

Interview

with

YOLANDA FORD

March 11, 2005

by Gerrelyn Patterson

Transcribed by Emily Baran

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

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Interviewee: Yolanda Ford
Interviewer: Gerrelyn C. Patterson
Interview date: March 11, 2005
Location: Riverside High School in Durham, North Carolina
Length: 1 cassette; approximately 35 minutes

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

GERRELYN PATTERSON: Okay, this is an interview with Yolanda Ford in Durham, North Carolina. It is March 11, 2005. We are at Riverside High School. The interviewer is Gerrelyn Patterson. This is part of the Spencer Grants project on school desegregation in the South and will be used as part of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The tape number is 31105YF. Okay, Miss Ford, can you tell me when you attended Hillside High School?

YOLANDA FORD: Okay, I attended Hillside from 1961, apparently, to 1964, I graduated. So in other words, I did tenth, eleventh, and twelfth at Hillside.

GP: Okay, three years there.

YF: Graduated in '64.

GP: Tell me what you remember most about Hillside. What was it like to be a student there?

YF: As far as a student there, I remember most probably my friends and how much I was really a social butterfly, loved to socialize, but academically on the serious side, I really did enjoy my teachers. I had a lot of good teachers.

GP: Who was your favorite teacher?

YF: Probably Mrs. Schooler. She was one of my favorites. Jeanne Lucas was a favorite because I had Spanish with her. I had a lot of favorites, a lot of good teachers that I really did like. I can't really think so much of any that I disliked, right off I can't, but favorites were Jeanne Lucas, Alfred Fischer and Mrs. Schooler.

GP: Do you feel like the teachers felt a special, did they send you special messages? Did they tell you certain things over and over again?

YF: I guess, thinking about growing up as a teenager then, back in the 60s and so forth, that just certain things were you just knew. They didn't have to be said.

GP: Like what?

YF: You just knew that you had to behave basically. I do have a couple of cases where I didn't behave because I just got wrapped in some of my silly stuff, but they didn't have to just monitor all the time about discipline and behavior. And they didn't have to just drive you about your work because I was in classes where as a student, I was on the college track or whatever, and we just did our work as far as I know. I mean I don't remember nobody having to, like nowadays, give lectures about how important grades are and all that. We knew.

GP: So what I'm hearing is there were unspoken, there was this expectation.

YF: All high expectations that you just knew were there. I mean I guess they were spoken, but it had come from just your family too and the expectations were in your family. I knew that I was going to college and just all of that. I always knew that. So I knew what I had to do, but teachers did drive you. They mostly really taught. They didn't just have to have [to] motivate you. That's another word. You just kind of were motivated and you just did your work. Now looking back, I probably could have had maybe some more, because I really could have done better myself now that I think about some grades. I

really should have been in the honors society but I wasn't. It's no big deal now that much, but looking back and being in education, I really realized that I should have been a little bit more serious, that school did come easy to me, but I didn't go the extra mile to do extra study. So I just kind of kept B-C averages and stuff like that.

GP: So what did you do at Hillside? Were you in any clubs?

TF: Okay, for the first couple of years I just kind of did—. I wasn't involved like that. But my senior year and junior year, and that sort of stuff was in the yearbook, I joined the dramatics club, I think that's what it was called, and then the announcing of--. They used to have the people who did the announcements and that was called announcement club or something like that. Let's see. There was another one that I was in, but I really was not that active, active in terms of extracurricular activities, no sports, no cheerleading, none of that, band, none of that.

GP: Did you go to any of those?

YF: But I went to everything, so like I said, I was a social butterfly. I went to every basketball game, every football game, all the little dances. I went to all my proms. I got prom pictures here.

GP: Oh, I want to see them.

YF: I really have always really been active in participating but not necessarily in clubs and stuff.

GP: So what do you think makes Hillside so special?

YF: Because it was such a community school. And see, actually, that was the only really quote unquote black school for years and years and years. So everybody from all over Durham went to school there and we're not talking about out in the county, because they had their own schools.

