

Interviewee: Bessine Jones Ingram

Interviewer: Kimberly Hill

Interview date: June 13, 2005

Location: Birmingham, Alabama

Length: 2 tapes; approximately 1 hour and 55 minutes

KH: We can keep talking for awhile. That way I can check if the microphone's working.

: Well, what kind of questions do you want?

BJ: Well, we can speak about how you all tried to get us in the school down here when we first moved over here. Mama, you know, you and Ms. Lowrie went to the board a couple of times and—

: ( )

: She's got the mike over here.

: And send their children down there.

BJ: Well, come on over here and talk about it.

: You know, we had a lot of activity around on this hill and I was the first black who ( ) for quite awhile when I bought it before I could bring my family here because the threats and stuff that were going on. During that time, they weren't able—they pretended they couldn't find ( ) when they would throw those bombs and things and they were threatening to bomb my house, shoot my children, ( ).

BJ: Just about every night. When we finally did move, we had those kinds of threats.

: That took place and I had to keep my phone off the hook all the time because people were calling me, saying ugly things.

BJ: They used to kind of tell us not to answer the phone at first, when we first got here. Most of the time, they said my older sister and my parents could answer the phone. But sometimes we would forget and we'd go and answer the phone and somebody would call us names like, "You black niggers," click, or say something uglier than that and click off. They used to do that all the time.

: ( ) got scared out of here.

BJ: We weren't scared, scared. When we heard that, I think we had kind of a comfort zone going on because we had so much company. When we first moved into this house, I just thought moving into this neighborhood meant we were just going to have parties forever, because I didn't know what was going on at the time. I didn't know what those parties really were and what was a party after all. But there was a brigade of—

: ( )

BJ: Men who were watching over the house with like a shotgun patrol that was going on. And sometimes they would bring their kids with them and we'd just have a good time running and playing and most of the time, we could do it in the house, because they didn't want us outside too much playing around. So we could get to play and do everything. We played hide and seek all over this house and nobody bothered us about it. So for us, we thought it was just fun. This was just a barrel of fun that we're moving into. And we had, like I said, it was such a comfort zone for us as kids, because so many adults were around and they didn't get excited or upset when we would say, "Oh, somebody called and called us a 'nigger'" or "Somebody said they got a bomb," and they didn't act afraid. So we just took it from them and we didn't act afraid either.

: I never marched, I never marched with them. I told Martin and Ralph when they started in Montgomery, I couldn't march with them because they were non-violent and I just

couldn't stand for nobody to hit me and I not hit them back. Ralph was my brother, so I never did march with them, but I gave them a lot of support along the way, because--. Martin and Ralph came here. They made a lot of phone calls from my house and they tapped my phone. I guess my phone was being tapped ( ). Even the company that I was working for, they tried to get me fired and I guess if it hadn't been for the union and the NAACP, they found out that I was a member of the NAACP and they had told the chairman of the board that the NAACP had bought the house and put me in it and I was a block buster.

KH: Which meant you were trying to make everybody else leave the neighborhood? Is that what that means?

BJ: A block buster means that—see up until this line was drawn at what they called the line of demarcation, because it kept moving from Center Street on, but there were blacks across the street and there was a white on the corner right there, but blacks were just about all in that block right there, on Third Street block, and that was up to that point, there were no more blacks. When we broke over to this block, that was when it was like, “They're still coming, so we've got to do something.” So bomb threats started up afresh. I don't know what they got, but we got it double-time after that, after we moved to this block.

: ( )

BJ: We broke into this block, so they called us block busters. They called him a block buster.

: I do believe ( )'s son was mostly the instigator. They didn't want blacks to come to the cottage and they had set this up as a buffer zone and they had formed what they called Cottage Hill Real Estate Company. ( ), the old ( ), not the young one, ( ) they had formed that real estate company and bought all of the houses to keep blacks from coming. When this man here wouldn't sell it to him, wouldn't sell, they had a contract on that house, and ( )

agreed to sell it to him, and so did that third house up there. But he refused to sell it, so he sold his house to me and told me that, “Don’t take the sign down and don’t tell anybody about it until I get ready to move in.” He was moving out of town. He moved down to ( ), Alabama. And they tried to get me out of here.

They couldn’t stop it and they tried to get me fired. Every time I’d go to work in the morning, the operation manager would come by and ask me, “What did I do?” I had bought a house on a ( ) street. I said, “When did it get ( )?” “If you don’t get rid of it, we’re going to get rid of you.” So for about a week, he’d come out every morning for about a week or two and asked me what I’d done about the house. I told him I hadn’t done anything about it, because I had my money tied up in it.

So it got to the chairman of the board of the company. So he called me through the intercom and told somebody to bring me over to his office and I went over there. It was ( ) from the ( ) Steel Company. I went into his office and he said, “I just got off the phone with the president of ( ) Cottage and he tells me that you were a block buster.” He said, “The NAACP bought that house and put you in it. You didn’t buy it.” I said, “I bought that house.” He said, “Where’d you get the money?” I said, “I drew the down payment out of the bank savings.” He turned right around from his desk, ( ) and call the bank and ask them did I withdraw twenty-two hundred dollars out of the bank. They told him yeah. ( ) and turned back around and he said, “Will you sell it?” I said, “Well, I got my money out of there ( ).” He said, “How much are they offering you?” I said, “John Gordon is offering me nine thousand dollars.” He said I paid too much. He said, ( ). He said, “The hell with it,” that ( ) will come together and give you all the ( ) you got in there; the hell with it. ( ).” From that day to this one, I didn’t hear no word, not another word about that house. It was rough, it was rough. A young man bought that house ( ), right up the street from us. He lost his job; they fired him.

( ) was one company owned by own family, just like O'Neill was owned by one family. Well, they fired him.

BJ: Which house was that?

: ( )

BJ: Oh, I didn't know that.

: Yeah, ( ), a young black fellow.

BJ: I remember it was somebody that ( ).

: He bought that house and they said, "You got fired." And after he found out that I had bought this one, he came down there and ( ) and told me what had happened to him and that it's going to happen to you too. I said, "Well, if it do, I ain't going to down to--." ( )?

BJ: Arthur Shores?

: Yeah. I went down to Shores' office. He was the one that handled our paperwork when we bought the house. So I went in there and told him. I said, "Man," I said, "These folks are giving me all kinds of problems about that house." I said, "Now they're talking about firing me on the job." He said, "Now, ( )." We'd have had a little fun with that.

BJ: Do I need to fill out the rest of these or just these two?

KH: Just those two.

BJ: Okay.

KH: This one is, I guess, in case something comes up in the interview that you don't want people to hear about. So you can fill that out later.

BJ: Okay.

KH: In one of my interviews, somebody mentioned a name that she wished she hadn't mentioned. So I just went through and bleeped out that name.

BJ: Okay, I understand. So if we get to do any of that before it's over, we'll write those down, okay. I think you were mostly interested in the educational aspect or that's your main focus right now?

KH: Especially after the first couple of years of busing and all that, after that had settled down, moving into the 70s and early 80s.

BJ: Okay, well busing did not occur with us and I'll tell you how strange some things went to. As my mother said and you said, you already talked to the Armstrongs, because they were the ones who really broke into integrating Graymont School, the school that's right down the street. Well, it's not a school any longer; it's the ( ) building now.

KH: He said he had some of the same issues with housing too.

BJ: Oh really? Well see, they were down on about Second Street, weren't they?

: Yes.

BJ: Between second and third blocks, so it probably happened. I heard from doing research when I was in college for something else and I ran up on something, every time I would see something about Birmingham, I would always read it to see if they had it anywhere near correct. But I remember reading something from Angela Davis's book when I was in college and it was saying something about the line when she was a child, that the line of demarcation was down where—was Center Street. So I imagine over the years it just kept moving and by the time—

: ( ) on Center Street like it did here.

BJ: ( ) about all that.

: ( ) and ( )'s house was right up on the corner, up on ( ) corner of Center Street.

BJ: Yeah, but they were on the side that was supposed to have been the black side, but if you cross over on this side, which is west—like when I told you to come up Center, one side

is north, one side is west—and I imagine over the years it just kept going up. So when the Armstrongs moved in, they probably did have the exact same stuff that we had all the way up because we kept going up until they finally gave up. That was a long time in coming, because after the first few years we were in this house, all of these people from this house next door all around this block, they put signs in their yards: “This is my home and it’s not for sale.” There was the sign in every yard, well-made signs so I knew it had been manufactured from some real estate company or something. Instead of it saying “for sale,” they had: “This is my home and it’s not for sale.”

