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### Oral History Interview: Michael Wilkins

Michael Wilkins

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SOCIETY OF YEAGER SCHOLARS

TAPE 22

March 25, 1988

AN INTERVIEW WITH: Michael Wilkins

CONDUCTED BY: Michele Shank

TRANSCRIBED & TYPED BY: Michele Shank

MUH-YS-22

Michele: This is one in a series of taped interviews on the Society of Yeager Scholars. Today is March 25th, 1988. My name is Michele Shank and I am at the Yeager Offices in Huntington, West Virginia with Michael Wilkins, one of our Yeager scholars, for an interview. (This is a mike test. One, two, three) Alright, Michael, I think we are ready to go. First, tell me when and where you were born?

Michael: I was born in Charlotte, North Carolina on April 26, 1969, in Charlotte Memorial Hospital. I remember that because every day during my high school career I'd pass the hospital where I was born within a, just right next to it. I usually sometimes would think about that. It was strange.

Michele: Strange feeling?

Michael: Yeah, really.

Michele: Did you always live in Charlotte?

Michael: Yes. Always.

Michele: So you came to Marshall University from Charlotte.

Michael: Yes.

Michele: O.k. Tell me a little bit about your hometown. What was it like growing up?

Michael: Well, growing up, it was strange. I had the feeling that Charlotte wasn't a very big place. I always used to think of New York City or Los Angeles as being sort of the center of things. And I was shocked one day, I think around fifth grade, to find out that

Charlotte was the largest city in North Carolina. That to me was a big surprise. And then recently, probably when I was in high school, there was a lot of growth. A lot of new people coming in, a lot of new businesses. And we've just been granted an N.B.A. expansion franchise which really put the city on fire. So it feels like now, that especially coming to a smaller city like Huntington, that Charlotte was always a lot bigger than I thought, which is one of the strange things, you know, of growing up. How you see things as a kid, versus as a young adult.

Michele: Um-hm. Tell me about your grade school experiences. How was grade school for you?

Michael: Well, I went to a small parochial school, a small Catholic school, from preschool, I enrolled when I was three years old, until I was in the eighth grade. So I was there around ten or eleven years. Like I said it was a small school, so there was a definite sense of community. I had been there longer than most of the teachers and some of my classmates I had known since diaper time. So when I graduated it was strange. I had a sense of moving on. I mean, I knew I was leaving a lot behind. I can remember being in first grade and watching the bigger kids in eighth, the graduating class, and thinking "These guys are great."

Michele: Now, was this a private school?

Michael: Well, yes, there was a tuition and I imagine they had some kind of high enrollment.

Michele: What was your father's occupation at this time? What was your family like? Was your mother working outside your home at this time?

Michael: Yes, my mother took time off right after I was born, of course. And then she went back to work. She's a librarian. And then when I was five or six, she began full time at Johnson C. Smith University. It's a small black college in Charlotte and she's the head of the library there. My father is a medical doctor, a general practitioner. And he's retired now, but he had a practice during most of my life as a child.

Michele: Being a black child in Charlotte, there is a . . . what is the black population in Charlotte?

Michael: Oh, I'd say it was about 30-40% of the population which runs about 350,000. I can't really say that there was any prejudice when I was growing up because the school I went to was all white. . . oh, excuse me. . . all black. About the only contact I had with white kids was during a parochial league basketball season, which we always thought there was some prejudice there, but I'm not sure that it was real or paranoia. There wasn't any name calling or anything like that. But any time you grow up in the South, there is definitely a feeling of being the outsider or the other. When you go into an all white environment, you feel sometimes strange, whether people do anything to you or not. But there is always something in the back of your mind, which I think is one of the most damaging parts of racism.

Sort of a subtle kind of effect, that you always think that you have to be better, or you always feel inferior. Either pushing yourself too hard or you're not really doing everything you can because you think you are bound to fail. But there was no really open racism when I was growing up.

Michele: Um-hm. Tell me about your high school experiences. Were you in a talented and gifted program in high school or any special classes?

Michael: I went to Charlotte Catholic High School and it was pretty small. There were only around 600 students so we didn't have really a program. We did have some honors classes which were slightly accelerated. They were probably pretty good compared to some of the high school courses, the regular ones. I never really took anything but honors, other than the required classes. So I would definitely say that they were helpful.

Michele: Did your parents, your mother being a librarian, your father being a doctor, both well educated people, did they encourage education in your family? Was it an accepted thing that you would be going to college and . . . ?

