

Interview

with

MOSE LEWIS

February 17, 1991

By Goldie F. Wells

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By Goldie F. Wells

Goldie: This is February 17, 1991, and I am in the home of Mr. Mose Lewis who is the principal of South Brunswick High School in Southport, North Carolina and he has agreed to interview with me this Sunday morning at his home in Fayetteville, North Carolina. I would like for you to introduce yourself and say that you know that this is being recorded.

Mr. Lewis: I am Mose Lewis, principal of South Brunswick High School and I am well aware that this is a recording.

Goldie: Mr. Lewis, when I wrote to you and told you that I was doing research on Black high school principals you were so nice to return my questionnaire. I am doing a comparative study. I am using the oral history method and I am comparing the role perceptions of Black high school principals who were principals in 1964, to principals who were principals in 1989. You are one of the 1989, principals. In 1964, there were over 200 Black high school principals in the state. When I wrote to the State Department last year and asked them for a listing they sent me the names of 41 Black principals and I found out that some of those 41 principals are principals of alternative schools but you are a principal of a traditional high school and that is what I am interested in. I just want you to relax and tell me something about your principalship. I will ask you some areas to address and I just want you to answer me please.

Goldie: I want you to tell me something about yourself and how you became a high school principal.

Mr. Lewis: Well, I had an education period coming in the back door. I was a twenty year military man and I served in the 82nd Airborne Division for the Special Forces most of my career. I came from a little town in Alabama and I joined the army right out of high school at 18 years old and served twenty years. About the time my military career was wrapping up I started taking courses, a lot of night courses and did a lot of testing so by the time I was retired from the service I spent one year on the campus of Fayetteville State with a B.S. degree and then I went to North Carolina State for a Master's in Adult Education. I have a principal's certificate and a six-year degree from East Carolina. I was a real estate broker and a friend of mine came by the office one day. He was a high school principal and he asked me to go to Carolina Beach to his apartment to deliver an air-conditioner so I left my office and told the secretary I would be back and while we were riding he asked me, why don't you come quit football for me with the year he knew I was quite a sport fan and I played a lot of football in the army

and attended a lot of his games. I did not have a teaching certificate at this time. So I went right to the State Department from there; he talked me into it and got a Class B teaching certificate and I went to North Carolina State, that was when I was going back to do testing measurement, and I decided to stay and go to graduate school and I went there one year. That summer the Assistant Superintendent called and asked if I would go to the high school as an assistant principal. I didn't know what an assistant principal did. I had been out of high school twenty years. So reluctantly I went over there with the idea that this was a temporary job because I was going back into business and the challenge became so great until I became wrapped up in it and finally it was six or seven years and basically that is how I got into the secondary education business.

Goldie: How did you get your position at Brunswick?

Mr. Lewis: Well, I was working at Harnett County and the Superintendent of Brunswick County was in attendance at a State meeting and he was talking to someone from Harnett County about a type of person he needed for a troubled high school. So a couple of weeks later the superintendent called me from Brunswick County and I met him in person and he asked if I would be interested in coming down and talking to him about a position. It was on the coast and I fish a lot so I said well, I'll come out and talk to you but I didn't think much about coming down here so I went down and interviewed. He asked me to bring a resume and he invited me back to go before the board and a crazy situation really and at this point I decided, hell, not me. I'm not going down there and anyway it seemed like another challenge and I've been there nine years and I think in the nine years I think that we have accomplished what we decided to do.

Goldie: Did you have any educators in your family?

Mr. Lewis: My sister was an educator; in fact she just retired. Other than that my parents were 8th or 9th graders. My mother is 99 years old and my father died at 97 so you can image the time and era that they came up in. We were just hard working people I guess.

Goldie: Now I want you to tell me something about your high school; something about the student body and the history of the school and tell me about your staff.

