that.

Zed Pine:

But for the community as a whole, there hasn't been much change, economically?

Rev. Willard Durant:

No, no, no. Because things are—they're still not rooted, you know what I mean? Everything exists at a surface level. And we're more involved in *maintaining* what we have, rather than really rooting it and put the roots down so the next generation can build on it.

Zed Pine:

Do you have any thoughts about why that happened?

Rev. Willard Durant:

Well, I think part of it is that we really did not come together and define for ourselves where we were going and where we wanted to be, and then invest in it.

0:49:06

You have to invest in whatever you have. And I realized that we have—I think the minority community makes about 40% of what the normal community makes as far as income is concerned. But we haven't learned to take whatever portion of

that we have and use it for seed money to do other things. We haven't done that. The other thing is that years ago, you used to have the old mom-and-pop stores and all, but that's not even a thing anymore. You have all kinds of zoning things. Those things that you could do in the past, you really can't do now. So it's sort of trying to redefine that Where are we really going? And so economically, I don't see any real things happening than some of our young people going off to various colleges and universities, unless they came back and decided to set up some type of cooperative effort to build the community.

0:50:14

Like my son came back for a while. He went to Morehouse. I really wanted him to come back, because I knew that's—we needed a whole new vision, and if you can get some of these young people to come back and come together, you could do it. You really can. Because I do have more—I don't have a lot, but I have at least a few pieces of real estate work. Some young people are coming back; I've got to use that for leverage, to get started. But you need a generation—and I was hoping it could be ours—that can really make that kind of sacrifice—“Let's get the ground built”—and then you build on that.

0:51:04

But it just never happened. It has not happened. I'm not sure what it's going to take to do it. The fact is, I still like this community. I really do. I mean, I still like this community. I don't know of anyplace else I would want to live. But now I'm looking to my grandchildren, looking at my grandchildren and saying, “Okay, now what can I do so when they get ready”—so that my children can now provide something else for their children. Somehow or another that's what I think it's going to take. Other than that, if you don't have roots in the community, how do you build? You don't. It's almost like—again, everything is just on the surface. You're surviving for the moment. Economically, that's all you're doing. That's all.

0:51:58

If you look at the other part of my life, as far as the *spiritual* development is concerned, even that—matter of fact, there's a portion of scripture that says, “Faith without works is dead.” You *have* to take your faith and use it in such a way that others who are looking at it can see the benefit of your faith. Not just for me alone, but how has this enhanced the rest of the community? What are other people doing that they weren't doing before? To strengthen families, to bring them to a better understanding, to open doors to the other kinds of scholarships and all that are out there for their children. And you look at it, and it's still not there. It isn't. And I look at my role in that the same way. I look back on it and say, “Geez, Will, well, you were better off.” [laughs] “You're a little better off than you were.” But what else? What else has really changed?

0:53:05 I just don't see a lot of changes taking place. It hasn't. And I'm not sure what it's going to take to get there. except a real concerted effort where everybody just stops and saying, "Okay, here's what we'll do. For the next ten years, we're going to do this." Set some long-range goals—"Here's what our goals are." Nothing else. That's where you'll concentrate. Then by doing that, being able to really establish a good firm base by which the next generation can build on.

Zed Pine: Are you involved in that?

Rev. Willard Durant: Oh, yeah. As a matter of fact, we've got another meeting Friday. [laughs] We're trying to reestablish the neighborhood organization again.

0:54:01 That's what we're trying to do now, because the things that had happened that we thought—that we had hoped would really enhance the community and move forward, there's so much politics, even within our community, so much infighting, and so we have to start all over again. That's what we're dealing with. That's what I'm doing all over again. Trying to reorganize. Trying to figure out another way of doing it. Who knows? Hopefully—*hopefully*—we'll be able to do something this time.

Zed Pine: I was wondering about the effect of the general economy on Pittsfield as a whole and the community in particular.

0:55:02 My impression is that it's not doing—that the city itself is not doing real well.

Rev. Willard Durant: Oh, it's not. We missed a number of real good opportunities. But again, it's like downtown development, there are things, like even the malls and all, there was a time when they wanted to try to build something in the city itself, and there's so much bickering between those in business who were afraid of new businesses coming in. You know what I'm saying?

Zed Pine: Mmhmm.

Rev. Willard Durant: And so it just hasn't happened. We keep—I don't know what it is. Yes, I do. I think I know part of the problem. It's that somehow or another, we've been lulled into this thing that everyone has to agree before you can do something. That's absurd! You're going to never agree! You'll never get everyone to agree.

0:56:00 But if you can just get a nucleus to say, "Look, you know what? Let's just begin to build. Let's begin to do it." But I look at it now—I look at downtown, and it's really much—it's in worse shape now than it has ever been. But you go down to South County, look at the changes that's there. Or North County,

some things are happening over there. But here? Within the city center, very little. Very little has been done as far as really—that's really *enhancing* our development, that has roots that could help us to grow as a community. It's just not there. Now, they have a few—well, they have one person I think who somehow is able to maintain a vision, and I think if you can latch onto that and join together and then help do that—like Peter Lafayette in Berkshire Housing, who now has been given, through Doyle [0:57:05] well even, our mayor before, we did some good work, working along with him, of developing a whole new plan for downtown.

0:57:19 They're trying get that off the ground now, with the Berkshire Housing, Newberry store and England Brothers and all that, to try and redevelop that. But if you could just get a—I guess the basic thing is—there's a portion of scripture that talks about, "Without vision, people perish." And it's trying to create that vision that people can really look at, can believe in, and begin to work toward. I find it very hard to make that happen. But it is being developed now. That's why we want to get that neighborhood organization up again, and just try again. So it's not the idea of giving up.

0:58:02 The idea is seeing more clearly a *vision* that also reflects who you are, and your dreams and expectations. That's what's lacking, and that's what has to be developed again. And as far as everything else, as far as [0:58:21], as far as the minority community is concerned, until they in fact have businesses of their own, all monies that come into the city—when the dollar comes into the community and doesn't even—it just turns over and goes back out. Until we have some businesses that can turn over at least five or six times before it leaves again, you have a chance to do something and build, to invest back in your own property. But as long as you don't have businesses, it just comes in and goes right back out. So it's trying to do that again.

0:59:00 And hopefully we'll have a chance to see it. But I think it's going to be a long haul. [laughs] I think it's going to be a long haul. Still work working for, but it's going to be a while. Mmhmm.

Zed Pine: I was going to ask you—I've heard your name in connection with the Christian Center.

