

Interview

with

LAURA KIRCHNER

December 8, 2004

by Elizabeth Gritter

Transcribed by Cathy Mann

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

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Transcript – Laura Kirchner

Interviewee: Laura Kirchner
Interviewer: Elizabeth Gritter
Interview Date: December 8, 2004
Location: Louisville, Kentucky
Length: 2 cassettes, approx. 1 hour and 45 min.
Notes on Transcript: Future researchers should review parts of this transcript against the tape. I was not able to do so because of time constraints. – Elizabeth Gritter, editor of this transcript.

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

ELIZABETH GRITTER: This is Elizabeth Gritter interviewing Laura Kirchner on December 8, 2004 in Louisville, Kentucky. Do you have a middle name?

LAURA KIRCHNER: I use my maiden name, Wilberding, W-I-L-B-E-R-D-I-N-G.

EG: Okay and I can fill that out later. [Gritter refers to an interview form.]
And what's your date of birth?

LK: 7/24/48.

EG: What's your birthplace?

LK: Louisville.

EG: Are you married?

LK: I'm a widow.

EG: Okay. What was your husband's name?

LK: George.

EG: Okay. Do you have any children?

LK: No.

EG: Okay. What's your educational experience?

LK: Do you mean how much education do I have? Is that what you want? I have postgraduate. I have rank one, which is thirty hours above my master's. And I have a master's in reading and I have a principal's certificate and an administration certificate.

EG: Okay. Where did you do your postgraduate work?

LK: U of L, University of Louisville.

EG: Okay. Where did you get your master's?

LK: U of L.

EG: Okay. When did you get your master's?

LK: Oh, now you'd ask something like that. Let's see. When did Lina get married? She's not thirty years yet. She'll be thirty. I guess I got it in summer of '75.

EG: Okay.

LK: Seventy-four or '75, I guess '75.

EG: Summer of '75?

LK: That's good enough. That's close enough.

EG: Yeah. Where did you get your bachelor's?

LK: Bellarmine University.

EG: Oh, yeah. What was it in?

LK: Elementary education.

EG: Okay.

LK: I was one of those K-8.

EG: Okay, yeah, I've been hearing that from various people.

LK: A lot of us were K-8's then.

EG: When did you get your degree?

LK: Seventy-one.

EG: Okay. And your occupational experience?

LK: Oh, God.

EG: Highlights at least.

LK: I taught two years Catholic school and then I taught the rest in Jefferson County or Louisville City and then the merger. I've taught everything from K-8th. I was a reading specialist but in the classroom work with Chapter 1. And, let's see, I was president of the teachers union for four years, Jefferson PCTA. Half of my experience is elementary and half is middle. It was almost equal.

EG: Okay. Are you still a teacher?

LK: No, I'm retired.

EG: You're retired, okay. So when did you retire?

LK: 2001.

EG: Okay. When did you begin teaching?

LK: Nineteen seventy-one, well, that was my first official [year] with the city and county but I did two years Catholic [school teaching] with an emergency certificate with two years of college and I did that in fall of '68. I taught the '68 school year and the '69 school year and went back and finished my degree and went to [the] public [schools].

EG: Okay and so you began with Louisville system?

LK: In '71, fall of '71.

EG: Okay.

LK: Because I had a hard time getting finished. I was hired and I didn't have my degree finished and they had to let me take like fifteen hours that summer.

EG: Yeah, you were saying that you were only nineteen.

LK: Yeah, when I started, when I got hired, first job, yeah.

EG: Yeah, the kids were fourteen, fifteen years old.

LK: Yeah, yeah, I pushed it. So I did two years of teaching and four years of college in five years.

EG: Wow, must have been really busy.

LK: It was and I held two jobs, two part-time jobs plus my teaching job.

EG: Wow.

LK: Yeah, I didn't get much sleep but I had to do it to get through.

EG: And you were at various schools throughout?

LK: I taught throughout.

EG: Throughout the system?

LK: Yeah. I've done a lot of schools. I mean I can give you some of them.

EG: I guess it would be good to get the ones during busing.

LK: Where I was at at busing was before, well, the first one I was out was Byck and then I went to Foster and I was at Foster at busing.

EG: Foster Elementary?

LK: Uh-huh, Foster Elementary. It was at Forty-Fourth and Garland, I think it was. I was there four or five years.

EG: Do you know the years?

LK: Let's see, what years did I leave there? Busing was what, '75?

EG: Uh-huh.

LK: I was there '72. I either left in '76 or '77. What year was the strike, '76? I was gone for the strike so I left in '76. I started at Shacklette that year because I was at Shacklette with the strike. We had the strike the next year after busing.

EG: Oh, Ken Rosenbaum brought up the strike just a little bit.

LK: Yeah, the strike was a big thing with the busing. It was the unification of the Jefferson County teachers from being city-county fighting. The strike did a unifying thing and made us one system more than anything I think else did.

EG: Oh, that's interesting.

LK: It was the year after busing.

EG: Okay. How do you spell the name of the school you were at after Foster?

LK: I went to Shacklette, S-H-A-C-K-L-E-T-T-E.

EG: Okay.

LK: Then I left there after a year and I went to Shawnee, which was an inner city middle school. I was going to try middle school. They talked me into it for a reading position and I stayed one year and then I went to Williams Middle School and I stayed a half a year. Scores got up and they closed the program mid-year and I went to Sanders Elementary. At that time we were testing twice a year. Reading scores came up and they closed that unit down and they moved me to Brandice. I stayed one

year at Brandice. Scores came up. Moved me out. I went to Portland and never got high up. That school was so bad that you could never get them up enough. It was too much poverty. The year after I left, they opened another center back at Brandice. My girlfriend took it and she lasted one year and got the scores up and she was gone. So they were moving reading teachers around. Every time you would start making progress, you were put somewhere else. Then the kids would drop and you'd be, well, I told you so, you know.

EG: They would drop after you left at those schools?

LK: Oh yeah, because there was nobody giving them that much extra attention. You'd be working hard and they'd be getting double reading is what happened. Then you'd be gone so the next crop would come up, they'd test them and they had not had that special reading and they would be low. So finally they got wise and started leaving them. But then they were moving us mid year.

EG: Wow, a lot of moving around.

LK: Uh-huh, I did a lot of moving.

EG: When were you president of the JCTA?

LK: I got elected in 1997 and it was '97-2001 and I went out from there.

EG: Okay. So you've been a reading teacher all this time?

LK: I was after--. When did I start reading? I started reading after I left Foster. But when I left, even though I was a reading specialist, I took regular classes and I brought the whole class in. Then later on I had a reading center and I had three assistants and I took mixed grades all the time and I would book me in with groups too and then, you know, rotate them and that stuff.

EG: What were you teaching at Foster?

LK: [At] Foster, I was fifth grade.

EG: Fifth grade? Okay, well, I think that's, are there any other like organizational involvements that I should put down or anything else?

LK: I was in Phi Delta Kappa, which was the teacher to do. Basically, my whole interest was in on the reading and everything on JCTA. I was on negotiating teams. I was on committee curriculum meetings and all that kind of stuff. But, anybody that was active in teaching was doing all those things. We wrote curriculum. We did planned in services.

EG: So you were a member of that from the time you began teaching?

LK: I got recruited by Ken [Rosenbaum] and Lloyd May at my first teachers meeting and they talked me into going to a leadership training session. I signed up and I was working from then on.

EG: Wow.

LK: I started working the first day I was hired. I started being in the union and helping out. That was the days of dedication and we were all the '60s, children of the '60s. You know, we're going in to save the world. There was a new program. He [Ken Rosenbaum] probably told you, Focus and Impact. It was a federal program for poverty, high poverty. We got a lot of Teacher Corps teachers. It was how you could get out of the draft and beat Vietnam and a lot of guys were signing up for Teacher Corps. Come work in the inner cities. It was like a Peace Corp type thing for teaching and the draft wouldn't touch you. So this federal funding came through and Louisville had a ton of it. So those of us at the city schools were getting all that training if you

volunteered for those hard core city schools. That's what I started with and I did some of their training and things.

EG: Wow, great. I am going to just jot down from time to time any proper words that you say and then we'll go over the spelling at the end. I'll probably be looking at the recorder from time to time just to make sure it's recording. So if it looks like I'm a little disconcerted I'm listening.

LK: That's okay, that's fine.

EG: So I'm going to start with some background questions about you growing up and then, of course, focus it on the school desegregation and busing. So you've lived in Louisville all your life?

LK: That's correct, all my life. Born here and was educated parochial schools. I was not in the public system. And went to a private girls' school after high school and it closed later on. Then my college was Ursuline College to start with and I was the merged class with that. So, in fact, I was one of the typists for all of the privacy things when it was being done and planned the merger. So when I graduated technically it was Bellarmine-Ursuline and they had the Ursuline name on the rings and stuff and then they dropped the Ursuline part later on.

EG: Oh, I see, okay.

LK: So it was a merged school. I was the first class out.

EG: Oh, sure, yeah. Did you know black people when you were growing up? Did you have contacts with blacks?