Michael: I think so. When I was growing up, my brother, Malcolm, was in school and both my older sister Elizabeth and Gordon, Jr., they already graduated from college. And since there really wasn't a problem with money, how can we afford college, my parents had taken care of that I think even before we were born, they started to

make plans, how can we afford this, there is always in the back of my mind that one day I would go to college. And so I worked towards that. In a way, I suppose even from fifth grade on, I knew that one day I was going to have to make that choice. And especially in eighth grade when I went on to high school, I really began to wonder, you know, there isn't just one college that I really have to go to. So it became a little scary even then. By the time. . . my senior year, I was frantic because I hadn't made that choice yet, going into my last semester.

Michele: Did you feel any pressure on deciding on a career goal at that time in high school?

Michael: Career goal, no, not really. My father's always said jokingly, you should be a doctor like me. (They both laugh.) I always told him I couldn't stand the sight of blood. So. . . my mother is very open about it. Whatever makes us happy. My sister and I. So as far as the career goals, no. I did want to choose a college where avenues would be open to me. Where I would get a good background in liberal arts and if I wanted to go to a scientific field, I could make that switch. And of course, Marshall is the perfect place for that.

Michele: Was there any special teacher in your life time that influenced you to be the best or be better?

Michael: Oh, yeah. In fourth grade, Sister Dorothy, that's all I remember about her. She was a kind of terror to the kids. Very



strict. Didn't put up with any back talk or any kind of insolence from her kids. But she was a great educator. She didn't spend her time, you know, spanking people. She had a brush, she called it her board of education. (They laugh.)

Michele: A brush? (laughing)

Michael: A brush. A big hairbrush. I never went up against it, but because she had such a tight rein almost, she could spend most of her time teaching and not worrying about who was cutting up in the back of the class. So I would say that in sixth grade, or even seventh grade, I was relearning some things that I'd learned in there. If I could have kept a teacher like that all the way through, probably to the eighth or ninth grade, it really would have been a big boost going into high school. But I only had her for one year. She was definitely the best teacher I've ever had.

Michele: And this was in your fourth grade?

Michael: Fourth grade.

Michele: O.k. When did you first hear about the Yeager Scholar Program?

Michael: Through the mail. They had sent out a flyer through, I suppose eight or nine states right now. My mother picked it up. In high school I had put my name down to have the colleges send me some information because I wasn't sure, so the Yeager was just one in a stack of maybe 200 that came to my house. My mom picked it up because she saw "scholarship" and that was always a concern for her because

money is always tight, of course. And I really didn't think that much about it. I didn't know that much about Marshall. I had been receiving letters from larger schools that I was more familiar with. So she just filled in my name . . . she asked me if she could fill in my name and send it back in. And then we got all the information on the program. And that really piqued her interest. And again I was. .

Michele: Did you know who Chuck Yeager was?

Michael: Oh, yeah. I had seen the movie "The Right Stuff". I guess everyone has seen that. And I heard about his autobiography. He was just one of those people you never really remember the first time you heard about him but you just know who he is. And I think that he is that famous. So it was really my mother who's interest was first. . . who took an interest first in the program. Myself, I was busy with school, busy playing football, busy at work. I didn't really think that much about it until it came time to fill in the application.

Michele: So when you were in high school, you were working, you were participating in athletics, as well as being a good student.

Michael: Yes.

Michele: Did you have any peer pressure to go out and have a good time when you were supposed to be studying or did you balance that well?

Michael: Actually, I didn't study that much in high school, which was scary coming to college. I knew I would have to improve my

study skills. I was always the kind of guy who picks things up on the first try especially from math to English. There were some classes I made Bs in I knew I should have made As. Simply because they required a lot more hands on experience. So it was pretty easy balancing high school with extracurricular work because if I didn't have the time, I could always throw myself into it really quickly and pick up enough to really make an A. Of course, in college you'd probably flunk out doing that. You have to spend a lot more time really getting into it. But I did have pretty bad study skills in high school, which I've tried to improve since I've come here.

Michele: What were some of the other schools that you were considering besides Marshall University, when you were getting right down to making that decision?

Michael: Well, coming from North Carolina, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is. . . was always there, especially with the success in sports they've had. My sister is a junior there now, so my sophomore year, she packed up and went to Chapel Hill. But I really wasn't quite sure that was where I wanted to go. I'm not sure why, because you know I love the place and I love the social atmosphere but I wasn't quite sure that that was the school for me. And then I started looking at Duke University.

