Interview with Rev. Walter McDuffy
Minnesota State University Moorhead
Ronald Dille Center of the Arts
Room 152
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Interviewers:
Greg Gilbert (primary interviewer)
Katya Volchkova
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GG: All right, this is Saturday May 3rd 2003, and we are interviewing Rev. Walter McDuffy And if I can just verify the spelling. That is Rev. Walter—W-a-l-t-e-r, McDuffy—M-c-D-u-f-f-y. Is that correct?

WM: That is correct.

GG: And could you please tell us your ethnicity?

WM: African-American

GG: Okay, Thank you. And you were born in Chicago, Illinois?

WM: Chicago, Illinois.

GG: Could you tell us a little about your childhood there?

WM: Well, um…as I said I was born and raised in Chicago, Illinois. I guess my earliest remembrance of my childhood was (long pause) what I'd call a sort of lonely, sad picture, in that I remember standing at the window in St. Luke's hospital waiting for my mom to come and pick me up. I don't remember what was wrong with me or anything, but I was waiting there for her to pick me up. We were low income, relief as we called it then. Welfare. And I moved around in…three or four communities as I remember. Growing up mostly at 47th and Evans—4725 Evans, which is in the section of the south side called Brownsville, mainly because it's… with African-Americans. And lived there until I was, oh, 18 or so, got drafted in the service during World War Two, you know, the *big* one, WWII as Archie Bunker says, (laughs) and spent a year and a half there, [then went to Loyola University of Chicago, then] came back. Well I was in college when I was drafted. I got a scholarship there, a two-year private college. And then, as I said, went to the service, came back, finished up there, went to Northern Baptist Theological Seminary there in Chicago, and after that went into the Air Force. Of course I was an adult by then.

The—my childhood I guess—I don't remember any kind of eventful things other then the normal children, you know, running, playing, this kind of thing. As I said we were low income—government assistance, welfare, relief, however we put it then. We called it relief then. And I remember a situation there—usually I went and gathered wood for a wood stove that we had, and usually we went to different stores that had wooden crates and that sort of thing and threw them out. And mostly this was in the white neighborhood that was close by. And I remember a young boy there, saying—I had my wagon with wood and crates and this kind of thing—and he asked me what it was for and I said, "The stove fire at home." And he says, "Oh, you're poor aren't you," and I

said, "No, I'm not poor!" And that was a fascinating thing about it—yes we were poor, but somehow we didn't think of ourselves as being poor. So I grew up as, I guess, not a very eventful, traumatic kind of childhood. I was one of four children, three older sisters and an intact family.

GG: What did your mother and father do?

WM: My father was a day laborer, you know, did whatever he found. My mother worked as a domestic maid in a home, usually, whenever she worked…well, which was quite often. We were latchkey children back then.

GG: And so I'd read that after serving in the Armed Forces you had a one year stop at Western Illinois University.

WM: Um, Yes. I was—well let me clarify something there in terms of the question that you have. When I was in World War II, I was in the Army Air Corps, which it was called then. And…but then the Army Air Corps separated form the…the Air Force separated from the Army. And then the Air Corps became the Air Force. And then I was out, as I said. I had been in college for a year when I was drafted, as I said, went for a year and a half in the military, got out, finished that other year at that two year college, transferred to a senior college, graduated, went to the seminary, then went back to the Air Force and finished a career there in the Air Force and got out and went to Western Illinois University, where I was in the Counseling Department there. So I was basically what we would call an Academic Personal. Well, we did academic counseling as well as personal counseling there at Western Illinois University at Macomb, IL. And I was here in Moorhead visiting with a friend when the…Director of—Assistant Dean of Students and Director if Multicultural Affairs at Concordia had just resigned, and I was at a pastoral—a clergy meeting with my friend who I was visiting here in Concordia, in Moorhead. When the newly elected Mayor was speaking—that happened to be, of course, Morrie Lanning—and when he found out what I was doing there at Western, having been introduced to him, he happened to mention that this fellow had resigned the position. They were looking for new people and he invited me to apply at that time. So I guess I ran on—you asked me about that interim and boom-boom...

