Bill Wilson, Founder/Executive Director, Higher Ground Academy; St. Paul City Council member, 1984-2000

Interviewed by Peter Myers at Central Presbyterian Church, St. Paul
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A My name is Bill Wilson and I'm the founder and executive director of the Higher Ground Academy charter school in St. Paul.

Q When did you found the school?

A The school opened in 1999

Q Describe when you moved to Minnesota…..

A I came to Minnesota in the early 60s and worked on the railroad as a student from college. That was my introduction to Minnesota. I remember the freeway was being built at that time and I can remember sitting alongside the freeway watching it being dug out. And, of course, University Avenue was having all the traffic at that time because the freeway wasn't completed, and it was a very vibrant corridor as it has been over the years; a very vibrant corridor. A lot of businesses were operating there. We'd go over and get sandwiches and the like. But I was a person who would be in town for three or four days and out on the rails for the next five or six.

Q Memorable retail establishments….

A I know there was a theater there. I hadn't gone to the Faust Theater, for example. There were sandwich shops and clothing shops, tailors, the barbers and the like. I really didn't do much business as it were on the Avenue because I didn't live here; I was just here for the summer. But I remember on University the buses – catching the buses, transportation downtown along University Avenue.

Q What role does University Avenue play in the Twin Cities?

A It plays a very important role. University Avenue, of course, runs all the way from Duluth – from one end of Minnesota to the other. Of course, it's been interrupted by construction and the like, but it's virtually a corridor through Minnesota. It has a lot of the traffic and commerce in the State of Minnesota, through the heart of the Twin Cities, the capitol.

Q How do you think diversity has changed along the corridor?

A When the freeway was built it drew a lot of attention away from University, so a lot of the shops were having to close, businesses closing down, relocating. It opened up opportunities for small business owners to come in and set up shop. So as particularly the Asians began moving in…I remember one of the stories that one of the gentlemen told me is, if I can have my business near the capitol, I know I'm safe. So he had his business on University Avenue and he kind of organized along there. It became kind of an Asian corridor. And so it focused on developing businesses. I advocated for that because as the business and commerce was declining, they were rebuilding. They were actually part of the revitalization of the Avenue.

Q Talk more about your early years in Minnesota.

A After running on the railroad for a couple of years and a year off, I came back and the truth of the matter is I got stuck here. Over the winter I got stuck here and had no clue or idea what Minnesota winters were like because each time I would come there was green grass and the sun and you felt like you could have been down South. It was literally that warm and pleasant. The air was always fresh and a lot of activity. So I had no clue about a Minnesota winter and I got literally stuck here. I caught a cold - very bad cold - and I couldn't work on the railroad until my cold cleared up and by the time my cold cleared up school had started and I was stuck here. So it was a good beginning, as it were. In the early spring I had to find work and a friend of mine connected me with the 3M company. So I went out and interviewed at 3M and was very fortunate in getting a job. The darndest thing about it though – the day I interviewed and was offered the job, I had to get back home from the headquarters out on Old Hudson Road and I knew I was kind of short of money, but I didn't realize how short I was. And I had too much pride to ask for a quarter to catch the bus, so I walked from the 3M Company out on Hudson back to the Selby-Dale area. It was early spring, it was quite cold - to me at least it was. It was my first tour of Minnesota from coming east, going west. But I got the job and I worked at 3M for about four years. It was a good time to be in Minnesota. I made a lot of friends and with that I decided to stay and I started my family here; brought my family. My wife came from the college we were attending and we started our family here and have been here, of course, ever since. I can remember taking her out to dinner and the restaurants along University as well as along Selby. And even to this day we remember having those kinds of experiences. The theater life here is great. We enjoyed that and the schools and communities that were growing here. When I went to the University of Minnesota for a couple of quarters, got my exposure to the University and then started working at the U of M. I worked in the Selby-Dale area for the short period of time that I went to the U of M. I was on staff there with the Center for (?) Affairs. That gave me a great opportunity to better understand Minnesota, as it were, and the developing of the region and the roles that I could play in community development. So those are my early memories.

Q Why did you decide to run for City Council?

