

Interview
with
WILLIAM BRODUS HOWELL
January 30, 1991

By Goldie F. Wells

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Goldie: I am in the home of Mr. William Brodus Howell in Shelby, North Carolina. Today's date is January 30, 1991. Mr. Howell, I would like for you to introduce yourself and say that you know that this interview is being recorded.

Mr. Howell: My name is William Brodus Howell and I live in Shelby, North Carolina. I am aware of the interview that we are now about to participate.

Goldie: Mr. Howell, when I wrote to you I told you that I was doing some research. I am comparing role perceptions of black high school principals and in 1964, there were over 200 black high school principals. In 1989, there were 41 and some of them were not principals of traditional high schools but of alternative schools. So what I want to do is compare the perception of the role so I am interviewing principals from 1964, and principals of 1989. You are one of the principals from 1964. I would like for you to tell me some things that I can use in my research. First I would like for you to tell me how you became a high school principal.

Mr. Howell: I became a high school principal through being promoted from the classroom. I was a science and math teacher and I had taught science and math for 8 years over in Cherryville, North Carolina at a high school called John Chavis. Then I moved to Washington School in 1959, as a teacher of science and mathematics. Then when the principal left Washington High School, I don't know the year right now and I will have to go back and check it out, but it was 18 days before graduation. The superintendent sent the supervisor to Washington School and said, see if Brodus Howell will be the principal for the remainder of the school year. We need a principal. I accepted and after closing school and having graduation and filing all the reports the superintendent was satisfied and asked if I would like to be principal for another year. I said, well, I will try it. So he said, you will have to go back to school. You need a principal's certificate. At this time I only had a high school science and math certificate. I had a Master's in mathematics and science from Columbia University. So that is how I became principal. I was elevated from the classroom and I went on to A & T and received my principal's certificate the next year and I stayed there until I retired.

Goldie: When did you retire?

Mr. Howell: I retired in 1984.

Goldie: Now I am going to ask you something about the

school and some of the responsibilities that you had. First tell me about your high school and how many students you had and how many staff members. Tell me about your high school.

Mr. Howell: I had 700 students and a staff of about 30. It was a union school, grades 1-12. I didn't have an assistant principal. The principal did all the work, of course he had a secretary but as far as being responsible for discipline and curriculum and the supervision and everything else it was the responsibility of the principal. Of course, you could get some help from the supervisor.

Goldie: Mainly it was your responsibility. All of the students and all of the faculty members were black.

Mr. Howell: Yes.

Goldie: Now I am going to ask you about some of the ways that you dealt with your responsibilities. The supervision of your personnel and the teacher selection.

Mr. Howell: The supervision of the teachers was done mostly by the principal. If he needed any help, the supervisor would come out and assist but it was mostly the responsibility of the principal.

Goldie: How did you get your teachers?

Mr. Howell: We were blessed there. Back in those days each school had their own school committeemen as they were called. Each school had about seven persons on his committee and it was the responsibility of the school committees to be somewhat of a bridge between the community and the school and also to accept the recommendation coming from the principal when he selected teachers. Principals were blessed then because they could choose the type of teacher that he thought would be beneficial to his program so the principal had a freedom of choice in selecting his staff members. You didn't have the interference from the central office. You would make a recommendation to the superintendent and of course the superintendent would accept that recommendation and pass it on to the Board of Education. It is not like it is now. It was altogether different.

Goldie: Curriculum and instruction.

Mr. Howell: Well, we had a flexible curriculum. We had in addition to the main basic subjects we had vocational, agriculture and home economics. In these vocational courses students had the choice of selecting whether to take home economics or agriculture and in these classes they could develop their leadership abilities which they don't have now.

Goldie: What about discipline.

