Dr. Walter L. Smith
Interviewer: Jennifer Diaz (JD), Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library Systems’ Oral History Project: Good afternoon, Dr. Smith. Thank you for taking the time to speak with us today. We really appreciate your participation in our Oral History Project. To begin with, could you tell us the date and place of your birth?

Dr. Walter L. Smith (WS) Yes. I was born May 13, 1935 on Constance Street. My street no longer exists. Uh, it was wiped out by the connections of 275 and Interstate 4 downtown. So you’ll not find Constance Street today. But I was born on the first floor of a rooming house – 825 Constance Street, and was delivered by Tampa’s famous midwife, Miss Wiley.

JD: Wonderful. Thank you. Now Dr. Smith, we’re currently located in the home where you grew up. Can you tell us about your childhood here and in Cairo, Georgia?

WS: Yes. Let’s start where it all began. When we moved from Constance Street, my mother took us to 811 Second Avenue – which is diagonally across the street from the Robert Saunders Library. And, the big oak tree that I played in as a boy still stands. We moved then after my mother married Rueben Reynolds, my stepfather. We moved from there to this place, 1940 Cypress Street in West Tampa, as we called it then. Uh, we lived there for a long time and I spent a lot of time, both in this house on Cypress and 828 Main Street in West Tampa with my godparents, Ellian and Josephine Brown. They were like parents to me because many times when my mother was working, I was with them. And even if she were not working, if they wanted me to be with them, I would be with them. And believe it or not, I don’t know of any day that I left 1940 Cypress Street and went directly to Dunbar Elementary School which is where I completed my first year of elementary school. Uhh. I would be dropped off by my godfather, Ellian Brown, to Dunbar Elementary School located where it is today, corner of Rome Avenue and Main Street. Of course, there was a railroad track at that time running north and south on Rome Avenue, and the old railroad station still stands. And, that was our hideaway to go from school to the river which we entered off Spruce Street at that time.

So growing up, if you will, ‘here’ was a kind of a mixed thing of living here, living on Main Street, going by school. And I say ‘by school’ because, uhhh, in the first grade I learned how to play hooky. And I did it well along with three or four of my little friends. And we swam each day in the Hillsborough River. And, finally my parents got tired of it – both my godparents and my mother and stepfather -- realizing they had to work daily and they could not monitor me properly. And they came together and decided I should go to Cairo, Georgia, to grandma Suzie’s house. She was a strict disciplinarian. They knew that, and they felt that going to school there would be better for me. Well, it turned out to be something quite different from what I
expected. First of all, I thought that I would be coming back to Tampa regularly, the holidays and all summer, etc. Well, it didn't happen that way.

I went to Cairo after flunking the first grade at Dunbar and, because I had some abilities, when they checked me out in Cairo they said, 'Well this boy doesn't belong in first grade. Let's put him in second grade. I'll never forget Miss Forest, my second grade teacher. And she took a real interest in me, and kind of massaged me, if you will, towards studying and doing the right thing – except when I could get the drop on her. When I could, guess what .. [JD: You did] I did and I didn't have the Hillsborough River, but I did have Bob Miller's creek under the railroad trestle. So, a group of us would often go swimming there even cutting class. And one day, one of my dear friends, Calvin Willis, died in Bob Miller's creek. He drowned; and we did not swim well enough to be able to rescue him. So we couldn't get him out of the deep part of the creek and he died. That was a turning point in my life. I never played hooky again after the loss of Carlton and I began to things that I guess parents want boys to do particularly. I became a Boy Scout. I joined the 4H Club. You know, I pledged my head to clearer thinking, my hand greater service, my heart greater love, and my health to better living for my community, and my country, etc. I'll always remember that because many of the things I am able to do today that are mechanically oriented – electrical wiring, building, laying bricks, laying blocks – I learned much of that as a member of the 4H Club in Cairo, Georgia, supervised by the negro county agent, as we called him, Mr. George Patrick Ketchins. Now, why do we specify negro county agent? Because during those years, there were two 4H Clubs in Cairo – one for the white children, one for the black children. Each had its own county agent and home demonstration agent. Miss Lotty Jordan was the home demonstration agent. And, they both had great impact, though she spent more time with the girls. And I spent as much time with the girls as I could [chuckle], but that was not my purpose. [more laughter] But at any rate, we learned many things in the 4H Club. We learned how to farm, how to judge eggs to decide whether they are healthy or not, how to grade hams, how to prepare gardens and farms for the growth of vegetables. And you know, we also learned how to plow with mules; and as tractors came on the scene, we learned how to drive tractors. And as a matter of fact, as we got older, we participated in tractor rodeos in the 4H Club. And I have some medals today from participating in those kinds of things.

