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Interview

with

DAWNE Y. GEE.

October 15, 2004

by Elizabeth Gritter

Transcribed by Cathy Mann

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

Transcript and tape on deposit at
The Southern Historical Collection
Louis Round Wilson Library

Citation of this interview should be as follows:
"Southern Oral History Program,
in the Southern Historical Collection Manuscripts Department,
Wilson Library,
The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill"

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Transcript – Dawne Gee

Interviewee: Dawne Gee
Interviewer: Elizabeth Gritter
Interview Date: December 9, 2004
Location: Louisville, Kentucky
Length: 1 cassette, approx. 1 hour

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

ELIZABETH GRITTER: [This is] Elizabeth Gritter interviewing Dawne Gee on December 9, 2004 in Louisville, Kentucky. [inaudible] is okay. Okay.

DAWNE GEE: One scenario was that it felt like, kids said it felt like somebody had just pushed them into a tidal wave and there were all these other people in there struggling to make it and you saw all these people. Everybody was just drowning, but everybody was struggling to make it. So we went to this tidal wave pool over in Indiana, and we pushed all these kids in, black and white, and everybody was struggling. We had water cameras, and it was just so cool, and then we were interviewing people in the midst of seeing all these people struggling in the water like they were drowning. So we had interviews in between this footage of people drowning. So we did that. I think somebody said one of them was like an ant farm. So we had this ant farm, the little ants marching. I can't remember all of them because I was only in the eighth grade then. But we had hundreds of interviews of students. Some of the students were really angry, and boy, did they come out with some choice words. People were really angry then. They were very angry.

EG: So you were one of the producers of this.

DG: I was one of the producers, one of twelve producers of that show.

EG: Is that something that got you interested in being a news reporter?

DG: No, no. I was always interested in television and theatre. So that's probably why I went out for it because I was so interested in it.

EG: Well, we'll definitely have to check that out.

DG: You really have to find it, and I have a copy of it.

EG: Okay.

DG: But I have moved. So I have sixty boxes, and it's in one of those sixty boxes and I just haven't, I haven't emptied those boxes yet.

EG: Okay. Well, it's good to know you have a copy in case we absolutely can't.

DG: Yeah and if you can't, I will go through those boxes if you cannot find it.

EG: I appreciate that.

DG: One of the other people that had a copy and I know he had a copy but he recently died was Bill Summers, not Bill Summers but Bill Wilson who was a councilman here in the city, but he passed away over the last year. But I don't know if Channel Fifteen which is now gone as well--.

EG: Or the place in Chicago.

DG: Or WTTW, () I don't know if they would have it.¹

EG: Sure, so I got your [message], do you have until two-thirty?

DG: I have until two-thirty, two-forty-five since I stood you up for fifteen minutes.

¹ Gee is referring to the documentary on school desegregation "As We See It," which was done in the 1970s by Channel 15 in Louisville and Channel 11, WTTW, in Chicago.

EG: I appreciate that. I got your biography off the web and just had a few questions for this life history form. Do you have a middle name?

DG: Yvette. Y-V-E-T-T-E.

EG: Okay. What's your date of birth?

DG: Four, thirty, '82. I'm lying. Four, thirty, '63.

EG: Good. I feel like a doctor when I fill this out.

DG: Don't ask me how much I weigh because I'm not going to tell you that.

EG: No. No.

DG: I'm not telling you anything about that.

EG: That would alienate everyone so we don't have that here. Were you born in Louisville?

DG: Born and raised.

EG: Are you married?

DG: No, divorced.

EG: Divorced.

DG: Happily divorced.

EG: Okay. Your son is Eric. When was he born?

DG: I have Eric. Oh Eric was born September 19th, 1984.

EG: And what about Alexander?

DG: Alexander was born January 19th, oh January 18th, sorry, I get their birthdays confused. 1996.

EG: And Brittany.

DG: Brittany was born May 26th, 1983. Don't tell them that I messed their birthdays up. Alex gets so mad when I do that.

EG: When did you graduate from the University of Louisville?

DG: First degree--.

EG: Was that communications?

DG: No, biology. First degree and that was in 1985.

EG: Okay. And in communications.

DG: Maybe 1993, maybe. I don't really remember.

EG: When did you graduate, did you graduate from Pleasure Ridge Park?

DG: Uh huh. Most certainly.

EG: When was that?

DG: 19--. I can't lie. I told you my birthday. 1981.

EG: 1981. Okay. I have an agreement form that we can take care of at the end, and also we'll just, I'll leave I guess ten minutes for that and I'm going to be just jotting down proper words.

DG: Wow, is it that long?

EG: Um, usually--.

DG: I'm going, holy cow.

EG: The agreement form?

DG: Yeah, takes ten minutes. Woo.

EG: No, I have the proper word form and we'd have to just go over proper names and spelling, but the interview agreement should only take two minutes.