A Actually in 1975, I guess it was '74, the then mayor of St. Paul – Lawrence Cohen, Larry Cohen – asked me to chair a task force to set up the community councils in the City of St. Paul. I had some exposure to community and thought it was a great opportunity and I jumped at it. And that gave me a chance to really know and understand St. Paul as a whole – all the neighborhoods throughout the city and connect with people in a way I never would have otherwise done so. I didn't have any clue at that time, but Larry told me later on that he was positioning me to run for City Council. Well, it turns out that while he was thinking about it, then-Governor Anderson appointment me to serve as State Human Rights Commissioner. So Larry literally got on the phone and argued with the governor about plucking me out of his city and I was kind of…I didn't know a lot about politics, as it were, but at any rate I served as Human Rights Commissioner for one term under Governor Anderson and Perpich. Then a friend of mine came along who, it turns out was a chess player. He loved to play chess; he was an Italian guy, Jim Bessini. Jim said, I just wonder, would you like to be on the city council? And I said I have no idea what that is, no idea. But he and my son connected because he began to teach my son chess. So they made a bond with chess

and I would take my son over in the evening to chess lessons. And Jim and I began to have more and more conversations. So he said, I think I know somebody who could run you for city council. I said, I have no idea what you're talking about. But he knew what he was talking about and he connected me up with a friend and I decided to throw my hat in the ring for city council. My first experience and I had no idea how tough that was going to be or what the job involves or anything else. But it was a citywide election at that time – we didn't have district systems – and it was a tough campaign. But again, my experience with the community councils gave me exposure to St. Paul made this kind of thing possible. So essentially, I was brought into that whole thing of city council and government in that respect, by this young Italian guy who just thought I'd be a good fit.

Q Talk about what you found as a representative of Ward 1?

A The corner of Dale and University was just…it was unfortunate to have that kind of adult theater activity going on. It was pornography, was what it was. And you'd hear the stories of women who would be catching the bus and get propositioned because they were standing on the corner. The corner, that stretch of the Avenue was also known as the place where you could get prostitutes and the like and the more people complained about this, the more I came to realize that it's just not going to stop. It has to be stopped. And the question became one of how to stop it. I did a little bit of research and found that businesses such as the sex trade or adult businesses, they were actually downtown. And then they got relocated from downtown and the only neighborhood to plop them down in, so to speak, was this neighborhood. And I thought that was really unfortunate and unfair so we just figured that if they weren't here before, they don't have to be here now. And I came out of a tradition of nonviolent, direct action. I marched against segregation in Tennessee. I can remember going down to movie theaters. Couldn't get in but you'd go to the ticket window and not get one. You'd come back, get in the line and go back up again. Just continuing and business was blocked. Nobody could do business at that theater as long as we students were there protesting against the fact that we were segregated and we couldn't get in. And it dawned on me that this is really what its about – nonviolent, direct action is the key to changing things in a permanent way. Because if we change them though nonviolent direct action, then you can move on. If you use conflict and violence and the like, then that becomes the issue. So what we did was focus on nonviolent direct action and I talked to a few of my friends and said I think we ought to do this. So I said, I'm going to start this as one person. So I made a sign. I said, instead of having lunch in City Hall I will go out – and it will be good for my health, too, not to eat so much. So I took a sign and stood on the corner of Dale and University – one sign at a time. And eventually there were more signs. And eventually people gathered and said this is good. Then people would honk their horns and go by. And more and more attention was drawn to that. And at the same time we explained what this was all about – that you can't stop wrong by being and doing wrong. You stop wrong by doing right. That was the philosophy and message Dr. King also had left us with. So coming out of that tradition I also realized that the churches had an important role to play. So I would go about and meet with ministers and explain that the ministry is in the streets. In the churches, yes; but also in the streets. That if we truly believe that we can address wrongdoing through right doing, then we have to come out of the church. So churches began to join in that. Then I started a little research project with the council research office and said, I wonder how much business we affect by being out there? Because if we can affect business, then it'll be in their best interest to leave. But we have to stay nonviolent. And we did nonviolence training. What if someone confronted you, if a john were there or someone got angry because they

couldn't get in. What would you do? And we said we'd just defend ourselves by doing nothing; just standing there. And people learned to react in this way, in a nonviolent way. So the churches joined and then we were charged with censorship – that was one of the favorite charges. So I said, it's not censorship; it's citizenship. That as citizens we're going to make a difference, make a change. Then we noticed that more people from outside of the community started joining our effort because the message connected with every community. So every community should be free of this kind of traffic and if University Avenue is going to be healthy, it can't be healthy with this kind of sickness. So we built on that theme. So people would come from Frogtown, from Summit-University, from different districts throughout the city – ward districts throughout the city and nobody wanted it in their neighborhoods. And we said, we don't either. So we conducted a nonviolent direct action campaign. Then one of the Catholic sisters – Sister Gabriel – said I think I'm going to talk to the church. So they brought the Catholic church into it and came down and just blocked off University Avenue one day and just sent a strong message that this should be the end. We shouldn't have this in this neighborhood. No neighborhood should have to suffer through this. So that's essentially what drew us to it.

