ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH

SHERDA WILLIAMS TOPEKA, KANSAS FEBRUARY 24, 2020

INTERVIEWED BY DEBORAH HARVEY

AUDIO FILE #BRVB022420 – SHERDA WILLIAMS

# EDITORIAL NOTE

This document is a rendering of the oral history interview as transcribed by the interviewer from the audio recording. Although effort was made to provide a verbatim transcription, for easier reading of the transcript, verbal pauses, repetitions of words, and encouraging words from the interviewer were omitted. The resulting oral history interview transcript was provided to the informant for review and, if necessary, correction. Ms. Williams made a few modifications to the draft transcript. For the original interview, please refer to the audio file.

# ABSTRACT

Ms. Sherda Williams begins by detailing the course of her career with the National Park Service beginning in 1990. She discusses her first impressions when she arrived as superintendent of Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site. Ms. Williams provides her insight into the attitude of the Topeka community toward the national historic site, especially given the OIG audit that followed the superintendency of Cheryl Brown Henderson. She also discusses the effect the unusually bountiful budget that resulted from cutting ties with the Brown Foundation had on the attitudes of staff toward performance awards and equipment purchases and the reactions when she tried to pull those budget items in line with the rest of the parks in the National Park System. Ms. Williams describes other management challenges that appear to have resulted from the brief tenure of Ms. Henderson, as well as some administrative challenges she discovered upon assuming the post of Superintendent of Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site and what she is doing to correct the situations. She explains the relationship of Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site as mentor to Nicodemus National Historic Site and her role in that. Ms. Williams describes the impact the federal government shutdown of 2019 had on management of the site. She discusses some of the outreach programs undertaken during her tenure. Ms. Williams also briefly discusses partnerships the site has with organizations other than the Brown Foundation. She discusses site management plans and studies with which she has been involved, such as the General Management Plan and the Cultural Landscape Guidelines.

# PERSONS MENTIONED

David Smith, Treva Sykes, Teri Perry [Gage], Theora McVay, Cheryl Brown Henderson, Steve Adams, Katherine Cushinberry, Katrina, [Midwest] Regional Director Ernie Quintana, Mark Weekley, Rosa Parks, Enimini [Ekong], Ta-Nehisi Coates, Doctor Ibram X. Kendi, Karen Hiller, [Doctor] Martin Luther King, [Jr.],

Sherda Williams, 2020

# ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH

**SHERDA WILLIAMS**

Interviewer: (Crosstalk) I know. That has happened. Well, not the whole interview. About half an hour – half of – half an hour of it, though. But it is recording, because I see little numbers coming up, so we’re good.

Williams: Alright.

Interviewer: Alright. So, I’m going to start with a little introduction, and – just for the purposes of – for the transcriber and for future people reading the transcription of what we’re doing here.

So, this oral history interview is for the Administrative History of Brown v Board of Education National Historic Site in Topeka, Kansas. The interviewer is Deborah Harvey, with Outside The Box, on behalf of the Midwest Regional Office of the National Park Service. Interviewed today is Ms. Sherda Williams, currently park superintendent at Brown v Board of Education National Historic Site. The date is February 24, 2020. The interview takes place in Monroe School at Brown v Board of Education National Historic Site, Topeka, Kansas.

So, Superintendent Williams, as I’m sure you know, the purpose of an Administrative History is to document the development of a unit of the National Park System, both physically and administratively, and especially administratively. Oral histories are one way to get information that might not otherwise be available in the documentary evidence. And we have found, in the past, that we do find – learn a lot of things that you can’t get in the Superintendent’s Reports at the end of the year.

Williams: Right.

Interviewer: So, we try to get as much information as we can, from as many different perspectives as possible in order to craft a robust narrative for the developmental history of the park.

This information will be used by future park administrators to inform their decisions as they navigate future developments. However, I do want to inform you that not all the information we gather from you will be included in the Administrative History. That – how much is included depends on how the information advances our understanding of park development. But I do want to say that we really appreciate you giving your time to share your experience of the development of the Brown v Board of Education National Historic Site to further this project.

Williams: Thank you! (chuckles)

Interviewer: Okay. So, to begin, let’s start with – I need you to state your full name, and, in your case, spell both of your names, because Williams is a fairly common name, and we all know how to spell it, but your first name –

Williams: Isn’t (laughs)

Interviewer: It would be helpful if you would spell it for the transcriber.

Williams: My name is Sherda K. Williams, and the first name is spelled S-H-E-R-D-A, middle initial

K. Last name, Williams, W-I-L-L-I-A-M-S.

Interviewer: Okay. Alright, thank you. So, we’re going to start with just, in general, your work for the National Park Service and then move on from there to your work with the Brown v Board.

Williams: Okay.

Interviewer: So, when did you start with the National Park Service?

Williams: I had a summer internship in Washington as I was going through graduate school, and that would have been 1990. It was in the Preservation Assistance Division in Washington, and then I started a term position in the Regional Office in Omaha in June of ’92.

Interviewer: As what? As –?

Williams: I was a Historical Landscape Architect, and I was responsible for starting a new inventory of cultural or historic landscapes within the Midwest Region.

Interviewer: Oh, okay. So, you were collecting past cultural landscape – cultural landscape inventories and making a –

Williams: No, we were creating the inventory. Interviewer: Oh, you were creating them?

Williams: Yes. There had been an Office of Management and Budget review of resource management programs – it was, I think, in the mid-‘80s, maybe – and it said that the Park Service wasn’t doing enough to inventory and to document historic structures and historic landscapes. So, they started – as I was coming into the Park Service, they were starting that inventory from scratch.

Interviewer: Oh, okay. So, did you do the one at Perry’s Victory? Williams: I did, yes.

Interviewer: Okay. I worked at Perry’s – on Perry’s Victory National –

Williams: And I – that one was kind of a – that was a partnership between a historian who did most of the research, and then I went in and reviewed all the graphic material, the map – they had extensive maps and photographs of the construction – and then I wrote the rest of the document.

Interviewer: Well, I – thank you very much! I found that quite helpful! Williams: Well, good! You’re welcome! (laughs)

Interviewer: Okay, so that was, like, 1991? Williams: Yes.

Interviewer: Alright. And so, how long – what did you do after that? How long –?

Williams: I only did that for, maybe, three or four years, and my immediate supervisor left the Park Service, and I moved into her position.

Interviewer: As?

Williams: I was head of the Cultural Landscape program. Interviewer: Okay, so this was still in Omaha?

Williams: Yes, still in Omaha. Yeah. And I had moved into a permanent position before that, so – Interviewer: Oh, okay. Because a term position is you were hired for this time –

Williams: Yeah.

Interviewer: – and it ends at this time?

Williams: Yeah. Usually, a period of about four years is the term that they hire you for. And so, it’s supposed to be project focused. So, I managed the Cultural Landscape report – inventory program. I moved more and more into involvement in different planning type efforts, like General Management Plans, Resource Management scoping meetings. I did a lot of regional reviews of different planning documents and construction documents, and I – then – and I also was carrying a pretty heavy workload on managing contracts for Cultural Landscape Report projects for parks, so.

Interviewer: Okay, so, was – is Brown v Board your first field position? Williams: No, no.

Interviewer: Okay. What happened next? (laughter)

Williams: Well, I worked for eleven years in the Regional Office, and was getting – you know, I was getting burnt out because I was doing – the last two or three years I was traveling three times out of every month. So, it was just, you know – get home, unpack, try and make notes, and do what you need to get done, pack again, and leave. So, that was getting pretty intense. I applied for the Superintendency of the Nicodemus National Historic Site.

Interviewer: Oh, okay. I’ve been there.

Williams: Yeah, and I got that right – like, the last day of 2003 was my first day there. And then I spent four years there, and I did a lateral transfer to James A. Garfield National Historic Site in Ohio. I also managed the First Ladies National Historic Site, and we had a partner similar – fairly similar to the Brown Foundation that was managing that site.

Interviewer: The First Ladies, or James –?

