

**SOHP Series: Listening for a Change
West Charlotte Project**

TAPE LOG - BRIAN TARR

Interviewee: Brian Tarr

Interviewer: Pamela Grundy

Date: 3 May 1999

Location: Mr. Tarr's office, Davidson College, Davidson, N.C.

Tape No.: (cassettes 2 of 2)
(approximately 130 minutes)

Notes: Brian Tarr taught English at West Charlotte from 1976 through 1988, where he was a well-liked and well-respected teacher. He also had two sons who attended the school. At the time of the interview he worked in the development office at Davidson College.

This was a particularly wide-ranging interview, which covered many subjects as well as many events at the school. Tarr spoke thoughtfully about both the rewards and the difficulties of teaching at a desegregated school – he clearly considered it an extremely significant period in his life. As well as discussing his own experiences with West Charlotte, he also offered a number of insights into the varying perspectives on the school held within the wealthier neighborhoods that supplied many of West Charlotte's white students. The conversation also touched on many other issues, including the dilemmas parents faced when choosing schools, the problems he saw with recent curriculum reforms, political battles West Charlotte staff had to fight within the school district, and the relationships he developed with African American colleagues. Overall, the interview had a quiet, almost poignant quality to it – he was clearly looking back at a period of his life that seemed over for him. This was particularly true when he discussed the nationwide drop in support for desegregated education.

I had difficulties with the microphone on this interview, and while Tarr's voice is audible on the tape, it is quite faint. We used portions of it in an audio presentation, but only with difficulty.

TAPE INDEX

[Cassette 1 of 2, Side A]

Grew up in Baltimore, graduated from Davidson in 1972 with a degree in English. Spent two years working in California, then returned to Charlotte where his wife began teaching. He got certified, and was hired at West Charlotte to teach English and coach soccer.

He got to West Charlotte through practice teaching; his wife knew a good teacher there and suggested that he work with her.

He hadn't spent time at a public school before, didn't know what it was like. Didn't know much about the school, how important it was in the community, etc. He was focused on his classes.

Question about how he learned about the meaning of the school. Talks about a series of "crises or events." Says it wasn't the school most white students wanted to be assigned to. Describes junior high where two-thirds of the kids went on to Myers Park, and the "unlucky third" who were assigned to West Charlotte. Apparently was some ridicule of West Charlotte, which he heard about through students. So came to understand that "West Charlotte was a cause as well as just a high school."

Learned also about fighting for respect. Then began to get glimpses of alumni support at athletic events and through PTA. Over years began to gain sense of the "African American historical perspective." The majority of his advanced students were white, so it was easier to understand white perspectives.

"One's identity is thrust upon one," not freely chosen.

"I think the white students who came from the sort of middle class and upper middle class neighborhoods to West Charlotte had developed sort of a tradition among themselves of going to West Charlotte and being proud of it. I think that their older brothers and sisters who came to West Charlotte in the early days of integration started to create that tradition. And that sense that West Charlotte was first of all just a lot of fun because of the diversity, second that it had a lot of bright students – there were a lot of academic success. And also the athletic successes – which were mainly attributable to the black athletes – were also something that was fun, and that they could take pride in. So by the time that I was there, in 1976-77, starting, these younger brothers and sisters came to West Charlotte with a sense that they were at a really great place, and a unique place. Just about all the students graduated with a real sense of pride in West Charlotte."

Importance of West Charlotte on lots of different levels. Saw himself and his students as competing with Myers Park and East Mecklenburg. Started humanities program with English and history integrated because Myers Park had a course like that. Myers Park teachers tried to recruit junior high students for the curriculum; students assigned to West Charlotte didn't have anyone recruiting them.

Myers Park was a big rival in soccer. He was particularly proud of building up the West Charlotte team to where it could compete with the stronger programs in the county. White students looked to Myers Park and East Mecklenburg. Black students competed particularly with Harding, West Mecklenburg. Other schools, such as Myers Park, were also athletic rivals because of black athletes.

Says were a lot of white parents who falsified addresses so that their kids could go to Myers Park rather than to West Charlotte, and black kids sought to get assigned back to West Charlotte.

