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Madison School Board Interviews

Johnny Winston, Jr. (February, 2004)

JIM ZELLMER: I'm with Johnny Winston, Jr., today. We'll have a few questions on his School Board candidacy. The first one, Johnny, if you could describe your background.

JOHNNY WINSTON, JR.: Sure, absolutely. Currently, I'm a firefighter for the City of Madison. That's what I do for full-time employment. Before I became a firefighter, I was actually a director of Vera Court Neighborhood Center, which is on Madison's north side. And I was the director there from about 1994 to '96. And during that time, and then actually a few years before that, Vera Court was one of Madison's most challenged neighborhoods at the time. And through the efforts of the Neighborhood Center and Neighborhood Association, community policing, Dane County Human Services, and the School District, we were able to turn that neighborhood around.

But after, before Vera Court, I've been in a multitude of Youth Centers Programs and Social Service Programs. I worked for the Madison Metropolitan School District in a variety of different capacities. I was a parent-community liaison. I've also been a consultant for the School District. I referee basketball. Let's see, I also worked for Dane County Human Services as a Social Service Aide. I worked for Dane County Shelter Home. Anyway, if I keep on going, you will run out of tape right now. But needless to say, I have worked with a lot of children, youth, and families here in the city of Madison.

JIM ZELLMER: Okay. Now how do you feel that background supports your aspirations for the School Board? What do you think you bring to the table in terms of your background?

JOHNNY WINSTON, JR.: Well, I think just being involved in a lot of different settings, social-centered settings, I think it gives me the ability to listen to the community. Because this is the community's School District, it's not my School District, it's not Art Rainwater, or anyone else's, this is the community's School District. And I believe that I'm the kind of person who would want to provide the type of leadership that the School District needs in order to propel itself in the future. But before we do that, we have to listen to the needs of the community and then be able to act on that.

JIM ZELLMER: Indeed. So why are you running, you know, what motivated you to put yourself up to this, you know, and both the good and the bad of being in the political arena?

JOHNNY WINSTON, JR.: Personal development, number one. I think I've been developing myself with this role since I graduated from high school, believe it or not. I was in a rap group, you know, I was in a rap group in the early '80s, early '90s, and we did a lot of educational type rap music, in terms of not being prejudiced, not taking drugs, we did shows all over School Districts, in school, city, Madison School District, as well as other School Districts throughout Dane County.

And I know people might say, well, rap music, why don't, you know, what that does is that you're able to talk to different audiences, young people, as well as adults, as well as parents. And, again, I gave a little bit of my background before, in terms of working with children, youth, and families in a lot of different agencies, but the big issue was to be able to talk to children, to be able to touch young people's lives in a positive way. Because that's what this School District is all about, being able to have people be able to influence young people in a positive way so that they can be important members of society. Because you never know, one of these young people one day may become a School Board member.

JIM ZELLMER: Exactly, exactly right. So when you decided to run for the School Board, what did you have to do? Did you have to get people to sign a petition or how did you do it?

JOHNNY WINSTON, JR.: You know, Jim, if I had a guide for, you know, just take it back a little bit again. Again, like I said, I was in a lot of different youth service programs, including being a member of the Madison Metropolitan School District. If had a dime for every time someone said, Johnny Winston, you need to get a bachelor's degree, you need to get a degree, I'd be a rich man, very rich man.

And after a while, you start hearing things like that and it's really hard to work in positions and trying to support a family, I have two children, and be able to also propel your own personal growth as well. I was very fortunate enough to be able to become a firefighter for the City of Madison. And when I became a firefighter, I was able to go back to school.

JIM ZELLMER: Okay.

JOHNNY WINSTON, JR.: And so since becoming a firefighter eight years ago, I have received an associate's degree in fire science, a bachelor's degree in public administration. In doing that, you start to get even kind of hungry for knowledge, and study, and to learn, and so I continued to go to school, and last May received a certificate in public management, sorry, a certificate in, I'm a certified public manager from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. And also I received a master's degree from Cardinal Stritch University. So I feel like I have an educational background, as well as the practical knowledge that I feel that I'd be a very good candidate for the School District.

