

Interview

with

STERLIN HOLT

February 18, 2005

by Gerrelyn Patterson

Transcribed by Emily Baran

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

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Interviewee: Sterlin Holt

Interviewer: Gerrelyn C. Patterson

Interview date: March 2, 2005

Location: Ideas Coffee Shop in Durham, North Carolina

Length: 1 cassette; approximately 25 minutes

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

GERRELYN PATTERSON: This is an interview with Sterlin Holt in Durham, North Carolina. It is March 2 and we're in Ideas Coffee House in Durham, North Carolina. The interviewer is Gerrelyn Patterson. This is part of the Spencer grants project on school desegregation in the South and will be used as part of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. The tape number is 3205SH. Okay, Mr. Holt, can you tell me when you attended Hillside?

STERLIN HOLT: I attended Hillside from 1959 to 1961.

GP: Tell me what you remember most.

SH: Well I remember a lot of things, and I guess the thing that stands out foremost would be the type of academic preparation that we received. The teachers that we had during that era were well-prepared academically. Several of the teachers taught part-time at North Carolina Central University as well.

GP: Oh did they? I didn't know that. Nobody else has told me that.

SH: Yeah, right. A lot of emphasis was placed on academic preparation. They created a college prep program and I was involved in that. Just the whole environment was totally conducive to learning. It was totally conducive to developing friendships. I guess

the thing that—I was on the tennis team and basketball team while I was at Hillside. We won state tennis championship, I think for two years out of the three years that I was there.

GP: I hadn't heard anybody talk about a tennis team. I didn't even know there was one.

SH: We had an outstanding tennis program and an outstanding athletic program. But they were sort of, coincide. We had Coach Blunt and Coach Easterling and they had to teach as well. We realized we had to excel academically the same as we had to excel athletically. It was a real good experience because we knew that we could excel after we graduated from Hillside. We had a vision of what we wanted to do even beyond college. I think that's some of the things that are omitted now in the way that African-American kids are treated, because we had a lot of outstanding role models. The discipline was very thorough, it was very firm, but at the same time, it was fair.

GP: Okay, firm and fair. Was Prop Alston there when you were there?

SH: Yes he was.

GP: I've heard a lot about him.

SH: Right.

GP: I'm hearing you say that these teachers and the coaches were role models. Did they give you a sense of this vision of what you could do after you left high school?

SH: Oh yes, right.

GP: Did they send you specific messages? Did you hear certain things over—

SH: Yes.

GP: Tell me some of the things that you heard.

SH: Well there was life after athletics. By that, you know that if you wanted to go to the next level, you had to be prepared academically to be accepted. Also, we had an

outstanding principal, Mr. Holmes. I guess he lived right around the corner, the majority of the time, from where I lived. But before they renovated and expanded Hillside, he lived right on Formosa Street where the athletic fields, practice fields were.

GP: So what do you think made Hillside so unique?

SH: Well I think the instructional staff, we had outstanding instructors. And it was a part of what people considered to be black Durham and received support from North Carolina Central University, received support from Mechanics and Farmers Bank, received support from North Carolina Mutual and Mutual Savings and Loan.

But another thing that stands out, the whole time that I was in, from elementary school all the way to high school, up to maybe the eleventh grade, I believe, ice cream was processed through Royal Ice Cream Company. At the time, it was during segregation and the ice cream company was located in a black community at the corner of Dowd and Roxboro, I believe. We realized that the only way we could eat ice cream after school if we went there, we had to stand at a window and order through a window. We (), the white people or Caucasians—I don't refer to people as white, but the Caucasians, and African-Americans put it that way—African-Americans had to order through a little window, Caucasians could go in and sit down to eat. At the same time, they wanted us to purchase ice cream at the school for our dessert. So we participated in a boycott and we decided we were not going to buy Royal ice cream. Ice cream kept sitting there and sitting there, and they stopped bringing it after a period of time. I think they went with another company eventually.

GP: Wow. No one had told me about that.

SH: Yeah, right.

GP: So y'all were politically active.

SH: Yeah, right.

GP: A politically active, intelligent student body.

SH: Right.

