

## WARD CONNERLY

### Part I: From Rural Louisiana to California

*Ward Connerly is born in the Jim Crow South and comes to California in 1947. After college he goes to work in government, confronts racial barriers and develops a lasting relationship with Pete Wilson.*

**Interview conducted by Dan Morain in Sacramento, California, on August 15, 2023.**

**Dan Morain:** Very good. Welcome. Welcome to Open California's ongoing series of oral history interviews made possible by a grant from the California State Library. I'm Dan Morain. Delighted to be here with Ward Connerly. Ward, thank you for joining us today.

**Ward Connerly:** Dan. It's my pleasure. I hope.

**DM:** Ward led the movement in California to prohibit the use of racial preferences in public university admissions, contracting, and hiring. I commend his first book, "Creating Equal," the story of his life and his role as a University of California Regents and main Proponent of Prop. 209 -- Proposition 209 of 1996. We'll get to all that. On the first page of "Creating Equal," you write in reference to President Bill Clinton: "Both of us are from the south and from a generation that finally escaped the burdens of Southern history." Do you believe that your generation has escaped the burdens of Southern history today?

**WC:** I do.

**DM:** And why do you say that?

**WC:** Well, I say it, Dan, because, I was born in Leesville, Louisiana, in 1939, and there was a C on my birth certificate. It wasn't for Connerly, it was for "Colored." And being born in 1939 was a burden in Leesville, Louisiana. The burden was accentuated by the fact that my mother and father had divorced two years after my birth, and my mother died four years after my birth. But just being born in the South if you were colored -- although my background was Choctaw and Irish and French Creole, this stuff on my face, wherever it comes from, the melanin -- being born in the South is a burden, was a burden. But the South has changed. I'm told a good friend of mine moved from California to Alabama recently, and I asked her, "Why in the hell would you move to Alabama?" Her husband is White, she's a Black lady. And I said, are you out of your mind? And she recently wrote me and said, you were wrong about Alabama. It's changed. And I said, I'm happy to hear it.

**DM:** Okay. So as you just pointed out, you're born in Jim Crow South Louisiana, 1939. Your father abandoned the family. And your mother died when you were four, and you were raised by your grandmother and an aunt and uncle. But first your grandma had to fight for custody. Tell us about that. What is that about? You came to understand this as I understand later in life.

**WC:** Well, there are two sides of the Connerlys, of Ward Connerly. There's my maternal side and there's my paternal side. My mother is a Sonier. S-O-N-I-E-R or S-O-N-I-E-A depending on whether you're Creole or not. And I try to be charitable when my maternal side explains life...

**DM:** Tell us about the Sonier's and the Connerlys...

**WC:** My grandmother, late grandmother, Mary G. Grace Sonier was of Indian and Irish descent, and she owned a restaurant bar and she her husband, Eli Sonier, was very, very fair of skin...

And mom, I call her mom. She was my grandmother. She had six children, and then four of them, five would look like you. And so my Sonier side was "High Yella." And life was going to be tough if you were a "High Yella". And those who don't understand that term, it means that you were very light skinned, and life was gonna be a little tough because you are gonna get it from black *and* white. Mom was not aristocracy, but she, because of that entrepreneurial spirit, when her husband died, mom, and then my mother died, Mom said, "I don't want the Connerlys raising my grandson." So she went to the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court, mind you, in Louisiana, a colored woman within a two-year time span gets on the court calendar to override the law, which says that the surviving parent gets custody over his kid. Is all this making sense to you? Within a two-year time frame, she gets the Supreme Court to say that she will be the guardian of Wardell Connerly, rather than Roy Connerly, his natural father. And I am blessed that mom went to the court, used her influence and succeeded in getting the court to grant me custodian of my grandmother, Mary G. Sonier.

**DM:** If that hadn't happened, you would be, I mean nobody obviously would know, could possibly know, what would've happened? But what do you think would've happened? Would you have stayed there in Leesville as opposed to moving out here to Sacramento and...

**WC:** Interesting question, I learned later in life that I had two half-brothers.

**DM:** By your father?

**WC:** By my father.

**DM:** By your father, yeah.

**WC:** Both of whom spent 20 years behind the big gate in Louisiana. And I wonder, could I have also spent a lot of time in prison for drugs if my life had gone in a different direction?

**DM:** Okay.

**WC:** So and again, I always try to be as charitable as I can about my father and his life because my Aunt Bert always said, "Even the smallest pancake has two sides." And that causes me to be charitable as I look at things, especially when in-laws, and the other side is painting the story and there's bad blood and there *was* bad blood. You go to the Supreme Court, it's gonna be bad

blood, no doubt about it. And I acknowledge that, but all I know is that I am grateful that Mary G. Sonier was granted custody guardianship by the Supreme Court of Louisiana.

