

Interview

with

JOHN GRIFFIN

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By Goldie F. Wells

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INTERVIEW WITH MR. JOHN GRIFFIN

Goldie: I am in Fayetteville, North Carolina and I am with Mr. John Griffin who is the principal at E.E. Smith High School. We are having this interview in the athletic director's office because there is a home game going on and he slipped away to have this interview with me. Today's date is February 15, 1991. Now Mr. Griffin, I would like for you to introduce yourself and say that you know that this interview is being recorded.

Mr. Griffin: My name is John Holland Griffin, Jr. and I am principal here at E.E. Smith Senior High School and I am happy to do this interview tonight on behalf of a young lady who is doing it for a very worthy cause. I hope that I can help in this regard.

Goldie: I told you before we started that I am doing some research on black high school principals. Back in 1964, there were over 200, the last man I interviewed said there were 219 black high school principals in 1964. Last year when I wrote to the State Department and asked for a listing of high school principals they sent me a list of 41 in 1989, and some of those 41 are not principals of traditional high schools. They are principals of alternative schools. So that means that there were less than 41 last year. You are in the group of the 1989 principals. I want you to tell me some things about your principalship. What I am doing is comparing the role perceptions of principals from those two groups. I want you to tell me a little about yourself and how you became a high school principal.

Mr. Griffin: I am a native of Fayetteville and I am a graduate of E.E. Smith High School. I began teaching on the junior high level and I received a Master's degree in administration and supervision from the University of North Carolina in 1966. In the summer of that year I was appointed assistant to the principal at Washington Drive Junior High School. The principal at that time was a gentleman named Mr. W.T. Brown. He later became Dr. W.T. Brown, who is my immediate superior now as associate superintendent for secondary education here in Cumberland County. I served with him for four years as his assistant principal and at the end of the four year period I became an elementary principal. I stayed an elementary principal for one year then Dr. Brown was moved here to E.E. Smith as principal and I became principal at the junior high school where we had served together and I stayed there for two years and then in the fall of 1973, he became assistant superintendent in the Fayetteville City School System and I became principal at E.E. Smith. So I have been principal at E.E. Smith since 1973.

Goldie: So you just moved up...

Mr. Griffin: Just for the record there were only four black high school principals in North Carolina.

Goldie: I knew it had gone down. I didn't know it had gone that low. I thought it had gone to 13.

Mr. Griffin: Well, to my knowledge I don't know more than four, at the most five. There was a principal at Dudley High School that was black, a principal at Hillside, John Lucas was black, the superintendent at Brunswick County now was a principal at a high school at that time and I think there was one other in the western part of the state. Maybe I was the fifth one. Hankins, do you know Pete Hankins? I think he is the superintendent now in Brunswick County. If I recall correctly, principal at that time. There weren't more than five.

Goldie: I know that after desegregation... I am only dealing with high school principals because I thought that was significant.

Mr. Griffin: But you also know that it has changed because how many historically black schools are still in existence? That is another thing when you look back through the years-- how many of those schools that were in existence when I went to E.E. Smith in the fifties are still there. There are not over five or six of those.

Goldie: Right. Hillside, Carver, West Charlotte, E.E. Smith, Dudley and those are the only ones I know right now.

Goldie: Did you have any educators in your family?

Mr. Griffin: My mother finished at Fayetteville State Norman and started out teaching and left the teaching profession to go to Fort Bragg as a civilian employee and she retired from Fort Bragg. My aunt, who just recently passed away this past weekend and the funeral was day before yesterday, was a retired teacher here in Cumberland County. My daddy came here to Fayetteville State Norman in 1927. All of our low athletic scholarships to play ball are at State Norman. He never taught or anything, he just went there awhile and started working at Fort Bragg too.

Goldie: So your family was pretty well educated.

Goldie: Tell me something about E.E. Smith. Tell me something about the school's history.

Mr. Griffin: This is what I call a historically black school. Its roots were founded in the black community

because at one time this school only served the black population in this community. In this entire city all the black high school students came to Smith and the black high school students at Fort Bragg came to Smith and we began, I think in '67, before I got here that the school was integrated and started serving a multi-culture clientele. We continued to do that. Right now approximately 60% of the students are black and 35% Caucasian, and 5% Hispanic and other origin. About 50% of our teaching staff is black and 50% basically white.

