

Interview

with

MINNIE FORTE

February 10, 2005

by Gerrelyn Patterson

Transcribed by Chris O'Sullivan

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

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Transcript – Minnie Forte

Interviewee: Minnie Forte
Interviewer: Gerrelyn Patterson
Interview Date: February 10, 2005
Location: Durham, North Carolina

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

GERRELYN PATTERSON: This is an interview with Minnie Forte in Durham, North Carolina. It is February 10, 2005 and we are in her office at North Carolina Central University. The interviewer is Gerrelyn Patterson and this is part of the Spencer Grants Project on school desegregation in the South and will be used as part of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The tape number is MF21005. Ms. Forte, can you tell me when you attended Hillside High School?

MINNIE FORTE: I attended Hillside High School from 1964 through 1967.

GP: So what was it like to be a student?

MF: Well really, let me just tell you. The class of 1967 was the class that actually spent the longest time at Hillside because as Sheppard Middle School was being built, we didn't have a place to go. So they let the seventh grade of Whitted use their annex at Hillside, so actually when I was in the seventh grade I was actually a student in the Hillside High School building.

GP: Oh, I didn't know that!

MF: Yes, so we used Hillside High School in the seventh grade. I went there in the seventh grade and I also went there in the ninth grade, tenth, eleventh and twelfth, so we actually had five years in classes at Hillside. Now what was your question again?

GP: What was it like?

MF: It was comparable to nothing else in my educational experience. From the time I was a little girl, just knowing that I would one day go to the thrill on the hill was the highlight of my teenage years. Being able to say I went to Hillside High School--. My mother graduated in the class of 1938 from Hillside so it was a legacy that my family continued. My brothers went there and therefore I couldn't wait to be a part of that experience. There was such a rich history. The people in my church, the people in my community and the teachers that I saw on a regular basis were all Hillside graduates. My dentist, my doctor and my pediatrician were all Hillside High graduates, so it was the ultimate--. My librarian was a Hillside graduate! () want to be a professional and know that I could get whatever I needed from this high school experience.

GP: So basically what I am hearing is the legacy and the history of the community-you were immersed in it.

MF: Right they were intertwined with everything that I knew. From Hillside to being productive, from my church to my school to civic organizations, it was all involved in that. Everything went back to the question about what high school you graduated from and plus it was the only high school for African Americans so we did not have any other school available. Everybody that was black that lived in the city of Durham went to Hillside High School.

GP: Now was this still the Hillside that was right across from Central?

MF: Still the Hillside that was right there.

GP: Did you live in this community, did you live near Hillside?

MF: Three blocks from it. I was able to walk to Hillside.

GP: What about people who lived in Wall town and the East End, how did they get to school?

MF: They had to catch the city buses. We didn't have the yellow school buses. The city buses brought students in to Hillside from every corner of Durham. As long as you were in the city limits and you were African American, during my time, you had to go to Hillside. So that's why we had the best band, the best football team, the best basketball team and an excellent track team-everything was spectacular. It was the ultimate.

GP: Were you in any of those things?

MF: Sorry to say I could not become a cheerleader. I had a big mouth and lots of school spirit, but I was not athletic enough. I couldn't become a cheerleader, but I was in the Pep Band. I chose to do other things. I was the layout editor for the yearbook. I was a writer for the Hillside Chronicle, a member of student government and a member of the National Honor Society. Let me see, what else did I do? I think that was it.

GP: That was a lot. Tell me about some of your favorite teachers.

MF: Wanda Garrett was my Speech teacher and she was the impetus for me to become a Speech teacher. First of all she was eloquent in her speech, she was always prepared and she inspired us to speak well. We were not allowed to be lazy in our speech. We could not drift off into what we now call Ebonics or colloquialisms, she expected us to speak well and that was the standard. The expectation was there and we had to rise to

it. Plus, she looked good. There was a standard of dress and she came to school dressed like I wanted to be, a teacher that was well groomed.

GP: Were there any others that had an impact on you?

MF: Yes, of course there were. There was Coach Blunt. Even though I wasn't an athlete, my close male friends were. The standards that Coach Blunt set, not only for the athletes but for those of us who were observers, there was a decorum that you had to represent. There was a way you had to behave, even as an observer of a track meet or a football game. There was again an expectation that we had to meet. The comradery that we had with our professors was unparalleled. As a student growing up in all-black schools, it was something that I expected. I expected to be able to talk to my teachers and have that kind of relationship with them. Prop Alston.

GP: Prop or Prof?

MF: Prof, but we called him in the vernacular which is Prop. I never knew it was Prof until I saw it written, we just called him Prop.

GP: Someone I interviewed said they called him Prop because he was so old you had to prop him up.

