

Oral History Collection
Curtistene Smith McCowan

Interviewer: W. Marvin Dulaney and Alfred L. Roberts

Date: September 23, 2011

Place of Interview: Dallas, TX

Dr. Dulaney: Do you see a red light?

Mrs. McCowan: I do.

Dr. Dulaney: Okay. All right. I'm doing the claps [claps].

This is to sync the audio with the video, and I am giving us a time and date stamp--we are in Dallas, Texas at ICDC [Intercity Community Development], interviewing Mrs. McCowan on September 23, 2011. And again, in Dallas, Texas. Mrs. McCowan, why don't you start off telling us where you were born and when did you come to this area?

Mrs. McCowan: I was born in Jefferson, Texas in 1948. I was born and raised there, as a matter of fact. Went to elementary school and I grew up in the

community of Smithland out in the country, which is just a part of the larger, if you can call it larger, city of Jefferson. And my elementary school, Smithland Elementary, and then I went to high school in town. Went to Central High School, graduating in 1966. My parents are Riley--the late Riley and Blanch Smith. I am the youngest of nine children and the first to graduate from college with a four-year college degree.

Dulaney: What college did you go to?

McCowan: I attended El Centro College--I call myself a late bloomer. I attended El Centro College and then went onto Dallas Baptist University. By the time I graduated, it was DBU. I actually got my Bachelor's degree from DBU in 1985.

Dulaney: Okay, tell us about your parents. What did they do?

McCowan: Well, my dad was just basic, down to earth, hard-working folks. My dad was a farmer. And it's my understanding that he had a third-grade education. The farm didn't just--worked hard to make a living for the family, [he] died at the young age of nineteen--excuse me, the young age of fifty-three when he passed away

in 1956. And my mom was, as I understand the story--she had no more than an eighth-grade education, but both from that East Texas area. My mom and dad--my dad married my mom when she was sixteen. On their first anniversary, the first of their nine children was born. My mom was basically a homemaker, but also worked in the fields to help my dad make a living to provide a living for their family. But just very loving. I was just eight years old when my dad died, and so much of my conversation and my upbringing, I refer to my mother a lot and a lot of people may wonder why. But she was just amazingly--just balanced and strong and [she] provided such a great experience in terms of learning, what it means to work hard, to be independent, not to feel sorry for myself because of the hand we were dealt having lost my father at such a young age. And always, there were times I'd get upset because I would say, "I'm just a kid", and it's like she doesn't even want me to have--she doesn't sympathize with me. Other girls have their dads around, and there with them for this and

that. But, my mother said, "It is what it is."
Basically, "And we're going to live," you
know, "Do the best we can to live a honest and
just a good life based on what the Lord had
blessed us with." But she was just an amazing
woman. Very positive. Very positive. Very
loving. Just couldn't do enough for people
around her even though we had little
ourselves. I always thought, you know how can
you do so much and we have so little, but her
philosophy was "I just believe," you know, she
said that "the more you give, the more you
receive." And so she, and I'm convinced as
I've gotten older that that's why the Lord
blessed us so much so, because she gave so
much. And very religious, but very fun, very
entertaining. As I said, and when I think
about how I am and people say "Why are you the
way you are?" And I say "A lot of it has to do
with my mom" [laughs].

Dulaney: Yes--

McCowan: And just taking on some of that--

Dulaney: Well your eyes light up when you talk about her,
your mother.

McCowan: Oh, yes. She was amazing.

Dulaney: Okay, well talk about your education as grade school and high school. What was it like in the schools that you went to?