Williams: The First Ladies. There was a partner at James A. Garfield, and it was a really interesting situation where I was laterally transferred into a position as Historic Landscape Architect working for the Midwest Region, duty stationed at James A. Garfield, because the site manager there had already notified them that she was going to retire, and she was going through a transition where the partner that was supposed to be doing all the operations was pulling out. And then she had about three months to do emergency hires, get the collection loan agreement – which they owned – in place so the collection stayed in the house –

Interviewer: Okay, so the park didn’t own the collection?

Williams: Yeah. And, you know, just get everything that that involved in place. So, I was kind of there helping her with work and they laterally transferred me into her position when she retired. So, I’m probably the only person in the Park Service that did the proper succession planning in place (laughs)! So, that was really interesting. And I was there for six years, and then I applied for the position here at Brown and transferred here in January of 2015.

Interviewer: Why did you apply for this position?

Williams: Oh, I just was looking – I mean, the position at James A. Garfield was wonderful. It was a very collaborative group of people. We had – you know, we were starting to get real good partner and local government support for our activities, but I was looking for an opportunity to, kind of, move to the next level of supervising Division Chiefs, you know, where you were getting things done more through other people, just as a personal – you know, challenge – professional challenge to myself, so.

Interviewer: Okay. So, what do you think in all this background prepared you for being the Superintendent for Brown v. Board?

Williams: Well, you know, definitely, Nicodemus was essential in that it, you know, helped me understand working with a minority community, one that, you know, I didn’t have the same perspective as. When I grew up in central Indiana, I was in THE most Republican county in the United States, and it had been the home of the Grand Dragon of the KKK in the mid-‘50s, which gives you kind of an idea of what the racial – but, when I was at Nicodemus, I was starting to compile – you know, any time I’d find an article on all-black towns, I’d drop it in our files. And my sister – youngest sister said, “Well, you know there’s a huge African American farming company just, like, fifteen – a town, just fifteen miles north of where I grew up.” And so, as I –

Interviewer: But you didn’t know that?

Williams: I did not know that. I mean, you know, you literally were blind to the African – the minority history that was in the area. So that kind of – I’ve always found that very frustrating that my education did not open my eyes to the complexity of history. And, you know, it was just so simplified when you went to school that it was lies, basically (laughs).

Interviewer: Oh, yeah. And I think it’s worse now because every day, more history happens. And so, teachers have to – you know, to cram more information into what they’re teaching. So, when you came to Brown v. Board, what were your first impressions of the park itself?

Williams: You know, it’s obviously a fairly simple park as far as the structures and landscape goes, very self-contained. My first impressions were that it had really good community support. The previous superintendent, David Smith, had done a really good job at outreach and engagement with partners. I think the folks from the Chamber of Commerce came in and met with me my first week here, which I had never had that happen before, so that was really encouraging. Internally, my initial assessment, which has stood the test of time, unfortunately, was that this was group of really high- performing, competent people, and they were not collaborating with each other. They –

Interviewer: Everybody’s got their own fiefdom?

Williams: Yep. Yeah. And, I mean, the – only the Maintenance Division was actually coherent as a team.

Interviewer: (Laughs) Oh! Well, I’m sure Ms. Sykes will be pleased to hear that!

Williams: Yeah. Oh, she’s – yeah, she’s a very good supervisor. So, that’s been, actually, a constant challenge that we’re still dealing with.

Interviewer: Okay, so is it each Division is the – is a problem? I mean – not “a problem.” Each Division is a challenge to get them to work with other Divisions? Was that what –?

Williams: Yes. It’s even within the Division. They – Interviewer: Each desk is a –?

Williams: Particularly with the interpretive staff, they each have their own little events and partners that they work with, and they don’t –

Interviewer: So, they don’t work as a group?

Williams: Hmm-mmm [shakes her head, no] And, I mean – you know, our current Chief is trying his best to work with that, but it’s just a hard nut to crack.

Interviewer: You have to overcome the –? Williams: History.

Interviewer: First of all, the history of the people who have already been here and their resistance to change?

Williams: Yes.

Interviewer: Which is a common human response – reaction. (laughter) Williams: Yeah. We’ve hired quite a bit of new staff, but there’s – Interviewer: That might be your answer!

Williams: Yeah, it is, quite frankly! (Laughs)

Interviewer: So – and what would you say was the opinion – sounds like the public was receptive to the park and feeling good about it. What would you say that, when you first started working here, the public perception of the park was?

Williams: I think they were very excited to have the park here. Like I said, I think David Smith has done a really good job at outreach. Unfortunately, it kind of was accomplished by targeting money toward partners without – you know, the long term agreements in place. It was – you know, I don’t think that he was doing illegal things, it was just not quite –

Interviewer: A little more informal than the Park Service prefers?

Williams: Yes, and in – yeah. And it also – in the meanwhile, we are just getting – as an agency, getting increasing scrutiny on ethics, transparency of funds. You know, make sure you are mission-focused with what you’re spending, etcetera. So that has placed me in a position where I’m having to say, “No,” more often to partners.

Interviewer: To partners that are expecting funds from the park?

Williams: Yeah. So, we’ve been doing some more to train and educate people more to –

Interviewer: Did that have any kind of a negative effect on the community support for the park?

Williams: I think so. I think it is. And there’s a couple other things that are – I mean, the dissolution of the Brown Foundation partnership –

Interviewer: Oh, I didn’t know that was – oh, the partnership. The Brown Foundation still exists, right?

Williams: It does, yes. But that had a very negative impact on the park, and it still does.

Interviewer: Okay. So, when you first started working with the park, what expectations did you have for what you were hoping to accomplish?

Williams: Well, I – you know, I – the Acting Regional Director, at the time, did want me to continue a strong focus on partnerships and educational outreach to kids. Part of that was political in that, when the Foundation left, they had a separate line item of funding in the National Park Service budget, and so they transferred to that – to the park, and they expected us to show that we were using that effectively to increase engagement of kids and increase our interpretive outreach. So, that – you know, we had to keep focused on that.

Interviewer: Okay. So, that was one of the things that the Regional Director directed you to do? Williams: Yeah. Yes.

Interviewer: Okay. And that was – part of your expectation was that you would be accomplishing that?

Williams: Yes. I also – I didn’t come in with this expectation, because I try not to ask a lot of questions about staffing other than, you know, “Are there any EEO issues that I need to

- you know, anyone who’s – Interviewer: EEO? Economic –?

Williams: No, Equal Employment Opportunity. Interviewer: Equal Employment Opportunity, okay.

Williams: HR kind of issues that I need to know about. So, I tend not – because I know that, you know, there can be personality conflicts with managers and staff. And, you know, I gave people a good year to kind of get used to me, and me used to them, but it just became very obvious that the park was used to operating with a very generous budget, and so things like award amounts were out of line with what is normally done.

Interviewer: Award amounts, as far – what –?

Williams: Way too – way – fairly large awards were being given for performance. Interviewer: Oh, I see. Okay.

Williams: Sorry. And –

Interviewer: Star Awards and those kind of things?

Williams: Yeah. So that was out of line with what was going on in the Region, and I’ve since found a note in the file that that was actually –

Interviewer: Why do you think that was the case? Why would the – why would the award amounts be out of line with the rest of the Park Service at this park?

Williams: Because they had the money.

Interviewer: Oh. And they had the money because the Brown Foundation provided it?

Williams: Well, they’re – because they were no longer associated with the Park Service, that line item transferred from them to the park.

Interviewer: Oh, I see. Okay. So, “What are we going to do with this money? We have to do something every year.”

Williams: Yeah. So they – I mean, we’re really well-endowed with furniture and equipment, performance awards, that kind of stuff, so.

Interviewer: (Laughs) Okay. Well, that’s a good thing!

Williams: And the – you know, to me, in some ways, that doesn’t do justice to an employee because it raises their expectations, and –

Interviewer: For when they go to another park?

Williams: Ohhh, they’re going to be hurtin’. I mean, it’s really – you know, you want to balance it between awarding a – you know, recognizing performance –

Interviewer: Good performance?

