

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

CHARLENE REGISTER
FEBRUARY 23, 2001

[My name is Susan Upton and I'm interviewing Charlene Register. It is February 23, and we are in Davis Library on UNC-Chapel Hill campus.]

Susan Upton: Alright, to start out with let me get some of your background. Were you born in Chapel Hill?

Charlene Register: Actually I was born in Chapel Hill. I was born in Memorial Hospital.

SU: And you grew up here?

CR: I grew up here in Chapel hill. I attended public schools and high school and junior high...elementary, junior high and high school and I went to UNC.

SU: Okay, which elementary school did you go to?

CR: I went to Estes Hills.

SU: Alright, okay. I heard you say you have a sister. How many brothers and sisters do you have?

CR: I have two older sisters and no brothers.

SU: And what did your parents do?

CR: My parents were...my father was a plasterer and my mother worked at one point for a health program, and also she did domestic work at different points.

SU: What point, how old were you when they actually desegregated the schools here?

CR: I know that I first attended a white elementary school when I was in fifth grade. Apparently I had gone to all black school, which was Northside, from the first grade to the fourth grade maybe.

SU: What do you remember about the first year you went to the white school?

CR: I remember definitely, you know because of the racial politics of the time period, certainly remember feeling lonesome and isolated and alienated. But I do remember a few teachers who seemed to reach out to...there were only three or four blacks who integrated the schools in the fifth grade at Estes hills when I attended Estes Hills during those first years of integration. And I remember them trying to reach out so we wouldn't feel so isolated or so alienated or so ostracized.

SU: Where the white kids there...were they really receiving or were they..

CR: I think it was mixed. A kind of mixed reception. Some were friendlier than were others. And I'm not sure if they weren't friendly because of the racial politics or if they just weren't friendly because they just hadn't been used to going to school with black kids. But I will say this: I did establish a long term relationship with a white student in my class whose father had died. And apparently because her father had died, she might have felt some degree of alienation given that that's a fairly young age for one's parent to die. So given that her otherness and my otherness maybe we felt comfortable and maybe that's why we became friends or became attached to each other, but we're still even friends today.

SU: Whenever you integrated the schools, were they...were all the other elementary schools integrated at the same time? Do you remember?

CR: I don't remember, but I will say this: At that time, and I would have to look at some of the documents, but at that time, there might have been one other elementary school but there weren't as many elementary schools then as there are now. So it might have been maybe two elementary schools so I don't know how integration was being implemented at the other school ro

if it was or if Estes Hills was like the test case, the experimental case. I don't remember any of that.

SU: Did any of your friends from Northside get to go to Estes with you?

CR: It seemed like, and I'm not how it worked out, but I got the impression it was kind of like a voluntary thing initially and only those persons who were interested in going could go. And I do remember of those students who did integrate the schools, there was...I'm not sure if we were recommended for this integration, but we were definitely, from what I recall, we were definitely among the high achievers for that particular class. So I do remember that, but I'm not sure if our parents were more aggressive or assertive in having us become part of this experimental program, which is how we got there. I'm not sure about that.

SU: Okay, do you remember, like, your parents reaction to it? Were they...

CR: I do remember this: and I can attest to this when someone interviewed my sister regarding her experience with integration. At that time, many African Americans saw it as a mechanism utilized to sort of level the playing field and for blacks to have access that they had long been denied in these all black schools. So many parents and community leaders and members of the community were very much in support of integration because they thought that blacks would have access to educational opportunities that they were not having access to in these segregated schools so I do remember everybody was very much for integration, they were pushing integration and many African Americans felt that their children would have a better quality education because they would be getting the same quality education that had been offered to white students at the time.

SU: Do you remember, like did many of you activities get to change once you got to the

white school. Did things get to change, did more activities open up to you than before.?