Mr. Howell: Discipline--we were blessed because the school had their own discipline. You decided on your discipline problem as long as it did not interfere with the policies of the Board of Education, the principal, and the teacher. The teacher could use corporal punishment. They did not have to get permission from the parents. They had cooperation from the parents because when the parent sent the child to school you had the backing of the parent. If the child got in trouble at school, he was in trouble at home because the parents would back the teachers up. The parent would tell the child, you obey the teacher. If you don't, I get on you. We were blessed. That was a great reward.

Goldie: Transportation.

Mr. Howell: We had bus transportation. I don't know how many buses we had but it was a large area and we had student bus drivers. We didn't have adult bus drivers. The buses were provided by the County Board of Education through the State Department. I was in charge of the buses but of course you would designate responsibilities. We had what we called a Division of Labor.

Goldie: What about the utilization of funds.

Mr. Howell: The utilization of funds. First of all where did the funds come from.

Goldie: Where did you funds come from?

Mr. Howell: Part of it came from the state and part of it came from the county but for athletics and other extra curriculum activities of the school we had to raise it through the PTO's, through candy sales, and so forth.

Goldie: So you had good support from your community.

Mr. Howell: We had a very good community. Parents took pride in the school and by the way, the school is still there. They did not close the school.

Goldie: That is unusual. A lot of the schools closed after desegregation.

Mr. Howell: Washington remained open even though there was a white school in the same neighborhood in the same area. They closed the white school but they did not close Washington School.

Goldie: Was it because of parental involvement in the school?

Mr. Howell: Yes and no. Partly because Dewaco School was a old school. Washington School was built later and it was

more instructional so therefore the state recommended that we close the old school and they brought the the students from Dewaco School to Washington School.

Goldie: Cafeteria management.

Mr. Howell: Cafeteria management was done through the lunchroom manager and the principals and teachers. Each teacher had to go to the lunchroom with their children. They would sit with the children as a family to teach them good table manners. If there was a problem, it was the responsibility of the teacher to handle that problem in the lunchroom. If it could not be handled that way, then they would be sent to the principal.

Goldie: Buildings and grounds.

Mr. Howell: That was the responsibility of the custodian and the principal but the principal was held responsible for all of it. He had good cooperation through his custodial staff.

Goldie: How much administrative power or control did you have over your school site and your responsibilities?

Mr. Howell: The principal had complete control. The buildings and grounds, if you needed assistance for example, you would need repairs and of course you would call the maintenance department. We had a maintenance department if you needed something, some repairs or additional supplies you could call the maintenance department and they would make provision for it but the principal had most of the control with his staff.

Goldie: Do you think you had control over that whole building?

Mr. Howell: Yes, I had complete control of the people. I made some notes and maybe you will ask that question later so I'll just wait.

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

Mr. Howell: Well, I remained at the same school so it had no affect there as being transferred from one building to another. We had a high school at first and then it was after desegregation it was an 8th grade, at first it was a freedom of choice. Freedom of choice I believe was in 1965-67. After freedom of choice they closed the high school but I remained at the same school so it did not affect me. They just took some grades and some staff members and I remained there and was happy with the elementary school.

Goldie: Did they bring in white teachers?

Mr. Howell: Yes.

Goldie: Did you find any difference in the supervision of your whites and your blacks?

Mr. Howell: Well, I will have to say yes because they were not accustomed to being supervised and being under black administration. They were somewhat hesitant in accepting or volunteering for special responsibilities, yet they were very cooperative but it was something new to them and it was something that all of us had to get accustomed to. So you could see that there was a difference in the way that they had been supervised.

Goldie: Did you have any apprehensions about supervising whites?

Mr. Howell: No, because I graduated from Columbia University. I attended a white school and it was nothing hard for me to accept. I had worked with them in other places.

Goldie: Did you enjoy your job and why?