Goldie: How many assistants do you have?

Mr. Griffin: I have three full-time assistants.

Goldie: How many students do you have?

Mr. Griffin: We have about 1050 students, grades 10-12.

Goldie: I am going to ask you something about your responsibilities and I will give you areas and I want you to tell me how you deal with those responsibilities.

Goldie: Supervision of personnel and selection of teachers.

Mr. Griffin: Supervision of personnel here at the school is from the effective teacher training standpoint. We basically do by delegating some of the work to the associate principals. We call our assistants associates. There is one associate who is an associate lead principal because I am a lead principal for this attendance area. So I have an associate lead principal. The counties are divided into eight attendance areas and I am the lead principal for the E.E. Smith attendance area and I have an associate lead principal and I have one associate who only works with the 50%, we have one visit from the instructional standpoint for the effective teacher training and then one associate and I work with most--I work with all of the initially certified and I have a total of 18 teachers and then the remaining three visit I divide among the other two associates. The athletic director who is also the associate lead does three tie visits, the female associate who works with pupil accounting does a person load and I take the initially certified and a few others. I like to work with beginning teachers.

Goldie: What do you do about selecting your teachers?

Mr. Griffin: Basically the selection process, unless it speaks to a unique area, I make the decision myself--the unique area being foreign languages. If I need a Spanish teacher, I may ask the chair of the department or one of the regular Spanish teachers to assist me in a selection process. If I need a vocational teacher, I will do the same. If I need somebody in ROTC, for example a sargent or non-commissioned

officer, I will ask the officer to assist me in that. If I need someone in guidance, I will ask the guidance here to assist me with that because those are specialized areas and I basically am a generalist and I need their input to talk about the specialties that people bring to them.

Goldie: How do you get the people to interview? Is there a pool downtown?

Mr. Griffin: There is a pool downtown and I go in and I ask for--if I need a science teacher, I need the science folders, and they give me the science folders and there is a conference room and I can sit and look and pick out persons based upon what I see from the conferences that they have had because they do initial interviews with information from recommendations, etc., that they have from previous employment. Then I pick out a pool of people maybe six to eight that look like top prospects. Some fields you don't have that and some you have multiplicities you know and then I will call them in for interviews. I usually let my administrator coordinator who is a female lady and is sort of my girl Friday help me. She sets up the appointments for me then they come in and I talk with them.

Goldie: Curriculum and instruction.

Mr. Griffin: As far as curriculum is concerned the attitude that we take about curriculum here is that the departments talk with me and make recommendations on what areas they would like to do differently. For example, if they would like to add a course--we just did that. We just talked about our offers for next year. They will present that offering to me. They will write up the description of requirements but it has to go before the curriculum committee for the county before it can be included. But the departments provide me with that information. For example, if in mathematics they wanted to offer something in statistics and probability, they would talk to me about that. If that is not a course that we are already offering in the county, they will have to write up a course description, requirements etc., and go up before the curriculum committees approved by the board then because of the course dictionary for the county.

Goldie: Do you have a lot of input--suppose they come to you and it is something that you really don't think is worthy to go before the curriculum committee.

Mr. Griffin: The first thing I want them to do is give me justification for it. Why should we offer this? What is it that you know about it that causes you to feel that this is in the best interest of our young people? What does the data tell us about it? Is this something that is a growing field? Is this something that we know as we look toward the 21st century that there will be needs for the young people to

know. If so, let's go with it. If not, if we look out there and we know the field is saturated in this area, this is not something that is going to support the direct goal that youngsters are going to subscribe to, we don't need it. So I ask them to give me some basic information. They have to substantiate it. It is not just a wish list.

Goldie So you sound like you are the instructional leader.

Mr. Griffin: I try to be.

Goldie: Discipline. How do you deal with discipline?

Mr. Griffin: Well, presently the three associates work with the grade level. One associate takes 10th grade, one takes the 11th grade and one takes the 12th grade. They will follow those students right on up. The associate with the juniors this year will have the sophomores next year and he will stay right with those kids so that every year they will be able to talk with them about the progress that they are making and the kinds of problems that they are having and if they are making improvements. They are learning the parents and how to deal with them if they have any special needs.

Goldie: Do you use that same system with the guidance counselor?