: ( )

BJ: Well actually, it was about the next summer, all of those signs were gone, all of those signs, and they were running like crazy by then. And I think after this block, I never heard of too many people having any more trouble because they just came in slews after that. The expressway that they were building over in our old neighborhood took a lot of people’s homes, gave them money. They just came straight over here, most of the people in the old neighborhood just came straight over here.

: They came by here and told me my house was sitting in the middle of the highway.

BJ: Oh yeah.

KH: Because they were going to build a highway here?

BJ: Yeah, they did.

: ( ) my house was sitting in the middle of it. They finally gave him enough to sell it back to him.

BJ: The man that we bought the house from said that’s not true. If they do that, I’ll ( ) everyday. Well, you know, I’m also thinking if Mr. Chestnut had not been so forceful, we probably wouldn’t have gotten in here with the ease that we had too. You know, it was a lot of

trouble too. Well, he talked to the guy that was raising a lot of a sand and he told him that I'm going to hold you responsible if anything happens to those people up there in my house; that's what he said.

: Yeah, he threatened them. He said, "Now I know all about you guys."

BJ: Well, he probably had been a part of that White Council. The Knights of the Klux Klan called themselves the White Council.

: ( )

BJ: But then after we moved in, then the guy came out from city hall and said we had to have a move-in permit.

: You ever heard of that?

BJ: And we were already in the house, a move-in permit. Someone came from city hall of Birmingham, Alabama and said that. I guess you all are out of luck, because we were already in the house and they had not gotten their permit to move in.

KH: Yeah, and how much is the move-in permit?

BJ: I mean, they did everything to try to scare black people.

: ( ) all the utilities doubled or tripled.

BJ: Yeah, they did that too.

: ( ) the utilities.

KH: So what year was it that you bought this house?

BJ: 1963. And we moved in about three months before the bombing, the Sixteenth Street bombing. There were other minor bombs before that. But anyway, getting back to the education thing, we—well, what were you going to say?

KH: I don't mean to cut you off, but before we actually start the education thing, I'm going to check the tape and make sure it's recording.



[break in conversation]

KH: This is Kimberly Hall. I'm at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Ingram and Ms. Jones— Oh, I'm sorry, Mr. and Mrs. Jones and Ms. Bessine Jones Ingram. We are doing an interview for the Long Civil Rights Movement project about school desegregation. Thank you for having me here. We can go ahead and start.

BJ: To preface, the desegregation of the schools that I attended and I guess we need to start with the segregated schools, what it was like before. When we moved to this home in 1963, we actually slipped in, as my father mentioned earlier. We kind of moved in secretly and that was in the summer. It was five of us in this family. I have five siblings. They assured us that we would stay at our schools, we wouldn't have to worry about changing. That's what my parents told us. So all of us, there were three of us still at ( ) Tuggle Elementary School, which was all segregated in the black community, a well-known school. And two of my siblings were down at ( ) Parker High School. All of them were segregated, all of our schools that we were still attending were still segregated.

In our schools, we were overcrowded. We got the second- and third-hand books. Our teachers were overloaded. Classrooms would sometimes be thirty plus in the classrooms and I can honestly say with all of the other portions of education, that was probably the best portion of education that existed for all of us black folk. We didn't know that at the time. We were fighting to get what we thought was a superior education, because we were always told ours were inferior. I found out after a few years of being in the integrated schools that that wasn't necessarily so. But I thank God for every portion of the confidence, of the self-identity, the help that we received in our segregated education, because it made everything else easier that I encompassed for the rest of my educational life.

So when we were used to the totally black education, we had no concept of going down here to ( ) School and there actually would have been three of us. My middle brother, he was in the eighth grade; my sister was in the fourth grade, and I was going to fourth grade at the time when that school year ( ) in after we had moved in over the summer. And my brother, of course, said, “Well, I only have one more year,” and he begged for not to be one of those kids that ( ). He wanted to stay in eighth grade at Tuggle. So they arranged with a teacher over there, who lived over on the other block, and we rode to school with her every morning and continued on in our segregated education.

Okay, by that summer, things were heating up a little bit more in Birmingham about integration and the summer of '64, my parents had said, well, me and ( ), we were the last two, we were going to probably have to go to this school down here. And Mrs. Lowrie of SCLC fame, now you know her, Joe Lowrie's wife, Mrs. Lowrie, they ( ). The next summer, they had moved in. Like I say, everybody just started moving in. They were on the block on Fifth Street up between Tenth Avenue and Tenth Court; they had moved over there then. So that next summer, which was like the summer of '65 or '66 or somewhere—it might have been two summers or one summer—they decided to go around. My mother was just saying that—

: From house to house to get parents to take their children down to ( ) School. So we thought if we could get all or a lot of them, then they wouldn't have any way out; they would accept the children there. But they had certain grades under court order. Certain grades could not go to school there. So after we tried to get—

BJ: And there was a school of first through eight—

KH: But some grades had to go to the black schools?

: Black schools.

BJ: They were only integrating certain grades by court order.

: So there was a letter saying, "Please ask Bessine to continue going to her present school at this time," because the grade that she was entering was under court order and she couldn't go to ( ) School.

BJ: I guess they were afraid that all of us would just come and integrate. They had certain grades that we could integrate at that time and I suppose with the Armstrongs—

: Armstrong was the only one then, only blacks there at that time.

BJ: And I imagine they figured they could scare that one group out and the rest of us would fall off if they allowed just a handful at a time, or one or two at a time. I think I was going to about fifth or sixth grade then, so I was still continuing my segregated education; nobody was bothering me. By the time, I think George Wallace had come back in office .He was always back and forth, back and forth in office around then, and he had come back in office then. I think they could see the handwriting on the wall that they had to integrate and if George Wallace was one thing, he was a good politician and he saw how it would help him appear as if he was not following orders, so to speak. So he came up with this thing called "freedom of choice." He said, "All of you will be able to go to the school of your choice."

That was how he appeased himself to the white voters who put him in office into thinking, "I'm not following this thing." But he came up with this "freedom of choice." So when that happened, that for the '67, '68 year, that was how I ended up at ( ) for my last year of school. I did not want to go, because I said, "You let my brother and my sister before me go their last year, when they got into the eighth grade." I said, "Now how come I got to be the experiment?" But they wanted it and they were glad to try and they sent me on down there as an experiment and I went on with quite a few others.

: Now the difference is ( ). It was all white and they were giving the kids breakfast in the morning.

BJ: Yeah, well I could talk about that; that was after we got there. We didn't know that.

: That's what they were doing.

BJ: We didn't know that.

: We didn't know what was happening.

KH: Tell me a little bit more about the "freedom of choice."

BJ: The "freedom of choice"?

KH: Why did that mean you had to go?

BJ: That meant, they said the "freedom of choice" act or—I don't know if it was an act or what, but it was even on a form I remember that you all filled out. The form for us to go to school said "freedom of choice" and you put down where you lived and where you want your child to go to school in this whole area. It was not sectioned off like now, if you live in this area, you can't go to this school because of where you live. Well, at that time, this was the escape route for the white people and I imagine it worked well, because when we first, when we went down to ( ), there were protests; they had a lot of people protesting and I think we didn't go a couple of days at first. We went in on another day. I'm not exactly remembering it correctly, but I don't know which day it was. It might have been later on in that same week or a day or two. It might have been the second week. I don't know, but there was a delay in school going on for us in that school, because the people were protesting; night and day, they had protests. And it wasn't black people trying to say, "Let's go in." It was white people protesting us black students coming there.

So by the time of the first day, the day that we actually got into the school, I think it was mostly nothing left but those who couldn't find a way to go anywhere else. That's my opinion. When I look back on the students that I went to school with those first few days, I think a lot of these other people had gone to their academies, because academies sprung up, these private

schools that white people started a lot of times from their churches, so they would not have to send their kids to integrated schools. A lot of them appeared or they sent their own kids somewhere else, because the ones who came to school with us were those white people from the projects, a whole lot of them came to school, and just a sprinkling from this neighborhood, and there were still quite a few whites in this neighborhood, but a lot of them were not ( ) where they had to go down here. So when we finally did get to the school and we went through the school doors, that's who we went to school with, mostly the poor whites who never seemed to know that they were worse off than us, but you know, that's neither here nor there. They came on in there with us and those few who for whatever reason, and I don't know to this day why some of them still got ( ), because they were homeowners and for some reason, and for some reason they got ( ) with going to the school with the handful of whites.

