Environmental Justice Oral History Project

Detroit, MI

Donele Wilkins

Interviewed by

Nichole L. Manlove

December 5, 2014

Detroit, Michigan

As part of the Oral History Class in the School of Library and Information Science

Kim Schroeder, Instructor

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Brief Biography

Donele Wilkins serves as the president and CEO of the Detroit based Green Door Initiative, an environmental justice and education organization that is helping to develop, promote, protect, support, and maintain a natural and healthy environment within Detroit and its surrounding Community. Not only has Ms. Wilkins' work been recognized in multiple environmental justice publications, she has also been the recipient of various awards and fellowships for advocacy within and outside the city of Detroit.

Interviewer

Nichole L. Manlove is a Library and Information Science graduate student at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan.

Abstract:

Donele Wilkins discusses her role as an environmental justice advocate from her beginnings with SEMCOSH, the South East Michigan Coalition for Occupational Safety and Health, the National Black Environmental Justice Network, the Environmental Justice Leadership Forum, the Michigan Environmental Justice Coalition, the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council (NEJAC), the Detroit Brownfield Redevelopment Authority, Detroiter's Working for Environmental Justice (DWJ), and her current work as the president and CEO of the Green Door Initiative. In this comprehensive interview, Ms. Wilkins highlights her work in eradicating environmental racism throughout the city of Detroit, Wayne County, and some of the surrounding metropolitan areas. Within this interview, researchers will learn about Ms. Wilkins efforts in recognizing Detroit as a nationally recognized Brownfield in need of dire environmental cleanup and reform. Such tasks ranged from but were not limited to eradicating the burning of bio-medical waste from the Henry Ford Health System, pushing to prevent the U.S. Department on Housing and Urban Development (HUD) from building homes and housing projects on top of contaminated land sites, her clean up initiatives in local Detroit neighborhoods, as well as her efforts in educating the public on fighting for and eliminating environmental pollution in their neighborhoods. Through her continued efforts, Ms. Wilkins fully demonstrates her role as an educator, consultant, trainer, administrator and of course advocate for environmental justice in regards to the role it plays in preserving the human race.

Restrictions

None

Original Format

Audacity file format (.aup)

Length:

01:06:51:00
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Transcription
Word Document (.docx)

Beginning

[00:00:00:00]

NM: OK

NM: Good afternoon, my name is Nichole Manlove and I am a Library and Information Science Graduate Student at Wayne State University in Detroit Michigan. Today is Friday December 5, 2014 and in collaboration with Wayne State University and the Walter P. Reuther Archives Library, I am conducting an oral history interview with Donele Wilkins, President and CEO of the Detroit based Green Door Initiative, an environmental justice and education organization that is helping to develop, promote, protect, support, and maintain a natural and healthy environment within Detroit and its surrounding Community. Not only has Ms. Wilkins' work been recognized in multiple environmental justice publications, she has also been the recipient of various awards and fellowships for advocacy within and outside of the city of Detroit.

NM: Ms. Green (Mistake, Actually Ms. Wilkins), I would first like to thank you for taking the time to sit down with me. Your contribution is greatly appreciated and I will prove, and will prove to be a valuable asset to Wayne State, the Reuther Archives, and the Detroit metropolitan community.

NM: Can you begin by clearly stating your full name?

DW: Yes, my name is Donele Wilkins.

NM: OK and would you mind telling me a little about yourself, such as where you were born and raised, your educational background, and what inspired you to become involved in environment justice and education?

DW: I'm a life-long Detroiter. I grew up in the city of Detroit, educated in the city of Detroit, Detroit public schools, attended Cass tech high school, I attended WSU as well, didn't complete my uh, higher education, I'm actually in the process of doing that now. But, um I can say that I've had a long history of advocacy and nonprofit, uh management, and uh starting back in the, in the 80s where I served in the labor movement, I served, uh in leadership capacities. Uh and as well as being employed by uh local labor organizations and even worked for a short time with a national organization at the national level, the American Federation of Teachers, that's where I really, uh, got baptized if you will into, uh, advocacy work, but I found, uh, a kinship around, uh occupational health and safety.

DW: I initially worked for an organization in the nine-, eighties, late eighties and early nineties called SEMCOSH, the South East Michigan Coalition on Occupational Safety and Health**,** and that's where I really learned about the disparities particularly among African Americans workers compared to other folks in the labor movement especially when it came to work place health and safety and the disproportionate number of folks particularly African Americans that were harmed on the job, had the least experience in advocating on their behalf being seen often in the dirtiest low paying jobs, uh in some of the harshest industries like factories and places like that., and I found uh, a real passion, I discovered a real passion for helping sort of create some capacity if you will among folk , uh, so they could be, uh healthier and have a better outcome, uh, in, in their work life.

DW: That is the initial step that got me [in] to the environmental justice work because of the work that I was doing around occupational health and safety being a non-traditional. Sort of individual in that kind of work. Uh, I got a lot of attention to be honest and one of the people who paid attention to me happened to be a professor at the University of Michigan [S/he's] really impressed with the leadership role and the voice that I created within that environment. I did some work and created a project called the Minority Occupational Health Project that got national attention actually and really, r created a, filled a void for Black leadership around health and safety. Dr., Uh, Bunyan-Bryant from the University of Michigan School of Natural Resources and Environment happened to be working with a national initiative to address what we know now today as environmental justice. They were pulling a forum, um that would begin to build a movement around environmental justice. He thought I would be an ideal candidate to represent our area as a delegate to that process, and when I accepted and participated in this 1991 National Conference, called the First People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit that's where I discovered my life[s] work.

[00:05:01.05]

NM: OK, OK, and um, just uh, I guess, uh, to reiterate a, a few things, um you been, let's say active, um within, um this realm of work, let's say for about 20 years or so?