GP: So tell me more about what it was like to live in Durham. How different is Durham now than it was when you were a teenager going to Hillside?

SH: Well for me, where I was raised, everybody was either self-employed or they worked for one of the black institutions. Early on, I knew that you didn't have to depend on white people or Caucasians to be successful. That's just the way I was raised. My father had his own business.

GP: What was the business?

SH: He had his own barber shop () beauty salon. It was on Fayetteville Street. Then you had presidents of other major African-American businesses sort of lived in that same neighborhood. So you had role models that you could go by. I think Durham was one of the first few cities in North Carolina that started utilizing the block voting concept. At the same, the Durham Committee on—

GP: The Affairs of the Black People.

SH: It was something else. I forgot the name of it, but it was the same thing () what they were calling them. You knew that was a stabilizing organization that dealt with political process.

GP: When I have done my research about Durham, learning about Hayti and all the black-owned businesses—

SH: My father's barber shop was in Hayti.

GP: Okay, it was in Hayti. They made it seem like everybody was doing really well.

SH: Yeah, I mean it was like, and my godmother's husband, he was a contractor. Also, he and his brother had a hardware store right there on Fayetteville Street. Then he also had an appliance store, also was black-owned. So he went to Savings and Loan, and the president of Savings and Loan at that time was his uncle, and so he was encouraged to do that. If you were interested, his nephews have their company. They had about twenty some people or more working for them.

GP: So then was everybody living large that was black in Durham?

SH: Well not everybody, but I mean people who were able to afford certain things, they did.

GP: And those of us who weren't, what we were doing?

SH: See even the people that were working, at the time you had American Tobacco Factory and Liggett & Myers, those people were making real good salaries as well.

GP: Okay.

SH: But it was just, you felt very secure within yourself.

GP: So the economic situation brought a sense of stability and security within the African-American community?

SH: Right.

GP: Alright. Okay, you went 1959 to 1961. *Brown vs. Board* was 1954, school segregation supposedly 1954. Were there white students at Hillside when you went in 1961? Do you remember Hillside changing in any way because of that?

SH: We didn't have any white students there, but I remember, I think Joycelyn McKissick was probably one of the first African-American students to integrate Hillside. She's a friend of mine. She still lives in Durham. I remember another guy I played basketball played, went to Durham High and played basketball, his name was Earl Mason.

GP: So you went to Durham High but they didn't come to Hillside.

SH: No, see you had a choice. You could make a decision if you wanted to go.

There was freedom of choice, I think that's what it was.

GP: You don't remember if there were any white teachers there? You () talk about this, sounds like.

SH: I don't remember any white teachers at Hillside. The only time I came into contact with a white teacher was when I went to North Carolina Central ().

GP: Do you think that there's something special that Hillside did for black students that is now kind of lost?

SH: Well it gave you a sense of racial pride, racial identity, academic stability, a sense of independence, where you were motivated to learn and you were motivated that you could be successful if you made the necessary sacrifices and commitments.

GP: How exactly did they motivate y'all?

SH: They would get on the telephone if you didn't follow through; they would call your parents, or they would go over and see your parents. That was the way that I recall, that teachers used to do it.

GP: So the teachers had a connection with your parents?

SH: Right.

GP: Did your parents go to Hillside?

SH: No. My father went to Palmer Memorial Institute up in Sadelia.

GP: Okay, that was a private school then?

SH: Yeah. My mother went to school in Rockingham, North Carolina.

GP: So I'm hearing some things you thought Hillside did that's now lost, that Hillside gave students a sense of racial pride and identity.

SH: Well what's lost now is the fact that you look at the administration. Their whole thing is to dismantle the history that Hillside developed and became a part of the African-American community in Durham. I'm a strong believer that certain things you should never change and I think a lot of times as African-Americans, we're encouraged to eliminate certain things, a part of our tradition, a part of our history, a part of our culture. One should never lose a part of their own culture. As African-Americans, we have a rich culture. We had a rich history. That is something, I think that the current administration, they don't want to say that Hillside () is still going under the name of a predominately black high school. If it was left up to them, I think they would probably try to have a white principal, a Caucasian principal. The thing is to destroy and divide; if you can destroy and divide, you can conquer the others or the masses. I hope I never see the day that happens in Durham and in Hillside.

