

Interview

with

Karen M. McKaig

March 17, 1999

by Kate Feldmeier

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

Transcript on deposit at
The Southern Historical Collection
Louis Round Wilson Library

Citation of this interview should be as follows:
"Southern Oral History Program,
in the Southern Historical Collection Manuscripts Department,
Wilson Library,
The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill"

Copyright © 1999 The University of North Carolina

Karen McKaig interview by Kate Feldmeier, Charlotte, NC, 17 March 1999.

Notes

Karen McKaig is a 28 year old social studies teacher and tennis coach at Vance High School in Charlotte, where she has taught for the past two years. Vance is only two years old and prides itself on its integration: the school is roughly 50-50 African American /European American. I met Ms. McKaig in a conference room and was struck by her enthusiasm and vivaciousness; she has a strong commitment to her school and to her students. The interview was very informal and I felt instantly comfortable, as though I was talking to an older friend about teaching. She had obviously thought about what she wanted to say beforehand, there weren't any instances where she seemed not to have an answer. Her involvement in athletics was a recurring theme through the interview; through playing basketball she stepped out of the private school environment in which she grew up. I did take into consideration, however, the fact that the interview took place in the school's conference room (and thus with the risk of another teacher or student walking in at any moment) and wondered if the interview would have been more candid had we met elsewhere.

Transcript

Kate Feldmeier: This is Kate Feldmeier interviewing Karen McKaig on Wednesday, March 17, 1999 at Vance High School.

KF: First of all, I have to tell you how great it is to finally meet you, Laura thinks the world of you.

KM: Aw, she's doing a wonderful job, too. We really clicked right away, we have a lot in common and that's made it so easy for us to work together. I've had other student teachers before, but they've been male and maybe that's made a difference. I hadn't thought about it until Laura came.

KF: Well, it seems like you're the perfect person to mold her into a real teacher.

KM: I don't know if that's good or just plain scary!

KF: OK, I want to start off with your background information, your parents education, your early years in school, etc.

KM: Ok, well I am from a big Duke family. My grandfather went to Duke, my dad went to Duke, my aunt went to Duke... Then me and my sister.

KF: Whoa, not bad. Had your parents always lived in Charlotte?

KM: We moved from Raleigh when I was about four or so... We lived in a neighborhood

right behind Myers Park.

KF: What was that neighborhood like, in terms of diversity?

KM: Oh, mostly white. Well, actually there might have been a few minority families but no African-American families. Very homogenous.

KF: So you went to Providence Day-- when did you start there?

KM: My mom got a job teaching Latin at Providence, and it really became a matter of child care. Like it was just easier for my parents to have my sister and me at the same school where my mom was teaching. And because she worked there it made it less of a financial... burden on my family.

KF: Do you remember having any say in the decision of whether to attend private or public school?

KM: Well, I guess it wasn't necessarily my choice at the beginning, but I think it was somewhat of a difficult decision for my parents as they were supporters of public school. It just worked out more conveniently to have us at Providence rather than Myers Park. Actually, I remember discussing whether or not to switch to public school I think when I was in eighth grade, yeah eighth and my parents asked if I wanted to go to the public high school. At that point, I said I wanted to stay at Providence but I think it was really because I was scared that I wouldn't be able to play sports at the public school level... But then after I played in basketball summer leagues and I was on all these teams with public school girls I realized I could definitely hold my own and I really wanted to switch schools like after tenth grade... Plus, the social life seemed much more exciting at public school... You know, you've dated the one cute boy in your class and you get a little bored!

KF: So you wanted to switch schools? What happened?

KM: It was pretty much the timing in my school career. My parents were concerned about my transcripts and the whole college process was beginning so it wasn't a big deal, I didn't mind staying at Providence. But I remember feeling much more interested in the public school idea then.

KF: What about kids in your neighborhood, like, did most of them go to private or public?

KM: Ummm... Pretty mixed, a lot of kids went to Myers Park.

KF: How would you characterize Providence Day-- like, diversity wise?

KM: Overwhelmingly white, it was definitely a little bubble world. We did have some African American students and they did really well. There was no sense of the "token" black kid because any African-Americans were really high achievers, it wasn't an issue or anything.

KF: Did you have a sense of... Well, I guess a sense of being at a private school?

