Scope and Background Note
In this oral history interview, Mildred Weathers McDuffie discusses her educational experiences in Columbia, South Carolina at Celia Saxon Elementary and Booker T. Washington High School, Allen University (class of 1957) and the Business department, Benedict College, working at the Columbia Housing Authority and pay disparity, time spent in Georgia, teaching in Richland County School District One in Columbia, South Carolina for thirty-four years, serving as a summary court judge, and volunteer work as a Relationship Specialist at Allen University. Mildred Weathers McDuffie was born on August 3, 1934 in Wedgefield, Sumter County, South Carolina to Ethel Mae Byrd and Charlie James Weathers. She worked for Richland County School District One for over 30 years. Tom Crosby interviewed Mildred McDuffie at her office at Allen University in Columbia, South Carolina, on August 25, 2010. Interview covers McDuffie's education at Celia Dial Saxon Elementary (grades 1-6) and Booker T. Washington High Schools (grades 7-12) from the mid-1940s to the late 1950s and at Allen University until 1957.
Tom Crosby: Today is August 25, 2010 and I’m on the campus of Allen University. I’m in the office of Judge—

Mildred McDuffie: Mildred Weathers McDuffie.

TC: Mildred Weathers McDuffie. Would you care to give your date of birth at this time?
MM: I was born August 3, 1934 at two-thirty in the afternoon.

TC: Two-thirty in the afternoon, okay. And what was the location, Columbia?
MM: No, I was born in Wedgefield, South Carolina, which is in Sumter County.

TC: Oh, okay.

MM: Yes.

TC: Alright. And who were your parents?

MM: My parents were Charlie James and Ethel Mae Byrd Weathers.

TC: Okay. And do you have siblings?

MM: I have two sisters and they live here in Columbia.

TC: Okay. Now, Judge, where did you attend elementary school?

MM: I attended Saxon Elementary School on Blossom Street, down near where the University of South Carolina is situated and they have that Thurmond Wellness Center down there in that area and Saxon School was there and Gibbs Machinery Shop was there.

TC: And that school is, I’ve read an article.

MM: It’s now defunct. It’s not anymore.

TC: Okay. I’ve read an article about the name of the person for whom that school.

MM: Celia Dial Saxon, yes.

TC: Okay. And would you like to say any information, comments with reference to her at this time? Was she principal at that time?

MM: No, she was not the principal of the school at that time. The principal was Creswell Madden, M-A-D-D-E-N. He’s deceased now but he was the principal and he was a strict one, strict but good. And he was the kind of person who respected the integrity of the students, you
know, regardless of whether you came from a one parent home or two parent home or out of the alley or wherever. Because you know a lot of times during that time a lot of African Americans lived in areas that had alleys. And so he was a real good principal and I was one of his favorite students because I sang real well.

TC: Oh, really?

MM: Yes, he calls me his little Marion Anderson and he would have me perform at every PTA meeting.

TC: Really?

MM: Yes.

TC: Wow, you were somebody.

MM: I’m still somebody.

TC: Excuse me. So how would you describe the teachers when you were in elementary school?

MM: Some of them were good. Some of them I could have done without.

TC: Really?

MM: Yes, because there were teachers who felt that if your mother or father or somebody, adult in your family, was not, and this is elementary school, if they were not in education or preaching or something like that, then you were considered a nobody. If your parents were blue collar workers or a maid or whatever, that was not good.

TC: I see and that was at Saxon?

MM: That was at Saxon Elementary School.

TC: Yeah, well, there are instances in which there have been certain kinds of teachers who conducted themselves in that way, but I suspect if you would say overall, many of them were not that way.

MM: I only remember one incident of one teacher that was that way and other than that my teachers followed me from elementary school all the way through college and since I’ve been out. And they compliment me on all that I have done.

TC: After elementary school I guess you attended some high school in Columbia.


TC: Excuse me.

MM: On Marion Street.

TC: That was a high school or a middle school?

MM: No, I went straight from elementary school from the sixth grade at the elementary school to the seventh grade at Booker Washington High School. And I was at Booker Washington High School from seventh grade until twelfth grade.

