

Interview

with

Raquel Williams

June 14, 2005

by Willoughby Anderson

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

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START TAPE ONE, SIDE A

RAQUEL WILLIAMS
JUNE 14, 2005

WILLOUGHBY ANDERSON: Today is June 14th, 2005; the interviewer's name is Willoughby Anderson. We are doing this interview for the Southern Oral History Program's Long Civil Rights Movement project on school desegregation in Birmingham. I'm here at West End High School today in Birmingham and the interviewee's name is Raquel Williams. If you please say your full name we'll see how you're picking up on the mike.

RAQUEL WILLIAMS: My name is Raquel Mathews Williams.

WA: We'll get started. So if you can tell me about your childhood and growing up a bit; where you were born and your elementary school years.

RW: I was born here in Birmingham at what is now called University Hospital. At the time that I was born: in '54, March 6 -- it was known as Hillman Hospital. I basically grew up between Asipco [?] neighborhood between 24th Street North and Friendly Avenue and in the Titusville area. My parents were from the Titusville area so my grandmother lived in that area, in fact both sets of grandparents from both sides lived there. They lived only one street away from each other, so I grew up spending a lot of time in the Titusville area, even though our house was in Asipco at that time. Typical childhood, we attended St. Mark's A.M.E. Church in Titusville, in fact it's one of the historical churches here in the city-it's a hundred years plus. I am proud to say that my great, great grandfather's name is on the cornerstone. Currently my family and I still attend St. Mark's AME. The Asipco neighborhood was, the area that which we lived in between Twenty Fourth Street and Eleventh Place-I lived on Eleventh Place, right off of Family Avenue. It was a middle class neighborhood, in fact we had several educators that lived in the neighborhood, and in fact there were several that were quite active with the Civil Rights

Movement. So our neighborhood in itself had a historical aspect as far as desegregation taking place during that time. I can remember I entered first grade at six years old at Winona Elementary. My mom was a teacher at the time at Winona High School. It's ironic that I can remember as a little girl passing coming along Pearson Avenue, bypassing it when it was an all white high school-it was a totally all-white community.

WA: West End High?

RW: Yes. West End High School was an all-white high school at that time. This was in the 1960s, and we would bypass it going to the Winona Community. Winona, at that time, once you pass Jones Valley there's a little railroad track where the gasoline tankers are found. Once you pass the little railroad track you were out of the City of Birmingham, you were in the county. So, Winona at that time was a part of the Jefferson County School System. I can remember very vividly passing by and wondering-the school was immaculate at the time. You would see all the students around and the yard was manicured very well and right across the street was a set of little double shotgun houses about six in a row and one little house. I remember this very clearly because my first grade teacher at Winona Elementary lived right across the street from West End High School. She was Mrs. Moore; ironically her kids were not allowed to attend West End High School. I can remember her telling us she was not even allowed to walk on this side of the street during that time.

We had a typical childhood as far as going to school and playing. My parents believed in education, they believed that you should do the very best that you could do. They always tried to push us to do our best, and they really instilled in my sister and I that education was important. I guess when you have a mother that is a teacher and you come from a long line of educators, they saw down the road what you could not see at that time. Going to school at that time, my parents

had to purchase our books a lot of the times, books were not free. Once the books did become available to us free, often we received the discards that were left over from the white schools. We never received brand new books.

I don't feel like I was shorted an education because we had very good teachers during that time. They were strict and they required you to do all of your assignments. There were no excuses. I remember every last one of my teachers from the first grade all the way through high school. People say you have to be kidding, but no, I can remember very vividly my teachers. That's just such the impression that they made on us.

I went to two elementary schools; Winona Elementary from the first through the fifth grades because my mom was a teacher at Winona High School, she really did not want me to attend high school where she worked and I understood that. Both my grandmother and my aunt lived in the Titusville area, so my mother transferred me to Washington Elementary in the Titusville area. Soon after that my youngest sister -- four and a half years younger than I, she entered the first grade when I entered the sixth grade, well, she should have been about the second grade then. Both of us were transferred to Washington Elementary. Washington has a very historical meaning for the Titusville community, the majority of the people there grew up in Titusville, and they attended Washington Elementary. Fortunately, I was able to have one teacher, Mrs. Anna Mae Mitchell Smith, who taught not only my mom, but my dad and my grandmother too. She was the epitome of what an old time teacher was all about. She did not mind calling your momma, your daddy or your grandmother--and she had that ruler! She would pop you and say I taught your momma, I taught your daddy. Ironically, I remember this very vividly because I come from a line of educators and she happened to be a close friend of my mom's older sister, so I dared to not do anything.

I attended Washington with a lot of my cousins from the area, so it was a family school, it was a community school. You had parents that were actively involved, they took an interest. It was a time when school was out, you came home, you undressed and you had so much time to play outside. You did your homework first and by all means no matter where you were, at your grandmother's, at your auntie's or at home, before that street light came on you had to be in the house. It was a time that you walked home from school with your friends or you stopped off at Pinson Store for a lime sherbet and orange sherbet ice cream cone to walk home, and everybody along the way knew you. They knew who your parents were and they would look out for you- "don't be turning around over there now, don't be going around Mr. So-and-so's yard, you know your grandmother is at home waiting on you..."

School at that time was fun. Even before desegregation came into the works we had school and didn't realize that we had a very rich learning experience. They not only taught you the core subjects, they taught morals, and they taught character. It was a time when you knew that every morning when you came in you said the pledge of allegiance and you had devotion before starting your school day. We had an eighth grade teacher, Mrs. Hattie P. Bean, who insisted we learn every point-between her and Mrs. Anna Mae Mitchell Smith, you learned every classic, you read every classic. They insisted that you did your best. We may not have had the best books, they may not have been in the best condition, but you learned how to go to the library and research. You learned how to dig for the information. They were teachers that really emphasized how important an education was.

