K-445

SOHP Series: Listening for a Change
Davidson College Interviews - Ada Jenkins School

TRANSCRIPT - BRENDA TAPIA

Interviewee: Brenda Tapia

Interviewer: Laura J. Hajar

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Location: Davidson, N.C.

Tape No.: (cassette 1 of 1)
(55 minutes)

Notes: This interview is one of several investigating the history of the Ada Jenkins School in Davidson, N.C. The school opened as the Davidson Colored High School in 1937-38 to serve the African American community of Davidson and northern Mecklenburg County. This neighborhood school was initially elementary through high school, and became elementary only in 1946-47 when a high school opened in Huntersville. In the mid-40s, the school was renamed Ada Jenkins, honoring the longtime teacher and leader. The school closed in 1965 when Mecklenburg County integrated schools. The facility has recently been renovated and re-opened as the Ada Jenkins Center with a variety of programs and services.

Brenda Tapia was born in Mooresville, N.C. in August 1949. She grew up in Davidson, N.C. and lived next door to the house that she lives in today. Growing up, she lived with her maternal grandparents, six uncles and two aunts, as well as her own parents and two younger sisters. She attended the African American Ada Jenkins School from 1955 to 1963 for the first through the eighth grades. Tapia attended Torrence-Lytle High School in Huntersville, N.C. for ninth and tenth grades and then transferred to newly desegregated North Mecklenburg High School for eleventh and

twelfth grades. Today, she works as the director of Love of Learning program at Davidson College, which is designed to encourage and prepare African American high school students to pursue a college education.

The interview contains a detailed and extremely thoughful assessment of the education African American children received in the years preceding desegregation, as well as an account of the difficulties Tapia experienced in her two years at previously white North Mecklenburg.

The interview took place in Tapia's office, which is wonderfully decorated with various photographs, artwork, artifacts, and books by and about Africans and African-Americans. In the interview, Tapia talked about the decorations she had chosen, and said: "I tell people one of the reasons I have so many pictures and artwork up in my office is so that, if I'm not in here and somebody walks in, they'll look around the office and say, 'Hmm, this must be a black person's office.'" She looks back on her days at the Ada Jenkins School with much appreciation and fondness, and emphasized the value of being educated in an all-black setting. Tapia excelled in school and she attributes her zest for learning, reading, and debating to her family—especially her grandfather. In describing her motivations in structuring the Love of Learning program, she stressed the idea of educating students as a "holistic venture," an idea that is grounded in her experiences at Ada Jenkins and Torrence-Lytle.

TRANSCRIPT

[Cassette 1 of 1, Side A]

Brenda Tapia: …that they wouldn't know what to—well, at least you got the voice check level!

Laura Hajar: Yeah, you're on.

BT: Ok.

LH: No, keep going.

BT: Oh, well I was just, um--. They have so little exposure to their own history and culture that they wouldn't know what they could put up that would be more reflective of them.

LH: Yeah, I think that—I don't know. Well, I was talking with Verdie Berringer last week, or a couple weeks ago, about it and she was saying how she never knew who Ada Jenkins was—the woman—and how she'd heard different things but never really got the whole story. It just seems like not a lot of people really think back on their time there and the fact that it was a school.

BT: That's because—we could look at this in terms of [Abraham] Maslow's hierarchy of needs: when you are on the survival level, you don't have much time to think about

anything because it seems strange to me that she would say that. There was a picture of Miss Ada Jenkins in the bathroom in the main administration building. All of us went in that bathroom at some point or another. It was a teacher's lounge. And if for nothing more than to go in and get something, retrieve something that a teacher had left in there that they sent you for—you saw her picture.

And maybe—well, sometimes, I think other kids were not as quizzical as I was. When I saw something that I didn't know or wanted to know about, I asked. A lot of people didn't take that time. I think one of the things that I missed, in terms of the people here in Davidson, was just how hard they were struggling. I was lucky to have come from a very large and supportive family who looked out for each other. Sort of like if one had, they all had. A lot of them—even though there may have been a mother and a father in the home—that was it. It was mother and father and a lot of children. And they were struggling to keep food in their mouths and a roof over their head. Many of them were employed here and were being paid less than slave wages, which they continue to do here for most of the service staff. And then we wonder why these people have no interest in participating in things or doing things in the community.

But anyway, this probably has nothing to do with your topic–

LH: No, it does. It completely does. But I want to kind of back up a little.

BT: Ok.

LH: Where were you born?

BT: I was born in Mooresville in–at Lake–Lowrance Hospital, which is now Lake Norman Regional Hospital in August of 1949. I grew up next door to the house that I live in now.

LH: In Davidson?

BT: In Davidson. On Catawba Road, on the other side of Hoke Lumber Company.

