

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

KATHY CHEEK
MARCH 27, 2001

[My name is Susan Upton and I am interviewing Kathy Cheek. It is March 27 at four o'clock in the afternoon at UNC- Chapel Hill.]

Susan Upton: Ok, I'll start recording now, if that is okay. To start out with I'll get background information, if that is okay?

Kathy Cheek: okay.

SU: Where you born at?

KC: Here, UNC Hospitals.

SU: Really? Have you always lived here in Chapel Hill?

KC: Yes, always.

SU: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

KC: I have a younger sister.

SU: And what neighborhood did you grow up in?

KC: Jones Ferry Road, outside of Carrboro, outside of town limits.

SU: Which schools did you go to?

KC: I went to Carrboro Elementary. I went to--my sixth grade--was at Lincoln. It was the one and only year the school system decided to put all the sixth grades in one building in one place together and it only lasted that one year. Then I went to Phillips Junior—it was before middle school so I went to Phillips Junior High. Until halfway through my ninth grade year when Culbreth opens, so I was the first class in Culbreth, then Chapel Hill High.

SU: Okay, that's a lot of schools. What did your parents do?

KC: My father worked at UNC Hospitals for thirty-six years. He was the director of mail

services and printing. My mother worked at UNC Hospitals personnel for about five years, but other than that she was mostly a stay-at-home mom.

SU: Let's start out with the desegregation stuff. When do you remember--like what are your first memories of the desegregation process?

KC: I remember--I think it was first--well it had to have been first grade because there wasn't mandatory kindergarten back then so my first year of school was first grade, not kindergarten. And I remember a little girl in my class just crying and crying and crying. And she had been brought in and left, a little black girl, had been brought in and left by her mother in this ocean of white faces. And all of--all the white kids parents being so upset because her mother had just walked in and left her. You know, first day of first grade parents, mom, were staying around and all that stuff, but I think she just wanted her to be tough. And I remember kinda feeling sorry for her, but that's --I mean, that's about my only memory.

SU: Did she end up staying in the class?

KC: Yes.

SU: The other parents, were they upset because she was black or because--

KC: No, because she got left, and she was upset.

SU: That makes sense. Well, were you aware of how everything--I guess you were aware of how everything was changing in the schools.

KC: Well, kind of, but not really. As a child you didn't--I mean that wasn't an issue and you didn't really care. I think we were probably aware because our parents were concerned about stuff, but I don't personally remember anything. I mean it was just--

SU: Do you remember any of the concerns from the parents, or any other adults around

you?

KC: I remember--you know this is probably just my old childhood memories, but memories of concern that it was pulling down the schools and we had Lincoln as a black school, why couldn't we keep it operating as a black school and so on. I don't remember it being a big deal.

SU: Throughout your elementary school, were there many other black students in your school?

KC: I remember some, but probably not many. I don't think it got significant until I got to junior high and high school.

SU: Did that change--do you remember any conflicts that arose in--

KC: Ohhh, junior high and high school, yes.

SU: really?

KC: Oh yes, oh yeah. When I was in junior high, well when I was still at Phillips. It was in the fall so it was before we had moved to Culbreth. And there was a huge riot at Chapel Hill High. This must have been 1968 or '69, I can't remember which, but it was significant enough that our mothers came to school and picked us up. The principal at the junior high hid in his office.

SU: Well, what was it about?

KC: Some--the black students at Chapel Hill High had presented a list of demands to the principal there that they wanted to change the mascot of the school from something to tigers or--some of it's vague. They wanted to change the school colors to black and gold instead of blue and gold. I mean, just this whole list of demands and they weren't being acted on very quickly so it just escalated into a full scale riot. They closed the high school for a few days. But I wasn't in

high school yet, I was still in middle school--or junior high-- but I remember--

SU: And your parents still came and got you--

KC: Yes.

SU: Did they do anything, like afterwards?