McCowan: I mentioned Smithland Elementary we actually in third grade--I actually went from first to third grade in Judea, a little country school. At that time there were schools near churches. By the time I came along it wasn't inside the church, but next to the church. It was at one time first through eighth grade, but by the time I was in third grade Smithland Elementary School, this beautiful brick building as we called it had been built. Pretty close to my home and there were several elementary schools that merged to come to Smithland. We had a wonderful principal who really fought for us and looked out for us. It was segregated of course, at that time it goes without saying I think knowing my age now. But Arthur Wesley was my principal and he ran a tight ship at Smithland Elementary. But we had an incredible--incredibly committed group of teachers. I always say that "School was like

an extension of home." Especially during my elementary years. And I don't think it was just because they knew that my dad had passed away by the time that I was eight. But it seems like everybody just wrapped their arms around me to make sure that I didn't have to worry about the extracurricular activities and different programs and what I needed in order to participate. But academics was a huge deal. And even though my mom had only gone through the eighth grade, you would think she had a Ph.D. the way she talked about education and the importance of it and I want you to get it. And even when—the interesting thing is—I laugh now, but I thought she was so smart because if I didn't know the answer she would tell me "to keep working until you find it. That's for you to do and talk to your teachers if you can't get it." But anyway, I never looked down on her for that. The teachers I had were always there to provide the kind of support--again, really and truly it was like an extension of home. I was very active and involved in school. In elementary school I did everything

from spelling bee, interscholastic league, to singing in the choir, Octech, and any other type of programs that I felt like I was good enough to participate in. And was encouraged to do that. I was also very athletic. At the time, I played basketball, thought I was very good [Laughter] and so did most people. Made the basketball team in the sixth grade. As a little person to play with these seventh and eighth graders I was really doing well. Was a captain by the time I was in the seventh grade... Ran track. Just very involved in school, because at that time, school was where it happened. If it didn't happen at school it was church. So those were the two places where--they were my outlets. The church was very, very, very important. We were--I'm a Seamy now, but at that time Methodist churches out in the country would have what they called circuit preachers. So we had church second and fourth Sundays. Maybe could get to Sunday School those other Sundays. But anyways I want to make sure I emphasize that, because again our faith and then just education and working-

-my mom working very closely with the church and the schools to make sure I was provide that wholesome lifestyle as best as she could give. And because I was the youngest of nine—I talked about my elementary years, but my older brothers and sisters were just amazing in terms of helping my mom take care of me after my dad died. Going to high school, much of what I did in elementary school carried over—my involvement. I was in band. I was selected to participate in band. Leaving the eighth grade I was a majorette [baton twirler]. Did band, did basketball. Started--was a varsity player for four years. But couldn't do any of that, according to my mom, if the grades weren't where they needed to be. Forget it [Laughter]. I think about kids now--parents make excuses for kids, you know, they're so involved-- were gonna help them get the work done. My mom's philosophy was you get to participate if your work is done. You have a tournament or event on Saturday? Maybe. She didn't care how good I was, how much the team depended on me. She said, "Charity begins at

home." And I would always say, "What does she mean by that?" I'm discipline you out of love. I want you to be grounded so you will know what's important. Your priorities will be together. In other words, I had to get them together real fast if I wanted to be involved she insisted that I take care of it.

Delaney: Why did you choose to go to El Centro [College]?

McCowan: Because--well one of the things I haven't said, my husband and I choose to marry quite young. And he went to school first. Graduated from Wiley College. Got his career to what I say now was a good start. Then that was our choice was to work together and to help him go to school and I started school late. So I went to El Centro after we were married, here in Dallas, and established ourselves here.

Delaney: So where did you work after high school and while you were married?

McCowan: I worked at Tycom [?] Chemical Corporation--well first of all let me back up. I was a teacher's aide first. Teacher's aide first at the same school, my little elementary school out in the country in Smithland. Was hired to work there

as a teacher's aide. Then was one of the, what I call one of the fortunate ones, to get a better paying job at Tycom [?] chemical corporation a defense plant. I was laid off at Tycom [?] once the Vietnam War started slowing down. They did layoffs, but it was about the time my husband was graduating from Wiley College in 1970 and he was recruited to go work for Reynolds in Houston [Texas], Reynolds Metals [Company]. So we go to Houston for a few months. Thought we were going there--that would be home probably for the rest of our lives because we had so many family members there. But then the Federal Government started recruiting him from there, because it was the days of equal opportunity. They were the doing diversity recruitment, affirmative action if you will. He was recruited by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to come to work here in Dallas [Texas] as a management intern. So that's what brought us to Dallas. Once we were here, I went to work for Continental Baking Company two weeks after we arrived and they hired me in preparation for opening a thrift

