

Interview

with

ELTON M. O'NEAL

July 22, 2004

by Gerrelyn Patterson

Transcribed by Cathy Mann

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

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Transcript – Elton O’Neal

Interviewee: Elton O’Neal
Interviewer: Gerrelyn Patterson
Interview Date: July 22, 2004
Location: Durham, North Carolina

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

GERRELYN PATTERSON: This is an interview with Elton O’Neal in Durham, North Carolina. It is July 22nd and we are at his school. The interviewer is Gerrelyn Patterson and this is part of the Spencer Grant’s 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 7-22-04-EO. Okay, Mr. O’Neal, can you tell me a little bit about how you came to be at Hillside? Were you a student? Did you work there?

ELTON O’NEAL: I was a student there. Probably entered fall of 1966 and graduated June of ’69.

GP: So can you tell me a little bit about, I have a brief understanding of what Hillside is like now, but what was it like to go to Hillside then? Talk to me about the teachers, the principals, and other students. What was it like?

EO: At the time I entered Hillside John Lucas was the principal. Hillside was a school that probably had about thirteen hundred students, if my memory serves me correctly. All of my life I had been looking forward to Hillside High School.

GP: And why is that?

EO: Hillside is held in high regard by the black community here in Durham.

GP: Why is that?

EO: I think it had to do with several things. One, it provided students with a quality education, did and still does, in my opinion. It also because of its proximity to Central was a natural bridge into Central. For those that were not successful at Hillside it still was held in high esteem. That Hillside pride was just something that was instilled from first grade on. Even now, at some point several years ago they talked about changing the name. There was some talk I remember about changing—

GP: I remember that, changing the name.

EO: And at that time I said all one needs to do, several of us need to make some telephone calls and get some of these movers and shakers that have come through Hillside, it won't happen.

GP: And it didn't happen.

EO: It didn't happen, no. The band I think is a factor because if you look at the Christmas parade when that band comes through (). It had many features that just attracted the black community, the band—

GP: Okay, so the band and it was a bridge to Central and?

EO: Un-huh, it was a social, I guess, back in the 40s and the 50s it had many social outings. The kids would go out. There were picnics and family outings directly associated with Hillside. Class reunions now, big time, my thirty-fifth is coming up September 10th.

GP: Okay, it's a big deal?

EO: Big deal. My high school class, '69, we all had a fiftieth birthday anniversary.

GP: Really?

EO: Over a hundred of us got together.

GP: Wow.

EO: John Gattis and some of the teachers there, when you enrolled as a freshman you were then thoroughly indoctrinated with the Hillside spirit.

GP: Okay. How did they do that?

EO: I think we went in for assembly. The freshmen were in the balcony of the old building. Sophomores sat at the back of the main floor, which was the first level. Juniors about halfway, mid-part of the bottom floor, and the seniors up front, and we'd have these pep rallies, wonderful.

GP: So the band played probably at that, right?

EO: Band played. Oh, it was a wonderful thing.

GP: Mr. Lucas talked?

EO: It wasn't as much Mr. Lucas as it was an assistant principal, Prof Alston.

GP: Prof Alston?

EO: F. Howard Alston.

GP: Howard Alston, I think I've seen his picture in the yearbook.

EO: He was the man.

GP: He was the man?

EO: He was the man. Much that I do I model after him.

GP: How was he the man?

EO: He practically ruled the school with his, what I call, the soul train. He would get guys out of classes that had been sent out of classes and rather than having you sit in his office until he could process you, he would walk them about the school. You followed him in his soul train.

GP: I remember students doing that with you.

EO: Followed that soul train, go in the class, you wait out here, if I hear a peep out of you that adds to your consequences. He had lockdown and people had high respect for him. Desegregation at Hillside, I was not there then, I understand went smoothly because he because he—

GP: Because he was there?

EO: Un-huh, Mr. Lucas was the principal but Mr. F. Howard Alston was the man.

GP: So when you were there even though Brown 1954 had already taken place, they had made the decision to integrate schools, there were no white students when you were there?

EO: Not one. There were some white teachers there.

GP: Oh, there were white teachers?