KC: The parents, I remember, had meetings. Back then children weren't supposed to know anything that was going on, it was the adults. And I don't know the specifics, but I know there were parents meetings in the evenings and that sort of stuff. Seems like the high school was closed for awhile and they brought in deputies for awhile and then most of the demands were met so I think it calmed down a little bit.

SU: Do you remember any other situations?

KC: I remember just in high school--well no, this was in junior high too. This was still at Phillips. I remember being scared to go in the bathrooms.

SU: Really? How come?

KC: Because the black girls would be waiting for you in the bathrooms and they would rip your post earrings out of your ears and that kind of stuff. I remember that you never went to the bathroom by yourself, and if you could hold it, you never went to the bathroom.

SU: Well, did you have--was there much interaction between the black students and the white students?

KC: Some it was very--you know there was a group of, or a pocket of "trouble makers" and then everyone else was okay. I remember that there was this one girl that was in chorus with me and she threatened me the whole time that she was going to kill me and this and that kind of stuff. But that was the exception, not the normal.

SU: That's interesting. Was anything ever done about it, the different problems?

KC: No.

SU: Did it change any in high school?

KC: Yeah, high school got a little bit better. There was still a pocket of kids that back then--I don't know what high school is like now, but back then there was an area in the back of the high school— this was the old Chapel Hill High School, I mean the original Chapel Hill High School on Homestead. And kids would go out there and smoke and stuff. You weren't allowed to smoke, but they did. And um, There would always be a pocket of guys, black guys particularly, that were starting trouble and picking fights and this and that and the other. I remember having to be protected for awhile because black guys would make inappropriate remarks to white girls walking down the halls and so forth. But I don't remember high school being as big a deal as junior high.

SU: Really? Like, being protected, did you mean by other guy students?

KC: Yeah.

SU: Do you have any idea why it got better in high school?

KC: Probably just time would be my guess. I mean this was the early seventies. I graduated in seventy-three so this would have been very early seventies and I guess things were just getting better in general at that point. There was a new principal, I remember--a new principal had come into the high schools and that was one of his major things was to clam the unrest and get the black white issues solved and that kind of stuff.

SU: Do you remember anything he did in particular?

KC: No, again I mean who cared? [laughs] I mean, we didn't care, our parents probably

did but we didn't.

SU: Do you remember about things going on in the community at that time, as far as sit-ins and things like that?

KC: No, not really. I mean, I was fairly protected. My parents were very cautious and so we weren't exposed to a lot of stuff really. And I don't remember it ever--[pause]--no, I don't remember it ever being a big deal about it.

SU: Okay, this is kind of changing the subject about it. But what activities and stuff were you involved in in high school?

KC: I was one of the founding members of the Future Business Leaders of America, and look where I am now [laughs]. I --that's probably about it. I was much more interested in boys, etc. than academic or scholastic activity.

SU: How about other things in the community?

KC: Girl scouts and my church.

SU: Just in general, within the community, was it mostly white or was it mixed in a lot?

KC: Everything I associate--anything that I participated in extracurricularly was white, predominately white. Except for girl scouts I think was a mixture. And I probably left that in junior high at some time so I don't think I did that in high school. But all my social interactions were a hundred percent white.

SU: The area you lived in, is it mostly a white neighborhood?

KC: No, it's a mixture. You go in through, you know, you leave Carrboro and getting outside of town and then there is one group that is specifically a black area and then you get on into where we lived. Now it is of course, much more mixed than it was back then.

SU: I was going to ask you too, you have children right?

KC: Yes.

SU: Did they go through school here in Chapel Hill?

KC: Yes.

SU: Did they have any issues--

KC: Yes.

SU: Could you tell me about those?

KC: Yes. They did. My son actually left Chapel Hill High after being beaten up and threatened by a black guy that just seemed like it must of cycled. Seemed like it quieted down for awhile then while my children were in school which would have been--they 're grown now, but it would have been the early nineties I guess. [pause] Yeah, the early nineties, early to mid nineties. Seemed like there was more racial unrest than there had been, must of been a twenty year cycle or something. But they both had trouble, my daughter and my son both had trouble with being picked on, you know.