**DM:** So you initially lived with an aunt and uncle who moved, as I understand it, to Bremerton, Washington, in search of work during World War II.

**WC:** Right.

**DM:** But then down to Del Paso Heights, not far from where we're sitting here in the city of Sacramento. So you grew up in Del Paso Heights, right?

**WC:** Yes, from about 1947 until I graduated from Grant Union High School, which was in 1956.

**DM:** Okay. And then you went to what then was called a junior college. Which one?

**WC:** Yes. American River Junior College.

**DM:** All right. And then you went to Sacramento State College.

**WC:** Cal State at Sacramento.

**DM:** There you go.

**WC:** Sac State.

**DM:** All right. Sac State.

**WC:** It's interesting that these institutions change names. American River Junior College becomes American River Community College. Sac State becomes Cal State at Sacramento University.

**DM:** Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Well, so you graduated from college. You got married in 1962.

**DM:** In fact, today we're sitting here on August 15th, 2023. You got married August 17th, 1962. So 61 years ago, to a woman who was white. And that was seven years before *Loving vs. Virginia*. So that marriage would've been illegal in many states in the union.

**WC:** That's right.

**DM:** I wonder how that affected your outlook.

**WC:** Wow. I was, first of all, we were married for 60 years and separated for many years during that time. But a great woman. You know as I've explained to you, Dan, my grandmother, Mary Sonier, her husband was for all intents and purposes, white "High Yella." And most of my aunts, except one, I had four aunts, three, not counting my mother, three aunts and two uncles. They were basically white guys, white people. And you can't understand why I am as passionate about

the issue of these stupid racial classifications unless you look at my own ancestry. We didn't judge each other by color. All I know is it's my Aunt Bert, it's my Uncle Bill. Color race was of no moment. And so I came to life with that C on my birth certificate, resisting it every step of the way. And so I go to college, I don't want to jump ahead of you, but I go to college. I don't join a black fraternity. There was none.

**DM:** Right? There weren't a lot of black kids, I'm sure at Sac State.

**WC:** About 50.

**DM:** 50 at Sac State at that time.

**WC:** Among several thousand. But even if there hadn't been a slug of them, knowing myself, I would not have gone that path. I was going to college to get education, to make something of myself. Uncle James insisted on me and Mom the same, and Aunt Bert, all three of them, the committee of three, wanted me to make something of myself, and I was going to integrate into society. And I became student body president of the whole student body, not the black students, the colored students, the Negroes. And I remember when I went back, I lived in a fraternity house, and I went back to introduce mom -- I call my grandmother mom -- to my fiancé. And she said to me, "Why couldn't you find a nice colored girl" This woman whose husband was a nice colored man said that to me, and I didn't see mom again for about seven or eight months.

**DM:** You were angry with her.

**WC:** I was very angry with her.

**DM:** Probably a little bit hurt too.

**WC:** I was disappointed. Later I said to her, "How could you say that?" She just wanted me to come back and live in her household at 3744 Branch Street after college was over. So, yeah, I broke the... If you wanna look at it that way, Dan, I broke the barrier of race, about marriage, but society was already ahead of the court. Society was already there, and people were integrating, although the law had not been changed, I did know that I was going against the rules somewhat.

**DM:** Well, 1962, California still had restrictions and many deeds that prohibited sale to people of color in homes...

**WC:** Colored people?

**DM:** There were, I mean, I'm sure you got looks when you went out on a date.

**WC:** You got that right.

**DM:** Yeah.

**WC:** God, you got that right. Not in college, of course.

**WC:** There was a whole different world in college and you're the student body president. Then taking your wife and son to dinner on Friday night, which was a ritual, and walking into the restaurant and the cold stares. I'll never forget those. And it didn't bother me as much as personally as this is my wife, she's a strong woman, but you know she's going through some misery and that bothers you.

**WC:** But I remember those stares from people. and they know you've caught them. So then the head goes down and... but I have no regrets about all that. I understand our society was changing but I hope that if anyone sees this, they think about that. The next time you see anyone, individual or a couple doing things to enjoy their lives, pursue their happiness, don't pass judgment. Don't ostracize, don't make life uncomfortable for other people. We've done that in our society. And it's not just interracial marriages. There are all kinds of things that we as human beings do that visit discomfort on other people. And that's not good. I've seen it firsthand and it's ... just think about it. A couple out with their young son having dinner in a restaurant in 1962. One has brown skin, the other pink skin. Why would you do that? Why would you make them uncomfortable?

