

TRANSCRIPT

SCRC Series: North Carolina State University Oral Histories – MC 00449

Field Notes: Irwin Holmes

Interviewee: IRWIN HOLMES

Interviewer: Virginia Ferris

Interview Date: Monday, October 20, 2014

Location: Durham, North Carolina

Length: Approximately 120 minutes

This interview was conducted in the home of Irwin Holmes in Durham, North Carolina. Born in 1938, Irwin Holmes grew up in Durham, North Carolina, and graduated third in his class from Hillside High School in 1956. His mother, Althea Holmes, was Art Supervisor at Durham County Negro Schools with an A.B. from NC Central University and an M.S. in Education from NC College Durham. His father, Irwin Holmes, Sr., was Director of the Neighborhood Youth Corps and Recreation Center for Negroes in Durham and had been an All-American player at NC Central University on their 1933 football team.

A year before Holmes graduated from high school, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Frasier v. the Board of Trustees of the University of North Carolina* that African Americans had a legal right to attend schools within the UNC system. Holmes exercised this right, and in 1956 was one of the first four African American students to enroll at NC State. Holmes, an electrical engineering major, lived in Watauga Hall and became the first African American student to play on a Wolfpack athletic team. Holmes became a member of the NC State tennis team in 1958; two years later, he served as the co-captain. Holmes graduated from NC State in May 1960, making him the first African American to receive an undergraduate degree from the university. Following graduation, Holmes attended Drexel Institute of Technology where he received a master's degree in electrical engineering (1966). He worked for RCA (1960-1966) and IBM (1969-1988) before retiring and moving back to Durham, North Carolina, with his wife Meredythe Johnson Holmes and their children.

START OF INTERVIEW

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Virginia Ferris: –a little bit about your childhood.

Irwin Holmes: Okay. Let's see, I was born in Reidsville, North Carolina on July 26, 1939. Reidsville was a small town of about fifteen thousand people, most of whom worked at the tobacco factory there, American Tobacco, and those who didn't worked at

support industries to the factory, and that included my family. But my family was special because my grandfather was like the right-hand man for the owner of the American Tobacco Factory so he did all kind of interesting things for him through the years, because my grandfather was a very talented man. Unfortunately he was the wrong color. He was black so he didn't get the benefits of all of his talents, but the president and owner of American Tobacco got many of the benefits of his talents.

VF: What was his name?

IH: His name was Charles McAden. He was a great chef, a great farmer. He was also—. They used him in the plant to actually tell them—. He would go out and tell them what tobacco to buy, which was critical in the cigarette industry. So they would have a white man, who was the tobacco buyer, who would go out in various places to buy the tobacco and then my grandfather would tell him what tobacco to buy, and of course my grandfather got nothing for doing that and the other guy was a very wealthy man because that was the critical job in that factory. That was just one of the many things that he did.

VF: So this was your mother's father?

IH: This was my mother's father.

VF: Can you tell me about your parents, your mother and father's names and where they grew up?

IH: I was lucky. I had two parents, both of whom, not only did they finish college but they were also very talented people. My dad grew up in the ghetto in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His mother died when he was about ten or twelve and so he raised basically he and his sister with his uncle's help. He was a football player, played football in high school, got a college scholarship to come to North Carolina Central to play

football; came here, finished college, and brought his sister and she finished college here too. But my dad didn't just finish college. My dad was the valedictorian of his class. He majored in chemistry and math. He was also an All American football player. He played [00:03:07]

what they call the end position in the old single-wing, and he played in the CIAA, the black conference. Back in those days there was a separate white and black All American team every year and he was on the black All American team. He was good enough that he could have played pro football but they weren't using black people in pro football in those days, so he ended up spending his life doing a lot of other things that never used all of his real talents.

He ended up working here in Durham at some point, running the recreation department for black people. Back in those days the recreation department in a city would have a white head of it and then they would separate and they would have a black department that did all the things for the black people – my dad was in charge of that – and then a white department that had a white man in charge and he did all the things for all the white people. They both reported to a white head, and that was always the way it was supposed to be.

So even when my dad took that job and turned Durham's black recreation to be one of the best in the country, all the kind of things he did, because he was a very talented, smart man and he did a lot of innovative things, but that didn't matter because when the white head of the whole department left they would always replace him with a [white] man, even if the guy was less talented than my dad. It got so bad that finally towards the end of my dad's career they had to bring in a white guy to work beside my

dad with the white department who was so ill equipped that they had to send him to school, during work days, so that he could get a master's degree, equivalent to what my dad had had for many years, in recreation, so that the next year when the head of the whole department for the city retired they could make the white guy head of the whole thing, even though he was totally ill equipped, especially compared to my dad who had many years' experience, who was recognized around the country, and was recruited by other cities who weren't so backward to do that job for them. But my mom didn't want to leave town so he never took one of those jobs. One, I remember, was the city of Phoenix, Arizona actually wanted my dad to come in and be the head of their whole department of the whole city, but my mom didn't want to live in Phoenix so he didn't take the job.

Fortunately that was good because they were too close to the end of their lives to start all

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over again.

But that's just an example of how backward America was, and particularly the South was, and how many great people with great talent [the United States did not use] because they were the wrong color, and it's hurt the United States to a large extent, particularly when you recognize that the most creative people – if you look around America – are the black people. If you look in the arts: who are the creative people? The black people. If you look at all kind of inventions that they have never given us credit for, they came from black people. I mean, so many things, and yet all of that creativity we turned our back on, and it's hurt America to a large extent, particularly when you recognize that the biggest advantage this country has over the rest of the world is its creativity. We pay people more than any place in the world, so we don't have the

cheapest labor. We don't have the largest market and yet we pay people more than anybody else in the world. How can we afford to do that, except that we use creativity to give us at least an equal footing even though we have to work with the disadvantage of the highest wages.

So creativity is critical. It brought us where we are and it's going to have to take us further, because if it hadn't been for World War II, which basically wiped out all of the factories in the rest of the world and gave us a fifty-year advantage over the rest of the world, we would not be so well off as a country today. Now the rest of the world is starting to catch up with us because that advantage has gone away and so if we can't have creativity to keep us ahead our wages are going to start coming down to be comparable to wages in China, in Vietnam, in other places, so this high standard of living that we have had is going to disappear compared to the rest of the world, unless we learn to use the creativity that we luckily have, unique in America, in a better way than we have in the past. That's enough of that.

VF: You saw that discrepancy at a young age. Can you tell me about your mother?

IH: My mother was as talented as my dad was. My mother, in some ways, had more talent. My mother got a lot of this stuff from my grandfather, her father. My mother majored in English but when I had to get help growing up in school in math, she helped me. My mother was as good a math student as my dad but her major was English, and [00:09:00] that was because, back in those days, women didn't major in math. They majored in good things like English.

VF: Did she attend NC Central as well?

IH: She finished NC Central and they both ended up with master's degrees from Central. She worked in the city of Durham in the school system. Just to show you, we moved back into Durham because my dad got a job with the recreation department, so we moved back here. My mom was looking for a job with the city of Durham in the school system. They said, "We don't have any jobs. The only job we got is we need somebody who can teach art in the school system because that's the only job we couldn't fill." So my mom said, "I need a job. I'll take that." So my mom took the job, having no previous experience in art, and was an outstanding art teacher, I mean things like—. See the dolls over there?

VF: Mm hmm.

IH: She made those dolls.

VF: Oh, wow.

IH: From scratch. My mom, with no previous background, just like her father, could do anything. My grandmother was a seamstress. She made clothes for a living. My mom could make clothes as good as my grandmother. My mom would typically, when my dad would have a party or something to go to, she would work all day in the school system, come home, fix dinner, sit down, and from scratch, without a pattern at all, make her dress to wear for the party that she was going to that night, from scratch. That's how good a seamstress she was. When I first started growing up she'd make my clothes, my pants for me, my coats for me, my suits for me. Men's clothes are impossible to make. She would just make them, no pattern or anything.

VF: This is with a full time job and a family.

IH: Yes. She worked until retirement age, and she raised a family, and she didn't have a housekeeper or anything, and we had a great family. She helped my dad in his job. She would frequently go out and teach arts and crafts in the city of Durham. She did a lot of that.

VF: Can you tell me about some of your memories of being a young man, a child and a teenager, in Durham at that time in America, as the civil rights movement was coming but it was a segregated society? What was it like in your family and your community at that time?