GP: Were you okay with the move, when they tore down old Hillside and moved down the street?

SH: One day I was over visiting my parents and I made a loop from Peceo around going up Formosa and I looked over there, and I said goodness gracious. I thought about all the times that I had practice over there playing tennis, practice in the gym playing basketball. We used to go over there on the weekends and just use the tennis courts and practice over there. It was just like part of the community and the neighborhood.

GP: So what do you think is important for people like me, who didn't get to go to a school like Hillside, and future generations, for us to learn from what Hillside has meant to this community?

SH: Number one, as African-Americans, we come from a long history of achievements. By that I mean that we have achieved against a lot of odds and a lot of

adversity. We know how to budget. We know how to develop things. We know how to manage things. I think that the Durham community is aware of that, but what affects me and hurts me the most is that a lot of people moved to Durham, that their appreciation for Hillside is not the same as my appreciation, because we know that the news media gives Hillside, right now, a negative image in the Durham community. That's not the way it should be. There are a lot of things occurring at some of the other high schools that are going on, that are worse than what's happening at Hillside.

The other thing is that I think a lot of the African-American educators sell themselves out and sell other African-Americans out, that they don't stand up for or support the management, and like principals that have been changed and shifted from one position to another, and (). There's still a lot of racism in the Durham public schools and it's deep. You only hear about the negative things about Hillside, only negative things about African-American principals or schools that are being managed by African-Americans, administrative-wise.

GP: Well is there anything else you want to tell me? If people say Gerrelyn, I know you've been talking to people about what it was like to go to Hillside, I know you're getting this story, talking to all these people about what it means to have gone to a black high school, am I missing anything that I need to know that I haven't asked you?

SH: I would say those who are fortunate to go on after graduation to college and complete their college requirements, then they went on to become successful. I still think some of those that didn't have an opportunity to go to college, that graduated from Hillside, are also successful in their own way. That is something, I think it was you had that encouragement, that motivation coming from the instructional staff. You have an outstanding vocational department at the time, auto mechanics, carpentry, brick masonry,

they also did some () the metal craft. I think that's something I'll always remember. I think in today's society, our kids will never have an opportunity, unless things take a drastic change, to experience some of the things that I experienced while I was at Hillside. It's something that's sort of deep to me, not only to myself but a lot of other people who have graduated from Hillside.

GP: So meaningful experiences.

SH: Yeah.

GP: Well at least they'll be able to listen to your experiences through this tape.

SH: Yeah. I guess another experience that stands out when I was a senior in high school, like I said, I played on the tennis team and at the high school nationals that was held in Durham for a couple of years. I mean () we're talking about African-African tennis players, they would come and then we would have a high school tournament, because at the time, they didn't allow African-American tennis players to sort of cross the line, unless you went to a national championship, where for awhile they didn't allow African-Americans, but my senior year I had an opportunity to play against Arthur Ashe.

GP: Did you? Wow.

SH: Yeah.

GP: Tell me you beat him.

SH: He beat me, I think 6-3, 6-2. But I did qualify to go to the high school national tournament. It was in Charlottesville, Virginia at the time, because they took all the quarterfinal players, they qualified, and I made it to the quarterfinals.

GP: Y'all play at UVA in Charlottesville?

SH: Yeah, but the tournament was held, my ().

GP: How interesting. Good for you. () games in on Arthur Ashe.

SH: Yeah, but we played in the summer because they had, the American Tennis Association was an African-American organization. They had a private club on Fayetteville Street where the current W.D. Hill Recreational Center is housed.

GP: Algonquin—

SH: Algonquin Club, yeah.

GP: Were you part of that?

SH: I started playing tennis there.

GP: Okay. I've seen some pictures of that tennis club.

SH: Yeah, right. They had three tennis courts there.

GP: Durham really does have a rich history for African-Americans, so I'm glad that we are able to get some pieces of it down. Okay, well I'm going to stop the tape unless there's something else you wanted to—

SH: Anything else you want to ask me?

GP: Maybe later.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Emily Baran. November, 2005.