KM: Yeah, I definitely felt that sense of privilege, of protection-- a bubble world. I really branched out with basketball, meeting so many different people and it really raised my awareness of just how sheltered my little existence was after all.

KF: So can you talk a little more about sports and all? What did you play?

KM: I played basketball, softball, and tennis.

KF: Do you coach at Vance?

KM: Yup, I coach the girls tennis team.

KF: OK, backtracking a little-- you mentioned the summer league basketball stuff. How did that come about and what were those experiences like?

KM: I had played basketball all through school-- loved it. And once high school started, I got involved in the summer league. I was the only private school girl playing --

KF: Was that something made apparent by your teammates or. . .

KM: (Laughing) Oh, yeah, they teased me and my coach would call me "hey private school girl" on the court. Yeah it was definitely apparent. But we all spent so much time together, like tournaments would be all weekend long and it would just be us in some little motel. . . It was a really wonderful experience for me because it was so eye-opening. I mean, I had always been aware of my background and the . . . Privileged nature of my schooling, but it was different. At Providence Day, my friends lived in these gargantuan houses and had so much money and I was really accustomed to being, I guess on the lower end of the economic spectrum.

KF: Were there any, I don't know, specific instances where socio-economic differences were clearer?

KM: Well, I can remember driving to pick up my teammates. You see, I was old for my grade and I was the first one to drive so I got to be the designated driver. And I had this big white 1983 wagon that I drove all through high school, and college. At Duke I always laughed at my big clunker parked next to all the snazzy cars --

KF: Hey, cars like that have character.

KM: Definitely lots of character! So here I was this white girl cruising around in this big white car and some of my friends lived in really poor sections of town. The projects. And I remember thinking about how funny it must have looked with me in the drivers seat and my car crammed with my friends, all African-Americans, as we drove around parts of Charlotte that I had never seen, nonetheless even thought about. I think that's when I realized how much. . . Well, how important it was for me to see beyond my lifestyle and my world. I never would have been exposed to those kind of things if I hadn't been involved in basketball. And the great part is that I still keep in touch with most of these

girls, we have lunch regularly and are still so close. It was such a bonding experience.

KF: So most of your teammates were African-American and went to public schools?

KM: Um, yeah with the exception of my sister, who played but she wasn't on the traveling team so she wasn't always around.

KF: Were you . . . Well, did they ever give you a hard time about being white?

KM: Oh God, yes. They were convinced that I had to learn how to dance. I was their project, getting a white girl to really dance. And we'd be pretty much stranded at these hotels when we were at tournaments so I'd be given crash courses in dance moves. It was so funny. . .

KF: Did it work? The dance lessons?

KM: Well I thought I was a still a terrible dancer but then I'd go to the private school dances and I'd feel all cool with my new dance moves!

KF: So it's safe to say that sports were a critical part of your high school experience--

KM: Absolutely. I think there are a lot of aspects, or outlets in which you can meet different people and be exposed to different backgrounds. But for me, sports, and basketball in particular was so pivotal to increasing my awareness. And I really loved my teammates, like I said, we still keep in touch. And we used to hang out in high school, I would go to public school functions because they always seemed so much more fun than dances or whatnot at Providence. And I guess my parents were so open-minded in the way in which we were raised. . . I didn't have any preconceptions based on race but I was also aware of my limited exposure to diversity. . . Which made me enjoy the summer league and those experiences all the more.

KF: That's so interesting... David Smith and I were just talking about how crucial sports can be to integration and breaking down so many racial barriers. So did you play basketball at Duke?

KM: No, I didn't play any varsity sports at Duke... But I played tons of pick-up basketball. It was funny because I was usually the only white person not to mention the only female, but hey, I met lots of cool guys. I just felt really comfortable. And although Duke isn't terribly diverse, there was so much more exposure to various ethnicities, especially compared to high school. Actually, I remember when I was an RA my junior year I had four guys in my corner of the hall, all African-American, and they always teased me. . . I was one of their boys.

KF: Switching gears for a minute- how did you become interested in teaching?

KM: Oh, I think I always knew I wanted to teach. I really loved my biology teacher in high school, he was so interesting and it was my favorite class in school. I set out to major in bio, but after the first year of all those science classes I decided that I just wasn't into it any more. And at the same time, I was taking this history seminar about the South.