SU: Why did they beat him up? Do you know?

KC: No, just got mad at him, and Chris had a little bit of a mouth on him, so he probably sassd back. But it was just--and it was definitely a black white thing I think.

SU: So you pulled him out of the schools? Is that what you said?

KC: Yes, because the school, or the assistant principal at that time, basically told me "too bad," you know. And I said protection for my child? And he said "no." And I said okay. So he went to private school after that.

SU: What grade was he in then?

KC: He was in tenth grade.

SU: Which private school did he go to?

KC: He went to Crescent Christian Academy.

SU: Okay, I was just wondering. I work at Saint Thomas More.

KC: Oh really? Yeah, no he didn't go there [laughs]. Might as well of, but he didn't go there.

SU: [laughs] Well, how about your daughter?

KC: She was in middle school, and trickle down. Definitely "Oh, your Chris Cheek's sister" and so on you know.

SU: Yeah, word gets around--

KC: Uh huh, it does.

SU: on things like that. [pause] Well, going back to whenever you were in school too. I was wondering about black teachers, if you had many black teachers or--

KC: I remember a couple. I don't remember very many. One in high school in particular who fostered the business interests that I had at the time, the office management and that kind of stuff. And she was she's the only black teacher that I can really remember. We had an assistant principal at the high school who was black. Actually, no, we had two. There was a man who had been assistant principal forever I think, or who had been in the school system forever and he was, kind of, the kids thought he was a joke. And then there was this other lady who was a typing teacher, but was also some form of assistant principal of some sort. And she was the disciplinarian. And she was a large woman and she, we were all scared to death of her. [laughs]

She was very affective when you had skipped class and she was standing in the parking lot waiting for you. But that's all I remember.

SU: [laughs] Well, what about, I guess whenever you first were going to school with black students, do you remember any teachers, white teachers in particular, either being really careful about that.

KC: I don't, I don't remember thinking any about it.

SU: Either one way or the other?

KC: No. No.

SU: I guess [pause] I did an interview a couple of weeks ago with Charlene Regester. Did you know her?

KC: Yes, I remember her from school.

SU: Okay, she was telling me about being in high school, and junior high too, and having sit-ins and the black student movement. Did you know anything--

KC: Yeah, I do vaguely remember. I mean, we avoided it because you know, that was something you didn't want to get involved in. And I remember going fifty ways out of the way to avoid where ever the sit-ins were taking place. It seemed like it became a very common occurrence, especially in high school. I don't remember it as much in junior high. But in high school, Chapel Hill High--I don't know whether you've ever been there before but in the main building there's this huge open area, lobby area, that has stairs that go up to the second floor and it's big and that's where the sit-ins would be and they'd just encompass the whole available area it seemed like. And we just stayed away.

SU: How come?

KC: Just, no use inviting trouble.

SU: Yeah, so they did that pretty often?

KC: Seems I remember they did that pretty often.

SU: And do you know why?

KC: No. I guess it was a method to get attention, I mean to try and get--there was always a list of demands or--you know which was what started the riots. My husband was in high school when the riots came that I was in junior high for. And he has very vivid memories of chairs flying through the air and all that kind of stuff.

SU: Oh really? What does he remember?

KC: He said they got locked in their classrooms by the teachers once it got started. And he said he just remembers mostly chairs and stuff like that being thrown and kids coming through and busting the doors down. I mean, it was not violence as unfortunately we know school violence to be today, but it was pretty intense for the time.

SU: I bet. I can see how.

KC: Uh huh.

SU: I guess one of the other things she talked about was trying to get black history and things like that.

KC: Yeah, and there was--I don't remember there being any such thing until my kids were in school. I mean, I had never heard of black history month or anything. I mean, it just wasn't--

SU: So you never--

KC: And I was oblivious to it because it didn't impact me necessarily so as long as there wasn't something going on, significant going on, then it was like, you know. [sighs]

SU: Yeah, hmm. Thinking back I guess to high school, the different activities and stuff, were they well integrated.