JIM ZELLMER: Excellent, yeah, excellent. So if elected, Johnny, what do you hope to accomplish during your first term?

JOHNNY WINSTON, JR.: Well, I think the first thing, again, I'll go back to learning and learning is very important. Now I've never been on the School District before, on the School Board before, and I think it's important that, first of all, I learn. I learn the system, learn the people that are a part of the School Board. I'm familiar with many of the members that are on the School Board currently and I talk to them. I call them on the phone. I see them at different events and we talk about the different issues and things like that. Again, I think it's really important to build bridges because the magic number on the Madison School Board is four.

JIM ZELLMER: Right.

JOHNNY WINSTON, JR.: Okay, there's seven of us. You need four votes to pass. I think we can do better than that. And when we have, I think everyone that's on the School Board is trying to work in the best interest of young people. But at the same time, we have to take into account all the factors that are involved and all the stakeholders that are involved in our community.

And when you do that, we have seven people that are actually making decisions, I think four to three doesn't just cut it. We need six to one, seven to zero, that would be the best situation. That way we can at least go forward and people have a good feeling about the direction that this School District is heading in.

JIM ZELLMER: Okay. How about your educational and financial priorities for the District, you know, obviously, the District, the financial aspect of the District continues to be in the news, but what would you say your educational and financial priorities would be for your term, if elected?

JOHNNY WINSTON, JR.: Well, it's very, well, we'll start with the financial piece. It's very clear to many people that are involved that the School District is not going to get any more money than what it has right now. Many businesses, many state agencies have had to downsize or reduce their budget situations. The School District will probably have to be the same.

And when I say probably, it's very, it's very hard to sit here on this side of the camera and then see your daughter on the other side of the camera and say, you know, we cannot, our priorities, in terms of society, do not add up to giving you everything that you possibly deserve. What I mean by that is that these are people that are the most defenseless people on the planet.

We spend \$1 billion to put probes up on Mars, but \$9.3 million for the Madison Metropolitan School District is not that much of a priority. At the same time, this is what we're in and we'll have to figure out a way to get out of this, but, so we will probably have to do more prioritizing when it comes to the budget. There are some things that we are not going to be able to afford, so as part of the School Board, we must be fundraisers as well.

It's not good enough to say, well, sorry, Carrie, we cannot do everything for you. No, we absolutely have to do everything for you. We have to find additional streams of revenue. We have to be able to find other ways that we can fund programs and projects that are important to this community, but the community will tell us what's the

important priorities. It won't be me. It won't be Johnny Winston, Jr. It will be the community.

JIM ZELLMER: Okay. What about educational priorities for the District? You obviously have a lot of experience in the schools, and now with your children obviously, so what do you feel your priorities would be for education, the core education curriculum in the next term?

JOHNNY WINSTON, JR.: Okay. Well, one thing I say all the time is that I'm not a teacher for the Madison Metropolitan School District, but what I am is an educator. And what I have to do is I have to listen to the teachers in our School District. I also have to listen to the community. And once we do that and they kind of say, look, this is the direction that we want to go, in terms of the School District, in terms of the community, then as a School Board member, that's where that gets the most of the budget per se. Classroom is important. I'm not saying that other programs are not as important, but we have to go to where our core values are, and my own personal beliefs would probably make that be the classroom activities.

At the same time, it's not good enough to sit here and say that the other programs are not good, that the other programs are not warranted. As a School Board member, I have to go out there and find again those additional, stream, those additional resources. It might not necessarily mean money, it might mean resources. I had a really good conversation with Chancellor Wiley from the University and he tells me with the, in no uncertain terms, that it's difficult for him to do his job if we don't do our job. And what I mean by that, and the same thing with Mayor Dave Cieslewicz, he cannot bring good businesses to this community if we don't have a good school system for people to want to come and have their children participate in.

JIM ZELLMER: Exactly.

JOHNNY WINSTON, JR.: We are all tied in this together. And, again, when we start talking about building bridges, that's what I'm doing right now, talking to the key players, key stakeholders in this community, and asking them, what can we do to best solidify a good educational process for all our young people? And that means all of them, not just a few, not just some of them, all of them. That's my goal.