IH: That's a good question. It's a good question for this reason: I'll answer it that way, but the real great stuff about it is that we moved to Durham when I was in the fourth grade, and I stayed here through high school, finished high school in Durham. Durham was, during that period, one of the unique cities in America, and still is but not nearly as [00:12:06]

much as it was then. Durham was the best place to be in, if you were a black person. It had unique things that no other city had or still had. For instance, North Carolina Central was founded in 1909, one of the first black schools, particularly state-supported schools, in America. North Carolina Mutual was, for a long time, the largest black business in the world, particularly financial, right here. Mechanics and Farmers Bank was a very good bank that was put together by a bunch of black folks that sat in a room someplace and came up with it. There were black entrepreneurs all over the place. I grew up with the kids of these black entrepreneurs so I grew up seeing that black people can do anything they want to, and many people don't see that, because I knew all these kids. I knew their fathers and mothers and I knew what they did.

I was lucky because my dad ran the community center, among other things, right on Fayetteville Street, right in the middle of activity, and every day after school I would spend, till my mom got home from her job, my time in that community center. So I grew up seeing a lot of the activities that happened in our community there, and knowing many of the people that I'm talking about. The head of North Carolina Mutual, I knew that family, the children of that family. The Mechanics and Farmers Bank, Mr. Wheeler was the president, and I played tennis with him because I grew up as an athlete.

Remember, I said my dad was an athlete. My mom played high school basketball. She was an athlete too, not near as good as my dad but good. So I was stuck with being an athlete. I mean I had talents and I enjoyed it, so I played all the sports. I played basketball, tennis, ran track, played baseball and softball, and Durham had all of these programs in the recreation in Durham, unique to almost any place in the country. My dad put them all in place. Some of the time it would be because they had softball. All throughout the South blacks played softball. Blacks did not play baseball. I think part of the strategy was, see, if you wanted to go to the majors, they played baseball. They didn't play softball. There was no softball career path for anyone. So throughout the South there [00:15:02]

was no facility for blacks to play [baseball], for many years, and particularly at the high school or college level. So when I was growing up in Durham all we had in there was softball. So I went to my dad one day and said, "Dad, why don't we have baseball here?" He said, "I don't know," so the next year he started baseball, so we had our own baseball league in Durham.

VF: Did you play sports through your high school as well?

IH: Yep, I went to Hillside and I played basketball. I had started playing basketball already when I entered high school, so I went out for the basketball team. Unfortunately during those years we had—. That was right during the end of the Korean War. At the end of the Korean War they passed a law that said veterans who had missed high school, if they had not finished high school, could come back and for two years or so, even though they were too old, could play high school sports. That was about the time I was in high school, so we had some of the best athletes at Hillside ever when I was going through. So even though I was a pretty good basketball player we had all these athletes—. My junior year the seniors on that team went to college and every one of the first eight players on that team were starters in their college as a freshman. That's unheard of but that's how good [they were], so I didn't get to play basketball until my senior year, till all those guys got out of there.

But, tennis is a sport that was not a big sport among blacks in general. It was a pretty big sport in Durham. That's another side story, and I'll get to it. But I played tennis purely by accident. How did that accident happen? We had a very good recreation system in the summers in Durham. We had about eight different parts of the city's elementary schools that in the summer the city assigned its schoolteachers – Dad always hired schoolteachers – to run a recreation department, outdoors, next to the elementary school, and kids could go there for free every day and there was an adult, typically a teacher, there to plan things for the kids. I used to do that all during the summer.

I can remember this one day a bunch of friends of mine who played on that softball team at that playground had finished practicing and just went up to the community center, W. D. Hill, on Fayetteville Street. We were messing around and there

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were some kids playing tennis. Now, you say, where were they playing tennis, because they were not playing tennis on the city tennis courts? It turns out in those days Durham had a privately owned facility that supported country club kind of activities, including tennis. They owned four tennis courts and a country club. They actually had rooms [you could rent]; they had a big facility that they could have banquets or dinners or whatever in; and they had these tennis courts, right beside W. D. Hill. It doesn't exist anymore. If you go up there now, it burned—. No. I don't know whether it burned down or whether the city bought it and tore it down, because I wasn't in town at the time. But W. D. Hill burned down at some point and it had to be rebuilt, and when they rebuilt it they took the land that the Algonquin Club existed on. Between W. D. Hill and the John Scarborough family home there was this building, about the size of the Scarborough family home, a large facility, maybe three-thousand-square-foot building with the tennis courts behind it.

So we went up to this one day, and back there were some kids playing, maybe ten years old, and we were maybe a couple of years older but there were like five or six of them. We said, "Can we hit—?" We didn't know how to play tennis. "We'd like to hit some," and of course they said, "No, we're playing," so we took the racket from them and the balls and we started playing, threw them out of way, because there weren't any adults around at the time. You know, it wasn't really bad, but we did that. We started hitting the balls, and I said, "Hey, this is fun." So we left, gave the kids their ball and left – we didn't do it but a few minutes – and then I remembered my dad had given me, a couple of years earlier for Christmas, a tennis racket, a children's-size tennis racket, which at the time I said, "What is this for?" and put it in a closet and forgot about it. I

remembered: I think I have a tennis racket at home. So I went home – I was about nine at the time – I went back home, found this tennis racket, got a tennis ball – I don't know from where – and started taking the ball and the racket up to W. D. Hill and going outside, because it turns out they had an area outside where you could actually hit the ball against the wall of the building and practice. So I start hitting these balls against that wall and I really enjoyed it. I didn't make anything about it. Occasionally I got to go down on these courts, which were private and I wasn't supposed to be on there, and get to hit a few [00:21:03]

balls then, but just occasionally.

So I get to high school, tenth grade in high school. We had some great men as coaches there: Mr. Carl Easterling, who was at the time assistant football coach; Mr. Higgins – I can't think of his first name now – was head football coach. Easterling was assistant football coach and coach of the junior varsity basketball team, and he was also the tennis coach. So this particular year when I was in the tenth grade he was looking for some more tennis players, so he planned a tournament for anyone who wanted to play tennis to play at recess in this tournament. Well I played in the tournament and I won it, and the reason I won it was not because I was a good tennis player. I won it because, and I didn't tell you, but when I was about nine years old at W. D. Hill they had ping pong tables, which is table tennis, some people call it, and I had started playing table tennis and by the time I was about eleven I was the state champion in my age group at table tennis. Now to take table tennis and take it on a tennis court is a big step but it makes playing tennis easier and quicker. So when I started hitting those balls against the walls and

played in that tournament I had a distinct advantage over all the kids who were playing in the tournament, because remember the tennis teams were not out there playing in it.

So I went out and played and won, so the next year I went out for the tennis team. The coach invited me to go out for the team, so I went out and I played on the tennis team the next year. I was a junior now. Most of the kids who played on the team started when they were in the ninth grade so this was eleventh grade for me. We had a very good tennis team. We had a guy by the name of Richard Malloy, who was the number one player on the tennis team and eventually over the course of the year won the national high school championship. He was a very good, fundamentally sound tennis player with an average IQ, and when I say average IQ I'm talking about maybe somewhere between a hundred and ten and a hundred and fifteen. So he wasn't dumb; he [just had an] average IQ. My IQ was a little bit higher, maybe a hundred and twenty or a hundred and thirty, but the advantage I had was I grew up with a dad whose IQ was probably even higher, who loved sports, so we talked and spent our time in sports, so I had a mind sensitive to [00:24:08] sports.

So I went out for the tennis team and I could beat everybody on the team almost immediately, including Richard Malloy. I didn't have as good a tennis game. His strokes were much better, he was a much better player, but I could outthink him, and the thing that's neat about tennis, it's a very interesting sport because there are a lot of physical skills required but it requires a lot more mentality than most people give it, and you can outthink your way on the tennis court and beat people who really are better tennis players than you. So that's what I was doing out there, and I would beat him every day. But this

is interesting: our coach, Carl Easterling, would only let me play—. And you got ranked and played the other players on the other teams, because it was a team sport, based on the coach's positioning you, and that was supposed to be based on what your real skills were. So your number one player was your best player, all the way down to the number six player, and that was your six singles matches. He let me play three, even though I could beat the one and two player, but he knew, and I knew, even though we never discussed it, that they really had a little bit better game than me, but that wasn't what the rule said. I should have been the number one player. Here's why he didn't make me the number one player: they were seniors. They came from families that, if they didn't get a college scholarship playing tennis, they weren't going to get to college. I came from a family that I was going to go to college whether I got a scholarship or not, plus I was only a junior. So for that year they played the one and two positions. They both got college scholarships and they both went to college.

