

Hazel Williams-Small

Hazel Williams - "Howdy, my name is Hazel Williams and I am so happy to be here at the Digital Media conference and to learn about your literacy project. It's one that I think is very appropriate for uh, for several of the communities that I am involved in. and most specifically as I was sitting in one of the sessions, I thought about language as an expression of culture. And I think it's much more than an expression of words that have a meaning, conveying a message to someone, it's actually an expression of culture. I think specifically about people that I know who live, who were born and uh, live in the south or perhaps migrated North in the Great Migration. I think about one person in particular who was uh initially a sharecropper. Her family was, her family was a sharecropping family and she had several siblings and they all worked the, they all work on the sharecropping plot. Many of the children had to drop out of school early perhaps in middle school or, middle school or early high school to help on the family, on the, uh, family plot and also to, to generate income for the families. But it's interesting to me that these folks, even with uh, what, what many would call an abbreviated formal of education, that they are still very educated in the sense that they bring a depth of understanding to their lives and they're able to accomplish great things without the, um, without the letters behind their names that indicated a particular degree. And then I think about languages as culture, as an expression of culture, for instance uh, in the south 'Madea' is a word that's used, and I, I asked him about it and it actually is an abbreviation of 'Mother dear' and I look at it further as an expression of culture of how dear the mother is in the African American community and how dear she is especially in a community where often the men were threatened, where there was intense activity against men, black men in particular, that often the woman was called upon to be the one who was the hub of the family or the one who had to hold things together. So I look at those women they were especially precious and called 'Mother dear' shortened to 'Madea' and even today I find in even the some of the popular culture there's a, there's a movie that's popular, I think it's called 'Madea's Family Reunion', yeah. And not to give them a plug, but it think that it's just interesting that it made it into the culture"

Background talking

Interviewer - "So tell me a little bit more about the um, when you were growing up, when you were a child and you were learning how to read. Did your mom read to you?"

Hazel Williams - "Yes she did. And it's interesting, when I, when I was talking to you about the people who came out of that background, I was actually talking about my mother. My mother is 'madea'; my mother is the one who, uh, stopped her formal education in the ninth grade and worked on the family farm first as a sharecropper and then later on when her father was able to have enough money to buy his own farm that she was, they were small farmers and later were able to purchase more land where they grew timer and were able to take crops to the market. But yes, I remember her reading to me and also, it's interesting though, she realized though that education was a form of freedom. It was looked upon not just as a way of expressing oneself or of being a correct and polite society but it was looked upon as freedom. I'm sure we've heard often that 'knowledge is power', I say that

'applied knowledge is power'. So she wanted us all to make sure that we obtained an education so that we could, we could write our own ticket, or make our own way, or to be free of the constraints of ignorance. Ignorance is really a prison, if you, if you will. So she always emphasized that, and it's so interesting that with a ninth grade education, my father did graduate high school and then he attended some college, but it's interesting, for my mother it was such a push, all her children attended college on academic scholarships."

Interviewer - "And that was no mistake."

Hazel Williams - "No, it was, it was by design, it was by design."

Interviewer - "Now did she, what kinds of books and reading materials did she keep around the house?"

Hazel Williams - "She always had, um..."

Interviewer - "Did you read the Bible?"

Hazel Williams - "Of course she read the Bible, being religious, but she also had other books that I think would be called, uh, academic in nature. We had 'Scientific of America,' we had 'Scholastic...' what was it, 'Scholastic Journal' or something like that."

Interviewer - "The scholastic books, yeah, yeah."

Hazel Williams - "We had the World Book Encyclopedias. And of course, we had to go to the library and read books and write reports for her. So it was very, very important for her for us to, to read and read well. And it is so interesting, even with, I think there is something else with language as expression of culture, or literacy as an expression of culture, a lot of people assume or think that one with a limited formal education would be inarticulate, it is so interesting, my mother is one of the most articulate people I know. And in terms of her use of words, her use of language, and she has a great stage presence as well. She and her sister..."

People talking in the background

Hazel Williams - "She and her sister actually were famous for performing plays as teenagers, and then carrying that forward in the community and it's so interesting that she did that and I just think it's such a great thing. So when I heard about this project today I just thought 'wow, what a great thing' and I would love to record, not only her, I would love to record my mother, there were some of her peers that had similar experiences. And I just look at her, I just look at her journey from growing up, first as a sharecropper, to owning a farm, to uh moving to the city, to becoming a part of what would be called today 'commercial culture'. And it's so interesting though, but I think it gives a, it gives a solid foundation and a firm background to those of us who had the good fortune to be her children."