EO: There were white teachers there but there were no white students.

GP: Were ya'll thinking white students would come at some point?

EO: I'm not sure that that was even discussed. It just hadn't happened and nobody was pushing it and it didn't get pushed until I think two years later. My brother got caught in that.

GP: Okay, okay. So F. Howard Alston was the man. You had these pep rallies. You had these social events. It was by Central and at the assemblies you kind of learned, indoctrinated into what Hillside was and got the pride. Tell me about some of the other teachers. What was it like to be in classes at Hillside?

EO: Now you were expected to do the stuff that was presented to you, the assignments. You didn't just go in there and sit in there and spin your wheels and twiddle your thumbs. That was unacceptable. They didn't mind marching you by. Well, you either performed or you knew you needed to leave. All of the teachers that I had engaged me personally. I felt that they knew me, knew my name.

GP: Did they know your parents?

EO: Many of them did because my mother was a Hillside graduate. Came out when it was only eleven grades. So, you know, I think a part of the reason why it had such an appeal is because it was the only black school in town. Everybody went there and it was probably a big social event on a daily basis, these kids coming from Walltown, Hickstown. West End was where I lived. The Bottom, Hayti, Pearsonstown, all of that on one campus.

GP: Okay. How did people get to school?

EO: Bus.

GP: The city bus?

EO: City bus, they had a special bus that would take me from the West End. They would pull it off its regular route, pick us up on the West End, take us to school, and then go back to the regular route and then come by and pick us up in the afternoon and take us back.

GP: Okay, so that was for your neighborhood and they did that for other neighborhoods too?

EO: Other neighborhoods, north Durham, Hickstown, Walltown.

GP: I had no idea. And so the teachers had these high expectations?

EO: High expectations.

GP: What happened if you didn't meet them?

EO: You probably dropped out. There were no remedial courses. It was one shot. You either did it or you didn't.

GP: Do it or get out.

EO: That's it. That's it. No do it or you walked out. And that behavioral, discipline problem, didn't have them. You knew Mr. Alston was walking those halls.

GP: That's really interesting.

EO: Had lockdown, thirteen children, lockdown. We'd have fights but in terms of orderliness it was like ().

GP: That's really interesting with thirteen hundred students that you didn't have a lot of discipline problems.

EO: Thirteen hundred students come from all parts of town.

GP: So even in classes you wouldn't have a lot of discipline problems, the teachers didn't have?

EO: Un-uh.

GP: Do you feel like the teachers tried to teach you, did they try to teach you anything special because you were black students? Did you feel like you kept hearing certain messages over from your teachers?

EO: I think we got a good dose of if it was an English III class, a good dose of whatever at that time the curriculum was.

GP: Okay, all right, so they had high standards, the curriculum was on point, and they took care of business?

EO: Un-huh, that's exactly right.

GP: All right I think I got a sense of Hillside and I'll probably go back to that a little bit. And I know a little bit about Durham because I went to Central. My mother went to Central, so I got a sense of the history. But can you tell me a little bit more of what it was like to just grow up in Durham during this time period because what I've read is that Durham was really kind of separate. That all the black kids went to Hillside. All the white kids went to their high school and there wasn't a whole bunch of—

EO: There was no bleeding across the lines.

GP: Okay.

EO: Let's see, I went to a small elementary school first grade and I had to stay there through seventh. Had to stay there through seventh because the all-black junior high school and the only black junior high school was full. They were building a new one, Shephard. The one I attended was Whitted, which is where Operation Breakthrough's headquarters are. So I had to stay in Lyon Park, which is now a community center. I had to stay there through seventh grade because they had not yet completed Shephard. So I stayed there grades one through seven. There were probably in that school three sections per grade level. Got a good background. My elementary educational experience was phenomenal. At that time the principal had

students stay with the teachers. We stayed with our first grade teacher first, second, and third grade.

GP: Oh, so you established a really strong bond?

EO: Exactly. And then fourth and fifth I had the same teacher but a new principal came on board. Now fourth grade, I was going to have the same teacher fourth, fifth, and sixth but a new principal came to Lyon Park so I ended up having a different teacher in fifth grade. But some how luck had it that I ended up with the teacher in sixth grade that I had in fourth grade, who was F. Howard Alston's wife.

