

Interview

with

SAMUEL PURYEAR

December 29, 1990

By Goldie F. Wells

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Goldie: This is December 29, 1990, and I am in the home of Mr. Samuel Puryear from Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

Mr. Puryear: My name is Samuel Puryear. Presently I am the principal at South Park High School in Winston-Salem. I have 25 years of education. I received my Bachelor's degree from North Carolina State University; Master's degree from A & T State University and my EBS from Appalachian State University in Boone and further study at Wake Forest University. I am aware that this conversation is being recorded.

Goldie: All right. I am pleased that you have consented to interview with me this morning Mr. Puryear because I know how it is on Saturday and I really appreciate this. I want you to tell me something about the research that I am doing. I'm interviewing principals who are principals of high schools-- Black high school principals in 1989, and I am also interviewing Black principals from 1964. I just want you to tell me about the high school where you were principal in 1989. Tell me how you became a high school principal.

Mr. Puryear: First of all I have 25 years of experience in the school system. Nineteen of those years are in the high school. I was an assistant principal for sixteen years in the high school and this is my fourth year as being a principal. I am now, however, employed in a special high school. Last year I was the principal at Parkland High School. We had an enrollment of 1300+ students.

Goldie: How did you become the principal of Parkland?

Mr. Puryear: Well, I guess through hard work. I was the assistant principal there for seven years and the principal was moved to central office as an Assistant Superintendent and the other assistant principal was named the principal at a middle school and the other assistant principal, there were three of us, left and went out of town and that left me. I guess they wanted someone familiar with the school to remain and I became the principal there.

Goldie: I want you to tell me something more about the school; the racial composition, and the number of people you had to supervise.

Mr. Puryear: Parkland had about 35% minority. 99% minority was Black. We had about 86 teachers. Well I'd say that we

had about 110 faculty and staff members at Parkland High School. We drew from the low socio-economic class from the minority and the White were at the upper extreme, the British Woods section. We really had a gap there between the ability of the students and their socio-economic position.

Goldie: How did you go about supervising your personnel and how did you select your teachers?

Mr. Puryear: I left that up to the assistant principals. I divided my assistant principals into divisions. I had more English than math teachers. I had one administrator working with that group. I had another assistant principal working with discipline and business, social studies, arts, music. Then I had my third assistant principal working with some of the other discipline. I had all the initial to certify it teachers plus , the guidance counselors. We had something like 20+ people to supervise and evaluate . When I interview for a position, I always include my assistant principals. I asked for their input and I got it but it was always my decision as to the person that I would hire. I personally tried to hire as many qualified minority people as I could get my hands on. And a lot of times that was very difficult finding these people because they were not in the stacks that were given to me at central office. I didn't even have to call Raleigh. One particular incidence; I wanted a home economics teacher and we didn't have any Black applicants on file. I called Justin White who was in charge of all the of the state of North Carolina and she got me a girl out of Greenville, North Carolina. I tried everything to find qualified minority. However, I wouldn't turn down any qualified majority people either.

Goldie: Were you trying to secure some minority teachers because of your minority population?

Mr. Puryear: Exactly right and because I didn't have at the time but eleven minority teachers out of eighty-six teachers and I needed some more minority teachers.

Goldie: Once you made your decision after the interview about who you really wanted to hire, did you submit their name to personnel?

Mr. Puryear: I did. I would call the person at the register and tell them the person I was interested in and wanted and ten times out of ten I would get that person.

Goldie: What about curriculum and instruction?

Mr. Puryear: I think the principal is the curriculum leader in his school. He or she sets the tone as to how the teachers teach, what the teachers teach; he helps in the

selection of their methodology. The principal has an awesome task in the senior high school with the number of people that are there working. Trying to oversee all of them is almost humanly impossible. Therefore, he has to get his assistant principals on task and he has to let his assistant principals know exactly what he wants from his teachers because it is humanly impossible for the principal to oversee every teacher and every class all the time. You just can't do it. You set the tone, and you let your expectations be known as to what you want to do.

Goldie: Did you meet with the department chairpersons to see what was being taught? Did you have a lot of input?

Mr. Puryear: My department chairperson met bi-weekly. At the beginning of the year they were given a schedule as to when we would meet with them. If I met with the English department then I would have the assistant principal or the English Department meet with me. I require teachers teaching the same course offerings to meet often such as English teachers teaching English 101. They would meet to prepare notes to see what direction they were going in plus the ninth grade teachers would meet, then the tenth grade, eleventh and twelfth grade, etc. I want to be with the teachers to get input from my stronger teachers. I did it with every department. Some of my weak teachers I even assigned a strong teacher as a mentor to work with them.

Goldie: Did you have a problem weeding out those weak teachers?