Nobody ever talks about that, about what teachers do and can do. But the interesting thing about it is, he never—. He should have, by all rights, sat down with me and told me what he was doing. We never had the conversation. But I always understood what he was doing, and he was very sensitive. For instance, every day I would play one of those guys, a practice match. When the match would start he would hand us a ball and then he would go upstairs in his office where he could overlook the court, but he would never be on the court when we were playing. After the match was over he would come back down and he would never ask who won. He was upstairs watching and he knew I was winning, but he was not going to ask who won because if he had I could sort of say, "Well how come I'm not playing ahead of him?" But since he didn't know,

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officially, he didn't have to deal with that. Really interesting man.

VF: Interesting strategy.

IH: Yeah, and he didn't-. I knew what he was doing, but I didn't mind because I knew why.

VF: You grew up in a really fascinatingly rich, thriving African American community in Durham. Did you have any interactions with the white population in Durham at that time, or were there any tensions that you were aware of as a young man?

IH: That's an interesting question. I have to think about how to answer that. I'm going to answer it, but let me jump to the end to give you a background. My senior year in high school-. By the way, I won the state championship my senior year in high school, single split, and doubles, and that made the papers. They always put us way down in the bottom of the paper somewhere but we got in the paper. Durham High, which was all white then, never had before but for some reason that year had produced two guys who won the doubles championship for the state in the white tournament. So somebody - and to this day I don't know who - scheduled, without anybody knowing, an exhibition match between me and my partner and this white doubles team, played at North Carolina Central in the presence of only black people, not another white person present, not any newspaper, not anything. I don't know if the white community ever knew about it.

So we played this exhibition, and it turns out they beat us, just barely, mostly because in doubles you're really only as good as your partner and my partner was sort of weak, but I had always been able to carry him. I was better than either of them, but it doesn't matter. Their worst guy was much better than my worst guy, so they played all

the balls to him, not to me, and they just barely beat us. But that's not important. The important thing out of that is – because it was just an exhibition anyway. It wasn't even a full match. We only played one set. We didn't play a full match, but I still was upset that I didn't beat them.

But anyway, at the end of the match we shook hands and had a conversation about each other's career during that year and winning the state championship in doubles. That was the first conversation in my life that I'd ever had with a person of a white background of a comparable age, of any sort, even to saying hello, and at that point I was [00:30:03]

a senior in high school. So just to give you background about how–. We lived in the same town under the same conditions, sometimes next door to each other. There were times when there was a black family and a white family right beside each other – I can tell you a little bit about how that happens – and yet we were like a wall was between us.

Now, we did have communication. Here's how we would have communication. If you went downtown Durham, and Durham was a bustling retail center, not like now, because we didn't have malls and things so if you wanted to buy anything of substance, other than food, you had to go downtown Durham to get it. When you went downtown Durham there were no black businesses downtown, so we had to buy all these things from white businesses. Those white businesses were set up to handle both communities, black and white. The difference is they had priority. So if I walked into the store and I wanted to buy an ice cream cone, and they had ice cream cones for sale, and I walked in and walked up there and they were waiting on somebody ahead of me, and I stand and I waited, and before they finished waiting on that person a white person comes in. Now

I've been standing there for ten minutes. The white person just walked in. The clerk would finish with the first white person and would immediately turn to the white person who just walked in and they got served, and if another one walked in right behind them, they got served, and if another one walked in, they got served. I might be standing there a half hour, and that was standard and accepted by both races and you didn't have any other choice, other than starting a fight, and you weren't going to do that because that would just be the excuse they would need to take it out on us.

So that's the background of what we grew up in. That same store had water fountains, like any store. There were two water fountains. One had a sign over it that said "White" and the other one had a sign over it that said "Colored," not "Black," not "Negro," "Colored." You drank out of the colored water fountain. If you drank out of the white water fountain you would stand to be arrested, and you certainly were scolded and run out of the store if they were nice and didn't arrest you. If you went to the train station and you were going to catch a train, in the train station there was a white waiting room and a black waiting room. Each one of them had their own separate bathrooms. If you wanted to buy a ticket you went up to the black ticket window in the black section, same thing about bus stations or anything else.

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So we were two races living in the same space, totally separate from each other, and that was throughout the whole South and Durham was no different. Even though Durham had a lot of positive things, for instance we had a mayor who was very forward-thinking who did the best he could to make things good. If something broke out between the races in Durham we had several black and white leaders who would sit down and

work it out and make it work okay. So Durham basically, the race relationship was good compared to the rest of the South, but not good compared to what it should be.

VF: So during that time growing up and kind of looking at your future, can you tell me about the decision-making process of how you chose to go to North Carolina State University? You said that your parents—. You knew that you were expecting to go to college, you were going to go to college; when you were in high school you knew this. But where did you apply and why did you choose NC State at that time?

IH: Well, let me give you a little history. That was 1956. In 1955, September of '55, three black students from Hillside, my high school here in Durham, enrolled at the University of North Carolina, a year ahead of me, before I went to school. The reason they got there and went there is because the NAACP came and sponsored them to take the North Carolina University system to court, and there was a court decision that gave any person of any race the right to go to university systems, and they took advantage of that and went to UNC that year. They were Leroy and Ralph Frasier and a kid by the name of John Brandon. Leroy and Ralph Frasier went on to have great lives. I still know them. Ralph just got honored at something he did recently. Oh, I think he—. No, it was his son – who's working here in Durham at the sports club – that just got honored. John Brandon disappeared. None of them finished the University of North Carolina. Ralph and Leroy I think went to North Carolina Central. I don't know what happened to John. They were average students. No, I can't say that. They were maybe a little above average but they were not student-students, so even though they probably had more talent than they produced they just weren't student-students. So both of them—. At least I know Ralph
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finished North Carolina Central, I think Leroy also, but Ralph went on with a very fine career in banking.

So they were good guys, but for some reason—. But, understand, when they went to the University of North Carolina they were one of the first two or three in the whole South to even enter a university that was segregated before, so I suspect that they didn't get as good a support system around them, and it's very subtle how you can make the support system really bad without making it bad, at least not seem bad.

Now they're in school in '55. That's my senior year in high school, okay? So I could have, if I wanted to, just enrolled like anybody else, any white person, at the University of North Carolina or North Carolina State or any of the state schools at that point, just enroll. And that's what I did: I just enrolled. Now, why did I enroll? I had always said I was going to be a doctor, an M.D. My senior year in high school I had this math teacher – who really liked me because I was a really good math student and really loved math – by the name of Thompson, and I can't think of her first name now.

Anyway, she started, on her own, an engineering club, but nobody knew anything about engineering so how was she going to get members? She went out and got all of the kids who were really good in math and said, "You're going to come to my engineering club," so I ended up in her engineering club. What the club did was it studied—. Through the course of the year we got together and studied: What was an engineer? What did they do? I enjoyed that, to the point where I said, engineers look like they do almost as good as doctors, at least economically, and doctors have to go to school seven or eight years and then go be interns and all that, and engineers can just go four years and start making a good living. So I said, I think I'm going to do that, because my mother had a daughter

right behind me in school so if I had gone to med school she would have ended up being in college when I was in med school, and back in those days that would have been a real struggle for the family. So I said, no; I'll just go to engineering school.

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So that got me to engineering school. Then I said: where can I go to engineering school? Well at the time in North Carolina, if you wanted to stay in North Carolina, A&T or North Carolina Central were the two choices. My dad was a football player at North Carolina Central and later coached at North Carolina Central. Every football college has some team that's their hated enemy. A&T and North Carolina Central were hated enemies. My dad said, when he finished college, the one that he was proud of in the four years he was in college was they'd never lost a game to North Carolina A&T, and that's the family I grew up in, okay? So, I was not going to A&T under any circumstances, so if I wanted to stay in North Carolina it was North Carolina State, but North Carolina State was an all-white school.

I enjoyed my high school. Hillside was a great-. I did not want to leave high school. I had a great time. I had lots of friends. So my tendency is, I was going to go to a black school, so I applied at Howard, I applied at Tennessee A&I, and I applied at Texas - I'm not sure if it was Texas Southern or Southern University, the black school in Texas that had engineering. I'm not sure which one. I heard back from all of them, got accepted to all of them, including NC State, but when I started looking at costs to go to school - and I decided I wanted to go to Howard because I didn't want to go further South. So going to Howard meant it would cost me fifteen hundred dollars a year, room and board. I could go to North Carolina State at the time for between five and six hundred a year,

room and board and tuition. So I applied at Howard for a scholarship, which would have made the cost of the two schools about comparable, and Howard at the time had a national exam that you could take, looking for outstanding students, and if you scored high enough they would automatically give you a scholarship. I took the exam. They sent me a letter back and said, "Congratulations, you scored in the top one percent, but we ran out of scholarship money so you didn't get it." Now I don't know who got it ahead of me but somebody did. So I said, okay. It doesn't look like Howard's a good fit.

