

Wiregrass Black History Project, RG 298

Dr. W. Charles Lewis Interview Transcript

Date Span: June 14, 2024

Biographical Sketch: W. Charles Lewis was born in Ashford, AL, where he was the first African American valedictorian of Ashford High School after desegregation. Attended Tuskegee University then Dallas Theological Seminary for his masters of theology and, in 2000, his doctor of ministry degrees. Founded Proclaiming America's Call for Equality (PACE) in 2015 to award scholarships, and founded the Dothan Community Church where he is (2025) senior pastor. In 2022, he wrote and self-published the book *28 Black History Makers: Dothan, Alabama* to commemorate Black History Month and Juneteenth. He has a long resume of activism and leadership. Lewis is married to Geraldine Isaac Lewis and has five children.

Organizational Sketch: The Wiregrass Black History Project is a collaboration between the Wiregrass Black History Channel on YouTube (by David "Mit" Kirkland) and the Wiregrass Archives at Troy University Dothan Campus. Funded in 2024- 25 by Troy University and the Society of American Archivists Foundation through its Catalyst Grant.

The Wiregrass Black History Channel will host edited versions of the interviews. The Wiregrass Archives will make the raw interviews available on its YouTube channel and create metadata records and finding aids that link to the project and to individual video interviews.

Scope / Content Note: Video interview transcript with Dr. Lewis in which he discusses the production of, and a few of the people he featured in, his book, *28 Black History Makers: Dothan, Alabama*, published in 2022.

Provenance: Interview conducted by Mit Kirkland and Deborah Pearson. Provided to the Wiregrass Archives as part of the grant-funded Wiregrass Black History Project.

Processing Notes: Transcriptions made by MS Word AI, then edited by Dr. Martin T. Olliff. Revisions planned to update and correct transcriptions.

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Dr. W. Charles Lewis *28 Black History Makers, Dothan Alabama, June 14, 2024*

Interviewed by Deborah Pearson, News director, WOOF Radio, and Mit Kirkland

00:00:00 Mit Kirkland

All right, Deborah Pearson.

00:00:05 Deborah Pearson

Give us your name and the title of your book. Actually give us your name, your title and the title of your book.

00:00:13 Charles Lewis

My name is Dr. W. Charles Lewis and I'm the author of *28 Black History Makers. Dothan, AL.*

00:00:25 Mit Kirkland and Deborah Pearson

Unintelligible cue and stage directions, and from Mit, "Look a little more this way."

00:00:26 Charles Lewis

And I'm pastor of the Dothan Community Church here in Dothan.

00:00:31 Deborah Pearson

Tell us about the . . . those twenty-eight Black history makers.

00:00:37 Charles Lewis

28 Black History Makers is a historical account of some of the foundational leaders here in Dothan, AL.

There's a range of . . . leaders from politicians, to teachers, to ministers, to sports personalities, but they have had a great influence on the community here in Dothan and the Wiregrass.

00:01:05 Deborah Pearson

How did you go about selecting 28 because I know that was hard to do?

00:01:10 Charles Lewis

Well, I I narrowed the number to 28 in keeping with Black History Month. So a personality for each day of the week for Black History Month. But to choose those 28, I interviewed a number of people who . . . who grew up in Dothan, who knew the people who influenced the community whose legacies are continuing here today, so. Out of those interviews there were names that were consistently listed and from that pool I chose 28.

00:01:56 Deborah Pearson

Did you know any of them personally?

00:01:59 Charles Lewis

I did. I . . . I knew quite a few.

Wallace Smith was my principal. I am a native of Ashford and Wallace Smith was the principal at Ashford High School.

Well acquainted with Mr. Cooper, Mayor Cooper, who's the mayor of Enterprise. His mother taught at my elementary school in Ashford.

Peggy James was at my elementary school. I wasn't a part of her ward . . . award-winning choir, but I had a sister who was a part of her choir. It was . . . it was a kids choir at . . . at Ashford and she was the . . . she was the director and musician for the choir.

Then there are a number of others. James . . . Dr. James Smith. I grew up . . . he would come to our church and preach usually every year, so I knew him as well.

00:03:11 Deborah Pearson

Was there any story or any person who influenced you the most?

00:03:15 Mit Kirkland

Ohh, hold on one second, Deborah Pearson.

00:03:19 Deborah Pearson

OK. Was there any person who influenced you the most out of the 28?

00:03:26 Charles Lewis

The person who influenced me the most was my personal interaction with Mr. Wallace Smith.

Again, he was my principal when I was in elementary school. The high school . . .

00:03:42 Mit Kirkland

Start again, OK? Alright, you're good.

00:03:47 Charles Lewis

The person who entered . . . influenced . . . is that. [Cross talk and checking with the camera operator]

The person who influenced me the most would be Mr. Wallace Smith, who was the principal at my school.

When I was in elementary school, the high school was located on a different campus, but he would come and look at our work and I remember him coming around looking at our handwriting. We were in 3rd grade and he stopped and he looked at my handwriting and he got my paper and held it up for the whole class to see, and he said my writing was a model of good handwriting.