Rev. Willard Durant: Oh, yeah. I worked there, 15 years. Actually I just retired from there. The beauty of the Christian Center for me is, the Christian Center, when my wife and I came on there—

Zed Pine: Give me a little background on the Christian Center, since I don't know anything about it.

- Rev. Willard Durant:** The Christian Center was set up in 1892.
- Zed Pine:** Oh!
- Rev. Willard Durant:** It's got a *long* history. And it came into existence because needs were going unmet in this area. And it was started really out of the mission arm of the First Methodist Church.
- 1:00:03 Epworth Society out of the First Methodist Church first started the ministry here. They came in, again, just trying to help people—what are the needs?—and did all these little things. And really they had one man that put 50 years of his life. Burbank [sp]? Is it Burbank? I think his name was Burbank. Just helping—this is volunteer. Whatever else he was doing. And building Sunday schools. A lot of—he had the Boy Scouts troops starting and all that. And he worked on that, really getting a real good base here. Then every year—then they started hiring directors, and they would do some fantastic things here. They had well baby clinics and all that, years, even before we got here, at the Christian Center.
- 1:01:03 And it was developed also right here in the area. They started serving some families—
- [audio cuts out]
- Zed Pine:** The date is March 6th, 1998. This is Zed Pine [sp] interviewing Reverend Willard Durant in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, for the Hidden Community Project of the Berkshire Historical Society. This is tape two.
- 1:02:00 So, I'd like to go over again when you arrived in the Berkshires and what you did after you arrived here, in as much detail as you'd like to say.
- Rev. Willard Durant:** Oh, okay. My wife and I were married in 1958, and for the first year, we lived in Ansonia, Connecticut. The following year, we moved to Pittsfield, and we've been here, we've lived in this town ever since, since 1959. Again, when I came here, I just moved here because I thought wherever [1:02:51]. This was my wife's hometown. I could find a job. I had no particular field that I was interested in, just trying to find a job and take care of my family.
- 1:03:02 We came, and when we did, I decided I wanted to enroll in school here. Initially I thought that I wanted to study—actually, I wanted to learn about sheet metal layout and design. That's what I thought I was interested in at that time. Someone had told me that they had a really good trade school here, this guy by the name of Miles Brook [sp] who's really sort of one of the top layout and design people, who did special work for—it was

ED Jones' at that time. I think it was ED Jones [1:03:43]. And he was an instructor over at the trade school, so I decided okay, I would go over there. Then what I did—I took on another job. I was just doing my regular job, working over at the hotel.

1:04:01

My wife was just—we had come back here. My wife was expecting our first child. And I began to do that. I was going to school during the day, working at night. And that continued, until I finished the trade school and got—I was just about two years there.

Zed Pine:

What were you studying?

Rev. Willard Durant:

Sheet metal layout. That's what I did. And I found it was interesting and challenging. It was. But—because again, we had one child. By the time I finished school, my second child was on the way. I decided that I would not be able to go any further as far as school was concerned. I was going to go to RPI. That's what I thought I was going to do, at the time. Ended up not going. Took on a regular job [1:04:58] working at ED Jones's as a machine operator.

1:05:04

We then had our second child, and she was born, and that's what I was doing. I remained there, just about another two years and decided to go to another job. I had the chance to get into General Electric, again as a machine operator, but primarily a drill operator [1:05:29]. And I was working there, and my wife was raising the family, and things were going pretty well. What happened is that when the War on Poverty was initiated, they started having meetings in the area talking about what the needs were of the community, and somehow or another, I was enticed just to go into one of those community meetings and begin to share concerns and just listen to people.

1:06:02

And as a result of that, I got involved in the neighborhood organizations, just meeting them, and talk about the problems of housing and employment and all of the things that the low-income areas had been involved in, just trying to get people really involved.

Zed Pine:

What were some of the organizations that you were involved with?

Rev. Willard Durant:

Let's see. The organizations—well, there was a few. First of all, Action for Opportunity was the primary organization here. That was Pittsfield's community action agency. They had like agencies in South County and in North County, each one. But the primary focus was getting people involved in all the areas that really affected their lives. That was the whole thing of “maximum feasible participation of the poor.”

1:07:02

That was the focus of getting people involved and educated in how decisions were made, how they could influence that. And that was the whole thrust of these OEO programs—Office of Economic Opportunity—that set up the CAP agencies. So really that's how I first really got involved. Then I served on the board of directors for Action for Opportunity. That went on until there was a job opening. They were going to hire community organizers, and I decided I wanted to apply for one of the positions. That was 1966. 1967 was when I started working for them. That's what I did. I came to just work within the neighborhood itself, trying to find out what would happen to the families, the kind of agencies that were impacting on their lives, whether it was welfare programs—

1:08:03

Got involved in working along with the legal aid program when they were set up. Oh, all the initial programs as far as the War on Poverty was concerned.

Zed Pine:

You were now working full-time as a community organizer?

Rev. Willard Durant:

Yeah.

Zed Pine:

Who were you working—?

Rev. Willard Durant:

Action for Opportunity. I came off the board and became a staff person for Action for Opportunity. I stayed with them. And we in fact helped to set up—there were three community centers, one in each of the primary areas of Pittsfield. By primary, I mean those who were listed as low-income areas, and in each one of the three areas in Pittsfield, we set up a neighborhood center. During that period, when we were first trying to set it up, they were unable to get additional monies from OEO, and so what happened is that—oh I can't remember, what year is that Dr. King was assassinated?

1:09:09

Zed Pine:

'68.

Rev. Willard Durant:

Okay. The year when he was assassinated, again we were involved, we were working in neighborhoods. That year—as a matter of fact, the assassination happened, and there was a lot of concern in the community, and there were some young people, in high school that were very uptight about what had happened as far as Dr. King was concerned. They had said that if the community didn't do something positive, they were going to do something negative. [1:09:40]. But that thrust, really what happened as a result of that—we were trying to set up an Urban Coalition, in the city, and that effort was begun, and then trying to find ways to fund it. And the Urban Coalition came out of the effort of that.

1:10:00 Monies were raised through the business community, spearheaded by a man called Larry Strattner, who was then the president of Berkshire Life. He called together a group of businessmen in the area and was able to receive commitments from them as far as funding was concerned, and through that vehicle, we were able to fund the neighborhood centers. That's where we had the staff, to hire a coordinator for each one of those centers, and to begin to work at each level. They reported [sp] to Action for Opportunity. That's how it happened.

Zed Pine: Can you describe how that worked, how neighborhood centers worked, and what part you played in organizing that and seeing it through?

Rev. Willard Durant: Initially—I was a part of helping to go out to locate the areas where they were to be placed.