Question about what happened in classrooms. Good description "One of the things that made West Charlotte successful was that it had in addition to some of the brightest and more affluent white students some of the brightest and most affluent black students." Perceived also a number of students from quite poor families, and not so many in between.

In 1976-77 there were a number of racial fights around the district, but: "The West Charlotte students got along . . . " "The white students for the most part took delight in being immersed in the black culture. They liked the music. They liked the energy. They enjoyed the language. They didn't resent the fact that only a handful of the members of the band were white. They just enjoyed the band." White students enjoyed black culture. Everyone succeeded.

When he came, white ratio was about 45 percent, but it dwindled, particularly with introduction of magnet program. West Charlotte in early 1980s became new site for English as second language, which in his opinion allowed for a drop in the white ratio because ESL students counted as nonblack.

He considered dropping ratio threat to West Charlotte's future. If fall below critical mass, can't offer as many advanced classes. Dropping numbers were from affluent neighborhoods that wanted those classes. Also image becomes that it's a black school, and not the flagship of integration.

In last few years, West Charlotte has had a series of principals. Issue of having black principals. Difference between concerns about West Charlotte as a school with black history and one that represents integration. Suggests that recent principals first see the black history and the pride of the black community, rather than the contributions of more affluent white families, who have both political clout and high test scores.

Suggests that integration has become less important to the Charlotte power structure than keeping white parents in the public schools. Sees John Murphy (superintendent from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s) as a representation of that. Issue of magnets – carrot instead of the stick. Once that happened, West Charlotte was not as symbolically important. "Because if you could bus white kids across town, past two or three other high schools, into a black neighborhood, and they could still get a good education and go to great colleges from there and be happy doing it all, then busing can work."

Recent difficulties he thinks have originated from the desire to get away from busing.

Says white students who came to West Charlotte because more cosmopolitan, and were delighted to have variety. Could start over again because they didn't continue old junior high school roles.

Says that students at West Charlotte were more sophisticated. Suggests that less sophisticated ones were selected out and sent to private school. West Charlotte could put on plays that couldn't be staged at other schools, such as *Equus*, plays with racial themes. "It was almost an avant-garde atmosphere." Mentions Charles LeBord who put on great plays during many years.

Great quote: "The atmosphere and the energy at the school were just invigorating. You had these bright students, both black and white – They were bold. They were assertive. They were more mature. They wanted to do serious things. And then you had the other students who

may not have had the advantages in life, but they had this great energy about them. They brought their own style, and you saw it in the band and on the athletic fields and in the hallways. It was just a very invigorating mix of students and of energy. And on top of that you had the open program students who were even more avant-garde and very creative. Some of them were just a little different than everybody. So you had this sense that you really weren't in Charlotte, North Carolina. It was like we were in a Northern city somewhere, near downtown. It was fabulous."

Question about difference from his own experience; describes church and private schools, all male. Says that there were a lot of similarities, though, between his high school and West Charlotte, where the teachers encouraged skepticism, free thought, etc. Says liberal arts in general forces one to deal with different ideas, different characters, ambiguities. Intellectually he was very prepared for West Charlotte, although wasn't used to African American students, or to female students for that matter.

Telephone rings, tape turned on and off.

Question about effect of West Charlotte on classroom. "The great thing about teaching literature at West Charlotte was that you could teach ideas to these students. They loved ideas. They loved new ideas. They loved perspectives different than their own. This was true for black students as well as white students. Because the students were more sophisticated you could teach things you couldn't teach other places." For example, I became known for teaching Moby Dick to my advanced classes, to the eleventh grade humanities classes. . ." continues in that vein. Then adds that he could also teach Huckleberry Finn. Appropriate story for West Charlotte because it's about black people and white children getting along, and how they learn to respect each other. Was a theme students could appreciate, even though the novel was full of the "n" word. Later on became more awkward to do that. Also could teach things like One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, without being attacked by fundamentalist parents. "Teaching literature at West Charlotte was just fabulous because the discussions were so great."

Discussion about how the difficulties of Huckleberry Finn were easier to teach to the advanced classes than the less advanced classes. How he had to be sure to prepare lower level students for what they were going to read the night before. Also discussed how black students in regular classes saw more of the humor in the book, humorous use of the word "nigger."

In humanities program, taught the classics, tried to teach them in a more creative, less teacher-centered fashion.