GP: What was the school in the county?

YF: Merrick-More. Believe it or not, Merrick-More was a high school back then and Little River. Little River was a high school and Merrick-More. We played them in sports.

GP: Little River was black?

YF: Mmm—

GP: It may have, yeah, yeah yeah.

YF: It was because integration wasn't really out there then.

GP: Okay, no. Yes integration was.

YF: Well not really, kind of.

GP: Because this was 1961 and 1964.

YF: Okay, it may have been.

GP: Okay, so you say it was in theory.

YF: It was a predominately black school, just like Hillside was. There weren't no white children at my school, not at Hillside when I went.

GP: When you went to Hillside there were no—

YF: Lord no. Uh uh.

GP: Okay, wait. Alright, well let's talk about this then, because *Brown vs. Board* was in 1954.

YF: Okay, may have been.

GP: That's when they passed the school desegregation law. You went in 1961 and 1964. It's almost ten years later. And you're still saying there were no whites.

YF: Okay, what had happened was some black kids had started going to the white school.

YF: To Durham High.

YF: That's right. Those kids had started going to Durham High and Carr Junior High at that time. And now elementary I don't know. But there were a few that had, by the time I graduated, like the () girl and () and Cora Cole, they had started going there. But none had come to Hillside. It was none of them had started coming to the black school.

GP: Now do you remember people talking about white kids coming to Hillside?

YF: No, no, no. Not at all.

GP: You don't remember any kind of like, "Oh, we're going to get some white kids any day now. We're going to be integrated"?

YF: No, I never heard nothing like that, that I can remember. I really do not. We never had any white teachers, nothing white. We knew our Board of Ed was white but that is all that we knew. We knew that those kids were going to those schools. I was pretty much aware of the integration and such because I had cousins who were really forefront runners at Durham. But no, we never even thought about any coming there, as I can remember. In '64, we didn't think anything about any white kids coming to Hillside.

GP: Okay.

YF: Unless I just don't remember it right now, but it certainly doesn't stick out in my mind or something.

GP: So then y'all just kind of went on as business as usual.

YF: Oh yeah, right, exactly.

GP: But there was no yearning or longing for when we're going to be integrated?

YF: Oh no m'am! Oh no, no, no, no.

GP: So Hillside was fine functioning as—

YF: As far as I know, yes.

GP: As far as you can remember.

YF: Yes.

GP: Well do you remember if school integration or desegregation had any impact on your family at all? Do you remember it ever coming up?

YF: Okay, say that again now.

GP: Even though there weren't any white kids at Hillside, do you remember your family or your parents talking about it in any way?

YF: Okay, not as far as education, but I had always been exposed to it as a little girl when I couldn't do certain things, like the lunch counters and stuff like that. My mom, we had several instances where she had to really explain stuff to me, or when I went downtown and I would see at Kress and Woolworths, the colored and white water fountains.

GP: What's Kress?

YF: It was kind of like a Woolworths -- just [an] all kind of store. I remember the day that I drunk out of the white fountain just for meanness, just to do it. I mean everywhere around me was still white and colored, the bathrooms, the bus station, the da da da da. So I quite aware, wide quite aware. I knew about Martin Luther King's rise then. Like I said, I went to several little meetings and remember doing a sit-in out at Howard Johnson once when I was in high school, because like I said, I had a cousin that was a really forefront, worked with () and all those people doing that. I was really aware of what we could do and what we couldn't do, because see downtown was our only shopping area then. Oh and I remember, not so much the bus because the bus that I rode anyway came straight to my neighborhood and there weren't any white people on that bus, so I never really went to the back of the bus like that, but really aware of--. Oh and I used

to hear my mama talk about white people at work, she worked at Duke, and how she thought she was treated different and stuff like that.

GP: But at Hillside, it was kind of a safe place ()?

YF: Yeah, totally.

GP: That's really interesting.