After graduating from Washington Elementary when I finished the eighth grade, I really had my mind set on attending A.H. Parker High School. This is the school that everybody else in the family had attended. [laughing] I had a vision of wearing the purple and the gold. We were in

the first stages of desegregation and several black students from the community and a couple of my friends that were a couple of years older than I- I guess Ramsey had been integrated for at least three to four years at this point. At the end of my eighth grade year in 1968 my mom informed me that I would be attending Ramsey High School. I said, "Oh?" Well, my dad's youngest sister's oldest son Bertram was already attending Ramsey High School and I knew a couple of his friends. My mom decided that I would be going to Ramsey, I was really terrified. This was a situation that I didn't think I was prepared for. I had been in mixed company, I had been to the symphony, and I had been taking piano lessons since I was five years old, so I had been exposed to things. My mother asked why I was afraid and I said but I have attended-she said and..., "You have the grace and intelligence, why shouldn't you go?" I said, "Okay, "this was the point that you didn't argue with your parents. You just go where you are told to go and do what you are told to do.

That summer we went through the registration. And I was a little hesitant. But, at that time, my godfather and my play uncle Dr. [Wayman?] Matheson at the time one of the first black superintendents for the Birmingham City Schools, and he said, "Raquel why are you afraid to go?" I said, "Because this is something I have never experienced before." He said, "That is what life is all about, that is the learning experience. You experience those things that which you have never experienced before, you should do well." I said, "But you all let everybody else in the family go to Parker High School, why can't I go to Parker too?" "You are at that stage; you are in a group of young people that are making headway. You are opening the door for others."

We entered Ramsey High School, one of my best friend's from elementary school, Margaret Morgan and I. There were several people there that I already knew. It was a learning experience; it was a very different experience being in a group of minorities where we had all

been of one race before where you felt very comfortable. The tension was there. Several of the white students made you feel welcome, but there were several that did not want you there. This was a time when you went by choice and by grades, so they sort of had the cream of the crop of the black students from other elementary schools that had ambitions and the desire to get an education. They had a good academic record, no disciplinary problems so they really had the cream of the crop. Some made it very hard for us. I participated in the marching band and the symphonic band my freshmen year; I played the flute, xylophone, and the bells. The majority of the band by my tenth grade year was, I would say, ninety percent black, but those in front of the band were white.

My freshmen year I was encouraged to try out for majorette, I had been twirling since I was about four years old. I had marched in front of the Winona High School band when I was a little girl, so this was nothing new to me. My mom said if this is what you want to do, please go for it. The process at that time was very prejudiced. They did all that they could to ridicule me, even got threatening phone calls.

WA: Really, from other students?

RW: From parents and students. I even had one teacher that took it out in my grades.

WA: Really, so did you have to try out in front of the school?

RW: At that time the try out procedure was that the judges were going to be the senior majorettes on the squad, the drum major and also two other people--the majorette sponsor, Mrs. Yarborough--God bless her soul, she was the sweetest person, she really was. Also, the band director Mrs. Martha Miller was also one of the judges. In fact, I ran into Mrs. Miller about two years ago, she was retiring as a principal. I ran into her at one of the city programs. I stepped up to her and said, "Do you know who you are looking at?" She said, "No, you look so familiar." I

said, "This is Raquel." It was such a nice reunion because she was very supportive of me during that time at school – Mrs. Yarborough was also. Those were two people on the staff that I knew I had their support. Also, my ninth grade English teacher, Dr. Bill Ernest-he went on to become the Dean of Education at Montevallo University, he's deceased now. I had their support, which meant a lot being a young black student to have these three white teachers to support me during this. My first year it was extremely hard and I gave up, I told my mom I could not take the pressure. My uncle asked me if there was anything he needed to do, I said no. This is something I have to face myself.

Through the encouragement of others, we had a young lady named Vanessa Robie try out for cheerleading. She went through the same type of ridicule and then of course she did not make it. That was the turning point leading into the next school year. The black students rallied together in support of each other. There was a big boycott of the lunch room; we refused to eat in the lunch room. We brought our lunches and we set out a feast every day in the lunch room at each lunch period. We refused to take part in any of the activities. That following year I was approached and asked if I would try out again, Mrs. Yarborough asked if I would. I said the last time I got to the point where I gave up because my grades were more important to me. I had a teacher that had given me a bad grade to keep me off the squad.

WA: Because you had to-

RW: I had to maintain a certain average at that time. We were given demerits for disciplinary action. I had no demerits; I was an honor roll student. The grading period ended in the midst of the tryouts during that week and I was very upset about my grade. There was no foundation for me to receive that grade. My mom asked me what I wanted to do and I told her I cannot take this, I had never been one at that time to stand up to pressure--I have learned since

then. I couldn't take the pressure because grades and making the honor roll was something I was proud to do and I wanted to do that. My mother allowed me to make the choice. That following spring I was asked to try out again. I had two close friends that were white that were in the band, and they told me that I would be going out for band. [laughs] "We are behind you," they said. Well, to make a long story short, two senior members threatened to quit the squad, the entire process of tryouts changed-

WA: How did it change?

RW: Outside judges were brought in from outside of the school. In fact to this day, the selection of cheerleaders and majorettes – this is still the procedure. That has taken place since 1970. Three outside judges were brought in. That evening, we went through the entire try out procedure and when the scores were read and they said that I had made it as the first black majorette at Ramsey High School, I almost died. It was unbelievable. It was a historical moment because a fellow friend of mine in the band Ron Coleman had just made it as the first black drum major.

WA: That year?

RW: That year at the same time, so we were in the process of changing history at that time. It was significant and I was also ridiculed.

WA: Really?

RW: Yes, because of my fair complexion. I was told that nobody can tell I was black anyway, so from far away they will think I was white. [laughs]

WA: Who would say things like that?

RW: There were parents and there were students that said it. The head majorette made a big deal about me even wearing an afro, and told me that afros were not allowed. I told her that

due to the fact that my hair only curls and does not truly get into an afro that that would not be a problem, but that how I wore my hair would be left up to Mrs. Yarborough. Little incidents like that would happen. After the process of ordering uniforms and paying money to go to camp and everything, it was such a big deal, I did not even get a chance to march in front of the band. I did not get to march due to the fact that the court order came down that to further desegregate the schools in the city of Birmingham we would all need to go to the closest school in our community.