DW: [Cuts in] About 20 years, yes, uh, I spent, um, yeah two decades …

NM: [cuts in] OK.

DM: …uh, in, in doing this work. We were charged with starting a movement when we left that four-day important conference. People from all over the country uh, came together, uniting and saying look we're tired, we're sick and tired of being sick and tired.

NM: [cuts in Laughing]

DM: And, um we were charged with return to your communities and start a movement and I just took that very seriously and did that.

NM: OK. And um, just to again reiterate, um, for our listeners and readers, um, you basically fight to um, you fight against, um, what some would consider to be environmental racism?

DW: Right. The whole movement around environmental justice, environmental justice is the, is the goal that we hope to obtain. Justice not for the environment, for people that are disproportionately impacted by environmental pollution. Poor policies, uh, inadequate policies, that, uh, equals unequal protection under the law when it comes to environmental protection. Typically, people of color and poor people are the ones that carry the greatest burden. So places like Detroit, where, uh, in the county of Wayne, the majority of people of color are concentrated for the state of Michigan, and of course we know how Detroit fares with that, and uh, like any other place the location of polluting facilities often are aligned where people of color live. That's the number one criteria or um characteristic if you will that, that helps to support this idea of environmental racism. So if your race is the number one factor, income is the second factor and all the data and research and stuff that's been done that continues to be, uh, the indicator for where polluting facilities and pollution, uh, reins, and so, uh, Wayne, Wayne county and the city of Detroit are not unique to that. Eighty-seven percent [87%] of the known polluting facilities are inside the city of Detroit and the county of Wayne, uh, where you get the majority of people of color and then, uh you factor poverty levels with that and yes we are the hotspot in the state of Michigan. So, that's why the term of environmental racism is important and that's where it comes from.

NM: OK. Well, excellent. And, um again, just to kind of, uh, describe your role in an, an environmental activism, um, you would classify yourself as a, uh, I guess simultaneously as a educator, consultant, uh, trainer, administrator and of course advocate.

DW: Right. Well you know what really drove me to, um, even serve in this capacity. One of the things, the additional thing, in, in addition to just being an advocate for what I believe is what's just and what's right is to be a model in our community in leading the work, uh, and being a voice and a face so that others in our community would be motivated [computer beeps] by, uh, whatever leadership, I, I'm able to, uh, display.

DW: So I want folks particularly African Americans and women to know that, uh, we can lead, uh, efficient, effective, uh, organizations, and we can be a voice for what's right, and not, not, not shrink from that. And, so that's the other driver behind why I do what I do. And, what I recognize there was really no forum or place for this work established in the city of Detroit at the time. So, I started in my living room, and invited folks to come and let's talk about this, is this something that we should pursue in the city of Detroit? And as we reached out more and more people agreed with that, ultimately we ended up, creating, uh, an organization in the uh, mid-nineties that got us really going and I served as the founding director and, um, uh, leader of that organization for like fifteen years, uh, with Detroiters working for environmental justice. And out of my living room we had nothing. When I left that organization in 2010 we had, uh, a budget of two million dollars and we, and we had staff that looked like the folks in our community and we should develop the capacity, to, to, to, to force equal protection under the law when it comes to environmental protection. And when you find places like Wayne county that has failed to meet the Clean Air Act and other important environmental statutes, it was very clear that , this, there's a link between environmental exposure and health outcomes in our community. Folks not being able to breathe, a preventable disease like asthma, lead poisoning and other things that's attributed to, uh, environmental exposures, we had to have… ex…, we had to exert ourselves, and, and a voice there. And why not us?

[00:10:19:04]

NM: Oh, absolutely. Um, now I know that in the beginning you did kind of, um, tell us a little bit about, um, how you got started, um, you know within, um the realm of, environmental, um, justice. Um, would you mind just, el…, elaborating a little bit more on some of the other programs, activities and some of the ideas that you were involved , um, or implemented in, um, prior to founding the Green Door Initiative?

DW: Sure, so I worked at Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice really set the foundation for, for advocacy in social justice around environmental justice. And uh, in the early days, um, our goal was to ensure that environmental justice became a household phrase. On, ah, and,

and assert that as an agenda for, um, social justice at a number of levels especially at the , um, political policy decision making levels, like um, like the city of Detroit, the state of Michigan and even at a federal and a national level being added to the voice there but some of our early fights, um, that we were successful at, at uh, accomplishing, um, we contributed early on, uh, to an issue that helped to protect another city in our state-Flint, Michigan. There was a proposal back in the early nineties to build an incinerator that was, uh, under the guise of generating energy, alternative energy. But what they were doing was, uh, creating a energy by burning, uh, demolition debris that would come from the city of Detroit, and demolition debris that most likely, uh, contained lead and other things, and they were going to build this facility in a Black comm…,neighborhood in Flint, Michigan. So being that we were getting involved in this whole environmental justice piece, like we can't be a contributor or aid to this! Though we weren't able to stop the facility itself what we did was stop, uh, Detroit from being the major provider of, of raw material that would go into that facility. What we did do though we weren't able to stop the facility being built, we were able to uh, present testimony that reduced the level of any lead containing that base containing material that would go into that facility. So in some way we reduced the, uh, health, uh, impact that, that facility could bring to that community; that was our very first effort.

DW: We have since, uh, shut down medical waste facilities, um, one such, uh, um, thing, was, was with **Henry Ford Health Systems**. Henry Ford Health, uh, the hospital itself made a decision in the late nineties to discontinue, uh, burning their me…medical waste. Which was a good thing, um, so they shut down all the facilities that, uh, existed in the suburban communities but decided to keep the one in Detroit open and to increase its capacity to receive all of the trash from those facilities they shut down in the suburbs.