Michele: Um-hm. That's an exciting place.

Michael: Yeah. I know now that it's not the place I want to go. I know more about the school now but my sophomore year, I started

to look at that. And then everyone was telling me, Duke's a tough school to get in to. You're really going to have to buckle down. You can't joke around like you like to, Michael. So I . . . because of Duke, I think I tried to really improve my grades, which possibly is the reason I'm here now because although I was always a talented student, it takes a lot of hard work to get ahead. Then in my senior year, I started receiving information from schools like Stanford, University of Chicago, Princeton, Harvard, all kinds of places. Even MIT wrote me lots of letters about a new liberal arts program they were trying to get boosted up there.

Michele: (Laughing) Well, what made your mind up? To choose Marshall University as the one.

Michael: (Laughing) I don't really know. I narrowed it down to North Carolina, Princeton, Harvard and Duke. Those are the places I applied to. And then after I applied to the Yeager program, we had the semi-finalist interviews in Greensboro, N.C. And I went up there and I didn't know anything about Marshall. Luckily the three gentlemen who interviewed me did know something about the school. I think one of them was actually a Marshall graduate. And they started filling me in on what Marshall was actually like. And then when I came up here for the finalist interview, I was actually able to see the school for the first time. But the thing that really interested me was the travel. As everyone says, the glamorous travel that we get to do. Because I had done a little bit of travelling in high school. I went to France twice and I did like that idea that I wouldn't. . .

Michele: That you would get to go to Oxford, to England, to study.

Michael: Yeah.

Michele: Isn't that an exciting part of this program that everybody really seems to enjoy.

Michael: Why I really chose Marshall, I can't really say. When Joe Hunnicutt called me that Monday after the finalist interview, I told him right there on the phone that I would accept. I didn't have any clearcut reasons at the time. It was just kind of a hunch I had. My parents wanted me to take it, so I knew that I was on a sound footing because they just don't make their minds up like that. And then I just went with the hunch that this was the place to go to.

Michele: What is your major?

Michael: Right now, I'm in economics and English. A double major.

Michele: A double major.

Michael: Right. I'm definitely going to stick with economics but English I might not have the time to fill out the requirements.

Michele: Um-hm. Has the Yeager program met your educational expectations?

Michael: I would say that right now it has almost exceeded them. I didn't think that my first year, I would have done quite as much as far as . . . especially the seminar. I expected the seminar to be just a broadening experience. It has definitely been that, but

I've also had to really just challenge myself to keep up in there. This semester, we have, I think, 16 texts to read which really means that we are reading the equivalent of a novel every three days or so.

Michele: My gosh!

Michael: Just for that one class. And then we've got to write reflections on it and discuss it with the people who are, you know, experts in their field. And sometimes I think they are a little disappointed with us and sometimes I think they are a little bit amazed. It really takes a lot of hard work just to keep up in there. And of course, here you have to not just keep up, you have to excel in everything you do. So it has definitely been a challenge just to stay afloat.

Michele: Are you feeling any pressure?

Michael: Oh, yeah. Definitely. (Laughing)

Michele: (Laughing) But not too much.. .

Michael: No, but I don't see that as a bad thing. It's like a pressure cooker in sports, that's what you are there for. We'll feel pressure for the rest of our lives, especially the people who are going into business, because you'll have last minute deadlines and all kinds of challenges you will be faced with, so the challenge here in college is probably not really any different from anyone else. Except for us. Maybe they can say, well, I'm going to slack off, but here you can't do that.

Michael: Tell me about your dorm living. Do you like that?

Michael: I live in the Twin Towers East, which is one of the super dorms, they call it. Fifteen stories. And I don't really like it. It's too big. I only know just the guys on my floor. I don't know anyone else in the building. I've been to other schools where the dorms are only six or seven stories and there's definitely more of a communal atmosphere. They do things together, have a . . . I don't know what you call them, but dorm activities. You do have some floor activities, but that's only about 35 guys.

Michele: Are you rooming with another Yeager Scholar?

Michael: Yes.

Michele: You are. Well, then you have something in common there.

Michael: Right. John Hussell is my roommate this semester. I roomed with Tim Longbine last semester. And we do have class together. But he's in a fraternity so he's pretty busy with his. . .

Michele: And you're not in a fraternity.

