A Personal Account of Efforts to End School Segregation in a Southern School System*

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Abstract

The Brown Decision, whose 50th Anniversary was observed in 2004, was a landmark case that ended the doctrine of separate but equal. During the observation of the anniversary, many pundits reflected on the political, social, and historical significance of Brown. This article takes a different approach in reflecting on the importance of Brown. A historical context is provided that reveals the conditions that existed in the south prior to and after the Brown Decision. The author tells the poignant and moving story of his first hand experience in desegregating a previously all-white junior high school twelve years after the Brown Decision. Conduct by students, teachers, and administrators had a direct affect on his experience as one of five black children to end school desegregation in a small Mississippi town.

NOTE: This module has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and sanctioned by the National Council of the Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a scholarly contribution to the knowledge base in educational administration.

Introduction

In 2004, our nation recently reflected on the 50th anniversary of the 1954 United States Supreme Court decision in Brown versus Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas. During that observation, many focused on the legal ramifications of that historic decision. Others noted the progress, or lack thereof, in ending racially segregated public education in our nation's school systems. Still, others used the occasion as an opportunity to either vilify or glorify the role of public education in our society.

This article takes a slightly different approach in reflecting on the Brown Decision and its aftermath. Instead of focusing exclusively on the historical, legal and political dimensions of the Decision, this article, more poignantly, provides a first person account of some of the extraordinary effects of the Brown Decision on the life of a small Mississippi community and on a young African American schoolboy who played a

*Version 1.1: Nov 17, 2006 11:40 am +0000
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pivotal role in ending school segregation in that community. The author recounts his own personal story of life in the public schools in the Jim Crow south of the 1960s, including some of the personal, social and academic effects of attending racially segregated public schools, his role in desegregating a junior high school, the effects on the community after the black high school was displaced in the name of desegregation, and how and why the predominantly white junior high school that he desegregated in 1966 eventually became a predominantly black school as did the entire school system.

This article also illustrates the challenges faced by contemporary school leaders. As public schools return to a neo-segregated status (Civil Rights Project, 2002), the lessons of how society responded to de juris school segregation during the Jim Crow era might provide some clues about how to respond to neo-segregation. While state-sanctioned segregation is not the primary culprit in neo-segregation, the effects are both similar and disparate. For example, single-race schools tend to limit cultural contact, and thus, limit cultural learnings. Such was the case in the segregated south during the Jim Crow era. In addition, neo-segregation is not the direct result of state action, i.e. Jim Crow laws. Instead, it is due more to white flight that results in dynamic and ever-changing single-race housing and residential configurations. The root causes of Jim Crow era school segregation and neo-segregation might be different but the effects are similar – limited opportunities by marginalized citizens to experience the American Dream, as passionately outlined by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in his I Have Dream Speech in 1963.

Background on the Brown Decision

The Brown Decision was handed down by the United States Supreme Court May 17, 1954. Essentially, the Chief Justice Earl Warren–led Court overturned the 1896 Plessy versus Ferguson Decision, in which the Supreme Court ruled that as long as public facilities, in that case, railroad cars in Louisiana, were equal they could legally operate as racially segregated and separate facilities, thus establishing the concept of separate but equal (No. 210, Supreme Court of The United States, 163 U.S. 537). In the Brown case, the Court reversed the 58 year-old Plessy decision and ruled that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal" and a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution (No. 1, Supreme Court of The United States, 347 U.S. 483). In its second Brown decision, May 31, 1955, the Supreme Court further ordered Kansas and the other states that maintained de jure segregation practices, or legally sanctioned segregation, to end their separate but equal policies and practices "with all deliberate speed" (No. 1, Supreme Court of The United States, 349 U.S. 294).

Following the Brown decision, many areas of the South simply chose to ignore the Supreme Court's ruling, as though it never happened. At the same time, however, southern states were creating strong resistance to the massive changes that would accompany the Decision and uncompromisingly pursued a course that included extraordinary attempts to delay or derail efforts to comply with the Court's ruling (Deever, 1992). For many school districts in the South, "with all deliberate speed" came to mean "slow speed", at best, or "no speed", at worst.

The mantra of the time for southern segregationists became States' Rights, as school administrators and elected officials justified their opposition to desegregation by asserting that the states and not the federal government had the right to determine if segregation would prevail or not. Such an assertion was evidenced by public demonstrations of defiance by three southern governors in the late 1950s and early 1960s: In 1957, Arkansas' Governor Orval Faubus attempted to use National Guard troops to prevent black students from enrolling at Little Rock's Central High School. In 1962, Mississippi's Governor Ross Barnett defied a federal court order to allow James Meredith to enroll at the University of Mississippi, setting off a campus riot that resulted in the death of a French journalist. And in 1963, Alabama's Governor George Wallace attempted to block the enrollment of two black students at the University of Alabama by physically blocking the entrance to the admissions office.

The government of the State of Mississippi took an additional step in its opposition to school desegregation by enacting a law in 1956, House Bill 880, which established the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission. The official language of the law stated that the Commission's purpose was to "perform any and all acts and things necessary and proper to protect the sovereignty of the State of Mississippi, and her sister states, from encroachment thereon by the Federal Government or any branch, department or agency thereof..." (Mississippi Code, 1956).