1:11:02 We had one here, right on Dewey Avenue on the west side. We had another center set up in the Morningside area, on Woodlawn Avenue. And then we had the Northin [sp] Center that was located right here on Waconah Street. Those are the three areas. Each of those centers, what they were attempting to do, they were attempting to—why they're located right there—to really get a pulse of what were the unique problems of that area, but also at the same time, what were the common areas of concern that existed in all the low-income areas regardless of location? In order to develop a real focus in getting different housing built for the low-income, et cetera. And that's what the primary concern was, then. They were also involved in recruiting families for the Head Start program, making sure that every family in the area would at least have a chance to apply.

1:12:05 I don't remember the number of children they had in the program at that time. Then through them, the Head Start program had a social service component, an educational component, but they also had what they called a parent involvement component. That was a whole thing, again, of preparing people in the neighborhood to get more involved in their children's lives. That was really the area. That's what they focused on.

Zed Pine: How were the people contacted?

Rev. Willard Durant: Door to door. Door to door. I remember each of us had to develop a way of doing that. We had printed up a flyer saying "Calling for Unity in the Community" and we'd go to each door, knocking on their doors, and if nobody was there, we'd leave them a blue [sp] brochure, or we'd just talk with them. And again, what we were trying to do is get them to come out for the meetings of the neighborhood organization, and from the

neighborhood organization, they would elect a representative to go [sp] to Action for Opportunity.

1:13:05

So we began to really build what we hoped to be a real political base for the disadvantaged or disenfranchised. And that's how it really began. Eventually I moved from that role into the housing, as a housing specialist. We began to explore, what are the kind of programs that are out there, that they could use to build housing for the low-income community. That's when efforts were made to stop large high-rises in the community. We pushed for scattered sites, to get away from that, and that was successful. We did keep them from doing that, as far as the Lincoln community is concerned. Eventually, they did build housing projects, but not at that level.

1:14:01

They built the duplex units and developed those in the city. That's when the [1:14:12] projects came into existence.

Zed Pine:

You mentioned when Dr. King was assassinated, that some of the young people in the neighborhood or in the community wanted to take some direct action.

Rev. Willard Durant:

Right.

Zed Pine:

Whatever happened with that?

Rev. Willard Durant:

Well, the fact is, once—well, a couple things happened. First of all, at those community centers we set up in each area, from that, we were able to also secure funds to help the youth in the area set up programs. They got involved in setting up and getting mentoring programs and tutoring programs for the kids in the neighborhood.

1:15:01

They were focusing—and also a whole thing as far as Black awareness was concerned—who you are, and all of those things. As a result of that, matter of fact there were even two plays. One was *Mirror Black* [sp] and another one was *Fables of the Sun People* [sp] that they got the youth involved in. As a matter of fact, the person who wrote both of those plays is still in the area. I just met with him last night about something else.

Zed Pine:

Who's that?

Rev. Willard Durant:

Ernie West [sp]. Ernie West, Jr. [sp].

Zed Pine:

And it was called *Mirror Black* [sp]?

Rev. Willard Durant:

The Mirror is Black [sp]. And I think the second one was *Fables of the Sun People*. Excellent plays. Did an excellent job with it. Matter of fact, both of those productions were well-received. I'm trying to think, were they—I can't remember was

it Berkshire Theatre or someplace, that they in fact had the plays. Really good.

Zed Pine: His name was?

1:16:00

Rev. Willard Durant: Ernest West.

Zed Pine: Ernest.

Rev. Willard Durant: Ernest West, Jr. But from that, anyway, a lot of kids got involved in these arts programs. They also developed, during that same period—no, well, it was a little later on—I'm trying to think about—it was before I left—they developed an African American Society that met right here in the community, again. What they did initially, they decided it was going to be all men, and that we were going to have women involved and then that the men were going to come together and start planning and organizing the community, et cetera. And they were very effective in that period. And it was going pretty well, I guess for about two years. A guy by the name of Al Nolan [sp] became the head of it.

0:17:00

What they did, matter of fact, they challenged the Christian Center, and said at that time, "You're in our neighborhood, yet you don't really have programs designed for us." And they challenged them, and the Christian Center opened up their downstairs area for them to run programs out of. So they came in, and they began to run youth programs out of the Christian Center. They called it the Harambe [sp] Room. Again, that was well received. After that, what happened? Oh. I had gotten involved again in working with—back to organizing people and making them aware of other kinds of problems.

Zed Pine: What year are we in now, approximately?

Rev. Willard Durant: We're about 1980, probably.

1:18:00

I can't even remember. Ah! That was 19...1970...yeah, well—1969. Because 1970, I—1969. Again, I had become the assistant director of Action for Opportunity then, and I began working with Head Start families, with the Head Start staff, working with the Head Start families and getting different information out and getting more people involved. As a result of my involvement there, some doors opened up for me, that I was able to get into some kinds of training in organizing through the Head Start programs. As a result of that, the University of Mass campus in Amherst received a grant to set up a leadership training program for the whole region, and that

took Maine all the way through Rhode Island, Connecticut, Mass.

1:19:08

It was the whole region one. They called it region one. And so, I was getting a little frustrated myself, here.

Zed Pine:

Why is that?

Rev. Willard Durant:

Well, one of the things I felt as staff that—one of the primary focuses, if you're talking about “maximum feasible participation of the poor,” one of the primary focuses there was that in fact we would work ourselves out of job. Makes sense. But what we found, that as we moved in that direction, that some of the staff were very reluctant to do that. They really didn't see themselves working themselves out of a job, and they really couldn't buy into it. In some ways, they became—I don't want to call them stumbling blocks, but they were just not able to completely give into that concept, and because of that, it sort of kept things from moving forward.

1:20:06

Then when I saw it, that's when I had a chance to move. A job opened up at UMass, at the training program at UMass, and I applied for that and received it, and it was through them that I had been given a chance to work as well as having a scholarship to attend UMass. That's what I did. I then left the job here, went to UMass, in the School of Education, and began to take courses in early childhood education myself, and being involved with setting up training programs for the region. So that was my entry into a whole 'nother level. That's where I began to see things, to understand what was happening in the urban areas, but also to see that there was a way of changing it, and that one of the primary things, that you look at the educational models for early childhood education, and how they were being used in order to prepare children.

1:21:12

The one model, the one they had here, was the Burchelle [sp] model, I think it was called. They had implemented one here for the follow-through program, which was step two in Head Start. When the Head Start [1:21:22] follow-through came along, and that was to bring what we thought the enrichment principles of Head Start into the regular classrooms. So they had a follow-through program to do it. But they had I think it was called the Burchelle [sp]. But that program, they used tokens. The child would earn the token, and then that's what it was about, and then he would use that. And what happened from my perspective is that somehow everything was way too short-range, the whole thing of immediacy, and I thought that that was the last thing you needed as far as a low-income family is concerned.

