

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

BENETHA ELLIS
October 16, 2004

DAVID CLINE: Today is Saturday. It is October 16th already and I'm in Louisville, Kentucky. I'm meeting with Benetha Ellis, yes?

BENETHA ELLIS: Yes.

DC: And if you'll just introduce yourself and say where you were raised and how old you are now.

BE: My name is Benetha Ellis and I was raised in Louisville, Kentucky and I am sixty-eight years old.

DC: So you went to, you had your schooling here in Louisville?

BE: I had my schooling in Louisville.

DC: And what schools did you go to?

BE: I went to A. C. Taylor, Madison Junior High, and Central.

DC: And the schools were mostly black at that time?

BE: They were all black.

DC: All black at that time?

BE: Completely black.

DC: Yeah. And what neighborhood did you grow up in?

BE: I grew up in the West End.

DC: Which is a historically black part of Louisville, right?

BE: That's correct.

DC: And did you know many white kids growing up?

BE: I didn't know any white kids growing up, not any.

DC: None at all?

BE: No.

DC: Hear stories, have any, you know, sort of perceptions?

BE: No. I didn't have a clue because I never had any interaction with them.

DC: Right. Do you remember what then your first interaction would have been maybe with a white person?

BE: When I got into the work world.

DC: And what was that like?

BE: It was fine. I didn't have any problem.

DC: What job was that?

BE: My first job was working in the public, no, no, no, I worked in the laundry and there were whites at the laundry.

DC: And did you, we'll get to talking about busing in a few minutes, but before that were there any civil rights activities going on in Louisville that you knew about or that you participated in?

BE: There were open housing demonstrations that were going on. One of my brothers participated but I didn't.

DC: Can you tell me a little bit about just some background about that?

BE: Well, they had sit-ins and they were trying to have housing accommodations for everyone. And they had sit-ins at lunch counters downtown when blacks were not allowed to eat downtown. And they had a lot of sit-ins and a lot of them got arrested in that. And the open housing demonstrations, they had some arrests in that but I didn't personally participate in it.

DC: And then when was your first child born?

BE: Nineteen fifty-nine.

DC: And how many kids?

BE: I have three children.

DC: You have three children?

BE: Un-huh.

DC: And so then they started in the school system in Louisville?

BE: They started in the school system.

DC: In which schools?

BE: Stephen Foster and then when I moved down here it was Shawnee Elementary.

DC: And then can you remember when you first heard that busing was being considered?

BE: It had been talked about but we really didn't pay that much attention to it because we didn't really know what the implications of it were. I might say it was a couple of years before it actually happened that we were hearing about it. We didn't know the impact it was going to have on us.

DC: So when did you realize that impact?

BE: When it started.

DC: What was your first reaction to that?

BE: It was like, wow. It was like we just thought everything was going to be okay. We were naïve and after a couple of days or a week we found out that everything wasn't okay.

DC: So what was your first, did you get notification? Did you get a letter saying that your children would be bused?

BE: Yeah, because my kids were going, my children, my oldest daughter was in the eleventh grade. She was going to graduate from Shawnee High School. And my younger kids were in Shawnee Elementary, which was in walking distance. And they were bused to I think my son was bused to about three elementary schools before he went to Pleasure Ridge Park. And then my daughter I think she went to Pleasure Ridge Park. I don't remember her going to an elementary school.

DC: So just give me the names and ages so I can get this straight in my mind.

BE: Okay, my oldest daughter is Vanessa. She's forty-five. My daughter Levita is thirty-nine and my son Troy is thirty-eight.

DC: Okay, so two girls and a boy in that order. Okay, great. And so she was in the eleventh grade that first year and did she get bused then?

BE: She got bused to Pleasure Ridge Park and she hated it. She didn't participate in none of the graduation exercises.

DC: (Pause in tape.) Okay, you were saying about your daughter went to Pleasure Ridge for that senior year but.

BE: But she didn't like it. She didn't take part in any of the graduation exercises, the prom or anything because she had had her heart set on graduating from Shawnee Elementary.

DC: Did her friends get bused with her or did she feel very separated?

