

WALTER BLAKE

May 2, 1997

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Mame Warren,
interviewer

Warren: This is Mame Warren: Today is the second of May 1997, and I'm in Lexington, Virginia, finally with Walter Blake. I'm so pleased to finally be with you and to finally be meeting you.

Blake: Thank you.

Warren: It comes as no surprise to you the primary reason I want to talk to you is because you're one of the first two black students at Washington and Lee who graduated. Can you tell me how that came to happen in your life?

Blake: Yes. Very easily. As you know, or probably may know, I am a native of Lexington, actually grew up at 9 North Jefferson Street, the first seven years of my life at 9 North Jefferson, is currently the parking lot between the Phi Kappa Sigma House and the University Cleaners. Literally my first conscious memories, other than parents and immediate family, were Washington and Lee students, especially Phi Kappa Sigma brothers who taught me to play Frisbee and do all of those kind of fun things that little kids like to do.

I remember looking up at the Hill and thinking, "God, that's really kind of a neat place. I like it. I was indoctrinated very early from not only the proximity, but the fact that my mother worked for William P. Coleman, a local attorney who was a Washington and Lee graduate. So it was kind of in the blood.

When I went through school locally, I did fairly well academically, and in 1967, I believe, the fall or whenever it is you take the PSAT, or whatever the test is that takes you on into that next level, did quite well and became a semifinalist, or whatever it was, in the National Achievement Scholarship Program, and was targeted or pinpointed, or whatever you want to call it, as a minority with talent at that time.

So in 1968, my senior year, I was recruited by – I lost count, but something along the order of recruited, contacted, a combination of the two, by something like two hundred schools, and those schools ranged all the way from Harvard down to Grenell College in Iowa. But by that time I'd pretty much made my mind up that Washington and Lee was going to be it for me. I had it in my heart, and I had it in my heart for several reasons. One was that in 1966, I believe, Dennis Haston, another product of the Lexington school system, had come, and Dennis was a friend of mine, kind of a big brother to some extent. It pretty much worked him over; he didn't last, as you know.

I was probably brash enough and confident enough in my ability to say one of two things. First off, I wanted to prove that a black student could come here and withstand whatever this institution threw at him and make it out. That was clearly a selfish motivation on my part at the time. An even more selfish motivation on my part was the fact that I understood even then at the age of sixteen that if I was serious about making a life professionally in the South, which I really wanted to stay in the South, defined as in my mind anything from Maryland south, Washington and Lee was clearly the preeminent and premier institution for me to do that just because of the contacts, the education. You couldn't beat it.

Warren: How did you know that at sixteen?

Blake: I don't know. I really don't know, but I just had this feeling, and I recall – and this is one of the strange things that happened in my life. I got a letter my senior year from Harvard informing me that I had been accepted in the entering class of 1968, and that I was the recipient of some scholarship; I have no clue what the name of it is now.

But it was a significant amount of money and it was a significant piece of financial assistance. I remember thinking to myself, "Man, these are some fairly arrogant rascals up there, you know, to presume that I want to go to Harvard. Clearly, Harvard's a nice school, but I don't particularly want to do it. So I jotted a nice little handwritten note on the bottom of their letter and sent it back to them, and suggested to them that I wanted to attend Washington and Lee because I considered it to be the Harvard of the South, and I was a Southerner. I never heard from them again one way or the other, so, you know, they probably put it in some round file and said, "We'll give it to the next guy on the list," which clearly they had no problem doing.

But I just knew it. I don't know. I think because if I had not been a native of Lexington and had not really come through that culture from the earliest days, I wouldn't have known that, but I had been so immersed in this institution and the students and faculty and administration. The kids of some of the faculty members and I used to play together on the front campus over here, which is now a parking lot. We had a football coach, assistant coach, whatever, named McCann, and he had a son named Michael. Apparently – and I do remember this very plainly, but I was six years old and it was just before I started elementary school – Michael and I were playing. Michael was probably four years old and I was probably just turned six. Michael darted out in front of a car on Jefferson Street, and they tell me that I pushed him out of the way and got nailed myself. Well, all I can recall is saying, "Hey, I'm going to try to make it across, too. If he's going to make it, I can make it. I didn't go out consciously to push the little kid out of the way, but I did. So that kind of ingratiated me with a number of people on the Hill.

Henry Howard, professor – whatever, I believe treasurer, his name was Howard, lived in the house right over on the street next to the church, his family, the McCanns, the Fishwicks, those were all families that I knew, I knew their kids, and I knew the institution through those people. It just was ingrained in me. I always could perceive,

even then, that this place was somehow special. It used to be a ritual of mine, every year when I finished up school – I went to elementary school at Lylburn Downing – every year my treat was getting out of school on that last day and walking home, and the way I would walk home, rather than coming basically through the neighborhood, I'd come down Main Street, come up the little alley right over in front of the Red Front grocery store by Professor Wise's house, and then walk down the Colonnade. Usually it was a fine spring day right around Memorial Day. There was just something about those columns and that red brick and that grass lawn that just kind of jazzed me, for lack of a better word.

That's how the decision was made. I didn't seriously consider any other institution. I clearly had options galore, but consciously there was no consideration whatsoever that I would go anywhere else other than here, and I think I always knew that.

Warren: That's fascinating.

Blake: Actually, I think I always knew that I was going to go to school here. I was just kind of like, "Okay, I'm going to do it," whether I was first, second, third, fifteenth, it made not really much difference. It just happened to be the luck of the draw that I happened to be the one who was one of the first to do it. Needless to say, it was interesting. It had its moments.

Warren: Let's talk about those moments.

Blake: Okay. Where do you want to begin? Because there are so many.

Warren: You start. Obviously you have your moments.

Blake: My moments started at Freshman Camp. My moments really started at Freshman Camp. We were going to Natural Bridge Freshman Camp then, which was just an incredible experience. In 1968, discounting the fact that Linwood and I came in 1968, the class that came in 1968 was probably one of the landmark classes in the history of the institution anyway, not so much because of the makeup of the class, but just

because of the times. We were a class that suffered large attrition because of Vietnam and the war, and guys trying to figure out ways to get out of the military or getting drafted or transferring because of the threat of being drafted.