MF: I never heard that. I only went by what I heard and so I always thought it was a P at the end. As I saw it written I saw it was Prof, to mean professor. He was feared and loved. Francis Schooler wasn't feared, she was the Dean of girls and that's what we knew, these were our Deans. The Dean of boys was Prop Alston and anytime you were out of order he would put you in check whether you were on campus or off campus.

GP: How did he do that?

MF: One time my friends and I decided to go to the College Grill to play hooky.

GP: On NC 55?

MF: No, it was right here. It was called Paul's Grill right on Lawson Street, not even a block from the school. We were sitting in there having grilled cheese sandwiches and when Prop Alston came in he rallied all of us around him. He said get out of here, go to my office! We were fearful; we ran back to school and went to his office. He made us clean the building. We were not suspended, he did not suspend us. You had to do degrading work like wash the trophy case so other students could see you doing that. Scrub the hall, mop the gym and go outside and pick up trash. Those were the kinds of things he would make us do, the kinds of things that were demeaning to us.

GP: So how was it that he was still loved?

MF: Because you knew that he did because he wanted you to be better. He had an expectation and you wanted to meet it, you did not want to fall out of his graces. You wanted him to respect you. He always dressed in a suit and a tie, always. He had certain expectations about how we as students could dress and look. The way you wore your hair for example, men had three C's-comb, conk or cut it. You couldn't just come to school with your hair done just any way; there was an expectation in your physical essence. I think about how are kids are now and how we allow them to do just about anything they want with their hair and their dress, well when they come to NCCU the expectation is that they are going to change that behavior. It is not allowed, the same thing they had at Hillside. Girls had to dress a certain way and you would be sent home if you did not adhere to that, it was an unwritten dress code. It was unwritten but spoken. There was an expectation for you in terms of your life, where they wanted you to go regardless of

where you came from and regardless of your background. There was an expectation that everybody had of you.

GP: What I am hearing you say is that was verbalized but it was also unspoken as well.

MF: Unspoken, you knew when you walked in there that there was a way for you to behave.

GP: So basically it was the culture of the school.

MF: The culture of the school.

GP: Are there other messages or other important things to know about the culture of the school?

MF: That you could be all that you wanted to be, there were no limits. Your success was unlimited. There were people there that would help you gain and rise to whatever level you wanted to go, regardless of your resources and your background.

GP: Some of the research that I am doing has painted Durham as black Wall Street, everybody had money and everybody was upper middle class. Was that the case?

MF: No. No, because like I said our culture was students from all around, from every corner. We had students from the Bottom and we had students from every public housing development, so we had students from meager means as well as the children of college professors and others that were considered maybe the black middle class at Hillside.

GP: Do you think that everybody got the same message?

MF: Everybody got the same message, it was there. I am not going to say that everybody was always treated the same because there could still have been bias. People

who were in vocational education were the ones who built the houses that line Lawson Street close to Hillside. Mr. Thornton-

GP: The houses back behind-

MF: Yes, those houses that are behind on Lawson Street, adjacent to Hillside High School, adjacent to the track, Hillside High School students built those homes. The brick Masonry classes were taught by Thomas Tucker and the carpentry classes were taught by Mr. Thornton. These men were graduates of North Carolina A&T. People brought their cars for the auto mechanics classes. The men that I know right now that are perhaps engineers started in drafting classes down in our vocational education department. Some of the men that I know now that are business owners started with vocational education or distributive education classes right here at Hillside. Those opportunities were not as many people thought that it was a class difference, whether you were college prep or vocational. The end result is where they went with the knowledge they gained.

GP: What I am hearing is that there was something there at Hillside for everybody.

MF: Yes, for everybody.

GP: Regardless of your background.

MF: Regardless of your background.

GP: Are there other things that you think people should know that makes the school so unique. Things that it has done for the community or why it seems to stir up such passion from those that went there?

MF: Hillside High School was our school; anything that important to the community somehow was also important or started at Hillside High School. The band, the Durham community supported Hillside band wherever it traveled, so that passion was always there. It was a benchmark in terms of success, if you made Hillside High School's band then we knew that you were a spectacular band student. If you led the band as a majorette or as a drum major, even to this day people who were drum majors or majorettes back many years ago still talk about it. They still come back to band alumni--. So we are still [fighting?] hard because that's a part of our school. Our football teams, if you were a member of the team it was a sense of pride. The '43 Hornets, those guys that are in our hall of fame are still celebrated. You just need to go to a Hillside game now and see the number of older people there whether their children or grandchildren are present, they still come back to see the games. My grandson is a drummer-

GP: Is he on the drum line?