1:22:06 Because it was too short-sighted, this whole thing of immediate gratification. I said, “Well, that’s not going to work.” But anyway, so when I took the job at University of Mass, I started hearing about other models in early childhood education, like the Montessori approach, and there were others, Peabody’s and others, and I began to study those to see what model best fit in to the low-income communities, and to begin to advocate for those changes. Like, let’s get away from the Burchelle [sp] [laughs]. Bereiter-Engelmann was another model. Bereiter-Engelmann, they just had things—well, they believed if you told this child that this was a cube and he referred to it as a square, he was incorrect. [laughs]

1:23:00 Their primary focus of that model was really to prepare you—
[audio cuts out]

Rev. Willard Durant: —person right now. Just decided she was no longer eligible to receive any supplemental help from AFDC, but there’s another terminology they use now.

Zed Pine: This person that just called on the phone?

Rev. Willard Durant: Right. She called and she’s trying to find out if she can get—she wants to apply for other programs to see if she can get some help. But she also needs food. She needs basic things. Because her husband’s not in town; he’s out trying to find jobs. Can’t find it. But she’s running out of food. I’m going to make a call and find out what’s happening, because I thought that they would move by now to at least get her something at least for the weekend. That’s what I’m trying to do now. Anyway. So I’ll get back in touch with her.

1:24:05 But anyway, so that’s how I got involved. That’s how I got involved as far as early child education and trying to get programs here in the community, to just give parents an alternative, a choice, between if Burchelle [sp] is not, what are the other models, so we can see about having those kind of programs here, and staying involved with that. But eventually, that’s all I was doing, traveling around the region, working with parent groups, and getting them to get more involved in their communities, and then coming back. Also, through the School of Education, I developed a few workshops and sent them back to BCC, trying to get the parents here to get involved so they can begin to look at another way of doing things, other kind of educational models. I stayed involved there until—I guess that was two years.

1:25:02 I was at UMass for two years, and I was supposed to finish my education there. I went there, I was going to get, again, an education—my primary focus was going to be in education. But

instead of going to early childhood, I decided I wanted to get more involved in administration, because I thought at that level, I might be able to do some other things that I couldn't do in the classroom. So that's where I went. And when I moved in that direction, I was working at UMass. I had become now the director of the Comprehensive Early Childhood Program there. So I took that position. One, it gave me more money. I now had four children. [laughs]

Zed Pine: So that was here? You were director here?

Rev. Willard Durant: No, at UMass. I became director of the—through the School of Education, they set up what they called a Comprehensive Early Childhood Education Program, and I had become the director of that program at UMass.

1:26:07 [1:26:08]

Zed Pine: Did you commute?

Rev. Willard Durant: No, what happened, as a matter of fact, I left my family here for the first year, and I commuted until the weather got bad. Then I got an apartment in Amherst, North Hampton, and I would travel back and forth. Then the following year, I moved my family up. Because then I was really involved in dealing with [1:26:34].

Zed Pine: So you weren't involved with the Pittsfield community at all during this year?

Rev. Willard Durant: Not during that whole—no. I had separated myself for a total of like two years, until I—what happened—when I was at UMass, we got involved with designing some training catalogs for all the Head Start programs.

1:27:01
Again, what I had done was—oh, I know what it was. I was involved in the Head Start program when that catalog was coming together and we were doing training. I was looking at other ways to come back to the community. Now that I thought I knew a little more than I did then, I was going to come back and do that. And I had heard of Goddard College, and they tell me based on what I was doing at UMass, that if I developed a project that they thought was worthwhile, that they would help me get my master's based on that project. And again, my focus was still the same. I had designed this project that was called Practical Parent Participation, and that was designed to take the parent from day one and bring them to a whole training program on understanding models in education, et cetera, and all of it, of getting them involved in all of those decision-making processes.

1:28:11 But it was actually a step-by-step process. By the time I finished writing that, doing my thesis on that, that's how I received my master's. When that was done, *that's* when I wanted to come back to the community. So what I did, I heard that in fact Action for Opportunity was now looking for a new director.

Zed Pine: What is it?

Rev. Willard Durant: Action for Opportunity, the same one that I had worked before I left. So I sent them back my resume and told them I'd be interested in returning to the community and working there. And that's what I did. I sent back a resume and I was hired there, and in 1973, I became the director at Action for Opportunity. I stayed there from 1973 to 1976. And again, during that period, we were doing some really exciting things.

1:29:06 We were helping people to buy individual homes, to rehab them. We helped them to find the monies that they needed to do it. We even found homes that were going to be knocked down by Berkshire Medical Center when they began to expand during that period. So every house that was there, I went and talked with them, so we can go in and strip those homes. You stripped them of everything; the lights and all, everything that was usable, put it in garages, and then worked with families who needed them, and gave them that to put in their homes that they were rehabbing. So that's how that whole process began. At the same time, we began to look at ways of documenting more clearly what was happening to people, and so we designed what we called a comprehensive computerized intake referral mechanism.

1:30:03 Anyone coming into the program, whatever their needs were, we'd be able to document it. Every time we made a referral, all I would have to do is come in the office each day, and I could just turn on that computer, I could find out how many people were supposed to be following up that day, who on the staff was supposed to do it, and be able to really document then not only the kinds of services they needed, but people who were still dropping through the gaps, who weren't receiving the service, or who were receiving services but it wasn't changing anything; it was just perpetuating. It was perpetuating the same kinds of things. So that's what we began to focus on. And in fact, right here in Pittsfield, we designed the *first*—and it was working; matter of fact, I still have some documentation of it—that we were able to show the community in every ward how many people were being served, what those needs were.

1:31:04 Again, hoping that if we gave people additional information, that they would design the system over again, so that people could in fact begin to really change their lives and they could

move forward. And I did that. I worked on that and developed—

[audio cuts out]

Rev. Willard Durant:

We went to United Way, talked with the City Council. The City Council in fact became excited about the possibilities of this happening. I talked to them about the Tucker School building that was then empty. We moved Action for Opportunity from Wendell Avenue into the neighborhood and set up programs at Tucker School, and began to develop what we called the Life Resource Center that we hoped would become one-stop shopping. So whatever the needs were of a family, once they reached that Life Resource Center, they would have a number of advocates, depending on the particular need, whether it was working with the youth or whatever it is, that would then work on their behalf to try and get programs started.