CR: I wouldn't say that there were many more activities. I, you know, it's really hard to say that the education was necessarily any better. So for me to make that kind of assessment is difficult. Also it's been a long time ago, so for me to try to make that kind of assessment is difficult. But I do vaguely remember that you assume that if you are going to a black school that the resources might have been inadequate, but in spite of the inadequacy of those resources the teachers were also very good and they maximized their potential with the meager resources that they had. So even though you might have been thrust into an arena where you had more resources, that didn't necessarily mean that you were getting more attention, more support, more encouragement, that kind of thing. So it's hard to weigh whether or not one was necessarily better than the other. But perhaps the thing that just stands out in my mind is the isolation and the alienation and the sort of sentiment that if you were black that you somehow can't learn and we could always learn. That was never the issue. But certainly when you are thrust into this environment, either that atmosphere is created, or you internalize that because you do feel different on the basis of race. So I'm not sure what it was.

SU: Did you have any black teachers at all when you went to Estes?

CR: When I went to Estes I don't remember any black teachers. All I remember are white teachers. After Estes I went to Guy B. Phillips.

SU: Do you remember if there were any...

CR: There were several black teachers at Guy B. Phillips when I went to Guy B. Phillips, yes.

SU: How about the high school, Chapel Hill High School?

CR: There were several black teachers at Chapel hill high School. In fact, some of my teachers and administrators at both my junior high and high school would later work for the university. Mr. Hayden Reinwick was a basketball coach and he might also have worked as a kind of counselor when I was at Guy B. Phillips and he later worked in the office of minority affairs here on campus. When I came , actually when I was an undergraduate here at UNC Chapel hill. As well as Mrs. Joyce Clayton. She was a high school teacher at Chapel Hill High School and she now is director of the [] Program so she now is affiliated with the university.

SU: Whenever you went to Estes, were your two sister also going...

CR: My sisters because they were older than me, they were probably going... I think my older sister probably helped to integrate the high school, Chapel Hill High School at the time.

SU: Do you remember anything she went through that might have been different from your experience?

CR: No, other than the fact that I remember her saying that when she went as well, particularly in the first year that again it was part of an experimental thing and only a few black students went, but our parents were so eager to have us become a part of this project that the buses did not transport, or did not pick up these students who were integrating the high school. So my parents paid for them to catch a cab everyday to go to school. So that's how much they were supportive in terms of making sure that we had resources I suppose that might have been perceived to have been better because of the funding and the way support was allocated in the time period.

SU: Whenever you went to Estes, were you happy to be going there, or did you wish you could still be going to Northside?

CR: I think it was a kind of dual reception meaning that yes, on the one hand I was happy to be going, meaning that we were going to have access to all these opportunities and resources. But on the other hand we were being thrust into a totally different environment at a young age. And it is difficult to contend with growing up as it is and to be a minority in a majority setting and have to deal with all those issues, particularly on a period where your trying to develop self esteem and self concept . It can be very overwhelming.

SU: Did your sister, before she was at Chapel Hill High, was she at Lincoln before that?

CR: One of my sisters apparently must have gone...I think my...I don't think either of my sisters ever went to Lincoln, or if they went to Lincoln they only went like one year. I don't remember them being at Lincoln long at all.

SU: This might be before you would remember a lot about it, but whenever Lincoln High School closed, do you remember much of the reaction about that?

CR: Well I just remember when it closed, for awhile it was converted to a school for like, it became like a sixth grade only school. So I remember going there for like my sixth grade or something like that, and it was like a pre-junior high school or something and then it was later converted into an administration building which it is today. But in terms of people feeling a sense of loss when the school was closed, yes...I think the African American community very much felt that way because what happened was that at Lincoln High School you had all black teachers and many of those teachers did not have opportunities in these integrated schools so I think the community very much felt a sense of loss and a sense of community, because at Lincoln High School they had you know, a marching band. Sports was a big thing and when integration came a lot of that was lost so people did feel a sense of loss.

