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**An Oral History of the CCNY 1960's SEEK**

**Interview with Eugenia Wiltshire**  
**Interviewer: Sean Molloy**

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In 1965, City College launched its “Pre-Bac” program by admitting and supporting poor and working class students who did not qualify under CCNY’s traditional standards (Levy 1965). Pre-Bac was a huge success. After one year, 72% of its students were still studying at CCNY. Over half had a “C” average or higher (Berger 1966 3). Renamed “SEEK” in 1966, the program got even better: 85% of the new Fall 1966 and Fall 1967 SEEK students were still studying at CCNY after one year. (Berger 1969 Table 40). Close to 40% of the 1965 -67 SEEK students would graduate from City College by 1972 (Frost 1972 1). One of those graduates was Dorothy Eugenia Robinson. In 1975, Dorothy changed her name to Eugenia Wiltshire. After graduating, Eugenia worked for WCBS, Channel 13 and other news organizations for two decades as an associate producer, unit manager and associate director. She then traveled to Nigeria for a year to teach broadcast journalism. Starting in 1991, Eugenia began her second career with Manhattan’s Community School. Since 2005, her third career has focused on peace and justice work as well as teaching adult language learners.

Wiltshire

“I remember living across from a stone wall.... But behind that stone wall was a college.”

Oddly enough, the first place I ever lived was on Convent Avenue across the street from City College. And I spent the first ten years of my life there [00:02:00] and I remember living across from this stone wall that was much taller than I. You couldn’t look over it, but behind that wall was a college, and I never got to see it, but I knew it was there. But then, I always assumed that I would never go there, because it was too familiar

and I didn't want to go there. It was, it was a very weird kind of experience because it was part of my neighborhood and college meant leaving your neighborhood. So I, I look back upon that now and it's quite amazing to me and in fact there was something called Lewisohn Stadium on the grounds of the campus and they had the outdoor concerts there and as a child I would go up in the summers and they had gates all around the stadium, but there were certain places where you could go and peak and actually see some of the concerts. I was a child, I would go up there and stand outside the gate and kind of peak and listen and I think my graduating class or the one after was the last to graduate from that stadium because then they tore it down, but that was my first knowledge of City College.

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Wiltshire

My father was a shipping clerk. He never made very much money in his entire life. He was a very, he was a very sad man; he seemed defeated. As I look back on it now, I know that he suffered from depression. He was a very kind man and a very loving man, but not ambitious at all. My mother when she got older and I would say she was probably in her 60s [00:04:00] when she took some courses to become a nurse's aide. Someone who took care of older people in hospitals or in their homes.

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Wiltshire

So, when I was about 10 my family moved from Convent Avenue to the Grant housing projects, because my mother thought that was a step up, little did she know. But we wound up there and I went to a public school, which was a couple of blocks away and my elementary schooling after the second grade, I was in SP classes — special progress, now they call it gifted and talented. So I was always on an accelerated academic track, which I loved. I loved school and elementary school. And um I loved the challenge of it and the experience of it. So I think that kind of fed into the expectation that I would go to college and it wasn't an imposed expectation, it was just an assumed um track, path that I would take and I was comfortable with that.

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Wiltshire

But it was P.S. 125 and it was in West Harlem — about 122nd Street off of Amsterdam Avenue. And because I was in the SP classes, these classes were specially configured and so — and very, very integrated. I remember that ah at one point my best

friend was Japanese and [00:06:00] then there was a kid from China, Argentina, Greece, Norway. There was a Native American in the class for a while. I think somebody from Cuba. There were blacks like myself from, with parents from the south, some from the Caribbean, and it was such a mixture when I take out that class picture now and look at it, it's amazing — it's absolutely amazing. But for me it was a wonderful experience because I had that exposure in, as a young kid and I didn't see myself in that situation as other. And I also appreciated other people for their cultures and for their experiences, and as a class they really played on that. We had something every year called the tasting party and what it was is that the parents of the kids made foods from their native culture and brought them in and it was great; we did this year, after year, after year and the foods and the flavors and the parents came, and it was really wonderful but—. So for me I've always felt like a citizen of the world. I never felt confined to one neighborhood, one ethnicity, one way of thinking, one religion— that was just never a part of my consciousness. I was curious and I wanted the exposure, I reveled in it, and it stood me in good stead throughout the rest of my life.

