

**March On Milwaukee: More Than One Struggle, Oral History Interviews
Conducted at Wisconsin Black Historical Society
April 12, 2008
Ms. Lauri Wynn**

Interviewer : Do you want to start with just introducing yourself and your role in the desegregation movement.

Wynn : Alright. My name is Lauri Wynn. I became involved in the desegregation movement almost not understanding what I was doing. When the very first day I arrived in Milwaukee for work with Milwaukee Public Schools, the school boycott began that day. And so not knowing what it was all about and having gone in the building because I didn't know what was going on. Immediately after dismissal I went to the church which was where the Freedom Schools were working. Which was St. Matthew's and my children had gone there. I came with five children, four of them school age. They had gone there because my husband knew about it and I had to be to work the first day.

I did meet Lloyd Barbee, who was an astounding, kinda brilliant, person, eccentric and just so bright you had to listen to every word for fear you'd missed a verb. And in working with them, it was very clear that money was a real problem. That the NAACP that had initially agreed with the commencement of the thought of the suit that they would monetarily support the suit, changed when the publicity from the Father Groppi movement on open housing was getting all of the news. And it appeared to me, and I'm sure it did to them, though they may not admit it, that it was much more newsworthy to have a white priest leading a bunch of black boys over a bridge than an eccentric attorney talking about school desegregation.

The thought was that if the open housing was available that people would move different places. There was no thought of the fact that many people could not afford to move and that there were things that could have been done to rearrange in some way how youngsters did go to school and with whom. So after a period of time this [indecipherable] and MUSIC which was an organization which was put together by persons that were positively advocates for desegregation. And they began trying to raise money and they did raise some.

However I was a public school teacher and beginning to be active with the [Teacher's] Union which had not been something I had been involved in previously. And it was through this movement of complaining about the schools. What our children did not have and what they should have. And the number of the schools that were black and the number of schools that were white in a community that at that time could have been integrated and schools could have been successfully desegregated. It came clear to me that the money was with the Teacher's Union. And so with a scheme and unabashedly, I began, really it was just me [because] there weren't many blacks in the Union to begin with. [I] Began to pressure the Union to stand up and stop talking about all these things and hand in their resolutions and what they said and do something.

So Lloyd Barbee was very anxious to get the money to computerize the evidence he had. And that at that time, you know, [that] was really something. A lot of people talk about computer, they'd look up in

the air. So this was really around 1969, '68. So he had prepared many charts which could display the, you know, the variances and the discrepancies in how youngsters were placed.

And so I had joined the National Education Association through the local which was Milwaukee Teacher's Education and the state was the Wisconsin Education Association and began to ask them, pressure them. I'd present resolutions which they thought were goofy. And they didn't know where this one black person came from and who did she think she was. And I didn't know them so I didn't care what they thought about me. I was able to request a loan from them saying that as a teacher I was forced to teach in a *de jure* segregated situation.

And I believe that the Union, which was really the Association, who had given money and had supported fully black teachers in the South when integration came in there so they had a pattern of helping blacks who were displaced and taking their causes and presenting them to make alterations. You know, quietly negotiating with a wink and nod. And they had attorneys. And the organization, the National Education Association, was very large, very big, and as I saw it, very rich. So I thought they were a very good group to start with. So I applied for the loan. The rules as I read them said that if you receive no answer, no response within 90 days you could request a hearing before the National Education Association Executive Board which was around 10 or 12 people in Washington, and so I did. In other words they made a mistake and I caught 'em in it and I called 'em on it. But the idea was I had to get there. So I didn't have any money so when [I] got paid which happened to be, we always got paid once a month then. I took my money and bought a ticket and went off to Washington. Didn't know where I was gonna stay.

But I did get to Washington in time for the Executive Committee meeting where I presented some 32 very large charts. Which Barbee had presented. Which had the statistics and the graphs and everything to prove this. So with a pointer, like teaching my class, I presented this to this group of, which was staff, and so it must have been a group of about 30 who kind of watched me like where did she come from you know something from outer space. And I presented them explaining what had happened. That I taught there, that I felt I was forced to teach in a situation which was specifically designed to keep segregation in its place.