SU: Whenever you went to Chapel Hill High, were there problems there as far as integration

CR: I can tell you, when I got to junior high school there were major problems and I was very politically active and those problems really subsided, but never went away. Even when I made the transition to high school. And I felt that those problems stemmed from the fact that white teachers did not reach out to black students, did not embrace black students and really did not make a concerted effort to try to embrace them, to make them feel a part of the environment there. And that's not all of them, don't get me wrong because there were some who were very instrumental in helping me but there were many who didn't reach out. And so because of that I think many black kids internalize that and so they begin to misbehave. They begin to not take their work or their education seriously and so a lot of problems began to develop as a result of how they were being treated. Not because they didn't have the mental aptitude or the ability to perform well. And so I think there was always some tension. I remember when I was in junior high, we had several sit-ins and protests in part because they didn't have a curriculum that attempted to address black history in any way, and so we wanted to have that incorporated in some level. And I do remember that being a central part of one of our protests and many activities were not geared to embrace the black kids and certainly by the time I went to Chapel Hill High School, those same division continued to exist and to persist. Black kids were encouraged to go to technical school as opposed to pursuing an institution of higher learning such as a university. They were not often times encouraged to take the advanced placement courses and it just seemed very systematic in terms of how they were um...their progress was halted or limited in a lot of different ways. And I will tell you that when I left there, high school, I was so frustrated I did not

march in high school. I did not go back to pick up my diploma and I told them they could send it to me in the mail. Because I found it so frustrating and so alienating. And I was very much involved in terms that I was a strong student, but the atmosphere was not conducive to learning. You were constantly on the offensive. Having to fight for this, having to fight for that, and so I was not happy at all about even saying I was from Chapel Hill High.

SU: Whenever you did like the sit-in for the black history curriculum did you get the black history classes?

CR: Yes, they did begin to incorporate that at that particular time. And I thought it good that they did.

SU: Like the other problems you had at that school, were you successful at getting many things done?

CR: I think on some level we were, and you can... one thing that you learn is that you can create activities, you can force them to offer certain kinds of thing, but if the encouragement is not there and if the attitudes of teachers perhaps cannot be altered, then it's really hard to alter, make these things affective even after you push to have them implemented or instituted., so that's the biggest thing.

SU: Whenever you left Chapel Hill High, you went onto college?

CR: Yes.

SU: Which college did you go to?

CR: I came here to UNC-Chapel Hill.

SU: And what did you study then?

CR: I finished here in English. Then I got a masters in radio, television, and film. And

then I got my Ph.D. in the school of education in education media, curriculum and instruction design.

SU: You teach here now, right?

CR: Yes, I teach in African-American studies. My area of specialty is black film history.

SU: I was wondering have you had any kids go through the school system here perhaps, or have you had children?

CR: I don't have any children, no I don't.

SU: Okay. [laughs]

CR: I don't know people who went to high school with me who have children and whose children who in fact did attend UNC as undergraduates. And I've had a couple of those students in my class.

SU: I was kinda interested in how people see the school system now, if they think it's changed much, the public schools in Chapel Hill.

CR: I don't know, but I will tell you this: I have a niece who went to Chapel Hill High and just based on some of the comments she's made to me. I can see...got some impression that things haven't changed all that much an particularly in view of...I was reading in the newspaper about the blue ribbon task force where you have blacks who are underachieving at a disproportionate rate. Something is clearly wrong and something is going on there. But I just find that appalling in view of the experience I had, you know, where I saw some of that happening but you would not think that would get progressively worse as time went on. You would think things would get progressively better. So I don't know what I attribute to that, but I will tell you this: growing up in Chapel Hill, being an African-American, is unique in enough of itself, particularly the time

period I grew up in. In part not only because you're dealing with racial politics, you're dealing with class politics. So many of the white students I attended school with, their parents were professors of the university. So my parents were not professors so I always felt, well I couldn't go to Europe in the summer to study, so I always felt I was behind, and as I told many people, playing catch up and trying to keep up. I felt constantly bombarded with that and preoccupied with that. [pause] Does that make sense?

SU: Yeah, it makes sense to me.

CR: And again that could be a figment of my imagination. That I assumed because their parents were professors, they were somehow more able to learn or had more access or something like that. But that's not always necessarily true. Because I found out years later some of their kids were not performing well at all, but you just assume they at least had the access or being in the environment where they could perform or achieve or excel. And so you know, you're always constantly preoccupied with that. I got to catch up and I've got to keep up.

SU: So you feel you worked harder when you were in school, just to...

