

Interview

with

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HESHMA PUGH-DU EWA

February 18, 2005

by Gerrelyn Patterson

Transcribed by Chris O'Sullivan

The Southern Oral History Program
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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Interviewee: Heshma Pugh-Du Ewa
Interviewer: Gerrelyn C. Patterson
Interview date: February 18, 2005
Location: Pugh residence, Durham, NC
Length: 1 cassette

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

GERRELYN PATTERSON: This is an interview with Heshma Pugh-Du Ewa in Durham, North Carolina. It is February 18, 2005 and we are in her home. The interviewer is Gerrelyn Patterson and this is part of the Spencer Grants project on school desegregation in the south and will be used as a part of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The tape number is 21805HD. Okay, Ms. Du Ewa will you please tell me when you attended Hillside High school?

HESHMA PUGH-DU EWA: We went to Hillside '62, '63. We entered Hillside in '62. That was the tenth grade; the year was '62-'63, '63-'64, eleventh grade and '64-'65 twelfth grade.

GP: Tell me what you remember most about being a student at Hillside?

HD: Hillside was very unique. It was unique in that the students who attended Hillside were like a family. We were like a family because there was only one black high school in the city of Durham. And, when we went to Hillside everyone knew everyone. We came from all areas of Durham, Walltown, Pearsonstown, the West End, east Durham, Braggtown. So, when we got there it wasn't like we were going to a school meeting

individuals we never knew before. We knew everything about each other. So, therefore it was a family. And, it didn't really matter which side of the tracks you lived on. Because those students whose parents were a little more affluent than the others, with the exception of a few, they mixed very much with the rest of us. Your question was what I remember mostly about Hillside. I remember the teachers. I had two teachers specifically, one teacher was Mrs. Cynthia Smith who taught French and the other teacher was Mrs. Garrett. I remember them because they were strict but they were mother figures.

GP: So, nurturing.

HD: Very nurturing. They would laugh with you, but when it came time to doing the work, [hands clap/slap sound] you did the work. They cared about you they took a lot of time with you. I remember, [laughter] I remember the fun that we would all have just on assembly programs, in the cafeteria.

GP: Okay. I never heard anything about the assembly programs--or the cafeteria actually.

HD: Yeah, we had quite a few assembly programs. I'm sure you probably have heard of Mr. Gattis?

GP: Mr. John Gattis?

HD: John Henry Gattis.

GP: Mr. G's Swing school.

HD: He had a special chorus. I guess I could sing then, or I thought I could.

GP: I'm sure you could.

HD: That was a real memorable event, because we all got together. We were able to sing, we would just pull out those characters or those qualities that we thought we had and just gel. Come together. Again, Mr. Gattis would talk cash trash. Cash trash, but you understood he meant business. And it was interesting because even if you were in the special chorus and you had a class under him, which I did, he did not marry the two. He was one person here with special chorus, which was a little more lenient. But when you were in the class with him, he was Mr. Gattis. Another thing I really really admired about Mr. Gattis--I didn't think he was one of my favorite teachers—but what I really admired about him was that each week he would give you a word of the week.

GP: Hmm, okay.

HD: He would give you a word of the week, and I remember that. The reason that I remember that is because as an educator--as a retired educator--that stuck in my mind and I did the same thing with my students.

GP: Oh, okay.

HD: Initially they couldn't appreciate it, but I realized how much it did for me. And in doing so, it worked with my students. And when I say he gave you a word of the week, you had to learn the etymology of the word, the definitions, and the synonyms and during the week he would expect to hear you use those words in sentences. So therefore when it was time for you to go on to school and you had to take tests and you know, the word analogies, et cetera. It helped you a lot.

GP: And he was the chorus teacher right?

HD: He was English and chorus.

GP: English and chorus, okay.

HD: Special chorus, not just chorus.

GP: Special chorus. So let me ask you a quick question, because I'm hearing a lot of people say that the teachers were strict but that you knew that they cared about you at the same time. That seems to be a really difficult thing to be able to do, can you talk about--

HD: The juxtaposition, right? I remember one teacher specifically, Mr. Barnes-- and I'll go back to that in a minute--I remember one teacher Mr. Barnes, he taught world history. In today's society in education a person might think that what he said was real coarse, you know what I'm saying really, really horrible. But I remember he would say, "I got mine, you got yours to get." And, he was right and it's really, really true. It made you stay on course because you weren't going there for games and playing, you were going there because you had a job to do. And they would let you know. And because of segregation and because of the way the teachers came up, because of the way we grew up--our parents grew up--it was almost like a knock of the boots. Let me throw this on you right now so that you'll understand that we mean business.

