START TAPE ONE, SIDE A

JULIE ARMSTRONG
JULY 13, 2005

WILLOUGHBY ANDERSON: Today is Wednesday, July 13th, 2005. The interviewer's name is Willoughby Anderson. I'm here in Chapel Hill interviewing via telephone Julie Armstrong for the Southern Oral History Program's project on school desegregation in Birmingham. So if you can say your name, I'll see how you're picking up.

JULIE ARMSTRONG: Julie Armstrong.

WA: Okay. So let's start by talking a little bit about your childhood and growing up before elementary school. So you were born in Birmingham.

JA: Right.

WA: What neighborhood did you grow up?

JA: I lived in East Lake until I was about fourteen or fifteen years old.

WA: And where is the East Lake neighborhood sort of in relationship to downtown Birmingham?

JA: It would be north, a little northeast of downtown, maybe five miles or so I think.

WA: Tell me a little bit about your parents.

JA: Okay. I actually lived with my mother and my grandmother. My mother and father divorced when I was a baby. Then my mother lived with her and, I mean lived with my grandmother, and so it was actually her house. I don't know my father at all. My mother worked as a secretary in US Bankruptcy Court downtown. My mother, I mean my grandmother, worked as a nurse at UAB [University of Alabama at Birmingham], well, what eventually became UAB hospital. I think it might have had a different name when she worked there and Summit Baptist Montclair until she retired. I'm not sure what else to say from there.

WA: Okay. So what elementary school did you go to?

JA: I went to Robinson, which was in East Lake. It's let's see, it's just a little, about a block or so off the interstate, what's now I-59 North.

WA: So you entered elementary school when you were six years old.

JA: Right, in 1967.

WA: Okay. Then in 1970 your elementary school was integrated, right.

JA: Right. I don't remember there being any, I remember my school being all white. If there were any black kids there before desegregation, there were maybe just one or two. But for the most part it was by law, by court order, integrated in 1970.

WA: So what happened, well, first what do you remember about the decision to desegregate Birmingham public schools?

JA: Well, I was very young so I don't remember a huge amount about it except for the fact that the parents that I knew--my mother was involved in the PTA – the other parents that I knew and my mother were very upset about it before it happened mainly because I think they were afraid, not only of desegregation itself, but I think they were also afraid that we were going to be bussed into another school as opposed to black students being bussed into our district. So I think she was afraid that I would have to, as an eight year old or nine year old child, have to get on a bus and ride it all the way across town. So there were some protests involved in that. My mom wrote a letter to the president, I have a copy of it or part of it. So far it's a three-page rant.

WA: Wow.

JA: I know it's pretty interesting. So there was a lot of upset around that. I remember when, I think, this was in fourth grade when the school was actually desegregated. I remember before it happened being both scared and curious because I didn't really know any black people except the woman who had babysat me when I was younger and so forth. I had all the kinds of stereotypes you might grow up with as a white person in Birmingham. I had these fears of black people being dangerous and the other students, I thought they might smell bad and all kinds of, -- and they would be – I thought they would be less intelligent than us and all kinds of things like that. But then I was also curious too, as any child would be. This is going to be a new experience. What's going to happen? So both of those emotions I think beforehand. When it actually happened, I don't know, I may be going off on a tangent—

WA: No, no.

JA: [Not] Where you want to [go]. I remember pretty vividly my first few weeks or months of school and being sort of surprised that the other kids were very much like us. There was a girl who sat behind me. Her name was Jane Henley. I think we were alphabetized. My last name, I changed it as an adult. My growing up name was Gamblin, Julie Gamblin. So she was H. She sat right behind me. I remember her just being very sweet, very well mannered, very well dressed, very quiet. She didn't at all -- and very smart too. She did not at all fit the kinds of things that I had been led to believe that someone like her would be. Other students as well, I think probably most of them were terrified. I can imagine coming into this white school and probably very much on their best behavior. I just remember being shocked that the black kids were actually smarter, nicer, better, friendlier than a lot of the white kids and sort of defied all those stereotypes that I had.

WA: Can you remember your first day at school in the fourth grade?

JA: No. I really, I don't remember that day specifically. I remember in the early days but not one specific thing. I remember Jane sitting behind me. I remember talking to her about various, the various kid things, “What's your name. What do you like to do?” That sort of thing, what games do you play? What dolls do you have, that sort of normal kid conversation. That's really it. Then just sort of being in school with someone and the--. You tend to know as you're sitting around students, who's got it together, who doesn't and so forth and so on. But that's really all I remember.