In practice, the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission, chaired by the State's Governor, spied on thousands of law-abiding citizens, maintained secret dossiers on them, and used bribery and extortion to entice and coerce black citizens to collect and report information about the civil rights movement and its leaders (Cloud, et al, 1998). The Commission remained in existence until 1977, when the governor withheld funding for the agency, with the proviso that Sovereignty Commission records would remain sealed until 2027. Following an order in 1989 by a federal judge to unseal the Commission's records, files and dossiers on 87,000 citizens were finally opened to the public in 1998. Unsealed records show that the government created and maintained a secret document, on which the names of several students appears, including the author's.

In addition, some southern states, including Mississippi, in another remarkable act of defiance, went so far as to repeal their compulsory school attendance laws in 1956 (Andrews, 2002). The clear message in repealing such laws was that school and state officials would rather children not go to school at all than have them go to a racially mixed school. Hattiesburg was no exception.

School Segregation in Hattiesburg

Hattiesburg, Mississippi, for 12 years following the Brown decision, maintained a dual and unequal school system, one for white students and one for black students. In the tradition of establishing and preserving racially segregated schools, Hattiesburg maintained six all black schools and eight all white schools. Also, consistent with the principles of Jim Crowism, Hattiesburg 's school administrators and members of the school board not only maintained racially separate schools, additionally, through their policies and practices, appeared to consciously and intentionally attempt to ensure that the quality of the white schools was superior to that of black schools. It was common practice, for example, for black students to be issued used, worn out, and outdated textbooks that were handed down from white students after they had received brand new textbooks. The same was true for science laboratory equipment, desks, chairs, tables, band instruments, football equipment, and office equipment. Separate? Yes. Equal? No.

Despite such neglect, the black community of Hattiesburg was extremely proud of its schools. In fact, black schools were not just brick and mortar that occupied 16th Section land. Instead, they, along with the Church, formed the spiritual, intellectual and cultural epicenter of the community, producing numerous outstanding leaders and professionals in the fields of law, medicine, ministry, music, education, and athletics. If the goals of racial segregation were to uphold the notion of white racial superiority, to discourage black achievement and success, and to deflate the individual and communal spirit, then it failed miserably in Hattiesburg. If its goal, however, was to relegate black students and black teachers to second-class citizenship, with all of the concomitant and well-chronicled disadvantages, challenges, and struggles, then it succeeded.

Within the context of a robust local civil rights movement in Hattiesburg in the 1960s, coupled with unprecedented federal intervention from the United States Justice Department, which gained additional impetus in its legal attacks on Jim Crow with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, efforts to end racial segregation in Hattiesburg became more potent in the mid 1960s. Buoyed by a series of successes in using direct action, including marches, boycotts, and sit-ins, the local black community became more emboldened in its struggle to rid Hattiesburg of all symbolic and substantive vestiges of racial segregation, including separate drinking fountains, separate seating on public buses, and separate public restrooms. Eventually, those symbols disappeared from sight, if not from the memories, of black citizens in Hattiesburg. However, the ubiquitous and most enduring symbols of the separate but unequal doctrine, segregated public schools, remained in place for years after other symbols disappeared. Owing to strong resistance from local and state officials, Ku Klux Klan activities, and the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission, the demise of school segregation was slow to come about.

School Desegregation in Hattiesburg

Nevertheless, despite such resistance, the demise of school segregation in Hattiesburg began in earnest in the Fall of 1966, the first year for the implementation of the school desegregation plan known as Freedom of Choice, which ostensibly, was created to achieve racial balance in the schools on a voluntary basis. Five young teenage children – James Hicks (age 13), Aljorie Clark (age 13), Velisa Clark (age 14), Benton Dwight (age 13), and _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ (age 12) enrolled at W.I. Thames Junior High School and became the first black students in the history of the Hattiesburg Separate School System (the official name of the school district, which denoted the racial separateness of the district) to attend a racially desegregated public school. For

James, Benton, and me, the decision to enroll at Thames Junior High School and to become trailblazers for school desegregation came about in similar ways and for similar reasons. One day in May 1966 near the end of our 7th grade year at Lillie Burney Junior High, each junior high student, except 9th graders, was given a Freedom of Choice Form on which we were to indicate our school preference for the next year. The choices were W.H. Jones Junior High, Lillie Burney Junior High, W. I. Thames Junior High, and Hawkins Junior High. The latter two were predominantly white schools. James, Benton, and I talked with each other the same day about which school we wanted to attend for the eighth grade. We were close friends and wanted to stay together in the same school. Moreover, we were actively involved in the "movement" through our on-going participation in marches, boycotts, Freedom School, voter registration drives, leading freedom songs at mass meetings, and passing out leaflets advertising mass meetings. In fact, I was the "wayward jailbird" among the group, having been arrested a couple of years earlier while peaceably picketing the Forrest County Courthouse in protest of the County's refusal to allow black people to become registered voters. The official reason for the arrest was that I violated a city ordinance that forbade anyone under the age of 18 from being on a picket line.