So the 4H Club was very important. But there was another organization just as important...the Boy Scouts of America. I went into the Boy Scouts at the tender age of twelve as what we call a Tenderfoot. And I went through the ranks from Tenderfoot to Life Scout. I became the senior patrol leader of the Boy Scout troop at our school. And there was only one thing came up short for me. After I earned all of the merit badges required for an Eagle Scout, they refused to have an Honor Court so that I could be promoted to Eagle Scout. And, the response was, 'We don't have Honor Courts for colored boys.' Imagine!

JD: That's a shame.
WS: Fifteen years old, outstanding scout, working with white guys who had the same merit badges I had, and they had their eagle. And I had nothing but my star in life. But, that’s the way it went then. So, I would come home to Tampa and spend part of the summer. Usually I would come right when school was out because I had to be back in Cairo, uh, in early June because we had to cut okra, we had to pick cotton, we had to shake peanuts, we had to pick tomatoes. All those things we did when school was out. And believe it or not, I learned a lot. 

JD: I bet.

WS: Picking cotton was quite a chore. My grandmother was a very capable cotton picker. She could pick 400 pounds of cotton a day, and she wanted me to pick at least 125 pounds. Well, I wasn’t able to meet up to her standards, so I got a spanking one day because I played more than I picked cotton. And that spanking resulted in me going from 79 pounds of cotton, and I shall never forget it, to 127 pounds of cotton. And you know what? I never picked less than 100 pounds of cotton for the rest of my days in the cotton fields. 

JD: It was very motivating. [laughing]

WS: Yes. If that’s what you call it – yes. More than that, it was tantalizing. [JD: Uh-huh.] with that stalk that grandma Suzie put on me. But we did a lot of things during that time. Uh, I learned to live and live well. I didn’t know that I was poor because we had plenty of fruits and vegetables. We had plenty of meat as a result of slaughtering cows and pigs, and as a result of hunting, killing squirrels and rabbits and deer. So we always had plenty to eat. And you know I grew up with an attitude that I would never be poor. And, I worked, worked and worked. I enjoyed working really. And, it was so mind boggling in terms of the things that we as boys and girls did during those years in Georgia, that when I left Georgia - between my 16th and 17th year I went to New York City – I was able to go right into the workplace, get a job pushing carts up and down the streets of New York. But, let me back up just a moment and talk a little bit more about what you asked me and that’s growing up in Tampa and Cairo, Georgia.

As I grew up in the 4H Club and the Boy Scouts, I told you what happened in the Boy Scouts. But the 4H Club was all fantastic. It was there that I loved to participate in a variety of activities. One was public speaking. And, if I can say so without being cocky, I was one of the best in the state of Georgia at that age. I won medals as a result of it. I was one of the best participants in the tractor rodeos. And believe it or not, we traveled to the camp for the first part of the summer and then late summer we would travel to Savannah State College. And they called that the state short course. It was there that we learned many academic things. And, WOW how that helped us to grow and perform in school while participating. As I did those things though, I was not isolated from athletics. I was a fairly decent athlete – didn’t play football. Didn’t play football because one of my best friends, who was an outstanding football player, was the person I was directed to guard when I first went out for football. And, he was a very strong running back – Joseph Cocks. So strong, we called him Pig Iron. And, until he passed a few months ago, we still called him Pig Iron. And, of
course, as I began to participate in football practice, I'll never forget Coach Eugene Brown said to me, "Walter, Joseph is coming your way and I want you to stop him." Well, Joseph was not only coming my way -- Joseph ran over me. As I tried to stop him, his knees caught me and I was knocked unconscious. Believe it or not, when they got through with the smelling salts and got me revived, I pulled off the tars and left the football field and never went back.

