Walter Qualls

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Abstract: Walter Qualls (1938-1987), the son of Luther Qualls and Mary E. Qualls, was born in Louisiana and lived on a cotton farm where his father worked as a sharecropper. At the age of seven, he moved north to New Jersey to live with an uncle in the Port Reading Railroad Camp. He was the first black child to attended schools in Port Reading and Woodbridge before serving two years in the Air Force. Mr. Qualls worked at the American Agriculture and Chemical Company, where he was the first black to integrate his carpenter shop. He began to build his experience with labor unions and became the first black president of the International Chemical Workers Union, Local 434 and eventually earned a bachelor's degree in urban studies and labor studies from Rutgers University.

Walter and his wife Tyrene Lee (Spencer) moved to Metuchen in 1970 where they settled at 85 Hampton Street. They had two children: Kauri and Rhea. Soon after their move, then Mayor Donald Wernik approached him to run for Metuchen Borough Council, which he did successfully with John Wiley as his running mate in 1973. Mr. Qualls became the first black councilman in the history of Metuchen. His career also included work at Rutgers University, the Office of Economic Opportunity, the New Jersey Department of Labor and Industry, and work on the President Jimmy Carter and Governor Brendan Byrne campaigns. He later became a lobbyist, working as a consultant for organizations such as Group Health Insurance of New Jersey, and when he died of a heart attack at age forty-nine, he was still working as a consultant and taking classes toward a master's degree in labor management at Rutgers University.

In this interview, Mr. Qualls discuss his family, growing up in Louisiana, his move to New Jersey with his uncle, his education, his involvement with gangs, and his experience in the Air Force. Mr. Qualls also talks extensively about becoming the leader of the International Chemical Workers Union, getting his degree at Rutgers University, his work with riots as part of the New Jersey Department of Community Affairs, and his involvement with Metuchen politics.

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R. Terwilliger: Today is March 15, 1978 and I am Ruth Terwilliger interviewing Walter Qualls, who has the distinction of being the first black councilman in the history of Metuchen. [recording paused]

Walter, I'm really pleased today that you take the time to sit down and talk to me a little bit about your life and your career thus far here in Metuchen. And I think a good place to start would be to talk about where you were born.

W. Qualls: **I was born in the year 1938 in Oak Ridge, Louisiana, which is the very northern tip of Louisiana right across from Meridian, Mississippi.**

R. Terwilliger: And how many children were in your family?

W. Qualls: **Eventually, there were nineteen boys and girls (fourteen boys and five girls).**

R. Terwilliger: Was this from the same mother and father? [chuckles]

W. Qualls: **No, no, no. It was totally in a growing kind of situation where we were cotton farmers. My father [Luther Qualls] was a sharecropper. We had, my mother [Mary E. Qualls], prior to her passing, we had four boys. And my stepmother had the remaining fifteen. In fact, there were sixteen because there was, I guess, a half-brother there, because she was married prior to marrying my father. So she had one child. Of course, she has a total of sixteen. So there's really twenty of us, I guess.**

R. Terwilliger: Right. Did your mother die young? Was she a young woman when she died?

W. Qualls: **Yes. I guess the age of–she was in her late twenties.**

R. Terwilliger: Do you remember her yourself very much?

W. Qualls: **I think I remember her or maybe I remember what people told me. But I did frame a picture of what I thought she looked like, maybe based on those things that people said, but I was only three. And I'm continually informed that I did not remember her, or do not remember her. But I feel that I remember her.**

R. Terwilliger: And she must have been married very, very young because you said you had four brothers?

W. Qualls: **Yes, that's not unusual.**

R. Terwilliger: It isn't?

W. Qualls: **No, marriage in the farm situation in very early teens is not unusual. And your first child being born before you're eighteen years of age is not really unusual in farm situations.**

R. Terwilliger: And how about the fathers or the men? Are they usually married equally as young?

W. Qualls: **Yes, they do, normally. There was not the concern for getting an education or anything like that. The concern was to do the kind of work that had to be done, to do the farming, to do the caring for the animals, and do the harvesting of the crops and what have you. It was not the kind of society that we kind of reflect on today.**

R. Terwilliger: Now was that then a good family structure? Was family a good unit, a strong unit?

W. Qualls: **Family, in a sense, I guess, there was some unity there. If I tried to compare it with the family that I have today, there is no comparison. The family was normally large because of the task that you had to do, such as farming and raising your own food, what have you. You didn't have to worry about the economics of clothing and dressing a child properly, making sure that he has the proper health records and proper medical care. That was not a part of it. Or making sure a child was properly educated. That was not a part of it either at that time. In fact, my two older brothers [Jack and Jim Qualls] are functional illiterates–they happen to live here in New Jersey today–functional illiterates in the sense that they cannot read or write. And in this day and time, in living in New Jersey, both of them, if they had to read a road map, it's not possible. Somehow, they learned to write their names.**

R. Terwilliger: Well then, how did you–I mean what was there in you that made you kind of rise above this and survive and to become the person you are today?

W. Qualls: **I guess you have to guess–I don't know. I can recall as–I don't recall the age–but I was very young, my father could read. And a letter had come from New Jersey from a long-lost brother who had traveled at that time, the only way that blacks could get off of the farm. And they needed professionals to follow the railroad. That was back in the early 1900s, you followed the railroad wherever it went and you built the railroads. And my uncle was a follower and a builder of railroads, or a laborer on railroads. And he wrote my father a letter and I was amazed that someone could communicate through this kind of whatever. And I always wanted to do it and wherever I got a chance with a crayon on the wall, on paper, whenever I got a pencil, I wanted to write. And I wanted to be able to understand what that said. So when they said school, I went to school. It was not really forced by anyone. In fact, you were encouraged by the landowners (the white landowners) not to go to school simply because your sole responsibility seemed to be to work on the farm, and to pick the cotton, and gather the corn, and do the other kinds of things that were necessary, take care of the animals. And to go to school would be taking away from that. In fact, the school year there did not start in September like you do here. The school year would start when the crops were laid away or when you were not needed for the major part of gathering the cotton or picking the cotton (whatever the term is now).**

R. Terwilliger: Let me interrupt you for a minute, you know this is so exciting to me because it's just a pity that more people–and you know I use this very cliché word of–can't know a person's roots, it can tell so much of a person. I mean you're a man of the earth I can understand now. If you've spent a portion of your early years around growing things and animals and the freedom of farm life, that must have had a great influence on things you feel today even. I don't want to skip way ahead and go to your artwork, but let me go back to this farm life. Was that farm owned by a white man?

W. Qualls: **Of course. Everything was owned by a white man; not only the farm, but the animals were owned by the white men.**

R. Terwilliger: So in a sense, I mean this was not slavery, of course, but you were employed this white–your family was employed by this white man?

W. Qualls: **Sharecropping is <u>really</u> slavery.**

R. Terwilliger: Was it slavery still?

W. Qualls: Yeah. You never, you never get out of debt. You don't keep your own books. The white man will tell you what you have earned. He will tell you how much you will be paid for the cotton you've picked. And there is no redress at all; it was not at that time. There was no subsidy of any sort, such as welfare or federal or state assistance during the time that you were <u>not</u> doing the cotton, picking the cotton, or harvesting the corn, or whatever.

R. Terwilliger: Well, what was this responsibility to these people then? How about if you got sick? Who took care of a family if someone got sick? Or where did they get help?

W. Qualls: Well, the best explanation for that is that if you know anything about country towns, and this was a country town, a very small town, total population of about 300 with about, I guess, eighty square miles; <u>huge</u> farm country. If you got sick, you normally had a grandmother or what they called a guardhouse nurse or doctor that would put up some herbs. In fact, one of the major things for a cold–and it sounds rather ridiculous and some might think it's funny, but it's not–you would have a piece of white cloth, clean cloth, and you would take the droppings from a cow and you call it cow manure tea and they would brew that and you would drink that stuff for a cold. It should cure you, you'd think, because it–

R. Terwilliger: [laughs]

W. Qualls: No, no, it's very serious.

R. Terwilliger: I know, but it seems incredible, Walter.

W. Qualls: But this is as a child with these things. But there was <u>one</u> doctor and I can remember his name oddly enough, a Dr. Mattress [phonetic]. There was one doctor in the entire town. Out of the population, I guess only about 8 or 10 percent were white, but that one doctor took care of whites and blacks and there were separate waiting rooms. I don't care when a white came in there and how serious a black might be, he still had to wait until there were no whites to be taken care of before he or she could be taken care of. And that was the standard in the whole Jim Crow[1] South during the time.

R. Terwilliger: Well, do you remember ever worrying about this? I mean I'm talking about as a small boy now. Didn't it ever cross your mind that this was unfair in some way?

W. Qualls: No, no. To be very honest with you, it never crossed my mind until I came to New Jersey. I don't think it was possible to cross your mind because you have been so indoctrinated, you have been taught your place, you have been taught what your lot is in life, and that the white man is so much better, and that he is white, and by the mere fact that he is white, he is like king. You will find that there were white people who were the same level, the same social level–if that's possible to be the same social level as a black–or there might be blacks who had more, who might own land, had their own animals and farm their <u>own</u> land, that person was still lower or less economically set–no, no, not less economically set, less socially

[1] Jim Crow laws were state and local laws that enforced racial segregation in the South.

set–than the lowest possible white, you know impoverished white. Many of the whites, the only thing–and this is not a commentary on my part, but it's something that I've thought of and it's been proven by many people–their only hold on life or towards being worth anything or greatness, was that they were higher than any black man that was ever born. I don't care if he was a senator or whatever. They believe that today because I went back [to the South] after twenty-five years in 1976, amazing. But that's a whole another story.

R. Terwilliger: Well, the whole thing is that we're not talking a real long time ago. We're probably talking in the forties–if you were born in [19]38–we're talking through the forties. This is not so terribly long ago. And I think, especially Northerners, cannot believe that the situation was as such. I don't think until Martin Luther King and some of these things that happened, where we were kind of almost pounded over the head to realize, "My God, they are being treated unfairly," that we realized as Northerners that this kind of situations still existed. I find it terribly interesting and shameful in my own mind because–you know this is not my commentary, but I was raised in Metuchen, practically born and raised, I came here very young. And I can honestly say my very best friends were black. There were very few of them here in town. Now whether it was different here or whether it was different with me, but I never had that feeling from long ago. That was one thing that was always taught in my home is that there isn't this distinction, we're all human beings, all children of God, if I can say. So you know this is incredible to me that you would be raised with these situations being normal.

W. Qualls: Well, you asked the question if I knew at that early age that there was something wrong, that I was being denied, or if it was terrible what was happening. Well, the situation that I think best clears this up–no different in the North, let me explain that. There was a young fellow there, my age, Jimmy Brown, but he was white. And he was a son of the landowner. Jimmy and I took a liking to each other about age three. Now it was taboo for black and white kids to mingle, especially the white landowner who lived in what they called the "White House." They had a white house, and it was actually white, a very proud colonial huge house. But he would come from his big luxurious home to my little shack with the holes through the wall, or where I lived, every day and wake me up very early in the morning and he wanted to play. Now I'm supposed to work. But all of this I'm saying is you have to teach a kid to hate. He has to learn to hate. He's not born with that kind of hatred. So we became very fast buddies. It endangered my family's lives; you really just don't do that. So when they had an opportunity to allow me to get out of Louisiana with an uncle to New Jersey, they jumped at the chance to save my life and to stop endangering their situation there.