It seemed only natural, then, that the next step for the three of us would be to step up to the plate and confront one of the remaining strongholds of racial segregation in Hattiesburg. We just hoped that our parents would give their consent. I took the form home to my mother and told her that I wanted to attend W.I. Thames next year and that James and Benton were also planning to do the same. Being the civil rights warrior that she was, my mother immediately signed the form as did Benton's and James' parents. Mr. and Mrs. Clark, who were teachers in the Hattiesburg Separate School System, pretty much decided for their daughters, Aljorie and Velisa, that they would attend W.I. Thames Junior High. The Clarks were especially courageous in enrolling their children in W. I. Thames Junior High because school district administrators highly discouraged and even threatened with termination any school employee who participated in the civil rights movement. Stepping out on the shaky limb of school desegregation and enrolling their daughters in an all-white school could have easily caused Mr. and Mrs. Clark to be fired from their jobs. However, being the owners of a successful funeral home business, Mr. and Mrs. Clark were able to take risks that most of their colleagues could not. Plus, I do not think that Mr. Clark was easily intimidated by anyone. I was a student in his 7th grade English class at Lillie Burney Junior High School; and he is the one who did the intimidating.

School started at W. I. Thames the day after Labor Day. As with any first day of school, running around inside of my head and heart were intense feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, and excitement. However, the intensity of these present feelings was markedly different from that of previous school openings, when my focus was on my new school clothes, my new notebook, my new bicycle, or my new teachers. This first day of school was much different. On this morning of September 6, 1966, I was about to be a part of history in Hattiesburg.

Somewhere deep inside of me I knew that it was not going to be easy. I understood and accepted the fact that I would encounter hostilities and resentment from white students and maybe even from white teachers. But I was determined that regardless of how they treated me, I was going to persist. And not only was I going to persist, I was going to excel; and if they tried to run me off, I would show them!

During the two years I spent at W. I. Thames Junior High School, many tried to run me off. I was routinely subjected to racially motivated acts of hostility – some unbearable and others more or less so. Being called a nigger was an everyday occurrence. In fact, one white classmate, in trying to explain to one of his friends the difference in my skin color and Benton's, once referred to my light skin color as _ _ _ _ _ _ _-nigger black, and to Benton's dark skin as Benton-nigger black.

However, two memorable events occurred which, in many ways, more perfectly captured the cold-hearted resistance to school desegregation by those who were unwilling to accept basic principles of human decency and racial equality. One occurred while I was walking alone to class on what started out as a rather routine day. Being alone and isolated was the norm for the five black students (In today's vernacular, the Fab Five.), except for those rare instances when some of us would have lunch or a class together. As I was strolling in my typically slow fashion to my class, one of my bigoted white classmates decided he would very crudely and publicly show his contempt for my presence in his school. With other white students looking on, he just

hauled off and spat on me as I passed him in the corridor. This big nasty glob of spit landed square on the upper part of my pant leg, even though he was aiming much higher. Although I knew to expect almost any type of brutal treatment from hostile white students, being spat on was totally unexpected and downright disgusting. The spitter and the other white students paused and, while continuing to taunt, jeer and laugh, watched to see what my reaction would be. I was feeling extremely humiliated and vulnerable. Tears began to well up in my eyes. Butterflies began to swarm around inside of me. Fear and dread visited me as I became painfully aware that no one was there to intervene. No one was there to tell them to stop. No one to tell them spitting on someone was wrong. Instead, I was alone and outnumbered, unsure as to what I should do next. Follow my heart or my head. Stay and fight back, as my heart was urging me to do, or walk away, as the rational thoughts from my head urged me to do. Because of the humiliation I was experiencing I just wanted to get out of there and find some safe haven, which I realized was non-existent. I did not consider going to the principal's office because I new that would do no good.

Although I felt hurt, embarrassed and angry, my reaction was not at all what the unfeeling perpetrators of this ugliness expected at all. Instead of hitting or spitting, I proceeded to the nearest restroom, took a paper towel from the holder, and wiped what remained of the spit from my pant leg and went on to my next class. However, with every step I took toward that class and away from those jerks, I kept reminding myself to be strong, to not show any signs of intimidation, and for God's sake, do not give in to the temptation to go back and knock at least one of them upside the head.

Even with the justified anger and the desire to escape the humiliation of the moment, the choice not to retaliate with violence was actually an easy one. All five black students at Thames Junior High and our parents believed very strongly that it was important for us to prove to everyone, especially the bigots in Hattiesburg, that black and white kids could indeed attend school together. If any of the five of us had responded to violence and insults with our own insults and acts of violence, the bigots would have been proven right in their irrational and wrongheaded thinking that blacks and whites cannot co-exist and that black and white students should not attend school together. We knew that if hostile whites wanted the five of us removed from Thames Junior High, provoking violent reactions from us would be the perfect strategy. If each of us could be coaxed into reacting violently to their racial insults and attacks, chances were good that one-by-one we would have been expelled and transferred to all- black Lillie Burney Junior High School. Nevertheless, we were able to resist the temptation to strike back when faced with words and actions spurred on by racial hatred from some of our white classmates. To our credit, we all chose to adhere to the principles of non-violence, which unequivocally and unconditionally requires one to avoid the temptation to respond to violence with violence. My own ability to remain faithful to the principles of non-violence came (and continues today) in daily reminders of a sobering message by Dr. King that ifwe continue to follow the retaliatory notion of an eye for an eye; tooth for a tooth, we will end up being a blind, toothless society.