LH: Who were your parents, or are they still living?

BT: My parents are still living. James and Dovie Howard. My father worked here at the college for the first 20 years of my life as a janitor in the chemistry department in the stock room. And would sometimes conduct labs for the professors while they went and played golf. He was sort of treated like a graduate's assistant in terms of his interaction with professors and students, but he was janitor. And so he was paid a janitor's salary. It really interested me when I turned 18 and got my first job in a mill before I went to college, to find out I was making

more an hour than he did, and he'd been working here for 20 years at that point.

My mother was a maid here. In fact, she at one point worked in this building. But, about midway, I guess maybe about the time that I was in middle school, she was working as a private maid for one of the professors here, which was very interesting because they were very decent people who paid her more than other maids in Davidson were paid. And were criticized by their colleagues for doing so. They probably would have paid her even more.

(hears beeper going off)

Ok, and then she started working as a teacher's assistant with, I think, the Presbyterian church, in their day care center, and then there was one they had at Ada Jenkins after it was closed, and at the local mill, Reeves' Brothers. My dad, like I said, stayed here for 20 years and then went to the post office.

LH: Do you have any brothers and sisters?

BT: I have two younger sisters. I have a sister that's six-five and a half years younger than I am and then one that's 11 years younger than I am.

LH: But you said that you come from a pretty big family-extended family?

BT: Extended family. My mother had eight sisters and brothers. In fact the house that I grew up in was my maternal grandparents' house. So I grew up with maternal grandmother, grandfather, six uncles, and two aunts, and my mom and dad. We had our own house, but they said even as a baby, I wouldn't stay there. I'd get sick and my temperature would flare up and my mom, being a new mom, would take me over to her mother's house. And as soon as I got there, my temperature would go down—I'd be fine. She'd take me back home and I'd start to scream and holler again, temperature would go up. So they got tired of going between the two houses, and my grandparent's house was large so we moved in with them and stayed there until I was nine years old and we bought the house next . . . Well, it wasn't a house. It was a former VFW building and then a small cotton mill that made children's cotton underwear. We bought it and converted it into a house.

LH: When were you at Ada Jenkins?

BT: I was at Ada Jenkins from 1955 until 1963. Is that eight years? Yes. Because Ada Jenkins was first through the eighth grade. I was the second generation of my family to go to school there. My mother and all of her sisters and brothers went to school there. In fact, my first grade

teacher, I think several of them had her for their first grade teacher as well.

LH: Who was your first grade teacher?

BT: Ahh, Josephine Brown. She's a really sweet lady.

LH: Did your sisters go to Ada Jenkins?

BT: My youngest—the sister that is five and a half years younger than I am—she was able to go to Miss Brown. And then the next year is when—I thought this had happened all across Charlotte-Mecklenburg school system but it didn't—only here in the northern county, the next year they closed the second and tenth grade at predominantly black schools and those students had no choice. They were forced to go to white schools. Others of us had the option to transfer if we wanted to.

LH: Why did they only do second and tenth grade?

BT: I have no idea. The whole thing was weird because they had a choice. In fact the very same choice they are having to go back to right now even as we speak. When they integrated schools, they could have chosen to integrate neighborhoods, but instead they decided to put it on the backs of children. It's always a very easy cop out. You know, rather than us adults, who really control things and can really make more permanent faster change. We say "Put it on the children." You know "If the children can grow up

together, even though they are exposed to our limited and quite often negative attitudes about each other . . . " "If children can get together, then everything's gonna be all right." If we weren't on tape, I'd say a few choice words that are not in our holy Bible. But, you know, I am sure that when Jesus went through the Temple, he wasn't saying very choice words either.

LH: Did you choose to go to the white school?

BT: When we had the option. It was really at the recommendation of the teachers at Torrence-Lytle where I was. I got to do the ninth and tenth grade there. They told me that the entire school would be closed the following year so I wouldn't be able to graduate from Torrence-Lytle, which was my dream. Everybody looked forward to your high school graduation. So they suggested that I just go on and transfer since the school was going to be closing the next year. At least that way, I'd have two years to adjust to a new school, rather than have to go my senior year. So I took them at their option and transferred. So I was there. I was at North for my junior and senior year.

LH: What was that like?

BT: It was probably one of the most painful experiences I've ever had in my life. I'm very fortunate and very happy that I had the opportunity to experience the

first ten years of my formal education in segregated all-black schools because I don't think that I could have withstood those two years at North if I had not had that. Some of the horrors that you saw on television in terms of students being spit at, called nigger, hoses and dogs turned on them—I didn't have that. Sometimes I think I would have preferred that to what I did have. What I had was more of a psychological torture, in my opinion.