Mr. Griffin; Guidance requested that we don't do that because of the specialties. For example, the 11th grade counselor is also the testing coordinator. There are some things that he does that are unique. The senior counselor does some things in college prep recommendations. They would rather stay with it like it is. I gave them the opportunity to make that decision. This year they decided to keep it just like it was. Some schools do it differently. Well, I know we have been toying with it at ours.

Goldie: Do you consider discipline a problem?

Mr. Griffin: No. Well, it is a problem to a degree that we must determine solutions on a continuous basis and what can we do to cause the youngsters to feel that they must understand what is proper and what is not proper. I have found that with most of our young people if we teach them the correct way, they don't have a lot of difficulty. A lot of them bring to us a lack of knowledge of what is expected of them and once we teach them--like proper behavior in the assembly programs, taking your hat off in the building, we don't wear hats in here. We don't wear hats in the gymnasium out there because there is a reason why you don't wear hats inside of a building. We explain that to them so then all the sudden they know that they don't wear hats at Smith.

Goldie: Where do you explain these things?

Mr. Griffin: We explain it to them at our meetings with students and right now we have something called student staff development which is a bit unique. But I continue to do it. Some people might question it but I think it is very justifying. Twice a month we have student staff development. All the teachers go for one 45 minute period. They meet together for staff development--50 minutes it really is and the sophomores meet together and the juniors meet together and the seniors meet together. And from time to time we have resource people come and talk with them and then I am doing staff development with teachers. You see you're moving into effective school stuff and talk about elements of teaching and all I've got to do is some teaching and reteaching with the teachers. So this gives me a chance during the school day. Ironically the school system is proposing a calendar next year where everybody will get out in an attendance area twice a month early so we can do the same.

Goldie: So your plan is working so well that it is being adopted by the system.

Mr. Griffin: Well, they are going to legitimize it by making the school day longer each day but see the basic education plan talks to students should be involved in a learning situation for five and a half hours. If what we are doing is not teaching and learning, I don't know what it is. So I feel very good about that and I think I can justify it.

Goldie: Transportation.

Mr. Griffin: Okay, the supervision of transportation. The supervision of transportation for public school transportation, the orange buses are designated to an assistant--one of the associates I should say deals with transportation. He also deals with transportation in-house for field trips, etc. We have a system for that. Half of our transportation needs are solved and are handled by Fort Bragg and Bragg Bus Lines because we serve all the students at Fort Bragg and Pope.

Goldie: You do serve the high school students from Fort Bragg?

Mr. Griffin: Yes, there is no high school at Fort Bragg and Pope so all of those kids come here and so they handle their own transportation to a degree. They set up the routes and send them to us. But if those drivers have disciplinary problems, they give them to us and we handle those.

Goldie: Utilization of funds.

Mr. Griffin: Utilization of funds and budgeting is done by request basis and prioritized through departments and basically I will give them an allotment at the beginning of

the year. In vocational ed I give it to them in the spring. They make allotments and requests and we prioritize those and I establish them then and each department gets a certain amount of money. They meet together and propose to me what they would like to have in the 5100 category and then if they give me their orders in the spring, when summer comes as soon as July 1, I send those orders in. Some of the stuff is here when they get here.

Goldie: Cafeteria management.

Mr. Griffin: The cafeteria management for me is basically a set player. I am the person who is responsible for the cafeteria. I have an outstanding manager. She does most of the managing. She only calls on me on a needs basis. We confer on employment only. If she wants to change the menu, she talks with me about that but the day to day operation, she handles. I am responsible for the receipts presently and that means that they come to my designee and get them to deposit and we deposit the money. I was also responsible for payroll but as of the first of January they allowed the managers to start signing their own payrolls so I do very little with the day to day operation of the cafeteria.

Goldie: So there is no menu that is planned downtown at central office.

Mr. Griffin: It is, right, but see we have an opportunity to do some things differently. I have three lines and a salad bar and we can do baked potatoes, soup and different kinds of things and she might say like right now we are trying to do French fries every day. We do baked potatoes twice a week. Those little things that make kids feel good about the cafeteria because motivating them to eat is a difficult task itself.

Goldie: The cafeteria has to make funds.

Mr. Griffin: They want every thing to be fast food types. Everything has got to be pizza, hamburgers, cheeseburgers. You know they want something like that all the time and so it is a bit of a challenge to us.

Goldie: Building and grounds.

