

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

LILLIE FINCHER
October 29, 2004

WILLOUGHBY ANDERSON: Today is Friday, October 29th. I am here at the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. This is Willoughby Anderson interviewing Ms. Lillie Fincher for the Southern Oral History Program, Long Civil Rights Movement Project on school desegregation in Birmingham. So if you'll please say your name for me and we'll see how you're picking up on the mic.

LILLIE FINCHER: Okay, my name is Lillie M.H. Fincher.

WA: Okay. So let's begin. We do these interviews sort of in a life history format. So if we could start by talking a little bit about your childhood and growing up in Birmingham and your educational experience and then we'll jump to when you started your teaching career and your experiences in the Birmingham schools.

LF: I was born and reared in Birmingham. In fact, I was born in the same community in which I live now. So that had to be a long time. The only difference is I was born in the north side of the town, now I live in the south side of the town. I grew up in Birmingham and I went to parochial schools. I did not go to public schools, twelve years in parochial schools. I don't wear blue skirts and white blouses now because of that experience. However, I think it, I think it paved me the way for me to do some other things because the nuns were quite good. I had no sisters and brothers so I grew up in a household of adults, which maybe gave me an opportunity to do some things in Birmingham city town that other children didn't do. For example, I had to go pay the light bill. I was riding the bus when I was five years old by myself. I was going to town paying bills at seven, light bill, water bill. It was three of them and they were right in an

area on First Avenue. So even if you dropped them all in the slot they would sort of sort them out and send them to the right places.

I guess I have some good memories of downtown Birmingham and I have some not so good memories of downtown Birmingham. My mom had to sort of force her way into getting the right to vote in Birmingham during that time. Even though she was an educator she had to demean herself and put on a maid's outfit to go down and register to vote and her co-workers went down in their work clothes, teachers, and they didn't pass. She went down in my grandmother's maid outfit and used the language of an uneducated person. She got the right to vote. So I learned a little about that at that time.

I also had this eating thing downtown where you could not eat. You could not go. My mom would say meet me under the clock at Loveman's. That was the meeting place. And I'd meet her under the clock at Loveman's and she'd say you do not go to the basement to get a hot dog or get anything. If you are hungry eat a candy bar that you can get from across the street from the school. She wouldn't allow that. And then I'd go into a five and ten store and they didn't want to wait on you. I mean they didn't want to wait on me at all. And so one day I was in there trying to buy some lipstick, looking at some lipstick, and this little white girl comes up and she says, what color do you want, black. And I said if you've got it I'd like to have it. And she walked away and left me standing there but you know they always thought that if you were black you were going to be stealing something or something of that sort. And I told a man, he said can I help you. I said I'm waiting on my black lipstick. And I didn't go into Kresses anymore after that.

But all in all, when you are young you don't really know a lot of things. You don't know that you're poor. You don't know that there is something on the other side of

the coin. So I didn't know these things. I knew from the jump street that I was going to go to college. I mean that was a given. I knew, didn't know where, but I knew I was going. So my childhood was pretty decent in a closed world. When I traveled to New York with my mom, she took me to New York, first day we got to New York there was a race riot.

WA: When was that?

LF: I guess I was about fourteen. But anyway, there was a race riot and we walked in Harlem and we saw broken glass and we saw all of this stuff and my godmother said it was a race riot last night. It's a good thing you all didn't come yesterday. It was my first idea that even in a black community there were those persons in the North who didn't like blacks, New York. And then when we went to California, I was sixteen when my mom and I went to California, and we saw perils of racism in California. But it was in California when my mom went to the University of California I saw people, white people, but I knew I wanted to be a college graduate. I knew those, they didn't go like they go today. They didn't have on jeans and over book shirts. This lady had on a skirt and a blouse and she had her books. She had some cute little flat shoes and she looked like the typical, what I perceived to be the college student that I would want to be. So that's about my childhood.

WA: Okay. And so you went on to college?

LF: Oh, yeah, I graduated from parochial school and went to Talladega. That's how I met Odessa [Woolfolk]. We went to Talladega together. But I didn't stay at Talladega. However, as I look back on it, I learned more about the aesthetics of life at Talladega in that one year than I learned wherever else I went.

WA: What do you mean, aesthetics?

LF: The finer things of life, the artistic things of life. I could recognize a design right now, you know. I learned my first steps in photography. So even today when I go and take these film to the shop, I tell them about the density, what I want them to have, and I tell them how I want to sort of pull it up and they don't have to run it over and mix the formula like I used to have to do. So that's why I get good pictures off of cheap film.

But I left Talladega and went to West Virginia, a whole new ballgame. State school, number one. It was amazing some of the things that they did at a state school that they did not do at a historically black college. So I knew I had to stay focused and in staying focused I said okay, I spent one year at Talladega. It gave me three years. So I spent two years at West Virginia and I graduated that summer so I still had another year to go and then I went to New York and got a master's degree. Why did I go to New York to get a master's degree? My mom went to New York to get a master's degree. State of Alabama in 1950s, 40s, and 60s did not give master's degrees to black people. They would pay part of your tuition if you went to Columbia University in New York. Being the kind of family that I'm from my mom said oh, no, we don't need that money. I mean we were poor as church mice. So we went to NYU there and I got a master's from NYU. My mom's master's is from NYU. Then I went to work. She said that's your four years. You've got to get out of my pocketbook.