DG: But that's--.

EG: It's not that long and complicated.

DG: Am I signing my house away? What am I doing?

EG: Right. So I'm just going to because of our limited time zero in on the bussing questions and desegregation. Where did you go to school before you went to Pleasure Ridge [Ridge Park High School]?

DG: I was supposed to go to Cane Run Elementary School, which was in my district. To Cane Run and I did not because I didn't want to, and so we cheated and gave my grandmother's address and I went to Jessie Rodman Carter Elementary School, which was once Virginia Avenue Elementary School. It had changed its name over to Jessie Rodman Carter Elementary School and I went there instead.

EG: Why did you not want to go to the other one?

DG: Well, I'm not sure if it was me or if it was my mom. But it would've been the first time any one of us had ever gone to a predominantly white school, and so they decided to keep me in our old neighborhood.

EG: Okay. Okay. Sure.

DG: So we cheated.

EG: So the Jessie Rodman Carter was a predominantly black school.

DG: Yes.

EG: That you went to.

DG: I don't know why I said predominantly black. I don't know think there was one white student there.

EG: Okay. When did you start at Pleasure Ridge?

DG: I started at Pleasure Ridge Park in the seventh grade. That's when we had junior high school. There was no such thing as middle school back then in the ancient days. There was no middle school so I started in seventh grade directly after elementary school.

EG: Okay. At that time you were living in a--. What was your neighborhood like?

DG: By that time I was living in an all-white [neighborhood]. I moved when I was about six years old. Actually right at the start of elementary school we moved into an all-white neighborhood. It was very interesting.

EG: Yeah, what was that experience like?

DG: I was too young to notice and my parents, I think, which was not very wise, did not tell me what really to expect. So I wasn't really sure why people did not speak. I figured it was because they just didn't know us. I did not know why the For Sale signs went up. When bussing came about, it was, I thought this is terrible that these people have these signs in their yard that say, "Die Nigger," and they had dummies hanging in the trees and different things like that. I thought, "Wait a minute. I play with their kids." I thought, "Holy cow." It was just a huge wake up call for me. Huge wake up call because racism was not anything that was ever discussed in my home. Although as I look back at it now it didn't really dawn on me that I stayed in the predominantly all-black elementary school. That didn't really, but then again too there would've been an issue of what do we do with her after school. So after school I could walk to my grandma's. I walked just right down the street to my grandma's house, and my grandma

kept me until my mom and dad came home. So there was also an issue of "What are we going to do with her after school?"

EG: Why did your parents move into an all, or live in an all-white neighborhood?

DG: Well, I think it was just an issue of they were looking for a bigger and better home. The home that we lived in was very small. My sister and I shared a room. When we went to the new home, we had our own rooms. We had a swimming pool and a deck and another backyard. We had two backyards. One backyard had the swimming pool. The other backyard had the play area in it. There was a concrete deck and a wood deck. I mean the house was totally different. Finished basement. I mean, it was a huge home. So it was night and day.

EG: What did your parents do for a living?

DG: My mother was a principal, and my father was a foreman in a company, in a chemical company.

EG: So you grew up playing with white children.

DG: When they would play with me, yeah. Yeah, when they would play with me.

EG: So you were in the Pleasure Ridge neighborhood.

DG: I was in what's called Butler High School neighborhood, but I was an AP student, an advanced program student, and Butler High School did not have [an] advanced program. So when you were an AP or honor student, you had to be sent to the school closest to you that had honors programs.

EG: Were you bussed to Pleasure Ridge or were you in the neighborhood?

DG: It wasn't called bussed really, but yeah. I rode a bus to that school.

EG: Okay.

DG: But I wasn't in the bussing program.

EG: Okay. Okay.

DG: But yes, I did ride a bus to PRP. But that was the closest school with honors programs.

EG: Yeah and when did you start there?

DG: Seventh grade.

EG: What year, was that in 1975?

DG: '77.

EG: '77 was when you started. Okay.

DG: I'm pretty sure it was '77. [In a follow-up e-mail, Gee said that she actually started there in 7th grade in 1975.]

EG: What was the racial composition there when you went?

DG: Well, that was the first year of bussing.

EG: Oh. So that was--. Okay. Because '75 was the first year.

DG: The first year was '75. Well, maybe I don't know what it was, but that seemed like the first year they had ever seen black folks.

EG: Oh, okay.

DG: I don't know what was going on. But it was really intense and very bad. Very bad.

EG: Give me some examples of what was bad.