When he first went there, West Charlotte had a lot of different English offerings; female authors, black literature. When established humanities program, he thinks they helped balance that out to some extent. During the 1980s, however, all of the choices were cut out, due in part to downtown and statewide curriculums. Thinks were concerns about too much liberalism. Story about Soviet Union and idea that children all taught same thing on the same day all across the Soviet Union. That way something like black literature had to get worked into this central curriculum. Some teachers were better at it than others. Also had to be careful about not turning off white students. Not necessarily good or bad, but it's choices that you had to make. Recalls that one of his sons, who was deeply immersed in black music, getting tired of reading nothing but black literature.

[Cassette 1 of 2, Side B]

Says doesn't know how black students viewed him and the books he taught. "All that is a part of learning to live with other people." He would try his best not to look at other classes and

students and teachers as "somehow not being up to certain standards." Had to be careful to talk to other teachers, share materials, and so on.

"That's one of the lessons of West Charlotte. Integration's not about the choice, it's day in and day out.

Phone rings, tape turned on and off.

Great quote "It's hard work, getting along with people who are different. It's no different I guess than any other relationship. It's just real hard work. One's feelings are going to be hurt. One will make mistakes, and feel terribly guilty. There'll be successes too, but it's just hard work, and it's really minute by minute by minute. You have to be so careful what you say, you have to be so careful how you look at people. You just had to be always on your toes." He learned to do it, but wouldn't say he was any kind of model. Had very few black students and parents who were angry at him. That's what people at Davidson College don't get a chance to understand; how difficult something like that is. Why West Charlotte is an accomplishment.

Gave him an opportunity to become involved with changing some people's lives in a personal way that wouldn't have been able to do if had stayed in business. Good summary: "It sort of gave me the privilege to actually interact with people according to my political and religious views. Otherwise I would have been sort of – and maybe am becoming now – a sort of effete liberal. Whether I taught at West Charlotte or not, I'm sure I would have felt, as I do now, that teaching was probably the one really good thing I've done in my life. And having taught at West Charlotte made it I think just all the more rewarding for me."

Talks about getting along as being a skill that you learn and don't forget.

Says that West Charlotte's role in Charlotte society is changing. Talks about the importance of keeping it a strong school, so that black youngsters will continue to have something to be proud of. Young kids bombarded with examples of white achievement, fewer of black. So they need to have their own successes. West Charlotte would be that kind of example.

One of things about work is knowing when to let go of it. So just because it was a great experience for the people at that time doesn't mean it shouldn't change. Wonders if he himself needs to change as well, let go of his old image of West Charlotte. A lot of white folks have a hard time letting go.

Question about what has changed. Thinks the mood of whites in the U.S. is not as tolerant as thirty years ago. Even though schools had to be integrated by force, there were enough white leaders to fight the battle to make it work. Doesn't think there's that leadership now. Doesn't see the movers and shakers pushing for it.

Integration takes energy. Neighborhood schools don't. Also haven't seen many eloquent advocates of integration recently, in the country as well as in Charlotte. Also practically more difficult because of demographics and distances. Also question of the definition of integration. If the idea is for minority students to become diffused equally throughout society, doesn't see that as happening soon. If integration is the possibility for minorities to individually achieve their dreams and live lives of respect through access to what they need – that's possible.

Discussions of possibilities and pitfalls of separate and equal.

Questions about his children at West Charlotte; oldest graduated in 1994, youngest in 1996. Two very different kinds of people, were in different circles at West Charlotte. Outgoing one enjoyed it more than the quieter one.

Cotswold, his neighborhood, was in West Charlotte's attendance area. Thinks that white neighborhoods sent to West Charlotte may have originally been picked out of a hat. Cotswold, Eastover, U.N.C.C.

Both sons looked forward to going there. He had taught there, and enjoyed going to football games, etc. Knew older kids who went to school. Thought education was both socially and academically superior. Particularly good teachers for advanced students. Some teachers gave few high grades, but were known at admissions offices around the country, so it didn't matter. Talks about some of the other high schools having significant party scene for affluent whites; they were glad to send their kids to West Charlotte.