NM: [cuts in] Wow!

DW: We received a call right and um, it was like you know this is happening and this is not gonna be good for the community. And we, uh, definitely pulled together an effort to stop that. And what takes normally 8 years to do we did that in a year and a half. We stopped that facility from, um, from increasing its capacity. We provided them alternative mechanisms to meet the state requirements for how to manage their, uh, medical waste, and it was done in a way that did not contribute to air pollution and, um, just the, the other issues. There was a lot of prob…things that went into that, that effort, the hospital threatened to shut its doors, uh, and [laughing], we know the threat to the community was that we're not gonna have a hospital because these extremist are, uh, making us do something that, um, is, is, just is extreme. And not necessary so we had to fight those kind of efforts from the hospital and even the county health department was definitely on the side of the hospital and we're trying to really keep this facility, uh, uh goals, uh, uh, going to, keep it going forward. So, you know we had a small but

mighty group of people that joined with us including some really, uh, fearless senior citizens in the neighborhood…

NM: OK.

DW: …who was tired of dealing with all the things that came with them burning their medical waste in the first place. Uh, we were successful! Now today not only does the hospital still exists, it, it created a department within the hospital that never existed before and that was an environmental department. Now they recycle and they do some things at keeps stuff from going into the uh, incinerator and they manage the five percent that they were supposed to apply some level of heat to…

NM: OK

DW: biological waste. That was reduced from one-hundred percent to five percent. Because they were burning, like household waste, stuff from the cafeteria, stuff coming out of the emergency room like scalpels and stuff. They were wasting a lot of money.

NM: OK [laughing]

DW: So on top of creating a problem for the community they were just wasting money in their own facility now they're saving money, they hired more people because they created this department and we reduced the burden of pollution. Our position at the time was, our kids deserve to breathe clean air like anybody else's kids.

NM: Absolutely

DW:…Right? And this to us translated into environmental racism, and we worked to ensure that our community got the justice it deserved.

NM: OK.

DW: So that was the example of a great win and effort that we were engaged in. And then that…shortly after we won that effort we joined some folks at the state level and we were able to get some policy, uh, instituted at the state level around, uh, how hospitals and facilities managed their medical waste, s, you know just, the struggle of building a bike and riding it to , trying to insure that you know what's happening to us today we can protect ourselves and guard ourselves but also ensuring that policy is changed and shifted in a way that doesn't allow this to happen in the future .

NM: OK. Great! Um and I noticed too that, um, when I was doing some research on you that um, you've been a very, very busy woman [laughing] to say the least. Um, would you be able

to, I guess elaborate on some of the organizations that you are a part of, um, simultaneously, um, with the Green Door Initiative?

DW: Sure, I mean, uh, coalition building and working in collaboration is the only way we can survive and do this work. Uh, in the early days I felt really alone, like what the heck? Who else has done this work [and whatever] and I found a lot of support outside of our community. The national work in particular and so I got connected early on with folks doing this work from around the country. One of the notable organizations was the National Black Environmental Justice Network, that by the way formed in 1999 and our first meeting was launched in New Orleans, Louisiana and that's really critical because everybody and anybody that happened to be African American doing work on this issue, uh, convened in this important meeting. Three-hundred people were in that meeting, thirty states were represented. Uh, I'd like to say it was from welfare moms to PhD's there. All with a, a goal of reducing the burden of toxins in our communities. And what was interesting, why did we choose New Orleans, Louisiana?... is because we felt that that was the place where things were going to pop off. If anything horrible was going to happen in our community, it would start in New Orleans. And here in 2005, Katrina hit.

DW: And Katrina was linked to climate change, global warming, and a number of things that come along with climate change. So we were on the cutting edge of what was not right in our community knowing that New Orleans would be the first one. And we, and we know what the story is behind that. The breaking of the levees and, and all the devastation that occurred. And who was most impacted by that?...African American people. So, uh, that work has been very important because I was able to link with folks from all over the country and I am still in a relationship with them. So, a, a current, an organization at that level that I'm involved with a group called the Environmental Justice Leadership Forum and that form works to ensure that there is justice in the policy around climate change. And, uh, uh, we lend our voice from Detroit, and from Michigan, uh, in that process, and we're really clear that a lot of the things that are important in the environmental justice movement are at odds with the traditional environmental movement. And many people in the environmental justice movement does not even, uh, sort of self-define themselves as environmentalists, I'm one of those people…

[00:19:50:00]

NM: OK.

DW:…Um, cause at the, what happens with the [more] traditional environmental arena, is that the focus is less on people and more on, on a natural, you know, creation and that's important. But we're finding that without people being considered in this process, folks die prematurely and are affected , uh, health wise and that's our priority OK…

NM: OK.

DW:…, so, um, when it comes to climate change for instance at lot of their priorities that being a traditional environmental organizations are at odds with what our priorities are and how we see, um, policy moving forward that will protect everybody. Su, um Being at, at the, at that level offering, um, what we think are the best approaches to reducing the impact of climate change, particularly in the communities of color and the poor, uh, is very critical because we can't leave it to folks who don't identify with our issues. Al right, so, um, so issues around [indecipherable language] trade and other things we see very differently from the extreme environmental groups. That being said, um… I'm also involved in and one of the founders of the Michigan Environmental Justice Coalition, um and it's a state wide org , we've work to, uh, ensure that the state of Michigan enacts a policy around environmental justice, I've spent a lot of time in that effort, Michigan is behind of the rest of the country when it comes to policies in place at the state level , and, uh, we want to see something like that done here so that vulnerable communities like Detroit and everyplace where the community, ha… has, a pro…a disproportionate number of African Americans and or people of color. [In their communities] that's where you're going to see the pollution align, so places like Pontiac, Flint, Saginaw, uh, Detroit of course and parts of the west side of the state and whatever often are the communities that are hosting um, these bad, bad guys and bad players in our community. So, uh, working in, with NEJAC was really critical, uh, in that.