Interviewer - "And here's, here's something um, so many of the black women that we have um, interviewed that come from the south, the very first thing that they remember in their house is a set of encyclopedias. "

Hazel Williams - "Yes!"

Interviewer - "And often sold by people who would come around and sold encyclopedias."

Hazel Williams - "Yes, I'm sure that's how ours was purchased, but I remember that because I remember looking up subjects in the encyclopedia as a footnote for a paper in school."

Interviewer - "And that was a huge, that was an investment; a family investment in literacy."

Hazel Williams - "Most definitely, and it's very important, like I said my parents clearly understood that education, education was freedom; simply, simply put, education was freedom. And I don't mean education for the sake of, of that saying you know something, I don't mean that kind of education, but education that could be put to use, that could be practical, uh, that would serve as a way of negotiating the world to achieve a positive result."

Interviewer - "Now, your parents rewarded you for literacy, they were probably so happy that you did it they always gave you good strokes and stuff like that. But were you ever, in school, did you ever encounter any time where you were told to not to read or you were told not to read and write in a certain way?"

Hazel Williams - "Yes and no. Haha, yes and no."

Interviewer - "Well tell us a story."

Hazel Williams - "In my, in my early years, I was born in the South so I attended an all black school, and there, I even had a couple of my instructors where actually my cousins, in other words, they were my father's cousins so they were my second cousins. So in school, and it wasn't just because they were my relatives, but that was just the normal, everyone was expected to do well, not do well, you were expected to do well and excel, and excel, you were expected to do your..."

Interviewer - "There's that Southern, you said excel."

Hazel Williams - "No I was trying to say, I was deciding upon exceed or excel so I blended the two."

Interviewer - "I thought it was the Southern coming out."

Hazel Williams - "Oh no, no, well, I don't know, but I, I was deciding upon a word."

Interviewer - "This is good, my husband has that southern accent."

Hazel Williams - "Really, cool. I was deciding on, on whether to exceed or excel; which one would be more appropriate. But we were expected to do well, and, and we did. And as I, I hear today, a lot of students say that it's not cool, or not hip, or not whatever to be smart but we were expected to be smart and, and we lived up to what was expected of us and it was encourage. And then, um, my father's employment transferred him to Ohio."

Interviewer - "Ah."

Hazel Williams - "And, it's interesting, then I was put into an all white environment, well with the exception of myself of course. But no" * laughing * "Or, or, or a, or a few others, a few others. And I recall there, that was, it was interesting, that was my first encounter with racism, it was my first encounter. Because in my community, everyone was African American, my dentist was African American, my physician was African American, if you had to go to the lawyer, the lawyer was Afr. The people who came to pick up the dry cleaning, uh, Mr. Christmas, I remember he owned his own dry cleaning store, he would come around and pick up your dry cleaning, give you a receipt right on the front, uh, porch, clean your clothes, come back and deliver them. So, when I moved to Ohio I remember being, um, in a predominantly white school, middle school and high school, and there, what should I say, of course I continued to do well because that's, that was our training, that was our upbringing, you're supposed to do well in school. But I remember in high school,

was it in high school? Yeah, I remember, it's interesting, my first encounter with racism, one of the white instructors seemed to be taken aback by the fact that we were, what should I say, that we were articulate and that we were good students and perhaps even sought to, what should I say, even sought to diminish our desire to learn. And it was very interesting and I remember explaining this to my parents, * laughs *, it was interesting both of my parents went to the school, my mother and father went to the school and spoke with the teacher, I remember that. And I'm sure that it continued in subtler and more covert ways, but that overt, well I remember even being discouraged from pursuing certain things, yeah. So it's interesting that, that that exists because, you know, people talk about racism in the South, but I would think that it's just as prevalent – for instance, my experience, I experienced no racism in the South, but that was because I lived in an all black community. But uh, in moving to Ohio and being exposed to that type of environment there are still many, racism is still an institution in the United States. And that's, well, that's not what I meant to cover on this uh, on this literacy statement, but I think it's important to always keep ones own goals in mind, to always be clear about what we're seeking to accomplish, and to continue marching that way regardless of the obstacles one might encounter, be they from a teacher, or from an institution, or from whomever, so that's my story..."

Interviewer - "And not forget history."

Hazel Williams - "No."

Interviewer - "Which is why we do this work."

Hazel Williams - "Exactly, and it's so important because, you know, there are so many things that I, I'm just so excited that you are doing this, you know, and I think it's just wonderful because I think about women at my mother's church now, and men too. Oh I think there, there, there's a whole band, there's a whole group who are about 80, there's some in their 90s, I think there's even one centenarian, I think it would just be wonderful to, to hear their stories and to hear about learning. So thank you so much for talking with me."