We were the last class to have mandatory Saturday classes. We were the last class with a dress code. We were the last class with the six-cut rule in effect. We probably were the last full class in which ROTC was mandatory for the first two years, I believe. So that time was really kind of a very interesting time in not only the life of the institution, but the life of the country in which the institution was located. While the institution reflected very much those nice traditional values and style that it had for so much of the fifties and early sixties as I recalled it, it was beginning to change simply because the world around it had changed so radically.

My class entering was one that really kind of hastened that change. For instance, I'll use the Kappa Alpha house, which was considered, at the time I came along, the flower of white Southern manhood. Well, when we went through Rush, I went through Rush pretty much on my own, and I went to the Kappa Alpha house, knowing, of course, their restrictions of ever being able to offer me membership, but that didn't stop me from going back on several visits simply because we all got along real well. We liked each other, and it was kind of apparent that there was some rapport and camaraderie that had developed just because of the force of personality or style or whatever you want to call it. Maybe I was different enough that these guys could perceive, "Let's talk to this guy. He's fun to be around."

That class, I'd say the class was the first to have what I'd call a serious hippie contingent, because my class, while there were hippies in classes prior to mine, mine really was the class that defined "hippiedom" at Washington and Lee. The class of 1970, I think they took the credit for the demonstrations on campus. They may have been the leadership, but clearly the foot soldiers in that whole campaign were class of '72 members. The true foot soldiers were guys in my class. They were an amalgamation of

guys who would be considered traditional Southern rockers like the Allman Brothers fans, who had been formerly straight, short-haired, conservatively dressed KAs and SAEs, to your traditional Northeastern Jewish liberals that were ZBT house members. I was a ZBT.

So that class kind of defined a period in the university's history, and I had an interesting role in that class because I was one of only two black students in that class. Race relations in this country were at an interesting state. We'd come up with riots. The Black Panther Party was a high-profile political cause and issue.

My major, which was an independent major, kind of concentrating in economics and engineering and all those things leading to a planning degree, allowed me the freedom to indulge myself in some activities that my very dear friend Linwood Smothers couldn't. He was an engineering major, and Linwood, basically on his first day, got his books and went over in a corner somewhere and started studying, which he had to do. Well, I had to study, of course, just to stay here, like everyone else. You didn't get 2.0s or whatever in order to be initiated by not doing anything; you did have to work a bit. But it was a bit easier taking my course of study than it was taking his course, plus my nature is a bit different than his. I'm one that, you know, like once again, force of personality, I don't mind jumping into something, and that evolved from just being a fairly gregarious person to one that began to take on a sense of purpose and understanding a cause and by doing that, got involved in a whole range of just interesting situations on this campus, things like the spring of 1970 demonstrations and protests.

Warren: What was your role in that?

Blake: I defined myself as one of those foot soldiers in the class of '72. Jeff Gingold clearly was the titular leader of that whole effort. There were a number of other people. But while Gingold was the identified leader, I was what I think he would define as a

trusted lieutenant, or if not trusted lieutenant, a darn good private who would kind of go out and do what had to be done.

One of the things that I did along with one of my classmates is go to Washington, D.C., and recruit several members of the Black Panther Party to come to campus and make a speech. The speech was made in Lee Chapel.

Warren: Tell me about that.

Blake: To a packed house. One of the most amazing, surreal experiences I've ever in my natural life gone through. I was telling someone last night, I still marvel at the fact that we went to Washington one afternoon, picked up several people, brought them back to campus, they spoke, and we turned around and took them back that same night. But it was an announced event. As I recall, I forget the time that we had planned to do it, maybe seven o'clock, something like that, whatever it was, sometime after dinner, and we, of course, get to Washington and pick up our guests, visitors, passengers, whatever you want to call it, and we get delayed coming out of the city, trying to get out of Georgetown. Traffic is just humongous. Key Bridge is backed up from here to there. We're running way late, so we get on the telephone. We stop and call and say, "Look. We're going to be probably an hour late or so," thinking, well, you know, maybe that will dampen the enthusiasm, but it didn't.

We get to Lexington, now I forget exactly how late we were, but we walked into Lee Chapel, and Lee Chapel was basically packed to the gills. I'll never forget we had people sitting in the balconies, and I'll never forget Mark Grobmyer and Lloyd Wolf were sitting in the balcony kind of looking over the side, and there was this rumble among the crowd when we walked in, because everyone was talking. And we walked in and they saw these people, and it was absolute silence. It was like [imitates sound]. And I'm thinking to myself, "Man, what have I—this is unbelievable."

Members of the Black Panther Party standing in front of the recumbent statue, talking, and, as I say, it was surreal. It was a great reception, relatively speaking. I

mean, it was a civil reception. I mean, there wasn't any provocative action that would cause one to get themselves hurt or anything. They listened and there were some questions and we left. It was like, "Well, I'll be darned. I remember driving back up the road, just thinking to myself, "What just happened there? You know, that was pretty weird when you think about it.

Went back to Washington and came back, and that's when it really started.

Warren: Let me understand. Was this during the eight days in May, so-called eight days in May?

Blake: Yes.

Warren: This happened as part of that?

Blake: It was either the eight days in May or sometime in late April, or whatever. It was that period right about the time that the institution closed down early, because we closed probably two or three weeks ahead of schedule. I know we had talked about it the end of—this was my sophomore year. We had talked about—I think the standard graduation date would have been June sixth or something like that, fifth, sixth. School probably closed around May sixth. So maybe a month early.

It had started with all these things going on nationally. There was an announcement that we'd been doing secret bombings in Cambodia. Kent State happened. The Black Panther trials and the Chicago Seven trials were going on up in New Haven and Chicago and other places. It was happening on campuses all over the country. I mean, there was this sense of just pure outrage. The draft was going on. The war had been a sore topic forever. Since I came, even my freshman year, the war was a very sore topic, because 1968, the Tet Offensive, and we were getting our people killed right and left.

I had lost a cousin just before coming here, in the war, and was fairly ambivalent, to say the least, because I didn't see much rhyme or reason for it. It was getting crazier and crazier and crazier. It was like, "Well, this makes no sense to me," and it made no

sense to any of my peers, of course, because we were the guys getting shot at. You know, sense of duty and loyalty, I think all of us had it, but it's like, "Look. If we're going to do this, let's understand the purpose."

