Rukiya Dillahunt Oral History Transcription

Abstract

Rukiya Dillahunt is a retired educator and active advocate. She grew up in Charleston, South Carolina, and received her undergraduate degree from West Virginia State University. In this interview, Rukiya discusses her experience organizing with Black Workers for Justice, as well as her tenure as a teacher and assistant principal in the Wake County School System. She also provides insight about the school-to-prison pipeline and its implications for North Carolina’s youth. Rukiya is married to Ajamu Dillahunt, another prominent organizer and advocate.

Key Terms
Al Jazeera
American Postal Worker’s Union
Black United Front
Black Workers for Justice (BWFJ)
Black Workers for Justice Women’s Commission
BLCES
Calla Wright
Catholic Church
Concerned Citizens for African American Students
Charleston, South Carolina
Denmark Vesey
Duke Energy Meymandi Hall
Education
Education Justice Alliance
Enloe High School
Hamlet Fire
HKonj Coalition (Historic Thousands On Jones)
Ida May Bess
Inequality
Integration reversed
International Women’s Day
Jack Kosman
Jason Langberg
Jim Crow
Jordan Davis
Kevin Hines
Laidlaw Transportation
Legal clinics
Malcolm X
Martin Luther King Jr.
Mary E. Phillips High School
McKimmon Center
Moral Monday
National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples (NAACP)
North Carolina Association of Educators (NCAE)
National Education Association (NEA)
Police brutality
Raleigh Civic Center
Raleigh, North Carolina
Restorative Justice
Rocky Mount
Rocky Mount Undergarment Factory
Rosa Parks
School-to-Prison Pipeline
School Resource Officers (SROs)
Sherriff Harrison
Steve Edelstein
Travis Payne
Trayvon Martin
Wake County Safety Task Force
Wake County Schools
West Virginia State University
00:00:00 NANDINI SRINIVASAN: Good morning.

RUKIYA DILLAHUNT: Good morning.

SRINIVASAN: How are you doing?

DILLAHUNT: I’m doing good.

SRINIVASAN: Great, well just to start off, could you state your name, and tell us about where you were born, your siblings and your family?

DILLAHUNT: My name is Rukiya Dillahunt – I pause because my mother and father will tell you my name is Elaine. I changed my name. My family – my daughters – I have three daughters – and so they all have African names. And so at a Kwanzaa celebration in Raleigh in the 80s, they decided that my husband and I needed to change our names to African names. So they named me Rukiya Kareema. Rukiya means “she rises on high” and Kareema means, “she’s generous.” So my name, I go by Rukiya Dillahunt.

00:00:53 SRINIVASAN: Wow. And so going back to your childhood maybe, could you tell us where you were born?

DILLAHUNT: I was born in Charleston, South Carolina?

SRINIVASAN: Charleston! And how many siblings did you have?

DILLAHUNT: I have none. I’m an only child and I still hold on to my only-child syndrome.

SRINIVASAN: And what does that look like?

00:01:14 DILLAHUNT: That looks like – I like everything that’s mine to be mine. I share a lot and I’m very generous, but I have certain things – like magazines – that I like, that I order, I like to read them first. I will lend them out after I read. I don’t lend books out because they never get returned. You know how people are. I grew up with my first cousins, my father’s brother and his family lived right next door to us in Charleston and so they had four siblings so I grew up with them like they were my brothers and sisters. So it wasn’t that bad. I always had company.

SRINIVASAN: Absolutely. And so your parents?
DILLAHUNT: My parents are deceased. And my mother was 75 and my father died at 85.

SRINIVASAN: When you were growing up, what did they do?

00:02:11 DILLAHUNT: Well I grew up during the Jim Crow days. So I went through drinking colored water. But I also taste white water and it was the same. I got in trouble with my parents because they said – even as a child you can get arrested for drinking colored water. I rode on the back of the bus, like Rosa Parks in many, many southern cities, many youth sat in the front of the bus when they were tired of sitting in the back of the bus. So some of my friends and I did the same thing. 00:02:45 In 1963, I was asked by the NAACP to integrate a movie theater. Some high school friends of mine, we went and we did. We went into the movie theater and in that part of the time, the struggle wasn’t as developed as it is now. At that time, black people sat in the balcony of the theater and you usually got in when it was very late. They had special showings and we never sat to the front. And so we went in. for me, that also showed because most of the people my friends who were with me, we were light-skinned. So they used that strategy and we got in, and at that point, we said that we were Negros and we got arrested. 00:03:41 My dad was active. He was an educator and he had to secretly belong to the NAACP. At that point, you couldn’t be an open member if you were an educator. And he didn’t want me – he knew that I probably would get involved – but he really didn’t want me to get involved my senior year of high school. So when I got arrested, I was kind of scared to say I had to call someone to get me out. And he was very proud that we did that. And that was my first civil disobedience piece. 00:04:14 From there, I went to college at West Virginia State University – an institute in West Virginia we used to call destitute because there’s nothing there but the college and a carbide chemical plant. So that was kind interesting as I started to learn about the environment, that I thought about four years being there and all my friends that lived there, in Institute, and being really in contact with all the chemicals. We would wake up in the morning and go to class and it would be foggy – you really couldn’t see in front of you and we had no idea scientifically what that really meant. 00:04:57 My high school days – if you want me to go back to that – I went to an all-black catholic school from K-12 grade and I had black nuns or some Puerto Rican nuns. It was really historical because there were maybe two nuns organizations that were people of color. They were out of Baltimore, Maryland and they still have a convent there in Baltimore, Maryland. When I’m in Baltimore, I try to see if some of my teachers are still alive – most of them have passed, but there are a couple that still are there. That was very interesting and historically, people have a hard time seeing that – or
believing that – there is a whole sects of black and Puerto Rican nuns that exist. That’s how I got my elementary and high school education.

00:06:09 SRINIVASAN: There’s a number of things in that I’d like to go back and touch on, but maybe we can start with your education in this all-black convent. Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

DILLAHUNT: So it was a school – a regular school building – and one of the things that really, I think, bothered most of the students there was that at that particular time in history we only got the old textbooks or no textbooks, that the white church – Catholic Church – had. That’s how we would get our textbooks, they would be passed down. I think for me, a lot of that inequalities began to be raised and we would ask the nuns, so why our textbooks are raggy? Why some pages are missing? But with that being said, it was still a quality education, because I did very well on the exams to get into college. A lot of my friends when I went to West Virginia State – a lot of my friends from the north and California came and they had to take a placement test. I didn’t have to do a placement test. I was like “wow” you know. That, for me, showed that it was still, no matter, that the textbooks was old and outdated and perhaps a lot of pages missing, that the nuns took a lot of time to really educate us with high quality information. Except, we never had a science lab. They got that way after I graduated. The schools were fully integrated. And I did okay in biology. Chemistry I struggled with, but I did okay in biology.

00:08:07 SRINIVASAN: So would you call that your first experience with racial inequality?

DILLAHUNT: I think so. And also just in growing up, in the south during that time, you see the differences. We had a church, which was segregated with all black in the Catholic Church. And then that was a small church, very nice. But then the white church in town, whether it was the cathedral or sacred heart, was much larger and different neighborhoods. I began to question things and growing up and my father and mother particularly my father, he would just say “just remember, you smart as anybody else, you can do what anybody else can do and you’re no better than anybody else” and so that’s really a thought that I carried for the rest of the life.

00:09:00 SRINIVASAN: And then, you mentioned that your father was not too keen on you getting involved so how did that start? How did you start getting involved?

DILLAHUNT: a couple of my friends – matter of fact – it was a guy that I grew up with, he said, “Yea, you know, the NAACP trying to look for some
young folks to go to a movie theater. You want to do it?” and I always was a
risk taker. I played sports. I played basketball from 8th grade all the way up
to 12th grade and I played in college as well. And I just said, “Well yea,
maybe there’s something we can do. I tried to get my cousins involved but
they said no, we’re not going to do that. So I went with some
friends. And so that’s how, you know, it started. I guess after I got to
college and graduating from there, particularly, I think doing college life –
Kennedy – so many things happened. You had the March on Washington, all
of that was happening and just having the experience of meeting people
from around the country going to school there because even though it was in
West Virginia we had many folks from New York, Detroit, Chicago, California,
a lot of their parents sent them too. And even though it’s in West Virginia, it
is still a historically black college. But it was integrated very early with the
commuters; they are from Charleston, West Virginia coming to there.

