WILLIAM HILL

May 4, 1996
—
Mame Warren,
interviewer

Warren: This is Mame Warren. Today is May 4, 1996. I'm in Lexington, Virginia, with William Hill, who I'm real excited to be talking to.

All right. What drew you here in the first place? Where did you grow up?

Hill: I grew up in Atlanta, Georgia, went to the public schools there. Actually born and grew up in the city as opposed to one of the suburbs like most people did.

Warren: So why Washington and Lee?

Hill: My dad was always adamant about his kids going to college. He had seven sons and two daughters. I was the oldest, and my baby brother was born my senior year in high school. But he wanted us to all go to college. There was no doubt in my mind that if I was going to go to college, I had to leave Atlanta. I could not stay in the city and go to school. My friends were ending up everywhere except in school; most of them ended up in jail or doing time.

When I got ready to go to school, I applied to colleges generally up and down the eastern seaboard. My dad and I visited schools, and I got scholarships to several schools. My dad was adamant, he wanted me to attend Emory, but I didn't want to go to Emory because I wanted to leave home. He said if he had to pay for me going to school, I was going to go where he wanted me to go. I said, "What if I got scholarships?" He said, "You can go anywhere you want to go."

So we visited schools, and on the way back through, we stopped in Virginia to see W&L. I had gotten accepted here and gotten a scholarship at W&L. As soon as I set

foot on campus, I turned to my dad and I said, "This is where I'm going to school." That was it. I didn't look at another college.

Warren: Why?

Hill: I don't know. It was just something about the school. When we parked over in front of the co-op and we walked across in front of the president's house, walking toward the Colonnade—and at the time I didn't know it was the president's house, but I knew the admissions office was over in Washington Hall, I had been told that by some students out front, and as we were walking toward the Colonnade, just looking at the campus, I knew this is where I wanted to go. It felt like home.

Warren: Did you realize that you were going to be in the first class of black students?

Hill: Yeah, I did, and I had a substantial lack of appreciation for what that meant. They say ignorance is bliss. It truly is. Ignorance really is bliss. The problem was, I grew up in an all-black neighborhood, I went to an all-black high school, I never sat in a classroom with a white kid 'til I was a freshman at W&L. Never had a white teacher 'til I was a freshman at W&L. And I had no appreciation for what culture shock really would be, and maybe if I had had an appreciation for it, I would have perceived W&L differently. I'm glad I didn't have an appreciation for it. I didn't truly get confronted with it 'til I was in my first year here, and in a substantial number of my classes I was the only black person in the whole class.

Warren: Tell me about that.

Hill: It was a little unnerving. You're eighteen-years-old. The problem with being eighteen is you think you know everything. And then when I got here, I thought I had gotten a good education in the public school system in Atlanta, and my teachers were constantly telling us that we weren't getting the best education we could get. I can remember, I worked for a cleaning service my senior year in high school, for Oxford Cleaning Services, and we used to clean other high schools. In my biology class, Miss McCloud had us to go down to the Georgia State bookstore, and we had to buy the

biology text we were using because she couldn't get them for us from the Atlanta City School system. Yet one evening we were cleaning the biology lab over at Farrell High, which was all white, and Farrell High had stacked in their biology lab the textbooks we had to go down to Georgia State bookstore to buy, and they were all stamped Atlanta City School System. So I kind of understood what she was saying.

But I understood it even more when I got to W&L, because a lot of the guys in my class, they weren't smarter than I was, but they had a better educational foundation then I did. I found myself up at night reading to catch up, and for a lot of these guys, freshman year at W&L for them was review with very little new information. A lot of it was just review. And they partied. They had a good time. They were out on weekends. I was in the library working my butt off just trying to make Cs. So the academic pressures were horrendous.

Then there were only a handful of black guys here. A guy named Leslie Smith had graduated from law school in June of 1970, and his brother, Bobby, was in my class as a freshman, an undergrad, in September of 1970. When Leslie went to work for the Justice Department, they found him stabbed to death in his apartment in D.C. during the summer.

There were two black guys in undergrad here, Walter Blake and Linwood Smothers, and they both live here in Lexington. They, to my knowledge, were the first two black people that ever graduated from the undergrad. They graduated in '72. So my class, there was Walter and Linwood in the class of '72. There were no black students in the class of '73 or the class before them of '71, and in my class, the class of '74, I think they had like either nine or ten or eleven, maybe it was twelve or thirteen of us. Most of us made it through. Some of us didn't.

So the social pressures were different, too. It was the first time I found myself in an educational environment like that. It was just the little things. You'd go over to the Cockpit, and this was before "Saturday Night Fever," so the BeeGees were not big in the

black neighborhood. We just didn't get into the BeeGees. You'd go over to the Cockpit and they played music on the machine over there, and they had no black music. The only black music they did have were old Motown music from the sixties, what they called beach music. [Laughter] So that was tough.

Then W&L was an all-male campus, which I knew when I came, and the surrounding girl schools were like W&L. I mean, Hollins had maybe nine black women, maybe ten, Mary Baldwin had six or seven, Sweet Briar was just as bad. And just because there were eight black women at Hollins didn't mean one of them was going to like you. So that was different. Although I ended up marrying a woman who went to Hollins. My wife went to Hollins. I met her my junior year; she was a freshman.

So it was different. Academically it was a challenge and socially it was a challenge. We drew a lot of support from each other, because unlike the black student population now, most of us came from all-black environments. We didn't grow up in integrated neighborhoods or integrated schools. So we were kind of different from the black student population now. We were hungry, a lot of us were, very hungry.