Well in 10 days, they advised me. Well they told me then that action was all over that they agreed with what I had suggested and that they would move on it. So they then advised me very shortly afterwards that they would call a hearing, a public hearing in Milwaukee, which was held at the old Radisson. And that they would send in their staff people who from their Civil Rights Division, who were accustomed to this because they had dealt with it in South. The North was new, that's what was new about this case. They had not had such a request from the North. So they did send some five people I think it was. And people from the community were called in. And they did come. And it was all 'chronicalized'. And at that point they agreed to grant \$10,000 for the computerization of the evidence, which was astronomical to us. And which was what was needed to put this into computer form so that we could proceed. That's how it kind of began.

Now after that it meant that you had to, you know on Sundays, you know I'd drag these five kids of mine and we would go to Barbee's office, which was closed, down on across the river and Wisconsin Avenue. And we would go through all the [student] yearbooks, you know, and finding somebody black in there was like finding you know a fly in buttermilk. And so we would go through all the books, we couldn't find anybody, so we'd save those books, you know, those yearbooks, to prove that these schools have been segregated and are currently segregated. And we had pictorial evidence.

And then we began to go through the placement of teachers. Well I didn't know it but I was an example of a teacher had been placed. I didn't know anything about Milwaukee, just that my husband had been transferred here and it paid more money than Chicago paid me. And in Chicago I was teaching 50 students and here I would teach 30. And I thought I died and gone to Heaven.

And so I [began] working on these things after we had figured out how to get the money. It meant that they also, the NEA, also granted to Lloyd Barbee the opportunity to use civil rights attorneys in the regions that was Minnesota, Iowa, and Michigan. There weren't many in Iowa but in the other places you know with the ultra liberals in Minnesota and the union people from the autoworks in Michigan, he was able to get some. But he was a genius and did not seem to really need these people but I said to him, "Don't refuse them; act like you're listening to them," because it was a plus.

During all this time, I advanced in the Union much to my surprise. I kept presenting to them resolutions that they didn't like and they would kind of like be shocked and they would. It was kinda like [Barack] Obama, you know, they think they like this guy but they really don't know him and he doesn't know himself. But in this instance it was like getting on the bandwagon, we're going some place and so they did. So they, I ran for office for third Vice President and I won to my amazement, I won. And I won by such a large margin I looked around I thought they were calling off the wrong person. And then after I served in Executive Committee for that two year period, I ran for second Vice President. Then after I won that. Then I said well I'm not gonna run for first Vice President. This is dumb I'm gonna run for president. So I ran for president and I won six to one. And I said "Good God Almighty I got all these white people, what are you doing?" And so I decided that I would be myself. And we were able during that time to present information to the white teachers across the country, plus at the state, because at that time there were less than one percent of black teachers in the whole state. I mean we had to dig each other up.

But it was a time when the Union was changing. It was really an association and it was trying to move into union gear. And there were of course which you know unions are bad so you had those that were for a union attitude. But it was very critical at the time because this state, Wisconsin, did not have a bargaining law. And so it was then determined that while we're showing that we're progressive, we're for desegregation, we've offered money to desegregate, we have offered attorneys, we are working on that and so it seemed a proper time for the union, the association, to move into Union gear.

And during that time as I was president we had 29 legal strikes across the state. I would hit a small town and it was obvious I didn't belong there because everybody was white. The sheriff would follow me like I came with an army. And we began to call for negotiations, [for a] bargaining law in the state. We

eventually got a right to bargain but not a union bargaining. We really had, you know, we moved into trying to negotiate in a more stringent way. Well, that's how that grew. But what that meant was that the Union was back there in a very quiet almost hiding behind the door trying not really to be seen but its money was up front.

