

Elisha Wilson interviewed by Dawney Wilson

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Harlem, NY

Dawney Wilson: Hi, my name is Dawney. Would you please state your name and do you give permission to the Brooklyn College?

Elisha Wilson: My name is Elisha Williams, I'm 40 years old, and yes, permission is granted.

DW: The first question: where did you live before New York City?

EW: I was born and raised in Mount Vernon, NY. The lower part of Westchester.

DW: What were some reasons that you left?

EW: Well, honestly. Mount Vernon is a small town, which benefited me greatly as a child, to be honest. A little more personal, children were able to play in the street with each other, cars looked out for us on purpose because they knew children would be there, but then as I started to get older, it really wasn't as many opportunities for an older person, like an 18-year old, 19-year old, 20-year old, someone who really wanted to explore. Mount Vernon was a little too small for me. And so I ended up moving on with my life and actually meeting my ex-husband and moved to New York City.

DW: At what age did you leave?

EW: I was 18 years old when I came to The City. Oh man. I was young and lost but very susceptible to what society was throwing at me. I was definitely willing to learn. Some things were probably learned the hard way like the job, you know like when it came down to having a couple of different jobs before I settled down and went to work. But it was just the fact that it was so many opportunities for me especially someone who didn't go to college and so it was amazing, to be honest. The city was so welcoming.

DW: When you first came to the city how did the community react? Did they like you?

EW: If I can be honest with that, I was already taught that the city people were a little rougher, a little tougher, a little more like bump you because there was so much hustle and bustle out there that I just already came into this city a little standoffish, but not in a bad way more like I'd rather observe the life then just go into it blindly as a Westchester girl or be too aggressive because of things that I heard. So it was definitely welcoming because when you get out there, to be honest, everyone is hustling so you just find your groove, you find your pace, you do what works for you and it was welcoming. The bus, the train, it was crowded. People are still so close to each other that you can tell that they are welcoming each other. When you move in close on a bus or on a train it's your way of telling your fellow commuters that you're welcome. So I do think they're welcoming. I stayed.

DW: From your time living in Harlem what was one of them stood out?

EW: Great question! The blackout of 2003. It was a blackout in August of 2003 and I was mature enough and old enough to remember everything about it. So it was a day like you know the whole city started to get dark. I guess the easiest part of the blackout was that it became a blackout in the summertime at like

three o'clock in the afternoon so we were already warned that there were no lights. It's not like the blackout happened at ten o'clock at night and then all the sudden everything got pitch black. No you were conscious and preparing yourself already that it was a blackout and so the day of the blackout we decided to go to Marcus Garvey Park which is located on 124th street and Mount Morris Park and eat tuna and have a picnic kind of a thing as the easiest way to have dinner. So we did that around six o'clock when it was still light and then from there it just got darker and darker and darker but that was definitely the thing that stood out to me. Once it was dark, we were in, we were safe, but yeah the blackout August 2003.

DW: How would you compare when you first came to Harlem to how it is now? You may want to include drugs, crime or new races coming in.

EW: In Harlem, I have been here now for 15 years and so I definitely believe me working in Harlem now, I'm in the supermarket business and have been in the supermarket business... January will make 15 years so I kind of got into the supermarket business right after coming to Harlem and so definitely I can hit every subject. When it comes to the drugs, I started at the Pathmark on 125th street and that Pathmark was located on the corner of 125th and Lexington. It was surrounded by methadone clinics and a lot of recovering drug addicts and a lot of relapsing drug addicts because to be honest that's a part of that life. So it was very overwhelming in the mornings when you were going into work. They would be out there so early in the morning and some hadn't went home at night, like the crackheads hadn't gone home at night, but then the dope fiends just came out, they're fresh, they're showered, but they're nodding. Then as the years went on when it came to drugs, that Pathmark ended up having like, it went from having dope fiends and crackheads to, by 2015, 2016, when it closed it was K2 drug users. Like the cops had to shut down a whole bunch of stuff down Lexington and the drugs definitely got worse over there and the fact that it shut down, I'm hoping that it's getting better. But the Pathmark on 145th and 8th Avenue, when I got transferred over to that one it definitely didn't have as many drug users. You could see the drug users pretty much as just the thieves in the store versus almost everyone was a drug user on 125th street, so when it comes to drugs I definitely think that as the years have gone on things have gotten a little better, especially when it comes to the fact of them shutting down 125th street which was the worst store. And crime, well, what I will tell you is that the person who's interviewing me taught me something the other day that I didn't realize which is that crime definitely was already at a steady when I came to Harlem and so it wasn't at a high because I came to Harlem in 03. It was probably we had been through the Giuliani... it definitely was good for me because I heard some Harlem stories that I missed whether because of age or because I wasn't in Harlem. Some Harlem stories that I missed... when I got here crime was at a steady but it wasn't horrible. I definitely wasn't scared to go outside. I wasn't scared to raise my children here. Really at the time it was just Dawney at the time. I wasn't scared to raise her at the park she actually went to the park every day. Like there was not one day when I thought oh no they might shoot up... nope wasn't like that. It was already good. And then this weekend, we actually made history because Dawney notified me that this was the first weekend in New York City history in years that had zero killings. So you can tell from that right there how crime has gone. So I'm real thankful for that. And the races. Well, I will tell you this, when I first got to Harlem my little heart smiled being a Westchester girl because I found myself never being surrounded by all black people. It was like in Westchester, we saw white people all the time. There was nothing wrong with it. It was the way I was raised. It worked out well for me and then we had the Hispanics who would travel from a certain part of town to a bus and we would all go to school together. A couple of the Arabic Muslim girls maybe one or two African Muslim girls... but you know I had a real big variety in Westchester versus when I came to the city because for me my part of the city was Harlem and so I would walk up 125th street and there were 100 people on 125th, but 98 will be black. I thought wow this has got to be life because when you get 98 black people out of 100 you've got every complexion and height and weight and personality and money. It was amazing. I was amazed.

