

Gloria Williams (parent), interviewed by Bridget Newsham and Olivia Obineme.

Bridget Newsham (BN): So, would you mind first, just for the record, say your first and last name and spelling it.

Gloria Williams (GW): First name is Gloria Williams as G L O R I A W I L L I A M S.

BN: So if you wouldn't mind just starting off, um, how long have you been a resident of Englewood and you know, what's your personal history in this neighborhood?

GW: Well, I moved into Englewood in the late sixties, early seventies. Um, was the second or third African American that moved into West Englewood. I seen the changes in the community and how the community was first divided. It's... if you go all the way back, a lot of the African American migrated from the South, so a lot of them came to the South Side as well as the North Side to move in to move into the community. Um, how the west England was divided. You had the African American on the west side of the street, if you're going down Western. And then if you look on the east side of the street was more Caucasian and when you get down to like 47th, 45th, you had Italians and you had the Polish. So that's how they divided the West England community. Um, Englewood was a vibrant community and as you can see we in Whole Foods, 63rd was the street where everyone came to do most of the shopping. You knew your neighbor, you was. You was safe. We didn't have a lot of the violence that's going on in the community. So I been in Englewood for a long, long time, little bit over fifty. But I don't look it, thank God for that. Um, but I really, really, um, I would never leave Englewood. Maybe because when I came to Englewood, this is where I grew up at. So it's my hometown. So anything goes on, I'm going to speak up and speak on behalf of those who can't voice their opinion. And that's why my organization is called Voices of West Englewood.

2:17

BN: So what is your personal connection to Robeson High school if you have one?

GW: Even though I attended a Gage Park, but I have family members who went to Robeson High School. Actually, my son graduated from Robeson valedictorian. Um, I had nieces went to John Hope High School, and my brother and cousins attended Harper High School. So it's very dear to me that these schools stay open because it's history. All these is... when they take down all of our schools it's going to wipe out all of our history, um, in Englewood and if they take Harper away, West Englewood would not have a neighborhood high school. So I'm, I'm for the new school, but I'm against them closing any of the high schools in the community. And I know they saying the reason why they closing these high schools because of low enrollment. Well the reason why is low enrollment is because you all promoted the charter schools to the families and pitch to them that this is what you all have to offer where you declined these programs in our high school and pitch it to our families for this is where your child can get a better education. But charter schools is no better than normal public school for me. That's the reason why we have low enrollment in some of our public schools today because they, when they go out and talk to these parents and parents want their kids to have a great education. But how could you give them the greater education and opportunity to, you know, move forward in education if you don't provide them the right tools that they need to be successful in life.

4:10

BN: So, you said your son attended, right? Um, could you speak to a little bit about what that experience was like for him? Um, did he enjoy it? Did it seem like, you know, he, what was it like going through that system there?

GW: Well when he attended Robeson High School, I forget the name of the principal. He retired, but, he has so many programs up in Robeson High School where the kids would come in. Robeson High School and Harper High School was the top two high schools in Englewood there was actually competing to have so much going for themselves. They had things for these kids to take. They had teachers in that they're really, really care and made sure that these kids get the proper education that they need. They took the time and tutor some of the kids. Um, it's uh, my son, when he first he was, he got accepted in quite a few high school because of his grade average, but since he was playing a, what they call it, a mini, uh, he was playing football with some of the coaches, but he's on a smaller team. I can't remember the name, but when it got up to age and they all came to me and I kinda, you know, build a rapport with these football coaches. And they said, well, Miss Williams, you know, we've been watching your son we been playing football with him. We would love for him to come to Robeson High School. Therefore we can help him, because I'm a single mother raising two kids. So I decided to let him go ahead and go to Robeson High School. And they, not only the coaches, the principal, the, everyone in the office, the teachers just kind of took a, took him under his wing. Not only my son, others under their wing and taught them things. When it was time for them to take the ACT, they uh, excuse me my mind kind of out of it because I just love training. Um, they call that test they take before they go to college?

6:05

BN: SAT or ACT.