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Wiltshire

So that great initial multicultural experience was real for me and that was [00:08:00] throughout elementary school and then I went to middle school and it continued— that middle school is called Manhattanville and it's still there. And then I went to high school, which was totally different. It was an integrated high school at the time, in fact it closed after my junior year. I went to my senior year in another school that had just opened and it's called Brandeis, but it was the first year and a brand new building of a new school, and um high school — I really didn't enjoy high school a lot, it ah, because it was more regimented; there was less enrichment I would say. There were, ah— it just didn't really hold that much interest for me. I was in the debating club. That I liked a lot, because I got to open my mouth and argue I guess, and make a case, I was a fighter, so — but other than that I don't really have great memories of high school except that I know the teachers liked me. I was always a good girl and teachers liked me and I remember struggling with chemistry. I just could not really get it and uh I failed the Regents, the chemistry Regents, and my teacher felt worse about it than I did, because I knew I didn't need to graduate and was done, over, I was leaving and— but he was – he said, “you know, you missed it by three points and I went over your paper so many

times trying to find those three points.” And I wound up consoling him saying, “it’s okay, it’s not a big deal,” [00:10:00] but I could care less. But — so high school was just another passage on my way to what I hoped would be college, what I expected to be college.

“And to this day, I’m still involved in lots of protests...”

At one point I remember going to... going on a protest march to the south and I was in high school at the time, I think. Because I was a member of an organization called the National Council of the Christians and Jews. And that was my first experience going south, and it was quite interesting to me. Well actually as part of a movement I had gone many, many years earlier as a child to visit relatives, I guess, I don’t really remember much about that except for walking along back roads. But uh going in high school was a pivotal point for me because it was my first experience of being part of an organized group with a mission.

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Wiltshire

In terms of the March on Washington, I wanted to go in the worst way, and my mother would not let me go because she was afraid that there would be violence. That was her thing, my mother was always playing it safe and uh —. So she wouldn’t let me go and I was very angry about that, but I think it fueled my activism to the point [00:12:00] where I knew that when I was out under her thumb I could make my own choices and do the kind of — engage in the kinds of activities that mattered to me, which I did in short-order, and to this day I’m still involved in lots of protests. I still have the uh, the paper handcuffs that were put on me in front of the White House many years ago protesting.

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Wiltshire

But yeah, I felt very uh, very restrained and my mother gave out mixed messages. She was a Martin Luther King Jr. fan. He was the God to her, because he was safe and he was non-violent, and anyone else ah, was just to be scorned. She — oh Malcolm X, God forbid, he was just the most horrible person you can imagine in her mind. And um the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and Stokely Carmichael, Rap Brown, Bobby Seale on and on and on, oh my God horrible, horrible, horrible! And I could never figure out where she was coming from with that, and she had this whole thing of playing it safe, playing it safe. And it took me awhile, but I finally got that out of my system because

there was no gain in that. But I had to overcome that and thank God I did.

“That was my ticket out”

[00:14:00] In high school, I had a counselor who um at that time was really paying attention to her students and she was aware of this program called the Pre-Baccalaureate Program, which became SEEK, and presented it to me as a great opportunity and she thought I would be perfect for it and I listened to what she had to say and I agreed, I thought, “oh yes, this is it, this is exactly what I would like to do.”

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Wiltshire

I guess if we're talking about how I got into the SEEK program, in terms of grades and qualifications and all of that, I wasn't a bad student in high school, in fact, I was a better student in high school than I was in college in some respects, but what really had a serious impact on me was my home situation, it was just very, very stressful. At young age, I guess I was about 10, I had an older sister, half-sister, and she died, and she had six children and three of them came to live with us. So at the age of ten, I went from being an only child to uh a child with other people in the house.