Imagine coming from a school setting where everyone knew you, everyone liked you, you were very involved in all the extra-curricular activities, where you were always late for class because people were stopping and talking to you, asking you about this meeting or these class notes or something. To walk into a school where you suddenly become invisible. Nobody sees you. Nobody knows you. Nobody says anything to you. People could bump into you, walk all over you, and never crack their lips because you're not there. To raise your hand in class and be the last one called on, if you're called on. And then when you are called on, everybody stops and they are staring down your throat. Teachers and students included. And it's like—the look is "Oh, she can speak." "Oh, she has a brain." That's the feeling that you get. To have teachers restate your answers as though something's wrong with them. Then if you listen

closely to their restatement of your statement—well, that's the same thing I said. But you were left with the feeling of somehow it was not right or wasn't quite right. To get A papers back with Cs on them and no correction marks. To up and ask the teacher, "Well, can you tell me what I got wrong?" I mean, I was used to getting As, and suddenly getting Cs—I don't see. Where's my error? I want to do better. I want to make As. To be told, "Take your seat. Are you questioning my grade? How dare you? Do you want to go to the office?"

I remember one class where this young man—he sat behind me. He always managed to get to class before I did. As soon as I sat in my seat, he would get up and move his seat so far from mine that you could've put two more desks in between his and mine. Teacher never said anything to him about it. We used to have to pass papers up and down the rows when you got your assignments—when you were passing in an assignment or getting it back. He would get up and walk around me and hand his paper to the white boy in front of me. When papers came back and he had to take his paper from me, he would grab it by the smallest corner that he could touch it with and hold it up as though it was infected with AIDS or something. Then he would lay it down on the floor,

and then after a few minutes he would pick it up—like giving it time to be decontaminated.

I remember being told that we could not join any extra-curricular activities while we were—because this was our first year at the school. We had to be there a year before we could join anything. Yet, our athletes were welcome to all of the athletic teams in the school. I saw white students who transferred into North at the same time that we did, that were given co-officerships in organizations that they would have been officers in at the school that they had transferred from. It was their first year. But, we couldn't.

LH: Wasn't the mascot a rebel?

BT: The mascot was a rebel. At North, you had to stand up for Dixie. You could sit down for the national anthem, but you had to stand up for Dixie. It was a very backwards place.

LH: Why do you think—what was it that you were given, or that you took from Ada Jenkins—your experiences there—that helped you get through those two years that were so horrible.

BT: That I was a child of God and that I was loved. But it was hard to hold onto that. By the end of my senior year, most of that had been chipped away because there was

nothing reinforcing it. I'd go home and I would try and talk to my parents about it but they hadn't been through anything like that. Looking back, I realize now, they didn't know what to say to me, but I expected them, as all children do. When you have something you can't handle, your parents—they're the big guys—they know how to handle it. But they didn't know how to handle it anymore. My mother would just say stuff like "Well, you're not going there to be liked. You're going to get an education." It was like she couldn't hear me when I said "I can't get an education. I don't like it there. I don't feel good there. I don't want to go there. I don't like people running from me. I don't like being ostracized. I don't like not being able to really be a part of the school."

I think my saddest moment was my senior—night of my graduation. I, and another classmate—black classmate, we were standing there and we were saying, "This is supposed to be the happiest night of our life" and all we can think about is just "get me the fuck outta here. I don't want to be here any longer than I have to." We weren't happy. White kids around us were all excited and talking about going to the beach and all that. There was no excitement for us. For us, it was just like being released from death row. Just happy to be on the outside. I felt like something

had been taken from me because I remember watching my aunts and uncles as they came up to their graduation, and all the celebration and the hooplah they experienced. That wasn't there for us.

LH: Was there any outlet for you? Were you able to talk to your cousins about it? Or other classmates that were balck? Did you find any support in your community?

BT: No, no. Not around here.

LH: It was just a lone battle?

BT: To me, it was the lone battle because I've always—with the exception of my uncle and an aunt who were not living here—I've always thought a lot deeper than most people about things. I don't take things at face value. I also feel very deeply. I have a spirituality that's extremely sensitive to things that are not of God, that are unjust, or unfair. To me, it was just deep wounds. When I tried to talk to people about it, they just brushed it off. It was—it's sort of like, I am sure there are people out in Colorado right now who have tried to talk about the tragedy that happened [she is referring to the shootings at Columbine High School]. But other people are in so much pain they can't talk about it so they brush it off. "Let's move onto something else." That was what I felt.