I went to work. I worked in Annapolis, Maryland, still, I guess I was about twenty, still not focused on civil rights. Remember, when we said we're going to go to vote and the principal said well, if you want to fine, if you don't, you don't have to. I was a transit so they wouldn't let me register to vote. However, that was Annapolis, the

capital of Maryland. There was this side and there was this side. So one day the principal came to me and he said Miss Harris, you have not been to church since you've been in Annapolis. I said okay, no problem. Got up Sunday morning, went to the one Catholic Church in the city. Monday they called me in and told me that if I didn't want to mix my religion I didn't have to go to church. That was the only Catholic Church in the city. It was white. But the message got back. They never bothered me again about going to church but I had my priest in Birmingham to call the priest in Annapolis to let them know that I'm not going to tear up your church and we didn't at that time drink from the cup so it was okay. I went a couple of more times and then I decided to spend my weekends away from Annapolis. I stayed in Annapolis three years. I needed to get tenure on my own. I just needed that. I needed that for validation. So that's my schooling. I got some more credits from UAB and I went to a lot of schools. I went to the University of Chicago, UAB, A&M, Alabama State.

WA: So when did you return to Birmingham and start teaching here?

LF: I came back to Birmingham in the 50s. My mom got sick and like I told you, I'm an only child. My mom got sick and I came back here and they didn't give me a job. So they had to put me on the supply list. And I got some calls but while I was away I had saved enough money to stay off from work for a year without going in my mama's pocketbook and in that September they did give me a job.

WA: And what year was that?

LF: Fifty-seven I guess, 1957. They give me a job at what was Western High School. Let me tell you. I went to Lassiter's 1957. Lassiter's is a school supply place, was a school supply place. I walked in, my mom had told me that I could go and get

some school supplies because we had to make the rooms blah, blah, blah. I stood up in Lassiter's for forty-five to an hour, forty-five minutes to an hour. People would come in and they would wait on these people and they wouldn't wait on me. But I knew I had to have it and by the time they were closing at four-thirty they decided to wait on me. And I had gotten there, because school had not started, I had gotten there about two-thirty. Sure did. You know, I'm still saying, maybe this is what they do in Alabama. This was not like it in Annapolis. Annapolis was so much more advanced than Birmingham because the Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education, 1954, Annapolis started the process of integrating. They said we'll do, it'll take us twelve years. We'll do a grade at a time. So we're going to start with kindergarten and then we're going to go first, second, third. However, they didn't do it year by year because after 1959 I think they just did it. They just did it all and as a result the school that I taught was no longer a high school because I taught at the black Bates High School. And from what I hear, from what I have read, and from my friends that I have there, there was no longer a Bates High School.

WA: So they moved all of the black students into the white schools?

LF: All to the black kids to the white schools and yeah, that's what they did. But you know, difficult.

WA: So you started teaching at West End High School?

LF: No.

WA: No, Westin?

LF: Western, that's here in Birmingham, Western. It is now called Jackson-Olin.

When I started teaching there Mr. Jackson was the principal and I thought he was – I don't know what I thought he was. I know he would come in and we'd have meetings

after school and he'd say things like the Birmingham Board of Ed wants us to do so and so and so and so. And superintendent said so and so and so and so. And now I have told you what they said. You know what they said. Now listen to P.D. because this is what I want you to do. And it was so, he was so, he was such an authority that you just loved working for him. I have never heard even posthumously, anything negative about P.D., P.D. Jackson.

So I enjoyed working for him but then the civil rights movement started, got underway, and Reverend Shuttlesworth lived over there in Cottageville and I know you know this, his son was about to go to high school and his son would have to pass Phillips High School, which was an all-white school to go to Parker. The bond money had already been allocated for a school to be called Eastern High School for Blacks, which would have been Western High School on this end, Eastern High School over here. The money had been allocated. But Fred Shuttlesworth said I'm going to take my child to Phillips, not send him to Parker. That would have been Western, then Parker here, Allman here, and the Eastern High School here. So with the money that had been allocated, and you know that Reverend Shuttlesworth got beat up and all of that. You know that history. But the Birmingham Board of Education broke the law because they took some of the money that had been allocated for Eastern High School and in a matter of two months they threw up Carver High School and they put it right in Shuttlesworth's back door so he would have no excuse for sending his child to Phillips High School. They did that in 1959. My mom worked over there and we all called it Shuttlesworth School. We didn't call it Carver High School for a long time. We called it Shuttlesworth School because his kids had to go to Shuttlesworth. That excuse was knocked out. They

put that school over there in a swamp area, one long corridor here and the office and that kind of stuff.

But the next year they put the Hayes High School out there, which was to be Eastern. Hayes High School was built in 1960. It was the first public building named for a living person in Birmingham. Well, basically, in the state of Alabama because the guideline said that you had to be dead so many years to have a building named for you or something like that. But Hayes was the first school in the Birmingham city school system named for a living person. Since that time they have named schools for other persons who are still living. Giving it the Hayes name, Dr. Hayes who was still living – you have to know who he was too. He was the director of Negro schools. That meant that every black teacher hired in the Birmingham school system had to come through him. He gave the okay to hire them. So if you got a school named in his honor, what does he do? He picks, he hand picks, all twenty-two people that he's sending to Hayes High School and one of the twenty-two was me. And I cried. I cried because I didn't want to leave P.D. [Laughter] You know, I didn't want to leave P.D. I wanted to stay at Western High School. I wanted to stay with Mr. Jackson. Dr. Hayes didn't say a word. He just called my mama and said I've done what I thought was best for the school. That's how I got out to Hayes.