Williams: Right. But it was just pretty excessive. And we – and, I mean, in general, our guidelines have tightened up on that, too, and there are constraints on how much you can –

Interviewer: So, have you had – over the years, had to reduce the awards that people were getting?

Williams: I’ve cautioned our supervisors to pull back and do, you know, more of a combination of day – time off as well as the financial, money awards.

Interviewer: Okay. So what’s the reaction among the staff with – for that?

Williams: I haven’t heard anything (laughs). I’m completely clueless! I don’t know! Interviewer: (Laughs) Okay. Nobody’s come – nobody’s come to your office with firebrands?

Williams: No, not yet. (Laughter) And another thing that I also noticed pretty – right off the bat was that the internal controls and that the administrative controls were not in line with what the Region was wanting.

Interviewer: Were they more lax or more strict?

Williams: Yeah, and – more lax, and there wasn’t a good span of control when handling funds – you know, accounting for property and all of that. And it was exasperated because the person that was the Administrative Officer when I came in had been in a trainee position, and then she had just kind of shortly promoted to the full grade level of the position. When I came in, she was not really comfortable with the budgeting and financial side, yet. Her background had been more in human relations.

Interviewer: So, is this the person after Teri Perry? Williams: Oh, yeah. Several people after Teri. So –

Interviewer: Oh, okay. So, you had a little bit of inexperience going on?

Williams: A little bit of inexperience, and then I just cannot say how much, within the last five years, internal controls, administrative controls, budgeting, finance, has become much more professionalized in the Park Service. And a lot of it relates to the fact that we switched from one – well, we still use one program for budgeting, but we use another program, called FBMS, the Financial Business Management System, for actually reporting, and that’s transparent all the way up to the Secretary of Interior. So, that transparency has really forced a lot of change in our operations. And, you know, people often are resistant to change, and that kind of compounded (laughs) –

Interviewer: Right. Compounds the problem?

Williams: Right. And the – so, you know, I come in at the very same time that all of this change is happening, so it looks like I’m targeting –

Interviewer: You’re coming in and making changes everywhere? Williams: Yeah. So, that’s been kind of a challenge, too.

Interviewer: Yeah, even though you are only doing it because the Regional Office has directed you to do it?

Williams: Yeah. And I try – I mean, my experience, with having come from the Regional Office and then working in several park situations, is, if you can make them happy, it makes your life a lot easier!

Interviewer: The Regional Office?

Williams: Yeah. So, you know, let’s just do it – get it over with! (Laughter) But I – and I think I really did a good job trying to explain, you know, why we were making these changes, but it’s still a – you know, we have people that are just very resistant to change.

Interview: So, you’re still working on that?

Williams: Still working on that. We have a new Administrative Officer now that is just really good, and she’s helping support all of that messaging and that. She’s getting a lot of work done now to get us lined out right.

Interviewer: Okay. Well, that’s handy. It’s always good to have a good helper. Williams: Yeah. She’s a very good person.

Interviewer: Now, you talked about some of the things that the Midwest Regional Office told you before you came. Was there anything else? Any other kind of directive besides the outreach to children and handling those (unintelligible)?

Williams: No, not really. They did not give me a lot of background on the Brown Foundation. What I knew of the Foundation, I – when I was at First Ladies National Historical Site in Ohio, it was a very similar situation, where a very strong-willed founding director had set up this non-profit organization, had pushed for the legislation to get the park designated. She was the wife of the head of the Appropriations Committee in the House, so there was a lot of money – (laughs)

Interviewer: Okay!

Williams: Yeah, a lot of money and politics there. So, I was very – I – what I was doing was consulting with the Agreements Officer Theora McVay, who you are going to be interviewing, when I was working at First Ladies, and she was telling me, “This is going on at the Brown Foundation, this is what the auditors are finding, this is how we need to change the Cooperative Agreement at First Ladies to make sure we don’t get –

Interviewer: “To make sure we don’t have that problem there as well”?

Williams: Yeah, she was telling me that First Ladies would be next on the list if they decided to audit all of the partnerships, so.

Interviewer: Oh, okay. Was that - was there something going on at the time where they were auditing all the partnerships?

Williams: They were auditing this partnership [with the Brown Foundation].

Interviewer: This partnership. Okay, not – this wasn’t a generic audit of all partnerships; this was special?

Williams: No. They have since kind of moved on to that, but not at the detail that they were doing.

Because they were conducting an audit in response to an OIG investigation.

Interviewer: Right. That would be a whistleblower, right? Williams: Mmm-hmmm. Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. So, this kind of moves us into the question of what you would think of as the biggest challenges you have faced on this job. I mean, you have mentioned several of them, one of them being you came in at a time when a lot of operational changes were being mandated by the Midwest Region –

Williams: The Region – well, and the Department [of the Interior].

Interviewer: And [unintelligible] the Park Service, in general, and you had to implement those changes in the face of resistance to change, so –?

Williams: Correct. Well, like I said, the staff here was pretty – I think you call it “siloed,” in that they were just staying within their own bailiwick and not collaborating well. And then –

Interviewer: Can I just interrupt for just a minute? Why do you think that was?

Williams: I think that some of it was trying to kind of stay under the radar with all the politics that was going on with the Foundation because – I don’t know if you are aware of it, Cheryl Brown Henderson was the Executive Director of the Brown Foundation, and so they had a partnership relationship for so many years, and then she was hired as the superintendent.

Interviewer: Right. And then the whole relationship dissolved after that? Williams: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. So, go on with the –

Williams: Well, I – when I came here, and I saw – thought that there was probably almost, like, a PTSD going on, with the older employees – the long – you know, the employees with the tenure that had been through that.

Interviewer: Dealt with all this chaos?

Williams: Yeah. And it was. I mean, there were some pretty ugly things going on. Whenever Cheryl found out that there had – somebody had blown the whistle on her, she had a staff meeting and said, “I want to know who blew the whistle.” And, you know, it’s just –

Interviewer: “Sorry, we don’t do that.”

Williams: Yeah, and you know, you would – in hindsight, somebody should have been saying to her, “You know, these are the ethics things and our employees get trained on these ethics things every single year. They know the law.”

Interviewer: Right. They know what they are.

Williams: Yeah. “So, you cannot do this and this and this.” And I think the OIG report did call out the Regional Office for lack of sound oversight, which I concur with completely, from what I’ve heard, so –

Interviewer: Okay. So, are you saying that your greatest challenge was dealing with the aftermath of the –?

Williams: Kind of. The aftermath, which meant that there was distrust in management, distrust – you know, distrust in change because they knew that they were taking care of business and keeping things going behind the scenes, which is very, you know, true and legitimate.

Interviewer: And so, when you came in and said, “We’re going to change this and this,” they’re like, “We’ve been doing this all these years, and –“

Williams: Yeah, “And weathered this big storm.”

Interviewer: “Managed to make it through all this – we’re not changing.”

Williams: Mmm-hmm. Yeah. So, I really think that trauma did make it harder to gain trust and make changes, and, you know, at some point, you just have to say, “You’re either going with me or you’re not, so – ”

Interviewer: “Or you’re going to another park,” right?

Williams: Mmm-hmm. And we have had several people resign, so –

Interviewer: Okay. So, when you came on site, the condition of the administration – was it – it sounds to me like it wasn’t as organized as it should have been, and it wasn’t as coherent as –

Williams: That’s correct, yeah. There was – central files were not being maintained – Interviewer: What are central files?

Williams: It’s the official files of the park. Interviewer: Okay, so, like, reports and –?

Williams: Reports and all kinds of – anything that’s a permanent record needs to be in the central files. And then there’s a deposition date dictated by the National Records Administration that, you know, you then transfer things to the National Records Center at some point. And some stuff you just throw away! (Laughter) And - but, anyway, that work had not been done.

Interviewer: So, had it not been done for a very long time – or ever?

Williams: It had not been done, I think, while – I don’t know exactly when the position of Secretary for the Superintendent was eliminated. I think, possibly –

Interviewer: Do you think David had one?