GG: No it's okay it makes my job easier. What were… (Brief gap in tape.)

WM: Unless you wanted to hear something more about Western?

GG: Oh, no, no. I was going to ask you, regarding college, you had said in a previous interview that all of the education you had after high school was at institutions where you were one of the only African-American students there, and I was wondering how that affected your view of multiculturalism, especially on campuses?

WM: Well, as I said. Yes, after high school I was in…all of my education was in institutions where I was the only one or one of very few [African-Americans]. The college to which I was going to right after high school was North Park College, which [is] in Chicago. And it had so happened that the teacher who taught us civics/government in high school had been in conversation with some of the administration there at North Park, and they had gotten on race relations. And they had never had an African-American there and—or "Negros" as we would call it back then. And she said, 'What would happen if you had a Negro apply?" And basically they said, "Well, if he qualified we would accept him." So

it so happened that, again, fortuitously—from my theological background I would say "Gods design," okay—I happened to have been coming into the office at the high school, getting some of my records to apply at another school—Northwestern actually—there and I met this teacher, Mrs. Herrick, and she and I got to talking about what I was doing there, and, "How would you feel about going to North Park?" And she told me about the situation there, and, hey! I had no problem with that! (laughs) And so I chose to go to North Park and spend a year there.

Um…it was an interesting kind of thing. A kind of benign presence. Most people, I think, who may have had some negative feelings about me… just ignored me. Others who felt welcoming, wanting to make me feel welcome kind of a thing. But there was one young man there—this was a community, well a two-year college—private, it wasn't a community, I'm sorry—and it also had an academy there which involved high school students. And there was this one young man from the high school, really, who just delighted in letting me know of his background. Again, this was in 1944 and…coming up, well, [the US was] actually involved in World War II, and Nazism, and all of this kind of thing. And he would let me know that he was German and he had a flat forehead and I had a curved forehead, so he was more intelligent then I was. I basically tried to ignore him. Or else I would be sitting there working and studying and he would come over and want to tell me some joke, a black joke, I guess. I remember one that he was saying: "Well, there were some men in a barber shop, and the one man say, 'How can I get rid of this black hair?' And the barber would say, 'Cut it off!'" (mock laughs) You know, this I just thought he was ignorant. (long pause) You know, that was my approach to it.

And, yes, I was, during that year, the only person of color there. And then, as I said, I went away for a year-and-a-half [to the army and] came back. When I came back there was another African-American that had applied and spent a year there. And I graduated after that, and then went on to Loyola University. And, there again at that time very few African-American students there, but nothing momentous in terms of racial happenings there. I went to…after that I went to Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, and there again I was the only Black enrolled at the time…for the first year—it was a three-year…educational course. And the second year there was another.

I was young and single at the time, and there was another pastor who came there and he and I of course got acquainted. And then the last year that I was there another younger fellow came…but the other had departed. So I guess during the three years I was the only one who went through the three years. The other two came in [and went].

And things there were pretty good… conservative institution. But things went along very well there, except for the last year. It seemed in one class we were talking about Evangelism, and the instructor was trying to say, "Well, what are things that we can, in our churches, *do* to make our Evangelism outreach more effectively?" I'm Baptist, we tend to talk about revivals and this sort of thing. And we had a very successful revival going on in my home church, and I was trying to share with [the class] what we were doing, and this kind of thing. And the instructor said, "Oh, we can't do things like that," and brushed it off and went to something else. And I said to myself, "What I am doing here if I have no contribution to make to anything?" And I guess I would have probably transferred to another institution except that this was the last quarter of the last year. (laughs)