Even ten years later—not ten years later, it was almost twenty years later—I remember getting an invitation to a class reunion, and writing the guy that was in charge of the class reunion at North, asking him if it were possible for us to get together and talk about some of the things that happened while we were there. How can we come together for a class reunion and there's still bad feelings and things we haven't discussed. What I was experiencing was that—we had a black reunion right before . . . I know I went to our tenth reunion, so maybe this was like our fifteenth reunion or something. We had a black reunion right before, in August, before we would have one with our white classmates in October. A lot of the black students were saying things that I felt like the white students needed to hear—about why they didn't want to go to the reunion and what they really thought about them. I challenged them. It was like, "Why you saying this behind their back?" My mother always raised me—don't say anything behind somebody's back you're not willing to say to their face. Don't you realize that if we sat down and we talked about this maybe we could have some real relationships? But, nobody was willing to do that. They continued to put a smile on their face and say, "Oh yeah man. That was really

good. Enjoyed that. Oh, that sucker thinks I liked that." It bothers me.

LH: I want to talk a little bit more about Ada Jenkins.

BT: Oh man, what made Ada Jenkins special-the teachers. Our teachers cared about us totally. One of the differences that I saw in being educated in a segregated school as opposed to an integrated school is that black teachers taught you not only the academics, but they taught you about life. They cared about the total child. They dealt with everything that you needed. If a child came to school and they were hungry-they didn't have anything to eat. There was no free lunch program; teachers would share their lunch, or they would encourage someone else who had a lunch to share their lunch with a child that didn't. If students were misbehaving or their behavior outside of class was not what teachers thought were appropriate, they didn't think twice about correcting you or talking to you about what you needed. It was like, if they saw that you had an ability in art or music, they made sure that you were given every opportunity--anything that they were aware of in those areas to further your ability on that manner.

Sometimes I think one of the reasons why black parents are not more active in schools is that when schools were

segregated, black teachers, realizing how hard and how long black parents had to work, took over the role of parenting, such that a mother didn't have to come to school and say, "Miss Jones, I think Mary really has talent in piano and if you know of any opportunities for her to get piano lessons beyond the first level, I'd really appreciate you doing it." It would be just the opposite. The teacher would call Mary's mother, maybe late at night after Mary's mother got off from work at 10 or 11, and say, "We've got a music teacher who's coming. It's not going to cost anything. I think it would be really good for Mary if she were to take this class. And this summer, I know a music camp that she can go to that's run by some real good Christian people. She'll be ok, she'll be safe." And parents would trust that and children would get an opportunity to advance themselves.

You were constantly being given your history in informal ways. Teachers shared who they were with you. They weren't empty plastic figures standing in front of you. They didn't have-we didn't have a lot of the resources. Now that was one good thing that came out of integration was books and resources. But, you know, if you're in a hostile environment where you don't feel comfortable, you don't feel welcome-you can have the best equipment, the best

books in the world but you're not going to learn anything because you're too angry or because you're too much in pain. With the black schools, we didn't always have the material but those teachers gave us as much as they could. Even if it meant going and getting-buying materials and things out of their pockets too make sure that we had it.

Also something else that I think was different then was not only were our schools segregated but our neighborhoods were segregated. So you had the best and the brightest living right next door to what people would call the dregs of society. So, regardless of-and everybody was supportive of you. Everybody tried to encourage you because every generation wanted the next generation to have more than they had. Just the camaraderie and the feeling-the presence of God. School day always started with prayer and the Pledge of Allegiance.

It just amazes me how black people believed so strongly in this country and all of its ideals and values even though we have very rarely been the benefits of them. But in those segregated schools we were made to feel proud about this country and the contribution that we made. We sort of began to have an idea of where we might fit in. We really sincerely believed that if we studied hard and we

worked hard, we would be treated fair and equal. Biggest crock of shit we were ever given. But anyway . . .

LH: Do you remember any specific teachers that had an influence on you.

BT: Miss Brown was a wonderful introduction to school in itself. She was just a sweet woman-just wonderful. She was just like everybody's mommy. She hugged you and took away the fear of being away from home. And she made learning fun.

The teacher that really stands out in my mind-there are two in those eight years. One was my fifth grade teacher, Mrs. Jones. She became Mrs. Sellars, maybe the year after I had her. They tested me when I was in fifth grade. I should have been skipped to the fourth but my mother had been skipped and she didn't want to see that happen to me. She was afraid that I might socially not fit-which I never did anyway. But I remember in the first grade, reading all the books that they had in the first three weeks and asking for more, and being told that I would have to wait until next year when I was in the second grade. I didn't understand why I couldn't just go across the hall to the second grade and get the second grade books and start reading them. But no, I had to help other kids learn how to read. For most of my time in school, I was

always waiting for everybody else to pick up whatever I had learned. It wasn't until I got to the fifth grade with Mrs. Jones that she did something that others didn't do. She sort of split us up. We were able to learn at our own pace. She really pushed us. I really appreciated that. That was the only time in elementary school I really had to work.