So surprisingly, Washington and Lee really was one of the earlier schools in the country to have what I'll call a consciousness-raising on campus. I won't call it an uprising or whatever. I'll call it a consciousness-raising, because that's really what it was. People who I never in my wildest dream, never in my wildest dream, would have imagined would have taken positions or participated in situations that did, that made statements, that listened, that, in the traditional Washington and Lee way, engaged in what I'd call relatively rational thinking and debate and came up with some conclusions. At that point in time it was so foreign as a concept to this institution that I really think the faculty and administration, primarily the administration, thought to themselves, "You know, what is going on? We have some significant potential here for some serious kinds of things to happen."

People were taking off and going to Washington to the protests. We were having guys getting arrested and jailed at the stadium, along with tens of thousands of other people. The university made the decision to basically call it off early, because that was seen as a way, I believe, to basically put the lid on anything that may happen that could be considered inciteful to a more violent or physically challenging confrontation. And the university said, "Look. We'll do it rationally. We will call off classes – we will reschedule examinations. We'll once again – back to the Honor System. We were able to work with individual professors with regard to the schedule for taking exams, finishing up whatever year you happened to be in.

That happened to be my sophomore year, which pretty much was a wash for me, as far as I was concerned. Freshman year, you came in, you were terrified, me particularly because it's like now I'm in what one would consider, or I considered, to be the big leagues. I'm competing against guys who have advantages that I've only

dreamed of. And how do I do it? I did it all right. I did pretty doggone well, as a matter of fact. It became a situation where it was time to take leave.

So we took leave in May of 1970. In May of 1970, when I left, Linwood Smothers and I still were the only two black students on campus. When we came back in September, much to my joy and my surprise, we had nineteen, I believe, nineteen freshmen. It was interesting, because I had a conversation with Dean John or someone. I had decent relationships with most of my professors just because we respected each other. Politically we may not have agreed. Typically, just kind of a wild nineteen-year-old or whatever, eighteen-year-old, whatever the guy is at the time. We agreed to disagree, but we always respected each other.

When the nineteen guys came, I remember kind of picking out seven people and immediately struck up a bond with these seven guys. I mean, it was just like we had never met each other in our lives, but within five minutes we were brothers. I mean, it's like, "I know you. I don't know your name, I don't know where you're from, but I know you. And we became like this. The others weren't quite that close to me, but that initial core of people—Thomas Penn, Philip Hutcheson, Bob Ford, Bill Hill, Johnny Morrison, Matthew Towns, and Bobby Smith—that was kind of the core of what became SABU, Student Association for Black Unity.

We had a meeting over in the Co-op when these guys were a freshman. There had been a number of minor incidences on campus, mostly incidences that related to what I'd call items of insensitivity, things that people get bent out of shape about just because they've got nothing better to do than get bent out of shape. We're here in Lexington, we're isolated, we're away from the ones we love, in most cases, and we've got to go to a basketball game and listen to "Dixie." Well, I had no problem with "Dixie." I knew what it was, and it didn't bother me one way or the other. As it was being used by certain people, it became somewhat inflammatory, and there were some

other comments that were made, some of the guys, and some actions were taken, sometimes not by students but by members of the community.

We decided we needed to adopt a model, and if that that model was something along the lines of the Black Panther Party or whatever, we needed to do it because we needed to band together for what I'd really call self-preservation, and we did. We met over in the Student Union and created SABU, Student Association for Black Unity. I was the first president of SABU and founding director or whatever you want to call it. SABU, for a number of years, became really *the* focal point for black students on campus. It became a fairly effective organization, went through its own internal struggle because there was a change in the nature of the student that came through here.

This institution, I'll maintain to this day, this institution, while it has blessed a number of us with the education that it gave us, I also think that a number of the ones who came through in that initial group enriched this institution, because they came and they brought a very different perspective on the world, and it helped sensitize a lot of people. Literally I developed friendships twenty-five years ago—more than that, nearly thirty years ago—with people in my class that have gone on 'til today, and these relationships have been with people that are as diametrically opposite of me as you can imagine. I mean, guys from Shreveport, Louisiana, whose fathers were corporate executives of oil and gas companies, kids from enormous family wealth. These guys have been lifelong compatriots, guys that I can speak with, and we've talked over the years and they've all said things like, "You guys helped sensitize us more than we sensitized or educated you.

One of the things we tried to get across was the fact that it's a big old world out there and all of us are different and we all come from somewhat different frames of reference. While I may not be exactly like you, in many respects I'm exactly like you, because there is no way in my mind that one could come to this institution—and I have

said this and I will go to my grave saying this – this is, like many institutions that have something unique about them, this place attracts a certain type of person, and either you are built to come here and succeed or you're not. And you can't force fit the mold. It's like some people go to the military and do very well and some people go in and wash out quickly.

Guys who've come here, who've been what I call moderate performers, average, have gone on in life and done just incredible, incredible kinds of things. There is something innately imbedded in people who have come here and done well, and that trait has been as evident in the black students that have come here and done well as it has been in the white students who have come here and done well in later life, or succeeded, or have survived. You had to be a survivor to make it through here. You absolutely had to be a survivor.

Warren: As a black student?

Blake: As any kind of student. As any kind of student you had to be a survivor. You especially had to be a survivor to be a black student. When I showed up here, if I didn't have what I call a mean, ornery, contrary streak in me, I'd have been a dead puppy after about two weeks. Basically it's an attitude that bothers my wife to this day. I can take anything and go home to bed and go to sleep. It's just like, "So what? I'll deal with it. And once you develop that ability – and this place clearly honed that ability in me to a fine razor edge – it's something that has held me in good stead to this very day and will for the rest of my life. But if you didn't have that innate whatever it took, you didn't stay here.

If you looked at the nineteen people that came in 1970, in the fall of 1970, a number of the ones that were very highly rated according to the – I like to laugh – standard statistical measure, they washed out very quickly, because they were not of a mind-set to put up with the kind of challenge that was put down before them. There is a saying, "I'd rather switch than fight. Well, our saying was, "We'd rather fight than

switch. We are who we are, and we are going to fight to maintain it. We can all coexist within the framework of this institution. And all of us understood that the one thing we could all get from here was just an incredible education and an incredible base of contacts.

Look at Johnny Morrison, look at Bill Hill, you look at Matthew Towns, you look at all those guys who came here and survived out of that original group and have done well for themselves in later life. They all had that fundamental toughness, that survivability. Frankly, if they didn't have it, they would have been gone by the end of the first semester. In one case we had one guy who may have been gone before the end of September. I don't know how long he lasted, but it wasn't a tremendous amount of time.

