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**Transcript of interview with William Walker**  
**Interviewer: Jerry Markowitz**

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**John Jay College, New York, NY**

**Transcription: Gretchen Rodriguez**

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**WILLIAM S. WALKER:** I'm professor William Walker. William S. Walker, and of course, now I'm a full professor but I started on the north level. Well, I started before the college even got down to 20<sup>th</sup> street, you know, near the precinct because at Brooklyn College they had some classes for police and that's where Ben Warden was one of my students. That's way back in the mid 50s. And then up across from Hunter, that high school, public school across the street from Hunter. They taught police up there so I got into some of that. But, eventually, I got here, not sure how, but I guess I would give professor Ellic Smith a lot of credit for me being here because not only was he a lot of support, but he was my mentor. That sounds odd and I'm a little older than he. Because I was 80, six months before he was 80, so I'm the oldest guy down here. So I've seen a lot of people come and go. Now, going back to 20<sup>th</sup> street which was primarily police, it was a small student body, and of course, we had good faculty and then we went up to Park Avenue, those two buildings there.

**JERRY MARKOWITZ:** How did you find the police as students?

**William:** I found them quite, quite cooperative and good and they tried and I always had a lot of respect for police. They would work all day and then come into the class at night, and after a job like policing, that isn't easy. A lot of students who have nothing to do would not do that sort of thing. Because I've had police, you know, that work such a hard shift, even doze off a little bit and I would not get on them, I would just tell them gently to go out and put water in their face and whatever and then come back. And they turned out to be one of the best students because any guy that had the guts to do that, you had to cooperate with them. Not because they were police, or you were trying to hand feed them, but because the person just has the... I guess you might say, or what do you call it, nerve, to go to college after school. Because I had some fellows who were in their 50s and came to school and I remember several took nine

years or so to finish going part time, but they finished. And I would meet some of them. So, I considered it a privilege to have taught many of the police.

**Jerry:** What were you teaching at that time?

**William:** I was always into Sociology. I've taught half a dozen fields, cause I taught juvenile delinquency, criminology, social problems, social pathology, and several others, but you taught whatever the curriculum called for.

**Jerry:** Did you ever find that the police who were involved with social problems every day thought that they had more practical knowledge, more useful knowledge, than professors who weren't police officers who were looking at it in a more theoretical way?

**William:** Yes, because they would look at you as someone in the ivory tower who didn't know what was going on out in the **real** world, as they would call it. And you would get challenged so you'd have to answer them in such a way that you gave them the facts and could also retain their respect and not just play around, and slough it off, you know, because they really wanted to know and they really felt this way. And they not only had questions about their particular part of the work, but they also felt, had feelings about the prisons and the courts. Because many of them would complain that whoever they picked up would be back on the streets before they could get back to the precinct, you know, the usual sorts of things.

But, before they finished and got their degree, they got a little respect for what we were doing here, quiet a bit of respect, I would say, because we had some great teachers here. And, as I said, it's a privilege to teach them and you had a good mix of students, too. Especially going from Park Avenue up to here. I always considered it good for the police to have these liberal arts students in with them, and the students to be with the police, so that they both could pick up something from each other. And the students get a little respect for what the police were doing, and didn't think they were just walking around busting heads, this sort of thing. It was a tough, hard job.

[00:06:50]

**Jerry:** Of course, at that time the vast majority of police were white ethnics, Italians, Irish. And in the 1960s there was a tremendous amount of racial upheaval. Did you find any resentment against you personally, as a black professor, that the white ethnic police would direct at you?

**William:** No, because I was trying to handle myself in a way that showed my respect for them as I commanded their respect for me. Going back to the other, there was some resentment about what was going on, of course. I'll give you a little anecdote. Farrakhan took over after Malcolm X was assassinated. I had him come down to the precinct at 20<sup>th</sup> street, and I told the fellows, "he's a guest, so

you must treat him like a guest. Ask him questions..." Of course he had his bodyguards and his entourage and they treated him very well, I thought. And one the students asked me, "why don't you have a John Birch speaker come?" because some of them were very sympathetic towards John Birch and many of them still are. And I said, I tried, but they would not send the speaker, because they were too busy to send the speaker, although I never could get the reason for this because it would seem like they would've wanted to come to a place like a police department, and talk to police because [UNCLEAR 00:08:48].