I often ask black children and black college students today what they would have done had it been they who were spat on. Almost always, the unanimous answers are, "Hit him" or "Spit back", or worse. Regrettably, I find it increasingly difficult to persuade young people to accept the principle of non-violence and to choose more constructive means of resolving conflict, whether the conflict is inter-racial or intra-racial. My sense of regret is not only for the emotional and physical hurt caused by wanton violence, but also for the total disregard of the teachings of Dr. King, especially by those who claim to honor his memory.

The second event at Thames Junior High that typified white resistance to school desegregation was my having to listen to the cheers and celebration from my classmates, on Friday April 5, 1968, the day after Dr. King was assassinated. I was the only black student in a class of some thirty white students. Except for the spitting incident, until that moment, I had never felt as tormented, as alone, and as friendless. I sat stoically in my seat, facing the teacher's empty desk, and intentionally avoided eye contact with my callous classmates. The teacher was out of the room at the time, which undoubtedly added to their sense of freedom to behave so insensitively. I was immersed in my sorrow and did not want to be bothered. I tried to block out the sickening sounds of celebration coming from all directions in the classroom, piercing my brain and my heart. I did not want to speak to anybody, and I did not want anybody to speak to me. All I could think was, how ironic – a great man, a man of peace who faithfully followed the teachings of Christ – love your enemies, pray for those who misuse you, and when a man strikes you on one cheek, turn

and give him the other to strike – had been killed in such a violent and cowardly fashion. What is America coming to? Why do we slay our leaders?, I thought. These thoughts led me to recall the night of March 17, 1968, when Dr. King came to Hattiesburg to speak at the Mt. Zion Baptist Church and how happy I was that I had the opportunity to see him and to listen to his magnificent oratory. Who would have known that nearly a month later he would be killed? The contrast in that feeling of happiness and the present feelings of overwhelming sadness, pain, and emptiness brought tears to my eyes, tears that I tried so desperately, albeit, unsuccessfully to conceal from my classmates.

The solemnity of my thoughts about Dr. King and my ability to block out the festive sounds of my classmates were appreciably diminished when I heard a classmate from the other side of the room yelled to one his friends, "Hey, Wick. Nice aim. Good shot. How did you get from Memphis so quickly?" Then another one chimed in, "Hey, Chuck. The King is dead. Yeah!" Those and other equally hurtful remarks were repeated over and over for what seemed like hours. The remarks were intentionally directed toward me and at a decibel level that ensured that I heard each ugly word. I felt helpless to stop them. They were thirty, and I was only one. As with the spitting incident, I was alone and realized that no one was there to remind them that it was wrong to do what they were doing. My thoughts were: How can anybody be so joyful at a time like this? What kind of sick minds could find reasons to celebrate the death of another human being, let alone the death of Dr. King? To pass off their insensitive behavior as typical junior high callousness and rudeness was dreadfully wrong. No! Their remarks went deeper and further than childish, pubescent immaturity. Their words were full of hatred that had been handed down to them from generations past. They were parroting and mirroring the same cold calculating racist remarks and feelings they learned from their parents! Bottom line, they were glad that Dr. King was dead, and I was sad about it. The gulf between our worldviews, cultures and races seemed even greater than ever. One tragic event, and two distinct responses – gladness and sadness. After what seemed like hours of an unending torrent of insulting and hurtful remarks, Mrs. Wisler, finally walked into the classroom. They did seem to get noticeably quieter when she walked in, but the snickering and laugher continued anyway. Apparently she had heard some of the remarks as she walked in, and in a tone of voice that evidenced incongruence with her words, told them to hold down the noise and to not be so insensitive. Her words did not provide the solace that I was so desperately hoping for, but they did bring a halt to the blatant-ness of the insults. I did not believe for one moment that her words would make one bit of difference in how she or any of the other whites in that classroom or in the entire school actually felt about Dr. King. I felt that they hated him and were relieved that he was dead.

The two years I had spent at W. I. Thames were very upsetting emotionally, although academically I was pleased with my efforts, if not always with the outcome. Following the end of the school year in 1968, I gave serious consideration to never again attending another white school. In order to avoid the unrelenting racist assaults and insults like the ones I had experienced daily at W.I Thames, I thought about immersing myself in total blackness by opting to attend all black Rowan High School. In a span of two short years, I had been spat on, routinely threatened, called "nigger", laughed at, insulted, ignored, shunned, and regarded by some white teachers as undeserving of any grade higher than a C, all because of my race. I knew that if I attended Rowan, I would not encounter such racist treatment from black classmates and black teachers. Furthermore, by enrolling at Rowan High School, I would be able to hang out with my neighborhood friends and would have had the distinct pleasure of learning from those wonderful black high school teachers who approached teaching with the same loving attitude shown by those great black women who taught me in elementary school. However, I also knew that if I had selected the path of least resistance and enrolled at Rowan, I would have betrayed the cause of ridding Hattiesburg of one of the few remaining vestiges of racial segregation. Although serious, such thoughts and feelings about attending Rowan turned out to be only temporary responses to the emotional drain of having to deal with racists and racism on a daily basis while attending Thames Junior High School. It was not easy, intellectually or emotionally, to choose to return to the lion's den and to quite likely subject myself to additional racially motivated assaults and insults from bigoted classmates and teachers. Ultimately, however, I did make the decision to attend predominantly white Blair High School; and I made it completely independent of any discussion and consultation with parents or friends, none of whom had any idea of my ambivalence about where to attend high school.