Mr. Lewis: My high school is a rural high school as far as southeastern North Carolina is concerned and, all of it is rural and I basically served five distinct communities and the school is located about six miles from Southport and I think the school was constructed in 1972, and it was during a time when they were closing the small community schools, consolidating and trying to come up with comprehensive high

schools so they set the school right out in the middle of a little town called Boiling Springs Lake. The school did not have any community identity like a lot of your high schools now and we served the district of Long Beach, Yuppon Beach, Southport, Bolivia and all of the little communities north of Highway 17 and 87, Winnibowl, right south of Supply, our line breaks right at Supply, Sunset Harbor, Snowfield so all of these were communities were there and can you imagine bringing all of the kids in and really for a while we had a time keeping the kids from thinking sexualism. So it took quite a effort on the teachers and the administrators part to get the kids to identify as a school, you know come up with a logo and come up with things so that you could have an identity and of course the route I used, the vehicle we used to do that was an excellent sports program and that helped to solidify the communities. The kids began to stop talking about Southport, Long Beach, and they became Cougars--members of South Brunswick High School and I think that was the road to making the school a pretty good school.

Goldie: How many faculty members and how many students do you have?

Mr. Lewis: We average about 846 kids and about 45 to 52 professional staff members. The ethnic makeup of the schools is pretty well typical, maybe 26% Black and 74% White. Very few Indians or Asians but we are right on the 30-70% ratio in the makeup of the school.

Goldie: Do you have any assistant principals?

Mr. Lewis: Two assistant principals, one male and one female. As far as the education level of my staff, I guess 50% of the staff have graduate degrees.

Goldie: How many Black staff members do you have?

Mr. Lewis: I think about sixteen about a third of the staff.

Goldie: Now I am going to ask you something about the responsibilities you have at the school and I'll give you different areas to address. First I want you to tell me about supervision of personnel and teacher selection.

Mr. Lewis: Well, we are fortunate. I have the last words in teacher selection. You know how administrators work in education. They can phone to you. They can pick out five they like and send you the five and then you select out of the five but the last two or three years this has been changed somewhat. We have the opportunity to really look at all the files, select personnel and interview them and usually at the school level I will include the chairperson, the assistant principal and myself to interview a person in assertive discipline and that is how we basically go about

it.

Goldie: Now the new personnel that you have, do you divide the responsibility of the evaluations?

Mr. Lewis: I really do not have a job description. I operate as if we are principals. Now we evolve into specializing sometimes just for continuity but as far as, you take discipline, you take buses--we do everything. If I leave someone in charge if they leave we can all do the same work. I think it is a fallacy in the principal/assistant principal relationship is that many assistant principals become specialists and very limited in their scope in the decision-making process. Of course I make decisions but I am not reluctant to seek input of the decisions and I think this creates a real congenial atmosphere.

Goldie: Curriculum and instruction.

Mr. Lewis: Again, you mentioned observations but assistant principals observe as well as myself. I spend a lot of time with curriculum. I think the focus and especially critical objectives that you have to follow in the course testing. It requires someone or all of us to just to see that personnel maintains focus because I found that teachers who are working harder but not smarter. You know how it is in this business. You teach a lot of things that are not measured but you fail sometimes to teach the things that are important. So I'm a hands-on curriculum person but you still do not have as much time to do these things as you like because of the generous possibility of keeping the community strong so that teachers can teach and kids can learn. It takes a lot of your time but I do a lot of walking around and I detest the upmost the formal observations. I think they are the worse thing that you can do. It is unprofessional, it is phony and you just-- it is something that we have to do. They say do three, I do three but that it tells you nothing but you have done three, or you've done two. It is not the crutch of the problem to determine whose is teaching and who is not teaching. I'd really like to attack it from the standpoint of appealing to the teachers sense of value and you have something to do and this is a game, this is a big game and you're the court, you get your people ready. You can't do that with a piece of paper and write it down. I don't think so.

Goldie: Discipline.

Mr. Lewis: When I went to that school, it was quite a discipline problem. I think that is why they wanted me down there because I'm off probation now. I have to go to court a couple of times for things unbecoming of a school person because it didn't make much difference I was in charge and some things I accept and some things I don't. I had two or three real critical situations where the norm of the school

a group of the kids were to just do what they want and even going as far as striking teachers. I had one kid to knock a male teacher down the first year I was there and challenge me and I threw him threw the window and I had to go to court. I was found guilty. Half the jury said you did good Mose but you can't... Well, it was an unfortunate thing but it is the best thing that ever happened to the school because kids realized that hey, this guy is crazy and I'll stay far from him. So of course I didn't like that but instead of one personality and it didn't matter to me if I worked or not. It mattered to the point that I worked because I enjoyed it but as far as the security of the finance I need the money but I can do anything and the board supported me and it was embarrassing for a while but it is one of these things that happened that reaped lots of benefits. The kids began to learn a new light of respect not force but they began to perceive school officials as people with emotions and job goals just like you. It happened and it was unfortunate thing but again it was and I didn't back off and like I told the board members that I can't guarantee that it won't happen again and I can't. That is just me and I'm natural in my court and if I can't serve than I won't serve.