**JD:** That was it. You were done, huh.

**WS:** That was it for football. However, I played basketball. I played baseball. I ran track. I was not the fastest in track, but I always had strong legs. So, believe it or not, I was a long jumper. And I set a regional long jump record that, I understand, stood for twenty-five years. [JD: Wow.] So those things I did in Cairo, Georgia. Well, as it would be, in 1952, I had just turned 17. I came back from the state short course at Savannah State College to my little job at the Joseph Campbell Soup Company. And a white friend of mine had been assigned my responsibilities while I was gone for the two-week state short course. And John knew he was supposed to give up my job and go back to his job. My job was that of grading fruits and vegetables because of my 4H Club exposure. Well, sad to say, when Mr. Fatman, the supervisor, told John to go and tell me, as a matter of fact... let me back up. He told me to go and tell John to come to the office because he wanted him to go back to his original job and I would have my job back. Well, he didn't like that and he pushed me and he called me nigger. His words were, "So you think you're something special now, don't you nigger, because you went down there to the college and got elected vice president of the state of Georgia 4H Club. Well you're no vice president of mine." I said, "John you don't mean what you're saying." "Sure I do, nigger." And he pushed me again. And, when he did, I laid him out with a barrel slat. And the ladies, overwhelmingly black, on the sorting belt screamed, "Run, Walter. Run." Because they knew if all the guys there ganged me, I could be killed right there or I would be later. So I went from Cairo, Georgia, to Tallahassee, Florida, to my grandfather, Walter Lee, for whom I was named. And, when granddad realized what had happened... By the way, I got to Tallahassee via taxi. One of the colored cab drivers knew my grandfather worked at FAMC – as FAMU was called then – on the farm. And he said, "Walter, get in. You're going to Tallahassee." Thirty-five miles away. But he drove me to Tallahassee, no charge. My grandfather was told what I had done. Then he simply said, "Boy, you can't stay here because they'll come looking for you. So I'm going to call your aunt in New York and ask her if you can come there. And I'll call Eva, your mother and let her know what's happened." So he did. The result was my life in Cairo was over. And, I rode the Greyhound bus all the way to the Port Authority bus terminal in New York City, hence, the beginning of a new life.

**JD:** Dr. Smith, you received your GED at 23 and later went on to finish your PhD at Florida State University. What inspired you to continue pursuing your education?

**WS:** Well, first of all, it was heartbreaking when I couldn't finish high
school. I went to night school in New York when I arrived there at Watley High. But, because I worked all day pushing carts in the garment district, I couldn’t finish and finally I would be sleeping in class. Finally the professor or my teacher said, ‘Walter you just cannot make it sleeping like that. It’s going to be very difficult for you to work the streets pushing a garment cart and come to my class. So you might want to take some time off.’ So, I did. But some very heartbreaking things happened. As I took time off from formal education, I suddenly realized that I couldn’t get very far doing anything else.

When I first tried to go into the Army at 18 they rejected me because I was a high school drop out. And, ultimately I was able to find an officer at Times Square who was willing to look at how I had done on tests and allow me in the Army. So, I volunteered and went into the Army. Well interestingly, while in the Army, I was selected for some special schools. Graduated from them and did well. For the 32 months I was in the Army, I became an E4. But more than anything, while in the Army, I played a lot of ball. But I never went overseas into combat missions. My overseas trips were in the Bahamas and the Caribbean area as we began to fly the rest on missiles and all down there. So, my high school dropping out cut me in some ways, but it also stimulated me to go back and do what I needed to do to be better than I was. When I came back from overseas, I was assigned to, uh, Edward Air Force Base in the Mojave Desert in California. Adjacent to there in Lancaster, California, was Lancaster Junior College. I spotted it one weekend as we were going over the Angeles Crest to have a hot weekend in Los Angeles. And, finally I went over to the college to find out about their programs. And it was then they talked to me about being a high school drop out and what they could do to change that. So I began studying for my GED while I was still in the Army. And the finality was getting the GED afterwards. And then I began to study.