Mr. Puryear: I couldn't weed them out. One particular person I filed for her to retire. She had thirty-some years in and she was just waiting around. She had been weak thirty some years when I became principal. Why this Black me was going to come here and tell this person, "hey, you're not doing an acceptable job and you have to go." It was very difficult. You have to handle people like they were kid gloves. I had to handle people like they were kid gloves. I don't know how other principals would handle theirs. This myth about firing incompetent teachers is a myth. It is very difficult to do unless you have the backing from all the way up to the Superintendent.

Goldie: What about discipline?

Mr. Puryear: Discipline took most of my time in the senior high school. It is sad to say that more minorities were brought to my office than anybody else. We didn't have any worse discipline, in my opinion, than the other schools but we definitely had our share of discipline problems. I try to and the majority of the people there . It was difficult. I tried to be fair, firm and consistent. That was my policy then and it is my policy now. Usually

people find out that you're going to be fair with them. They can't accept punishment better if you are wishy washy with what you do.

Goldie: Did you have one of your assistant principals assigned especially to discipline?

Mr. Puryear: Oh no. As I said, I had one administrator for the ninth grade. He handled the discipline of the ninth grade and he had a hard job at my school was the worst in the building because we had to get the kids oriented to high school at the time, they were just coming out of middle school. They had more independence at this place than they had ever had before and were changing classes every period, and another administrator for the tenth graders and I had the third assistant principal who had the eleventh and twelfth graders. Which is really not that difficult here but . I was the overseer. I didn't have time by trying to be a manager and a leader and I had to be both to run that big school for it to be settled down with discipline. That is all I would have had to do for the whole time. So what I did I networked my whole office. Every assistant principal had his own computer which tied in to the master computer. Any time I wanted to know what a student was doing or what the attendance was I could punch in this number and get the information off the computer.

Goldie: Transportation.

Mr. Puryear: Is the bus what you are talking about? Ninety-five percent of our minority students rode the bus. I would say maybe 25-30% of our majority students rode the bus. We had twenty-six buses that ran. I was very strict. I let my kids know that riding the bus was a privilege and that privilege could be taken away at any time and in a lot of instances it was taken away. So I didn't have that many problems with riding the bus. We had four activity buses for our athletes to ride home on because a lot of them did not have transportation.

Goldie: So you were responsible for supervising but you really did not have to have direct contact with the bus drivers.

Mr. Puryear: I see where you're coming from now. I had an assistant principal over the buses. But in this county we also have a bus supervisor. He is an independent person. He has an office at my school but he has two high schools and he has fourteen middle and elementary schools so hiring the drivers, keeping up with their time cards, etc., is such a responsibility. The discipline is mine and we work well together.

Goldie: What about the utilization of funds? Where did you get your funds? How did you spend it? How did you divide your funds?

Mr. Puryear: We have what is known as a budget committee and the budget committee in my school is made up from the principal, athletic director, and teachers. What I would do is at the end of each year we would get a budget. All the clubs and organizations at my school -- we had major fund drives, candy drives, etc., and we would dole out money to these clubs according to their budget. Now we would get money from the central office for instructional supplies, technology supplies and other programs. When I would spend money for the departments of course I used the department chairperson on the decision making. I also had my assistant principal there. I made a decision by myself about spending money in the school. We had input from other people so that it would be spent wisely.

Goldie: Cafeteria management

Mr. Puryear: That is a separate division in the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools. It is run by the Director of Food Service. He hires the managers, all of the workers; we just provide a place and of course we also provide the discipline in the cafeteria. The operation of it is a separate thing in this county.

Goldie: What about buildings and grounds?

Mr. Puryear: Buildings and grounds is under my control. I had an assistant principal for that area also. I hire and fire the custodians but I am in control of that. The few years that I was principal there of the department for three years. I planted over a hundred trees trying to beautify. The was so bland. It had been for twenty some years and no one had ever done anything to the outside of it. I had been there as I said seven years as an assistant. I had made a lot of suggestions to the principal about how to improve the looks of the school but I guess he had other priorities. Like I said I purchased over one hundred kinds of trees--pear trees, white and red dogwood trees, crepe myrtles, shrubbery, flower beds which we put a wooden fence around some of my shrubbery; in the three years I was there we had one copier for eighty-some teachers. By the year I left we had seven copiers, two laser printers. I had networked every office in the school from the guidance to the kinders to the administrative offices with computers. I was working on the library when they decided to move me; trying to automate the library. It is just so much that you have to do working at the high school. It is awesome come to think about it. It is just so much that you have to do. I worked on Saturdays and Sundays. I think I was a very good principal--I took one day's vacation that summer. I took

about three days my second year so I never really had a vacation until this year. You had to be at school almost every night, PTA meetings, executive board meetings, basketball and volleyball games, something all the time. It was really a lot of responsibility.