LK: I lived in a very, very poor area at the West End, which was almost all white. The blacks were on one side of Market Street and the whites were on the other.

I knew very few black people and had no contacts. I mean there was just very little contact here until I got into--. We moved in, I was eleven years old. [In] fifty-nine, we moved deeper in the West End of Louisville, which was predominantly black. We were the neighborhood that became--. There were a lot of scare tactics and blacks were moving into the area and they were calling whites and threatening you. Real estate agents were saying if you don't sell, your house is going to be bombed and dah, dah, dah, dah, dah.

EG: The real estate agents were calling and threatening you?

LK: Oh yeah, you were getting all kinds of calls trying to get you to sell your house cheap. My parents were getting it and I had younger brothers and sisters, and we were living there when the riots broke out. By that time, we were the only white family within about a five-block radius. My family stayed and we had no problems. We were protected by our neighbors and word got out to leave us alone. But I remember coming home from Bellarmine and getting an escort by the police because we were under curfew and I had a night class and they brought me down and saw that I got home.

EG: What riots were these?

LK: There were riots in Louisville in '65, I think it was. No, it was '67.

EG: And what were they about?

LK: Black-white. There was a park in Louisville that did not allow blacks. You had segregation in stores, which as a kid I didn't even realize it happened. There was segregation on like water fountains in some places. I don't know if it existed on the bus because I was too oblivious when it first started. But this was the time of the

civil rights movement in the South and it was starting here to make the park open, open housing, because I remember going down as a Bellarmine student and being in a protest for open housing here. My twin and I was a praying and we were kneeling in the street and I'll never forget the BBC had a camera on us because we were twins, identical twins kneeling together and some guy came in and spit in our face. They kept saying you cannot be violent, you cannot be violent, and I was ready to kill that guy and I couldn't get up and do it. But that was my first protest for anything but I was in college by then.

EG: Did you do any other protests?

LK: Just minor stuff just around here, but I did not go on any of the marches or anything basically because I couldn't afford it. I wanted to but you had to pay your own way and I didn't have the money to go.

EG: To like Washington, D.C.?

LK: Well, no, it would have been to Selma and down South. It would have been those marches.

EG: The civil rights movement marches?

LK: Yeah, in the civil rights marches because they were recruiting people at college and stuff but I didn't go. I just did what was here in Louisville that I could do when I wasn't working.

EG: So you did civil rights movement activism?

LK: Yeah, I did a little. I mean we were just kids that would show up and they needed somebody and we'd do it, that type of thing.

EG: What did your parents do?

LK: My parents: My mother was a homemaker and my dad worked for A & P. There was a grocery store chain. He was in the shop on the trucks. He worked as a tire man and greased cars and that kind of stuff. If you heard them talk, race words would be occasionally used. There'd be things like that but my mother babysat black children all the time in the house and took care of neighbors. Grandma did, but you would have thought it was racist, from the language. The N word would be said and things like this. But we always had kids in our house. Mother was the one over there helping them when they got sick and helping the neighbors and things. So it was language. It wasn't meaning.

EG: What was that like growing up or being the only white family in an all black neighborhood?

LK: We didn't have any trouble until right before the busing, the riots, and one of my little sisters was chased up a tree and threatened and it was very scary. It was very scary knowing it was around you. Before that I'd been coming home one night from school, about a week before it happened, and a black child had been killed up the street and he'd be shot to death. There was trouble. You knew it was brewing, but I didn't know what was coming. I was just worried about getting through class, summer school class. Lane and I were driving home and we didn't have air conditioning in our old car, but we always left our windows up because it was too dangerous in the West End. The door was locked and a bunch of blacks surrounded our car and tried to break in as we were driving. I had to swerve and go on the sidewalks to get the guys off, and it was scary. Then right before that, that winter, I'd had a date coming home late one night, and we [were] shot at. That was the last date

with that guy. He didn't have any sense of adventure. So it could be scary. Things were happening and you knew they were happening.

When the rioting broke out, I had met a guy -- we didn't even know it was happening -- donating blood, who happened to be-- He was a kid, you know, we were at college. We were donating blood, and he was on the bed next to me and we had been chit chatting while we were giving blood and he worked for the [*Courier Journal*]. When the rioting broke out, he called me to warn my family because he knew where we lived. My grandmother was deaf and she lived in a really bad section of town up on the West End and we had to go up and break in because everybody thought she had money. She didn't have any money. We were afraid she would get robbed because she wouldn't hear them breaking in. We had to go up and get her out and bring her down but we slept in the floor. And all the kids, we didn't use lights at night and things like that because we didn't know. But we were protected. We never had any trouble at all until it was over with. But it was scary. Then my parents moved in '72, but they bought in another area and that area went predominately black pretty fast also. They stayed there until-- When did they move? Let me think. Ally is twenty years, twenty years ago. My dad had cancer and my grandmother was still alive. She was deaf. My dad was deaf. Dad had cancer and Mother and Dad decided they couldn't live there anymore, that there was too much gang stuff happening and drugs and they were afraid that if Dad died there would be two women there alone so we moved them.

EG: What area was this that you moved them from?

LK: That was off Cameron Road. It was off the South End. My parents were living there when busing happened. That was the area that was the most belligerent white area of the city and was fighting it the most and burning the crosses and the whole schemer. My parents lived in the fringes of that area.

EG: So were they affected by busing?

LK: We only got affected--. I had a sister taken by emergency one night to the hospital. She was fifteen and she was in the hospital in that end of town and I had to go. Mother and Dad called me and they were hysterical and I had to talk the police to let me through the curfew because that was when the rioting was breaking out with busing and that area was sealed off and I needed to get to the hospital. So the police gave me a pass and let me get in and I went to the hospital and checked my sister out when they released her [in] the middle of the night. Then I brought her to my apartment. I had an apartment then and I brought her home with me.

EG: The emergency wasn't related to anything with busing?

LK: No, no, no, she had gone unconscious, and something happened with her head and we dealt with it later. But, you know, they got her conscious and they checked her out and was able to send her home and then change medicines and stuff. It was like a seizure type thing but wasn't anything to do with busing. But it just so happened it was that damn weekend and we were under curfew and we couldn't get to the hospital. Mom was panicking and so I went and I talked myself through it and got in.

EG: When the busing, the violent protests and demonstrations were going on, were you affected by that at all?

LK: It was in my neighborhood all over trying to get people to do it and all that. Of course, where I was teaching, I was living with my folks still then and that neighborhood was being bused to Foster. They were coming from my general area and they were coming to Foster, so it was really hard that I was the teacher and they were protesting coming to my school. Because I'd been at Foster before busing and then they moved a bunch of black teachers out because there were just a few of us white teachers there and they brought more white teachers in because all that happened with the Singleton ratio. I'm sure Ken [Rosenbaum] talked about Singleton and how they staffed the schools, and we had an order by the judge on how to staff schools.

EG: Actually he didn't talk about it.

LK: Okay, the Singleton ratio was, I think you had to have, and I could be off on my numbers now, like twenty-two percent minimum black but you couldn't have over thirty percent black in a building or something like that. It was a ratio. And you didn't count at that point special ed [which] was just getting started. You didn't count special ed because that became a refinement later. But we had to staff our buildings according to this. So black teachers were getting moved out of the West End, put around the district because a lot of the county schools had no black teachers. White teachers were being brought into the black schools. So all that happened at the same time. I mean the judge ruled in like July or August and this was all done by school starting. It was unbelievable. You went out and you came back and there you were. You had a whole new staff. Most of the principals were being moved around. Everybody was getting moved and we had a merger.

EG: Yeah, Ken talked a lot about that.

LK: The merger is what brought about deseg. I'm sure he explained that to you.

EG: Not in detail. He just talked about how they [were] related.

LK: Okay, well, [the] city schools went bankrupt. Because they went bankrupt, the county had to absorb them. We did that in the springtime, I don't know, March, April, whatever it was. At that point we were then segregated because we were one school system. You had all these black schools and then you had the county was white. So therefore the judge ruled that we were a segregated school system and we had to bus. The city had precipitated that by going into bankruptcy. Because of that you had to, if you move your children around, deseg your staff also. That becomes a sore issue even today because we still follow the ruling. You know, sometimes you've been trying to get in a school for fifteen years and they need a black teacher and a young black teacher might get in there where a white teacher didn't. But then in another way, black teachers have a hard time getting where they want to go, because it might be frozen to them because they've got too many and they've got to spread them around. So it's got a two edged sword to it but I think it's necessary.

EG: You said then while you were living in the South End area you were teaching at this black school and the protests were going on and people in your neighborhood.