I managed to get into the class even though it was an upperclassmen class, and the professor was this little old guy with this thick Charleston accent and, oh, he was phenomenal. His lectures were captivating and I think I worked so hard because I didn't want to seem like a little freshman. So I majored in history.

KF: Did you take any education/certification classes?

KM: Well my sophomore year I had this fabulous education professor and I learned so much from her and simply adored her class. But she didn't come back the next year-- her philosophies were apparently too progressive-- so that turned me off. I knew I could get certified in grad school and I could focus on history as an undergrad.

KF: So you went to grad school--

KM: At Duke.

KF: Continuing in history. . .?

KM: Yeah, I wanted to be certified in world history. I think that's such a great subject to encourage diversity, introduce new cultures, and to give attention to often overlooked aspects. The irony is that I refused to take any economics courses and the professors were like "you're going to get your certification in social studies and you aren't going to take the economics part? I don't think so." But I got around a lot of the Econ and now the class that I teach, that I love teaching --is ELP [Economics, Law, and Party Systems].

KF: So right after Duke, you came back to Charlotte-- did you know you wanted to wanted to teach in the public school system?

KM: Yeah, well during grad school we did our student teaching in public schools-- I guess private school teaching was an option but I never really considered it. And then I knew I wanted to continue that route, you know, get away from the private school bubble thing. I was young, idealistic. . .Going to change the world and all of that. I remember the placement woman asking me if I was going to go back to the private school sector and I was like, "No way."

KF: Really?

KM: Yeah it was funny, too, because I went back to Providence Day recently, to give a speech at an assembly, and I was talking to the headmaster and he was like "So when are you going to come back to us?" and I kind of laughed because he was serious but it's just not for me. I love teaching here.

KF: Did you start at Vance right away?

KM: Well, Vance has only been open for two years. I had an interview at Myers Park and the guy who interviewed me said I reminded him so much of my aunt--she had graduated from Myers Park--and I didn't know if that was good or bad. I mean, the connection was nice but I wanted it to be my own thing. Anyway, I was dead set upon

teaching high school history but they convinced me that it would really help me to start at the middle school level and then move up. So I taught seventh and eighth grades. It was really good for me. And then positions at Vance opened up and I followed my principal here. . .

KF: How would you compare Vance and Myers Park in terms of being well integrated?

KM: Ugh, Myers Park is really different. Here, kids mix so well and the silly things like lunch rooms and class seatings are non-issues. Vance is almost 50/50 white/black, you know, and it's just worked out so well from the beginning. . .

KF: So what was Myers Park like?

KM: Well, a good example is the lunch room situation. The white kids always sat outside-- rain, snow, whatever, they ate their lunches on the outside picnic tables. Always. And then the same with the black kids. Even if it was the most perfectly beautiful day outside, they stayed in. It was just frustrating. And the socio-economic differences were really apparent, affected a lot.

KF: Well, at Vance, do you notice like segregated groups within your students? Mr. Smith was talking about how he has to assign seats in order to prevent kids from sitting within racial groups-- is that the case with you?

KM: I don't always use assigned seating, well at least after I learn their names. Actually, I notice that in my ninth grade classes that on the first day kids will be sitting by middle school and that could mean that four black boys and three white girls are sitting in one corner talking because they're all from the same middle school.

KF: What makes Vance so different from Myers Park?

KM: Gosh.... Well, the thing is , you can bus and you can have all these different.... It's hard to articulate--

KF: Kinda like the difference between integration and desegregation?

KM: Yes. Myers Park was not well integrated and a lot of that was the result of such varying socioeconomic backgrounds. I mean you have these incredibly wealthy white kids and then African American kids from the projects and you have these barriers from the beginning. Vance has its newness as a real plus. There's not any history, like being a black school or a white school and it's been so diverse from the beginning. And we have this parent involvement program that is just phenomenal--

KF: A parent involvement program?

KM: Yeah, it allows kids to come to Vance if their parents can put in X number of hours a month to the school--it could be volunteering in the library, tutoring, helping chaperone a dance, etc. And it's so interesting to see who's in this program. Like you'd think that it would be kids whose parents had the means and the time to volunteer but a few months ago I had to hand out letters to kids that were in the program and it was

awesome to see who was in it-- I was definitely surprised to see a complete range of students, in terms of race and economic background.