That was 1960. Hayes had one long building, a cafeteria, and a library because half the money had gone to Shuttlesworth School. Okay, we got to Hayes in 1960. I always like to say this. Anybody who's anybody graduated from Hayes. [Laughter] At one time I think Priscilla asked me, she said, did everybody graduate from Hayes in this city. And I said everybody who's anybody graduated from Hayes. So we went on and

we became an institution. We started out in the ninth and tenth grade and then we added eleventh and twelfth grade the next year and our first graduating class was 1962. In that 1962 class we had a lot of great kids who turned out to be real good because we told them they were pace setters. We would not be bulldogs or tigers or something. The principal, A.C. Dickerson, who is ninety-some years old now, said we'll be pace setters and then we'll be eagles and we'll soar like eagles. And so if you get that pace setter spirit, you know that you have to be good and if you've got twenty-two teachers who have been tapped by the man that the school is named for, you got to be good. And that's what we did. We used to say we could run that school, the teachers, without a principal and we could do that.

But in 1963 when they were really forcing school integration, they were really forcing school integration, I was on my way to Hayes one day. Remember, think back before your time, cars didn't have push button windows. You had to roll them up. I stopped at the light by Sloss and I saw all of these hooded people and they were pushing stuff because they didn't want, see there were some whites in that area too, they didn't want integrated schools. And here that lady got her head into my window and my window touched [her head] and scared me to death. I thought they were going to kill me. They were pushing papers. It was the first time in my life that I had been that close to somebody in a real Ku Klux Klan outfit, saying that they did not want integration and stuff and pushing papers. She got the paper in there. I don't know what I did with it. I probably threw it away when I got to school but I went on to school. For one full week every major road that led down First Avenue North, that's the way I had to come or either come in from Woodlawn, I had always thought that the Klan lived in Midfield. I had

always thought that they lived in Midfield and so to meet them there and we would have these little meetings and we would say we would not be intimidated, why we would not be intimidated. And then the Board of Ed by 1967 decided that they were going to move some teachers from Hayes High School. Oh, let me go back up. Dr. Hayes retired in 1966 so he was no longer the person who hired the black teachers. He was no longer in that position. He was retired from the school system and Dr. Matheson was in his place. But they decided that they, about '67 or '68, I don't know what year it was, they were going to send some teachers to Woodlawn and to Huffman High School. Those were white schools.

WA: And was this the first wave of black teachers going into white schools?

LF: This is going to be the first wave of black teachers going into, right, and my year may be off one or two but it's not much. And the math head, the English head, department heads from Hayes, math head, English head, science head, social studies head.

WA: Were you social studies head?

LF: Yeah.

WA: Okay.

LF: They had us going to, I was supposed to go to Huffman.

WA: Okay.

LF: And Josephine, the math head, was supposed to go to Huffman. Doris was supposed to go to Huffman, science head. But our principal now is named J.B. Norman and J.B. Norman said do you all, he pulled us in, he said do you all want to go. I need you. We said no, we don't want to go. And he said what they're doing is pulling my best

teachers and sending them there and sending me their worst teachers, because the whites were having the same problem in their schools. They were taking whites and sending them to black schools. And J.B. said they're taking out best teachers and sending them and they're sending us their worst teachers. And he wasn't being negative. What he was saying is they were taking his trained teachers, his teachers with experience and sending him young people right out of Alabama or Auburn or some place and they didn't have that. So I said well, I'm not going. Josephine said well, I'm not going either. Well, what do we do? I said I'm not going to do nothing. I'm just not going. I think that that came from the fact that Dr. Hayes was not dead. He was still alive and he would back me up.

But I also had defied the first principal at Hayes because I started out teaching English and I didn't want to teach English anymore and so I got my contract changed to social studies, to history. That's what it was, to history. So when school started he did not change me on the schedule. He had me for English and he said you go and hold those classes for English and I'll find you a history class. I said I'm going to sit right here until you find me a history class. I sat there for a week. I would not hold an English class. I would not teach an English class. I would not sit in an English class. I sat right there in the library or the office for a week until he found me a history class because my contract said history. So I had defied a principal and gotten away with it, [Laughter], much to my surprise.

But so when he said you all want to go, I said no, we aren't going. Mr. Norman, J.B. Norman, has a legacy of being so bad, so this. Give him credit. He told the Board of Education these four will not go and I'm behind them. And that's why we didn't have to go. We did have to lose some teachers. We did have to lose some teachers, out of each

department we had to lose one. The department heads did not select that person. The principal did because he thought that he could stand up and defend his selection. And that's why I did not go. I did not integrate those schools. The four of us stayed at Hayes until we retired.

WA: And when was that?

LF: Josephine retired first and I retired from the school system, well, I didn't stay at Hayes. I'll back up. I stayed at Hayes until I was sent down to the central office.

WA: Okay, and why was that?

LF: I was sent down to the central office in '88.

WA: Okay.

LF: Okay. So I stayed at Hayes all of that time. What I did see, let me tell you this. About 1972, maybe '72, around in that time, I had to go to the television studios in Phillips and that's where some records you had to go (). I had to go to Phillips with this other teacher and I said to her, we got there about three o'clock. I saw all of these black kids coming out of Phillips and I said to her, what, do they let the white kids out first. Phillips High School had turned almost completely black.

WA: By 1970?

LF: By 1971 or '72, yeah, almost completely. So where did those people from Central City go? I don't know. And Florence said to me, she said, I don't know. I said well, looked at my watch, I said it's just about five minutes after three. All the kids that were coming out, they were all black kids. What I lived to see was the system go from a two race system to a one race system and now it's coming back to a Spanish speaking system and black system. And I just don't know. I don't know why that is. I don't know

how can this white family get out of government projects so quickly and go. So they're not questioning the financial institutions of Birmingham who would supply the money for them to get these little houses. All of them didn't go to trailer parks. But anyway, that, we did have, you got another question?

WA: Go ahead.

LF: We did have a couple of white kids to come to Hayes.

WA: That was going to be my next question.

LF: Okay, yeah, we did have, I know we did not have ten the whole while I was there but we did have some. We had one little guy who would come and I don't remember his name. But it was during that period when you wore long hair. It was almost like that, what was it? What's the name of that period that went through with the wild music?