BE: She felt separated because some of them did but one of her best friends was a little white girl that lived across the street and she stayed at Shawnee and my

daughter had to go to Pleasure Ridge and that was hard for her. Like I said, she didn't like it at all.

DC: And you were living in this house then?

BE: Un-huh.

DC: So that was a mixed neighborhood then at that point?

BE: This was a mixed neighborhood, yeah.

DC: About how mixed would you say at that time?

BE: About fifty percent.

DC: Interesting and so her best friend was a little white girl?

BE: Un-huh.

DC: And so she did go to Pleasure Ridge. Did she have any difficult, did she run into any of these demonstrations or did she have any...?

BE: Yes, she did but I don't remember, yes, she did but not like my other daughter and son did. It wasn't as intense.

DC: Can you remember at all what it was like at Pleasure Ridge for Vanessa?

BE: I really don't remember Vanessa having that many problems. I didn't have to go to the school that much.

DC: Okay. And then your other kids, what school did they end up at?

BE: Pleasure Ridge Park.

DC: That first year they were all there?

BE: No, my son was in elementary school. He was still in elementary school. And then my daughter, my other daughter, I think she was in junior high.

DC: And you had to go to their schools?

BE: Yes.

DC: Can you tell me about why?

BE: It wasn't as intense as Pleasure Ridge Park but it was a lot of undercover with the teachers snatching the kids and putting fingernails in their arms. I remember one teacher dug her fingernails in my son's arm. That was at an elementary school in the Highlands. Then my son was bused way out at Dixie Elementary, which was way out, and there were problems with their grades and the hostility of some of the teachers. That was most of the problem for the elementary kids.

DC: Do you think they were treating the black kids poorly?

BE: Sure, sure, because my son was a brain. When he went into the school he was an A student and then once he got there his grades started dropping and I had to go and let them know that you just didn't get dumb overnight. So there had to be a problem.

DC: Do you remember sitting down with the teacher?

BE: I talked to the teacher, the principal. I talked to everybody there, the counselors, everybody, to let them know that I was watching them because I know that my kids were capable.

DC: What kind of reception did you get or reaction from them?

BE: Well, you know, the, "Oh, well, we understand and we're going to work with you," and, you know, the basic.

DC: Did anything change?

BE: I didn't have too many problems with them in elementary school because when the teacher dug her fingers into my son's arms I made sure that she knew that that would never happen again.

DC: How'd you do that?

BE: Because I told her, she taught, I disciplined and if any problems came along that he needed discipline to please let me know and I would take care of it but make sure she did her job and I would do mine.

DC: Did that change things with her?

BE: I didn't have any more problems.

DC: And as far as other parents, did you get to know other parents at that point?

BE: Yeah, that's when we kind of started organizing because the kids that were going to high school, they were the ones that was getting the things thrown at the bus, the buses being rocked, kids standing outside when the buses were getting ready to leave the school grounds and kids called all kinds of names, fighting in the halls, suspensions, expulsions, everything just skyrocketed in high school. So us parents got together and said now, wait a minute. Something has to be done because it wasn't anyone doing anything, anybody in authority, no organization, I mean no NAACP, no Urban League, no one was doing anything.

DC: The NAACP, did you ever have a chance to talk to them and ask for their help?

BE: Oh, sure, we confronted them all the time. We confronted the ministers. We confronted who ever to see what are you all going to do.

DC: And their response?

BE: The NAACP president told me he wasn't going to fight no Klan. And we had told him we weren't asking him to fight no Klan. We just asked him what was he going to do about the kids being mistreated. So they didn't do anything. They weren't going to do anything and that's when we said well, we'll just have to do it ourselves.

DC: And so what did you do?

BE: We organized. It was about thirty parents got together and we organized [United Black Protective Parents] and we started writing letters. We started going to the schools. We started taking kids back to the schools. We started confronting teachers. We started confronting principals. We started confronting the school board. We went to school board meetings. We marched. We did whatever necessary to do to protect the kids. That's what we did. We went to all the schools. We took all the kids back when they got suspended and we thought they were being suspended unfairly. We wanted to make sure that if you're going to suspend one, suspend all of them. Then they had the timeout rooms where they had little cages that they put the kids in.