One of the teachers at Blair High School who had a profound affect on me was the band director, Mr. Tommy O'Neal, a short, well-tanned white man with an aggressively receding hairline. Mr. O'Neal maintained, and insisted that the entire band do likewise, extremely high standards of musical excellence. In addition to motivating me to achieve musical excellence, he reinforced in me the importance of self-discipline and taking care of one's details. One of his more interesting and dreaded techniques to help instill self-discipline took place during summer band camp when he would lineup the entire band on the goal line. While holding our instruments, he told us that we were to stand at attention for 20 minutes; and for each flinch, body twitch, or sound emitted other than normal breathing, another minute would be added to the original 20. Ten minutes into the routine, people started dropping like flies from locking their knees, cutting off blood circulation to the brain, despite the warning not to lock our knees. Swarms of giant and hungry mosquitoes feasted on every exposed part of our bodies. Camp counselors whispered jokes in our ears daring us to laugh. Yet, we were to stand completely motionless and speechless like palace guards. We stood on that goal line for over 25 minutes, even though we surely deserved to stand much longer. At the time, such an exercise seemed cruel, stupid and pointless, and undoubtedly still seems so to some. But the lessons learned from that, as well as from other character-building techniques, ultimately became another source of strength for me, helped me to develop more self-control and self-discipline, and improved my ability to cope with racial insults and attacks.

Over the years, I developed an even deeper appreciation for Mr. O'Neal, not just for his efforts to help instill self-control and self-discipline, but also because he was not afraid to stand up for his beliefs. The only men I had ever personally known with the courage to take risks to preserve their principles were black men like Mr. James Nix, Mr. J.C. Fairley and Reverend J.C. Killingsworth, leaders of the local civil rights movement. Mr. O'Neal's uncommon courage was best exampled when the band traveled to Jackson to compete in the annual state band contest, which consisted of inspection, a marching routine, playing a concert tune and sight-reading. To Mr. O'Neal's chagrin, state band contest officials required all bands to compete in both the marching and concert portions of the contest during the Spring, which was traditionally concert band season. He unequivocally clung to his conviction that the marching competition should take place during the fall when bands performed their halftime marching routines, and that concert competition should take place during concert season when bands typically worked on concert tunes. So, in order to drive home his point to state officials, he did something that had never ever been done in the history of state band contests and has never been attempted since. He lined up the band in a single line on the goal line and ordered it to march from one end of the field to the other, with only the steady cadence of a lone drummer's beat. No music and no precision drills. Just the steady beat of a snare drum. I loved it. A southern white man challenging the system.

Socially, life at Blair High School was not very exciting. In fact, for the handful of black students, a social life was downright non-existent. Adding to the challenge of trying to have any type of social life, particularly dating, black students knew that if we did not conform to conventional Jim Crow rules on inter-racial dating, serious trouble would follow. The unwritten Jim Crow prohibition against inter-racial dating was strictly enforced, although sometimes unevenly. During my sophomore year, a black male student at Blair High School developed a mutual infatuation with a white female student, and for a couple of weeks, the two of them passed love notes to one another. One day, someone in the administration intercepted one of the notes and reacted in a typical one-sided, Jim Crow fashion. The black student was summoned to the principal's office and was immediately transferred to all-black Rowan High School. The reaction by the administration was calculated and sent a clear message to all students – interracial dating would not be permitted at Blair High School. Although there were not written rules in the Student Code of Conduct against such dating relationships, the prevailing Jim Crow prohibition and accompanying forms of punishment were sufficient to squelch any budding inter-racial romances and to serve as a deterrence to others before they even got to the budding stage. The administration's reaction to a black male student writing a love note to a white female student illustrated perfectly southern white fear of miscegenation and how such fear was at the root of white resistance in the south to racial desegregation.

On another occasion, during my junior year at Blair High School, I was sent to the assistant principal's office under, what seemed to me, very secretive and mysterious circumstances. After turning in my test paper,

