FULL TRANSCRIPT OF WILLIE KING III INTERVIEW

(AB) I wanted to start this conversation with the theme of identity because I know that's a big part of your approach to education and place-based education. Could you start by telling us about your own identity and how are you prioritizing bringing that identity to your whole career?

(WK) Yeah, I would say that my identity is wrapped up into three categories: my environment, my journey, and my future. Well, not just my future, the future, I should say. So my environment can be described as a young, Black or African American male from Detroit, Michigan on the west side. And I let that shape my identity and my persona in terms of knowing where I came from and knowing where I'm going. But always reminding myself that knowing where I came from got me to where I am. Um, it was the hardships (which I guess goes into the journey), the troubled times, the good times, the bad times. Having the ability to walk so many paths but also observe so many paths allowed me to figure out what was best for me and then what was best for community. Which I guess gets me to the third part which is the future. I think I recognized, um, when I was 22 that I am a man of service. And I think that was like an eye opener for me in the sense of operating in a space where I knew that I could be selfish and only focus on myself or I could be a person that provides a service to others. And if that service comes in the form of me as an educator, I'm okay with it. If it comes in the form of me as an activist, I'm okay with it. If it comes in the form of me just being a representation for what it's like to be a young Black male or a leader or whatever the case, I've always been okay with stepping up to the role, especially if it means that I am allowed to uplift and be of service to someone else. I think that that's where a lot of the misinterpretation come in sometimes - with the they/them pronouns. I've consistently said my pronouns are he/him, I, and they. 'He/him' is who I recognize in the mirror. The 'I' is the representation of knowing that I did a lot to get here, I personally put in the work and want to acknowledge myself. And then the 'they' has always been a representation in my eyes of the community that doesn't have a voice. And they have been some of my friends who haven't been in positions like I have been in, friends that have been marginalized, friends who come from a lot of traumatic experiences, um, they are not able to tell their story, but I don't mind being a face to their story, as to why the 'they/them' has always been a part of my identity when it comes to pronouns. It has nothing to do with gender or anything, it's always been a part of being a voice for a community that doesn't have a voice.

(AB) Yeah, those are all really things I've seen show up in how you approach your work. I'm also curious to hear from you, when you're thinking about bringing identity to the forefront as an educator, how are you thinking about it and what are you prioritizing in that?

(WK) For me, I guess it would be trying to be as authentic as possible when it comes to identity. And I think a lot of that came from having walked so many paths of life as a youth. From being the emo kid. Being the nerd who was on debate team and on the forensic team and all that. To being the cool kid to being the class clown. As I got older and I grew I wanted to I don't have one set identity but what I do have is transparency in the sense of how I show up as an educator -

you are going to be able to see all of that in one block. You're going to see the fun side, you're going to see the serious side, you're going to see the animated side, you're going to see all of that because my identity is not shaped in one way. It's shaped almost like a rainbow - it has so many colors to the point where it allows certain students and certain youth, or even individuals, to gravitate to me because they see certain bits and pieces of themselves within my identity because I show up in so many colors. There is no one set so I don't walk in and say 'Oh, I'm going to be an educator today.' No, I'm going to be Willie, who just happens to be teaching today and I'm going to teach it to the best of my ability but I'm going to teach it in the way I want to teach it. I'm going to show up to work this way because that's how I'm going to show up to work because I'm driving to work, it's not saying I don't recognize the power and positions that I have, I just know that if I don't show up my way then I am showing up short. And I never want to shortchange anybody. My identity has always been shaped around being transparent and authentic but also around being vulnerable as well because I'm very big on constructive criticism and expectations. So, *(laughs)*, even though I might show up one way, I'm constantly thinking about it when I leave like, 'Oh I could have did this a different way.'

It allows you to build value in relationships. People get to connect with a version of you that can be a reflection of a path or journey they have took and it allows you to nurture that particular path or relationship that they're grounded in, you know. So I could show up and only be 50% of me, but then I'm holding back a 50% and that's not fair to the relationship you're trying to establish.

(AB) I'd love to hear from you when you knew you wanted to be a teacher and how that's changed over the course of your education and your career so far.