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Wiltshire

My mother, she was very controlling and domineering and uh not a very nice person; she treated my father horribly. She treated ah my nieces and nephew, her grandchildren horribly.

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And out of my knowledge of the situation, the guilt that I felt about it, I played the mediator and I tried to fix it [00:16:00] and be the pacifier in all the disputes and all the confusion and it took a toll.

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Wiltshire

So, all those years later when it became time for me to go to college, my grades would not have gotten me into the City University. They would have gotten me into other colleges, but then I would have needed a scholarship, and uh we just never

investigated that. And even though I grew up knowing that I would go to college and wanting to— it was just totally expected— there was no preparation for it. There was no savings account for me to get to college, so when I was presented with the opportunity of going to the City University as part of a Pre-Bac program, I jumped at it and I said, “yeah, this is great and free yeah, I’m there. That was my ticket out.

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Wiltshire

“Betty Rawls.... Her approval and encouragement was like an armor....”

When the opportunity was presented to me ah to go to City College, I was thrilled, but I also knew that it was a highly academic, white school. And it, it seemed like the meshing of a dream to go to college and to go to a good one and it was free. I felt a little intimidated by it, but because the way that the program was presented with all the supports, I felt I could do this.

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Wiltshire

I remember [00:18:00] registering for classes and getting my books and they had a special process set up for the SEEK students to get books from the bookstore and we were on a separate line from the regular students getting their books, because we didn’t have to pay for ours. So we all lined up and we went into this little room in the back of the bookstore and we got our books, and I walked out with my books and my supplies, and, and once I had a schedule of classes that I was going to take, I was a real college student. And that, it was a wonderful, wonderful feeling, because I was there; it was legitimate, this was really happening to me. And with all the supports that the SEEK program had for us, I always had a resource, someone to go to or talk to, who would answer my questions. So I never felt like I was fending for myself and that was one of the strengths of the program.

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Wiltshire

I think the key element in my feeling cared for and not alone was the counselor I had and her name is Betty Rawls, and she was fabulous. I don’t know anybody who could have had any encounter with her who wouldn’t say the same. And for me she was just kind and caring and focused. She was young, she was

beautiful, wonderful personality, wonderful smile, she loved to laugh, but so, so caring and I wanted to be her. She was absolutely my idol. And [00:20:00] um so with someone like that in your corner, it just makes all the difference in how you— how I proceeded with what I had to do, because I— her self-confidence was infectious I guess. And also I think her approval and her encouragement was like an armor in a way; it gave me what I needed to do what I needed to do— I felt very comfortable.

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Wiltshire

I remember having one class, I think it was a history class, and there was a test with questions of course, and when the teacher gave back the exam, I don't remember what I got on it, but one of the things was that you had to interpret the question and I had never encountered that before and I'm thinking, "what do you mean interpret? This is the question, the question says blah, blah, blah, you answer the question. Why do I have to interpret the question?" that was like a whole new thing for me, and that I think happened maybe in the second year— first or second year that I was there and I was one of the few black students in the class, so I thought, "is this a white thing where you have to figure out what the question is before you can answer it?" Because I hadn't experienced that before, it I was, like, oh my God, so that was like a red flag. So, of course I went to Betty with this and she basically talked me through it. Friendship in The SEEK dorm:

"It became a community, in and of itself.... And it was just a blessing."

Living in the residence hall or the dorm was the next step for me in really being in college, because I now was no longer living at home, and grateful. [00:22:00] And it also was the next step in being an adult and in being responsible for everything that I needed. It was a place to live. They made arrangements for us to have vouchers to eat in restaurants, and it was my go-to place that I could make into what I needed it to be, and I was grateful for that. It was a safe environment; it was in a great location. And um, it became a community in and of itself— how could it not? And it was just a blessing, a true, true blessing for me.