WA: Disco with the long shaggy hair?

LF: With the long hair, right. Well, this little guy had long hair, very quiet. Number one, didn't want to be there. Was in my class. Followed all of my rules, in on time, don't leave if I'm not here. If the bell rings and I'm not here, don't leave. I'll be back. I didn't go home. The principal wanted him to cut his hair and he would send for him every day and tell him he had to cut his hair. And I asked him, I just stopped him one day and I said you don't want to cut your hair, do you. He said no, ma'am. I said and you can't go anywhere else and you got to stay here, right. He said yes, ma'am. I said, well let me tell you something. It's your hair. If your mama is happy and your family is happy and you are happy with it, keep it. He said you really mean that. I said yeah, I really mean that. I said this is your personal stuff. It was down to mid-ways his

back and it was thick. It was not straight. It was out this wide. But that's what he wanted and he graduated with that hair. [Laughter] He graduated with that hair. We had, it's about six white kids who graduated from Hayes.

WA: And did they live in the area so they went to Hayes or they weren't bused in or anything?

LF: Yeah, they had to, yeah. They weren't bused in. They had to bus in black kids to Huffman High School. I mean I lived right there on the north side, on the south side of (). My next-door neighbor was bussed to Huffman. They had to leave home at six fifteen to get to school in time. But these kids lived in the neighborhood. Had one little comic there. He was such a cute little comic. Every variety show or something like that, he wanted to be on it. He'd come to me and say Miss Fincher, I want to be on it. I got some jokes this time. I got jokes. I said okay because he was so tiny but he was so jovial and so happy. We all loved him. We had one girl. I remember she was a big girl. I mean she was a big girl but she was the most helpful person around so we didn't bother that.

Now on the other hand, the white teachers who came to Hayes, the white teachers who came to Hayes, some of them were good and some of them were not. And those who were not, Mr. Norman got rid of them just like that.

WA: And these were teachers that were put in by the school system?

LF: Right.

WA: And by not good meaning they weren't teaching?

LF: Well, first of all, colleges don't teach you the subject matter. You get the subject matter when you've got children in front of you and you're studying at home.

They couldn't do the discipline. If you cannot discipline, you can't teach. I mean that's a given. If you've got to constantly be saying be quiet, sit down, when you going to get up there and start teaching. You can't do that. So he would get rid of them. Then we had one girl who was an Egyptian and she wore an Egyptian skirt with no slip. [Laughter] And Mr. Norman sent for her and she said I walk around like this all the time. He said in Egypt but not in Birmingham. [Laughter] So she refused to change. And then I had one Jewish girl in my department who felt too much pressure working with black children. It was too nerve wracking and came to me and she said I just can't take it anymore. She says I'm just going to quit. I mean she left the school system because she could not take it. I had one guy who just retired this year. He stayed in the school system, bless to his heart. He was at Hayes. He was doing fair to middling. I thought he was a good history teacher but when he got ready to get married he came to me and he said, Miss Fincher, he had announced that he was going to get married, he was engaged, he was all excited. He said, Miss Fincher, I am so sorry, my father-in-law will not allow blacks at the wedding. That's what he said. My father-in-law will not allow blacks at the wedding. And he survived that. They had a baby and all of that but he is now, he stayed in the school system until about two years ago and he's married to another girl who was in the school system and they're doing fine. But that kind of stuff went on. It was we can work together but at three-thirty we go our separate ways.

WA: And that was in the '70s and '80s?

LF: And '80s, yeah, '70s and '80s, work together but you go your separate ways. And that was sort of, I said to him, don't worry about it. It's fine. It's his daughter and the parents of the girl takes most of the responsibility, so you just don't worry about that.

So that was one of those little incidents that happened and we had a number of them. The frightening was my Ku Klux Klan. I worked at, where was I, Woodlawn one summer. I worked at Woodlawn one summer teaching social studies and I gave a test, I taught. This little guy, little white guy, would sit up, put his head on the desk and I was teaching civil rights something, the Klan movement or something, and I said Ku Klux Klan. He raised up. I must have said Klu Klux Klan because he said it's Ku. I said okay and then I ignored him. I gave a test. That was one of the questions where you had to write and I gave fifty questions where they had to write the answers. That was the only question he answered. He wrote it in. His dad called and wanted to know why his grade was an F. We were going to summer school was six weeks long. At three weeks you get a grade. And his dad was a lawyer. I told his dad, I do not discuss children's progress on the telephone because I don't know who I'm talking with but I do get to school at seven-thirty and I leave at twelve-thirty. He could come in any time during that time. And when he came he was a big time lawyer in the city of Birmingham and I showed him his child's test papers. I showed him his child's participation and everything and he apologized to me. I taught summer school at Western High School one summer.

WA: And when is this?

LF: I don't know. It had to be in the '70s. I taught summer school because teachers don't paid. People think they get paid. They get paid for a hundred and eighty days. That's no money in the summer and bread still has to be bought in the summer so I taught summer school. I had the lady who worked at the bank where I was having my money cashed and everything, son was in my room. There were two or three other little white kids. Western was a white school. So Miss Lipscomb saw me at the bank and she

asked me how her son was doing and I told her, I said well, her project wasn't what it was supposed to be. She said but I did it! [Laughter] I said well, I'm sorry. Maybe he gave you the wrong information. I said well his project wasn't, but, I did it! That's what it was. And then I had one little girl in that same class that same summer. You sit where I say sit. Okay. They wanted to cluster in the back, the white kids.

WA: The white kids wanted to sit in the back together?