SRINIVASAN: I’d love to touch more on that point. When you
were in high school, it was sort of the throes of the civil rights movement.
What was that experience like?

DILLAHUNT: Looking back on it, I guess I always said and my parents
always told me that I always had this surge for just knowing things
differently. I could not understand particularly in religion, if the Catholic
Church – and we were Catholics – why wouldn’t everybody be together and
why were things segregated? So that took quite a bit of time to kind of place
in my mind. And growing up during those eras, you see the
inequality is so there, you know, whether you have to use a water fountain
that says “colored water” which was always dirty and then the white water,
or you couldn’t go to regular bathrooms in businesses. Like Woolworths’ – we
didn’t go to Woolworth’s until – I can’t remember, till my high school I think,
I might have been a senior when they let us come in actually shopping. We
had to go through the backdoor or wait until the stores were almost
closed. So it was really there in your face. I wouldn’t go to
Woolworth’s now if it was open. The other store in Charleston was Craig’s 5
and Dime. I wouldn’t go there when it was open to folks. When people treat
you that way and even though the little bit of opportunities that you have, I
think you can still have your own, what I call my “personal boycott.”

SRINIVASAN: So what else do you “personally boycott?”

DILLAHUNT: I think back in those days, I think those two were one of the
main places because that’s where everybody wanted to go. We had
opportunity as time developed – I believe it was ’63. Where that 5 & Dime
wanted some folks to come in and they were willing to take some African-
American Black teenagers that come in and work – it was Easter time –
during Easter baskets. Making Easter baskets and stuff. My girlfriend’s mother worked there and she encouraged her daughter and I to do that. So I did do that part, you know. In order to earn a little bit of cash. 00:13:12 So, you know, I think that I was a lifeguard in my high school days at our community pool which was black, and that was good and even though I had an opportunity to work my first employer the head of the park and recreation was white. His name – I can’t remember his name – it’s Adam – he my basketball coach was the director of the pool so he hired me to work and from there I got to know Mr. Adams and he’s the one who hired me so that was kind of interesting. 00:13:50 My first experience with particularly a white man in the employment arena. On the street we lived that was one, two, three, four houses that were black. My parents, my uncle and aunt, and cousins next door. And then another neighbor and another neighbor on the corner. But the rest of our block was white, which was kind of interesting so that’s how I grew up. The neighborhood is downtown by the citadel – you heard of the citadel – so it was right down the street from the citadel – and right round the corner from a park called Hampton Park and it’s still there. 00:14:33 Now, and I just heard that they put a statue up for Denmark Vesey which is good and then they have another plaque citing some slavery information. So some of the history is now being restored, though a lot of it I didn’t know growing up. You know, cause that’s never really really taught. Even through the catholic school, we didn’t learn very much about – you know – black history.

00:15:04 SRINIVASAN: Could you tell me if you remember – was there anything striking about your first experience having a white male be your employer?

DILLAHUNT: No, you know, it was okay at that part. I’ll tell you what was really striking and this goes a little further to when I went to West Virginia State University. 00:15:23 I didn’t know that there were white people going to school there. [Laughs] and so when I got to – I took PE – I was going to major in physical Ed. And when I got there and there was – you know – my classes had white people, I called my dad and was like “whyyyy? Howwww? Did you send me there?” My dad and my mom was like “no, you chose to go there” and I did because I didn’t want to South Carolina state. I just wanted the experience again of growing, you know. And so I’ll never forget this. In PE, you know, you play all sports. 00:16:08 So I was in the class and playing field hockey and Karen Jarvis – I remember her name – she was my first real white friend. And she hit me! With the field hockey stick. And I really didn’t like that. And so we had an encounter and from that day on we became best friends. And what’s really really encouraging. Is that I go to homecoming – some years I miss it – but I still go back to homecoming. About three or four years ago, I go back, hadn’t seen Karen in years. And
she came on campus because she heard I was there. And so that was really amazing. And so we still have – we don’t communicate – but when I go to West Virginia and she’s around, she’ll come and see me so that was my first experience that I think that helped me to really integrate myself because there was a lot of white students. 00:17:11 We had in – I don’t know – 64, 65, Jet and Ebony magazine came down to do a story on West Virginia State. Mainly because it was integration reverse. Because all the students that were commuters that came on campus and came to school there were white. So they actually outnumbered the African-American students there – you know – 00:17:40 but we still controlled the campus. As far as like Student Government you know, still had all the sororities, fraternities, all the clubs were still controlled then, by the black students. And it was you know, I think by my senior year some of them became integrated in the social aspect of the college life. And there was one that I can remember – one white woman – who actually during – I didn’t pledge into a sorority – but one white woman did pledge into the Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority there on campus.

00:18:25 SRINIVASAN: How did campus react?

DILLAHUNT: There was fine! I mean, we were fine, I mean, you know, everybody seemed, we didn’t have any – as far as my experience the first time with e field hockey and Karen – other than that, everything was really fine and specially with the sports and you know, classroom situation. They were there from like early in the morning to afternoon, and then they left and then became again, all black.

00:18:43 SRINIVASAN: So then how did you get back into advocacy work and those types of work?

DILLAHUNT: Okay, how did I get involved?

SRINIVASAN: If that’s too broad of a question, I can narrow it down.

00:19:04 DILLAHUNT: Yea, I mean, I can take it back to my first – I think – advocacy before I got into being real “political” started with my oldest daughter and a good friend who were, at that point, living in New Paltz, New York. And we had my girlfriend and her husband had a daughter the same age as my oldest. 00:19:40 And we noticed that her development was slower than my oldest and we noticed that my daughter and some other friends always allowed her to do whatever she wanted. You know how kids play and take toys and they never bothered her, they just allowed her to do that so it was like they had an instinct or feeling that she was probably a little different. 00:20:07 So I – at that point – was a stay at home mom and
I my husband, thank goodness, of 47 years, said to me, that “you need to go find you a job again or you need to go back to school.’ Because I think I was really in to that stay-at-home mom stuff back then, that was still in the early 70s. And so I decided to go back to school and the state university at New Paltz, had an opening – a new program rather in special ed. – master’s in mental retardation. At that time, simultaneously, my girlfriend and her husband had taken their child to the doctor and found out that she was mentally challenged. And so I said, “Hm, this is a good thing. Now I’ll go to school for that and then I can help them out.” And learning what I did, and so I started in mental retardation special ed. Taught there at – in upstate New York – in what they call ‘Bolseys’. That’s an organization that actually is BLCES and I can’t remember – Board of Education – I can’t remember exactly what it stands for but I can probably find out for you.

And, then I started then getting – I got a class – I got my master’s I began to teach, began then to realize that they were the ones that people had to advocate for. For needs and for – you know – it was a very good experience because in New York – in upstate at that point they weren’t in like dilapidated buildings or in the basement, they were in the regular school but there were still challenges. So that might be my first sense of advocating for what I called “people who are always needing some help at a particular time.” I think, yea, I would call that – and then I guess from getting involved with the African Liberation movement and being in New York and at that point in time there was the Black Power Movement and reading and living in New York and being experienced with learning about Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, all of this is really there and realizing that even though things had somewhat changed in and integration had begun, there was still a lot of work to be done in reference to inequities and the segregation of peace even whether it was New York or particularly the south. That things had changed – and had not changed – in the sense of a great improvement. Learned a lot about African American history and about just struggle and that things won’t change automatically and that it takes a mass movement to do that.

SRINIVASAN: So is that how you ended up back in the south?

DILLAHUNT: Back in the south, my parents was still here and my in-laws moved – retired – in Gloucester, Virginia. As time – my parents got older – my husband’s parents retired in Virginia, we were in upstate New York and what happened is like – we would drive because we had kids to Charleston to see my parents and we would stop in Raleigh because – or Durham – because my cousins, I had cousins living here. And so we would stop here and continue 5 hours (at that time) to Charleston. Coming and going to Charleston, my husband always would tell me “You know, Charleston just has the wealth of history and struggle. We should
look about here” we were always learning about organizing and organizing in labor – in particular because we were saying that the system couldn’t remain the same and people continued to be oppressed under the same system and we were talking about change. We looked at that and then my mom got sick and I was pregnant with my last daughter and then the pediatrician then said that “You cannot travel”. I was at that point where I couldn’t travel and I’m like “Oh, I’m an only child I got to be there”. I made it through that piece and from that point on; we looked at the possibility of moving south and looking at – and learning and reading politically about the riches of the south and the struggle. And said that it would be good. 00:25:47 The other piece was that my two daughters – my oldest and middle daughter – Dara and Kimba were beginning school there in New Paul’s and it was ideal. It was ideal. It was a campus school. It was highly integrated. We had no problems with racial things cause it was really an educational school. It was really good and they had the experience of having lots of white friends – learning how to ice skate. Doing all these nice things. 00:26:23 And I said, you know, it’s not the real world. New Paul’s is not the real world for some African American young girls. That was another reason I really wanted them to get the experience of living in the south and believe me, the first day they went to school – or the second they went to school in Raleigh – they got the experience 00:26:45 where a Vietnamese little girl that lived in our apartment building called them a nigger. They was like, “Ma!” and I’m like, “real world. Real world.” And so that was really earth shattering to them but then it brought them to reality to where they are living now. That it was totally different than New Paul’s.