Williams: No, I don’t think – I’m pretty sure he did not have a Secretary, so it would have been maybe under Steve Adams’ administration that that position was eliminated. But I would say, you know, a good five years before I got here, they were not keeping files in the manner that makes them accessible.

Interviewer: Okay, I’ve got to write that down because I am interviewing him, and I’ll just ask him if he eliminated the Secretary’s position – or, if it was eliminated because of budget –

Williams: Yeah, that probably would have been a reason. And, now – I mean, very few parks have Secretaries much anymore. There – you know, there were not good span of control.

There were just the Administrative Officer and an Administrative Assistant, and they were doing – just the two people doing the credit card audits each year that we’re required to do. You know, you – at most parks, I’ve had a credit – another person that is familiar with using the credit card set in on the team, so you have at least three eyes, you know, one outside the Division, looking at the credit cards to make sure –

Interviewer: Right. Like a neutral observer?

Williams: Yeah. And the deposits were not getting done the right way. I had to – when we lost our – the last Administrative Officer resigned, I had to do the deposit audit. Some deposits had not been made for nine months.

Interviewer: Oh, my goodness! Oh!

Williams: Yeah. So, there were some – quite a few - and property was not being excessed, it was just accumulating, part of which was – part of that related to the fact that we didn’t have an IT person that was doing their job.

Interviewer: Okay. So, was there a – when you were looking at all this, was there a, like, generalized date that this all began, or was it random, like some of it went back six years and some of it went back to the beginning of the park, and some of it was just two or three years? Or did it all start at about twelve years ago, whatever?

Williams: I – well, they had a really strong AO named Katherine Cushinberry – Interviewer: Yes, I’m interviewing her, too.

Williams: Okay. And if you find out what date she left, I think that probably would be – because – Interviewer: Okay, so that’s when things started being –?

Williams: Yeah, because Katrina, then, was the next AO, came in from the interpretive ranks. She – they set her position up as a Trainee 7 slash Administrative Officer 9. So, she had, you know, a year or so in a trainee position, but, as far as I could tell, there was no assigned

mentor with her, and David Smith, who had been Superintendent at the time – I’m pretty sure he’s the one that hired her – he is a – he was not strong in Administration. Or that is my – what I – (laughs).

Interviewer: Okay. That’s your – that’s your impression, anyway?

Williams: Yeah. And he was getting a lot of resistance to change, too, so. But, anyway, so it – you know, it was just kind of a combination of circumstances, lack of really sound knowledge, you know, with the person coming in.

Interviewer: Okay. That was one of my questions: why do you think that was – it was in that situation, and it was basically that someone who had done it well left, and the person who followed that person did not have someone to mentor them and possibly didn’t get a lot of training, and one thing led to another, and the next person after that couldn’t figure it out and just did whatever?

Williams: Yeah. Did what she knew how to do, basically, and stayed up with that. Interviewer: So, what changes have you instituted to correct those problems?

Williams: Well, we’ve hired – we basically have hired a third person, although that person is dedicated to Nicodemus National Historic Site.

Interviewer: Oh! Are you still mentoring Nicodemus? Williams: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay, I want to talk about that in a little bit. Williams: Still trying to. (Laughter)

Interviewer: Okay, so, let’s go back to changes you have instituted. Williams: I have PSD, too. (Laughs) PTSD.

Interviewer: (Laughs) PTSD?

Williams: Yeah. But, anyway, so we’ve done – we’ve been doing a lot more training, primarily in communication and – but also trying to emphasize, you know, mini-trainings on, “Here’s what we expect for credit cards,” you know. This is – we’ve sent people to, you know, property training, that kind of stuff, to refresh their skills. We’ve done – we are in the process of updating a lot of our internal park policies and making them tie very closely to Regional and, you know, National policies.

Interviewer: Do you – so, do you sit everybody down and say – and have a training class where it says, “This is the national policy for doing this?”

Williams: We try – a little bit of that. And we have – every quarter, we have an all-employees meeting. And last – I guess it ended about the time we went into shutdown, I was using the year and a half before that to issue a policy and say, “Okay, here’s a draft. Look at it.

See if you see any concerns.” And then, at the next all-employees meeting, I’d have it finished and it would be, “Here’s your –“

Interviewer: So, “Here’s the final policy?”

Williams: Yeah. So, we went through that for about a year and a half, and then shutdown hit, and I have kind of had other things I’ve had to deal with since then. But, yes, we do a little bit. And, like I said, we do, kind of, refreshers on credit card training from time to time in the staff meetings. Our new AO is really good at sending out reminders that, “Your statements are due and here’s what it – goes into your package when you submit it to your supervisor,” and that kind of stuff. So, there’s a lot more information being given out that says these are her expectations, and here’s why, and here’s when.

Interviewer: (Laughs) Especially the “Here’s when”? Williams: Mmm-hmm.

Interviewer: Okay. Let’s do discuss Nicodemus. It’s a little bit off our track, but, since it came up, how did the park happen to become –

Williams: Mentored by –?

Interviewer: Yeah. Explain the relationship to me, please.

Williams: Well, I was the second Superintendent for Nicodemus. And it had been – at the time, Ernie Quintana was our Regional Director, and he had about – I think probably about seven of the smaller parks set up to where you would be a site manager, and then they started just changing the title back to Superintendent. But, anyway, you would be reporting to another Superintendent of a higher grade and that set up – I mean, it was supposed to be a mentoring relationship.

Interviewer: Okay, so, were you under – were you being mentored?

Williams: By Fort Larned – the Superintendent at Fort Larned at that time. So, the first Superintendent that I worked for at Fort Larned, I had worked with him on a Cultural Landscape Report, so I had a really good relationship with him. Someone else came in that was not good and had – eventually had to be – take early retirement.

Interviewer: At Nicodemus?

Williams: No, at Fort Larned. When that happened, and I took the lateral transfer to get out of that situation, they put the next Superintendent in, still reporting to Fort Larned. He immediately started to have the same kind of issues, so they changed, at that point, the supervision. I think they had – for just a brief bit of time, it may have gone to the Regional Office, but then they decided to assign the Brown v. Board.

Interviewer: Do you know what year this was, approximately? Williams: I do not. I don’t.

Interviewer: Well, it was after you left Nicodemus.

Williams: Right. So, it would have been when Mark Weekley was the Superintendent. And he – I know he initially started working for the Superintendent at Fort Larned NHS. He had that same reporting relationship, but then it changed.

Interviewer: Okay. And so, what is involved?

Williams: Basically, it just means to kind of over – you know, have oversight of the larger issues. Just make sure that you are communicating well with them and giving, you know, a – advice.

Interviewer: Do they report to you how many visitors they have? Or do they report –?

Williams: They do the reporting to the Regional Office, but it’s just that you’re an intermediate, more accessible, supervisor for questions.

Interviewer: Okay, so, if they have a question, it’s easier to get to you than it is to somebody in the Regional Office and get a fast answer?

Williams: It is, yeah. Right. And, I mean, because the Regional Director and the Deputy Regional Director usually split park superintendencies for supervision – but, I mean, we’ve got fifty or sixty parks in the Region, so it’s just –

Interviewer: I know! And you keep getting more of them!

Williams: Mmm-hmm. And so, it’s a – you know, it’s an undoable job. So, the – it really was kind of an interesting way to set it up. The positions are generally a 12 grade level position, and then the mentoring supervisor has to be at least a 13. You have to be – have at least one grade difference.

Interviewer: Okay. So, a GS-12 or – and then the mentor is a GS-13?

Williams: Right. But the advantage of those trainee-type parks was that it allowed a person to come in at a lower grade and get some experience under a mentor, and then – and that step into a Superintendency is often really hard.

Interviewer: So, if someone is a GS-11, they couldn’t automatically go to a GS-13, so a GS-12 was an intermediate step as a trainee Superintendent, basically?

Williams: Correct. Right. Yeah. Because there is not very many 12-level positions in parks unless you’re at a Division Chief level. Yeah.