And actually, I could tell when I first got in there, I learned so many things about white people within the first few weeks that they made differences among themselves, because those poor white weren't always welcome with the whites who, when we walked home from school, there was a group of whites that walked up through here who were living in these homes still. And at first, they didn't hardly say anything to each other either; I got that. So I said, "Well, they have class distinctions still going on when they're in the minority here." It was strange to me, because I just thought "white people." I didn't know any more, because I had been in my segregated school. But I learned that they made differences among themselves, that was the first thing I learned, and class distinctions, and they were very, very distinct. But after awhile, I also learned that if something occurred, some incident occurred, they came together. It was white and black at that point.

But just individually, they just like, when we had our little breaks, because like my mom said, they were feeding the kids breakfast in the morning. We didn't know a thing about

that. But I remember the thing that struck me the most was that orange juice break we had around mid-morning, like halfway between lunchtime. They told us, “Well, you all have a break,” and quite a few of the blacks who were in e school with me, in our classes, had been students that I had gone to school with at Tuggle and they said, “What are they talking about break? When do we get a break? We never had a break.” Then they said, “You’re going to line up by classes. You must stay with your teacher if you want your orange juice.” We said, “Orange juice? What do they mean an orange juice?” But we did it, we started staying with our teacher and when we got in line, we found out they were giving us little glasses, little cups of orange juice, and said, “Go on outside.”

So we had orange juice breaks where we got our little orange juice in mid-morning, somewhere around between nine and ten, I guess, and we would walk out there outside just a little bit. They wouldn’t sometimes let us get all the way on the playground because it was only, I guess, about fifteen to twenty minutes and they’d have to gather us up too quick. So we would get to get outside and get a little air, drink our orange juice, and put our little cups in the trash, and go back and sit in class and wait until it was time for lunch. We were just astounded by something like that, I’m telling you, an orange juice break. So that’s what we had, an orange juice break at that school.

So we thought we were something for awhile, we really did. But then a lot of us started comparing as the school year went on, different things that were going on. They took a lot of our black teachers who had been in high school and placed them in elementary school. So they figured if you were a pretty good teacher in high school, you were, I suppose, equal to teaching their white children in elementary school. To me, it should have been a demotion, but they took the best teachers, some of the best teachers I’ll say, and placed them in these schools. Consequently, my homeroom teacher had been my sister’s French teacher down in high school.

I don't know what else she taught, but I know she taught French there. I think she taught English and French down at Parker High School. My English teacher up there had been a drama teacher and English teacher at Carver High School, I think she had been—nope, it was Ullman High School, I think she had come from. And she was an excellent teacher.

So we got some of the best in our little eighth grade year in the elementary school. Our black children were getting exposed to teachers who were used to teaching black high school children and they knew, I guess, what position they were in, so they couldn't upset the apple cart too much themselves. But I think they were very, very supportive of us in those early days, because if something went wrong, if they heard about some little skirmish that was coming up, they would yank us over to the side and do what they would do in a black school, because we had, I suppose somewhere on the books was, that you shouldn't hit a child, no capital punishment. I'm sure that was somewhere on the books. But everybody hits. It was the way we were taught and it was the way they gained respect and it was the way we were disciplined and taught enough to pay attention and get that learning that they put on us, because it was something that we did get back then. Those teachers were used to that, so they knew we needed a little something extra. They'd pull us to the side and tell us, "Now you know your mama knows better than to let you come down doing this, that, and the other." They would still, so in those early days, we had teachers who weren't afraid of what the white principal might think of them and they knew us enough to know that we wouldn't go screaming and say, "She hit me," because we were used to that from our black teachers.

But at the same time, we had a couple white teachers down there who were awful and I feel like the better teachers probably had gotten away in time; their best teachers were gone. We were left with the worst teachers, because I know those ( ) the white teacher I had for history and I think she was both a teacher of art and history, she used to go to sleep in class.

She was pitiful, she was awful, and the white students, she favored them without any apologies about it. I mean, there was just no sense of you even trying to make a distinction. I think her name was Ms. Shaw or something; I can't remember her name, Ms. Shaw or ( ) something.

We would raise our hands sometimes to answer questions and if a white child didn't raise their hand, she might call on us. I promise you that that's what she did. We got where we would make jokes about it, said, "Go on and try to raise your hand and see how many times she's going to recognize you." So sometimes we would raise them like this and have them behind another child's head and make her think that somebody else was raising. We were just doing it because we knew she wasn't going to call on us. They did things like that and it didn't matter. It should have mattered, but she was such an awful teacher, we weren't learning anything anyway in her class, so it wasn't like she was teaching them something and wasn't teaching us anything, for her to call on you, because she just was not the best teacher in the first place.

KH: How did the grading compare?

BJ: The grading? For me, it was different. I must say it was different now that I think about it. But in the past, I guess it was more on-hand in the parents. If a teacher knew you as a child who should do better, then I guess they would catch up your parents at church or wherever else they'd see them or call them and say, "This child's been acting up. She's not doing what she's capable of," and we'd straighten up. That didn't happen just for ( ) education week; that was ongoing in the black schools. So that was a difference. We were more or less on our own with our grades. It had to be what you put out there and hoped that you might get a good enough grade that exemplified what you were doing in that class; it didn't always happen.

I know for that lady's class I was telling you about, I can't remember what, but I think she grudgingly gave us some B's and A's before that year was out, those of us who were used



to straight A's. But I think at first we were getting like C's and stuff from her and it didn't match up with what we might have made on our tests if we had any. I can clearly say without any problem that I'm sure she didn't give us the same stuff that she gave them. I just don't believe it. I'm sure when she did tests or something, our problem was harder. I'm pretty sure she did that. She didn't make any apologies about trying to look out for her white people who were left there. It was almost like I guess she felt like, "Well, since you all are here, I'm going to make sure I take care of you against those awful black people." And the thing about that, that worked pretty much after awhile, but some people had gotten to be friends, white and blacks, before the school year was out. We found out about some little things that were going on, the little differences and stuff, and some of us would go home and tell our parents and sometimes parents would go up there and sit down with the principal to see about making some changes. So a lot of that kind of thing went on in those early days too.

KH: Did you think that her behavior was typical for a white teacher at the time?

BJ: I felt, given the fact that we were not ignorant of the fact that it was something great for us to be sitting up here in this class with these children, and given that fact, we kind of expected things not to just open up all of a sudden and be fair. We were not ignorant kids. We were real street savvy on that kind of stuff. We knew what was going on. We had our eyes open.

: You told me when ( ).

BJ: I can't remember everything, but I probably did say that. It probably worked, because to us, that is something that I did learn too. I'm glad you brought that up, because we thought we were going to be behind because we were in the segregated schools. We were way ahead of them in so many things. It was a good thing, but I talked to some people who went to

Lincoln and ( ) and some of the other elementary schools. They were feeling the same way. They felt like they were way ahead of those ( ).

: ( )

BJ: In the segregated schools, we had teachers who cared.

: You had some black teachers that really cared.

BJ: Who cared, they cared about what they were doing and they did their best. We don't have that now, I can say ( ) we don't have that now. A lot of people don't even have an idea of educating when they get into the educational system, but back then, it was something that they felt like, "If I have this black child under my wing, I'm going to teach you something and I'm going to beat it in you if you're not willing to get it," and that's what happened; we got it. We got every little bit of that learning.

KH: Tell me some of the reasons why you thought your education was inferior.

BJ: Because we had always heard that. As black people, everything about us was supposed to have been inferior. We had inferior teachers, so we have to have the inferior education. We had inferior books. We had the books that the white people had written all over, torn up and everything else, and then they handed them out to the black children; that's what books we had at our school. So we figured that the newer books and newer materials meant that you would be more intelligent and your school was superior. Not so. We didn't understand that then. That was a problem with all of us in integration, not just in the school system, everywhere. We thought that the whites had it right and the blacks didn't. It's like that old saying: "If you're black, get back." Well, we found out that wasn't true. They were educating us better in those segregated schools than they came close to in the integrated schools. I can guarantee you that, because as I went on to—now that was in ( )—the next year, because we

were under the freedom of choice, I went to Phillips High School. That wasn't the nearest high school to me.

KH: The nearest one is Parker?

BJ: Parker, but a group of us went on to Phillips from there and another group went to Ensley. Ensley probably was closer to me than—well, about the same distance, I guess, as Phillips, but neither one of them was as close as Parker High School, but that's what a bunch of us who were in that eighth grade class, we went to different schools because we still had that freedom of choice.

: Didn't they assign you to it?

BJ: Uh uh, not then; that came later. I'll get to that. I remember that part was different too, that was really different. But at the time that we had that freedom of choice, I went on to Phillips High School and they didn't bus us anywhere. I don't know if they were busing the white people, but we went on there and my mom drove one way and another parent drove us back, back and forth. Do you remember that, Mama, when we went to Phillips? Phillips is downtown.