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Wiltshire

When I think back about the dorm, one of the people I have to talk about is Francee Covington. I was so intimidated by her. I was afraid of her, because she, as far as I was concerned, had it so together. It appeared to me that she never had a doubt about anything, didn't second-guess anything, was so committed, and positive, and, and quick with an idea, with a response to something; this woman was just indomitable. And I was envious and fearful at the same time because I just couldn't imagine how someone at that age could be all that.

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Wiltshire

What happened was we both got involved with a program at WCBS-TV [00:24:00] and we became the SEEK interns at the local TV station. She was interested in journalism and writing as I— so, ah I think there were five of us at the time— so through that experience we got to know each other very well. And in fact for a while we were both— I think it was a couple of years— we were on a TV show together called “The Learning Experience,” which came on Saturday afternoons about 2 o'clock, which we all called ghetto prime time. And so our relationship grew and then when the dorm closed and we moved out of the dorms, she and I both got apartments near each other in the Bronx. So this was a relationship that grew over time and I am so grateful for it and for her, because we are great friends now and her son is just—he just hold a place in my heart that I am so glad that he's there. He's wonderful, and she's a wonderful mother and person. But it goes to show because I thought she was this flaming radical that I wanted to be, and uh and she was. And in some ways I think that there's got to be a point almost where we switched sides and I became this— this, uh more radicalized and as I said when I got arrested, but people have done that so many times more than I ever have— but it's a relationship that started at City College and I'm really, really grateful for that, so I'm lucky.

English classes at City: “I mean, this was just a whole new world.”

[00:26:00] One of the teachers that I remember, ah was Barbara Christian. She was an English teacher; and she was amazing, because all of these SEEK teachers were young, but they were so knowledgeable, and they taught in a way that was just easy to absorb. They were communicators; they weren't instructors and they didn't tell us what to think. They just shared with us their knowledge; that's how I received it. And, um, with Barbara it's—

I remember once asking her how she knew so much about something and she was I guess surprised at the question, maybe it was a stupid question, but I was just in awe of the amount of knowledge this women had: about literature, about authors that I never heard of, about language. She could go back and forth from literature to poetry and, and it was it was just absolutely amazing. And from her I learned that there was a larger scope to literature and knowledge than I had really ever thought about. I knew fiction, non-fiction, what else? Well, and of course then the black authors and the black poets, and African authors. I mean, this was just a whole new world. So I've always been grateful to her for that.

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Wiltshire

In terms of a learning experience, yeah she was, she had that great impact on me. And another one was not a SEEK teacher, but her name was [00:28:00] Eve Merriam and she was a writer and I think she mostly wrote, well I know she wrote children stories and short stories. And um I got an A in her course and I remember what I learned from her. I got a lot of encouragement from her and I used to write and write and rewrite until I thought it was perfect and what I learned from her was that you could always do it another time. It can always be better, even when you think it's perfect. And that stood me in good stead, because ever since that time whenever I write something, I go over it again, and I go over it again; so everything I write in my mind is draft, because I know it can always be made better. And um I learned that from her and I am very grateful, she really just clicked with me.

“And the problem was not that I was incapable of learning – she was a bad teacher.”

Interestingly, when I think back on my years at City, there are so many lessons learned that I can now look back upon as life lessons. I had a math teacher at one point, I think I was probably in my junior year, and it was— I don't even remember the course, and it wasn't algebra or trig, I'd had those, but it was something along those lines. And I just was not understanding anything she had to say. And I was getting 30s and 40s on the tests, clearly not understanding. And I worked and worked and I just couldn't get it. [00:30:00] And I went to her at one point and I said, “what happens”— stupid question— but I said to her, “what happens if I don't pass this course?” hoping she would say, “well you can take something else.” Then she said, you'll

have to repeat it. And a light bulb went on in my head and I just said, “hell no, no this is too painful, I’m not doing this again.”