DW: What other work am I doing? I've served under NEJAC, the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council. Uh, on the full council and that's the council that provide advice to the U.S. EPA [United States Environmental Protection Agency] that provides and environmental justice voice to their public policy work to ensure the vulnerability of communities, the vulnerable communities in particular are protected and considered. And a lot of times what I've done at that level I've tried to [groom] to the state of Michigan and say look we can use the model that the federal government is using for engagement and advisement, bleeding multiple department and divisions together so that we can work, work across these , um, um, these spaces to ensure protection.

DW: I'll give you an example of that. NEJAC and the National Group has focused on, um, making sure that [indecipherable language] Department of Agriculture and HUD [U.S. Department on Housing and Urban Development] and Department of Labor, EPA, all these folks, department of energy and whatever come together to ensure that they're talking to one another. One reason for that is, let's give the example of HUD. HUD is built, has put a lot of money into building public housing in places across this country but unknowingly, maybe knowingly [laughing], building these public housing on top of contaminated sites, on top of old, uh, uh, landfills and things like that…

NM: OK.

DW:…without any input from the input from the environmental protection agency. So they've placed deliberately people in harm's way.

DW: Uh, poor people, people without a voice on top of, they're living on top of hazardous wastes and materials and no knowing it and so, um, this is a practice of HUD…

NM: [cuts in] I didn't know that.

DW: …the same is with the department of education. Like school districts, at, do not have to answer to anybody about where they build a school. And in Detroit, they built schools on top of contaminated sites and putting children in harm's way without policies that says that's wrong. OK. So, who gets to, to, to, be in housing like that, who gets to be in schools like that? Our community! Then we're blamed for not meeting the educational attainments, not, uh, you know, our children being violent and that kind of stuff. We know what lead poisoning for instance does to, to children. It diminishes their capacity to thrive and to be educated. But how 'bout recent research and stuff shows that it's a, a contributor to violence…

[00:25:00:00]

NM: [cuts in] OK.

DW: …in children in particular, so there was a study once done, I'm getting off target a little bit, but there was a study done at the University of Michigan looking at the most , a, violent , uh, offenders, at, uh, who had passed away at Jackson, uh, State Prison. The common thread they found in each of these prisoners, the most violent ones, they had been lead poisoned as children. The vulnerable population in the community are African American boys.

NM: Right

DW: They are walking around many of them undiagnosed. But you're building prisons and stuff for 'em. If we start talking about some of the environmental factors that contribute to this maybe, we'll find solutions! Right?

DW: So, it's those kinds of reasons why we do the work and I've done the work that I've done is to insert these conversations in places that you would not likely be talking to. And one of the hardest places that we've been doing that, with, in, is the public health community.

NM: OK

DW: For instance, they may, many of them have environmental health divisions, but their no doing environmental health from our perspective. What they're doing is important stuff, you know, rat control, lets go and review a, a restaurant and make sure they're serving good food and healthy food and whatever. But what they're not doing is looking at the impacts of air pollution on public health, lead on public health. You know [how/ why] a disproportionate people in our community have asthma and those kinds of things. So we bring that kind of thing to the table and say look you have to consider these kinds of things, expand your work! And there are resources to make that happen. This is always the question you know. "Do we have the money to deal with that?" we can't afford not to, right?

DW: So, my work there and let me see what else. Is there something on your list that I didn't touch? [laughing]

NM: Um, well I know, um, just from doing some of the research, um, they mentioned, um, that you were I guess part of the National Brownsfield Conference?...

DW: Oh, oh yeah, yeah.

NM:…and, uh, let's see, Green Jobs and Career Network …

DW: Yeah, yeah.

NM: Uh, there was actually quite a few, uh [simultaneous laughing between interviewer and narrator followed by indecipherable talking].

DW: But yeah, the other thing that was really important and I sit on, and I'm an appointee to the Detroit Brownfield Redevelopment Authority. Um, that was no small task because when that was created during Dennis Archer's administration when he was mayor**,** back in the nineties, he established the authority because the federal government was saying where [are] we going to put some money in, uh, places that are uh, burdened with contaminated sites. So, uh, you know of course you had to create an authority, a decision making body to make that happen. What he wasn't interested in was having a community voice as part of that. So that was a fight we took on, and, uh, to ensure that the community had a voice I the space there.

DW: Now, he was thinking at the time, well look if we have to let community in on this we'll place them in an advisory committee capacity. And that's cool but your decisions really happen at the authority level. So that was a big fight and we won that fight, we had to really advocate at the city council and others because that's where the decision was, had to be made and the mayor makes all of these appointees but the city council gets one appointee . So I've been their appointee to the authorities since its inception like in 2000, 1999 or 2000. And, um, that was definitely something the mayor was happy about to be honest [laughing]. But I knew that

without a voice that understood that decisions about cleaning up property and stuff shouldn't only be driven by the bottom line, like "is this going to be a good piece of property, will, we can use for some development?" That's cool we need economic justice too but we also need it to be driven by the severity of the issue and the thing with Brownfield say versus, uh, superfund sites, I'm not sure if you know much about superfund sites. But superfund sites are considered to be national priority lists that, they, they're so badly contaminated that you have to invest in health clinics and other things in, aside from clean up for it to protect that community.

DW: The Problem with brownfields, how they became designated as brown fields where we are, people of color are mostly, where the communities have the, the highest-level designation of brownfield sites. These sites were removed from the national priority list from the superfund sites, yes.

NM: Hmm, that's not good [simultaneous laughing between interviewer and narrator].

DW: Exactly.