R. Terwilliger: How old were you about then?

W. Qualls: I was seven at that time.

R. Terwilliger: Seven!

W. Qualls: Sure.

R. Terwilliger: And that's when you left home?

W. Qualls: Of course.

R. Terwilliger: Oh my God, Walter! Had you had any schooling up until then?

W. Qualls: None to think about, no. I had tried schooling. Schooling was–it's like a shack pulled up on stilts, which were part–

R. Terwilliger: This is just for black children now?

W. Qualls: Oh, absolutely. You didn't even have white teachers at that time. You had teachers that not necessarily have any kind of degree, not even a high school degree. They were selected to be teachers because I guess–and of course, I know by now there were federal laws that were kind of separate but equal kind of laws–but you had eight grades in one room. And just try to imagine a teacher trying to teach in a very small compact area. It was not like it was sectioned off into eight different sections of cubicles. It was just one huge room with a pot-bellied stove in the middle that you had to teach eight grades. And most of the times, he did not know how to teach the first grade, but he had to teach eight.

R. Terwilliger: It was a male?

W. Qualls: Yeah, always a male.

R. Terwilliger: Always a male.

W. Qualls: Well, not necessarily. I guess when I went back–see, my uncle, the uncle died in 1949, and I went back to Louisiana and stayed there until 1953.

R. Terwilliger: Well, let's not skip ahead though. You just finished saying that you left there at seven with this uncle, who was a railroad worker?

W. Qualls: He worked for the Reading Railroad in Port Reading[2]. That is where we came to.

R. Terwilliger: Oh, that's interesting.

W. Qualls: We came to Port Reading and lived up in the camp, which was an old railroad camp up in Port Reading.

R. Terwilliger: Up in Port Reading. And you were eight years old and you were working on a–?

W. Qualls: Seven years old.

R. Terwilliger: Seven years old and you're working on a railroad! What could you do at seven?

W. Qualls: I wouldn't work on the railroad.

R. Terwilliger: Oh, you just lived with him there.

[2] The Port Reading Railroad was a railroad chartered by the Reading Railroad in 1890. The line extended from the Port Reading Junction with the Lehigh Valley Railroad and Central Railroad of New Jersey in Manville to the terminus point in Port Reading along the Arthur Kill in Woodbridge Township. The line was constructed to specifically to serve the needs of the Reading Railroad.

W. Qualls: **Yes.**

R. Terwilliger: I see.

W. Qualls: **You see in 1945, the income tax laws changed. I think it was [19]45 or [19]47–[19]45 where if you claimed a dependent, that dependent had to–you know if you claimed 100 percent support–he had to live with you or she had to live with you. And my uncle had gotten into trouble with the federal government, he needed to fill that void. [laughter] So I came as an income tax deduction, which was fine with me.**

R. Terwilliger: But this was kind of–if you want to call it that–your big break. I mean it did get you off the farm and up here.

W. Qualls: **Oh yeah, sure.**

R. Terwilliger: And then did he put you in school up here?

W. Qualls: **Immediately.**

R. Terwilliger: Immediately. In Port Reading?

W. Qualls: **In Port Reading, yeah. It was a school called Hagaman Heights. It's right near Carteret. Oddly enough, it was close to that schoolhouse in Louisiana–much better, much better constructed–but it was two large classrooms.**

R. Terwilliger: And was it black-white then?

W. Qualls: **No, I was the first black to integrate those schools.**

R. Terwilliger: You were the first black to come here. Did you have any problems with that?

W. Qualls: **Of course, you did. Having the first black, mostly it was inquisitive kids and it was 90 percent Italian, at least. And many of them had never seen a black kid. And it was not prejudice or bigotry or anything like that. They learned that as they went along as their fathers and mothers related how they were supposed to respond to a black. But I spent the vast majority of that day trying to explain, or at least allowing kids to see, what the inside of my hands looked like. [laughter] I had to take off my shoes and show them the bottom of my feet, and that my teeth looked like theirs, until actually I got tired of it. And I remember that first day when I refused to do it this last time, a kid by the name of Richie Moonhart [phonetic]–I'll never forget his name–and a guy by the name of Slim Mujota [phonetic] said, "Well, you have to do it. There's nothing else, you just have to do it." "I'm not going to do it." And that's when we fought for hours. Teachers didn't know what to do to break up a fight with this little black kid. And that's how I won the fight with these two guys.**

R. Terwilliger: Did they leave you alone sort of then after that?

W. Qualls: **Well, you became a Superman. They were still in their fantasy ages and evidently all black people became Superman then. So of course, there was that fear. He had beaten the two bullies in the school all at the same time, so evidently, he's not to**

be messed with. So kids became friends. When you can't beat someone, and they were not into that bigotry or racist kind of thing, they joined you. I became the leader of all the gangs or all the stuff like that. [chuckling]

R. Terwilliger: So eventually, in rather a bizarre kind of way, it settled down.

W. Qualls: Oh yes.

R. Terwilliger: It did settle down and you became an accepted part of some sort of group in the school?

W. Qualls: Oh sure. In fact, I became the gang lord of sort. I would call the numbers on what should be done. In fact, we had a protection racket way back in those days. I don't know what we called it, but I headed that after a while. [laughter] I was the best rock thrower; I could hit you in the head with a rock a block away. You know I was very good with a rock, at throwing. So whatever, I was the leader.

R. Terwilliger: But when did learning something become important? I mean if they made you this kind of a hero shortly after you were here, I could see where that would almost be enough satisfaction. Who needs to learn anything?

W. Qualls: [laughs] There were four teachers: Mrs. Kinsey [phonetic], Mrs. McGonagall [phonetic], Mrs. Briney [phonetic], and Mrs. Genevieve Keane [phonetic]. [laughter] Never forget their names. They adopted me! It was a rather strange thing. Most of the kids were Catholic, and here is a kid who really has no specific kind of–other than Southern Baptist, I guess–religion. In Hagaman Heights, the priest came every week, maybe two or three times a week, to the school. It was Father Milos [phonetic] and I just couldn't fathom why all these kids had to call this one guy with this black collar "Father." Bothered the hell out of me. So after about, I guess, six months or a year, and I was always coming in contact with this guy, you know passing him, and I don't think I even spoke to him because I didn't know too much about this kind of a guy. So one day, I don't know what possessed me to do it, but I said to Father Milos as I passed, "Good morning, Father." And he froze, he absolutely froze, and he turned, the guy had tears in his eyes. He felt he had finally–

R. Terwilliger: Oh, won this little black kid over!

W. Qualls: Oh yeah! And the teachers that I just spoke to, they like adopted me! They pleaded with me, they dealt with my education. This was at the lower level, and then I integrated to the next level of school, which was PS 9 [Port Reading School No. 9].

R. Terwilliger: This was junior high level or high school?

W. Qualls: No, no, no, no. Hagaman Heights only had two rooms. So when you got to the second or third grade, you had to go to PS 9.

R. Terwilliger: Oh, I see, yeah.

W. Qualls: When I got to PS 9, it was a whole different situation. They had a principal there, Martin Braun, B-r-a-u-n, a Jewish fellow. I think he was about the only Jewish

person in the school system and I was about–no, no, some of the teachers were, but he was–and I was the only black. I was still a tough guy. In fact, I had to let the kids know that were–this school went up to eighth grade–that I was there and I wasn't about to be pushed around by anybody, and I had my boys there and they weren't to be pushed around. This made it very difficult because Port Reading is made up, as I said, of large families. And they are of Italian descent, most of them. And they kind of know each other and stick together. So it became a very difficult thing. In fact, one of the guys there was Joe DeMarino, the sheriff of Middlesex County. [laughter] We were laughing about this about–last week I ran into him up in New Brunswick.

But the principal was very hard on me; there was no question about that. I guess maybe I deserved it. But these teachers decided that there was something worth salvaging in me, so they worked with me during the school time and after school time. I was picked on by the kids–not picked on in a sense of physically impeded on–I think it was something that hurt even worse. It was my diction and pronunciation. I still had that Southern kind of–and you know how kids can really do a job on you. So I had to … [clock ringing; recording paused]

R. Terwilliger: [recording begins mid-sentence] … going to make me fall in love with you all over again.

W. Qualls: [laughs] So I had to change my speech pattern and I worked very hard on that. But some teachers who had not ever really gotten involved with students, got involved with me. I appreciated that. To cut a long part of this short, the last one was a seventh-grade teacher, a lady whose dedication was beyond belief. She was probably, when I met her, in her fifties.

R. Terwilliger: Do you remember her name?

W. Qualls: Oh, that was Lady Genevieve, Genevieve Keane [phonetic]. She got married in her sixties to a guy by the name of Klein [phonetic]; I think she married a guy Klein [phonetic] for the first time after her mother died. And then–because her mother was from Baltimore, I think she used to leave Friday at two o'clock to go visit her mother. But anyway, this woman, everybody–you mention Genevieve Keane's [phonetic] name in Port Reading today of any of the people that have been there, they know her. This woman was such a teacher. What I learned at seventh grade allowed me to pass an equivalency test, high school test, with flying colors with one of the highest grades that they had when I left the high school. But anyway, she did something that I don't even know if she was aware of it, but I think she was. She and the other mothers that I had, all white, because we didn't have any black teachers–in fact, we didn't have any black students other than myself–she had impressed upon me to change my attitude and try to be like two kids there: Francis Lombardi and Thomas Simeone. [coughing] And I decided to try it. In fact, I thought it was the thing to do–stop being a ruffian, the guy who controlled everything. So I started being a nice guy, started getting straight A's, started saying, "Yes, ma'am," and being very nice, didn't rough up the girls or anything like that, or make the girls kiss me or anything like that–oh, I did those things.

R. Terwilliger: Good, I'm glad. [laughs]

W. Qualls: **So one day, she just said, "Come on." The ladies room was right down the hall; this was seventh grade. She said, "Come on, I have to talk to you." She was filled up; I'd never seen this woman like–this woman was hard. She would stand there with her hands on her hips and you'd pass by and you quivered. [laughter] Everybody was afraid of Genevieve Keane [phonetic]. So she took me into the ladies room and this woman boo-hooed. She cried and cried and she says, "Walter, something is wrong. I've done something to you that I don't like." I said, "What have I done? I spent the last two weeks, I haven't raised my voice, I've done all my copying, all my notes from the board, I've done everything right and I have been pleasant. I haven't talked back to the teachers or the principal. No one!" I said, "What have I done?" She said, "That's the problem." She said, "You're not yourself." So I said, "I don't understand." She said, "Well, you are acting like other students." I said, "Yeah, I'm acting like Lombardi and Simeone. They're nice kids, they get straight A's, and you love them." So she says, "Oh Jesus, what have I done?" She says, "If you start to use a crutch," and she used that term, meaning relying on others to determine what you're going to do and how you are going to do it, "it will always be the need for a Francis Lombardi or Thomas Simeone." She said, "You have to be yourself. You can't do that; you're losing your own identity." So I was confused, I must admit. So I said, "Well, what the hell, you can't please them." [laughs] You know I was just saying, you just can't.**

So her office was on the first, the classroom was on the fourth floor, and I was downstairs this one noon hour playing basketball on this macadam court. And we went up for a ball and this kid elbowed me in the stomach. Well, I came down and I got up and I walked over to this kid and I punched him in his mouth, knocked him down. And I don't know what made me look up at that window. I looked up at that window and she was standing there. And she had her hands on her hips, she smiled and she turned away as if to say to me, now he's back.