Mr. Howell: I really enjoyed my job but I think I enjoyed my job mostly as a teacher. You see I was teaching science and math and I was really happy and I would tell my students, man I would rather solve these problems than eat ice cream. They would say, Mr. Howell, you are crazy. But I did enjoy my days as the high school principal because of the positive feedback that I received from the community, the parents and from the students. It would make you feel good when you would walk up to a student after 10 years and he would say, Hey, Mr. Howell. Hey, man, how are you doing? He would say, Mr. Howell, you know when I was in school you gave me a paddling. I said, for what? He said, I violated a rule. I said, did it help? He said, yes sir, I'm so glad you did it. When you meet students and not only that occasion but there are other occasions they say, Mr. Howell, you have been a blessing so that really makes you feel good.

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

Mr. Howell: I guess the major problem was not having the necessary funds to get everything that you wanted for your staff and the students and the inability to get full participation of parents being involved in the school program.

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

Mr. Howell: That is what I wrote down.

Goldie: You can read it.

Mr. Howell: First, the freedom to select my staff members. That was very rewarding when you could select your members, you can interview them and decide which person you want to fit in this position and that. The positive feedback from the staff, parents and community. Do you know what I mean when I say positive feedback?

Goldie: When they said, thank you and I appreciate it.

Mr. Howell: Thank you, you are doing a good job, and my child came home today and was pleased with what was going on at school and you have some good teachers there, and then I have the cooperation from parents. It means something when you have parents that will cooperate with your program. When they speak well of you and then you have a good PTO. Even when we had a high school we had a PTA or a PTO. It would get the parents to come in and visit the school and have a discussion with the teachers and a discussion at PTA's and find out all about the school and become involved in the school program. You don't have too much of that now in these high schools. You have them in the elementary schools. Then the freedom to formulate your school discipline policies. You didn't have to go to the parent and say, "May I discipline your child?" We had our own discipline policies. Each teacher had a copy of it. We would discuss these policies in the PTA or PTO. The parents would ask questions and they would back you up. And then some of the other rewards that I had--some of the others is community pride in the school, where you have a school in the community and the community feels that we are a part of the school and they would rally to your behalf and do all they can to help make your program go over. Of course I said something about a flexible curriculum and student feedback before and after graduation and a pat on your back from the staff members. Having a professional and a good positive relationship with your staff. So I was blessed to have stayed in the classroom for 42 years and I still didn't want to retire when I did but I said, well, I have been there long enough.

Goldie: I told you at the beginning that there were less than 40 black high school principals in North Carolina last year. If you knew of a young black person, male or female, who aspired to be a high school principal in the state what advice would you give to the person?

Mr. Howell: I would tell him to go to it. Prepare yourself, and get all of the training that you can and if you possibly can get the job, take it. I have great determination and perseverance.

Goldie: Are there any specific skills that you think a high

school principal needs?

Mr. Howell: Yes, I believe one of the greatest is whether you are a high school principal or an elementary principal and the ability to communicate with your staff, your supervisor, and your other superiors. Communication and knowing your subject matter. Be well prepared but communications seems to be one of the greatest problems that is needed and the ability to get along. Be open minded. Accept criticism. Those would be some of the things that I would tell them along with some other things.

Goldie: I have come to the end of my interview guide. Do you have any words of wisdom that you would like to share?

Mr. Howell: Thank you for coming. I enjoyed participating.

Goldie: I am so please that you allowed me to come. These interviews that I have done I have learned so much from hearing you all talk. I thought that I would find a real difference in the 1989 principals and the 1964 principals, but they you have the same stuff in you. All of your responses to the questions, especially what is rewarding, fields that are necessary, what motivates them and it is really interesting and I'm thinking that a lot of the findings will be helpful especially for those who are aspiring to be principals. It doesn't matter whether you are black or white, you really still need some characteristics to be a principal.

Mr. Howell: I left one reward off that I would like to add and that was to have a wife and family that would support you. I was blessed in that. My wife is a school teacher, home ec teacher and she retired a couple of years ago and I think I was blessed to have someone stand behind me so that was a great blessing. We have four children.

Goldie: Thank you so much. I appreciate it.