And now as time has gone on you definitely do see a lot of other races. You see the Mexican mom walk up the street with her children and I've seen her a bunch of times and she seen me a bunch of times I have a lot of mixed couples that I see now with their beautiful babies and I'll get to know them and I have the all-white couples and the chicks are like, "Hey I'm new to the neighborhood" and I'm introducing them to the supermarket business because I been in all these years and so I've definitely seen the races change and I have to be honest there is some good thing that came with that because you do need to broaden your horizon and there are some people who don't really get a chance to leave where they are and like when I was growing up in Westchester my whole world revolved around Westchester and I didn't really know what else was out there. It was up to my parents to show me because as children, that's all you know so when there's a child growing up in Harlem I think they might have a lot of opportunities because now we have all types of cultures in Harlem and so businesses are trying to please all types of cultures so these kids get to see that and they can go for henna like my 10 year old is driving me crazy. She wants to go for henna.

I never thought of henna when I was growing up in Westchester because for me the corner store was penny candy. There was more like a Bodega that sold Kool Aid to my mom. There was a Chinese restaurant, there was a liquor store... now I do have the liquor store and the Chinese restaurant but now there's the henna and the threading of the eyebrows... these are other cultures. You have the African braiding shop... Growing up in Westchester, you would have to come to 125th street to get your hair braided. Growing up in Harlem there are choices. "Oh I don't really like that one," ... like girl, I'm telling you I think it's amazing.

DW: Do you have any opinion on the US government or the US as a whole? Do you think it's changed over time? You may want to include the new president or the old president.

EW: Well I was born October 18th 1978 and the president was Jimmy Carter. I really wasn't as much into politics as I got. Well honestly, I've been through Carter and Reagan and the War on Drugs. I've been through a couple of presidents that have really blurred by me. But my first president that I actually got to vote for was November of 1996 I got to vote for Bill Clinton, William Clinton was the first president I voted for. I turned 18 on October 18th and growing up in my household it was such a big thing that my mother would never really discuss with us good things about the president that she was going to vote for or bad things about the opponent because she was definitely like telling me I was going for this and that but my first year of going for a president was blindly following my mother going for Bill Clinton. And have to be honest, this many years later, being 40 years old turning 40 on October 18th 2018, that it definitely makes me happy that I have no regrets for that. I'm glad Bill was the first president that I voted for, but he definitely deserves a place in history and in my heart as being the first president I voted for. I can speak a little more about Bill Clinton and after and me saying that that Bill's the first person I voted for. The Bushes are absolutely my least favorite like there's no competition, like I really felt a lot of things were done that I was a little more open to and didn't agree with. I didn't like how greedy they were. I just thought like America has no place to punish other presidents like Saddam Hussein for doing things to his people when we have a whole bunch of history of our own. I just feel it was not necessarily about that because when you sit back and think about it as an American you have to be honest, we do have too much history of our own to get into that, but you also have to be honest with yourself then, why would we? And we would because of things like oil and that makes me feel like we do things like be greedy and I don't like that. So I don't like the Bushes. Obama, amazing with two As and an H! I love him. I always loved him. To be honest, initially, when we first were going with Obama in the primaries I went for Hillary Clinton and so when the majority went for Obama I was like OK. Democrat in my heart, I went for Obama. Really good decision. Love him and the whole family. Donald Trump. That's really hard for me because I can tell you the truth about Donald. I always loved Donald Trump until he became my president and so it's hard for me because I thought why didn't you stay like... you know when someone's alive and you picture him a certain way and

when they pass you still choose to picture them a certain way because it's the person they were. I wish that Trump had stood still in time with him being our celebrity apprentice and let me enjoy him right there and that's the most I'll say about Trump. I think America is foolish for voting for Trump. I think America is foolish for the lack thereof in voting which is how we ended up with Trump so either way we have to take responsibility for being foolish.

