Interview with Ralph H. Parker, October 10, 2006

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Description:
Mr. Ralph Parker summarizes his career at UNCW. He came in 1971 as assistant director of admissions. (At this time, he says UNCW had an enrollment of 1500-1600 students). After 2 years, he was offered the position of Dean of Students. After 6 years in that position, he was offered the position of Director of Admissions. Then, from 1983-1996, Mr. Parker was the founder and first director of the Office of Minority Affairs. He had long advocated for the creation of such an office on campus. Mr. Parker discusses projects and initiatives that he oversaw in the Office of Minority Affairs, including the establishment of the Upperman African American Cultural Center.

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Transcript:
Interviewee: Parker, Ralph Interviewer: Riggins, Adina Date of Interview: 10/10/2006 Series: Voices of UNCW Length: 110 minutes

Riggins: Good morning. My name is Adina Riggins. I'm the archivist, and we're here in the University archives. Today is October 10, 2006. As the interviewer, I am behind the camera, but we have a very special guest in front of the camera to take part in our University archives visual oral history program. Please sir, state your name for the tape.

Ralph Parker: Yes, sure I will. My name is Ralph H. Parker, and I am a retiree. I worked here at the university for 25 years, and I retired as of July 1, 1996.

Riggins: Okay, that was a good day. Was that a good day for you?

Ralph Parker: Not just a good day; a very good day.
Riggins: Thank you so much for coming back to see us and fitting us into your schedule. In this university archives oral history program I have the pleasure to interview people who have been instrumental to the history of the university whether it's faculty or administrators. It's really been helpful to get your story, and find out all these things that happened while you were here and because you were here. But first I would like to get some background information. Where were you born, and where did you grow up?

Ralph Parker: Okay, I was born in Southport, North Carolina, a small town about 30 miles south of Wilmington, and I grew up there, and I've lived there throughout my life, and I am still of course a resident of Southport.

Riggins: That's great. One of the few, perhaps as things changed over there; one of the few natives?

Ralph Parker: Yes, it's almost a rare occurrence when you come in contact with someone in a store-- and just about your daily routine-- it's a rare occurrence when you come in contact with someone who is a native of Southport.

Riggins: And people must be excited when they meet you, and they find out you're from Southport.

Ralph Parker: Well, I've served on several committees and, you know, been involved in several things since I retired and, you know, you go around the table and you're introducing yourself and you say you're a native of Southport, "Oh, you grew up here?" and blah blah blah, so like I said, it's almost a rare occurrence.

Riggins: So you grew up in Brunswick County. Where did you go to school?

Ralph Parker: I went to school right around the corner from where I grew up. At that time of course, schools were segregated, and the school that served the town of Southport and the surrounding area was the Brunswick County Training School, and I stress that because I think throughout the south, in many cases, the word “training” was added to the name of-- especially black schools, you know, to identify them. So, either you attended a training school of Booker T. Washington High School or George Washington Carver High School, and that was kind of an, I guess, a way of identifying schools that were designated for black students. But the school was very small. I guess at that time it was called a "union school" because it consisted of grades one through twelve, and we probably had maybe 500 or 550 students in the entire school, so it was small. Then my
graduating class had-- we had 37 students in my graduating class.

Riggins: Wow. Being in the same building for all those years, the teachers have a lot-- it seems like they would hear about you way before they had the opportunity to teach you.

Ralph Parker: Well yea, I know that happened quite a bit, because that was (inaudible) where parents and schools worked closely together in terms of doing things in a better interest you might say of the children, and even though it was during the time when Brunswick County was a very poor county compared to now, as I look back it was a wonderful experience. Even though we lacked a lot of educational materials, you know, supplemental materials and that type of thing, had wonderful teachers, a wonderful principal, and I think where the school was lacking in material things, you know, that void was surely filled by teachers who were enthusiastic and they encouraged us and inspired us quite a bit, and that combination along with things that went on on the home front, you know, I think added tremendously to the overall development of the students during that era, and I treasure those years very much.

Riggins: Sounds like you have good memories of it. What happened after you graduated?

Ralph Parker: Well, we had a pretty good band program when I was in high school, and so when I graduated I went to North Carolina A&T State University in Greensboro, and I wanted to major in instrumental music because I was interested in band programs and that type of thing, and so I earned a degree in instrumental music, and a minor in history and social sciences and that type of thing, and during my senior year when I went home for Easter break, my principal, the one who had been principal for probably 30 years at gold old BCT, the Brunswick County Training School, called and asked me to stop by, and he offered me a job, and I don't know if I signed a contract then, but I gave him a verbal agreement, because jobs were rather scarce during that time, and so I decided to return to the school from which I had graduated, as Band Director and Social Science Teacher, and we worked hard, and I'm not saying this to sound cocky or to say I'm bragging or anything, but we developed a strong band program there, and I still have students coming by now to see me who were in the band back in the '60s and that type of thing, because thankfully they had some good experiences, and we did have a good band.

Riggins: What instrument did you play?

Ralph Parker: I played the woodwinds, but I stayed there for nine years.
Riggins: You were the conductor and the teacher?

Ralph Parker: That's right. I think we had six periods in the school day, and either I taught social sciences or band every period, and the school was so poor, I probably stayed up half the night trying to repair instruments for kids to get ready for the next day of rehearsal. So, it was a taxing experience, but a wonderful experience, and I cherish that experience like I mentioned I had cherished the experience of being a student at that school.

Riggins: Band teachers have a reputation of being pretty tough. You have to be pretty tough to do things so orderly, otherwise you...

Ralph Parker: I- I was tough, and for my makeup I had to kind of put forth the special effort to be tough, but fair, and I was 22 years old returning in an environment where everyone knew me by all my little nicknames and that type of thing. For the seniors at that time, I was only like four years older than some of these kids, but one thing the principal mentioned, he said, "Now Ralph, you have to remember in biblical scripture, a prophet is without honor in his homeland," and I knew what he meant. I knew what to expect, so I geared up mentally to deal with that, and I got along just fine. The students-- some looked as old as I did, but we had a wonderful experience, and it was just good to be back home. Then, as I had approached my 30s I guess I said, "I would like to try something else before I get to old to make a change," and that kind of led up to UNC Wilmington.

Riggins: How did that arrive?

Ralph Parker: Well, I think through a guidance counselor. She mentioned to me that UNC Wilmington was going to hire an assistant director of admissions, and at that time I'm quite sure a lot of pressure was being placed on the university system to integrate, to bring in more students of color on the historically white campuses, and I knew that was the case, so I applied, and when I came over I was informed they had already hired someone. Well, that didn't bother me too much. I still had a job, so that was fine. A couple days after the telephone rang, and it was Dr. Marshall Crews. I don't know if you've interviewed him or not, but I still have lunch with him sometimes. He's getting up in years now, but he's a wonderful man. He asked me if I was still interested in the job, and I told him yes, and he said, "Well, we want you to come over for another interview," which I came to the campus and,-- I guess I should say went to the campus, and I talked with him again and some of the deans, and I guess the (inaudible) at that time, I think he was Dr. Reynolds, and just talked with a lot of people, and the Chancellor, and it was a good experience, and I went back home
and talked to my wife Ivory and I said, "I think these people are serious about hiring me," and she said, "Well Ralph, maybe is the opportunity you’ve been waiting for if you want to make a change as far as your career is concerned," so they offered me the job, and I accepted of course, as Assistant Director of Admissions, and I guess that marked the beginning of my tenure here at UNC Wilmington, which lasted for a period of 25 years.

Riggins: You would have started in '79?

Ralph Parker: No, '71. When I came here, I think the enrollment was probably 1500 or 1600, and the University I guess was kind of locked into a mindset of being a local school, you know, and (inaudible) the admissions office would probably visit high schools, and up to that time, mostly the historically white high schools, but the whole movement was to broaden recruitment efforts, at least cover the entire state, and of course to work to try to bring more black students to the campus, and I accepted that position knowing that that was my primary job. I knew that, and of course during that era a lot of social changes were taking place, and sometimes labels were placed on black individuals for accepting jobs in situations like that, you know, knowing that that's the only reason why you were being hired. But, knowing and being aware that was the situation, it didn't bother me, because I knew if I accepted that job, I was going to use that position hopefully to help students of color, and help provide some educational opportunities for them that they possibly would never have, and when you look it, black (inaudible) paying tax dollars to support the entire university system and really up until that point they had not been permitted, more or less, to take advantage of things that their parents, grandparents and great, great-grandparents had contributed tax money or tax dollars towards. So I wanted to bring about some change in that direction, and that was my goal, and also once students came to the campus I wanted to be available as much as I could to help address needs that were unique to them coming onto a campus like UNC Wilmington, which at that time probably had maybe 20 black students.

Riggins: Wow.

Ralph Parker: The number was very low. So, we started recruiting.