Warren: Tell me what you mean by that.

Hill: We weren't here at W&L because our daddies went to W&L or because our granddaddies went to W&L. We were here at W&L because we saw W&L as an opportunity to make our lives better, to get out of the old neighborhood, not as part of the ritual of growing up. You go through W&L, you come back home, you work in your daddy's business. I mean, we didn't do that. It was like you go to W&L, this is your opportunity to try and acquire a key to open doors that ordinarily you wouldn't have access to, so we saw W&L in that sense. So it was real important to us to try and do well at W&L, not just be here marking time.

Warren: Did all the people you started with finish?

Hill: No. No. Most of us did. Maybe we lost two or three along the way.

Warren: And people who were lost, was it for academic reasons or social reasons?

Hill: I think it was for academic reasons more than anything else.

Warren: Take me into the classroom. Tell me what it feels like to walk in and be the only black student in the classroom. What was the reception from the faculty? What was the reception from the students?

Hill: It all depended upon which classrooms you were walking into it. If you walked into one of the classrooms, say in sociology department or the English department or the history department, I always found those to be extremely receptive departments. When you walked into a sociology class, and I think in the beginning I was more aware of being the only black person in there than they were. They were aware, but I was more concerned about being the only black person in there than they were concerned about me being the only black person in there. I think, and I'm projecting now, I think back on it and I think the professor saw it as a unique opportunity for them to teach a minority student and try to learn something in the process.

For a vast majority of the student body population, it didn't mean anything one way or the other. I mean, they were more apathetic than anything else. As a minority student, the only students you had problems with were a small minority of students who were adamant in their belief that minority students shouldn't be on campus. Most of the students didn't care one way or the other, because they weren't here to focus on the issue of minority students on campus; that's not why they were here. So for the vast majority of students, it was a non-issue.

Now, some of your professors were slow to warm to the idea of blacks on campus, as they were slow to warm to the idea of women on campus. The law school went coed in '72, when I was a junior. When I started in law school in '74, the women were still having a difficult time at law school. Well, you know the experience that women were having their first year at law school, which was culture shock for them coming from a coeducational environment, coming to W&L's law school, which was

only recently coeducational, they were shocked and taken aback by the subtle forms of discrimination, and for me, I mean, it was old hat by then. The subtle forms, so long as it doesn't hurt me, I don't care about it. But it was somewhat amusing to see how white females reacted to truly feeling as if they were being discriminated against for the first time in an educational environment. All of a sudden they became more sensitive to what it felt like to be a minority at W&L. So you had a natural commonality of responses over in the law school.

Well, in the undergrad, I'd be in class sometimes, like I had one biology professor—we'd finish our gym class, there were three or four of us in the same gym class, and we would literally have to run over to the other side of campus once we finished showering, and we would get there and I can remember many occasion getting there and there'd be three of us coming in late, all three of us would come in and sit down, and I would be the only one he would say, "Hill, why are you late?"

And I'd say, "Well, Dr. So-and-so, I'm just getting out of gym."

He says, "That's not my problem. You need to be here on time."

And I'm not going to turn and say, "Well, I just walked in with John and Tom and you're not on them." And he never would. He just jumped my butt every damn time I'd come in late.

We used to get extra credit for class participation, and I would participate in class, never got extra credit. If my grade hovered between a B and a C and extra credit would push me over to a B, I didn't get a B. And I can remember one Christmas he gave out hard candy in the classroom, I was the only black person in the classroom, he gave everybody else hard candy and gave me a pack of Tootsie Rolls.

Warren: Who was this?

Hill: I can't remember his name right now. If I found an old course curriculum, I could give it to you. I don't know if he's still down there or not, in the biology department. Gave me a pack of Tootsie Rolls. So what am I going to do? I'm going to go complain

to him about getting a C? You know what happens? I went back and talked to him one time about my grades, and he was going through my test papers, and he said, "Mr. Hill, you know, I'm glad you came back to discuss your exams with me. I see certain things on your exams I missed the first time. I'm surprised I gave you as much credit for this particular answer as I did." I'm sitting there, and he says, "Do you think we ought to continue this discussion?"

I said, "No, sir."

He said, "Take your paper and go."

I said, "Yes, sir." I never went back to discuss a grade with another professor after that. You learn the rules of engagement.

Warren: Did you feel that the same thing would happen if you talked to other people, or was that just so frightening?

Hill: No, I'm not so sure the same thing would happen, but I figured I'd give it my best shot the first time up, and whatever I got that was it. I wasn't going to go back and ask a professor to change my grade, and I never did. Even if I felt I had been graded on the low side, graded more harshly, I never went back again and talked to another professor about my grade. Not because I felt intimidated by the other professors. And I don't want to give the impression that everybody at W&L was like that, because they were not. As a matter of fact, the administration was bending over backwards to try and make the black students feel comfortable on campus.

About, oh, I guess, maybe thirteen, maybe fourteen years ago, I was back on campus. Dr. Hodges publishes, I think on a quarterly basis, this booklet on law, medicine, and business, ethics of law, medicine, and business, and he invited me to come up and speak and he invited John Morrison. Morrison and I were undergrads here together and we also were in law school together. Morrison is a circuit court judge in Portsmouth now. Well, this was before either one of us got on the bench. Morrison

was a Commonwealth attorney and I was the director of the criminal division in the state attorney general's office, and we both came back up here to speak on ethics in law.