My first college course was biology, believe it or not. And that was because of my love for the sciences. I had said. I shouldn’t say ‘I said,’ the people in Cairo had dubbed me their little doctor because I used to go from house to house after they had had some bad cuts, their cuticles and all, picking cotton and I would repair those. Using methiolade, mercurochrome, alcohol, clean them up and then put little bandages on them, and they used to call me their little doctor. So that’s what I used to do. So I had that scientific interest. So anyway, I studied biology first, got my GED. But my mother was perhaps the most stimulating of it all. There she is in that picture with Mayor Iorio – 95 years old at that time. She wanted me to come back home and go to school. She said that I just had more to offer than I even knew. Well, I came home for the summer of 1957, and I met a man named John W. Rembert. Dr. Rembert was both the president of Gibbs Junior College and Principal of Gibbs High School – High school by day; college by night. With the insistence of my mother, I drove over there and met Dr. Rembert. He told me what I needed to do. He said, ‘If you go back and get your GED completed, you come back to Gibbs and we’ll make something out of you.’ Well, in 1958 at the ripe old age of 25, I mean 23, I came back home to Tampa and began to
commute to Gibbs Junior College every day. For two years I did that. Meantime, I worked hard. I waited tables; cut yards; and did everything else I could do that was legal to have enough money to stay in school. After all, I had a pregnant wife when I came and it wasn’t long before I had a son. By the way, that son who was born as I entered my first year at Gibbs Junior College, is today a full Bird Colonel and Chief of Staff of the 1st Army Division. [JD: That’s fantastic.] Sooooo anyway, I finished Gibbs. During that time I was elected president of the Student Government Association. I was a member of the basketball team. And quite often, when guests came on campus, I was invited by the president to meet with them. And, perhaps one of the greatest moments of my life, in terms of outside people while at Gibbs Junior College, was the weekend that Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt visited our institution. I was among those who provided the hospitality for her. And when they went in to the formal greeting in the auditorium, I was plucked out to offer the greeting address to Mrs. Roosevelt. I have a picture with her and that was marvelous.

JD: That was incredible.

WS: What an education it was. Well, when I finished my two years at Gibbs Junior College, I made up my mind I was going farther. But I had a problem... a family. We didn’t have the kind of monies that they have today. The GI bill only paid me $110 a month. And, that made it difficult. [JD: Mm-hmm.] So, guess what? While waiting tables one weekend, I served a party of executives from Texas and California – the top people in 7-11 food stores. Mr. Sam C. Myers, who I’ll never forget, told Leo Dolsheimer who owned the restaurant where I worked that I seemed to be one of the smartest waiters he had ever had. And that was because I was able to serve a party of fifteen by myself and they were all very satisfied. He said, ‘We’re getting ready to build another 7-11 store. I would like to have him as a clerk.’ So Leo told me and I said, ‘Oh. Sounds like something I would be willing to do ‘til I go back to college.’ So, they invited me over; I took the test; they found they had given me the wrong test. Instead of getting the clerk’s test, I got the manager’s test and I did very well on it. Hence, I became the first African-American manager of a 7-11 food store in this entire region.

I worked with my eye on the highest of seven hills in Tallahassee which is where Florida A&M University is. I worked and I worked. Ultimately I said to mother, ‘I’m going back to school.’ I said the same thing to my wife. And you know, I went back. 7-11 was so pleased with the job I had done, they gave me a $500 scholarship. The first scholarship they had given in the state of Florida. So then I went to Florida A&M University and enrolled. While there, I worked at the university hospital laboratory. As I said earlier, science was my love. I became a lab technician and was able to do a lot of things that were helpful. Finally I got my BA degree in biology, chemistry and physics in 1963. I was 27, just about 28 years old. I was chosen as the first black graduate scholar in the sciences I was taking. And you know what? When I became that scholar, they sent me to Washington, D.C. And there I worked with some high level people in research. Particularly, logical research – cell growth and development, and all of
that. So, that began my education because when I came back from Washington, I was met by Mr. E. Lutrell Bing, Principal of Marshall High School in Plant City. He wanted me to come work for him and be the head of his department. I balked initially because I felt that some of the older people who had been there would be kind of, you know. But, I did it anyway. So that was the Georgia side of things. [pause] I’m trying to think now where to go from there.

JD: Well, I have a question about libraries specifically. Since you started a library here, could you tell me about your early life and if there was a connection to libraries? And also, I know the community room at the Saunders library that you mentioned is named after you. Could you tell me how that came about?