R. Terwilliger: There, he's normal again.

W. Qualls: **Yep. And from then on, they never tried to change me. You know they tried to make me study more because they felt I was capable. But at that time, they had realized something was going on and that was–they'd given an IQ [intelligence quotient] test back in the third or fourth grade and this little black kid got the highest IQ grade on the IQ test in the history of that school system. They couldn't understand; this inferior kid comes through, my poor mother could, but they couldn't understand. This little inferior kid, who was doing just average work, gets the highest IQ in the history of our school system. It blew their minds! So even now, I went back to Woodbridge High School after I had gotten my college degree, and the principal there said, even though I dropped out of high school, [he] said, "I knew you'd do all right with an IQ like that. You had to do all right." But anyway … [recording ends]**

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 1]

R. Terwilliger: So Walter, you dropped out of high school, and was it because you wanted to go to work, or you were bored with what was going on, or why did you drop out?

W. Qualls: **I guess I had decided that after talking to a guidance counselor, Mr. Keating [phonetic]. I don't know if he's still in the school system in Woodbridge. I would imagine he is; he was the guidance counselor. And I had gone to Mr. Keating [phonetic] because I've always wanted to be a lawyer. And I said to Mr. Keating, I wanted to know–this was the end of my freshman year–I wanted to know what kind of courses I should take in order to prepare myself for a degree in law. And he commenced to tell me that, well, there wasn't a need for black lawyers. And as my guidance counselor, it would be the best thing for me to do is to find a profession that there was a need for because there was no need graduating black lawyers if there is no market for them. He was very logical.**

R. Terwilliger: He actually said this to you?

W. Qualls: **Oh, of course. In fact, he went farther than that. So I said, "Well, what kind of professions do blacks (at that time the word was Negro), what kind of professions do Negroes or colored people work towards?" He said, "Well, you know, fairer, off the top of my head, there are three very lucrative positions. They are very good for colored people." He said, "You could be a cook, you could be a presser, like in dry cleaning." And he said, "You can be a boxer like Joe Lewis." And I said, I was still myself, and I said, and at that time I was seventeen or eighteen years of age–I said, "I like the last one better, you know the boxer one." And I hit him in his eye and I left school. [chuckling] And that was the way it was, and then I went into the service. I went to the Air Force. I was sixteen or seventeen; seventeen, I think. I was too young to join the service on my own, so we contacted my father and that was shortly after the Emmett Till[3] situation in Mississippi. It was still alive in everybody's mind. And I pleaded with my father that if he didn't want me to come back to Louisiana and end up like an Emmett Till, because I was not really able to restrain myself and keep my mouth shut, that he would have to sign the paper. So my father said, "If that's what you want," he would. So he signed me into the Air Force.**

R. Terwilliger: So what year was that, Walter?

W. Qualls: **That was in 1955.**

R. Terwilliger: Fifty-five. And then you went in the Air Force. Did you find the same discrimination there?

W. Qualls: **Well, in the Air Force, I got in trouble the first day there. Some friends had also gone in.**

R. Terwilliger: Black friends?

W. Qualls: **Yes, from Carteret. You see, prior to going into the service, or prior to quitting high school, I had gotten in trouble–I guess they call it trouble–in Port Reading. I was at the age where the girls that I had grown up with felt that I was a normal young man and we used to go out together. And they decided that "they," being the Italian families there, that it was taboo for me to go out with the Italian girls**

[3] Emmett Till was a fourteen-year-old black boy who was lynched in Mississippi in 1955 after being accused of offending a white woman in her family's grocery store. His brutal murder brought nationwide attention to the persecution of African Americans in the United States and he became an icon of the civil rights movement.

any longer. In fact, my head had been turned so badly, I had not been going out with black girls out of Carteret. So they had a meeting and told me that for my own safety and my own social well-being, I should start to deal with just the blacks in Carteret. And in fact, the principal was in on a meeting that my elementary–but anyway, so I was kind of confused.

R. Terwilliger: So let me get this straight, you had just normally, because of growing up and normal desires and things that take place, dated Italian girls; white Italian girls?

W. Qualls: I had gone to school with them, yes, growing up.

R. Terwilliger: And this was no big deal with you? This was just a normal chain of events.

W. Qualls: No. In fact, there was no physical, sexual kind of thing that went on between us simply because I was still about being the toughest guy in the world. My main aim in life was to be able to protect myself physically because in a community like Port Reading, it's kind of barbaric. You kind of learn survival, physical survival, through your own wit and your own physical strength. So I was all about making my body the strongest body in the world. So there was no cohabitation of any sort with the girls.

R. Terwilliger: It was strictly a social kind of thing then?

W. Qualls: Yeah, we liked each other.

R. Terwilliger: There still was that need to share something, maybe, with a female?

W. Qualls: Sure. And if I can remember back that far, any time it ever got to sex, they were in the strictest of terms, Catholic. And back in those days–and I'm sure Father Milos [phonetic] had a tremendous impact on them from catechism or whatever–they did not deal with that. And so there was not really a serious problem–evidently home and religious upbringing, there was no serious problem there; there was no chance of any half-breed kids popping up. But the families didn't know that, in the families.

R. Terwilliger: And they were afraid it might take place?

W. Qualls: Yeah, they reacted and caught me a little off-guard because it really hurt me badly. Not only because of what they did, but having been forced to go to Carteret, as they said, to your own kind, Carteret says, "Hell, you've been out there for x number of years and you didn't come here. And don't come here now." They used to chase me across the tie yards until I got to the point that I beat the most powerful guy there and became the gang lord of Carteret. And that was at an age where cars were involved, and there was a gang from Woodbridge called "The Yanks" and the Mercy Street gang out of Carteret where we used to roar with Carteret and Perth Amboy. In fact, prior to going into the service, I was in a riot when riots weren't fashionable in Perth Amboy for–a guy was stabbed, I ended up in jail for a couple of days there in Perth Amboy jail. Even though I was not of age to be in jail, I was there.

R. Terwilliger: And this is where you met these guys you went in the service with then?

W. Qualls: **Yeah, yeah.**

R. Terwilliger: And you went in the service, the first day you were there, you were in trouble?

W. Qualls: **Well, yeah.**

R. Terwilliger: What happened?

W. Qualls: **Some little guy with this sharpest outfit I've ever seen, I guess, with these spit shine shoes and a crimp in his hat, he called himself a T.I. Yes, "I'm your T.I."**

R. Terwilliger: What's a T.I.?

W. Qualls: **A T.I. is a tactical instructor. And he had three marks on his arm, which I later learned was a sergeant. And he came over to me as I was–because they had made us march with our gear, not march–well, we couldn't march, we were walking. They called it marching. But we were tired. It was kind of late. And I told my guy to sleep on the bottom bunk, which is to watch my back because you don't trust anybody. [laughter] I was going to sleep up on the top bunk. And here comes this little runt of a man with all this fancy look and said, [yelling] "You sleep over there, and you sleep over there!" I said, "No, no, no, man, you don't understand. That's my boy. He's going to sleep here and I'm going to sleep up there." So he ran up to me and he put his nose on my nose and said, [yelling] "I am your T.I." I grabbed him and hit him in this–it was like a spit shine floor; we had to have our floors like that or they were like that when we got there to prove a point that we had to keep them that way. And I hit this dude and he must have slid half the length of the building. And regular airmen came from everywhere, grabbed me because I had committed a cardinal sin.**

R. Terwilliger: My gosh, yes.

W. Qualls: **Well, it turned out they had a Southern sergeant and a Southern lieutenant, who was in charge of the whole thing. They had taken me into these officer's quarters, and they were going to really do a job on me. They were going to put me in jail and do all that stuff like that, so–because this little guy, I hit this guy hard and I was in pretty good shape having to survive in the streets. And they said–well, this lieutenant said, "I don't know what you guys planning to do unless you read the Uniformed Code of Military Justice to him." And they all looked at each other, "Did you give him the book?" "No, he has not read it, didn't read it. He has not had an opportunity, nor has he had the book issued to him." See, in the military, you are under two sets of rules. First, there is the Uniformed Code of Military Justice and secondly, it's regular common law or your regular legal system. So they had not read this book to me and this angered all of them because the lieutenant made it very clear, they couldn't do a thing to me until I was familiar with this Uniformed Code of Military Justice. They took turns–seven of them–all night and part of the next day reading that Uniformed Code of Military Justice to me. I stayed on, but they couldn't put me in jail. They could have beaten me up, I guess, but they didn't do that. They got back at me by making me play football with them, that I couldn't tackle, but they could.**

R. Terwilliger: Oh my gosh!

W. Qualls: **Military discipline was probably the greatest mark of positiveness in my young life. They did some strange things. I had to do things like–because I stayed on restriction the entire fifty-four days of training. I was never allowed the liberties of a two-day pass or a three-day pass or to roam around the base like some good airmen were allowed.**

R. Terwilliger: And you learned to live with this?

W. Qualls: **Yeah, sure. You can learn to live with just about anything. But this was military discipline and military discipline is like no discipline anyone will ever receive. I think every young man should go through military discipline because I was still cocky and still doing things that the military couldn't live with. I would punch a guy in the nose if he needed it; he thought he was tough enough. And you always have guys who challenge you physically in the military. So they had to punish me. I had to like, what they call G.I. [government issue or general issue] the ceiling of a long building with a toothbrush; not with a brush or a mop, but a toothbrush, toothbrush and G.I. soap. You use G.I. soap and hot water. And I had to do the same thing to wooden oak steps, you know kind of porous, but you had to clean them. But meanwhile, other airmen, airmen basics, could walk up and down those steps, but you couldn't let any dirt get on it. So each time somebody walked up and down, you had to go. So that meant you had to finish by twelve, one, two, or three o'clock in the morning. You couldn't do it while everybody was going up and down. But I think, again, I would say military discipline was very good for me. It's probably a difference between my being able to discipline myself to do that which I thought was correct and proper, rather than going into the unsavory kinds of professions that you could have gone into. Because I think with my attitude and my physical ability and brashness, I could have done a lot of other things, or at least I could have <u>felt</u> that I could have been successful at a lot of those things. But I chose the other way.**

R. Terwilliger: Did you receive any special kind of training? Did you go in the Air Force because you wanted to fly a plane?

W. Qualls: **No.**

R. Terwilliger: Why the Air Force?

W. Qualls: **I really don't know. The Air Force seems to be a real glory thing, blue uniform. The green uniforms have been around for a long time on the Army. And I have seen a lot of those guys with those <u>crushed</u> hats. I mean they were tough! And I guess that's why I thought I'd go in there.**

R. Terwilliger: You're very honest.

W. Qualls: **And they said you'd travel and see the world.**

R. Terwilliger: Yeah, right. You didn't travel and see the world?

W. Qualls: **No. [laughter] I put in for everywhere in the world. But oddly enough, the reason for going in–or the reason I gave my father–was that I didn't want to be sent back to Louisiana because I wasn't yet eighteen and I wasn't on my own.**

R. Terwilliger: How long were you in the service then?

W. Qualls: Twenty-five months.

R. Terwilliger: Twenty-five months.

W. Qualls: But [the] time I finished basic training at Sampson Air Force Base in Geneva, New York, the coldest place in the world as far as I'm concerned, I was sent straight to Biloxi, Mississippi, of all places.