TC: Un-huh and I think I told you earlier today that my high school, which is Sims High School, was Sims High School in Union, South Carolina, had something in common with Booker T. Washington High School.
MM: Right.

TC: Do you recall what I said?

MM: Yes, I do, accreditation.

TC: What do you mean?

MM: They were the first schools, two of the first schools to be accredited.

TC: Black.

MM: Black institutions, well, I thought that was understood, two of the black institutions to be accredited by the State Department of Education.

TC: Right, and then there was a third one.

MM: Darlington, South Carolina, Mayo High School.

TC: Mayo High School?

MM: Yes. I can’t figure out and I don’t think you can either what happened to Burke in Charleston.

TC: That’s true.

MM: Maybe we need to investigate to find out what happened with that.

TC: We do and I will.

MM: Yes.

TC: Yeah. Now how would you describe the teachers at Booker T. Washington High School?

MM: Excellent teachers, I had excellent teachers.

TC: All of them?

MM: All of them and to this day and time some of my teachers are still living.

TC: Such as?

MM: Mrs. Elise Martin who lives here in Columbia, Elise Jones Martin. She was the cosmetology teacher and health teacher. And we had Margaret Walker, Margaret Scott Walker who is a graduate of Allen University and a member of Bethel A.M.E. Church and has taught at Allen University, Mrs. Walker. And Fannie Phelps Adams who is also a member of, a graduate of Allen University and she’s an African Methodist Episcopal member and she’s still living, and Mrs. Evelyn Mance, who is also still, Evelyn Byrd Mance our of Lamar, South Carolina who is still living also.

TC: I see. Well, I’d like to inform you, if you’re not aware, I did my student teaching, I’m an Allen University graduate also, and I did my student teaching at Booker T. Washington High School.
MM: Who was your—
TC: And my supervising teacher was Mr. James Payne.
MM: Really?
TC: Excuse me.
MM: Yes, I remember Mr. Payne.
TC: You do?
MM: Yes and he also taught driving.
TC: Yes.
MM: Un-huh.
TC: And I remember him well too and this is one reason why.
MM: Isn’t that something?
TC: He came to class the first two or three days and after that I guess he saw that I had my class under control and I didn’t see him for several weeks. And so the last week that I was there, I think that was about the sixth or the seventh week, he said, “You have one more thing to do.” I said, “What is this, as late as it’s getting to be here?” And he said, “You have to do a bulletin board.”
MM: Yeah, they believed in those bulletin boards.
TC: So I went down to R.L. Bryan on Main Street and got the materials and I did the bulletin board. The only criticism he had was that I used staples rather than, what is it, rubber cement glue?
MM: Right.
TC: And the principal at that time was Mr. Harry Rutherford?
MM: That’s right, Harry V. Rutherford.
TC: Okay. And I passed at least one lesson plan to him. He passed it back. The only comment, ‘your u looks a little like a v’ or vice versa, that was all. And something else that I remember during my student teaching at Booker T., I heard this singing going on and that was around one o’clock in the afternoon I think it was and I was wondering where all of this singing was coming from and I learned later on.
MM: Un-huh, John Work Chorus.
TC: That was the John Work Chorus.
MM: Yes, you couldn’t graduate from high school at Booker T. Washington High School unless you sang in the John Work Chorus.
TC: Now was that, you had to sing one time or was that continuously?
MM: You had to sing every year.
TC: Every year?
MM: In the high school, ninth through twelfth grade, you had to sing every year. You had to sing in the John Work Chorus every year.

TC: That was a requirement?

MM: That was a requirement, yes.

TC: Yeah, well, that’s unusual that everybody had to do that.

MM: Everybody had to recognize Mr. John.

TC: So would you like to make any additional comments about Booker T. Washington High School that you haven’t mentioned thus far?

MM: Yes, I would like to say that Booker T. Washington High School was so respective of its students that they gave, they allowed me when I was in the ninth grade through the twelfth grade I typed all of the exams of the teachers after school. Those who wanted me to type their exams, I typed them. They trusted me just that much.

TC: Now you weren’t the only student in the school that could type, were you?

MM: But I was good.

TC: Oh, excuse me, I’m sorry.

MM: I was good. I was really good.

TC: And they trusted you?