GW: SAT test. Those teachers got together with a group of other students in this school and they took the time to sit down with those kids to help them with, to practice with the SAT test. Even if the kid, the student needed extra work, those teachers took the time to help those students. And that's why it's so dear to me that they keep these schools open because some parent is not, especially a single mother who's struggling. And if this is a neighborhood high school and she is unable to provide bus fare for the child to get to school on the regular and he can go to this neighborhood high school and just walk two blocks, I'd rather for my child to go there. So it. And then another thing they need to do some upgrades in these schools. They refuse to do any repairs in these public school and this the reason why they saying we're going to cost us so much to do the repairs. Well you let all this lap, you know, you never did no repairs in years in these schools. You got toilets that's not working properly. You get a paint peeling off the ceiling. That's on CPS. So it's dear to me that I stand firm on keeping these high schools open. That's how I feel.

7:34

BN: Um, do you have one specific memory or something that's especially striking about your son's experience or your experience with him at Robeson high school?

GW: My son had the best year at Robeson high school. Um, he played, he was one of the most valuable player on the football team and they did an article on him and me, and if you go in

Robeson High School, you see our picture on the wall if it's still there. Um, and not only that, he graduated Valedictorian and for Prom he was nominated for prom king. So he had a great experience at Robeson High School. He enjoyed his teachers. He enjoyed all, he got along with everyone in the school, the coaches, and if anything that I, as a single mother that, you know. Some kids, you know, boys ain't gonna tell mom everything. The good thing about it, I love those, those coaches because they was married men, they believed in God, and if he go to them, he can confine in them. Now some things they would tell me some personal things they wouldn't tell me and I respect that because they helped me grow my son to where he is today as a single mother because some things, you know, as a teenager you can't reach them, you gotta have a surrounding group of families or outside people to help you raise your children. And that's what I love about Robeson High School. I had this experience as well.

9:10

BN: Do you feel that experience is different now that the enrollment has gone down or how do you feel like that experience with your son, um, compares to how it is now currently based on when you were speaking to students and everything?

GW: Well these kids will never have an opportunity to have the experiences. You know, the high school experience, they don't, they don't have that opportunity there because there's nothing there. Um, what is there for them to enjoy high school? When I was in high school in my time, I had a good time in high school. Um, I was able to get in cooking classes, sewing classes, whatever. They had to offer. They had different events, sock hops, dances and stuff like that. They don't have that now. These kids do not know what it is to have a high school experience because right now they experiencing, what, violence in the community. and I understand some parents don't want their child to go to a particular school because they child may be the one to get shot if they walking down the street. Because if you look at from Western all the way to the expressway, you got 20 different so-called gangs. So if you close out all these schools and you want these kids to transfer all the way over here to, to Normal, not thinking about they safety. And this child might be the one that get killed by a mistaken identity. So you can look at the safety aspect of these kids out here. It's not as safe as it was back in my time. It was semi safe for my son went there, but there's no, you know, you gotta look at the safety of these kids traveling now. You have a lot of these kids is dealing with mental illness, social issues within the household, raising themselves, parents on drugs, you got, they dealing with a lot. So they've been traumatized. So, they don't know how to interact with another child because this child upbringing is totally different from this child upbringing. So both of them coming together and this one disliking this because he, this person don't act like how I'm acting. It's going to be a conflict. So you got to look at the whole picture of what's going on with the kids today in this world.

11:23

BN: When you originally started you were saying you were against the school closing because of, um, you know, the history of being lost and they're being sort of a gap in the community.

GW: It's all about history. You know, Robeson. Paul Robeson. When we first, when we, when they first migrated in Chicago, we went to Paul Robeson. John Hope, you got Englewood High School. You got-- all these schools is very important to us. Before it was Robeson High School, Chicago State was stationed right there before they moved all the way to 95th Street. That's what Chicago

University used to be in right there on 69th and Normal. A lot of people don't know that Chicago State University used to be right there and then they moved them all the way over to 95th. Then it transitioned to Robeson High School. It's a lot of history in Englewood. What's the group of the um, the rock group. I think it's the rock group, what they call that group with the... There's a rock group. All these different faces and stuff like the-- but I forgot. But they home is still in Englewood. 54th and Hermitage. The one with the eagles and stuff like, I forget the name of that rock group. And somebody's still live there. They family members still live there. We got a lot of history here. And we losing it. Yes, we need some development in our community, but not only that, why are we taking away our history?