WA: So this is the change from freedom of choice--

RW: This was the change of freedom of choice to the community schools.

WA: So you were moved.

RW: I was moved. It was a bittersweet pill that I had to swallow, because I really cried. I did not want to leave Ramsey because I had worked so hard to attain the honor and I wanted to fulfill my dream of marching in front of the Ramsey High band. However, the freedom choice was now not mine to make. There were a few exceptions to the court ruling. Those students that were going into their senior year of course had the chance to stay where they were. Of course, I was just a little sophomore, going into my junior year and therefore, I was up under the court order and I would have to. It was the second time I had asked my Uncle Wayman to help. I would use my grandmother's address, who lives in the district-I would use. Uncle Wayman said, "Everybody knows the relationship between me and you and if you don't move then we would have to make exceptions for everybody," he said, "Once again you have to lead the way." But I said, "It's unfair, it's not fair for me after two years of taking the ridicule and the threats to have to give this up." He said, "Don't look at it as losing something; look at it as gaining something." My momma told me the same thing; she said, "You never know what the Lord may have in store

for you once you get to Glenn High School." I said, "What is a Glenn High School?"

I went from wearing blue and white and cheering for Ramsey High School to making this trip down Graymont Avenue and turning down Sixteenth Street West to see what Glenn is. We didn't know what Glenn was or where it was located. Momma said, "When we are on the freeway going home; it is the group of buildings off the freeway that you see." Okay, I was not pleased with this, because they were known as the Glenn High Rebels. Their colors were red and Gray at the time. It was a vocational school and the majority of the kids there were white, with some black students too. The school was more of a vocational setting than an academic setting. Their first true academic class would be the class entering as juniors, the 1970-1971 class, which would be us. This affected kids that had already normally attended Phillips; I had a friend that came to Glen that had made cheerleader at Phillips High School. She was the first black to make it at Phillips as a cheerleader. It affected a lot of us; we were thrown into a situation that we now had to switch schools. We had worked to achieve certain honors, but now we had to stop midstream, backup, turn and go a different direction. I think all of this really prepared us for life further down the line and we didn't realize it. The only thing we knew was that our hopes and our dreams for that particular school were being shattered, and our lives were changing.

We attended a big family meeting and student meeting at Glenn High School, and we all asked what kind of school is this that doesn't even have an auditorium? They have a gymnasium [laughs] () Okay, the gym and the auditorium are in one building, the lunch room is next to it and we have a strip of vocational shops down this way. We have a main building, but can it house us? They went through the process, they introduced us to the new faculty and they took a survey. We were adamant that we were not going to be called the Glenn High Rebels, there would be no confederate flag and the colonel or rebel soldier in the middle of the gym floor with

the confederate flag would have to come up. The school was now fifty percent black and fifty percent white. We could not do this. Survey was done.

WA: Was that of the students or the parents?

RW: Of the students, a little of everybody but I think the students outnumbered the parents. We told them under no circumstances would we march to the confederate flag, we would not salute the confederate flag and be known as the Glenn High Rebels. They understood our predicament and suggestions were given. The survey was done, a vote was taken and the Charles B. Glenn Rebels were no more. There on the scene was born Charles B. Glenn High Hawks, we were known as the hawks. They stripped the gym floor and they painted a big green and white hawk in the middle of the floor. Our principal Mr. Crawford was very old school, very old school he still had some old fashioned ideas. His ideas were not in line with the new generation that was coming through Glenn High School. He had been there a while and I don't think he was too thrilled with the idea that there was about to be a change.

The tension that I felt when I first entered Ramsey was not as stifling at Glenn as it was at Ramsey. I did not have the nervousness. I think because my parents and my uncle insisted that I attend Ramsey, it prepared me for this change that God had placed in my life. We entered Glenn High School with everybody just about on an even keel; everybody was new to the situation. The majority of us were college preparatory and there was no chemistry lab for sciences. The parents worked feverishly with the board and demanded that a chemistry lab be built and a chemistry teacher be brought to the school. They stressed that academics were foremost. They told us that everybody and anybody who had participated in, been elected to or had been selected for in any extracurricular activities in your past school, you would serve in that capacity at this school. So that was a relief!

WA: So you transferred and you were a majorette then?

RW: I transferred, and not only did I march as a majorette, but I became the head majorette at Glenn High School. I had several people, including Patricia Chaney that had marched with Parker's band and we were in the same high school club, so she became my co-head majorette at that time. We went through the whole process of having try outs for future majorettes for Glenn High School. We built a program from the ground up. Mr. Ronald Bell was our band director at that time and that was a joy. I was thrilled with that because Mr. Bell had been my band director at Washington Elementary. So, like they says when one door closes, another door opens. This was an opportunity that I did not think I would have.

Leaving Ramsey prepared me for new challenges and new positions at Glenn High School that I did not think I would even have. We built the band program from the ground up. I was able to continue my college preparatory track and we really fell in love with the campus, because we were the only school in the city of Birmingham that basically had a whole campus. It was like a college atmosphere. We had the main building with the vocational and home economics building off of the main building. We had the gym/auditorium on one side of the campus with our own vocational area on the other side, it was like a college campus. It became a second home, the feeling was that it became home.

We had teachers that transferred there to help us with the transition. Now, of course we did have some teachers there from the old regime that were not too thrilled with the new ideas, and they really made it somewhat hard for us. We prevailed, we had Mr. Williamson and Mrs. Helen Heath who were our counselors and they were there to support us and they did. They guided us, supported us and directed us in everything that we did. They were foremost in insisting that academics were in place that the core subjects that we needed to prepare us to go to college were

there. They worked with us continuously to prepare us to go to school. They guided us in every aspect of our lives just about. Mrs. Heath was like a second mother to all of us, especially to me because of the fact that my mom was a counselor and they had known each other for years. My mom would always tell me, "Don't ask me anything; go ask your mother Helen." She said, "As long as you are over there with her, let her handle everything!" That's what she did, that's what she did.