GP: So he knew about you before you got there?

EO: Before I got there, yeah, I knew I couldn't go over there. And I want to talk a little bit about him a little later because he had this way of--. Let me do the school bit. I then went to Whitted, which was an all-black junior high at that time that probably had over a thousand kids, loaded. Even after they built Shephard it was still loaded.

GP: And it was all black, Whitted?

EO: Both of them all black. But Shephard I think only had, if I'm not mistaken, I remember somebody saying about four or five hundred students because it was a small school. If you look at it now it's even small when you compare it to other middle schools.

GP: You're right.

EO: But had a wonderful experience there, good teachers, excellent teachers. And then went on into Hillside. Got to Hillside, ninth grader. At that time it was a nine twelve. No, it wasn't, I was at Whitted eighth and ninth. Hillside was ten

twelve then, ten twelve. Hit there in tenth grade and we were, had alphabetized homerooms pretty much like they do now, so you stayed with that group all the way through. And I think that was a plus because we'd pump each other up and you'd come in in the morning. I just had a wonderful experience. Prof Alston knew practically ever child in that school unless they were new to Durham.

GP: Thirteen hundred kids?

EO: He knew most of the children in that school because of their parents. He would tell you I know your mama. I know your grandma. He was a Durham product, having been reared in the Bottom.

GP: Where was the Bottom?

EO: The Bottom right now, Miss Patterson, is the Durham Bulls Stadium, you know where that is?

GP: Un-huh, the new one or the old one?

EO: The new one. Right there where the American Tobacco Company--. From there probably back to Forest Hills Shopping Center, which is a little small strip mall, all of that was the Bottom, from there over to Mt. Zion Baptist Church, Mt. Zion Methodist Church. That was the Bottom. My mother was reared in the Bottom so he knew my mother. In fact, he used to pay one of my mother's sisters to iron his shirts. He was a first-class guy.

GP: Okay, so he was connected?

EO: And he was connected but most of the children are people that you will probably engage, during that timeframe will tell you, he was the man, except maybe

the early to mid 50s. I'm thinking he may have hit there about sixty-ish. But he was in charge. Would walk into any class and could carry on the instruction.

GP: Oh, really?

EO: French, chemistry, (), and was an eloquent speaker, polished man. Only drawback was he was a Kappa. (Laughter) And when he found out () I went by there later after I pledged, he's just misguided and misdirected. I didn't get to you. But he was a wonderful person. He again, it's going to be interesting, and I want to talk to you after you've interviewed. I want to know how many times that name comes up.

GP: Okay.

EO: Because I would venture to say since I'm on the front end that practically everybody that came in the 60s and 70s would tell you he was what made Hillside.

GP: Okay, and you decided you wanted to be like him?

EO: I liked his style.

GP: Is that how you ended up in the school system?

EO: No, believe it or not, I went to Central as a business administration major. Drove a school bus to supplement my income. Fell in love with working with the children.

GP: I can see that.

EO: Fell in love with them and just kind of went on from there. Had no idea that I'd end up teaching.

GP: And running the school.

EO: Hey.

GP: Just like Mr. Alston.

EO: Just exactly, exactly, but that stuff that he used then I use it now.

GP: Do you?

EO: Un-huh, that hey, come here!

GP: So, okay, kind of picking up on stuff that he did then, can you tell me some other things that kind of like at the time what people thought was a good education for blacks. Since Hillside was the place to go and it was well respected, what were the elements that people thought made up for a good education for black kids?

EO: If you learned to write fluently, if you learn to compute to the point that you could take care of those basic survival skills, such as being able to balance a checkbook. Hillside would if the child behaved him or herself, would engage that child and provide as much as they could for that child. You know, given that we didn't have EC at that time. I believe we were on the cutting edges of special ed. But the teachers at Hillside at that time would give you, in my opinion, quality instruction. I can remember in my typing class I never thought I would type proficiently, but Annie Cruise.

GP: Annie Cruise?

