

Interview

with

JEANNE H. LUCAS

April 15, 2005

by Gerrelyn Patterson

Transcribed by Emily Baran

The Southern Oral History Program
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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Interviewee: Jeanne Lucas

Interviewer: Gerrelyn C. Patterson

Interview date: April 15, 2005

Location: North Carolina legislative building in Raleigh, North Carolina

Length: 1 cassette; approximately 20 minutes

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

JEANNE LUCAS: I graduated from Hillside High School in 1953. I also taught at Hillside High School from 1957 to 1975. I taught French and Spanish at Hillside High School. When I taught French and Spanish at Hillside High School, it was an all-black school. All of the staff was black until one Jewish teacher came there in maybe 1970, when it was integrated, 1970, '71. The first white teacher's name was Doris Gordon. She became one of my dearest friends. In fact, some of her furniture is stored in my garage now.

GERRELYN PATTERSON: Oh, really?

[conversation inaudible]

JL: I want to tell you first about being a student.

GP: Okay.

JL: When I was a student, it was all-black. It was important for us to be number one. All of the teachers wanted us to be number one, and so their commitment to teaching was for us to be number one. Therefore, they believed that their teaching was to inspire us to be top students. Everybody in Durham knew everybody. Therefore, there was not a black student in Durham who didn't know everybody. We knew every community, every student, every neighborhood, most of the families we knew in east Durham, north Durham, west Durham, Walltown, East End, every community. We knew everybody who went to

every church, so there was the community neighborhood. Because of that, the commitment of the teacher, the church, the community, and the home was so connected that you couldn't fail.

GP: So there was a connectedness.

JL: There was a connectedness. There was not the disconnect. There was family. There was home. There was church. There was community. In fact, our pastor of our church made sure that we went to high school and that we went to college. So everybody from our church went to college.

GP: Really?

JL: Everybody. Everybody went to Central. Because he came from South Carolina, he felt that by our living in Durham with an NC--North Carolina college, that everybody should get an education. So all of us got a bachelor's.

GP: Wow. That's impressive.

JL: And we were poor. We were all poor, but we knew that we were going to have a college education.

GP: So what I'm hearing you say is that those messages, the expectations of continuing on with your education and how important education was, were messages that were reiterated to you throughout the community.

JL: Even though our parents were maids and dry-cleaning people, worked for the university professors, factory people, they borrowed money from the bank to educate us. I'm sorry that I'm eating (). And they made sure that we worked during the summer to get our education, our tuition money. So all of us got undergraduate degrees. The pastor of our church wanted us to get PhDs, but it's interesting that not a one of us got a PhD degree. The first person to get a PhD degree was his daughter.

GP: Really?

JL: And she was in South Carolina. Her name was Harriet Roland. When he died, I went to speak at his funeral, which was about five or six years ago. I said to the congregation that all of us, twenty or thirty or us, not a one of us got a PhD and Harriet was sitting in the front row, was the first one to get her PhD. Isn't that interesting?

GP: It's very interesting.

JL: So we all got our undergraduate degree and our master's, but she got her PhD. Now we are encouraging others to get their PhDs. So what Hillside High School did for us was to prepare us for life. It didn't just prepare us for high school graduation. It prepared us for life. It did so by the teachers setting examples and being role models for us. Now what happened with the teachers was that it was important for every teacher to know every child and every family. So before school started, they visited every home.

GP: Oh really? They went to the students' homes?

JL: They went to every home. If they had a hundred and fifty kids, they had to visit a hundred and fifty homes.

GP: Wow. Well then you didn't have a choice. Everybody knew everybody. That's nice. That's very nice.

JL: If Jeanne Lucas got out of line, they knew her parents, so all they had to do was pick up the phone and to go and visit them. So we didn't have to misbehave or ().

GP: Was that still the case when you were a teacher there?

JL: It followed through even when I was a teacher. I had to do the same thing. I had to go and visit all my students' homes. Now what happened was that we could not, we just could not allow our children to fail and they did not. What happened was that Billy Hayes, who is now the coach, the athletic director at NCCU, will tell you that I was his teacher

and that if he was going to drop out of school, he couldn't drop out because I wouldn't let them. He couldn't go to prison because I wouldn't let him. He couldn't be a failure because I wouldn't let them. That's not what's happening with our children.

GP: So it sounds like the teachers really had strong connections with the students and really cared.

JL: That's right, absolutely. Another thing you need to know is that every child had some kind of involvement at the school. You didn't believe in a child not being involved in some extracurricular activity. In addition to your academics, you had an extracurricular activity. We had what was called an activity period.

GP: Okay, nobody's told me about this.

JL: An activity period means that in the middle of the school day you belonged to some club.

GP: So it was during the school day.

JL: It was during the school day. You might go to broadcasters club, music club, drama club—

GP: French club, Spanish club.