Goldie: So you don't have discipline problems at school now.

Mr. Lewis: I have some irritants but I tell you what, nobody is going to disrupt that school--being late for class or skipping school or being tardy for school and occasional fights. You're going to have these kinds of things but fights, drugs, no. But not the little irritants that you are going to have that you are going to have when you get 800-900 kids with different values and different makeup together--but gross behavior--no.

Goldie: Transportation.

Mr. Lewis: Buses. We have kids on the bus some 1 1/2 hours or forty-five minutes or two hours a day one way. A very large county and transportation is a real problem. I don't know if it is any better since we have adult drivers or not, maybe somewhat but I guess a third of the kids drive cars. A great number of your White kids have automobiles and so for the population of our school I have only nine buses but you have 500 cars on campus.

Goldie: Utilization of funds.

Mr. Lewis: Well, you know the catigal funds from the state and local governments are set in stone but we have been very fortunate. I have a very strong support group made up of about seven or eight professional men, doctors, laborers, and electricians and we have what we call a South Cougers Sports Club. In the last six years this group has been responsible for construction of a \$185,000 stadium, \$35,000 track. We

have poured into that school more than \$200,000 in the last six years that we have raised and with very little effort and it is not candy sales. The sports program is good so I have generated revenue from that. We take these revenues and turn right back for the kids. We dress them nice for the athletic events, we improved on the , we used some of the money to supplement instruction. I don't want my teachers to need or want anything. Most of us get too much. There is too much reproducing stuff but as far as actually needing something you just don't need. I don't see how a teacher in North Carolina can say they need anything. I just don't. I think about my own impoverished education when you see a globe occasion go from room to room and a teacher has a chalkboard. They didn't cover as much junk as we cover but we didn't deal in quantity as much as quality. I think that is part of our problem. Too dang gone much. They know more now that I did when I got out of college and you try to teach them that and it is all surface. All surface.

Goldie: What about your cafeteria management?

Mr. Lewis: We have about six sweet old gals there that do well. They have to be friendly and they have to be nice. I guess a third of our kids are on free lunches and maybe more.

Goldie: Do you select your cafeteria manager?

Mr. Lewis: I'm in the process. I'm included in the process of interview and I tell you what we look for when we get a personnel. I accept one basic type. That you have gone to school somewhere and you've passed all these tests and someone says that you can teach and you're certified. Well, I'm looking for people who are strong and effective domain. Feelings and being energetic and happy and that is what I put in all my advertisements. I just want them to be enthusiastic and happy and I don't care if you've made A's or B's in college. That doesn't make any difference to me and I think if you surround yourself with people like that who can relate to kids and really feel about the work as a missionary. That is good.

Goldie: Buildings and grounds.

Mr. Lewis: Real bad initially. We just had completed a \$1.7 million dollar addition to the school and it was about 16 trailers and several years ago this sister school, West Brunswick, had an addition and they added about 12 or 13 classrooms in the center and it didn't look too well so it came time for--and all the high schools are just alike, like chicken coups--all alike. You should see South Brunswick. I found out when we selected the architect that weekend I went over to the architect's office, Wesley Boney's office, and I sat down and talked with him and he drew out on a sketch pad two proposals one about \$3.4 million and one about \$1.7

million and talked to him about some thing I wanted and so the first meeting he had with the board members he went in there with the drawing and it threw all of the board members off balance because they wanted it to be just like the other high schools and he sat there a little while and he hauled around but as a result we have a lovely plant and it has really enhanced the sense of well-being for the kids and teachers and community and we only moved in about a year ago and it's nice.

Goldie: So it makes your school different from the rest of them.