EO: Was her name, she knew my parents. She was another one that knew everybody and their mama. The first day of school she showed us what the home row keys were. We had a speed test every day. She'd come by with that daggone. She

had a little ruler. She'd pop those knuckles if they weren't on the right keys. I mean you did what she prescribed you do.

GP: Okay, no questions asked.

EO: And that made you successful. And I think that ran true for all of them. English, I did very well at Central I think in writing because I had some teachers that made us write. If it wasn't up to speed you got it back and you did it until it was brought up to speed. And I think at that time there was pride in your work. Students exhibited that quite a bit, doing it but doing it well. I actually went in not knowing that I was going to even go to college. I don't know what I was thinking. It didn't dawn on me until the end of my junior year that I might be able to go to college. I just never thought of myself as a--. I did very well through ninth grade and then I kind of fell in with my boys and you know got into that nah thing. It wasn't cool. But it was unacceptable. So my grades fell a little bit but not to the point where it would have affected my having gone on to college. But I did not take those college prep classes. I needed geometry and what was it that I ended up having to take my senior year because I was in a class with a whole bunch of sophomores and freshmen.

GP: Oh, okay, you went to take it so you could get in school?

EO: I had to go back. I ended up my senior year I had enough credits to graduate. Somehow I was able to I think get ahead. I think only eighteen units were required for graduation, if I'm not mistaken. And so that meant that I could do twenty-four, no, I could do eighteen. It may have been fewer than eighteen but at any rate, I ended up having to take a couple of freshman and sophomore level classes my senior year to be able to get, Government and Economics, that was it, which we've

now gone back to. You know for a while they had ELPS but now we've now gone back to it's now Economics and Civics because I had to have that to graduate. Let's see, what else can you ()?

GP: How did you decide about the college thing, your parents or some teachers said, Elton?

EO: Somebody probably, you know, I guess probably sitting around talking somebody said what are you going to do next year, you know, once you come out of Hillside. I don't know. I know I didn't want to go to work.

GP: I think we all felt that way.

EO: Yeah, I didn't want to go to work. I knew I couldn't stay in my parents' house and not do something. Either you're going to go to school or—

GP: You're going to work.

EO: You're going to work so I didn't want to go to work so I kind of made that quick shift in schedule and went down to see I think it was Miss, what was her name, Miss King, either King or Lawrence, Barbara Lawrence, and had my schedule changed and added those college prep classes. Took the SAT and did pretty well on that. I wanted to go to Hampton.

GP: Oh, did you?

EO: Oh yeah, my cousin went there.

GP: I wanted to go to Hampton too.

EO: But when we looked at tuition.

GP: Same for me.

EO: Twenty-six hundred versus probably five hundred for the year, no way, and there were five children and I'm number two from the top, it won't happen. We'll go to Central. We'll send you to Central.

GP: Well now your mom had gone to Hillside, right?

EO: Un-huh.

GP: Did your parents have any involvement with the school while you were there? Did the school bring parents in?

EO: My mother's class, in fact, she was class of '41. They had a reunion not long ago. That class reunion that's big business.

GP: Tell me about the class reunion thing because I'm not from Durham.

EO: There's a class that has incorporated. If I make a mistake, the class of '60, they have incorporated. They give scholarships. Class of '61, Levi Dawson, I'm not sure but he works downtown. I saw him yesterday. He had his Hillside class of '61 lanyard on. He wears his ID on his lanyard.

GP: So you all really stay in touch and have activities throughout the year?

EO: I got an email this week from Gloria Thornton Boyle who teaches at Hillside. There is an all-class alumni reunion planned for this weekend. I think it's this weekend, where all of the classes will come together. There have been [for] years a move () to try to establish an alumni association. It has not gotten to the level where they want it. I think () another effort to get that up and going because there are a lot of dollars out there. So we sat down and calculated that if you took a look at if three hundred kids came out of Hillside each year for the last forty years, that's a big pool of folks to call. My class was the largest class ever.

GP: Oh, really?

EO: Un-huh, we had four thirty plus.

GP: That's a big class.

EO: And the reason for that, classes typically ran three fifty to four hundred, was because they had just implemented what they called the co-op school. That was for girls who got pregnant. They came over and marched with us so they were included in our graduation numbers.