SRINIVASAN: So I see that your husband is also involved in organizing work. Is that something he’s always been involved in or how has that influenced your work?

00:27:18 DILLAHUNT: Yea, I think both of us together. He started out reading a lot of stuff and like “you got to read this and read that and go to this meeting and that meeting” and both of us the interest grew somewhat together. He started out with some of his career on the college university and then when he moved here, he wanted to go to work in labor plant. And he did. And that was real educational for him as well as me, and it worked out very well for us because he was on the third shift, which means that he went to work late and got home early in the morning, but then he was home if my girls got sick, he would be home or take them to the doctor because I was teaching and it was very hard to take off at that time. So I think he is a lot active in labor. 00:28:22 He became president of his union in Raleigh after he changed jobs of the American Postal Workers’ Union. So he stayed there for quite a long time. Ironically, he and I both were president at the same time. I was president of my teacher’s union local in Wake County, and
he was president of the Postal Workers’ Union, and believe it or not our offices really joined and we had nothing to do with it. We were in the same building, and so it was really easy to work late at night because he was right next door and I was right next door. 00:29:00 The Independent did a story on us back then too, calling us the two troublemakers. I don’t know what year it is, but I could tell you the year. So we have been working pretty close together and in the same organization, particularly the Black Workers for Justice. His is a lot concentrated on the labor piece, and I do a lot of the labor stuff based with BWFJ, but mine too I still have that hand in the education world because I feel that I love kids, I love students, and it’s heartening to see what the education system is doing to students of color. I think it can be fixed, but it’s going to take a lot of work to restructure what needs to be done.

00:29:58 SRINIVASAN: So I’d love to dig more into the Black Workers for Justice. Could you tell me about how it started and what your role was?

DILLAHUNT: Sure. Let’s see...I got to go back a little bit because some of us came down in the seventies here, and the first organization that I belonged to here was the Black United Front. And that developed and became a national organization in the eighties. That developed a lot from police brutality in Raleigh. 00:30:39 It’s ironic that people- I say progressive people- but people who know about movements and know things are wrong, we all met and it was the Charlotte Three and the Wilmington Ten, people were rallying around those groups and trying to get them out of prison. Some of us met then, in the area in Raleigh. It’s a lot of the marches that would be in Raleigh and the Black United Front, the same thing. 00:31:14 So from there Black Workers for Justice, it was Kmart workers, women, who actually started, they were being mistreated, not paying fully, I think somebody got fired, and they came in Rocky Mount and came to one of our organizers there and we found out about it and started working with them trying to fight with them to get their job back and end there case. And from that grew the spark to say we need to have an organization of workers. So that’s how Black Workers for Justice became through the various struggles. 00:32:00 We also had developed, I think in ’86, the Women’s Commission. Black Workers for Justice Women's Commission. I want to spend a little time on that because what the women in Black Workers for Justice always fought for was the fact that we would be in leadership roles, whether it was we could call in the Executive Committee, or the National Coordinating Committee, but it had to be majority of women or at least 50% of women to be on in the organization. And that has held to this day for 31 years. And back then, that’s a really big step particularly for African-American women because the quote-un-quote feminist movement, people assumed was white, but there were lots of African-American women struggling within there
organizations, whether it was SNCC or Black Panther Party, to really uphold their leadership roles and not be seen as somebody always fixing the food or doing daycare. And I want to say this just jumping in, with Black Workers for Justice what we do, the Women’s Commission every March 8th usually we have a program for International Women’s Day. What we decided to do organizationally was that the men would be in charge of daycare, and food, and setup, but they could not set up like the technology piece or anything like that because we wanted to learn to do that ourselves, one, but we also wanted to empower other women workers: how to conduct a meeting, how to write leaflets, and how to begin to organize your work committees yourself. So we did that as part of the Women’s Commission’s strategy of empowering women. 00:34:11 We do have our programs; men are not allowed to come. People think, “Is that sectarian?” It’s not. Because what we found out is that women are more ready to speak when men are not around and oftentimes if you in a forum, or you in a meeting, or even a classroom with men, they dominate the conversation or at least try to. And some sisters, and women in general, step back. And our thing is they need to step up. So we want to provide what we call “the safe space” for women to be able to share what their feelings are and to struggle against male supremacy. 00:35:02 Stuff that whether it happens at home— and we had to be clear that we’re not trying to break up your marriage, we’re not trying to break up your relationship, but there are certain things that you have to do too to be empowered: not only on your job, but also in your home. What we did find out, and it’s not strange, is that women often have a difficult time going to meetings at night, and that’s when we would hold meetings. One, because they might need daycare. Two, men always think that perhaps they were going out to do something else, so the jealousy question and non-trust issue comes up. So that was something that we continued to struggle with as we continued to really encourage women to get active and stuff. And I think today it seems to be a lot different than back then. 00:36:04 The Women’s Commission- I spent quite a bit of time too organizing plants that were majority women, and that took place in Rocky Mount. There was the Rocky Mount Undergarment Plant; they sold and made underwear for Victoria Secret. 00:36:27 We would go to the plant early in the morning because a worker came and said they were having problems whether it was around race, but a lot of it was around sexual harassment. So what we did, we got up early like the hint of first shift, get there at six, and we started passing out leaflets. Well when we got there-to the Rocky Mount Undergarment Plant- the sisters would not take our leaflets. I was like, “Wow.” But what it was that they were afraid. One of the reasons they were afraid was the boss or the manager, supervisor, would be right there. And they tried to run us away saying, “No you can’t be on this property.” We said, “No we’re on the sidewalk. This doesn’t belong to you this belongs to Rocky Mount.” And so we stayed there and we were kind of like drawn back
with “wow” and then we had to really realize one, still the south, two, really not union real anti-union and here we are talking about workers organizing themselves. So we went back again and did the leaflet again and the sisters started taking the flyer and out that developed a workplace committee. **00:37:55** It was very successful, and we developed several women out of that plant as really good fighters. The plant- once you start organizing- they have a strategy to move further. And I believe that plant moved to Mexico. Along with other plants in Rocky Mount that people had started to look at organizing as well. **00:38:27** There was another sister, Ida May Bess, she was working in a plant, I can’t remember where but it was down east, and she got fired because she was trying to organize a committee, an in-house committee. We got quite a few workers there at the plant, we picket down there, and what BWFJ did at that particular time, we were always reaching to the North where there was more unions and other unions to come down South and try to organize the workers here, but it was difficult for them to come, **00:39:20** I think they didn’t see a need or a great need; like just the forum that we had Monday night here, that people talking about unions coming down now or wanting to come down now because they see the south as key, we’ve been saying that since the late seventies early eighties. I’m glad that people are realizing it, and hopefully we get some real good footage out of them. **00:39:48** But we did outreach to a lot of other unions who are members, who would come down to our annual banquet. And they were friends politically, and really supported Black Workers for Justice. And what we did was a workers’ tour. Not only was that ideal for the workers to get to see unions, and how unions function, or the programs that they’re able to have, but it also helped the people in the North to hear about the terrible conditions that workers had even today, compared to what they have in the North, or Chicago, or California. **00:40:34** That was I think for BWFJ, Black Workers for Justice, was a highlight in our work because it expanded the educational piece concretely to the workers; they were able to travel, one, two, they were able to really get to go to states where they had organized labor and see how unions function and also to spread the word there what was happening in the South.