DC: Oh, you're kidding.

BE: And we made sure that those timeout rooms were torn down, that they weren't used anymore. They did a lot of things. They did a lot of rotten things to those kids.

DC: What would they say? I mean if they pulled a kid out and put him in the timeout room, why was that?

BE: That was supposed to be "in-house suspension."

DC: In-house suspension?

BE: Yeah.

DC: [Dubiously] Okay.

BE: And they were like in little cages. So we said no, we can't have this and we kept going to the school board meetings. We would disrupt all the meetings. They could not have meetings until we were heard and finally they recognized that we were going to be reckoned with and we even went to Washington. We went to federal court and did whatever we had to do to make sure that our kids were treated fairly because we didn't ask for it, we didn't know what to expect, and we were not prepared.

DC: This is United Black Protective Parents, is the name of the organization?

BE: That's when we organized the United Black Protective Parents.

DC: And did others join after the initial thirty? Did you grow larger?

BE: Yes, we grew larger. We confronted the ministers, the black ministers. They got a bus and chartered us a bus and we took I think it was about two busloads to Washington to testify in front of the Senate. We wrote letters. We had letter writing campaigns. I mean we did everything.

DC: What was that like stepping in front of the U.S. Senate? [I] can't imagine.

BE: I mean at that time I guess we had faced everything else so it was nothing. You know, they were just a bunch of white men sitting up there looking stupid. So I mean the fear was gone so we didn't have any fear.

DC: What did you have instead after the fear?

BE: We were angry, disgusted, because we didn't know what to expect. We were really, really, really naïve because we didn't expect that. We didn't expect the hostility that our kids faced. Our kids would be on the bus and see some of the white kids in class and they would say oh, she's in my class, you know. Oh, I know him. I know her. And they were surprised. They didn't expect it.

DC: These are the kids that would be rocking the bus or protesting that were in their classes?

BE: Yeah, yeah, throwing things on the bus or spitting on the bus. I mean they did everything.

DC: Which schools do you remember being the worst or do you remember going to?

BE: Pleasure Ridge Park, Valley High School, Fairdale, Southern High School. It was most of the schools out in the southern part of Jefferson County that had the most opposition. Doss High School Stewart High School.

DC: Are these parts of town that you had gone to before busing started or that you knew?

BE: No, we didn't go regular. There was nothing out there for us to go for because we had everything we needed down here.

DC: Were there many black folks living out around say Pleasure Ridge at all in those days?

BE: If there it was very few. It was not a lot. They tolerated one or two of them.

DC: So I'm just thinking in the very early days when there were these sorts of violent demonstrations happening and you got together with these other parents and decided to go out to the schools, did you actually confront people? What did you do when you got out to the schools?

BE: Sure, we confronted parents. We would confront the principal, the counselors, I mean the teachers, whomever.

DC: Did you ride the bus with them or did you go out in cars?

BE: At one time we did ride the bus with them. And we would be on the bus stop with them every morning. Sometimes we would ride the bus with them. Most of the time we tried to be there when they got on the bus to come home because that's where the problems started.

DC: After school?

BE: After school.

DC: And how long did this go on for?

BE: Oh, gosh, at least a year before it really started quieting down, before it started getting a little better because other organizations started popping up. Then they tried to infiltrate our organization.

DC: They did?

BE: Oh, sure.

DC: Tell me about that.

BE: They tried to infiltrate our organization with their educators. Let me help you do this. You're going to Washington. We need to train you how to act when you go to Washington. And then they started trying to pick us off one by one, give us

jobs. And you know when you get a job with the board they control you after that. And some of the parents they took the jobs. We would have workshops and sometimes there would be so many people there that they couldn't accommodate all of them. Then they tried to break that up and make that come through the school board and a lot of us wouldn't let them do it. But then, of course, they got to some of them but they didn't get to all of us.

DC: So that was from the school board itself exerting that influence?

BE: Yeah, sometimes the school board and sometimes the black ministers were doing it because we had to confront them a lot because we felt like they had the most influence in the black community and they could do more.