my chemistry teacher, Mrs. Hatten, handed me a folded slip of paper and told me to take it immediately to Assistant Principal Snell's office. Was I running an errand for her, or was I in trouble for some unknown transgression?, I thought to my self. For the love of God, I could not fathom what I could have possibly done so wrong to warrant being sent to Mr. Snell's office. It has to be. I'm just running an errand for her, I decided. If one were not running as errand for a teacher, going to Mr. Snell's office meant that one had really messed up. I knew with absolute certainty that I had not cheated on the exam, and that I had not created any sort of disruption in class. So, I proceeded to Mr. Snell's office and waited in the outer office with other apparent wayward students for my turn to see the Grim Reaper. His secretary read the note and from the frown that quickly engulfed her moon-shaped face, I sadly concluded that I was not running an errand at all. She handed the note back to me and slowly shook her silver bee-bonnet-hair-topped head from side to side, tightened her lips, and let out a loud sigh and a sarcastic, hmmm! I just held the slip of paper tightly between my fingers, too nervous and afraid to sneak a peek at it, for fear that it would confirm my suspicion that, indeed, I was in such trouble. The butterflies and sweaty palms that were controlling my entire body were only a prelude to what I would feel in the next few moments. After sitting in the infamous death chamber, stewing in my rapidly increasing fear and constantly drying my wet palms on my pant leg, counting minutes on the office wall clock, which seemed like hours rather than minutes, my turn finally came to meet Blair High School's judge, jury, and executioner. In that distinctive and inimitable booming gruff voice, Mr. Snell snapped, "_ _ _ _ _ _, what you doing here?" Still too confused, afraid, and nervous to speak, I simply handed him the folded up piece of paper that Mrs. Hatten had given to me. As he read it, he shook his head from side to side just as his secretary had already done, made the same hmmm sound that she had made, and his huge, square, bespectacled face began to take on that same look of disgust that she had already shown me. He then looked me over from head to toe, started sucking on his teeth, and said, "Boy, get in here to my office, on the double!" Obligingly, I got up from my seat, faced his office door, put one foot in front the other one and quickly found myself moving in the direction of his office, then slowing a bit before entering to ponder once again, what in the world could I have done to find myself doing this dead-man-walking routine? With that look of disgust still plastered across his face, he closed the door with such a bang that I froze momentarily, waiting for the stain glass in his door to shatter into a million pieces. But it didn't, no doubt because he slammed his door so much, he must have had the type of glass that did not shatter. "Boy, sit your behind down!" I moved over to an armless metal chair directly across from his desk and lowered my bottom until it made contact with the cold metal. This must be what Judgment Day will be like, I imagined. Sitting there before the Almighty, accounting for all of my transgressions, waiting to learn if I would be going to heaven or hell. By then, my hands were wringing wet, as if all of the pores in the palm of both hands had suddenly opened like flood gates and unleashed an out-of-control torrent of pinned up water. They were clammy and sticky from the build up of sweat. Butterflies were flying out of control and adrenaline was gushing like a geyser. Unrelentingly, I kept searching my mental databank trying to discover some clue as to what I had done to find myself in this unfortunate predicament. I could come up with nothing.

Then Mr. Snell finally ended the suspense. "Boy, that shirt you wearing! Can't allow you to wear something like that to school."

"Sir, you mean this dashiki?", I asked with some new found vigor, now that I realized what this was all about.

"That's what you call it?", he replied.

"Yes, sir. It's a traditional African shirt. For me, it represents pride in my heritage."

"Well, that's more reason we can't have you wearing something like that. This ain't Africa, and it ain't no hardship that you gotta wear it. So, you gonna have to take it off. Let you wear it, every colored in the school will want to wear one of 'em. Before you know it, we gonna have a race war. And I can't allow that. See, Harris, when you come to this school you got to abide by our way of doing thangs. Over at Rowan, they'll let you wear your, what you call it, dashiki, cause Rowan is all colored. But here at Blair, this is a white school, and you can't do such a thang, cause it aint't gonna do nothing but cause trouble. And now, anytime you want to transfer to Rowan so you can wear your dashiki and be with your own kind, I'll be more than happy to arrange for you to transfer."

So, this was all about a dashiki. Sending me to Mr. Snell's office and going through all of the rigmarole, worrying about whether I had done something wrong, was all about my wearing a dashiki. Noting that I was wearing a black turtleneck shirt underneath the dashiki, Mr. Snell told me to remove the dashiki, take it to my locker, and warned me to never wear it to school again. Although nothing in the student handbook specifically prohibited the wearing of a dashiki, Mr. Snell and Mrs. Hatten objected to it, fearing that I would incite a riot or an uprising. Considering what had happened to the black student, who was transferred to another school because of his infatuation with a white girl, I suppose I felt slightly lucky to have gotten off with only having to remove my favorite dashiki. A simple and clean article of clothing that I wore to express pride in my heritage had become, in the minds of Mrs. Hatten and Mr. Snell, a dangerous symbol of subversion and radical Black Nationalism that was going to cause a race war at Blair High School. Such were the times at white schools during desegregation in Hattiesburg!