**00:41:13** DILLAHUNT: So for some of the tactics that we used was always having workers to see that they needed to develop a workers’ committee inside the plant. That we would be there on the outside, but the power became with them being inside the plant because that’s where they work. So that was one of the main strategies. So we would say all you need is maybe three, four people inside and they would come to a meeting, and we would strategize and help them. We would also help them do leaflets to pass out, and we said that if you don’t want to pass them out inside the plant, you may pass them out as people leave, or when you’re in the parking lot in certain places, or we can come and pass them out. So those were some of
the strategies. 00:42:17 That form empowers workers from the very beginning. Other than seeing a union organizer coming in and trying to do that, though they are well needed. But a lot of time, workers need to be empowered because they are the leaders inside the plant themselves. So we did that and we always had tried to get into some of the churches down in Rocky Mount and win some of the ministers over because we realized that’s where a lot of folks – particularly African-American folks – go there and try to get them involved. 00:42:56 Always try to pull in coalitions of different organizations of people to unite with the work. 00:43:08 We always set up legal clinics there in Rocky Mount, and the legal clinics were with some of our lawyers’ friends who supported Black Workers for Justice: Steve Edelstein and Travis Payne are real good labor lawyers. And Jack Kosman. They would come down on Saturdays – alternating on Saturdays – to set up legal clinics, talking to workers about if they had any trouble on the job and things that they can do or even any personal experiences that they may had. That was another strategy trying to put that in place. 00:43:55 Down in Rocky Mount where most of the organizing went, we would have white workers that would be interested and they would be part of the in-house, in the factory worker rooms, right? Some of them would be a part of that. And their family members would get upset, “why you involved with this Black Workers for Justice?” 00:44:29 This one woman, she said, “Look, they’re helping me with my job and nobody else is doing anything and we having” What was it? Schlage locks, and keys – go look on your keys sometime, it’ll say Schlage lock. And she was very active in the committee and we had a center at that time in Rocky Mount. She would come to the center – just drop in or come to the meetings there. There were white men workers, as well. 00:45:03 One day, we have some pictures, where the white workers and the black workers – our porch was falling in – and so they were there. One guy had on his Confederate flag at and he was there knocking the wood in and putting. We was like, “yea that’s a pretty good scene.” People united based on their rights within the workplace. That’s really empowering and very supportive. 00:45:38 People never had any issue; the only thing is that is for Black Workers for Justice, you have to be black to be in the organization. But you can surely be a supporter. We had lots and lots of white supporters who believed in what we were doing and support us whether it is on a committee or whether it is doing other work historically, even at the beginning.

00:46:02 SRINIVASAN: You just listed a lot of projects that the Black Workers for Justice is engaged in. Could you explain to me how BWFJ is able to keep all of that organized? What was that structure like?

DILLAHUNT: Well we had – at one point – we had what we called a national coordinating committee. That was seven of us who was on what we call a
national committee trying to extend it at one point. We really wanted it to be in the South. At one point we had a chapter in Rocky Mount and we still have that. We have a chapter in Raleigh, we still have that. We have some of our members – our leaders moved down to Atlanta. So we had a chapter there in Atlanta, beginning to really grow. 00:46:57 At that point, we were really seeing it expand. By bringing in members workers – as members – that was very good and helping us to grow. We never grew immensely but we grew enough and had dedicated people working on the organization to keep it going. 00:47:24 You always have a core of folks that’s there, and we keep pushing and banging and trying to really develop other workers to come in and other people in the community to come in and be members. 00:47:42 It’s hard, I think, and this is my view because for us, a lot of our statements, a lot of our beliefs, a lot of our views are pretty advanced in what we see in regards to organizing and work labor. And it’s different. Much different than the NAACP and other community organizations that you might find because we’re always looking at how do you change the system. 00:48:16 Basically, to help workers and everyday working people have a life that is as quality as the so-called “1%” and if not the 1% than at least to the point that they can have a living wage. Because I think that it is fair to see that everyone needs health insurance. That everybody – here in the South you need a car. We don’t have transportation like New York and Chicago, where you can jump on the train and people don’t even need a car. 00:48:53 You have certain things too, that you really need. Workers here, by not having a livable wage, and not even the minimum wage being so low, and your rights – not being able to collectively bargain. We have to keep pushing that and to make sure that things do change for the majority of people, not only in the south but the majority of people in the country. 00:49:33 AZARIA VERDIN: So you told us a lot of interesting things about your work with Black Workers for Justice, and I was wondering if you could wrap up with a memory, or an experience that really stood out to you while working with that organization. 00:49:45 DILLAHUNT: Okay, I’ll try to share two, and I’ll try to do it quickly. One was the International Women’s Day Program that we sponsored in Atlanta, Georgia. We had women come in from South Africa, Brazil, Mexico, I’m trying to see, it was so many states, and then we brought a bus load of folks from Raleigh and Durham. Sisters from Raleigh and Durham. And it was like a two-day conference, and it was just a highlight of all the work, the (inaudible), the workshops from South Africa, the sisters there in South Africa did some workshops on their struggle in South Africa but also around feminist workshops and empowering women. That was good. The sisters from Mexico, you know, we had various workshops. 00:50:47 We had just that night, on Saturday night, we had just a big festival, and panel
discussions, and so that was one of the highlights, I think, for us in our organizing.

The other one was for us, as an organization, organizing the protest, the national protest, around the Hamlet Fire. You know 25 workers died in Hamlet at a chicken plant, because the owner would lock the door because he said that somebody was stealing chickens. And the plant caught fire, and 25 workers died, and the majority of them were women. And so we organized, Black Workers for Justice organized a national march, and they came on Hamlet, and it was the most powerful thing I think for us as well, but it also brought a lot of people again from all over the country to Hamlet, to really protest what had happened. And that owner of the plant did go to jail based on the negligence of all the, you know, negligence and broken laws that he had within that plant. And so for us that was a major victory.

VERDIN: Do you remember what year that was? Whereabout, in the ballpark?

DILLAHUNT: No, it had to be in the, I believe 90’s.

VERDIN: Okay.

DILLAHUNT: Yeah, I can, I will give you that date. I’ll send that date back. But you can look it up, the Hamlet Fire. It made national news.

VERDIN: Wow. And I’m just curious you know, you organized on a national level; what were some of the things you did in order (inaudible)

DILLAHUNT: Well you know, I told you about the, early on, about us having connection with various unions and organizations in the North, as well as in California and other states, and so we put a call out saying we wanted to organize a march on Hamlet. And you know, you say it to a few people and then all of a sudden it grows because that issue was so devastating. And talking about the violations in a workplace, that pretty much folks in the North would not even think about somebody locking a plant because you’re stealing chickens, or thinking that you’re stealing chickens, and you’re not being paid enough. The workers in the chicken and turkey plants lose limbs, fingers, all kinds of things happen to them accidentally, you know, accidents, and then they don’t have health insurance. It’s not like they have paid health insurance as well, so I think it was a major travesty in the labor world in itself.
00:53:52 VERDIN: Wow, that’s amazing. We’re going to transition just a little bit. You told us earlier that you began your teaching career in New York. And so I’m just wondering, when you moved to North Carolina, how did your teaching experience change?

00:54:11 DILLAHUNT: Okay. Well, when I came to North Carolina in ’78, I came to Durham first, to look for a job, and then Durham wasn’t responding fast enough and I went to Raleigh and just walked into central office at that time, and I met this black man who ended up being a very good friend and he was assistant superintendent. And I told him I had a master’s in Special Ed, he said “A master’s in Special Ed? I don’t think we have anybody in Raleigh with a master’s in Special Ed” at that time, that was in 1978. And so I got hired. What I did notice was that in New York, we were already in schools. 00:55:09 Some of the special Ed classes in Wake County were in schools, but were still in a basement. When I got hired, it was at now Enloe High School in Raleigh, but it was Aycock, it was a middle school at that time, the principal informed me, he said, “You’re very good, I don’t know anything about Special Ed, so the program is yours, you just tell me what you need.” So that was a real good stance at that particular time for special Ed. And so I think the difference was, I think that here in Wake County they were really learning how to conduct, and at that point a lot of Special Ed teachers didn’t have a master’s in Special Ed, they weren’t trained in Special Ed. Like now you can get it from the very beginning of education you can go straight into Special Ed, 00:56:14 and just have an undergrad degree or specialty in Special Ed, or ESL, there was no such thing as ESL, English as a Second Language, and so people were teaching in Special Ed who basically weren’t trained to do Special Ed down in the south. And so that was a lot different. But for me, I was really 1) getting more experience, but 2) at an advantage because what I would request, and where I was, my principal was very lenient, saying if you need this for your students you can do it. I remember when I asked permission to take my class off campus, he was a little hesitant. I was like, no, we’re going to catch the bus, this the CAT bus, and go down to Wake Med, and then we’re going to go downtown Raleigh and give them experience to learn how to catch the bus. 00:57:21 At that point I was teaching trainable mentally challenged young adults, they were ages 13- I think at that time I had from 13-16. The funny story was that I didn’t know how to catch the bus because I drove. So anyway, we got on the bus and coming home I missed my stop to the school, and I’m like “Oh my God.” And so I had a teacher’s assistant, and I had to call my principal and he was like, “Mrs. D, you have those children, where are you?” and it was funny, but it wasn’t funny because I was scared, and I was like “Oh my God, I’m probably going to get fired.” But anyway, he sent the school bus, you know we had a activity bus; he sent one of the coaches to pick me up with my kids. And so from that day on, he talked about me in the faculty meeting
being lost with 18 students, 00:58:20 but at that point it was a real whirl for people to understand on my faculty that that’s a learning experience for my students, but also I told them for me, because now I know how to catch the CAT bus. So those experiences were good. But I think on a whole, Wake County in particular, and I think in North Carolina, they have really developed around the area of special Ed. I think the one weakness that is still there is around the Individual Education Plan, the IEP. They don’t hold teachers accountable for the objectives that are there. What I wrote, my kids did. If not, the parent and I agreed that we would remove it.