DC: Were there any of the black ministers that were particularly helpful?

BE: Oh, sure. Reverend Elliott of King Solomon, Reverend Bottoms of Green Street, Reverend Moore of (), there were quite a few of them.

DC: And the ones that weren't so helpful, how did you address those ministers?

BE: Well, we had quite a few words with them. They had the attitude, well, I'm here and who are you to come trying to tell me what to do. You can't come into our meeting like I'm the God and you're supposed to do as I say do and, of course, we paid no attention to them. We just went on.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGINNING OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

DC: Okay, this is David Cline with Benetha Ellis just starting another disk. And I was just trying to find where we were again.

BE: I was saying that I don't see any benefits of busing because most of those kids that went to school with my children, they're either on drugs or they're alcoholics. They didn't finish school. They don't have any jobs. They're wanting to be drug dealers or tried to be drug dealers or they're dead. I just don't see the benefits because they weren't used to that hostility that they encountered and a lot of them couldn't take it.

DC: And you think that that showed itself later on?

BE: Sure, it did. They said the heck with it. What am I going out here to be treated like this for? They don't want me out here. I don't want to be out here. So a lot of them took other turns in life, you know, where they could have been very, very smart. I know one kid that lived in the neighborhood with my children and the police ended up killing him, shooting him I don't know how many times, because he had mental problems. But he wasn't like that at first. He didn't have mental problems. A lot of them, they couldn't take it. They just couldn't take it. So like I said, of course, I'm lucky because my children did fine.

DC: How do you think your kids were able to do all right?

BE: Because I was there at every turn and I knew they could do it. So I have one, she's an accountant. My son is vice president of operations of Coca Cola. My daughter is twenty years in the service. So I'm lucky.

DC: Yeah, you should be proud.

BE: Yeah.

DC: I just want to ask you a question because I think it got missed when I had to change tapes. I'm just going to re-ask a question about, if that's all right, about the

goal of United Black Protective Parents and whether that was to end busing or to protect the kids. What was sort of the major goal?

BE: I don't think we ever thought about ending busing. We didn't like it but ending it wasn't, I don't think it was an option. Our main goal was to protect the kids to make sure that they got fair and equal treatment and that was the main thing that we tried to do.

DC: Right. And I'm sorry this is a little repetitive but as far as things changing, when do you see things as sort of the most difficult in that first year of busing and when things started to maybe get a little bit better?

BE: I think time did that. Some attitudes changed. Some people died because a lot of times a lot of them have to die because they're not going to change. And then with my son, I could see the change when he started going to PRP. He had a lot of white friends because he played basketball and he would stay all night with them and the parents were very supportive. So I think everybody just tried to start accepting the fact that that was the way it was going to be. So they just make the best out of a bad situation.

DC: And how about now? What are your feelings now?

BE: I don't think that riding the bus has helped any. Some of the problems they had back then they're still having them. You have a lot of kids that's coming out of school can't read and write, which I think is criminal. I've always said if my kids went to school for twelve years and came out and couldn't read and write then I was suing somebody because it's criminal. But that's still going on. I don't think the teachers are teaching anymore and I guess they've got so many rules and regulations

that it's changing so much. I don't know whether that's a good thing or not. But I'm looking at my grandchildren and I can see some of the same problems that some of the kids had that my grandchildren are having.

DC: Where are they in school?

BE: I have a granddaughter at Central and I have one at John Kennedy and then two in Atlanta.

DC: Do you talk with them about what ya'll went through here?

BE: Un-huh then I have a grandson. He goes to LSU. Yeah, we talk about it but they say well, that was then, this is now. I think it's more diverse because like at Central my granddaughter tells me all the time about all the different nationalities that's in that school, which I think that's a good thing. So the cultures are more, it's a more diverse culture.

DC: Right. How about the neighborhoods? Have neighborhoods changed at all?

BE: Yeah. Of course, when we started, like I said, when we lived and moved down here, which is about thirty-three years ago, it was fifty percent white. Now it's ninety-five percent black. But you can see they gave these houses away. They ran. And they gave away some good property and I guess that was to our benefit because we did get some decent houses out of them running because I think, a guy told me the realtors had a lot to do with it. They were going around telling the blacks are coming, the blacks coming. So they gave the houses, almost gave them away.