13:01

BN: Do you feel like even if the school is closed, there's a way to preserve that history of Robeson and the other schools or do you feel like it will be lost or do you have any ideas for preserving that?

GW: Well I'm on the steering committee. I'm in these rooms with these people and we fighting to keep the schools open. And I say, OK, hypothetically, let's say you close the school, what are you gonna do in the new school to make sure that you say something, you need to put something in his new school that's going to talk about our history here. And they thinking about what they're thinking about, they say they will do that. Take some history part of Robinson, Harper High School, John Hope, and Englewood, and technically the only two schools going to really be removed is Robeson. That's what the new school is going to be. Harper High School is going to be an empty building. You Got John Hope, they got KIPP's middle school, so they're going to end up taking over the whole building. You got TEAMWORK Englewood, which got that Johnson Prep, which is the all-boys school. They gone take over that building. So, technically the only two buildings that's going to be empty is Harper and Robeson. Robeson gone be completely torn down. What you going to do with Harper High School building. It's going to be sitting there. They got a culinary course in there. They had an automotive course in there. You've got all these skill sets up in Harper High School, but you refuse to put money into these schools.

14:38

BN: At the meeting a few weeks ago. You and two other's got up and—

GW: Asiaha Butler and Eddie Johnson.

BN: Yeah. Would you mind just as speaking to a little bit to those demands and what you were, what you were thinking to accomplish with that and you know, just sort of—

GW: The reason why we... We didn't like the behavior of the first meeting. How the first meeting was just totally disrespectful. We all have our own opinion. You can feel a certain way. We can agree and we can disagree, but for you to be so a disrespect not allowing the parents to speak, not allowing those children to speak, and not allowing the community to speak. I think there was so disrespectful because this is a public meeting, you can feel the way how you want to feel, but give these individuals opportunity to speak as well and by us having two individuals that's on the steering committee behaving the way they behaving and we just didn't feel like we want to be part of that because I think that was totally disrespectful.

15:45

BN: Uh, would you mind just sort of outlining what the specific... because I know there were specific demands you made otherwise you would resign, but I just to have—

GW: I don't want to say too much of what we we... We made some demands and um, CPS is looking at these demands and um, we're still waiting on a respond on these demands, and we don't get majority of particular few of those demands or all of the demands. Yeah. We're going to walk.

BN: Okay, so, last question and you've kind of covered a little bit of it, but I'm just in a little bit more detail. What specific sort of gaps do you feel like Robeson being demolished from the community will leave in Englewood? I know loss of history you said, but if you could just elaborate a little bit more on like what that physical gap will feel like to you.

16:28

GW: The kids-- If you notice a lot of these kids are going down city hall. They protesting. They want to keep they schools remain open. Um, if you go down 69th Street, a lot of kids even, alumni says, what about them, how you think they feel that the school is no longer here in the community? Just like Gage Park had their alumni picnic community. Englewood and Robeson and John Hope, those students still can have they picnic but yet still they can't go back to the, to that school and say, let me volunteer some of my time. I graduated here and I got some free time so I can go volunteer some of my time and helped one of those students or being motivational speaker to some of those students. They don't have that to do that in there if they take away. All that'd be gone. Banish. You know, people might moan for a moment, but after that for so many years it's going to disappear. So yeah, you still in, you take it from us.

17:33

BN: Is there anything else? That's all the questions I have for you. Is there anything specifically you want to say about Robeson or anything that you feel like I've missed that you'd really.

GW: I think it's just the fact that if we invest more... Parents need to get more involved. They really do need to get more involved. Even If your child graduated and attended school and went to college still come and volunteer some of your time. We um, we lack a lot of parent involvement. We lack a lot of that. And then um, they need to know what's going on in the community. It's good to get involved so you can be aware of what's going on in your surrounding. And we as African American—Imma say that—we always wait until the last minute. Get involved and let your voice be heard. I mean everybody has something to say. What I might say might not dress to you issue, but what you got to say it, might address to a bunch of people. So it's important that we get involved or what's going on in your community that's all i'd say.