00:59:10 VERDIN: What was it about being in the classroom that really fostered your passion for education?

00:59:19 DILLAHUNT: I think it’s the students. It’s really the students. And Special Ed-first I taught Physical Ed, but not here, that was in New York. When I went into special education, they are your best friends. See I’m a touchy feely person and they’re touchy feely, so we would have a good time. And they would know when I was having a bad morning; I would just get several little rubs. Just to see them accomplish what we take-people who so-called normal- what we take for granted, and to see them accomplish something that’s really challenging- and their happiness. And then also parents were always thankful for what you did. 01:00:20 Though often I had to struggle with parents to show that their student needed to be independent, and they would have to allow somebody like Mark to have a key to his house so when he gets home he can go in and fix him something in the microwave. I said that’s why they have microwaves because you just push a button. I would struggle with them with independence, and the main thing I would have struggle with them about is that their students had a right to move out, to go to a group home, and live independent from them. And that was the hardest thing for parents with special students to want to let go. One parent told me, “Well suppose he don’t make it?” I said, “Well your normal son went to college and came back home, so he can come back home.” And so the reality of that set in. 01:01:20 So I think students. And then Enloe, when I was at Enloe, I integrated my class within the school system. We were segregated. I moved from the second floor to the first floor. I had one of the best classrooms in Wake County initially because the principal, the second principal I had, he decided that he was going to move me into a Home Ec room. So I had a washing machine, a dishwasher, I had a stove-all my colleagues would come in my classroom in the morning and have breakfast, you know you got the coffee on, you got this on, and so it became a social thing. But what it did, it made them aware of my students. So that was really the first step in integrating my trainable challenged students into the school. And then I asked could we do they learn how to clean the tables in the cafeteria as part of a lesson, 01:02:27 because
maybe they’ll get a job working in a fast food restaurant, or a restaurant, and so I also had students come in, they had at that time, I don’t know if they still have what they call peppy students, and that’s students who take Physical Education but it’s not a regular P.E class. Like if you’re interested in doing like a community service piece, and so they would come into my classroom and volunteer. And I had several students who went into Special Ed based on their experience. And I see them in Wake County all the time and they always thank me for having given them that experience with Special Ed students.

So, your question, I would say- and then I changed my field to the alternative high school in Raleigh and that became my love and that was another advocacy piece. I felt that Special Ed had their federal laws now, 01:03:27 and their parents were fighters, and it will continue. But then when I moved to Phillips High School, Mary Phillips High School, in Raleigh, I realized then that’s my first encountering, realizing that students are pushed out of school. I didn’t have the concept of school-to-prison pipeline, but I had the prism of school, push-out, drop out. When I went to the alternative school. Because when I read the folders of the students and saw minor offences that they had done, and it got them 1) either to be arrested, 2) to get suspended long term and get so far behind that they don’t go back to school. So I became really passionate about that population, 01:04:26 and was really, really glad, because that was a risk-taking move for me, because I had been to Enloe since 1978, and I went out of the classroom for three years to be president of the union, and then I came back in ‘95, no, ‘96 I think, and then I went to Phillips part-time and then I went full-time there at Phillips. So it was an experience. And I realized that this population would need more advocacy. So, I did a lot of things at Phillips to make sure those students graduated with a high school diploma. And those were kids that the other-at that point in time 15, 16 high schools in Wake County- that had been either pushed out, dropped out, based on suspensions, and this was their second chance to get a high school diploma.

1:05:32 VERDIN: Wow. I definitely want to come back to the school-to-prison pipeline, but I want to back track for just a little bit. Can you talk more about what went into your – because I know that your organizing overlapped with your teaching at some point, so talk a little bit about what it was like to balance that, and then tell us what went into your decision to take a break to be president, and then how you decided to come back into the classroom.

1:05:57 DILLAHUNT: It does overlap. And I’ll start with what made me want to be president was that I became active because I believe in everybody rights, right? And so people ask me, “How you advocate for students,
advocate for teachers, and advocate for parents?” It’s easy. If you’re a person of principle, right is right and wrong is wrong. So you make your judgment call, and what is correct and best for the student or the parent, or for teachers. So I wanted to, I did advocacy work. I said I was involved with North Carolina Association of Educators, and then I was involved with my local, I did a lot of local stuff with teachers, and we fought for- you know, my age, and my retirees, we have an organization too, we fought for the tenure and career status; 01:07:00 that’s how it got there. We fought for that, that wasn’t given to us. We fought for the salary increases for many years, because when I came here I lost about nine, ten thousand dollars from New York. That’s how powerful, yeah, I always said, I told my husband that the other day, I said, “You know, if I had retired in New York, hmm.” But I’m glad I moved here. It’s amazing that all the issues that we struggled for many years that was taken away last year. So it’s disheartening because teachers here too are workers. So that’s how I align myself. A lot of times we use this word as the profession. But we need to look at our workplace because we really don’t have a real positive environment a lot of times in your schools. 01:08:07 And you don’t have a lot of benefits that they keep trying to take away. So I kind of merged that with the right of teachers to organize, and they have rights, but also in our jobs, and our job description, and what we do on a daily basis, we have right to make sure that every child has a quality education, because that’s a human right. For us to be as teachers, we have to believe that education is a human right and educate every child, no matter what color they are, no matter if they’re middle class or if they’re coming from a home. I really hate for people to use the word, and use poverty, because there is poverty, but poverty doesn’t stop anybody from learning. So there are things that we need to really restructure in the education system, 01:09:05 but there are things that students as well need to do, as well as parents, you know, being active. So I kind of merged myself into all three, but I really enjoyed doing teacher advocacy work; I did a lot of really good things for teachers and bus drivers in Wake County when I was president. At that particular time, see, merit pay isn’t nothing new, they tried to give us merit pay back in the ‘90’s when I was president, and what happened was teachers across the state started making the grades that they didn’t think everybody was going to get, and they thought they were going to have a few teachers to get this bonus...so the state ran out of money. So Wake County had to put money in that. 01:10:06 And when I became president, it was that summer, I knew it was 3.5 million dollars in the budget, but I had to find it. So I got some folks I know who know math, and I found 3.5 millions dollars, and I advocated, I had the teachers advocated, and that was when Wake County took that 3.5 million dollars, because I kept saying “that’s teacher money, and you can’t take our money,” that 3.5 belonged to teachers, and I asked them to raise our local supplement. It was the first time in ten years that the teachers in Wake
County got an increase in their local supplement. And I also gave some to the teacher assistants and the bus drivers. I was one of the first presidents to organize bus drivers because in NEA, National Educator’s Association, bus drivers are members. 01:11:07 In the South, particularly in North Carolina, they allow bus drivers to join and teacher assistants, but they wouldn’t give them voting rights, and that was wrong. I always fought being another-leading the way- look, you can’t ask people to pay dues and don’t give them a voting right. And so we struggled around that, and finally bus drivers, teacher assistants became what I call full time members with voting rights. I made sure that they got some of the money as well even though they don’t have supplement, because they are the lowest paid in the teaching profession. And some areas they get a lot more than what we get down here, but still their salary’s not based on your master’s degree and things like that.

01:12:06 VERDIN: What were some of the tactics you used as president to get other members on board?