DW: They said well the reason that we need to do that is because we need people to feel confidence in vesting in places like Detroit. And Detroit at that time they stopped counting at forty-thousand contaminated sites for the entire city , and decided like, we're gonna designate the entire city as a brownfield site.

[00:30:10:00]

DW: Now there are some places within the city that really qualify to be superfund sites, uh, though like I said to make it easier for developers, they get that confidence in the city in that way, they wanted to remove the stigma if you will. So, and bring resources, you know their, their thought is "if we can remove the stigma we can then get confidence from the developers" and we can use the money for cleanup and whatever that way but public health and stuff is not a driver yet and now the economic bottom line is, which means that if you're living in a neighborhood where a site like that exists, but you're not attractive for development you're not gonna get attention.

NM: OK.

DW: Right?

DW: So, if you're not gonna get attention people living near you know, uh properties that may have uh, some kind of spill on it, maybe a transformer or something like that, may have, uh, fallen in a, a playground or something it's not considered a priority. But my children, my community is exposed to it. Right? So being at that table my constant you know cry is look, we need to, while this is happening yeah great that you're investing in finding ways to you know find ways to invest in midtown and the city and downtown we need to find ways to clean up

properties outside of those hot spots for development. Um, his, his being the former mayor at the time, uh, his being the mayor at the time his biggest concern was that somebody like me would stop the process.

NM: Hmmm, Hmmm.

DW: I wish I had that much power, right? [simultaneous laughing between interviewer and narrator]. So, uh in the earlier days it was really tough because everybody saw me as the enemy at the table, you know. Um, but today I'm not interested in standing in the way of progress what I want to make sure is that the priority of public health and environment are, are established at the Brownfield Authority, I think that's where it should happen.

DW: So, um, that's why what I do around green jobs and stuff is really critical because if there's forty-thousand parcels of contaminated property and other need to clean up then there are jobs there. What are the recent, what kind of steels and stuff need to be uh, uh, developed in our community so our community can compete for those job opportunities? And do the clean-ups and whatever, even creating their own businesses around here. So, um, uh, we created, uh, I was the first one, uh, when I was serving at **DWJ** [Detroiter's Working for Environmental Justice] to launch a green jobs program in the state of Michigan.

NM: OK.

DW: And then, uh, here at Green Door Initiative, um, that's one of our priority programs is our Environmental, uh, Technician Job Training Program**.** It's a very comprehensive training program, uh, we target people who have barriers to employment, uh, and it's difficult, uh, chronically unemployed and all those things. And we invest in them, and, uh, um, I'm really grateful for the record that we have. Since 2011 and before we launched that program we trained one-hundred and fifty individuals, prior...the majority of them coming out of jail, prison, or whatever, Right? Uh, with those issues and we have a good track record, ninety-two percent job placement and retention...

NM: Al right [cuts in]

DW:.... and you know people who can see transformation in lives from it, so we really think this is a good model, uh, and, uh, it really does meet a need, not only in terms of the clean-up piece of this we are also looking at the green piece of this. And it's like what do you do once you have a property that's clean? We need to do something with that property, let's re-purpose it so it, it doesn't remain a targeted place for, uh, the, the stuff that's harmful. So we teach folks things like weatherization, energy auditing, installing solar panels, and other things like that!

NM: OK.

DW: So, they could be competitive in the industry. In addition, they get certified and licensed in HAZMAT [Hazardous Materials and Items] and asbestos and lead and a number of other

things. So there's this comprehensive investment that really allows them to be very competitive in the industry. We have some strong relationships with employers, uh; mainly minority firms especially because we really want to help them be competitive in the industry. We get them skilled individuals already trained and licensed that's an investment they don't have to make in terms of the human capital. And then that just helps their ability to compete, so that's, uh, you know so, one of the, the primary goals of the work that we do.

NM: OK.

[00:34:52:00]

DW: We also do work with young people, um, we like to introduce the environmental sector to, uh, urban kids especially we want them to know that this is a good approach for their educational, future educational career goals as well as any other career goals outside of that and so we do things through our Youth Speak Green Project to build that capacity. I'm really excited about our very new program that we have yet to launch buts it's called COLD, Climate Leaders Organizing Detroit, Uh, I mean Climate Organizers Leading Detroit-COLD. And it's really targeted at, um, high school kids, um, our goal is to get them engaged at the um, United Nations Youth Forum around Climate Change and, um, so we can create a voice from Detroit that can contribute to the international policy making around climate change. Ultimately, we plan to take a group of young people next year, 2015, to the Paris meeting where they can represent our community and, uh, you know just see a world that they have not been exposed to and, um, when we do that we can see people looking at themselves and their community a little differently

DW: But, um, other things we've done in the past with young people, we've taught them how to do beach monitoring, like at Belle Isle Beach, and taking water samples, and things like that and determining if E-Coli exists, and you know Detroit, Belle Isle has never been shut down because of E-Coli or anything, not like what we hear from places like, um, Metro Beach and whatever, right? Partly because there's no law that requires a beach to be shut down, but, um, there's also, there's also, um, activism and leadership at the community level. So, uh, we're, we've been notified that Belle Isle is worse than Metro Beach any day.

NM: [laughing]

DW: Right?

NM: Oh yeah! [laughing]

DW: ...But no one ever has said you shouldn't go and, and, and, and, and fish at Belle Isle. You shouldn't go and swim at Belle Isle, and whatever, and [we want] to pay attention to that, put some skills in young people's hands so they know how to do that, and be a voice for that.

DW: Um, what else have we done? And of course our, uh, important, uh, work that we do has to with just informing the regular community about, uh, important laws, uh, when it comes to environmental protection like the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, safe drinking water and those kinds of things so they know there's a place for their voice in that as well and what to expect, uh, when it comes to equal protection under the law.