And as desegregation began, after there was a lawsuit of course in place. So in 1973, '76 the case came before the federal court here. I was an expert witness because as a teacher, which is what I was saying, I was assigned to a school because I was black that was black. I was not assigned to the school because I lived in the area but I was assigned to the school because I was black. They had said that they placed teachers where they lived which wasn't necessarily the case, in my instance. First because I didn't know where I was because I was brand new to Milwaukee. From that point, as the case came forward, we had desegregation of black teachers, we had the desegregation in the, I mean the segregation, of children and we had differences in the schools.

In addition to that, they also began to find ways to have black children in a school but bring them in by a bus. Keep them in separate rooms while the rest of the school was white. And so that, in court, was another instance of intentional segregation. Now one of my sons was one of these kids on this bus and there was an orange line, yellow line, diagonally in the playground where the black kids played on one side and the white kids played on the other. So he would tell me about this line and I said "I don't have time to listen to that--that couldn't be possibly be true." Now I should have known, but it was true. And they were bused back to their original schools in the black community for lunch and then bused back to the school for after lunch. But at recess they played in these divided areas. Well it was clear that this was a mess.

And so the judge did rule in favor of desegregation, but given the political situation in Milwaukee which is really not much different than it is now except we are poorer and blacker. But segregation reigns supreme. But we were able during that time for the judge to come up with a plan to bus. Well what happened was all of the school districts, the white school districts kinda came in to it, as you would imagine, trying to like secure their spots. So there was a special master that was appointed who tried to work out this thing so that it could work and each side could at least see some of it. While there was no question that they were not going to agree to bus white kids to black areas, so it was the blacks who were bused to the white areas. And that even 'til today when it's all over when everything is black or white that is a contention. But for a period of time that did go. Except of course that the whites began to flee so you didn't have many people to integrate with and so the difference between desegregation and integration was really not something that was taken into consideration by black people. The point was we were moving around and to some degree we had won. But what happened instead was that the, the forces, the political forces were very very concerned because they imagined, and they were right, that whites were gonna run and they did. And that blacks who were economically able to would move, which they did. And so the ring of suburban areas around Milwaukee did not suffer much because the economics meant that blacks could not move in those areas because the economic sources were different than ours and so the integration within the city was what was done. And later in that period of time it was then decided well they would do something that would be called the Chapter 220, which is still in effect, but is lessening. Where you could apply to a school and that occurred.

But I would say that for the desegregation Lloyd Barbee really did it almost by himself. I just helped with the money at a very critical time, that was the computer time. But there were other people who were giving money but it just wasn't enough to have large the amounts of money. You needed to have UWM really computerize it. And so that was done.

Now we are now at the point now where it's like somebody just threw out all the linen and we are back looking at the bare bed and the bare bed now is black and the school district now is black. The school district has disintegrated and it has disintegrated not because of desegregation, though although that was a concern, but because the institution was not prepared, nor did it want to receive a different population. Which meant that they were coming in with different cultural attributes. That they had not had some of the advantages. That they were poorer really almost poverty, then they didn't say poverty now they admit it's poverty. And that they did not have ways of getting about. And so this concentrated population knew each other. It didn't know the external perimeter, which is a very serious matter. Now nor did the perimeter know the black community and I'm not saying they didn't want to, they just didn't.

And so Lloyd Barbee won the case. And the busing began. And the numbers of whites to mix began to disintegrate, they just weren't there. And consequentially the problem has now gotten to a point that it's right back to where it was. But I think it is more serious now because at that time the school system itself had generally a very good reputation. I mean it produced people with good ACT and SAT scores. I enjoyed teaching here. They had all sorts of supplies. You could stand on the floor and you could see up your dress, the floors were so shiny. It was just a physically well-kept school with prepared teachers, mainly white. But when the blacks [teachers] came in, you better be good or they didn't take you. They didn't tell you that, but you kinda knew that you were there, that you were not, you know, you were a little different; you might even be better than some of the white teachers. But they were a secure, stable school district.