WS: How that came about… Gosh that’s another whole part of my life that is [sighs] very complex. Bob Saunders and I were friends. And, he was in the Office of Civil Rights for the Office of Economic Opportunity. I was in the Office of Civil Rights in the US Office of Communication. We were both assigned to the regional office in Atlanta, Georgia, one block apart. And when we were making trips into different southern states, uhh, we would call each other. And I shall never forget the one time I didn’t call Bob. I was going to Mississippi. The car ride to Mississippi, I shall never forget it. Algonquin County. And I made a presentation telling them what they should do for the desegregation of their schools. A few people got angry. And when I got back to the hotel that night, the desk clerk said to me, ‘Mr. Smith the meanest ole highway patrolman in Mississippi came to ask what room you were in ‘cause he wanted to see you.’ And she said, ‘I wouldn’t tell him. But I know he’s coming back and I’m gonna have to tell him. So you need to get out of there.’ Well, that night I had to jump out the back window, second floor, of the hotel where I was staying.

JD: To escape?

WS: To escape. And, when I got back to Atlanta, Bob and I talked about it, and we got closer and closer and closer. Well, you don’t have the document, but I came home during that time and made an address at what is now Leto High School advocating and admonishing at the same time. Advocating school desegregation without regard to race, color, creed, religion and sex and admonishing the people to take the leadership role and making certain things happen. Bob liked that very much. So we maintained that friendship. Unfortunately, he was killed one night. Someone ran a red light up on Dale Mabry. He’d gone out to get dinner, and he was killed. And, they named the library for him.

Now I suspect, people who knew me best, uh, made the decision to ask the library board to name that center for me. I don’t know that. I don’t really know how it happened, but I’ve heard. But, that’s what happened. Uhh, because of the relationship, I would say, with Bob Saunders.

JD: That makes sense. So what made you decide to build a library in your own neighborhood?

WS: I think that’s all for that.
**JD:** Definitely.

**WS:** That’s how my name got on that library. When they named it for Bob, they decided to name the big meeting room for me.

**JD:** So what made you decide to build a library in your own neighborhood?

**WS:** Well, a number of things happened to me. Well, not happened to me – I don’t mean that negatively. A number of things happened. Remember, I had been university president. I had taken my sons to Africa to live. I was a Senior Fulbright scholar. And I began the concept of building libraries, technical libraries, regular libraries while I was there. When I came back home, each time I visited this community I could see the absence of library resources. The kids had to go all the way across heavy traffic to get to the library. So when I retired in the year 2000, I made up my mind that I was going to do something to help alleviate that problem. My mind was not to build a library, but I was going to do something. But it changed overnight. Sitting on my back step I watched little girls get off the long yellow school bus. And they were just cutting the fool, you know, doing what kids do. And I said, you know what, it would be nice if they could go home – well say when they got off the bus – ‘listen, let’s go home, get something to eat. I’ll meet you back at the library.’ I started thinking about that. I said, ‘You know what? These two houses next to me, if I were to tear one of them down, I’d have a parking place. The other one, I’d have a library. And I could build that. I looked at my retirement check, one hundred some thousand dollars, and I decided that I was going to build a library for the community. And I did. I bought both houses, and you can see what the results was. [Mm-hmm] Before my parents died and I assumed this responsibility, too. But I wanted somewhere for young people to be able to come, to sit and talk and enjoy each other without having to go up there. The more I thought about it, the more I felt it was the right thing to do. So I took my retirement check and bought the facilities. I had my boys come, my sons come and help me start the renovations. All of the siding on that building, my sons and I did it. So we remodeled that house. And, uh, brought all the books I had. I solicited some books from other folks. And, of course, you see the first building? [Mm-hmm] Heavily attended. Mother died. Well, daddy died first. Then mother died. In the driveway as we were leaving to take her to hospice she said this to me, she said, ‘Baby, I know you’re not going to give up that old shack of yours.’ That’s how she referred to my house that was built in 1907. But she said, ‘But, I don’t want nobody living in my house, and I want you to think about what you can do with it.’ She said, ‘And, I like that library that you built for them children. Maybe you can do something like that.’ Hence I began to think about how to use this facility rather than rent it out and get some revenue. I could rent this thing. Well, you see it..[Mm-hmm] I could rent this place probably for twelve, thirteen hundred dollars.