Glenn High School represented a time that truly prepared me for the future. We faced some obstacles; we were told we could not have a prom. They did not want an integrated prom yet. Of course, we couldn't stand for that. We met at Legion Field to plan our prom.

WA: So how many students?

RW: [laughing] All of the blacks. We had a little over one hundred and twenty black juniors and seniors. We met at Legion Field and planned our prom.

WA: So were you going to have a separate prom?

RW: It was an all black prom because they cancelled the prom. We found out that one of the white vocational teachers had already had a senior luncheon for the white students. Mr. Crawford, who was the principal at the time, told us there would be no prom, that he was not going to have a prom. In fact, that year, the same thing happened at Ensley High School because they were going through the same scenario as we were. I think Ramsey was the only one that had a prom-they did have a prom. Ensley High School was going through the same thing, and if I'm not mistaken I think that Phillips ended up having a prom. No, I take that back, Phillips did not have a prom because they did not have a true senior prom with the blacks and the whites. One of the vocational teachers had a senior luncheon so to speak for the white seniors. They did not want the mingling of the whites and the blacks at a social event.

So, we planned our prom at Legion Field. We ran our flyers, with school paper. [laughs] We met, we had parents that worked with us and they were able to book the Airport Motel. We had a live band and we had a senior prom. They said you can't have one, but we didn't say it was in the name of the school. We just said we are having a prom-it was fantastic.

There were a lot of things that played into them trying to stop us from doing certain activities, but we prevailed. We found a way around. I think mainly because we had teachers and parents that supported us as long as we did it the right way. I'll never forget, my junior year I was tapped by the National Honor Society and my best friend Zsa Zsa Yow--can you imagine, Zsa Zsa and Raquel! [laughs]--we would play tricks on the substitute teachers, we would sit right in front of each other when the teacher was out and we signed our name and we knew that when they got to our name they would say okay, what is this we have a Raquel and a Zsa Zsa? They would say stop pulling my leg, you know they were thinking Zsa Zsa Gabor and Raquel Welch! So we would raise our hands and they would say what is your name, I would say Raquel Mathews and Zsa Zsa Yow. They would say no, that is not your name and I'm going to send you to the office. At the time, we didn't even have student identification; we just had a little card. The kids would tell them that it was indeed our names. They still would not believe it, so Mrs. Green, who was the girl's advisor, would say that is there name, we do have a Raquel and we do have a Zsa Zsa at this school. So, Zsa Zsa was my best friend through school. Both of us were college prep and had worked very hard to maintain grades, the saddest day was the date that we had the honor society tapping. I was tapped and my best friend wasn't.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

RW: The tapping that day when Zsa Zsa was not tapped, I questioned. A lot of us did. It went back to an incident that had happened between her and Mr. Crawford earlier that year. She

had the grades and everything, but she had received a suspension because she reacted to the fact that he had called her a nigger. He held that against her and he suspended her because she reacted to his using that remark. Of course when he did it, it caused an uproar among the class but the suspension was uplifted. The board brought her back to school after a hearing and said because she was provoked into this action, but he did not sign off. He would not agree to her being inducted. One of the English teachers at that time gave her a bad grade, so it made her GPA drop. It was the saddest day. And my heart, even to this day it still bothers me.

After witnessing how cruel some people can be and I guess that's why since I have been teaching I have done all that I can do to be fair to all my students. I really hate to see people mistreat the students, and to use them to get over their personal vendettas. That is not what teaching is all about, that is not what being an educator is about. You go into education to help change and mold the lives of young people so that they may become productive citizens, which they will be able to move on and someday take over your place or do better than you. I guess that's why I have such a passion for this job.

But that hurt me more than anything in the world, when Zsa Zsa did not get inducted. That following year, our senior year, there were I think five people to be inducted. Out of that five, Zsa Zsa was one of those five. When they were giving out our assignments, the induction ceremony: you have this air of mystery because you never know; we were walking around just looking for these people. When the sponsor and Mrs. Heath told me that Zsa Zsa would be inducted, I literally cried. Zsa Zsa had worked so hard and for Mr. Crawford to do this to her was like a slap in the face to all of us. He didn't want us to have a prom, so this is what he really thought of us.

Every child is not a bad kid; the majority of us are here to get an education. The school did

not have the cream of the crop when we first came here because Glenn was a vocational school, but it was also the holding or correctional school for those white kids that had cut up and had been put out of regular school. That senior year when the lists came out and each one of us were assigned a person that we would tap; they walked up and gave me Zsa Zsa's name because nobody is going to be able to tap her but you. That was the happiest time really I can think of, outside of making majorette and graduation day in my four years in high school. And I know that she had been wronged and suspended and kept out of the honor society for something that was not her fault, and we just cried. I walked, I walked, I walked and I walked, and I stopped at several people, and when it was finally my turn, I just placed my hand on her and we just started to cry. It felt good, because, like I said, she had worked so hard, and I know how hard she had worked, to that dream of ours, because we had talked about it: "We're going to make the Honors Society." And, "We're going to do this." That day we just stopped and we cried and everybody was clapping, now I still get emotional because it affected me so. But she did make it.

And years later, after Mr. Crawford had retired from Glenn and right before he passed I saw him somewhere and he apologized. He apologized. I can't remember exactly, we were at some event and he apologized. That meant a great deal. He apologized for the wrong that he had done us. He had had such a time, having lost his wife. I didn't even think he knew who I was, but he remembered me and he apologized. The boys' advisor was Mr. Pass and Mr. Crawford even apologized for him, for some of the things that had taken place and the stance he had taken.

Sometimes I wonder what I would do if this ever came up again, and I accepted the apology from all of us and I told him it was the time and a lot of times people get caught up in the times, therefore we have to overlook that and move on. We can either let that fester and tear us apart or we can say God forgive them for what they have done and move on. I was glad that I

had grown to the point that I could forgive him for causing that little havoc in my life during that time, and move along. He did apologize.