I was talking to President Huntley and I said, "You know, President Huntley, I look back on it, and I recall some of the things we did when were here on campus." Like one time we, the black students, got all bent out of shape because President Huntley would not agree to let us have first choice for rooms in the Old SPE House, down below the post office, the house with the red door. They had all gotten kicked out of the house and they were opening up to student housing. This was at the end of our freshman year, and we said, "Next year when we move off campus, can black students have first access for housing in that house?"

And he says, "Well, you just have to take a turn like everybody else."

So we had started the black student union and the university wouldn't fund our black student union, so we had a sit-in over in President Huntley's office, probably all eight of us. [Laughter] And they just stepped over us all day long, going back and forth to work. I mean, just like we weren't there. We sat there and read and we studied on the floor, and they just walked all over us. And around 4:30, quarter to five, they closed up shop and everybody left, and we were just sitting there. It was getting close to dinnertime, and we always wanted to watch the news before we ate dinner, and so finally we said to each other, "You guys think maybe we ought to go on over to the dining hall now?" [Laughter] So we got up and walked out.

But we were back for the seminar, and I was recalling that experience and I said, "You know, President Huntley, sometime if I had been you guys, I'd have lost patience with us."

And Huntley said, "Well, we saw something in you all."

And I said, "Well, do you think you were right?"

He said, "Well, here we are years later and you're standing here on campus talking to me, aren't you?"

So I thought, I said, “Well, I guess you’re right. I guess you’re right.” Maybe he something in us we didn’t see.

But the administration was bending over backwards trying to make us feel comfortable on campus. They were making, I guess, honest faux pas because they didn’t have a common basis for communication, and we didn’t have a common basis for communication other than they wanted to give us a good education and we wanted to get a good education.

That first year we had a Black Culture Weekend and the university wouldn’t fund us. We called Doug Wilder up on the telephone. He was a young representative with a big afro, and we asked Representative Wilder would he come down and speak in Lee Chapel at our Black Culture Weekend, and he said, yes, and the only thing we could do was, we could buy his gas. We had to scrape together the money. We bought his gas down and back, and we bought him dinner. He came down and spoke at our first Black Culture Weekend, and we ran into the hole on that and the university bailed us out. So then the university said they were going fund us to a small degree, and they did. We spent more than they gave us, so the next year they gave us a little bit more, and the next year they gave us a little bit more, and that’s how we started our black student union, which was SABU, it was the Student Association for Black Unity.

One night we were sitting around studying for exams, and I said, "You know, we need a patch." So I designed a patch that we were going to put on the back of our denim jackets. It was red, black, and green with red letters, SABU, on a green background with a black border, and down in the bottom, in cursive and white was Washington and Lee University. I’ve still got one of the patches at home in my bottom drawer, never been put on a jacket, still in pristine condition. We had those produced in 1972. I've still got my old jacket with one sewn on the back of it, too.

Warren: Do you have any pictures of yourself in them?

Hill: Yeah. Yeah.

Warren: I would love, love to see those.

Hill: I'll find one. If you get the 1974 yearbook, you can see us all sitting out on the front porch of the house that we lived in right across the street from the funeral home here.

Warren: Do you have the original of that?

Hill: I've got a print of it at home.

Warren: See, I can't use what's in the yearbook. I have to work from an original photograph.

Hill: I've got the original black and white photograph at home.

Warren: Great. If you could loan us that, Patrick will copy it and we'll get you the original back again.

Hill: I'll do that. We used to get these little white cards from the administration, we got them from Dean John, I got one, Hutch got one, Penn got one, and it said, "Dean John would like to see you in his office at 8:15."

I said, "Damn, did you get one of these, too?"

And Penn's said, "Dean John would like to see you in his office at 8:30."

And Hutch's said, "Dean John would like to see you in his office at 8:45."

So I get over there to see what Dean John wanted, and he wanted us to take another yearbook photograph. He didn't want the yearbook to be published with that photograph in it. So we wouldn't take another yearbook photograph, and that's how that photograph ended up in the yearbook.

Warren: What was his problem with it?

Hill: I don't know. I guess we could have done better. We were late taking the photograph. They kept trying to get us together, and we were never in one place at one time. We had all just walked back over from class, and a photographer was sitting on the porch waiting on us, and he said, "I need to get you guys photographed." So we said, "Okay." So we sat there and he snapped the photograph. That was it.

But freshman year, it was tough. I mean, it shook my confidence in my own academic abilities. By the end of my first semester, my GPA was 2.000, flat C. And I knew I could do better than this. I just couldn't figure out what the hell was wrong. And what was wrong was, I didn't have good study habits. I had to teach myself good study habits. I had to learn what to listen for and what to read and what not to waste my time reading. I had to learn how to put down cogently on a piece of paper what my thoughts were so that they would make sense.

I had a professor, Dr. Zucker, who taught first-year English. I had him my first semester, as a freshman. "Patton" had just come out, it was a brand-new movie. He told the class to go see "Patton" and write a critical analysis. So I went to see "Patton," and I wrote a critical analysis. He called me in. I think he gave me like C/D, and he explained to me how I had not put on the paper what I intended to write. And I said, "Dr. Zucker, I'll be candid with you. I was of the impression that I wrote what I intended to write."

He said, "Well, if this is what you intended to say, you can't write."

And I thought to myself, "You son of a bitch." That was kind of how the first year went. I mean, it was disappointment after disappointment after disappointment.