: ( ) trying to get these children in and ( ).

BJ: But when we went to Phillips, unlike by the time we finished out that first year at ( ), we were definitely the majority. I think the first few weeks of school, there might have been more whites than blacks at first, because you had a group of blacks who were actually afraid to send their kids down there; they didn't send them at first, a whole lot of them didn't. They lived right around in here. They were afraid, so they didn't send their kids down there.

: Some of them would say, "My child is in the band and I don't want him to miss his band. They don't have band down here."

BJ: But they did have band there. They didn't have band; we had band at the segregated school.

KH: They never had a band?

BJ: They had a music teacher, but they didn't have a band. If they had had one, it wasn't ( ). They might have had a band teacher that left, but ( ) as far as I know. But they didn't have band like the black schools had band; they didn't have that. And there were some parents who didn't send their black children down there when we first integrated. It wasn't full right then, but before they entered that school year, a lot of the whites had disappeared except for the poor, the very poor—

: In the projects down here

BJ: Yeah, in the projects.

: And the projects were white.

BJ: They were all white then.

: They didn't have much of a choice. They had to go there. But all of the whites who lived around here—

BJ: Most of them went to private schools. Private schools popped up, those academies, so by the end of that first year, I think black was just about the majority down at ( ). But when we moved to Phillips, okay, you had almost the same thing going on at Phillips. That project down there, right now they're building high-class condominiums and town homes down there in that area. That used to be a project area, all white. It was all white, just like this project down here was, and all of them went to that school and they outnumbered us two to one when I went to Phillips. We were a small minority at that time when we went down there. Things were very interesting at Phillips. Blacks had a very small voice in anything that went on over there. We didn't have anybody looking out for us.

: That was a tough school.

BJ: They had very few black teachers, staff.

: ( )

BJ: But it was tough. We'd have assemblies where, I mean, we were totally ignored at all those assemblies in the beginning. It was just for them. They did—

KH: What kinds of assemblies?

BJ: Just regular school assemblies, but we were overlooked for everything, black children. We were just in the crowd, I guess making up the number, but nobody recognized us for anything those first couple of years at Phillips.

KH: Were there any black administrators or black student leaders?

BJ: If there were, I never met them. They were very—

**END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A**

**START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B**

BJ: I remember seeing some in a little white boy's hair. I remember seeing them and I was saying, "What in the world?" And he was not looked well upon with the other white poor children and he used to hang around us all the time. So we would look around and somebody said, "What is that in your hair? It looks like something's in your hair." And then one of the other white children said, "That's how he always has those lice. They're going to send him home." He had lice. We had heard about lice, but I didn't ever think anybody would actually be standing in front of me with something in their hair.

KH: I first heard about lice at school too.

BJ: With the white people? That was the first time we had ever heard of it, I mean—

KH: But they told me I couldn't get it, because I had too much grease in my hair.

: (laughs) White children had lice and black children had tetter.

BJ: Tetter, that's what they told us; that's right. ( ) he had tetter, black children had tetter if they had anything. But we didn't get lice. I didn't know why, but I just know if was

some ugly-looking stuff and we would say, “Get away from us, get away from us,” and he kept running behind us every time. He was a little ( ) anyway, so that’s why they didn’t care for him. He was really lost in a poor white, predominately black school by the end of the year and they didn’t want him and we just tolerated him. So I don’t know what happened to that poor child. But anyway—

KH: Before the tape ended, we were talking about Phillips High.

BJ: Oh yeah, Phillips. Like I said, we had white principals. Overall, I think they had assistant principals too and they were all white. I can’t even remember. There was a black art teacher. I think his name was Mr. Vann. Do you remember the Vanns? They went to our church. His son, I think that was who that was when I look back at it. That was one that I know of and there might have been one or two others, but there was nobody really when you look on it. You only see one or two around. We didn’t have any black teachers there to go to for anything or who would offer us any kind of assistance if we needed it; it was totally white, totally white faculty basically. There might have had a couple sprinklings of some black teachers in there, but it wasn’t many. This was like ’68 to ’69 when I went to Phillips.

KH: So you generally didn’t go to white teachers?

BJ: We had nothing but white teachers, but I’ll tell you by the tenth grade, I had a very good white teacher in my history class. She was like the best teacher that I can think of, black or white, in history. She was very good. But in her class, you know, things could just be blatant and we just let it roll off of us a lot of times. I remember once in her class, we had to do some reports and there was this white student who was in the class. He was legally blind, I suppose, because he had a dog with him all the time. I got my report back and I can’t think of that lady’s name, but she said, “I think yours was about the best report that I had.” It was something we had to do and I remember him saying something of the tone like, “Well, you would think that

because you were--." Now he didn't call her a Yankee and he didn't call her a nigger lover, but it was something akin to that. It was like, "Well, you would think that."

I remember him saying that under his breath and I looked over at him and stuff, but he wouldn't have seen it. But even that kind of stuff went on all the time if you had a teacher that said something. Most of the time you didn't, but she was one of the better ones and she was fair. All we would hope for was fairness. A lot of times, we wouldn't get that. In our gym classes, blacks, stereotype or not, are generally better in gym than whites, but they would group us up.

: Didn't they have an incident down there ( ) had to reassign you to ( )?

BJ: Oh no, there wasn't an incident. It wasn't an incident. I'm going to tell you what I'm looking back on it as, because the second year, it was pretty much like this neighborhood had turned just about all black by the end of the year, my first at ( ). The second year I was at Phillips, the only whites of quality, I'll say, and I mean whites who weren't necessarily poor, were from the ( ) area; those whites came over. Okay, ( ) had gotten to be just about all black or predominately black, I guess, except for the ones who hadn't had a chance to escape. So we were left with pretty much a lot of those project whites then.

Now they came up that year at the end of my second year at Phillips, they threw out the freedom of choice. And knowing white people as I know now and learning of some things that I have learned of, that freedom of choice only gave them a chance to get out and to get away. I was told by somebody just since I've been ( ) here maybe the last twenty years or fifteen years, I've been told by somebody that, "How did all of the whites all of a sudden leave the projects?" They furnished them with low-income housing, the government did. Our US of A government gave them low-income housing. I always wondered where they went, because they went just like that. So the second year of the freedom of choice, we had freedom of choice for



two years. The third year, they went to zones. They said everybody had to go to your zone. Now get this. I lived in a home with two children already at Parker; there was two of us still at Parker. I was zoned to Glenn. My brother graduated that year, so there was only one year left that year I went to Glenn. I was zoned to Glenn

: Yeah, we tried our best to get a change and ( ) out here where the other children were going.

BJ: I was zoned to Glenn and my sister went to Parker; we had the same house. I had a church member on those rare occasions, because Glenn was a long way off, and on the rare occasions when I had to walk home, we would pass each other. We'd stand and talk awhile. She went to Parker. She lived three or four blocks over, closer going toward Glenn than I did. But if I walked home sometimes and I'd run up on Anne, I'd see her. We'd stand on the corner and talk a little while and then she'd go on home and I still had two or three blocks to go before I got home. But she was going to Parker.

KH: How do you think that happened?

BJ: The way I figure it, because they had also claimed to have outlawed putting black and white on the forms for ( ), like you didn't know, and I think they weren't quite sure. They looked at my record, since they only have where you came from in eighth grade. I came from ( ) and I went to Phillips. So just to be sure that they didn't mess up and put a poor white child in the wrong school, I think that's how I got in. That's just my—because I could never understand why.

: It was all about control. They wanted to control how many blacks were in whatever school, because they wanted to keep enough whites. They didn't want all the whites ( ). See the thing was to integrate them, so they didn't want all the whites ( ) staying school, but they didn't want all the rest of them and that's what they were getting. Those people, the white folk

that was able to send their children to private schools, they did, and they took them out of public school.

BJ: And they figured in those two years, if they hadn't had a chance to do it then, they weren't worth it anyway. I think the poor whites just never knew how terrible they had it. They don't understand and they would still, when I'd go to class, ( ) it up and I'm thinking, "You're worse off than I am because you don't even know who your perpetrator is." But when we had that freedom of choice, they threw it out, and we had the zoning and that zoning was pick and choose. It was just the wildest thing you ever did see. It went right down here, right over here, across the street. James, he and I both were zoned to Glenn. We had some other people that stayed over here, were zoned to Parker and there was a girl my sister walked to school with every morning, they were all zoned to Parker. I'm thinking another thing. That's one explanation I had, was one, and another thing it could have been, we said it might have been that, well, we had gone to their schools, to the white schools and did okay and didn't bother them, so we'll keep those same ones and try them out over here at the other white school. Now that's the other explanation it could have been.