01:12:12 DILLAHUNT: My BWFJ organizing skills. I need to share this with you. When we moved here in ’78, there was a bus driver- at that point in time students used to be bus drivers, and I thought that was really terrible. They would pay students low wages but students needed money, high school students I’m talking about. So the student bus driver, young black male, driving the bus had an accident and the young lady died, which was terrible. That was actually terrible. Wake County Schools was not going to give him a lawyer. And I 01:13:09 was like no. They were going to allow this kid – this is a teenager- to go to jail, do all this stuff. So we were at that point, I believe we were the Black United Front. I had just got a job here. We went to the Board, the School Board meeting, bringing signs and chanting, and they freaked out. They was like, “Who are these people?” And a guy who didn’t know me then, he said, “I’m like where are these people coming from; who are these people?” I mean we had a large group of folks coming in there saying we want to free the bus driver. They wanted to put us out the meeting and stop chanting. So we stopped chanting, but we kept our signs and every now and 01:14:02 then would do something. But I wanted to put that in there because we came in with a bang, and so I don’t know if they realized who I was on the School Board, and at that point I really didn’t care. I really honestly feel because I did get my master’s to be a principal, and Wake County didn’t give me a school- I only applied for one school and then I went to Phillips- but I knew they wouldn’t because they haven’t forgotten my history. And I keep telling people, they said are you sorry? Some of my coworkers asked me, “Are you sorry for what you did?” I said no. Because if that’s still on their mind, that was the exact thing I wanted to do. Because when I was president they were trying to start bringing in
contract privatization of schools. They wanted to privatize cafeteria workers, custodians, they even had somebody there to do something about Special Private Ed. A company come in, and I’m like oh, no. They had a fair- I had never heard of this- the superintendent central organized a privatization fair. And I rode all around the country asking my friends, “Have you ever heard of a privatization fair?” and they were like, “no, what is that?” I said, “Well my school system is having one.” Long story short, my husband, his coworkers, BWFJ, other unions, other supporters, I organized a picket around McKimmon Center. They were shocked. They didn’t know anything about it. And they saw me there with the megaphone, saying no to privatization, it’s not coming to Wake County Schools. That next board meeting, I went to speak to the school board about privatization. Particularly around bus drivers, because at that point they wanted to privatize school bus drivers and hire a company, Laidlaw. Laidlaw was in Atlanta, Laidlaw was in a lot of other places. And I had seen a video of their bus drivers’ experience, and I said you are not going to drive our precious jewels to school with the privatization company. And custodians- you’re not going to do that. Because custodians for everybody who teach, principals know, if you know the custodian, and you make friends with the custodian, that’s your best friend. And the secretary. Because if you need a desk because your desk is falling apart- they know where one is. If you need a filing cabinet, they know where one is. Plus, they know everything the kids do. They may not tell you, but they know. They know. So that privatization failed and I wanted to end with that part was that the supervisors in transportation and the cafeteria, everywhere came to me at that board meeting after I spoke, and they were passing me notes secretly “Thank you for what you do. Sorry we couldn’t support you.” So to them, because yeah, you know what that would mean—that was their job. And I laid that out at the board meeting so everybody could be aware; your job is going because that company is going to come in. So that’s the kind of skills that I could integrate through BWFJ. And for some folks, it’s militant they call it, or “How do you do that?” but you got to take a stance. I think just from my growing up, and the time that I grew up, that I learned that you have to take a stance; you can’t be afraid. So I didn’t get to be a principal like I wanted to be a principal later in life, because I didn’t want to be a principal at all because I thought that was management. But I thought that I should have done it earlier. I had opportunities that knocked like in Greensboro and stuff like that, but I wasn’t ready to move. But I’m glad I did what I did do, and I did make a change at Phillips. Even though I wasn’t principal I did most of the work and I brought more things there than they’d ever have if I never went there. Not bragging, but I just see my students Young lady yesterday, real experienced, I was outside walking my dog and I saw this car passing, and I said “Wow, that’s one of my students from Phillips.” She stopped her car in the middle of the street,
jumped out, and was screaming “Oh! That’s Mrs. Dillahunt, Mrs. D, I love you, I love you.” I said, “No baby, I love you.” She said “No. I’m sorry for whatever, all the trouble I gave you.” I said, “you know what, I forget. I don’t even remember.” I said, but you know I’m proud because I see you have two kids. I said, “Do you have a job?” She said, “You told me to always have a job. I have two jobs.” So when you hear that, that’s so rewarding and it makes you know that what you did and what you do is right. If people can remember you like that— and I get that all the time in the stores and I tell them “I can’t remember your name, it’s so many of you came through my life, but I know your face and I love you.” And then they’ll tell me their name.

VERDIN: Well you tell us a little bit more about your work at Phillips and some of the changes you were able to implement there. Some of your favorite students

DILLAHUNT: So one of the things I did when I first went there part-time at first doing peer mediation. Believe it or not, Wake County had a peer mediation program going on and I had the first peer mediation class at Enloe High School. It was very successful. Systems, not just Wake County, but systems start very good programs and then all of the sudden they disappear. And that wasn’t because of funding. I don’t know why that didn’t develop, but it should’ve been. So with Phillips when I went there part time, the principal asked me to do a peer mediation class in the evening because Phillips had an evening program at that point. I went to their graduation, and it was in St. Aug’s gym. And St. Aug’s gym didn’t have air condition. So you try to bring 100, 150, 200 people up in there on June 9th, so I told the principal, I said, “look, this is nice, but this is not going to work.” I said, this is a high school diploma, we need to be someplace nice.” So she said okay. The next year, she asked me to come over there full time as Lead Teacher. They didn’t have Assistant Principal, it was Lead Teacher. I wouldn’t have a teaching load that I would be administrative with her. And from that point on I started trying to make different changes. One of the things that I did do is I asked her when she went to her principal’s meetings to let me know when they were having their graduation meetings because I wanted to go. And so I did go. And they were kind of surprised, all the big high schools, Enloe, at that time Enloe knew me so they knew I must be there for something. I finally asked them, so how do you get the “Civic Center?” because it was at Raleigh’s Civic Center, all the graduations would be there at that time. We didn’t have that many high schools. And they said, “Oh the county, Wake County gets it,” I said, “okay.” So I went back to the principal and I said, “When you go to your principals’ meetings and meet with your supervisor, you need to ask them how Phillips get on the agenda for graduation. I said, “I’ll take any day, any time.” They gave me
Sunday morning. But look, it was the best. It was the best because they gave me the whole building. I said, “Well can I have a reception afterwards?”
“Oh yes!”
I said, “Oh I’ll bring the cake and the punch and everything.” My kids had the best graduation, and parents, because everybody who came to graduation at the Civic Center, 10:00 or 11:00 on a Sunday morning, they had a reception afterwards and it just brought more pride to the kids, to the faculty, to the principal, and so we went on for years. And then, many years after that they got so many high schools they were trying to weed us out again and I told my principal, I said, “you know that’s not going to happen.” She said, “I know.” I said, “I worked too hard to get my students a elegant, real elegant graduation.” And so they took us over to Progress Energy. And that was the best thing because they gave me the biggest auditorium. They said, “Oh, this is wonderful, yes.” They said, “Oh no, we’ll charge Wake County. Do you need the sound system? You tell me what they’ll pay for it and I’ll pay you for it.” I said, “Okay.” So we had Memorial Auditorium, Meymandi Hall was where we were every year. They still there. They still there at Meymandi Hall. The year that I was getting ready to retire, one of the associate superintendents called and told me that I probably wouldn’t be at Meymandi. I said, “Excuse me?” And so I went and told the principal, and I said, “I’m leaving, so you need to let me have it because this may be the last thing I do for the students of Phillips.” So he said, “Yeah, go ahead.” So I said, “you hear rumors, whatever they say, I probably said it.” And so I called her back and said, “I’m going to write you a letter and give you a history.” And so I did. About where Phillips came from, St. Aug, we went to Meredith one year, we went to Peace one year, and we were just like, I told her we were like just offered. The system didn’t care for us and so we were still there at Meymandi Hall. And so that’s a change. And then I brought in different schedules, and I told the teachers too that the schedule was student-centered. It wasn’t about what you wanted to teach, but it was about what kids needed. What students needed. And particularly these students, because they had failed so many courses, and the principal ok’d if I ran a class with 5 or 6 in Algebra 2, because those students, those 6 students, wanted to go to college. So we did follow any state guidelines for the college, when they change the different diploma tracks. So we did offer both of those for students who wanted to go to college. Most of our students initially was going straight to the workforce if they could. Or the military. But then we started getting more students really pushing the four-year college or Wake Tech.