Q Talk about how you rallied support.

A I went to key ministers in the community and said, if we truly believe that wrong has no place, then the right thing to do is confront it. And we'd used churches as places to build signs. People would come and pick up signs and we would keep lists of names of people who would come so we could always contact them just as we would in any other campaign – contact them to come and protest with us. And we reached out to women's groups who really realized that this was an affront to not only everyone, but certainly an affront to women – the way they were being represented and demonized. So we made connections wherever we could. We brought young people in – college students. We said would you want this on your college campus? Of course not. And you're learning about social responsibilities. It's a responsible thing to come and be engaged. You can't be here every day and every night but you can do it once a week. So we got people on a schedule to come out. We got children whose mothers were subject to this disgraceful kind of exposure. And these little children would come out. Now we had whole families out there. And it took on a kind of a…it was a protest. But it was a joyful kind of protest, where people knew they were making a difference. They did what government couldn't. Government couldn't do it. There are things that government can do and things that government can't do. And because the law says it's not illegal, well we said, it's just wrong. And so we said we should stop it. And as I reflect on it, what's going on in Egypt today is the same kind of thing. That citizens rise up and say enough is enough. We don't have to have this. We don't have to live with this. So we have to protest against it. Whatever it takes, we'll put our bodies there, we'll put our minds and our hearts there. And we can make change. So by going around the communities with this very basic message – that if it's wrong then it can't be right. So get involved and be engaged.

Q What kind of impact did the protests have?

A Well many of the businesses supported it unquestionably. They'd quietly make contributions. It wasn't the kind of campaign where you could go and write a check and go and take a picture. But all the signs and the communications we had – all of those things had to be paid for. We made some, but we started getting contributions. Western

State Bank was a very, very strong supporter. Bill Sands I respected then; still respect. He stood up and said, you're absolutely right that unless we change this then this avenue is going to go downhill. So he became a supporter and he spoke to other businesses and said, look get behind this thing. Let's make this happen. Let's change. We can do this. So I think it lifted the morale of all people. It also let businesses know that their businesses were negatively affected by having this kind of trade and that more people would come into their businesses if only they didn't have to put up with this kind of indignity. So they were cooperating in this effort.

Q So what was the next step?

A Well, the fact is that we could not do it through legislation. I tried that; it wouldn't work. We passed laws. It didn't matter because by law they could legally be there. They were already there. You couldn't move them; you couldn't grandfather them out, that's for sure. You couldn't move them. So what we had to do was make it uncomfortable and unprofitable for them to be there. And they fell one at a time – the Faust, the Flick and then the Belmont – they all went down. Because they really fed off of each other, was what it was. They'd go from one place to the other for "variety." So once we stopped one, the others went down too. But it's basically that we impacted them economically and that's what I learned from the marches when we were in the South. You go to that window where they're selling tickets – if they couldn't sell tickets, the theater couldn't stay open. And they wouldn't sell them to us so they could sell them to nobody. So it was the same thing. The johns could not get in the place because we were all out there and we asked that people would take pictures and put it on the…it wasn't the internet then but on cable and some people got very, very creative. They would take license numbers from vehicles that they saw johns coming. I never advocated this, but you have to let people be creative too. So they would take the license plate and of course it's public information – who the drivers are – they'd get their names and they'd write letters saying that your vehicle was seen at the corner of Dale and University at the Faust or Flick Theater with the hope that the driver wouldn't get it, but the other member of the house would get the letter and they'd have to answer to that. So when people realized that things like that were happening I think that had an effect on them, too. They said, this is not a good, safe place to come to because of the impact it could have on their families.

Q Discussions within the city council….

A Yeah, there were a lot of discussions about this. We knew it wasn't right but what could we do legislatively? And we crafted due legislation, the City Attorney's office was very helpful but the new legislation basically limited what could be done going forward; not what was already in place. So we put in place legislation to protect the future, but we still had to deal with what was present. I quite frankly got so frustrated that I literally attempted to develop a survey that could be sent out to all the citizens and they would have to open this forum up and they would have to say, in their judgment, what was pornographic and what was not. Because the court said once you see it, you know it. So I said, well if we have to put up with this in this neighborhood, let the whole city as a larger neighborhood see what we're really dealing with. And that was a proposal that went down four votes against, three votes for. And we couldn't send the survey out. But I think it made an impression on other members of the council, as well as the mayor, of how terrible this situation was in the neighborhood and if we don't want everybody to see it, why should a few people have to see it? So I think we started

changing the conversation at that point. I know the mayor was active but there wasn't much he could do. I mean, he is the mayor but that doesn't mean he can just go and sweep things away. And he had made his efforts, as well as other people. And everybody agreed it was wrong. But the question is how do you fix it? And we fixed it through nonviolent direct action.