JL: You belonged to some club. You couldn't go to school and not belong to something. Consequently, if you belonged to something, you had pride in yourself. You couldn't grow up in life without belonging to something. Every year, I felt that I needed to add something to my vitae. One year, I'd be broadcasters, one year, I'd be music club, one year, I'll be debate club. So when you graduated you had something to show.

GP: It was stacked.

JL: That's right.

GP: Okay, well I heard a lot of people talk about Hillside pride.

JL: Even now, my class, the class of '53, they just got together and had a Valentine's dinner.

GP: Good job. That's nice.

JL: Still getting together. I told them I'm so tired of meeting with you all. (laughter)
Fifty-one years they're still getting together.

GP: That's impressive though.

JL: They still get together.

GP: That's more than most colleges do.

JL: That's right.

GP: That's certainly more than my high school.

JL: They'll pick up the phone and call you anytime and say hey, you coming to () for Valentine's dinner? No, I'm not coming together to see you all.

GP: Do you think that there's something special that historically black high schools did, that's now lost?

JL: Yeah.

GP: Can you talk a little bit about that?

JL: Yes. What we've done is we've given away our children. If you will think about it, other cultures don't give away their children. We gave away our children. We thought that integration was integrating and we gave away our children. Integration, we thought, was what it said; you would integrate with other cultures. You can integrate with other cultures but you have to keep a handle on your children. Those children need to know their culture. Our culture is different from another culture. We need to teach that culture. What that culture means is that the African culture is different than the Chinese

culture. It's different from the Japanese. It's different from the Latino. We need to teach our culture and teach our children to be proud of their culture.

When we grew up in our neighborhood, there was nothing like a Miss Jane or a Miss Mable saying I'm going to tell your daddy that you left that porch. I'm going to tell your daddy that he told you to come home and sit and get out your lessons and you're not sitting on that porch and doing your lessons. There's something about our culture that we've lost. Now you can't speak to other people's children, whereas in their day, my father required that you speak to us. My mom died, and a lady took us at 10, but my father required that we respected other people and they could speak to us. Not only could they speak to us, they could beat our-- (laughter) If they didn't beat you good, daddy would send us back over to Miss Jane's. You talk about sparing the rod, and spoiling the child, not in our day. There was no child abuse in our day. There was no child abuse in our day. So I think what happened was we gave away our children. I can't say it any better than that.

GP: Do you think we gained anything?

JL: Yeah, I think we gained in the fact that we got better supplies and resources. We gained better exposure to what we didn't have. We gained a greater knowledge of what was out here that we couldn't have that we needed to have. But we lost in what we gave up, when we gave up our children. I don't want people to think that I'm not for integration, but I do want to get our children back.

GP: So what do you think we can do now to better educate black kids?

JL: I don't want us to go back to saying that we want all our folks to come back to our neighborhoods, and I don't want to say that we need to have all of our churches back,

and I don't want to say that we need to corral, but we probably need to do like the other cultures. You don't see them always with us. At some point, it just needs to be us.

[tape interruption]

GP: Okay, well one last question because I know your time is limited. When people say to me, Gerrelyn, I know that you are talking to people about what it was like to go to Hillside and Hillside's place in the Durham community, what more should I tell them about the legacy or the importance that Hillside has played?

JL: Hillside was a place that protected, educated, nurtured, prepared, groomed, I'm going to use the word "oversaw" the total growth of students from, we started at Hillside from seventh to twelfth grade. That's a long time. That's six years at least, and some were there longer. They not only protected the girls; they educated young men. To this day when I buy records, if you will see my records, I just bought two albums of classical records and I was taught that at Hillside. How many people do you know who listen to classical music? They were taught at Hillside High School because each assembly was started with a classical introduction on the organ.

GP: I didn't know that.

JL: John Gattis started the assembly—

GP: Oh, Mr. Gattis, okay.

JL: With a classical introduction and he taught us that that prelude meant for us to become silent, so we know now that at church, when you heard a prelude, you get quiet. When I hear the prelude, I know to shut my mouth. I know that when an artist gets up off the stool is when I applaud, because Prop. Alston taught us don't start clapping until that person—if you don't know when to clap, wait until they get up off the stool. That's when they'll move and--. (laughter) He taught us well.

GP: It sounds like it.

JL: I can't begin to tell you what Hillside did. They taught us how to eat properly. If you hear my diction, I learned that at Hillside. Now everybody didn't learn at the same level, but it's because they didn't want to learn at the same level. I just learned it. My mama didn't know how to put "it" with "is" but I learned how to speak well at Hillside.

GP: Look at you now and so many others of you.

JL: Hillside was unusual. Give me a pen. The reason—

[tape interruption]

GP: This is an interview with Senator Jeanne Lucas in Raleigh, North Carolina. It is April 15, 2005 and we're in the North Carolina state legislature building. The interviewer is Gerrelyn Patterson. This is part of the Spencer grants project on school desegregation in the South and will be used as part of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The tape number is 41505JL.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Emily Baran. November, 2005.