There was another teacher, I can't remember his name right now, gosh. But I remember this: he would say, if you were playing around and your grades weren't up, he would say "you may January, you may February, but you will not march in June." It was funny, but it was real.

GP: [Laughter] Okay got it.

HD: May January, may February but you will not march in June. That's in terms of academics. Another thing I remember about being at Hillside is that the people with whom I associated, we were very competitive. Very competitive. If you had an

assignment you would do your work, but you would also talk to your friends, your classmates. Why did you do this? Okay, let's get together and make sure that this is correct. It wasn't like let me copy from you or anything. It was like okay, you did this and I did this, let's understand what we've done and--I'm not saying that that's what happened with everybody but I know with most of the people with whom I associated. We were very competitive. It was like if you got a 90 and I may have gotten an 88, okay so what is it that I didn't do and we would sit and get together and go over the work again. This was an ideal thing I believe. Many of the teachers may not have come out and verbalized this, but they went along with that. They thought it was a good thing.

GP: So, the teachers supported you all working together.

HD: Absolutely.

GP: I'm hearing you say a lot of teachers made an impact on you. Do you feel like they sent you special messages, either explicitly or not, about whom you were as a person and what they expected from you?

HD: I'll put it this way, and I'm going to be very honest with you. Some teachers yes and some teachers no. Those who sent positive messages were teachers who I felt were really--to use the terms that they use today--were teachers who were very much down to earth. They genuinely, and I mean genuinely cared. Now, you also had some teachers that were snobs. I don't know if you heard that or not, but we had teachers who were snobs. I have to be honest with you, and if you came from one side of the tracks, they tended to put you up on a pedestal more than those who came from the other side of the tracks.

GP: Okay, help me understand this because I didn't grow up in Durham. When people tell me the neighborhoods, Walltown, Pearsonstown, Braggstown, East End, the bottom--I don't understand the tracks of Durham. Help me understand the tracks.

HD: You've never heard that expression?

GP: Well, yes, I do but I don't understand--

HD: What we say in Durham, you don't see the tracks. If you came from one area you came from a family of a lower economic status.

GP: Okay, and what areas were those?

HD: It's interesting; the bottom, McDougal Terrace--where I grew up--and East Durham. The interesting thing is even though those few teachers who looked down their noses on the people who came from those areas, those teachers who looked down on those students--it's interesting because a lot of the students who went out and they did something and became something came from McDougal Terrace. I speak of it as McDougal Terrace because today they call McDougal Terrace "the projects." It only became the projects I'm going to say about 1967, '68 somewhere along that time. Even though you lived in McDougal Terrace your parents, who may have been from a lower economic standard, they expected a lot from you. It wasn't like you would have some parents who did not finish school themselves, and they didn't give two hoots whether or not their children finished school or not. We had parents that said, "I didn't do, you are going to do. You will probably be the first generation in this family that will graduate not just high school, but will go on to graduate college."

GP: So I'm hearing you say those parents had very high expectations for their children.

HD: Extremely high expectations.

GP: So the message to go to college was from parents or did you receive that message from Hillside as well?

HD: Both places. And your elementary school. And Whitted Junior High School. It was a drum beat. It was a drum beat.

GP: So, a drum beat of high expectations.

HD: Absolutely.

GP: Can you tell me some more about what it was like to live in Durham? How was it different when you were growing up than it is today?

HD: When I was growing up Durham was a community. And when I say a community, meaning a community consists of—I'm going to say the African American community—consists of economics, we had businesses. It consisted of a governance and when I say a governance, I don't care who you were everybody expected you to do well. If they knew you, they would say something. If they didn't know you, they would say something. So there was a community.

Today, nobody knows anyone. You can't say anything to anyone and you don't feel that warmth. You don't feel that closeness that you did when I was growing up. When I was growing up, it was unheard of for a child not to go to church. And our teachers, most of them went to the same churches that we went to. So, you didn't just see them at school, you saw them again at church. And they were super role models, and when I say, you know with that high expectation—they were super role models. If they

found a place where they went out for entertainment or whatever, you never laid eyes on them. And Durham was segregated at that time. So they held themselves high and expected you to hold your head up and do something for yourself.

GP: So, you said that Durham was segregated at that time. In 19—when you were there from 1962-1964--

HD: '65

GP: '65, I'm sorry. School desegregation had already almost happened for 10 years; did it impact Hillside in any way?

HD: [pause] Did it impact—no.

GP: Okay.

HD: Hillside was the same. We had a few students who, I don't even remember how they were chosen to go to Durham High School, but we had some students to attend Durham High. But still Hillside was the same. We never had any white students at Hillside.

GP: So no students, when the students from Hillside went to Durham High, none from Durham High came over to Hillside?