At the end of the first semester, halfway through the second semester, I wanted to transfer. No, that was the second year. Halfway through the first semester, second year, I really wanted to transfer out. Walter Blake, who was a senior then, came over to the house that we lived in, right down the street from the post office, and me, Morrison, Towns, we were all sitting in the basement and we were talking about transferring from W&L. Blake must have talked to us for three hours, to talk us into staying and not leaving W&L. And we stayed. Then Morrison and I ended up not only staying through undergrad, but staying through law school.

Warren: What did Blake say to you? What was his reason?

Hill: He said, "Well, let me tell you something, you're smarter than you think you are. Don't let these people convince you that you don't know what you're talking about or that you don't know what you're doing." He said, "It's learning how to do it. Going to college is not like going to high school. You've got to learn how to go to college. You've got to learn how to do it. You've got to learn how to maximize your time. Just because you spend six hours in the library at night, that doesn't mean a damn thing if you spent six hours reading the wrong thing or studying the wrong thing. You've got to learn how to identify what it is you're supposed to read or what it is you're not supposed to read."

One thing that took me some time to figure it out, too, was—and I told this to my daughter when she was getting ready to come up here her freshman year—I said, "Well, let me tell you one thing. It took me about two, almost three years to figure this out in college. The key to it is this: find out as quick as possible what you like, because college is about good liberal arts education. It's not about specializing for a job. It's about trying to broaden your own horizon and soak up as much as you can. So find what you like. Once you find what you like, find a professor who understands how you think, who can empathize with the way you write, and who sees life the way you see life, take every goddamn thing he teaches. So don't go up there taking courses. Take professors. That's what you've got to do."

It took me about two and a half, almost three years to figure that out. Once I figured that out, that I wasn't preparing for a job, I was just trying to make myself better by trying to broaden my horizons, then all of a sudden things got better. Classes got easier. It started to make more sense because I enjoyed what I was doing. But it took me a long time to figure that out. Blake was trying to tell me that, I just didn't hear it.

Warren: Who was that for you? Who were those teachers for you?

Hill: Dr. Merchant, he was a brand-new professor when I was a freshman here and I took his first history course. Dr. Merchant. Dr. Moger, who taught history. Ken—I

can't remember Ken's last name, he taught sociology. Merchant will remember his name. Dr. Kimbro [phonetic], who was the head of sociology department when I was here. All the sociology teachers. Merchant and Moger in the history department. Dr. Pleva down in biology department. Dr.—heavyset guy teaches chemistry, walrus mustache.

Warren: Shillington?

Hill: Shillington, yeah. Those were tough courses, but they were good teachers. They were really patient teachers. They were good teachers. Moger, more than anything else, taught me some lessons that I never forgot, and I don't think he ever realized he taught them to me. When I signed up for Moger's Old South course, it was me, Matthew Towns, and Bobby Smith, three black guys. We was sitting in class and Moger put us in alphabetical order and it just so happened that all three of us ended up on the outside of the rows. So when he realized what he had done, he basically told us, he says, "Well, if you're uncomfortable where you're are, you can sit anywhere you want to sit." So I sat in the last row, last seat, in the very back.

One day he was lecturing on hangings and how in the Old South hangings were public affairs and they usually took place on Sunday, after church, and people would come from all over the county to watch a hanging, especially when it involved the hanging of a Negro. I remember after class, I went up to Dr. Moger, and I was bent out of shape, and I told him that I didn't think it was appropriate to refer to black people as Negroes. And he says, "I'm using the language of the times. How would you like to be referred to?"

And I said, "As black."

And we had to do these book reports. Every Monday morning we had to turn in these book reports. He gave us this long damn bibliography that we had to read. And book reports would be anywhere from two to five pages, and the highest score you could get was a four on it. So I'd turn in these book reports and I'd get these fours on

all my book reports. So one day he called me back after class, and he said, "Mr. Hill, I read with great interest your book reports, and I find your views to be perceptive, but you seem to be extremely impatient with the progress that black people are making in America."

I said, "Well, Dr. Moger, I'll be honest with you, my perspective is only some nineteen years and, yeah, I'm impatient with it."

So he proceeded to tell me about this person he met. He said, "Let me tell you a story about the most intelligent man I have ever met in my life." And he started to explain to me his first meeting with George Washington Carver.

And I said, "Well, my dad used to tell me about George Washington Carver, because Carver taught my dad when he was in Tuskegee." And my dad would tell me how Carver would come into classroom in the morning and walk around and speak to all of his plants, touch them all before he started his lectures, and how all the students would crowd in to get to the front of the classroom because Carver never raised his voice when he talked, and he talked in a low monotone.

Moger and I started talking on a regular basis, and after a while I started to like Dr. Moger, and then I started to make the effort to talk to him, asking, "Dr. Moger, can I talk to you after class for a minute?" And I started to enjoy his company. Then this was my senior year. Yeah, this was my first semester, senior year.

Second semester, senior year, I had applied to law schools, and Dr. Moger found out I had applied to law schools, and he said, "Hill, I would really consider it a privilege if you let me write a letter of recommendation for you." So I asked him would he mind writing one to Dean Steinheimer, who was dean of law school, and he said, "No, I'd love to." So he wrote his letter of recommendation for me to Dean Steinheimer.

This was Moger's last year of teaching; he was retiring. My parents came up for graduation, and he wanted to meet my parents. Moger gave me about thirty volumes

out of his library, because he was getting rid of his books in his office. And I took 'em all home. I've still got 'em all.