DW: So, um, you know, just we put a new face on the environmental movement. I'm not trying to save the owl or the whale it's about people.

NM: OK. Now, um, well you've definitely provided me with a lot of information [simultaneous laughing between the interviewer and Narrator]. This is great, so thank you. Um, and, and just to, uh, I guess reiterate, um, in regards to the, uh, this organization now, the Green Door Initiative, um, you actually, um, founded the organization in 2010?

DW: Yes.

NM: OK. So it's almost five years old!

DW: Yes!

NM: And I know that, um, going back to stating some of the, the organizations, uh, basic principles and, um, objectives, um, you did, uh, talk about, youth development, and, um, and so forth. But I also, um, noticed that you guys sometimes, um, put on certain activities within the neighborhoods like the neighborhood initiatives, um, various things such as, um, uh, festivals, um, fairs, and you know what have you.

DW: Well that's the only way to get out to the community, are Community Health Awareness Training Seminars. CHATS is, is the basis for it. And really want people to understand that this work is, is here in the city and what we're intending to do is build an army of folks that, uh, can join with us to change what the city looks like and reshape it into this, and create a green vision for the city of Detroit. So, we're always, uh, lending ourselves to uh, uh, to projects within the neighborhoods. And one way that, that we, we do that is, we want especially in our job training things, while we may be focused on job training we're really trying to, to, to establish some social justice awareness among the trainees, so giving them something, uh, to do to give back is really critical for us, uh, and today many of our, uh, students who didn't do that before they came into the program, you know, like being part of a block club or volunteer in any capacity. Now they're doing that, right? So we [indecipherable language], have these guys coming back saying, "Hey Ms. Wilkins, I'm now working as a, I'm volunteering with PAL League or I started a block club or whatever you, know." That's what we're trying to, uh, instill in the people that we serve as well so, uh, whether we link with ARISE Detroit or a, a senator or a organizations, we're trying as much as possible to have a presence in the community.

[00:40:12:00]

DW: Again not to take over anybody else's agenda but to make sure they're aware this exists and they can't, not that they can't but we hop et that they will at least say yeah this is something we should be focused on a little bit so, by being out there, giving back tour community, we, we are seen as contributors to change in the city and that's what exactly we want to do. So, instead of having the young people as well, it's really important to us. So we're trying to figure out, always trying to figure out ways with their input to do that.

NM: OK.

NM: Um, now I guess, I'm, I'm curious to know like, in, in your opinion um, right now, like what is the current state of the, um, environment, in uh Detroit and what types of things do you see happening in the future?

DW: Well I have to say, hmmm, [long pause] that's a hard question because [simultaneous laughing between interviewer and narrator] on one side, I want to be optimistic and say I think things are improvement, improving, but I mean one of the biggest issues we've had over the years with our, um, political leaders and whatever is this sort of this short term commitment brings jobs and stuff to our community which are important but often times they've compromised, so right now, um, if you look at the stats you could say that Detroit's air pollution, air has improved air quality has improved but part of that is because there's not as much manufacturing going on, and I do not think that that would be the case if manufacturing was going in a way that employers to reduces pollution. To give you an example of that we've lost on two cases, Marathon Oil and another company called Severstal met…and or steel, Severstal Steel. Both of these, uh, entities are major contributors to air pollution. And they have been successful at amending their permits so they can pollute more…

NM: OK.

DW:…so, that's the con, that's the, the conflict that I have, you know. Like yeah these, these, stats say this but everywhere that you could compromise, the city, and the state compromises. So we have a long way to go to get everybody on the same page with us.

NM: Oh, yeah. [laughing].

DW: Another issue that's, uh, a huge issue is the incidents of infant mortality. And where there are hot spots for air quality around air pollution the level of infant for infant mortality is greater. Detroit and some places in our city have the worst statistics then any third world country and what we've doing through our work with a project called D.R.E.A.M, Detroit Reproductive Environmental Advocacy Matters project with the University of Michigan is bring attention to, uh, to the environments impact on birth outcomes in our community. So, what have been able to prove through research and stuff that other folks are doing and doing some lit reviews and whatever around is that, um, moms who are exposed to air pollution part particulate matter two point five are at greatest risk for having a pre-term birth. And when

have a pre-term birth you increase the possibility of that child not even lasting the first year of its life. Um, we want to see that decreased right?

DM: So one of the policy things we're doing at the federal level, we've approached the EPA and said look, here's the literature and here's our position on this literature. We want you to consider pregnant moms a vulnerable population in your research and policy making which right now is not the case.

[00:44:45:00]

NM: OK.

DW: You would think that's a no brainer but it, it isn't. So, it's those little things that we try to do. So, is Detroit better off right now? No, not until we see a reduction of, uh, those kind of statistics and babies living longer and healthier, you know and moms being protected, uh, in a way that they can create that first environment and make it a safe environment their, their, the unborn child.

DW: Um, so that's you know those are the reasons why I hesitate to say we're better off…

NM: [laughing].

DW:…there's much work to be done, um, if can get the state of Michigan to sign off on a policy for environmental justice we will see our light at the end of the tunnel. We were successful at getting that done in Granholm's administration but in this administration, they've done what they can to ignore that work. So, that's an issue…, uh, that says you know, things are, are not moving the way that we wanted. And, the final example I would give you is the work we are doing around the location of schools, school sightings.

NM: OK.

DW: And, um, the fact that, um, disproportionately schools are being built and located in really dangerous situations, or no consideration for, say for instance I-94 is being proposed to be expanded. There are several schools along I-94, the only areas that I-9, I-94 would be most impacted is here on the east side.

NM: Um, hmm.