And a lot of people reference my penmanship today. I'm thinking maybe what he said had an influence on me continuing to practice and have a . . . a fairly legible handwriting.

00:04:52 Deborah Pearson

OK. How long did it take you to do the research for this book?

00:04:56 Charles Lewis

It took me about a year. And the . . .

00:05:04 Mit Kirkland

[Stage directions.]

00:05:05 Deborah Pearson

OK, how long did it take you to do the research to put this book together?

00:05:09 Mit Kirkland

Oh. If you want to hold the book up.

00:05:12 Charles Lewis

OK.

00:05:13 Mit Kirkland

And just say it took me, you know, answering about.

00:05:14 Charles Lewis

Yeah, I got. I got what you're saying.

00:05:21 Deborah Pearson

OK, how long did it take for you to do the research to put your book together?

00:05:27 Charles Lewis

The research for *28 black history makers* . . .

00:05:30 Mit Kirkland

[Stage directions and adjusting equipment]

00:05:38 Deborah Pearson

How long did it take you to do the research to put your book together?

00:05:43 Charles Lewis

The research for *28 Black History Makers* took about a year. People were very cooperative in providing what they knew. They . . . they told me stories. They sent me pictures. They sent me news articles. Some sat down and . . . and told me the back story about a lot of the people. So it took about a year and it was . . . it was a year of learning for me.

00:06:23 Deborah Pearson

Were there any surprising stories or something that stood out to you the most from the stories that you were told?

00:06:32 Charles Lewis

One of the things that stood out for me, something I was never aware of, was the role that Mr. Glenn Wiggins played in the history of Dothan in terms of getting blacks to be hired by the city of Dothan. He filed a federal lawsuit against the city of Dothan, and that opened a door for many blacks even today, who are in position to come into position. So that was a pivotal thing that happened in our history that I wasn't aware of, and I was, I was so glad that I found that out.

00:07:17 Deborah Pearson

And I want you to probably open it up here.

00:07:24 Mit Kirkland

Yeah.

00:07:25 Deborah Pearson

I noticed that you chose to use character photos versus the actual photos of the person. Is there any particular reason why?

00:07:33 Charles Lewis

I use the character photos instead of real pictures because in my research I came across a few people that either I didn't have a photo or it was old and not, you know, you couldn't tell who, who it really was.

So I . . . during my research also, I found another book that was doing some history on individuals and they had character photos also and I . . . I imagine that it's for the same reason. Sometimes you just can't get a . . . a photo that a person can actually tell, "this is who this is."

So. We had a good artist who was able to look at a picture and draw it well and you could tell that "yeah, that's that person."

00:08:31 Deborah Pearson

See, I thought I thought totally different. My thought process was that you used it for children to grab their attention.

00:08:38 Charles Lewis

Ohh OK.

00:08:43 Deborah Pearson

So who influenced you the most in your coming up?

00:08:49 Charles Lewis

Of the 28 that are listed in the book, the one that had the most influence on my life personally was Mr. Wallace Smith, who was the principal of my school. I was able to somewhat grow with him. I was a student and then when I moved back to the . . . to the city, we actually became friends and we interacted a lot and I was over his home. He came to my home. We would visit each other and his son Wallace Smith and I became very good friends, got married the same year and we . . . we still stay in contact with each other.

00:09:34 Deborah Pearson

I think . . . I think that's all the questions that I have.

00:09:41 Charles Lewis

I am W. Charles Lewis and I'm the pastor of Dothan Community Church here in Dothan. I wrote the book *28 Black History Makers* in 2022 and it debuted at the time of Juneteenth, a very fitting time for such a work.

00:10:05 Mit Kirkland

If it was, if there was any one thing that stood out to you while you was writing this book, what . . . what would it be?

00:10:15 Charles Lewis

If that was one thing that stood out while I was writing the book, it was the richness of our history here in Dothan.

I called to mind during that time something that Jesus said in the Bible, that a prophet is not without honor except in his own home and among his own people. So, oftentimes the people in our community are as well-educated and/or as professional as people who are in large cities, but we often don't give them the credit and the recognition for what they've done because they are local and we know them. But that was one thing that stood out. We have some top notch people in our community.

00:11:05 Mit Kirkland

All right, if you . . . I just want you to sum up things in your own words, if you would.

00:11:15 Deborah Pearson

About the book.

00:11:15 Mit Kirkland

About the book, yeah.

00:11:18 Charles Lewis

28 Black History Makers looks at some key leaders in the Dothan community. And one should not shy away from the title *Black History Makers*. It is not just for black people. I have found that a lot of the individuals who are in the white community, other communities, have learned a lot from this. I had one person to . . . to call me to say that one of the persons and . . . and Mac Lloyd, for instance, taught her and had such an impact on her life.

So it's not just for black people, it's for the Dothan community to look at some of the leaders who influenced and had an impact in the community.

00:12:09 Mit Kirkland

Good.

END OF TAPE