Interviewer: Really? Okay. So, did you, like, have to go – did the Superintendent here go to Nicodemus for anything, or were they just available for –?

Williams: You know, we usually try to get up there at least for – several times [unintelligible]. Interviewer: You have to see how its being run, and how things are working? Whether or not the –?

Williams: Yeah. We – it’s – the relationship out there has changed dramatically over the last couple of years, and it’s about to change again. In response to complaints from the local historical society speaking for the community – so they said – they – (laughter)

Interviewer: I’ve been to Nicodemus. I imagine the local historical society IS the community!

Williams: Yeah. Right. It’s – that’s about right. But, anyway, they, you know [unintelligible] - they always wanted to have more input into interpretation, because it’s their story, and –

Interviewer: Okay. And it’s a fascinating story, too. Williams: It is.

Interviewer: It’s one – it’s one that I never learned in high school. Williams: No, huh-uh.

Interviewer: And I was just astonished, basically, when I saw it, so –

Williams: Yeah. I was on the General Management Planning Team. That’s kind of what got me really interested in the history there. But, anyway, we had – we had, in the – in between July and September of 2015 – so, the year that I came here – we lost three staff. We lost the –

Interviewer: At Nicodemus?

Williams: Mmm-hmm. We lost the Facility Manager, the Administrative Officer, and the Superintendent. So, you know, the Regional Office –

Interviewer: Oh, wow! Who was left?

Williams: Yeah! (Laughs) A couple of Park Rangers and the maintenance worker. Yeah. So, no supervisor. And so, you know, the Regional Office said, “Well, let’s re-think what we’re doing out there, because this is an opportunity.” And so, we did an enhanced Cooperative Agreement, where they [the local Historical Society] were basically running the Visitors – the local partner was. The historical society was running the Visitors Center and doing the visitor orientation. And it was very meaningful for people to walk in and be able to interact with the local – you know, a descendant of the community.

But they –

Interviewer: Yeah. How has that worked out?

Williams: They have realized how much risk management that they’re (pause) – Interviewer: Undertaking?

Williams: And they’re really, from the ten years I was gone, the historical society made a lot of – they made some improvements in sustainable – being a sustainable operation. They have a better Board, with broader representation, but they’re still not doing membership drives, fundraising, nothing to really sustain their operation. So, I don’t know how long they’re going to be there.

Interviewer: Yeah. People just keep getting older and older and dropping out of the system. So then what?

Williams: Yeah. So, now, what we have done with our Chief of Interp [at Brown v. Board] position is, we sent the position description to our classification in HR and asked them to look at if we combined the duties of supervision – or, of Superintendent for Nicodemus with the Chief of Interp here, would it push it into a higher grade? And they said, “No, it’s still a 12.”

Interviewer: So, is the Chief of Interp here also the Chief of Interp for Nicodemus? Williams: He’s the Superintendent also.

Interviewer: Oh, the Chief of Interp is the Superintendent and the Chief of Interp for –?

Williams: For Brown. He’s the – our Chief of Interp for Brown, and he’s the Superintendent at Nicodemus.

Interviewer: Okay. But not the Chief of Interp for Nicodemus? Williams: Well, he is by the default because he’s – (laughs). Interviewer: By default because nobody else is there? Okay.

Williams: They – the reasoning was – is that the – he wasn’t going to have to supervise any Park Service staff out there because we did eventually move the staff that was out there.

Interviewer: So, you moved the Rangers that were left and the Facility – the maintenance person that was left elsewhere?

Williams: Yeah, we – well, we made them a – we moved one Ed Tech here. We moved a Park Ranger here. The other Park Ranger had taken an early buy-out that came out at the end of 2015. And then the maintenance worker, we offered to find them a position at some other park nearby, and he wasn’t willing to move.

Interviewer: Okay. So, your Chief of Interp is also the Superintendent out at Nicodemus? Williams: Yes.

Interviewer: Does he have staff at Nicodemus? Williams: No. He has the partners.

Interviewer: He’s like the Lone Ranger out there?

Williams: No, he’s the partner. He – it’s a partnership, and they have been doing everything. But now, they’ve indicated they want out at the end of September. We are going through the process of hiring a Superintendent, hiring Park Rangers, etcetera, so –

Interviewer: Okay. Well, that sounds complicated! (Laughs) Williams: Yeah. (Laughter)

Interviewer: So, let’s get back to Brown v. Board more fully. So, just for administration here, you’ve changed some staff. Have you changed any hours of operation or reporting – well, you’ve changed reporting requirements, you told me that.

Williams: Well, we’re – no, we’re still open to the public seven days a week. When I first got here, I was, like, “Why do we have so many permanent interp staff?” And it’s because, when you have seven days of operation, it requires it. Plus, you know, direction from HR is, if you have year-round needs for staffing, you need to hire permanent staff. Because we were doing, like, summer seasonal interpreters and winter education techs to deal with all the school groups. And that’s two seasonals that, basically, are needed year-round. So, right now, we don’t have any temporary staff, seasonal staff, we just have permanent staff, so.

Interviewer: Okay. Were you the only one to make these kinds of decisions, or did you get help?

Williams: Well, you know, some of those were on-going or just starting. Those decisions were starting to be looked at as I came on board.

Interviewer: Oh, I see. So, you just implemented some of the things that they’d already decided? Williams: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. Alright. So, you talked about the shutdown [in 2019]. First of all, besides – you weren’t here when Brown Foundation and the park relationship dissolved?

Williams: No.

Interviewer: Were there any situations that were tricky and delicate that you had to navigate that – since you weren’t involved with the – what we think of as The Big One?

Williams: (Laughs) Well, we have to kind of continually deal with that breakup out in the community.

Interviewer: Oh, because of the community?

Williams: Right. Because, you know, the OIG report is fairly accessible. I think a lot of people in the community have seen it. Their comments tend to range in, you know, “So what if they were using a limo rather than a taxi?” And it’s like, “That’s a big deal. That’s a definite –“ so, it’s – you know, it’s very hard to walk the line of saying, you know, “That happened then. It’s not now. I didn’t have anything to do with that, but I understand why it happened, and, you know, we just have to move on from there.” But you can’t talk bad about anybody. (Laughs)

Interviewer: Yes, that’s exactly right. Did - how about with the city. Has the city been –?

Williams: They’ve been very supportive. And there’s been a lot of work going on. Number one, the city plus Freedom’s Frontier National Heritage Area, they have been working with – both entities have been working with tourism partners in the downtown area to try to generate more heritage tourism. So that’s starting to –

Interviewer: Yeah, unfortunately, you’re off the Civil Rights Trail. Williams: No, we’re at the very end of the Civil Rights Trail, but –

Interviewer: Well, okay, but that loop kind of doesn’t loop up into Kansas very much?

Williams: Well, it hits Little Rock Central High, and we’re the very last. And it cuts – so, it’s kind of like a string of pearls from Washington, D.C. across the South to Kansas. And not – now there is a movement coming out of Birmingham, Alabama – I can’t – they started asking about World Heritage status. And so, from the World Heritage folks, they recommend that they do a serial nomination of several sites, so they’re looking at –

Interviewer: I know – I know that Central High School is –

Williams: Yes, and we are, too. We’re part of that. So, we’re working with the researchers out of Georgia State University and providing them information. And that’s going to trigger a need to work with the city on some kind of Historic District overlay, basically, to provide a buffer.

Interviewer: Is that going to change the management of this park in any way? No?

Williams: Hmm-mmm. But, it will – I think it’s going to be more beneficial to the town, in general, in elevating tourism and, you know, generating more international tourism, basically, if they – and they’re – they’ve become very aware of that potential, and one of their planners – preservation planners is going to a symposium in Atlanta in April with me, so –

Interviewer: Alright. Okay. So, the other one – thing I wanted to ask about was what kind of impact on the park did the government shutdown of last year have?

Williams: (Laughs – long pause)

Interviewer: Do you want to tell me that, or is –?