**DM:** Well, that's a good question. And we'll put a pin in that and come back to it when we talk about your time on the UC Regents. So you got out of college and you got a job. You went to work for what, the state, right?

**WC:** Right out of college I went to work for the redevelopment agency of the city of Sacramento.

**DM:** At some point, before you were 30, I think, you met a young Assemblyman by the name of Pete Wilson.

**WC:** Indeed.

**DM:** From San Diego. Tell me how that came about?

**WC:** I had gone on from the redevelopment agency to be a staff member at the California Department of Housing and Community Development. Among my duties was representing the department at the Legislature. And that meant that I would be the one to go over and testify regarding legislation. And there was this brief period when Republicans controlled the Legislature.

**DM:** Actually, before we get to that. So Byron Rumford in 1963 pushed through legislation that Pat Brown signed that prohibited discrimination in a watered-down bill, but in certain housing. That got repealed by Prop. 14 of, what, 1964, I think it was, which was sponsored by the California Real Estate Association.

**DM:** You must have been well versed in all that fight. Right?

**WC:** Not well versed. But I was very familiar with it.

**DM:** You were familiar with it? Yeah, yeah. What did you think of all that?

**WC:** I was delighted that Rumford and Unruh... Jesse Unruh was very important in all of this as the speaker and a towering figure in California. I went down while I was still a student, contrary to the wishes of the (college) President Dr. West, and testified before one of the committees on open housing.

**DM:** In support of open housing.

**WC:** In support of it, yeah.

**DM:** In what year would that have been, if Rumford's bill was 1963?

**WC:** Well, I was student body president at the time.

**DM:** I see, okay.

**WC:** And...

**WC:** Dr. West didn't want all this student activism going on. And I talked to my professors, Dr. Thompson and Dr. Livingston, and I asked, what do you think I should do? I was a reader for both of them. And they said, what does your "knower" tell you? That was Dr. Thompson. What does your knower tell you Mr. Connerly? And I said, What do you mean my, "knower"? He said, if I ask you something and you're not sure about the answer, but you say, "I just know" -- that's your knower. And I said, my knower says I should testify. 'There, you got the answer. I'm glad you figured it out.' And so I did go down and testify.

**DM:** Before a legislative hearing on the Rumford Act.

**WC:** Right, right.

**DM:** Had you ever been the subject of housing discrimination?

**WC:** Not in college.

**DM:** Not in college.

**WC:** But I lived in River Park, which is right across from the college, in a house with my fraternity brothers. And no, but I didn't feel subjected to housing discrimination then. But I sure did in 1962. When my wife and I married and we were out looking for apartments, and a couple of times, God, I got there late because the house, the apartment had been filled, but it wasn't filled when we started looking. But just in a matter of hours, it's filled. Interesting.

**WC:** So, but I didn't experience it as much in college then, but your experience as a student in 1958, '59, '60, and your experience as a man who's just married a white person in 1962, those are

entirely different. Being a student among a bunch of frat boys, the only one of color, just those students, people would say it just those crazy students. And being a man with a wife of a different color in 1962, that's different. People react differently. It's okay to have your roommates who are of a different color. It's not okay to be married to a woman of a different color.

**DM:** Okay. Interesting. So anyway, so tell us about Pete Wilson. Tell what, how did you come to meet Assemblyman Pete Wilson?

**WC:** As I would go down and testify at the Legislature, Pete Wilson was wanting to be chairman of the housing committee. And Bob Monagan, who was the speaker in that brief period where the Republicans controlled the Legislature, Pete Wilson was made the chairman of this new housing committee, and he wanted a consultant. And Bob Monagan's chief of staff, knew of me and said, you might want to talk to this kid, Wardell Connerly. And I was introduced to Pete. He asked me to come on board as the chief consultant of the committee. I met him. I had some misgivings about it because I wasn't sure whether the Republicans ... I was not a Republican.

**DM:** You were a Democrat and then, and you were a Democrat at that point?

**WC:** No, at that point I had become an independent.

**DM:** I See.

**WC:** But I had previously been a Democrat for about, I think, a year. I think I changed my registration while I was still in college. I went to one meeting of the college Democrats and decided this is not for me. And I changed my registration. And then when I got out of college, I was an independent. And then I met Pete. I accepted the chief consultant with misgivings. Not for, not because I disagreed or about anything, but I wasn't convinced that Republicans were going to retain control of the Assembly and therefore I'd be out on my ear, which is what happened.