CR: No doubt about it. Because we knew in view of the class as well as racial politics that it is not going to be easy, it has never been easy. We didn't always have money, but our parents really pushed for us in view of what they had to offer. And I do remember, in junior high and probably high school, the public library at that time was located on Franklin St. and almost everyday we would ride the school bus from school to the public library and study there and then walk home. So we always, you know, took advantage of our resources and compensate for what we felt we were lacking behind in or did not have. That was, I suppose, one of the ways many of us survived. And also at that there were a lot of UNC students who always offered tutorial

programs to black students and we always took advantage of that. In fact there was a white church here in Chapel Hill that offered a tutorial program. And again we would catch the bus, go down there and capitalize on those tutorial opportunities provided by UNC students and that was another way we tried to compensate for whatever we may not have had.

SU: The what you may not have had, do you think they helped you, the tutorial and stuff...do you think maybe a lot of it...I'm trying not to lead the question, but do you think some of it might have been just needing more attention and things or what do you think it was?

CR: As to why we were able to benefit from the tutorial program?

SU: Well, what you were missing more than the white students I guess.

CR: And again, it could be our perception. It's possible the white students probably needed to go and capitalize on those tutorial services as well. But we just assumed because their parents might have been more educated that if they had questions about their homework or how to do complete as assignment they could go to their parents. Unlike us whose parents were not as well educated, we would not be able to go home and ask our parents to help us complete a particular assignment, so we often took advantage of those types of tutorial services. So, yes they were very beneficial and the students at that time were very eager to help us. The...students always have energy, enthusiasm, they can change the world, they can bring about change, they can have an impact. So when we went to these tutorial programs with students, we were very comfortable and they were very receptive and we were very appreciative and very eager to have access.

SU: What, it's kinda going back to the level...I've heard about the Blue Ribbon Task Force and all that stuff...

CR: Yes.

SU: Why do you think that's happened?

CR: The only explanation I can attribute to that is that maybe in America today, and this could be a nation wide dilemma, class is almost beginning to surplace, on some level, not exclusively, but on some level, race. And because it seems that we are becoming more class oriented, then maybe this is what has happened in the school system where you have basically an environment of upper middle class white students going to school with lower income black students. And certainly over the years, the black middle class in Chapel Hill has not grown at an alarming rate, so because the black middle class has not increased it's presence. And you have this growing underclass, a lower class, then maybe that in part could explain the clear divisions that exists here and that are exacerbated by the fact that society at large is becoming more class oriented. So the people who were already behind are getting pushed back even further. But I don't know if that's the explanation, but that's what I'm thinking about the dynamics in Chapel Hill. I have no clue because when I came along I had the attitude I can't let class or any other variable become an impediment to my ability to learn because learning is free. To some extent. Now, I might not be able to go to a private school, but I can take advantage of the resources that a public school may offer and I can take advantage of a public library because that is free, and I can take advantage of public resources right here on this campus. So that was the attitude I had and I didn't let the class dynamics make me feel insecure or lower my self esteem and maybe I have compensated for that in some way, or maybe because I was always a fighter you know I responded to it in that way and I'm not sure about that. But even in the African-American community you have these class issues that pit one group against another and create tensions or

divisions. Can probably make people who are the under class, lower class more alienated more isolated make them question themselves, their ability to perform, to do well, etc. etc. But I never internalized a lot of that. I was just trying to compensate, overcome, you know do the best with what I had.

SU: Did you have a lot of support from your parents?

CR: We always had support from my parents. And of course I was the youngest one so I followed in the footsteps of my two older sisters, I suppose. And they were always very encouraging and supportive and they were always high achievers, I would say.

SU: Do they, your sisters, do you think they have the same feelings about it as you do? Did they face a lot of the same problems?

CR: I think they did.

SU: You said you were involved some in the political activism in high school? Did they try to get involved in things like that as well?

CR: Actually, they were probably much more politically involved than I was, which is why I became politically involved. I was following in their footsteps, which is why I became politically involved. They were I think, at least when I was in junior high, we had a black student movement, something comparable to a black student movement in junior high. We organized and came up with an agenda, came up with some of the agendas that were disproportionately impacting the black students. And my sisters had done that on the high school level.

SU: Did that create problems for you in junior high? How receptive was like the administration and things to that?