**JD:** Oh absolutely.

**WS:** And, I decided not to do that. Instead I decided to build unit two of the library. So that’s how the concept began.
JD: That’s wonderful. And, so this area now as you’ve shown me, you’re converting into the science and technology part of it. What are your plans for the future with this library? What do you have in mind?

WS: I have something in mind that a lot of people don’t even realize. I’m going to start a fundraiser to endow this library so that it will never be destroyed. And, if because of aging, that building is brought down, this one that is concrete block will be renovated to take care of everything that is there. Everything that is here. And, I would like to see my youngest son the curator. Because he has the broad, international experience. He’s an environmental engineer. And, he’ll be completing his Master’s degree in Africana studies. So that gives him a broad background. [Mm-hmm] So that’s what I really want to do. That’s my future for this building.

JD: That’s excellent. So, did you have any special connection to libraries earlier in your life?

WS: Yes. Yes, I did. You’d have to go to Cairo, Georgia, to appreciate it. Wessie Conoll, white librarian, Cairo, Georgia. She knew my grandmother. For some reason, she just fell in love with me. We didn’t have a library for colored children in Cairo. So she used to come out on Bookacile where we lived, bring some library books, sit on the floor with us and have study sessions. Mind you, we didn’t have an electric light anywhere.

JD: That’s amazing. So it was all just by candlelight.

WS: So what could we do? She said, ‘I’m going to come to Bookacile where we lived, and teach you kids how to read, how to write. And, the thing that was so significant about that was we didn’t have electricity. We lived by candlelights and water drawn from a deep well each day. So Miss Conoll would come out to Bookacile to my house and sit in the middle of a ring of us kids and teach us things that we could not get otherwise. So that was my first introduction to libraries. Think about it.

The first thing I did here, after I built this library, was go around and get kids coming here. And, I would sit at the table and talk to them about different eras of America. Those that come here now they love it. [JD: Absolutely.] So that’s how the library concept came about. It’s a 501(c)(3), so take out your checkbook; [laughter] write a big check. It’s a 501(c)(3) organization. Not funded by any governmental agency. Funded from my pocketbook and the few donations I get from time to time. And, it meets a lot of needs other than just the little children. There are adults that come in. As a matter of fact, I worked one lady through her PhD, University of South Florida – sitting at this table. She’d come out and I would go over her dissertation. Show her where the flaws are, all of that. That’s right.

JD: That’s a great story.

WS: So that’s how it happened.

JD: Mm-hmm. As a cultural center, community center.

WS: So, there you are.
JD: I have just one more question for you. It’s kind of a heavy question, but... As president of FAMU, you greatly expanded the school’s colleges, programs, the physical size... What are some of your proudest achievements during that time?

WS: Wow. This will make you laugh. [pause] Hold tight for just a moment. I’m going to show you something [JD: All right.] that will touch you in a strange way. [chuckle] Have you ever heard of the name Bob Hayes? [JD: I have.] Bullet Bob Hayes? My classmate. I was his tutor when he was in college. I was the guy who coached Jake Gaither and Earl Ethan Ware – assigned to keep him together at Florida A&M University. Well, having said that, this guy would not have made it, probably, if we had not pursued some of the things we did to make it happen back in those days. Well, when I became president of Florida A&M, think about it. We graduated, I in 1963, he came out in 1964, went to the Dallas Cowboys. Thirteen years later, I returned to Florida A&M University as its seventh president. At the time I arrived, our track field was still dirt; our baseball field was inadequate; there were no special facilities for women athletes; our Bragg Stadium, where we played football, was grossly inadequate; and our school had been rejected from Division I competition by the NCAA. They had just divided institutions in America in two categories for Division I – Division IA and Division IAA. Football was in those categories. All other sports were just Division I.

“When I arrived, we had been rejected. And, I sat with the athletic director and others. I said, ‘No we cannot, as a well known institution, allow the NCAA to reject us. So we need to confront the classifications committee.’ I was laughed at. Even the Tallahassee Democrat newspaper writer Barry Cooper laughed at me. I announced that I was going to Dallas, Texas, and confront the classifications committee and make a case for them reconsidering FAMU.