GP: Oh, okay, all right, so that's why your class got bigger?

EO: Un-huh.

GP: I'd like to learn more about this. I mean I don't know of any other black high school anywhere that has--.

EO: But people come back from across the nation.

GP: Like it's a college.

EO: Exactly right, un-huh, exactly. It probably does better in Central in terms of numbers of graduates coming back.

GP: Wow, okay. Well, I mean I'm going to continue to learn as I talk to people and I'm talking to people like I know some people from the class 1964 I think. They kind of talking to people in between there and they still seem so connected with their class.

EO: Oh, they are, they are.

GP: I don't know hardly anybody from my class of high school.

EO: You were—

GP: I was in an integrated high school. I went to Broughton High School in Raleigh and there were probably eight hundred of us that graduated. And I could probably tell you five that I still talk to.

EO: Right, gotcha, gotcha.

GP: And this is our ten-year, no, twenty, is that right, fifteen-year.

EO: And I bet you I can whittle off a hundred and fifty that I see probably once or twice a year.

GP: That's incredible. I can't imagine it. So while you were there, just kind of touch on the whole integration thing, while you were there did your family or the people around you, your friends, is there any sense about oh, Hillside's going to get integrated, we're going to have more resources? There was really no?

EO: There was no talk about that when I was at Hillside, and that again was '66 through '69. In fact, while I was there the Black Power movement was afoot. In fact, one of the more prominent memories that I have is the day Martin Luther King died or the day after Martin Luther King died. I was, I think, a junior. He died on a Thursday night. We went to school that Friday and I was sitting in class and all of a sudden I heard this commotion out in the hallways. And what essentially was happening was that they were protesting. People were just angry that this had happened. So all the kids marched out of school. I fell right in behind them. And I think they had a peaceful march downtown to city hall or someplace like that. I didn't go. I went off and played basketball.

GP: Didn't make it to city hall?

EO: I didn't make it to city hall.

GP: Made it to the basketball court.

EO: Made it to the basketball court, yeah. But they were real upset. In fact, that night there was rioting throughout the city. City was put on curfew. In fact, it may have started that night that it happened. No, it didn't. It didn't start till that Friday night. But oh, the city was on lockdown and stayed locked down for three or four days.

GP: Well, okay, no real talk about Hillside being integrated?

EO: None whatsoever.

GP: Nobody was thinking, okay, we're going to have white kids any day?

EO: Had white teachers. That was probably the extent of integration.

GP: How did the white teachers get there? Did they choose to come to work at Hillside because they had Hillside pride too?

EO: Yeah, they did pretty well. Let's see, during my tenure at Hillside I had, I can tell you this by my schedule. In the tenth grade I had Mrs. Cotton for English. I had a general math class under Coach Easley. Called him Bear, was his nickname. He was the basketball coach. I had IV instruction for vocation. For science I had Mrs. Burse, biology and then social studies, Mr. Perry, world history. So I didn't have any white teachers my sophomore year. My junior year I had a Mrs. Kunsler for U.S. history. English teacher was Ms. Corbett. I don't think I had a math.

GP: Ms. Corbett that lives in Durham now?

EO: Un-huh.

GP: Okay, she goes to our church I think, Holy Cross Catholic Church. I think she goes there.

EO: Just recently lost her daughter?

GP: Un-huh.

EO: Un-huh, she taught me eleventh grade English.

GP: Wow, okay.

EO: And then my senior year I don't think I had any white teachers.

GP: But they seem to do, they seemed?

EO: They seemed to do very well and I think kids were respectful.

GP: And they had the same high expectations that the, so that was just the Hillside way? That was kind of a way of being?

EO: Un-huh. Again you had this man walking through the halls on a regular basis cleaning it up. And dean of students, (). He was called the dean of students at that time. I'm not sure that he was even called a principal. Or was he called an assistant principal? I think he was the dean of boys, dean of boys/AP.

GP: Okay, I saw him in the yearbook as dean of boys but I don't know what year the yearbook was.

EO: Un-huh, but he had an iron hand.