Goldie: What do you think the relationship of Parkland was to Cameliton?

Mr. Puryear: It was not what it used to be because it is not a neighborhood school. When you are busing in, the Blacks and Whites driving in, with the school limits being all the way down to the Davidson County line and at one time it went all the way to city limit of High Point. The community is just so big that you don't have the relationship that you would want and that is something that we were working on. You don't have much of the neighborhood school concept left and a lot say hey that's not my school anymore we're so far from it. You have PTA meetings and very few would come. We would have more teachers there than the parents especially the minority unless you ran a bus for the minority parents. They couldn't get there and you'd always see the parent that you didn't need to see--the kid that is making A's and B's. They would be there every time. The problem children--you wouldn't see their parents so the community is not as tight as maybe it could be.

Goldie: How much administrative power and control did you think you had over that school site and responsibilities?

Mr. Puryear: That is a tough question there. I would say I probably had more than I thought I had I would imagine. But I don't believe I had as much as my forebearers had twenty years ago when principals could hire and fire and all those things. You can't really do that now. You can recommend and that is all that you can do but you have control, certainly five percent control over curriculum. People are at the central office who are "experts in that area," but you have control over your school in certain areas on what is going on there.

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

Mr. Puryear: I was a teacher when schools first desegregated. I was the first in many instances. I was the first black teacher when I first started. In Kernersville, you know Kernersville--you pass through there every day. At the junior high school there I was the only Black teacher there, first Black teacher there. I think we had two or three Black kids. Then I was the first Black assistant principal at Mt. Tabor High School. Then I was the first Black assistant principal at West Forsyth High School. I was the first Black principal at Parkland High School. So I have

been the first Black in many instances. But I think that with integration I figure it has hurt minority population. I think that whereas people respected educators because usually the same teacher that taught your mother or father taught you so you went home and said Mom, Dad, Mrs. Brown doesn't like me. She wouldn't get in her car or get on the phone and cuss Mrs. Brown out. She would ask you why what worked on them didn't work on you. Make you nicer so that Mrs. Brown would like you or whatever. I think that plus with integration we ignore accepting the burden of integration with the busing out and that has taken from the parent and from the community and they don't feel a part of the total educational program that they once felt. I do think however that there are some pluses in integration. Since this is an integrated world it is good that kindergarteners can be together and can learn more about one another. I think the most damaging thing about all this is the life styles of our community have changed so. An awful lot of one parent families. I am not downing a single mother--most of them are doing an excellent job but I think that two can do better than one. I think the life style has a lot to do with it. I think you just can't start education in the school. It has to start in the home, start at conception. They have to accept us and if we don't take anything to school we can't bring anything back.

Goldie: Can you find any difference with supervision of Black teachers?

Mr. Puryear: Sure, every school that I have worked in Black teachers I would say, 95% of them were excellent disciplinarians. Excellent. I don't care if he wasn't three feet tall. They demanded respect from those kids and they got it. You could not intimidate them. They would not be intimidated. I'll say it like this. A lot of our Black teachers were strong. They were the cream of the crop. The ones who were the cream of the crop went to big business and made big money. They left those that were not as good for the teaching therefore their hearts and maybe their minds and I'm just saying maybe a percentage of them, their mind was not on it and maybe they didn't do as well as some of the majority teachers but in my business my minority teachers have all been my strongest disciplinarians.

Goldie: Did you ever get any comments that you were treating them any different than the way you treated the Whites?

Mr. Puryear: Yes. Any time I had to make a judgement for the Black it was, "if I had been Black you would have ruled differently." The Black would say that I ruled against him if I had been White. It was a no win situation. The kids sometimes do the same and the parents too. The parents tell me, I'm sure if my son had been Black you would not have put him out of school. Those who knew me probably wouldn't have

asked me that question. They knew that I was fair. I didn't go by color, size, looks or whatever. If you did something that warranted out-of-school suspension, in-school suspension, detention, or whatever then that is what you got. Because society is a part of what you are going to face when you go out into real society. But I expected these things and therefore it didn't bother me too much.

Goldie: Did you enjoy your job at Parkland?

Mr. Puryear: Oh yes, I really did. As long as I feel that I am making a difference I know that I am a role model for an awful lot of Blacks therefore I try to live and act so that somebody would say that Sam Puryear was my inspiration and that he was a fine person and I enjoyed being in his school.

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

Mr. Puryear: I'd say that the job now is so big that it is hard to be an instructional leader and do everything else that it takes to run a school. It is an awesome responsibility as I said before. The schools are now too big. You shouldn't have over six or seven hundred kids in a school. You shouldn't have thirteen or fourteen hundred kids.