DG: One day I missed my bus, and on my bus I was the only black person, which was okay because most of those kids lived in my neighborhood anyway. But I missed

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my bus. Well, there were still some African American students out there too. I don't know if they missed their bus or what happened. We were all standing out there just kind of talking and goofing off. There was a group of white students out there, and they had sticks and chains and they were screaming, "Niggers go home." So they start to chase us. I thought, "I am home. Hey, wait a minute." So they start chasing us. Well, we ran for the TARC bus. They caught a couple of kids and they beat the, I mean beat them. Just beat them. So we ran until we could stop the TARC bus. We were beating on the side of the TARC bus screaming "Hey stop" because he wasn't at a stop. This guy was kind enough to stop. We jumped on the TARC bus, and I had never ridden a TARC bus before.

EG: What's a TARC bus?

DG: It's River City Transit Authority. It's just the local public transportation system. So I rode the TARC bus home, and when I got home, I called my mom at school. She was at her school. I was crying so hard she had no idea what I was talking about. Probably thought I was severely harmed, but I wasn't. Mentally maybe. It was just traumatic. Traumatic. I didn't understand it. I was screaming at her. Why didn't you explain this to me? Why did you tell me this happens? I was just furious at her. I was furious. It made no sense to me at all. Once I calmed down enough to tell her I'm fine, nothing happened, but this is what happened. They beat these kids. Then she tried to calm me down. We had a long talk about it all. It was just terrible, and my sister was furious because she wanted to stay at Shawnee High School, which was an all-black school. They wouldn't let her. They made her go to Butler because that was the school in our neighborhood because she wouldn't get bussed because she already lived in an all-

white neighborhood, but she wanted to go to the all black school that she would've gone to had we stayed in our neighborhood. My parents said, "No. You'll go the school you're supposed to go to." That caused a lot of ruckus in our house because they had a cool band and she was in the band. She wanted to stay with her friends and she couldn't. It was just a horrible time period.

We had KKK in our school. For Halloween they wore their KKK outfits. It's the first time I ever realized they're not sheets. They're the uniforms. They're tailored. They have zippers in them. They have hems. They're not--. I thought they were sheets with little holes cut out, and they are tailored uniforms. One of the guys called one of the football players "nigger," and he hit this guy. The black player hit the guy in the KKK uniform in the nose. That sheet just bled. You could [see] just red all through that sheet. That was on Halloween, one Halloween. They shouldn't have worn those uniforms though. That was not good.

EG: These were the protestors who were or actually the kids.

DG: Well, the kids. No, it was the junior KKK I guess you'd call it because the Junior Grand Dragon went to our school.

EG: Could they wear them in school or--?

DG: They were wearing them that day for Halloween. I guess they were considering that their Halloween costume. So they wore them.

EG: Did these violent incidents happen mostly when you started or did they continue throughout your time at Pleasure Ridge?

DG: The first year they were continuous. They were daily, the first year. You didn't know when they were going to happen. Any time of day. Any time of day. After

school you were really, you were very careful. Get on your bus and get out quick. They happened all the time. The second year it was a little better. The second year was a little better but not by much. The third year it was better, and you saw people trying to make an effort to make it better. I had decided to go out for cheerleading. They hadn't had any black cheerleaders. So I thought, "Well, let's shake the tree a little bit."

EG: What happened when you went out for cheerleader?

DG: Well, it wasn't so bad. I did it. I made the team. I made the team. One of the football players spit on me though. I thought, "Wait a minute. You're on my team." He spit on me, but I made it.

EG: Were you the only black cheerleader?

DG: At the time, yeah.

EG: How did that experience go?

DG: I know once we went to [a] school, and I cannot remember the school, and a racial fight broke out. Immediately my cheerleading coach said, "Hide her. Get her. Grab her. Get her out of her." I guess they thought it wasn't good for me to be in that uniform. So they swept me, just like swept me out of there really fast.

EG: With these violent incidents did these white kids who were perpetrators of them--.

DG: Trust me--. I'm sure African American kids did the same thing, but me, my vision was always on the white kids. I wasn't afraid of the black kids.

EG: Right. Right. Did they suffer any discipline for these actions?

DG: Maybe they did because again my focus was always on the white kids. Like in the incident when the KKK guy said "nigger" to the African American student, that

KKK student did not suffer any discipline but that black student did. So I'm sure some time they had to if they were caught, like those kids that beat those black students. They weren't caught. So they didn't suffer any discipline. But I'm sure at some point somebody had to have suffered discipline. Somebody had to have. I mean there was too much of it going around not to have suffered discipline.

EG: How could they get away with that, all that violence? Were there not monitors?

DG: Because it was crazy. It was crazy. It was nuts. You think the teachers weren't scared. I know they were scared. They didn't want to get hurt either. I mean it was everywhere, and there were so many new students and you were just trying to keep the peace and not set that powder keg off. They were swinging and running. It was just get a good lick and take off. It was crazy. It was crazy. You were just trying to keep the peace if you could for a minute.

EG: How were you able to get through that time? What gave you strength to be resilient in the face of that constant violence?