JIM ZELLMER: Excellent. Johnny, what are your thoughts on the role of technology in the classroom from elementary school to high school?

JOHNNY WINSTON, JR.: Well, I think the role of technology is very important. We are in a technological age right now and the fact that this interview can be played on the Internet, I think, is very important. You know, it's very funny, when I went to school and graduated in 1986, I don't think that 1986 is that far ago, although some of the children will probably disagree, but in 1986, the type of computers that we were working with, and my family had a computer at home, you know, I think the Apple II.

JIM ZELLMER: Sure.

JOHNNY WINSTON, JR.: Or Commodore 64 or something like that, and we had a little . . .

JIM ZELLMER: Sure . . .

JOHNNY WINSTON, JR.: Yeah, little blips and bloopers on the computer screen. And, you know, this technology is going far beyond our wildest imagination and will continue to do so. Again, I think the role of technology is very important. It's very important in our schools. Unfortunately, I believe a lot of our students, when we start talking about the educational gap, this is where the gap, it doesn't begin here, but this is part of the issues in terms of the gap, many students are, do have computers at home, not just one computer, but two, and maybe even three. But some students that are in our School District do not have that type of advantage in their home.

That way, but one of the things that we need to do is be able to have this technology that is accessible in maybe other areas, like a community center that a young person that can go to. They can go to a computer lab at Allied Drive at a Boys and Girls Club, Vera Court Neighborhood Center and be able to access the computers there to be able to learn and to enhance their education that they're receiving in the schools. But, again, this goes back to our School District.

JIM ZELLMER: Right.

JOHNNY WINSTON, JR.: When we bring in technology and, you know, when we bring in technology, sometimes it's almost old by the time we get it in and get it started. The technology has already changed. So we have to be able to change with that. At the same time, when you have an older building and it's not able to be up to code . . .

JIM ZELLMER: Exactly.

JOHNNY WINSTON, JR.: . . . well, that has additional cost to it. So, but again, it's not good enough to sit here and say we don't have the money. No, we have to find the money. We have to find the resources because these children cannot be shortchanged and it's not good enough to just make excuses about it. We've got to go out and do something about it and I think we can.

JIM ZELLMER: Okay. Johnny, today's public schools are, in many ways, the front lines of a great deal of our society's challenges from illiteracy to childcare and basic nutrition. Can you comment on where you see this going and what you see the roles of the schools and the School Board should be beyond the core educational services?

JOHNNY WINSTON, JR.: Well, that's a very good question. It's a very long question.

JIM ZELLMER: . . .

JOHNNY WINSTON, JR.: And there's not a short answer to it, actually. Schools are an important place. I mean, I can start by saying that, schools are an important place. And as I said before, in terms of my background, I have been involved with the Madison Metropolitan School District in a variety of different capacities and I've been involved in a lot of different social service capacities as well. School is an important place for our young people because, for some of our students, school is the safest place that they will be, Monday through Friday.

Some of our students do not want to leave school for those reasons, in terms of having a safe place for them to be, a place that they're cared for, a place where they can learn, a place where they're getting a hot meal, a place where they can even lay their head to rest for a moment. So I believe, in terms of our schools, we're serving more than just kind of the core curriculum that some people may be looking at. We do more than reading, writing, and arithmetic. We are serving a variety of students in a variety of different challenges.

I'll give you an example. I was at Glendale Elementary School, which perhaps may be one of the places where a new extra window may end up. I went, I'm going to see, I've been, out of the 46 schools, I've been to, I believe, 43. Another three will be done very soon. But I'll just talk about particularly Glendale Elementary School. I went downstairs and saw the classroom where the children, a large contingent, a lot of students from, Spanish-speaking students, talked with the teacher, talked with the ESL instructor as well.

So I'm talking, and right about now, all I can say is hola and smile. Okay, I'm learning, I'm trying to learn Spanish right now, as we talked about earlier. After leaving that classroom, and I felt really good about being in that classroom, and I can say bameto(?), which is firefighter in Spanish, so kids like that.