KC: Seems I remember they were. I don't remember a lack of integration. Dances and all that kind of stuff I remember being mixed. And, again, you didn't think about it, that's just the way it was. It wasn't "Oh this is a mixed event." That's just the way it was.

SU: What about like, interaction I guess between the students?

KC: Well, I had what I considered to be friends that were black, as well as white. Now, they weren't close friends like some of the white kids were. I mean, they didn't come to my house and I didn't go to their house. But at school we were friends, and you know, activities after school we'd talked and that sort of stuff. Different though, I mean there was definitely a barrier, unacknowledged, unspoken, or whatever, but there was definitely a barrier.

SU: The other thing that's kinda come up in some of the other stuff I have is Chapel Hill having such high class differences. Do you remember--

KC: Ohh yes. [laughs]

SU: What do you remember about that?

KC: Well, there was an in-crowd and a not in-crowd and most of the in-crowd were professors's kids. I think probably for segregation, or desegregation, Chapel hill was the exception to any rule in the South. I can't--I mean I know we had some of the same things, but we were probably very very very very different than I mean if you went to Pittsboro and asked some of the same questions I bet you'd get very different answers from people the same age as me. Or Burlington or wherever. I think we were probably very different, very ahead of the time, because of Chapel Hill being a melting pot and a non-typical typical Southern town. But, yes I do

remember a significant class difference. You knew who the rich kids were and who they weren't.

SU: It's kind of interesting because I found out, and you might know about this, they say that Chapel hill students in the state have like the highest scores, but the black students in Chapel hill have the lowest scores in the state.

KC: Really?

SU: Yeah, so the gap is wider than any other area--

KC: Huh, wonder why?

SU: Yeah. I'm not really sure about that. Some people have mentioned the class differences being, which is--

KC: Well, Chapel Hill High, if you're smart and have means [pause] the school is at your feet. If your medium, average, or below you can forget it.

SU: Really? How does that work? Do they just pick out the--

KC: I think its just a natural selection process because Chapel Hill is so driven academically. And so if you're academically above average, you've got every available opportunity there is. And if you're average or below, you're not. I mean it's just like "forget it, we don't have time" — I mean that's not said but the attitude is 'we don't have time to mess with you. Out attention is going to be on the academically gifted kids. Figure it out."

SU: This is more your own personal differences, but what were some of your favorite things about high school. Did you enjoy high school?

KC: I don't remember not enjoying it, I mean I don't remember being miserable. I don't remember having strong feelings one way or the other. I think most of what I liked was the social stuff. And I liked--I developed relationships with several of my teachers, you know, so that was

nice. That was a good, positive reenforcement.

SU: What did you do after high school.

KC: I went to a business college for three months. Came home. Started working for the university, gt married, and had children.

SU: Really? So have you always wanted to stay in Chapel Hill?

KC: Yes.

SU: Where your parents from Chapel Hill?

KC: Yes. And my husband and his family.

SU: Really? That's neat.

SU: Well, it there anything else you remember about desegregation in the schools, or any other experiences?

KC: I don't. I mean, I have very vivid memories of the horror in junior high. Of being scared to death of being physically hurt.

SU: How come?

KC: The pulling earrings out and stuff. The one black girl that haunted me all the way through junior high telling me she was going to kill me. I mean those were very significant, very vivid memories.

SU: Why did she do that?

KC: I don't know. I wish I did know. It's thirty years later and I still don't know. [laughs]
I don't have any idea.

SU: Did you know her before?

KC: Probably not before junior high because that was the merging of elementary

schools and I don't think I knew her before then and I haven't run into her since. I think she dropped out of school.

SU: Did you know anyone who got their earrings pulled out in the bathrooms?

KC: Yes, yes.

SU: Did a lot of people?