Warren: Walter, you have gone seventy-five different directions I want to pursue.

Blake: Okay.

Warren: You are a wonderful interviewee. I'm tempted to go back in chronological order, but I want to stay where you are right now. I've interviewed Hill, who tells me I can't call him Bill, I have to call him Hill. He talked about what a difference you made to those guys, that you helped them see how to survive. Did you have a "big brother" relationship to them? What was that relationship? It sounds like you're describing something a little different than he described it, but I may not understand.

Blake: It is almost what one would call a "big brother" relationship. Hill and I talk about that a lot. But in some cases I wasn't much older than they were. Philip Hutcheson and I are six months apart in age, at most. So there was not a tremendous age difference, but experientially I had two years on them. As I said, there were six or seven guys out of that nineteen or eighteen or whatever that I, to this day, don't understand the connection that we made. I didn't even know their names, but we just looked at each other and we knew that, "Yeah, okay. You are a guy who can make it here. I took it upon myself to hold hands, cajole, protect, do whatever I had to do to get

those guys through. If they considered me a big brother, then that's more power to them or me or whoever, but we were just close. We were absolutely truly friends in the most fundamental sense. If one of us ate, all of us ate. If one of us didn't eat, none of us ate. I mean, that's just the way it was. You did not do something to one of that group unless you did it to all, and it was pretty much known around campus that, "You really don't want to go mess with this one, because if you do, you're going to have six or seven other people to deal with. So you just keep 'em happy. We're not real sure which way they might go."

The relationship, I can't even begin to describe it at times, because sometimes it was almost like we could finish each other's sentences. We were so simpatico, I mean, in terms of our thinking and our habits and our styles and everything, it was just something that we felt comfortable together. We felt protected, and it was like my extended family. They were my brothers, not necessarily little brothers, they were just my brothers. I didn't particularly think of them as little brothers that I had to nurture and bring along; I just looked at them as my brothers. Whatever a brother would do for me or I'd do for a brother, that's the way I treated those guys. I mean, that's just kind of the way it was. There were guys in that class, in that same class, that I didn't have that relationship with; it was a much more formal type of relationship. We were friendly, we spoke, we talked, we joked around, but there was not that sense of "If it really comes down to it and I have to put it on the line for this guy, will I?" sense. But there was that core group that it was like, "Yeah, we'll do that."

Warren: Were those other guys in SABU?

Blake: They were all in SABU. Everyone was in SABU. Every black student on campus kind of was in SABU, whether they wanted to be or not. Really, going back to the old analogy "cream rising to the top," it's just the natural leadership and force of personality of that group. You can tell we had some strong personalities in that group, and managing the personalities was not really a chore, but it was something that had to be

done, and I managed to get it done. But those were the guys who I think everybody else said, "We'll be in SABU as well, simply because we know we feel protected. They weren't as blatant in their membership of SABU as we were. We wore our SABU jackets everywhere. Everybody may have been a member of SABU, but you really knew who SABU was. SABU was six, seven, eight guys, and that basically was it. Technically, SABU was twenty-some, twenty-one, twenty-two people, but the core group of SABU, the SABU Seven or Eight or whatever you want to call them, you know, that's those guys.

Warren: When you first talked about them coming in in 1970, you said you were delighted and surprised. Did you really not know there were going to be more black students?

Blake: Well, you know, I didn't really know it simply because there was so much confusion going on in the spring of 1970 with regard to everything else going on, that there was no real announcement that anything was going to happen. With the uncertainty that my sophomore year ended, you really didn't know what the institution was going to do come September or August or whenever we'd come back to school. So, no, no one in the administration came to me and said, "Look. We've got some help coming," because I don't think they perceived it as that, but I did. It was like, "Yes! I got some help? Thank you, thank you! Up to that point, I had been a member of ZBT, and that was basically my campus family. My fraternity brothers were my campus family. It was immediate when the guys showed up, it was like, "Yeah. Finally. I mean, my ZBT brothers were very close to me and still are very close to me, but there was still something that I'm able to share with that six or seven guys of SABU that I couldn't share with anyone else.

Warren: Did you then leave ZBT?

Blake: I never really left ZBT any more than any other member of my class did, because at that point in time it was not atypical that your freshman year you were

active in the fraternity, trying to get pledged. Once you got pledged, then kind of that was it. Your sophomore year, which is the year I call the year of great confusion, that was the year that I lived in the fraternity house. Then traditionally on campus at that time, juniors and seniors lived off campus or in housing, and they became less active in the house. They would go and have a meal and pretty much just kind of do their own thing.

Right about that time, that was probably the most stressful time in the life of W&L fraternities in modern times, because lots of fraternities were suffering from significant attrition just because the nature of the beast was guys were going, "Hey, you know, fraternities had become irrelevant in my life and I don't need them anymore. So I was no more or less active in ZBT than some guys were active in SAE or Phi Kappa Sigma or PiKA or any other house.

Warren: That's a good point.

Blake: I didn't withdraw from ZBT.

Warren: I hate to do this, but I'm going to take you back, Walter.

Blake: Okay.

Warren: You mentioned Freshman Camp and Rush. Although I'm very interested in 1970, I'm class of 1972 myself, so I understand a lot of what you're saying. That was the crux of our lives.

Blake: Exactly.

Warren: But let's go back to '68.

Blake: Okay.

Warren: You were the first who stayed. What was that like? You were the first to go through Rush, right?

Blake: Linwood went through Rush as well, I believe. I think Linwood went through Rush. I think Linwood didn't go through as extensive a Rush as I – I mean, I kind of just signed up for everybody. I didn't care. My attitude was, "Hey, let's just get out there

and meet some guys and drink some beer. I mean, whoop-dee-doo. It's a big old party. I'm just kind of a wide-eyed kid in a big city, three blocks from home, but a wide-eyed kid in the big city, of course.

When we started, as I recall, we came on campus for, I don't know, maybe a day, a couple of hours or whatever it was, and then immediately got on school buses and went to Natural Bridge. At Natural Bridge you are assigned to cabins by alphabetical order, and I forget how many people were in each cabin. I can't even remember, but I think we had two people to a bed, which most of us found pretty appalling. It's like, "I'm not sleeping with this guy. You've got to be crazy."