R. Terwilliger: Oh, for goodness sake!

W. Qualls: And that was one of the reasons for going in, I told my father. That's exactly where they sent me to, for technical school in Keesler Air Force Base, Biloxi, Mississippi. And on the way there, they read the riot act. And when we got there, they explained to us that when you are in Rome [Italy], you do like the Romans. There is a Jim Crow law down here. You are not, after you leave this base–military reservation is integrated, but the rest of it is not. You are not to go into white establishments that you are not supposed to go in. You have separate bus quarters, you have separate train quarters, you have separate–like they have public fountains–you have separate drinking fountains. You cannot be seen walking down the street with your white buddy. That is a ten-dollar fine automatically. If you are riding in a cab with him like you want to share the cost of going downtown, that's fifteen dollars. And if you're sitting in a movie with him, that's fifteen dollars. You have a hotel room, that's twenty-five dollars. And that was a lot of money.

R. Terwilliger: God forbid, what would ever happen if you stood at a bar and drank with a white girl?

W. Qualls: Oh my God. They would hang your butt!

R. Terwilliger: Really? [laughs]

W. Qualls: The cops would beat you nearly to death.

R. Terwilliger: Well, I'm not laughing, Walter, but it seems incredible!

W. Qualls: The cops would beat you into–in fact, it happened quite a few times because they had civilians and a lot of very attractive white girls who would say to black guys, "You know I don't think you're inferior." Because the black guys from New York and New Jersey would ask them, "Do you think I'm inferior?" [They] said, "No, I don't think you're inferior. In fact, I like tall, dark handsome men." And you'd start that thing on the base and sooner or later they'll ask you, "Well, why don't you meet me downtown," whether it's planned that they want to get you in trouble or not. If anyone sees you downtown, even some of the white G.I.s from the base who are upset that you are mingling with the white girls anyway, would tell the local people and you are in a lot of trouble. In fact, the Air Force made it very clear, when you're down there and they catch you down there, you're in trouble because they're going to do whatever they want to you down there. If they want to lock you up in jail, you're going to jail. But if they want to beat you up or kill you, you're–but if they send you to jail, you're going to have to serve your time out there and when you come back here, we're going to put you in jail

for being A-W-O-L (absent without leave). So you have double jeopardy. However, if you can manage by running or by driving your car or whatever to get past the guards at the gate, you're safe. In other words, you have never seen some races to that gate. [laughter] We would do a hundred or a hundred and some miles an hour in those old Packards and what have you. And you have never seen cops put on their brakes on this dirt road and sliding around, like on the movies today when they take up so much time.

R. Terwilliger: They were really out to get you then?

W. Qualls: Oh, they did some dirty to black guys down there. A kid from Rahway, Dennis–what was Dennis' last name? I can't remember his last name, but Dennis was down there and he had never been South. He had no idea and he didn't like the idea of being told that he was not as free as other people. And they called Dennis one day, the cops, because they had like a windshield on their car that went out and they had like a type of machine gun mounted on the dashboard. And the windshield would go up and they could do whatever they want with it. And to kill a black guy meant nothing. They called Dennis over and this is what kind of got me to the point where I even went to see a chaplain; I didn't talk religion to anyone, but I went to see a chaplain after this. Dennis was called over to the car and he didn't want to go because he was a little afraid. But you couldn't run; they'd shoot you for running. The man is calling, so he calls you over to the car and he says, "Stick your head in." The guy didn't want to stick his neck in, [unclear] stuck his head in and the cop rolled the window up on his head. And they just beat him indiscriminately. You can't get your hands in to protect your head, you can't do–and as you move your neck, he winds up on your neck and there is nothing you can do. And they beat him senseless. He got a medical discharge because of it, but today Dennis is not right. He works for the water department in Woodbridge, I think, but he's just not right.

R. Terwilliger: That's terrible, Walter.

W. Qualls: Oh, there were inhuman kinds of things. But you still managed to laugh because sometimes as bad as your problems are, someone else has even worse problems. See, like the USO [United Service Organizations]. They had a black USO and a white USO, but in 1955 and [19]56 when I was in Mississippi, they had no USO for Puerto Ricans. Puerto Ricans had started to come into the military.

R. Terwilliger: Oh yeah, right, yeah.

W. Qualls: So Puerto Ricans couldn't go to the black USO and they couldn't go to the white USO. They were worse than the blacks! They had didn't know what–

R. Terwilliger: They had no place to go.

W. Qualls: Nothing. No, it was really bad on them.

R. Terwilliger: My gosh! I'll tell you it makes my head swim. I think I understand, and then there is so much more that I don't know. You know it's one thing to watch it on the TV [television] or to read it in the newspaper or read something, but when you have a real live person–and you know I don't mean to–

W. Qualls: **It's nothing unusual.**

R. Terwilliger: Traumatic, but that's just my reaction to it, Walter, really and truly that–

W. Qualls: **Yeah, but many of the people that you might know who have had a similar kind of–or have had it much rougher than I have. I don't know with my whole early life was really that rough. I didn't think it was rough at the time. I just thought it was living.**

R. Terwilliger: Have you always, through all of this and seeing these kinds of things and having them happen to you, have you always been able to maintain a basic happiness, good attitude?

W. Qualls: **I don't know if that's relevant. You know I don't know if–my wife asked me not too long ago, "What do you do for happiness and social fulfillment?" I told her, "I don't know. That's never been a part of my repertoire." I never considered it. I never considered happiness. I would never be able to give a person a definition of it. As my wife claims, I would never be able to give anyone a definition of love. And she's probably right. I don't know!**

R. Terwilliger: Yeah. That's an interesting question because as I've known you over the years–and it's probably what, about five or six years, maybe even longer–if somebody said to me, "Describe this guy Walter Qualls. What kind of a guy is he?" I certainly wouldn't say cheese.

W. Qualls: **Sweet! [laughs]**

R. Terwilliger: No, no. I was going to say the opposite. I certainly wouldn't say he's uptight and a grump. There is a <u>beautiful</u> sense of humor that always comes through. Maybe it's been your saving grace. But to me, you're a happy person. And for you to say to me, "What's happiness?"

W. Qualls: **Maybe I'm happy because I take things and deal with them. I don't dwell on the horrors of any situation. I deal with whatever it is to be dealt with, but positively.**

R. Terwilliger: And yet as happy–I have never seen it–I mean, I'm told, as happy and beautiful as I've seen you, other people have told me you can be vicious and full of hatred. So there is the full swing of emotion there. It isn't like it isn't there. I don't know which one you identify with more than the other, but there is that full scope.

W. Qualls: **Vicious? No. Vicious, if I had to define viciousness, I guess I would kind of look at it where someone took undue advantage of one with lesser ability or lesser know-how. I don't think I've done that. I don't think I do that. I think–**

R. Terwilliger: Cunning?

W. Qualls: **I don't trick people either.**

R. Terwilliger: No?

W. Qualls: **No. [laughter]**

R. Terwilliger: Maybe it's a poor choice of words, Walter. You understand what I'm trying to say.

W. Qualls: Oh, absolutely. I understand exactly what you're trying to say. I also know what you're sharing with me is the opinion of a lot of people, simply because they can't best me in an argument. I seem to come with facts when I argue. They can't best me in a physical confrontation–at least they don't think so–so they do whatever damage they feel they can by telling people I'm a bad guy. I don't think you have any person in this town that I've ever struck physically. I don't think you have any person in this town that I've taken advantage of in any kind of a situation, I don't think.

R. Terwilliger: Just [let's] see where we're at. [checking the tape recorder] I think we are still in good shape. [recording paused]

W. Qualls: But politically that sounds good.

R. Terwilliger: Don't jump ahead on me now.

W. Qualls: I'm not going to jump ahead on you. I'm saying that a person is that way if you want to cause people to say, "Wow, he's a barbarian or he's barbaric. And he is not ready for our kind of progressive middle-class community."

R. Terwilliger: That's true and that's it right there. And I want to make this an important part of our tape, but before we jump ahead into that, if we could kind of–I don't mean to say quickly, but how did you go to school? Where did you go to college when you got out of the service?

W. Qualls: Oh, when I got in the service, it was not college at first. Now remember, I had taken an equivalency and had passed this equivalency and had graduated high school long before the people had, who I started high school with back in Woodbridge. And with Genevieve Keane's [phonetic] very warm kind hand, I was able to kind of handle the English language and the reading, writing, and arithmetic kind of thing. But I had to get a job. I came back to Port Reading and back to Carteret, and I got a job as a laborer at American Agricultural and Chemical Company in Carteret. And it was kind of strange. They put me to work in the hardest of the work. This was a fertilizer plant and they used to send fertilizer all over the country by rail. And what they did was put me in a boxcar with eighty-four-pound bags of fertilizer and we were stacking them over my head. I was in excellent physical condition because I had been a fighter in the military. So I stayed in physical shape; fighter in the sense that I was in the gloves.

So when I finished that for the first three days and I didn't quit, the boss, a guy by the name of Billy Dunch [phonetic], came to me and says, "You really want to work?" I said, "Well, that's why I came here." I was always very glib; I would always come back with an answer. So he said, "We're having some problems over in the carpenter shop. Would you like to go to the carpenter shop?" I said, "Yeah." So on the way over, he says, "Can you read a ruler?" I said, "What are you, some kind of comedian? Of course, I can read a ruler!" I later learned why he asked me that question. But I went over there and all of sudden it caused trouble in the plant because they'd never had blacks in the carpenter shop again. So I'm the first black in the carpenter shop. But I'm only there a brief period of

time when I learned that the people that they had in the carpenter shop had no education or no ability–they had ability, they were intelligent but–they started to fight over me as a helper. And I always wondered–we put in bulkheads, like building walls and cubicles, and what have you, and putting boards overhead–why they fought over me. Because I was still this cocky guy, still young, still under twenty years of age. One day this chief guy in the carpenter shop, Louis Phillip [phonetic]–I'll never forget Louis' name [chuckling]–you had these guys–Louis said to me, he says, "You measure the board, and cut the board, and hand it up to me, and I'll put it in." So I said, "All right, you measure the hole." So he says, "Okay." So I said, "All right Louie, what's the size?" He says, "Six feet, two inches and two little bitty marks." I mean, he couldn't read a ruler! [laughter]

R. Terwilliger: Two little bitty marks! [laughter]

W. Qualls: Two little bitty marks.

R. Terwilliger: Let me check this, Walter. [recording paused]

W. Qualls: So I continued there as a carpenter and then it was time for me to be involved in a strike; they had a strike there. A very interesting strike. I knew nothing about a union, but having been in the world of fisticuffs, they couldn't get anybody as chairman of the Strike Committee. By that time, I had moved out of Carteret and I lived in Rahway. And I used to jog to work in Carteret every morning, keeping my body in tiptop shape. So they said, "You want to be the chairman?" I said, "What do I have to do?" They told me because I didn't know a thing about unions. So finally I said, "All right." And I commenced to pull guys through the windows in their cars and beat up people that tried to cross the strike line. It was a very vicious and a very bloody strike. A guy got shot, guys got injured from the boat side because we were on the waterfront–turn boats over with guys who couldn't swim, you know crazy things like that.