store in Oak Cliff. Went to work for them a few months. They needed a supervisor. Again remembering that work ethic that my mom instilled in me is to work hard. I was fortunate enough to become a supervisor very early. Worked there until one day my husband—of course working weekends was something I wanted to get away from. Working there I was required to work weekends, but my husband and I were talking about, okay you have this government job now. Why don't you look out for me to see if there's some opportunities. I thought I would make a good clerk-typist there. Just an administrative assistant. Whatever, I said, "See what's available to get my foot in the door." So after working for Continental Baking Company and working as a supervisor at the thrift store for a short while. That opportunity came available. The Federal Trade Commission was advertising for a clerk-typist position. They were getting ready to move the regional office to Dallas from New Orleans [Louisiana]. So I was the first hire. There were three individuals in the office at

that time. Two consumer protection specialist and one attorney. Because at that time it was a field office preparing to become a regional office. I was the first staff hired in preparation for the move. I took a test, and actually we rented an electric typewriter. When I think about this stuff I laugh [Laughter]. To get me ready for that test. I thought I did pretty good on the test until a few years later I looked at my mistakes, because I was so nervous. But the Lord was with me. They said there was something they like about me. So in spite of my errors on the typing test, they hired me. And went to work. Got my foot in the door as a temporary clerk-typist, but within a few months I was hired permanently. In less than a year I was promoted to a consumer protection assistant job. That's how my career took off. Then I started thinking, 'Okay. I'm here, my foot's in the door. I see an opportunity to move up within this agency and I'm going to start now.' So I became a consumer protection specialist by 1975. I went to work for them in

1972. I went from temporary, to permanent, to consumer protection assistant, and by 1975 I was, in three years, a consumer protection specialist without a college degree. Which was quite unusual at that time. But I knew that I needed to go back to school, that was always my desire. I went to El Centro first. Got the associates degree. Then transferred to Dallas Baptist [University]. So that kind of gets us there--a long way around it.

Dulaney: I'm going to pass the questioning to Dr. Roberts.

Dr. Roberts: Thank you very much.

McCowan: Thank you.

Dulaney: And of course he's going to talk to you about how you got on the school board and all of that information.

McCowan: Thank you.

Dulaney: Thank you.

Roberts: You talked about your family, but you didn't talk about your kids.

McCowan: Okay, thank you for bringing me back to that. We have two grown sons. We have Danny Sebastian [?] and Leon Curtis. Danny and Leon--we call him Lee I probably should've just started--are

both great individuals. We're very proud of them. They both graduated from Desoto High School. Danny graduated in 1984 and Lee in 1992. Danny went to Texas Tech [University] on a partial track scholarship and football scholarship. Ended up leaving Texas Tech to go to the military. After an injury and becoming disenchanted with the way he was being treated at Tech. You know, you need to run or you need to play anyway. He left which I think was one of the best decisions to help him grow up and become the man he is today. He went to the United States Air Force. Since that time, he has earned a bachelor's degree and master's degree in management information systems from the University of Phoenix. And is now working for the Federal Aviation Administration as an electronic technician. The younger son, again graduated in 1992 Desoto High School. Went to University of Texas in Austin. Graduated with a degree in management information systems. Went on to--I should say accepted his call into the ministry. Went to Austin Graduate School of Theology--I have to remember these