LF: Yeah, wanted to sit in the back together and I said if you can't do what I say do, and you know why you're here because you flunked this course once before, then you can go out and take it from somebody else. In the summertime you can go to any school you want to go to. I said but I got a seating chart. That's the only way I can learn your names. I said this seating chart will not be written over. I did it at home. I didn't know who you were. I don't know these kids are here so you have to sit in these seats. And then I gave the little white girl an assignment to go to the bank. It wasn't AmSouth. It was SouthTrust, had this economic packet that you could get. And she said well, what do I do. I said here's the lady's name. Here's the phone number. You have the assignment. And she told me she said, after this was over that next week, she said you're the first teacher who's ever given me anything to do. The others didn't think that I could do it. And I was so pleased, you know. I was so pleased. She said nobody has ever given me an assignment to go outside of the classroom because they didn't think I could do it. I said well, you introduced the lady very well. We got the packet, we followed through, and you did everything good. She said am I going to get an A. I said no, you're going to get a B but that's good. [Laughter] So those were the experiences I had in school.

When the children walked out, oh, my God, when they walked out.

WA: When was that?

LF: Nineteen sixty-four.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGINNING OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

WA: Okay. Go ahead.

LF: When the kids walked out, let's see we opened in 1960, it had to be '63 or '64. [She is referring to the May 1963 mass demonstrations].

WA: This was at Hayes?

LF: Yeah.

WA: Okay.

LF: Yeah, they walked out everywhere. They walked out at Parker, Carver, Ullman, J.O., Hayes, because we had five predominately black schools. Fred Shuttlesworth and Martin Luther King had gotten the children in the movement, children in the movement. We went to Hayes and at this time my mom was still at Carver. You know, you pass by Hayes to go to Carver. We went to Hayes that day and somebody, I don't know who it was because my room was down the hall, just went outside and just blew a whistle and the children would hear the others and they got up. Those who could, who weren't afraid of their mamas and their daddies, walked out of that school. Now there were some teachers who tried to stop them. There were other teachers who just continued to do what they were doing and let the children walk out. And they came down here to the church and then that's when, this is when the hoses and putting the children in the wagon and they loaded up so many children until they had to use city buses to transport them to the fairground. They were there for a week. I may have had

one or two students to come in. So by Wednesday I called Mrs. Ware and I said, Mrs. Ware, where is Carolyn. And she said who is this. I said this is Mrs. Riggs. This is Mrs. Riggs. She said Carolyn is in jail. I said, she is? She said and I'm keeping the others at home. I said okay. Carolyn is in jail. The jail got so full of the children and at the fairground that there were no schools going on in any of the five black high schools.

WA: That's in the spring of '63 with the big demonstrations and the children's crusade, okay, okay.

LF: Right, un-huh, no schools were going on. The next year our contracts read if for any reason children are not in school, teachers will not get paid.

WA: Wow.

LF: It read like that for five or six years when it came out. And I'm like, we got a contract every year. See now you're on continuous contract. I mean if you work, you don't sign anything. But we got a contract every year that you had to sign. And after those children walked out of that building, yeah, that was '63 because Carolyn [McInstry] – was the first Miss Hayes, yeah, the contract for the Birmingham city schools changed. Now I don't know whether the white's contracts changed or not but I know my contract and everybody who worked at Hayes and at Ullman and at Parker and at Western contract said the same thing. If for any reason, because you see we were paid for a week with nobody to teach and they saw that as being a loss to the system and they knew that the civil rights movement was escalating and it may happen again. So they wanted-

WA: Teachers to keep the students.

LF: Yeah, keep the students in and there were some who stood in the way but there were those others who said hey, Biblical, this is Biblical, this is the way it's

supposed to be. Parents would lose their jobs. They worked for white folks. If the parents lost their jobs there was no food in the house. Children had nothing to lose but some time out of school except from the pain and suffering that they got from the policemen. And they did that. When Carolyn came back to school she said to me, she said, Miss Riggs, it was an experience. She said but I would do it again. I saw her about two weeks ago. She said I would do it again.

And that made me, but you know, it's not all just, I can see it just from the black side but I can understand now as I look back on it, there were some whites who were concerned. My grandmother on my father's side worked for a lady named Bouselina who was Catholic also and Miss Bouselina would ask my grandmother questions and ask her if she needed help or that kind of thing and ask her what about your granddaughter, how is she doing, that kind of thing. So it wasn't all bad, but we don't see that side of it. We don't get that. We get the bad side of it and the pictures that are in your minds that you see, I mean I have nightmares about them sometimes and I say to myself, because at that time I had one little girl and I said I don't want this to happen to Sherrie. In fact, when I had Sherrie in dance school with Miss Troxel she called one day and she said the people in my building are protesting my having black kids for dance practice. And I said to her okay, Sherrie won't be back. I wouldn't let Sherrie go back because I didn't want anything to happen to her. I was afraid. And dance, I mean they don't dance anyway so I said okay, all right. When my Sherrie got to be high school age I sent her to John Carroll. This is '80, I don't know. I sent her to John Carroll and she had been a cheerleader for five years but she was too dark to be a cheerleader at John Carroll. Yeah, she was too dark. Not too big, not too fat.

WA: That's what they told her from the squad?

LF: That's what I got when they turned her down.

WA: Okay.

LF: They didn't tell her that.

WA: Right.

LF: They just didn't choose her and a lot of the kids wanted to protest because she was about the best there. And they said she's too dark. They did get one black but hey, I don't know where she come from because she didn't have not a black nothing, not even hair. So I can tell you exactly when that was. That was in '77, '77 at John Carroll. Yet they needed, John Carroll needed people like me or me, they used me to help them get their accreditation.

WA: Because they had to have a certain number of black students?