Says that as a parent, there's a lot more faith required in the school and teachers. Rely on what kids say, or on what the administration says. Can't have all questions answered. So there's a leap of faith. The one drawback of white students being far from homes meant it was more difficult to do afterschool stuff. Psychologically, also different from having kids at school in a black neighborhood and another to have them in a small group later in the afternoon or evening. Some fears are exaggerated, but is a legitimate concern. Immediate neighborhood was generally middle class, but stretch of Beatties Ford Road was fairly run down. "You have to get used to that sort of urban environment." Still, he coached soccer for nine years and never had any trouble with anything. He'd have to reassure parents about that.

Considers that the only disadvantage, other than receiving flack from less liberal folks in home neighborhoods. When his kids were there, and he talked to people on east and south side, would seem perplexed if he said his kids went to West Charlotte. No question that many affluent folks just could not imagine that a school in a black neighborhood could be good. "Because, unlike Huck Finn, they've never had to interact."

Concern about backlash, and how it can create complications.

Might be that other schools are able to serve purpose of integration, doesn't know.

Question of magnets and options, and how they give people more ways to opt out of integration. West Charlotte was flagship for busing, rather than necessarily for integration.

Talking about difficulty of maintaining special programs such as the open program. Originators create energy and excitement, later on people do what's convenient. Description of open education and the excitement around the country in the early 1970s. Also filtered into mainstream classrooms, with projects and writing and so on. He thinks many of the magnets will suffer from the same type of decline once original teachers move on.

Suspects that people going to magnet schools do it for convenience, or because they don't like their assigned schools, rather than the curriculum.

Question of what he would have thought about sending his kids to West Charlotte if it had been well integrated but not quite as strong academically. He would have been much less enthusiastic. Says that early parents said educational preparation was more important than integration. Was told school system made big effort to get strong teachers into West Charlotte. Most were still there in the late 1970s. Having good teachers "made it easier for the white parents to be idealistic."

His own education, he says, belies the necessity of integrated schools. Repeats that "at least intellectually, I was prepared for diversity." Idealism as something many people do if they don't have to fight too hard for it. As long as there's not too much self-sacrifice.

Story about the battle. Story about front-page Charlotte Observer article that said "Black Image Threatens School That Made Desegregation Work." White parents complaining that top administrators were black, and school leadership didn't care about white students. Also had Myers Park students with racial slurs. Recalls discussion in A.P. English class; students were irate. Invited the reporter who wrote the story to come to his class. He came out, and they let him have it. Fighting for years to overcome that problem, and article didn't help.

Says that with that article there was a lot more going on than just West Charlotte.

Then went to principal, McMillan. Waited for school board meeting, relates that attitude of administrators was apologetic about West Charlotte.

[Cassette 2 of 2, Side A]

Invited high-level people to the school to discuss it. Had to negotiate heatedly over getting people to the meeting. Remembers district superintendent knocking on his door in the rain one time to talk about it. Story of public confrontation with superintendent Jay Robinson. Fighting battle not just in white community, not just in the media, but also with own leadership. "That was one instance where I learned that separate can never be equal. Human nature does not allow it to be equal."

Remembers needing to tell someone who would understand. Called C.D. Spangler and asked if he could come over and talk about it. They sat up and talked about it. It really was living like some kind of a novel. People whose self-interest pulled things in different directions.

One of four or five battles he fought personally.

Material from the following section is restricted, and may not be published

Remembers being threatened with a lawsuit by folks at Myers Park. Soccer program at West Charlotte starting to develop, beginning to challenge Myers Park. One year had good team, although not as strong as theirs. Had student on the team from Ethiopia, a substitute who didn't play much. Politics of Ethiopia, family had gotten on wrong political side; brothers had been arrested and tortured, and they were spirited out of the country and ended up at West Charlotte.

Myers Park had a lot of foreign players through ESL program, when the soccer coach saw an article about player, realized he must have been ineligible. Towards the end of the season they were turned in. In fact the player wasn't eligible to play according to rules that were designed to keep kids from being recruited by different schools. Ended up having to forfeit all of the wins. Parents got mad who lived in Myers Park because they knew there were players on the Myers Park team who falsified their addresses to go to Myers Park and not West Charlotte. When they played Myers Park in the conference tournament, lost 4-1 and every goal was scored by a player who was supposed to be at West Charlotte.

