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A Conversation about Teaching, Kitchens, and Concern

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· Mrs. Wilma Stephenson has taught in the Philadelphia public school
· system for over forty years. She currently serves as a culinary arts
· teacher, a cheerleading coach, and the director of the yearbook
· committee at Philadelphia's Frankford High School. Despite the fact
· that very few conversations about education incorporate a broad
· understanding of literacy and education that includes practical arts
· such as cooking, we believe such practices model spaces where
· institutional knowledge can meet community knowledge in valuable
· ways.

· Wilma Stephenson and her students are the subject of Pressure
· Cooker, a documentary about a group of Philadelphia high school
· students learning the ins and outs of the culinary arts.

Ersula: It was a real blessing to get you on the phone; you are an incredibly busy person.

Wilma: Yes, and now I'm in charge of graduation, prom, awards assemblies, and Yearbook. But I have a good group of teachers that help me.

Ersula: Well good good, cause I don't want them to over tax you.

Wilma: I'm always overtaxed but I enjoy it.

Ersula: So I'll try to be as quick as possible—



Wilma: No no, take your time.

Ersula: Many of my questions have to do with the idea that individuals pass on traditions and literate practices through their verbal and written communications which teach others different ways of being in the world. For instance, I noticed as you went outside [the classroom] to check each student's pants to see if they were too low, or if their shirts were tucked in—

Wilma: Oh you heard me!

Ersula: Yes! And it brought back memories. I taught for two years and I have a slew of small children—not my own, nieces, nephews, god children—and I'm always in the kitchen, I'm cooking, and they are always trying to help. It is through these experience I try to teach them certain behaviors and practices that they can take with them that don't just end there in the kitchen but follow them to the classroom, to the field, to their practices, to the [basketball] courts, even with them to the streets! You know the old saying “when you walk through this door you don't only represent yourself...”

Wima: Right!

Ersula: “you represent everyone in this house!” Or in some cases this community. Those kind of notions, those are what we're considering features of African American Community literacy that are taught in various situations for very specific and strategic purposes.

Wilma: African American?

Ersula: Yes

Wilma: And it [the social training] is not really happening as it should.

Ersula: Or as it used to.



Wilma: You know, as with most who have probably grown up like you, like my daughters, it was the parents who passed on these lessons. With my children here, it's being left to someone else to do it...

Ersula: Someone in the community like yourself?

Wilma: Yeah. Sooo I decided long ago, I will do it. That's how I feel.

Ersula: How long have you been doing this for, specifically within this context?

Wilma: I have been teaching here for 42 years. I've taught many things here, but I have been here that amount of time and I love it very very much, so I feel that this is my ministry. I feel that this is where I'm supposed to be. I am no nonsense teacher.

Ersula: hmm hmmm

Wilma: But I still give the students the respect that they deserve. I have very high expectations of everyone, I do not care if you're in Special Ed, I don't care if you're in the National Honor Society. You're all expected to rise to my expectations. And I believe that they do in various ways; in how they come into the class, how they sit, talk, speak-everything. That's the way it is, that's the way I'm gonna have it and I have students that come from all types of backgrounds, mostly troubled backgrounds to tell you the truth. And I just feel that the students—aside from the crazy things that we all have done when we were teenagers—I think they are honest, very needy, and a wonderful group. There's no other group I would want to teach or consider teaching. And they're just remarkable people when you give them something to do and give them an expectation—for instance, with my cheerleaders; we're the public league champs. This'll be the tenth year in a row and we have it now after school and the students amaze me because they're here every day on time, the guys, I didn't ask them to come, they just came. They knew



we needed them; every Saturday at 8:15 they're here. They were here this past Saturday before I got here. And they stick to those commitments, which is wonderful given that the average inner city student today does not have or know what commitments means. Sometimes I look at them and I am just in awe of how they just lap up an opportunity and just go for it. They truly do. And when they see the success that is available to them it becomes a lot of fun, and you get to know them—I don't *know* a lot of the kids' names yet. I don't even know the guy's name who I just bounced from my class before this interview. One guy that's in there [my class], came to class with no coat on, you know last week it was cold, and I said to him, "Where's your coat?" And he said, "Well, I don't have a coat. And I said *"well we'll just see about this."* And see yesterday—it was very cold out, again so I went up to him and said: "Hi Honey, where's your coat?" And he said: "I toldjuh I don't have a coat." So I left here, went to Macys and bought'em two coats! Well, if you gave me a million dollars I would not be able to tell you his name so I could give them to him. But I figure, it's okay, I'll see'em later on. I got'em a hoodie, because they all love hoodies, with lining, I mean with real lining. And I got him a wool coat too. But I think that moments like that are important, real teachable moments, not like in language and math, but moments where if someone needs something you must help them if you can. That's community to me, moments where we come to appreciate things and people, like these children at this age.