: Well, they got ( ) Reverend Gardner lived in the second house down there. Reverend Davis lived in this corner house, but Reverend Gardner was a member of the Alabama ( ).

BJ: He was also a member of Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights.

: ( ) I talked to him about it when they had that zoning thing and they were satisfied with the zoning to get away from that freedom of choice, but it was still controlled by the white majority. The white folks were still in control and they did it the way they wanted to do it.

BJ: Because we were still playing catch-up. Every time they made the rules, we'd have to adjust and figure it out, what's happening. And when they had the freedom of choice—I mean the zoning—I guess him being over at the human rights organization, figuring well at this

point, all of them that live around us will be going to the same school; didn't happen, because they ( ).

: Well, you see, Reverend Lowrie and Reverend Gardner was in the Alabama ( ).

BJ: We were heavy on this hill with a lot of people who had organizations and stuff, I think. Reverend Lowrie was working with the—Reverend Lowrie, Reverend Oliver, do you remember Reverend Oliver?

: Yeah, right, right.

BJ: All of them used to march and stuff when we had all those marches downtown. They were very active in the groups.

: ( ) lived right there.

BJ: The insurance man?

: Yeah.

BJ: Oh, Mr. Drew used to—

: John Drew.

BJ: John Drew had moved right next door. But we were pretty heavy with people who were really front and center with the civil rights movement, the movement that was going on in the city at the time.

: Thelma Patton bought that third house up there.

BJ: Well, he was working with the NAACP.

: Her husband was working with Tuskegee; Mr. Patton was working with Tuskegee.

BJ: I thought he was working with the NAACP. Yes, he was working with the NAACP. Anyway, we had a lot of heavyweights on this hill. But see zoning didn't do anything, but like he said, they still had the control. They still knew what they were doing from the main house.

: ( ) for their benefit.

BJ: Like I said, I'm in the house with my sister and I was going one place and she was going to another. Now you figure that out.

: Was her room on a different—

BJ: We were in the same room at the time, so it couldn't have been that. Maybe she slept on that side of the bed and I slept on the wrong side; I don't know. But I don't know how they figured it out, but that's how it went and people who lived closer to that high school were still going down there. I used to pass them—

: James ( ).

BJ: James was over there with me at Glenn. Let me start talking about Glenn. Let me tell you about Glenn.

KH: I wanted to ask you just some general questions.

BJ: About Glenn?

KH: It could be either school really.

BJ: Well, let me tell you about Glenn. This is very interesting. I'm just remembering a lot of this. That first day of school, we had a meeting; they met with us. Glenn had been a vocational school. The year I went there was the first year it was also an academic / vocational school. We had a meeting. Their colors were gray and gold, rebel colors. They were called "the rebels." So we had this guy, this principal, I can't remember his name, he had one arm, and the gym teacher, Coach Smith, they met. We didn't know them then, but that first day of school, all of us, they said, "Everybody meet in the gym." We met in the gym and they said, "We understand this is all new to us. You all are coming from different places. We're going to try to make this transition as smooth as possible and the first thing we're going to do is change our name and our school colors."

You had some booing from the whites; they were upset and were booing. And we were (claps) standing up cheering, because we knew those rebel colors, gray and gold, I mean that's confederate, right. So they said we would change the name from rebels to hawks. So those poor whites that was over there, you had a few still who had not had a chance to get to the private schools from Bush Hills at this point, because when you're in the high school, you encompass more area than just College Hills, Bush Hills and College Hills over there. Some few whites were still over there who were homeowners and not from the projects, but basically they were poor whites over there and they were upset.

So you had a lot of pushing and shoving that first day from that, because they were upset about us inflicting ourselves on them, where they had changed their name and their school colors all in the same stroke. But that's how we entered that school, that's how we entered that school. You can say that we felt somewhat victorious coming in there. So we were probably an arrogant group of black children, real and true. When I look at it, we were really up on ourselves. We all thought we were smarter than them, really. I don't know too many blacks that I went to school with in those two years who didn't feel like we had more going on educationally than them, especially since we knew we had come from academic high schools prior to that. I spent eleventh and twelfth grade there. So we knew they had only been vocational and if you've been in any school, you know you look down on vocationals. It's probably up to this day, people still do that. But that's one reason we really felt like, "Oh, these white folks are vocational and we're academics." So we had that going in and that kind of pretty much set the tone for us throughout over at that school.

KH: Did it also make you feel like the administration was catering to you?

BJ: It made us feel like they were more appeasing and they were probably going to listen to us more. That wasn't necessarily true either, but it had that flavor going in there; we

felt that going in there. And by the same token, the whites were upset because they felt that too, that they had been pushed to the brink and had to accept us regardless and somebody was kind of ramming us down their throats. So like I said, there was a lot of pushing and shoving going on, like, “What you looking at me for?,” and all that kind of stuff going on in those first couple of days.

KH: ( ) pushing and shoving?

BJ: Maybe not, but sometimes, but I’m just saying it was a lot of, “I don’t like you” and that kind of sneering. We were kids and nobody was trying to be proper at that point, because we came in that way. We came in as if we had been victorious on something. They came in as if they had been defeated. You know, white people never stop doing that Civil War, so I’m thinking they felt like that last day of the Civil War, that they had been conquered by the Union Army and I’m pretty sure they felt that way.

KH: At all of the schools, did you still have that sense that it was a competition between white and black students?

BJ: In those first days of segregation, I think we felt like pretty much like those people that were able to ride in the front of the bus. We felt like we had to be good, because we had to prove that we were worthy to go to their school and failure wasn’t something—if you failed, other black children would whip up on your head harder than probably your parents. You know, we were that way at that time. We were like, “What are you doing?” I mean, it’s like even in sports: “What did you let that white boy beat you for? What’s wrong with you?” We did that. We expected it and we would give you a hard time if in any little thing, you let some white child pass you boy. There was no worse thing you could do back in those days. Now if it happened where a teacher or some white person just chose you over them, that was okay, but it

was an outright besting by some white child, you lost everything you ever had. You were at the bottom of the pile from then now.

KH: Among all the other black kids?

BJ: Among all the black kids. I remember there was a child once that, he was a bully, and he used to push around, push around, and some kind of way, I don't know how he and this white boy got to fighting, and the white boy beat him. It was told that he beat him. After that, that poor boy, he may have well have gone somewhere and hid, because the black children were just beating him up just to beat him up everyday and I heard on his way home, they were doing that to him too. I felt sorry for him, but he had been a bully before and he didn't want to think about bullying, I'm sure, after that. But it was like the worst thing in the world to have had something like that happen. People let him know it and it was like that in every ( ), not just something like fighting or in educational things too. You just felt like we were there to prove that we had a right to be there and we couldn't let the race down. We were not just going to school for ourselves; we were going for the whole race. Nowadays, in our politically correct society, we'd probably say there was undue pressure on the poor children and they'd probably have somebody suggesting some psychiatric help for us, but no such thing then. We accepted that and demanded it of each other.

KH: Did that lead to a sense of divisions even in sports or clubs?

BJ: Sports, and I'll say male sports, was always more or less a general, universal equalizer in integration, because those guys, the few whites and things that were on the teams, after the first couple of times, and maybe this one had been quarterback and this was right on his neck trying to be quarterback, after that initial stuff, they were closer than anything. If there was any real integration, it happened with those male sports more so than anything else. It didn't happen to female anything.

KH: Did the women have sports? Did you play anything?

BJ: We had sports within the school and now that I think about it, there were a couple of white girls that were very good in sports, so they, I guess, learned ( ) hanging out with us and being okay with us, because it was something. Like I said, we had an arrogance over there. We were kind of bad, but ( ) can tell you. She was one of those teachers that used to yank us and pull our chains and put us in our place when we got too far out of hand and thought too much of ourselves. She'd bring us down to reality real quick.

KM: How did she bring you down?

BJ: Oh, they did like they did in these segregated schools, like I said, they'd yank you a couple a times and threaten you and get up in your face, like, "Who do you think you are?," and just pull us down to reality and let us know that we're not so far up as we think. They would ground us in a flash. We had a few like that and she was one of them that used to do that, ground us when we got too big on ourselves. She'd bring us back down to earth and keep us grounded.

KH: Your whole time in school, from Graymont to Glenn, how did you make friends?