**DM:** Yeah.

**WC:** Pretty much.

**DM:** But you did work on some bills that...

**WC:** A lot of bills.

**DM:** That became law under Assemblyman Wilson, right?

**WC:** Indeed, indeed.

**DM:** Any anything stands out?

**WC:** Well, the factory-built housing bill, it was, it was the trademark, the landmark legislation of that moment. We look around right now at housing, you look at this house and you think it was

built stick by stick. No, it wasn't. A lot of the houses' prefab parts are brought in from here and there on a truck glued together in some cases. But prior to our committee dealing with this, there had to be separate laws, separate regulations about stick-built versus factory built housing. And we were approached, we, meaning the committee, were approached by the Realtors and the home builders who saw what was happening and wanted to change the laws to facilitate more efficient production of houses in relation to the marketplace. And so we, I drafted a law relating to factory built housing so that one code would apply rather than different codes based on the components of the housing.

**DM:** So the, so the goal was to reduce housing costs, increase efficiency.

**WC:** Increase efficiency. And hopefully reduce housing costs. But that was secondary to just getting it, give us one set of standards and not have to comply with different standards and regulations in order to get the house built.

**DM:** Okay. So you were on that committee for two years, and that's where you met Assemblyman Wilson. You met another assemblyman at that time, Willie Brown, who was also on that committee and wanted to be chair of that committee.

**WC:** Yes.

**DM:** But of course, the Republicans had the votes then, not the Democrats. So what was, well, so how'd that go?

**WC:** It did not go well.

**DM:** With Willie Brown.

**WC:** With Willie Brown. A man who was moving very quickly in the political process. I think Willie saw me as a race traitor. I don't think he really did, but that was, if you know Speaker Brown as I now call him, he plays hardball and so he wanted to be chairman of this new housing committee. And Pete Wilson stood in his way, and he knew, I think that the day would come when Republicans would not control the Legislature. And he is a wily politician who was looking down the road. And that was why I was a little bit uncertain about going to work for the committee, because I had some misgivings about how long I would have that job, but it did not go well between Speaker Brown and yours truly.

**DM:** Yeah. No. So, do you remember any of the words that you and Assemblyman Brown had at the time that was a long time ago?

**WC:** We didn't exchange many words, but I knew that I wasn't one of his favorite people.

**DM:** I see.

**WC:** Mr. Brown and Mr. Burton.



**DM:** John Burton.

**WC:** (Brown and) John Burton were both very close friends. And if you were not a friend of Willie's, you were not a friend of John's. Mr. Burton became a towering figure in Democratic politics in California, and so was Mr. Brown. But my years were somewhat contentious because of their relationship, our relationship with them.

**DM:** Was there anything in particular with John Burton?

**WC:** No. Only that if Willie didn't like me, then John Burton wasn't going to like me.

[laughter]

**DM:** So, so the Republicans lost control of the assembly, after two years, I think it was, Pete Wilson doesn't want to be in the minority party. And so he goes down to San Diego, runs for mayor, wins, serves time there, and you go off and you left government service right. And you go off and become an entrepreneur.

**WC:** Well, Pete was ... he felt that his path would be enhanced if he were the mayor of San Diego. And so he went to San Diego and ran for Mayor because the convention was going to be held there. And that would visit a lot of attention on the mayor, on the city of San Diego.

**DM:** The National Convention?

**WC:** National...

**DM:** So this would've been the 1972 Convention?

**WC:** Right.

**DM:** Okay. So the 1972 convention, he's mayor. And basks in all that glory. And then, but you went off and did other things. Tell me about, tell me...

**WC:** Well, Pete asked me to go to San Diego.

**DM:** Yeah.

**WC:** And they had a department of community development or something, but I didn't want to leave Sacramento. Unlike Bob White, who was chief of staff to Pete, he was attached to Pete...

**DM:** Yeah.

**WC:** I really wanted to remain in the housing area and not to become a political hanger on, so I stayed in Sacramento, went back to the Department of Housing and Community Development as a chief deputy of the department. This was the Reagan Administration and stayed there for two

years. And then I started thinking about going into business for myself, which I did, formed Connerly and Associates. I had met a lot of people while drafting legislation, and they needed wise counsel. And so I was able to get some of those trade associations to come to Connerly and Associates for their housing consultation. The rest is history.

**DM:** Well, so were you a lobbyist at this time?

**WC:** No.

**DM:** No. You were a consultant?

**WC:** Yeah.

**DM:** Yeah. Okay. So Pete Wilson wins the U.S. Senate seat in 1990. He runs for governor against Dianne Feinstein and wins. You were a significant supporter of Wilson's run for governor, a contributor. And then he wins, and he offers you a job. Tell us about that.