That was basically what the public schools were like, some accepted us and some didn't. I had a young man at Ramsey; we were in Biology in Coach Smith's class. The young man had picked at me, picked at me and picked at me the entire semester. I had asked Coach Smith to please ask him to leave me alone; he just continued to pick at me. One day we had just left the lunch room and we were preparing to go back to the lab, I was sitting on the left hand side by the window and the young man was sitting closest to the door. He just kept making remarks and making remarks, then he just hauled off and called me, "You yellow white nigger." Coach Smith heard this and said nothing, before I knew it, I picked up my biology book and threw it across the room and hit him. Picked up my purse, I went to the office and I asked Mr. Thomas, who was the principal, I said, "Either you can get my uncle on the phone" or I would call him and I am going to call my mother too. I have asked several times for someone to ask that young man not to bother me; this has gone on and on and on and on and on and on. I said, "If you are going to suspend me then suspend me, but in the meantime I need to get my mom on the phone and you can be the one to call down to the board and ask for my uncle and tell him what is going on or I can." I think the principal thought it best to call my mom and my uncle to let them know what is going on, but he said I was not going to be suspended. He said he was going to call my mom and have her come get me. I said, "Yes, and then you are going to explain to her that I have been picked on and picked on and you refused to help me, and she knows this, so whatever." After a conference they decided that I was provoked and Coach Smith, who was a funny character, heard what had been said and when it came down to it he wasn't that thrilled that I didn't get suspended. Lo and behold, when I made the switch from Ramsey High School you wouldn't

believe who the Biology teacher was at Glenn--Coach Smith.

WA: So he was at Ramsey and then--

RW: He was at Ramsey and he--

WA: So this incident was at Ramsey?

RW: This incident took place at Ramsey.

WA: And then you got to Glenn High and in your Biology class was Coach Smith.

RW: Yes.

WA: How did that go?

RW: Fortunately, I did not have to take Biology anymore, I had already passed Biology. He was the new Biology teacher that was being transferred under the new desegregation plan, so I guess he needed a little sensitivity training. After that we really became good friends, we really did after that. After that, he said, "You are the only student that has ever stood up to me." I thought, "okay," but after that we became good friends. When I first started out teaching, I did a little while full time supply. I was at Phillips High School then, but got swapped out for another Biology teacher and ended up at Woodlawn High School and he was there. [laughing] Is this some kind of karma? He said, "It never fails, we always end up at the same place." I said, "I know. Is there some relationship there that we don't know about?" It was ironic that we had this big confrontation in his classroom and then we both ended up at Glen High School.

These were the types of things that happened, discrimination happened. Yes it did, I will not lie and say it did not happen. Sometimes it was open and sometimes it was just under the table, it was just throw the mud and hide your hand. This is what we faced in school. You had to have determination that you were not going to let the times get you down, and the determination to know that you would go on. Birmingham public schools have come a long way since then. I

have watched and witnessed the transition from a system that was basically all white, I have lived through the white flight and I have seen the schools change from all white to all black.

WA: Like West End?

RW: Like West End High School. West End, like I said I can remember the days passing through here when this entire community was all white. I can remember one of the Italian families; they had a grocery store up here at South Park. I remember them very well, because they were the same people that sold my mom and dad their house in Bush Hills. We were one of the first blacks to move up into the Bush Hills area. We had the cross burned in our yard. The neighborhood stayed integrated for quite a while, in fact we moved to Bush Hills during the same time that I entered Glenn. The area that we lived at the time was across Graymont and up the hill from Glenn High School. So, I was living in an integrated neighborhood and also attending an integrated school. They did not want us in the community, like I said I witnessed the cross burning in the yard.

WA: This was in 1970.

RW: This was in the 1970s, exactly. They had set several crosses in neighbors' yards. They would ride up and down the street and holler "Nigger go back to your neighborhood". There were people that accepted the change, and as usual you had those that did not accept the changes in the neighborhoods. West End High School was going through the same transition as we were having at Glenn High School.

My mom's older sister was teaching at what was then Western Olin High School in the math department during that time of desegregation. When they were trying to balance out the numbers in the schools of the whites and the blacks, she was transferred to West End High School to teach math. They took the best of the black teachers and moved them to the white

schools.

We saw a change in discipline, at that time also. As blacks we knew that if we did something wrong, we knew that we were in for it. There was no question about it, your mom or dad didn't question when the school called to say that you had done something that was it. You were dead meat, no matter what. My mom told my sister and me "The day I have to leave Winona High School to come to your school for something outside of you being sick or half dead, please be on the other side of the state line. I don't go to work everyday to leave my job to come for something that you know you are not supposed to be doing. Your job is to go to school, do what the teachers tell you and understand your lesson." We understood that, there were no ifs, ands or buts that. There was a break down because we knew that and it was an unspoken understanding, it was not said openly. The white parents in the white community that did not want their children to be disciplined by the black educators, no question asked. So, there was a whole set of rules and regulations that as blacks we understood, but the rules changed midstream once integration took place.

I witnessed some of the best black teachers being taken out of the black schools and being placed in the now integrated schools. The white teachers were placed in the black schools. To some of us, we felt we were being cheated because we felt that these were not their best teachers. They were following a court order, we knew that the teachers did not want to be put in that situation because for so long the black schools had been lacking equipment, supplies and had been neglected for so long that they were not up to par. We knew this. My grandmother used to be a maid at Phillips High School and I can remember as a little girl going and helping her wash the blackboards in the evening time. The equipment and stuff they had at Phillips High School then was no comparison to what the black schools had, but they worked hard, those blackboards

were immaculate. The blackboards were clean, they had all the equipment and supplies the students needed and if anything broke down they jumped on it getting it fixed.

We on the other hand, scraped for everything we had and we appreciated it. When we opened Glenn High School and built the band from the ground up, we were not even given the option of new uniforms at first. They had closed Oldman High School and had offered us the old uniforms. That's how much we were thought of, until the parents stepped in and said these kids deserve the same as the other schools. People felt that we should just take what they did not want and be thankful, and for some things we were. We didn't like it, but it was the best we could do at the time because of lack of funds.