BJ: I consider that more of a combative era, to be honest. You didn't really go out for friendship. It was more competitive, to see, to make sure that I didn't let the race down; there was more of that going on than outright friendship. I mean, we had friends, but it was not thought of as much as just trying to make sure you did your part for the race. Going from there to where I ended up in college was a whole different game. That was a different integration; that was Northern integration. Northern integration was a thousand times different and then it was college, so college is always different. But everything I accumulated from those five years of integrated education to those seven years of segregated education, it helped me make it wherever I went from there on. I could always refer back to those years to pull on any strengths



or any weaknesses that might have been there, to build on it. It had to come from those early years. I always attribute anything successful from my segregated time, because we were too much in the limelight, too much, as I said, trying not to let down the race, too combative, too competitive to really enjoy your time in high school or your time in that environment. There wasn't much time for that. Those early days, it was work, it was work.

KH: By twelfth grade, did you think that your education hadn't been—I guess especially desegregated public schools, did you feel like it had been worthwhile?

BJ: I suppose I did feel like it was worthwhile, because I learned more about white people than I had ever thought to learn and never have been intimidated. That's something that I can put on that shelf from my integrated years that I never have been intimidated by anybody white. I don't care what you have or who you are; I feel like we're on an equal footing at any time. You're no greater, no smaller than me. That's why I say all of that carried me on. But if I had not had the segregated upbringing where I learned so much confidence, so much good self-confidence, I wouldn't have been able to make it through those combative years where we had to fight every day just about, about something. It was little things that came up. They would say, "We want to see if we can get a black cheerleader." Sometimes it might be that. Or when I was at Phillips," We want to try to get a black homecoming queen. We want to at least get on the ballot." There wasn't any thought of trying to get one; that was out of the question, but just for us to have one on the ballot, for all of us to work for and to vote on. It was something, a major accomplishment, and we all kind of would gather around and do those kind of little things like that, support one another here and there. It was not the same, because like I said, my sister was going down to the black high school and they seemed to be enjoying things more, for me. They didn't have all of that to deal with.

KH: You were envious?

BJ: Sometimes, sometimes. But at the same time, there was a lot of other stuff that goes on with us too. When you are all segregated and stuff in school, sometimes the haves and have-nots ( ) you have that same thing. I just felt like I had another ( ) to learn that would probably be more benefiting me in life and I don't think I was wrong then, having gone to something segregated totally. I learned about what sometimes ( ). If you are not there, let's say, I might have been more fearful of things that I hear about white people and all if I had not gone ( ); it did help.

KH: Did you expect to learn so much about white culture when you first started?

BJ: We were all just naive. We felt like our parents had intended for us to go to a superior school to get a superior education; that's what we thought and we felt that too. But we learned to always worked. It was something we had to fight for, something we had to measure up against, something we had to be careful of, trying to make sure things didn't happen or occur. That was always going on.

: We instilled in all of our children the importance of education and it wasn't a question of whether they were going to finish high school, whether they were going to college; they were going to college and they prepared themselves to go to college. We made sure that they had grades to accomplish that college education, so they did, all of them; all five of them went to college. It was a struggle. We had three ( ) at the same time. My two boys were in Morehouse and it was a struggle—

: ( ) two and three for ten years.

: Yes.

: Two and three.

BJ: Two and three in college at the same time, at the same time.

: It was a struggle.

BJ: That's why my sister and I knew we had to get full scholarships somewhere and though we might have wanted to go to the historically black colleges and the universities, we knew we didn't have money for it.

: Couldn't get a scholarship.

BJ: So we both had scholarships to white colleges, predominately white colleges in the Midwest. That's where we went to school. I know I had the jump on my sister, because she had gone to a segregated school all of her life. So I kind of knew what to expect when I went off to Dubuque for my education. I had the jump on her for that, because it was totally something new for her, having not gone to school with them. But I already knew enough about them in some places to always be suspicious of everything.

: There was a ( ) phone call from ( ).

BJ: That was after we got there.

KH: You were at the same college?

BJ: No, she was in Illinois; I was in Iowa. We were like seven hours away from each other.

KH: But you would help her out by phone?

BJ: Well, we would talk to each other back and forth. By the time I got there, she was two years ahead of me. ( ) She was two years ahead of me, so she had gotten with it by the time I came on into school, because she had already told me what to expect and I go, "Okay, yeah, I know, I know," because I do know what to expect. But then it was north and south, so you know, I always learned that before segregation, it was just whites and you just saw whites. But once I went to school and somebody knew it was the white haves and the white have-nots; you have the blonde and blue-eyes against the ones that are darker. I didn't even know whites considered each other having different colors of skin. I mean that was after I went to school that

I learned that, because I'm thinking, "I look at you and you're white." And they'll say, "Oh, she's fair skinned, oh, she's darker skinned." And I'm thinking, "What?" But that was from going to school that I got all of that kind of stuff. I learned it's not just black and white. It is black and white, but within the black and white, you've got layers in the whites and I'm sure already we had layers in our blacks. But we didn't think about them being anywhere near as complicated.

KH: How did you learn those details, just from hearing them talk about it?

BJ: From hearing them, sitting next to them in class or out on the playground, listening to snippets of their conversations, watching them, them watching us, how they react to something we do. Because if they had friends, sometimes there were reasons for their friendship and we knew it; it was evident sometimes. If guys played sports, they just mutually respected one another after awhile that you were a good sportsman in whatever sport you were in. I suppose that's how they got to be friends. But us females and others who weren't in sports, if there was somebody who eased up to somebody, it may have been because if you were in class, they wanted to get next to you because you might have been making higher grades than they were. They wanted to get up there to see, "What is she doing different so I can kind of get on that and grab that from her," or "See, can I get a little bit of that?" There were always reasons for the friendships, but getting along ( ). I in turn, all of us, I guess, got to be more suspicious of white people.

KH: You learned more about opportunism?

BJ: Yes.

KH: Once you desegregated?

BJ: Oh yes, all of that, all of that. I mean, I got all of the negatives forced on me about white people, but then I could see sometimes there was some good too. I couldn't say ( ), because I could see them ( ) Something was going on.

: Oh yeah.

BJ: They'd be all huddled together. I'd go over there and get in the edge and just start listening to them talking and find out what was going on and stuff, so yeah, there was a lot of that. I forget about so much of that. I wish I could remember. There were a lot of things like that going on. If you've got any more questions, because I could go on thinking of some things that I'm just beginning to think of, but I can't think of anything specific.

KH: Were there particular times in either school when you thought that race relations were either really, really good or especially bad? I guess one would be the first day at Glenn.

BJ: Yeah, we thought we might have smooth sailing here, because they recognized that we were the academic people coming to this vocational school and they appreciated us; that's what we figured going in, that that must have been how they viewed us. So we felt like we had our little heads up and chests out, and thought we were something pretty good to have accomplished that, because all of us had come from those same years of forced integration. A bunch of us had either come from Ensley High School or Phillips High School, when we went over there. A few had come from totally segregated school, like people might have come from Western; at that time it was called Western.

: Where had ( ) come from?

BJ: She had come from Hayes, I believe, because she had been at Hayes for awhile then before she came over there to us.

: ( )

BJ: Yeah, she was, she was an excellent counselor. I don't think there's a better counselor and you know, we had a—have you talked to her already? You know we had, we say a white counselor and a black counselor? She was our black counselor. At Glenn, where we went to high school, she was the one all of us went to and they had their own counselors. They had a white man who all the white people were supposed to go to, but actually, I think the real distinction was supposed to have been that he was vocational and she was academic.

KH: She didn't tell me about that.

BJ: She didn't tell you? Okay, well I always thought because she did a lot of vocational stuff for black children who weren't going to college. She made sure every black child had an opportunity away from high school to further their education or occupational desires. She made sure of that and whites went to her too afterwards. Like I said, and I've learned this in life, if they're integrating sometimes, we might have the best of the blacks with the mediocre to poorest of the whites. That's what you integrate. Very seldom do you have the best of the blacks and the best of the whites meeting together. I haven't been in any of those situations, maybe once or twice in my college years, we might have run up on some of that, once or twice, but basically, it's inferior whites integrating with superior blacks. So is that true integration? I don't really think so. It's not exactly. They've already snatched the ones who they feel who are worthy or worth anything. So those teachers and that counselor, he probably couldn't have gone anywhere else. He was left there and ( ) had to be there, because he didn't have to do that. He wasn't upsetting anybody with these poor whites ( ).

: ( )

KH: So what would integration have been like if—

BJ: If it had been equal, more equal?

KH: If it had been equal.