DG: I don't know. What do you do but do it? You just do it. It's not like we had a choice. You have to get through high school. You don't have a choice there. Well, I mean I guess you could drop out, but that certainly was not a choice in my home. I couldn't drop out. I don't give up easily. Even now as an older person, as an adult, I don't give up easily. So you do it. You just do it. I love school. I still love school. I'd still love to be in school now. So you just do it. You have to do it.

EG: What other sort of resistance did you or other black students face aside from these violent incidents?

DG: Well, it was hard. I felt bad for a lot of the African American students because there were so many neat things to do at Pleasure Ridge Park. Now I got to do them because I didn't live that far [away]. I ran track. I was in drama. I did choir. I did Spanish club. I did all these different things. A lot of the other students they can't do that. How are they going to get home? They didn't always have busses for them to get home, or TARC in that area at the time did not always run right or did not always get them to where they needed to go. So here you wanted to become part of something. Number one, a lot of the people don't want you there anyway because you're black. So that's one strike against you. Number two, how are you going to do it because it's twenty, fifty, sixty miles away from where you live? So that's another strike against you. You feel uncomfortable anyway because you don't know what these things--. Because it was never at your school anyway. Heck, you didn't even have books at your old school. So that's another strike against you. So it was just, there were so many strikes against a lot of the African American students. It just wasn't good. It's really funny. I used to say then for me anyway, I was too fair skinned to be friends with a lot of the African American students. They thought I was mixed. I was just dark enough not to have a lot of white friends because they knew I was black. So for a lot of the time I was kind of in limbo. It was crazy.

EG: Did you see then people who congregated around people of the same skin color as themselves?

DG: Oh absolutely. Yeah.

EG: In terms of social groups.

DG: Absolutely.

EG: And so forth. Yeah. I'm wondering, getting back to what we were talking about just a little bit earlier, why your parents didn't explain these things to you.

DG: Because in my household color was not an issue. I guess that was what they wanted to teach. Color is not an issue. But color in the world is an issue. Color in the household may not have been an issue. But they were sending me out in the world so it would've been a really good idea had they told me that color was an issue out in the world. But I think in my parents' defense they thought if we don't bring it up with her, if we don't make it an issue and we tell her that love is the important thing and that you treat everyone fairly and that everyone is a person and everyone is a human being and that you must at all times listen to everyone's side and you must at all times treat everyone fairly and equally, that is how it is. There is no turning back from that, and I mean they were stern about that. So that's what I did because I knew that's the way it is. But that's not the way it is. So that's how I went out into the world. I was furious with them for that. I mean that day when they beat those kids, I came home. I didn't even want to look at my parents. I was furious with them. I was furious with them. I cried so much that day my eyes were almost shut. I was furious with them.

EG: That's very sad.

DG: Yeah, it was terrible.

EG: It brings tears to my eyes.

DG: It was terrible. It was terrible. I just don't know why they didn't tell me. Then I grow my children up with the same thing. I do the same thing to them.

EG: Really.

DG: Yeah, I did. I did. But I did let them know it's not always like that, but whatever anybody does to you, you treat them fairly. It doesn't matter what they do to you. You treat them fairly. So at least I let them know it's not always going to be like that in the world. But regardless of what somebody does to you, you treat them fairly. Whatever you face, whatever happens. So my kids, it tickles me especially [in regard to] my daughter. She just thrills me. She calls me one day and she goes, "Mom, this woman got fired because she was gay. It was in the newspaper today and these people are going to picket." I went, "So," and she goes, "Well, if people are picketing I'm going down there." I go, "Brittany, you don't know that lady." She goes, "But it's injustice." I'm like, "Honey, what does this have to do with you?" She goes, "I just think it's wrong and I sure would like to stand behind her." I'm like, "So what are you going to do?" "I'm going to go down there and picket." I'm like, "Okay, you can go picket but if the police say go, you get your little picket sign and you come home. That's all I'm asking you to do." She goes, "Okay." She goes and she pickets. That just tickled me so. These kids were messing with this other student and I see her go over there and I'm like what is she doing? This poor little boy could not take up for himself. She goes, "You guys want to fight somebody your own size?" Well, she's five foot two so truly not their own size. She said, "You want to fight somebody your own size fight me." Nobody wants to fight Brittany because she just doesn't play. They back off and they leave them alone. She says, "Come on." And the little boy follows her. I mean she just doesn't play. She won't have it. I look at her and she just, she thrills my heart. She won't have it. You don't mistreat people. She will not have it. I'm extremely proud of her. My son does it in the same way, but he's a gentler soul. He's a very quiet gentler soul.

EG: Did they go to integrated schools?

DG: My kids went to a predominantly white school. I put them in private school. With the drug problems that we have in the high schools I was afraid to put them in public schools. I shouldn't have done that because they're spoiled now. They don't understand, they see wealth. That's all they see. They went to a very, very, very, very, very, very wealthy school. I'm not as wealthy as most of those people. So although they do charity work. They do as much charity work as I do. In their little minds they think they should have everything that they have or they want. So that's the problem.

