McNair's promise cut short

"The environment [at McNair's high school] was still very segregated," Williams explained. "You got your strength from your community. There was certainly a tremendous segregation of resources and how we acted in school."

McNair graduated as valedictorian of his high school class and starred in basketball, baseball, and football. But his two loves were science and the saxophone.

"He was interested in science ever since he was a little boy," said physics professor Michael S. Feld, '53, McNair's graduate thesis advisor. Professor Ali Jawan, who also worked with McNair on his MIT thesis project, said McNair would sometimes play his saxophone in the laboratory, patiently waiting for the results of experiments in the late hours of night. "He was an absolute virtuoso on his saxophone," Jawan recalled.

McNair entered MIT in 1975 as a presidential scholar and was awarded a scholarship from the North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University. After trying a music major at MIT, he was able to develop his talents in the natural sciences.

McNair learned karate during his undergraduate years and eventually became a fourth-degree black belt. "His karate required a lot of precision - [and discipline]," Williams said. "It was similar in his studies.

In the spring of his junior year, McNair came to MIT as part of an exchange program designed to bring promising black science students to the Institute where he stayed at MIT for the summer, taking courses and doing more research.

McNair graduated cum laude from North Carolina A&T in 1971 with a degree in physics. Educated by his mother, an A&T professor, McNair applied and was accepted to MIT's graduate physics program on a Foundation fellowship.

McNair had "boundless energy," said his MIT physics professor, Paul Javan, who also developed a close relationship with McNair. "He was one of the best people in the lab," Javan recalls. "He did some of the earliest experiments in the field," said Javan. "He would fly all over the United States," Turner continued. "He'd stop in San Francisco for lunch, and then go back to Houston at night."