There were some instances that there was no equality, you had to scrap and fight for everything you had. I think it made us better people, my generation is a lot more appreciative of the movement because we witnessed it. We appreciate the essence and the importance of an education, and we know what a fight and struggle it was through the Birmingham school system. Now, kids are given the opportunity and they don't truly appreciate it. They don't know what it is to use a second hand book, to go downtown to the book store and be offered the used outdated books only, not the new ones. They don't appreciate that in order to go on a school field trip you had to wait to save up almost an entire school year for them to allow you to go. Outside of going to the symphony, that was allowed. I truly think they don't appreciate the struggle and the changes that had taken place within this system alone. God works in mysterious ways. It was ironic that my aunt was transferred here during the beginning of integration and desegregation plan, and it was ironic that after I began my teaching career I was hired as a biology teacher at Glenn High School.

WA: That's right, and that was in 1984.

RW: Exactly. The thrill of being able to go back to your high school and being able to teach. I had previously worked and served with the Ford Foundation at Glenn two years before that, two years running, as a science tutor. I also was a volunteer and sponsored work with the band with Mr. Reed before I was hired full time. So, I had been back and forth to my old school. Dr. Simpson Berry became principal and he had asked around to see for somebody to work with Mr. Reed in the band. Mr. Caddy came to Glenn after Mr. Bell left and he was our second band director. Later on in the years, after college and everything, and going my way I got back to Birmingham they said they were looking for someone to work with the girls. My girlfriend that had graduated from Glenn with me, that had come from Phillips; she had also been hired as one of the science teachers at Glenn High School. So, we were back at home fulfilling a dream. And having those come along so I suggested and Thelma said, "Well Raquel is back in Birmingham, and I'm sure she wouldn't mind coming down to help." I did, I worked for several years with the band, before I was even hired. I came through, I was a volunteer in the public schools program. I worked as a tutor under the Ford Foundation grant that they had.

During that time I was going back and forth, I was at UAB [University of Alabama at Birmingham], trying to finish up my certification. And my first teaching job after that, we were still up under the desegregation plan and they were still balancing teachers to ensure you had equal numbers of whites and blacks hired in the school system. They needed a teacher full time at Phillips High School, the teacher that had been hired did not come back after the Christmas break. Well, unfortunately they needed a white science teacher. I had done my internship there under Mrs. Fannie Nelson, Mrs. Pam Jameson and Irene Hawkins at that time. Mrs. Nelson had recommended me to Mr. Talbot, who was the principal at the time, to fill the position until a decision about that position was made. So, my teaching career really started at Phillips High

School teaching Physical Science, the year before I went to Glenn. I would say I was a full time substitute, so that was the start of it. I left there in the middle of the year by spring break. There was an incident, they swapped me out with one of the teachers at Woodlawn, he went to Phillips and I went to Woodlawn. That following May, at the end of the school year I got a call and had an interview. Mr. Arthur Brown, who was also a former teacher of ours at Glenn High School-- he was the Vocational Coordinator. He was now the Principal at Glenn High School and he needed another Biology teacher. He hired me. I had come full circle at Glenn High School, from a student, to a tutor and then back as a teacher.

WA: So tell me about Glenn High when you came back. When you graduated it was fifty/fifty white to black students, but what was the faculty like, the racial balance.

RW: When I graduated the faculty ratio was fifty/fifty, we were under the court order at that time. Everything had to be fifty/fifty. Soon after, they felt that Birmingham had established and accomplished racial equality they were up on the list for so many years. When the federal mandate expired, they were not brought back. At this time, there was also a shifting in the population. The majority of the population in the inner city area was black. So when I got back to Glenn High School as a teacher, the majority were blacks and the minority were whites. In fact, I think at that time I can only remember about twenty white kids in the whole school.

WA: In a school of....

RW: A school had about five hundred at that time. We were always not the largest and not the smallest, we were a family. I would say that seventy-five percent of the faculty was black, twenty-five percent white. It was a faculty that was very close knit, they supported each other. We were like a family.

WA: Were there other former Glenn High students?

RW: At that time there was only Thelma Davis and I. Thelma was Thelma Moore when we were cheerleaders; she was the other science teacher. At that time, we were the only Glenn High graduates that I can remember. That was unique for us, because we had the chance to go back to our high school to teach. We were starting traditions that people from Parker High School had been doing for years, because at that time Glenn and Parker were the only schools that blacks attended. So, a lot of those that became educators went back to Parker, they had a tradition. Thelma and I looked at our tradition of going back to Glenn High School to teach. It was a thrill to be able to go back and give something to the place that had given us so much heartache and joy, at the same time.

Like I said, the majority of the kids were black, the faculty was seventy five percent black and we now had a black principal. He was the second black principal to be at Glenn High School; Dr. Simpson Berry at that time was before Mr. Arthur Brown. And of course, we had very few whites, but the area had changed. So, you had more blacks that had moved into the neighborhood that was feeding into the school. But it was a time that, we--. The kids, of course, you had bad ones, mischievous ones, but they were not bad, bad. We never had any major problems. The few whites that were there all got along; there were no major problems, racial tensions or anything. Everybody just acted like one big happy family.

And the saddest day that happened was when they decided that Glenn did not have enough students to qualify to maintain it, to stop it open, and to close it as a high school. That there were not enough kids in the area to feed Glenn, Jackson Owen, Ensley, Parker and Phillips at that time. So, the first wave of consolidation of schools up under the superintendent, Walter Harry, I think it was Walter Harry--I'm not sure. This was the first consolidation of schools that took place, and my dear, old alma mater closed its doors as a high school. I was given two options,

Western-Olin High School or go back to Woodlawn High School. Going back to Woodlawn High, that was my first option, never under the sun did I have an idea that I would end up at West End High School. Since the school years 1985-1986, I have been at West End High School until this day.

WA: So tell me about West End when you got here in 1985, what was the racial make up of the student body and the teachers? What was the neighborhood like?