MM: And they trusted me because they knew that I was a confident person. I would not give out information to anyone, not even my sisters. I did not.

TC: So you didn’t play?

MM: I did not play. And that’s one reason how, that’s one way I got to Allen University. When I came to Allen University I was the secretary to the athletic department, which Mr. T.B. Nelson, Mr. Joseph Golphin were in the department and I served as their secretary. They had no other secretary. I was the secretary. I typed all of their exams.

TC: And no students got them?

MM: And no student, not even my boyfriend.

TC: Really?

MM: That’s right.

TC: He put up with that?

MM: That’s right.

TC: I see. Now weren’t you a secretary for a short period of time or you had an interview to be secretary with somebody else on campus?

MM: You remember too much. (Laughter) Yes, I did.

TC: The president—Now you be careful.
MM: The president office needed a secretary and I went for an interview and I went for an interview but I did not accept the job. I did not accept the job. And I went for the interview and after the interview I did not take the job.

TC: Okay, I appreciate your telling me that information because things do happen in life.

MM: Yes, yes.

TC: Okay, so how would you describe your experiences at Allen University?

MM: My experiences at Allen University continued in the same line as they had at Booker T. Washington, had excellent teachers and they were concerned. Of course, I was in the business department and Thelma Combo was—

TC: My freshman orientation teacher.

MM: You remember her?

TC: My freshman orientation teacher.

MM: She dressed immaculate every day and still does.

TC: Yes.

MM: She’s in Fayetteville, North Carolina and her cousin is married to Dr. Willis McLeod who was once the superintendent of Richland School District 1. And so when I saw this stately lady and she said where she was from and I asked her about Thelma, her last name was Combo.

TC: Right.

MM: So I said I had a teacher that I was so fond of by the name of Thelma Combo. That’s my cousin. And so I immediately held onto her because of having been so fond of Thelma Combo. And every day from a freshman until I graduated I dressed, I wore suits. And during that time when I was coming along you didn’t wear, ladies did not wear pants.

TC: Yeah, well I was very impressed with her too as a little freshman, her up in front of us in the orientation class teaching and I’m just looking and so impressed. She was a nice looking lady.

MM: Yes, she was and she could step, couldn’t she?

TC: Yes, she could, with her hair (unintelligible).

MM: That’s right. That’s right.

TC: Impeccable speech.

MM: And still active.

TC: Yeah.

MM: Still active.

TC: I think business was a pretty good, one of the pretty good departments, wasn’t it?

MM: Let me tell you about business. Business at Allen University was an excellent department. Science at Benedict College was an excellent department. And the students that came to Allen to take business, major in business from Benedict, we became very close. And I
took all my science courses at Benedict. So when it was time to graduate Frank Gilbert, who was a state senator from down there I think he was in Marion, South Carolina or Florence one, he came to me one, he called me and he said, Mildred, why aren’t you at practice. I said practice for what; graduation practice. He thought I was a student at Benedict because he and I would be together all the time studying and he didn’t realize Allen and Benedict got along so well until you didn’t know sometimes who was at Allen or who was at Benedict.

TC: Whether you were a Benedict student or an Allen student.

MM: Right and it didn’t make any difference.

TC: Right and also if I may interrupt you because I know you have to go here.

MM: No, I don’t have to go.

TC: Okay, you mentioned the cooperative relationship between Benedict and Allen. This is back in the early ‘50s?

MM: In the early ‘50s, right, yes.

TC: Okay, would you like to make any comments with reference to the AllenBenedict summer school that existed or you’re not too familiar with it?

MM: I am not familiar, familiar with the summer school because I never had to go to summer school. I graduated from Allen in four years because you know we were on the quarter system and I took the maximum hours each time so that I could get the heck up out of here. And so I was not familiar with the summer school sessions.

TC: Between Benedict and Allen.

MM: Between Benedict and Allen. But they were cooperatively, they worked closely together.

TC: Yeah and you were aware and heard that many of the teachers came during the summer?

MM: That’s right. That’s right. And they worked during the summer and a lot of the teachers worked in the high schools and they came from across the state.

TC: Yeah.

MM: Yes.

TC: That’s true. Okay, would you like to make any additional comments about relative to your experiences at Allen?