When I graduated from law school three years later, Dean Steinheimer said, "Hill, I want you to do me a favor. I want you to recruit for the law school over at the Atlanta University Center."

I said, "Dean Steinheimer, as long as you're dean here at the law school, I'll recruit for W&L."

And so he says, "Let me show you something. I want to show you one of the best letters of recommendation I ever received for a student. I've never shown it to you before, but I want you to read it." And it was the letter of recommendation from Dr. Moger, and it was really a good letter.

And what I learned from Dr. Moger was, no matter what I do, I have to be very, very careful, because the human tendency to stereotype is so seductive. I mean, it happens before you realize you're doing it. Dr. Moger was tall and thin and distinguished and grey with this real thick southern accent. I mean, he just reminded you of a Kentucky colonel. And at first I didn't like him and I felt righteously entitled to not like him. And then slowly I began to understand that he truly was a young-thinking man. He was growing as I was growing, too. The lesson I learned, and to this very day, I am careful not to ever stereotype anybody. I'm not going to make a decision about somebody until I sit down and I talk to him and I know him as an individual. As far as I'm concerned, there are no groups of people. That was a lesson I learned from Dr. Moger I will never forget. I don't know whether he even realized, before he died, that he taught it to me.

So my first year was tough, but it was a good year, in the sense that it made me stretch a lot. When I came back my second year, things started to change a little bit. At the end of my first year, I was happy to go home, and then somewhere along the line, the end of my first year I was happy to go home, and somewhere along the line, my

second year, home wasn't really home anymore. Then by the end of my second year, W&L was home and Atlanta was where I went for the summer. So it just kind of changed on me. I still come back to W&L, because W&L, although is not home, because I live in Atlanta now, my family's there, my kids are growing up there, I always come back to W&L to get grounded again.

Warren: What do you mean by that?

Hill: It is good to be in the company of people with a strong sense of duty and responsibility and honor and honesty. And W&L is not the real world. It is an academic environment where people enjoy academic pursuits, where in a list of priorities, things like the honor code and truth and intellectual integrity rate high. You step outside of W&L, out into the real world, into the business world, the practice and the rules of engagement are different. Honesty, intellectual integrity and truth, they exist on a list of priorities, but they damn sure ain't at the top. They're kind of somewhere in the middle if you're lucky. In general, they're at the bottom if you're in a crisis situation. It's whatever is most expedient. It's situational ethics. You constantly have to guard against being slowly seduced into that situation.

When I first got on the bench, lawyers would come to you and they'd say, "Judge, how're you doing?"

I'd say, "Fine."

They'd say, "I was just in the courthouse, wanted to stop by and see you. I got two tickets to a play next Saturday and I'm not going to be able to make it, I just wanted to give you the tickets."

Then I'd say, "I really appreciate that, Darrell, but I can't take them."

"Well, I do this a lot of time for my judge friends. If I got tickets I'm not using, I give them the tickets."

I'd say, "I understand that, and I really do appreciate that, but I feel uncomfortable taking them. I truly do appreciate the gesture, I really do, but I can't

take the tickets." I mean, and it starts off with little stuff like that, because he's going to appear before me in a case, he's going to want something like a favorable ruling on a motion, or he's going to want a continuance for two weeks because he's not ready for trial, and he's placed me in a position where I have to pause for a second, because three weeks ago he gave me tickets. I don't want to have to pause for a second. I want to do what I know is right and keep on moving. You'd be surprised at the number of people that are not at all dissuade from taking tickets, free meals, vacationing at some lawyer's condo down in Jamaica, and then the same lawyer appears before that judge to practice and the judge makes a substantial number of discretionary rulings, they can go one way or the other. Maybe people get that type of ethical teaching somewhere else. I just happen to have gotten it at W&L.

Warren: Did you get it as an undergraduate, as well as in law school?

Hill: Yes. I got it in the undergraduate as well as in law school. I don't know what the experience is for people who come to law school at W&L from somewhere else, because I went here all seven years, but for me it was most impressed on me in undergrad. When I got to law school, I didn't need to be taught that. I already knew it. So my focus was really on trying to learn how to practice. But for people who were just three-year students in law school, maybe they had that same experience over that three-year period of time.

And when I'm eighteen, nineteen years old, I was much more impressed with the fact that students would leave their books laying around and they didn't get stolen. I mean, when I grew up in high school, people would steal your dirty Converse All-Stars out of your locker. Your tennis shoes would be gone the next day. Some guy is walking down the hall with your shoes on. And I got here, you didn't have to lock your room, your dorm rooms or anything like that. I mean, it made an impression on me.

So I like coming back, because for me it's a respite. It's an opportunity to get away and relax and be with people who truly have a common desire, which is to see the university do well, which is to pass along what they think they got from W&L to students here now, to talk to professors. It just feels good. I like coming back.

Warren: I want to go back to a couple of things you said. You are a wonderful interviewee, by the way. I want to get back to those early days, that you all liked to watch the news.

Hill: Yeah.

Warren: Why? I'm not aware of people around here being all that tuned into the news, except perhaps the journalism students.

Hill: Just to try and keep up with what was going on.

Warren: Were other students doing that?

Hill: Yeah.

Warren: Or were the black students doing that?

Hill: The other students, too. What we would do is when we'd finish the labs down on the other end of the campus, we'd come over, we'd watch "Wild Wild West," "Star Trek," Cronkite, and then we'd run to dinner. Five days a week, that's what we did. And on Sunday's we'd watch "Kojak." Sunday night we'd stop studying, come over watch "Kojak" and come back to the library. And that was it, that was the routine. But we'd always watch the news just to keep up with what was going on.