LK: Oh yeah, it was all over. They were blocking the streets. They were starting, you know, it was all over. My mom lived there, and I was going back and forth. My apartment was the other end of town but I was staying with Mom and Dad a

lot, you know, and things like that. We would drive--. I'd go to school and it was just bad. When we started, we had very few white kids that showed up and not that many black kids. It was Christmas and we were still having things like where the year before I had forty-five kids in my room, I might have eight. We were fully staffed and by this time they were going after the families and bringing judgments against them to force them to put their kids in school for not having them in school and things. When that started happening, we started picking up kids. Then you were constantly bringing a kid up. Now at the beginning we took advantage of it, the teachers did. I'd say I've got three kids, you got three, I'll teach them for an hour. You take them for an hour. You know we'd trade them back and forth and I'd do the reading. It was wonderful. But you would pick them up one at a time or two would show up so you were constantly back peddling and you're going to be held accountable for a years worth of learning. Those parents didn't want to hear their kid's going to be held back because they missed three-fourths of a year of school. So those kids were coming in and you had things like I told you: When I was in a former black school, we had nothing. With the poverty of that school system, there was nothing and we were forty-five kids to a room. We had no PE, music, art teachers. Nothing existed. Your music was what you sung a song. They brought these teachers in, well, they thought we were holding out on them on supplies and things and we only had one little box of chalk among us and didn't have a lot of textbooks, didn't have basic necessities. We didn't have new maps. We didn't have things, so all of that had to be equalized because now we're one system. So that became a big issue of trying to get equalization in the buildings.

EG: Yeah. Did you see that happen?

LK: It happened gradually. You know things started getting better. But the first year, that first year was bumpy. We had a lot of complaints. The county teachers stayed together and they were sure that we white teachers that had been there before because we were basically who was there, we had played with those numbers and gave them the worst kids and this kind of stuff. I mean nobody trusted anybody and I was holding out on you and you thought, you were sure I was holding out because you had to have more than this. We were saying they'd been soft. They'd had it easy. They'd always had--. Didn't have to make up stuff like we had to make our own supplies. We had dealt with all kinds of emergencies. We had been attacked. We'd had all these things that happened in poverty schools. So the distrust was there and then you're trying to make this work and then the parents were being so nasty. You'd have them come in and they didn't want--. You had to protect those little white kids so carefully because if anything happened that would have been blown up ten miles. So I was watching them and then I didn't want my black kids getting abused. So you were constantly--. Those poor little black kids going into these white kids with angry nasty stuff. It was a hard year. You were constantly playing Solomon and trying to keep everybody watched and everybody safe. I'll never forget I had one little boy. He was a little white boy, and he got sick. We had taken his temperature and it was like a hundred and four. We didn't have a sick room, you know, that kind of stuff. I'd found a cot to put him down on. Called his mother, and she said he's your responsibility. There was many a time they'd miss their buses and things. The parents wouldn't come and we'd have to take them home, and things like this. PTA was hard

to come by. They didn't want to do anything, not in the city schools. By then, you were put on a rotation and the white kids were bused two years and then you did it by your last name at the beginning. Well, they weren't going to do anything in these black schools. They're just going to put in their time and then they'll go and work at their home schools. So that was a hard thing to turn over. It took a while to win that over. First year was rough.

EG: When do you feel like that you did win them over?

LK: I think the strike the next year.

EG: Yeah, could you talk about the strike and what that was about?

LK: They didn't do a contract. If I remember correctly, it was something about the contract and we didn't settle it. There was no money. They weren't putting in. It was like the teachers felt unappreciated. We had made this work. We were the ones that protected the kids because we didn't have kids hurt. We protected the kids. We were riding buses. We were coming at all hours. We were playing catch up all year long. We felt like that we were the ones that made this program work and they weren't going to put the money in. They weren't settling the contract. They put one before us, and it was lousy and I don't remember all the details. Ken would remember more.

EG: They weren't giving enough money to the schools?

LK: No there wasn't anything for teachers or for supplies or for salaries, and they weren't going to even settle. We couldn't settle a contract. So we gave them a deadline and it went through. We did some just practicing marches in that fall. And Thanksgiving we took the vote and we went out on strike the day after Thanksgiving.

Now it so happened when we went on strike Louisville -- it was the day after Thanksgiving, Monday we started -- we had a huge snowstorm and it was colder than blue blazes. So we had pickets at all schools and we got barrels for them. Then they ruled that you couldn't have an open fire in the county unless it was a cooking fire, so we had marshmallows and hot dogs and everything. So, we were cooking. But parents took sympathy on us. We did a really good PR job. Parents supported it. Jefferson County closed the schools. So, we didn't have this somebody crossing the line. They closed the schools so they played into our hands. We were out two weeks and it was cold and snowing the whole two weeks. But we had organized it so well, any teacher that didn't walk that picket line was in deep stuff because we kept lists of who was there and whatever. Even our credit union wasn't going to give us money for loans to help teachers pay their bills, so we took over the credit union when that was over and we kicked everybody off the board. We signed up a bunch of teachers, got the credit union under our control and put teachers on it so that would never happen again. That was the beginning and I would say that turned it. Parents were supporting their teachers. Teachers united. You were no longer city county. We were us against the administration, and we went out and the strike became a rallying force. You really saw an improvement in schools after that.

EG: Wow.

LK: It began because we had two different curriculums. You had different books. We were fighting to try to get organized where we had one set of textbooks or at least things that worked together. We didn't have the curriculum mapped together. Report cards, everything had to be redone. See, for a while there, we had two school

boards. They put them together. We had thirty-some odd people on a school board. You can imagine the fighting went on there. We had duplicate deputy superintendents and this and that. So all that had to be merged and the record keeping and all that had to be done. I think the strike for the teachers' element put us together for working for our schools.

EG: Then did you see better resources?

LK: It came gradually. Money started coming in and we got grants and the tax base was there. But by having all of it as a county it helped keep down some of the white flight.

EG: Oh, right, right.

LK: That's what happened in a lot of districts. You had white flight. We had some. We had Bullitt County. We had some Christian schools build up and that kind of stuff, but a lot of them died down. We were able to keep this because Jefferson County had a good tax base. Our school system didn't become poor, and we started spreading it around and trying to balance it out and this type of thing. So I think we have kept a very good school system, which you don't often see like this. We're probably one of the top urban school systems in the country. But it was because of the way it happened. We had to reach a compromise on how do you keep some of these parents from going to private schools that have got a lot of money and that's when we did our schools within a school. We have magnets, Male, Manual, our traditional schools. That was kind of a way to satisfy those people.

EG: When did those start?

LK: Started the year after busing.

EG: Really?

LK: Yeah, that's when we started and that was, you know, it's a sore point still for some teachers. It's like we have our private schools, but they have to take blacks but they can interview and they have to, you know, but they take the poverties necessarily. They don't take special ed, that kind of stuff.

EG: What schools don't?

LK: Well, you've got traditional middle schools, traditional elementaries. We've got magnets. Manual is probably one of the top here. It's probably one of the top schools in the country. You interview to get in. Oh, they say they take special ed. They take orthopedically handicapped. That's how they get around their special ed needs. When you're teaching in a real poverty school like I was at Southern Middle, we bused for race. The issue really isn't race. The issue is poverty. Social economic is the real indicator of poverty. That is where your scores and your education is the cutting edge. That's what you need to work on, socio-economic. Poor whites, poor blacks, it's the same. But we've never been able to get the district to bus for socio economic. We do the busing and a lot of us have proposed it, but I think the rest of the county would throw a hissy and I think the district's afraid to take that issue on because they're afraid they'll lose more white parents. But socio-economic issue is a real problem. You've got Atkinson. You've got Southern. You've got all these schools, Western Middle, and they're fifty percent black, but their socio economic is like ninety-five percent below poverty level. So there's the issue. Are you going to bus all of those kids out? That's what equalizes -- if you can get them into where they see a better life and that.

EG: Have you tried to do that?

LK: Oh, yeah, we've proposed it for years in negotiations and things. It's like opening a Pandora's box when you start doing that.

EG: When did you start trying to push for this?

LK: Oh, I think it's been on the talk since the '80s, mid '80s, late '80s. You had to get the busing part settled first and then people that really deal in poverty schools realized it's not always race, it's poverty. You see a higher poverty rate in minorities but your real issue comes with the poverty. That's where you have the broken homes. That's where you have mothers having babies too young. You have the drugs. I mean not that you don't have it in the others but all these things just build up and affect the learning of the kids.

EG: How did you manage teaching at a school like Foster with few resources?

LK: You had to be very creative.

EG: What were some of the ways you were creative?

LK: I did a lot of teaching from the newspaper. You know I would bring things in and I'd run them off or I'd make things. We'd make things. We made our own flash cards. We didn't have flash cards furnished. I made my own song sheets to teach them songs that I thought kids should know. I'd go out and buy little old--. Then you had ditto machines. We didn't have the Xerox and all that stuff. You had the old blue ditto and the Spirit Masters. Oh, I'd buy one and you'd buy another and we'd share them. I would make stories. I taught them stories by using their language, the whole language approach, because I could get cheap paper and we'd make stories up. We'd learn words that way. I made my own spelling lists, because we didn't have

spelling books. I'd make activities up, and we'd do it at the board. I couldn't send homework home a lot, because we didn't have enough books and when they went home you lost them. They'd forget to bring them back or somebody would steal them or whatever so you couldn't afford to let your books go. So you made other things and you were constantly making things.

EG: Was that typical of the teachers who taught there?