BJ: I would wonder. I have no idea what it would have been like. I would suspect it might have been, that's just being optimistic to say this, that it might have been easier if more equal minds had been merging. It might not have been, but I would have hoped that, because if they were equally intelligent, because we knew we were. I'm not just saying that the poor folks were not intelligent, because you have intelligence ( ), but a lot of times, they don't know they are, because they feel deficient, they know they're deficient, they're going to act deficient. We know we're supposed to be deficient, but we know we're not, because we had been told by our segregated teachers and ( ) that we were just as capable, just as equal as anybody else, and we could go it if we wanted to; we were told that. They didn't have that. They didn't have anybody telling them that. So that's why I said it might have been better if there had been some more intelligent, more middle class people merging, than the poor people who were just left because they had nowhere else to go. That's basically the way you did it.

I learned as I went on, in college and stuff up there in Iowa, that if you had an integration, it was either going to be—it might be some liberals with some black people, which is still not a true measure of integration, because they have too many expectations. We had liberals, they felt like, "Oh, we're just so glad to have you," and I did have a lot of that too, by the way, when I went there.

KH: That was in college?

BJ: "You're black and you're from the South? How did you do it?" I'm thinking like, "I get up and I put my clothes on every day like everybody else. What do you mean? What's so special?" But you have that and then you have racist people here. I don't know which is better or which is worse. It's easier to move along probably with the liberals on one point, but at least with the segregated people, you know exactly where you stand; you don't get any surprises.

You know from the outgoing exactly what they don't want you to do and you just force your way on around or move and don't bother. It's as simple as that.

KH: My last questions were about the desegregation process as a whole and looking back on it from your experience now. Do you think that the process is still going now?

BJ: It started and stopped. I think it's there. I think that we're in the same spot we were in when we started out. We have probably the same expectations that we're all going to be equal. That's not going to happen. There's no such thing, I don't think, because I've learned that mostly everything is political and even back then, we didn't know it, it was all political. Everything that went on back then was just all political grandstanding by those in charge. Nobody really had any real sense of what was happening when you merged two different societies or two cultures; they didn't care. It was all what the powers that be said must happen. The Democrats, the liberal Democrats said this was going to happen so that we could appease the black people all over the country.

: And the Dixiecrats—

BJ: And the Dixiecrats did what they wanted to do to appease the poor whites who were putting them in office, to make them happy; they fought it so to make them happy. I don't even think some of their hearts were in it all the time, but they knew that was expected, so they made sure they did the grandstanding, like George Wallace in the schoolhouse. He did what was expected of him to appease those who put him in office. I don't think his heart was really in it. He knew what already had happened. He just did it so that they could say, "He's always standing up for us. Go, George, Go." If it's always going to be that, and it is, it's always going to be something political behind it.

KH: Do you think it started out as just politics, even at the *Brown v. Board of Education* stage?



BJ: For that, I think, we just wanted equality in education. That's all we were looking for and we felt like, black people always felt like if we learned, since we came to this country with nothing, no language skills, no expectations of arising above ourselves, we came here at the bottom and they intended for us to stay where they brought us, where they had put us. We weren't supposed to go anywhere. So we always believed the more education we had, the better off our life would be.

: We were getting all of those secondhand books and we always thought that the whites had better books ( ). But what we didn't realize at that time was that our black teachers were really doing a better job teaching out of those old books that they had destroyed and they turned down.

BJ: They did, because a lot of times, they put those books aside and taught what they knew in that subject. They didn't rely on what that white book maker or book writer had put in that textbook.

: So when they went into those black schools, ( ).

BJ: They taught from their college notes, those teachers, because they didn't have the materials. They taught from stuff that they knew, from wherever they had gotten in from. So we were getting it new and fresh all the time anyway, because the teachers had that desire to give back—

: Dedicated—

BJ: Much more dedicated than what we have now.

KH: My last question is how do you think the desegregation process affects your children?

**END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B**

**START OF TAPE 2, SIDE A**

BJ: I don't know, I think they always—

: ( )

BJ: Yeah, ( ) probably could, she probably could answer that very well. Yeah, let's let her answer that. I had my daughter the other day tell me, "Mom, I think we were just discriminated against." Last night when they left here, they went on out to get something at the store for me and I went on home and they called me before they got back home. They were going to buy a tape at Best Buy. They called me, "Mom, I think we were discriminated against." I said, "Oh really? Like what?" "We waited at this counter for at least ten minutes and when the guy finally looked over at us, they were on the machine telling us the store was about to close. So I said, 'Sir, we need to get some assistance please,' and he still kept talking to the white man over there and 'blah blah blah.'" I said, "Oh my goodness, my little children." But I've always told them and they know Ms. Heath well, Ms. Heath is like a grandmother to them,

so they heard her say some things that I did when I was in school, ( ). There have been some situations with them coming up in school, where being the only one—

: ( ).

BJ: Oh you mean, talking about ( )?

: Yeah.

BJ: My daughter, who just graduated, was a merit scholar. And she always had been in the honors classes—all of my kids have been in the honors classes—but she was more competitive. She is the one that, “I want to make the highest.” My other ones may just want to get in the number for the highest, but she wanted to make the top score every time, all the time. She’s always been that way, so in some of her classes, there was always this white boy and he was valedictorian too, by the way. He’d always asked, “( ), what did you make?,” every time they had a test. She’d say, “He always wants to know what I make.” But I think they’ve been in classes together since seventh grade when they all merged. And actually my kids had, they were supposed to have been integrated, but they went to a school that was in white flight and by the time they finished their elementary school, it was all black just about. They only had maybe a handful in the whole school that was left and they knew them to be just the same, the same as it was thirty years ago. They said, “Mama, the only whites that are left in our school are the trailer park white people, the poor whites, and they don’t even know that they’re poor. They don’t even know that they’re discriminated against just like us.” So they’re learning the same kind of things thirty years later that we learned when we first got down there to those integrated schools; it’s the same kind of thing.

KH: And which schools did they go to?

BJ: They went to ( ) in Parksdale; it was Hillview Elementary School and Hillview is on the whole, pretty much black now, I’m sure. They started in kindergarten there and my

oldest, it was half and half when she went there in her class. Matter of fact, in her kindergarten class, there were maybe two more whites than blacks. I think it was eight—it was a small class too, by the way—it was maybe eight whites and six blacks, or something like that in her class ( ) or just a few more. But as she went, maybe by second or third grade, it was something like two or three whites in her class, all the ones who—the haves had already gone. They went to one of the churches over in the areas, started a school, a Christian school. There were academies in the old days; they're Christian schools now. But they had all gone to the Christian school.

And it's funny, my oldest said, by the time they got to the high school, because I don't think the Christian schools go to the high school, they only went to elementary, she said, "Mom, I think I remember this boy when he was in kindergarten with me," or, "this girl was in first grade with me. That's where she went; she's been going to this Christian school all this time." You know, I said, well, honey, that's the same thing they did when I was in those first days of integration. They ran off to academies and such. She said, "But they're all over at Minor." When they all converged, Minor was like, when she went, I think it was thirty percent, probably, black and right now, my daughter that graduated this year, this was the second year that there have been more blacks than whites at that school. So we see that same transition that I experienced when I first went to school.

KH: How does it make you feel when you see—

BJ: No other progress? It makes you feel like you're still in the same spot. I'm thinking, "Gosh, we all thought 2000 was going to be some great change going on by the time the twenty-first century came up." I know you all probably did too, didn't you? I didn't think we'd be sitting up here still talking about desegregation and stuff.

: But it's gone back so far.

: ( )

BJ: All that mood has just gone back to the same ( ). They don't say "racism" and "anti-racism," or whatever they said back then. They say "conservative" and liberal;" that's the difference now. But we're in the same spot.

: ( )

BJ: We're in the same spot. The only difference is that our children don't know what to do with it, most of them, because they've been in this pseudo-integrationist society. They don't have what I had with my segregated education. I was prepared when someone told me that I was inferior. I was prepared to challenge you on that, because I was told too many other times how good I was. You couldn't tell me I was inferior. I was expected to do better. I was one of those—all of those who went to your school, we were expected to do nothing less than our best and they got it. Now these kids, when they tell them, "You don't have this," or "You don't do this," they already have that defeatist attitude and they can't grab it from anywhere, because they've had probably white teachers in their early grades, even though they went to a school that almost predominately black, but its faculty was half and half, almost exact.