Two coaches learned that two of the students were supposed to be at West Charlotte, and a "mole" in the attendance offices at Myers Park showed that they should be at West Charlotte. Sent it up to the superintendent, and the principal threatened him with a lawsuit for libel. Says was more going on – with these things it's usually more than it

appears to be. Nothing was every done about the Myers Park ineligible players. Suspects that superintendent thought bringing it out that caused more harm than good.

Following year, one of the two players came to West Charlotte. One graduated. One applied for a board-approved transfer to Myers Park, and it was approved. Battles for respect, played out in part in the media. Constant fighting, sense of outrage. Other things you saw. Bond referendums with things supposedly earmarked for West Charlotte that never got built, and so on.

End restricted section

Doesn't think he ever created battles in order to make points. Goes on to talk about how he got involved in educational reform, in blasting career development program in Charlotte Mecklenburg. Trying to create respect for teachers.

Left teaching because he was ready to do something different. Not burned out, but wanted to try other things. Remembers his son coming to Davidson and finding students were less liberal. Said could argue with other students all day long, but he didn't come to Davidson to fight those battles. He himself decided it wasn't his calling to fight that kind of battle.

Talks about development of merit pay programs, which was completely opposite to his belief in what teaching ought to be about.

Anything else that he thinks is important.

One thing that strikes him is the connection of West Charlotte to places such as Davidson. There's a tradition of students doing that. Sees tradition of Davidson being interested in West Charlotte students who were successful.

Also mentions back and forth between West Charlotte and private schools. Only a few students left West Charlotte to go to private school. More came from private school to West Charlotte. Sees private schools as part of a system. They're a necessity to give parents a choice. Better to have parents be able to take their children out of a school they don't like than to build up resentments. Some parents just have a very low tolerance for people who are different, for unfamiliar situations. He didn't see West Charlotte in competition with private schools, although they really were. He would hope that people wouldn't see just individual conflicts, but larger picture of what's best for society and for the students. Not shocking that students could go from West Charlotte to Davidson and be happy. Not shocking that students could come from affluent backgrounds and go to West Charlotte and be happy.

Talks about poignant memories of black teachers and administrators. Difficult for them to see what had happened to their school. Were very proud of school before integration. Was a big sacrifice to let white kids come. They had less control over what was done, because decisions being made downtown for political reasons.

One of the black teachers told him that before integration they didn't have discipline problems. Teachers commanded much more respect at the school and in the community before integration. That eroded along with discipline.

Alumni association is largely classes before integration. Pride in the school, the kind of things that white folks will never see unless you have connections to it.

Remembers state championship game in late 1970s, and "the disappointment was much greater than just losing a football game." Doesn't think that some folks got over it. Discussion of different head football coaches, and how they've won championships. Thinks, though, that earlier game, with a black coach, had more riding on it.

Question about what it means to have experienced that. "It was a privilege, of course." At same time, he's aware that on most issues he doesn't really know what black people are thinking. Discussions of what is said and not said. Isn't a matter of distrust, but a matter of being careful before leaping to conclusions. Making sure everyone is on board. Just because people don't voice objections doesn't mean they agree with something.

Remembers going out with other teachers sometimes. Teachers don't socialize much, in part because they don't have much money. A couple of times they had parties over at the Omega clubhouse. Discussion of significance of black fraternities. They danced and had a great time, and he saw that as a glimpse that he would never have had otherwise. They enjoyed having the white teachers. It was great to build some kind of trust like that. Achievements of individual students were also great. Everyone took great pride particularly in achievements of black students. "We valued them so much."

Band was unbelievable, cheerleaders were unbelievable. Sees improvement in the band as another accomplishment. Recalls that at the state championship the Rockingham band was much more striking than the West Charlotte band, which was wearing an assortment of T-shirts and tennis shoes and played fewer songs. Afterwards they recruited a director who transformed the band, got money for uniforms, and turned it into something great. Black style but didn't have to apologize for it. In fifth grade, his son took up the saxophone so that he would be able to play in the West Charlotte band. The director also created a wonderful jazz band. Sense of things improving, being accomplished.

Realizing that life is far richer because of diversity. Got to the point at West Charlotte with thinking those folks who didn't want to come, that was their problem.

Notes again that story about soccer lawsuit may not be published.

End of interview