R. Terwilliger: Oh my gosh, Walter!

W. Qualls: Well, it was vicious. It was really vicious, and they picked a guy who could live with it, I guess. Well after we settled the strike, and we did because the company was just awed at this violence, they settled the strike. And then came time to select or to <u>elect</u> shop stewards. And I said, "Well, I want to be shop steward." They said, "Well, you have to run." I said, "I don't [unclear] I'll put my name down, but you make damned sure that I'm shop steward." I started learning the way of the labor movement.

R. Terwilliger: Oh yeah, right.

W. Qualls: And then there was a grievance chairman's job open, I wanted that. But meanwhile, if problems came up, I would go to a shop steward and I got to the point where I went to this shop steward by the name of Corky Garraugh [phonetic]–he was from Perth Amboy, he owned a bar there–and I said to him, "Corky, I got a problem with this foreman. And this a problem I want to apply to grievance." He said, "Don't talk to <u>me</u> about it." He said, "I take care of white grievances. Go to Mel O'Brien." And I said, "That's it. I'm going to take over this union." So I continued to move, and I gave myself a five-year limit. In four years, I was vice president and acting president of the union.

R. Terwilliger: Which union are we talking about now?

W. Qualls: International Chemical Workers Union, Local 434. Well, I wanted to run for president even though I'm acting president. This union was about, I guess, 10 percent black. It was a very large union in a sense of the number of people involved. And blacks had never really supported me; I couldn't understand it. So I ran for the presidency, which you know I lost the presidency of that union by thirty-four votes.

R. Terwilliger: Were they the black people?

W. Qualls: Yep, didn't even show up. None of them.

R. Terwilliger: But Walter, why was this?

W. Qualls: Well, you learn later on in life and after talking with them. They were of the opinion–they, being the blacks there–that any black could not or was not capable of running a union. Or if I could run a union, they could and why would they vote for me. And who the hell did I think I was anyway, running for the union? But the following election, I won and became the president. I didn't get their vote that time either. It was all the white vote; I got the white vote. And one of the first things I demanded, and I was a guest speaker in Carteret at a testimonial with Simeone Devorin [phonetic] and … [recording ends]

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 2]

R. Terwilliger: Okay.

W. Qualls: So I demanded that they hire a black foreman. They hired two, and I thought that was one of the greatest things that I could ever do. But it was short-lived. I got an emergency call to go over to the superintendent's office right away. So I ran over to the superintendent's office, Superintendent Hotalin [phonetic]. And as I entered the room–to give you a picture of what it looked like–one of the foremen, Brown from Rahway, was standing behind Hotalin [phonetic], the superintendent, with his head sticking out. And there was the other employee–we called him Pop Phillip [phonetic]–who was standing there shaking his knife, very sharp knife, at this person behind the superintendent. But he was talking to the superintendent. And the conversation might not seem weird to you, but it did kind of put me in an awkward position. [coughing] He was saying to Mr. Hotalin [phonetic], and he said, "Mr. Hotalin [phonetic], since you've known me, I have never disobeyed an order of any of your white foremen regardless of how old they are or whatever. Have I?" Mr. Hotalin [phonetic] said, "No, no, no." Looking at that knife, of course I would have said the same thing. But I'm sure that he had not. Well, he said, "I am sixty-three years old and I have never taken an order from a nigger in my life and I'm too old to start now."

That kind of situation to a black who is in authority or a union president presents a hell of a lot of problems because society has not prepared you to deal with that kind of problem, <u>no</u> shape or form. You just have to try to get it all together. It's

a very difficult problem. I recommended, and of course, he went home. Hotalin [phonetic] went home and eventually had to retire because things in an attitude like that <u>cannot</u> be dealt with in any method or know-how that we have. It's going to have to happen through attrition. So it was just one of those things that you learn and then you say, "Well look, I'm not <u>prepared</u> to actually be union president when all of these kinds of things are developing where the police are called into the plant." And this employee was such a robust man, he reminds you of Paul Bunyan [giant lumberjack], black guy that six good men could never put down. The police came in, and about ten of them, and grabbed his feet while somebody jumped on him from up above and knocked him to the floor, on this concrete floor in the washroom, and split his head open and killed him.

R. Terwilliger: Why? Why did they do this to him?

W. Qualls: The guy had actually gone off somewhat and thought he was the superintendent of the plant. And they were supposed to be taking him to a hospital somewhere to deal with his mental problem, but instead they killed him right there on the floor. Nothing ever happened out of it. And as a union president, how do you handle those things? So, it was very difficult.

And then I started to seek education from Rutgers University [in New Brunswick]. A guy by the name of Dr. Herbert Levine felt that he was the "labor professor" and he used to follow our union conventions and what have you, trying to convince us to make <u>labor</u> a major subject in the university. And subsequently Rutgers University did become the first major university in the country to have a labor building, plus to have an undergraduate labor degree program in the entire nation.

R. Terwilliger: You mean in all the history of unions up until this time, they had never really dealt with it on sort of an intellectual basis at a college level?

W. Qualls: Never. Nope.

R. Terwilliger: They finally realized there is something that has to be understood. Was there a philosophy that they were after?

W. Qualls: Well, prior to that time, and probably still now, when you mention to college kids or high school kids or elementary kids, unions, ask them to tell you what comes to mind right away. It will be goons; it will be racketeering; it will be strikes; everything that's negative about unions. The school system has not dealt with labor or unions as such. They're beginning to. It took twelve years of very, very hard work to get a degreed undergraduate program at Rutgers University, even though we labor unions built the first labor institute in the country right here at Rutgers University. In fact, my union committed $100,000 over a ten-year period to the building of that building [Rutgers University School of Management and Labor Relations]. That was one of the most modern air-conditioned buildings going, right on Ryder's Lane, right here in New Brunswick. And I started there, first taking courses (non-credited courses) and then I wanted a college degree. And I felt that having had a high level of experience that somewhere along the line I had to make a marriage between the academic and the experience to make it all meaningful. And if I ever wanted to write about it, I would have to be

academic. I went to school seven years and nights, Rutgers in New Brunswick–in Newark–to get an undergraduate degree.

R. Terwilliger: And what was your degree in then?

W. Qualls: Urban studies and labor studies. But I changed over to days. Oh, by the way, that's another factor–even though it took that long to get the undergraduate program, it was only at night. So in order to get my degree, I transferred over to days. So I had to move my major over to urban studies because that was the closest thing to it. And even though I took more labor courses, it was like a degree in urban studies and labor studies, very hard to get.

R. Terwilliger: A bit unusual, I mean I have never heard of that kind of a degree myself. I guess that this was unusual.

W. Qualls: Well, they weren't around. They're new degrees.

R. Terwilliger: Yeah. So what happened to you after that?

W. Qualls: After that, I got in trouble with the labor movement, Spring Lake Country Club at the end of the Parkway, back in 1960–what, [19]65, I think it was. Well, I had been union president and the ranking person for an international representative's job with the [International] Chemical Workers [Union] out of Akron, Ohio more than anyone. So for four years, they would not make anyone [international representative] because I was top guy. And in unions, you're supposed to go up through the ranks for the higher responsibilities and paying positions. And I wanted to in the worst way. I had become better educated than the president of the International and any of his international representatives, and I wanted the job badly. So they wouldn't give it to me and I knew it was because of my color. There was no question about it. So in 1965, at the Spring Rock Country Club–I mean Spring Lake Country Club in Spring Lake, New York–I think in New York / New Jersey, it's right on the line–I went to a convention, International Chemical Workers Convention, and the president, Walter Mitchell, and the secretary of the treasury, [Marshall] Shafer, was there. And I said this was the time that I was going to tell the world about these bigots. So I asked for the floor. I want you to understand that not always am I the nice guy. I arise to the occasion.

R. Terwilliger: They keep telling me that.

W. Qualls: Well, when I took the podium, I knew the consequences. When you're in labor and you're moving up in ranks, you must know that some horrible things can happen to you. The labor movement is not a kiddie game. It is a very serious, very <u>tough</u> business. That's the best way I can explain it. So what I had planned to do, I knew my life wasn't worth a nickel.

R. Terwilliger: Are you telling me in a sense, Walter–I mean again I have to keep thinking of many years from now somebody listening to this–that there could be a price on your life if you step out of line too much? I'm trying to put it as gently–

W. Qualls: Step out of line too much, and that's what I was about to do.

R. Terwilliger: About to do, yeah.

W. Qualls: It could have meant instant death. So I started my spiel, and I remember the guys that started to approach the podium as I called Walter Mitchell what I thought he should be called, and Marshall Shafer the same way. In fact, Marshall Shafer had done something to my girlfriend at that time, [who] is now my wife, playing kneesies under the table. I learned later on from my wife, this slimy man–but anyway.

R. Terwilliger: This was your girlfriend before she was your wife? You're talking about Tyrene [Lee (Spencer) Qualls] now?

W. Qualls: Yes, yes. Well anyway, I told them what I thought of them: Scallette [phonetic], Dequalen [phonetic], McDivett [phonetic], and the present President of the International Chemical Workers [Frank] Martino. They <u>all</u> were like–there were labor goons of this sort that people thought about, tough guys. They jumped up and started moving towards the podium, and I said, "Hey fellas, you should know by now that I knew the consequences of this whole thing. If you move one more step, I'm going to shoot Marshall Shafer and Walter Mitchell," who were sitting right next to me. I had come there with two guns, two pockets of ammo–no, no, serious–two guns, two pockets of ammo, and I had on like a khaki suit, and I was perspiring out. No, no [serious]. Walter Mitchell got up and screamed and, "Please don't move. Nobody moves. Please let him say anything he wants, just–." You see, in the labor movement, it has happened more than once, when anyone attempts to do what I did, the lights go out and I mean this literally, the lights go out. And when the lights come on again, they pick you up with a shovel! I mean they have torn you to bits, literally torn you to bits. It has happened several times. They don't know who did it because everybody was there, but whatever. I knew that was going to happen. I dared anybody to go near the light switch. And I dared anybody to move and I backed out of that place. That's how I got out of the labor movement.

R. Terwilliger: Walter, why did you have to do that?

W. Qualls: Because it was necessary. <u>Somebody</u> had to do it.

R. Terwilliger: Personally, I mean to you–I mean you had to get this out of yourself?

W. Qualls: I had to do it, for not only for myself. They were refusing to make <u>me</u> an international rep. They didn't even make any other blacks. So after I had to leave the labor movement, two blacks were made. And then other unions had to follow through. I feel that I had a part in that. I <u>knew</u> the consequences.