YF: Yeah, because it just did not come there. We just didn't have day-to-day contact.

GP: Well you talked kind of about what it was like to live in Durham. Can you tell me a little bit more about what Durham was like when you were at Hillside when you were a teenager?

YF: Okay.

GP: Is it very different now?

YF: Yeah, yeah, yeah, because I was not around any white people unless I went to a store.

GP: Where did you live?

YF: Okay, first of all, when I was in high school, I lived down the street from Hillside. The side street to Hillside, it was called Otis, and you crossed the railroad tracks, and it's the neighborhood now called (), with Weaver Street, () Street, and my little street was Teresa. So I walked to Hillside and I walked to (). So Durham for me was just a very confined kind of area. I could walk to church too because it was down behind Lincoln Community Health Center. My little world was really right in there, that area. I did go downtown every Saturday. That was the biggie to go downtown, but it was still very segregated downtown. I kind of remember, you know, fast food, all that stuff, was not--. The first one when I was in high school was Hardees, okay, started coming to () so we

kind of started a little bit, my little group, we would go there. That was the hangout. And we actually didn't hang around there as much as we just went and got the stuff and left.

GP: So did y'all hang out at Hillside too?

YF: Not really, but I was in a group that we had lots of parties on the weekend and then we went to () Community Center was our Saturday Night thing. Like I said, for socialization back then was really all the games and stuff, all the sports stuff.

GP: At Hillside?

YF: At Hillside. And then we did a lot of Central stuff. The gang I was in would go to Central, specifically the basketball games. We had one little area where we all sat—

GP: The high school area.

YF: Yeah, the high school area. And we had a button that was called the () club. My dad was a custodian down at Central so I used to really--. And just all of us would go there too. We did Central stuff. Then I guess off-season must have been when we went to the () and W.D. Hill for our little Saturday night dances. Plus, like I said, my group we just had lots of house parties, lots of house parties. In the summer it'd be backyard. People had basements and stuff like that. That was really, really the social--. Then my church, I've always been involved with my Presbyterian church and so I always had my youth activities there.

GP: What were race relations like? This isn't on my list, but I'm thinking is it—

YF: Okay see, I wasn't around white people.

GP: Okay, because you were so confined.

YF: Yeah. When I went to Smith, I started having some white professors there, but let me tell you the other place where I did see white people and they lived in the community kind of, was when I went to my grandma's house in (), North Carolina,

which is between Winston-Salem and Boone, and little country stuff. I was around white people there because they lived all around in the little—but other than that—and white kids, and I kind of played with them a little bit and stuff like. But when I came back to Durham, it was just all black. I've often thought about that I really had not been around white people and all until I went to Newark, New Jersey in 1968 to start teaching. That was when I was really around them, my coworkers and I taught some kids and stuff like that. That was my first real exposure. That is the truth.

GP: That is so different from my experience.

YF: Yeah, I mean I know y'all can't imagine this. And I lived in a whole black community because that whole Hillside area, all that was black, oh yeah, that whole () Street, the whole Hillside area. Then there were pockets where I guess there may have been blacks that kind of lived near whites, but I didn't.

GP: So when I've been doing my research about kind of Hayti and this whole black area of black-owned business, they make it seem like everybody was living large.

YF: But that is not true because there was still so much ghetto and poor. Right beyond the Hayti section was a really poor, poor neighborhood. That's why urban renewal wanted to come through there and wipe out that kind of, some of that same Alston Avenue, it just all that was still, but of course it didn't look as bad and as raggedy. We've had some poor. Now I actually grew up, I spent five years in McDougal Terrace in my elementary and junior high years, but it was nothing like--. If anybody told me like it was a project, like I knew now, I mean I had both parents, most of the people there had two parents. It was just a starting block from folks getting ready to buy houses and stuff like that. Durham—it had it's poor. The other part about Hayti, I never dealt that much with Hayti because by the time I kind of came through, a lot of that was run-down. Like I would never

go in that Regal Theater or that—no. I mean I never went in there because I always heard how ragged and nasty and rats and stuff. People didn't stay in the hotel that they later had back then.