schools, to get his master's degree. He is now working on a--and hoping to get his doctorate degree next spring from Dallas Baptist University. His doctorate degree would be in servant leadership studies in ministry. Both Danny and Lee are married. Danny has three girls. Our beautiful granddaughters, Tiana, Kirsten, and Taylor. He's married to--married Felicia, I want to say that the two older granddaughters are Danny's and Felicia's girls. He is married again to Angie. Angie and Danny have Taylor. And they're just beautiful, beautiful girls. And Lee and Stephanie have no kids after being married 10 years! But can't say enough how blessed Leon and I are, my husband Leon and I are. For having such a great family and such wonderful young men as our sons and these three beautiful granddaughters we've been blessed with. And I can't say enough about my husband Leon. Sometimes the focus is on me so much, but one thing I always want to emphasize he has been a strong supporter of the things that I love to do. In that, I guess whatever my talents are,

he seems to recognize them sometimes and help me realize that, "Hey you can do this and I encourage you to do it, because it's such a great fit for your personality." I credit him with so much of the many accomplishments that I've been able to realize. And he has so many in his own right. But when the focus is on me I'm sometimes very uncomfortable because I said "You know, it's great to focus on me, but I would not be who I am and what I am if it were not for my family and certainly the wonderful man I married and the wonderful children we have." The sons we have, because they [don't] make life very difficult for us. They've just made us very proud.

Roberts: Great. How long have you lived in Desoto [Texas]?

McCowan: We've lived in Desoto--this will be our thirty-fourth year. I have to really--it's a long time. We moved in 1977, so in December it will be 34 years.

Roberts: Okay. The purpose of this project as Dr. Dulaney has stated is to look at the Civil Rights Movement in Dallas County. So we would like to transition to that.

McCowan: Okay.

Roberts: When we say civil rights we're talking about housing, criminal justice, education, transportation, and so forth. So would you describe your involvement with community organizations? If you're with the NAACP [National Association of Advancement for Colored People], or Urban League, other organizations—progressive movers that—have you ever worked with any of those organizations?

McCowan: My husband and I both have been members and supporters of NAACP and Urban League for many, many years. Mainly financial supporters. I cannot say that I've been actively involved in those organizations. But we've supported them and continue to support them though our financial contributions and particularly, since education is such a big deal and civil rights, if you will, we designate our contributions to NAACP young legal defense fund. Also Urban League is basically the great things that they do in all of those areas. But actively involved? No. Our involvement has not

been--we've not been leaders in those organizations as we have been in many others.

Roberts: Can you describe what the circumstances and conditions and your experiences related to living in Desoto. What about housing, especially education. The changes you've seen, the progress and so forth.

McCowan: Your question is to describe the condition of housing and education in Desoto?

Roberts: Right, the changes you've seen over the years.

McCowan: There have been drastic changes. When we moved to Desoto in 1977, we were just among a hand full African Americans in the community at that time. We were really looking for a quite area. Looking for--as we talked about it back in 1977 and before. Something similar to where we came from. Quiet, but good schools. That country atmosphere. Well of course it's no longer that [Laughter]. When we moved there in 1977, it was interesting, one of the first things we experienced my husband was out in the garage--out back, moving some things in. A police officer drove by and this police car was going by. He was in a marked car and he

stopped. He asked my husband, "What are you doing here?" And my husband said, "I live here." And he came in and he said, "Okay, here we go." [Laughter] And that was like a wakeup call. They're not quite ready for this yet. So just an assumption that we did not belong at this house we had just bought in Desoto. Well that was a sign right there that we may have some challenges and I just remember how uncomfortable that made me feel and how irritated we were. You know, the nerve of them--of him to make that assumption. It was a reminder, you have not arrived [Laughter]. You may think you have, but you have not. I don't really think we thought that, we're just really fair people and expect people to treat us in a fair and just way. But what it did, it said to us, "Not only that you should live here, but you need to get involved here." Because so many of the--our friends who had been here for a while--and a lot of our relatives were very involved even though some of them had moved to the suburban areas. So much of what they did was in Dallas and of