LK: All of us were doing it. All of us were doing it. So fifth grade teachers would share and fourth grade teachers. "Oh, I've got something that's a little too hard." "Here, try this." We'd share among ourselves. I remember I had a ball. Nobody else had a ball, so they'd come to my room and we had to stagger our playground time. Then later on we had three fifth grades, and two of the girls were pregnant. By then, you could work pregnant, and I'll never forget--. We started every day out because we went to playground. We were firm believers of playground. Unless it was pouring down rain, we were outside and we played. We did calisthenics with them, because you didn't need books for that. I did all the leading, and they had to do ten minutes. We had them all lined up. Each of us now had forty-five kids. We had all these three classes of forty-fives lined up and then I would do four square and somebody else did the jump rope because we had brought an old clothesline. Then we'd let a little group talk if they wanted to, because girls, you know, a lot of times--. We'd give them free time. Then we sent the group that had to do punishment, we put them in another corner. They missed homework or didn't do their seat work or whatever and we had them in another corner. We rotated among ourselves and took charge of them.

EG: You were one of the few white teachers at that school?

LK: Well, when it became merger, there were a lot of white teachers. They brought white teachers in. But when I first started I desegregated the faculty. I was one of the first white teachers that went to Foster. There were only three or four of us in that building.

EG: How did you come to teach at Foster?

LK: When I got hired the year before in '71, I was sent to a place called Cotter Duvalle. The old term used to be they'd call it Little Africa, because it was in the middle of a black project, really tough, tough projects then. They've all been torn down now and the big drugs were over there. They tore it down and they've now made better homes. Really tough. I've got sixth grade in the junior high section, and I was no bigger than you, long hair. I was a hundred and ten, hundred and fifteen pounds. I walked in there and after a couple of days, graffiti all over the walls, [and] was terrified. I was terrified. The kids picked me up and carried me into a bathroom, some boys did.¹ My principal had told me she didn't ever want to see me in a dress. I was to wear slacks at all times. At that point, we didn't wear blue jeans and stuff. We had to wear dress pants. I didn't have any money. I only had a couple of pair of pants to my name. I was terrified.

I went to () Wilson who [had] hired me. I said, "Miss Wilson, I want a transfer". She says, "You've only been working two weeks, honey." I said, "You've got to transfer me. I can't work there." She said, "We don't transfer new hires." I said, "Well, it's like this. You've got some openings, am I not correct?" "Yes." I said, "If you give me one I promise you I'm a good teacher and I'll stay. But if you

¹ Kirchner said that she thought that she was going to be raped, but nothing happened to her.

don't give me one I'm quitting, and you've got to fill this position anyway. You'll have two positions to fill. This way you'll only have one to fill. So why don't you just move me and make things easier for yourself than finding two teachers?" She says, "Well, which one do you want?" I said, "Give me twenty-four hours. I want to interview them." She said, "You're going to interview principals." I said, "Yes ma'am."

So I called them. Went home, I got on the phone. I'll never forget: I called Lena Waters, and she was a Kennedy--. A black principal. I said, "Tell me about your students." She got real defensive and she said, "Like everybody else these kids have two arms, two legs, and a head. I thought, "I don't want to work for you, honey." So then I called Byck and that was the school with real poverty and it was a fourth grade position. I called there, and I talked to Matt Benningfield [the principal]. I said, "Tell me about your school." He went on about his kids and the high poverty rate and how they needed a teacher, dah, dah, dah, dah, dah. I said, "You've got a teacher. I called () and told her, and she says, "You can have it, honey." I'll never forget: I went to that principal and I told her I was being transferred. She said, "Well, I didn't know you were unhappy." I said, "That's the whole point." Her name was Sedalia Lomax. I said, "Sedalia, you never once came up and checked on me, asked how I'm doing, nothing. You left me like a babe in the woods and I can't work here." So, they transferred me. Well, I went into a room where they had moved all the bad kids into one room. Well, I would have done it too probably. New teacher's coming, let's make a new room. I knew the game and I said fine. It was an all black school. It was fine. But towards the end of the year—

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGINNING OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

LK: Now the year of busing, Harriet had been our principal from there and Harriet was like your mama. She was a black woman and tough. She was so tough, and we got huge classrooms. There's no special ed. You got them all in there. Everybody's slow. We've got all these kids and Harriet would say, "Teachers, I need to see you in the hall right now." She could say, "Children, I don't want to hear a sound. We're leaving the mic open." We could walk out and go to her office and there wouldn't be a thing happen. That's how good of control she had of her building. So, one day, I'll never forget it. I had a girlfriend there. She was a young girl, flatter than a pancake, and she came in and we didn't have a dress code. She came in with a little sundress, big ties up on the shoulders, you know, and it was smocking top but it was obvious you couldn't have a bra under it. Harriet got mad at her and told her she was going to write her up because she didn't have a bra on. I thought it was ridiculous. So the next day I had organized all the women teachers and we all came in braless and we all had little sun tops or something on, even the big fat ones. So, she couldn't write us all up so she had to drop the issue. One day she called me in, and she was mad at me about something. She said, "You know, Laura Wilberding, I only ride your tail because you are so good. I love you like a daughter." I said, "Honey you're like Cinderella. I'm the stepdaughter." But I loved her to death. She was so funny. She got moved by busing and they moved her to the East End, and I heard she had a horrible experience. The white parents didn't want to respect her. She was a black principal coming from a black school, and, you know, those schools were no

good. She was tough, and they weren't used to that style of administration and I heard she wasn't very happy at all. Then we got a principal brought in and came in with all these diamonds on her and designer suits. Her husband was the head of a hospital. Eunice Collins, poor Eunice comes down there, and I meet her at the in service right before school starts and she's crying. She's scared to death. She's got to make busing work, and she is terrified. She doesn't know how to run this kind of school. The black parents don't trust her. She's all dolled up. We don't wear that kind of clothes in this kind of school. So I'll never forget, she didn't come to meet the first buses. Another man teacher and I did that. We went and received the buses and went into the gym and picked out, which kids were getting on what buses. It was a disaster. We knew what letters, so we just said, "You go. You go. You go on this bus. You go on this." We did the best we could but Eunice was scared. She only lasted a year.

EG: Yeah, I was [going] to ask that.

LK: Yeah, she lasted a year. But we did a lot. She was very good with her teachers, and her teachers did a lot to help her. We helped her with conferences. We helped her in the cafeteria because then we had to eat with our kids. There were no monitors or anything. We ate with the kids and stuff and then we just did it.

EG: Where was Foster located?

LK: Fortieth and Garland. It's almost down deep West End, deep to West End.

EG: Okay, so that was a poverty area?

LK: Yeah, but it wasn't as poor as some other areas. I mean there's poverty and there's real, real tough poverty. That was a medium poverty. You had some

working families. You had very poor working families, but you had your share of the lice and that kind of stuff.

EG: What was that like meeting the first buses and sending [the kids to be bussed]?

LK: It was scary because you didn't get that many white kids coming in and these poor black kids were scared to death. The parents were scared to death. Some were coming that were going to stay with us. Some were going out to other places. The National Guard are coming in and sometimes you were driving kids, because they had missed the bus or was wrong and kids were going the wrong places. You didn't have fax machines then. You didn't have telephones in the classrooms and telephones on buses and stuff. It was scary those first few weeks. Bomb threats were out there, and you'd just stand out there and you did it. You just did it.

EG: So how many students or like what percentage of students were bused away from Foster?

LK: Oh, I would say about eighty percent of our blacks, and we got in eighty percent whites. But the whites would come from five different schools at the beginning. Yeah, five in a cluster, four other schools or whatever. So you got some from this one and this one and this one and this one, depending on the grades. But as I said at the beginning, they only stayed two years, the whites. Sometimes it wouldn't be two years in a row so that was a problem too -- getting their records. Oh, records were a horrendous thing. Now it's easier, but then it was a half a year. Then, it was all hand done and now you can pretty well fax it over and that kind of stuff. You can get what you need pretty fast. Those things didn't exist then.

EG: Yeah. You've mentioned several times--. I just can't imagine how scary that must have all been. What gave you strength? How were you able to get through that?

LK: I guess I am kind of a person that's in your face. I was never worried about my safety that much. I just didn't think about it. I thought I've got kids. They've got to be protected. You got a job to do and the big thing was don't let a kid get hurt. So, that's what I think was governing all of us. Teachers covered each other's butt. You watched out for your neighbors. I'm trying to think if it was busing year or the year before. We had a girl [a teacher], mother came in to kill her. Had a gun, came in, and we heard she was in and she was drunk.

EG: The mother came in to kill her child?

LK: Yeah, to kill a teacher.

EG: Oh, to kill a teacher?

LK: Oh yeah, she was mad. She was going to kill somebody and I'll never forget the security guard went and put himself in a closet instead of helping. We had a security guard that year. Must have been the year before busing or that busing year. Puts himself in a closet, so we had to go get the teacher out of the classroom, hide her, and we said she was absent and we were doing double duty and then we got rid of the mother.

EG: Did you call the police after that?

LK: Oh, I don't know. I guess we did eventually. I don't remember. You know, I mean things like that would happen and you just dealt with stuff and you sent

them on. Now you would do more. Then you didn't have metal detectors. There weren't as many rules and things.