Warren: And how about fraternities? Were they an option for you?

Hill: No, fraternities really weren't an option for us when we were students here. I think some of your least enjoyable encounters with other students happened at fraternity parties, at least for me, anyway.

Warren: Would you be willing to talk about that?

Hill: Well, I mean, if two or three of us walked into a fraternity party, you were just ignored. You'd get some beer, maybe two or three or four of the guys would come over

and talk to you, nobody else would. And I'm not assuming that there was a desire to exclude us, I'm simply assuming that there was apathy, because there was no desire to include us. So joining a white fraternity was not an option.

My last year here at W&L, we started a chapter of Alpha Pi Alpha. The chapter down in Blacksburg at VPI was going to take us over, they needed thirteen of us to start a chapter here. And I'll be very candid with you, I just could not get into the fraternity mentality. I mean, I just didn't like the group mentality. I wanted to do things my way.

Warren: So where did you live? Freshman year you were in the dorms.

Hill: Freshman year we lived in the dorms. Sophomore year we lived in the Old SPE House, right down the street from the post office. If you walked down to the post office, if you walked past the post office and straight down the street you'd walk right into the house. I think it's still got that red door on it. We lived there my sophomore year, all my sophomore year. Our junior year, we moved off campus and moved into a house up on Massie Street. And then at the end of our junior year, our senior year we lived in a house on Randolph Street, right across the street from the funeral home. So we lived in a dorm freshman year, the Old SPE House sophomore year, Massie Street junior year, and on Randolph Street our senior year.

Warren: And "we" meaning did all of the black students live together?

Hill: When we lived down the street from the post office, it was me and Thomas Penn were roommates and then Gary Avery was my roommate. And upstairs was Hutch, Bob Ford, Bobby Smith, and Matthew Towns and John Morrison.

Warren: That's a big house.

Hill: Uh-huh. Then when we moved off campus onto Massie Street, there was me, Hutch, Penn, Matthew Towns, and Bobby Smith, the five of us. Then the same five of us moved into the house on Randolph Street.

Warren: Did you have any close white friends?

Hill: Yeah. I had friends who were white, but they weren't really close. They weren't really close. The thing about it is, I think, at least my perception, unlike black students on campus now, when we were here, I think we felt not only drawn to each other but pushed to each other, not just internal attractions because there were so few of us, but also externally because for one reason or another we didn't feel totally included in other activities, so we were pushed together, so we were close. So we found a lot of the emotional and personal support that we needed to get through, we found it in the group. So there was not a real need for outside support.

I suspect, just my observations as I walk around on campus now, that I don't know what the degree of the internal attraction is between minority students on campus, but I suspect they don't feel the external force pushing them together so they aren't as cohesive as we used to be.

Warren: Eugene [Perry] talked about having some white friends who were then ostracized by their fellow white students.

Hill: Oh, yeah. We had this one guy, Harry Smith. I liked Harry, he was a good guy. He was the only white guy on the third floor of the Old SPE House, where we all lived in our sophomore year. Harry was the only white guy upstairs on the third floor. We were in the dining hall one day and some white guy was giving Harry hell for hanging around with "them niggers." And me and Philip Hutcheson we were sitting—me, Hutch, and Matthew Towns, we was sitting in the dining hall eating dinner or lunch, and this white guy was giving Harry hell. And I said, "Hutch, do you see that guy over there giving Harry hell?"

He said, "Yeah, Harry can take care of himself."

And so we were sitting there, and I said, "If that guy swings on Harry, I'm going to go over there and jack his butt up."

So Hutch says, "Well if he swings on Harry, we'll jack him up."

Then the guy swung on Harry. Then we went over there and jacked this guy up, started turning over tables and everything. Mr. Darrell comes running out. [Laughter] And if you talk to Jerry Darrell today, he'll tell you he remembers that fight in his dining hall. But Harry was a good guy. Yeah, he caught a lot of hell because he got along real well with us.

Warren: What was the outcome of that scene?

Hill: I don't think Harry had any more problems with him after that. But yeah, that happened. Now, I know the other guys had real good friends who were white, too. Hutch was real good friends with a guy named Dean Golembeski. Hutch died on Easter morning in Roanoke, just this past Easter. I wanted to come to Hutch's funeral, and I was in the middle of a trial in federal district court, and I couldn't get out and I couldn't come to his funeral. But I was talking to Penn, and I think Dean Golembeski flew in for Hutch's funeral. We had friends among ourselves that weren't necessarily friends in common with all the other black guys.

Warren: I need to turn the tape over.

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

Warren: How about the town of Lexington? Was it welcoming to you?

Hill: Oh, yeah. I got to tell you, it was. When we were here as freshmen, the black ladies who worked at the Cockpit and who worked in the co-op, they took good care of us. They looked out for us. On the weekends, we'd get invited to dinner. We'd always try to take something. But they kind of adopted us and raised us. They really did. Mrs. Poindexter used to work over in the financial aid office. She worked for Dean Sholt [phonetic] who was the dean of financial aid when I first got here. I think she may have worked for a few years for Dean Van Pate when he was financial aid director. But Marjorie Poindexter, she kept us sane, and the university needed to pay her for that, because she served a counseling service for us.