course we had joined Kirkwood Temple CME [Christian Methodist Episcopal] church when we moved, because we had lived in an apartment. And then had lived in the Pleasant Grove area [in Dallas, Texas] before we moved to Desoto. Again, everything we did was in Dallas, but just that incident said that we need to have a presence here. Let people get to know us and we need to get to know the people here. With us, when you talk about then, with us was so few African Americans in our school system in Desoto. Danny was in elementary school, the younger was going to daycare at that time. I thought 'It's time to get really involved--for us to get really involved in our schools.' I thought the best place to start was PTA. My husband said, "Okay," he traveled a lot. He said, "Well, you do know the way their meeting now," he said, "working people don't have that much of a chance to get involved." Because PTA at that time was meeting during the day, because most of the moms did not work. What I did, I'd go to the programs that they had for the kids in the evenings. Then occasionally

there would be a meeting before the program. So I thought I would make sure they understood this is not working. You all said, "You want more people to get involved," but yet you're meeting during the day. I work. They gave me a stare like, 'You work?' [Roberts laugh] Yes, I do. I got the feeling from some of the women that I should feel inferior, because I had to work [Laughter]. According to--I mean nobody said that, but that was the impression I got. That, you have to work? Well I choose to work. And make no apologies for that. But that was also the begging of my move to change that. Those daytime meetings to nighttime meetings. Well, that didn't really happen for me until our son Danny, the older one, had gone onto junior high school. I think it was an evolution. I only did the schools where our sons [unclear] were changed and start having meetings in the evenings. But others were beginning to do it as well. But I was very outspoken at the time, in a soft way. Why aren't there more African American teachers? We want to see teachers and administrators who

look like us. We believe our children will benefit and it will help them to feel more comfortable about their learning environment if they see people who look like us. Of course, sure, sure you're right, we're trying to recruit, but they'd rather go to Dallas where they pay more. You won't believe how long I heard that. And my approach to getting stuff done back then was to deal one on one and sit down and talk. I don't usually run to the media, but by then the media had been contact. You know, you need to look at what's going on out here. Somewhere in the archives I've been quoted a few times as one of the PTA parents who was very concerned about the lack of minority teachers and administrators in Desoto. Also, one of my concerns was at that time, I thought that too many of our children were put into the lower level classes or groups if you will. Within their grade levels. I had begun to talk more to teachers and administrators about that. Again, feeling that I could have a significant impact just by getting in there and working. I said--they

said they don't have the African American parents not stepping up to volunteer and I said, "Okay, I'm going to volunteer to be an officer in PTA." My first role was parliamentarian. Parliamentarian because I felt like I know just enough, as they say, to be dangerous. [Laughter] But no, I learned it in church. That little bit I learned in church I studied some more and carried it over to PTA. My role as parliamentarian led to my becoming a PTA president by the time my younger son was in eighth grade. I was contacted during the end of that previous year in May when it was time to elect officers. This was around 1987. "We think you did such a great job as parliamentarian, we think you need to be our PTA President." At that time, these were all White parents. I felt like, to be honest, I'm being set up for something. [Laughter] But no, I told them, I said "Okay, one of the things we're going to have to do— PTA Board has been meeting early in the afternoons. PTA Board now has to meet at night. We moved the PTA meetings to night, now

we need to move the PTA Board Meetings to nighttime." They pretty much agreed to do what I recommended and the principal at that time said--Dr. Richardson said at Desoto Junior High, "Mrs. McCowan, I'm going to work with you so whatever it is we can do to accommodate your schedule." I said, "Not just mine, there are other people like me. Who work every day, who want to be involved? What you're doing is you are making it possible to involve other parents. Not just African American parents, but working parents, period." And so that was sort of my beginning. From that I went on to work with PTA. Then working in the city. Working on some committees in the schools for Desoto ISD [Independent School District]. I think one of the first committees I was asked to work on was a diversity committee. Because again, I had been pretty outspoken about what I thought needed to happen at Desoto. From working on those committees within the school district then I started getting some calls within the City of Desoto to serve on those committees. One of those was a charter review