EG: Was this a white teacher or a black teacher?

LK: It was a white teacher, young little white teacher.

EG: She was going to kill her?

LK: Mother was mad, going to go kill her, going to shoot her. I had a teacher come after me at Byck that first year, parent come after me -- and Matt knew she was in the building -- and Matt came up and defused it. We knew she had a gun in her pocket, and she was high. I don't know, drugs or drunk or whatever, and Matt got her out of the building.

EG: So these were blacks that are coming up?

LK: That was a black. Then I had a black kid break in that year at Byck, and he ran up the steps. I didn't know him. He was from a middle--. They were junior highs. We didn't have middle schools, junior high, and I didn't know this kid and I just noticed him. My door was open, and it was hot. It was a hot day. I saw his hand go in his pocket. When his hand went down, I jumped back and a knife landed where I had been. I tore off after that kid. If I had caught him, I'd have killed him. I got down that alley, ran that alley up to this kid, and didn't catch him. But I got back in, came back to the building, and Matt came up immediately. The district sent somebody out and we did a deposition real quick, because the kids knew who he was and they got him and they sent him up. He went to detention. He was on drugs. That was the beginning of drugs. They said drugs didn't exist. Drugs existed. They were happening. Stuff was happening back then.

EG: So these were all drug related incidents?

LK: Oh, I'm sure, I'm sure.

EG: And people who were in poverty?

LK: People drunk, on drugs, whatever, whatever kind of drug it was but you saw that kind of stuff. Those things happened.

EG: Were there racial tensions?

LK: Oh, sometimes, and I think it was just plain old meanness. I just happened to be a white teacher standing in a doorway, near the door, and he took a look at me and I don't know if he was mad at a white teacher somewhere else or what. He didn't know me from Adam. I'm just glad I saw what I saw, and I jumped before he. But then I thought later that was pretty stupid to go after him but.

EG: Were there incidents where children or teachers actually got injured?

LK: Oh, that happens everyday in a school somewhere. During busing I didn't hear of a lot. I'm sure there might have been some, but I didn't hear of a lot. I always felt sorry for the black kids. I thought they had to deal with the most and the black teachers. They had to go into a very hostile environment and deal with it. My environment wasn't that bad. The black parents were not horrible. Sometimes they didn't think we were strong enough or disciplined enough, you know, strong enough discipline because black teachers are much more, at that point, were very (), and we weren't. But I learned a lot.

EG: Why did you decide to become a teacher?

LK: I was very altruistic. See then there wasn't much for women to go into. If you were educated, there was no such thing as women going into business or

anything. It was nursing or teaching and that was it. Or you'd be something like a secretary. You'd work at the telephone company and that kind of stuff. You just didn't see women going into much else. That was the field and I chose the teaching aspect.

EG: Did you see in terms of treatment of students or treatment of teachers during busing, any difference between how male and female students were treated?

LK: I thought the male students were treated worse, the black males. That was harder. I was at a black school, so we didn't have any trouble with teachers treating their kids bad there. At least I didn't see it. But later on when I've talked to other people, I felt like we all felt the same way. We felt like we had to protect our kids and it didn't matter if they were black or white. That was our job and try to protect them but that was hard to do. You know things happened in the hall. You were constantly in bathrooms checking things because you didn't have monitors. You were the monitor. We didn't have planning periods. You know, you did it all.

EG: Why do you, getting back to what you just said a minute ago, why were the black males treated worse in your opinion?

LK: People were scared of boys more than they are girls, and the boys could be more in your face. But now you hear kids will say, "Well, she's against black kids." That's a bunch of crap for the most part. I think you know it's just kids want to use that as an excuse. I think most, I'm not saying all, teachers go way out of their way to try to be as fair as they possibly can. It's a handle you can grab.

EG: Black males are treated worse by the white students who came in or by?

LK: I think the boys had a harder time being accepted and I think a lot of the white teachers were afraid of them. A lot of these teachers were coming from county. They'd been in those lily white schools and all of a sudden they're dealing with inner city. They're dealing with poverty. They're dealing with parents that can't come to school. There's no telephones. You know, the not having eaten, the medical problems. Then you had the problem [that if] the kid misses the bus, they can't get to school because these kids lived way down here and they're way out there and there's no bus lines. So that's been a staggering problem of what do you do, so that was a big issue back then. Some of those kids had an hour and a half on buses. We've got that down now as pretty well refined but that was a major, major problem.

EG: Did you see that affecting how they were in school, that they had these long bus rides?

LK: Well, scores were so bad back then in the city. You know the kids were so slow and so much poverty and you know that gradually we have brought them up. I mean there is nothing to be ashamed of on Jefferson County's test scores. We do well for an urban situation. I think it's a result of busing. I really feel like that the deseg has worked. I think there's a large group of black parents that would like to go back to neighborhood schools. But they're thinking because they live more in better areas. Without the busing you would have these poverty schools sitting with a lot of problems. Well, right now the problems are kind of divided up and it's easier to address. You have to have role leaders, role models. That's why I think socio-economic would be the really way to go, but I don't think there's anybody that's going to have that much guts to do that because your socio economic in Jefferson County has

dropped. You've got a lot more poverty kids now and more and more are coming in. You know that's where the birthrate is in lower economics. I think we now have, I don't know what the ratio is now, but I would say about sixty or sixty-five percent of Jefferson County kids are in that poverty level and so that would be pretty hard to do - to bus for socio-economics.

EG: Yeah. What do you see as the benefits of school desegregation?

LK: Well, I think we have gotten much more sensitive to other people. I think the educational program has increased dramatically, the skills. I believe that every child needs to get along with other race. Now we've got all kinds of races here. Then it was just black white. Now we have Vietnamese. We've got Korean. We've got Bosnian. We've got this and that and it's a very much more world global community around here and I think that's important. I have nieces in parochial schools and that's my one big issue. You don't see people that don't look just like you and you've got to learn to get along and to respect other cultures and other people. I think that's getting along in life. I think that holds true with the black kids have to learn to get along in the white community as well as the whites with the black community. It goes both ways.

EG: With these county teachers who came in and so forth, could you talk more about that?

LK: Oh, we did at the beginning but you know at the beginning they stayed together and we stayed together. It was only when you got to know them well. I mean it took months because it was so bad starting out. People were scared and they were mad that they got pulled out of their good schools. Here they are sitting in a

school that doesn't have diddly squat. They're sitting in the middle of trouble zones. So it took a while till we became personal friends and, of course, I moved the next year and I went into a county school. I was the odd man out, so I had to prove myself that I could teach, you know, because everybody thought that city teachers were just lazy teachers and we weren't very good and, you know, one of that deal because our scores weren't as good. But, we thought we were probably the better teachers because we were doing without you know. So, you had to learn there's good teachers both ways and but, like I said, I think the strike did a tremendous amount for the unification.

EG: Let me look over my list.

LK: I probably went off on a different tangent than Ken did.

EG: Well, yeah, which is great, because we want to hear a variety.

LK: Well, see he came from a better area so he would have had a different experience. I don't even remember if Highland bused. They might not have. They might have been exempt. I don't know if they had their ratio or not.

EG: Yeah, we talked a lot more about the union in my oral history with him.

LK: Because he was dealing with it. See I was just a plain old teacher then. I wasn't on any big committees like this or anything. I just did what they told me. It was time to strike, I'm out there.

EG: Well, he did talk about with these union meetings about how they met separately.

LK: Yeah, we had different unions.

EG: And how there was a compromise, no position taken on school desegregation. Were you at any of those meetings?

LK: I probably was, but I don't remember them. I would have probably been the one saying we need a position. I would have been the one saying we need to do this. But I was a white teacher in a black school seeing the inequities and living the inequities and I felt this was the only thing. Now let me tell you, I got a tremendous pay raise when we became county, because they brought us up to the rate of the county teachers and the county teachers got paid a lot better than city teachers. So we were pretty happy. We saw a pay raise.

EG: So were you living in poverty too when you started teaching?

LK: Oh, I was not poverty but I was poor. We didn't get good salaries. I got more than I got in the Catholic school. My first paycheck in Catholic school was thirty-two hundred a year. I got a hundred dollars at the beginning of the month and then I got the other two or three hundred dollars at the end of the month. That was poor. Then when I became city, I think I went up to like five or six thousand dollars so I thought I was pretty rich. Then, like when the busing [started], we got fifteen hundred more or something. So it was doing pretty good. And then after the strike we were doing even better and that's when we started getting music, art, PE teachers.

EG: After the strike?

LK: Uh-huh, yeah. We started getting librarians. We pushed for equalization of the schools. That was part of it. We got librarians started. We had a little library, but we did it. We didn't have any librarians in our schools. So we got librarians in all of our schools. We started getting a little bit of planning time eventually. Now, we

didn't get that with the strike. That came the next team. I was on the next team after the strike and we thought we were going to go on strike again. In fact, we stopped the clock and we got locked up in the VanHoose, the education center, for seven nights. Night and day we negotiated, and we did reach a settlement. We got a hundred minutes planning time a week for elementary teachers. But we cracked the nut to give them some planning time and that was the big, big hold out. I was the holdout. I was the one that wouldn't give on that one. I said we'll walk the strike, we'll do whatever you want, but elementary has got to get something. These teachers do need something.