1:32:35

The pilot program was excellent. But at that time, computers were so expensive. We found that what we wanted, that we needed, I think it was like \$25,000 for the computer. In total, it was over \$50,000 that we needed, minimum, in order to initiate the program and to do what we wanted to do.

1:33:03

Couldn't find it. Couldn't find it anywhere. I found during that period that—even the regional Department of Welfare was interested in the computerized program, and we shared with them on what they might be able to do, and what the capabilities of it was. One of the primary concerns at that time was confidentiality. Once you have that kind of information on people, you're exposing people to everything, then. Now, everyone has information. And the fact of the matter is, that was in fact a risk. That was a risk. And I think it's still a risk, as far as that is concerned. So after about a year and a half of trying to get that up—we ran the program out of Tucker School. That went reasonably well, but it wasn't really moving forward. And so actually I stayed until 1976.

1:34:00

Then I came out. I had reached a point where I knew I couldn't move any further with it. Thought the idea was good, then, and still think it was a good idea, but really couldn't get it off the ground. So I left Action for Opportunity then. Didn't go anywhere. As a matter of fact, my wife and I, there was a group by the name of Downey Side families who were interested in working with youth, working with the youth who were in foster care, and they wanted to set up homes where they could provide parents for these youth who were in the foster care system, that would help them to develop whatever skills they needed with these kids. So my wife and I, we took a job doing that. It was right here in Pittsfield. We ran a Downey Side home for boys

for about four years, and at one time had as many as 16 kids in the home—our own four, and then we had 12 others.

1:35:11

The beauty of that system, what I liked about Downey Side, and the reason we took it, was as parents of those children, all the resources that we needed were available to us. If I needed to call an attorney, I could call in an attorney. If I needed to call in an educational specialist to help design the educational program for kids based on where that child was, we were able to do that. So we did it. We ran that home for four years. We ended up adopting ourselves four of the children. [laughs] And the others actually—all of them—I know their lives were enhanced some, but some of them, during the period of time, some things would change at home.

1:36:04

Like we had three of the children were from one family in Springfield, and that mother, when the children were taken from her and they ended up in the Downey Side home here, she began to set goals for herself of what she wanted to accomplish, in order to get her children back. I was in total support of that. In fact, that in fact happened. It took her a year and a half, a year and a half of going and finding a job, getting an apartment, and the people in Springfield working with her. And at the end of that time, they did an evaluation and decided she had proven herself, so those three children went right back to the mother. So for me, that was a major accomplishment, because it is trying to empower people themselves, but also make sure as you empower them, that they have some kind of skill that they can now apply and keep their family units together. And so my wife and I stayed there, until—I'm looking, I don't know, down here someplace, it tells you. Oh yeah, 1976 to 1980, that's what we were doing.

1:37:12

We ran a house for Downey Side, Incorporated. In 1978, while I was still doing that, they had a New Horizon program, and their primary focus again was working with youth, high school kids, who were having difficulties at home, primarily because they were low-income families, again. And what my job, while I was running the Downey Side home, I now had a half a day that I could spend working with this group to help kids find jobs and help them tie it into their own educational programs. So that's what we did. We worked with kids, with getting them on the job someplace.

1:38:01

Making sure that the jobs were meaningful to them. At the same time, helping them to learn some basic skills that they needed as far as study habits, good study habits, so they could prepare themselves and move ahead. And I did that for two years, while I was also in the Downey Side home for a while, for families. Why I left—oh, I know—the program was not re-funded. The funds were coming from the Berkshire Training and

Employment Program to run that program, the New Horizon project. That's what we received. But the next year they decided that they didn't want to fund that program again. So at that point, I applied for the job at the Department of Mental Health and Retardation. And so I moved from there, into that Department, and I was doing staff development and licensing.

1:39:01

Helping the subcontracts and to find housing in the neighborhood. You remember that was a whole thing then of deinstitutionalization. And I worked there, helping to find homes, making sure that they met basic guidelines, ensuring that there wasn't any saturation in any one area, because you could only build one unit—or I forgot, but there was some hundred-and-feet, you couldn't have another one. So we tried to do it, and we helped them set up [1:39:37] for mental health and also for mental retardation, right in the city of Pittsfield. And again, the same thing was happening in North County and South County, so we started [1:39:48] to do that. I stayed there until 1982, and that's when I heard about the Christian Center. They were looking for a new director.

1:40:02

So I talked with my wife about doing it as a joint venture, and so I sent a letter to the Christian Center—"I understand you're looking for a director." I sent them my resume and my wife's resume, and asked if they would consider having a co-directorship. I think it took about six months for them to really decide to go in that direction, but when they did, they came back and offered us the position, myself as the executive director and my wife as program manager. I resigned from the Department of Mental Health, came down to the Christian Center, in September of 1982, and it was like a launching pad. [1:40:53]. I mean, we sort of [1:40:57] what we think were the joint skills and all that we have, because my wife [1:41:01] career development things.

1:41:03

She had [sp] worked and had started [sp] programs and all. We told them we thought we could do some sort of innovative programs if given the opportunity. So when we came in September, we walked in there in September; by December some-odd, we had—just being there, you could see—we decided there were still basic needs that were still being—food, clothing, and shelter, people still were not receiving that. So many people. We used to watch kids go by with no coats on, and winter's here. So what we did, we started setting up a free clothing place. We instituted a free lunch program for families, and we ran that for Monday, Wednesday, and Fridays, because that's all we could afford to do at that point. As soon as we initiated that program, it really began to take off.

1:42:02

I don't remember how many we served the first year, but by the end of that second year, and for every year after that, we served

over 10,000 lunches, every year, out of that place. The beauty of that is that the various congregations and churches, individuals from the temple, individuals from the Catholic schools and the various churches as well as the Protestant churches, they all began to support us. They would do food drives, and we would go by and we'd receive the food and we would set up lunch programs. We ran those lunch programs again Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. We then began to work with the individual churches who came and formed another group to run the programs every Saturday. And *they* would come with a full staff. We didn't have to staff it. They would just get people from the churches that would buy the food, come prepare the food, and serve the food.

1:43:02

We had about 24 different churches, and about six different organizations. In fact we had a group out of Western Mass Electric who wanted to become a part of it, and that became an ongoing part of that program, people coming out to set up and all. So that's what we did. By February that next year, our clothing program was up and running. And again, the good thing was that we weren't selling anything. All we were doing was receiving it, and putting things on a rack, and people could come in and get whatever they needed without any [1:43:42]. Because that was part of the problem. A lot of low-income families, if the mother, she was fortunate enough to buy—she had four children, and she might be able to buy one or two of them new shoes at that time, but she couldn't buy all of them shoes at the same time. So what we decided—"Let's give things away."