But you go to Freshman Camp and you spend a day or two, or whatever, at Natural Bridge, which is quite nice. Then you come back and you begin the Rush process. Of course, this time you're going through your advanced placement testing and your registration, getting your classes squared away, and it's just this wide-eyed time when it's like, oooh, this stuff is whirling around you.

As I say, we came in as a very clean-cut traditional Washington and Lee class. We had a dress code. We had to wear a coat and tie to class. Most of us had relatively manageable hair in terms of length. We were all relatively clean-shaven, all mannerable people, traditional Washington and Lee students of the 1960s, late 1960s, guys who liked to have a good time, drank a little wine, a little beer, a little whiskey, whatever, chased a few women if we could find them to chase. That was us. Sixteen, seventeen, eighteen years old, whatever the guys were in the class, that's kind of who we were.

We all showed up. I came back to campus and went through Rush, as I recall, I don't know how many houses I visited, but a very high percentage of the houses that I visited initially invited me back for a second visit. As I recall, the process had a deal where you went in for an initial kind of, "This is who we are," you drink a beer and you talk to the guys, and either they hate your guts and you never see them again, or they

invite you back a second time, which means they kind of like you and there is some possibility. Then after that, that's when they really got serious about it.

Well, I knew at the time that there were probably only two houses on campus that I'd really have any kind of a chance at all of getting into, one being ZBT, the other was Phi Epsilon Phi right across the street, but I went to ZBT and PEP and Lambda Ki and Sigma Ki and Phi Gam and maybe Sigma Nu, even. I think I even went to Beta. I mean, I think the only ones I didn't go to were Phi Delt and SAE and maybe one or two others, because you can only do so many of the eighteen. But I did as many as you could do. As I say, of the number that I could do, got invited back to a significant portion of those, and had just a very good experience.

A lot of that went back to the fact that having been, well, being what I call a townie, I had an unfair advantage, because a lot of these guys, I wasn't new. A lot of these guys I had known, and I attribute it to the fact that I knew some of these guys from the time I was in high school and worked at the dining hall. I knew some of these guys when they were freshmen, and now they were juniors or seniors and they remembered me, of course, and it was kind of like old home week. "I remember you. We used to work together at the dining hall when they were on work study or whatever. So I think a lot of it clearly had to do with the fact that there was some prior knowledge and they felt comfortable with me and I felt comfortable with them, but whatever the number of houses I got invited back to a second time, I chose to go with ZBT.

ZBT, up until that time, had been almost exclusively Jewish. I think my class probably was the class that had the first couple folk in it that were non-Jewish. Me and Tom Rogers and maybe one or two other people went into that class that were not Jewish. Just, you know, went into that situation, made very good friends with my fraternity brothers, very close to my fraternity brothers, and just had a traditional freshman year here.

Warren: I need to turn the tape over.

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

Warren: So a normal traditional freshman year.

Blake: Normal freshman year.

Warren: What does that mean?

Blake: Had Professor Royston for calculus on Saturday morning, I think Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday; didn't understand a thing he said. Just like any other freshman, had no clue. Loved him, and figured out, "The way I'm going to pass this course is talk about baseball with him," because he went to the University of Michigan and played baseball. So I just learned about baseball and talked baseball with him, and he liked me and I passed. I crammed, studied, and made a C. Literally walked out the door and it was kind of a core dump, and I put everything I knew about calculus on a piece of paper, which obviously was enough to give me a C, and was happy as I could be.

English. I did fairly well in biology, did well in English, clearly did well in history, I believe. Can't remember what else I took. I took Spanish. No, excuse me. I took French, and I think I had Professor Hamer maybe. Didn't particularly like French, hated language lab. Always said, "If I ever go to France, I'll be financially well off enough to hire somebody who can speak English, so I don't care. So I didn't do quite as well in French as everything, but I did manage to pull the magic 2.0000 grade point average my first semester, which was the cutoff for getting initiated into your fraternity. So end of the first semester, getting initiated into ZBT, and just the rest of the year, just like I say, had that traditional first year.

I think it may have been the spring of my freshman year or the fall of my sophomore year when Melvin van Peebles came to town. We had a world premier of a movie here, "Watermelon Man," 1969, 1970, maybe. At the time being one of only two black students on the campus, I was assigned to escort Mr. Van Peebles, and that clearly

was quite a thrill for me. One of my fraternity brothers, Steve Maslansky, his family had some ownership interest in Columbia, and we had a film festival here. Professor Riegel over in the Journalism Department, I believe, Ritz, Riegel, one of the two, had a film festival, and they managed to get "Watermelon Man" world premiered here. Melvin van Peebles showed up as the director. So I spent three days with him, two days, two and a half days, hosting him, kind of, and we spent almost that entire time shooting pool over in the General's Headquarters, the Cockpit, as we called it at the time, you know, basically drinking wine and talking. I mean, fascinating. Fascinating person. To have a world premier of a movie in Lexington at the State Theater was quite the deal. It was quite the deal. I remember thinking this is about as good as it gets.

Right about that period was the beginning of the end of the Age of Innocence, because right about that time things were beginning to happen politically in the larger world and were beginning to happen on campus, and things were becoming more and more active and more aggressive in terms of positions being taken and stands being taken on some significant issues. And things began to change right about that time, right about 1969. People started attending protest meetings in Washington. We went away from things like wearing coat and tie, and the dress code loosened up, and all of a sudden we had guys who were sporting long hair. I mean, real long hair.

Warren: What happened then? Did the faculty go nuts when people stopped wearing coats and ties?

Blake: The faculty didn't so much go nuts. There were some who were very traditional, old traditionalists like Professor Futch, who just kind of said, "I don't care what the university says. You come in my class, you're going to wear a coat and tie. Pure and simple. Others at the time, it really all depended, because we had some faculty members who were what I'd call hip, or wanting to be hip, who, "Yeah, man, that's cool. I can't understand. You know how professors, whatever it takes to relate to your students, that's what you do, so they tried to relate by being friends. And we said, "Hey,

no problem. That's cool. You can do that." But there was not a real — at least if there was a real hue and cry when that change happened, the students didn't perceive it so much. I mean, there may have been some great consternation among the administration and faculty, but we really just didn't see it. Guys just kind of went on about it.

Warren: Did it happen schoolwide or was it the freshmen and sophomores who were doing it and the seniors were still wearing coats and ties? Or did everybody change simultaneously?