VERDIN: You mentioned earlier that you first started to notice students being pushed out of the system when you started working at Phillips, can you tell us a little more about that?
01:25:52 DILLAHUNT: Sure. When students, our students would be accepted to Phillips it was that guidance counselors, or principals, or parents could refer their students there. But if a parent referred, they would have to go through the school system. So counselor to get the records because we would ask for test scores right from elementary school, absence, suspensions, and anything pertinent that people would want for transfer. But it wasn’t just a automatic transfer. Reading the folders, I would see two things in my mind. One, in 3rd, 5th, and sometime 8th grade, students were doing very well on standardized tests. But their grades didn’t show that. Then I would see through the suspensions that they would be behind based on the number of suspensions whether it was for cell phone, whether it was for cursing. Whether it was because a lot of times students try to get out of the situation, and the way they do it that is that they try to leave. And when you stand in front of somebody and they’re trying to leave, the tendency is that you want to push. So when you touch a teacher you can get arrested for assault on a federal employee. 01:27:26 And schools systems oftentimes use that. So from those experiences, I would say to the students, my first questions to them I would say “do you know you’re smart?” “No” I would say, “But do you know what you scored on your reading test in 3rd grade, then in 5th, and then in 8th?” And they was like, “oh.” And then a lot of them would say, “Yeah, I like to read.” But nobody ever said, “you’re smart, you need to be in school.” And the other ones was just to ask them what did they do to get suspended. Of course, the story would vary from what was on the paper. The story would probably be true, but a lot of it would probably be what they wanted me to hear. And I would say, “I just wanted you to know,” which they didn’t know, “follow you wherever you go in Wake County Schools.” And that was shocking to them. So that’s when I realized that, wow, Phillips was a gold mine, and it had to be really good educationally and be able to accept the very students and personalities that we get. 01:28:35 And they can learn, and they change. And you can hear them when the first report cards come in, “Wow, this the first time I had an A in a long time. Or a B.” And that would bring tears to my eyes because they too then realized at that point that they could do, if they only wanted to do. And the people were behind them.

01:29:00 VERDIN: We know that the Enloe High School had this controversy with the seven students who were arrested for throwing water balloons. Just tell us about your role in the situation and what you see happening with this.
01:29:16 DILLAHUNT: Yeah. Between the Education Justice Alliance work that I do and the School-to-Prison Pipeline, there’s also another organization: the Concerned Citizens for African American Students, you know, Calla Wright. She’s a friend of mine and I’ve been knowing Kayla for awhile and her interests. When that incident happened with Enloe, I was like, “a balloon fight?” And the parent Kevin Hines was the father who got arrested. That whole situation for me and for many others was blown out of proportion. One, I know Enloe is large, Enloe is too large. I think they have close to almost 3,000 students. It might be 2,600. One of the reasons I wanted to leave Enloe because it was too big. There were balloon fights at Enloe when I was there. There were balloon fights at other high schools last year. There were balloon fights the year before that when my granddaughter went, and all the principal told them to do was to clean up what they needed to clean up, and these were seniors, before they got their graduation tickets. 01:30:51 So you know students were going to clean up whatever, and it wasn’t a big mess, so it wasn’t any suspensions. Now Enloe’s situation with the balloon fight there was a little different because students got on Instagram, they got on Facebook, and they start talking about all these various chemicals from urine to bleach to feces maybe even being in the balloons. And so for some students that would be frightening, but I think for me what I would have done, I would have investigated right then and there. And there’s a way you can investigate. They don’t like to snitch as they say, but I always used to tell my kids, “You ain’t snitching. Write it on paper, nobody will even have to know.” And I’d just go about my business and they’d write down just what I wanted to know. 01:31:53 So there’s ways that you can find out, and if you don’t find out an (inaudible), then you would find out if those students really had that. The sad part about it; they have never proven that there was bleach, that there was urine, and those young men got arrested and their parents—there were about three, I think about three parents- that did not know where their child was. They did not get a call from the school, and that is against Wake County policy. If anything happened at Phillips, what I would tell the police is “do you have their home address?” They “yes m’am.” “Well you need to go find them at home. This is a safe haven for them. I appreciate that.” Some would get angry, but what would they going to do? Arrest me for telling them that they needed to go to that address? Or if it was something really serious, I would say, 01:32:53 “Let me go get the student. I will bring them here because I don’t want my students embarrassed.” I will walk them out to the car; oh they didn’t like that part. And I used to tell them “If you run, I can’t walk face anymore. I’m going to let you go out here in dignity.” And they always thanked me for that. That’s things that you can do to be respectful of the student. I just think the investigation—I think the school board and central office should have played a much better role. The parents tried to set up grievances, they did, they didn’t win. These were for African-American
parents who really really support their students and they really cared about what happened. 01:33:53 Some of the students, one young man who wasn't really involved and got involved, he was living with the aunt because his mother was deceased. So I just think it was just really not very good for Wake County Schools, not good for Enloe, particularly the administration, and I think that they apologized to the parent who got arrested, but how dare you not be inviting to a parent who comes into your school whose two daughters goes to your school and play on your lacrosse team, right? How do you not see them? You always, for me, had an open door policy to parents. You might never always agree, but the bottom line is that you respect them. 01:34:55 What I found out with parents, even the ones who gave me a hard time, if they know and find out the truth and know that you’re sincere and you care about their student, and they see that their student is doing well, they’ll respect you and they’ll back off. But you got to put that trust in front. They have to understand that you respect them and you’re not about them. I think Wake County Schools have, it’s not a policy, but it’s an air in the environment where particularly parents of color don’t feel welcome. It’s not inviting like “come in, I’m glad to see you here.” It’s always “Why are you here?” It’s the same with students when they’re absent, “Oh, where have you been?” rather than “Oh, I’m glad you’re here. I missed you.” Even if you didn’t you can say I missed you. That shows that you care. It’s sad about the Enloe incident. 01:35:56 Al Jazeera came down and interviewed the students and the parents and so it’s on YouTube I think. And that was really good. An article was in Jet Magazine as well about the balloon and the Enloe six.

01:36:14 VERDIN: I’m just curious, because I know, especially in the aftermath of all this school violence and shootings and things that Wake County and other districts are trying to increase security because of that, so how do you engage parents and educators and the community about the School-to-Prison Pipeline knowing that people are afraid (inaudible)

01:36:35 DILLAHUNT: Sure, I mean that’s real and schools have to be safe, but with my experience and particularly at even Enloe, but at Mary Phillips where people may assume that because it’s an alternative school that it’s rough, students want school to be safe. They do. You don’t hear very much about gang activity or fights in schools because they too want it to be safe. So what we do say to people though, is the fact that police officers-and one thing that Al Jazeera found out that we didn’t know- was that the SROs in Wake County has never been trained by there’s a national SRO company, and they do training around the states for SRO. And they said they had never been to Raleigh, North Carolina nor Wake County to do any training. So the only training they get is either from the sheriff or the chief of police. 01:37:49 Now Phillips, all the SROs we had at Phillips High School were
very good. The saw what we were doing, and what our strategy was for working with the students and they followed suit. They followed suit. They called and asked me or the principal, “Does so-and-so go to school there? I see a warrant for his arrest.” And we would say no or yes. But he would give us a lead, and he never took the lead from the principal. For SROs, they shouldn’t be in the schools, (inaudible) but that’s probably not going to happen. But I don’t think schools should end up putting more SROs, School Resource Officers, in the schools. I think what we believe in is the restorative justice measures. Whether you do peer mediation, the peace circles, talk about bullying, what happening bullying. They just had not to long ago, a young, I guess he was middle school student, who committed suicide based on bullying here in Wake County. It’s sad, but it’s real. So we have to get hold. So we would say more school social workers, counselors who can counsel and not be in charge of testing and not have so many 500, 600 students getting ready for graduation or whatever, but that they would have time to counsel. If we can put professional people within the schools system and the schools-nurses, that would really allow students to have someone who they can relate to. Again, back to Phillips, which I said was ideal, we were the only high school that had a full time social worker. And she worked. She did her job, she did groups, she did counseling, so it’s needed. And we saw that for a fact. So I think it’s going to be a struggle running SROs, but we have, just last night, my grandson spoke to the school board, I didn’t go, but he spoke to Wake County school boards talking about Enloe High School and how many—he doesn’t go to Enloe, he goes to Southeast Raleigh- but how many students at Enloe get arrested, get suspended, mainly African-American students, and how the percentage of African-American students that attend Enloe is much lower than how many suspensions that those many 39, 40 percent students have. I think they’re supposed to be having a MOU or try to look at maybe a committee or something about SROs that the school board involved student and parents and teachers. Because I was on the task force for Wake County’s Safety Task Force last year, and basically it was me, Jason Langberg was a member, and if he couldn’t make it he would send one of his coworkers there, and there were one person representing the PTSA for Wake County Schools, there was one teacher on it, the president of the local in Wake County, and the rest of them were state, either SBI, either maybe FBI, retired, somebody on the sheriff force, it was all of these people. But they didn’t have that many parents. I mean, I’m a grandparent now, and there was another woman there worked for the city that she was a grandparent, but it wasn’t just a parent. Say a parent of one of the students from the balloon issue, even though that hadn’t happened then, but just use them as a fact. But I think that the committee being changed to that would really have helped. Now, what we did, we came out with Jason & I pushed our restorative justice and people pretty much agreed with that, but then
when they reported it, Sheriff Harrison, he decided that the thing that people need, was Wake County Schools needed it’s own police department. So that did not even come out. So we kind of beat that back. I wrote a letter for Education Justice Alliance and got other groups in the community to sign on and say that’s not part of what was said, even talked about throughout the meetings of the task force, Safety School Task Force. It’s going to take a lot of work, but I think there’s a controversy-some people want SROs in the schools- and I mean we feel that they’re probably not going to take SROs out of the schools- but they need to be trained, and they need to be able to follow the principal’s lead, and principal’s need to be trained 01:43:36 in how to, if they don’t know how, to investigate, to make sure that they give parents-parents were never allowed to see that video, if they had a video- and they were never allowed to see any evidence of the balloons: if it had urine in it, if it had bleach in it. If not, then you really don’t have a case, but they pursued it as if they did have evidence and just refused to give parents any ideas or not drop the charges. And those students have records. And there’s only one time in your lifetime you get to expunge one thing of your record.