Riggins: How did that go?

Ralph Parker: Well, it went well. As a matter of fact, I don't know if you're familiar with the geographical layout of North Carolina per se, but there's a song, a slogan or something that says something from Murphy to (inaudible). Well let me tell you, when you say leaving the coast driving to
Murphy, North Carolina, that is quite a challenge, and that was my first recruiting trip for the
university, and there was one other guy in admissions, a guy named Murray Lee; I think he's already
retired now. So, we would alternate. I would go out a week; he would go out a week. So someone
would be in the office along with the director of admissions, so I drove-- didn't have Highway 40
then, so I got up early Sunday morning, and I drove all day on Highway 74 over the Smokies and all,
to get to Ashville. I spent the night in Ashville to get up early Monday morning to drive to Murphy
High School, but I was still a 130 some miles from Murphy, and Murphy is that last little speck on the
state map that brings the end of the state of North Carolina. It's right in a little isolated area there,
but that was an experience, and I think there was one black kid in the entire high school, and he had
just moved there, but of course that was the first stop of the week, and I stayed out all week going to
various high schools in the western part of the state working hard trying to recruit for this university.
Not only some of the students had never heard of UNC Wilmington; many of these students had
never even heard of Wilmington. You know, you mention that, "Where's that?" so I knew it was
going to be an uphill battle at that point, and I'm talking with all students now, not just students of
color, but that marked the beginning of a broader scope of recruiting at the university. But all of a
sudden, as we were out shaking the bushes and trying to provide information and visiting churches
and housing projects and everything, applications started coming in, and a lot of folk along the way
started finding out a lot about this university. We pushed to get, I guess you could say a slicker type
of printed material, because at that time believe it or not, I think the university was sending us out
with stuff that was printed on one of those little mimeographs. You remember, you turn and you get
that purple ink all over your hands. That's what they were sending us out with, and I said, "We've got
to make some changes here," so I went around to all of the tables-- because we belonged to, I think
it was called CACRO, and I can't remember what that acronym stands for, but all of the schools in
the state, you know, universities and colleges belonged to that, and we would just go to a high
school-- it would be like 80 or 90, sometimes 100 colleges and universities represented, so I went
around to the tables of all these schools with the printed stuff, and I brought that material back and I
scheduled an appointment with the Chancellor and one of the Vice Chancellors, a guy named Jim
Price, and I went into the conference room where I asked him to meet me, and I put all this pretty
stuff on the table, and then I put our little puny stuff right in the middle, and both of them walked in
about the same time now, they looked, and they just started laughing. They said, "Ralph, we'll do
something. Something has got to be done." I didn't have to say much of anything, and like you say,
it's like the old cliché, "A picture is worth a thousand words." That was surely the case in that
situation. So we tried to get pretty materials and stuff and, you know, we're kind of like catching up,
you know, a little bit, and so I worked in admissions I think for two years. Then some changes took place in student affairs, and I was offered the job Dean of Students, and it was kind of organized in a way that there were two Deans of Students, but basically it was like Dean of Men and Dean of Men, and my coworker was Dean Helena Cheek, a fine lady. I just thought the world of her, and our supervisor was Dr. Bill Bloy [ph?]. He was Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs. So, I accepted the position and I stayed in the capacity I think for about six years. I kind of lose track of time a little bit, and we started doing programs, and bringing about services for students, and housing started being developed on campus, on-campus cafeteria; stuff that other universities had been doing for a zillion years, UNC Wilmington coming off of the two year Wilmington College and Wilmington College is a four year school, now we're part of a university. We had a lot of catching up to do, and I think we did I think a fine job establishing services for students that were in keeping with their needs. You know, it's one thing to recruit a student, but you need to put forth an effort so the student will be retained, and the student will have a good, positive experience when he or she comes to the campus, so I think we did some wonderful things in that direction. I do remember vividly a lot of guys were coming back from Vietnam during that time, and one of my responsibilities was to take care of veterans. Well I had to start from scratch learning how to do that, because they were coming to the campus by the hundreds. Actually, I don't think the VA was set up to take care of the onslaught of people taking advantage of their VA benefits, so I put forth an effort to learn as much as I could about that. I wrote a little grant program. I was able to hire someone to assist me a little later down the road, but that was quite an experience taking care of the needs of veterans during that time, especially when they went through-- I think it was called a prepayment-- to try to get a check in the hand of the veteran before you even started class, you know. You had to do a whole lot of checking to make sure these people were attending class and that they possibly, some of them may have walked away with the check, never attending a class on campus. That was a rare occurrence, I do want to hasten to say, but all of that was a part of student affairs and gearing up to address the needs of students coming to the campus. Then, I went back to Admissions. I should say forward to Admissions, because at that time I was Director of Admissions, and I stayed in that capacity for several years, and I had been pushing the concept, "Dr. Wagoner, we need an Office of Minority Affairs. Students coming to the campus have to know that there is a special effort being put forth to address their needs and to try to take care of the needs that are unique to a black student coming to a predominantly white campus where they're being just absorbed into the structure-- just getting lost in the system, and the office needs to be set up so that it will be able to do things to work itself out of a job. When it gets to a point that students are able to feel that they are part of the main floor of the campus, then do away
with the office, but until then, the university is duty-bound to do things to address the needs that are unique to a black student on this campus."

Riggins: How many years did you talk to him about this?

Ralph Parker: And then all of a sudden, he called me into his office and said, "Look Ralph, I decided to make a big decision." I didn't know what he was going to tell me. He said, "We want to start an Office of Minority Affairs, and since you've been pushing it so much, I want to give you the first opportunity-- if you would like to head that office up and start it from scratch, I would appreciate it, and I think it would be a big plus for the campus." Well, the admissions staff was set up so that I felt that I could leave, and there were some very capable people that were part of the staff then, and when I say capable, not only to take care of recruitment and the processing and so forth of students as a whole, but still a main focus was on African American students, and I had no second thoughts about it because my friend Doug Johnson, my dear friend Doug Johnson, he's deceased now-- I really thought the world-- I just loved him like a brother. I knew that he was going to take care of that aspect of it and I told him I wanted the challenge of setting up an Office of Minority Affairs. One thing I did stipulate-- I said, "Now on a campus like this, it's going to be a real challenge to me and to you and everyone else-- I want to accept this with the understanding that I answer to you," so I knew from experience, if it went on record and if he announced that, "The office has been established, Ralph Parker's going to head it up, and he will answer directly to me," then that's going to give me a stronger status on campus, because when I have to deal with problems of a racial nature, or if students think there's a problem of a racial nature and I have to confront someone, or investigate someone, or look into something, then I know if he is there as my supervisor, then it's going to put me in a better posture on campus to be able to do what I would have deemed necessary to do. So, we- we got off to a pretty good start. We had to move around several times on campus before we found a home over in Old Student Union, but once we did that and set the office up with a secretary that worked out fine. We were able to do some things that I was quite proud of and quite pleased with.

Riggins: Let me show this on the camera. We have a picture, "Ralph Parker to head Office of Minority Affairs."

Ralph Parker: And what's the year?

Riggins: 1983. November, '83, so maybe this was after. It reads, "UCW has opened the doors to a
new Office of Minority Affairs."

Ralph Parker: And I stayed with it until ’96. That’s a period of 13 years I believe.

Riggins: Look, they only gave you this little paragraph though, and a picture.

Ralph Parker: Well, at least a picture is there. Referring back to the old cliché of "A picture is worth a thousand words," I’m glad to have a picture there, but I hardly recognized that guy. (laughs)

Riggins: So, you really saw a need for this office to support students. What kind of programming or role did you see for this office?

Ralph Parker: Well, in talking with students and visiting other campuses-- because we did that-- the campuses that had already established an office like this, and many times they had various names, but they meant the same thing-- I guess today the title Office of Minority Affairs is kind of out of touch, but at least during that time, if someone saw that that was the official name of the office they knew exactly what the main focus of that office was. So, and times change, but at that time and the dynamics of that time, it was a good name. Well, we did quite a few things. We did a lot of things in the way of programming, and we were-- I guess one of the strongest areas of programming sometimes took place around February which is nationally known as Black History Month, and we were able to do all kinds of programs and workshops and activities on campus, and each year-- because I had a little budget-- I would try to bring in someone who’s nationally known. I think one year I brought in Congressman Walter Fauntleroy of Washington, DC. I brought in Nikki Giovanni, who is an outstanding (inaudible), I guess. I brought in Randall Robingon [ph?], (inaudible) bringing in Maya Angelou-- who else-- Chuck Davis dance group, and also for programming throughout the year I would try to get African American student organizations to co-sponsor programs with me. They had several fraternities and sororities on campus, plus I guess the strongest organization was the then Black Student Union. Black students had an organization before I came. I just want to mention this. It was called Wantu Wazuri which is Swahili for "beautiful people". Students said, "Look, maybe we need to change the name of the organization." I mean, someone could see that and unless they were aware of the Swahili meaning behind that, they wouldn’t-- So it changed to the Black Student Union, and I’d also like to say this, that the Black Student Union emerged as a very strong organization on campus. We helped students to organize a chapter of the NAACP, and we also...