Michael: No, I'm not in a fraternity. But, I think the biggest problem with the dorm is the size. It really takes away from a lot of things.

Michele: O.k. give me an example of a day of a Yeager student. . . a day in the life of a Yeager student. For you, what's your busy day like.

Michael: Oh, well it probably begins around 6 p.m. when deadline time comes up. You've got to get your work done. Probably

before, you've gone to class and maybe laid in the sun or played frisbee. Or done something all day long. So you've got only a few hours to do all this work you've got to have done by 9:00. And so you start then and you maybe cram until 2:00 in the morning. Get a few hours of sleep, wake up at 8, go to class and maybe do nothing there. At 2:00 in the Yeager seminar, you've got journals due, a speech due, you've had to have read the entire Iliad. And so it's not really just a day. You have to work up. And then when you leave class, you've got a paper due next week, and so you never get a break until the next semester. And then . . .

Michele: 27 hour days. (laughing)

Michael: Right (laughing). It's not easy, but it's a lot of fun.

Michele: So you like the seminars. Is that what you like best about the program so far.

Michael: Well, in economics, Dr. Wilkins, Dr. Alan Wilkins, is an associate professor in the Economics Department, he was one of the interviewers for the finalist weekend last year. So I had a chance to talk to him. Strangely enough we have the same last name, which was the reason why he came up to me because there aren't a lot of Wilkins in the world. Which is neat having a name like that, other than maybe Smith.

Michele: Right (laughing).



Michael: I thought again, during the Yeager symposium during 1987, actually the night we celebrated Chuck Yeager breaking the sound barrier, you know the 40th anniversary. . . .

Michele: Um-hm.

Michael: We talked there. I was telling him that I was interested in getting started in a major, something that was, I guess, a broadening experience, and so he sold economics to me as kind of between science and liberal arts. So you have to pick up math, history, political science. You have to know people. And so he really did a good job, of selling the department to me. And then after that we've had all kinds of discussions on economics and he's given me a few books to read outside of class.

Michele: Wonderful!

Michael: And this semester, I'm also taking a Natural Principles class in economics. So that, by far, has been the most thrilling thing I guess, that I've done educationally here.

Michele: The personalities that you've had an opportunity to meet and the executives that have come in for the different Yeager symposiums and seminars - has any one person impressed you that you enjoyed their speech or their talk or your interview or whatever?

Michael: Well, I'll just name a few. Colonel Joe Engel, who came in for the symposium was, he's one of the best test pilots in the Air Force History. He's a great guy. He really impressed me with his frankness. You know, he's, of course, military, so he's very down to

earth and serious. But he's also a good human being who enjoys life and shows that you can excel in your career and also have a good time with it. And Dr. Poltoff, who is an author, he's a Jewish author. He's written books about growing up Jewish in America, I guess, one way of putting it. He's written The Chosen and The Promise. We had a discussion with him right here in this room in the Yeager suite about, I can't really . . . , I guess about writing about your life as an author the way Hemingway did it, Faulkner, or the way he did it. And the way you have to open up yourself, not just to your community, but to the entire world. That the deeper you get into your own life as a growing up Jew in New York, or a black in the South, or anything like that, the deeper, the more you learn about people in general, which was probably, you know, strange, but I'm not sure how to put it. Just sitting here in the room talking about it . . .

Michele: Exciting, it sounds like.

Michael: Yeah, exciting. You know, maybe when I'm a hundred years old. His name, I'm sure will be up there with the great authors of the twentieth century. Probably maybe the best of the latter half of the twentieth century. Talking to him is strange, exhilarating. That's the only way you can put it.

Michele: Well, when did you first meet Chuck Yeager?

Michael: Oh, that's kind of a story. (Laughing)

Michele: (Laughing) I want to hear it.

Michael: Joey McDuffy and I were over at the Radisson downtown. We were taking Colonel Engel around for the two day symposium. And

General Yeager was somewhere on the eleventh, tenth or eleventh floor in a suite, and we were, you know, looking around for him, trying to meet him. Trying to be the first of the scholars to meet him. And so, Colonel Engel who was a good friend of General Yeager's, wanted to go up there. We just sort of tagged along with him. And he goes in to this room and we hear a bunch of guys just laughing and just shooting the breeze, I guess. So we walk in there and there's Chuck in a flight suit. He's got his leg up on the furniture. He's not a very tall man. He doesn't strike you as the Greek type hero - huge. He's just sitting there talking to Joe Hunnicutt. And Joe says something like, hey Chuck, it's time for the press conference. We've got to go now. And Chuck blurts out an exclamation. That's the first thing I ever heard him say. I don't want to repeat it now.