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Wiltshire

The night before the final exam, I was living in the residence hall. So I got the big black chalkboard that was there on wheels and I rolled into the lounge, with an eraser, chalk, and my math book. And from about 6 o’clock that night to 12:30, one o’clock the next morning, I taught myself that course. I started at the front of the book— the answers were in the back— and I worked the problems and checked the answers. And when I got the answer right I knew that I knew how to do the problem, and I went through the entire book that night. There was one thing that I couldn’t do, something called reverse fractions; but I figured okay, I was tired, it was late and if that’s the only thing I didn’t know it was fine. So I went in the next day and I took the test and I aced the test. The only thing that I couldn’t do again was this reverse fraction problem, but that was just one problem out of a whole slew of them, so I knew that I aced the test. And I got a D on the course— in the course, and I thought that I at least should’ve gotten a C because I had pretty much aced the test; but that’s not what happened I got a D.

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Wiltshire

And what I didn’t know then, which I figured out years later was that this teacher [00:32:00] gave me the D, because I passed the test. But then I thought she didn’t really believe that I took the test. I got somebody to sit in my seat put my name on the paper and take the test; it wasn’t me. Because that was not possible. It wasn’t possible for a student to do that, it certainly wasn’t possible for a black, female student to go from not passing a single test to acing the final— just not possible. And then I thought later— I wish that I had understood that at the time, because I would have gone to that teacher, challenged her on the grade, and said, “I will sit down right now in front of you, give me a problem, from the test — make it up, whatever, I will sit down in front of you and do the problem and get it right and show you.” What that taught me was not to allow what other people think of me to impact in a negative way what I think of me. Not to absorb their negativity and their lack of confidence.

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Wiltshire

That was quite an amazing lesson. At the time, what I knew was that I could do it, I could do it. And the problem was not that I was incapable of learning, she was a bad teacher. It wasn't me.

“SEEK....got me into college. It got me a career. And it got me one stellar friendship.”

I didn't go to college out of a love for learning. To me, college was a ticket. I knew I wanted a better life than the life that my parents lived, and that was the tool [00:34:00] that I needed to get me there. This, this sheepskin, the BA degree, was what I needed; that would be my ammunition. And really, that's all I ever wanted out of college; I didn't have any lofty ideas about being an academic. I knew I was interested in journalism; I wanted to do that. I enjoyed writing; I wanted to do that. And — but in terms of the whole college experience, it was a ticket. And to this day, I view it as that, because there were things that I had to do that I didn't really— subjects I had to take that I had no interest in. Now that I've been out of college so many years, I can choose the courses that I take or the lectures that I attend or whatever, it's a much different environment.

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When I left City College, I went to WCBS-TV to collect my job as promised as an intern, and I became a researcher for local news. And I did that for maybe a year, a year and a half. The reason I left CBS was because I felt labeled and identified as “the SEEK student”. I don't know how much of that was real or imagined, but I believed it and I felt that that was going to be a negative label, that I would always be identified as that and therefore not be allowed to move up.

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Wiltshire

But when I think about that identification, and um years later in situations where people talked about college, I always said well I went to CCNY, I never said I was a SEEK student.

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Wiltshire

It [00:36:00] becomes a question of how to explain it and then we get into the negatives. What did it mean to be a SEEK student? How did you— what did that involve? Well the negatives — uh, I had to be a minority, not qualified, not as good as, needing special help, all of the negatives would have to go into an explanation of how or why I was a SEEK student. Who

wants to go through that? Who wants to explain that? And, uh, so I never, never really talked about it much as being a SEEK student. I can talk about it now because I am grateful for the program, and I, I am proud of what it accomplished for me and so many other students— but I had to get to that point. A lot sooner in my life, I wasn't there and I didn't want to have to apologize for the fact that I got into the City University “on a pass” quote, unquote. So even though all these years later I can talk about how wonderful SEEK was, for awhile there I wore it as a label and as, it was a negative, and I'm just glad I got beyond that but at the time, no.

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Wiltshire

All the things from time to time that I thought of as negatives, I can look back on them now and understand them. And I can explain them to myself with a clearer understanding and a lot more compassion.

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Wiltshire

[00:38:00] Looking back on it, I see that SEEK was a wonderful opportunity. It got me into college, it got me a career, and it got me one stellar friendship. And all of those things are tremendous gifts.

Credits:

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