Mr. Griffin: One of the associate principals is designated with the authority to manage and direct the custodial staff which includes eight custodians and a head custodian. He meets with that custodian every Monday morning and plans with him what we have to do for that week. For example, tonight is Parent Appreciation Night. They have some different things to do. I have five guys working at night and three people in the daytime. But he directs all of that. He does inspecting and all. He does everything but hiring and firing.

I do that. He can recommend but I reserve that right.

Goldie: Community relations.

Mr. Griffin: That is a family thing. All of us are PR people. Our students do our best job here. Our teachers are PR people, our custodians are family. We say we are a family. All of us are about PR because what we say makes a difference. The kids love the school and they are going to tell other folks that they love the school. If the teachers feel good about what John Griffin is doing, they are going to tell people, "You ought to be working with us because we do it this way and we like what we are doing." So we are all into the business of public relations. There is no planned Public Relations Program at this school other than how we disseminate information for public notice.

Goldie: How do you think the people in this community feel about E.E. Smith?

Mr. Griffin: My feeling is that generally people in the community have a pretty good feeling about E.E. Smith. We have been pretty fortunate for the most part that we haven't had any major incidents or violence at our school. I think that is a plus for us. We have not had a whole lot of drug problems to the degree that we have identified them as such. We have drugs in our school and I think people are foolish to say that they are drug-free no more than the society is drug free but how you deal with them I think is so important. That has been our major challenge. I say we are like Avis, we have always got to try harder. We take nothing for granted. In other words it is important that when people talk to the principal of E.E. Smith when they leave they feel good about whatever it is. I might not agree with them but they feel like they had an opportunity to be heard and whatever my rationale is should be a justified word. I hope most of the people feel that way. I don't just say no to say no or yes to say yes. What is it we are doing and why are we doing it, is it in the best interest of the young people? Everybody wants to see their kids do well. But they want you to be fair. They can tell when you are not fair.

Goldie: And the children really can tell.

Mr. Griffin: No doubt about it.

Goldie: How much administrative power and control do you feel that you have over your school site and your responsibilities?

Mr. Griffin: More than I have ever had because with the new administration in the new regime the superintendent's attitude now is and the national trend is looking toward site based management. The where the building leadership team has

been expanded to, do more and more and give me more input on the kinds of things we are doing at our school. We have a communication counsel that is really something that we have had here for many years. We had that when we were all black. We had people from the various attendance areas to have cars to come in for a little PTA council once a month and then that was stopped and now everybody is doing that. I really feel good about that kind of thing. I feel like the superintendent holds me responsible and whatever I decide I should be able to justify it and he should be able to support me because when he talks to me about it I should have a sound reason and rationale for doing it. He gives me that prerogative.

Goldie: How did the desegregation of schools affect your role as a principal?

Mr. Griffin: Well, when it really began back in the sixties I was an assistant principal. Shortly thereafter I became a principal and it was a challenge to sell yourself in your school. I was a junior high principal in 1971, and there were people there who did not want to be there who had been assigned to the school and could not afford to go any place else. They watched me very closely and it was my job however to let them know that we were trying to provide the best education possible for all of our young people, regardless of their origin or ethnic group. I was very concerned about each and every one of them and they watched me very closely to see if I was a fair person and how I dealt with their young people. I think once most of them realized that I did have a genuine interest in the youngsters I think it became less of a problem. We certainly have not turned the corner. There is a whole lot of work to be done. Some of the things that were once controversial in the feelings of people have sort of been hidden and disguised but some of them still have some of those feelings. People in general will respect intelligence, they will respect persons who are sincere, they will respect fairness, I think. To some it is more difficult than others but if you have those kinds of things to your advantage, then I personally feel that you are halfway there.

Goldie: Do you enjoy your job? Why?

Mr. Griffin: I do. Well, I enjoy seeing youngsters grow and mature and prepare themselves for the next step. I love the challenge of the person whom somebody says can't do it and seeing some of them become able to do it. I guess I am a strong supporter of the underdog--the kid whom nobody else wants to deal with and I really don't know why not. I guess I get my greatest thrill when I see those kids who come in in the 10th grade and nobody wants to deal with graduate from here and feel like they are somebody because we cared about them. I think school adult family supports me very much in that and we all feel like that once they leave here and do

not complete their education, we must feel that we have done everything within our power to help them and if we have not, then it is our fault. If we have, it is theirs.