EG: How does their experience going to predominantly white school compare with your experience?

DG: Oh, they didn't have any trouble. No. I mean they had a few nigger this and nigger [that], but they didn't have any trouble like that. Yeah.

EG: Um.

DG: I got you on a whole different track there.

EG: That's all right. Interviews tend to cover a lot and go in all sorts of different directions. You said that you were in the AP class. When I talked to Mr. [Vincent] Jarboe, he [talked] about how he also was in an AP class.

DG: [Michael] Gritton too.

EG: Was he too?

DG: All these people I'm giving you are the people that I grew up with.² We were all in AP.

² Gee is referring to the fact that she referred us to Michael Gritton, Vince Jarboe, and other potential interview subjects. In October 2004, David P. Cline interviewed Gritton and Elizabeth Gritter interviewed Jarboe for the SOHP's Long Civil Rights Movement Project.

EG: His impression was that the interactions among blacks and whites in the AP class went really well.

DG: Oh yes.

EG: Okay.

DG: I don't think that we ever really discussed the differences of our skin color probably because we had too much homework. We didn't have time to discuss the differences of our skin color. We didn't get into that. There were never any racial problems or discussions in the AP honors classes at all. We didn't have time for that. Generally we were kept away from that. We were never allowed to take classes like gym and home economics or anything like that. So very seldom did we ever get to take a regular class where we were mixed with all of that. But we did when we were going home or when there was a pep rally or something like that get to see the interaction or if we had to go through the smoking area. The absolute worst place to go was in the smoking area.

EG: Why was that?

DG: Well, because there was always fighting in the smoking area, just because there was so much smoke in the smoking area, but there was always fighting in the smoking area.

EG: Did you have, well, probably not at that time. Yesterday I interviewed a man who was a National Guardsman so he patrolled the hallways during bussing. Did you have--.

DG: I wouldn't have wanted that job.

EG: Yeah. Did you have any security officers or--.

DG: Uh uh. If we did, I did not notice them. I don't think we did.

EG: How were you treated by the teachers?

DG: The teachers were fabulous at PRP. I loved PRP. They were great. I was never treated poorly by any of them. None of them. They were all fantastic.

EG: Did you feel that your academic experience was better at Pleasure Ridge than it would've been if you'd gone to a predominantly black school?

DG: Now see I can't say because the only black school that I went to was the elementary school. From what I hear, I wouldn't have had computers at a black high school. The desks are torn up at a black high school. I wouldn't have had any type of athletic facilities at a black high school. I don't know. But that's what I heard. For band I wouldn't have had any instruments at a black high school unless my parents bought my instruments for band. So I don't know, but that's what I always heard.

EG: That's what I've heard too from talking with various people and reading and so forth. Do you think that your experience is typical of other black students who went to schools that were undergoing desegregation?

DG: No. I think I had it mild. I think that other students are a lot more bitter than I. I think they probably had [it] a lot worse than I. My school bus ride was not very far. I was already in a white neighborhood so I didn't have to go that far. My school bus ride maybe took me twenty minutes. They drove an hour or an hour and twenty minutes sometimes to get to school. I didn't have to drive that far. So no, I think I had it easy.

EG: What were some of your friends' experiences like that were--.

DG: You have got to find this, you have to got to get this tape and I'll try, if you leave a card with me and I get in my basement and I find this tape. I mean, you've got to

get this tape. They would have to get up at ridiculous times of the morning like four-thirty or five a.m. in order to get out there and get their bus and have to ride on this bus for an hour to an hour and a half to get their busses. That I think was hard for them. I don't know if any of them ever had trouble with teachers or anything like that. I would say no at PRP. I mean, just think the teachers were wonderful there at PRP. Like I said half of the [black kids] didn't get to--. They didn't feel part of the school. How could they? They couldn't do any extracurricular activities. They were never allowed to stay there because they've got this two-hour bus ride. So how are they going to get home and be able to do anything? They're afraid of being beaten. They know the KKK is there. I knew the KKK was there. So they're fearful of what's going to happen to them. We had several times where the school was, well, I don't know if I want to call it lockdown, but nobody could come out of their rooms because there were riots. There were literally riots where they had a hundred or more students that were fighting, and they were trying to break these fights up. I mean they had sticks and all kind of things that they were fighting with. So I mean there were crazy things that these people went through. I mean their busses would be pulling out of the school lot, and people would be throwing rocks at them screaming, "Nigger, go home." I mean that's not--. I don't think I'd like that at forty-two, right now I don't think I'd would like that if somebody when I went driving out of the lot was throwing rocks at me telling me, "Nigger go home." I wouldn't like that at this age. Could you imagine that at thirteen or fourteen years old? You face that every day when you come in and out somebody screaming to you, "Nigger go home." I mean I don't know how they dealt with it every day. I wouldn't have dealt with it very well.