The other teacher that stands out in my mind was the principle, Mr. J.R. Harris. He taught math. In the eighth grade, which at that time they didn't do-we studied-we finished eighth grade math in the first three weeks, and then the rest of the year we spent learning Algebra I and Algebra II. All of the students coming from Davidson were always strong in math. We would run miles ahead of the students at Huntersville. But now that I know something about abusive behavior, I realize that Mr. Harris' method of teaching you math was really quite abusive. He would send you to the board. You always did everything at the blackboard. You would work problems. Whenever you made a mistake, he would grab you by the back of your head. He would take your head and knock your head into the error. You never made that error again, because you didn't want to be embarrassed. And he would embarrass you. He used to love to say, "Naw, naw, you little n-i-g-g-e-r!" It was an affectionate use of the word "nigger" but it was also the

derogatory nature of the word was also there. But you learned math. In fact, I was like a few hours short of a double major in college in math because of the strong foundation that he gave us. And the confidence. Because you studied-you may not have studied anything else. But you never were unprepared in math because you knew Mr. Harris was not going to let you off the hook. It was sort of a tough love. Even though we complained about him-and he was old by the time we had him. I mean, I can remember his tie used to have all this food. He never changed his tie. He was still very sharp in terms of the math. You could see that he was beginning to get feeble, but he was definitely a character.

The other things I remember about Ada Jenkins was, again, because I learned so quickly, I used to get in a lot of trouble. But I was never the one. I used to take advantage of other students' lack of mental ability. I would have them doing things. I remember one day, Mr. Harris had gone somewhere and I suggested to a group of kids that I thought it would be nice to get up and walk on the roof of the building. And like little dummies, they went up there and walked on the roof of the building. While they were up there, Mr. Harris turned the corner from Potts Street onto Jetton. A couple of kids almost hurt themselves

trying to get off the roof, but it was too late. He saw them. I met him at his car when he got out. I said, "Mr. Harris, I am so disappointed. I tried to get those students off the roof but they would not pay me any attention. You know that it so dangerous. Mr. Harris, they would not listen to me. I knew you would be upset but I really tried my best to get them down from there." And I was the one that told them to go up there.

LH: Did you ever get caught?

BT: No.

LH: What happened to them?

BT: They got punished. And I laughed at them. But they were dumb enough. The next time I made a suggestion to do it. So, you know.

LH: What were the books like that you guys were reading--or that you were flying through?

BT: I remember the first grade books were like the typical "Look look. Oh look. See Jane. See Dick. Run run. Run Spot." They were the basic primers. Part of the reason for that was my aunt, who was a tutor in the after school program for a number of years when she retired back here, happened to have been sick two years before I started in school. She was confined to bed. She began to teach me to read. She read to me a lot. She gave me my love of reading.

In fact, to this day, one of the reasons that I'm really happy that I'm getting my own place is that for once I can have all my books together. Some women go into department stores and boutiques and drop a lot of money. The most money I've ever dropped in one spot has always been at a bookstore. I mean, it's nothing for me to spend $500 on books. When I do my tax returns, it amazes me. I generally spend $2000 a year on books. I just love books. I love to read. I thank her for that gift. Just the regular first, second, third, elementary school books. And fairytales. Loved fairytales. And myths.

LH: Did you do any plays?

BT: Oh yes. We had the operettas. I'd forgot about those. I remember being a gypsy. I never-I think, for some reason they stopped them. The last one I remember being in, I must have been in the fourth or fifth grade, and for some reason they stopped having them. That used to be a really big thing at Ada Jenkins. The community would come out to them. That was the only opportunity we really had for theater. But they were fun. I remember being a gypsy and I remember being a fairy. Because one of the plays that we did was "I Believe in Fairies." Throughout the play we were constantly--at various times--say that line, because saying that line that I believe in fairies, would free

somebody that had been entrapped from some evil toad or troll or something. They were fun.

I also remember the sock hops that we had in the gym. The Halloween parties. Oh gosh, Halloween was fun for us. I remember one year, my grandfather made like a wheel of fortune. Different people donated gifts and stuff. I think a lot of them were like white elephant things but, as kids they were fun, you know. You'd put your money down on a number and round and the wheel would go, and where it stops nobody knows. If it stopped on the number that your nickel was on then you got a prize.

I remember Bible school--we used to have vacation Bible school at Ada Jenkins in the summer. That was always fun. I remember Miss Grace James, who lived right down the street here on Concord Road, I think. She would come over and tell stories. She was a great storyteller. It was a fun time.

LH: Do you remember the May Day celebrations?