Goldie: And you teach that.

Mr. Griffin: To the best of my ability.

Goldie: What do you consider the major problem of your principalship?

Mr. Griffin: Finding enough time. Time management and I have read a lot about it and I have done a lot of things with it in the effective schools work. One of the pieces that we had to do for homework last week was to take Tuesday and record everything that we did and there was a ball game Tuesday and I start every morning at 8:00 a.m. We start school at 8:30 a.m. All of the associates are here when I get here but by the same token I basically stay until 6:00 p.m. every day and I am usually the last to leave along with the AD but even in that time I do most of my paperwork after 4:00 p.m. because I like to be out there with the youngsters. You know the mesh from the state level and the federal level the accountability due in the name of writing documentation for things has gotten sort of enormous that a lot of times I cannot do what I would like to do and that is get more involved in the classroom with teachers. But I have to fight through that and make ways to do it because that is what I am here for.

Goldie: What do you consider the most rewarding about your principalship?

Mr. Griffin: As I said, seeing the youngsters grow and develop and watching them come across the stage.

Goldie: Now taking into consideration that there are less than 40 black high school principals with graduating classes in the state, if you knew of a young black person, male or female, that wanted to become a high school principal, what advice would you give?

Mr. Griffin: One, keep your mind open to learn, don't be afraid of a challenge and let people know that you really are interested. I think sometimes some of us are a bit too reserved. We sit back and don't project ourselves. Nobody can read your mind. I just talked to a young man tonight about a position as principal. I said to him--you have to do some things to help yourself. I love to read and every minute I get at home, I read. My wife keeps magazines at my favorite spot. She has books for me to read. My youngest son is 15 years old. He has done the same thing now. I love to read. What is the research telling us about that? What is it that we need to do? What direction are we taking in

education? What is happening to the schools of choice? What is going to make a difference in the next years in education as we maybe move away from the mandatory busing? We may be doing that so what is our challenge going to be? Is it going to be that the schools with the strongest program would provide the best education from things that are measurable to be the schools that will survive? If so, what should I do at E.E. Smith to prepare us and to continue to develop a foundation for that. That is the way that I see it. I have enjoyed what I am doing and God has been good to me because I never thought I would be principal of Smith. That was the farthestmost thing from my imagination. I thought I was doing real well when I became a junior high principal.

Goldie: Do you feel like you had a sponsor--someone in the other culture?

Mr. Griffin: Well, let me tell you what happened to me. Mr. Brown took me out and I got my Master's that summer and he said to me, I understand that you have completed your work area so I have talked to the superintendent and he says that I can take you on and give you a little help.

Goldie: Was Mr. Brown white?

Mr. Griffin: No, he was black. He is the associate superintendent now. He is my immediate superior. He has been my mentor. He is a little older than I am. My mother calls him her son too although his mom lives in Durham. He is sort of my extended family to a degree and so I kept a full load. I was teaching 7th grade math and science and he changed me and made me self-contained 7th grade. I still was his assistant and I still kept my load. I continued to do that and then I got a half-time load. I would teach in the afternoon and then teach in the mornings, then finally I became a full-time assistant. He gave me an opportunity from the first year to work with the schedule for junior high schools, to work with discipline and transportation, and do some things in that arena. At that time we didn't have an emphasis on instructional leadership that we have now. I think if there is any one thing that I might add to this discussion is that there is no doubt in my mind principals really in this day and time have to be instructional leaders because the indicators tell me that what gets measured gets done and the things that are getting measured are the things that are happening in the classrooms. So that is where we have to be. But he took me under his wing, and he was very good to me. He taught me a lot of things and I followed him to that job in the junior high when he left and then he stayed over at E.E. Smith for two years and then he went up to the top level and I came over here. He and I have been constant friends and he has been my mentor and advisor. If I have anything that is really pressing me, I have always felt

that he was the person who would always be there to help me. And he has done that. He is a super person.

Goldie: He gave you a lot of chances to learn all of the areas.

Mr. Griffin: We have done this here at our school. I have developed a lot of people. One of my former assistants, who is white, is a superintendent now down in Ahsoskie, George Armish. I have had maybe three assistants become principals and I feel like we are grooming some people here now to become principals.

Goldie: I appreciate you taking your time to interview and you have to go out and talk to your parents and I understand. Thank you.