LF: No, they needed me to show them how to go about getting their courses, their social studies department set up for Southern Association Accreditation.

WA: Because that's when you were administering that in the school system?

LF: Well, I was at Hayes but they knew about me and Miss Miliazo knew about me and they didn't know anybody else. And John Carroll was up on the hill where Sherrod is. But I say that to say this, even in my faith there was and is prejudices against African Americans. There were prejudices against coloreds, there were prejudices against Negroes, there was prejudice against Afro Americans, there's prejudice against African Americans even in the church in Birmingham and I guess it's other places too, and in the schools. I remember I served on the Catholic board of education for six years. I remember black parents coming to the board and the president of the Catholic board

was a Catholic nun wouldn't allow them to speak. And that hadn't been no hundred years ago either. It was about nine, ten years ago. So you see and they had real issues. They had real concerns.

So did the 1960s and the late 50s, did it have an impact? Yes, it had an impact. It had an impact, positives builds up much higher than negatives. But there needs to be a reconciliation for people in Birmingham. It doesn't have to be nation but for people in Birmingham. Those children who went to jail, do you know that that jail record is still there? They were supposed to sponge those records. They did not. Some of those kids who went to jail who will come and talk with you like Gwen and some others, Ricky and all of those people will tell you that it's still there. And now I ask myself, every school in Birmingham, high school, is ninety percent black.

WA: Today?

LF: Today, every one of them. So what do the children learn? Where is that coming together? Then you ask yourself was integration bad. I don't know. I'd like to say that it wasn't because children now have an opportunity to see both sides of the coin if they want to. Had it never happened, they wouldn't have had that chance to see both sides of the coin. They would have continued to see the one side of the coin. But, you know, I think it was a bad time for us with memories, what the girls get involved in the church. You know, you never forget where you were when that happened. I will never forget that. I know where I was that Sunday morning, what I was doing, what Sherrie was doing, blah, blah, blah. I'll never forget where I was when Kennedy got killed. I'll never forget where I was when Martin Luther King got killed or what I was doing. And I will never forget when the Red Sox won the game the other night. [Laughter] You

know, those kinds of things, I'll never forget those things. But yeah, it was hard. It was hard. Another hard part for me was not buying and not shopping. They said don't go to shop. Don't buy no Easter clothes and that kind of stuff. I had a little girl like this and oh, my God, where am I going to go. I took her to my cousin and told her, make her a dress. I took her to my cousin in Gaston and told her to make her dress. But there were a lot of things. You know, I watched to see. I watched J.J. Newberry's who didn't want the children at the counter. I know I'm sort of rambling now but J.J. Newberry's is one of those five and ten cent stores, you know, and they had, David Mann said that they had to integrate. On a Sunday they changed their name. They took down that J.J. Newberry sign and they put up a big Britt's sign, B-R-I-T-T-S. And when they opened up on Monday they opened up under the name of Britt's because they had to integrate.

WA: So it was a whole new store so they had to do whole new lawsuit against them to?

LF: Right, right, they didn't have to do that because they were willing, Britt's was willing but Newberry's was not. So they changed the name of the store.

WA: Oh, to integrate it?

LF: Yeah.

WA: Oh, wow.

LF: Yeah, I just happened to have been passing by there that Sunday and I saw people standing there. They were putting up the B-R-I-T-T-S. Didn't stay up there long but it stayed up there long enough to integrate.

WA: So what do you think that the goal of school desegregation was?

LF: I think basically the goal was to give equal materials, equal access, you could go and do it. But it was not to mix the races. It was, I don't think that this man, Brown, wanted his daughter to be in a class of whites. I believe he wanted his daughter to have the same things and if that meant being in the same class, so be it. I remember Ramsey High School up there on the hill. The person that integrated Ramsey High School is a doctor today in Birmingham. Cleopatra Goree was a teacher there and Cleopatra said that nobody would let him in class, that he'd have to have classes where nobody else would be. He'd be the only person there.

WA: That's Richard Walker?

LF: Yeah, Richard, he'd be the only one there. And then he said to me, he said, but you know, I was from the Southside. And for whites, a white person that he's talking to would not understand that but I understood what he was saying. He said I was from the Southside. I mean the Southside was like Korea during war times, you know. They were bad. They were bad. They did not play. They were bad. A lot of my friends were from the Southside because my school was on the Southside. But that makes a difference.

WA: Why?

LF: Because he would break their necks. He would fight back. He could not, he could not, Richard could not have been a protégé of Martin Luther King. He could not have, un-uh, he couldn't. Ricky Powell could and he was but Richard couldn't. They would fight back and he was from the Southside, that's how they knew.

WA: Who is Ricky Powell?

LF: Ricky Powell, they didn't give you Ricky Powell's name?

WA: No.

LF: I don't know whether you can talk to him, Ricky Powell. Ricky Powell was in jail with Gwen. What's Gwen's name? Gamble.

WA: Okay, I have her. I have her.

LF: Oh, they had such a horrible time. Ricky Powell, he's around here somewhere. He's around here, yeah. Ricky was a friend of Addie May Collins and Cynthia Wesley. I'm thinking he was a friend of theirs and a closeness. My goddaughter was supposed to have gone to church with Denise McNair that day. Phyllis did an interview in California for the newspaper there but she was supposed to have gone to church with them that Sunday and her mom and dad overslept and she couldn't get ready to go.

WA: That bombing was right after, it was sort of right as school was starting?