GP: So it was on the decline.

YF: I guess as far as, I remember mom () Speights, like black-owned service stations stuff, I mean (). My church was on the end part of it; it was in the area. I just remember walking through there and stuff like that and maybe stopping to buy an ice cream at Garrett Pharmacy, because they have some good ice cream. But I just didn't, because I'd had () at the Carolina (). St. Joseph's was the church there and I knew people that went there. () was a church but it was so--. Hayti existed and Fowlers Store and all that but it just wasn't any big deal to me it seemed like.

GP: Well tell me more about Hillside because everybody loves it so much. Was it all good? Was it all wonderful?

YF: Okay, first of all that was all we know. Let's say that. Then you had TV and your this and that, but you've got to remember, we were pretty confined. I had never been anywhere else, except like I said my grandparents. So again the only reason I know Hillside was so special, and it may not have been so special, my friends from Winston-Salem that went to black schools, they all thought their schools were special. I really think the reason why it's maybe so special now is because it kind of stayed like the Hillside for all these years, even after integration, it never got that much off the ground. Because my sister graduated in 1974 and they were white people in her class. I mean I can look at her yearbook and I see them, but then either the community shifted or something, and it got back black. So I don't know that, my understanding is that kids, I mean people moved and they shifted around and they got from that situation or I just don't know why. It's always

just been a handful, except those first early 70s and mid-70s, and then how we got back--. Really I have not just dealt with the demographics and everything of why Hillside, but I do feel like that it stayed black so much longer than all these other predominately ones in North Carolina.

Then it's had so much controversy so that alumni and community leaders just stepped up to the plate to try to preserve its historical value, I guess. I've never been a part of any of all that stuff. I've been a part, I'm in my alumni class. We just have some outspoken leaders who just really wanted to preserve it, and not so much now that it's integrated, but they just wanted to see it have its fair share of equity of monies and stuff like that. I think it's because it's lasted longer than others, I think.

GP: How do you think they could have integrated it better in Durham?

YF: I'm just not really sure except if the families had really, that lived in those communities where the line was, had really come in there and got a part of it and felt good about it and so forth. Other than that, I'm just not really sure except—I'm just not really sure.

GP: It sounded like you're not sure if it could have been done.

YF: It probably could have if the whites had come in there and wanted to be a part of it, I guess, because naturally the blacks probably didn't just go out of their way to try to integrate really, really. Therefore, it must have been that the whites didn't push it either, like so it didn't make it as a really integrated school. I think that makes a little sense. I mean the blacks were trying to just preserve it and then the whites didn't go through any big deal to change it.

GP: So do you think that there's something special that schools like Hillside, that have been historically black and kind of remained historically black—

YF: Do I think there's something special about them?

GP: Uh huh, and something that has been lost now.

YF: I still know that the education we got was a really, really--. I feel it was sound, there was a lot of intimacy because pretty much you knew the teachers. They were in your community. They were in your church. Several of my teachers went to my church, stuff like that. I feel like, you know people say that teachers really cared then and they could call your mom and your grandma and all that stuff, and I believe in that and that was true. But I also really see caring teachers trying to care today as well. I mean the whole society, of course, has changed. Back then, a teacher was not afraid to call your house or probably afraid that a kid would cuss her out or any of that kind of stuff. It was a rarity. I mean there was discipline needed and some kids got wrote up, I guess. But I never cut a class, none of my friends ever cut a class, so I didn't know about that kind of stuff. I mean there were some kids that you know, they just, mmm-mmm, never cut, lord, never even thought of nothing like that.

GP: Really?

YF: Oh no.

GP: I was a good student but I cut classes.

YF: Oh no, no, no, no, no.

GP: I cut half the senior year, I'm sure.