EG: Was the KKK a constant presence throughout your time at Pleasure Ridge?

DG: Well, you know they were there because you heard about them. You knew the Grand Dragon, Junior Grand Dragon or whatever was a member of Pleasure Ridge Park. You knew he was there. You heard about it all the time. But they only wore their outfits there maybe once or twice. That was it.

EG: What did all this make you think of white people?

DG: It didn't make me think anything of white people. But it made me think very poorly of those white people that I saw do those things. Just those particular ones I thought, "Boy have you got a lot to learn." Yeah.

EG: How did this experience impact you later on in your life? ()
impact. What lessons did you learn from it?

DG: It let me know I had a whole lot of work to do. As a person as my parents taught me, it's extremely important to be compassionate and thoughtful and to always give someone a second chance. That became more important because you don't know what somebody else has been through. Just like I was taught to always value someone for who they are, to try to give that person at least that much. Well, you don't come into this world hating someone. That's just not how humans are. So somebody was taught that. So that's sad. So you have to give that person that much. I don't know, try to get through that if you can. So when I meet someone like that if I can I try to get through that part and at least try to find who that person really is and get through what that person was taught if you possibly can. So that's what I always try to do when I meet somebody who is evil or nasty or something. There's somebody better in there. So I try to be as patient as I possibly can even with people that I cannot stand. You try to be as patient as

you possibly can, if you can. So it has taught me to do that. Just to maybe not be so judgmental, not to hate. Hate is such an ugly thing. It is so ugly. It's just so ugly. Just work hard and to do what you can to make the world a better place.

People think I'm so crazy. I volunteer at so many places. That's why I told you I don't have any time. I volunteer at about twenty to thirty places a month. So, I have very little time and I have an eight-year-old still. My oldest are twenty-one and twenty. So I don't really have much that I have to do for them anymore unless I have to give them money and that takes about ten seconds. So I have very little free time. But you just, I just feel, all of that just let me know we all have a lot of work to do, all of us. And if we all work really hard this little old world would get better a little quicker, I think.

EG: Beautiful answer.

DG: Well, it's hard to do sometimes, and on days that I can't do it then I just stay inside.

EG: Do you think it was worth it? Do you think the whole desegregation idea was worth it?

DG: Oh surely. Yeah. Of course. We'd be so behind if we had not done that.

EG: Can you expound on that?

DG: Well, I mean we'd be so behind because if you think about it, if you think about okay like this. My grandparents, my grandmother--. For me, let's say when I date, I'm an equal opportunity dater. I don't care, white men, Mexican. I don't care. They're men. They're all the same. They're all stupid people, men. So it doesn't matter. But for my grandmother I can remember when I brought one of my boyfriends over and he was white, and she grabbed me by the hand and she was like, "Do you know that he's white?"

I was like, [gasping sound] "No!" She was so mad at me. She was like, "You be careful because you don't know what he is going to do to you." I was like, "Grandma he's a person. He's just"--. That was her mindset. But see my parents had already told me that people are equal that you see, but that's because that's where my parents are. Here I am at a better place. Well, I already know that people are equal. So my kids, I've already told them that we're all the same and that we--. So now my kids are probably even at a better place than I am. Now when my kids' kids come, they're going to be at an even better place than I am. So if we never took that step that my parents made to tell me that we're all better because I can guarantee you that my grandparents were not telling my parents that we were all made equal. They were telling them be careful and don't go in that other neighborhood. Had my parents not broken out of that and decided to okay, come on. Let's make a change. Nobody would be talking. We'd all still be not allowed. I mean my grandfather was fair-skinned. His favorite story is to tell me--. He's lighter than I am and his hair was so fine it was unbelievable. You could not even tell that my grandfather was a black man. His favorite story is to tell me, "You won't believe what I did when I was eight years old." I'm like, "What Granddad?" He went into the front of a candy store. He went through the front door. He went all the way up to the cash register and bought candy and walked out the front door. He looks at me and is like, "Can you believe I did that?" To me I'm thinking, "Woo hoo. Big deal, Granddad." He said, "And all my friends were waiting for me out there and when I stepped out, they all busted out laughing, and we took off running." That's a big deal to him. He went through the front door and bought a piece of candy. All of his friends thought he was the biggest dude for doing that. He was the coolest. Well, it was a big deal for him. He was black.

He went through the front door and bought a piece of candy. Well, I mean so here it is. We go from that to here I am. I mean I could marry a white guy. It wouldn't bother me. If we hadn't done that, then we'd still be right back there where we started. That, oh my God that would be, that would be just horrendous. That would be horrible. That would be awful. I mean, all the crimes that have been done to any ethnic group be it native Americans, Jews, African Americans, I mean Chinese, whites. I mean whites I'm sure have had their own crimes perpetrated against them by other groups too. It'd be terrible. We all need to clear that all, all away. All needs to be cleared away. So every time somebody makes any effort to reach their hand out to someone that's different from them, than them, that's an effort that is truly, truly well meant and it needs to be done. So that's why I think that's important. That's why it needs to be done. Yeah.