The mobilization of students began when people were poor. They would move if rent was too high or something would change. Jobs would change and people moved about. And so the school system now is, I would say almost destitute. And it is an embarrassment to democracy. And it should be a shame for Americans because what we are producing are people that can only be dependent, because they are not adequately prepared technologically. Things are fun but if you replace that with job preparedness, it is not in the curriculum and it should be.

So I taught in Milwaukee for more than 25 years. I went away to serve as President of the Union, the Wisconsin Education Association Council that I spoke of, for two terms of three years. And I was on the National Education Association Executive Committee for three terms at five years. So my involvement from this arriving and not knowing what was going on, what church to go to, grew to be that. So I learned a lot and I think I was able to influence a lot. I was able to during that time to found the National Education Association Black Caucus, so that in all the cities around the country where the Union is, this particular union, there are black caucuses who are talking about things like this. Why aren't we teaching our children more? Why are we segregated? Where before people were, you know, the North was very quiet, they were not organized. So it was an interesting experience and I'm pleased I have it.

Interviewer : Just to [clarify] did you come in 1960, to Milwaukee, or 1964?

Wynn : I came in 1965.

Interviewer : 1965?

Wynn : Right.

Interviewer : And did you...I have read some places that there were not a lot about African American History.

Wynn : Oh nothing.

Interviewer : [indecipherable]

Wynn : That's the simplest way. Nothing.

Interviewer : Nothing?

Wynn : No, there were no books that were dispensed. And if you came in and put something up on the board you would be chastised. "What is that? Everybody isn't interested in that." And so the whole Black History month, you know, people began to openly observe it, I would say in the Seventies, early Seventies. Not the Sixties at all. I really probably should say more like '74, which I guess would be early but prior to that time that was not. You didn't do that. And frankly you were fearful of doing it because you thought it might be torn down. I mean it was that sort of contention.

Interviewer : Did you notice a difference [in] the schools in the central city opposed to the schools in the suburbs like--

Wynn : Well, really, I didn't know anything about the suburbs. I just knew this was where I was, but it was. And we didn't do that comparison with suburban schools and Milwaukee schools. We did, Lloyd Barbee, did the comparison with the schools within the Milwaukee Public Schools, the white schools versus the score of black schools that was really enough to prove his point. And of course when you got outside, that it was, you know, another heaven out there which we didn't really know about. That was brought into the equation when a law was passed much later, which was the 220, Chapter 220, which I mentioned, which is still going on now where you, you know, apply for schools. It's not a lottery and you are accepted if there are vacancies. If other things are equal that's where the suburban thing got into it, but not in the suit itself.

Interviewer : You said that your son was part of, had to participate in the intact busing. Were you upset about that? Did you say something?

Wynn : Well, I didn't believe him. I was one of these mothers [who] didn't believe everything these kids told me because I taught school and you know. But I learned from going through some of the things that Barbee had that it was a real live diagonal line from the chimney of, the I think it was Sherman School to the fence. And the black kids played near the building and the white kids played near the fence. So their

area wasn't as large, you know, as a fence thing. And I didn't mind the busing because I was fighting for that. You know I didn't mean [indecipherable] but I didn't realize they were kept together. So they came to the school in a bus, went to their classroom which was not in the same area with the white kids. And then when the lunch bell rang, you got back on the bus, went back to home school, had lunch, got back on the bus, and came back to the school. So you played in the yard during recess morning or afternoon, you know, or both if you were at that grade level. So when I did find out about it, I was ashamed that I had ignored him. But you know you get so many stories with five kids, you don't know. Once our son had a kindergarten teacher that had green hair and a pink face and I thought he was lying until I went up there. She'd gone up north, gone swimming, and her hair turned green because she was in the water and she had too much make-up on; the kid was telling me the truth. That should have taught me that I should have listened to the line, but I didn't.

Interviewer : Did you participate in any of the protests--the MUSIC protests--when they protested the busing or anything like that or the building of the schools?