(WK) It was sometime in high school, probably my senior year. Senior year being bored in class and trying to figure out what I'm going to do with my life. I loved poetry. I knew I wanted to go into some form of creative writing. I knew I wanted to be able to express myself, but I also realized that once I leave high school what can I do with my gifts, or what can I provide in the sense of service, or what can I provide back to people. And I thought back to all of my teachers that I had, like, all of my male teachers have been like superheroes for me. They've been father figures, they've been role models, they've been guides, they've been friends, and what they did not know was that I was going through some of my hardest times ever as a student. So many hard times, both in high school and middle school and elementary. But the male teachers were people that I identified with. So going into teaching was truthfully was never really about teaching, it was always really about mentorship *(laughs)*. I felt like that would be an opportunity where I would be able to provide mentorship and kind of get paid a decent amount for mentoring *(laughs again)*. But, my freshman year of college they had a thing called Fast Track where in your first three days is where you have to build your schedule, meet your dorm - all of that. All of that. And they sat me in the room and I thought I was going to be able to major in creative writing and minor in secondary education and history and they told me right then and there that I couldn't do both, so I had to make a decision right then and there that if I'm going to

pursue creative writing - which had been my passion, I had read the school poem at our graduation, I was writing poetry all through 11th grade and 12th grade - or am I going to go straight into trying to become a teacher. And I made the decision to be an educator and it felt like I could just always write poetry on the side and sell it maybe. But education for me has always been a gateway to get out of my environment and I wanted to be able to provide people with that same opportunity as to why I went into education, so it was one for mentorship because teachers have a bird eye view of what students are going through and you're with - well, at least from my experience now - you're with a student at least 8 hours out the day. That's more time than they spend with their own parents sometimes. So you have an opportunity to guide someone and redirect and provide them with opportunities that they might not even get at home. And I got those opportunities and I want to provide that back, which is the mentorship side of it. The education side of it is, without education, and not having the opportunity to pursue a higher education, I think I would have been a lost cause. And I don't want other people to be lost causes. I saw what education could do for me - I saw how it could open up doors, so me going into education was me wanting to provide other people with the opportunities - to uplift their opportunities or provide them with opportunities but it was also mentorship in the sense of providing people - being a figure in people's lives where they can reconcile with.

(AB) So you went through school and you were having teaching experiences throughout undergrad and then when you got to graduation, you came and worked with SEMIS, which meant not being in the classroom. Can you talk a little bit about that time and how you were thinking about your role as an educator?

(WK) Well it was really how SEMIS was brought to me. So a lot of it goes to Ethan (Lowenstein) in the sense of those male teachers becoming mentors and friends - how Ethan was brought to me was, he was looking for a mentee and I was in a position where I kind of needed a mentor in my life. Our first conversation I knew of him but never really had more than a 10 minute - I don't think I even had more than a 5 minute conversation with him - but we had a phone conversation and I told him that the male mentors in my life kind of sucked. Which I think placed some sort of expectation on him to kind of step up (*laughs)*, but we had a series of conversations of just talking, but his need to want to push me made me feel valued. And by feeling valued, he allowed me to sit in on his doctoral class where I got to see him teach firsthand - being able to watch a master at work. He provided me with an opportunity to be the director of the NSBE Jr. program at Ypsilanti Community Schools which was through Dr. Jennifer Banks at the Washtenaw Intermediate School District. So while I'm working at WIHI, I'm working as the director (of NSBE) and having conversations with Dr. Banks, I'm also sitting in on Ethan's doctoral class and also having phone conversation with Ethan, and also I think I was running another club or something - like I was doing five different things at one time. My transition into SEMIS was a transition that is based off of relationships. You know how SEMIS is very strong in relationships and coalition, it was my ability to be able to - not my ability, my opportunity and my exposure to the current relationships SEMIS had to offer that made that transition easier. So, knowing Ethan, meeting with Ethan consistently, seeing how Ethan operates, Dr. Banks is not in the Coalition but she was

someone I was meeting with regularly, NSBE. I didn't even know Paula (Sizemore) was in SEMIS at the time - but me and Paula had never met but we talked every week on the phone. She was my boots on the ground for trying to get [NSBE] off the ground in the pandemic and I thought that it was so weird that someone would go up to the office for me, maybe post a flier, pass things around for me and have never even met me. So I'm making all of these relationships, Ethan offered me the job maybe in January or February - I told him no, that I wanted to finish out the school year, we can revisit it in the summertime but then I had an opportunity to do an interview. I had an opportunity to interview Miriam and never really met anyone from Brazil before and thought, oh this is interesting. But her approach to education, her approach to SEMIS and how she saw things was like, oh SEMIS might be different than what I've ever met before. And then I got to interview Nigora (Erkaeva) and I thought, oh, I've never met a person from Tajikistan before, so it's like, SEMIS is already exposing me to so much that I didn't even know was possible and in 6 months I've met this random teacher who I've never met before, this lady who runs all of these organizations throughout the WISD, I made connections with Ethan who is very powerful plus a professor slash director slash all these things, then there's Miriam, and Nigora and it just felt like a full-circle moment, you know, like in the sense of being a part of Detroit Youth Energy Squad (a program at Willie's high school) it felt like it was an opportunity to provide service again, which, I felt like I was doing it at WIHI, but I felt like I was losing that service side of things, especially with the pandemic happening, and I felt like SEMIS would be that opportunity for me to get back out and provide a service.