Dealing with insensitive and mean-spirited classmates was a constant struggle that every black student at Blair High School faced. However, dealing with insensitive and mean-spirited teachers was a different struggle and for me, far more frustrating. As if the dashiki incident was not frustrating enough, I soon experienced that same frustration again with another insensitive and bigoted teacher. I sat in my history class one morning trying to maintain some interest in what the teacher was trying to teach. Actually he was not teaching at all. He was reading to the class word-for-word from the textbook as he always did; and his reading skills belied his status as a certified school teacher with a college degree. As was his daily custom, he taught/read while leaning back in his seat with his legs resting on top of his desk, dressed in his purple and gold coach's wind suit. This particular morning, he was reading a passage about the harshness and cruelty of slavery. Suddenly and uncharacteristically, he stopped reading in mid-sentence and slammed the book face down on the desk. His face turned as red as a beet as he plunged head first into a slobbering diatribe, challenging the author's assertion that slavery was a hardship on slaves and an example of the South's economic exploitation of black people. He took strong exception to both claims and stated very matter-of-factly that slavery was not a hardship on slaves. After all, he insisted, slavery actually rescued the African slaves from a savage land and provided them a much better home, better food, and most importantly, introduced them to Christianity. He continued, saying that slaves did not have the intellectual skills to do anything else but to work on the plantation. Everyone, he said, had their place in southern society and that slaves were best suited for work on a plantation. He went on to say that the plantation owner needed to make money and that slaves needed a decent place to live, so as far as he was concerned, it was a perfect arrangement. I could not believe what I was hearing. This racist pig!, I thought to myself. I began to feel something inside of me that went beyond anger. It went to that place in all of us where we just want to explode and totally go off on someone. What I was feeling was rage, quickly approaching the point of explosion. Accompanying the rage was an equal amount of anxiety, as I could feel the butterflies starting to fly uncontrollably all around my insides. My face was probably turning red as I shifted in my seat and shook my head from side to side. Not wanting to let him get away with such stupidity, I just blurted out, "You are wrong and slavery was wrong!" I remember looking behind me for some support from the only other black student in class. To my disappointment and surprise, however, she just dropped her head. Either she did not know what to say or was too afraid. I felt like I had thrown myself into the lion's den and was there all by myself with no one to back me up or to assist me. That all too-familiar and painful feeling that comes from being the target of a racist insult re-visited me and hit me right square in the gut. Once again, I was out on a limb all by myself fighting against another example of ignorance and bigotry. Just before the bell rang, he told me that I did not know what I was talking about and that I had better not ever contradict him again. I closed my book, gathered my belongings, and left the class feeling abandoned by my lone black classmate, ignored or sneered at by my white classmates, and insulted by my white teacher. But I was determined that this was not going to deter me from speaking my mind, no matter how alone or insulted I felt.

By the summer of 1970, it was evident that the city of Hattiesburg's efforts to achieve racial balance in the public schools had met with profound failure. Freedom of Choice had not worked, primarily because white students chose to attend white schools and black students chose to attend black schools. So, beginning in the 1970-1971 academic year, school officials, under pressure from the United States Justice Department and acting upon the recommendations of a biracial committee composed of local black and white citizens,

implemented a new school desegregation plan. Under this new plan, a line was drawn on a map, and students on one side of the line were required to attend Rowan High School and those on the other had to attend Blair High School. Since I lived only a few blocks from Rowan High, I attended that school. Ironically, black students living near Blair High School enrolled there, while white students living near Rowan High School did not enroll there. Instead, many "moved" to locations near Blair High and others chose to attend Beeson Academy, a private all-white school.

My senior year at Rowan was a period of tremendous transition for me. After being in mostly white schools for four years, I was now immersed in a mostly black school. The biggest transition for me was social. I had to completely learn for the first time, how to date. Developmentally, dating in high school is a normal part of the maturation process. However, because of my years spent at white schools living under the sanctions of Jim Crowism, which explicitly forbade inter-racial dating, I was woefully unprepared to deal with dating at a black school. Despite some rough starts, by the end of the school year, I had found my stride and was able to ask a girl out for a date without breaking out in a cold sweat.

As time drew near for graduation, I began to have mixed feelings about leaving Rowan. I was looking forward to graduating, but not necessarily to leaving Rowan. I was pleased that I had had a number of unforgettable coming of age experiences and was thoroughly enjoying my senior year at L.J. Rowan High School. Despite the rough start at the beginning of the 1970 school term, I managed to settle into a comfortable routine by the time spring 1971 rolled around. I was making all As in my classes; and I really enjoyed being in the band. Most refreshingly, I did not have to deal with racism while at school. After spending 4 years of putting up with racial insults from white classmates and low expectations from white teachers at Thames Junior High and Blair High, being among my black friends and black teachers at Rowan High was like a cool summer breeze in the midst of an oppressive heat wave.

At the end of the 1970-1971 academic year, Hattiesburg's school desegregation efforts took yet another turn. Freedom of Choice had failed to achieve racial balance; and now the line-in-the-map approach had also failed. So, the school administration's next approach was dramatic and extremely controversial, and would forever impact public education in Hattiesburg and all segments of the community that were served by it. The new desegregation plan called for the elimination of mostly black Rowan as a high school and to maintain mostly white Blair High School as the one and only high school in the City of Hattiesburg. In terms of achieving racial balance, the plan worked. Black and white students were forced to attend the same high school, whether they or their parents liked it or not. For sure, the option of attending school in a neighboring town or the local private school remained an option. But in the process of achieving that elusive balance in racial composition, an institution (Rowan) that had served the black community for generations was changed forever. Not only had the institution been relegated to a 10th grade Center, but more importantly, the spirit that sustained the institution and that had been sustained by it, suffered an irreparable breach.