Mr. Lewis: You're darn right. It better be different.

Goldie: Community relations.

Mr. Lewis: I don't do much to foster community relations. And I tell you my point because first of all I'm not Proctor and Gamble. I'm not selling something. I think that community relation is generated from the 800 kids you have in your school. I say to the teachers and I say to myself, if kids can go and say you are fair and you treat us all just alike, even if it is like dogs it's okay because if I have 800 kids and they go home they say you know Mr. Lewis is all right. He is cool and I like him then that is two parents, that's 1600 parents and 3200 grandparents and all your uncles, aunts and cousins and all you want people to say about you is that you are human, you are fair, you are consistent and that is that. I don't like to wave the flag. I like to be for real. If something is wrong and you make a mistake, say I'm sorry. Because the majority of the community will say, hey, this guy is okay. Somebody must have done something real wrong. Well, you survive it. You see. I can't go out and tell you that in the senior pamphlets and letters that we are the best school in the country when people have test scores that measure you or you have things of that nature so all you gotta do is say, hey we did the best we can and we are improving and I think from that we have good community relations. We have excellent community relations.

Goldie: How much administrative power and control do you feel that you have over your site and your responsibilities?

Mr. Lewis: I take it. It's mine. Literally if the superintendent feels that he wants to dictate or run the schools the board can let him take it. The school is mine, it is my personality, I make the good and bad decisions within the confines of the school and the laws and I feel as if it is my organization. We work within limits but I am not afraid to make decisions that are contrary sometimes to popular beliefs.

Goldie: How did the desegregation of schools affect your role as principal?

Mr. Lewis: Well, when I got in this business it was after most of the desegregation. All of the turmoil and this type of thing was gone. The fact is, they sent me to school in Harnett County in 1973, the first year I was there was 1974, as an assistant principal and afterwards I found out the reason I went over there was because of the Black-White things and I could see the residue of the Black-White issues but back when I was in school in L.A., Little Alabama, I think the Black kids had more opportunities to ascend to leadership positions in school, they had to be always and foremost in the forefront because they were all Black. I found that even when I went to my current school I could go into my higher math classes and I might see one Black kid and go to my AP classes and see one or two Black kids. There was a general feeling in both schools I worked. The Black kids will always be in this track and sadly to say, I had a lot of Black teachers who endorse this and if they didn't endorse it verbally they endorsed it by being complacent and letting it happen. I think I have 2 1/2 or one half of general math because my kids take algebra, geometry, algebra II. I had a kid to go to an appointment to Annapolis Academy. Kids in all of the classes and they are learning and they're doing well and I think that integration initially hurt and you can almost walk in any school and find this I think. My kids went to Pine Forest and I didn't get too much involved in their education. If they came home with C's it didn't make any difference to me. I think this thing of grading pacified is something of the truth but I think a lot of the discipline problems in your schools stem from low expectations and putting kids in categories. You see we teach kids a lot. We don't have to tell them, it is just how we act we teach them a lot. We are so guilty of that--the White and Black administrators for letting this thing go on like this. I think that maybe because of the way that I got involved in education being a real adult and then set out to be a teacher, to be an administrator I think my approach and my experiences provided me the different spectrum and how to look at it and I just think that we haven't done a very good job at this, even to a great number of your high school teachers in vocational education.

Goldie: And the Blacks tend to be in the vocational areas rather than in the academic areas.

Goldie: Do you enjoy your job and why?

Mr. Lewis: Let me see. You see dear. I was a war hero. I was a soldier and crises, things that make your blood boil, problems, were the things that I was used to--so to walk in a high school in this country you find the same type of crisis situation day to day that you find in combat. I served in

Viet Nam, Korea, the Dominion Republic and to me it was--boy, this is good so from this perspective I like it because it doesn't bother me. I don't worry about things. I don't see it as being bad, I see it as one gigantic challenge and I set a lot of goals for myself and my people and as I talk with them I feel good about it.

Goldie: What do you consider the major problem of your principalship?