HD: None came to Hillside. We had no white students. We didn't have any white teachers at Hillside.

GP: So, no impact.

HD: No impact. Like I said, there was no impact. It was like [laughs] okay, the schools are now desegregated, you woke up the next morning you heard the word desegregated but as Roberta Flack could say "business goes on as usual."

GP: So, life goes on.

HD: Life goes on as usual.

GP: So, do you think--because I am hearing you say that there are a lot of benefits that Hillside did for you as a student--do you think that there is something that schools like Hillside did for black students that is now lost?

HD: Of course.

GP: Okay, tell me about that.

HD: I know I'm sounding redundant, but it was the nurturing, the caring. And when you went to school as a student, you went there knowing that you were expected to succeed. You knew that once you entered those doors all the horseplay was left on the outside. You may have gone in to try your hand just a little bit, but you knew where to stop. Today, on a whole, I really feel kids don't care that much about an education.

GP: Why do you say that?

HD: I feel like if students really cared that much about education today they would go in with a different mindset. They would go in knowing that there is something that they need to strive for. They would have some type of goals. I hear too many kids today say--well I'll put it this way--kids today are living for the now. What can I have now? As far as going to school to prepare you--not for a job because I don't believe in preparing yourself for a job--but to go to school to prepare yourself for life experiences, that whole concept is lost.

As a matter of fact, we're going backwards. We're going backwards, because as I said to you before, parents cared about kids, their children. The teachers cared. Today parents are grasping for excuses, I am so sick and tired of hearing "This child comes from a single family household." We are talking about students coming from single family

households; I came from a single family household. I've done extremely well, not to brag. I went to college; I went to North Carolina State University. I was a pre-med major, didn't get there because of family finances. I went on, I got a masters, got a doc—6 credits short of a doctorate, just stopped. I've traveled, I've done well. But I did that because my mother, my grandmother, the neighbors, my aunt, the extended family wanted you to go on. So that was a single family household. Mothers on welfare who've had men to come in to try to help out in the family--the system realizes a man is in the house, what do they do? They shut off the welfare.

GP: That's right, they penalize you.

HD: You know, you're penalized. But we are all so concerned about family structure and family values. We talk about single family households; well this has been systemic since the beginning of time. Slavery? What did they do, they separated the family.

GP: Right.

HD: But even though families then were separated—and I'm going to get back to the point—even though families were separated then, what did they do? They taught themselves to read. I was just looking at the documentary on Smalls—

GP: He died last night.

HD: Yeah last night () well. But parents don't think that way today. Today, what can I get? Who owes me this? Never, I want you to do well and go out and be competitive in the world. So no, school is not the same. The kids just seem not to care. They want what they can get, right now. And, I blame Madison Avenue.

GP: Why do you say that?

HD: Most of your advertisements, your commercials, et cetera, all start right along in that area. The kids watch TV, they see this they want this. Nothing on that TV speaks to okay, why you don't turn your TV off and have a little respite for reading or family time when you can sit down and discuss whatever you've been taught in school that particular day. Or whatever is happening in the world today. All of this is education. Education is not just walking in the door doing an assignment during the day and coming home doing homework. So, because the parents today don't seem to be conscious enough of what is happening to us--not just African Americans--but what is happening to us, because it's not just black kids, it's the whole gamut.

So no, education today is not the same. And in addition to that--and I think this is very paramount too--our teachers were taught, were educated. So when we went to school, we had teachers who knew subject matter. To be honest with you, you have teachers who come out of college today and you stop and you open your mouth in awe because of the way they speak and because of what they don't know. So what do we expect from the kids when we have teachers who are not doing well themselves?

GP: Okay, so what do you think schools can do now to better educate our students?

HD: That's a tough question.

GP: Black students particularly, when I say our--

HD: That's a tough question. It's not just the school. It's going to take a combined effort of parents, educators--I don't even want to go to the church, so I'm not even going to bother with that. Your parents, your educators and if we can find community people. As the African proverb goes "it takes a village to rear a child." What

can we do? If we could take away the dollars from those people on assistance, because I hate to make a blanket statement like this, but basically it's true. Many of those people on assistance, they are the ones who basically are not doing their job as a parent. So in order for you to get your check, you have to attend class. And I don't mean just attend, you have to attend, you have to participate and you have to show some improvement.

[Laughing] This is going to sound funny--funny is not the right word. This is going to sound real, real harsh. I'm even an advocate of taking away kids from parents. And I mean taking them away at an early age, for some type of boarding school. Where they will be—trained is not the right word—where they can be properly educated. And I mean the total education; manners, respect, knowledge, knowledge based. If you were to take the kids away from a parent at an early age, and the parents are going to be upset by this, give them a chance maybe after the first 6 weeks to go and visit. And you can't keep running back and forth calling. I think that would be a start.