RW: Neighborhood make-up at that time, the majority of the neighborhood was black. The make-up of the faculty and staff at that time, I would have to say, about eighty percent of the faculty was black and the other twenty percent was white. We had a black principal, Mr. Cantrell. The kids at that time were all black, no white students at that time. At that time, the school was extremely large, this was at a time in which there were twelve to fifteen hundred in this building.

WA: Wow.

RW: Yes. We had twelve to fifteen hundred for school starting that year in the building alone. We had seven periods a day. You started out with session room in the morning, basic core classes, and a couple of vocational classes. The school was packed, no air conditioning. Birmingham: the Deep South, Alabama's very humid, it's one of the reasons I cut all my hair. Earlier pictures of me will be with shoulder length hair, no air conditioning, fifteen hundred students--my first classroom was on the second floor, room 225. I had thirty five sitting inside the classroom, there were adjusted schedules, and I had twenty five sitting outside the classroom, no air conditioning! No air conditioning at all, but I maintained. I taught inside and I taught outside. The superintendent at that time--[telephone interruption]

RW: There were thirty five on the inside and twenty five in the hallway, there was no air

conditioning anywhere in the building. It was hot. I was managing the classroom, would pass out their assignment on the inside and then go pass out the assignment on the outside and then I'd sit in between. At that time Dr. Hammonds was the superintendent, and he was good about visiting the schools. He would come in and you never knew which way he was coming. It just so happened that one time he came in from the back side and up the back stairway. He said, "Are you a little over crowded Mrs.--" I said, "No sir, no sir, I'm managing very well." Now mind you, I had been informing the scheduling committee folks that I had room for twenty five in this room yet I have all these kids, thirty five inside and twenty more lining the hall outside. Every time I talked to the schedulers they would say hold what you have and we'll work it out. All of a sudden everybody runs upstairs. I said, "Yes?" They said, "Why didn't--?" I said, "I've been telling you for three weeks." I said, "You kept telling me to hold what I have....I'm holding! Everyday you keep sending around the card asking me how many kids I have for each period, and I keep adding and adding...and now I have nowhere to sit." They said they would take care of it. After that I didn't have to worry about an overcrowded class for quite a while, they finally solved the problem. Air conditioning soon came, the following year too! It was not easy, but we have maintained. That has been some of my remembrances.

WA: Well, thank you so much. Let me ask you just a few quick questions about Ramsey, in terms of how many black students came in your class and how many black students were already there at Ramsey.

RW: I guess Ramsey had a population at that time close to eight or nine hundred. I would say the class that was before me, the class that finished in 1970-1971 had about forty five to fifty people that were black in that class. They were active in football, basketball and all types of academics at that time. With my class, I would say that we had a class of about three hundred

freshmen that came in and out of that approximately one hundred and twenty five of us were black. We weren't that large, but there were quite a few of us.

WA: You said that you had some friends that came in with you?

RW: Yes I did, I had some friends that came in with me. Margaret Morgan and Belinda Braswell came in with me; in fact the three of us had finished Washington School together. I had friends that were already there. My cousin Bertram Garner was already there. Thomasine Howard was there at the time, also we called her Neicy. Paul and Eric Gardner of the Smith and Gaston Gardner's, they were already there. Tyree and Tadese () Pendleton, they were already there. We had Pierre and Bernadette Dickerson were there also, I could go on and on. Gail Adams...there were quite a few of us there. Like I said, that first group that came to Ramsey High School was really the cream of the crop from the black schools. At the end of my freshmen year, we saw a transition because that was the year that UAB bought Ullman and they closed Ullman High School, so we saw a transition of other kids that were coming in the South Town Project area and further back. Those that had originally gone to Ullman school, they would now be incorporated into the Ramsey population.

WA: For teachers, were the teachers desegregated at all?

RW: There was when we first got there. To be honest with you, when I first got to Ramsey all of my teachers were white. I had Coach Wheeler for session one, Mrs. McKissick for Alabama History, Mr. Ernest for English, Mr. Farmer for Algebra--

WA: You remember all your teachers? [laughing]

RW: [laughing] Yes, but I was proud to say that--

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B]

[BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A]

WA: Okay, so what we end our interviews with are some general questions. When you first entered high school what did consider the goals of school desegregation to be?

RW: At that particular time to me it meant the coming together of the black and white race for the equality of education. I was one that had lived and had witnessed the marching. There were homes that were bombed in my neighborhood, so I had gone through that. It was the time to say that education should be for all, every child should be provided the best education possible that the state of Alabama and that the United States could provide. So, this was where we thought that maybe we were lacking and we thought this was the time for us to start gaining, as black students. That's what desegregation at the time meant to me, that we had the coming together of the races and that education would be one provided for all of us.

WA: Is that how you look at it today?

RW: Today I still look at education as an educator. We are to provide the best possible education to all of our children. Whether it is an inner city school, a suburban school, a major city or a rural school, there should be equity in funding. Those kids in the rural areas should not be lacking because of a lack of funds. I feel that one part of town in the city should not do without while another in the suburbs has more due to lack of funds. What a lot of people fail to realize is that we are preparing our future within these walls, whether it is West End High School, Mountainbrook, or Forest Park, we all have a duty and the responsibility to prepare these kids to be productive citizens, to be able to be ideal citizens, to be able to take care of themselves, to provide opportunities for them and their families. We are preparing them to take over where we leave off; these are our future teachers, doctors, lawyers and plumbers.

We should provide them with a well-rounded education. We have seen trends go from focus on vocation to focus on academics, but we need to understand that every child that walks

through a door at a school deserves the right to be educated. It shouldn't matter what side of town that child lives on or what color that child's skin is, that child needs an education. That's my belief, and I feel that sometimes educators find reasons not to teach a child. Reasons are found like a disciplinary problem, but what is causing that child to be a disciplinary problem. Have you looked at some of the issues that the child may have, what are some of the things that may be happening in that child's life? My mom always told me that it doesn't take an ounce of energy to listen to a child talk. I am a true believer in that. It doesn't take any energy to listen to a child, because that child may not have anyone else to talk to. I listen to them and I talk to them, then I ask them what they think they should do. I have a passion for this job as an educator. My husband has told me I should have given it up and gone back into medicine years ago, but I still refuse. I think that all of our children, white, black, yellow, green and purple deserve the best education that our state can offer.