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

Mr. Puryear: The most rewarding is on Commencement Day. Seeing the joys, seeing the tears, hearing the cries of the kids and looking at those that you knew would have difficulty making it in the world. That is the best thing about it. That is the joy and to go to the Mall and a kid come up and say Mr. Puryear, thank you for what you did for me or receive Christmas cards from kids that you worked with ten or twenty years ago. For kids to bring candy, cookies and put it on your desk and not even leave his name. You don't even know who put it there but you know that you have touched somebody somewhere so it is very rewarding.

Goldie: You know back in '64, there were over 200 Black high school principals because we had Black schools and last year when I started to pull together names for this research I wrote to the State Department and they sent me 41 names and of those 41 some of them were principals of alternative schools so we don't have a lot of Black high school principals in North Carolina.

Goldie: If you knew of a Black who was aspiring to be a high school principal in the State of North Carolina, what kind of advice would you give him or her?

Mr. Puryear: I would tell him or her that first of all they would have to prepare themselves educationally and that they would have to persevere, that they would have to have a whole lot of patience. They would have to grow another skin. They would have to be very, very thick-skinned and they would have to prepare themselves for disappointments. The principalship now is such a political thing that a lot times you may be the most qualified. The opportunity may not come your way because of politics and things. A Black person has to be twice as good as a majority population in a lot of instances to get the job. And then once you get it you have to be a very strong person to be yourself and not to become a part of the system. Because the hardest thing about a Black principal. He has to find a way to motivate, in my opinion, the Black male. I spent a lot of time with the Black males and I cannot tell you now that I've had a whole lot of success because the Black male is a . Any time I read a paper I read about some of my kids who have robbed a pizza parlor or who has killed someone or who has done this or that. That's the major problem now. It's saving the Black males in this society. We have to save everybody but we have to put special emphasis on the Black male and unless we find a way to do that I don't think we are going to do but the advice I would give the Black male is to first of all get an education. Study hard and be strong. Get a strong skin because they start shooting at you every which way you turn somebody is shooting at you and a lot of times its nothing you do is right and if you don't have a lot of self-confidence too. You've got to know that I make the difference and I don't care what you say I know what I'm doing and you just have to keep doing it and you have to be fair and treat everybody right. You know it says being a principal is not necessarily being like a classroom teacher. The classroom teacher --if you say that I treat all of my students the same, you're not saying much. Because there are so many learning styles and some people would learn differently than others so you have to treat them different. But if you are a leader what is good for one has to be good for everybody across the board.

Goldie: Now, you're not at Parkland. You're at another school.

Mr. Puryear: Southpark.

Goldie: How did you happen to transfer to Southpark.

Mr. Puryear: The Superintendent called me at 3:00 to report to his office at 4:00. And at 4:00 I walked down, I sat with two Associate Superintendents and one Assistant Superintendent and they said, Sam, "the Superintendent has decided to move you." So I said, "Where?" He said, "Southpark." I said, "Southpark?" I don't know anything about Special Education. I've been in the regular school for 25

years." He said, "well, you can learn." I said, "well, will my salary be affected." He said, "No." I said, "Okay, no problem." In fact they moved 26 principals.

Goldie: Who replaced you at Parkland?

Mr. Puryear: I was replaced with a minority male who had had one year as a principal in a middle school.

Goldie: Had this person taught before?

Mr. Puryear. Yes, this person had been an assistant principal at a middle school.

Goldie: Any words of wisdom or advice or just some thoughts that you would like to share?

Mr. Puryear: This is my 26th year in education and I have enjoyed it and if I had to do it all over again I would choose education. I'm had more positive than negative in my life. I think that I have made a difference. I'm not bowing out now and I think I still can make a difference and I will try. But education is the key for everybody and we have to prepare ourselves.

Goldie: The students that you are working with now, you said it was a Special Ed school. Are these children exceptional children?

Mr. Puryear: These are exceptional children.

Goldie: It takes a lot of love and care with them, doesn't it?

Mr. Puryear: It does. EMH and TMH kids and it is a whole different ball game. To tell you the truth. Very, very rewarding. Always rewarding. It's hard to be down when you walk in that building. We see those kids struggling; we have a lot of physically handicapped kids too. You see those kids with the smile on their face in their condition, you can't help but perk up. So I've always been a feeling, caring, sensitive person and maybe this is my reward. Blessing in disguise.

Goldie: I'm glad that you are able to work with those children and just from our interview I can tell that you really do care about education, about people and about children and that is what we need. I appreciate you spending the time with me this morning and you'll get a copy of the transcript and when I finish the research you will get a copy.