1:44:00

Why make that—why not somehow try to free up that money so she could do the kinds of things that she had to do? And we began to provide that for them. And *that* took off. The beauty about those programs is not only the number of people that were being served and the ones that come in and do it, but the number of volunteers, people from the community who had come to receive service, now wanted to volunteer. They wanted to give what they had. We started—and I'm trying to think of how many volunteer hours did we have. It's incredible, the number of—I have it written down someplace. But the volunteer hours itself I know represented, if we were paying minimum wage, over \$80,000. People, every day, would come there, they would come in, and they would go up and set up the clothing stores, be there to help people try on things and find the things for their families that they needed.

1:45:00

The other ones would come down and set up the dining area and serve the food as people came in. And things just began to mushroom. We really began to move ahead. As a result of that, there were a number of other things that we found out, and we had a social service person who then we began to do advocacy

work for the families. If we had to send them over to Welfare or Legal Services or whatever the services were, they would follow up on that. They would make sure that they received the services and make sure things were going all right. And that's the level that we were functioning in. The result of that, we set up a transitional shelter for men, right in back of the Christian Center. There's a home that they have there that—I guess initially it was going to be like the parsonage [laughs] sort of thing, for the director. But we set up the transitional shelter.

1:46:00

And what was happening at that time was that so much was going into the Christian Center, and that the board felt that if I took on anything else, that we were going to burn out. So I said, "Well, let me see if I can find someone to agree to do this." So I went to the Pittsfield Area Council of Churches, told them what we wanted to do, and asked them if they would oversee that program for us if we got it up. We needed them, because the Council of Churches began—not only because they helped us with the lunch programs and those kinds of things, but also helped us with the clothing program. We thought if we could get them involved in the transitional shelter, that we could really begin to do some really positive things. So we asked them to manage it. We then went and talked to the Red Cross, who decided they would try to find funding for the staff of that shelter. As a transitional shelter, the beauty of the transitional shelter was, is that the men wouldn't just—when they'd first come, they had to sit down and make a contract with what their goals were, what they were going to be attempting to do. That contract would say, "Okay, understand, you're not going to be able to stay here during the day."

1:47:11

Because we felt, if we left the doors open and if someone just had a place to go, they would stay there. They wouldn't—so we decided, "No, you're not going to be able to do that." By 9:00 in the morning, after you had your breakfast, you're going to have to be out. You'll either have to be looking for jobs, attending some of the Alcohol Anonymous meetings or whatever drug-related, whatever it is—that they would have to be involved in doing some things to reverse what was happening in their lives. And that's what they did. And what we found in that process—and again, there were six bedrooms there—is that—and we gave—we established initially that we were going to say a 90-day or 60-day period they could stay there.

1:48:00

Whatever funds that they made, all we wanted was them to save it, so they can get enough to have a security deposit or whatever else is happening. That would give them enough time buy a secondhand car if they were trying to—they had gotten a job. Whatever they needed, just to get them off the ground. And that's what we did. Red Cross did find the money to hire the staff. We were a part of hiring them and getting them in place.

And that program flowed out [sp]. We also tied in with the Berkshire Council for Alcoholism and Addiction, to make sure that those kinds of things were in place, and that program really went well. I don't remember what year, now—1986?—'88!—1988, we also heard that there were monies available to build low-income housing for the elderly. So we talked with this guy at Berkshire Housing, by the name of Peter Lafayette, and told him what we wanted to do. We found the money.

1:49:02

Now, what was happening is that we had a number of low-income people in the community who were still living in some of the old houses that were very drafty, that were very cold. What we wanted to do was build some new housing for them, where they would have a chance, at least, to live in some nice units. They would then have the opportunity for turning that over to their family, okay, or whatever they wanted to do with that particular piece of property. What we found in the long run is that the individuals that we were eventually able to help did not own those units anyway. Most of them, they were renting those units. So what we did, as we built those units [1:49:41], that they had first opportunity to move into the elderly housing project. And that really went well. Because now, all of them have Section 8. They only have to spend like 25% of whatever their income was to have a first-class unit. And then built in a center where all of them could get together.

1:50:04

So the transitional shelter, and housing for the elderly, and those are the kinds of things we did. That continued on until 1992. In 1992, the Christian Center began to look at what they were doing and asking me, "Well, what kinds of things do you think we need to be doing now?" And what I wanted—I said what I really wanted to do—[phone rings]—Hello? Hi, Mrs. Hamilton, how are you? Okay.

[break in audio]

1:51:00

Rev. Willard Durant:

It was the 100th year anniversary, in 1992.

Zed Pine:

The Christian Center?

Rev. Willard Durant:

Right. Because they started in 1892. It was really fantastic, by the way. But anyway, what we said we were gonna do is that we got a special bicentennial committee together to look at the overall goals. And what I was encouraging, I said, "Look, we're doing all this. The basic things are now being met. Now let's shift. Let's become an agent of change. Let's really begin to look at now the roots of the problems. As long as we're maintaining people as far as giving them and helping them get their basic needs, now let's move to the next level." And so we

sat down with the committee and they designed what we called Focus For the '90s, and it really developed the primary focus was parental—what was it, parental involvement? Oh, parent invol...parent—empowering parent, and something else. I'll have to look it up.

1:52:14

But there were four primary goals that were established. Primarily again what it was is getting parents involved, getting parents educated, so that they again could begin to move forward, okay? To do that, we began to identify again the same kind of problems. There was still housing. There was still people did not have jobs. And even trying to get jobs, the whole thing with daycare, again, what was happening to them. And it's coming back to the same four things again, but that was going to be our primary focus. So the bicentennial committee developed it, developed beautiful brochures, and that's the way we were moving. While we're moving in that direction, again when it came back, it came right back to, "Look, at this point this computerized mechanism needs to be in place."

1:53:06

Because if we do that, then in fact we can really help parents. So we moved in that direction again. So we got this—actually, I got the city to buy the computer. Now, computers weren't costing \$25,000. Now they're down to like a few thousand dollars. The City Council found the funds for it. So we bought the computer, brought it in, went out then to try and find someone who can develop the program for us, based on what we had done, what I had done at Action for Opportunity, and could not find a person to really develop it. The young man that developed for me when I was at Action for Opportunity was a young man who had quit high school. He was living in Stockbridge.