LF: Yeah, right as school was starting because look, you see Shuttlesworth started his kid in 1969, in 1959, 1959. So okay that got passed then the board of education's going to speed up and then the civil rights movement speeded up. And then I really do believe that two things, had not Fred Shuttlesworth taken the stand he did and had not the church been bombed, the civil rights movement would have had a later start. I believe that it was going to come. I'm just saying that these two people, these two things, made it come sooner because it was Fred Shuttlesworth who enticed Martin Luther King to come here. I always tell people, hey look, if Fred Shuttlesworth had not asked him to come he probably would have gotten a prominence sometime, but Fred made it happen earlier. And if the church had not gotten, if those girls had not been killed, because they had had other bombings, they'd had other bombings. But if those

four girls had not gotten killed it would not have started when it did. And it's too bad that this had to happen but it did because it had worldwide implications. You take what happened in Birmingham and the movement, went to Wales, went to Africa, went everywhere. So I do believe that there is a reason for everything. I may not agree with the reason but who am I to mess with the man upstairs, you know? I just believe that. I think about integration of schools and I think about the four little girls. Carol Robertson's mother was my friend and you know I followed her and everything. In fact, I was there the day that she died at the hospital. But I even watched her, I think, change from her, well it wasn't absolute disbelief, but it was a why. It was a why. Why did they do this and why aren't they punished and so forth and so on. And when Doug Jones got that case and you will notice that even though there would be appeals and so forth, Mrs. Roberson was at ease. She called me. She was in Maryland when it happened.

WA: Were these the final two trials a couple of years back?

LF: Un-huh, she was in Maryland, un-huh and I was talking to her when Doug called her. I said I'll call you back. Okay, what else?

WA: I guess I have a couple of, I know we've been going over an hour. The couple of other questions I have, you talked about the run in with the Klansmen.

LF: Oh, yeah, that was scary.

WA: It sounds awful.

LF: You know, when I was a little girl I saw Communists in Alabama but I had never seen Klansmen in full regalia.

WA: And so those were protests that were going on for, in '63 and in '64 for weeks and weeks?

LF: Yeah, about four weeks, about four weeks. I saw them on First Avenue at the foothills of Sloss and they were sticking stuff in folks' windows. I didn't believe it.

WA: Okay. And were there students who were protesting school desegregation?

LF: These had to be parents. These had to be grown folk. You know, they had to be grown, yeah. They were grown folks. I didn't see children here. The only children that I ever heard about were the ones at Phillips.

WA: Okay, and tell me about that.

LF: Those were the ones who protested Shuttlesworth. Oh, they did have some at Graymount for Anderson, Alexander Anderson.

WA: Armstrong.

LF: Armstrong. They did have some out there for him in the elementary school. I could never have done that. My child could not have been a Ruby Bridges. But I don't remember protests at Woodlawn High School. I don't remember protests at West End High School. Isn't that funny, West End used to be all white? My daughter was assistant principal at West End, you know.

WA: So what about this change that's happened in the Birmingham schools where they've become all black and now they're becoming more and more Hispanic as well? Do you think that school desegregation or integration, I guess, is an ongoing issue? Do you think that it's something that people are talking about and trying to?

LF: I think they're talking about it. I think they're trying to ignore it. I think it has taken a new turn, a new twist. You see with black and white we could understand each other. But with the Spanish people you can't understand each other. It's like when I first started doing my cadet work in New York in the Spanish community, there was a

fight that broke out in the classroom and the male teacher grabbed one little Spanish boy and said what did he say, what did he say, what did he say, because they were cursing and fighting in Spanish. So what I'm saying is, our Spanish kids are not bad kids. I have to take Center Street Middle School. There's a big Spanish population there. In fact, there are about twelve languages over there. Those kids are not bad kids. Our kids can't understand their language and so there's a language barrier. There's a cultural barrier. Little boy last year or year before last, last year, one of the little kids at Center Street walked up to a little guy and said do you know Bin Laden. And the little boy didn't understand the English and said yeah, and he hit him. So they had to bring them to the principal and when she got home that evening she was talking about it. The principal is my daughter. She said he didn't understand the English. So there is a language barrier here that was not there with black and white. So I don't think they're, and I think that they work. The ones who are in school, the Spanish kids, want to work. They don't want any trouble at all. Hayes got some over there now that it's back to a high school. I saw some, about five or six over there. But they aren't creating the problem. The problem is created because there is a language barrier, there's a cultural barrier, and we got teachers who do not understand either. That's just my belief. As my mom told me once, you cannot teach what you do not know and you cannot lead where you do not go. And that's what's happening with this population. And I do think that these Spanish kids are going to do well. I really do. I think that the Mexican kids are going to do better than the Cuban kids.

WA: Why?

LF: They've got more of a desire.

WA: The drive?

LF: The drive, they've got more of the drive, more of the drive.

WA: So do you think that school desegregation starting in the mid-60s fulfilled its goals?

LF: No. I don't know what all its goals were but no, I don't think so. [Pause] I think that all due and deliberate speed has not been there, has not been there. It hasn't. It has a long way to go. But I don't think that, I think that the makers of the laws are somewhat responsible for this. I think that. You know, as George Wallace says, we live on state's rights and even though we have federal laws, we also got some state laws. And while federal laws supercede state laws you've got to do eminent domain and you've got to follow that. I'm having a problem with Amendment Two right now today. I'm having a problem with that. I don't know what to do with this. So I pulled my big Alabama constitution like this and I looked for Amendment Two and the whole Amendment Two but it has so many implications for those five or six little sentences that I really don't know what to do with it. So I don't think that it met, it couldn't, because if it had made its goal we would say we are successful and we are not successful. We have not torn down all those bridges. Those people in Gee's Bend just can't even get around, you know. So, what else?

WA: So your daughter is now a principal at a middle school?

LF: Yeah, my daughter is a principal. She was assistant principal at West End. Principal at Center Street Middle School where we get all of the things, but when she went to the military she was deployed and those Spanish kids, she gave them four days notice and then they had a program for her and those Spanish kids, oh, they came out.