DW: Would you like to speak more on Reagan's War on Drugs? I know that you spoke earlier about it when you talked about their drugs and crime in races in Harlem.

EW: I don't remember too much of life with drugs before Reagan because like I said I was born in 1978 and Reagan came down in 84 so I don't really remember that, but I can speak about as an adult and after I do agree with some parts and disagree with other parts.

The parts that I agree with are that, hearing the stories of Harlem and how there were certain blocks that were shut down... if it wasn't for Reagan's War on Drugs how would it be? Would we still just be honestly committing war on each other because that was the option, because either you commit war on each other and fight over the territory or Reagan comes along and commits War on Drugs and you and who is "you" aka the black man or the minority man who is struggling and feeling like drugs was the only way out. But the way you were getting out is you are either selling your drugs to other African American people in your community or you are killing other African American people in your community because you guys are going for the same spot because nobody comes from 100,000 miles to have your spot. You know it's y'all's spot. You probably know each other and now you're willing to kill each other just so the living person can kill all the other people by selling them the drug. And so if it's a choice of that, I would probably prefer the streets to be cleaner like they are but at the same time, some of his punishments were very harsh and so he felt like, if I give this person 25 years for doing something that he might really deserve 10 years for, then everyone else will learn their lesson, but at the same time, who are you to give that person 25 years for something that you just said you know that they really deserve 10 years for? I don't like that. Give them their 10 years. So that's my problem with the law on the War on Drugs. I don't really have a problem with the War on Drugs. It's the law that goes with it that so harshly he punished them and how many of the young struggling black men were being punished because they were the ones who had the drugs in their hands and got caught. That's my take on that, but I don't really know about the war beforehand what I've seen on TV or what I've heard from people older than myself.

DW: I would also like to mention 9/11 since that also affected the community. Where were you? What was your initial thought? And did it really affect you compared to other people?

EW: September 11th 2001 was a Tuesday. I remember clearly. I was home with a one year old. I was really oblivious to the world at that point my life because I wasn't working and my newborn baby was one and I was 22 years old and I was just learning how to get into the life that I'm living now, but I was definitely at the beginning of that stage she is 18 now but at the time she was one. My ex-husband, the children's father, was working at a building as a painter and he says to me, "you know my friend told me something just happened with a plane hitting the building." We then went upstairs to the roof and he says, "you can see the building a little bit." We were in Brooklyn at the time so he tells me to cut on the TV so I sat there and I cut on the TV and when I cut it on the first plane had already hit and that's why everybody was watching, but what we didn't know was that another plane was going to hit. So when I watched, the building had already had the hole in it from the first plane and I found myself thinking, you know, more family, because like I said, I was just the beginning stage of my family and I was definitely thinking family. And feeling that and feeling bad that there are people trapped in that building and gosh I hope they get out, but I really honestly thought they'd get out. I thought maybe a few people where the plane went you know so like if it went through the 43rd floor I thought maybe a few people from the 43rd floor would die

cause what's the chances of the 43rd floor being empty when the plane hits. But I did not know at that moment that they were both going to fall and they were both going to be heads. So in the second one god hit, it like, clicked, like what the hell just happened because now you're thinking, this is not a mistake, and when you realize it's not a mistake, you actually start to tear up a little bit and get goosebumps and start to think about everybody close to you and you realize that the buildings are falling now and that these people are definitely gone forever.

I didn't realize the affect it would have on so many people down there with their lungs and stuff, but I did know that all those people had already died and I did feel a little angry because like I said I felt like America at times are greedy bullies and so when somebody comes back and tortures a group of Americans and kills a group of Americans I kind of get angry with America, if I can be honest, because you can't be a bully and expect to win them all. So you're admitting that yes I'm a bully, or you're doing bullyish things because these people running America are smart people, so you know that it's bullying and you still don't think to yourself, "what about the people who are gonna hit back?" because it doesn't really affect them. But you see the people from 9/11 were trying to affect them by doing things like hitting the Pentagon because I'm thinking why would you hit the World Trade Center? There's not really government people there, but the truth of the World Center was it was filled with people that worked for companies that were able to afford space in that building. That was the people who died in 9/11. It wasn't the government official that came and decided to sign the paper for you to go and kill off their president or to go over there and take your oil. It was just people who thought they were doing well in life because they might have went to college and their job, their corporation had a little more money and now they can afford a better space and now these are the people that happen to be collateral damage. So it made me kind of angry with America and, you know, that's a lesson I guess we all learned together.

