

James Dawkins interview by Kate Feldmeier, Charlotte, N.C., 16 April 1999

Notes

I had called ahead and left a message with the secretary at West Charlotte to tell Mr. Dawkins that I would be arriving to meet him Friday at noon, however when I got to the school I was informed that he had left the building. I decided to wait, knowing that our schedules would not be likely to coincide again, and observed the students and staff milling in and around the main office. Most of the students and faculty were African-American, a change from Vance where it was much more of an even mix. Around 12:30, Mr. Dawkins came in and we went on a quest for an available interview space, finally settling on a nearly empty classroom. James Dawkins is a 44 year old African American art teacher at West Charlotte. He graduated from Myers Park High School and spoke about his family in Charlotte, his schooling, and his athletic experiences. He became much more comfortable as the interview progressed, although the classroom set-up gave way to lots of bells and announcements for interruptions. He had some particularly interesting stories about discrimination, and although he mentioned them in a casual manner, I tried to gather more detail and asked him to elaborate with his stories. My major difficulty was in asking him about his current teaching approaches, because I wasn't sure how my line of questioning applied to the predominately black West Charlotte, rather than a more integrated school. We had to end the interview on the early side because students were about to pour in the classroom.

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Tape 1, Side A

He recounts his family background. "I'm a native Charlottean, I'm what people call now an original." Dawkins family has foothold in Charlotte, they have been here since 1935. He talks about his black neighborhood, Little Hope and the differences between the Charlotte of today and Charlotte forty years ago.

Black kids at that time (early 1960s) went to all black school, Sterling. Mix-up at registration and was told that he was supposed to go to Sedgewille, which was a predominately white school. They (Dawkins and about five others from Little Hope) were the only African-American kids, but talks about Cuban and Spanish kids who attended. "When you're that little you don't get a lot of racial tension or anything like that because you're little and you just see a friend as a friend and you know 'em from first to sixth grade or whatever and you don't, don't see any of that. You get all that from the parents and the outside."

Importance of his family owning land, not apartment people. He was economically at the same level as anyone else in school, thinks that played a role in feelings of acceptance.

He had gone with those kids all through elementary school, knew them. So by the time he got to Myers Park it wasn't much of a big deal.

"Now, at that time in the 60s, you know your place. You know. And so at that time what my mother told me is that you just have to behave. I don't ever, at the beginning, first grade was not a problem, second grade was not a problem, maybe third through five were a problem. When I look back on it now because I have my own kids, I don't think I was acting or behaving any worse than the other kids but I was one of the only black kids in the classroom."

Story about standing out and how one teacher called him wrong name, calling him name of another African American child she'd had, he didn't answer because it wasn't his name.

Question about race of teachers. All white teachers in early school, only blacks were custodians or cafeteria workers

Question about comparison of Sedgenville and Baringer schools. He talks about the importance of church to community. Worked harder at Baringer because teachers knew family, wouldn't want a teacher to talk to his mom. Baringer was predominately black as opposed to the majority white Sedgenville.

Discussion of white flight out of schools

Question about return to Sedgenville after brief time at Baringer. Says it wasn't much of a readjustment because he knew most all of the kids from earlier. Especially if you played sports, you knew each other.

Question about diversity of Myers Park High School. Class that he represented was one in which they all knew each other from Sedgenville. Classes before him had had riots. Recounts secondhand stories of tension. Black community upset because of the large number of black schools that had closed, and no replacements. Question about reaction of his neighborhood to black school closings. Talks about his grandfather who wanted him to have opportunity to interact with white kids.

Teachers at Myers Park-- took a lot of better teachers from West Charlotte and brought them to Myers Park. Description of Myers Park and its college atmosphere, meaning more relaxed and laid back.

Question about black teachers as role models, importance of being able to identify with a black adult. He never had any male black teachers at Myers Park High School, thinks black children need to see black teachers.

Discussion of athletics, he played football and ran track. Proudly mentions that he was part of the fastest backfield Myers Park ever had.

"There's no tension on the field when you're playing, and we're kids, you gotta remember we're kids. But there is tension with family and coaches and families would want to see their kid out there playing.. Because you know, 'I went there, grandpa went there, so-and-so went there...' So we had a lot of, during my time at Myers Park, we had a lot of black kids who probably should've started, well may not have started but they should have played more than they played because they were talented. There

was one time we actually had to boycott a couple of practices. And we went in and talked to the coach and said we have some guys that we know can play--and they don't have to be starting, they can be on a specialty team, the kickoff team, the punting team, because we're gassing out out there, trying to hold it . . . He did that for one game and we played West Mecklenburg, I think, and we blew 'em off the field by thirty something, but slowly and surely it went back to the way it was and those guys were back on the bench."

Similar situation with boycott in track. Not everyone could travel to away meets, mostly white kids went. Black kids boycotted and white kids decided to hold a boycott of their own "We understood what they were doing, I hope they understood what we were doing... There were not hard feelings."

Story about racism in Little League baseball. Supposed to play in Dilworth league but director did not want black kids to play. Goes back and forth to different leagues, trying to figure out which team he's supposed to be on. "This is really sad, you know, we're kids, we don't know. There weren't only black kids, there were Jewish kids, Hispanics, any kid that looked like someone of color . . . He put us all on this farm team, we did have uniforms and we were all on this farm team..."

Question about friends, social group. He says that it was half and half between black and white. Had so many black friends through church, but through sports he knew whites.

Question about college decision. He wanted to attend University of Tennessee to play football, but deal went through with Winston Salem State College instead. He really wanted to go to Tennessee and be a part of their backfield, everyone on Little Hope Road went to Winston Salem State College. Art teacher got him a scholarship to University of Tennessee, but the deal was that he had to come in for spring quarter and this wasn't something he wanted to do.

Winston was known as a teacher's college, knew that is what he wanted to do. It had a great fine arts department.

Describes teaching jobs. Subbed and tutored at Myers Park, then worked at Northeast Middle School until 1983 and moved to Carmel Junior High. Came to West Charlotte two years ago.

Question about efforts to promote good race relations. "It's easier for me because I grew up with them since I was little, so I knew, you know how to relate to them better."

Tape 1, Side B

Question about specific efforts, like assigned seating. He talks about the art classroom in itself, hard to have any sort of seating.

Talks about why he left Carmel, it changed to middle school. He likes teaching older kids at West Charlotte.

Question about coaching, he is track coach.

Question about whether he thinks back to own schooling experience. Talks about his family make up, some African American, Native American, white. His grandfather influenced him, gave him lessons in life: patience, listening, find out something about people, talk to them.

Final question of anything else to add. He has no more comments. I ask one last question about lunchroom seating, he talks about how sports break barriers and he would often sit with team.

End of interview.