I wasn't really ready to throw everything and start over again somewhere else. And, also, another thing happened there with a theological class. In this theology class…where we were—we were on the north side of Chicago… and the institution was located kind of in the city, like Moorhead State here, and Concordia. But it was a changing neighborhood, transition, from white— predominately white residents—to

black residents, and there was some kind of tension going on. And this theology instructor of mine, [his] son had had an incident with a African-American and I guess the fellow beat him up, took his watch and this kind of thing. And the instructor for some reason had shared this with the class. Well, the institution was trying to decide whether they ought to move or not, and he was one of the ones who wanted the institution to move. And, of course, we, being seniors, would be alumni during this time that this was going to be moving, and this sort of thing, and so I think this is why it came up. Well he just thought the neighborhood…was going to pot. (laughs) And he wanted to move out.

Well, that was one thing, and it was interesting to me, that, after we had our final examination and all of this kind of thing, and after graduation—was it after graduation? Anyway, kind of late—we got our grades back. So I had gotten a…a grade that I thought I didn't deserve. Less than I deserved. And I started to…I just accepted it—hey, I'm graduating, it's over, why worry about it? But it kept bugging me. So I called him, and asked him about the grade—told him I thought I had done better in the class than that. And… he said, "Well—" because, you know, when I looked at my grades and everything I thought I'd done better, you know. He said, "Well, you didn't turn in your final readings." Well, I said, "Hey, I'll let you know. I'll give it to you." And he said, "It's too late now." And that was it. Well, to me, I had *done* it, but the final readings wasn't that tremendous, because I…. Well, what you had to do—for each marking period, you had about 100 pages outside reading we had to do in addition to class work. And all we had to do was to write the name of the book, the number of pages that we had read, [the author], sign our name to it and turn it in. And that's why I said to him, "Hey, I'll give you that." Because I had done it. And I guess leaving the classroom and going his office or to wherever, he might have lost it. But—and I don't know this, let me say—but it is one of those things I feel…that because of what had happened to his son and his feelings about the change, I was the one that had paid the price for this, (laughs) you know? I couldn't understand it any other way. Because it so happened that one other member of the class and I went into the Chaplaincy together and we got stationed at the same place. And I was single, and he was there without his wife for a while, and so we roomed together. And we would talk, of course, about what had happened.

GG: Right.

WM: Because this was our most recent life together. And while I didn't said anything about it, he had not read one of the books that was required reading, and he had "averaged" less in the class then I did, yet he had gotten a better grade than I did. So I was again looking for some reason this might have happened

GG: And that was a white guy you had roomed with?

WM: Yes, this was a white guy. And so that's what made me think *this* was the reason why it had happened. But, as I said, I graduated, got my degree, I was on my career, and I didn't feel it made that much difference to me after that.

GG: And when was it that you arrived in the Fargo-Moorhead area?

WM: August 8th 1982. Actually August 15th of '82.

GG: And, in your opinion, what was diversity like in this area at that time?

WM: The Census said 35 African Americans, 525…Hispanics. The next group was Native Americans, and then of course the majority being white. I am sorry, I had it in my wallet and meant to bring it with me because you had to ask that.

GG: What was the general attitude toward minorities?

WM: At the time?

GG: Yeah.

WM: Well, there wasn't much hostility toward African-Americans at that time, *openly.* Because, as I said, there were only 35 or so—a very small number. The Native Americans, there was a great deal of negative feelings about them. And the… Hispanics also got most of the brunt of it. The thinking in terms of, "These are migrant people coming in taking away our resources...and they're just moving here in this area because they can get better services, and coming up from Texas and settling down here in Minnesota. Which was right. They got better assistance—migrant workers—and Hispanics were the fastest growing migrant group. And… to me—well, I got in an argument. Well, I was part of a group, really, that was discussing this one time. And my reaction was, really, that it was people here in Moorhead and my reaction was…. Businesses were moving out of Moorhead, moving over to Fargo, ND because they paid less taxes. And we thought of that as a wise business decision—moving in a place where we got better business atmosphere, and we praised those people. But if somebody moved from one place to another because it improved their standard of living, human relations, services that they got, we damned *them*. And, in principle, at least for me, was the same—I am moving somewhere to make my life better.