CR: On some level they were actually receptive because they were trying to promote

integration and so they wanted to...they knew that in order for integration to work they could not not respond to some of the demands because otherwise then integration wouldn't of been working. So I think on some level they tried to negotiate and to compromise, even though there were moments when they were very resistive, but we also had a group of parents that worked as a committee behind us. So anytime we had problems, we took it to this parental committee, and they would then meet with administrators. And there were local black ministers involved, such as Reverend Manly. He was on the forefront of the movement. There was also Reverend Hoyt. There were other people, Vivian Fushe and Miss Susie Weaver. There were a number of persons from the community, Gloria Williams, who often if we couldn't get administrators to respond to our causes or our issues, they would take them and confront administrators themselves. So we did have the support of out parents and out community.

SU: So the group of parents were mostly the black students parents?

CR: Yes.

SU: What year did you graduate from Chapel Hill High School?

CR: I graduated in 1973.

SU: Were you there then for the little bit about the riots they had in 1969?

CR: Actually that was over with, cause I didn't get there till 1970. At that time it was only tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades.

SU: Did you know anything about he riots when they were going on?

CR: I just vaguely remember a little bit about it because I remember my sisters being a little involved, but that all I remember.

SU: That's fine. So whenever you were in the high school, what were...were the problems

different from the ones in junior high you faced?

CR: I imagine they were probably very similar, some of the same kinds of causes.

SU: Do you remember anything particular, offhand?

CR: No, I don't. Not right off.

SU: Whenever you were in high school, did you have more interaction with the white students than maybe before? Or did you think it was more?

CR: By the high school? Yeah, I think once we went to junior high integration was well on it's way by the time I got to junior high school. Certainly we got accustomed to each other and realized that this is what highschool was going to be like. Many of the friends you met at that level you would maintain at the high school as well.

SU: What about in the community once integration happened did things change in the community?

CR: I will say that the community was still divided on the basis of race to much of the same manner as it still is today in Chapel Hill. But I will tell you what I thought was very interesting, is I do remember that as a result of the sit-ins and boycotts, that there were a number of establishments that prior to the sit-ins and boycotts on some level, they did patronize African-Americans, but because of the sit-ins and boycotts they were then forced to take a position. So it's very possible that a business could have patronized blacks, but then when they were really forced to take on a position, they decided 'well we are against blacks' and then at that point they would refuse to patronize blacks, and then they were boycotted or protested or whatever. So I think that it's very important, and someone else brought this to my attention, in the South there was always a level of tolerance that existed between blacks and whites, where they learned

to sort of get along, but then of course when integration came up people had to take sides and even some of the white people were split because some whites were for blacks and some whites were against them. And so I just think that's kind of interesting.

SU: So you saw a big change then in the community?

CR: Definitely, definitely. There were some businesses previously patronized blacks and then, and I'm not sure they even willingly wanted to do that, but maybe pressure was being applied, so they said, well, we got to stay on this particular side of being in opposition to blacks or integration or whatever. But I will tell you this, which is interesting. Having grown up during the period of integration, I do remember there were some businesses that were known for not patronizing blacks. And we were told as children not to go there. It wasn't until I went to college that I even went in some restaurants which had been integrated for many years because as a child growing up I had been told not to go there. And I tell that to some people now and they laugh and I say you know I've lived here all my life there's certain buildings or restaurants or whatever, businesses, I had never been in because I was not allowed to go as a child and I've never been in there.

SU: Did you not go because...

CR: Because of the historical tradition. They said 'don't you go in there' and so I just never went and I never had a desire, because once you...and of course the business could've changed ownership several times...but once you just remember that was one place you were not allowed, you were not welcome so it was really hard for me to make the transition to go in there now as some new restaurant or whatever.

SU: Whenever they were having the sit-ins and things here in Chapel Hill, were you

involved in those at all, just within the community?

CR: I was actually quite young so I don't remember being actively involved. Certainly when I was in junior high and high school, I was very much involved, but as a youngster, I don't remember it all that well. I do remember attending church meetings with my parents. I do remember maybe the march on Washington, when black churches were organizing to get people to participate in that. And I do remember our parents and some of the persons in the community participating in some of the boycotts. But I just really remember it primarily from a very distant view.

SU: What organizations or activities did you do once you got to high school?