GP: And so you had him and you had some white teachers and you had these black teachers and no talk about white students coming at all? Okay, so I got the picture. Do you think there's something special that Hillside did that has now been kind of lost since most schools are integrated now?

EO: Pride. It was a pillar in the black community. You went there to refine yourself.

GP: And you don't think other schools are really doing that anymore? Do you think that's because there aren't community neighborhood schools anymore?

EO: Hillside was the school where everybody went. There was pride in my elementary school because all the neighborhood kids went there. Whitted was a different story because when you got that middle school kid, you know, they're not attached to anything. But Hillside I've always contended that by the ninth grade those that are going to do well are on the right track. Those that aren't, they're moving towards the front door. It's unfortunate.

GP: Okay, so just that sense of pride in your school and in your work and how you relate to your teachers and the expectation that you're going to go on and do some other things?

EO: Un-huh.

GP: Okay, all right, I think I got that. How about do you think that there was anything that I guess black kids or students in general gained from schools being integrated, even though Hillside wasn't really? From what I understand Hillside had its first integrated class in 1970.

EO: Seventy-one.

GP: Seventy-one?

EO: Seventy-one I think. I may be wrong. Because I think '70, Taletia Cruise was in that class. We were talking about that not very long ago. She had an all black class. I think '71. I'm almost sure it was '71 because my brother got caught up in desegregation. He went to Hillside his sophomore and junior year, which would have been my junior and senior year. He got shifted to Durham High School.

GP: Okay, because Durham High was the white high school, right?

EO: Exactly.

GP: Were there only two in Durham?

EO: Two schools.

GP: Hillside and Durham High?

EO: In the former city schools, at that time there were two different school systems. There was Durham County—

GP: And Durham City.

EO: Un-huh.

GP: Okay, so this was all before the merger?

EO: Exactly.

GP: Okay, so do you think that schools have lost anything from being integrated or have they gained stuff from being integrated or both?

EO: I think it's a combination of the two. One I think with black children that they have lost that sense of pride. They don't readily respond to a Jordan and a Northern and a Southern the way that we responded to Hillside.

GP: Why do you think that is?

EO: Again—

GP: This community, social aspect?

EO: () that was on your lips. That was on the lips of people that you engaged from the first, you know, from people beginning to talk about school, Hillside, Hillside.

GP: So no sense of history with these other schools, family history, community history?

EO: Right, right, that was the white school.

GP: Okay, all right, so we lost that?

EO: Lost that. Now in terms of academics I think now there are more opportunities for students because of more opportunities to address the individual learning styles of students. Everybody at that time it was one shot. Everybody got this broad shot. If you didn't get it, shame on you.

GP: And so that's something that we have gained is that black kids have more opportunities to kind of get specialized instruction, those types of things?

EO: I think a negative for us here in Durham with some of our black males is they're not because they're not doing well academically they're not able to participate. One of the magnets for black males is typically athletics or the opportunity to participate in athletics. That's not always the case if your grades aren't up to speed because those rigorous academic standards would shoot you down. You don't get to play. Whereas, I think back at that time there were no academic standards or they were minimal.

GP: Okay, so they're not able to participate in extracurricular activities because of—

EO: Athletics.

GP: Why do you think the academic performance has, seems to have decreased?

EO: Decreased. That's an excellent question.

GP: If you had the answer we could probably make a lot of money.

EO: Big time. I think it has to do with the breakdown of the family unit.

When I came through the majority of the kids that were in my elementary school had one or two working parents. I guess I'd call it fifty-fifty. But very rare was it the child who lived with grandmother or lived in a group home. That was just unheard of at that time. But that's pretty prevalent these days in this day and age. One of the things that-- Now this is probably interesting, I just thought about it. There were some kids who were in elementary school that were given the opportunity to go to Durham High, because one of the kids who went was an OBG-YN guy here, Ira Smith, Dr. Ira Smith. He's an OBG-YN. He and I are real tight now. We were in first grade through seventh grade together. He elected to go to Carr Jr. High, which was an all-white, or practically all-white school at the time. Went on to Durham High. I just thought about that. So black kids did go to some schools. Some of them did.

GP: Okay, and that was because of integration? They could elect to go if they chose to?