Your question was what can we do? We have to stop placating to kids. You have parents who will run out and buy Nintendo and all these games and kids walking around with their pants hanging down and the stomach is out and the breasts are out. Kids don't work, parents are buying that. So parents are feeding into that frenzy. Which is also causing the child to think he or she can do whatever he or she wants to do, and as a result if I don't want to do my work I don't have to? You have parents who say, "Well I have a computer in their room and the television in their room." No; there should be one room in the house where all those things are located. What else can be done? We need to come back to a time where we have some family time. Turn off the TV, sit down and talk. Set some rules.

I remember when I was in school, and this just didn't start at Hillside, there was a routine. You came home, [laughs] you may never have heard of this, but you took off your school clothes and you put on your play clothes. And in my house--I would be so upset with my mother--you came home, you took off you school clothes, you put on your play clothes and you sat at the table. If there was any homework that was to be done, you sat at the table for an hour when you came home from school. And my mother said it was important to do it then while it was fresh in your mind. After that hour, if it was the spring or the fall and you still had some daylight, you went outside and you played or hung out a bit. You came back in; it was dinner time at 6:00.

We sat down as a family; they don't sit down as a family anymore. McDonald's, Burger King whatever. We sat down as a family, my mother, my sister and I. After we ate dinner, the dishes were washed. Turn on the news, watch TV—and believe it or not, before—and this happened at Hillside, I would be on the phone because I love a phone. I would be on the phone, and basically it was about calling to check on homework, making certain the work was done. And then, before Johnny Carson came on—before we went to bed, my mother would always say, “You look over your work again.” So it was twice before I got to Hillside—in the afternoon when I got home and before I went to bed at night, you had to look over what work you had.

My mother was not educated, but if I came across any problem and anything I wasn't certain of I would call my uncle who was educated, and he would come over. This meant, it goes back to what I was saying--you had a village. What can we do today? I really think if someone has the answer to that question, that was really a viable answer, they would be rich.

GP: I agree.

HD: They'd be rich.

GP: Well, tell me what you think is important for future generations to know and understand about the legacy that Hillside offers this community.

HD: What is important? Okay, ask that question once more. In order for the future generations to get something from the legacy that Hillside left, one has to have that desire to understand and know the importance of education. Because if they don't understand the importance of an education, the legacy means nothing. The legacy means nothing. For those that do understand, the legacy should be the struggle continues. We didn't go there and have education and the camaraderie and the fun that we had handed to us on a silver spoon. We worked hard for it. And when you work hard for something, the reward is wonderful. The legacy should be that there are teachers, and there were teachers who cared. The legacy should be [pause] that understanding the struggle that the ancestors or their parents or teachers went through, they led the way. And we are standing on their shoulders, and they should want to have a goal or the desire to climb, to stand on the shoulders of those at the top. So that we will not lose what we have or what we had. If things continue as they are going today, we're going to be lost, going to be lost. We're already making that fast track back.

GP: Okay, well I'll stop there unless there—is there anything else you want to tell me about Hillside that I didn't ask, that you think I need to know. People will come up to me and say, “Gerrelyn I know you are talking to people who went to Hillside and asking them about what makes the school so special.” Is there anything more I should tell them?

HD: They never should have taken Hillside from where it was on Concorde.

GP: You don't think so?

HD: I know not.

GP: Okay.

HD: Because, even though it was large over there on Concorde, there was closeness. This new Hillside is like a factory, it's like a mall. And I think that's one of the problems with education today. You are just cramming in, it's a factory—an assembly line. You have too many people in; you are cramming too much into this building. You are cramming too much into the minds of children.

GP: So you think things wouldn't have changed if the building had stayed on Concorde?

HD: No, I'm not saying they wouldn't have changed, I'm just saying I think it made a difference. It made a difference. I was just listening to a program the other day on NPR and they were talking about the international tests of math and science. They were saying how students in other countries fare a lot better than American students, and one lady called in and said she had traveled abroad and had studied the educational system in other countries. She said she found out one thing that other countries do that we don't do, and it's a possibility that that is why they are doing so much better. They might take two or three courses--math, science, and I'll just say whatever it is--and they make certain that the foundation has been set in those areas. So that when they go on they have a solid foundation. Whereas, here we want to give the kids the math and the reading and the foreign language and the this and the that. Give them so much and they don't have a good understanding of any of it. So, there in of itself is another problem

when it comes to our kids doing well in school. They are cramming too much down our throats.

GP: Alright. Thank you so much.

END OF INTERVIEW

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