R. Terwilliger: Then the end results happened. I mean you did get results?

W. Qualls: Of course, and I <u>don't</u> feel that I did anything that I should be sorry for because I went there fully prepared. When you have driven someone the way I had been driven–I had prepared myself academically, mentally, for the position of international rep. I had everything in place; I had worked hard; I had earned it. It was mine! But because of the color of my skin, I couldn't get it. So I went prepared to let them know that I knew and knew why. I got the greatest respect from those people, but they told me one thing: you have to leave the labor

movement for there's nowhere you can hide. I had the federal government, the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation], and the local police watch my car because they were going to blow me up; there's no question about that. And that went on for couple of weeks, but it became a strain. So okay, I said, "All right fellas." I called them, I said, "You win." They said, "What does that mean?" I said, "Well, I'm resigning." So in November or December of 1966, I resigned as of January 1, 1967. And they said, "Okay, no problem, just don't come back to the labor movement. We don't want you back." However, I could have gone back. Four weeks later, Walter Mitchell had been re-elected, regardless of what I had said or done, to an unprecedented four-year term. And this was the president and he was upstairs putting on his pants, and as he went to step in his second leg, he had a heart attack and he died [in 1968].

R. Terwilliger: [whispers] Oh my God.

W. Qualls: Yeah, right, rather strange. I said I could have killed the guy by being there with a gun and ended up in trouble myself. You look at those afterwards, these kinds of things.

R. Terwilliger: Yeah, right. [recording paused]

Walter, after your experience with working with the unions, what shape did your career take after this?

W. Qualls: I started working with the New Jersey Department of Community Affairs. It was a new department, just created. And I was asked as one of the moving forces in the labor movement to vest contracts and to vest–what do you call it?–benefits–vest benefits, like I said, and most modern of benefits ending contracts to come into the state government and federal and the Department of Community Affairs. So I did.

R. Terwilliger: And was this the group you were connected with when you took part in the Plainfield riots? Or am I jumping much ahead?

W. Qualls: No, no, it's all a part of it. One of the new programs that they had initiated that I was assigned to very early on was as a result of the Newark riots[4] in 1967. The New Jersey State Police had been a part of that and that was the first time the New Jersey State Police had been used in an inner-city kind of situation. The State Police was a rural paramilitary outfit that normally dealt with rural areas (areas that did not have police departments and needed police protection and things like that). They had never gone into an inner city and tried to do police action. Well, they found that the people in the inner city were <u>different</u> than the people in the rural areas, and they responded differently to police and police authority. So when that happens, you have to do different kinds of things, and they didn't know how to do that and they just reacted. And when policemen react, I would naturally expect them to resort to what their strength is and guns.

[4] The 1967 Newark riots was one of 159 race riots that took place in cities all over the United States during the "Long Hot Summer of 1967." The rioting, looting, and property destruction occurred for four days between July 12 and July 17 and killed twenty-six people.

If you recall, the State Police and the National Guard shot up Newark black businesses indiscriminately, not because they were doing anything wrong, but because they felt, I guess, frustrated. So Governor [Richard] Hughes decided that something should be done to change the image of the New Jersey State Police because they had been on television and all this bad publicity had caused a blemish on New Jersey's finest. And they said, well, we are–Hughes [established] a counseling kind of a program with the State Police using inner city kids, those who defy all forms of discipline, be it in the home, in the school, or on the streets. And that was relegated to the junior level. I was assigned that responsibility by Dr. Paul Ylvisaker, the present dean of the Graduate School of Education at Harvard [University in Massachusetts] now. But he assigned me the responsibility of designing and implementing the program. So I designed it [and] implemented it by doing the recruiting myself. I recruited a hundred youngsters from Jersey City to Camden and brought them to Sea Girt down at the shore, the Jersey shore, at the National Guard Training Base, and had confrontations and paramilitary training for these students. And the confrontations were unbelievably good. We were hoping that we would also influence youngsters to come back and join the State Police. These were black youngsters, most of them.

At that time, they had five blacks on the State Police. When I finished the program, or when I was pulled out of the program, or left the program in 1971, they had twenty-one blacks in the State Police, which I think was about the largest number in any state police organization in the country. But then I went into–or during the same time–I was doing riots and community disturbances all over the state. That's how I came in contact with a lot of schools and a lot of kids. Because they had riots: Rahway, Linden, Paterson. Paterson had a seven-day riot; I think that was the longest one where it really was hard. And they had second riot in Newark, and I guess there were many other cities. I can't recall all of them offhand. But that was the kind of thing I did for a number of years.

R. Terwilliger: But just to stick with this just for a minute, what actually was your role? I mean, all right, there was a riot in Plainfield. What physically would you have to do with these people that you–?

W. Qualls: First, you get them together. [coughing] When you say people, it's normally you can identify those who were at the front, be it in the community, be it out of the mayor's office or other segments of the community, which I don't talk about that much. But it would be my responsibility to get the mayor and the community to talking (in fact, to mediate the differences), and also to coordinate federal and state funds that would come into that area so that you could prevent the kind of thing that happened, [and] make sure the money would be used in the most useful way. So the state government was being helpful in negotiating and mediating differences as well as directing state and federal funds where they would have the greatest impact on preventing the conditions that precipitated the issue.

R. Terwilliger: Well, in most instances, was there any pattern to what instigated a riot? What kind of level did things have to reach before these people decided enough was enough?

W. Qualls: I don't know if they ever decided enough was enough. I think once the ingredients are there–overcrowding, dissatisfaction with your job, dissatisfaction with your condition or not having a job at all–many things can cause a riot. And I

think when you have all the necessary ingredients, someone can smack someone or someone can loud talk someone, someone can accidentally bump into someone's car, it was very easy. When all of those variables were there, you could have a riot at any time. Paterson was because the police had arrested a guy and they said the police beat up the guy, and the rumor went through the community. And at the same time, they were having trouble with the sprinkler system–not the sprinkler system, that was what we tried to institute. But they had all of the water hydrants open, the fire department was very upset because they couldn't get full force to put out fires. And the community people were upset with the fire department because they didn't get there on time or they didn't put the fire out. Everybody was angry with everybody else. And when the police got angry with the blacks because they accused them of being mean to the Puerto Ricans, so instead of dealing with the Puerto Rican problem, they came and fire-bombed and–well, I shouldn't say fire-bombed. It was alleged that they fire-bombed black businesses and what have you. So that kicked off a seven-day riot. But there is no one that can go in and say these are the kinds of things to look for in order to be able to tell if they are going to riot.

Rahway and Linden, it happened in the school system. The school system was predominately white, and blacks were in jeopardy. And I distinctly recall down in the black section of Linden near St Georges Avenue in Roselle, in that area, the kids filled the telephone booths full of pieces of concrete and bricks, and put them inside of the telephone booth. You couldn't tell until they opened it because they didn't go to the glass. And they would take them out and indiscriminately throw a brick through your windshield. If you were an afternoon driver just driving for the pleasure of driving, next thing you know you have a brick through your window and that's how the riot started there. But it was basically kicked off by some difficulty in the school. Rahway was the same way; and a lot of them go that way. So we put together teams: somebody from the Department of Education, somebody from the Division on Civil Rights, the Department of Community Affairs, and the governor's legal staff. And we would go and try to mediate and settle the differences–or not settle them, but to make it possible for the people to continue as normal as possible.

R. Terwilliger: And for the most part, were you successful once you got them talking to each other and trying to negotiate something?

W. Qualls: Oh sure. People don't normally want to destroy whatever they destroy. I think we had tremendous success simply because people become frightened. They have done it, but it's simply reacting to stimuli rather than objectively addressing themselves to what they should do in a rational way. They're irrational when they're rioting and burning and destroying things. But once it's all over, I would venture to say they are very frightened people. And if they can find a solution or something to let them out of their predicament, they will definitely do it. That's why I don't <u>expect</u> riots of that sort again.

R. Terwilliger: I was just going to ask that. Do you feel then what you did was effective and we haven't had this type of situation?

W. Qualls: I think what <u>they</u> did, what they agreed to and what they understood, caused our efforts to be considered effective and successful. But I think the decision is theirs, and if they want to riot again, I guess they could. But my opinion is that they felt

never again, I don't think. I think that was a stage. I think as we have seen in the seventies, the social war has moved into the political arena. I don't think it's in the streets and burning any more. I don't see it there. I don't think we'll have those kinds of condition, or those kinds of riots. The conditions are still there and they are worse in many situations, but I just don't see them rioting and shooting and killing any more.

R. Terwilliger: Let's hope not. I'm going to diverse a little bit, and I know somewhere in this interim you got married to Tyrene. What year was that?

W. Qualls: Nineteen-hundred-sixty-five. I met Tyrene in 1962 and we dated while she was at Glassboro State College [present-day Rowan University] and then her next educational experience was at Virginia Union University. In fact, I used to drive down almost every weekend to Richmond, Virginia. And when she graduated from Virginia Union, after being there a couple of years, we got married. We got married August 28, 1965, yes.

R. Terwilliger: And did you move then? Or did you live back up in this area?

W. Qualls: No, we lived in Roselle. Her parents, and my wife is very close to her mother, she was an only child–very close to her family, period. And I was the kind of guy that could live anywhere. I was working in Carteret at the time. I had no strong ties to any particular town.

R. Terwilliger: At this time, both your mother and father were dead?

W. Qualls: No, my father was in Louisiana and I was here. And I had no real strong family ties. So it didn't matter where I stayed. So we stayed in Roselle for the next five years.

R. Terwilliger: And you were then working in Carteret?

W. Qualls: I worked in Carteret until 1967, and then I went to work for the state.

R. Terwilliger: Is that when you worked for, was it Speaker of the House?

W. Qualls: No, no, no. That came much later. No, we left Roselle and moved to Metuchen. That was in 1970.

R. Terwilliger: Oh really? Oh, to your present location?

W. Qualls: To my present location [at 85 Hampton Street]. We bought a house in Metuchen in 1970. And it was like an accident we came to Metuchen. I accidentally ran into an old friend. I had seen my attorney, Jack Wysoker from Perth Amboy, and I had asked him if he knew any real estate agent that was pretty trustworthy that I could deal with. I wasn't interested in fighting the civil rights movement edict all over again, I just wanted to buy a house. Didn't necessarily want to integrate in the neighborhoods or anything like [that], just a decent home. And he said, yes, he had just the guy. And he introduced me to Jim Elek of [JJ] Elek Realty [in Woodbridge]. I'm sure you see it around. Well, Jim Elek and I had been in school together. I was a little more vociferous, or what should we say, than Jim. [chuckles] Jim at that time was a small guy who was very quiet. Now Jim is about

six-foot-four-inches and a big husky guy. But Jim, at the time, was having some problems with being accused of being a racist. I'm not sure that he was guilty or anything like that, but he said if I would buy a house through him, it would help him a lot. And I said, "Well, if you have a house that has the right price, I'll buy it." And the only place he could find a house that had the right price that I thought I could afford was Metuchen, and the house that I bought at the time was really damaged and what have you. It was only six months old, but it was damaged–holes in the walls, frozen pipes that had broken, water was spraying all over everything. So it was in bad shape. So I did manage to get the house at $10,000 less than it was on the market. So I came to live in Metuchen. I think it was totally by accident. I knew no one in Metuchen, knew nothing about Metuchen, had never really visited anyone or any establishment in Metuchen.

R. Terwilliger: What were your feelings when you first came here?

W. Qualls: That I was going to live here; it was going to be my bedroom community.

R. Terwilliger: No, I meant, what kind of a community, what kind of vibes did you get in the first six months you lived here? Did you think it was a community, was going to–you were interested in becoming a vital part of or you wanted to have some input into it?

W. Qualls: Well, the first six or eight months, I guess I was busy working in the house. I had no contact with anyone really.