EO: They could go but none elected to come to Hillside.

GP: Okay, all right.

EO: Yeah, that opportunity was available as I think about it.

GP: Okay. What else do you think is important for people like me who didn't grow up during this time period, don't know a lot about deseg, what it was like to go to an all-black school, except from talking to other people and reading books, what else do you think, what do you think we need to learn from—

EO: From those experiences that folks had with that?

GP: Un-huh.

EO: One, students will respond to behavioral constraints. Again, Prof Alston ruled that school. It didn't take security officers like we have in many of our schools. It didn't take, we only had one AP.

GP: Thirteen hundred kids?

EO: And one AP when I came through, if my memory serves me correctly. They respond to the discipline code. We dressed appropriately. You didn't come in there wearing, and there was a sense of pride. There was always, there were senior superlatives and most of the kids jockeyed to be one of those senior superlatives. One of those was best dressed, best looking, most ambitious. Oh, that was a big thing. Being on the "Chronicle" staff, which was the school newspaper, was a big thing. Being involved in Mr. G's swing school—

GP: Mr. G's swing school?

EO: Swing school, that was I guess a musical production where, you know, he would have a screening and kids I guess, what's the term they use when you try out for?

GP: Audition.

EO: Audition, yeah, oh, that was big time back then. And of course, playing on one of the athletic teams, oh boy, you was in high cotton if you got on one of those athletic teams.

GP: Who did ya'll play against?

EO: At that time Ligon.

GP: Oh, in Raleigh, yeah. I know all about Ligon.

EO: Ligon, that was a rival. That was our archrival, Ligon, yeah. Played a school from Goldsboro, which was Dillard I believe. Then we played, may have played Lincoln over in Chapel Hill but that was a much smaller school.

GP: Okay, so other black segregated schools in the area, ya'll would get together?

EO: I don't think Durham High and Hillside played until probably the 70s. Merrick Moore, which was the county, it wasn't a high school. It was a union school that had K-12. Played Little River. I don't think we played them. May have played Merrick Moore in football but they eventually phased out football because of numbers. But we played Merrick Moore and Little River in basketball.

GP: Okay, let me make sure I get it down because I think this is important. Some of the stuff you are telling me that you think is important for my generation and beyond to know about what was going on with school desegregation is that students do respond to behavioral constraints, discipline, without all these extras that we put in, as long as they're in place.

EO: Exactly.

GP: The dress code was very important. Are there other things I need to know?

EO: Parents were involved, intimate in the going ons at Hillside, very intimately involved.

GP: Why do you think parents felt so welcome, because it seems like sometimes in school now parents don't always feel as welcome to come in? They're

not as involved and that may be because they're busy and working jobs and those types of things.

EO: And maybe the race factor, they could come in and be sitting around a room of all blacks. That could be a factor.

GP: Okay. And it sounds like they probably knew most of the people there because it was a part of the community.

EO: Un-huh.

GP: What do you think schools can do better to help educate black students? You talked about some of the things that were kind of lost and some of the things that Hillside did well. That they instilled a sense of pride and strong in academics and the teachers engaged personally and they seemed to have concern about your future progress. What do you think schools now, that are integrated now, can do better to educate black students?

EO: We've got to zero in on that black male that's floundering. I think what we've got to do and we try to do it here is find out what's going on. Try to get that child to a higher level in his thinking, such that he has some pride in himself and the work that he needs to produce. Help him to understand that what you're doing now is detrimental, that it's not going to get you anyplace. Nobody's afraid of you. You're going to follow the rules or you're going out the door. We don't want to do that. But what we've got to do is embrace some of these kids on an individual basis and do some things that are out of the pocket, out of the box. Right now Durham is in need of a vocational high school for kids that are crashing and burning in these schools where it's a college route, a straight (). It just doesn't work.

GP: There should be an alternative?

EO: Should be an alternative high school or a high school where a child can pick up a marketable skill, such as carpentry, brick masonry, plumbing, something that he can do with his hands to go out and make a, become a productive citizen, that sort of need. When I went through Hillside one of the reasons why everybody enjoyed the experience then was there was something there for you to do beyond the academic rules. There was tailoring, machine shop, auto mechanics, carpentry, carpentry and brick masonry to the point that five high houses that stood behind the old Hillside were build by students during their classes. So it wasn't building a model in a room.