Williams: Well, I mean, I’ve only got a few more years with the Park Service, so I can be pretty frank. (Laughter) It was one of the worst shutdowns I’ve ever been through, as far as impact. And it – you know, part of it is because the –

Interviewer: I would really like to document what the impact was.

Williams: It was the fact – it was – hit us specifically – I made an offer, like, a week or a week and a half after Thanksgiving to an IT specialist. He did not come on board until March.

Interviewer: Because of the shutdown? Okay.

Williams: When we came back from the shutdown, our HR people immediately said, “Do not send us any permanent positions. We have to get all the fire – wild land firefighting seasonals, the interp seasonals, we – the law enforcement seasonals –

Interviewer: Because you would have been doing that during the –?

Williams: During December. So, they – you know, we couldn’t – I mean, even though we were, like this close to hiring an IT Specialist, they wouldn’t even work his paperwork for a while.

And it really hurt the parks. We had – in addition, right before the shutdown, we had one of our Park Guides front desk people resign, so we were down two permanent positions: Park Ranger – well, one was an Ed Tech position, one was a Park Ranger

position, and then that Park Guide position. So, we were down three permanent positions plus I was trying to get that IT Specialist hired.

Interviewer: And you couldn’t refill those positions because you were on hold for permanent positions until they got –?

Williams: We were on hold both for that and because the administration placed a hold on anything that was GS-11 and above, which really didn’t impact us too much because ours were all lower graded. But it was – it was devastating for parks. And now that – I think the budget situation has become so uncertain, that people – you see all kinds of details being offered, and – but not a lot of –

Interviewer: Not a lot of permanent positions? Just go there – a detail is a time-limited, temporary position?

Williams: Temporary, yeah. And the park that lets somebody go on a detail is – Interviewer: Then, they’re missing that person, so –?

Williams: Yeah. So, it’s a no-win situation. I mean, it’s a “win” situation because people are getting a lot of experience, but –

Interviewer: (Laughs) Sooner or later it will be a “win” situation, but not now? Williams: Yeah. Right.

Interviewer: Okay. Well, that’s a good transition: let’s discuss how budgets are affecting your park.

Williams: We’re actually, because of that Brown Foundation line item in the budget, we’re very well funded. Yeah. I went from a park – the Garfield park was thirty to fifty thousand dollars in the hole for the last three years I was there, and, here, we give around a hundred thousand dollars back.

Interviewer: So, budget restrictions are not having an impact on your – on your –?

Williams: Not – except that we have to – you know, I’ve been trying to coach people to be – “don’t do conspicuous consumption. It’s just not going to go at this [Editorial Note from SW: I was trying to convey that perception is important] kind of – under this kind of –”

Interviewer: (Laughs) “You’re a government employee.”

Williams: Yes. It’s just right, in the first place, but – so, we, you know, try to kind of – like I said before, we’re kind of working on keeping expectations more reasonable.

Interviewer: (Laughs) Okay. So, let’s move on to outreach programs that this park conducts.

Williams: You know, though, with the shutdown, it was amazing that there was a lot of recognition within the local community that we were being impacted.

Interviewer: Oh, really? And how did that – how did that express itself?

Williams: Oh, there was a few offers, you know, for free meals and stuff like that, which, you know, we had to – we kind of had to have –

Interviewer: Oh, really? “Oh, I’m sorry. We’re the government; we can’t do that?”

Williams: Well, if it’s offered to everybody in the government, we can do it, but, you know, not everybody in the government was being impacted by the shutdown, so, yeah. So, that was –

Interviewer: So, did anybody come and say, “I’ll be happy to be a – well, of course, the park was closed, so –

Williams: Right.

Interviewer: And you all weren’t getting paid, so that’s another impact. And it impacts, also, the community, because, if you’re not getting paid, you’re not spending money, so –

Williams: Yeah. And it was – we had a couple of employees that were really suffering, you know.

First time in a federal job, whatever, so –

Interviewer: And they’re – so they’re a lower grade, so they’re not making as much money and – already?

Williams: And the rent still had to keep going and all that kind of stuff. Interviewer: Right. Did anybody offer to hold off on the rents or –?

Williams: I didn’t hear that, because I was actually out for knee surgery at that time, so I wasn’t hearing the day-to-day stuff.

Interviewer: Oh, okay. And no – you weren’t gathering here at the park, either, so you wouldn’t have heard those things?

Williams: No. They had, I think, one breakfast meal together during the – during the shutdown. A lot of parks that I’ve been in during shutdowns, they – you know, you get together fairly frequently, and, you know, go hiking or do something social to kind of keep yourself sane while you’re in shutdown. But at least they did meet one time. Not everybody came in for it, but – and not here. They were at a local restaurant, but –

Interviewer: Okay. Alright. So, what kind of outreach programs have – does this park engage in? I have down here “National Park Weeks” and “March for Park.” Those are the only two I know about.

Williams: Well, we’ve actually, let’s see – I made a note of some I saw in the files. One that I thought was really effective was a “Remember Rosa.”

Interviewer: “Remember Rosa?”

Williams: Mmm-hmm. It was the anniversary of Rosa Parks’ set – Interviewer: Sit-in?

Williams: Sit-in, thank you. I knew something was wrong with that. But anyway, that [unintelligible] from the metro transit, the bus company, and they started –

Interviewer: Oh! Did you have a sit-in in the busses? How cool!

Williams: Yes! You know, because her sit-in was on a bus, so they were looking at doing something to commemorate the anniversary in December and provide free ridership that month, so they started working with the 501, and then, because our Chief is on the 501 Equity Council – because, at that time, we had an Ed Specialist that was pretty hooked in. 501 is the School District, sorry.

Interviewer: Okay. Thank you.

Williams: They got started collaborating together, and it was kind of a fluid group, but people just kept kind of adding in little things that went along with it. But, primarily, the bus company wrapped a bus with “Remember Rosa” on it. And then our Rangers helped 501 create interpretive panels that went in the overheads inside. And then we – they – the bus company committed to bringing the bus to every school in Topeka, and our Rangers met them there and did a lesson on the bus about Rosa Parks and the – and the protest. So, I thought that was – I thought that was really – I mean, because it was targeted on education, but it engaged so many different people; it was fun for the kids because it was different, you know.

Interviewer: Yeah. It was a community effort?

Williams: Yeah. We – and so, that one was really good. We helped work with the Constitution Hall downtown, a non-profit, to do some panels for a little pocket park by their building that the Rotary Club did. So, we did the interpretive materials for them – the graphic layout – then they had it printed and installed. We did – we’ve done like an Outward Bound program a couple of times. A group from Topeka would bring young, black youth in to do their first camping experience inside –

Interviewer: Here? In the park? In the school?

Williams: Yes. Yeah, that was something we were kind of trying, because we don’t normally keep, you know, people here overnight, but – and I –

Interviewer: Right. How did that work?

Williams: It was okay, except that it’s not for a Superintendent that’s in her sixties, I can tell you that! (Laughs)

Interviewer: You’re not into camping out even if it’s indoors?

Williams: No! Yeah, that’s right! (Laughs) But I volunteered one time. But, anyway, that was – that was kind of fun. And we – like I said, we’ve been working with downtown heritage tourism groups to do some enhanced marketing. They – there’s an African – a Kansas African American Heritage Trail that we’re a part of. There’s been a couple of – let’s see, I guess last year, or, maybe, a year and a half ago, there – we had a film series every month where we got, you know, different kinds of films.

Interviewer: You showed the films in the auditorium?

Williams: Mmm-hmm. At night. And people would come in. And, for the sixty-fifth anniversary in May of 19 – 2019, because of the shutdown, we were already – you know, people would be saying, “What are you going to do? What are you going to do?” And, it’s like, you know, “We’re not going to be able to do any kind of big blow-out for the sixty-fifth anniversary.”

Interviewer: Right. You don’t have time to plan it?