R. Terwilliger: No one came; no Welcome Wagon came?

W. Qualls: Oh, the Welcome Wagon did come. [laughter] She came. She came, she was very nice, and gave us all kinds of discounts on our first tune-up on our car and all that stuff like that. But other than that, I didn't come in contact with the powers-to-be in the town until I guess almost a year later. There was some property out back of me that I wanted, and I went down to see the mayor [Donald Wernik]. I was informed that the mayor was the person to see and that he owned the drug store [Wernik's Pharmacy at 412 Main Street]. So I walked in to talk to the mayor, and had a very meaningful conversation with him. He asked a lot of questions and I answered them.

[coughing] And I came out and Metuchen's first black policeman waved at me and I waved back. And I thought he was waving, so I went around the block–what is it, the Train Station Place [Pennsylvania Avenue]–and came back around to Main Street. And he was on the corner waiting for me and he waved again. So I thought, *This guy is really friendly*. So I waved back to him. And he said, "I'm not waving to you. I'm pulling you over." So I said, "What for?" He said, "Don't talk back to me. Get out of the car." "Get out of the car?" [chuckles] So I got out of the car, and the guy says, "You pulled out of that parking space too fast." "How can I pull out of a parking space too fast when I'm locked in both ways, a car parked behind me and one in front of me?" He said, "Shut up or I'll give you a ticket." I said, "For what?" And to cut a long story short, I didn't say anything else to the guy because I realized that he did have a problem. And I had been dealing with the State Police … [recording ends]

[END OF TAPE 2, SIDE 1]

R. Terwilliger: Walter, how did you first become interested in your approach to getting involved in politics? You spoke before about trying to purchase a piece of property behind your house?

W. Qualls: Yes. There was a piece of property, fifty by 112.5 [feet], and I just wanted to add it on to make my property larger. And I approached the council [Metuchen Borough Council] on it; the mayor first and then the council. And more than once they refused me by letter stating that I did not have an entrance to the property or the property–and Metuchen's zoning requirements are that you must have an entrance to the property.

R. Terwilliger: Right.

W. Qualls: And I convinced them that I had an entrance to the property because my property, the back of the property, fronted on my property. And finally, I forced them to sell after a lot of arguing and fighting; I forced the council to sell me the property since no one else could bid. I kind of asked them, "What was the starting bid?" And they told me and that's exactly what I bid. And that upset a lot of people that I did not bid more. I didn't feel it was necessary to bid against myself.

R. Terwilliger: Right.

W. Qualls: If the entry bid or the lowest bid was $1,500, that's exactly what I bid. And they got a little uneasy about that, but I didn't despair. And so all of a sudden, my name had starting getting around as a guy that was pushy or the guy that was standing up for what he thought was right. And one rainy night, I was in a hurry to get to Wernik's Drug Store before it closed. And when I went in, two people were there: [Donald] Wernik and [Leonard] Roseman. And Wernik said, "That's it!" And you know I really didn't pay them that much attention; I thought they were talking to each other. He came over and asked me if I had a degree. And I said, "Yes." And he says, "You've had a lot of experience in state government?" I said, "That's right. I've been involved in state government, a number of things." So he said, "Would you like to run for council here in Metuchen?" And he caught me cold because I had not planned to, and [I] had not been active in the Democratic club or any Democratic politics. Oh yeah, he did ask me if I was a Democrat. And I told him yes, I was a registered Democrat. He said, "We'd like to have you run for council. Would you run?" And I told him, "I don't know. I'll have to take some time to find out, to talk it over with my wife." And he says, "How long?" I said, "A few days." He says, "Well, I'll expect your decision by Wednesday." I said, "All right, who else would be running with me?" And he said probably–

R. Terwilliger: John Bertrand?

W. Qualls: No, he lives over on Middlesex Avenue. He's a–oh wow–he's an art critic for *The New York Times*, I think it is.

R. Terwilliger: I can't remember who ran with you then.

W. Qualls: **Oh, he didn't run with me.**

R. Terwilliger: Oh, he didn't run with you?

W. Qualls: **So he said, "Probably this guy because it is his turn." So I said, "Fine." Well, I came back three days later and I told him after talking with my wife, who agreed that I should run, or it would be interesting if I did run, and they said, "Good. Glad to have you." And I said, "Well now wait, are there any Democratic policy issues that I have to agree to <u>prior</u> to having my name put on the ballot or having the Democratic line?"**

R. Terwilliger: Now let me interrupt you right here. Did they do a screening on you? Was there a screening committee where you had to sit down and talk to?

W. Qualls: **Of course not. [laughter] No, it was said and it was done.**

R. Terwilliger: This wasn't that same night? This is after you agreed to run?

W. Qualls: **Three nights later, yes.**

R. Terwilliger: Did you meet with the mayor alone for this–?

W. Qualls: **To give him my decision, I did. And then after that, about a week later, they set up a meeting with Bob Johnson, Leonard Roseman, Marty Spritzer, and the mayor. And that is the time they told me that the person they had expected to run with me wouldn't run with me. So I was–**

R. Terwilliger: Wouldn't run or didn't want to run with you? Didn't want to be on the same ballot?

W. Qualls: **That's right, [he] said that a black could never be elected in this town and any slate that he's on, he would actually cause that slate to be defeated. Okay, so I said, "Well, if you're going to have that kind of problem, maybe I should get off." And they said, "Well, we want you to understand that there is a great possibility that you won't win. But the Democratic Party is a fair party and we'd like to give everybody a shot. We certainly want you to understand that there is every possibility that you won't win." So I said, "What I get into, I try to make it possible."**

R. Terwilliger: And you had good feelings about these people now at this point?

W. Qualls: **Not necessarily about those people. I felt that it was a bigger thing than all of them; it was all about a vote. And I felt that through my involvement and exposure that I could convince people to vote for me. They were telling me that "Well, you don't know Metuchen." And I said, "Okay." So they had a hard time finding someone that would run with me. Finally, after many heartbreaks to them, I guess, trying to find someone that would run with me, they had a young fellow by the name of John Wiley, a law student. John, as you know, is councilman now. And they put together a ticket that was absolutely un-Metuchen. You had a black and you had a hippie. John had a complete beard, Van Dyke [beard], and long hair. In fact, during the campaign, John's brother was picked up for marijuana in town and that caught the papers. So no one in the**

hierarchy of the Democratic Party in Metuchen felt that we could win, so no plans were made for us to take over our duties properly.

Well, even before we got to the hard part of running for the campaign, or the campaigning part, we couldn't get a campaign manager. All the people that were knowledgeable in running campaigns refused when they saw this ragtag ticket. I mean they just refused, all of them, every single one of them. The last date that we had to get a campaign manager, Leonard Roseman was asked to talk to Judy Elliot and she accepted. Now we have three "no-nos" from Metuchen. You have a black guy, which is a no-no as I was told. You had a hippie, which was so out of Metuchen-like style in a conservative upper middle-class community. And then you had a woman, who was managing the campaign of a black–an attractive woman, young woman–and a hippie. Absolutely three no-nos. And she was kind of arrogant too. So you had an arrogant black, I guess you might call him, and a slow hippie, and a very arrogant, uppity-kind of white woman as campaign manager. We put together a campaign that we won with flying colors, and that's when the trouble started.

R. Terwilliger: Before we jump into your election and your term on the council, what were your vibes as far as campaigning? You know the procedure in this town is to knock on doors and talk to people personally. What was their reaction when they opened the door and saw this black guy standing there?

W. Qualls: Extremely good. You were cognizant, at least I was, of the fact that they knew you were black, they knew you were running, and they kind of accepted that as a normal thing.

R. Terwilliger: What kind of questions did they ask? What were they most anxious to know from you?

W. Qualls: Well, they mostly talked to me about their problems that they had with the municipality, and would I be able to focus on those problems? And many times, especially at coffee cloches, my main response to questions–because I had not been in the political process here in town–was that I would do my best, but I just don't have a magic wand. I'm not going to tell you that I am going to solve your problems. I will use all of the experience and exposure that I've had and bring that to bear on your problems and try to adjudicate them as best I can. And they seemed to accept that. They didn't seem to be any rougher on me than they were–in fact, I thought they were very kind on–many times they could have followed through with some of their suggestions or thoughts that could have been kind of embarrassing to me. And they knew it and wouldn't do it because you know.

R. Terwilliger: How about the small black community? Did you ever campaign in that area?

W. Qualls: Of course. I learned early on that you need to go to the people that you think are in your corner, or would normally be in your corner, much more than you do to the people that you're trying to persuade. Because people that you think are in your corner, unless you go and reassure them, you can't get their vote. Or they just won't even bother to go out and vote. [clock ringing] But I found more animosity in the black community than I found in the white community, as a total. Now the black community was about 5 percent of this community and

probably less of the voting population. Many of them were jealous. I had not been in the community for three years, and they felt that they were here thirty years, and someone else or they should have been given a chance. And I asked them, "Well, why haven't you tried?" And the basic question was that they weren't qualified and that really irritated me. Now maybe I was too strong and too powerful in my answer when I said, "That is about the dumbest statement I've ever heard, simply because the governor of your state, all he needs in the form of qualifications is some type of a residency requirement and an age." He is not required that he really speak English, but I'm sure that he would get by better doing that, since television and radio. But I said, quote, "You have need, what you need is a will to serve, not education and college degrees, and stuff like that. You don't have to have that." It might help you to know how to approach things and give you a little more rational look at things, but it is not a prerequisite, it is not a requirement, so that–

R. Terwilliger: Did you find that any of the black people–were there many of them that were unregistered voters in this town?

W. Qualls: Yes. In fact, when I started to run for office, out of the 855 black people in this town, only 157 were registered to vote. Now out of that 855 people, many of them were kids, under sixteen. But those who were of registering age, only a 150-something were registered to vote.

R. Terwilliger: Did this in any way inspire them to get out and register and vote, the fact that there was a black man running?

W. Qualls: That year we did not register that many. The following year, we were able to register quite a few in District 10.

R. Terwilliger: Now do you remember the numbers you won by?

W. Qualls: No, I don't, I don't. But it was a sizable number and it was not influenced–if all of the blacks stayed home or didn't vote at all–it wouldn't have influenced the final tally.

R. Terwilliger: So now you are elected and you were sworn in as the first black councilman in Metuchen.

W. Qualls: Yes, caused great problems.

R. Terwilliger: What were your feelings about this? Did you go in with any feelings of things you wanted to see accomplished?

W. Qualls: No, not really, not right off. What I went in with was the understanding that I was carrying to the council quite a bit of experience that others did not have on the council. And being one of the six lawmakers of the municipality, I felt that would be very useful. And we had a majority of four to two, four Democrats and two Republicans. And in politics, spoils go to the winner, and the winners–you know politics is all about winning, and so the spoils go to the winner, and they take the better responsibilities. As a liaison–you are a liaison to different parts of the community. And I had expected to be put in an area where I had expertise. I

had at that time about ten, twelve years of labor background at every level; I had government background.

R. Terwilliger: At that time, you were down in Trenton?

W. Qualls: No, at that time I was–no, I was at Rutgers University. I was assistant to the president at Rutgers University. And you know I had educational background. I had private sector, public sector, educational background.