BT: I remember one, because we had to have our dresses made the color of the string that we held. I remember having a yellow dress with puffed sleeves and sort of a square neck, tight bodice, and then the full skirt. Never did understand--it was a big to-do to wrap this maypole, but to me it wasn't connected to anything. It was pretty,

it was something you did but I think I would have preferred-even though I enjoyed it and I participated in it-I would have preferred doing something that had some relationship or some meaning connected to it. I never did understand what May Day was about.

LH: Did you belong to any clubs?

BT: Oh, yes. 4-H Club. We had 4-H. I remember 4-H Club. I pledge my head to clearer thinking, my heart to greater loyalty, my hands to larger services for my community, my country, my school-something like that. 4-H Clubs, what else clubs did we have? Piano lessons. We didn't have a French club. I remember band, glee club. Because I got to play with the high school band when I was still in elementary school. When I was in the eighth grade, there was a competition piece. We used to go off for band competitions once a year to some kind of state competition. The state would choose the pieces we had to play. That particular year, they decided to do Mozart's Cosi Fan Tutte. It had a part for a bassoon soloist. The band director from Torrence-Lytle, who was also the band director at Ada Jenkins, realized how quickly I learned. He gave me the school's bassoon, and I had six weeks to learn how to play the bassoon and to do the solo piece. Because my dad was a janitor over here, he knew a student in the

band who played bassoon. So I got private lessons from him and learned the piece. We won the competition. It wasn't really like a competition-you were trying to get like an A rating, and we got an A rating for our performance. It was a beautiful piece. I love Cosi Fan Tutte. It's very fast.

I'm trying to think. I'm sure there were other things. Band, glee club, 4-H Club. We always had classroom clubs. We would have class parties.

LH: What were the classroom clubs like?

BT: Well, you know, like class offices-president of the fifth grade, and the fifth graders or whatever grade level you were would do various activities.

LH: Were you ever president of your class?

BT: Yes, because I was always number one in my class. So it sort of goes hand-in-hand. Again, that is why North was so terrible because my tenth grade year in high school was probably my best. I was president of every organization except the student government, of which I was vice president. I wasn't president because you had to be a senior to be president. Drama, French club, math club, science club. I remember being president of 4-H Club, and class president. Seventh and eighth grade, I remember. May have in lower grades but it's too far back.

LH: Did your parents push you with school stuff-I mean with your education?

BT: My parents and my grandfather. My grandfather-his name was Logan Houston. That's my maternal grandfather. I didn't have a lot of contact with my paternal grandparents even though they only lived eight miles away. But at any rate, he always drilled into us that two things in life were important: sound education and a relationship with God. Those were the two keys to freedom. If you had a sound education and a strong relationship with God, the sky was the limit in terms of what you could do. He had to drop out of school when he was about in the fifth grade to help support his family. But he never stopped getting an education. He used to-we used to have 12 o'clock dinner because everyone was either in school or working somewhere where they couldn't come home for dinner and supper in the evening. It was either dinner or supper but it was one meal everyday-you had to bring something that you had learned to the table to share with my grandfather. That was the way he kept up his learning. That was something that we always did. Even before I started school, when I was too young to read or to know anything, one of my aunts or uncles had to get with me and teach me something before a meal so that I would have something to share with my granddaddy. So yeah,

it's always been important. He made his children a promise that each one of them would get at least one year in college. After that they were on their own. All of them did. Out of the nine, I think three finished. And two were an hour or three hours away from graduation when they quit.

We used to debate all the time and talk. One of the things that I liked about my family, and is probably why Davidson appeals to me-we were always encouraging each other to think. I had an uncle who is probably one of the greatest debaters in the world. He would argue-like if he was arguing the abortion question, he would be pro for about 30 minutes and then he'd flip to the other side and argue that as vigorous and as hard as he had argued the pro side. He'd just flip back and forth. We were always disagreeing or discussing things. Like if you were an outsider, you would think we were fighting or something because we were very adamant about we were discussing. In fact, in many ways, my mother's family was very arrogant in terms of intellectualism. We could be very down to earth with people but we were sort of like, behind their back, "Hmmm, that person is SO dumb. They couldn't think their way out of a paper bag if the directions were written in the inside."

LH: Were your parents really involved in the school?

BT: My dad was. My mom has worked all of her life. My dad was active in the PTA. In fact my grandfather-he took the president of the PTA over from my grandfather. My grandfather went on to the high school to be the president of the PTA there. So yeah, he and my grandfather were very active. My mom and her mother stayed home, worked.

LH: What do you think of the Ada Jenkins Center now?

BT: Well, it's like I was saying to you earlier. I really appreciate the refurbishing, the rebuilding of the Center. But it's not a community center to me. I . . .

LH: Whose center do you think it is?