DW: On a non-political note, you mentioned earlier that you worked in the supermarket business. How do you believe your presence in the community has shaped the community at all? Whether through relationships that you have your coworkers or relationships you have with your customers that you see on a day-to-day basis?

EW: I think that we both probably shaped each other - me and the community. I really got into the supermarket business to have a job. That was it. I just didn't want to not have a job. Like why don't I have a job? I need to be working. My first born and only child at the time was three. what am I doing with myself? So that's why I got into the business.

What really got me interested in the business and wanting to stay in the business was when I realized that one, somebody told me in my orientation back in January of 2004, the guy who did my orientation, whose name was Keith Jefferson, he's a friend of mine now, he said, "if you look around now in this room right now, it's like nine attending, you guys in here, if you look around in this room, at the end it's only going to be one or two of you staying here. You're going to look around and say whoa remember such-and-such?" I didn't really know I would be one of the two, but I knew I'd be one of the two. I knew I was hungry enough to keep the job. I did not know that I was hungry enough, determined enough, equipped enough, to really dominate the business.

So it worked for me and I believe it works for the community. I believe it works well for them. I believe I'm an African-American woman that is helping to run something that is in an African-American community that is being gentrified on a regular basis, on a daily basis, and to still see a sista in power... I didn't sleep my way to the top, I didn't kiss enough behind to the get to the top. I actually work hard. I really do a great job, and so when the community sees me at the top, it's like OK good, they do trust us, they do know that we're good, that we do a good job. She does deserve this. And when they say things like that to me it makes me feel amazing and it makes me want to always make them feel like that.

I want them to always say that, like, when they walk up to me and they're like "God, I really like having you here. I like watching you work." There are some customers that I haven't even seen before come up to me

and say, "I just wanna tell you great job" and I'm like, "thank you" and it lets me know that they're watching.

And to be honest, I'm watching them too. I might be watching them for different reasons. I might be thinking you know, "OK, they like that flavor. OK good." I might be thinking, "Is she gonna watch her kid?" or I might be thinking, "Do you see that in your basket still?" I might be thinking, "cute shoes," but I'm watching them.

So when they let me know that they're watching and that they're pleased, I am definitely pleased. So I definitely think that we're shaping each other. I'm getting to know the community and as I get older I get to keep in contact with the lot of the younger. I watched some moms go from pregnant to then they have three-year-olds and the whole time I'm steady growing older and I think that it's amazing.

With the fact that me being a person that is doing well right here in our community is really good for my children and they come in here and they're like, "My mom is in here. Where's my mom? I know my mama's here." They know I'm here, they know I'm working, and they also know that their mom deserves the position. With that being said, I am not worried when it comes down to their turn to get to the workforce. I am not thinking that nobody's gonna be in there kissing bottoms. Nobody's gonna be there sleeping around. That they already know what it takes to be successful. I love it.

DW: Earlier you mentioned being an African-American woman in the United States, how do you think the states views you as compared to the city, compared to Harlem?

EW: The states... that was a really good question because I think that on the whole, the states may not give me the same opportunities as maybe New York does. There are some cities that probably wouldn't give me the opportunity that New York City itself does. I think the fact that we are so much of a mixed pot leaves less space for prejudice. So when you are apart from other people sometimes you can assume some prejudiced things. You don't know that and so you guess what African-Americans are like; you guess what Caribbeans are like. Sometimes you might be right, but you might be wrong. Either way, it's not right to do. It's not your place to do. So you do find yourself guessing what they're like. In the city, with us being so close to each other and so different from each other and so much of the same with each other we get to see that. We get to see we are different in some ways. We get to see that we are the same in some ways. So with me in the supermarket business I will see that an African-American might pick up the same rice as an Hispanic. The difference is what we get to go with it. So we do have some things that are the same but then we do have some things that are different and I think that the city definitely is a little more open to getting to know people for people and so that works for me because I think I ended up on a better part of the spectrum when it comes to that and so it works for me. They actually gave me a shot. But I actually deserved it. so it works for me.

DW: You mentioned a lot about Harlem and the changes in Harlem and how your move to Harlem was essential for you to grow up. Is there anything I didn't ask that I should have asked that you would like the people to know about you? Just a quick summary about you?

EW: I thought you did a great job. I'm just ... I believe a lot of the questions were asked and gave me a chance to cover a lot of incidents. I really appreciate the interview. I'm just a hard-working mom who is just trying to make it and that's it. Thank you and have a good one.

DW: Thank you for taking the time out of your day to conduct this interview. I will send you a copy when it's finally finished and published.