1:54:01

He fed himself by hunting. He wouldn't use a gun. He learned how to use a bow and arrow. His name was Lou Nathanson [sp]. This kid, Lou Nathanson, every time you'd see him, he'd look like he'd just come out of the woods. His hair was long, he had a beard. He was about 5'4", 5'5", always wore hunting boots. After he had quit school, had heard about computing and fallen in love with it and started taking courses. I just thought about him, but we moved west, out west someplace, [1:54:38]. That kid designed a program that absolutely did *everything* that we wanted it to do. *Everything!* He designed it from start to finish. Our deal, my deal with him is, "Okay, listen, if you develop a program for us, okay, yeah, that's your program. That's yours. But we're going to have the system."

1:55:03

He did that. So when he left the area, he took all of his things with him, of course, because they were his. So I did have the program, but I didn't have anyone who could do any follow-up, could expand the program or nothing. So I said, "Well, let me

see if I can start all over again.” So then what I did—so then we went back out to BCC, because that’s where we had the terminal from. We had a terminal set up. We had it all through BCC. I said, “Well, BCC must have a better setup now.” So I went out to BCC. Again, they said, “Sorry, we can’t do that. We don’t have the capacity to have terminals anymore.” So I said, “Well, can you take this, can you designs this for us, so we can get the software to put into our new computer?” They said, “No, you can’t do that.” So I contacted people at North Adams State, asking them, “Listen, here’s what we’ve done before. If we did it then”—this was like ten years before—“surely we can have the capacity to do it now.” They couldn’t do it for us.

1:56:00

Now I’m trying to get money to hire a person, to write the programs. Well, I couldn’t get the board to move in that direction, the kinds of things we wanted the computer to do. And I understand it, but it’s primarily the whole thing about funding base, to be able to get all that—because we ended up with a large mailing list, as far as people’s support. But what they wanted to do, really, was to use that now to ensure that the funds kept coming in. And so the time that—they did find me a person, to sit down and write all the things, from a mailing list of 70 things that I could categorize, the individuals that were contributing to us in all kind of categories. You know what I’m saying? If I want to find out their interests, if I knew where they were working, it was in the computer, so we can do that kind of thing. But that all came back to primarily the fundraising. And I really wasn’t interested in fundraising.

1:57:00

I know you have to do it. I know you have to do fundraising. And we were doing it. I mean, when I arrived at the Christian Center, I think they had—they were receiving about \$15,000. I think it was \$15,000 a year, for what they were receiving in fundraising. Every year after that—I think the following year, we received—we had gone up to \$25,000. The year after that, it kept going from \$26,000 or \$28,000. By the end of the first five-year period, I think we were averaging about \$50,000 a year. By the time we left, we were averaging \$76,000 a year. Again, monies were not going towards staff. Monies were going to programs. But there was just so much—I guess over the period of time, they just felt that was too much money that was being spent, and that the Christian Center was starting to go in the hole. They had to begin to take money from their endowments to support some of the programs, and they decided they wanted to find another way of doing it.

1:58:12

And so that’s where we were. That’s where we were. And that’s what I was doing, all of that period, until 1997, when I decided, well, it was enough. It was enough for me, anyway. And so we came out of there. Looking back on it, a lot of good came out of it, as far as people being served, and they’re still being served.

But the fact is, there's still not anything, any changes in their lives. I don't mean that in—I mean, some people have—some people, I'm sure their lives have been enhanced, but I'm talking about as far as changing the system so that the next generation wouldn't have to go through the same thing. It's not there! It's the same thing. You still have the low-income families going through exactly the same thing.

1:59:04

They have to run to 15 different people to tell their poverty over and over again in order to get services. Once they *receive* services, often the requirements on them of what they have to do in order to maintain it as such, they're almost overwhelmed. They reach a place where they're just giving up. It seem like everyone else is making decisions for their families instead of them. And it's just continued to erode. There's no real—families themselves are not really being served, not if you're low-income. And that's where we are. That's where I am. I'm still trying to find out, well, what will make the difference? What really can make the difference? And that's where we are. That's where I am, anyway. Not necessarily that we are; that's where I am.

Zed Pine:

What have you been doing since you retired?

Rev. Willard Durant:

Well, what I've been doing first of all is, first thing I had to do was go through a *major* adjustment. [laughs]

2:00:05

Zed Pine:

How so?

Rev. Willard Durant:

Well, the fact of the matter is, that's a ministry. That really is a ministry.

Zed Pine:

The Christian Center.

Rev. Willard Durant:

The Christian Center really is a ministry. And while I was there, I was doing a lot of ongoing counseling of people, doing some marriage counseling as well, helping—you know, just sort of [2:00:26] families [2:00:27]. When you go through that for that period of time, and you come out of it, it's almost like there's a vacuum that's created in your life. You know, it's almost a sense of being overwhelmed. It's like all of a sudden there was a—that's what it was. It was a vacuum. Almost nothing was there. It was an emptying, and I was just trying to figure out, "Okay, where do I want to go now?" Anyway, what I decided to do, I wanted to go back to the church, where the church I was concentrating on just having—you know, how churches run, or having our programs and our Sunday schools there.

2:01:08 But what I wanted to see—I wanted to do something different. I want to see if I can do what we wanted to do at the Center for kids, and see if I can do it through the church. And that’s really what we’re doing. Now we want to see about setting up programs.

Zed Pine: What church is this?

Rev. Willard Durant: Oh, I’m with Price Memorial.

Zed Pine: Price?

Rev. Willard Durant: Price Memorial AME Zion Church. And I’ve been with them since 1973. Even while I was doing that, I was always—

Zed Pine: Did you serve as pastor there?

Rev. Willard Durant: Yeah, still do.

Zed Pine: Okay!

Rev. Willard Durant: For all this time!

Zed Pine: All this time.

Rev. Willard Durant: All this time. And what I had thought—well, here’s how naïve I was, I guess. What I had done is since I was—my church is located two doors down from the Christian Center. So I said, “Well, we can marry—we can—these two things can—

[break in audio]

2:02:00

Zed Pine: This is tape three of the interview with Reverend Willard Durant. The date is March 6th, 1998. We’re in Pittsfield, and continuing the interview.

Rev. Willard Durant: Where was I? I don’t know what I was talking about.

Zed Pine: You were talking about the two—that the Christian Center and your church were next to each other.

Rev. Willard Durant: So what we had done, is that some members of my church had some onto the Christian Center board. And actually, they provided a lot for me during that period of setting up those programs, getting those programs off the ground.

2:03:02 And so what I thought—and in the early stages, a lot of good things happened as a result of that. Because even when we were trying to set up a neighborhood development corporation, they were there and involved in helping us set that up. So what we

had done is—just trying to keep that balance. But there was a place where there was a conflict that evolved. The Christian Center, because programs grew so fast, just demanding more and more time, so much so until often, my church, other than seeing me in our meetings and on Sundays and going to various places on behalf of church, actually began to feel that, “Well, you're really the pastor for the Christian Center.” And I was executive director. So that sense where it was almost like a conflict between the two.