EG: Yeah. Same here. How do you think that desegregation could've been handled differently or could it have been handled differently?

DG: I don't know. I certainly wouldn't have wanted to be the one to have to do it. I don't know. I mean the only thing that I wish could have been done better is that the kids did not have to go so far. Maybe there could've been a plan to look at what schools were closer to the kids, and also so their--. This would've taken more money. Like we have more money. I don't know if they would've had the money. And to also make more busses available so that these kids could be part of the schools. You can't tell somebody to be part of something, and then when they go, oh I want to be part of this. I want to stay for this. Go, oh no. You can't stay for that. But you need to be part of the school. But you can't stay for that. You need to go on home. You can't do that to them. That's not right. How are they going to be part of it if you tell them they can't be part of

it? So they needed to allow them to stay after school but give them the means to stay after school. Some of those parents couldn't leave work and drive all the way out there to get those kids. I was lucky. I didn't live that far. It took my mother fifteen minutes to come out there and grab me. So that was no big deal. So I think they should've found a way to make sure that whatever the after school activity was there was a way for that child to get home. I know that takes a lot but somebody should've tried to rethink that. And I think everybody was afraid to say black, white, all of that.

Maybe they should've had, have you ever heard of the study circles? I love study circles. These study circles you put people in a circle where you literally allow anyone to say what they want to say. But you have to have somebody that can command that, that can oversee that group. You let people say what they want to say, but you have someone to facilitate the group so that you can get over whatever it is you're afraid of. So maybe one class would've been a study circle. So instead of having home economics you would've had study circle class where instead of pretending like there was no fear we would've had a class where we discussed each others' cultures and fears and concerns and all of that instead of stuffing them in a box or bag like they didn't exist. We acted like they didn't exist and they did. So we should've had a class where we said hey, we're all coming together. What's your fears about all of this? We just pretended like it didn't exist, like we were fighting for no reason. We were fighting because we were afraid of each other and because of what our parents were telling us. I mean I'm sure there were some parents saying, "Those niggers are dirty" and there were black folks saying, "Those white folks are going to slit your throat and hang you from a tree." That's what the kids were hearing so what are they going to do? They're going to fight for their lives.

They're going to be afraid. So they should've had classes, gotten rid of PE one day out of week and had classes where we were allowed to address our fears or classes where we could learn cultural identity or something. I think that would've been good. We've got to stop pretending that those fears and things don't exist. They do.

EG: One of the people that I talked with last time was Bob Cunningham. He said that he formed a group at that time because he was very worried about the psychological effect that desegregation would have on black kids going into the white schools. He felt that they would be really assimilated into white culture and their own culture would be lost. Did you--. What is your experience or take on that?

DG: Well. The black culture would only be lost if their home base allowed that to be lost. In my home that would never happen, but that could happen. I could see that possibly happening. But it shouldn't happen. The parents should never let that happen. I mean it could, but they should keep that. I mean we still keep our same celebrations and cultures and things like that. In my home they didn't teach black history at PRP, but in my home you'd better believe we learned black history for sure.

EG: Right. What should historians emphasize about desegregation? What do you think people reading history should know about it?

DG: About desegregation?

EG: Yeah, I guess what would you emphasize?

DG: The things that they already emphasize, the sit-ins--.

EG: Or about bussing, I mean.

DG: Bussing, oh. Well, I don't know. Do they say anything about bussing? I've never really read anything about bussing.

EG: Well, I guess from your own experience what would you want people to take away from--.

DG: When I look at it, it was successful, but it didn't become successful until all of the turmoil ended. It's successful now. I don't know that it was successful back then. But it's successful now. It had to get through its growing pains. When we were there, every day was stressful. It was stressful. You look over your shoulder a lot. I don't know if they could've made it less stressful though. I don't know. I think we had to go through that. We had to go through that, and I guess, it's stupid that they fought though. I don't know why we fought like that. I don't. I still don't understand that. I don't know why there had to be chains and sticks and bad words and blood. I don't know. I don't know what you would say about desegregation. If you're talking about the first years, it's not going to be anything really good to say about it other than we had to go through it to get where we are now.

EG: Did you see students who you went to school with that this having a psychological impact on them later, at the time ()?

DG: Yeah. I have friends that still cry about it. You can ask them about those early years and they'll start talking about it. They'll break down. Yeah.

EG: Did they later [have] a mental health impact in terms of suffering from depression.

DG: No, I haven't had anybody that has been that honest.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

EG: We have to go over the forms and sign it and stuff so I just have one final question and you've been very helpful and I also appreciate this very much.