**Jerry:** How did they respond to Farrakhan?

**William:** They responded quiet well. He talked, he didn't give one of his fiery anti-white speeches. He talked about their goals, what they were after, and so on. And they asked him questions. There was a good give-and-take between them. And the students, the police, were quiet astounded when I told them one time, I would rather see- because they were quite upset about the black Muslims, so I told them I would rather see the male students, particularly talking about males because gangs were prominent in the city at that time... I told them I'd rather see them in the Black Muslims than belong to a gang, and they sat up and said why. I said, for one thing, they don't allow their members to use dope, to drink, do all the things that these kids do to give you so much trouble. They got to straighten up if they stay in that particular group. So they began to nod their heads a little bit, then after I gave my reasoning for saying it... of course you'd always hope that the kids would grow up and make other choices perhaps, than their initial choices, just like we do with our religions if we aren't satisfied. We hoped they would outgrow that sort of thing, because a lot of people haven't outgrown the civil rights movement from the 60s and 70s, they're still saying these sorts of things which you can tell from the [Tawana] Brawley case, you know the girl, because the lawyers and the other people are still talking, saying we should hit the streets, this sort of thing, like we used to. Times have changed and tactics should change.  
[00:11:10]

**Jerry:** When you talked a little bit before about when other students, non-police students, came into the classroom, after open admissions, how did the police respond to the large number of civilian students?

**William:** Not only civilian students, but also they would talk about the non-whites but also talk about them in much the way they did when they lowered the requirements somewhat for police to enter the police department, and they said this was not right, and so on. Of course, they would question me at times because one time I remember one them saying that, "we're not responsible for what happened 200 years ago." So I told him, yes but you can be responsible for perpetuating that sort of thing. And that pacified them a little but I don't know what they said after they got out of the classroom but at least that stopped that one.

**Jerry:** Did you have conflicts in your class between the police and minority students?

**William:** Not conflicts, per se, arguments. Might have some discussions at times. And the police sometimes would have discussions among themselves when we had a course on social problems. It was a 401 course that they had to have before they could graduate. And they would say things that were sort of police secrets, which I won't repeat now. They would just say, oh you know we'd do this, such and such a thing. And of course, I would kind of try to squash it before it got too far because police work is police work and shouldn't be in the classroom with everybody. But, they had these things sort of going that way, they would sort of discuss it, and eventually they, I guess after they got rid of the students who weren't there to be students, I think more or less settled down to be a good college group. I mean, the entire school did. When Reisman was there, of course, at first, then of course, Riddle came and kept up the work.

**Jerry:** Did you find that there was any opposition to Riddle becoming president because he didn't come out of the criminal justice field or the police department.

**William:** A little, but I wasn't aware of a lot of things going on because most of the time if there were any politics going on among the faculty and so on, I wasn't involved with it because my bag was giving my time to the students from the time I came to the time I was retired. I could have been head of the black studies department, but I said no, and I had two reasons for that. One, because I only had so much more time left and two, I thought that a young fellow should be in the job and stay there, so he could learn something from the job and also put his stamp on the department. It shouldn't be an in-and-out sort of thing. So, students, that was what I was concerned with because that was what I thought my job was.

**Jerry:** Was there ever any conflict between the police faculty and the non-police faculty? And did it affect you?

**William:** Well, if there was some conflict it didn't get back up as far as my class. Fellows had some feelings, of course. I don't know whether you'll edit this out or not... because I remember when Malcolm, no, when Martin Luther King was assassinated, a young fellow came into the class that night, and we were about to start class and he came up to me and said, "well [UNCLEAR 00:17:10] got it because he asked for it." Of course I was upset, but I didn't put a class around that because that would stir up conflict, but I got around it before the semester was over, and this particular student apologized... for other things.