DC: So busing was part of it do you think but there are other things contributing?

BE: Yeah, there were other things.

DC: And so what's that been like for you seeing the neighborhood change being in the neighborhood?

BE: Some is good. Some is bad. You know, it's okay. I guess everything has changed. Nothing stays the same.

DC: What's good, what's bad?

BE: The good part was that we were able to raise our kids in a stable neighborhood and everyone knew everyone and everyone helped everyone. The bad is that the neighborhood is changing now and parents don't seem to care. They let their kids get away with anything and that's bad.

DC: How do you think you got through it, those times? I mean what gave you strength?

BE: Love for my kids, the way I was raised. It was nine of us, but I was raised by a mother and father. My father was a roofer. We were raised with morals. My father was a minister too. I felt like if I could make it, they can make it and the grace of God they did.

DC: They did, yeah. Did your feelings, I mean you grew up in a neighborhood without knowing a lot of white people.

BE: I didn't know any white people.

DC: Right and then you said when you started working that was sort of the first time you met some white folks. Was it this issue that really sort of introduced you to, you know, the bad, I don't know.

BE: The real world?

DC: Yeah, the real world.

BE: Yeah, yeah. I'm saying what? Uh-uh, no. No, we didn't expect that. I just thought they'd get on the bus and everything would be fine. Like I said, we were very naïve but reality set in real quick.

DC: Did that sort of form at that point your sort of general opinion of white people or how did it, you know, for your kids too, what did that do to them?

BE: No. That just let us know that there are good and bad in everybody. We had a lot of white support when we were United Black Protective Parents. A lot of them may have been undercover but it was there. Then a lot of it was openly, open support. I guess it's just like anything else. There's good and bad. Just treat everybody like you want to be treated and until you are confronted with something or someone like that then just everybody is the same.

DC: You said you did have some allies obviously.

BE: Sure.

DC: Who were your sort of strong allies that you personally would reach out to?

BE: Ann Braden, Tom Moffitt, Suzie Post. There was this guy. I think his name is Henry Wallace. Those were the ones that we could think of and then at that time they were calling us Communists because we were dealing with Ann Braden. But then after we started reading up on Communism I'm saying what's the difference, you know. What's the difference in Communism and the United States? Not a lot. Yeah, we had a lot, a bit of white support.

DC: Were there particular people in town who emerged as the enemy?

BE: Where they were?

DC: Yeah, I mean were there particular people? I mean I know obviously the Klan at these rallies but were there organizations opposed to busing that were particular people that you know to sort of watch out for?

BE: There were both. There were some organizations that they had that popped up. We would confront them too. I know one of them was () and I can't think of the others. And then there were some particular people. Three of them were sitting on the school board and we knew that. But you know we had to confront them too, whatever it took.

DC: So did you ever consider getting into politics for the school board yourself?

BE: Oh sure, we tried. I tried. But politics is so dirty and petty around here they'll suck you up and eat you up and spit you back out and it wasn't worth it.

DC: Did you run for?

BE: Yeah, I ran for school board.

DC: And any other positions?

BE: I think I ran for board of aldermen once.

DC: Did you have any success in getting any of your allies onto the school board?

BE: Oh, sure, sure.

DC: Were they able to get anything done?

BE: Well, once they get in there it's a different story. I guess once they get in there and they have to get in to fit in or fit in to get in or whatever, that's what's happening.

DC: What about now? I mean what's the situation now? Do you keep track?

BE: Sure, fit in to get in, get in to fit in. They're all the same. We don't have any real representation around here because they all have their own little petty set of agendas. Politics is very petty in Jefferson County.

DC: Did you, I mean you've told me how you feel about busing and desegregation now but when it first started did you think there might be some positive outcomes from this plan?

BE: We didn't think. We didn't even think that far. We really didn't have time to think that far or think of the implications or anything. It just hit us. Here it is and now you deal with it.

DC: So would you call it a failure, a partial success, how would you?