MM: My experiences at Allen were so great until I am here today working as a non paid fulltime volunteer, working five days, sometimes seven days if activities are going on with the children that I feel I need to be a part of. I come to work Mondays through Fridays and I serve not only the students but I serve the faculty and staff and my title is Relationship Specialist. Another word for it could be ombudsman but we use Relationship Specialist and my expertise is being used very well. Students, teachers, staff members tell me about the fact that they are so happy that I have made a difference on this campus, just having me hear and being able to know there is someone that they can go and talk to about their problems and sometimes it’s not school related. A lot of times people have personal problems that
they need help with. And sometimes you need to talk about it to someone confidentially so that you can get it worked out in your mind.

TC: That’s true. Now you graduated from Allen in 19?

MM: I graduated in May 1957 and since that time we have celebrated our fiftieth anniversary in 2007 and we will be celebrating our five years after the fiftieth anniversary in 2012.

TC: That’s good. So now what was your first job after graduating from Allen?

MM: After graduating from Allen University I became a secretary for the Columbia Housing Authority and I worked there for about two and a half years. And then I did my practicum at C.A. Johnson High School.

TC: Practice teaching?

MM: Practice teaching and the principal there, Dr. C.J. Johnson, Jr., told me that he would love to have me as his, to work for him but that my mother had not sent me to school to get a college degree and work for the little bit of money that they were paying secretaries at that time. As you know, it was not integrated and so therefore secretaries, black secretaries weren’t making anything, you know, pennies. While I worked for the Columbia Housing Authority after I graduated from Allen, a white secretary was making double the money I was making and she had not even finished high school.

TC: Isn’t that something?

MM: So I left Columbia and went to a place called Crawfordville, Georgia about a hundred fifty miles from Columbia and started teaching down there.

TC: Business or?

MM: Teaching business courses, yes. I eventually ended up coming back to Columbia and, of course, the first place I went after I came back to Columbia, I was at Booker T. Washington High School, yes.

TC: So you taught there?

MM: Yes.

TC: Business again?

MM: Un-huh, yes.

TC: Okay, so you eventually retired from where?

MM: I retired as a summary court judge but before that time I was in Richland County School District I for thirty-four years, served as a teacher. I served as a coordinator. I served as an assistant superintendent, which entitled being an ombudsman and then I served on county council. I served on county council while I was still working in Richland School District 1. They allowed me to do that. And then I went into the judgeship at, Senator Darrel Jackson recommended me to the governor.

TC: Can you explain, elaborate as to what judgeship is about or the nature of how you got involved? You have already started I know.
MM: Well, Senator Darrel Jackson is my godson and after I retired and my parents had, my parents were both ill and they were in the nursing home and I had retired and he said to me, he called me one day and said what are you doing and I said nothing. He said well, I’m going to get you out of that house. He said don’t you want to be a judge and I said, no.

TC: This is Darrel Jackson?

MM: This is Senator Jackson. No, I don’t want to be a judge. His mother and I have been friends since we were young ones because she was in Arthur Town but she went to Booker Washington also. And he said okay. I said give me two weeks, let me think about it. In two weeks I received a letter from the governor stating, congratulating me on having been appointed as a summary court judge. And a summary court judge sometimes they say magistrate but by the state name its summary court judge because the magistrate court sees everybody before a circuit court sees them. You know, they go to the local courts. So anyway, that’s how I got involved in that. Now before a lot of blacks started being appointed to that position, those white men had, some of them didn’t even have a high school diploma I don’t think. But once it started being a lot of those senators started appointing blacks to that position, then you had to have, at first you had to have an associate degree and now they’ve moved it up to a bachelor’s degree. But you have to take a test. Its two hundred questions and you can only miss four. And then you have to go to school every year like we did in education to get eighteen hours.

TC: Okay, the test, you have to do some studying for that?

MM: They want to see how much you know about the law, you know, because laws change. Some of them change every year and, you know, it’s a—

TC: So did you have some workshops?

MM: See if you have broad knowledge. You have a workshop, yeah, and they have instructors to come in and, you know.

TC: And then eventually you’re given a test?

MM: Given a test, uh-huh.