BT: I think that it's-I think that it's a white center from what I see. I don't have a lot of time to be there. But the times that I've been there, I just don't see many black people. Like I said, when I walk in the door, I don't feel-I don't feel my culture. It's sort of like, I tell people one of the reasons I have so many pictures and artwork up and things in my office is so that when-if I'm not in here and somebody walks in, they'll look around this office and say, "Hmm, this must be a black person's office." I don't have that feel. And the reason I did my office like this, was like after I had been here on this campus for about six months, I felt myself to be extremely depressed. One of the things that I realized was

contributing to that depression was that I saw nothing here that celebrated my presence, that said that I was here. So throughout this office, you will see a lot of African, African-American art pieces or pictures of famous African-Americans.

The center feels sterile to me, and sterile to me always equates to white. I mean, you know, I don't know why y'all don't have any life about you. I'm really making that a generalization, because all white people are not dead. But many of them act that way. We need color, we need expression. We need energy. I just don't feel that there. But I'm not knocking it because I can't put it all on the white people. It's a shared problem I think. You've got black people who have been beaten down, who have been treated like less than children of God for the bulk of the time they have been in this community. I mean just look at the difference we make here in terms of the fact that the majority of black people that are here are the people that are emptying the trash cans and cutting the lawn. That's not because that's the only thing that we can do. But we don't put a lot of effort-we say we do-but we really don't put any effort into bringing any other types of African-Americans here. We don't do anything to uplift those that are here. I mean, why is it that a college doesn't have

classes at night? It could. We do all this wonderful community service and I wonder why we haven't thought about really helping the people that are here. People will say, "Oh, well we've got the Love of Learning progam." But then I look at the type of support we've had over the years with this program and I wonder how real we are about what we're doing.

But, getting back more specifically to Ada Jenkins, I can't really fault people because I've made a lot of emphasis-I've been here to try and get black people involved and talking with whites and letting them know what they really feel. But they won't. I think there are whites here who mean well but because they been white so long, their idea of doing things is just white. They don't realize that. So, I think people have been well-meaning and I don't really want to knock the center, but it's not what it could be. I wish like hell I knew how to get it there.

LH: This is not related to Ada Jenkins, but I honestly don't know that much about Love of Learning. What do you do here?

BT: Love of Learning is a pre-college program for African American secondary students and their parents. We prepare students for college. It's been about 12 years ago now, Davidson was concerned about getting more African

American students and faculty here. They realized that in order to get more faculty, you had to have more students. But in order to get more students, you had to have more faculty. They asked me to design a program that would 1) increase the number of African Americans going on for post-secondary education and 2) that would hopefully propel them to more advanced terminal degrees, i.e. the Ph.D. The thought was that if we could involve black students on this campus for five years during high school, and then convince them to come here as students then, like many of our own graduates, they would probably come back as professors. And so that is what Love of Learning has been about since 1987. It's a pre-college program, it's year-round.

LH: It's year-round?

BT: It's year-round. Most people think it's a summer program because that's when people seem to notice us. I guess on Saturday mornings people are asleep. But twice a month, on Saturdays, basically from 10 to 12, from September to May, we have students here for a variety of academic, social, cultural activities. During the summer, they actually live here on the campus for the month of July.

What makes us unique from other pre-college programs is that I look at educating students as a holistic venture,

which is really a product of my experience at Ada Jenkins and Torrence-Lytle. You have to teach the whole child, not just the deal with the mind. If you're really going to educate a human being, you have to impact the mind, the body, and the spirit. And so Love of Learning has that holistic approach. We impact the students intellectually, with math, English, science, test-taking strategies, PSAT, SAT preparation class, African American history. We impact students spiritually with spiritual development. We're not trying to push them toward any particular religious denomination but we want them to know who God is, what God's relationship with them is, what their relationship with God should be, and then from that, try to help them understand what their relationship with one another should be. One of the reasons we have so much friction and violence among human beings is that we have not yet learned that you've got to relate this way. You've got to relate with God before you know how to relate with your fellow human beings.

Also, within spiritual is a leadership component that's designed to help students go within and to discover their own unique gifts and talents. Most of us-most human beings, regardless of race, color, creed, social, economic status have absolutely no idea who we are, and whose we

are. That to me is the most interesting thing to ask somebody. "Who are you?" And they start rattling off their name, what they do, where they live. This is not who you are. Who are you? Why are you here? What is your purpose for being? Is there more to you than this life? Those are the type of things we try to get them acquainted with.

Physically, I'm just trying to get them addicted to different kinds of physical activity. Many black youth are interested in basketball. Davidson offers a variety of physical activities and my thought is, if someone had engaged me in physical activity as a child, and physical activity had been a habit for me, it wouldn't be something that now, as a middle aged person, I'm trying to get myself into so I won't have a heart attack or high blood pressure. With the physical aspect, trying to get them into different kinds of physical activities as well as a wellness health component that begins to deal not only with preventative health and proper nutrition, but also with some of the obstacles that could keep them from completing their education: teenage pregnancy, substance abuse, peer pressure. Communicating with parents, things of that nature.