GG: Right.

WM: But somehow, with business, we thought it was wonderful; with human services we thought it was awful. And we approached life that way, seemingly—that we have no problem arguing or accepting charity, or support, or whatever you want to say, to businesses. But the money we pay out we give to businesses to grow and develop, and this kind of thing, but assistance we give to people to better their lives… somehow we think we are *losing* resources; that they are drained us and to me it's the same principle, with the businesses. And, I guess, the argument then was, if I was proud of Minnesota that they felt better towards supporting human services, and deciding that there was a level of assistance—of *humanness*—that people ought to live at, rather then what Texas or Mississippi or some other place felt—or North Dakota.

But now I am wringing my hands (laughs), you know. And of course that was a time when things were…people were resistant, very much. But, I guess, I remember seeing, well a friend of mine, who was—well, I call her a friend but, she was a daughter of friends of mine. She was on welfare. She had been married, divorced, had a couple of children. And at that time, we were rather generous in our assistance in terms of helping people to, I guess, better their lives economically, assisting them to go to school, and with support for babysitting and all of this, so they could go to school, get better jobs—this kind of thing. And now she is functioning at a very high level. She got her degree. \Actually, she ended up with a Master's degree. She didn't get support all the way through to when she got her Master's, but she got a Bachelor's, got into her profession working there and went on from there to get her Masters. And she is working as a head of an accounting department now, and giving the state much more money then if they hadn't assisted her along the way. She'd probably still been on welfare. And so we talk about

pushing, forcing these people off into the work area, and we are pulling all of the supports out from under them. Well, that is part of my soapbox, too. I'm sorry. (laughs) Maybe I go on to long with some of these questions. But I feel that there is all…economics, political, all of this play into this racism. Really what's that? But go ahead…

GG: I was just wondering if you have seen improvements in the last 20 years in this area, and in what ways, as far as diversity and the opinion of diversity?

WM: Yes, I have really seen improvement. We haven't reached the "Promised Land" in this area, and I surely think that in the welfare assistance thing that we've gone backwards instead of forward. But I think that there is a real strong attitude, that change of attitude. I can remember earlier times, as I said, when the Hispanic [population] was doubling itself, and we were charging all of them with drugs and drug addicts and bringing drugs…and many…with the attitude of the letters to the editor and people that you talk to. You would think that there was never any crime or anything here negative in Fargo-Moorhead until these Hispanics start increasing in numbers, and this kind of thing. And at least now I don't see that as prevalent—openly—and I think a lot of that has happened because people…felt— the majority of the community, if you would say that, felt that this was *wrong*, and they started doing things to change attitudes.

And you had developed one organization, Communities Working to Dismantle Racism. You had the Cultural Diversity Resources Project. And now TOCAR—which you are probably acquainted with, the Tri-College Organization Against Racism—developing in this area that wanted to face these issues and change it. And again, while I say I don't think that we have really come to a point where we don't have any issues, as far as I'm concerned me have made tremendous strides along the way.

GG: You had mentioned that at the time you were in college you were single and you are married now, is that correct? Will you tell us how you met your wife?

WM: Actually, she and I would disagree on this. (laughs) Well, maybe not *how* but *when*. We went to the same church, in our community. She went there much longer then I did. Really didn't become active in church until I was about 19, and she had been there most of her life. It was at a convention in the church—at the church—we met and got acquainted. And one thing after another. (laughs) And finally we got married. We grew up in different neighborhood but somehow came to the same church, and got acquainted there.

GG: Um, you are a reverend of Baptism and…

WM: I am a Baptist Minister, yeah.

GG: And, Concordia is a Lutheran College…

WM: Lutheran. (laughs) Yes.

GG: I was just wondering—you must have a pretty open-minded view of religion?