Blake: Well, everybody changed, but I wouldn't say simultaneously. It really took hold among the younger guys in the freshmen and sophomore classes. The older guys would loosen up to the extent that they would wear sports coat with no tie, and maybe some penny loafers with no socks. That's kind of one extreme. Then there'd be the bell-bottomed, tie-dyed teeshirt, long-haired hippie on the other extreme. So we had the continuum. By the time I was a senior, my class basically had a bunch of bell-bottom-wearing, tie-dyed, long-hair hippie freaks, and the guys who were coming behind us were beginning to rotate back into something of a bit more traditional style. So, you know, we kind of went through the continuum while I was here. I was kind of at the beginning and the end of it during that period of time, and it just kind of went full circle, not all the way back, of course, to wearing coats and ties and being very conservative, but at least being somewhat more casual in terms of dress style, going back to maybe a sports coat and some chinos or whatever.

But, yes, it was an interesting, interesting time, and to have been here during that time in my particular circumstance was just — you just can't begin to describe it. It was phenomenal. It was phenomenal. We had a questionnaire on our alumni form that asked, "Please name your most memorable experience," my same old comment was, "I had more memorable experiences than I can ever begin to recount, and I can't name just one. I cannot name just one experience that I consider most memorable. There's just too many. It could be any one of a hundred, two hundred. I mean, if I could recall the

things I did twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-seven years ago with perfect clarity, there would be just so many things, I'd just say, "I don't even want to begin to get into it," because these little flashes of things that come back, and I look back on them finally and I think, "Man, those were the days. Those were the days. Never to come again, but those were the days."

Warren: One thing you have not mentioned, and it fascinates me, is the one thing that people say when they talk about you and Linwood, is that you lived at home.

Blake: I lived at home for my freshman year. Sophomore year, I lived in the fraternity house.

Warren: Oh, you did?

Blake: Sure. I lived in the ZBT house my sophomore year.

Warren: There are rumors about you that aren't true.

Blake: Yes. My sophomore year, I lived in the ZBT house, which is now the Kappa Sig House. I lived in the room right at the top of the steps to the left. I lived in the ZBT House my sophomore year. My junior and senior years, I lived a little bit of everywhere. I stayed at the fraternity house some, but mostly I became kind of an ad hoc dorm counselor, because in my junior year they put most of the black students, they were over, I think in Gaines or wherever, so I wound up spending half my time, or a significant portion of my time, camped out over there trying to keep those guys going.

And then in my senior year they moved a good number of them up to the Preston House, which is the house right up the head of Preston Street in front of the post office. I lived at the Preston House. Now, the university may not know I lived there, but I basically had my cot and all my stuff at the Preston House, and that's where I lived. So, yes, I went home. My mom would feed me every now and then, but I really didn't live at home for three years.

Warren: All right. I'm glad to get that record straight.

Blake: Like I say, my mom would cook for me, do my laundry maybe, but I pretty much left at the end of my freshman year and that was it.

Warren: How did your parents feel about getting involved in Washington and Lee and being here?

Blake: Well, they loved the idea that I stayed at home. They absolutely loved the idea that I stayed at home, and they loved the idea that I went to Washington and Lee. They were clearly a lot less enthused about my getting as involved in some of the things I got involved in as I did. Like every parent, "Get a haircut." Like every parent, "Why don't you wear some decent clothes?" Like a parent, "What are you doing up in Washington protesting? Stay your tail down here and get an education," and blah, blah, blah. Typical parent-child relationship. I loved them to death and they loved me to death, and they were proud as they could be. I tried never to do anything to hurt them.

That pretty much is it for them. They just, frankly, loved the idea that I was at home. They didn't want to see me go off to school somewhere if I could help it. They didn't particularly feel strongly one way or the other about – and I don't think they were cognizant of the fact that I was in respects a pioneer and was exposing myself to what I may be exposing myself to. I don't think they consciously thought about it, because I think they perceived that they had prepared me well enough that I could deal with anything, so it didn't make a difference. They kind of suggested, or without saying, they pretty much knew that, "Look. You've got enough sense to act right, and if you don't, we'll knock you out. [Laughter] So that was kind of it.

Warren: You talked about when the guys arrived in 1970, and then there were some more who followed in '71.

Blake: Not nearly as strong as the ones in 1970. Not nearly as strong. I have never been able to prove this, but I know I've had some discussions with members of the class of 1970, my compatriots and close personal friends, but I made a comment to them that, "It is my firm belief that the university made a conscious decision in its admissions policy

to never again make the mistake of going out and accepting a bunch of guys like you, because you can cause a man's hair to go gray real easy. Whether or not that was the case, I don't know, but you just knew that if there had been a real aggressive effort to get the class of 1970 in here, get that number of bodies – and I don't think we've ever approached that number of bodies again – that effort changed from that point on. They'd come in at four or five, six. If you had a good class, maybe eight people would show up following that time. But there never was this concerted effort to go out and get a big old bunch of guys like the group that came in here in 1970.

Warren: Who was behind that effort, do you know?

Blake: I have no idea. As I say, once again I can't even prove that it was a conscious policy, but I remember going to meetings with Dean John and Dean Farrar, both men who were close to me and I was close to when I was here, and have maintained a relationship with Dean John even to this day, but I remember how exasperated they would get sometimes dealing with us. It would be like, "I don't believe this. What do we have to do to get these guys to act right?? Whatever "right" might be.

We had once incident in which it was, I believe, my senior year, Thomas Penn was walking his girlfriend, maybe soon-to-be fiancée, back up to the Preston House, and we had some townies, probably some guys from Buena Vista, is my recollection, drove by and pulled a shotgun on them, and he had to push his date into the grass up just above the post office. These guys drive off, of course. Well, we take this pretty seriously. To us, that is absolutely an outright up-front assault on us. It's like, "Okay. Now one of several things is going to happen. Either the university is going to figure out a way to deal with this problem or we're going to deal with this problem, and we know how to deal with it. Take our word for it. We know how to deal with it."