EG: Make sure I'm clear on this. Before they just ()?

LK: Elementary teachers had no planning. The middle and high school teachers did. Elementary never had it, and we cracked the nut then. Once you get your foot in the door, even though it's not equal, it gives you something. It's like pushing the door open a little bit and then you can go a little further.

EG: Yeah, yeah, you could have that time for lesson plans or reports.

LK: Oh, yeah. What they do now -- they try to schedule parents meetings on you and all the stuff they want you to do and see you're constantly grieving that because that planning is meant for planning. You aren't going to give up all of your planning time for things that the administration wants you to do. So it's always a fight but at least you got something. Now, I think most of them get almost equal. We're getting pretty close to it. But it's been all these years trying to equalize it. That's when art, music, PE came in more and the library, because that's how you get--. They

don't like to hear that but that's exactly how that came down. () way to get elementary teachers planning.

EG: How did the black and white kids get along?

LK: Oh, they play together or they work on committees together. They fight just like normal kids. Every now and then you'll hear the little racist stuff, and you got to knock that in the bud. But for the most part, they fight and they go on and you'll have buddies and then they'll be mad just like other kids do. But you will see once they get older in middle school and stuff a lot of times in the cafeteria they segregate. They don't do it on purpose. It's not like we do it. It's like you'll see white black girls might be together. White black boys might be together more. But a lot of times the kids that ride the bus together or this type of thing, but you know what, it's their neighborhood friends and things. The next time you might see them and they're all together or they've added two white boys. So, it's not perfect but I think it's come a whole long way. And then you have your black white couples. That's fine. It's just pretty much you'll have your fights and every now and then when I was teaching I'd hear them say the N word or something. I hated it because when my black boys used to do it I jumped their ass, their bodies, just like I would a white child saying it. That word isn't appropriate for anybody. It's derogatory. You're not going to call somebody a honky. You're not going to use that word. You don't use those words in these schools.

EG: So it went, like was there a difference between how blacks and whites got along when busing first started?

LK: Oh, yes. Oh, my gosh. The white kids didn't want to sit next to black kids. Black kids didn't want to sit next to white kids. They didn't talk. Now, they're on the phone calling each other. You'll see them--. I mean they'll be kids. They'll fight. They'll argue. Now they'll say, "I don't want to sit next to you," but it might not be because of your race. It's now because well, "You're a nerd, and I don't want to sit next to you. I like this other kid over here." So it's a lot better. You see a big improvement. It still happens. You'll still have this. Especially I'll get some of these kids come in and say I don't sit next to--. I say, "Well, in this classroom you do. You sit where I tell you to sit and you don't pick your partners all the time. I put you with a partner." I think most teachers are that way. You let some of it go, and then sometimes you don't but you watch for that. We still make sure our classes, because a lot of times teachers assign it, we make sure we have black girls, black boys, white boys, white girls. You go for that when teachers divide classes up -- you try to do that. You try to always keep the fifth grade's coming up--. "Let's look at the cards, and let's see how we got it falling out."

EG: When did you see the shift?

LK: It's been gradual. The first year was the worst, but I think every year it's gotten better and you'll see it. There's still some racism that comes in but it's a whole lot -- at least it's more subtle.

EG: You said too that you got like a lot of nasty parents at first.

LK: Oh yeah.

EG: If you could give a few examples of that.

LK: Oh, I told you that one. I had a white mother that was just mean as a snake and she didn't ever want us to ever correct her child or whatever. I had a couple of mothers come in and tell me, "If you try to retain my child, I'm going to get even with you," and this type of stuff. It just went on and on. You got that kind of stuff. They expected their child to pass even though they didn't come in till January, and we did. We pretty much moved kids on. We held the worst, but we did our best to advance them and get the basic knowledge down. The next year, you just had to fill in and catch them up more. It took a while. Now, kids are on that bus the first week and here they come.

EG: You said it took the lawsuit to get the--?

LK: To get those white kids in, yeah. They had to know the federal judge was going to enforce the law. Once they started making issues and started serving papers on parents, kids started showing up. But it was gradual. It was really hard to get some. Now probably at Highland, where Ken was, I bet he had most of his kids. It was these hard core schools where you didn't see it. More black kids were going than white kids were coming. There was the problem. But it was gradual and I think now kids just come. Now, teachers go for conferences down into the black areas. Like when I was at Westport, we went down to a couple of our neighborhood feeder schools so the black parents could come and have conferences with us.

EG: That didn't happen before?

LK: No, no, no, no. That's been an evolution, and teachers will go and go to a community center or a church or something and meet so parents don't have to come out and drive out or come out to school because we have conference days. We'll send

some teachers down, and some teachers will stay in the building. Usually if you're a team--. It depends how you work, but a lot of teachers do that now.

EG: Yeah, ways of accommodating.

LK: Try to accommodate. You try. You try to do the best you can. A lot of times some of the schools will send a bus down and pick parents up and bring them out to the school and try to increase it. But, you've lost some things too. It's hard to get the black parents involved in some of the schools sometimes, the ones far away, because they have no way of getting there. So that's probably the downside of busing, is getting the involvement.

EG: Let me look at my list. We've covered most of this. Is there anything else that you would add about benefits and drawbacks of school desegregation?

LK: I guess I know I feel the socio and economic thing is the really, really, really big issue. I really feel that we need to look at a different way of funding schools that have a higher population, the special eds, the needs. I get really upset. I'm one that gets upset with these magnets become a way to siphon off the better kids so you lose some of your--. Like the No Child Left Behind [Act]. That's probably the most travesty of justice I've ever seen. That's a horrendous law for education. They're saying, "We're not leaving a kid behind," but you're holding schools that have maybe eighty percent poverty and with all the problems that go with it to the same accountability that you're doing a Manual or some of these other schools. I have friends that are magnet teachers, and she'll say, "Well, we're not getting the quality that we used to have. Our kids are terrible. We've got ten percent free and reduced lunch." Now I say, "Yyeah, and other schools have got eighty and ninety percent and

the kids you're on free and reduced more and likely have two parents." They don't have to take kids unless a kid drops out. They don't pick up kids. So now, these schools are having kids coming from shelters and moving around and all of this, the mobility rate that goes with poverty levels, and these schools don't have it. So, that bothers me -- the way we're looking at things now. We're talking accountability, but the accountability hurts poverty schools. Now I think you need to hold those schools accountable to high standards, but you need to take and bring in some resources to make those standards be equal. When you've got kids [where] there's no electricity and there's no water or they don't have clean clothes or they're sitting in a darn clinic all day, it's not equal to--. Well, your kids aren't coming to school or they're running the streets and you can't get homework out of them. How do you hold a teacher accountable for that and a school accountable? You need to build in after-school care and you need to build in homework help, so that your books aren't stolen and taken away and things. So that's a big issue. I'd like to have a nickel every time a kid moves in the middle of the night and you don't get your books back. They're just left or they're ahead and high tailing it.

EG: So your alternative solution would be?

LK: I think you need--. Equal is not always equal and you need to have equal and that doesn't mean your school gets five hundred and I get five hundred. It might mean this school needs fifteen hundred to your five hundred. A lot of people don't want to hear that. I know when I was president I would go out to some of these wealthy elementaries and I'd listen to them bitch about: "I've got three children that can't read on grade level, and I'm getting no Title One funding," and they're getting a

PTA that's bringing in thousands and thousands of dollars. I'm looking at these well equipped [schools]. Then, I go into a school where they're getting the same amount of funding yeah, they're getting Title One funding coming in, but the needs are so tremendous. They don't have a clue. They haven't a clue.

EG: Do you try to bring up [these arguments]?

LK: It's hard to do because nobody wants to hear how bad someone else has it. I know a couple of times when I'd be getting hot, my executive director would be saying, "Cool down, Laura, cool down, cool down, don't lose it." I'd say, "They don't know, Steven." He said, "I know they don't understand, Laura." He said, "But, we're doing what we can." I would bring it up the best I could. and I was always on the district. "You've got to deal with these buildings. You've got to get in there. You've got to bring money. You've got to look at other ways to make them more attractive. You've got to deal with the safety issues." All that goes together. They need more safety than a school sitting out in the East End. You're not going to have drug addicts or drunks hiding in those stairwells or being in this whatever that can happen now.

EG: Has that had any sort of impact?

LK: Oh yeah, when I was president we'd get a little here and get a little. You don't win the battle. You win squirmishes, and you pass it on. I passed the torch on to the presidency now, and I hope I made some difference. We opened up Liberty High School when I was president. It was just for kids that learn a different way. We opened up Franklin. I pushed for Franklin. That's for kids that are coming back from-. I'm not saying I brought it about, but I helped be one that pushed to get it. Franklin is for kids that are coming back from institutions or been in () or any of the drug rehab

or anything of this sort or Job Corps or whatever, and they needed to be transitioned back. We had no transition. Well, now we do. We have a school where we can transition these kids in, and we can work with them and get them prepared to go back into the regular program. Instead of setting them up for failure, they'd come in, be in big trouble, come in, get out of the trouble, come back to school, and they're in trouble again, because there's too many kids in the classroom and the teacher doesn't know their issues. Well, now we've got a transition. So you win small battles.