**Jerry:** What was it that he said?

**William:** He said "The warrior got it, he asked for it." He had no idea what the man was trying to do for the country. Trying to make us live up to what the

constitution stood for, democracy. All of us, not just any particular group.

**Jerry:** That's horrible.

**William:** Yeah, I was kind of taken aback, but I tried not to let any anger or dismay show too much, that he should say that. Even though he'd been in the class a while and was half way, or more, through the semester and he thought through reading books like this, going through the life, on the streets of the ghetto, that he wouldn't have these attitudes, but people have them.

**Jerry:** But he apologized by the end of the class?

**William:** Not the class, the semester.

**Jerry:** Do you remember what he said to you?

**William:** No, other than, he was sorry for a number of things that he'd done or said, and so on. I let it drop. I wouldn't touch that with a 10 foot pole. Because if he felt that way, one thing, I never wanted to start anything in the classroom, take advantage of my position, because the professor does have the position of power over students who can do something to them. You'd always be afraid that they got out on the street and could take it out on somebody, which would be bad for them and bad for the civilian, who ever. I, and I guess others, too, because we had a good group of teachers here. And some much closer to [UNCLEAR 00:19:45] than others. I'm blocking and that's bad because his office is right next door to [UNCLEAR 00:19:55].

**Jerry:** Was the faculty particularly close in the early years of the college? Did you feel a camaraderie?

**William:** Yes, especially in your particular areas because Reisman was a good president and Riddle carried the ball, too. Of course, after we got spread around these two buildings... I've been in two buildings from Park Avenue across the street, South Hall and North Hall; it was almost like a foreign country when we start talking about one department or another. Of course, I always knew people because I made it my business to talk to cleaning people, the secretaries, because they're people who just happen to have different jobs. So when I come in... of course, they're begin to drop out, now. When I come I always feel welcome, it's not as though you were an SOB and you start looking over your shoulder when you come in, as if somebody's going to say something to you.

**Jerry:** Did you feel that the college should keep its criminal justice focus or that it should expand into other areas? Did you have a strong opinion on that?

**William:** In this sense, the police should pick up the things that would help them be professional in their field but they also needed to pick up other things to

broaden their horizons, in a way. I always felt this, and this is one of the things I guess you would do some research on, for police to be people, rather than just somebody carrying a gun up the street doing things, halting crime, knocking heads if they have to, and so on. In other words, appreciating the fact that they also have their problems on and off their job. They can have breakdowns in spite of the fact that they are supposed to be macho like other jobs. In spite of Hill Street Blues. But they're human. And that's one of the things we're going to be involved in with the research I'm going to do around here. Because I guess things occur... with the brass some down to the people in the streets, certainly. I hope we're going to get some satellite programs so that even if they don't come here, we can go to them.

**Jerry:** There was a lot of criticism of the police in the 1960s and early 70s. Feelings that they weren't behaving professionally, that they weren't well trained. Did you ever get any reaction from the police about those criticisms?  
[00:24:08]

**William:** None other than hearing somebody say, "they ought to be on the streets with us," and so on. But the thing is perhaps they weren't trained to take care of certain situations and some of their training breaks down periodically. You know just what, a month ago?

**Jerry:** Thompson.

**William:** Yes. And the head of the police that were out there, I think he got dumped, he got fired. Of course, at this moment the police need to be trained so they can be comfortable with all levels and all groups and different races of people, especially with all those Orientals who are coming in. But, they also should be trained to be professional in more than one way. Because I still remember in one of the social problems classes, and this is before the AIDS thing came up. I spoke, and we had a discussion and homosexuality came up and, of course, one said, and two or three agreed with him, "I will not have a homosexual teaching my kid in class." I said, "Do you know who you're talking about? You're talking about a pedophile, not a homosexual. A homosexual wants a man, not a little kid." And so downstairs, I saw a fellow in the lavatory and he said they're having a panel on one aspect of it and I said I hope they're doing something a little broader. Because there are all sorts of off beat sexual practices that police need to know about so they don't get upset if somebody, if they run across somebody doing it, or somebody in the ranks does it. Of course, one of the things you mention to them is this fellow who used to be a policeman who wrote *The Killing Fields* or *The Onion Fields*... an ex-policeman and the policemen who they caught with prostitutes was ripping him because he went to S&M and then he committed suicide out of shame. You have to learn how to accept these things and that is part of being a professional and that gets into what you asked about training. Sometimes it's so narrow that it needs to be broadened out to where they can be human and not feel like they're going to be

labeled by their fellows, their peers as wimps, homos, or whatever.