Now in the meantime, when I was accepted at North Carolina State, things

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happening across the races were big deals in those days. When I got my acceptance – and to this day I'm not sure who found out – but it hit the newspapers, all over the state of North Carolina: "Irwin Holmes is accepted at North Carolina State." Well, all the people that I knew in my family were just calling and congratulating me: "I hear you're going to North Carolina State," and I hadn't decided to go to North Carolina State. I just got accepted, like I did at four other places. It was such a big deal, and Howard was hesitating, then I said, oh well; I guess I may as well go to NC State. At least it's close by. But I was not particularly excited about that because I didn't know what was going to happen when I got over there.

VF: Did you feel any kind of hesitation or anxiety about being one of the very first—?

IH: About being a black person in a white environment where the white people didn't particularly want you to be there? Absolutely. I also felt concern because the white community spent a lot of time and energy justifying how they give us a hard time by

convincing everyone that we were inferior, less capable, and not human beings but animals. Even though my parents spent a good job and a good time showing and justifying why that was a bunch of hogwash, you always, in the back of your mind said: are your parents really telling you the truth, or can you really compete over there with these other guys? That was in the back of your mind because one of the things as a child is throwing away all the stuff your parents tell you that isn't quite true and figuring out what is true, and that was in that bunch of stuff. I was sixteen when I went to NC State, so I was kind of young, so that was in there too: can I really compete? Now understand, I finished at Hillside third honor student, and Hillside, as I found out later, was a – then, at least – very outstanding school that produced some outstanding people, so finishing third honor student there showed, looking back on it, that I could have gone to any school in America and done well. But I didn't know that at age sixteen, so I'm wondering about that.

Now then what threw the monkey wrench into the whole thing was somewhere [00:45:00] around the end of July I get this letter from Howard that says, "Oops! We found the money. You can go to Howard. We've got scholarship money for you." So now, if I want to, I can go to Howard, but by that time the feedback from so many people that I should be at NC State was overwhelming and I didn't do it, and I lucked out. Not that Howard would not have been a great choice; Howard is a very good school, was then too, maybe even better than it is now, but what I did not understand then that I do understand now is: segregation had a lot of negative for black folks but it had a lot of positives, and one of the positives is it forced most of our talented people to go and work in the black

community, so our colleges were full of talented people who couldn't get a job anywhere else, who today can get a job anywhere else. So our faculty at our colleges – and that's down to the high school level – were fabulous. Now, if you're a really good professor at Howard, Harvard may call you and give you a job, but they didn't then. So those schools were really good then and the education there was good, and I found that out because later I ended up managing some of the graduates from Howard and put them beside the graduates from NC State and they competed very well. So I found out later how good they were but I didn't know that at the time, so I ended up going to North Carolina State.

Now, that worked out good for me because, one, North Carolina State is a great school. It's clearly one of the five best engineering schools in America, without question, maybe one of the two best but at least one of the top five. But at the time almost all of its student body was from North Carolina, so I ended up going to school with all these redneck country farm kids, most of which had never been to college – the families hadn't been – but it turns out there's a plus to that. See, when you grew up on a farm in those days, there usually was, right next door to you, a black farm community. They may not own the farm. They may be – what is it? – tenant–.

VF: Sharecroppers?

IH: Right, sharecroppers, but they were right close by, and back out there nobody worried so much about race and stuff. So those kids grew up knowing each other so those
[00:48:01]

kids coming to State, they were used to mixing more than I was in Durham. So you didn't get a lot of the negative feedback because you were expecting, which was interesting. Now, did I answer that question? I don't even know what the question was.

VF: [Laughs] Well we're kind of getting into your time at NC State now.

IH: All right, let's go to NC State.

VF: Could you just kind of walk me through that first day? What do you remember of your first day coming to campus?

IH: It's funny you should ask that. That's an interesting—. I can remember that day quite well. In those days, I don't know if they still do it, they would take the top incoming freshmen and invite them to school a week ahead of the rest of the freshman class. They invited me and ninety-nine white guys to that first week to get you orientated before school really started. That first day I went down there, and remember I told you about the other thing. Now I'm in here in this thing with ninety-nine white guys, peers, and just me, and I have never been in this before in my life. I go up there and I'm sitting there, and I was always conservative in those days, so I said: I'll just sit back and let them make the move. I'm not messing with this. See what happens. Because I wouldn't have been surprised if anything happened, including somebody walking up to me and slugging me, or walking up to me and saying, "What are you doing here, nigger?" I wouldn't have been surprised if any of that happened.

None of that happened, but nobody came, except for one kid who comes up to me, introduces himself, says, "I'm glad you're here," and starts talking to me, and talks to me for about two hours. I don't know what was going on otherwise, but we talked for a couple hours. Then we got separated. For the rest of the week I never saw him again. He never said another word to me for the rest of the week. I don't know what happened after he left me. Now the interesting thing is, you might say: well, you were there; why didn't you go speak to him? I couldn't find him. We were in the same room, there were ninety-

nine white guys out there, and somewhere in that ninety-nine was the kid who had talked to me and I looked for him around and I could not find him. They all looked alike.

VF: How so? What did they all look like to you?

IH: I mean they all looked alike. I mean, think about it. I have never had before to look at a white person and say: he has a big nose, and he has a little nose, or he has red [00:51:06]

hair, or he has black hair. I never had that, so there may be two guys standing beside each other and one has light hair and one has dark hair: they look alike to me, because I never had any reason to separate them out. I didn't even remember what the guy looked like, [Laughs] so I couldn't find him in that crowd. I went to look for him because I'm sitting there by myself. Nobody else in there really did the same thing. So I was going over to talk to him, but I couldn't find him. Now the thing that's interesting is, frequently white people used to say that in those days about black people: they all look alike. Now I know why they said that, because it happened to me in reverse. They all looked alike.

VF: Now there were three other young African American men that were entering NC State that year as well with you. When did you meet them, that fall freshman year?

IH: No. Yes and no. My name's Irwin Holmes and there was another one by the name of Walter Holmes. Walter Holmes and I went to high school together at Hillside. I was third honor student, he was fourth honor student. He was a good athlete too but he never liked athletics in high school so he didn't play as a formal athlete in high school. He also was an excellent musician so he got involved in music in high school. But we both went to State together, so we were roommates at State. The other two guys were a

guy by the name of Ed Carlson and – what am I doing? [Pause] Gosh. My mind's gone blank. I'll think of it. But anyway, they were both from Ligon High in Raleigh.

[00:53:08 Break in recording]

Walter Holmes was in aeronautical engineering, which at State at the time was a part of mechanical engineering. That's what he started in, went there for two years; did okay. He had like almost a B average, at least. Walter was all right but he went to State because his dad talked him into going to State to study engineering. He didn't go there because he chose it, and he and his dad always had that kind of relationship. So after two years he said, the heck with it, and transferred to UNC into business administration;

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stayed there a semester, decided he didn't like that. Business administration – and he played music on the side. He was a very good musician. He was in a dance band and he spent his time, maybe too much, playing in the dance band and not going to school, but he was still a good student. He was really bright. Transferred to Howard University, which is the school I was talking about, in electrical engineering. He went to Howard for a semester and said: "This is crazy. I could've taken electrical engineering at State, and it's a better school than Howard." He quit and came back to NC State and then graduated – of course now he's two years behind – later at North Carolina State in electrical engineering.

Ed Carlson, of the three of us, was the least talented student but had stick-to-itiveness like you wouldn't believe. You needed at least a 2.0 to graduate. He probably had a 2.0056. I mean he just struggled through but he refused to not get there. He finished at State in electrical engineering in about six years, but he was more determined than

anybody, and it turned out he ended up working at IBM and he was a good engineer. He was okay. It shows you, you know. What's the guy's name I can't think of? I'll think of it.

VF: So were the four of you kind of a support network for each other? Did you see each other much, or how was that?

IH: No. It was two and two. The two guys from Ligon looked out for each other and ran together. They would drive to school together. Walter and I were roommates at State. Let me just back up and let's get to getting to State.