GP: Oh, that's impressive.

EO: You built a house, built five houses that are still standing behind the old high school. So you got that. You had drafting. I took drafting, enjoyed it. But you could pick up a marketable skill, one that would have allowed you to go on into the world of work.

GP: And so you think we need that?

EO: Got to have it. Got to have it. Tailoring, my sister-in-law right now made our daughter's wedding gown. She took it to somebody who runs a bridal shop to get something. They said, you know, can we hire you. You know, you've done a wonderful job on this thing. But she got that formal training at Hillside. I know several folks now that went through their tailoring courses, now that are tailors.

GP: Wow, well, okay, okay. We got a record of it, some of the things you need.

EO: Got to have it. Those kids have got to--. Those students want to be successful. They want the finer things in life but they just don't know how to get it, given what we presently have. I can't do English. I don't know how to read at the level that I need to read so I'm just going to act out. And then I hit the streets and I got to go out. I've got to make a dollar. I'm going to sell a few drugs. I'm going to do whatever; break into somebody's house and get me something that I can take to a pawnshop and get some dollars. They're going to make it by hook or crook unfortunately.

GP: Okay, well, I know you're running out of time. I know you've got things to do. Do I need to know anything else? If somebody came up to me and said okay, Ms. Patterson, you're going to tell me the story of Hillside because I know you've been talking to people, is there anything else that I need to know that I don't have right now that I would need to tell them about Hillside? I know it instilled a sense of pride and strong academics and it offered an alternative to academics. It was something for everybody at Hillside. A community spirit, there was kind of this history that went through family generations and the whole black community generations that went through Hillside. Do I have it?

EO: You have it. And, you know, that thing goes back, I'm not sure when Hillside was first founded. But those class reunions, lady I worked at Little River my first year, her husband their class had a reunion last year. I think it was early 50s and it was a small class but I think the Korean War was going on at the time they graduated. If I make no mistake, all of the surviving class members were in attendance.

GP: All of them?

EO: All of the survivors.

GP: Okay, that's incredible. That speaks a lot about how people feel about the school.

EO: They came in wheelchairs. You talking about those people, and I think, let's see. What year would that have been? Let's see, '53, that would have been their fiftieth. It was seventy-ish.

GP: Do they have the reunions at Hillside?

EO: They typically have them in hotels around the city. For instance, mine is, I already got the thing back in April, but it's in one of the local hotels, a three-day affair. Start out on Friday night with a banquet, dinner and dance, Saturday something during the day and then afternoon, Saturday night another banquet, dinner and dance. And then Sunday afternoon picnic. Well, we go to church services Sunday morning and then on to the service.

GP: I might have to come sneak in there.

EO: Wonderful thing and if you were to look at—

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGINNING OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

EO: Meeting at somebody's house to plan another reunion, Hillside class of 19-X is having a reunion this weekend. Big time, and again that fiftieth birthday celebration, we were kidding about it and then somebody put it together. Pulled the plans together and over a hundred of us showed up.

GP: What did ya'll do?

EO: We had a banquet. We had a dance, just did it up, celebrated because all of us turned fifty, you know, back that year.

GP: That's really nice and I know that there are not—

EO: That doesn't happen often, no.

GP: No, that doesn't happen anymore at all.

EO: In fact, I've got a paperweight on my desk, wonderful, beautiful, with the Hillside blue on it, hornet on it, fiftieth anniversary celebration, class of '69.

GP: How did people feel when they tore the building down and they moved?

EO: I got a brick.

GP: Oh, do you?

EO: Yeah. People really didn't struggle with that. Knew that it was a liability. But, yeah, I got a brick. In fact, as a part of this reunion I think somebody made or painted some bricks that they're going to be selling or auctioning.

GP: Okay, very nice. All right, well, I'm going to stop the tape. I appreciate you taking the time to talk to me.

EO: More than welcome.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

TRANSCRIBED JUNE 2005 BY CATHY MANN