DW: [sighs]. The state is required; M-DOT [Michigan Department of Transportation] is required to do what they call an environmental impact statement. And the one way that you begin to do that is to create a baseline for say, air quality. We want to see where we're starting before we build this thing. Right?

DW: [clears throat]. The failure and this is required by law, what, what they've done to manipulate this process, they decided to do their baseline assessment in Livonia. This freeway expansion won't be anywhere near Livonia….

NM: Right. Um, hmm.

DW: Why would you do the baseline assessment there?

NM: That doesn't make any sense.

DW: [cuts in] makes no sense. There's nothing, there's a little element within the environmental impact statement that tells you to address health. An environmental impact statement does, you can't assume you will look at the potential health impacts. So our approach has been, we need you to do a health impact assessment, if you do that we could predict what could be the potential icome, outcomes if ten-thousand new vehicles were allowed to come through this neighborhood. Whatever right? What will that do for the kids who are in school along this route? Uh, an environmental racist point to this…MDOT has a policy that says we will create barriers to protect the population from insults, [office phone rings in background] but that doesn't kick in unless you're property values are at a certain level.

NM: OK.

DW: So, you don't get new walls along the freeway, you don't get, uh, trees and those kind of things that create buffers for pollution and noise and stuff. You don't get that unless you have property values that are at a certain level. So if you notice going through Detroit Freeways if you don't see walls and you don't see trees it's likely that your property values don't match what the state says…

NM: ok.

DW:…that's an environmental racist thing. Cause, you go along the I-75 corridor you get outside the city of Detroit, honey, you gonna see all kinds of barriers and trees and whatever…

NM: Oh, absolutely!

DW:…but not in our neighborhoods, not in our community. And these are state dollars, that's not city dollars. These are federal highway and state dollars, right? So it's those sort of systemic sort of policies, things that people don't really know about that contribute to the burden that we face right? So until we change those kind of policies…we still in a bad shape in the state and in the city, 'cause the hotspot is still the city and the county of Wayne. Ok?

DW: So yeah [sarcastically], but I'm crazy in this way. I mean you know to get into his kind of work you got to be kind of crazy, because I still believe you know we have the power and the ability to make change, right? And, uh, you, know, in this time that I occupy that's my goal…is to

make those improvements you know. Along [indecipherable language], and pass the baton, when it's time to pass the baton so that the work can be done, you know. But, I have hope, uh, I gotta have, always have hope because of the [indecipherable language] [laughing], you can walk away from this stuff feeling pretty deprived and depressed and whatever but I refuse to do that and I want people to understand…I'm just a girl from Detroit…nothing special behind her name or anything and if I can do it, you can…

NM: Right.

DW: And that's our obligation, our responsibility. Right? To be your own voice. That's what I, that's what, the main message for me!

[00:50:18:00]

NM: OK. That's interesting and ,um, I know that, um, you had mentioned before, like some of the, um, environmental factors that helped to lead to like illnesses and diseases in the Black community such as, um, you know high infant mortality rates, um, asthma, and, and, so forth. And I found that really interesting and especially how you, um, brought up the idea of environmental racism because a few years ago, um, probably about ten years ago I was diagnosed with Sarcoidosis, Pulmonary Sarcoidosis. I [couldn't] figure out, like, you know, where'd that come from?

DW: You weren't smoking or anything right?

NM: No, and the doctors, you know, I had several doctors look at me and they just all told me they don't know where it comes from, so to speak, but it is very common, ah, amongst African American women that live in urban environments. So I thought OK well it's something in the air, but you know, I, I took the doctors word for it, I mean if they don't know where it comes from then I guess nobody knows where it comes from. So, um, just you know, I guess speaking on that are there any other types of illnesses, um, that are prominent, like especially within urban areas or African American communities that are [a] result of our environmental woes?

DW: Let me put a disclaimer out here and first say this, um; we can never say it's an absolute that it's linked to.

NM: Right.

DW: Right? I'm going to say that first but there's a lot of illnesses that have been, um, born by our community that are now known to have links to environmental exposures. High blood pressure, hypertension. In fact, they have found studies to that if you're an older person with high blood pressure you're more than likely there able to link early exposure to lead poisoning.

NM: OK.

DW: That's one example. Diabetes! There are certain things that come from chemicals from factories and stuff that mimic itself as diabetes in a person's body.

NM: OK.

DW: OK. They linked that Lupus…

NM: Hmmm.

DW:…they linked that, uh, let me see what else, we know asthma has been a real linkage particularly to, to, uh, uh, uh, um what is diesel [fuel], uh, diesel fumes and that stuff like that. Um, of course birth outcomes, their linking some of that. So there's a lot of things that are being, we're being blamed as being responsible for and that's sort of the premise of public health. It's about human responsibility, you've got to be responsible for your health, stop drinking, stop smoking, you better exercise, all those things are important, but if you live in an environment that doesn't lend itself to a place where you can get healthy exercise, to walk, to feel safe and then on top of that we call it, some people call it residential apartheid. No, no access to quality healthy foods…

NM: Right.

DW:…no access to an automobile or vehicle that'll get you to places where you can get access to quality and healthy foods.

NM: [cuts in] absolutely

DW: So you're stuck buying food from gas stations and things like that. OK…

NM: [cuts in] corner stores

DW:... [the built-in environment] corner stores and you're paying more for it than anybody else and you're getting the least quality. So, all the those things matter that's why we look at it w[holistically] and that's why we get on the nerves of policy makers. 'Cause, they're like "that's not environment." Right! We define the environment! Where we live, where we work, where we play, where we pray! This is our environment, right? And these are the things in our environment that's contributing to poor outcomes in our community. We are challenging, you know, this.