Riggins: A student chapter of the NAACP?
Ralph Parker: It was just a chapter of the NAACP, because some faculty members joined and other personnel as well as students. And of course, another strong organization that emerged-- it was kind of in limbo at that time, but it started to grow and make its presence felt on campus, was the Gospel Choir, and maybe a little later on in the interview we can talk about some of the things that...

Riggins: Definitely. We talked a little bit about that on the phone, but I know that was strong for many years.

Ralph Parker: We did some other things. We arranged for some students to get emergency book loans. You know, if a student is receiving financial aid, evidently there's a need, but if the financial aid's going to be processed so that the kid gets his check, or whatever portion of his aid he's going to receive in the form of a check, say three weeks down the road, if he doesn't have any books, then he's lost from the very beginning. So we were able to work with housing to help students who weren't able to get, you know, off-campus housing and this type of thing, in the form of an apartment on campus, because at that time, we didn't have the- the housing capability that the university has now, and so we worked with housing to make sure that students that were coming on campus and needed to live on campus, that we were able to help them out.

Riggins: Things like the emergency book loan, it seems like a small thing, but I know something like that would take a lot of paperwork. It seems like something very personal to arrange something, because I talk to students now when I'm working on the desk, and it's the same thing. They say, "I don't have my financial aid yet. They're trying to find textbooks in the library, and we don't have our textbooks."

Ralph Parker: That's right. And textbooks are extremely expensive, but I worked it out with the Vice Chancellor for Business Affairs, and he had a person designated. I was to call that person and make arrangements, and they had a little form to complete so that the kid could get some books, and then when financial aid had been processed, whatever he owed for books would be deducted and he would get the remaining portion of financial aid.

Riggins: You just had to make it happen, and make people listen.

Ralph Parker: That's exactly right, and I also was able to establish excellent rapport with people in the community. There were some ladies on the list; I had visited them, visited their homes, and they were willing to accept, you know, like a young lady to rent a room, this type of thing, and I checked
all this out, and I had my list, and if I really got in a bad bind, there were ladies in the community I could call on for help and, you know, as we have programs on campus for people in the community who attended, I would always make it a point to go to them, get their mailing address and telephone number, and I'd develop a mailing list, and every time we had programs or anything I would send them one of the flyers and keep them-- in many cases they would come on campus to the programs, and in cases where they could not attend the program, maybe I'd see them in the mall, "Hey Mr. Parker. How are you doing? I appreciate you sending me that flier. I couldn't make it, but thank you for keeping me in mind."

Riggins: So that way they know the university is involved.

Ralph Parker: That's right, that it's trying to do things, and we're concerned about incorporating the entire community in the whole educational process. So those were some of the things that we did to help establish rapport with the-- because let's face it, UNC Wilmington was set aside on this side of town, and it was viewed as a white university.

Riggins: Well, yes. So were you really going up against a lot of reality, but a lot of notions too?

Ralph Parker: There were horror stories out in the black community about UNC Wilmington.

Riggins: Just about not being welcoming?

Ralph Parker: That's right; not presenting a warm, welcoming atmosphere, and I guess I took that upon myself to try to help change that image and if a student felt uncomfortable, they knew there was someone on campus that was in their corner and would try to do everything they could to address the problems they had. In other words, I took it upon myself to try to expand that comfort zone on this campus, so when a kid came on campus, he would not be discouraged and say, "The heck with that. I'm going to North Carolina A&T." Not that A&T is not a wonderful school, because it's my alma mater, but you don't want to be in an environment in which you feel like you're totally being isolated, you know; The last person chosen when the class breaks into groups to do little projects, or the last person that the professor calls upon, yet you're raising your hand, you know, that type of thing. And that might be an exaggeration, but I'm just mentioning that to try to stress the point that I'm making to you.

Riggins: It sounds like you're there for the students 100%, but as one person you can't do it all, and you mentioned that there are often lots of other-- or you tried to call on other people to mentor
Ralph Parker: Well see, that was another challenge. You know, sometimes when you are the black administrator, everything that happens is dumped on you, like you've got to be responsible for the whole university, but it was my thing, "Look, I'll do what I can, but it has to be a university-wide effort to make this work."

Riggins: So to a certain extent, it became that way I'm sure.

Ralph Parker: During that time there were a lot of conferences held throughout the country about addressing the needs of black students on campus, and it was amazing when these professional organizations would send out this literature, and maybe five or six offices on campus would receive-- they would send it all to me. I said, "Look, you need to go yourself. You don't need for me to come back and tell you what's going on on a national scale. Go and find out your first hand information. You can get a little better feel for what's going on on different campuses, what people are doing, attitudes they have projected towards students and that type of thing. I don't need to go. You need to go." You know, that type of thing. Well, pretty soon they stopped sending me the stuff, but that was no assurance that they went to the conferences, but at least I think I made a point along the way. Now at this point do you want me to tell you some other things that we did?

Riggins: Yeah, sure. Continue on.

Ralph Parker: We did an awards program. As a matter of fact, I started that and I think this-- a couple of weeks ago, the university celebrated the 21st awards program for students of color.

Riggins: And you came to that.

Ralph Parker: Yes, and to tell you the truth when I left I felt so honored when the Ralph Parker Scholarship was established. Then there was a Ralph Parker Award established, and I try to come over every year to present that, and this year-- it's kind of ironic-- I brought one of my little grandsons. He was down sitting in the front row, and his name is Tre, Ralph Parker III, and he's just looking at me, and I'd give him a little sign every now and then, and I said, "You don't realize Tre, but I'm trying to recruit you right now. This is the first day of you working on your Doctorate." We were leaving campus that particular day, and he said, "Hey Papa, I'm going to tell everybody I've been to college." I said, "That's fine." We also continued to- to help our work with Admissions, because-- as a matter of fact, we had kind of an African American trio act. I have to explain this to...
you. I mentioned Doug Johnson earlier, okay. Then there's another African American on staff, on the faculty, his name was Jim Braye. I don't know if you've ever heard that name. Jim retired from the military as a Lieutenant Colonel, and he worked at Pfizer and a couple of other places. Then he came and he was appointed to Director of Career Planning and Placement. I don't know if this is under the same name or not. So, not only would we meet students visiting the campus and just, you know-- here's this black family coming from Charlotte bringing their kid down-- they want to know, well, "Who is it on campus that we can call on? Who is it on campus that my daughter or son can go to if they need some assistance or information that's kind of unique I guess to the welfare of black students?" So the three of us kind of had this thing put together in terms of students visiting the campus, and we'd take them around, show them around, but also we would go into the community housing projects, churches, clubs and organizations, and schools and so forth, and we would make our little spiel. Doug would talk about admissions. I would talk about the experiences that we would try to provide to help retain them, make them feel comfortable once they got here, and then of course Jim Braye would deal with, "When you finish UNC Wilmington with a degree in this, this is what you can expect in the world of work." So we kind of-- we had a pretty good little thing going there, and I will never forget one day we were leaving campus and we had one of the university state cars, and this lady, who just happened to be white said, "You guys, please be careful. If anything happened to you out on the highway, the entire-- all of the black male staff members in the administrative end would be completely wiped out." We thought "She's right!" But, and we worked with the athletic program a lot too, especially men's and women's basketball. Also, another thing, especially during my last year, I took some kids to the Million Man March, and that was quite an experience, and I heard them talk about it, and I had planned to pick my son up who was then a student at UNC Charlotte, and I was going to take him, because we figured it was one of those experiences that you'll never be able to have that opportunity again. So, I went to, I think my Vice Chancellor, his name was Bill Bryan, and a couple of other people and I said, "I need some help. I want to take these guys up to the Million Man March." So, "Fine Ralph, what can we do to help?" So they provided a van, a credit card-- I just wanted to spend one night in the hotel, get up early, go to the march all day and then head back to Wilmington. So I packed that van with guys. I can't remember the number; possibly thirteen. We were crowded, and we went to the Million Man March, and that was a wonderful experience. You know, I'm an advocate for always saying that in a university setting, not everything is learned from a book. Many of the other experience you have away from the classroom are just as important as those experiences that take place maybe in a biology class sometimes. That was good for me. Another thing we did-- we did a lot of academic
monitoring at the end, especially of the fall semester I would request a printout on all African American students. I wanted to know their status, if it looked like they were going to have some academic problems, and I would contact them. You've heard of the Buckley Amendment? The Buckley Amendment was designed-- and I don't know if that's changed or not-- Buckley Amendment was designed to I guess to protect information about individual students. In other words, you just couldn't send information to parents, even about his kid's grades and stuff, that type of thing. I can't remember the exact wording, but if I receive that printout, everybody who had below a C average, I would contact them through the mail asking them to come by, remind them about services that are available on campus just for the asking, trying to find out if they're trying to work too much and if they're courting too much, you know, the whole nine yards. You've got to shape up here, because if you don't. See, UNC Wilmington doesn't take any prisoners academically. This is a very challenging school, and it needs to be that way. I think that is a tremendous plus for this school. It has some strong academic programs here. Then, if I didn't get a response I would send another letter, and I would word that another way and say, "Look, obviously you didn't receive the first letter I sent you. If I don't hear from you, or if you don't come by my office this time I'm going to send a letter home to your parents." Now I knew in the back of my mind that would have been in violation of that, but I had to take that risk, and sometimes you have to step out on faith in terms of doing some things, and that would usually get their attention, and we would talk and so forth, and try to find out why those grades are low, you know, all in an effort of trying to help retain students. Sometimes it would be something they could adjust in their schedule, or something that usually would boil down to needing to study more, you know, that type of thing, and not procrastinating on projects and papers and all that, and then at the end of the spring semester, I would check again, sometimes contact them at home while they're at home on a summer break and say, "You need to get in summer school to pull the average up so that you can come back for the fall." Another thing we would do in the beginning of the fall semester, I would check every day during registration in that late registration period, and if a student is eligible to return and he has not registered, I wanted to know why. Why are you not registered? I've gotten in my car, gone over to the mall. I ran a kid down one day; he was riding a bike. I said, "Hey boy, why aren't you at school?" "Well Mr. Parker, I just didn't have the money to come back." "You didn't come by to see me to see if we could provide some type of help for you." "Well Mr. Parker..." you know, that type of thing, and some kind of arrangements could always be made. I mean, there's always something, and I knew that I probably rubbed some people the wrong way or bugged some people about some things.