CR: Let's see I was very active. I was one of the editors of the newspaper at the high school. I was probably involved in student government. I was a page in the N.C. House of Representatives. I'm sure I was involved in the black student organization, whatever that might have been. I was involved in a lot of things, I would have to look in my high school year book, but apparently I tried to forget all of that [laughs].

SU: You said, whenever you left, you weren't interested. Have you been back any?

CR: I have not been back to a class reunion. I have not been back out to that high school. I will say that I might have gone once or twice and that was because my niece missed the school bus and I had to give her a ride to school, but I just felt it was never embracing the black students in the way it should have been. And you would be surprised if you create a conducive atmosphere and environment where everyone feels they have the potential to learn and to perform and to do well, my guess is that you would have half the behavior problems that you have, and you would probably produce a pool of persons who would become very competitive. And so I don't know

how that is lost. And I'm not blaming race exclusively. I think teachers felt that they are under a lot of pressure. And in Chapel Hill, teachers feel that they are under pressure from the university because they teach a lot of kids whose professors attend here, so I'm sure they're feeling a lot of different pressures on a lot of different levels. But my only concern is, how can you teach a room full of students and cater to some and not to others, you know. I just see that as very disturbing. Which is what I do think that many people will say that they miss is all black school, is that regardless of your class, your economic status, when you came there, you felt they were concerned about your well being and they were concerned about you as a person, and you... they were concerned about you both personally as well as professionally, you know. And that's what I see missing in these schools today. But I'm using these terms very loosely and very broadly when I talk about whites and blacks collectively, because I do want to say that there were always exceptions to the rule. There were white teachers who really took an interest in me and maybe who went out of my way to maybe make sure that I was competitive so that I could achieve, and there were always one or two who did that, even when they could probably experience some repercussions from doing so.

SU: Do you have any idea why some were more responsive than others?

CR: No, I saw one of my teachers not too long ago, and she's now a principal, and she said this to me, and I thought it but I didn't really know it. She said 'you' and she mentioned some other students, she said 'you know you all were among my favorites' and why she responded to us I have no idea other than the fact that she might have recognized that we had potential and she wanted to make sure that we did not fall through the cracks, and we received what we needed to receive in order to excel. And maybe she was trying to compensate because

she knew that we were isolated and maybe she was compensating because of that. She made a commitment to go out of her way to make sure we did well. I have no idea.

SU: Whenever you look back at it now, do you feel you gained more by going to Chapel Hill or do you feel you lost more by not going to Lincoln?

CR: I...oh, between Lincoln and Chapel Hill High? I think there were some gains and some losses on both sides. A sense of black community you lose when you don't go to an all black school. And that is very valuable and very important. When your thrust into these cold environments that can be cold and harsh at an early age it makes you defensive. You know, and even though you might be exposed to certain kinds of information, is that to your advantage if you have bitterness about the experience? I don't know. I think there were gains and losses on both sides.

SU: How do you think the black community is now? How has it changed since desegregation?

CR: I will tell you one of the things that disturbs me the most as a result of integration, is as a result of integration I see, and I could be wrong, I don't know everything, I see this sense of blacks feeling insecure and having a lower self esteem in part because they have been thrust in these majority environments that they perceive as being superior. And that's what I see as very disturbing and very problematic.

SU: That they look at it as being superior...

CR: Right, and to talk white and act white and be white as somehow more acceptable. What's wrong with being black and talking black, whatever that means, if we can operationally define that. You can still have self esteem. I'm black, I'm happy, I'm proud, I'm not insecure.

I'm not desirous of whiteness and being white. I mean, does that make me great or any better? That's what I see as very disturbing now. And this notion I see here now that if I go to a white school I'll be more marketable. Well, if you go to a good black school you have some good teachers and some good access, you'll be even more marketable. You know, so that sense if you're in this environment your somehow having a better life, career, access and that's not necessarily true at all.

SU: You've pretty much answered everything I have written down so far. Is there anything in particular you haven't talked about, that I haven't asked that you would want to mention?

CR: No, not that I can think of.

SU: I think that's everything I have if...

CR: Then that's everything I have to say. [laughs]

END OF INTERVIEW