Ersula: What do you think it is about your classes or interactions with the youth that prepares them whether in the classroom, outside the classroom, or in the kitchen—to expect more? I mean I get the sense that you don't have to work too hard to let them know exactly what you believe they can do.

Wilma: Exactly. I think that it is from the consistency, from the expectations that I don't fall back from, I don't compromise. I don't



compromise. And I don't accept any excuse. There is no excuse. And I think that they love that. I think that once the student comes and is asked to make a commitment to cooking and learning they must believe that they have a chance at succeeding. I always say this when they commit to my program: "Have you heard about me? Listen, really, if you haven't heard about me you need to find out before you commit..." To some of them I'll say, "Have you heard about me?" and they'll say "Yeah," and I'll say, "You sure you really want to commit to this?" and they'll say, "Yeah." And I think once they see my passion some of them believe they can really do this work.

Ersula: Right! Right! Right!

Wilma: [Laughing] And I say, "Well it's up to you then, okay. We're gonna find out—" [Smiling] I tell them I have no intentions on changing. I tell them they have a right to sit down and pay attention. And you know what, it's a lot of fun, because I don't mean everything I say, but I didn't realize until that documentary came out I have a very smart mouth, wouldn't you say? But it's these conversations that let them know what's in store for them, in here [the kitchen] and in the real world.

Ersula: [Chuckling]

Wilma: And sometimes it sounds so funny. Sometimes its stuff that I say I'm very serious about and it sounds so funny afterwards.

Ersula: Funny or not, you get your point across.

Wilma: Yes. They know what I mean when I say certain things. But they also know that I adore them.

Ersula: It comes through. It comes through.

Wilma: I so adore them. And we have so much fun in the kitchen.



Ersula: What is it about the kitchen, why does it invite such energy, such dialogue, such discipline from your students as opposed to the classroom? Why the kitchen?

Wilma: Oohh, well...I think that's because a kitchen in anyone's house is the center of the place, at least I think so. Even when you have a beautiful home with a nice living room or family room, most of the time you always end up in the kitchen. Whether it's sitting on bar stools at the counter, or sitting at a table, you know you end up in the kitchen having a conversation—usually while you're fixing somebody something [to eat] they'll come in and talk to you. You know every third Saturday I have Bible study at my house, my home, and we have someone bring the word, a scripture to discuss, and onetime as these women were leaving I thought to myself "I should take them to the kitchen and make them something to take home with them." And we ended up standing in the kitchen, not one of us even sat down, about ten of us standing in the kitchen just talking. We had all this other space, the family room was right there, everything, all the chairs were in there yet we just stood and talked. And I think that is because a lot of things are said in the kitchen that aren't said in other places of the house or the home. It's just a place to share not only food, recipes, and tastes and things, but all those things that contribute to making you a person. You know, and many people find their personalities in there.

It's funny because many of the kids I work with find their personalities in there too. You find the kids who put a lot of salt in something without tasting it, the kid who thinks they know how to do this cut or that cut. But through learning how to cook each kid starts to develop their personality and it's funny cause when we get in there I'll say, as one of my students often repeats, "If you do something in here that's totally ridiculous and way off or is just plain silly you're gonna be known by that act." I don't really mean that, but what I do mean is that I will correct you. I find that I because of



these students background a lot of them learn about the world in our class. I remember one year a girl, I said take this and put it on the coffee warmer in the dining area, I meant the coffee, but she takes some water out of the faucet, puts it on the coffee warmer with no coffee. It was the most ridiculous thing in the world to me—until I remembered that she probably never even seen a coffee maker, we laughed. I believe the kitchen is a place for learning, a place where young people can make mistakes, ask questions, and learn about the world. It's really a place where someone can come into their personality.

But it's these moments where you really feel like a community. We had these kids, I think it was Stephanie or—one of the girls. Anyway, she said “Mrs. Stephenson, I hear about you all the way down on the Avenue. Everybody talks about, how we know about you.” She meant they know how I am with the students in my class, what they learn about, and what I do for them sometimes. But it's a privilege and an honor to just know that what you're doing leaves a positive mark on the kids and on their peers as well. That's why I think many teachers or even mentors who are not ready to become a part of this community should not work with the kids.

Ersula: I hear you. It takes a certain kind of constitution.

Wilma: I think so.

Ersula: And a certain kind of love and patience.