Riggins: You mean the students?
Ralph Parker: No. Administrators and other people. But when they send me notes-- and I've been retired for ten years-- when they send me notes or call me sometimes, send me a Christmas card, and they always say how thankful and appreciative they are for things we did, you know, that I know that all of that bugging and pushing and irritating people, it was worth it. See, because sometimes the kid is at the age of 18, 19 and they don't always know what's best for them.

Riggins: And they don't always know people will help them.

Ralph Parker: That's right. I also set up a tutoring program. Money I had in my budget for, I think temporary wages, you know. I hired excellent students to provide tutoring, and it wasn't just for black students; any kid on campus could come. I had black tutors, white tutors, students of other ethnic backgrounds and so forth, and later on the university consolidated that with some other tutoring. In many cases students would not take advantage of the service when I had it over at my office, and even when the university did it on a broader scale, and sometimes students don't want to admit that they need help, and they think it presents a bad stigma towards them if someone sees them going into the office for tutoring and that type of thing. Maybe it's a macho thing. I don't know, but I tried to talk and convince them to put that on the side. It would be worth it when you can get out of here with a degree in business and I can see you over as the manager at Wachovia Bank, and that type of thing, you know. So we did the academic monitoring, the tutoring. We also did a mentoring program in which I would always have about 35-40 students. We'd go through a little training process, and I want you to help these new freshman coming in, and we would have meetings and do's and don'ts of a mentoring program, and there are times I would call back over here at night to students in the residence, "Look, I want you to check on such and such. I have a feeling that he's not doing what he needs to do, or he had an experience today in the classroom that bothered me. I want you to go by and see if he's doing alright;" that type of thing.

Riggins: Peer mentoring.

Ralph Parker: That's right. Peer mentoring. That's exactly right.

Riggins: In all of these initiatives you directed and carried out...

Ralph Parker: From year to year. There was one guy on campus-- I can think of his name, but I won't mention his name-- When he would see my-- I know one time he saw my annual report summary, he would say that he didn't believe that I was doing all of that, you know, and I got a little
huffy because I was doing it. So, "Are you saying I'm providing false information on my report? You ask any kid and they'll tell you the same thing." But that's neither here nor there. I don't want to dwell on that too much, but I want to tell you some other things we did. We worked closely with the Gospel Choir. Gospel Choir was good, and they would always give the annual-- I want to say concert-- the anniversary, happy anniversary in February, and have this tremendous concert over in the auditorium, and I would always attend of course, and my purpose was of course to support them, make my presence known. Ralph Parker's here. He's always interested in choir, and so forth, but it was also to-- I wanted to know how they sounded; see how good they were, because for ten-- no for twelve years Doug Johnson and a couple of your coworkers downstairs-- They probably told you Joyce and Deborah-- We would take the choir on tour, and either we would go in a northerly direction up as far as the Washington, Baltimore area, or we would go in a southerly direction down as far as Atlanta, Georgia, and it would take place during the Spring break, and I think we would stay out maybe two nights, possibly three nights, you know, and not only was it an opportunity for kids to showcase their talents, but it served also as a means of recruiting for the university, because we would visit high schools and churches. I remember one time I arranged for them perform down at Underground Atlanta. Have you been there before?

Riggs: Yes.

Ralph Parker: Well, that's a busy place. It was on a Saturday. That place was just crawling with people, but when that choir cut loose, I guarantee you it got just as quiet as it could be. All of the focus was on the UNCW Gospel Choir. And another time, I had them to perform at the base of the Washington Monument on the mall in Washington, so I guess those are the two I guess you could say "national sites" that we performed as a choir, but the main, the grass roots efforts were performances at churches of people who were just so nice to us, and they fed us and, you know, it was just nice. See, if we went like in a northerly direction, there were students who were from places like areas up near the state line of North Carolina and Virginia, so they would make arrangements with their-- sometimes their high schools, and get a hold of churches for the choir to perform, and so we had it so that choir probably gave three performances a day, and university supported that effort, and it was one year I had made arrangements for the bus and hotel accommodations and everything, and-- of course we went through a lot of paperwork, you know, so everybody would be covered. They knew what they were expected to dos and don'ts, because if you misbehave I'm just not going to carry you anymore. So that particular time I went over for their anniversary program. They sounded horrible. They just didn't sound good. I went right back to the (inaudible), I called the
president and I said, "Look, I'm cancelling the tour." "Oh Mr. Parker, you're kidding, aren't you?" "No. You sound terrible, and I'm not going to carry you out there representing this university when the quality of your performance is just not up to snuff. Some little junior choir in some little country church up around Virginia will sing you out of the church!" They couldn't believe that I was going to do that, but I did, and basically they knew I was right. They knew I was right, and I never regretted that decision, so of the 13 years I think we carried them out 12, with the exception of the one that I cancelled, and if you're not up to snuff you don't need to go out there representing this university, because I'm proud of this university, and I'm proud of the choir and I'm not going to see you embarrass yourself out there, so you're not going.

Riggins: So this was the anniversary of the choir?

Ralph Parker: Yeah, and it used to take place during Black History Month, in February, and that particular time I went over to the auditorium to listen to them sing, and I just didn't like what I heard as far as the quality of the music, so we scratched that.

Riggins: Well I just have to say, I have a student now, and in 2006 a student worker who is the Gospel Choir, and when I brought her around to meet some of the people downstairs, and she met Debra Price and she told her, "Oh, you know, we used to go on tour and we used to do all this," and the student said, "Well you do it now. Why don't you take us around?" Debra said, "I'm too old."

Ralph Parker: Well, Debra and Joyce, they were dedicated, and they did a fine job and, you know, just Doug and I couldn't carry the choir out there. We had to had these ladies with us and, you know, you still-- even though kids are legally grown, but parents all over creation expect the universe to look after their kids while they are under the umbrella of a university activity, and we worked hard to do that, and I'm just thankful that the Lord blessed us to never-- we did have a wreck one time around Fredericksburg, but that worked out just fine. But we had some great experiences. I would also like to mention, we did a lot of things to involve local schools, and churches, and agencies that I mentioned earlier, and we had some key people and individuals in the community that helped us out on programs. A gentleman by the name of Fred McCree [ph?], a guy by the name of Lloyd Wilson; he helped us quite often. Have you ever seen any of the artwork of Harry Davis? I think some of his work is right on display in the library, or it was in days gone by.

Riggins: Yeah, there's so much artwork up now.

Ralph Parker: I mentioned the tutorial services I think. Also, in the beginning of the fall semester of
every year, we would have what we would call our Fall Get-together, which students would be invited to, say like, come to the union, or one of the larger rooms on campus that would accommodate them, and we would have refreshments and play games and stuff, and in many cases clubs and organizations on campus would have displays. I think at that time we probably had three historically black fraternities and maybe at least two sororities, and then the other organizations like Black Student Union, the choir and so forth, and that would give new students a chance to see various organizations on campus and hopefully we get them involved with things, and help them to feel comfortable talking to upper classmen and that type of thing. It was just a good...