We had a meeting up at, I believe, Dean John's house, up on Jackson Avenue, someone's house on Jackson Avenue. I think it was Dean John's house. I remember Dean John or someone making the comment that nine times out of ten if someone pulls

a gun on you, they won't shoot you. And, you know, Hill and Buck and Hutcheson and myself, we all just kind of looked at each other, you know. I go, "Wait a minute. Excuse me, but where you come from, maybe they don't shoot. Where we come from, when people pull guns on you, they shoot you. Pure and simple. And at that time I made the statement that, "If the police of Lexington and the university security and the state police or whoever you have cannot protect us, we'll protect ourselves. We don't need anybody to take care of us. If you want a shooting war, then you got a shooting war. Period. Just simple as that. We will not tolerate having guns pulled on us. So the least thing you can do is go and inform everybody that from now on, if you pull a gun on one of these guys, they're going to pull a gun back on you and they're going to shoot you, just pure and simple. That's all there is to it. There's no discussion."

And probably five people armed themselves almost immediately after that meeting, or within several days after that meeting. I mean, really, when I say armed themselves, I don't mean with BB guns, I mean just flat-out weapons. It was like I assume people knew it, I don't know if they knew it or not, but we were very serious. We were not going to be terrorized. It was just pure and simple. It was like, "Look. If somebody thinks this is a game to pull a gun on me, then we will have to show them that there is a very serious consequence when you do that."

We had not many conflicts with locals. Most of the locals were pretty cool. Every now and then we'd get a couple of guys who'd get drunked up and act stupid, but Murph, bless his heart, Murph did a great job of diffusing almost every situation. He did a great job of diffusing almost every situation that had the potential to get truly out of hand and have somebody get hurt bad. We never had any situations in which someone got what I call hurt real bad. That was just by sheer providence, and a couple of good people.

Warren: Murph seems to have been a real presence on this campus.

Blake: He was.

Warren: So he was real important to you all?

Blake: He was important to us. Murph was cool. Murph understood us. He watched out for us. He watched out for us. He knew what was going on. He pretty much knew what was going on. He didn't let too many things happen to us. If somebody was going to come, especially somebody from outside the university, he was especially aware of local presence and how it might interact with us in a negative way. So he managed to keep that to a minimum, managed to keep that to a minimum. We were quite fortunate to have someone like Murph at that particular point in time, and we were pretty close to him. In fact, I talked to him today at lunch. I went right up to him. Talked to him before I talked to President Huntley. Went over, "Hey, Murph, how you doing, bud? I mean, we went back immediately twenty-five years ago and started talking about stuff.

So, yes, he was clearly a presence, but he either diffused situations before they happened or buffered us by keeping certain elements away from the campus that could have made things a bit dicier around here than they really were. So that's to his credit. He may not get credit for that, but at that time there were a couple of people around here who had both the means and the capacity to reap pretty serious devastation on someone if they wanted to, and we never had to do that. Once again I go back and say I give him as much credit as I give anyone. He did good work. He did good work. And him being an honorary alumnus, he deserves it. If anyone, in my experience with the university, deserves to be an honorary alumnus to this institution, Murph is it. He served his time and he did good. The four years I was here with him, he did good. He protected a lot of stuff.

Warren: He sure sounds like a very special person. How about the Honor System? What did it mean to you?

Blake: Well, you know it's interesting you would ask that question, especially in light of the discussions we've had over the past several days at the Alumni Board level. When I came here, the Honor System, of course, was presented in the orientation at

Freshman Camp and at several other times during the course of the year. You had the Blue Book, "I have neither given nor received aid on this exam," or whatever it said at the time. It was not held out at that time, at least in my perception, as a threat the way it seems to be perceived now by the students. What it was, and I still haven't quite figured this out, because I talked about this a little bit yesterday, and I haven't figured this out, it was done so suddenly, the indoctrination was done so suddenly of the Honor Code, and not only the Honor Code but this system of values that was inculcated by this place and instilled in me, I don't know how it happened and I didn't always exhibit it maybe when I was here, but as I've gotten on in life, I find these things beginning to come out, and I'm going, "Damn, I know where I learned that. Or I remember the situation that made me think and react this way.

It became a system of values that you got in terms of how you deal in certain situations. To this day, some of the things that came down from the Honor System and really what I call more than the Honor System, value system, play just fundamental roles in my everyday life. As I say, I don't know yet how they did that to me. I don't know. I don't know who did it, how it was done, when it was done; all I know is that it was done, because I go through stuff now and I look back, and if I have to point to a factor in my life outside of the fact that my parents, as they say, brought me up basically right, the only other frame of reference I have for that value framework is the time that I spent here – commitment to duty, perseverance, ability to suffer in silence when you know you're right. It's that whole thing. The ability to speak out when you have to speak out to address an injustice. It's like, gosh, I don't know quite where it came from, but it came.

So to me, the Honor System really goes way beyond just that statement of "Shall not lie, cheat, or steal. It really kind of is a broader set of values, of which the Honor System is clearly a linchpin, but it's clearly only one of several values that I kind of came out of this place with. That's really kind of what it means to me.

We talked about that a bit today, and I told them, I made the comment yesterday when I was talking to Dallas Hagewood and Jed Dunn about the dilemma, as we've gotten on in the world, the dilemma of being what I call an honorable man in a dishonorable world. Not everybody has that same value reference, that framework of values that you come out of here with, so either you open yourself up to being had often, or you change your value framework or you adapt your value framework, and it just becomes sometimes difficult to translate your values to those around you. It's how you do it. Those are issues that we have to struggle with every day, because I know what may be right or wrong and I've got to respond according to what makes me at peace with myself, but that's not always what makes my wife and my kids happiest, or is it always what makes my clients happiest, or whatever. So how do I deal with that? You deal with it. Like I said, I have to deal with it and go home and go to sleep, you know. Do whatever you've got to do, say okay, and I'm outta here.

Warren: You're talking about present-day stuff. Do you recruit for W&L now?

Blake: I have not recruited for W&L actively outside of my chapter functions and chapter participation. One of the reasons is, I was active in the alumni admissions program when I lived in Baltimore – actually, I lived in Annapolis. I moved to Dallas twelve years ago and really got more into to big-time civic stuff in Dallas. Was active in the chapter to an extent, but we had AAPP people in Dallas, so I never really spent much time doing AAPP-related work, and clearly that now that we just moved to North Carolina, I'm not even been involved in any chapter-related work. Alumni Board-related work, of course, but not recruitment directly. Anytime I have a chance to talk about the institution to a prospective student, I do.