Wilma: And I think that most of them, so many of them don't receive that from others in their community. My principal agrees, I've found that when people are not invested in these kids as a community many times events and activities that benefit everyone are not up to caliber. I've seen important things that would be run by certain people—graduation and proms not up to the caliber that they should be. The yearbook [for example] was horrible and it kept going down



so I just decided this year, ok I'm going to take it over. Of course, I had to ask the principal first—the sad thing is that when I went to the principal he said “Please take it, please I would love for you to do it,” because it was in such bad shape. So I asked people would they be on the committee and told them that we would all have the same amount of input and it came together. I also go around looking for community sponsorship for the seniors, not for the Yearbook but for the senior prom and class trips. I asked a group of black women, 3 or 5 of ‘em, for 37mins—I timed it—to volunteer for these events. I begged them. I said “You know, we’re always complaining that our kids are not getting the best of the best, so would you as a committee come together and do the Graduation?” You know what they asked? “How much they paying me?” This is what came out of their mouths, every one of them.

Ersula: What am I going to get for giving?

Wilma: Right. So I just let that one go and I came and I focused on the Yearbook thing. And in the years past it's been horrible: small, thin; all black and white, and for an astronomical amount of money. So I put in for it, of course I got it, and have a good team—a wonderful team of teachers—and we got students, okay, the whole book is gonna be wide and thick, all color for like 10 thousand dollars less. This year they're gonna have the best Yearbook that they have had in awhile because I am determined for these students to have *something* they can be proud of.

Ersula: What I hear is that you're invested in the things that they do and that you want them to be likewise invested and take pride in the things that they do.

Wilma: Right. It's not the same school that it was forty, thirty, twenty years ago. We have a different child, ok. But I have a good group of teachers that are very committed and we're going to have a



great Graduation, we're going to have an Honors Assembly as it should be. Last year's was an embarrassment to everyone, alright! And we're going to honor the students that deserve to be honored because it looks like we're always giving our attention to the kids that are not working to their full potential. But I want our children to really enjoy and have pride in their work.

Ersula: What kind of impact do you feel this has on the students?

Wilma: Oh we hyped it up. We're having assemblies now; we have music as they come in the door. We're taking pictures all the time so that when they come into the assembly we flash these pictures of all that they were doing all year and they just have a totally—they're calm, they're respectful; the total opposite of what they are at other assemblies. And because of that I think that they look and say: "Wow, look what they did for us." And I think that when they look and they see that we're [the teachers] interested in you, that we don't just care about you cause we need you to pass this test to make our school look good. This is you, class of 2011, you're the best; we build them up.

Ersula: You said "We have a different child." These children—today's child—are they really that different from yesterdays? How?

Wilma: Aside from the environment being different, the child though is still the same as the child forty years ago. The feelings are the same; the needs are the same, except the parents used to give more [love, nurturing, attention] to them. Now we have to give more to them, and I'm talking about the urban child. So in a way it's the same child or the same teenager, but the family environment, the network is different.

When my children were born and growing up, I never did anything here [in the school for these students]. When that bell rang I was out. I was so involved in my daughters' high school and



elementary school experiences I didn't have time to do as much as I do now. At that time, I was a PTA President and Girl Scout Leader for seven years. I was always involved with them, which they loved. You know usually you have kids say, "I don't want my mom to come." My kids wanted me.

Ersula: Thinking about your daughters, cooking, and the lessons that get passed down through cooking that might otherwise not get passed along, what kind of lessons do you feel your students get from you while in the kitchen?

Wilma: My two daughters did not learn growing up in the kitchen. My kids were so involved in activities—I don't even know to this day how they did it. There was too much going on. I mean they were both drum majors, they were both—one was All South Jersey Flautist, one was a first violinist. You know they took piano, organ, saxophone, trumpet, flute for like eleven years. And then they were in like everything that was possible to be in for school. But I had so much fun bringing them up, every step. I mean, I'd take thirty girls Girl Scout camping by myself every year. And those women, which are now thirty-six, thirty-seven still talk about it. Matter of fact they have a Facebook page, Troop 397. It's amazing. I had them out every weekend.

Ersula: You were invested.

Wilma: Yes! And I had so much fun with them and even in high school we just had so much fun. And it's the same fun that I have with my students. And in the kitchen, my girls did not grow up learning how to cook because they were so busy. Because I wanted them to do the best they could in school. But now they do cook, even the one that's a physician. She calls me sometimes and asks, "Mom, how do you do this?"



Ersula: She calls you?

Wilma: Yes. “Mom, how do you do this, how do you do that?” I tell them to write it down so that they know what to do and know how to do it. They have a very keen interest, sharp interest in the kitchen. But I think the kitchen brings a family together, friends. I think that it represents—when Rachel Ray gave me my kitchen, they asked me what does the kitchen mean to me and I said that the kitchen represents a place for student success. And it does because out of that kitchen students have come from conditions you can’t imagine--or perhaps you can for some of them—to success. And that’s what the kitchen represents. It represents the lives of people, where they’re going, where they’ve come from.