**Jerry:** Did you ever have the feeling that the police who didn't go to college, the police in the precincts, criticized the police officers who were at John Jay in the very early years? Either at Brooklyn College or here?

**William:** Brooklyn College, I didn't get to hear anything like that because I just had that one class. But later on you'd here something like this because the fellows who would go to college would think they were looked at askance by the other police who didn't, because they did go to college, and they had some feeling about this. Perhaps because one of the teachers downstairs was saying that something happened, and police were able to kind of quash it, and one of the policemen said to the other, "John Jay shit does work." So, it was education both ways, we learned some things, too, as professors with them, because we learned about what happened to them psychologically, as well as physically, and you can respect these sorts of things. The only thing was not pushing too hard to get your point of view over and kind of respecting theirs, and kind of keeping a good middle of the road and be as good a teacher as you could be.

**Jerry:** If you could go back 25 years ago, would you have done anything different knowing what you know now? Would you have done anything different in terms of educating the police?

**William:** I think I'm a poor person to ask that, because 25 years back, at least I was in college, I mean that would be back just about the end of the 40s, wouldn't it?

**Jerry:** No this would be 1960, about 1963-64.

**William:** I'll repeat the question because I was going to answer another way because I had a funny educational experience, which gave me a mindset I guess a little different mindset from you and your professors.

**Jerry:** What was that? What was that educational experience that was different?

**William:** Well, I went to high school one semester. That was when I was about 16. My mother died and we had one parent living then. So I was high school 22 years and then I had to go straight to college. It was an accident that I'm here, because I got thrown off a horse and hurt my back. So a psychologist was kind enough to give me an exam and see what I could do, and they said what I could do college work; I was capable of. Then when I went to the college, because it was in a segregated state, they made me take it again; they didn't believe it! I was lucky enough to graduate summa cum laude. But I was dumb enough to send out two resumes, one to Columbia and one to NYU. I was accepted at both of them. So I was lucky enough to go to NYU because they have some great teachers there. Their department is one big family, in fact. I guess it sort of goes

to some of the things you were asking about our particular faculty in departments... Of course, like any other group you have feuds going on.

You were saying, what I would have done differently in the 40s. [60s?] Well, when you read something, you talk to some of your peers, your professors and so on, if you started teaching over you might teach courses a little differently, you might have a different mind set. At least I feel differently now than I did then, because I feel a little more sophisticated, I guess. I was learning as I went along with them and now I feel like I know quite a bit about it and I could do something and be a better teacher, but you do what you do. You just hope you didn't hurt anybody.... which I never did, I don't think, not knowingly, because I always tried. That's why I always taught one-on-one courses. I thought it was my duty to help that student survive the first year, and I'd tell them, it's not going to be this easy when you get to 2, 3, and 400 level courses. Just like you learn to be a high school student, you have to learn to be a college student. And I would do things to try to teach them these sorts of things.