After leaving that classroom, I walked into another classroom and there were students in that classroom that needed sign language. So, again, this is two classrooms, back to back, and there wasn't just one student, there were several students that needed sign language, walked into the hallway a little bit further, this is in a span of 100 feet, this is, I'm not kidding, saw another classroom where students have physical challenges, cognitive disabilities. Whew, it was tough, you know.

And then not to mention children that have challenges in terms of their learning styles. Again, this is in a span of 100 feet. And to see that and to say, okay, we have teachers in our District that have to work with these young people on a regular basis, on an everyday basis, and we're going to feed them, we're going to give them a safe place to be, we're going to teach them, we are going to be involved in social services, we're going to be involved in some of their home issues, in terms of, let's say, some of these students become homeless, then what, you know.

JIM ZELLMER: Right.

JOHNNY WINSTON, JR.: So schools are playing a major role in this society and, again, I don't think our challenges are, I mean, we're just getting the tip of the iceberg. When we start talking about Nuestro Mundo, I mean, that's for Spanish-speaking kids.

JIM ZELLMER: Right, right.

JOHNNY WINSTON, JR.: Well, there are other students. There are Hmong students, Southeast Asian students who need services. Where's their charter school? There are African-American children who are having some great difficulties, not all of them, some though.

JIM ZELLMER: Sure.

JOHNNY WINSTON, JR.: Where's their charter school? We just got done talking about students that need sign language. Where's their charter school? You know, we have students all over the globe. I went to another school. I went to Shorewood Hills Elementary School.

JIM ZELLMER: Oh, sure.

JOHNNY WINSTON, JR.: A beautiful, beautiful school. And when I say beautiful school, I mean, there are children from all over the globe in this one space that have to learn from one another, that have to, that are playing with one another, and interacting with one another. You want to solve racism, school is where you do it. You want to start building bridges, school is where you do it.

I don't know if I answered your question in a direct manner, except that I know that the challenges of the schools are great and that school is an important place in our society, it builds bridges, it builds our community, and, again, it's not good enough to just say, you know, we can only give you X amount of money, we can only give you X amount of resources. This is where the money should be going, this is where the resources should be going, to our young people because, again, they are going to be the leaders of this society one day.

JIM ZELLMER: Absolutely. Johnny, what career advice, you've had a very extensive background obviously, would you give to today's students, both from elementary through high school, what would you tell them?

JOHNNY WINSTON, JR.: Well, one thing, I'll just talk about my own experience first. I believe that young people should do the things that they like to do. When I say like to do, you know, everyone is not going to the NBA. Because when I, you know, I do some guest-speaking at different schools and different community programs, and I ask young people, well, what do you want to be when you grow up?

JIM ZELLMER: Right.

JOHNNY WINSTON, JR.: Well, I'm a firefighter right now, but then I'm also running for the School Board. And who else, who know what else I'll be doing five years from now, you know, so I'm still growing up. So, you know, I'm not black, I'm green, and when I say it means I'm growing. You know, young people are the same way. When you're green, you're growing. Bo Ryan said that, and since his Badgers are winning, I'm going to say that, you know, he's right, you know, he's right, absolutely.

But, you know, again, when we start talking about career advice, you know, I will first start with, young people should do the things that they like to do. So if it is a sporting even, you know, young people should try to follow their dreams and follow their goals. And if it's basketball, well, it doesn't mean that you have to be a basketball player, you could be the basketball coach, you could be involved with a technology, somebody who videos the games. You could also be someone who is an athletic trainer. So, again, you're involved in your sport, you just don't necessarily have to play the sport, okay. You can be a sports agent.

I mean, there's all kinds of things, and all these things kind of tie in together, but I would start with the things that they like to do. If a young person is into music, again, you don't necessarily have to be the singing star, but you could be the producer, you could be the manager, and then, you know, all these other things, in terms of business practices, in terms of educational practices and backgrounds, all these things come into play. So I will start with the things that young people like to do.

JIM ZELLMER: Okay, great. How about political advice, Johnny, you know, again, this is your, you jump in the lake here.

JOHNNY WINSTON, JR.: Yeah.

JIM ZELLMER: What political advice would you give to young people . . .