So we both decided to go. We talked about it together, we both were accepted, and we both decided we'd go and we said we'd room together, and then we said: where are we going to room? We decided – with my dad's help. He said, "You don't know how those folks are going to take you." We found that there was a family, whose son was on the faculty at North Carolina Central, who had a home on Oberlin Road in Raleigh that was halfway between State and the highway, and they had two rooms to rent. We rented [00:57:05]

rooms-to-rent from that lady on Oberlin Road. Mrs. Turner was her name. Her son's name was John Turner, and I think she was Mary Turner. Anyway, we rented rooms that first year there. You could walk to the campus from there and he and I stayed there for one year. The second year we were on campus, because by that time we believed they weren't going to shoot us or lynch us so we felt comfortable going on campus, but we just stayed off campus because we didn't feel comfortable by and large, no that we wanted to be off campus.

So he and I roomed together, but we were in different fields so we didn't have a single class together in the two years we were there together. In fact I never had a class with a black student in the four years I was there, which was an interesting experience. The real shocker is, until my second semester senior year I never spent one minute in a study group. You know what a study group is? I didn't even know they existed. All my classmates were in study groups and not only did they not invite me into a study group they didn't even tell me they existed. My senior year, by that time it was clear that I was going to graduate – to my fellow students – and that I didn't really need a study group. They invited me into a study group. I said, "What's that? Sure, I'll come." I was never so shocked in my life. You went into a study group the night before the exam; they would walk in the room, sit down at a table, and lay out their professor's last ten exams he's ever given and say, "This is how he tested the people on this chapter for the last ten years," and you know there's no way that he's going to test you in any way that there isn't something on those old tests that's going to tell you where to study. It changed your grade point average by at least one grade point. If you were a C student, that makes you a B student. If you were a B student, it makes you an A student. I was just about a B student; that semester, in those classes, almost straight As.

VF: So this entire time, these four years, you were kind of–

IH: On my own.

VF: –on an island. Did it feel lonely to be doing it on your own that way?

IH: Well, no, because that's how you grow up as a child. In high school you're on

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your own, except for your parents. We didn't have study groups in high school so I didn't feel like I was on an island until I found out—. I didn't know everybody else was in study groups. I thought everybody was doing what I was doing.

VF: So who were your friends? What would you do in your free time and who would be the people that you would call on?

IH: Well at State they had one dorm, Watauga Hall, and in that dorm they had a certain set of rooms that they set aside for black students, so they would cram all of us in those rooms. You roomed with somebody; they handpicked you because they were black and you were black, and they put you in that room.

VF: And there weren't very many of you.

IH: I think when I was there we never had more than two rooms, but we had as many as six in those two rooms, even though there were supposed to be only two in there. But one year we had about six that were coming from Ligon and about six that were in dorms, I believe. There were at least ten or fourteen of us for one year. That was the year we had two females from Ligon. They made it through three semesters, I believe. They shouldn't have been there. They were smart people but they were not engineering minds so they didn't do—. In fact one of them made an A in English. The only student I ever knew at NC State that made an A in English was this black female, but she wasn't in the engineering school but she was obviously a smart lady.

VF: Were there any professors or classes that really had a big impact on you when you were at NC State?

IH: Yeah, sure was. I guess the first one was my freshman year. We had a course called Industrial Arts, which was a drawing course. We didn't have drawing in high

school, I guess because nobody was going to engineering school. Hillside didn't have drawing, but everybody else in that class had it in high school. The professor was a graduate student who was teaching the class, so he was not much of a teacher but it didn't matter because he didn't have to teach the guys because they had already had the course before, except for me. I really struggled in that course, and you know you have lots of homework in Industrial Arts. I remember the first—. I wish I'd had somebody else, so that's mostly me.

My freshman year I had a female math teacher, whose name I do not recall

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because I only knew her for one week. At the end of the second week they replaced her, at her request, with a male math teacher because she did not want to teach a class with me in it. They did not announce that. They were real cool about it. We just showed up for class and there was a new teacher up there. They never announced that she requested not to be teaching me.

VF: When did you find out that was the reason?

IH: The question is: how did I find out? How did I find out, because I should not have found out. There was no plan for me to find out. God decided I was going to find that out. He planned it. Watauga Hall is right next to the YMCA. Frequently I would be going somewhere and I would cut through the YMCA to go wherever I was going. One day I cut through the YMCA and as I'm passing this hallway there's a bunch of students in there talking about something, and they were talking about race in general. One of the guys says, "Well, you know, we've got black students on campus." There were only a few of us, so a lot of students didn't even know we were on there. He said, "You know,

we got black students on campus, and in fact we had this one student who was taking math as a freshman and one of the teachers asked to be changed, that she didn't want to teach him," as I'm passing the hall. That's how I found that out. Now how's that? You know God just sent me that message. There's no way that I would be passing that door at that instance when that person said that. God is a strange guy.

VF: What went through your head when you heard that?

IH: Well, you got to remember—. Today it would have been probably much different than then. Remember, I grew up in a world where half of your mother's training was teaching you how to survive and not get lynched, so that was just another event that, it turned out, didn't work out so bad after all because the other professor who went in there taught the class fine. I think I made a B in that class, or maybe an A. I don't know what I made, at least a B, so it didn't matter. I'm glad she told them. I'd rather that than have her teaching me and not wanting to be there.

VF: It seems like there's a lot of kind of quiet, hidden racism that, instead of in-your-face, someone would quietly say, "I don't want to teach this student."

IH: Yes.

[01:06:00]

VF: Did you feel that was the case or did you ever have any more visible signs of discrimination at State?

IH: You're asking good questions, and generally at State that's what it was. When there was racism it was quiet and subtle. There were some examples. I'll try to see if I can get though most of them. Not a lot. The most glaring, overt one was, my junior year I'm taking a course called Contemporary Civilization. This is documented so somebody

could go out and check and find out who this professor was, but I don't even remember the guy's name. First semester, Contemporary Civilization, junior year, a course you need to have to graduate. The way the guy taught the course was he would assign reading material and, to make sure you read it, every day you walked in the class there was a pop quiz. Then we'd have a midterm exam and a final. That's how he taught his class. And then he gave you some credit, I guess, for what you said in the class, but not much.

So he gave these pop quizzes. Well you know you're going to get them so, I'm a good student; I'm going to study. So I'm making mostly B's on these pop quizzes. I could have been making A's because I knew the material that he was asking the questions about, but I was making mostly B's. So we get to this one chapter on race. Now here's a course in Contemporary Civilization and you got one chapter on race. That's how that book was written, and he was going by the book. So this week we're discussing race and it was perfect because I'm there, the students are there, they're discussing, and one of my classmates stands up and he says, "Well, you know, Irwin is going to be the first black graduate to ever finish North Carolina State," and the professor says, "If he doesn't improve his grades he's not going to finish NC State." Now, I just told you what I was making on the tests. The student stands back up and says, "Well, sir, if Irwin doesn't graduate, we will all be shocked because he is one of the best students in our class." [Pause] And we went on to something else.

VF: So what happened? Did the professor eat his words? [Laughs]

IH: See, you ask good questions, because that's the point of the whole story, is

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what happened from that, because it could have been a story that ended right there. Here's what happened. So, we continued to have pop quizzes, we had the midterm and the final, and I ended up making mostly B's or—. No. That's not true. All of a sudden I start making A's on the pop quizzes. The ones that I was making B's on before, that I said I could have been making A's? I'm now making A's on the pop quizzes. I make A's right through the rest of the course. Now the rule was, when you had all these pop quizzes, the worst pop quiz you could ask him to throw out in averaging your grade. Now I only got A's and B's on the pop quizzes, so I've still got one I can throw out, right, and it's the last pop quiz at the end of the semester. So I'm going to see how crazy this school is. On the pop quiz I answer every question wrong as can possibly be, every question, and turned in my paper. What do you think I got back on that pop quiz?

VF: An A.

IH: An A. [Laughs] That's the story on that professor, an A.

VF: You gather he just wasn't even looking at them?

IH: He wasn't looking at them. He says: I don't want to be found as a racist, so I don't have to deal with this. The thing that's interesting about it is this professor, in his spare time, also taught at Shaw University, a black school, as an adjunct professor at Shaw. So, I mean, he's got his problems but he didn't mind going and teaching them.

VF: Can you tell me how you got into the tennis team, why you chose to join the tennis team and what that experience was like with your teammates and your coach?