YF: Oh no m'am, no m'am, no, no, no, nothing like that, never even thought of that. I mean we never even thought what would you do. I mean I don't even remember ever thinking that you would even do something like that. Not that we were goody-goody, but it just was not a part--. Then like I said, the way I was and my peers, my friends that I

hung around, now I'm not talking about some other kids that I just didn't necessarily, you know, they were not in my group, we used to call them "groups"

GP: ().

YF: I guess what I'm saying is that society has really changed. Kids are different, society has changed. I do feel like that I am not very much sold on the fact that () that white teachers don't care and stuff like that. I don't feel like that. For the most part, the ones that I see and that I have worked with as a coworker, I see that they basically try to care and do, but there are so many factors that come in the way nowadays of kids succeeding and so forth. I don't really put it on teachers.

GP: So now what do you think we can do to help better educate black students?

YF: I don't know. Wow. That's such a heavy-loaded--. You talk about loaded to the core and we don't have enough time, because right now I'm kind of disillusioned with it myself. So let me admit that, that I really am and that's one of the reasons I'm getting out of it, not only because it's time, but I just don't know what to really, really do, because it's just a swinging door here. I know that I have reached some, but there are so many that need to be reached. Gerrelyn, I'm really not sure exactly what needs to be done, except I wish that the violence thing could really stop, and if kids could really look back at just really morals and respect. Basically, that comes from home, but then I know so many kids that have that at home, and then when they get in the street and at school, they act different. Because even with me, even back in my time, we acted a little different too away from home, that's just a kid. So you can't really say all the time that it's [tape interruption].

Okay, one thing as far as educating black kids or any kid, is that the schools now still are trying to fit everybody pretty much into the same mold. I mean they're expecting you to fit, excuse me, these diploma tracks that are still also academically-based. I

definitely know vocation, I mean the kids that I see in EC and all of that, they are struggling with this other hard-core curriculum. So I think we need some more alternatives, especially skills and vocational. Now I definitely am an advocate of that.

GP: And Hillside had those kinds of programs?

YF: It did. They most certainly did. They had bricklaying, carpentry, drafting, auto mechanics, oh yeah. I mean some of those houses down the street from the old Hillside were built by kids.

GP: Oh really?

YF: Oh those houses coming down Lawson Street. C.C. Spaulding sits over here, you come down Lawson and all those houses on the left, those brick houses at the bottom of Lawson were built by students, yes.

GP: Okay, so what I'm hearing you say is there was something for everybody at Hillside.

YF: Yes, yeah, yeah, yeah. Of course, I was kind of removed from that because I wasn't in the vocational kind of track.

GP: But you know of—

YF: Oh yeah, because I mean right here, here you go.

GP: Vocational and—

YF: Auto mechanic stuff.

GP: Tailoring.

YF: Yeah, and I didn't even know they had tailoring.

GP: Bricklaying.

YF: Bricklaying class, yeah.

GP: () and () plumbing.

YF: I know some of those people now that are really making more than me with a skill. That right there is a difference, now that I'm thinking about it. I hadn't even realized, I mean I knew we needed them because I see what I'm up against, but I forgot that back then that was a school that had all that.

GP: So almost everybody had a place.

YF: Had a place, that's right.

GP: And we need to find a place for all kids.

YF: Mmm hmm, yeah. Look, that variety right there was about six or seven things that could certainly be offered again today with more; cosmetology wasn't offered then but it could be now.

GP: You're right. You're absolutely right. I hadn't thought about that.

YF: Cooking classes, we had so many, and I'm not talking about just home ec, of course, now it's called foods and nutrition, but I'm talking about cooking, cooking. I have so many of my LD kids that want to just cook. And you got to learn the book stuff too and at culinary schools and all that, but even on a smaller scale learning. So it's so much.

GP: Well I have one of two quick questions. We talked some about what we thought was lost from school integration or school desegregation. We talked about—

YF: Okay, did I say, okay I may not have said it like that per se, but the intimacy kind of stuff, yeah?

GP: () and the kind of connection with the community, those types of things. Do you think we gained anything?