Wynn : They, yeah that's another story. Yeah, you almost had to get into things because you felt like you started this. But I did have a lot of children and I didn't drive at the time. I'm a New Yorker and we don't learn to drive in New York, just nuts driving in New York. So when I came here from Chicago I didn't drive, so I got here I didn't drive, so a lot things I couldn't get to. But I did involve myself in the open housing marches across the bridge. When my son said "Why we marching over? These houses are worse than over there?" and he was just 10 and he figured that out. I said "because they don't want us to" which didn't make very much sense. He did remind me that economics is part of all of this but principles are always important.

Interviewer : You said [something about the]McDowell thing, the McDowell construction protests was another story .

Wynn : That was another thing. I didn't get involved in that but friends of mine did. But later and much later after this was in place, another group called the United Community Action Group was able to block the placement of teachers in these schools if we didn't think they had some sort of feeling for black kids. In other words they would have come in and [be] patronized. They didn't want to be there, we didn't want them. So at that time Dr. Ernest Bates, who was at UWM, was someone that the group selected to sit in with some of the interviews we had with teachers. Because we did gain the right to interview teachers, this United Community Action Group. And he would give his version after asking, listening to them, hearing our questions, whether this was a person who really would be able to function with black kids or wanted to. And that was a first time that was ever done. But that drew out of the McDowell situation. Which then grew into something that was called the interrelated language skills which was the opportunity for us to select teachers.

Interviewer : Okay. Did you have any relationship with Vel Phillips at all or any dealings with her?

Wynn : With who?

Interviewer : Vel Phillips?

Wynn : No, not much. Vel Phillips stayed at the Common Council. She was not involved with. Actually she and Lloyd Barbee didn't like each other too much, as quiet as it's kept. But so he didn't let her up into too...He was an interesting person. But she had her hands full down there with the...which was the open housing thing. She was involved with the open housing, which was Father Groppi. Barbee was involved with the education thing. People kind of mix them up sometimes. The problem was Barbee insisted that people would be dead before they were buying homes on the Southside and those schools would be integrated. I didn't say anything because he was very forceful about it. But the bottom line was that open housing was seen by many to be the key to opening up integration for the schools. That if they just lived in the places that they would be able to go to those schools and that would integrate them. That did not work. And so that Vel was with that group and Lloyd Barbee was over here with. It's the schools we start with, educate, we start with where youngsters go to school and they will learn and then they will be the leaders. If their parents aren't ready, then they will be the leaders. But the hostility was in both on both issues—on the schools and on the housing.

Interviewer : It's interesting that you mentioned that they that Vel Phillips and Lloyd Barbee didn't get along, I mean they had some tension between them?

Wynn : No they were quietly. Well, let me explain. I don't mind, I'm fearless. Vel was real lady, you know, she was girly. She was flirtatious. Barbee was very direct, didn't like that, you know. This is what I do, you know. And that's kind of it was. So the two didn't meld. They didn't openly fight. I mean, I'm over there watching him and his point was well taken. Because what had happened was the media was just excited about a white priest leading these black kids along and then as you put Vel marching beside him, that proved it was integrated. So she would march across the thing, too, the viaduct too, and all the blacks would come after them and that really looked good. Over here you had this little man who didn't care if you liked him or not and you got angry with him because he was so damn smart. I mean he just knew what you were gonna say. He could tell you the page in the section that said what he was saying. He was just different, all right. And so he had the, I would say the intellectuals, the university people, understood the issue and the churches understood the issue. The black churches didn't really want to run after this white priest. Let him take whoever he's taking on down there. Let the Catholics go over there. We're gonna meet at St. Matthew's Church, which is where MUSIC met, where the Freedom Schools were. And everybody was doing their thing. Now nobody was going to openly give any manure to the *[Milwaukee] Journal* or the *[Milwaukee] Sentinel* to pick up anything in between there. So they never did figure it out. They were smart but they didn't figure that out, you know.

Interviewer : You just mentioned that the black churches weren't too thrilled about following a priest, a Catholic priest.

Wynn : No they didn't.

Interviewer : Was there some tension underneath there?