MF: Yes and he had thought about choosing Southern High School because they were gaining a reputation as perhaps a rival to Hillside's band. Needless to say my daughter and I quickly told him that he had no choice, he could not choose the school he wanted to go to. He had to go to Hillside. He was afraid he wasn't going to make the drum line at Hillside, and he didn't make snare drummer the first time out. He played tenor drum on the drum line. This year as a tenth grader he is a snare drummer. He has been a part of blue steel and is proud of that. He is a quarterback and he is proud of that. There is a pride that runs through that school that is a connector to the Durham community. Other schools are building that, but Hillside will always have that. Our blood runs blue and white.

GP: A couple other general questions. Whenever I interview people I feel the passion, the blue and white. Mine's getting blue. You went to school from 1964 to 1967 and Brown vs. Board was in 1954, did Hillside change as a result of the integration?

MF: I had a white teacher Ruth Gordon. I had two white teachers, Ruth Gordon was my English teacher and Ms. Scagnelli was my Psychology teacher. This was the first time Hillside's staff had become integrated, so that was a big thing for me. We did not have any white students, but we did have white teachers.

GP: You didn't have any white students in 1967?

MF: No, we had no white students but we did have white teachers.

GP: Was there talk about white students coming?

MF: Not during my time.

GP: If you had wanted to go to Durham High could you have gone to Durham High?

MF: I don't even know because it never even crossed my mind. I never felt inferior at all and I never questioned the quality of the education that I received. I knew that I was getting the best education that was available to me and I knew that I could be all that I could be. I wasn't worried about going to college and I wasn't worried about the SAT exam, I scored well. I knew that I was well equipped to do whatever I wanted to do. From my class, my friends went to Duke, they were National Merit Scholars and every college throughout the gamut, and we did what we needed to do. So, I never felt that I was being short changed. Whatever Durham High had I didn't miss. Having a white person sitting next to me in class didn't validate me, and not having one didn't invalidate me. I don't feel that my white teachers taught me any differently than John

Gattis did in my English class, because he certainly prepared me. What Ms. Willis did in English class was teach us advanced grammar, so-

GP: So do you think that there are things that schools like Hillside did that were lost once they became integrated?

MF: Definitely. As a member of the Board of Education, I tell people that diversity is an issue that somehow has gotten off track with what it should do. Exposing children to different people is always great, but to think that by that mere exposure that is somehow going to increase their educational opportunity is not realistic. Brown vs. Board of Education meant equal access. You can be in an all-black school as long as you have equal access, equal treatment and receive the same quality of education. What's lost with our schools now is because we are not culturally sensitized to each other in terms of cultures. We have many teachers who are afraid of African American students so therefore they cannot teach them if they are afraid of them. What happens is that they don't understand the culture, they don't care to understand it and they are so fearful that they push them out of the schools. The high suspension rates and high drop out rates show that our children are not being challenged--not being taught and the expectations are low. Those are the things that are lost due to integration. There is an expectation that a black child has to have, and they need to know that they can meet it and that there is somebody that will help them meet it and will not take less than that. If they know it, they will rise to the bar. I think what has happened is that in our schools the expectations have been lowered for African American students as a mind set. They feed them Pablum when they should be on solid food.

GP: Do you think that there are things that we gained?

MF: I do. I think we gained access to a lot of things. I think our children have better equipment and better facilities-[phone rings]-exposure to other people and another way of processing information.

GP: Do you think school integration could have been done better?

MF: Oh certainly, I think if we had thought about what we were actually doing, the whole process of integration rather than just taking a bus load of kids over to another neighborhood. That didn't achieve anything; I think we could have had choice. People need to want to be in those places and we need to have teachers that want to teach those children. First of all I think we have to deal with desire instead of trying to legislate morality, we can't do that. We set many children up for failure because it was a Federal mandate.

GP: Do you have any thoughts on what schools can do to better educate black students now?

MF: We have to have training, and when I say diversity training I mean training where you actually have teachers, students, administrators and staff go through the same training of cultural competency and sensitivity. So we can understand what we come with, because understanding the culture is the first step. How we are different and respecting and recognizing that difference is important. Part of that training has to be building a way of responsible communication to all people, and it has to be a part of our teacher education programs and also a part of our ongoing staff development. It cannot be a hit and miss; it must be something that Boards of Education look at as a mainstay in their program and a requirement in order for teachers to stay. Some of those who need to be filtered out should be.

GP: Last question, what do you think is important for us to learn about the legacy of Hillside?

MF: First of all that it is just that, that legacy is important. Tearing down that school was such a painful thing for most Hillside graduates. I have two bricks at my house. It was tearing down the memory, but also the fight of the Durham community to know that we would still have Hillside was important. Hillside will never die, that pride will never die. That legacy is as much in the Hillside graduates as their birthright. The thrill on the hill.

GP: Okay, thank you Ms. Forte.

END OF INTERVIEW

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