We also are unique in that I have classes and workshops for parents-because it's really who we need to

deal with. The children will do whatever the parents are. That's why people-I though it was interesting they keep talking about those two little boys who did the killings out in Littleton [Colorado]. Well, what about their parents? They didn't just suddenly become killers overnight. There was something going wrong for them parenting. How could somebody have that many bombs and guns and their mama not know or their daddy? So, we try to provide classes and workshops for parents as well to make- first of all, to help them understand the different stages of development the children go through. Because, again, one reason I can't fault those parents out there is that I realize that we don't really prepare people to be parents. You know, you just have sex one night and the sperm hits an egg and boom, you're a parent. Children don't come with directions so a lot of it is trial and error. It amazes me that we make people take classes and get a license to drive a car, but you can do more damage with a human being than you can with an automobile. But yet, you can become a parent just by finding a fertile partner. Some developmental psychology, but also some things that will help them help their children further their education: college admissions information, financial aid, helping them to look at careers, and possibilities for their children.

LH: It sounds like everything that came from Ada Jenkins and Torrence-Lytle that you didn't have at North Meck . . .

BT: Is what I'm trying . . . Because that's what wrong with the kids. I mean, these kids get Ds and Fs during the academic year and they come here and get As from teachers-half of my teaching staff is from Charlotte-Mecklenburg. We're not doing anything different. But what is different is that I take . . .

[end Tape 1, Side A]

[begin Tape 1, Side B]

BT: . . .hug the kids, touch them. Give them a lot of hands-on experience in terms of classroom. Don't just stand up there and lecture to them. And if, in the middle of the class, you look over and somebody's. . .

(phone rings)

LH: I have two more questions. Number one, was there any-did you get a lot of black history at Ada Jenkins or at Torrence-Lytle? Or was it just sort of like a daily . . .

BT: Not in terms of a course. But it was a daily thing because people talked about-it's like, we sung "Lift Every

Voice and Sing" and we were told that that was the Negro national anthem. In the process, you're told who James Weldon Johnson is and some of the things that he did. People talked about Mary McLeod Bethune and George Washington Carver. The class-the information was not a class but was just a part of our daily lives and discussion. It was oral information passed on but not in a formal class, no.

LH: What do you know about Ada Jenkins the woman?

BT: I know that-a lot of personal data like where she was born and where she grew up. I've known but I don't remember. What I know about her was that, in my opinion, the way she was described to me--because I never met her-was that she was a lot like Mary McLeod Bethune in terms of her desire to educate children. The lengths that she went to to raise money-the fish fries and the bake sales and things to get money so that the students could have the type of school that she wanted them to have and the things that they needed. Her strength and her determination and her commitment to the community. The way she taught things. And she taught not just, again, the academic things, but the social things as well. It's like, she wanted the students coming out of her school to be well-rounded. She, like many early African Americans, bought into that whole

myth that if we learn to do things and we act a certain way, we will be accepted and treated fair. And so, she, to me, bent over backwards to make sure that people not only had the academic skills but the social graces. I can hear my mother saying, "You play the piano just like Miss Jenkins" because Miss Jenkins was very heavy-handed. But that was the way she was with everything. It was like every word had to be articulated. It had to be clear. You pronounced the endings of your words. Everything was exact. Always your best. And that whole thing of whatever we do, we have to be twice as good as they are. It wasn't so much a competition thing as it was "We're so far behind, we have to work so far to catch up"-which in one way was very negative, now that I think about it with what I do know. But then, I can understand, because people really thought that this was the way for freedom for us. This was a way for total acceptance for us, was that we'd be like them, that we'd do things as well as them. Not knowing that we were already doing things better. But anyway . . .

LH: Was there ever a myth about her? We heard that someone might say that if you did something bad, then Miss Ada Jenkins' ghost was going to come get you.

BT: Oh yes. Because the picture in that room-the picture and that skylight-it was sort of eerie. Kids would

say that. I don't remember any teachers saying that. But it was like, "If you don't quit acting like that Miss Ada Jenkins gonna come and get you." Or if you ran down that hallway, because you weren't supposed to run in the hallway, "You know Miss Ada Jenkins' ghost roams through there, she'll get you." And naturally, when you tell kids that enough some of them think that they actually ran into her or something. I reckon it's been a long time since I heard that. But yes. She was a strong force. A very strong force.

LH: Thank you so much. I think that's everything for now.

BT: You're welcome. I hope you can use my ranting and raving.

End of Tape