Riggins: Were you the advisor for a lot of these student organizations?

Ralph Parker: Well, I wasn't the official advisor, but I guess unofficially I would always have a hand in a lot of things and, I notice one question that you mentioned earlier was also committees that I served on.

Riggins: Well there must have been a lot, at least one or two pertaining to retentions, and all of that.

Ralph Parker: Let me tell you, when there are just a few African American administrators on campus I think every committee that's formed feels like, "Well, we've got to have a representative from the African American segment of the campus." Look, I'll do anything I can, but I'm not going to serve on any more committees. I think one time the list was up in the teens. I said, "I just can't do it. I'm only one person," and the way for you to solve this is that you bring more African American administrators on campus. I just can't do it anymore. I just can't. Now there were a few that I stayed on, like the Residency Committee, Admissions Committee, and a few others that...

Riggins: Which ones did you Chair?

Ralph Parker: Let's see, I know one that I Chaired that was kind of a hot ticket item on campus-- I can't think of the official-- When someone was fired on campus and they wanted to appeal...

Riggins: Like a promotional tenure...

Ralph Parker: Not a promotional tenure, but it mostly took care of SPA employees, you know, and honestly a lot of secretaries, people in housekeeping, so forth that were dismissed and the committee I headed was like an appeals committee for them, and I'm delighted that we had it too, because in many cases the person deserved to be dismissed, but a lot of other cases they did not deserve to be, and had it not been for that appeals committee to try to correct an unfair situation,
that person would have just been out in the cold as far as a job at UNCW is concerned. So, at any rate, I know I was on the Human Relations Committee, some kind of federal compliance, the Residency Committee, the Learning Advisory Board, the Orientation Committee, the Self Study-- you know, during that time you had to do self study, maybe every five years or so. I had my share of committees.

Riggins: You did your service.

(tape change)

Riggins: Alright, I'm back. This is Adina Riggins again, continuing a tape, tape 2, with Mr. Ralph Parker. And we're just talking about all of your leadership at UNC Wilmington. I'm very impressed by everything that you managed, and coordinated.

Ralph Parker: (laughs). Well, thank you. Thank you very much.

Riggins: But one thing I was saying at the end of the last tape is that I interviewed Dr. Delilah Blanks from social work, and she talked about going out with you on recruiting --

Ralph Parker: Mmhm.

Riggins: -- trips, and everything that you did to recruit and retain students, because that, I think that was coming up as an issue. Of course, it's like, "Oh, have you recruited them," but how to (inaudible)

Ralph Parker: How-- that's right, that's right. And even though I know we're not going to get in this area, but the retention of faculty and staff people is just as important as the retention of students. And --

Riggins: Do you have time to work in that area, to try and (inaudible)?

Ralph Parker: Well, we ha-- I don't, we didn't have an official organization, but we would often meet for lunch and just kind of talk about issues that were common among those of us in that circle. And -- but back to --

Riggins: Yeah, I think that's continued, but maybe not now, but when I first got here.

Ralph Parker: Right.
Riggins: Some people were going to go -- So, and that would be for faculty and staff, administrators, you know, anyone, and to get together and talk about, you know, issues for black faculty.

Ralph Parker: That's right, that's right. And you know, and students need to see black faculty members in those classrooms, too. Not only do African-American students need to see that, but white students as well, to know that there are people out there capable of other persuasions other than white people, to be able to hold down those positions and do a fine job at them. So it has kind of a two-fold purpose, when it takes place.

Riggins: Okay.

Ralph Parker: Mmhm.

Riggins: Oh, yeah.

Ralph Parker: Yeah.

Riggins: So what are some of these, as we have gone through the '90s, I would like to hear about the Upperman Center and what was, who was Linda Upperman, and how did she-- how did this evolve? I'm sure it was an evolution. I'm sure you're, like I said, and engine behind this.

Ralph Parker: Yeah, yeah. At that time, we already had the Office of Minority Affairs in place, and before getting to that, I would like to say that every time I had the opportunity to use the media, you know, and we had -- what we have two or three TV stations in the area -- at one time, the people from the, what is it, public television came down and interviewed us about some things. And I think we done some AIDS workshops or something that they were kind of impressed with.

Riggins: Uh-huh.

Ralph Parker: 'Cause we did workshops on various health issues. I would even have people from say like Wachovia Bank to come over and try to teach kids how to handle the checking account, and all that kind of stuff. One thing that kind of bothered me, and -- I don't know if you guys still permit folk to come on campus and give out almost free credit cards for the asking, but sometimes students get excited about that credit card, first time they had the opportunity to get one. They'll get a gold necklace, just to fill out an application or something else that's attractive to the student. Girl came to me, she was a transfer student from Charleston, South Carolina, and she was in tears. "I don't know what I'm going to do. These people keep calling me. I just don't have the
money to -- "Well, who's calling you?" "They were J.C. Penney." I said, "What? Why do you owe them money?" You know. "Well, I got this credit card, when I came on campus, and I went down there and I charged a lot of stuff." "What did you charge?" You won't believe this. "I-I got some crystal, I got some dinnerware, I got sheets and pillow cases and -- " "You're living in the residence hall, right? What are you going to do with this?" What do you call that lady that read, the hope chest?

Riggins: Yeah, right.

Ralph Parker: Yeah. "I wanted -- " "You have a boyfriend?" "No." (laughs) "Are you engaged?" "No." "You have a boyfriend?" "No." (laughs) "You go to the residence hall, you gather all of that stuff that you have, and you take it back to J.C. Penney's and see if you can talk to those folk, and turn it in, and get them off your back." You know, stuff like that.

Riggins: Yeah, right.

Ralph Parker: And I'm kind of giving you a fast version of stuff I told her. But sometimes kids just need that kind of guidance and direction, because we all make mistakes in life.

Riggins: Yeah.

Ralph Parker: But some of those things just kind of --

Riggins: Someone like you, who's, you know, pretty assertive.

Ralph Parker: Yeah.

Riggins: You tell them, "You know, you just have to be assertive and look our for yourself," and you know, that kind of thing.

Ralph Parker: That's true, that's true. So, and I don't know how it got to that point, but I -- I'd utilize TV as much as I could, because I would always tell that they wanted to come over and interview me. And it's always number of -- "How many black kids do you have, what percentage?" You know, I would just tell them, I know ever time news gets slack downtown, you come over here and talk to me, because you know that you can always get a news story on some things --

Riggins: About the numbers going up?
Ralph Parker: Yeah, "Well, why didn't you -- ?" you know.

Riggins: Or, yeah. Or numbers went up last year, but this year it's --

Ralph Parker: That's right, that's right, all the time. But you know, I -- I would accommodate them as much as I could. Radio stations, there are two black newspapers in Wilmington -- The Challenger, I don't know if it's still operating or not -- but the Wilmington Journal has been operating for many, many, many years. And Mr. Tom Jervay, who's deceased now, but he was a force to be reckoned with in the Wilmington area, because he was really a community minded person, as well as Dr. Hubert Eaton. But, and we conducted interviews with the Seahawk campus newspaper. So I really tried to utilize the media as much as I could. The only thing that disturbed me sometimes is that we have, I guess an official news office on campus, and in many cases -- maybe I shouldn't mention this, but -- there were things that I thought, that happened, or were taking place, that I thought were "newsworthy," but they didn't think it was newsworthy. And that bothered me. That bothered me. And sometimes you can look at things through different eyes and that person can see something in the situation that you can't, maybe. You know, and so I reached the point, I just contact the news people myself, and send out news information. And I guess behind --

Riggins: Press releases?

Ralph Parker: That's right, and I guess behind the scenes, somebody was, when my ears started burning, I knew somebody (laughs) really, really talking about -- But sometimes you just have to do those things. People in the community needed to know what was going on, on this campus, what was being done, services that were being provided, things to addr-- Because during that time, it was in the news, you know, "Enrollment at UNC Wilmington," "Percentage of black students," and so many times -- the university was growing so fast -- so many times we would increase the number of black students, but the overall growth of the university was so huge, that what represented a substantial increase in number, would not be reflected in an increase in percentage.

Riggins: Percentage.

Ralph Parker: That's right, that's right, that's right. And I didn't use that as an excuse, but I knew that we were out there beating the bushes as much as we could, to try to increase numbers and percentages. And I -- in cases where the percentage didn't increase, I still found a great degree of satisfaction in knowing that for those students who came here, that we had programming and services and stuff, to address their needs, to try to retain them, help them to have a good
experience while they were here.

Riggins: Right.