committee. But simultaneously, I never let any of my involvement in anything else take away our involvement from our church, and making sure our kids were involved in church and that we were involved in church as well. But I was so in [unclear] school, that became a priority. When you talk about then versus now, my involvement with PTA was what led to my involvement on the School Board. It was that involvement that I think suggested to someone that I maybe a good leader and a good school board member. It was some people who had not only been in PTA, but serving on the school board at that time. Then that recommended that I run for the school board. I ran for the school board in 1990 and our younger son, at that time, was still in high school. Was the first African American to get elected for a public office in Desoto, by winning that seat on the school board.

Roberts: Are you at large or your seats at large?

McCowan: We're at large. Still at large in Desoto. [I'll] talk a little bit in a few minutes about a little bit of a change on the city [council].

The school board is strictly--anybody can run for any seat and that's still now. Desoto--I served two terms on that board and served as board president twice. I also held some other offices. But what started to change was we started--I pushed to get more African American teachers and administrators. And gradually, that started changing. Ironically, the first African American principal--she was hired and was the assistant principal then promoted to principal. She happens to be the principal of the school named in my honor [McCowan Middle School] at this particular time. It's amazing how things have evolved. I'm very honored to say that Mrs. Sissy--her name is Melvlyn Lowe, but she prefers to be called Sissy. But Mrs. Lowe is now the principal of McCowan Middle School.

Roberts: What were some of the challenges for you on the school board as a member and as board president?

McCowan: Some of the challenges were just getting them to recognize and think differently. Things that--the fact that our children needed the

exposure. And again, the presence of leaders, teachers, employees—other than custodians. And of course I take nothing away from that, but professionals in our school system who look like them. And it just seemed like it was too slow coming. I sit down and talk with them, "Well what's wrong?" "Well what's wrong is we need to do a better job recruiting. And if you can't do it. If you need people to go with you, I think I can find--I can find people who look like me including myself. I will take leave if that is the excuse. That you can't convince, "You know, it's like we can't get them to come. Our salaries are not complete. That was an excuse. It was a copout. So getting over that hurdle. Just letting them know that, who do you think believes—I mean, come on. Don't insult me. I don't believe that is the reason why we have more African American teachers and administrators. They are qualified. More qualified, I think in many instances, than some of the ones we have here. I know, because I was educated by African Americans. And they had so much less to do

their jobs than our teachers have now. You can't tell me that there aren't African Americans who are not only qualified, but willing to come to teach. And are qualified to teach all children. Not just African American children. So that was a challenge. Getting or trying to influence a change in that mind set. Then once we had teachers to say, "We can still do better than that." There were just a few. But to get that first Black administrator. Then to get them into the positions of principal. Then at Central Administration. Now, just to fast forward a few years now a lot of people don't realize Desoto is—African Americans are the majority. We are the majority population. Definitely within our school system. We are the majority within our administrators, our teachers. When you look at the makeup of administrators I should say. I'm not really sure about the overall balance or demographics as far as teachers are concerned. But I know we made great progress. We made great progress. Right

now the person serving as interim
superintendent is African American.

Roberts: Who is that?

McCowan: Her name is Levatta Levels. Mrs. Levels. But before
Mrs. Levels--I should say six years ago. We
had our first African American superintendent.
Mr. Alton Frailey was hired to come. He was
with us two years before he recruited to come
to Katy [Texas]. To go to the Katy Independent
School District. So Mrs. Levels is our second--
she is serving as an interim now, so we'll see
where that goes.

Roberts: How does it feel to have a school named after you?

McCowan: It is very humbling. A very humbling feeling. Every
time I think about it--and especially when I
drive up there. I'm there at least a couple of
times a week when I'm in town. I just get
Goosebumps, because never--I can't say that
was something I ever thought would happen. I
always thought I would work hard to achieve--
just whatever position I'm in. I'm going to
work hard and try to do the very best I can to
be the very best professional in whatever
leadership role.

[End of interview]