Whether intentional or not, the new approach to school desegregation dismantled what was once the foundation of academic and social life in Hattiesburg's black community. More tragically than the demise of Rowan as a high school, was the treatment of black teachers, administrators, and coaches who were displaced and relegated to positions with reduced authority, visibility, and credibility.

Mr. N.R. Burger, a beloved and respected educator with decades of outstanding service to black children of Hattiesburg, was relegated to principal of the Rowan Tenth Grade Center. Mr. James Winters, the outstanding band director at Rowan, became the assistant band director at Blair High School. Perhaps most callous and regrettable of all of the reassignments was the banishment of Mr. Ed Steele to the school system's athletic director's office as Coordinator of Recreations. Coach Steele, or Head Man as he was affectionately called, was one of the winningest high school coaches, black or white, in the state of Mississippi. He had the distinction of winning four Negro Big Eight State Championships in his seven-year tenure as head coach at Rowan. Not only were his football teams excellent, they were exciting and entertaining as well. The home side of the stadium was always filled to capacity. It was very common, also, to see the visitors' side of the stadium completely filled with white fans who appreciated good football. Many of his players went on to successful college careers and several played in the National Football League. Most graduates, however, went on to successful careers as fathers, husbands, and professionals. Not only was he a role model and mentor for athletes, but for those of us who were not athletes he was held him in high esteem as well. What, other

than race, could account for the fact that Coach Steele was not given the opportunity to become the head football coach at Hattiesburg High? The decision certainly was not based on ability and record. Had it been, Coach Steele would have easily become the first black head coach at Hattiesburg High School.

Compounding the relegation in position and title of these three outstanding educators was their loss of visibility, authority, and power, which negatively impacted those of us under their guidance and influence. True, they could still influence young black men and women and guide their moral and academic development, but that ability was noticeably diminished because of the intentional or unintentional efforts by school system administrators to diminish the stature of these important and influential men. Prior to the reassignments, these men were able to uniquely touch our lives and to create in each of us the determination to succeed, not only academically, but in life as well. They kept untold numbers of us, especially boys, from engaging in self-destructive behaviors and helped to make sure we attended school, made good grades, and respected our teachers. Today such influence is conspicuous by its absence. I often wonder if we would have the problems today of gangs, drugs, and hopelessness among our black youth, if the Ed Steeles, Jim Winters, and N.R. Burgers of our nation had been allowed to maintain their ability to influence young people. This period in the history of public education in the south marked the beginning of what I call the spiraling down of African American youth. In the era of all black schools, black educators had a unique ability to chastise or correct the behavior of a misbehaving black student in a way that resulted in compliance. Typically, the teacher new the student's parents and maintained a carte blanche permission from the parents to do what was necessary to keep the student in line. Such an arrangement was taken seriously by parents and teachers; and it accounted for the majority of students maintaining proper conduct at school. When school desegregation caused the relegation, termination and dispersal of black educators, white educators, by default – not by choice, stepped in to fill the void. From that point to the present time, young black youth, particularly males, began to push the limits of acceptable behavior. The white educators, lacking the requisite relationship with the parents or the students, were woefully unsuccessful in correcting the behavior of black students. Their response to black student misbehavior was, indifference, overt racist behavior, or feeling intimidated by the black students. Today, as public school enrollment continues to be dominated by black and Hispanic students and school leadership continues to be dominated by Anglos, the spiraling down continues. That is not to suggest that all white educators respond to black students misbehaving with indifference, racism, or intimidation. What is clear is that a disproportionate of black students are placed in special education and referred to alternative education for conduct issues.

Hattiesburg Public School System in the 21st Century

Today, the Hattiesburg Public School System hardly resembles the school system that existed during my twelve years as one of its students. The school system that was once predominantly white is now predominantly black. The all-white school that I desegregated in 1966, W.I Thames, is now more than 90% African American. The school board selected, for the first time, a black superintendent in 1999; and in 2005 the board hired another black superintendent to lead the school district. The reasons for the changes in racial makeup of both the school system and W.I. Thames are basically two. First, and the most commonly occurring reason across the country, is white flight. White families simply moved to new sub-divisions and suburbs that were markedly different, racially, from the communities they left. Second, new black families moved in to occupy the houses, neighborhoods, and seats in schools that were vacated by fleeing white families. The transformation of the Hattiesburg School System from a predominantly white school district, in the tradition of "separate but equal", to a mostly black district is not unique to Mississippi or to the south. Unquestionably, the name of almost any southern community could be substituted for Hattiesburg and the scenario would be similar.

The focus in Hattiesburg and in other southern communities is no longer on the achievement of racial balance. It is, rightfully, on the achievement of academic excellence. After all, that is what school desegregation efforts were all about and what public education is all about. While public education is not perfect and has a dreadful history in its treatment of African American citizens, it is still the best hope for transforming lives, for turning despair into hope, and for creating strong communities, the result of which is a more robust democracy. In fact, as goes public education, so goes our democracy.

The Fab Five - Where are they now?

Velisa Clark is currently working for the Immigration and Naturalization Service. James Hicks works for a major airline carrier. Benton Dwight is a medical doctor. _ _ _ _ _ _ _ is a college professor. And, sadly, Aljorie Clark was the victim of a homicide in 1992.

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