I have two children who I wasn't able to recruit to come here, a daughter who graduated from Rice in 1992, and a son who's currently a freshman up at St. John's, both incredibly fine, unique institutions in their own right, but their choices were best for them. They were real familiar with this place, and I didn't push one way or the other. I

didn't say, "This is where you need to be," because they weren't going to be happy here. Sometimes legacies have trouble following in Dad's or Mom's footsteps; they just don't want to have to go through that grief of being compared to. "God, I remember your daddy. My son said, "I don't want to go through that."

Warren: "I don't want to listen to that." [Laughter]

Blake: "I've got to deal with that enough every day. So it didn't bother me that he made a choice to go elsewhere."

Warren: I know you've had a long day, but I have one more question I really want to ask you. Are there any faculty who made a particular difference for you?

Blake: Oh, several. I indicated Eddie "the Axe" Atwood, Dr. Leyburn.

Warren: Tell me about them. Tell me why they were important to you.

Blake: Dr. Leyburn, I'll go with him first. He was, to me, the absolute epitome – I was talking about this with someone today – he is the epitome of the Renaissance man. He was a man who, at the time, you kind of wondered about him. As you got older, you really appreciated it. He was at peace with himself. He was sure of himself. He was very good at what he did. I don't think he ever stopped learning. He just had this incredible knowledge of this incredible range of subjects, and it just boggled the mind when you'd talk to this guy. His ability to just go to the heart of an issue, just cut through all the fog, the haze, and take the chaos and just cut through all the chaos and pick out the essential core of it and make sense out of it. You'd sit there and you'd go, "Man, whew, this guy's good. This guy is real good."

There was just something about him and his style that I think every student who ever had him had a little bit of him rub off on him. If all of us had our druthers, the material world that we all go out in and struggle and to survive and do everything, that would be fine and dandy to succeed in that context, but to be able to be like a Leyburn, sure of yourself, confident in your abilities, a man who has just so much style going for you, that's what a lot of us would like to be.

Atwood was my faculty advisor. He was the guy who kind of held me together there for a while. I wanted to be an economics major, and I had a Professor Nowak, and Nowak had the same exam every year. This was my sophomore year, Economics 101. He taught Samuelson as the textbook, but he taught Keynes and the Keynesian model. That was basically his shtick. Everybody knew what the exam was, the same exam every year, absolutely the same exam every year. Didn't make a lick of difference. I mean, it was the same questions. So everybody studied the Keynesian model and went in and took the exam, and your ability to explain it was your grade.

I basically went to the ZBT house and got the guys there who were economics majors, who were incredibly economists, one is a professor of economics at University of Virginia now, just drill me to no end on Keynesian economics. I knew it up one side and down the other, knew what the question was going to be. Went in, took the exam, exactly the same question I knew was going to be on it, and got the exam back and had a D on it. I was absolutely crushed, absolutely crushed. That was the first time in my life I— not the first time in my life, but for the first time in a long time I was just— not only was I crushed, but I was mad. I was really mad. I mean, I was shaking mad. It's like, "What just happened here?"

So I go to Professor Nowak and I say, "Can you explain this?"

And his comment, I'll never forget, was, "Isn't it obvious?"

I thought to myself, "Hmm. Think I'll go outside and sit down, because if I don't, I think I'm going to do something you will regret— not me, but you will regret. So I went outside and sat down and kind of calmed down a little bit, kind of walked a little bit and cried to myself, I was so angry. I had to release it somehow because at that time I was about ready to just physically rip someone apart. I was a pretty stout fellow. If you had better things to do, you'd pretty much go do them instead of mess with me.

I called my mother and she called my sister, and my sister came and got me, took me out of town. It concerned my mother enough to think, "This boy's going to do

something stupid. So she got me out of town, took me to Bedford for a day or two, and I came back.

I went in to talk to Professor Atwood, and he said, "Look. Really there's nothing that we can do simply because it's his discretion. He so much as said, without saying it, "I know what happened. And just the style that he handled that situation with to calm me down and kind of make me know that, yeah, okay, you can work your way through this one, and being my faculty advisor at the same time, just kind of helped me. He just kind of kept me going, and I was always grateful for that. I was always grateful for that, because that was my sophomore year, as I say, that was before I had another base of support in the guys that came in. I really kind of, for the first time, felt truly alone, felt truly alone, and I was hurt. I mean, it bothered me, it truly bothered me.

I look back to this day, if it hadn't been for my mother doing what she did, I frankly think I could have done something really, really violent, because I was mad. I was just mad. I mean, I was eighteen years old and I was hurt and I was mad. And I don't get mad much, but when I get mad, I do get real mad. And I was real mad. I mean, all rational logic, all that good stuff had kind of gone out the window, because when I get an answer that says, "Isn't it obvious?" and the only thing I can think of that's obvious is the fact that I don't look like this guy who happened to be a graduate of LSU, I'm thinking to myself, "Now, wait a minute. We can't go through this paper and you can't tell me actually what is wrong, because basically that's the Keynesian model. My Keynesian model is just like everybody else. Like one plus one equals two, mine is wrong but his is right? Can't be. So something was amiss. That was a time that it was an interesting week, let's put it that way. It was an interesting week in the life of Walter Blake: possibly an interesting week in the life of the institution if my mom hadn't gotten me out of town, because I really don't know what I would have done. I mean, I know I was just kind of sitting there thinking, "Well, life as I know it is over," because at that point in life, you know, you're thinking, "I want to be an economics major and my

chance is gone because I've made a D in the core course, the base course. What chance do I have?"

Well, I took Dr. Atwood's course in money and banking and did quite well, and other economics courses and did well. It's like, "Well, obviously I must have known a little something."

But, yes, those are the two that particularly stand out, there were others. But those two guys, yes, those are the two that I would put on the list, and I think you'd find those two guys on a lot of lists.

Warren: Yes, you're right.

Blake: Yes, I think you'd find those two guys on a lot of lists.

Warren: I have a number of other things I'd love to talk to you about, but I know there's a party going on out there. You've earned your place at the party.

Blake: I need a drink. And I put that on the tape. I need a drink.

Warren: Walter, I want to thank you. It's been a real joy and a pleasure, worth waiting for.

Blake: I've enjoyed it. I don't know what your time frame is on finishing this, but if you want to do some more, we'll accommodate you.

Warren: I would love to, because there's several other important issues I'd like to talk to you about.

Blake: Okay. Let's plan on doing it.

Warren: All right. Thank you.

[End of interview]