YF: In a way now, I'm beginning to think it's probably a bad thing in a way. Exposure, it certainly can be a bad thing. I think exposure and knowing how to handle it is probably where we lost. I really think that diversity has been a really, really good [part] of

integration, not just black-white, but just all the other nationalities and stuff. And as time and society has moved, and all these scientific technologies and blah blah, the exposure, I still think, is good, but we just don't always know what to do with exposure. Those are the things that I think we have gained. Then just a respect for, there should be, now let me go back to that, there should be a respect for all different types of individuals.

GP: I know I've talked to a lot of people about Hillside and so many wonderful things about the band and teachers and high expectations and the community. If somebody was going to say something bad about when they were a student there or something that wasn't as great, was it all great?

YF: The worst part negative that I have is that the people that were supposed to be the support staff, like counselors, they were just not as supportive like nowadays. Everybody, of course, was not on the same economic level. We had a counselor in particular, Mrs. King, who really looked down on kids if they lived in certain areas, the projects or certain poor areas of town, and thought that they could not--. If your parents worked at the Mutual or North Carolina College or were teachers, then she really looked after or—

GP: Showed favoritism.

YF: Yeah, showed favoritism. That's a good word. Myself personally, I always knew that I was going to college and I had picked out () a couple years ago.

GP: For some high reason. (laughter)

YF: No, because I was very () and I had been there to camp and I just knew that's where I wanted to go. So I just did all my stuff on my own, but I think that was really bad, that we really didn't have a support. Then I've heard more that—she's the only one—my parents were not, my mama was semi-educated and stuff like that, and my dad had been a

famous Hillside graduate football star, so people really knew him as well and all that. I think I presented myself too as an okay. My parents weren't at the Mutual or this or that. My mom worked at Duke. So all the folks kind of liked me anyway and this and that. So I wasn't in the group, where overlooked, except Miss King, I just didn't deal with her because I just knew how she was. But all the other people, I still think they were okay and they treated me like yeah, I was okay, and maybe because I was a pretty good student too or something.

GP: So even if there was some favoritism, it wasn't enough to kind of spoil your experience?

YF: With most people no, it really wasn't. Anything else bad, I really can't say from what I went through and just how I can remember. I just have good, good feelings about it because I really, really had, I just was my true self of just acting up and having a good time and the teachers, I loved them. So I don't really have any other bad stuff.

GP: Have you remained in contact with people from the school?

YF: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. Still some of my best friends are my classmates. When I see my teachers, I still go real crazy about them. I do all my reunions. We do them every five years now. I hated to miss my fortieth, because it's the only one I've ever missed. I had a family reunion in St. Louis last summer and I just felt like I've got to go to St. Louis. So now, I go to some of the alumni meetings. I'm a true Hornet. I'm not a fanatic though. I don't go to just say oh, I go to go to a Hillside game or this or that. I still love the spirit. I've got a Hillside shirt that I bought not so long ago. I still have a lot of pride about it.

GP: So I'm hearing the word "pride" and a lot of people have talked to me about that Hillside pride or Hornet pride. You know I'll be talking to a lot of people about Hillside. Is there anything else I should tell them, if people come up to me and say,

“Gerrelyn, I know you’ve been talking to people about Hillside, what have you learned? Why do people love it so much? Why was this so important to the Durham community?”
Is there anything more that you think I need to tell them?

YF: Except it was such a community fixture. It was just a community fixture. You know my dad went there, my cousins went there, my aunt went there. That’s just all I can say. It might could killed us when it moved from the new—

GP: Really?

YF: Oh, oh yeah. Oh I got a brick. I mean a lot of people went and got bricks. Just a fixture, that’s just the only way I can really say it, and a good fixture. Oh yeah. We hated to see it, because like I said, I lived like, I could walk five or six minutes, maybe ten, from school to my house and you just wanted it to be there.

GP: Do you think the spirit—

YF: It seems like it’s—

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Emily Baran. November, 2005