IH: When I came to State, remember I was North Carolina high school state champion, and I also played in the summers in the junior program and I was number three, ranked nationally, in the juniors. So I came, thinking that, no matter how good that

tennis team was, some kind of way I can make it, and I was an athlete and I liked sports, so I went out for the team. Plus, NC State did not give tennis scholarships, so they were not going to have a team full of great athletes. We were all walk-ons. So, I went out for [01:12:03]

the team my freshman year, and there weren't any real good walk-ons out there that year, so I was the number one player on the freshman team.

We had a coach by the name of John Kenfield. I'm telling this story because some kind of way all these years I never seem to find the time to talk about John Kenfield. Of all the people that I had a close relationship with at State, he was the one that I felt most comfortable with that he didn't have a racist bone in his body. He didn't have to fake it or anything. He was just pure gold. I was the best freshman player on his team; he made me number one. The first match we had, we played a high school, because in those days freshmen could not play varsity so freshman teams played other college freshman teams in general and sometimes if there was an outstanding high school team you would play the high school team. We played I think it was Kinston High. They had an outstanding high school team that year.

The coach shows up to play us and, the poor soul, he did not know that I was playing on NC State's tennis team, and he does not know what to do because he's brought his little all-white team up there to play this all-white freshman team and there's a black man sitting there playing number one. So he went up to the coach and he said, "Look, I don't know what to do here, but my position is I'm not letting no player play him, because I haven't gotten permission before I came up here that I can do that." So Coach Kenfield said, "Well, I guess you're going to be forfeiting those matches then,

because if you can't play him he wins by default." So he says, "Okay," and they forfeited the matches. So, one of the top high school players in the country, I have a record of winning a match against him. [Laughs]

But then beyond that, through the whole time, because coaches, like I told you about my high school coach, you can do all kind of subtle things and do whatever you want to. He never did a single subtle thing, Kenfield, to play any kind of games with me. Whatever I won, I won, and when I lost, I lost, and if he found out somebody was playing games with me, another teammate, he fixed it. And there were games played, because some of the kids—. I mean it's a competitive situation and no white tennis player wanted [01:15:02]

to lose to a black tennis player because they'd been told that they can beat any black tennis player, and a lot of them lost to me, so they did not like it. I'm talking about teammates now because it's team tennis, so where you play on the team depends on how you do in practice. You have a ladder and you compete on the ladder and it's very competitive. So there were some periods where some of my teammates would get out there and obviously pull against me for a teammate to beat me in a practice match, which is totally taboo. You don't do that. Everybody's for everybody. But that happened on several occasions. The coach didn't see it so he didn't fix it but it happened on several occasions.

But in general I had a good time and I had good relationships. Two things to point out: We went to play the University of North Carolina one year, and coming back from the match we stopped at a restaurant on the Chapel Hill-Durham Highway to eat lunch –

or to eat dinner, I guess, because it was after the match. The people wouldn't serve us, told the coach that they wouldn't serve us until I got out of there.

[01:16:32 Break in recording]

VF: You were telling us about after a game in Chapel Hill.

IH: Okay, so the coach took me aside and said, "They don't want to serve you guys," even though they had taken all of our orders, had cooked the food, and then at this point they say they're not going to serve me, "But they'll serve the rest of the team as long as you leave, if that's okay." The coach turned to the players and told them the same thing, and I said, fine, because the meal money was like two or three dollars. I could eat two days on two or three dollar meal money. I said, "Give me my meal money. You guys go ahead and eat." So the coach told the players, the rest of the team, what I had said and what the owner had said, and they said, "If he's not willing to serve Irwin, we're not eating here." They all got in the cars and we left and left the food sitting on the table, and that was a team full of redneck North Carolina boys that do the unexpected. Like I said before, you never know who somebody is until you really see them with some pressure on them and know how special they can be.

[01:18:00]

VF: Your teammates elected you co-captain.

IH: That's an interesting story. Yes, they did. Traditionally the captain of the team is a senior, and I think unfairly. I thought so then. I mean typically in most sports the captain of the team is one of your better or best players and one of your more mature players, particularly like a junior or senior but not specifically a senior. But the tennis team had had a tradition that the captain's a senior. Now that year it turns out I was the

only senior on the team, so now we're sitting there, and the coach is calling a meeting so we can elect the captain, and it's done there. It's not done separately. I mean you're just sitting right there, and he could see that they were hesitant. If I had been one of them I would have been hesitant because we had a couple of guys on the team who were seniors [*sic*] and better players than me, really good players, and by all rights they should have been captain of the team, but that's not the tradition of the team, and I think the coach sort of sensed that. He said, "Look, we traditionally elect a senior. This year I think we should elect Irwin and the best player on the team as co-captains," and they said, "We all agree with that," and that's how it happened.

I don't know what would have happened if he hadn't stepped up, but that was typical of that man, that he would do that, and the heck with the consequences, because obviously the players went back and told others so other people knew about what he did. But that wasn't important to him. The other thing he did, back in those days the state of South Carolina had a rule that a white athlete would not participate in sports, in the state of South Carolina, against a black athlete. [Pause] Do you understand what I said?

VF: Mm hmm.

IH: Now let me tell you, you don't quite get it, unless you've heard me say this before. If that same white athlete played on a team at Clemson or South Carolina – because those were the only [South Carolina] schools in the ACC that I'm talking about in those days – if Clemson had got a bowl bid to play Pittsburgh in the Orange Bowl in New Orleans, Pittsburgh would have at least five or six black players on the team. They would accept that bid and they would go there and they would play in that Orange Bowl, in New Orleans, against Pittsburgh. But if it's the regular season and South Carolina, by

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some chance, has scheduled a game with Pittsburgh in South Carolina, the game wouldn't happen because there's black players on the team. But if Pittsburgh had scheduled a game against South Carolina in Pittsburgh, that would happen.

VF: So it's only in the state borders?

IH: And basically it was – because they would have never scheduled a game in Pittsburgh. That's the first thing. The other thing is, what they're saying is: we don't want to play against blacks, unless it's going to hurt our pocketbook, because if you go to a bowl game they give three or four or five hundred thousand dollars to the team, so we can stand it in that case. Too often, if you look at race as it's practiced in America, it's practiced under conditions, and if you can affect that person's pocket big enough, how they practice it changes. That was just an example of it. That's a real example that you can't argue. That's for real.

So, I'm on the tennis team; so therefore, given those conditions, that means that every other year, traditionally, NC State's tennis team went to South Carolina and played South Carolina and Clemson in South Carolina. Historically that's what they did, but they didn't do that the years that I was on the tennis team. So the coach said, "Well, if you can't do that, and you want to play us, then what you can do is you can come to Raleigh the years we should be going down there. So we will have the home advantage but you will have to come up there, because if you play us, you're going to play us with Irwin on the team." So for those years South Carolina and Clemson came to Raleigh to play. Now, as a player, one of the fun things you enjoy is you get to travel, right? So they denied my travel, my chance to go to South Carolina. I've never been on the campus of South

Carolina or Clemson because of that rule, so that pissed me off. As a result of that, through my whole college career I never lost a match to a player from South Carolina or Clemson. I would be so pumped up that I would play so good that they couldn't beat me, even if they should.

VF: Big motivator.

IH: Well, I don't-. I look at it now and I say, oh, it was a motivator, but was it that big a motivator? Well, I guess it was then. I'm not sure if it would be that big a motivator now.

[01:24:01]

VF: So your coach was a big source of support, it sounds like, during your time at State. Did you find any other support or was it really-?

IH: No, there was a lot of subtle support, just little pieces. The best other support I got was from a professor by the name of William Stevenson, who was an electrical engineering professor in the School of Engineering, and he was also one of the favorite professors across the whole department, not just mine. In fact, my junior year the students of the electrical engineering department voted him Professor of the Year, and that's traditional - I mean that's typical. It's typical that the real class acts when it comes to relationships - and I'm not just talking about at NC State, I'm talking about in America - those are the people who handle race relationships best, to the point where in my career I have discovered that if America would, every time they found somebody who was handling race poorly, they would fire them, they would be better off because they've just fired somebody that handles people's relationships, black or white, poorly. So, they would be doing something that would be the right thing to do but it would also help them

businesswise and professionally to do that, as a byproduct. So it's almost like God says: If you do the right thing, you win, even though you don't think you should. Just do the right thing, even when you don't think you're going to win. In the end, you win. If people could learn just that one little thing the world would be better.

VF: How did you see Professor Stevenson doing that, in your case?