(AB) I'm curious about your memory of your first connection to place-based education - when did you start to hear 'place-based' and what did you think?

(WK) It would have to be through Iman, so through Dr. Grewal, and I think we have always talked about like people are doing place-based education without them knowing they're doing place-based education and I think my exposure to place-based education was in her class in 2016. She made us all get up and start to dance. Mind you I'm walking 40 minutes to school every day. I have to leave at a certain time to walk 40 minutes back so I can clock in to work. I am, like, facing eviction and all of this stuff, like typical college undergrad broke things, but this teacher has me dancing. Not only does she have me dancing but she's consistently talking about teaching with love. And not just, her way of breaking away from education, like a typical education session, and just providing a sense of home and a sense of recognizing this is where we're at in time and the world needs love, I think was my first exposure to place-based education. Overall staying connected with her, her coming on as my first real mentor, I got to see place-based education in a different light and start to see how people were starting to connect education with place and how important where you're at in place can be used in education. And then when I came on at SEMIS it was like, okay you've been exposed to it but now you are like on the front lines of it all. You're now seeing how it can change a classroom, how it can change you as an educator, how it can change your approach, and even now with me being in the classroom and teaching my first day I'm reminded of Ethan never stand just in the front of the classroom, move around. Me probably saying that my approach to education is in place-based, so

everything I'm going to do is going to have a connection to where we're at in the city of Detroit and how I'm going to use that to incorporate different elements. Bringing stories into how I teach and make things make more sense. Bringing in pop culture into education, which has always been a thing, but we are in a place now where you have certain - well a place-based education approach to that is recognizing that you have certain key phrases or key moments that are happening in certain celebrity's lives and incorporating that into your education. So saying things as simple as 'whoopty doo', which is to a whole situation going on with a rapper in a jail case, but doing the 'whoopty doo' was enough to just gravitate the kids to 'oh, he's hip' so place-based education is rooted in my style and my identity as an educator now, I can't really not incorporate stories, I can't not incorporate place, I can't not incorporate place-based education. The teacher I'm working with now used to work at EcoWorks, so my mindset now is just, everytime I look at her and I'm thinking how am I going to get these kids outside - I know I can convince her to help me get these kids outside.

(AB) What were some of the most impactful parts of your time at the SEMIS Coalition?

(WK) Teaching with Paula Sizemore for the first time. She shared a little bit about that story about the kid sleeping in the classroom. In my mind I think the kid sleeping is a little bit disrespectful but I also allowed a kid to sleep today in the classroom. If you're tired, dude, you're tired. It's early in the morning. You never know what a kid is going through before school or even after school where they have to go to. And that was something Paula taught me. Her approach to that was breathtaking and I jotted down notes - this is a master educator at work. Tracy Ortiz - her approach to education - she come off very gentle and nice but when she's in that classroom she's a stern teacher but she provides and breathes life into her students. Ryan Bodary, his approach to education is unique. There is really no way to describe him as an educator but it was one of them things where having an opportunity to work with him, talk with him, and see how he uplifts his students voices in the classroom is something that empowered me to want to do that with other kids. Kim Sherrobi in the sense of a community partner who is embedded into community and empowering community and knowing what is going on in the community made me want to be more of an activist for the city of Detroit but also be a bridge between SEMIS and Detroit in the sense that there's things going on in SEMIS, there's things going on in Detroit I want to help connect those things. And then the NOAA (Environmental Literacy Program) teachers, specifically. I remember the first year working with Abigail (Woodman) not knowing Spanish, to the second year of her being able to speak Spanish, to the third year of her being able to speak Spanish fluently, you know, those strides of always wanting to grow as an educator was like, this is it. And then Emily (Phillips) and Andrea (Stanczyk) have to be two of the strongest relationships I've formed within SEMIS. In Emily I found an educator, I found a mentor, I found a friend. With Andrea I found a friend, an educator, but I also found someone I can study. I think SEMIS provided me an opportunity to study behind two teachers but it was also the level of trust they gave me. They allowed me to come into their realm and to educate in whatever way I felt fit to meet the end goal. And then, to wrap it all up, it's the Community Forum. There's nothing more powerful than the Community Forum. Like, there's really no way to