Mr. Lewis: I might not even know because I'm just wildcating it. I think what could be a real problem in the principalship is the expectation of this thing called "instructional leader." I think if you want to equate it to a CEO in a large company, here is a guy who is a gentleman who keeps things running but may not know anything about the technical operation of his plan or what it is producing. A principal may or may not be a person who is a leader, administrator and may not know very much about the technical aspect of the disciplines. We know that you are not supposed to be a versonary disciplinarian but we haven't defined whether teaching is a technique, an art--they don't know. So someone could come in and screwdal out of the thing to assume this exclusive responsibility, not as an evaluator but as someone who has the ability to work with teachers and to help. I don't think principals have the time exclusively throughout the day because of the process that you are responsible for.

Goldie: What do you consider the most rewarding about your principalship?

Mr. Lewis: To me, the most rewarding thing about being a principal is when parents of those kids who almost fell through the crack can come back and say--not come back--we give them that diploma and you get a hug from them or the parents come up and say something to you not the person who was going to be successful just because they got up and came to school but the other kid. I'll give you an example. I told you about the little incident when I had that little confrontation with the student. Well, after this we kept the boy in school and got him and naturally his mother was angry of course the kid was larger than I am--a lot younger too.

Goldie: Was this a White boy or a Black Boy?

Mr. Lewis: A Black boy--no it was a White boy. There was two, one was Black. The mother came back to me after this was over and after graduation and she came up to the school and went back to the car and sent for me and I said, maybe she is going to cut me or shoot me. She said, Mr. Lewis, I want to thank you. I have seven kids and this is the only one that ever finished high school and if it had not been for you and what you've done he never would have. I want you to know

that I love you and appreciate it and it was such a--you know because you know because she is a mother and she was really angry with me and wanted my jugular vein but she realized that--The kid is doing real. He didn't go to college but he has a good job and has a family and these are the kinds of things in your life when you touch or help those no one thought could be helped or touched.

Goldie: If you knew of a young Black male or female who aspired to be a high school principal in North Carolina, what advice would you give?

Mr. Lewis: Know yourself. Get a good education, and I said good education--go in there and get your ticket punched. Do that. Be natural, be Black, be real Black. Don't be afraid to be Black. I can't break dance now, I danced last night. I'm Black. Be a person of resolve and self-confidence. Fake it until you make it. If they don't want you, don't want them. Don't be a "Yes man" or "Yes, woman" Recognize hypocrisy. Be wise, be judgemental and be Black.

Goldie: Do you think that young Black people will have to have someone of the other race to say that they can do it--a so-called sponsor?

Mr. Lewis: I don't know if they have to but to look at the proportions of people from majority races who are in leadership positions in our schools. Whether they have to or not the chances are they are going to have those people to tell them so I don't know whether this is a must or not but for the average kid as you say there are forty high school Black principals growth have this familiar to them. That's something else.

Goldie: Well, I'm at the end of the interview. Do you have any words of wisdom you would like to share?

Mr. Lewis: If I had some wisdom, I'd be down at Key West, Florida right now fishing in a 24 foot boat. I admire you guys who have been in it. My wife has been in it for thirty years and I think that they have a lot of people who have done a fabulous job to have been in education. From a masculine standpoint from a standpoint of a man I have found and this is strictly my perception of manhood and of people who are high achievers I have found very few who are real sharpe White males in education. I don't care if they are superintendents, principals or what. They are there because when you look at it years ago for a Black man to consider the profession as a teacher or a minister. We speak of education in the same sentence and the same voice as economics. The real sharpe member of the majority race are in areas where they can make money. Those who are not so sharpe are educators. Okay, now Black males in education are pretty sharpe and laid back a little bit because I don't know why

maybe feelings of you know but basically pretty sharpe. Of course the women of both races are--We'de be in big trouble if they didn't have women in education. You guys are the ones who carry the banner but the people who show any real leadership ability I've not found them in education. Not in the majority--not in the White race and you can print that. I don't care.

Goldie: I really appreciate you taking your time. This has been very interesting and this is the first interview that I have had with someone with your background coming from another field to education.

Mr. Lewis: Well, it's probably going to be quite different because the other guys--we're products of our experiences. They are going to talk about their experiences and they are going to talk about education.

Goldie: But the one thing that I have found is that administrators are administrators and even though you come from a different area the way you answered the questions are still high school principals way. I appreciate this.