IH: Professor Stevenson came up to me-. Professor Stevenson, every summer, went to Philadelphia and worked at Radio Corporation [RCA] as a summer job. My senior year, when it came time to interview on campus, Radio Corporation came on campus, and when they came on campus he called me in and said, "Today Radio Corporation's on

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campus. You should go in and interview." I went into the interview, I sat down, and the man said, "Irwin Holmes, good to meet you," and he did not interview me, he just talked to me in general for about a half hour, and then he said, "We're giving you a job offer," so Professor Stevenson obviously had told the guy to give me a job offer. So besides being a good professor personally to me in the classroom – and I mean some of the things like subtle kind of things – he also did that, and as a result of that I went to work there, had a great time there, and I met my wife, who is from Camden, New Jersey.

VF: Okay.

IH: So if Stevenson hadn't sent me there, I would not have the same wife. You never know, do you? And it turns out going there got me into computer design development, which when I finished college I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. But, having taken that job, the first job I did was in computer development, and the second,

and the third, and now it's been a career in computer development, which is a whole different discussion in itself because when I went into computers they were—. The computer that's in this – this isn't a watch, but in the little hand in a watch – that computer has more power than the first computer I worked on, which was about the size of a football field, and I worked on computers all the way through that whole period.

VF: You started that the summer after you graduated from college, at RCA?

IH: Yes.

VF: Can you tell me a little bit about just your graduation day, what you remember about that day? Was your whole family there?

IH: My whole family was there, including my dad's sister, his uncle that raised him, my mom and dad, my sister. I guess that's all that was there. My grandparents were dead by then. [Pause] It wasn't one of the big moments in my life. High school graduation was bigger. Both of them were significant educationally but I felt life changing more in high school than in college, so it wasn't nearly as significant.

[01:30:03]

VF: Were you looking forward to moving up to New Jersey? Did you have any expectations of what life would be like?

IH: Well, I was getting out of the South, so I was looking forward to that. That was an interesting experience. I spent the next ten years finding out that the South is not as different from the rest of America as I thought it was.

VF: How did you find that?

IH: Simplest thing: my wife is from Camden, New Jersey. Camden is a town of about eighty thousand people. At the time Durham was a town of about eighty thousand

people: amazingly close in size, quite different but in a lot of ways very similar. My wife lived in a very upper class black neighborhood. There was not-. Let me see. Was there a black-? There was not a white family within a half mile of her house. There were neighborhoods within a mile of her house that there was not a black person in. They were totally white. The high school she went to was half a block away and that was totally integrated. Her graduating class from high school, of the top twenty that graduated probably fifteen were white or Jewish.

So integration was there, but so was segregation. Within three or four miles from where she lived there was a town of about fifty or sixty thousand people that had no blacks in it, none. She didn't even know this because her parents protected her from all that stuff. I had to introduce her to all the segregation that she lived around. She went to an integrated school, and my wife has always had more interests and experiences that were more white than black. I mean she was a ballerina. She played the piano. In her high school, mostly white, she won the speaking contest as a senior.

VF: Can I ask, when you were in college and in the years after when the civil rights movement was really ramping up, how aware were you of that or how involved were you, personally, in seeing the sit-ins at the lunch counter in Greensboro, or James [01:33:06]

Meredith, two years after you graduated, integrating Ole Miss? Did you feel a connection to what was happening, or how did you kind of understand all of that?

IH: That's an interesting statement. Good question. I finished high school in '56. That was almost the front end of the movement. Up until that point almost all of the movement was in the courts, the NAACP fighting in the court system. It wasn't until '56,

'57 that it became clear that any real victories we were going to get are going to have to be outside of the courts, so that's when we started doing things like getting into the streets and marching and all that stuff. At the beginning of that – and a lot of it happened right here in Durham. There were high school classmates of mine that were involved in a lot of it. At the beginning of that I was at State going to school, and from my point of my view at that time I wasn't sure which one was more important, what I was doing at State or what they were doing in the streets.

Now, looking back on it, I'm still not sure which was more important but what I am sure was they both were important, and I wasn't sure at the time whether I could have–. Getting into the streets would have affected my ability to get through State. So I thought about it, I mean some of the times when they were going to do this stuff I thought about it, and I said, well, wait a minute. There are people here who would just as soon have me not at State, and I'm not sure, if I went out and did some of this stuff, that it wouldn't get me in trouble in getting through school, and I thought it was a very important thing to get through school. So, even when I felt an urge to do something, I said, no; that is not the right thing. But personally I think that was the choice I would have rather made, because I'm not sure that I could have been as nonviolent as some of the people had to be in some of the situations they were in, and that was important, that you are nonviolent. I think that made a big difference, being nonviolent.

So I think I was in the right place, and I think I made the right decision, but I thank God that they were there making their decision because none of this would have
[01:36:05]

happened without going into the streets and so forth. The thing that frightens me most now is we're going through a period now that's just as bad, and going in the streets won't work anymore because they've figured out how to beat that. It surprises me that they didn't figure it out before, but they didn't. They were so used to brute force and stuff that they didn't stop and think, because if they had stopped and thought they could have made all of that walking the streets fail back then, but maybe God wouldn't let them think that through that way, but they've thought it through now. I mean we've had walk-ins almost as big as anything we did in civil rights in the last year or two and you don't even know about it.

VF: Can you tell me about that?

IH: About what?

VF: About what you're seeing now that reminds you of the kind of protests and demonstrations—.

IH: You mean all of the things, when they were sitting in the parks and all that stuff, recently?

VF: Mm hmm.

IH: [Pause] I think that all of the stuff that's happening now, I can't put that in the same—. It's not the same level of doing things because the issues that we have today are so huge, the issues that we're dealing with, like: should we or should we not open the borders to Mexico and let people just walk in the door? Those are different kind of issues. It's not clear how much we are responsible for people who break our laws and go across the borders and come here and take advantage of the fact that their country is not as successful as it should be, or not as safe as it should be.

So the issues – and I’m not saying that I don’t respect them and feel sorry for them – the issues are different. First of all, how much are we responsible, and second of all, what is the right solution? In our case it was very clear, the responsibility, and it was very clear what the right solution was. In this case it’s not, so if it’s not clear, if you go out and tell another man, “You’re wronging me,” then you should be prepared to tell him what he should stop doing or what he should start doing. Otherwise you get his attention and don’t get the effect, and so I’m not sure that those guys sitting in the park, if

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they get the attention, have the right answer to when he says, “Well, what do you want me to do?” and if you don’t have the right answer to, “What do you want me to do?” then get out the park and figure out what that is before you get in the park.

VF: Are we talking about Zuccotti Park and Occupy Wall Street?

IH: Yeah, all of that, and one of the failures of our civil rights movement was we didn’t have the right answers enough. Too often they said, “What do you want to do?” and we didn’t have the right answer, or any answer, and that was one of our failings. We got a lot more attention than we got results, and we still are doing that. Right here in North Carolina right now, this thing with the Republican legislature. We’re getting out in the streets and saying they’re wrong, and they are wrong, but we haven’t specified what needs to be right, what is the right solution, what is the problem that we’re dealing with and how do we fix it, and you really need to have that in place, to me. Now, I’m an engineer, so maybe that’s my problem with thinking this way, but you really need – and you can do it. I’m not asking the impossible. You ought to know what the answer is when they say, “Okay, what is it you really want?”

Because right now we got a legislature that says, “This is what we’re going to do, and we go to do this,” and such and such and such, and all of that stuff that they’re saying is easily defeated by just playing it all out, and you’ve got to be able to do that because the masses are confused. They don’t really know. When they get up and say that we are spending too much money for the state of North Carolina, they don’t understand the fact that we spent more than that in the past and it worked, that when you invest in your future you win and when you stop investing in the future in the long run you lose. You’re spending less money but you’re getting a whole lot less back. You got to spell that out. You got to make that clear. You got to make it clear in a way that people understand it, and the guys that are fighting those guys I don’t think are doing a good enough job of doing that.

VF: So, it’s kind of one of those things—. You’ve been in this area, in your life starting out and now coming back after your career. You worked at IBM for most of your career and you came back to Durham – in the 1980s? Is that correct?

IH: Yeah. It’s actually late ’70s.

[01:42:01]

VF: Late ’70s. So what was it like to come back to this town that you grew up in, several decades later? What kind of change did you see?