EG: You mentioned earlier and I've heard this before. I'm not exactly sure what it means -- traditional schools.

LK: Traditional schools -- they teach the traditional way, which means that we don't do fu fu. We do a lot of homework and parents have to sign agreements and you have strict discipline supposedly. The kids are hand picked. Your parents have to apply. They pick them by a lottery. They draw. Once you're in, you're in. Doesn't guarantee your siblings will get in. So every year, they make the drawing. After the first year, you're in but once you give it up you don't get it back. At fifth grade it's going to be the same class as the third grade. They might have added someone at the beginning of the year but very rarely would be a kid come from another traditional. But if you act up, if you have a real serious special need, if you're not following the traditional rules, which means you miss too much school or you cuss the teacher out or you got in major fight or something like that, you're gone, honey. They can kick their problems out.

EG: What do you think about those schools?

LK: Well, I wasn't in favor of it, because I think it was a haven for whites. But it has kept, here's the flip, those parents from going to private schools. It keeps our scores up because we have our Manual and we have our Male. That's our two high schools that are traditional and now a lot of schools are now adding traditional sections. Like Fern Creek has said, "We're Fern Creek Traditional," and it's not the same -- it doesn't carry the same clout. But basically what it is: They demand parental involvement, and the parents have to come to meetings. The parents have to sign and you agree that they will do all their homework, that they will do this and they will do that. They're held to accountability. Well, guess what schools are always on top. Every school, you'll find them right up there, very traditional, traditional middle. I mean I've got nieces and nephews that come out of traditional middle. My sisters probably would not have had them in public school if they hadn't gotten them in. But I wouldn't have pulled the strings for them. But they've just lucked out.

EG: Has it been a haven for whites?

LK: Oh yeah, I think it has been. Oh, my one sister tried to tell me oh, "We have a big black population down at Traditional Middle [not sure if former is proper word]. You don't know what you're talking about anymore, Laura." I says, "Anita, I saw the data for years. They're about eighteen percent, which is about the minimum rate you can have." "Oh, no, no, no." Well, I called up this year, because I was tired of hearing that. I asked them what was the ratio this year, and I think it was like twenty percent. I rest my case. You've got a school sitting here forty-eight percent, fifty percent and then she's telling me, "Oh, no, we're not up." They take their tokenism. But it keeps whites in and I can understand why the district started them. I

didn't approve of it when they did it. I thought we needed to ride this ball out, but we did it. Anybody that's going to be honest -- I'm being pretty honest with you -- why the district would say, "Oh no, it isn't this"--. But the people that have been on the other side will all say, "Yeah, it is." But, like I say, my friends that are there that teach there say, "Oh, Laura, we have a lot of problems," and on and on. They've lost reality because they've been away from it so long. You only know your own reality. You don't know other peoples' [reality].

EG: you've seen the other side.

LK: Oh yeah, I mean I taught. I've had knives thrown at me. I've wrestled kids down. I've lived that life. That's the schools I taught in. They don't understand what poverty causes, what a life is for these other kids.

EG: This is a broader question. What do you think it would have to take for this country to seriously address poverty?

LK: We got to get Bush out. But this country doesn't like to face the reality of what's happening in the cities with poverty. They have vowed to wipe it under. what we're doing to the elderly, what we're doing to the handicapped, kids right now, we've got four hard years where education is going to suffer. Poor people are going to suffer. They are not moral. I think this is the most immoral group. They call themselves moral and we are.

EG: You mean the Bush administration?

LK: The whole group, I think they're immoral because they're not dealing with issues. They want to talk about abortion or they want to talk about this, but they don't want to realize we had butchers in the alley. I've watched eight-year-old girls.

We have ten year olds that have had babies. I had kids that had two and three children by the time they were eighth grade. Yeah, if I could, I'd give birth control out in the classroom if I could keep these kids in school. I can't tell them not to go out and do this. This is the only thing they've got. Doing this is the way they can make money. This is what's happening, and their family, the value system is different. I can't put my middle class--. All I can do is try to keep them safe. Now, me, I would furnish it in the classroom. I'd like to put the injection in their arms, and they didn't have to take pills. Then, I'd love to give condoms out every day and pass them out just in case. But you can't do that. We don't face reality of what this life is for some of these kids and these people.

EG: You said you did try to protect the kids and the teachers tried to. What were ways you did that?

LK: Oh, we rode the buses with them sometimes if we had to. When you took them out you were checking things out making sure it was safe outside. You ate with them. You made sure that the kids that might have been the rough ones, , you sat beside that kid and kept him with you, because I didn't want to take a chance that that kid was going to hurt a white kid or vice versa if it was a bad white kid. You were always watching because there was so much that could just escalate. It was a really tense feeling of you couldn't just relax. You couldn't have a black boy and a white boy are having a fight. Fights are kids--. Before if two kids got in a fight, pull them apart. Give a punishment or whatever you're going to do, separate them, whatever I did, that was it. We'd make up and kiss or whatever and go on about business. You

had to try to keep it from happening a lot, because then it was a racist thing. So that was a hard thing at the beginning to keep under control.

EG: Here's another broader question. What do you think that this country has to do to overcome racism and inequalities between blacks and whites?

LK: Well see, I believe that busing is important, and I think we're now taking away a lot of that so we're making the ghettos again. We need to address the housing issues. I think you need scattered housing sites.

EG: What do you mean by that?

LK: Instead of building areas where you have pockets of poverty, I think you need to do more Section Eights or scattered housing, low cost housing. You need to blend it in.

EG: With middle class?

LK: Oh yeah, but they don't want to hear that. Our dear congresswoman here, Anne Northup, she swears she an education congresswoman, but she isn't. She's just a Bush puppet. But she led the revolt when we were going to build in her neighborhood the Home for the Innocents where we have kids that are in poverty and this type of thing. It's kids [whose] parents go to jail or they're high needs or runaways, that kind of stuff. It's a home protecting kids. Judge picks them up, little ones or something. and they have to have a place to go. Not in her neighborhood, she didn't want traffic patterns (). That's the kind of stuff that has to stop. What's happening in medical care, you're getting more and more kids that are un. We have the neighborhood centers. I don't know if you're familiar with them. In our schools that was part of the care block where we have the neighborhood centers, which parents

come to school and you could get this, that, and the other thing. Well, they're not funding it as much. We've got a Republican governor and that's another one of the cuts. You have to have it where they can come. You can't leave kids home because they haven't had their shots. We need to be giving the shots in school. We need to have medical care at school. Kids get too far along before they get treated and then you've got a big issue. I think we need to do more after school. We need to do Saturday schools. We need to have things like this to keep these kids off the streets to equalize. You're talking a big expense, but that's how you're going to save. You got to do it with the kids and I think you have to hold parents accountable. These mothers that are out there drinking and driving and whatever or drugging in the places, I think part of their rehab should be they have to come to school and work. They have to work with not necessarily their kid but be assigned so we have extra hands, and I think the judges should require now more getting their GEDs. Require them to be community service and they need to be assigned where they could be helpful. Put them on the buses. Let them be monitors on the buses. That's a big problem is the behavior on buses.

EG: That's still a problem?

LK: Oh yeah, kids carry on on the buses. A lot of the trouble with the gang fights and things you have in school come not from what happens at school. It comes from the neighborhoods, and the fights happen because of what's happening in the neighborhoods. So, we have monitors so I would really like to see some of these mothers having to do. But what do they want to do? They've passed the law where you can't come to school if you've got a conviction of a drug or things like this. Well,

half the world back there, in some of these minorities, have drug convictions. Let them pee in a cup and check them out if you want to -- to make sure they're clean when they come in or something. But you can't just keep not working with these people. You've got to train them. If not, we've got babies having babies and this problem is going to keep on escalating. With the immigrants, we've got serious, they come in here years behind. We don't have nearly enough ESL people and the people that can talk to the parents. All that's money.

EG: I just have I think one or two more questions. You've been so generous and insightful, and we really appreciate it. I think I know your answer and you've touched on this but overall do you think school desegregation has been worth it?

LK: Oh yeah, yeah. I think we are a success story here. I would think most of the community now supports deseg. When there were attempts to try to overthrow it, whites were organizing to support it and that tells you it's worked.

EG: When was this?

LK: Oh, we've had two court challenges. Central High School is what it was about. It was brought by black parents and the majority of people realized it has been good. What this community went through hell over it, but it has been good and it I think we've turned around.

EG: What did you think about the Central High School case?

LK: I thought it was wrong. I think Central should be held to the same accountability and I don't think that there should be a black high school. That goes back to Central was the only black high school, and I think it's called, "Get a grip and let's get on with life." They're not getting many whites going there now. Once you

tip the scale and you get the above fifty percent, the whites won't go and that's what's happening to Central. I think it's a bad mistake.

EG: I'm going to change the tape in a second because it's running out. But that's what Ken Rosenbaum said too that he was against the Central for the same reason..