KC: Didn't take too many because after the first couple of occurrences you didn't go in the bathrooms.

SU: Was anything done? Did they--

KC: There was never any proof. What would happen is you'd walk in the bathroom and they'd--the lights would be turned off. You'd be grabbed, earrings ripped or whatever and then be shoved out the door. And then by the time you could get help everyone would be dispersed, so there was no proof.

SU: Was it like that all of junior high?

KC: No, it must of been just my ninth grade year, or maybe eight and ninth grade. I don't remember it being that way in seventh grade.

SU: But nothing really--

KC: No. And I remember you traveling in numbers, you didn't--and I know adolescent girls are packs anyway, but you didn't go off by yourself anywhere.

SU: Were there many fights that were black and white?

KC: Yes. And I don't know the causes, and I don't remember any white and white fights. It was either white and black or black and black. A lot of girls, a lot of black girls fighting. And that was all the time. Fighting among themselves or fighting white girls because of jealousies,

perceived jealous or whatever. Because a white girl would be paying attention to a black guy or vice versa black guy paying attention to a white girl.

SU: So you think it was worse then among the girls than among the guys?

KC: For that, yeah.

SU: What about like in high school, the issue of black and white dating , was that still a--

KC: I remember seeing one mixed couple and I can still remember my shock. I encountered them in the stairwell, I mean I can show you the stairwell. It made a vivid impression. It was--he was a tennis player and it was a white guy and a black girl, and I remember being just dumbstruck. But that's the only time I remember anything about it. I mean, that was not, neither of those guys were considered smart by their friends. I mean, it was like that was not the smart thing to do.

SU: Did a lot of the people in the school know about it?

KC: Yes.

SU: was there anything else about your school in particular, or your experiences in the school? Anything I haven't covered?

KC: Right, yeah. No, I mean you don't think of it as out of the normal until you start thinking of it as out of the normal range. It's just kind of the way it was.

SU: For you children, is there anything else you know of that happened to them? Did they have a really integrated experience?

KC: yeah, probably more so than I did. And it was much more prevalent from kindergarten forward like I kinda grew into it. And it came more and more, every year there were more black kids in my classroom so it was kind of a growing thing whereas theirs was the same mix from the beginning to the end.

SU: Something else I just thought of. The little black girl you told me about being left in your class, was she left by herself through the year?

KC: I don't remember her being ostracized. There were two black girls in my first grade class. I can remember her name and I can't remember the other one's name, but I don't remember any events of her being ostracized. But I don't know how correct that is either, I mean I was oblivious. I don't remember "oh that little black girl, don't play with that." I mean, I don't remember that from teachers or parents or any of that, so I don't think she was.

SU: How about from later on, did you ever encounter that kind of teasing? [phone rings]

KC: No, I don't, not that I remember. [phone rings]

SU: Um, [phone rings] That's pretty much I think everything got listed. You might have been too young to have noticed this but as the schools were changing, did you notice any changes going on in the community as far as the barrier between black and white?

KC: I don't remember restaurants that were posted 'no blacks.' I mean, I don't think that was how they put it, but I don't remember any of that. I remember there was a black grocery store and a white grocery store.

SU: Really?

KC: yes, in Carrboro.

SU: What were they?

KC: Andrews and Rigsby were the white grocery stores and I could not tell you the name of the black grocery--I mean I could not tell you. And I remember black neighborhoods and white neighborhoods. But I don't remember-we never rode buses, so I don't remember anything like that. I don't remember bathrooms being marked at all, I don't have any memory of that, so

evidently that had stopped here by the time I was old enough to pay any attention to it.

SU: For how long were those grocery stores like that?

KC: Probably most of the way through my grammar school years, so through the early sixties.

SU: That really is most of my questions though I think. Do you have any thing else you want to add?

KC: Not that I can think of, but you know where to find me if you think of more questions.

SU: [laughs] That's true. Well, I'm gonna go ahead and turn this off.

[End of Interview]