IH: That’s a good question too. When I left in 1960 Durham was a population of eighty thousand. Raleigh was a population of about fifty-five, sixty thousand. Cary was a population of about maybe five or ten, not even ten, I don’t think. Chapel Hill was maybe twelve, fifteen. State had a student body of about six thousand. Carolina had a little bit bigger than that. Duke had about two. Research Triangle Park didn’t exist. That’s the

place I left. I came back roughly eighteen years later, and what did I find? Durham had a population of about eighty thousand. It had not grown at all. Raleigh had a population from fifty-five to well over a hundred and fifty thousand. Cary was about twenty or twenty-five. Chapel Hill was about fifty, at least.

So, what did I see? I saw a city of Durham that, because of its racism and its rich man-poor man issue – because this is crossing racial boundaries now – it had given itself a future of non-growth. It was so determined to keep the poor class, black or white person, laborer, working in these low-paying industries, textile and tobacco, that when these high-paid industries came to the Research Triangle Park they were determined to twist their city up and ruin their city's future to prevent this thing that was happening in the Research Triangle Park from affecting their good old low labor force. So they did things like close their bus station, close their train station, take the bus service that should be taking people to work in the Park and not allowing them to take people to go to work in the Park. They took all the money they were developing in building an infrastructure, [01:45:05]

like sewer and water infrastructure, and put it as far away from the Triangle as they could, in northern Durham, to discourage anybody working in the Park from living in Durham County, and they successfully stymied all the future growth of Durham, whereas Raleigh did the exact opposite. They put their sewer and water next to the Park, they went out and talked to every company they could to come to Raleigh, and Raleigh had grown like mad and Durham just sat there.

It was all because we had a Durham that was controlled by a group of people who were committed to their own personal things and not the growth and wellbeing of the

city, and they successfully achieved that. The voters in Durham, poor souls, had let this happen and not understood what their politicians and leaders were doing to them, so they ended up having to buy cars and drive out to the Park to try to find jobs that they frequently were not even capable of taking because they didn't have the education or experience to take them.

So that's where my home, Durham, was when I came back to it, and Durham again, like America, lucked out. They lucked out that the black community was able to gain control of the politics in Durham County and get black politicians in place so that these things could happen: the Durham City Council did exactly what you don't do as a politician. They went out and asked the voters to put through a bond to allow them to build a baseball stadium to grow the inner Durham so that it could spur all of the investment and growth in Durham, and the voters voted it down because those same group of white people who had kept Durham small convinced the white people they should keep it small. Fortunately the blacks were able to get enough votes through to make it a close race but they couldn't win.

So then the Durham City Council turned around, on their own, and put through a certificate of need request that allowed us to go out and get bond dollars, that the voters

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said we should not be doing, to develop the inner city, including the ballpark, the city that they've effectively – that and other things – have turned the city around despite what the white leadership and poor white voters had inferred they wanted.

Then the other thing they did is, the county commissioners, black-controlled again, including the head of the county commission, black, then move all of the sewer

and water development into the southern county so that now all of the housing development and retail development is happening in southern Durham, near Research Triangle Park, and so now all of a sudden Durham County is approaching huge growth that it was not getting and should have gotten a long time ago, because these black politicians who figured their way into office have done things that more than anything have promoted the business development for white Durham, and of course have gotten some of black Durham some jobs, but have basically helped more of white Durham that voted against this thing, than it's helped black Durham. Again the black politicians have driven and made all that happen: sewer and water here; the black politicians pushed the South Square—. What's the shopping center?

VF: Southpoint?

IH: Southpoint. Everybody wanted to leave South Square there, they pushed through, and other black leaders pushed Southpoint through anyway, and Durham County has just totally turned around. Fortunately we were able to use the black politicians' good sense to do with Durham what Durham didn't want. One of the other things Bill Bell pushed through, DPAC. He almost single-handedly pushed through DPAC. The other thing Bill did was almost single-handedly push through the integration of Durham and Durham County school systems, and the school system is doing great now. Nobody thought it could happen.

VF: Now, looking back at your alma mater, what kind of changes stand out to you most? A lot has changed. There's now Centennial Campus and there's a room named after you on the engineering campus there. What does it look like to you when you go

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back to the campus today and what change do you think has been most significant?

IH: Well, it's certainly a different campus. I think Governor Hunt, when he gave us all that land for Centennial Campus, did a far-reaching thing. I'm not sure he knew what he was doing, knew how big it was, but that was critical. Then we lucked out and got some great leaders coming through there who understood the impact, and I think the critical thing was—. I think if you have an institution that's based upon technology and engineering it should be led by technology and engineering people because they understand not only what is possible but what kind of results can come from it. The decision to take the Centennial Campus land and say, we're going to use that to promote the relationship of NC State to industry, gives you a whole different flavor. Now all of a sudden the industry says, when we promote things on Centennial Campus we're not just promoting education; we're promoting ourselves, so all of a sudden the investment changes.

Of course everybody says, "We want to do right," but in the end too often where we want to really put our money is what's good for us, and we've made NC State, more than ever before, what's good for others more directly. That's made it grow like mad and it's made us do things like, I mean I cannot believe that—. I went to the fifty-year celebration. They asked me to be one of the speakers at one of these things. I forget. Oh! The thing they have every year, where everybody who's doing, what, I guess B average students come and they celebrate them, and I walk in the room, and they had this room full of black students. [Pause] I could not believe it: one, that they were even at the campus, but two, that they are also doing well, which says that an awful lot of the potential problems that they could have had on that campus, the campus is not letting

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them have anymore, if they ever had them and to the extent that they could have. I speak to that because a lot of Northern colleges I've done recruiting for IBM on and I've seen the struggle that the black students have on the campus because they're tolerated; they're not promoted. What I see at State is State has learned to promote their black students, not just tolerate them. In the end if you want to get the best out of people you have to give them the best, and I see that happening more at State than anyplace. The whole idea of naming the room after me, I mean it's nice and I appreciate it but I appreciate it more because of what it says to black students about what State feels about black people. When you've got that kind of environment you can't help but win.

That, to me, is the thing that we need to keep pushing, because in the end no matter how you figure it, who you're helping, as a nation you're helping yourself, particularly now because it's going to get very competitive. It has not been competitive for the last sixty years. Since World War II we've been out there fighting battles by ourselves. We play football games where there's no team on the other side because of what World War II did to the rest of the world. Well, that's changing. There's going to be people on the other side that got more people and just as much investment opportunities as America has, so if we don't take advantage of every person that we got and promote every person then we, as a nation, are going to hurt. So it may not be your child that we're promoting but if we promote the guy who's building the company that your child gets to work at, or invest in, then we all win.

What I see happening at NC State is, in a small way, given who they impact, a fore-leader and a real opportunity for that to happen, and we need to do more because we

need to look at more—. See, we've now reached the point where I think we're giving a real good opportunity for education for all of the people, but after education if we don't give them the same opportunities to use that education to do what they can do with it then we still don't win, and that's the area that we need to start looking more at

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now. When we start talking about investment dollars, who's getting the investment dollars? Because if you don't get the investment dollars you could have the best idea or the best potential product or the best potential service going, but if the other guy gets the investment dollars it didn't matter. So we should be looking on that side of the issue, and that's something that we can do without being in politics, just like NC State has shown. Politics didn't win this NC State we got today. It helped, but it didn't win. That's the same thing there too: we can change and promote opportunity for our graduates without having to be politicians; just know how to use the politicians and make it important to them to do those things, because we, through the last twenty years, we had a state that thought it was important to promote North Carolina being a state that's great to have businesses, great to have people living, great to have people go to school. We got to keep thinking that and then add more to make sure our people who went to our schools have the opportunity to do, and then hope every other state does that in the same way. I think it makes a big difference as engineering graduates from NC State get an opportunity to do, in a way that promotes them before an engineering student from Pennsylvania.

VF: Mr. Holmes, I'll just ask you one last question. You've been so generous with your time with us today, and there's so much that we haven't gotten to talk about in depth with your career and your family and all other aspects of your life, but I would love

to know what you feel is your greatest legacy or what you'd like to be remembered for most, your greatest achievement?

IH: Well, [Pause] that's a hard one. [Pause] It would be interesting to hear what my children would say in answer to that, because they sit there and watch you all your life and try to copy you when it makes sense, and you hope they can forget about what you did that doesn't make sense. I guess I think that I would like people to see me as a
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person who took the assets that God gave him and used them the best he could to make God's world better when I'm gone than it was when I got here.

VF: Thank you.

IH: Sure.

[02:00:40]

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcriber: Deborah Mitchum

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