Ralph Parker: And I knew that from the depth of my heart, that that was going on. But during one interview, for one of the local TV stations, Dr. Leroy Upperman, a retired local doctor, saw me. And I knew a Dr. Upperman, but I'd never had contact with him. But he called me, and he asked me to stop by his house, that he wanted to talk with me, which I did. And we had a good conversation, and I went over there a couple of times, and we just talked and talked, he was talking about things that happened in Wilmington in years gone by, and how at one time there was a branch, I guess you might say, of Fayetteville State University offered college courses at the all-black Wilson High School, in years gone by, you know, in the -- So, well, to make a long story short, he said he wanted to do something special for the students of color at UNC Wilmington. And again, to fast forward a little bit --

Riggins: Wow.

Ralph Parker: -- he, I think he contributed about $400,000, to be used to start that, the Center, cultural center. And Dr. Bryan was I think vice chancellor for student affairs, and of course Dr. Leutze was all excited about that, and so decided to use the second floor of the university union. Yeah, I think he changed names of it now, I don't know, but the second floor was going to be the location of the cultural center. And by that time, I think also a lot was going on up at Chapel Hill. Those students up there wanted a freestanding --

Riggins: Oh, right.

Ralph Parker: -- building, I think.

Riggins: I remember hearing about that.

Ralph Parker: Mmhm. But I didn't worry about that.

Riggins: Mmhm.

Ralph Parker: See, sometimes, I think it was Booker T. Washington who once said that, "You don't measure a person's success by the height that he climbs, but the depth from which he came." So I knew, the idea of having a freestanding, that didn't bother me at all, when I could think about how
far we had come from zero, up to a point that we could have a second floor, over at the University Union for that cultural center. And so the university kicked in money for books, and materials, and AV equipment, and all that good stuff. And it's a nice little center over there now. I haven't been over there lately, but the last time I was there, I think Dr. Bronson [ph?] was doing a fine job with it. Helena Lee did an excellent job when she was there. Matter of fact, I hired her to be in charge of the Center, and she did a magnificent job.

Riggins: And then Joanne Nottingham was in charge for, before Debra Bronson, I think.

Ralph Parker: Yeah, right, right, right. As a matter of fact, for Dr. Upperman's daughter, Linda -- what's her name, Linda Sm--

Riggins: Linda, mmhm.

Ralph Parker: Smith. She served as interim director of minority affairs, well after I left. I think there was one other lady then, than her. I think a lady, I can't think of her name. She was the wife of one of the assistant basketball coaches. But nevertheless, that was a big plus for this university, and not only for students of color, but for the entire university. And I surely hope that it's being utilized as a resource on campus, and I like the idea of it being right where it is, because it's kind of like in the center of the campus, and it was, I was very proud of that. Very, very proud of that, and I still am, you know.

Riggins: Yes.

Ralph Parker: And I just think it was just wonderful on the part of Dr. Upperman to have that kind of forethought and concern about the students on this campus and in this general area, to want to do something like that to help them.

Riggins: Right.

Ralph Parker: Yes, yes.

Riggins: And I'm not sure, but I think that's where a lot of the programming comes out of now.

Ralph Parker: Yeah, I think so. I think so, I think so, I think so.
Ralph Parker: But those 13 years, I enjoyed them. It was a lot of work.

Riggins: It sounds like it. (laughs) I'm getting exhausted hearing about it.

Ralph Parker: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Riggins: But it sounds like that's, when you came here, you had a vision, but that's what the university needed, in some ways. Almost as soon as you came, you saw that there was a need for an office like that.

Ralph Parker: Right, right. And for it to materialize, you know, I just really felt good about that. Felt real good.

Riggins: It sounds like it. Well, I'd just like to also ask about some of the people you worked with. And we talked to you a little bit before, but you suggested that I interview William Bryan. Well, I definitely would like to. He lives somewhere else now, but --

Ralph Parker: Uh-huh.

Riggins: -- Can you think of any other people that would be great for us to include in these stories?

Ralph Parker: Yeah. The gentleman I mentioned earlier, Jim Bray, James Bray.

Riggins: Yes.

Ralph Parker: As a matter of fact, he lives up -- near Figure Eight.

Riggins: Oh, okay. And he was the lieutenant colonel, which is like Dr. Haley had been.

Ralph Parker: Yeah, that's right, yeah, yeah.

Riggins: So do they, maybe they, they have, well I don't know, Dr. Haley didn't talk about his military past too much, he said.

Ralph Parker: Yeah, yeah.

Riggins: You know.

Ralph Parker: But it was good to-- And Haley, Earl Sheraton, James Johnson, all those guys helped me tremendously. Have you interviewed Dennis Carter?
Riggins: No, not yet.

Ralph Parker: Well, I think Dennis brings a lot to the table, also. Now, are you just restricting this to faculty and staff?

Riggins: Faculty and administrators or staff, particularly those who have retired or who have moved on, because, well for one, they're here, they're, you know, too busy to --

Ralph Parker: Right.

Riggins: -- sit and reflect.

Ralph Parker: Right.

Riggins: Although I, sometimes if they're changing positions, I'm able to catch them.

Ralph Parker: Now what about Dr. Crews, Marshall Crews?

Riggins: I did interview him a while ago. I'd love to talk to him again. I --

Ralph Parker: He's --

Riggins: I don't know if he'll do morning.

Ralph Parker: I don't, I plan to call him today, just to see him, because in the past I've come over, had lunch with him, and sometimes he, when he was able to, he would drive down to South Port and we'd go out and have lunch, and just kind of talk about the good old days.

Riggins: Yes, yeah.

Ralph Parker: Mmhm.

Riggins: That's, I can imagine, I mean he was, just until a few years ago, he was coming into the library a lot, doing a lot, but I think now he's somewhat limited in his mobility.

Ralph Parker: Right.

Riggins: But, yeah, I'd love to talk to him again.

Ralph Parker: Okay.
Riggins: So, yeah, Marshall Crews, and he was probably a good source of information for you, since he was there for (inaudible).

Ralph Parker: Well, you know, he wrote a book on the history of the University, growing up I think from its beginning, 'til about 1970 or '69, something like that.

Riggins: Mmhm, yes. (inaudible) college years.

Ralph Parker: Mmhm, that's right, mmhm.

Riggins: And you left in 1996, so you worked for a good amount of time, also with, under Dr. Leutze.

Ralph Parker: Yes.

Riggins: How was the University changing? How did you see the University changing in the 1990s, by the time you left?

Ralph Parker: Well, of course a lot of my working years, I was under Dr. Wagoner.

Riggins: Yes.

Ralph Parker: And needless to say, Dr. Wagoner brought the University under his leadership up to a certain level. And I think when he retired and Dr. Leutze came aboard, that Dr. Leutze accepted the baton to move it up even to another level, which I think his track record proves. And I think he brought wonderful leadership qualities to the University, and like Dr. Wagoner, both made valuable contributions in their own way, to the overall growth of the University. And I just admire both of those gentlemen to the utmost. Of course, Dr. Wagoner's deceased now, and I guess Dr. Leutze's still doing some other things connected to the University, I don't know. But I think he was the right man at the right time, when he came aboard as chancellor of the University. And I'll always appreciate the things that he did.

Riggins: Mmhm. I know. And then Dr. Wagoner, you obviously got to know very well, 'cause he was --

Ralph Parker: Oh, yeah.

Riggins: -- he was here when you were hired.
Ralph Parker: That's right, that's right.

Riggins: And then, yeah, so -- and so he was there. He was the one that you talked to when he wanted something. (laughs)

Ralph Parker: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. And there were times we had situations on campus, that we needed to address, and after hours we sometimes had to talk on the telephone and plied strategy and contact key people and individuals to address issues and (inaudible) everything. And I just appreciated to the highest the support he gave me, in my capacity here. Because, see, you have to understand, and I'm not saying this to brag, but when I came aboard in 1971, it was a whole new dimension added to this University, because there had not been any black instructors or administrators, or anything, so I mean, everybody on campus knew that I was here. But I came with the attitude of, to do my very best, like my parents had always taught me. And to give it my best shot, and with the understanding that (laughs) I had a job before I came. And if anything went down, I would, I was capable of getting another job. And I think sometimes you have to approach certain situations, step out on faith, give it your best shot. At the end of the day, when you leave, you got to have the satisfaction that you did your very best on that particular day. And whatever challenges that the workplace presents the next day, you'll jump aboard and you do the very best you can to address those issues. There's just --

Riggins: That's all you can do.

Ralph Parker: That's right. (inaudible) I say. There are many things, and any capacity of employment, and especially in the University, that the graduate school and nothing else will prepare you to deal with. And you just have to say that little prayer, and jump into it, and do the best you can. And you've probably experienced that a few times yourself.

Riggins: Yes, and you know, and you learn, but it's part of the deal.

Ralph Parker: That's exactly right.