They were so pretty and they did their dance for Miss Fells and they did all of this for her and everything and we were so happy. It was all the () over all of this stuff. She did a good job for the city and we need more people like Dr. Rosalva because we got more Spanish kids coming in and she's one person and she covers the whole system, the whole system. She can't do it. And I want the public schools to do it because I'm tired of the Catholic schools taking care.

WA: So, my last question, is there anything that I haven't asked you about school desegregation, about your experience in the '70s and '80s in the school system, that you'd like for us to talk about?

LF: You know, I guess I covered it pretty much. During that time and those children, those children had respect. They took half of our kids from Hayes and sent them to Woodlawn but they maintained that initial pacesetter spirit. The eight or nine, ten white kids who came to Hayes, they had respect. It was family, so forth. I don't think that it was a bad period for us. I think it was a learning situation. Oh, it was bad when they told me I couldn't join the NAACP, otherwise I may get fired from teaching.

WA: When?

LF: In the '60s. We couldn't join. If we were a member they were looking for their rolls and stuff and I had joined the NAACP in Annapolis and I joined it when I came here. I was wondering what would happen and why was this. And then I had people like Lucinda Robey who would tell me, Lillie, don't worry about it. Her car always had her toothbrush and a change of underwear in it just in case she had to go to jail. She was a principal and she was really one who would talk with you and tell you don't worry about it. She went to every one of those meetings at night. She didn't have

any children. Had a husband but no children. She went to every one of those meetings. She left home every day ready to go to jail because she was determined. She would take her money. School system wouldn't give her a secretary and she was a principal of a black school. She paid for her secretary. She bought her stuff. She gave those little children everything that they needed that she could give out of her salary and her husband's. So Lucinda was one of my role models and she was a role model for me although she wasn't that much older than I was. But I admired her.

I think that it served its purpose. I don't ever think that there will be a total of anything. I don't ever think there will be a total of anything. So, you know, we got kids running around now. White guy gave me the finger the other day because I couldn't speed up fast enough for him and when he came around he gave me the finger, 2004. So I don't think he would have done that to a person of another race. But he saw old black woman and I was in his way so he thought. And I didn't give it back to him because my window was up. You know, like I said earlier, I cannot conceive of where all the white kids were. I worked for the city of Birmingham, you know, forever but for eight years I did a television show for the school system, cable television for the school system. I would have to have, I'd have grown people come in but once a month I'd have students and I'd want students from the high schools and the elementary schools, something like that. But I want male, female, black, and white, Asian if you have one. The first five years I had no problem.

WA: And that was?

LF: That was '90 through '95. I had no problem. Call Ramsey, call Huffman, I got it. The last three years I called I said hey, so-and-so, I need a white kid. Girl, no,

we don't have one that you would want. Send an Asian kid. Can't understand the language. I said, the last year I even went to Alabama School of Fine Arts. I did get me a couple of musicians over there, from over there. But Alabama School of Fine Arts is a specialty school. I'm looking for kids, public school children in regular classes, regular schools. My last year there, Huffman did not have any that they could send me. Ramsey did not have any that they could send me. Where else am I going to get some? Hayes didn't have any. Woodlawn didn't have any. Where did they go?

WA: And that's like '98?

LF: My last year was in '98. I had to do it with my cousin's children.

WA: So you see the change in the mid-'90s, not in the '80s?

LF: Yeah, right, I see the changes.

WA: Eighties it was still fairly balanced, certain schools more than others?

LF: Well, it was maybe sixty-forty, sixty black, and then, you know. Those kids, when you hear the words white flight, it was a white speed race. They were gone but they did leave some. But by 1998, you know, you had to take an exam to get into Ramsey and they took so many blacks and so many whites. Okay, you still take an exam to get into Ramsey but you don't have any whites. Just walk through Ramsey. Just walk through. Just walk through Ramsey and see because in 1998 I wanted to talk about family values with a cross section of people but I had to stay within the Birmingham city school system. Ramsey's in the heart of UAB. These are children of doctors and educators and lawyers because they live over there in that area and they go to school. By the time the kids get out of Glen Iris their parents have moved on and they're not going to Ramsey or they're going to send them to Indian Springs or Altamont or some place like

that because they are affluent enough to go to those schools. So that last family values thing that we were talking about I called the head of the English department and told her to send me a white kid. She says, no, don't have one. Send me an Asian kid, said no. I said well look, there's one black guy over there that you can send me and she said who is it and I told her. She says oh, yes, he's wonderful. I said well, send me him if it's okay with you. And I let her talk and after the show was over I called her and I told her, you know, my cousin's kid was great. Your cousin's kid? I didn't know that was your cousin's kid. I said if I had told you it was my cousin's kid you would have said something.

But it has changed. It's changed. We had a workshop last Wednesday with teachers who are working on their master's and they don't know what went on to get them where they are. They don't know what went on, black teachers nor white teachers. And if we don't teach it, and that's how come I'm so pleased with the Institute, because it's an Institute and not a museum. And they can learn and Wayne can give them so much information and provide it for them. But teachers got to know that it is here. Somebody got to tell them.

WA: And so you're teaching these workshops?

LF: I don't teach. I don't teach. What do I do? You know, I don't know what I do but whatever it is I must do it well because they asked me to do it again. But I don't know what I do. I really don't. We initiate workshops. Teachers do these workshops. I am responsible for them. If they take this course in the summertime, if they take the course in the summertime and the board of ed pays for them, they got to do a workshop so this is what it is.

WA: Okay.

LF: I don't know what I do. I don't know what I do.

WA: Well, I think that those are all my questions and I really appreciate you coming in today.

LF: You were persistent enough.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

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