Q What role did Mayor Latimer play?

A I didn't have a lot of faith in that myself because I'm more of a guy on the street. And I thought buying them out, quite honestly, was a reward. But the mayor recognized that that was an approach that was legal and logical from the point of view of getting rid of them.

Q So what happened after that?

A The first thing was that the Faust Theater was leveled. Finally got around to leveling it. There were all kinds of ideas of what could be done on a redeveloping basis, but quite honestly, the life of the Faust Theater was well past its time and to renovate and make something out of that other than what it was, was very, very difficult. And the memories of it were just too much for people. They thought of putting in another kind of theater and rebuilding, but it just simply…the structure was such that it didn't make sense. So it came down to just leveling the building. So there was vacant land there for, of course, many years. And the Flick Theater, across the street, once they pulled out that was gone and then the Belmont – that was gone. There was a bar there for a while but that finally closed, too, because all of that area fed off of the same traffic. So it was just vacant land and space for the longest time. And then the police department went in and built a substation there. And that was a positive thing for the people to see – that even as bad as that corner was, some good could come from it. So that presence, that really lifted people's hopes for the future. But the big investments would have to wait. I soon realized that my job was to get rid of it. It was somebody else's job to build it.

Q What do you think about the Rondo Community Library?

A No one really knew what was going to go there or what could happen. But it was a wonderful idea to make this a community space that the community could use and turn it into something very, very useful. The library's a great idea and then the idea to put housing atop – because it had to be economically feasible too. That library has so much activity going on in it. What a wonderful turnaround from where we were and the community actually reclaimed the space that had been taken from them for so many years by places like the Faust and Flick. So it was a wonderful, wonderful complement to that corner, to that community, for all the work they've done that they in turn could get a library. And once you have a library, you have not only your history you also have your future. And it is educating and transforming lives. And that's a good thing.

Q Talk about the educational institutions along University Avenue.

A I think one of the big additions is the Hubbs Center. I can recall being involved and I met Ron Hubbs at that time and it was dedicated, of course, in his name and his honor and St. Paul Insurance was a big supporter of that effort. And here, again, that opportunity opened up channels of resources for the community, reaching out to those who have not yet learned to read, reaching out to those who are new to the community,

making education available particularly for adults, particularly for adults. Because oftentimes if you don't have it by high school you're probably not going to get it. But this says, no you can get it. You can get it any time in your life. So the support and mentoring and work that goes on there is astonishing and particularly as the new immigrant community families come in. They have to have a start and regardless of their age they have to have a start. And that Hubbs Center is an enriching opportunity for all those families.

Q Another major development was Gordon Parks High School. Talk about the importance of that school.

A It's a very, very new addition. The Board of Education – again I was not involved in this but just know from just reading – the Board of Education had to close down an Area Learning Center and this is a replacement for the ALC, to again serve children, serve young people who desperately need education. It's a wonderful structure, it's a wonderful building, very attractive, invested a lot of money in it and it says that education is important. And every child has the right to education. I met Gordon Parks many years ago. I have a photograph of me and him together and it was a delight and he was a wonderful gentleman. Wonderful. He grew up in St. Paul, of course, and was an outstanding photographer. I'll never forget the time we met. He just put his hand on my shoulder and said, I've got to come see what you dudes are doing here. He was so genuine, so genuine.

Q Any final thoughts?

A I think University Avenue is going to be what its always been – it's been a connection between all people throughout the State of Minnesota, from all the way north to all the way south. And it's a corridor. And it'll survive the freeway. It's revitalized without the freeway. Life is coming back to University Avenue. As you go farther west – all the way down to the U of M – a lot of building and activity is going on and its kind of the ebb and flow of communities. But this corridor, this spine, along the St. Paul and Minneapolis as it were – it's going to have a very important role going into the future. The idea of light rail transfer – that's something when I was on the city council we just debated, we fussed about. I always knew we should have had it, but it didn't come then. But its coming and that's the important thing – that each generation needs to pick up and carry the case further. But I think if we look back ten years, maybe a shorter window, maybe 20 years from now, to come back and look – God willing and the creek don't rise – we'll see that happen. And I think its going to be vibrant, full of life, new buildings, small shops combined with housing – you can see the pattern already developing with the shops at the lower level and the housing above. That, I think, is going to be what we'll see throughout University Avenue. It's going to take time and transition but it'll happen because the populations are there, the diversity in the community's there. It'll be a destination place. No doubt about it.