BE: I think it was a waste of taxpayer's money. There should have been a better way of doing it because at first we were saying bus the teachers. Upgrade the schools. But see I think it was all a plan because there are no schools in the West End anymore. All of them are closed. They are apartment buildings or condos or whatever you want to call them. We don't have any schools in the West End, very few. I think one over here, Portland Elementary. But they closed all our schools and when you close schools then you're doing something to the neighborhood. So I think it was all the overall plan. So now the kids don't have any, they don't have any choice but to

bus them because it ain't nowhere to go in the neighborhood, you know. Very few schools are here in the West End.

DC: How might things have been done differently or how would things have ended?

BE: I think they should have upgraded what we had and held the teachers to a higher standard. And if they didn't do it, if you couldn't teach a child to read or write then you just don't need to be a teacher because that's your job, along with the parents, you know. But get the right materials in the schools that we had because we had good schools. We had good teachers.

DC: Do you think there's anything gained or lost from not having races together in the school system?

BE: If you go to Central right now there will blacks at one table and whites at the other. There's not a lot of intermingling because I think it's by choice. I don't see where it, I don't know what it was supposed to do. What was it supposed to do anyway? You don't see it. I don't care where you go or what school you go to, the blacks are going to be in a cluster and the whites are going to be in a cluster and I guess that's just by choice. I don't think it has anything to do with racism or whatever. I guess it's the neighborhood you live in, the friends you have, and I think that they have a right to do that. If they have white friends, they have white friends. If they have black friends, they have, but don't try to force it because if you force it, it ain't going to fit. Ain't going to fit, didn't fit.

DC: So I mean your own daughter you were telling me earlier on whose best friend was a white girl from the neighborhood?

BE: Still are ever since the seventh grade.

DC: They still are? I was going to ask that, yeah. And do your grandkids, I mean their friends?

BE: I think the nine-year-old does but I don't think the sixteen-year-old does. The teenagers they don't.

DC: Don't mix in that way?

BE: No.

DC: Did this getting so involved with United Black Protective Parents and this issue did this get you going in other issues in town?

BE: Yeah, to a point. To a point but after, Louisville is very passive. I mean we take so much and we can sing We Shall Overcome all day long, every day, seven days a week, twenty-four seven, but if we don't act instead of reacting and really come together as a community, then it's a waste of time. When something happens, there we go, We Shall Overcome. Come back in, be quiet, something else happens, there we go, We Shall Overcome. So, you know, it gets old.

DC: Is there anything lately that's happened that's sort of drawn people together?

BE: Well, the police shootings if anything and it will die out until the next one.

DC: Is there anything that I haven't asked you that you thought I might ask you or that's on your mind?

BE: No.

DC: You've been talking about this a few times I understand the last couple of years.

BE: Yeah. I went to Frankfurt, hadn't been too long ago, about six months ago.

DC: And how was that? What did you talk about?

BE: The same thing, just how we got organized and what we did, how we did it and how we organized.

DC: Do you stay in touch with the folks from United Black Protective Parents?

BE: Sure, we're best of friends, most of us, yeah.

DC: And do you still talk about those days or about now?

BE: Yeah, we do. We have a lot of laughs and a lot of things that we think about and how bold we were, you know. Everybody says well, you mean that you faced the Klan. Well, sure. They wasn't no big thing. We didn't have any fear.

DC: Did the Klan just sort of go, you know, go back in their holes after this or did they continue to show up in town?

BE: No, I think they went back in their holes. They had a rally. It wasn't been too long over there I went to where they had a Klan rally downtown and I went. It's sad that they still exist. But they're still in their holes and in their offices and got their three-piece suits on with their neckties in the White House and the board of aldermen. They're everywhere and definitely on the workplace. But they're just undercover, that's all.

DC: Do you know who they are in town?

BE: I know who some of them act like they are.

DC: So you're keeping tabs?

BE: Oh, yeah. Talk like a duck, walk like a duck, act like a duck, it's a duck.

DC: Anything to add?

BE: No.

DC: Well, thank you so much for your time. I really appreciate it.

BE: That's okay, my pleasure.

DC: Thank you.

TRANSCRIBED APRIL 2005 BY CATHY MANN