WM: Not really! (laughs) Oh yes. Well, I guess part of that developed out of my being in the chaplaincy. When I was in the chaplaincy, of course, you got acquainted with various religious groupings and—I shouldn't say religious groupings if I'm going to be specific.

Faith groupings. And, I guess, it was amazing to me that I *should* end up in a Lutheran institution because most of those chaplains that I had the most difficulty with when I was in the chaplaincy were Lutherans. (laughs)

But I met a friend who was Lutherans who changed my mind completely about the Lutherans. And in reality, I guess, we who are Protestants, I would say 95%, maybe even larger than that, are beliefs we hold in common. And it's those three to five percent, whatever you want to say, that, back in my day when I was growing up, became real problems. We used to talk…we used to feel that you've lost the faith of you married somebody outside of your faith group—you know, a Lutheran marring a Baptist, or a Baptist marring a Catholic. "Ah!" The world was going to fall apart! But we found out that really didn't happen. And, as I said, that as Christians, really we have a lot more in common than we have disagreements. Not that I don't believe that some of these distinctions are very important—because I do. But I think we have made more of our differences than we should have, in the past, of course. Now we tend to minimize them, I think, too much. (laughs)

But I did not find it difficult being there at Concordia, a Lutheran institution, and my being a Baptist. In fact, we had kind of a little joke when somebody… like one friend of mine said, when this person, well, knew I was Baptist at a Lutheran institution. And they said, "Well, are you going to become Lutheran?" And I smiled and my friend said, "He'll probably become Lutheran the day after he becomes Norwegian." (laugh)

GG: (laugh)

WM: No. It was no problem.

GG: You were Director of Multicultural Affairs and Assistant Dean of Students at Concordia? Could you tell me what duties you performed when you held those titles?

WM: Actually, I guess the title should be Assistant Dean of Students, and then the subtitle: Director of Multicultural Affairs, you know in the sense I was the Assistant Dean of Students and kind of my area of specialty was being Director of Multicultural Affairs. Which meant that I was kind of the supervisor of staff that worked with our students of color, or minority students, and this mainly involved African American, Asian, Native American…Hispanic students; being an advisor to them; assisting them in the course of their development and relationships with the institution. As well as our international students.

I guess, when I came here I was really planning…I had retired from the Air Force. I really hadn't expected to be here very long—maybe 3 to 5 years at the most. And it went back mainly to the experience I'd had earlier, of being the one of very few African-Americans in institutions of higher learning. I guess it was kind of stated in that article that you made reference to earlier. And I felt in some way I could make some contribution to, mainly, the African-American students, when I was coming here. I guess *they* were the ones that kind of motivated me and I found identity with, and wanted to, maybe, help in maneuvering through a predominately white institution. Because I feel that there are some real problems of adjustment that goes on with students who are in a predominately white institution—students of color.

GG: What year did you retire from you position, then?

WM: From…as Director of—

GG: Yeah.

WM: Oh, in 190—whoops! 2002. Just about a year ago. March, 2002…after about 20 years.

GG: You mentioned that there is still a lot of work to be done in the area as far as, you know, the treatment of minorities and diversity. What are your goals for the future?

WM: I guess I've pulled back from it. (laughs) I guess my hopes or dreams would be that we might function as a community in which we can accept people—the differences that we find in people—and see that as a positive thing, and something that we need to accept and celebrate, rather than something that is threatening to us, and to our wellbeing. And I think this is what happens to a community, and especially one like here in Fargo-Moorhead, which, when I came was 99.9%, almost, Caucasian, and at least now is about 95%. (laughs) You have a community that is very monolithic. You have students coming to this community who have lived in communities where there is very little diversity, if any. Maybe the diversity is that we are Norwegian and they are Swedish, you know, or we are Lutheran and they are Catholic, you know. And, yes, there is that diversity there, but very little of it, and they come out of that kind of a community and settle down in a community here which, I guess, as I said, is changing and more and more minority groups are coming in. Again, I think it is still the Hispanics that that are the dominant group, but you have now these refugees coming in who are from Somali, Nigeria, and other black Africans that are coming in… maybe even Bosnians, and others, but at least the difference there is not as pronounced. Again, my analysis of racism is pretty much…pretty much skin color. So that's where you find the radical differences.