Riggins: What have we not covered? I mean, I see all your wonderful (inaudible)

Ralph Parker: Oh, okay, well I did, you know, I just did jot down a couple of things, to kind of job my memory, because after ten years, you know, there's a lot of --

Riggins: Already.
Ralph Parker: Yeah, a lot of names that I haven't even though about in a long time. And I'm just glad you gave me an opportunity to come over and be a part of this, because it kind of put me in a mode to have to think back through some things.

Riggins: Well, yeah, it's like you said, you know, there's just amazing things that happened, and we could have all the reports and all the official documents here in archives, but without these oral histories, you miss a lot of the stories and a lot of the events, and flavor of what happened. And what some people, when (inaudible), you mentioned once that there was a woman who worked in telecommunications, who was a little --

Ralph Parker: Yeah.

Riggins: -- mentor to some of the students. Or --

Ralph Parker: Well, well, she and I, came here at the same time. Her name is Kate Jackson. And she worked in, I guess it was called telecommunications, she was the operator.

Riggins: Okay.

Ralph Parker: And needless to say, it was a new experience for her, too. And --

Riggins: She had worked somewhere else before (inaudible).

Ralph Parker: Yeah. But it wasn't like UNC Wilmington, I'll put it that way. And you know, sometimes, in your capacity as an administrator, for me I found out that not only that I had to try to reach out and help students, but there were times that employees would come by and share concerns and ask for assistance. "How do I go about appealing this?" "How do I go about handling this?" Or, "Why am I passed over for promotions?" And, "Who should I see? What should I do?" This type of thing. So, you find yourself not only being a source of information for students, but a source of information for fellow employees. And whether you want to accept that role or not, if they look towards you for that, then I think you're obligated to the best you can in that situation, too. But Kate Jackson has retired, she lives in Wilmington, and students really like and appreciated her. Being she's a fine lady, and I don't know how much you're going to expand this.

Riggins: Well, it'd be good if I could talk to her.

Ralph Parker: Yeah, yeah, yeah.
Riggins: You know, she's in Wilmington, still, and --

Ralph Parker: That's right, mmhm.

Riggins: Yeah, even if she wasn't, I mean, we travel.

Ralph Parker: Right, mmhm.

Riggins: So, and she had a long service with us.

Ralph Parker: That's right.

Riggins: So, oh yeah, this is going to keep going.

Ralph Parker: Yeah.

Riggins: Keep going as long as I'm here. So.

Ralph Parker: Right.

Riggins: Well, let's see what's some of the other questions. Well, I'd like to ask, just while I'm thinking about it, what have you been doing since retirement? I know you said you --

Ralph Parker: Oh.

Riggins: -- for a while (inaudible) --

Ralph Parker: I've been quite active. But it's a -- a different mindset to the things I've been involved in, because I can always stop and go home, and I'd say, when you asked me that question, I said, "I'm going to tell her that I'm the president of the Southport Porch Rockers Association."

Riggins: (laughs)

Ralph Parker: (laughs). But --

Riggins: No, I don't believe that.

Ralph Parker: I do a little rockin' on the porch, but not a whole lot. But I'm involved. My wife is a retired teacher. She retired after 31 years of service, and my total number of years of service, I think 34. But both of involved in some church work, we're involved in civic types of things in the Southport
community. I've been president, not president, chairman of the Martin Luther King celebration committee over in the Southport area for the past ten years, as I retired. And we've done some things with the school system and in the community that we're really proud of. Haven't traveled a whole lot; we've taken, we usually take some trips, but we haven't taken any long, extensive trips. We've been down to the Bahamas and places like that. I still have my list of honeydews to take care of. (laughs)

Riggins: Uh-huh. You have a workshop.

Ralph Parker: Yeah, yeah. I have what I call the good wood shop. I got involved with the woodcrafts before I retired. I went to a yard sale one day, and saw this little saw. The guy charged me five dollars for it, and I took it home and just fooled around with it, just for the fun, just 'cause -- You know, I like this. So I built me a little shop in my backyard, not very large, just about as large as this table. (laughs) And I have a lot of oak trees in my backyard, and worktable, and I started buying other equipment, and I started making stuff. And all of the sudden people would see the stuff and they would want to buy it. So I said, "That's good, I'll make some more and sell it." Not that I'll make a lot of money at it, I figure all the work and time I put into stuff, I probably make about 50 cents an hour. (laughs) But I enjoy doing it. It's good therapy for me.

Riggins: Wow, right, right.

Ralph Parker: And I enjoy doing it very much.

Riggins: And you started it before you retired, so when you needed some relaxation relief?

Ralph Parker: That's right, that's right.

Riggins: (laughs)

Ralph Parker: Go out in my shop and just beat and bang on boards, take out my frustration, I guess. And we have five grandchildren, and we do a lot of family things, you know, with my wife, my wife and I, along with our son and his family, and our daughter and her family. And we just kind of get together as often as we can, and it's always a very, very special occasion whenever we're together. Younguns running all over the place, knockin' over stuff, breaking it, but that's all right. You know?

Riggins: (laughs)
Ralph Parker: It's just a pleasure to have lived long enough to see them and to be a part of their lives. And it's very gratifying to my wife and to me for that to take place. I think one day maybe I'll just, I'm not going to try to write a book, that's too time consuming, but I do want to put together a little booklet for my grandchildren. And I'm not, I don't plan to do a lot of research and family background, but just from what I can remember, just to write down things about family members --

Riggins: Family members.

Ralph Parker: And just little stories and anecdotes and this type of thing.

Riggins: Or you might want to do something like this, like a video, an inter-- you know, just to say it.

Ralph Parker: Yeah.

Riggins: Do an interview.

Ralph Parker: That's right, that's right, that's right.

Riggins: And then you don't have to worry about --

Ralph Parker: Writing it out. That's right, that's right.

Riggins: Writing it out. 'Cause this is, you know, this is different. It's memory is about your professional life and the life of a university, but it's perfect for this day and age, the electronic age.

Ralph Parker: That's right, that's true. That's true. That's true, that's very true. You know, if you have another question, I'll go ahead and --

Riggins: Well, I -- I don't, you know, just have some more, about some of the people here at UNCW, but what were you going to say?

Ralph Parker: I was getting ready to say, my last day at work, I think we were on that -- I can't remember the term you call that schedule, which you get out a half day on Friday -- you still do that during the summer?

Riggins: Oh, right, in the summers? Yes, we do.

Ralph Parker: Okay. I think I was probably the last one to leave the building. Before I left, kid came over, having problems with books, you know, and I said, "Oh, lord, I don't need to lose a battle on
my last day." (laughs)

Riggins: Right, right.

Ralph Parker: So I call over and, you know, we talked on it. "Okay, Raf [ph?], tell the kid to come by Monday." I say, but that's good, that's good, that's good, very good. So that was good, and I put all my boxes and stuff in my car. And it was about lunchtime, I went (laughs) Burger King down the street. And some guy, he just kind of kept looking at me. I said, "Wonder who this guy looking at me?" Nicely dressed, he came over, and he just happened to be a (inaudible) guy. Not that that is that important, but that's just the way it worked out. He said, "You're Mr. Parker, aren't you?" I said, "Unless you are a bill collector, I guess I am." (laughs)

Riggins: (laughs)

Ralph Parker: I'm sorry, I didn't turn that off. He said, "I know you don't remember me," he said, "But I've been planning to come by your office for years and years." I said, "You have? Why?" He said, "My contact with you, you working in admissions over at UNC Wilmington." [phone vibrating] I'm sorry.

Riggins: That's okay.

Ralph Parker: I'm very sorry.

Riggins: Oh, that's alright. He said he knew you were in, when you were in admissions?

Ralph Parker: He said, "You were in admissions." He said, "I went to your office one day and you went over my transcript, and it was very marginal as to whether or not I could get accepted. And you took time to explain to me what I needed to do." And he said -- [phone vibrating]

Riggins: Do you want me to-- I can (inaudible) pause it.

Ralph Parker: Just pause it, yeah.

Riggins: That's fine.

Ralph Parker: Okay. This guy said, "You don't remember me," he said, "But when I was in admissions, you know, you look at my applications and said, you know, there was a strong possibility I couldn't get, wouldn't be able to get accepted. But you explained to me the function of
the admissions committee." And that was a committee, you know, to look at marginal situations, to see if any exception should be made. He said, "Not only that, you helped me to write a letter to that committee, and you said that if I wrote, finished writing the letter after you told me the things to say, and so forth, you said that you were going to present my case for me." He said, "And you did, and I got accepted." And he said, "I graduated with a degree in accountancy." That's what they called it then. And he said, "Then, I went on and now I am a certified public accountant, I'm doing extremely well. I have my office here in Wilmington." And he said, "I just kept putting off coming, just to come by and thank you."

Riggins: Right.