We had a white teacher and a black teacher in every grade, and that was a small school, so we had like classes for every grade, even ( ). So they had the white teachers and they notice differences and stuff sometimes when they do their best and they don't get the grade or when they have academic challenges or games or something, whatever, they're not chosen by their teachers. But thanks be to God, most of my kids, I guess because of my influence, ask: "Why did I get passed over? Because I have all the materials here and I did all of that, so why didn't I get chosen?" You know, they're able to do that, but every child didn't have that. They get that defeatist attitude and they say, "Well, I didn't get it this year. I'm not going to even try next

year and I know I'm not worthy to be in that number, so that's for them and this is for us." I see more of that than I did when we were segregated and that bothers—

: They came along at the time that they had teachers that didn't expect the black child to be as smart as the white child.

: Yes, right.

: They had those kind of teachers.

: Right, that is true, exactly.

: Just because they were black, they didn't expect them to be as smart as the white child.

They had those ( ).

BJ: And we didn't; it was the opposite for us. Our black teachers had told us we could and we weren't going to do anything but what they said. Even when we were away from them, their influence was still on us and our parents too were always telling us, "Well, you're just as good as the white children or better." It wasn't any inferior. "You're just as good or better." Those two things, just as good or better. So that's the way I tried to raise my kids coming up, so that's a product of integration, because I told them that they were better.

My daughter, I heard them laughing with some of their friends a few months ago about how I told them that their hair was better than the white kids and they were laughing. I heard them, I said, "You all remember that?" They said, "Yeah, Mama told us our hair was better than theirs," because when I fix their hair in the morning, it stayed in place. They'd come home and they'd say, "This girl's hair is always moving, Mama, and her hair is bouncing and everything and her hair moves all over the place," and stuff. And I said, "Oh and that's awful." I said, "You know when I fix your hair in the morning and I put your little bows in there and your braids? When you come home in the evening, it's still in place. That poor white girl."

That's the kind of stuff I would do with them and they were remembering that not long

ago, so it was something that it helped them, because if they could still remember that, it means something, because I did a lot of that kind of stuff. Every little thing that they were told was negative, I put it as a positive or tried to, at least. That did make them more confident, so they could deal with the setbacks that they are going to get in life and they have to some extent.

KH: Do you think the others in the black community tried to instill confidence?

BJ: Uh uh. What you have now in a lot of the schools are parents who were in totally integrated schools, a bad situation if you ask me. I was so grateful, because I had a friend when the whites started leaving my children's school just like that overnight, they all just about left, and I remember we working with the PTA one time and she said, "You know what?" We had just gotten a report that our school in our district, and we were like *the* black school in our district, and our school had surpassed everybody else on the SAT scores. We were like, we were really shocked and we knew we were not getting all the money and the breaks, and like she said, "You know what?" She said, "We need to just let all of them run on off so we can claim our school and do what we want to in our school, because we're doing a doggone good education over here, aren't we?" That's what we were saying. So I said, "You know, there's something to that." I said, just like when all of us grew up in the segregated—because she was one who had had a portion of her education was totally segregated too, so she knew the difference.

But most of these young parents we have now didn't have that, because what our black teachers did in those schools back then, after they were integrated, the schools totally, even those like my old school, they had white teachers and stuff in there, although they didn't have white children, they still had white teachers all in their faculty, and I think some of those newer black teachers were afraid to do those things that they did back then.

Of course, they couldn't beat, they couldn't have church in school, so to speak. I had more hymnals that I learned in school, in my public school, than I learned at church. My church was right across from the school I went to, right across the street from it. I learned more hymns at school than I did at church, because we had devotions every morning. We had devotions, like a prayer meeting, it's just like Wednesday night's prayer meeting in any black church, that's what we had. And we would have a thought for the day. We had to do recitations. We didn't do that in the white schools; that wasn't expected and nobody asked.

We didn't have programs. Every class in school from first—because we didn't have kindergarten in school at that time—from first grade to eighth, your class had to be on parade. You had to have a program. It was a play or you'd have expeditions where everybody got up and did recitations, or singing or dancing, or something, but you were put up there front and center before that school year was out in front of the whole school. Your class had to do a program. We didn't do that at the white schools; nobody had programs.

We did not have a Negro History Week, because it was a ( ). We had to fight for it that first year I was at Glenn—not Glenn, Graymont. We went to our teacher in the unit. The month was approaching, the week was approaching, Black History Week was approaching, and we knew what they were doing at the other school. My sisters at Parker, they were doing all the big, nice programs and stuff that you do on Black History Month and going all out. And we said, "Hey, you know, nobody asked us to do a poster or a song or a dance or a recitation or anything. Why can't we do something?" We had gone to one teacher and she said, "You can't do that here."

One of our black teachers that we thought we could go to had said that. So this other teacher, who had been a drama teacher at high school, we went to her. She said, "I'm working on it." She said, "You all just wait awhile," and she said, "I might not get it in February, but



we're going to have a program." She had two or three programs before that school year was out, actually. So I'm thinking maybe what she—because I don't remember if one was for Black History Month, or Week, but we had two other programs and they gave us a chance to be on exhibit and to show what you could do. Because that was something, you might have a child all through the school year that'll just sit there and get by, not try to do anymore than C work. They'd get up there on that stage sometimes and just show out, I mean, talent just bursting out all over the scene. That would make that child strive more the next time, if they got a chance to vent some of that, that's stored down in them. You don't get that, so these kids—

: ( ) You get a chance to give them some attention—

BJ: ( ) He said his church made him forget stage fright—

: Oh, from him going up on the stage?

BJ: He was talking to so many kids in that ( ). That's another thing. You do have a chance to not be afraid to stand up and speak out. That's what that teaches us when we get a chance to do that at an early age. They don't that. They don't have any opportunity except, like I said, when my children were going, when the school got to be just about predominately black, the school where my kids went, the teachers started doing more and more programs, I noticed, over there. It wasn't from some of our parents urging. I think they just got together and said, "Let's let these children do something. We need to have plays or have some song contests or something." So they started doing that and it helped, because it gives some of those kids who are just there a chance to vent and maybe they won't be a discipline problem or whatever kind of problems they might end up being if they get a chance to show something of themselves that's down in them. That's something that was stolen from us from integration.

KH: Which is why it mattered so much when you were at Phillips and they didn't let you participate?

BJ: Yes, they wouldn't let us participate in anything. I mean, when we had assemblies, they were all-white, they were all-white. And when we had maybe a black child that might get up on the stage to walk across to announce something, I mean, we stood up and clapped and everybody just—it was something special. But that was like very rare. I remember maybe once or twice that happened. The year that we went from the zoning, when I was at Phillips and it was predominately white, my second year it was still predominately white, the third year when we had the zoning and they sent me and some others all over the place, that school got to be predominately black, like that. It was amazing. I had a friend who was still going there and she said, "You wouldn't believe it, but there's nothing but black children here now." I said, "No, I don't believe it. I just left there. What do you mean?" And she said, "All the whites are gone."

Where did they go? That was always a mystery to me until, like I said, I had this friend who was working for the government and he told me about this low-income housing that appeared for just the white people to get out of the projects and that's where they went. They all got out and got into this low-income housing and that's how they disappeared. It was amazing to be, because they weren't there; they weren't even down in the projects. So they just left, just like overnight. So I think they must have been having some meetings or something and George Wallace and all those folks were telling him, "Just hold on for a couple years. We're going to get all this together and let them have that integration."

: They were coming out of white churches.

BJ: They would meet at white churches?

: White churches.

BJ: Really?

: Yeah.

BJ: I didn't know that. They must have been having something, because it was like—  
how did they get together like that? It was just like midnight, just like overnight.

: All those families went up to the white churches and they still are; they still are. And  
they come out and say blacks, when we get out of order, they should recommend us to vote for  
certain candidates that they try to ( ). But yet and still, all we got to do is look at them. They  
vote in block. Now why would they vote in a block? They're being told to and they're being  
told through their churches and their meetings. But they'll fight us ( ) or make  
recommendations for us to vote together.

: That's my parents' voting registration ticket, so ( ).

: We had to pay poll taxes.

: They had to pay poll taxes.

BJ: We're pretty sure white people weren't paying anything to vote, but that's what  
they gave black people when they voted and you had two years down there that you could vote.  
We got the two years written in there.

: We had questions that you had to answer and you know the movement passed out  
questions to people so they could study them and they would be asking them the questions  
when you go down to register and you would have to answer so many questions and that's how  
you passed.

: It had nothing to do with voting.

: But that's how you had to pass.

: Nothing to do with voting.

KH: Wow.

BJ: They asked some weird questions too.

: Yeah, they had all kinds of things.

KH: Political questions?

BJ: No, it had nothing to do with politics. What were some of the questions, daddy, that they asked? Didn't you say one time somebody had some beans in a jar and they asked how many?

**END OF INTERVIEW**

Transcribed by Emily Baran. December, 2006