describe the Community Forum but if I had to describe it, it's like eating too much sour candy. You know, like it's so good - because it's like a rush that you get. As someone who's working it, planning towards it, bringing students to it, it's literally like sour candy. Or if it's not like sour candy, it's like taking Mentos - you know those little things - and putting it in a Coca Cola bottle and shaking it up and watching it explode. Kids is running this way, kids is running that way - they have felt free. I watched kids that I worked with from September all the way to April not be interested in certain things and then Community Forum come around and you see an instant change - instant change. And it makes the work that you do feel worthwhile, knowing that you are able to provide kids or at least be a part of an opportunity to provide kids not only a platform to speak at a university but an opportunity to connect with other kids. An opportunity to be on a bus for 20 minutes and drive somewhere outside of their environment into a new environment and then see that the work you're doing is not just being done alone in your classroom, its being done all across southeast Michigan. And then the parks. It made me remember how much I love outside. You know, somehow, someway over time, things had gotten too hard for me to be able to just sit down and just take in the air, look at the grass, sit in the grass, run from the bees *(laughs)*, talk about flowers - I never even thought I could talk about flowers, identify flowers, pull out the app to try to identify this flower or tree. All of that was just an exposure that I forgot that I love and my time at SEMIS I've been exposed to so many different parks, so many different ecosystems, where I think we talked about it in a staff meeting once but I used to have a concept of Rouge Park viewing Rouge Park a certain type of way, I now view Rouge Park as a hidden gem but it's not - it's one of the most known places to go to for a barbecue - it was one of the places I used to go practice for my football team. There's so many sides to Rouge Park that you wouldn't even know unless you get exposed to it. So, just the beauty of being exposed.

(AB) So you are about a week into your next chapter in your career as an educator. What does being a place-based educator mean to you now?

(WK) It feels like - it doesn't feel like the final mission. But it feels like a part of a saga. I know that there is another calling outside of this. I know that I'm not prepared to take on that calling yet, but I know there is a final mission out there. But as far as the saga of who I am as a place-based educator, I feel like this moment is special because this is an opportunity for me to not only showcase different strengths and gifts that I have, but also an opportunity to expose a community to everything that I have learned within the last four years. And not just suddenly do it, but do it in a way where only I can do it and I know that it is going to be not only fun but it's also going to be scary. I have to be able to consistently be me and try not to change within a system that is going to consistently try to straighten me out. So like how long can I fight the system, how long can I fight to be flexible and free before it becomes too much and they bring me down and that's the scary part. But it's fun because it's an opportunity to have a classroom. I had told someone on the phone, just maybe 30 minutes before this conversation, that it used to take me like a month and a half for a classroom to recognize that I'm different. These kids have been able to see it within the last four days - from day one who are you, to day two okay this is he, to day three to see me teach, and then today they're hand shaking, claps, I remember

yesterday I did like some type of handshake and did a bunch of freaky stuff and then they're like, 'Okay, that's our handshake now'. That usually takes like 5 weeks in doing the work I used to do, but that was the situation of coming into the classroom one day out the week. To be in the classroom for four days. The scary part is, you know, how long can I keep it up? Before it breaks me down and then the fun part is, what can come out of this. I don't think they trust me all the way now, but if I have kids to be able to lock in with me just within the first four days it's almost kind of scary to think what might come out of this in two months. What I can do in four months. If I come back and teach another year and I have one year under my belt - what more can I do? So it's kind of scary right now, where this path is at for me as an educator, you know, because it can go one or two ways but if you know anything about me, I'm going to grow regardless and I've learnt more than anything from other people but I think people also learned from me and how I operate. So I have an opportunity to grow within the community but I also have an opportunity to grow a community.

(AB) I know you know this, but SEMIS has your back if or when it does start to wear you down. Across the Coalition you have people in your corner who want to see you succeed - whatever that looks like.

(WK) And I think that's what it is, you know I've mentioned it before, sometimes for our SEMIS teachers the PD is useful, but it's also good just to be around and be in community with other people who think and view the world like you do and I think that is what I need, and you know I'm blessed to still have an opportunity to be in the Coalition to know that when that time do call, I have a community I can rely on that see the world more than just a classroom. It's fun and scary right now, but only the future can tell.