**Jerry:** What was open admissions like at John Jay?

**William:** Just like every other part of the university. Hectic. Because the university as a whole was not prepared for open admission. They threw money at them and a lot of people who came in weren't ready for open admission. Just like some people get into the police department or the army or whatever and aren't ready for it and they have to dump them [UNCLEAR 00:34:44]. But, it was kind of hectic that first year especially, because teachers had to get used to the kind of students who were there. You had some teachers who, like a told you, had my kind of educational experience, and you had some who had practically an Ivy League type of experience and it was a little hard for them to come here and meet the students on their level, and try to bring them up. And then I had the feeling that some of the teachers were a little bit wary, I won't use the term afraid, to tackle these kids because I remember down on Park Avenue, the guys were in there making a lot of noise and the teacher, who happened to be white, was trying to teach his class and I went in and gave them hell, and told them, there's a class going on next door, what are you doing playing cards and drinking, you should be studying, and so on. So I could do this, because I was too old to punch out. [LAUGHTER]

So, as I said, it was kind of hectic, but the college survived it. I don't know if the curriculum or the teachers were quiet ready for open enrollment that time. As I said, we lost 600 of them that first year. I don't know how many were lost in the other parts of the university, the other units. But I did tell someone here, pardon the language, it would have made a hell of a doctoral dissertation to see what happened to these kids after they left, whether they tried to get back in school and woke up or whether they went to Rikers or whatever, depending on their sex whatever they were doing or whether they went to the streets. Nobody's ever done this, and still haven't, and they won't ever do it because people have the

tendency to dodge problems if they can.

**Jerry:** What do you think the college could have done differently to make open admissions work better?

**William:** I wouldn't exactly say, our college doing so much differently; the overall people down at 80th Street could have planned it a little better. Then there might have been a little better preparation for this type of student. Because I'm sure they were used to, or expected to teach the average type student, regardless whether white, black, or whatever. And they ran across students who were just about educationally crippled. And when you ran across students like this, there was a tendency to throw up your hands and be overwhelmed by all the problems and I think this happened in some cases.

**Jerry:** Did you feel that way?

**William:** No, I always was trying to get students to move away from a certain point. I remember one time, there were two black students, because I would give a test, for example, and I gave essay tests, and they were writing things like they were writing for the Civil Rights movement. It had nothing to do with the question I asked, and there were two of them, and the thing was, they were bright kids. But I said something to them, one day, and the class said, "Oh!" collectively. Cause they never heard me do anything like this, these two students got up and ran out of class. One came back, the other one didn't. But he knew this other feller, and I told him, please see if you can get him to come back because he has so much on the ball, I don't want to see him lost out there. He never came back to my class, I don't know whether he came to another one, but I'd like to see him come back to the college, cause he was bright. But he was just stuck spinning his wheels in one aspect of the Civil Rights movement, which was hit the bricks and demonstrate and so on.

**Jerry:** Were you involved in the crisis when John Jay was about to go under?

**William:** Yes.

**Jerry:** What role did you play?

**William:** Well, I was at all the meetings that we had. And then there were rallies. I went to those, and we.. I think I was something like.. Not sure if it was a departmental group, but blacks that met. I went to all those things because I came in everyday during that period, just like my wife when things happened at Oceanside [Oceanhill- Brownsville] with Rhody McCoy. Of course, I'm still friends with Doctor Russell, who was his right-hand man. The things they were doing, she went everyday to school despite the fact some didn't want her to. They said she should join and march, this sort of thing. Her answer was, these kids can't afford to lose school. And they couldn't. You know, because I was behind

whatever was going on, whatever the school was for, I was for. Not much of a talker, just a marcher.

**Jerry:** Did you ever teach in the precincts?

**William:** No, the closest I came to that was up across from Hunter. That was all police, and I guess that class that Ben Warden was in was all police, too; it was at Brooklyn College. And I never was in one of those satellite programs, that I can remember. After all, when you get my age you can forget easily.

**Jerry:** You have the right to forget. [LAUGHTER] I just have one last question for you. What was Ben Ward like as a student?

**William:** He was a good student and a good person. Yeah, of course the whole class was good, I guess. They weren't challenging anybody at that time, too much. Perhaps I wasn't challenging them that much, either.

**Jerry:** I can't imagine that.

**William:** He was a good student. He was sergeant then so you can see how far he's come. Because he's head of a couple correctional institutions, here [UNCLEAR 00:43:38]. He's a very sophisticated person, I'll probably see him on the 20<sup>th</sup>.

**Jerry:** Bill, thank you very much for doing this interview.

[00:45:37]