WA: Thank you so much

RW: You are so welcome.

WA: So, do you think that school desegregation fulfilled its goals?

RW: Yes and no. In some aspects it paved the way for segregation to happen, it was an unforced segregation. We are facing segregated schools now and we have segregated ourselves for one reason or another. The majority of your inner city schools in Birmingham are all black now. The majority of suburban schools are white. You find that the majority of the population there is white and the blacks are once again in the minority. We have seen that the flight, the tax base and the funding go to the suburban areas. We have seen that as blacks move into the same economic place, they want the same things for their kids as everybody else; they want the best education possible. So, because everyone else is moving to the suburbs they are too. What is left

in the inner city are those that cannot move out. So we don't have a forced segregation anymore, we have a segregation by choice now. West End for instance, we had a population of nine hundred and twenty five and out of that population there was one white student at the beginning of the school year, at the end of the school year we had two.

WA: This year?

RW: This year! What a switch from the history of West End High School. We have gone from all white to black and white, to the majority black then on to an all black school. Everybody in this area, that feeds into this school are all black. It's not a forced segregation, it's by choice. Though they say that schools are equal, I don't feel that they have truly reached that level of equality just yet. So, that's where we stand as to whether desegregation helped or hindered. In some ways I think it delayed the possibilities, it delayed the choices because we wanted so much for integration to happen. But now those choices that we made have forced us back into segregation of separate schools once again. It's a circle. It's like a circle that goes around and around. We're back where we once started.

WA: If you had it to do over again, what we talked about your choice to go to Ramsey, would you go? Would you go to a desegregated school?

RW: Yes. Yes. I would, even though at first it was not my choice to go, it was my parent's choice. I would not change--I don't think I would go back and change anything as far as my educational choices, not even my educational choice from when I did finish high school from leaving Glenn High School and going to the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. That was my parent's choice also. I had scholarships to go to all black school at Howard University, but because of health reasons and other things my mom and my dad said no I needed to go. I had a cousin that was down at Alabama on a basketball and football scholarship, and he told my mom,

"Ruth send her to me, let her come down here" I went because that's where (where most kids don't understand) my parents said I was going to school so that's where I went, but I wouldn't change anything because I think that my experience from high school, through college and through my life experiences have made me the person that I am. It has made me aware of things that are happening and I am more sensitive to some things that maybe some of my colleagues are not. It has made me the passionate educator that I am. It has made me the person that I am, so I wouldn't change a thing.

WA: Have you kept in contact with any of your friends that you made at Ramsey and at Glenn High?

RW: Yes, Thomasine Howard is now Thomasine [Square?], she is over the English Department here at West End High School. Another teacher, Sharron Harwitt, came in that group from Oldman High School, we are working together. There are several of us back in the education field. Paul and Eric Gardner are the Directors of Smith and Gaston. (), we're still friends and stay in contact. Yvonne ()--oh, it seems like that was a connection that was never broken! Several of us are still in contact with one another, we may not see each other as often, but we see each other frequently and we know where everyone is.

WA: Are there Glenn High reunions?

RW: Yes! Yes, yes, yes and I'm very excited about that because the class of 1981-1986 is having their reunion this weekend and I have been asked to be the speaker. So they will be celebrating their class reunion this weekend at the Howard Johnson's and as I said I have been asked to be their speaker Saturday night at the banquet. In fact my class had a fifteenth reunion that was the class of 1972, we did have one. So, there are several, it's not as frequent as some but usually when there is a Glenn High School reunion we have them with four and five classes

together. Now, the suggestion has come up to have one grand reunion. The class of 1985 was the last class to really march at Glenn High School, the others had to go to other schools, but they call themselves the class of 1986. So, they are talking about a reunion from the first class, my class in 1972 all the way to the last class of 1986. Hopefully, somebody will be brave enough to do that reunion. [laughing] It won't be me, but hopefully somebody.

WA: You told me you have two daughters, where did they go to school? What was their school experience?

RW: Believe it or not, my oldest daughter is twenty-five. She graduated West End High School in 1998. My youngest daughter turned nineteen this past May. She is a member of the class of 2004 from West End! The youngest one is attending Miles College at the present time and the oldest one graduated in four years, she finished A&M University. Their experiences in school have been quite different from mine because they do have to attend their neighborhood high schools. We live within the area so they attended the school within their community. The youngest one was practically born in West End High School, she's been attending West End High School all of her life. I am now in some instances considered second generation, and some instances I am considered third generation. My kids' experiences in school were totally different than mine. They got to go an integrated situation in the primary years and middle school years and then their high school years were just about totally black.

WA: My last question is, is there anything that I haven't asked you about that you want us to talk about either as a student or as a teacher?

RW: I could go on and on but I don't think that you have missed anything. Fortunately for me my memories are long. I can remember things happening, I could talk--I could go on and on about Glenn High School and my experiences with the Birmingham city schools. I grew up as a

product of the Birmingham school system. I am proud of the fact that I did attend Birmingham schools. People talk about attending private schools, but I am proud to be a product of the Birmingham school system and I am proud of the fact that I work for the Birmingham school system. I think that my life is richer due to the experiences that I had. Sometimes, it has made me a stronger person, it has made me a caring person and it has made me very passionate about my job, definitely. I will be in this position until the good Lord decide that, "Raquel it is time for you to move on." I have served as a teacher and this past January to May I served as the acting principal of the night school program, so I have had a chance to work with a lot of kids from around the city and from various other school systems. I don't think I will be getting out of education anytime soon; I'm at the point now that education is my life and my life is education. Like I said, we could talk forever about some of the experiences that we had but I think those are the highlights.

WA: Okay, thank you so much.

RW: Thank you!

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed August 2005 by Chris O'Sullivan