Ralph Parker: "Thank you." I said, "Well, you know, that's alright, I -- that was my job, to do anything that I could for any student," you know. And I just wanted to stress that on this interview, because, you know, even though a lot of my years here the focus was on African-American students, I think there are a lot of students that will tell you that whatever I could do to help anyone --

Riggins: And this is (inaudible). Did you tell him that --

Ralph Parker: I said, "Man --"

Riggins: -- it was your last day?

Ralph Parker: I said, "Look, you won't believe this, but it's my last day at work, I have all my boxes in my car, trying to grab me a burger."

Riggins: (laughs)

Ralph Parker: And for you to come along today --

Riggins: You just made my day.

Ralph Parker: I said, "Boy, you've really made my day, just to thank me, you know, for doing something that you consider to be special, where I considered it to be my job to try to help anyone that I could. And you're expressing your appreciation." And I said, "You don't know what you have done for me on this last day of work." And we just kind of talked. I said, "Now, if you want to thank me now, next time you see me, buy me a hamburger." (laughs)

Riggins: Uh-huh.
Ralph Parker: And so he just kind of laughed behind that, but that was just a great way to just wind up my career at UNC Wilmington. And I'll always think about that, and cherish that as one of those, kind of little special moments during your career.

Riggins: Sure.

Ralph Parker: And it was great and I appreciated that very much. But, I didn't mean to jump the gun, you probably have a couple more questions.

Riggins: (inaudible) drills. Into Southport, over the bridge.

Ralph Parker: (laughs) Fading into the setting sun.

Riggins: Did you drive, did you commute from Southport every day?

Ralph Parker: Every, yes, every day.

Riggins: Okay.

Ralph Parker: And you know, there were times, and we did a lot of programming through the years. There were times that a program would maybe start at 8:00 o'clock. It's a long time to wait over, so I would usually leave maybe 3:30 or 4:00 o'clock. I'd go home, take a nap, grab a bite to eat, and jump in my car and come right back to the campus. There were numerous times I did that. And I couldn't say anybody was responsible for it, because I made the choice to remain in Southport; whereas, if we had moved here, then, you know, it would've been a little more convenient. But I love my little hometown, that's where I wanted to be, you know.

Riggins: Right. And you had a life.

Ralph Parker: And I didn't want to use that as an excuse not to attend programs and not to do things, and I never did. However, there were times, if I was a little late in the morning, I would always say it was the Cape Fear Bridge (laughs) Cape Fear River Bridge that held me up, and sometimes I just kind of stretched it a little bit. But, and it was, "Ralph, was it the bridge this time?" "Yeah, it was the bridge, it caught me again." (laughs)

Riggins: Uh-huh, right, right. Well --

Ralph Parker: But, I had figured how many thousands of miles I had driven at one time. I know I
wore out eight automobiles. (laughs) I'd wear 'em out, throw 'em away and get me another one.

Riggins: Yeah, just drive it 'til --

Ralph Parker: That's right.

Riggins: -- 'til it can't go.

Ralph Parker: Yeah. I'd go into my carport and see a little pile of burgundy dust there, said "The old Pontiac just kind of gave it up." (laughs) But it was a good experience, and I enjoyed it. And I'm glad the lord blessed me to see time that I could do this and then retire, and pass the baton on to someone else.

Riggins: Well, during your time here, you said you had the chance to see other universities a lot, and you had to, to just get ideas from other universities.

Ralph Parker: Mmhm.

Riggins: What is it about UNCW that makes it unique and that this kind of special for -- ?

Ralph Parker: You know (laughs) when my son was a little boy, there was a wrestler that he admired. The guy's name, I think, was Lex Lugar, but he called, he would flex his muscles and he would always say he was the total package. That was kind of like his nickname, "the total package." And I think I could apply that to UNC Wilmington, because I really think UNC Wilmington is the total package: strong academic programs, strong faculty, nice facilities for students, student services; the location is great and just the idea of being as close as we are to the beaches in south-- needless to say, that's very, very appealing. I think as far as African-American students, I think we had, I guess services that I consider to be unique to help them to have a broader comfort zone, or comfort level. And I think all of these things contribute to a, I guess you might say, a positive experience for all students. And when a student goes into a situation, and they have a good experience, that serves as probably the strongest recruiting tool that you could ever have, because they're going back home and they're going to tell their friends and relatives and that's right, "Look, that UNCW is a great place. It's everything that I looked for. The setting is nice, the campus is well planned and it's -- "

I know you're running out of space now, probably, but in, compared to some campuses it's still spacious and just well designed. And I think that gives, those factors give the university, or kind of put in the box of being the total, total package. And I think that's why it has grown, not only for in-state students, but you probably have students here from many, many, many foreign countries.
now, as well as other states in the United States. And all of those are strong indicators that this is a
great place to be. And for a person to spend -- well every year in a person's life is important -- but
from say like 18 to 22, sometimes 23 (laughs) that age range, those are beautiful years of a
person's life, and for them to be able to spend those years on a campus like UNCW in this
environment, I just think that is just a positive aspect that is just great for the University and the city
of Wilmington, and even for the state of North Carolina.

Riggins: Mmhm.

Ralph Parker: Mmhm.

Riggins: Yeah, I agree, it is. That's a good summary, the total package.

Ralph Parker: Mmhm.

Riggins: I think we covered a lot of the ground here. I'd like to ask is there anything I missed, in
terms of people or memories or funny stories. I remember, there's a lot of, as we say, "characters."
Gerald Shinn was a UNCW character.

Ralph Parker: Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah. He was.

Riggins: He was very, seems like very much in your, from your mindset about mentoring students,
(inaudible) students.

Ralph Parker: Oh, yeah. Gerry Shinn was all-- extremely student oriented. He, I guess I'm thinking
about the guy -- he was -- Charles Moss, a student of UNCW, he went through the whole philosophy
and religion program. And I never will forget how Gerry Shinn helped that guy to get enrolled at
Duke. So he went on through Duke University, and got a masters degree, up at Duke. And I just
thought was just nice on Gerry Shinn's part, because -- and I know he's helped many, many other
students, but I know Charles, and we keep in contact with each other, and I just know that, had it not
been for Gerry Shinn, in all probability, he would not have been able to go to Duke University.

Riggins: Mmhm.

Ralph Parker: Mmhm. And I also have to say this: When I first came here, I had a bachelor's
degree. And UNCW was described as being a developing institution, and somehow they had a joint
grant, I think, with Pembroke State University, to-- for faculty and staff development. And they
helped me to get a master's degree, and I had to do a lot of commuting between here and North
Carolina State in Raleigh.

Riggins: Oh, right.

Ralph Parker: And like I said, Interstate 40 was not here, but I said if those folk are willing to help
me, and all I have to do is go, I'll make the sacrifice to go. It took me a little while, but I finally got
through the program, and got a masters from North Carolina State.

Riggins: What was your field? Your masters in?

Ralph Parker: Well, it was a masters in education, but with emphasis on student services in higher
education, and right in line with things I wanted to do here. And I really appreciated it. I want to
mention one other thing that comes to mind: Oh, when I worked in admissions when I first got here,
I got the bright idea of putting together what we call a "special admissions program," and I think the
program is still in place around here. And the whole idea was to accept a limited number of students
who did not meet traditional admissions requirements, and have letters of recommendation, the
interview and this type of thing; make sure that they could only take a minimum course load until
they proved that they could handle more. And it was nothing in it about black or white, it was just for
students. And so quite a few students of color came through the program, but also quite a few white
students came through the program. And there are some folk right now who still thank me for having
that program. I had a hard time getting it approved on campus, I'll tell you that. But we hung in there,
and it was well worth the effort. I know some government officials right now that, every time I see
them, say "I'm just glad you guys had that program at UNCW. If not, I just don't know what I would
have done about trying to earn a college degree." Because they were, I guess, just didn't have the
funds to do some other things, and they needed to stay in the area. And so it helped folk.

Riggins: If there's any time that you're going to give someone a second chance --

Ralph Parker: Hey, that's right.

Riggins: 18, age 18 --

Ralph Parker: That's right.

Riggins: That's the time they need to prove themselves.
Ralph Parker: That's right. Like I said earlier, we all make a lot of mistakes, and a lot of mistakes in life are made during that timeframe, and if a kid is willing to take advantage of having the second chance, I just tip my hat to them, and feel like we should all be thankful that we had a mechanism in place to address their needs, and help them in a positive way.

Riggins: Mmmh.

Ralph Parker: Mmmh, yeah.

Riggins: Well, I thank you very much for your time. You certainly seem comfortable with speaking on the (inaudible) role of the administrators.

Ralph Parker: (laughs)

Riggins: You're always out and about, speaking.

Ralph Parker: Yeah, I guess --

Riggins: Before groups.

Ralph Parker: UNCW prepared me for a lot of things. (laughs)

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