Ersula: How did you get the idea for using the kitchen to get students scholarships for college?

Wilma: With the scholarships I heard from Mr. Richard Grossman that there was an organization called C-CAP, Career for Culinary Arts Program. Years ago Grossman wanted to go into the inner-city school to the Home Economics teacher and teach them skills that could help their students get jobs or to go to school. And so I became a part of that. On Feb. 21st C-CAP is going to have a preliminary competition, then they’ll [winners of that competition] go to a final competition. At the final competition they have these scholarships that are given through C-CAP. And my students always do very well because they practice, and they practice, and they practice. And I even went out and began getting things for them to start practicing now. And they, you know last year every kid was here at 5:45 in the morning so they wouldn’t have to miss their classes. And I had one little girl, Rolande, who was a foster child who actually lived in Harem, a foster home. And one day—she was always the first one to arrive, but they’re always on time because I start it on time and if you missed you didn’t come. That’s it, you lost it. And I asked her,



“Well where do you live, Sweet Heart?” And she said over on 69th street. And I said, “Oh my God! That is totally the opposite—at the end of the line.” To get on the L (an train in Philadelphia) takes about an hour, probably longer to get here. It’s all the way at the *end* of Philadelphia, just before you get to go into Media and Upper Darby. I couldn’t—to this day its mind boggling. I said, “Well Lande,”—she was from Haiti, I says— “I can’t believe this. You’re actually coming all the way here, and we’re at the end of the line here.” And she was here—never ever missed. She’s now at Monroe College doing very well. And if she comes home—she has no place—my home is available to her. And see, my point is that these kids they don’t mind, once they see that someone believes in them. Whatever it takes to get them where they are going, most of the students will take that opportunity and they’ll just do it. And I think sometimes that they realize that this is their only way out. So a lot of times that’s why they stick with it. But then they’re so very appreciative.

Ersula: I’m thinking about Fatimata, I’m thinking about Erica (students in the documentary).

Wilma: Fatimata just called me last week.

Ersula: Would she be a senior now or...

Wilma: I went up there to Madison Square Garden with Rolande, on a train in June. Fatimata graduated [from culinary arts school] in three years. And she’s working in New York and she called me because Marcus Samuelson who is on t.v., he’s a well-known chef from Morocco—

Ersula: Wait, did he spend some time in Sweden?

Wilma: I’m sure he did. He has a wonderful story of his own. But he took us to dinner when he came to see the premiere of *Pressure Cooker* in New York, and recently he took Fatimata and put her on



his staff. He has four restaurants in New York. Fatimata works at one of those restaurants, so she calls me the other day and tells me Marcus is selling a restaurant and building a new one in Harlem and he wants her to come and work for him at the new one. And she says, “Oh, Mrs. Stephenson I called you because they gave me a raise at this one [her current restaurant], so I don’t know what to do—” And I said [Scoldingly] “Would you please tell Marcus you just received a raise—I’m sure that he will give you the same amount of money!” [Laughing]. Fatimata, she’s wonderful.

Wilma: And she’s doing very well. They all are—my students keep in touch. When they need something or when they want advice or when they just want to say thank you. You should see my cell phone bill around Christmas, Thanksgiving, and Mother’s Day.

Ersula: Because they’re thankful.

Wilma: Yes, very.

Ersula: How long have you been associated with C-CAP?

Wilma: Let me see...ten to twelve years. Because I remember the first year, I had an old Home Ec. Room. And I told the kids, you know what, in spite of this—you know, it was horrible. You’d walk pass the oven and the door would fall off. And they still practiced. And then I decided to write a letter to the Superintendent which was Paul Alice at the time. So we wrote a letter and sent it overnight and had the kids sign it; we both wrote it, all of us. And we invited him to lunch and he came and he brought his people. And my students, he talked with the students for thirty-six minutes, again I timed it—which is unusual for any of the Superintendents to sit and talk with students. And he came in the kitchen and he stood and he talked with them. And he said, what is it, what are your concerns? And after hearing them out he told his people I want this kitchen this summer. That’s how we got our kitchen.



Ersula: They must not like you.

Wilma: Well, I—hey! [Laughing]

Ersula: I'm just saying, when teachers step outside of administration to get things done it makes it seem as if administration could not—or *chose* not—to make good on their promises.

Wilma: But my principals have always supported the program, however as far as monetary support.... I mean there was no equipment. And so that's how we got it and so we've been doing it ever since. And like I said it's been an honor and a privilege to work here and to work with these kids. I'm here every day at 5:30am and I leave most evenings long after 8pm.