Addie Payne [phonetic] worked over in the information center in the Student Union Building. She kept us sane. Famie Smothers, who was Linwood's mother, he and Walter were here, they were the two guys from town, Famie Smothers worked in the co-op, and I think Miss Famie may have retired last year. She may still be working there. She took good care of us.

Let's see. Who else? There were a couple of people in town, and her name will come to me in just a minute, but she fed me and [unclear] many a night.

Warren: How about going into shops and restaurants? Were you welcome there?

Hill: Yeah, I didn't experience any problems with that.

Warren: I want to talk about Walter Blake and Linwood Smothers.

Hill: That was Miss Famie's son.

Warren: All right. And she worked in the co-op?

Hill: Right.

Warren: All right. And they're both local people?

Hill: Yeah, from Lexington.

Warren: Do you know the story behind their coming here?

Hill: No, I don't. When I worked in the admissions office of W&L, W&L has categories of preference: sons and daughters of alumni, minority students, and residents of Rockbridge County. And I think as resident of Rockbridge County, they got a substantial financial advantage of coming to W&L and they both were really bright guys. Blake, who's working out of Texas now, he owns, I think, a construction firm. He's actually on the alumni board of directors. I was on a search committee and they were looking for new members for the board of directors of the Alumni Association, and I suggested Walter Blake.

Warren: Is he here this weekend?

Hill: No, he's not here this weekend. He was here last time I was here, but he's not here this weekend. So Blake is on the board of directors now. Now, Linwood, last I

heard, Linwood was working for the Department of Defense, and he was doing a lot of technology work on nuclear submarines. I don't know where he is now.

Warren: But his mother's still around?

Hill: Yeah, Miss Famie still lives here.

Warren: I'm interested in finding out their stories, too. So they were a guidance to you?

Hill: Well Blake really was. Linwood stayed to himself.

Warren: Did they live on campus?

Hill: No. They just walked back into town. They went home. Blake spent a lot of time with us. I mean, he really was a mentor to us, Linwood was not. Linwood didn't spend a lot of time with us.

Warren: As you know, the reason I was so thrilled to meet you yesterday is because I know you were a mentor to the next class behind you.

Hill: Yeah. That was an obligation we owed. We were supposed to do that.

Warren: Tell me about that.

Hill: Well, when the class came in behind us, it was smaller than our class, and then I think maybe the second class or the third class got a little bit bigger. These guys were a little different from us. They had gone to integrated high schools. So things were changing a little bit. Some of these guys were really bright, but experiencing the problems I experienced, and I tried to do for them what Walter did for me, which was help them see around the corner. See, my problem was—I mean if getting through W&L was a series of turns, I could only see straight ahead to the wall, I couldn't see around the corner, and Walter was standing at the corner constantly telling me, "You can get here, and once you turn the corner it's going to be all right. Trust me. I'm telling you what's around the corner."

And for these guys I was trying to do the same thing. I was trying to say, "Look, I'm telling you, you can get there. Trust me. I'm standing right here on the corner.

Once you turn it, you'll be okay." And unless you got somebody telling you what's around that corner, you lose your motivation. You think you ought to be somewhere else.

And consider this, too. Here we are at W&L, W&L is all male. Our buddies have gone to Howard or they're going to Morehouse, and they're telling us they're having a great time. They're telling us all the things they're doing in the frats. They're talking about going to football games. They're talking about how great the bands are, all these nice women they meet, and they're just having a ball, and we're living in the goddamn library.

So I mean, you're here as a freshman or as a sophomore and you've got all these pressures here on campus. You've got the academic pressures. You don't want to come up here and disappoint your family, you don't want to let the other guys down that you're in class with because everybody's looking to each other for support. You've got your buddies at home telling you how great it is. And you know, some of these guys are no brighter than you are, but they're making hellacious grades. I mean, here you are, you're pulling a 2.1 or a 2.2, and unless you've got somebody that when you're down they pump you up, and then when they're down you pump them up, unless you all support each other, you don't make it.

I felt that we owed that to students coming in behind us, so I would always come back for alumni functions. I'd talked to the guys over the telephone. See, it was really great, because when I graduated from undergrad, I was still here for three more years, so I'd come over. We'd sit in the dining hall and eat or we'd go out and get a hamburger or something like that or they'd walk over to the law school. So it was easy to do it while I was still on campus for those three years.

Warren: You mentioned that you worked in admissions.

Hill: Yeah. I worked in the admissions office, doing recruiting, student recruiting.

Warren: Tell me about that.

Hill: I would recruit at high schools for the undergrad, and I would recruit a lot in my old high school in Atlanta whenever I was home for a break. I'd call the principal and say, "Could I come in and talk to some of the seniors about going to W&L?" Or if it was too late in the year, talk to some of the juniors about going to W&L. And I talked to them about my experience here. I'd tell them, I'd say, "Look, let me tell you something. If you want to go to W&L and if you do go to W&L, you're not going to get there and I'll run into you on campus and you cuss me out for not telling you what it was really like, because I'm going to tell you what it was really like." I'd tell them, "If you want a good education, if you want to be challenged, if you want to graduate knowing that you can do whatever task is placed in front of you, this is where you want to go. If you want a great social life, if you want to have stories to tell your children about what you did in college and where you went and what music group you saw and what girls you dated, don't come up here."

Warren: Do you hear what you're saying, though? Because that's what the white kids are telling their kids. The white students you went with, went to school with, that is their memory of Washington and Lee, that it's a great party school.