2:04:09

Had to figure out how I was going to continue to do that time. I found out—well, I guess the Word says it better than anything else. It says, “A man can't serve two masters.” [laughs] You know what I'm saying? And looking back on it, where I thought there was a marriage, there really wasn't a marriage. People were there supporting me, to what we were trying to do, and because they were, that happened. But in many ways, they ended up probably sacrificing more than I did. Because I in fact was doing those kinds of things I wanted to do, and the kinds of things that I could have been putting more time in, as far as the church was concerned, and ministering more specifically and precisely to those families, I was giving to the families at the Christian Center.

2:05:02

So when I came out, and when I finally said I was going to retire, I said, “Wait, maybe now, let me—maybe I can concentrate now on the church, and the church families, and get that off the ground.” You know, really get it off the ground. And that's what we're doing. That's exactly what we're going to do now. What is happening with that is that as I move back to do that, I find my parishioners are seeing a different pastor. [laughs] They're not sure if that's the direction they want to go. Because it's like so many churches, actually. We end up with a small group of people, a group of people who are more concerned about their church building and things than they are with how they're serving their community that we're in. But that's our focus. It's our focus, is to serve the community.

2:06:11

I'm all for fellowship, but I think fellowship [sp] needs to be there. You know what I'm saying? You can't just come together and enjoy each other. We might be receiving all kinds of blessings [sp], all kinds of vestments [sp]; our call isn't to do that. Our call is beyond the fellowship to fellowship. It still is calling us to do the same thing—feed the hungry, clothe those who are naked, being father to the fatherless and all that. You can look, at the end of all of those, they represent some kind of program to serve those people that now must be in place. So what I want to do in the church now in some ways reflects what the Christian Center, what we did at the Christian Center, but now I want to move in another level.

2:07:00 As a church, my primary focus is going to be a—must be—serving, first of all, the membership of that church. The second area of focus is the rest of the minority community, because that's who our church is. It's not limited to them. I mean, we have a couple of white pastors. Matter of fact, one of them serves [sp] at a church in Great Barrington. And we do have some individuals from the community that are not minority. But the fact is, you've got to bring those people together. They have to solidify as one congregation. And I'm finding it very difficult, at this point, to make that happen. So what we're doing, we're pulling back and looking at pieces of it. What we're looking at is again, starting to work with the youth.

2:08:00 We had other programs that we had done in the past like tutoring and mentoring, and we want to do that. We've talked about initiating a Rites to Passage [sp] program. And that is involving kids. And I think they said it would start from like ten years old on up to 14 or 16. And the Rites of Passage program is designed to in fact—first of all, it's a whole historical thing that would help them to realize from whence you've come. But the second thing is the principles of Kwanzaa, which is that whole celebration that starts in January—December 26th, and runs for a week. It emphasizes things like economics, unity, cooperation. But it's the basic principles of Kwanzaa. What it does, it establishes within each child that goes through it, not only a sense of family, but also a sense of community, and what it really means.

2:09:01 And it helps them to develop some basic characteristics to become a really functioning, independent but productive human being. But it's looking at them individually first, before they come into the community. You know what I'm saying? So that's what it is, it's Rites of Passage, of helping them to look at where they're going, as far as maturity is concerned, what's going to be required of them, in order to function at that level in the community. Looking at where they are educationally, now, so we can help them to get to where they need to go, whether if they're going into college—that's where we hope they're going—and then prepare them for that. Because right now, we've had a sharp drop in the number of minorities going into college. I mean, it's almost fallen off the board. In Pittsfield, we have a 51% dropout rate of our kids. And now with the whole thing of drugs and the pattern of drugs coming into the community, and what it's doing with families—the number of single parent households, it's absolutely going out of sight now.

2:10:10 And what we're doing now is to see, what can we put together? How can we begin to change this? And that's where we are. The same time when that's happening, we're talking about building a brand-new jail. That's not going to help us. It's not going to help us, not at all. As a matter of fact, it's already hurt

this community. When we look at the number of individuals that are being incarcerated now, some from the community, but so many of them aren't from this community, where they came from, whatever—Springfield, Albany, whatever—they come in and sell drugs. Once they become incarcerated, they're incarcerated here, their families move up to the city. Okay? Now at the same time, if we had programs in place to work with those families while that person is incarcerated, and then someone within the House of Corrections working with us so we can—they work with the individual that's incarcerated, we work with the families—so by the time the individual comes out, that we can help him change his perspective and at the same time work on the family, I think you really have a chance to perform some miracles.

2:11:22

So it's getting that piece in place, where we can begin to do that. And what I'm saying to the church is that our outreach *ministry* needs to address that. Because like it or not, when they come out of the House of Corrections, they don't move back to the cities. They're staying here. Because in one way, they like what this community is, but at the same time, they're remaining part of the problem. But they're gonna be here, and if you don't plan them in, then they're going to be out, and they're going to continue the same kind of behavior they had before, because that's all they know.

2:12:00

And the other thing is, if you listen to the newspapers and the articles, they *romanticize* the whole drug-dealing thing. You know what I'm saying? They talk about "Oh, these kids are making so much money." You follow what's happening, and 99% of all these kids that they claim are coming in and making all this money, they are worse off now than they ever been. The money that they claim they have made, that money isn't theirs. None of it's theirs. So they're often in worse shape than ever. But we keep romanticizing—"Oh, well, you know, kids ain't gonna [2:12:35] when they can make so much money." None of it! That money flows right through them to the dealers at the other level. It's not theirs. But they end up becoming drug-addicted themselves. The number of single-parent families and the number of children that are being born through these relationships, the number of things that are just being lost.

2:13:01

Single girls, who may have had a Section 8, and now that one of these young men move in with it, and as soon as they're caught selling drugs, that individual isn't just thrown out; that mother and that child is kicked out of that housing, and no longer eligible, so they return to the community. So a lot of things, a mushrooming effect that's going on right now. And it's now looking at, what kinds of things can we do? So what I'm saying to the church is that you gotta be on the cutting edge. We've got to be on the cutting edge. Because if we're not there, nobody's

gonna be there. And they will make more jails, and they will move them into jail, and as far as any really rehabilitation being done in there, there's very little being done in there. And when they come back out, they're faced with exactly the same thing. They're not coming out with additional skills. When they're coming out, they're coming out with some additional attitudes.

2:14:02

They become a little more hardened, as far as criminal is concerned. But they're coming back out, and now they're ours. They belong to us. You know?

Zed Pine:

It's 12:00.

2:14:28

Recording ends