TC: I see. I don’t know to what extent you can talk about the nature, what you did other than what you just said about being a judge. Any specific incident you remember that you can relate?

MM: I can remember one that really wracked my nerves. This young man came in, he had killed his mother. He had stabbed her eighty-five times and he chopped her neck off. That did not set well with me. He was nineteen years old and he looked like I haven’t done anything wrong. But he was on drugs and so when he did it he, at the time you know how, imagine how drugs work with people. And so anyway, that one really, now there’s another one that should have been on the world’s dumbest criminals. Three people went to the bank at nine o’clock in the morning, two men and a lady, and she asked the bank teller, gave her a note and said I want three thousand dollars. The bank teller said I don’t have three thousand dollars this time of morning, you will have to come back at two o’clock in the afternoon and I’ll have it for you. They came back at two o’clock in the afternoon. And, of course, you know SLED and city and county and everybody was there for them. And the oldest person out of those three was sixty-four years old.

TC: Really?
MM: Yes.

TC: That’s amazing. Well now, you had jurors that—

MM: I didn’t have jurors in that courtroom. In the magistrate court there you don’t have jurors. When they first come in, I see them when they first come have committed the crime. But then they can ask for a jury trial. Okay, for example.

TC: So what did you do with reference to that first one where he chopped his mother’s head off and so forth?

MM: He went to general session’s court. No bond was set because he couldn’t get out of jail. He had to go to general session’s court and then they deal with him there downtown.

TC: I see. So why did you talk to the guy is what I’m asking?

MM: Because they have to go to magistrate’s court before they go to any court.

TC: But you’re the only person that makes—

MM: That decision at that time but with a crime like that—

TC: What was your decision with reference to him?

MM: A crime like that particular crime, you know that they go straight to magistrate court. There are certain situations you don’t have to decide. The law has already decided. If you commit a murder, you know, you go straight to general session’s court.

TC: I see. So it depends upon the nature of what—

MM: What has taken place.

TC: What the situation is?

MM: That’s right.

TC: Yeah.

MM: If you rob a bank, that’s a felony. You automatically go to general session’s court. But now if you do a ticket for speeding and that kind of thing, then we have all these fifteen different courts in Columbia and the clerks will look to see where this person lives and send them to the court that’s nearest their home.

TC: I see.

MM: But that’s for misdemeanor. You know, you have your misdemeanor and your felony.

TC: So what’s an example of where a person had committed something and you decided on some, you made a decision on this person and it didn’t have to go further?

MM: No, whatever I make a decision on, it’s going to have to go further.

TC: Oh, it does?
MM: Yes. But now I can make a decision on whether you come in and you have committed a misdemeanor and I will say I’m going to let you go on a PR bond, which means you don’t have to pay any money at this particular time, but you will have to show up to court on a certain date.

TC: I see. Okay, because I really never knew what the nature of what your judge area would be.

MM: Right, yes.

TC: Okay.

MM: So that’s the way that goes.

TC: The way it works. Okay, well, you have been most informative about your life and your work and I’ve enjoyed it.

MM: Well, I’ve enjoyed it also. We’ve been trying to get to this for the last year.

TC: Yes, we have.

MM: And it’s taken us that long to get there.

TC: Yeah, so in closing do you have any final statement you’d like to make about anything that you wish to say?

MM: The only thing that I would like to say is that I am prayerful that Allen University is going to get to the, we have a state of the art campus and I want us to get to the place that we have a state of the art faculty and staff. We have a wonderful student body and we have, I’ve never seen so many children in the cafeteria, I don’t think you have at one time, than I’ve seen this year, which is a wonderful thing.

TC: Yeah, that’s true, right.

MM: But I want to make sure that we are having people who are teaching these children that are understanding them.

TC: Or their needs.

MM: Their needs and not just there to say I am a professor or I’m a Dr. so-and-so-andso, but they’re here to help our students.

TC: That’s true.

MM: Because there are some people here that don’t need to be here because their dispositions, not only with the students but with faculty and staff, seems not to be what we need.

TC: That’s true. Well, I certainly thank you for your time again. It’s been most informative and enjoyable. Thanks again.

MM: You’re quite welcome.

End of interview