(Laughing) That was Chuck Yeager.

Michele: (Laughing) A down to earth word.

Michael. Right. Exactly. And then when we met him, he wasn't interested in impressing us. He just shook our hands and asked a couple of questions and went about his own business. He's really down to earth. That's the only way you can put it. I think a lot of people are thrown by that. They don't expect, you know, a perfect stranger to be frank with you. That's the only thing he knows, I think, is to be honest, whether it is a crude sort of honest or not.

Michele: Alright. What about Mr. Denman's role in assisting you and helping you. Tell me, what has he done for you and what do you expect him to do.

Michael: Well, Dr. Denman is the coordinator of the program. He's the director. And he sort of acts as a, you know, CEO of the program and also a father figure. We'll make a joke, when you come over here to the suite, that he never does anything. Takes coffee breaks every five minutes, and never does any work, which of course isn't true. He works very hard at keeping the program running. But the most impressive thing about Dr. Denman is he can balance, you know, spending time with the day to day running of the program and then also spend time with the scholars, to get to know us. To take care of our problems. Every time I have a problem in class, I come in and ask his advice. He must get tired of me, but, he really does quite an extraordinary job with the scholars themselves on a day to day basis. I guess you'd call him Uncle Denman, (laughing), I don't know.

Michele: (Laughing) O.k. What about Joe Hunnicutt, the founder of the program. You've had some contact with Joe, and what are your general impressions?

Michael: Mr. Hunnicutt was the one who really impressed me when I first came up here. He. . . I know that he was the founder and in talking to him, I could see that there was definitely enthusiasm. A sort of, you know, enthusiasm in the community for what was going on here. Kind of showed that Huntington, West Virginia, and all of West Virginia was, you know, the one really behind this. It was community and not just someone in the school, saying well, let's start a scholarship program. So if you ever did get to talk to Joe, it's

strange because he has a story for everything. And they aren't always funny, so you sometimes look around. And then he'll say something that will really crack you up. (laughing) So I enjoy talking to him every time I have a chance.

Michele: And Dr. Nitzschke, have you had much contact with the president of the university?

Michael: I've met him just a couple of times, but the most impressive thing about Dale Nitzschke is what you hear from other people. Everyone is impressed with how hard he works and the way he's really behind Marshall and the things he's trying to do. When I flew up here for finalist weekend, I sat next to an elderly lady who I think took some classes at the community school and she was really just blown away by him. She thought that he was the best. And I was really enthused to meet him. He's, I just think that Marshall is lucky to have him, I guess.

Michele: Um-hm. Being the first Yeager scholar and the Ashland class, what responsibilities if any do you feel?

Michael: We are in an awkward position because you can't do too much right now. We are just students and we are trying to learn. In twenty years, I'd like to read in the paper that Craig Moore is voted the, you know, the Nobel Prize, and I surely think that he can do it. For now, I don't think that people should expect us to, you know, fly to the moon today, because there's just no way that you can do it. (they both laugh). It takes time.

Michele: It takes time to be brilliant (laughing).

Michael: Right. If that's what people expect us to do, be brilliant, it's going to be a life time kind of thing. You know, we might not do anything until we are seventy and then we might write a great book on physics or something like that. So if I could give any advice to the general public on what to expect from the first class, hopefully they would just expect that we are working very hard to one day be the best we can.

Michele: Are there any changes or criticism of the programs that you would like to see for the next class?

Michael: Although I said I like the seminars, there is a tendency where it is running into a problem. It's (sputter on tape,) because as I said, it's going so fast with the kids. A lot of us have our problems squeezing in our majors. We have to have so many hours just to graduate in four years. There is no chance to say, well I'll take a fifth year, because they expect us to be out of here in four. Get rid of us forever. (laughing) So there's going to have to be a little bit of reworking of the seminar just so that we'll have time because any hour you spend with the seminar becomes less and less quality time because you become fatigued and everything else and we are fed up with it. So right now I think it's taking a little bit too much time. In the future, it's going to have to scale down the requirements. Maybe not so much writing. There is a lot writing required, which is good because it improves our writing skills, but it is very time consuming also.

Michele: Um-hm. Well, Michael, I thank you very much. I appreciate the interview and good luck.

Michael: Alright.