Williams: Yeah. Which was a shame. So, Enimini, he has – was already thinking about, “Well, let’s do, you know, a series of big-name speakers, because we can at least throw money at something, and it doesn’t take a whole lot of time to organize that. So, he had worked with Washburn University, and we did a couple of those. We had Ta-Nehisi Coates come in, and Doctor Kendi, Ibram [Dr. Ibram X. Kendi], who had both written books about race relationships, but we had a couple of those speakers planned for right following the shutdown. And, because we couldn’t work to make all the logistic arrangements, we had to cancel a couple of those. But, anyway, we were telling our partners, like, you know, “We really can’t handle a whole lot this year.” So, they went out – and there’s a non- profit group called the Brown v. Board - Sumner Legacy Trust that’s run by Karen Hiller, who’s one of our Council people, and she – they were so effective at engaging all kinds of different people and groups and doing ten days of programming, basically. And so, we tried to start supporting those efforts by, you know, covering the costs of pop-up banners, graphics stuff, the booklets that went to a couple of the events, paying for some of the smaller named speakers that spoke at different things – so, just using our money to help lift up and support what they were doing. And they basically were – I mean, they were doing things that I – that I don’t think we would have thought of. I mean, they had, like, a Spoken Word party out here in front of the mural, which, you know, we don’t really get too much into that, at this point. But maybe we should.

Interviewer: Well, we’re interviewing her tomorrow, so we’ll be sure to ask her about that.

Williams: Yeah. So, they did just an incredible job of pulling together, like I said, ten days of programming – and resulted in a documentary being done by the local PBS member station.

Interview: Oh! Okay. It turned into a giant THING!

Williams: Yeah, it did! They did – the Kansas African Affairs Commission, which is under the Office of the Governor – they did a breakfast for the children of the plaintiffs. There were still a couple of teachers alive at that time, and then, the kids that had made the transition at these schools from, you know, segregated to integrated education, they invited them in, and it was – I think it really was the first time that the – those people really started feeling acknowledged – because there actually had been quite a bit of criticism of the Brown Foundation that only the Brown family was being promoted in media. Which is – you know, I don’t think –

Interviewer: Right. That just happens.

Williams: Yeah. That just happens. I mean, you know, the media just focuses on one person or one image, and then that becomes the story. So I don’t – I don’t blame the Foundation for doing that, but that was the perception. And I think that kind of broke that open, and –

Interviewer: So, was that the first time, let’ say, those children had got together since grade school to discuss their experience?

Williams: No, I think – I think - well, in a public forum, I think, yes. Yeah. I mean, the Brown Foundation and the Park Service had done a really, fairly intensive group of oral histories, and those are all – we’ve got copies here, but they are at the Public Library and the Kansas Historical Society. And so there have been oral interviews, but I don’t think – like, the transcripts and – I don’t think they’re readily available, really, unless you go into the library or the historical society.

Interviewer: Okay. So, what partners – kind of partners do you have besides the Brown Foundation, after – I mean, during their relationship with the park and after?

Williams: Well, our partnership with the Brown v. Board – Sumner Legacy Trust has been an informal partnership.

Interviewer: Okay. So, the Sumner Legacy Trust has a subset for the Brown v. Board? Williams: Their focus had been on getting the Sumner School a public honor.

Interviewer: Right. So why do you keep saying, “The Brown v. Board – Sumner Legacy Trust?” Williams: That’s the – that’s the name.

Interviewer: That’s the whole name?

Williams: Yeah. They had helped the park with the sixtieth anniversary, I think. And they had focused a lot of their attention on, you know, on their connections to the Sumner School. But then, right as we were going into the sixty-fifth anniversary, there was a lawsuit that kind of brought their efforts to a screeching halt, so they decided to kind of shift focus and help with this. Yeah.

Interviewer: Oh, I see. Okay. So, besides them, Kansas – University of Kansas?

Williams: Well, we had a lease with them for a while. They were using – but we asked to drop that lease this past May because we were starting to run into a lot of conflicts with that.

Interviewer: They had an office here in the building, or you had an office there?

Williams: No, they just leased either – they had the choice of either being in this upstairs classroom or the downstairs one, and they held their Public Management courses here.

Interviewer: Oh, I see.

Williams: Yeah. So, that was a – that was a lease agreement. Then, we have a partnership with a couple organizations that’s not really collaborative to much extent. We’re going to try to

work those into something more collaborative. The NAACP Topeka Chapter meets here monthly. And then –

Interviewer: Mmm-hmm. Do they contribute in any way to the park, other than just meeting here?

Williams: No, so that’s why I want us to do at least one program together, you know. And it – we do that, and there’s one Kappa – some fraternity that only usually uses the building one time a year. We do those two partnerships because of their historic connection to the case. Because the lawyers were working within the NAACP, etcetera, and this other fraternity was apparently really heavily involved in recruiting parents and stuff like that. So, those two are kind of in recognition of their historical connection. Then, we still – we allow the elections commission to do voting here, and then we have the Monroe Neighborhood Association that meets here. So, I want to formalize the agreements – not, you know, in anything like –

Interviewer: So, right now, all these things are just, “Yeah, you do this,” and you don’t have a Memorandum of Agreement for any of them?

Williams: We do have a – an old – it’s called – it was called a General Agreement, at the time. It would be a Memorandum of Agreement or Understanding, whichever one is the financial one. But, yeah, I just want to change them so there is a little bit of collaboration so that it makes our justification for maintaining that relationship a bit stronger.

Interviewer: Right. Yeah. Get the paperwork.

Williams: Yeah. So, other than that, there – we had hosted – the “Living the Dream” is a big non- profit here in Topeka that does a huge Martin Luther King week celebration, and they give away, like, fifteen – ten to fifteen thousand dollars in scholarships every year. And so they would do – we would host the awards ceremony for the kids. And there would be a display of art. There was – you could do spoken word or artwork as part of your scholarship, and we either – we displayed the winning art, and then they’d have the awards ceremony in the – in the auditorium. That went away during the shutdown, and then they – we’ve – our relationship’s gotten kind of rocky with them. Yeah. But, I’m – you know, I’m trying to leave the door open for them, but I’d want it under an Agreement, if it happens, so.

Interviewer: Yeah. So, are some of these groups resistant to putting their relationship with you in writing, or are they afraid –?

Williams: No, I think the big conflict has been in that they viewed us as a free venue, and, you know, that’s not what we’re here for. So, you know, I understand completely why they want to have the affiliation of having an event here. This is not a question. But we have updated our Special Use Permit Form so that the requestor has to identify how it relates to our interpretive themes.

Interviewer: Right. And tell you how they’re going to insure their event? (laughs)

Williams: Yeah, if they have food or anything like that, they definitely have to have insurance on that.

Interviewer: Okay. So, how – your interpretive themes, let’s move to that. Have they evolved since you’ve been here, or have they been pretty much what they were when you got here is what they are now?

Williams: They - our interpretive themes come directly out of the legislative intent.

Interviewer: Right. And you had a – there was an Interpretive Themes Symposium of some kind here early on, in which the Kappa fraternity was involved, which I wondered about – why that was, so –?

Williams: Yeah, and Karen Hiller also was in the latest update to that. Because they do update the Interpretive Plan. You know, all of our planning efforts are tiered down off of the legislation. The General Management Plan is the primary document, and then these – all the implementation plans, like the Interpretive Plan, are underneath them. So, we have updated the Interpretive Plan and – before I got here, maybe about two or three years – two years prior to that.

Interviewer: Now, that’s – don’t you normally update them, like, every five years or so?

Williams: No. That’s the plan, but it never happens. You’re lucky that it gets updated every ten years. I mean, you’re really lucky if it gets updated.

Interviewer: Well, yeah. It costs money to have those things done. Williams: Yeah.

Interviewer: What about Cultural Landscape Plans. Did you –?

Williams: The Cultural Landscape Guidelines, I was the Project Manager for that out of the Regional Office, and we – because the landscape is so simple here, and we were not finding – through the inventory work that we had done – we were not finding a lot of documentation on what it looked like, we went ahead and looked at what was the neighborhood character, because we knew that the city would, at some point, need guidance on how – preservation.