01:44:20 VERDIN: Well let’s tie everything together. You’ve told us a lot about your labor organizing and your advocacy through education, and I’m just wondering how you’re involved, if at all, with the HKonJ or the Moral Monday Movement that’s been happening recently.

01:44:37 DILLAHUNT: I went to every Moral Monday except, I think I missed two because I was out of town, I did not get arrested. My husband got arrested, and he went with the labor contingent. I don’t know what happened, I just never got arrested. I said, well that’s something that somebody can do now. So I thought Moral Mondays were good, I think it’s a movement, I think we need to continue the movement, but I also think that we have to continue to raise the issues that are there. I think that it’s not just a labor issue, it’s a human right issue and all the really benefits, quote un quote, that people really had whether they were state workers or city workers, and teachers that have been lost 01:45:43 that we really really have to fight and struggle to get that back. I think people are talking about election and making sure that we have candidates who run, who support if not Moral Monday, support the issues of healthcare, education as a human right, collective bargaining, all the issues that we’re faced with in North Carolina. I think it’s amazing that it’s moving like around the country. There are people in Georgia who started Moral Mondays. We were down there for a conference this summer and they were asking-I think it was in October- how did you start the Moral Mondays? So people there and Virginia, New York, so it’s catching on and everybody as we said earlier, is looking at the South.
Looking at Raleigh, looking at North Carolina. But I think for us, and this comes from a Black Workers for Justice thing, we have to still target the war on black America and the war on people of color. We can’t camouflage that. Everybody is suffering, yes. Everybody has these issues, but if we look at what’s happening in the country, what’s happening in the south, and who is most affected, there’s some folks who may be don’t see that and think that because the movement now has fully integrated—which is positive, I’m not saying that it’s not—but that we still have to have what I call the political line and looking at what’s happening to people of color. And if you can’t do that then look at the school-to-prison pipeline and see who is affected and see how many youth are in prison already and continue to go to prison, and that they are students of color. And I wanted to say, people talk about African-American males, and we have to also look at the African-American female because large numbers of them are growing inside the prisons, sadly to say. And we really have to look at and can’t forget Trayvon Martin and the young man, Jordan I think Davis is his name, who really got killed. I worry about my grandson. He’s 16 years old, a junior at Southeast Raleigh High School. He’s a good kid. You visualize, you put your personal experiences when things like that happen. We try to educate him about what to do if the police stop you, what not to do if the police stop you. You know, oftentimes they’ll say, “Well grandma, we didn’t want to tell you, but so-and-so got stopped when we was in the car.” I’m like, “yeah, did you get the police number? Did you look at his badge? Did you get his name?” Because we have to really really enforce that, and it’s hard for young teens. You can’t keep them hibernated in the house, but you also are really scared to see what is happening to African-American youth, and right now it’s males—for playing your music loud, for going to the store to buy some iced tea.

VERDIN: How do you see yourself continuing to advocate for people of color in North Carolina?

DILLAHUNT: I will continue going to, I went to HKonJ, and I will continue to advocate as much as I can. Every now and then, my husband and I talked about we’re retired and our calendars are just about as full as when we worked, I tell people I work for free now and it’s okay. I think we will probably continue to do as much. I think sometimes we draw back. I like to go to Charleston, I still have my home in Charleston, so I like to spend time there, so we do take a break and do that, but I really, really would hope that in my lifetime I would see a major change in one, the public school systems around the country because it’s not just here in North Carolina that students are faced with the inequities and the disparities. And I hope that educators will be trained to know how to deal with all students, and that the systems that they work in would give them the resources to be
able to do that and make sure the students are successful. So I think we’ll be around continuing to do some work. Black Workers for Justice, we have our 31st Annual Martin Luther King Jr Banquet in April, and I’m working to organize that and to try to do some different things for the banquet. So I’ll stay active with them. And of course Education Justice Alliance and working with parents as well, I always get churches and other places always ask me to come speak or do a workshop. That keeps me in touch. And then one thing I do miss is students. I do miss that. But with seeing them in the grocery store or the community means a lot.

VERDIN: So I have one last question for you. Tell us what you think has made you an effective leader, advocate, reformer, and what advice would you give to future generations who want to follow in your footsteps.

DILLAHUNT: To be open. Open to change, though change is hard, and to be a risk taker and I tell teachers that all the time. I used to really love teachers if I came out with an idea or a program and they would run with it. I was like, yeah. And sometimes it works and doesn’t. And then I would say read and be exposed. And if you have a opportunity to travel I think you should do that. I think you should be involved if there’s a union at your job I think you should be involved. If you’re going to be a teacher I think you should be involved with the National Education Association or the Federation of Teachers because one day they will merge. We’ve been trying to merge for years and it hasn’t happened, but they will. So I think you should be a part of that and being able to advocate for others on your job, but also you still could advocate for students because within that, particularly the education unions, they work to make sure that students are represented and receive a quality education. So I would say those things, and be in an organization; a community organization. Even the sororities nowadays and the graduate chapters do community service. They do programs whether for males or females. I think those are issues that become a part of your community. And really, really work to change for the better and not remain stagnant. Because as we move on things will need to change. So I think that those are some of the things that I try to tell folks. The one thing for teachers too is to be motivated and look for different things and new things that you could do. And standardized testing, high stakes testing, it’s a criminal offense what it did to the teaching field. And I think we have to pull back from that and push that you have to give kids the experience: innovative, new stuff, hands on stuff. Or if they don’t like hands on stuff, let them just read or be happy. And I think that’s real important for educators and for me, I would say, when it’s time to retire, know that that time has come. I had to realize that it’s probably time to go and you can do better things. Just in ending want to let you know that in another realm that we doing my husband and I involved with a
group of folks that we’re trying to open up and will open up a food co-op in Raleigh, and that’s going to be exciting. One of the reasons we got involved is that Kroger’s-and you might have heard on the news- closed two grocery stores, one being very well located in the community where I live, in the African-American community in Raleigh, they closed. And they closed one off of New Bern Avenue. And we had a big community meeting trying to find out why did they leave and why did they close, and from that we got with some folks and just talking, and it started out to be more of a co-op coffee house cultural center, then after Kroger closed we said no, we’re going to do a food co-op. 01:56:23 So we’re in the process of doing that. We have a core leadership team. We’re looking for a feasibility grant to make sure we’re in the right location, the right place to do that. So that’s going some work that I’ll be spending some time doing along with the advocacy work.

01:56: VERDIN: Thank you very much.

01:56: DILLAHUNT: You’re welcome.