18:44

BN: That actually reminded me, when I was speaking to Asiaha Butler, she had mentioned that uh, she had tried to rally parents to sort of save Robeson and the other high schools in the area. Do you feel like there was this lack of like interest until it was kind of like, OK, now our school is going to be taken away? And do you feel like that could have made a difference initially if parents had been interested or, you know, trying to, you know...

GW: You got to look at the fact that, and I'mma say this. We have young mothers. Back in my days, and I'mma speak on my time, how my mother didn't play around with me regarding my education. Um, these parents today, they, they instead of them being parents, they want to be friends with it, but the kids, you got some of these parents out here going out with they kids, partying with they kids, drinking with they kids, and they allow their kids to do what they want to do. And that's what we missing. We missing parents being parents. You got young mommas out here that's not even, that's 30 years old got grandkids and they not involved. Everybody trying to live they life and not really paying attention to what's going on in they surroundings, or their child, or what they child is dealing with. So yeah, we dealing with, that's not only just in Englewood that's all over, parents need to get involved, you know.

Olivia Obineme (OO): What year was your son valedictorian?

20:18

GW: He graduated, I think it was 19... No, 2005 I believe. 2005. I was a proud mother. I had two kids. My daughter, she graduated from CVS. Both of them graduate with high honors. Um, I stayed on them about education and my daughter when she attended CVS, she wants to be a fashion designer. So yeah, she went to CVS because they offer that course. They didn't offer these courses, that course in none of the neighborhood school. So she had to go to that school. And I know CPS is talking about a lot of kids travel outside of the community. Well why is they traveling outside of the community? What do they have in they neighborhood school for them to stay in they neighborhood school to attend. So if they mind is desire to be a journalism, do we have anything in these neighborhood schools to help our kids to be a journalist? What about photography? What about um, learn a industrial skill. You don't have, even Harper have that. But still in all, what can you offer our kids to stay? I guarantee if you put some of those things, those programs back into those schools, watch a lot of those kids come back and then that's challenging. Yes, some of our kids go out, because they go out for a reason to go out because there's nothing in our high school to, to offer them. And then you also have these charter schools that you not inv-. These charter schools is taking away from our kids because our parents want our kids have a good quality education, and they're not getting that, you know, they're not getting what they need. They're getting by. Robeson don't even have a science teacher. How sad is that? That's real sad. And then you have teachers-- we have positions available in the school, but the teachers don't want to come. Why? There's nothing for them. They got old, old textbooks and then you might have some children that got some behavior issues. I see the challenge in that. And then the media's so quick to highlight the negative with the violence. You got so much good stuff going on in Englewood, the media is not covering that cover. They'd rather cover the negative moreso the positive. And I don't like that.

22:42

BN: So, if your son graduated in 2005 you said. Right. And everything I've read says about in the last decade or so it's sort of started going downhill. The high schools in Englewood, just like through disinvestment and everything. Um, did you experience that as a parent like as he was sort of ending his time there or was it still like very vibrant with resources and everything?

GW: I had two more nephews that played on the football team. So they graduated... one graduated a year after him. Then another one... after my nephew... so let's see, six, seven. Actually 2007 is

when everything just totally deteriorated. Um, I know some of the school, due to the budget, they had cut somebody. They had to let go some students-- some parents-- I mean some teachers and some security guards. Where, that's when you start seeing a lot of high level of fights in these schools, because they cut the budget. School have a budget that they have to maintain and they see they had to cut some of the staff. So that's when I start seeing things is going down. Going down tremendously.

23:57

BN: My understanding of it was when the charter school started, started coming in—

GW: That's when they, the beginning are, when they start, when they. The beginning part, when they announced with the 50 schools, it was already in play and putting some of these charter schools, maybe one or two then into the community, and then when they close those 50 schools, they utilize some of those schools that they closed and turned them to charter schools where our kids can filter to those schools. That's what happened.