R. Terwilliger: And what was your liaison?

W. Qualls: Oh, they gave me the Welfare, they gave me Health, they gave me the Arts Council and things of that nature.

R. Terwilliger: And the library [Metuchen Public Library]?

W. Qualls: They eventually gave me the library. I was a little bit upset about that because the major problem and the major work to be done in this municipality came from the Public Works Department. The Public Works Department had a Teamsters Union, and they had very little reference to what that meant. But they kept a Republican in charge of the Public Works Department rather than to give it to someone that had more experience and more knowledge about the functioning of a department like that, than anyone else.

R. Terwilliger: Why do you think? Did you ever question their decision?

W. Qualls: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. I questioned it almost immediately. I said to [him], "What is this? I don't understand." And he said, "Well, Joe Schwalje is really not a Republican like most Republicans, and we thought we'd leave him there. You know we won't punish him because we won." I said, "That's not really the reason, is it?" And I took them to task. I asked the Democratic majority–this is before the Sunshine Law[5] and you could do it–for a meeting and we met at Don Wernik's house. And I said to them, "You people really didn't expect me to win, did you?" And Marty Spritzer spoke up and said, "No, we didn't." And Don said, "Well, but you did win. But we didn't think it was possible for a black to win in Metuchen." I said, "Well." So I said, "Once I was there, you guys didn't know what to do with me." They said, "Well, that's right." I said, "Hey, I'm not going to take that lying down; there is no way for me to do that. I'm elected, and <u>properly</u> elected, you cannot dictate and give those responsibilities I know belong to me to a Republican." And they said, "Well, we'll straighten them out next time, next year," because I had a three-year tenure there.

That went from bad to worse because not only did they require Democratic policy issues, but they required that you <u>blindly</u> follow the dictates of the mayor. I said, "No way." I cannot blindly vote on transfer of property in violation of codes. I cannot blindly vote on police action that I know was really improper. I couldn't blindly vote on the kinds of payments that were being made to–not

[5] New Jersey's Open Public Meetings Act, known as The Sunshine Law, is designed to ensure that decision-making government bodies in the state conduct their businesses in public, except in specific circumstances where exclusion of the public is needed to protect the privacy of individuals, the safety of the public, or the effectiveness of government in such areas as negotiations or investigations.

illegitimately, they could be legitimate if the council voted on them–I couldn't do that. So I became a maverick of sort. I did not worry about that simply because I felt that the people of Metuchen knew I was working on their behalf, they would respond to that. That was a gross error. The people in Metuchen who bother to read about what's happening downtown–they don't bother to come down, but bother to read–I would guess that they reflect on it as, oh, some more political jargon that's going on downtown because nothing good is going to come out of it. And so based on past procedures, I guess, they had no way to believe that I was any more honest than anyone else, and this was just a political ploy that I was [unclear].

Well, the following year, they wanted to change Schwalje from the Public Works Department and the administration, what have you, because he had not done a job. He was in the minority for the first time and he just didn't have the time. He was building his own business. So John Wiley was selected by the group, simply because he was my running mate, I guess, to talk to me and try to convince me to allow Schwalje to be transferred from Public Works Department to director of the police, police commissioner. And I hit the ceiling and had a little fit to tell all of the people there. So, the Democrats won again in that election and you had again four Democrats and two Republicans.

R. Terwilliger: The second time around, did you run with John Bertrand then or was it you with–?

W. Qualls: No, that was second, the next year. John Bertrand ran with Cathy Stumpfl [Catherine Stumpfl], and that was the year I found the color of the people there. Because doing that selection–Cathy was not the first selection, the first selection in the eyes of Len Roseman, myself, and Don Wernik, and John Wiley was Judy Elliot because she had worked our campaign and she was the proper one we thought. And we all had convinced her to do it, to run. And all of a sudden, one night John Bertrand asked us to come in the back room after a council meeting, and he asked Leonard Roseman, myself, Wiley, and Don Wernik. So we're sitting there. And Bertrand says, "I want you to know I will not run with Judy Elliot." So I said, "What is this? We had been fighting and convincing Judy for six weeks that this was the thing for her to do. Now that we have convinced her, you're telling me you're not going to run." He said, "I'm not going to run." I said, "Why?" He said, "My wife doesn't like her. She's a cocky, wise whatever." And Len Roseman was shocked; he didn't know–none of them knew evidently. And he [Bertrand] said, "I don't like her and I couldn't run with her. Well, you know I can't stand hypocrites." So they said, "Walter, do you think you can talk to Judy?" John Wiley said, "No, I can't talk to her because I've been talking to her to tell her why she needs to run." So [he] said, "She's working on her PhD down at Rutgers and she's there during the day, and you work not too far from where she goes to school. Why don't you talk to her?" [coughing]

So I happened to drop in and see Judy working and talk to Judy for about three or four days until I convinced her and her husband that it really wasn't a time for her to run. So she backed out. She said, "Well, you're right, I have to get to my dissertation," and all that stuff like that, and its German kids or something like that, German school kids, "and I need to do some traveling. I just don't need to do it." And I said, "Fine." So I felt pretty good about that. It was a decision of hers after I'd talked with her for [unclear] long time. But then when I really got angry and bitter was when Bertrand goes to Judy Elliot and asks her to be the

campaign manager of the crew. Now Judy Elliot didn't know anything about this. No one knew anything about it, but the four of us. And I said, "The un-mitigating gall of this guy!" So at the victory party when they won, when they got the last reading, Bertrand jumps out on the floor with Judy Elliot. And he's hugging her and has her feet off the floor as he twirls her around and said, "I love you. There's no way in the world we could have done it without you!" And he's dancing her across the floor. I just couldn't believe that. I mean this is unbelievable!

R. Terwilliger: But that's politics, isn't it?

W. Qualls: They once said that to lie in politics is just plain politics; it's not a lie. I don't buy that. [laughs] You know a lie with a small "L" is just as much as a lie as it is with a large "L." So I don't know if that's just politics.

R. Terwilliger: Were these the kind of the things that–?

W. Qualls: Blew my mind? You better believe it! [laughter]

R. Terwilliger: Yeah. I mean you saw the insincerity. I mean I don't mean to accuse him of being that, it appears that there was–

W. Qualls: Politics doesn't have to be deception and trickery. Politics is an art. It's a very sharp art. It's an art that can move mountains. Politics touches every thread of everyone's life everyday of their life. So it doesn't have to be deceit and trickery. Those who do not have the ability or the talent to do it are those who will resort to that.

R. Terwilliger: Walter, did you ever consider the fact that your experience in politics and labor negotiations, the kind of job you had over at Rutgers, eventually where you ended up down in Trenton, that–I don't think that you were aware of small-town politics and the kinds of things that do go on in small towns. I mean you were so much above this kind of thing that it was almost intolerable for you to deal with these people, and they with you.

W. Qualls: Well, small town politics, as one might call it, no. And I'll need to coin a phrase or a cliché: *No man or no town is an island*. Metuchen cannot function without being active in county government, state government, and parts of federal government. It is a part of those. It is not an island unto itself. And they found that out very shortly after I became part of that office–when I became part of council–when they wanted to build senior citizen housing, when they wanted to do something on county roads, when they wanted to modify the train station, or when they wanted to straighten out Route 27, or when there's taxing problems. They're not problems that can be adjudicated by Metuchen Council, there's no way. But if you bury your head in the sand, nothing gets done. Like the train station [Metuchen Railroad Station renovation] was on the books, for what, eleven years [coughing]; Route 28, thirteen years. No need for that to happen. But when you don't have the ability or the know-how, when you don't reach out to learn, that's why you just grind your wheels; nothing happens. And sure, my way of doing things and my approach to doing things challenged them and would make them get off their lazy tails and do something. Because if I opened my mouth at the council, it would be printed in the local paper if Don Wernik

couldn't convince the press not to print it. And then people would start asking questions and more people started coming to council meetings, more people became interested in their municipality.

Yeah, I caused some problems, but I think they were good. It was like the gadfly, kind of prodding, and they didn't want to deal with it, no. No question about it. But I don't think that I was any more qualified than the kind of person that you should have for council. That's one thing that bothers me about Metuchen: politics. There seems to be no enticement for those people that are most qualified to run. When I say qualified, I mean in the sense that they could do the most for Metuchen. I'm not talking about those sterile qualifications. [coughing] I'm talking about the people that have had some experiences, the people that would understand the capitalization of a budget, people that would understand instruction setups for the municipality, or layouts of the protection of the city or whatever, or the insurances of the city. They understand how the government functions. <u>They do not</u> approach government in Metuchen. I don't know if it's because that, if you pay very little, or they just feel that it's too much time.

R. Terwilliger: I think it's a combination of both. I wondered if you felt it was an apathy. I mean if "that's their thing, let them do it," and that people just don't want to–

W. Qualls: It might be apathy, or they might be apathetic in the sense that Metuchen historically has not been a crooked town in the sense that people were taking large sums of money. That is the general consensus. I think they're right, but I think that's the general pattern of the 567 municipalities we have in New Jersey. You see, municipal officials do not have to steal; they don't have to steal personally themselves. They can legally through their legal counsel, they can legally through other chiefs and bureaus in the municipality, see that money goes to friends. They can make sure that specifications fit those that they want it to go to, so they don't have to steal. Metuchen is not above doing those kinds of things, making sure specifications go to friends or friendly organizations. For instance, when it was very obvious that they wanted to buy a firetruck and a sweeper truck ($55,000 or something like that), and the firetruck was, you know whatever–that they made the specifications to <u>only one company</u> that could do it in the whole county, and it was a local company, but that's the way they do it. So you don't have to steal. Metuchen is no different when it comes to directing major parts of the budget so that friends will receive some monetary rewards out of it. For instance, all of the sporting equipment they bought from one person without a bid or anything like that. But that's the way it is. So Metuchen's not any different. You know that as well.

R. Terwilliger: No, Metuchen is not uncommon to other communities in that sense. I think we're coming near the end of our tape. And in some way, I would like for you to sum up your feelings as a council member. Were they years of frustration? Do you think what you did was effective in the community?

W. Qualls: I think the three years that I spent on the council were three years of growing and gathering of tremendous experience. I don't think they were wasted years. I think the people in Metuchen–no different than other people–do not take an overly active interest in what the council is doing. They do not ask for accountability; that was a let-down. Not only do the general public not ask for accountability, [but also] the black community that I thought I might represent,

which I did not, and I had wanted to in many ways. I made myself available to all of the churches, to all of the local organizations, white or black. None of them had a need when they wanted to understand the income tax. And at that time, I was drafting the income tax bill and doing the kinds of legal interpretations that would allow the bill to be understood really. And I was willing to explain it to everyone. That was as early as the first bill was in [1975] when Governor [Brendan] Byrne first went into office. I offered all kinds of services and understanding to the Democratic Party, and also to local organizations. They did not accept that. That bothered me and when they did not come to council meetings, that also bothered me. But the main thing, when they came to council meetings, whomever or whoever came to council meetings, did not come to <u>support</u> anyone. They always came because they had complaints of some sort.

R. Terwilliger: They had a personal problem either in their neighborhood or privately on their own property or their own involvement?

W. Qualls: Yes. So I say to Metuchen that my experience on council was one of the most rewarding. There was every effort by the city fathers to break my aggressiveness and to humble-ize me. That didn't happen. I don't think the Metuchen people were unkind … [recording ends]

[END OF INTERVIEW]