**WC:** Well, Pete and I have different memories. He said to me, "I want you in my administration." And I said to him, "I can't afford to go into your administration, but if there's anything I can do to help you, let me know. And I will." Because during all of this time, although Pete had gone to San Diego and then gone to Washington, D.C., his feet... his footprint was all over my career, I'd get calls from Pete, 'Well, you may want to take a look at this or take a look at that, because there's something there that might be of interest to you.'

**DM:** Like, for example, what do you...

**WC:** Well, let's say a bill is introduced in Congress, and it may have some implications for me, my career, he was always looking out for me. He was always looking out for me, and I knew it. And he's a very loyal guy, and he deserves loyalty. But then it's like, it's like a big brother that wants to know that little brother is doing all right. And with Pete, you had this understanding that if he finds out about something, he wants to make sure that his staff, former staff, people that he is ushering through life, that they're gonna be all right. And that's one of the reasons why I think so much of the guy.

**DM:** Well, he wanted you to be Secretary of Business Transportation and Housing. Didn't he? Wasn't that an offer?

**WC:** I don't recall it as a specific offer. But I understood that if I wanted that, that would've been given to me.

**DM:** Okay.

**WC:** You do this dance when you're a governor and you're a member of the team. It's sort of over a lunch or something. What do you think about this. How would you like that? There's no offer, but you are being approached about it. And so you do that little dance. If I'd wanted to be on the cabinet, I certainly wasn't going to be a secretary of social Services or something,

whatever it is. But I wasn't interested in that. It would've amounted to shutting down my business.

**DM:** Okay. And then at some point the discussion turns to UC Regents.

**WC:** No, it does not.

**DM:** Tell us. So this is where your memory and his memory diverge a bit, but that's for another day. But tell us your recollection of how it came to be that you became a University of California Regents.

**WC:** My recollection is that I said to Pete, I can't afford to leave my business, but I'll do anything I can to help you. And so that help meant raising money. It meant being his eyes and ears on the outside, being the chairman of his finance committee, being the chairman of the Governor's Foundation, which paid the rent on the house that the governor rented. California doesn't have a governor's mansion.

**DM:** Well, it does, but governors don't live in it, with the exception of Jerry Brown. Yeah.

**WC:** Nobody'd wanna live in it.

**DM:** Yeah.

**WC:** And so we rented a house in the Wilhaggin area for the governor to stay in. Somebody's gotta pay the rent and the foundation pays the rent. And so I was on the outside of the administration doing everything I could to help the governor, but not taking a salaried position, (which) would've meant shutting my business down. I don't ever recall discussing the Board of Regents with the governor. I went to a community college. I went to state college. I knew nothing about the University of California. It just was outside my frame of reference. I got a call one day, I was driving to San Francisco, got a call from Julie Justice. Julie was the governor's appointment secretary. And she said, Ward, the governor wants to appoint you to the Board of Regents. I said, what's that? And she said, the board is responsible for all of the campuses. And I said, well, let me think about it. The next day, Julie called me and read the press release. I said, "Julie I haven't said I wanted to do that," and she said, "Ward, the governor wants you to do it." I said, all right. Now you need to understand Dan that the governor was elected in '92.

**DM:** '90.

**WC:** '90. And there was a big problem with workers compensation as he came in. Huge problem. And he wanted to deal with that because the word on the street was that California was losing jobs and that employers were going to be leaving California. And so he appointed Peter Ueberroth to chair that, Nathan Shapell to be on that Council on California Competitiveness. And I was appointed to it as well.

**DM:** Well, this was a terrible recession. This was the post-Cold War, the crash of the defense industry in California.

**WC:** That's right.

**DM:** It's a big recession.

**WC:** It's a big recession.

**DM:** Really, it was the '90s you walked into...

**WC:** And so I was appointed there as well. And I just left my business for about a year and served as the chair of the task force on regulations, because I had some familiarity with regulations. Nate Shapell was a housing guy. Peter Ueberroth was a business guy. And so I literally left my business for about a year. When you have a company named Connerly and Associates and you're Connerly, you're expected to be the billable guy that brings in some dollars with your billable hours. I was gone for about a year and I had no desire to go on another position. But I think that I had served with some distinction on that committee, and Julie said, 'Ward, the governor wants you to do that.' And so I did it. I did not know that some of the Democrats were hounding the governor about making more appointments of people based on diversity, which was becoming a big thing in government politics of California. I didn't know that.

**WC:** And that's another issue that involves a state senator. But I said, okay, I'll do it. I had never discussed with the governor my serving on the Board of Regents. I just knew nothing about the Board of Regents. That wouldn't have stopped me from doing it, if I... as history proves out. But I knew nothing about it.