And so I see that there have been progress because of these efforts that have been made by people of good will, to bring this community together, and to be a more accepting community, but I think that there are still issues here that need to be dealt with in terms of acceptance of people in our community. I remember when…well, I used to say—and I still do—with people in our community: I live in a very accepting community; I had an impressive title—Assistant Dean of Students and Director of Multicultural Affairs; worked at a prestigious institution and in a real sense, I had no problems as such in this community for people who knew me. But, once people did not know that I was the Assistant Dean of Students, that I worked at Concordia and this kind of thing, they treated me in terms of my skin color, which was negative.

I'd walk into a store out there at West Acres, and I'd be followed all around in the store. I remember very vividly I had stopped in a store out at West Acres, I don't remember the particular one now. It's gone closed, out of business. (laughs) But, I went in looking at a Lladro, and they are these porcelain--I don't know if you know what Lladro's are, but it's a porcelain figurine, and they are really expensive. And I was getting one for my wife, so maybe I had goofed somewhere (laughs), feeling guilty or something. But anyway, I went in there and I was looking at it, and this one woman was in there, you know, a clerk, and I came in dressed as I usually went to work—administrators dress differently from professors, you know—had a tie and all that kind of stuff. (laughs) Anyway, I walked into the store and was looking around, and all of a sudden I realized that she was just following me around the store. And I felt devilish and I just started walking all around the store (laughs) and others came in and went out because they weren't getting served, and dressed less status wise than I was, so, who knows, they might have stolen something and she was trying to make sure I wasn't stealing anything. But this happens, and as I said it's a color, it's a skin thing, and sometimes we don't realize that. But maybe I better try to shorten my… (laughs)

GG: Oh no!

WM: I don't know how much time we have. I get on these horses every once in a while. Just shut me up!

GG: No, not at all. You mentioned the Cultural Diversity Resources, which you are a board member on. Could you tell us a little bit about that?

WM: Well actually it started out as Cultural Diversity Project. How it came about was that, little over ten years now, the Pew Foundation was concerned about how communities dealt with diversity. And they had some grant proposals, or monies, that they were willing underwrite a proposal for a community that wanted to work towards bettering relationships among people in their communities. And hopefully trying to find some kind of model, pattern, that might be workable in other communities. So they made this announcement and the Fargo-Moorhead Foundation, and some others wanted to submit a proposal for this grant. So they held community gatherings to see what they could do and come up with a design for a proposal to submit. Which they did, and they got monies to develop what we call the Cultural Diversity Project Initiative, I think, and Yoke-Sim Gunaratne was hired as the director for the Cultural Diversity… and I became, at that time, one of the trainers.

You see, the group would go about working with community agencies as well as the city government—this kind of thing—training people in cultural awareness and trying to help individuals understand the differences—to be accepting of these differences in a community, so that we could all work together in a better more harmonious relationship. And they had divisions working with religion, government…social agencies, schools, this kind of thing. And, so, the group became a kind of resource agency and training agency, and mostly, as I said, my work has been in the area of being a trainer. We would have workshops at businesses, government, or whatever, go in and talk to them about racial tensions and this kind of thing, and how do we work with people. And that's where the majority of my work—actually, its been the last year that I have been a member of the board, and so, as any kind of board of directors, we try to see the overall picture, and deal with policies and procedures in terms of how the agency will work.

GG: Well, that is all the questions I have for you, I guess.

WM: Oh, okay…

GG: I really want to thank you for spending time with us today. It was a real pleasure to talk to you.

WM: Well, this was enjoyable, and I hope that I made some contribution to your project. (laughs)

GG: Absolutely…

WM: Okay, thank you very much.