Well, I had to indicate what I was going to do at FAMU to make it able to compete. I said there’s not a problem with them being able to compete. I said there are things I must do in terms of facilities that weren’t answered [Mmm]. But they are still able to compete because of the quality of the athletes. After a very heavy fight, I was able to sway the classifications committee of the NCAA to reverse their decision. And, this institution, Florida A&M University, became the last institution elevated to Division IAA; and, became the first national championship team in Division IAA. And, that happened in 1977 that we were reclassified. And as we went through the season 1978, and they had their first play off game, we destroyed the University of Massachusetts in Wichita Falls, Texas.

In the meantime I began working with architects and others to redo our stadium; move our baseball diamond to another site so it would have adequate space; build facilities for women athletics; baseball diamond for women’s softball stadium for women; a gymnasia; and all this for women. So, in 1980 we dedicated a whole slew of athletic complexes, including an all weather track field and an Olympic size swimming pool and a new stadium with head house and every place, and
everything with the gym and all those things in it.

So, I have to say that that was one of my most memorable and kind of thing that made me smile then and it makes me smile now. [Mm-hmm]

The second thing that I did that was so important, was in science. When I arrived, we had difficulties with our nursing school. Once I got it on board properly, got it revitalized, I looked around and I said, ‘You know, we really need an allied health program with physical therapy, respiratory therapy, healthcare management, etc.’ I got laughed at again. ‘They’re not going to allow it.’ In 1982 we opened a new school of allied health. The same year we opened a new school of journalism, media and graphic arts. The same year we opened a new school of engineering jointly with FSU. And the same year, we opened a school of general studies that would allow youngsters who were undetermined about where they would like to go, what they’d like to be educationally to enroll in Florida A&M and be guided through their first two years. So now, with that having been said, I must say that those things accomplished in less than five years were extraordinary. But, I’m not through. In 1984, when I announced that I was leaving, I began to fight for our first Ph.D. program. No, in 1983. And guess what? One of the most complex programs of all, we got our Ph.D. in - pharmaceutical sciences. Today we offer the basic degree, the farm doctorate degree, and the Ph.D. in pharmaceutical sciences. As a result of elevating ourselves to that level, we also conferred on the first black astronaut his first honorary doctorate degree when he came back from outer space.

Now, which of these things do I treasure most? All of them. I had a hell of a tour as president of Florida A&M University.

JD: It sounds like it.

WS: And at the same time, we developed a Presidential Scholars program where we went out to recruit the best and the brightest of students.

JD: Well Dr. Smith, you’ve had a truly impressive career; and I just thank you so much for sitting down and taking [My pleasure] the time to talk to us. It’s truly been an honor.

WS: Thank you. Well, you know I’m sorry I didn’t get the chance to talk with you about Africa. [I know] Because that is also, what should I say, umm, a positive heart throb for me. Because as a Senior Fulbright scholar, I went to Africa and taught graduate programs; established the first Master’s Degree program at the University of Malawe; and at the same time, coached basketball – men’s basketball. And, my middle son, who was a starting point guard on that team, and they won the national championship. The first time a college had won the championship in the country because the pro teams always won them. We had to play the pro teams in order to win the national championship. So that’s one thing very significant additionally. And the other, of course, was having lived in the Republic of South Africa as well, I did the feasibility study on the likelihood that community colleges would be an asset as they went from Apartheid to Democracy. It was presented to the
Parliament. It was approved. And, I came home. The next year I was called back and asked to ‘Please build the first model American style college in South Africa.’ Got underway with two, the one that I preside over as president, [        ]. The other one is Wilburforce Community College in Everton. But I did the feasibility for both of them being developed. I came back home, and was called back to be a monitor for the 1994 elections that brought Nelson Mandela to power.

So, I’m proud of that. Proud of the fact that two of my sons went to school in Africa at different levels and, what can I say.

JD: Your role in education has just been truly, truly inspiring. [Thank you, thank you]. Thank you so much. And thank you for sharing that story.

WS: Well, you know, I’m not one to talk an awful lot about what I do or have done, but I believe in my heart that there aren’t many who have done much more in the route that I traveled. And, I guess the Cornelius P. Turner award being presented to me next month is a good example of how others feel.

JD: I would certainly agree with that.

WD: And, I gave you the papers related to that so that you can … okay.

JD: Well, thank you.

WS: My pleasure, my pleasure.

END OF INTERVIEW