Hill: Yeah, it is. We had one guy named Brad Martin, we were in law school. Brad went to undergrad with me and Morrison, we were all in the same class. Brad got married while we were in undergrad, and when he decided he wanted to stay here and go to law school, he and his wife started having problems, and I think she left him for a while. She moved down to North Carolina, maybe Greenville, and he stayed here in law school.

I remember one night Shot and I were in the law school, Shot was over at my carrel, and we were talking about some class we were going to have the next morning, and Brad came through, just bemoaning the situation. And Shot goes, "What's wrong with you, man?" And he's going—I mean, he's all heartbroken because his wife has left him and all this kind of good stuff, and Shot says, "Boy, if I was a white guy, I'd be in

heaven. Here you are at W&L with all these goddamn surrounding girl schools, and you sit up here crying over one women. You crazy." And he was absolutely right. I mean, if I was a white guy at W&L, this would be heaven. I mean it would be heaven. It's real different if you're a black guy at W&L. It's damn sure different if you're a black woman at W&L.

Warren: Tell me about that.

Hill: Which is what I told my daughter before she came up here. I told her it was going to be different. It is very, very different. I mean, if you're a black woman at W&L, where is your pool of available men?

Warren: It's not there?

Hill: No, it's not there. And if there is a pool, it is a substantially reduced pool. I mean, think about it. Have you ever been down to the Atlanta University Center? Clark, Morehouse, Spellman, Morris Brown. All black. And all those colleges and universities, they have common campuses, they abut each other. Suppose we take you over there and drop you off as one of eight white women at Spellman, and suppose over at Morehouse they've got ten white men, and at Morris Brown they got eight white men. That's generally your pool. So how great a time do you think you're going to have? I mean, that's the way it is, just the situation is reversed.

Warren: So what was it like for you? What did you do for Fancy Dress?

Hill: We invited girls from the surrounding girl schools. See, the thing about it you may not have a romantic relationship with somebody, but you make friends. So you end up inviting friends. The probabilities of finding somebody you're going to marry are probably not substantially high. Although I ended up marrying a woman from Hollins. Shot ended up marrying a woman from Hollins. Matthew ended marrying a woman from Mary Baldwin.

Warren: So it's worked in your favor.

Hill: Yeah, I was just lucky. I was lucky. But I told my daughter that when she came up here, I said, "Look, the reason you're going is to get a good education. You get as much as you can as quick as you can, and you take it with you when you leave."

Warren: So when you were doing recruiting for admissions, were you recruiting students or were you recruiting black students?

Hill: I was primarily recruiting black students. I was going to minority high schools, all-black high schools, recruiting black students. When I was recruiting over in the AU Center for law school, I was recruiting black students for the law school, minority students. And it's difficult to talk minority students into coming to W&L out of undergrad or law school because the minority students that W&L wanted are the same ones that the Ivy Leagues wanted. And the minority students that the law school wants are the same ones that the Ivy League law schools want.

So you're asking these minority students when they're being confronted by schools that are not any better than W&L, but they've got more name recognition and just the prestige of going to an Ivy League school, when you're trying to talk to them about coming to W&L and then in addition to coming here you tell them, unlike the Ivy League schools, you're going to be in a substantial minority position, not just a minority position, but a substantial minority position, unless they are of a frame of mind where they're willing to make a sacrifice, a social sacrifice for four years or three years, they're not going to come. So you may walk into a high school and get one person, or make it two people who are truly interested in W&L and you may get one person to come, after you talk to thirty or twenty-five.

I can't bemoan it, because it is a difficult situation. W&L is steeped in tradition and the tradition is not going to change. It is a small, upper middle-class/upper-class, private, white, conservative institution and that is what it will always be, it will be that. It offers to a minority student some advantages, however, that you won't get if you go to some other school. For one thing, you not only get a good academic education, you

get a good social education. I graduated from W&L. I have never been in a social situation where I was uncomfortable. Never. There were many a times I'd be someplace and I'd say, "Melba (that's my wife), do you realize that we are the only ones of us in here?" And she'd say, "I know that." But she got the same education at Hollins. She's not uncomfortable.

If anything, the all-white environment in which we're in, they're uncomfortable because they think I'm uncomfortable, until I make them understand I'm not or unless I find myself in a group of people who know me, and they realize I'm not uncomfortable. But you get a good education here. There is no place you can't drop me that I'm not going to be okay.

Warren: I would agree with that, from what I've learned in the last twenty-four hours, less than twenty-four hours.

Well, I feel like I've taken enough of your time, and I've got pure gold here. Is there anything more you'd like to say?

Hill: Well, some people ask me what I think about W&L. I come up in the summer. Mimi wants me to come up and do another series of lectures for the Summer Scholars and the Futures Program. And a lot of the kids will ask me, "Would you send your kids to W&L?" This was before my daughter was old enough, and I said, "Yes, not only would I send my children to W&L, but I'll tell you something, if given the opportunity to do it again, knowing what I know now, I'd do it in a heartbeat. I'd come right back. Absolutely, no hesitation." I mean, that's how much I think if the university. It is a good school, populated with good people in the faculty, good teachers, they really care about the students.

Warren: Well, I'm happy to be here.

Hill: I know. It's a good experience. I've been lucky more than anything else. A lot of times I made the right decisions, not always for the right reasons, but then only in retrospect you look back on it and realize how precarious you were and how fortuitous

you were to have made the right decision, and you go, "Whew, I'm glad I was lucky on that one." [Laughter]

Warren: I'm glad you were, too. Thank you, Bill.

Hill: Oh, my pleasure.

[End of interview]