JOHNNY WINSTON, JR.: Well, again, you know, I'm still green and I'm growing with this. I'm running this election not to be a politician, although that's what the job requires is to be a politician. I'm running this to be a leader. And there's a young person out there right now that's eating Apple Jacks and, well, hopefully, they're eating something, you know, and we talked about that earlier. But, you know, they may see me on a Monday, and on television, and say, you know what, that's somebody that I'd like to be like, you know. I know that's how I was.

JIM ZELLMER: Sure.

JOHNNY WINSTON, JR.: My best friend in high school, one of my best friends is Kevin Salter, and he lives in Chicago now, and his father was the president of the Madison School Board, and Mr. Salter was the coolest guy I had ever met before. You know, my dad was cool too, but, you know, when you see other people and you see them on TV, and, you know, he always had a suit and tie on, and he's just a sharp guy.

And I would watch him on Mondays and, you know, see, you know, kind of, you know, what he was saying, and how he was saying, and how he was presenting himself. And, you know, he was one of those people that was always telling me, you know, Johnny, you need to go back to school, and get a degree, and things like that. And, you know, finally, I was able to do that. And I thanked him for that as well, staying after me, you know, to do that.

And in terms of political aspirations, I think one of the things that I'm going to, and, again, this is will be on videos, on the Internet, so I may have to go back and watch this, but I need to keep in mind what my core values are and not compromise them to, it

needs to be in the best interest of young people, okay. And I know, again, I have to take it, we have to take everything into account, our stakeholders, our taxpayers, senior citizens. We have to take into account, everyone has to factor in on this.

But I have to keep going back to the core values. What is important to young people? Again, I'm running for the School Board, so it's another political office. Somebody else may think of something else, but what is important to the people that I'm serving, listening to them all the time. You know, again, and this isn't the Johnny Winston, Jr., Show, this is the city, this is the community, all having to work together for the best interest of young people.

JIM ZELLMER: Right.

JOHNNY WINSTON, JR.: It is absolutely imperative that we listen to one another. It's imperative that we build these bridges so that people can utilize these services, and that's young people, you know, that's where it's at right there.

JIM ZELLMER: Exactly.

JOHNNY WINSTON, JR.: And I've been developing myself for this position for a very, very long time, Jim, very long time, again, since graduating from high school. And I've been working with young people, have been working for the best interest of children, youth, and families for a very long time and developing this skill. And, you know, I just think that 50 years ago, *Brown v. The Board of Education*, and that's the integrated school that lost, you know, regardless of what happens in this, regardless of what happens, if I don't get enough votes or whatever, you know, I won, you know. I mean, because 50 years ago, somebody that looked like me couldn't go to school, you know.

JIM ZELLMER: Right, exactly, exactly.

JOHNNY WINSTON, JR.: And so here I am running for School Board.

JIM ZELLMER: That's why you're in the game

JOHNNY WINSTON, JR.: Yeah, yeah, yeah, and I think that's a wonderful thing and I just have to keep going back to that and saying, you know, this is a good thing. I think, you know, young people deserve leadership that looks out after their best interest and takes into account everyone else, and at the same time, has been able to work with other people.

JIM ZELLMER: Right, yeah.

JOHNNY WINSTON, JR.: Because I don't think you can do this alone. You can't do this alone. You just, you can't. You have to have good friends and I've been very fortunate enough to have good friends. I've been fortunate to have good mentors and people that have given me advice, and I think I told you before, I have a notebook full of advice.

JIM ZELLMER: Right, right.

JOHNNY WINSTON, JR.: Which, you know, again, it's a wonderful thing as well, but it's a part of the building bridges. And, you know, here you are, you're doing this, and I really appreciate you doing this for the community. Because you're not just doing this for me, you're not doing it for yourself, your family and the community at large will see this video, and, again, going back to those core values, core beliefs.

And if you, now if we do this three years from now, Jim, and I look totally different, and I sound totally different, you know, I think I will have a problem with that before anyone else will. But I think growth is good. I think, but, again, going back to those core beliefs, I think that's just, it's absolutely imperative that someone who's going into politics take that into account.

JIM ZELLMER: Thank you very much, Johnny.

JOHNNY WINSTON, JR.: No, thank you.

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