LK: We were just glad he didn't make a general ruling that would affect all schools and allow the whites to do that.

EG: Yeah.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

BEGINNING OF TAPE 2, SIDE A

EG: [What should] people like I as a historian, people now, know about desegregation? Major lessons?

LK: I think the major lesson is this was won school by school. The courts brought about [it], but the people that made it work [were] just everyday people, little teachers trying to do their jobs in a very, very difficult situation. I know the kids were heroes riding the bus but there was a whole lot of people there trying to make that work and trying to put those kids first. I think that often gets forgotten that it took a lot. A lot of people had those prejudices and things, and they had to try to fight them and overcome them and not bring them with them. I know that some people are going to say, some of our black teachers will say, "Well, I had to face this," and they did. But I'm hoping most of that's gone now, and we're seeing kids as kids. They still now--. When you start school, you have to give your black white count, ABCDs, blacks, whites, boys, girls. There's time you would be doing it, and you would think,

"God, I think of how many blacks I've got." You have to pull up a face, and you think, "Are they black?" because you've gotten to the point [where] it's just a kid. You're actually going down your list, thinking, "I don't know, let me look at this." That was a good feeling the first time that happened -- when you didn't see color.

EG: When would you say that happened?

LK: Oh, I guess it probably took four or five years, because you make those counts. At the beginning of the school year, you make the count every darn day. They're calling you, because they're moving people around, and we had to reshuffle classes and all that. Now it's much better with the computers but back then we were always, "Oh God, I've got too many black boys. I've got to move a couple of boys. Put them over here." Or, "Bring me some black boys in or I need more girls" or whatever. Now, you do it but it's harder to do because you've got to really think of who's what. That's an improvement.

EG: Is there anything you'd like to add, anything I haven't asked you?

LK: I just hope the courts don't change it. I'm really worried if we get a new Supreme Court. It's gotten so conservative as it is, and I'm afraid we could have--. If this happens, I think our education will slide here.

EG: Slide in terms of?

LK: We [get] back to all black schools. Money will not follow as well because the needs will be worse in those buildings and I'm not so sure it will follow in. I think we need to keep it but it's dropping in a lot of school systems. Didn't Charlotte-Mecklenburg get theirs overturned?

EG: I'm not sure.

LK: I think they might have.

EG: Yeah, I'm not sure.

LK: Because we used to be compared a lot with Charlotte.

EG: Oh, were you?

LK: Uh-huh, and I'm not if it was overturned or not. I'd be interested to see what's happening. I think they were. I think that's where the overturning was at. But they found wiggle room for us. What made it different was us becoming one county. That's what saved us.

EG: In terms of people couldn't do the white flight as much as other places.

LK: Uh-huh.

EG: Yeah.

LK: We have private schools. We've got Christian Academy that's huge now, and the Catholic schools are big. The big problem we have now is we lose some of our kids in middle school and the parents are afraid of the middle school. But that's a problem with the district. They need to change middle schools, on the discipline and the whole bit. There needs to be a revamping of what's happening there. But that can happen. But when we have people that are deliberately choosing public it's good.

EG: How would you say that desegregation was different at the elementary level versus middle school or high school level?

LK: See, I was elementary. Elementary, you know, you mother kids and things like that and middle school you don't do that as much. So I think that probably the kids that had the easiest probably were the elementary because you were there with the little numbers and you were mothering and protecting babies. I mean that's how

you look at them as your babies. middle school crap would happen in the halls, in the bathrooms and it would have been much more difficult to control the interactions. I would imagine those kids had a harder time. I would think it would have been really hard for those kids. The mouth that exists in middle school, , kids are getting brave and they'll shoot their mouth off and all that and I'm sure they had to deal with more than the little kids did.

EG: Yeah, that makes sense.

LK: You tried to protect the little kids and it's a little easier to do than I think it would have been if I was middle school. That would be my guess is what you're going to find when you talk to them.

EG: Yeah, yeah. Well, I have some words to go over to wrap up and I'm going to leave the tape on to ensure accuracy and sometimes these words trigger people to tell stories, and I feel so bad when I have the tape off so I've learned to keep it on. You mentioned Lloyd May. Is that L-L-O-Y-D and then May like the month?

LK: M-A-Y.

EG: You said a program was Focus and Impact?

LK: Focus and Impact. That was a federal funded city program. It was an initiative to bring in Teacher Corps and things. It was a whole new way of looking at education. It was touch good feely. We did sensitivity training and the whole bit.

EG: Teacher Corps was the program?

LK: Uh-huh and I think Teacher Corps might still exist. It's to bring people who were non-educators into schools and you got part of your education paid to help you get certified to work inner city is basically what it was.

EG: That is two words?

LK: Uh-huh.

EG: Okay. Ursulan, is that U-R-S-U-L-A-N?

LK: L-I-N-E.

EG: Oh, L-I-N-E, I see, okay. Oh, let's see here. The Singleton ratio, is that S-I-N-G-L-E-T-O-N?

LK: Uh-huh.

EG: Okay and ratio, is that?

LK: R-A-T-I-O.

EG: Is that capitalized?

LK: No, I don't think they usually do it. But if you need to know exactly what the Singleton ratio, you could call out at the district and you could ask Pat Todd or ask anybody. Pat Todd does all the deseg stuff and things and I'm sure she would know it or you could ask for personnel and Carolyn Meredith would help you too.

EG: Okay.

LK: They could tell you what Singleton ratio is right now. I'm not sure what the numbers are. They'd know exactly. When you have to staff schools you still, we follow that.

EG: Yeah, that's good to know. Bowling County?

LK: Bullitt County, B-U-L-L-I-T-T.

EG: Oh, B-U-L-L-I-T-T?

LK: Uh-huh, Bullitt.

EG: Is it Atkinson?

LK: Atkinson, A-T-K-I-N-S-O-N.

EG: Okay. Oh, you mentioned before Xerox machines there was?

LK: Mimeograph.

EG: Yeah, and you mentioned ditto?

LK: Ditto machines, D-I-T-T-O.

EG: Okay.

LK: It's the same thing as a mimeograph machine. You had the old blue paper, carbon like, and you'd run it through and it would make copies. You'd get blue all over your hands. You'd have to throw those things away and you had to fill the machine. Oh, they were awful. You wore it.

EG: The other was a Spirit Master?

LK: Spirit Master and that was where you'd write on it and you'd pull it off and use a different machine. But if you made a mistake you had to cut pieces and oh, yeah, they were pains in the rears. We were really glad when we got a Xerox machine.

EG: Is Spirit Master one word?

LK: No, it's two words, Spirit Master machine.

EG: Unusual name.

LK: Yeah.

EG: You said Cotter Duval?

LK: Cotter Duvalle, C-O-T-T-E-R. That was the elementary part and the middle school part was the Duvalle, D-U-V-A-L-L-E. It don't exist anymore.

EG: Is the V capitalized?

LK: No.

EG: Okay. Lena?

LK: Waters, W-A-T-E-R-S.

EG: It's L-E-N-A?

LK: L-E-N-A, uh-huh.

EG: You said you were--. [Recorder not recording for a brief time.] Sedalia

Lomax?

LK: S-E-D-A-L-I-A and her last name was L-O-M-A-X.

EG: Alma Davis?

LK: A-L-M-A and Davis. She became a principal and then she became a higher up. She went high.

EG: Harriet Baker?

LK: Uh-huh, B-A-K-E-R. She's still alive last I heard.

EG: Oh, I think I have asked you already how to spell Wilberding. Yeah, I got it. Eunice Collins?

LK: E-U-N-I-C-E and then C-O-L-L-I-N-S.

EG: Okay. And Garland?

LK: G-A-R-L-A-N-D.

EG: Okay and VanHoose?

LK: Capital V-A-N-H-O-O-S-E. That's the main board of education building.

EG: H-O-S?

LK: H-O-O-S-E, two O's.

EG: Okay, is that?

LK: It's on New Burke Road.

EG: Okay, is that two words?

LK: It's written as one word but it's capital V and capital H.

EG: Okay, and Westport?

LK: W-E-S-T-P-O-R-T.

EG: Liberty and Franklin like they sound?

LK: Uh-huh.

EG: Fern Creek like it sounds, two words?

LK: Uh-huh.

EG: You mentioned Anita.

LK: My sister, A-N-I-T-A T-E-E-T-S.

EG: Okay, Anita, okay. Yeah, I actually saw Home for the Innocents. Is that by Frankfurt Avenue?

LK: Yeah, they built the new one. That's where they built it. It's beautiful, isn't it?

EG: Yeah. I mean we just drove by it.

LK: It's huge and it's wonderful. They did a good job.

EG: That's great. Let's see, sometimes I can't read my writing. Well, I might have to, if that's okay, give you a call later with follow up questions. [Kirchner nods.] Yeah, great. Well, I don't think I have any more questions. We've covered everything and really appreciate your generosity and giving the names of people.

LK: Oh, you're welcome. I hope you can get some good ones out of it.

END OF TAPE 2, SIDE 1

END OF INTERVIEW

TRANSCRIBED February 2005 BY CATHY MANN