DW: So, um, to this issue of doctors…most of them [are] only required to have only a couple of hours in their whole educational career around environmental or occupational medicine education. They don't know! They don't know, so we have to be our own advocate, we have to bring information to them. Here's where I live and this is what my neighborhood looks like!

DW: And a lot of times, our community don't know that! So, we do what we call environmental justice tours and stuff like that and we help people understand their community through our eyes.

NM: OK.

DW: Because it's so normal, we're accustomed to it and we don't know that his is not a normal way to live. Like to live near factories, it's not normal. You don't build factories in all White communities.

NM: No, [indecipherable language] very seldom…

DW: You understand? You don't even dissect White communities with freeways. You don't do these things in places where people exist that matter! And so, our community, once they get the information they become on fire, you know it's like "well what did I, what can I do about this?" Right?

[00:55:02:00]

DW: I talk about this one young man all the time, well he was a boy, he wasn't man. Uh, so Xavier Joe, a few years ago was ten years old, he became famous because Xavier Joe could not breathe, he died in his mother's arms in the people, rightfully so, we were all focused at the time on what was going on. What was going on was that an ambulance couldn't get to him and that's how you remember Xavier Joe. But, for me it was what was he suffering from? He couldn't breathe because he had asthma and there's too many children that don't make it because they can't breathe. That's a preventable disease.

NM: Right.

DW: So, on top of [narrator pounding table] not having access to the emergency vehicle, the fact that he couldn't breathe should be the most important thing.

NM: Right.

DW: And his mom couldn't get him to a hospital. But the thing is [narrator pounding table] we need to have clean air. Right? [narrator continuously pounds table] So, everybody says "well you know people got all these other issues trying to survive and stuff." Yeah, but if you can't breathe you can't survive!

NM: Right, it's kind of essential!

DW: You Understand? [simultaneous laughing between interviewer and narrator]

DW: Just like safe drinking water, you can't get access to some drinking water what's the point of surviving?

NM: Exactly.

DW: So, those are the, those of the tenants of environmental justice. Public health moves our agenda, number one! And that yeah we've been criminalized and everything. Extremists, whatever and all we're taking about is improving public health for everybody. And looking at the environment as a venue to do that.

NM: Right! OK, hmm, hmm

DW: So my kids deserve to breathe clean air, just like your kids.

NM: Hmm, hmm.

DW: They deserve to be on playgrounds free from lead poisoning and that kind of stuff. They deserve to be in schools where they can learn and not be exposed. They deserve to live in homes and houses that are not contaminated. They deserve to be able to play outside and not breathe ozone and other things like that. Yeah, our kids deserve that. That's a basic human right. So, we have appealed to, the, uh, to, to the, uh, Nations, you know the World Health Organizations, the United Nations and stuff is saying…and we've accused the United States of failing to meet a human rights mandate.

NM: Hmm, hmm, and that is interesting because, uh, in many cases the United States is usually the one accusing other people [laughing].

DW: Exactly.

NM: You, know, um, so yeah that's definitely interesting and a lot of people you know, I guess like you said just really aren't aware you, know of all of these environmental factors that contribute to…

DW: [cuts in] absolutely.

NM: …to our poor health, um, not just our physical health but our mental health as well…

DW: Absolutely

NM: And I believe that you know in many cases people may ponder the idea, but they, they're not able to really make the connection…

DW: [cuts in] That's true.

NM…because they're not educated…

DW: [cuts in] That's true, that's true

NM:…you know on such things, so. So that's, uh, that's very interesting and then. I mean that makes me think about a lot of things because I actually live here in the city, I live in Midtown…

DW: [cuts in] OK.

NM: I live in a, ah an old building…

DW: [cuts in] OK.

NM: …um, ah, it's almost a hundred years old…

DW: Where do you live?

NM: I live, um, actually on Seward, uh, just past the boulevard…

DW: [cuts in] Oh yeah, hmm, hmm, hmm, hmm.

NM:… right off of Woodward, and, um, yeah I mean they're, they're trying to do some things I guess to improve the community, you know physically…

DW: [cuts in] Oh yeah, it's a nice neighborhood over there actually, hmm, hmm.

NM: But you know, the actual environment because there is a lot of smog and they still have a lot of buildings that are you know, you know dilapidated…

DW: [cuts in] sure.

NM:… and they're in the process of I guess trying to you know refurbish those buildings…

DW: [cuts in] Hmm, hmm.

NM: …so it kind of makes me wonder about some of the things that are going on…

DW: [cuts in] Hmm, hmm.

NM:…in the environment over there in the air, um the air we breathe. So, and, it also um, you know, bringing up the, I...the point that you made about, um, I guess like lead poisoning and so forth contributing to, uh, violence you know and a lot of um, you know and a lot of communities.

DW: That's right.

NM: It's really interesting because, um, a lot of people say "Boy, it must be something in the air," it really is!

DW: It really is! [simultaneous laughing between interviewer and narrator] Right, right, right, it really is and it's like OK what are we going to do about it?

DW: And so instead of waiting for other people to do it, that's again, this idea of being the model for it is like, we gotta do it, we can't wait for other people 'cause other people working to achieve their agendas…

NM: Right.

DW: Whatever that is. We have to work to ensure that we have an agenda and fight for that agenda.

NM: OK. Now, um in regards to, I guess, uh, fighting for this agenda and, uh, becoming more active , um, you know within the, in, in environmental safety issues, um, um, what other type of advice would you give someone that was perhaps interested in, in learning more, you know about, um, you know our environment and what the can do to actually help fight, you know pollution and so forth within our city?

[00:59:54:00]

End of Transcription

Environmental Justice Oral History Project

Walter P. Reuther Library

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Detroit, MI

Transcript of interview conducted December 5, 2014 with:

Donele Wilkins, Detroit, MI

By: Nichole L. Manlove

Manlove

Wilkins