KF: That sounds so great.

KM: I'm really pleased with the success so far. . .

KF: OK, as a teacher, what kinds of efforts do you have to make in order to promote good race relations? Like, do you do certain things. . .

KM: Well, yeah. You have to be really aware of the differences in background. This actually transcends racial borders, it's more a matter of some students having more than others. So, like, if I assign a project that involves poster board and markers, I try and allot class time so that the kids can use the school's materials. Because a lot of these kids don't have posterboard, they can't ask their parents to take them to the drugstore. I mean, I remember my mom taking me on the big school supply trip every fall and buying every little thing I deemed necessary for school. But that's just not the case for so many kids. . . And if I give a project or something and a student needs scissors, for example, I am really lenient about loaning them for a night, I just say "make sure you bring them back by tomorrow" but it's really not a big deal and it makes the kids much more comfortable. And overall, I guess it's just a matter of being fair. It's just easy to be colorblind in the classroom and set a good example. But Vance is a really relaxed and encouraging environment over all.

KF: What about tracking-- like, is there a significant difference in terms of the racial composition of, like say an honors class versus a lower level class?

KM: Yeah, there's definitely some difference. But I don't know, it's weird because I absolutely love my regular classes. Before I started teaching I thought I would prefer the advanced kids and it's not that I don't enjoy like my honors history class, but the feeling of accomplishment is so intense and rewarding with my regular classes. They are pretty even in terms of black/white... But for example, I don't know if Laura has told you about the kid who brought us carnations last week?

KF: Oh yeah she was so excited about that, some positive feedback!

KM: Right, so this boy has failed ELP three times. One of the administrators asked me if I would take him in my class this year, you know, she gave me a warning about his record. But he is making an A in my class and I am just so happy because it's not like I'm being easy on him, he's just working so hard and he totally understands everything in class. So I told the vice principal that she can send me any more kids just like him! When he graduates, I am definitely going to let out a big "Yahoo" and scream. He's like my favorite. Anyway, there is generally an even spread of diversity in my classes, which is really nice.

KF: What about the tennis team? What's that like in terms of like race?

KM: Well last year was our first year, obviously so we had a really small team. But of the eight girls, we had three African Americans so that was great The team was so close, I

mean, the small size was really conducive to bonding. But this year, I don't have any African-American girls. One graduated, one didn't have the grades, and one decided not to play. And it was hard this year because we had this huge turnout for tryouts, and two black girls tried out but they'd never held a racket before. I think they really only came out because I'd had them in class last year and they weren't particularly surprised or disappointed, I think, to be cut... But I still felt badly because I loved the diversity of last year. Actually, it's really interesting because some of the best players in North Carolina are African Americans so when we went to the state tournament this year, there were tons of black players and I was thinking how cool it was that my girls like thought that this is the way tennis is. Just because it's so stereotypically a country-club sport. And they really don't hold any of those old stereotypes just because of what they see at tournament and all.

KF: I'm sorry, tell me your time constraints-- I know you have a class soon.

KM: No, it's okay, I just have to meet a student in about five minutes. I'm sorry to have to cut it short here

KF: It's fine, you've gone through most all of my questions here on my list anyway. But I guess I just want to ask you, how you see your past experience as affecting your current teaching? And do you think back to your own schooling at any time during your teaching? Like any special teachers?

KM: Well that bio teacher I mentioned earlier was really inspirational and so enthusiastic, interesting. I think about his teaching styles. And I really enjoyed my mom's classes even though I would sit so quietly in the back since she was my mother after all-- but she was really calm and relaxed in her style and I try to emulate that.

KF: What about in terms of how you teach such a diverse student body?

KM: I think it goes back to being open-minded and having had such positive experiences with sports and learning at a fairly young and most definitely impressionable age that these racial stereotypes and barriers exist when you perpetuate them. I don't know, I think we've got a ways to go but I feel atleast from personal experience that things are starting to be on the right track in schools like this.

KF: Thanks so much, you've been wonderful and so helpful.

KM: I feel like I just told all these stories and babbled--

KF: Definitely not, it's been awesome.

KM: Well please call me if you need anything else, I'd be happy to help you out.