Wynn : No discussions, no arguments, just "You go right ahead," and they went over here. You know the interesting thing about the black community is you see people fighting on the street but the people who are trying to do things are really fighting quietly with each other. And many things are resolved that

way. And then the nonviolence thing was everywhere. In other words, you did not fight going across the bridge. I come from Illinois and had a dog and had passed a driver's test when they were marching. And so I had this new 1967 Plymouth Fury, so I put this dog in the back and this one child who couldn't do anything because he was too young. And I was supposed to go across the viaduct with the Illinois license. See that gave me a chance because then they didn't have the expressways. Go across there with the Illinois license, and they wouldn't bother me because they thought I was just passing through. And I was supposed to count the people with sticks and things and the picket signs and then come back and tell somebody when I came back across. So that's what I did—did that for three days. And I thought I was insane. The dog was no protection. I could kill my kid. These white people were crazy. And I didn't do that anymore. But that was, you know, you almost had to do that sort of thing because it was violent over there.

Interviewer : So you were kind of an intelligence agent?

Wynn : Just for those three days, that was enough for me. It was clear to me that my intelligence and I should stay on the other side of the river. You know, it was a very very, aggravated time, you know. I didn't know the community so I really felt ill-at-ease. So I didn't even know how to, I knew that if I got off that one street that I wasn't gonna get back so I wasn't venturing around; they didn't have to worry about me. I say that because people were trying to use all sorts of ways not to get hurt besides just walking acting like they were bold.

Interviewer : You may have asked this and if you did, pardon me, but did the Vietnam protests have any influence in what Milwaukee blacks were doing?

Wynn : No, that's another thing. My husband was the one who organized the black veterans in the city—the National Association of Black Vietnam Veterans. But that was after this. They weren't even organized in any manner. They became very militant I would say when they got some money, which was like '76. When I was in Madison as president of the Union, they were really kicking in and now have four different places where they work with homeless vets. King, Union down in Racine and here at 34th and Wells. They have a very large place where they house 82 homeless veterans and have all sorts of veteran programs. So it's grown but they weren't in that.

Interviewer : That was later?

Wynn : That was later. As a matter of fact, my husband thought I was crazy so you know just doing this. He wasn't even talking about the war because people were frightened of that. So there was a spirit that kind of grew. You know, it was kind of smoldering and it kind of grew, but it's dead now.

Interviewer : Yeah it sure is. Okay well, thank you so much.

Interviewer : You said when you first started, your first day [of employment] was the day of a boycott?

Wynn : Right.

Interviewer : What was your opinion of the school boycotts and the Freedom Schools? Did you think that it was helpful in getting the point across?

Wynn : Well I thought it was stunning. You know, I'd never heard of a Freedom School. I came out of the West side of Chicago and we were just, I was working on shifts. So I was really running away. I mean I taught two classes a day. So when I got here, this was like heaven, I opened the storage door and they had paper, they even had pencils. We never had pencils. They had notebooks, we didn't have notebooks. I mean it was really shocking all that Milwaukee offered to its students at the time. I don't know if that answered your question, ask me the question again.

Interviewer : Just about the Freedom Schools—

Wynn : I didn't visit them because we still had to go to work. But we had white children and some black children whose parents couldn't get them to the Freedom School, you know, but we still had to teach. I don't remember how long the Freedom Schools went on either. I think it was a little bit better than a month but I'm not sure. But they were held in churches mainly St. Mark's which had a large [indecipherable] then other churches picked up groups. And then kids just stayed home, you know.

Interviewer : So was it okay that they weren't attending school for that period of time?

Wynn : I think people were very proud they weren't attending school . I mean people [would say], "You're kids aren't going to Freedom School?" You know you'd be in the grocery school or Kohl's, you'd say to someone, "Where are your kids, how come they aren't in school?" You know we've questioned one another. So "I couldn't get 'em there" or something so I think people felt they should. I said they either stayed home or they did go to the Freedom School or they did go to some other church for something.

Interviewer : Thank you very much.

Wynn : Thank you.

Interviewer : For talking to us.