DG: No problem.

EG: Oh I guess two. One is did you make any friends who were white?

DG: Absolutely. Yeah. Vince Jarboe and Michael, we all still hang out. It's so funny. I have a lot of friends. We're all still really close. February 12th we'll all be together actually at a, we have this little reunion thing that we do. We'll all be together February 12th to have dinner and just goof off is what we do. So that'll be really fun. It's not too many of the African American students though that come. That's odd. I'm just thinking about that. But we have a ball. But yeah. I have good friends, really good friends.

EG: And is there anything else that you want to add that we haven't covered that you think would be really important to include in here?

DG: No. No, it got better though while I was there. It did get better. It took a while though.

EG: I'm going to leave this on as we go over the words so I can ensure accuracy.

You said Bill Wilson.

DG: Bill Wilson. He used to be an alderman.

EG: And he, W-I-L-S-O-N.

DG: Um hmm.

EG: Bill like Bill.

DG: Um hmm.

EG: And Cameron Elementary?

DG: Cane Run.

EG: Okay.

DG: C-A-N-E R-U-N.

EG: C-A-N-E—

DG: R-U-N, Cane Run.

EG: Two words. Elementary. And Jessie Rodman Carter.

DG: Um hmm.

EG: So is that J-E-S-S-E?

DG: J-E-S-S-I-E.

EG: I-E. Okay. Then what's Rodman?

DG: Rodman, R-O-D-M-A-N.

EG: R-O-D-M-A-N.

DG: It no longer exists anymore.

EG: Carter. You said that used to be Virginia.

DG: Virginia Avenue.

EG: Virginia Avenue. Oh Butler High School. That's B-U-T-L-E-R.

DG: Uh huh.

EG: Oh TARC, is that T-A-R-C? And what did that stand for again?

DG: Transit Authority of River City.

EG: Okay.

DG: Big old red and white busses out there.

EG: Okay. Study circle, is that a proper word?

DG: I don't know. We called them study circles, and I don't know even know if they have them anymore going on in the city. They had them a lot for a while. I don't know who does them. But I did a study circle and it was powerful. Oh my gosh. It was so funny. This little old man, white guy was bitter. He was a nasty little thing. He was nigger this, nigger that. I thought all right. I thought to myself this is just where he is. Let him be there because that's just where he is. He got to talking and what and all of a sudden he just broke down crying, broke down. I mean just broke down and started crying and then started telling us his son was gay and how his father used to hit him and how his daddy used to tell him niggers were no good and this and that. By the time that man was done, he was a totally different person.

EG: Wow.

DG: But that's what was all in him. It was just all in there and it had been there. So he was a totally different person. He was so apologetic to me as if he had done something wrong to me. I was like it's okay. It's all right. Yeah. Yeah.

EG: This was about racial reconciliation, study circle.

DG: Uh huh.

EG: How long did you lead these?

DG: Well, you're generally in a study circle for like about seven or eight weeks. Every week you come in. Every week you come in so by the end of it he had, he just that barrier just broke. Just [phew sound]--.

EG: When was this?

DG: A couple of years ago. It was amazing.

EG: It does seem like wonderful. I did [a] diversity workshop. I went to American University for undergraduate education, and the local high school held one once. It was the same sort of thing about just letting go, unearthing what comes out of you. It was very well done and I definitely think there should be more of those. [break in tape]

DG: This one guy and I remember him clear as day, and I don't think he was like that by the time we got out of high school. I remember he had blue eyes, little catlike eyes. He was like those dumb niggers. They come out here and mess up everything for us at our school. He was just furious. I don't know what would make somebody so furious like that. But he was just so furious about blacks coming to his school like it was theirs and we didn't have a right to be there. Although I would've been there regardless, but he was just furious. But this tape is nothing but that. Just little scenarios about how everybody felt, how it made them feel. Just examples, more than just saying well this is how I feel. It was little scenarios about--.

EG: Of representatives and ()

DG: Yeah. Yeah. So you got to find that tape. I wish I could find it for you.

EG: Yeah, well, I think as academics and historians we like to explain things and find out reasons and for things like that there really isn't any rational explanation. I mean you can explain it and justify it. You can't justify it but [you can] explain it, try to rationalize it to some extent, but I read somewhere talking about September 11th, terrorism, to some extent you can't explain it. How can you explain irrational behavior?

DAWNE GEE, DECEMBER 9, 2004

DG: Which is just bizarre. It makes no sense because I've always said there are so many other reasons to hate me other than my color. Stay with me for a minute. You'll find a reason to hate me but not my color. There's got to--.

EG: It's so bizarre.

DG: Yeah. My personality or something but not my color. That's ridiculous.

EG: I'm sure it's not--. [break in tape]

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by L. Altizer, January 24, 2005