Interviewer: How to preserve the neighborhood character around the school?

Williams: Yeah. So, we went ahead and – basically, the Design Guidelines need to be updated a little bit, but they’re still in pretty good shape, because there actually hasn’t been a lot of changes.

Interviewer: Yeah, I wanted to ask you: when we were looking at this – at the neighborhood around the school, it’s pretty industrialized, and was it always that way?

Williams: Not – I mean, yes on these sides (gestures northeast, toward the front of the building), but –

Interviewer: Yeah, because there’s – the train tracks are right there, so you wouldn’t really expect a lot of residential.

Williams: So, for this north part that’s all open, the lots north of us, Topeka had a really bad tornado in ‘66. And it came – it basically – if you look north of us, there’s a water tower. It lifted right as it got there, so it was just like a half a block, a block, away from the school. And so, there was housing in those areas north of us that got wiped out – destroyed.

Interviewer: Okay. And so now the area is used for other things? Williams: Yeah, it’s [unintelligible].

Interviewer: What about the ballpark? I guess it’s –?

Williams: That’s historically associated. That’s part of the property here.

Interviewer: Okay, so that’s part of this. I knew it was, but I wasn’t sure if it would – if it had once had houses on it. It sounds like they always used it as a play field.

Williams: Yeah. And, actually, whenever the High School – you know, the High – Topeka High School was integrated except for the social clubs and the sports clubs – or sports activities. So, if the white ball teams had stuff already reserved – the fields already reserved, they would bring the black ball teams from the High School over here and use this school field. And then they would occasionally use the auditorium for, like, a prom for the black kids. So –

Interviewer: Hmm. Do you know how long that went on?

Williams: I do not, but I’ll get you one of our historians with [unintelligible].

Interviewer: We can look that up. Well, it doesn’t really – it doesn’t really impact the administrative history of the – at the site, but –

Williams: Except that, I have to say, you know, I was – have always been really impressed with the level of maintenance on this property. We – Treva does industry standards. I mean, she is like it was a business. She manages it, she knows where her work orders are coming up, and she knows – you know, she’s got everything programmed out. She does all of our annual inspections. I mean, they are -

Interviewer: She’s wonderful, basically! (laughs)

Williams: She’s wonderful! Well, during the sixty-fifth anniversary, as we started listening to these kids and their memories of the schools, they would continually mention how proud they were of how well kept the schools were. And that was essential in the case, itself. And so, you know, the level of maintenance that we’re investing in this property, it’s like, “That’s very historically appropriate,” so – (laughs)

Interviewer: (Laughs) It’s supposed to look good!

Williams: Right! And if they try to take my maintenance budget away from me, I’m going to be able to use that one!

Interviewer: So, do you have a volunteer program, like a Friends of –?

Williams: It’s – we have no Friends Group, and the Brown Foundation was not a Friends Group. Interviewer: Okay. Right. I knew that.

Williams: Yeah, it was just –

Interviewer: So, there was no other volunteer group to help support the –?

Williams: No. They – I don’t know if the Brown Foundation had people working as volunteers. I have not heard a lot. Our volunteer program currently is pretty minimal. We have some people, usually students that are, you know, needing some service work for whatever.

Interviewer: Yeah, for going to college?

Williams: Yeah. They will come in on weekends, etcetera. We have some that are pretty steady now. We have one woman that’s, I think, probably a retired – a retiree that comes in pretty consistently, but [unintelligible].

Interviewer: So, you don’t have, like, an organized volunteer program? It’s just –

Williams: It’s not well organized. We just recently have switched volunteer coordinator for the – Interviewer: Oh. Okay. So, are you planning to organize it well?

Williams: Mmm-hmm. Yeah, he’s just sent out – the new coordinator has just sent out a list of “what are your needs?” you know, from each Division, you know, “what ideas do you have for things that people could do.” We do have some pretty consistent volunteers that work at off-site events, like the Juneteenth Festival – we have a booth at, and the Aaron Douglas Art Fair, we have a booth at, so we have volunteers that routinely go with a Ranger and help staff those events, so –

Interviewer: Okay. Well, we’ve been talking for a little over an hour, and I have two questions that I always ask at the end of oral history interviews –

Williams: [Unintelligible – laughs]

Interviewer: No, that’s not one of the questions. The first question is: regarding the work that you’ve done here at Brown v. Board, what are you most – of what are you most proud? You know, what do you think has been the most effective thing that you’ve done?

Williams: [Unintelligible – laughs] Interviewer: Oh – just holding it together, right?

Williams: Holding it together, yeah. You know, I think, you know, hiring really good people. I mean, between myself – and the Chief of Interp has hired a couple new people, and we’ve got one new administrative person, I’ve made some really good hires.

Interviewer: So, you’ve made some transitions from the “siloed people” to people who are more –?

Williams: More open and engaging, collaborative. Yeah, I’m just – yeah, they’ve got experience outside of this park, and I –

Interviewer: So, you think improvement in staff is probably your best –?

Williams: Yeah. Plus, really – I mean, I hate to say it, because I – it makes me sound like an administrative geek, but, you know, getting the internal controls and the administrative processes into much better shape. It just –

Interviewer: Yeah, but, if you do that, you don’t have to worry about the Midwest Regional Office coming down and breathing down your neck about the –?

Williams: Yes. Yeah, and, I mean, you know, all of the administrative processes are built off of the Code of Conduct for the government, your ethics roles. They’re all – if you are operating well administratively, you are usually operating in a proper ethical way. And, if you’ve got that down, you don’t have to worry about a lot of stuff. Because, I mean, you know, you’re eliminating the risk of people committing fraud, for one thing, so – not that – not that I think that there was, but it’s [unintelligible – laughs] as people become more and more angry at me for change. (Laughter)

Interviewer: So, my last question always is: is there something that – we’ve had a – covered a lot of topics. Is there something that you would like to talk about that I have not asked you about – something that you said to yourself, “Oh, I hope she asks me about this!”?

Williams: No, I guess – you know, one thing that I wish we had, I wish we had better partnerships within the community, and – because, I mean, you know, quite literally, when I moved here, one thing that just really slaps you in the face is, like, “Oh, my God! This is recent history!” I mean, you know, and you – last – I went to a offsite presentations by a different group, and a speaker was saying, “Oh, you know, I don’t remember if so-and- so is still in town or –,“ you know, and somebody from the audience would say, “Oh, yeah, they’re still living over –,“ you know. And it’s like “Oh, my God!”

Interviewer: “These people are still living this history!“

Williams: They are! But we’re losing that group of people very quickly, and I really – you know, we’ve been struggling with the Brown v. Board – Sumner Legacy Trust to try to find grants for doing additional oral histories.

Interviewer: Do you have a collection of oral histories here for – so that people –?

Williams: The Brown Foundation had a really comprehensive collection for that, and the documentary by the local PBS affiliate, KTWU. They’re - they gave us all the raw interviews with that, so there’s information captured there. But we – what we, I think, need to do is capture the people that made that transition, the students, basically. I think –

Interviewer: Yes. I think that would be wonderful.

Williams: Yeah. I think one of the last teachers in town just died – passed away recently, so –

Interviewer: And so, all of those people have left the scene, so to speak, without being able to get their memories of that time?

Williams: Right. Interviewer: That’s too bad.

Williams: Right, because, you know, part of the – when I – I have a newsfeed, you know, from Google News that comes up every week that, you know, every time Brown v. Board is referenced in a news article, it sends me a little alert. It’s just amazing how relevant the case is, because people are still talking about, “We’re not there yet.” You know, “What’s the legacy?” And I – now, all of these related people with the Civil Rights Movement, as well as the Brown decision are passing on: the lawyers that were involved at different levels in different communities, so it just is amazing how very much this history is still important in that – in shaping, you know, conversations that are going on right now, so.

Interviewer: Right. Okay. Well, thank you very much for spending time with me. I really enjoyed it and appreciate it, and I’m going to turn this recording device off.

Williams: Yay!

END OF RECORDING