WA: So let me think. So do you remember any incidents around the desegregation?

JA: No, you know I don't actually. I remember everything going very smoothly after it happened. I went through fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh grade, no problems whatsoever. In my eighth grade year there were some problems that were race related, and I think most of them happened at the high school, at Banks High School. Some of that trickled down into our school, and there was some controversy over the high school's fight song, which was sung to the tune of “Dixie”. Black students protested against that, and fights broke out, interracial fights broke out, and then some of that tension sort of carried over into our school. I remember there being a couple of fights, nothing really major but probably sort of normal school kid fights between boys but black boys and white boys, and they were definitely related to that issue. There was one particular day in which I think the

whole lunchroom erupted into this free-for-all, and I don't remember what exactly triggered it. But a white kid picked up one of those fans. Do you remember those tall sort of, not the box fans but the very tall kind of metal fans.

WA: Oh on a pole.

JA: Yeah. On a pole and this white kid picked it up and hurled it across the lunchroom. I don't remember if anyone was hurt. Maybe people got out of the way, but I just remember being really, really scared and doing my best to get out of there. There were some other issues too. There was a fight in my, a couple of fights in my classroom. One time this still once again this is in eighth grade. I had a, I actually had a black male teacher. I can't remember his name. I've been really struggling to remember it, and I can't. But he was just, I think it was his first year out of school and his first year teaching, and he really didn't have a lot of control over the classroom. There was something happened where we were taking a test and I passed the test back to the kid behind me. His name was Angelo, a black guy, and there was a desk between us, and he got angry about something, and he pushed the desk into my back, and it really hurt me. Had to leave school for that day. But not permanently hurt but just freaked out, more scared kind of hurt. Then my mother got really all upset about that. Nothing happened to him. I don't think he got suspended or in trouble or anything like that. But a few days later after that he got into a fight with the teacher, and he actually beat up the teacher and got expelled. That kind of incident, I don't know if that was any kind of racial incident, but it I think a lot of white parents cast [it as] that. “He did that because he's violent because he's black. That's how they all are,” kind of thing. So a lot of the white parents started pulling their kids out and putting them into private schools. My best friend that year got transferred. Her parents put her in a private school because they were specifically afraid of t! he kind of racial things that were happening.

WA: So you said that you had a black teacher that year? Were the teachers integrated in 1970 as well as the students?

JA: Yes, they were. He was not my first black teacher. I had another one in, a woman—I can't remember her--. I don't remember any of my teacher's names. It's so sad. But another, a female

teacher in sixth grade.

WA: So what, about how many black students came to Banks, to Robinson Elementary in your fourth grade year?

JA: You know I don't really know, and I was trying to, I was looking for those schoolroom photographs that you have with everybody all lined up in their desks, so cute, to try to get a sense of the percentages and so forth. I don't remember how many students were actually in my school. I think we had maybe twenty to twenty-five students per classroom, and there were usually two classes of students. So you can sort of do the math. What would eight times fifty would be about 400 students I guess. I remember let's see if there were twenty or twenty-five students in the class, there were probably around ten, probably eight to ten black kids in each class. I'm an English major. So that involves more math skills than I'm capable of.

WA: So about a third or less than third.

JA: Yeah. Yeah.

WA: So you were, you talked a little bit about the reaction of white parents to desegregation. Do you think that that got more intense as time went on, things came to a head at the school in the eighth grade, when you were in the eighth grade?

JA: It could have been. It also, it also might have been and I'm just speculating here. I don't really know, but like I said, I imagine the black kids who came into our school, because we were in a decidedly white part of town. They were sort of being brought out of their neighborhoods into white neighborhoods, and I imagine that that was very scary for them, especially living in Birmingham in the late '60s, early '70! s and so forth with all the things that had happened there before. So I imagine that was very frightening, and probably it took people a couple of years to become more comfortable with that. Maybe I guess over the next four years or so one moves from a place of being afraid to being angry to being more verbal and vocal about things that are not so great. I mean we were the Robinson Rebels, you know. Banks High School's song, school song was sung to the tune of Dixie. Those are the kinds of things that if you're, if you're a black person just don't set well with you. It probably took people a few years to get to a place where they felt

comfortable saying, "This is not right. I don't like this. I don't, we need to make a change here." That kind of change when you begin to tamper with those symbols of southern racism and southern white supremacy, people just don't like that. So that's really just speculation on my part. I don't really know.

WA: Was the Banks High School song changed?

JA: Umm, no.

WA: No.

JA: No, it was not. It was really sung to the tune of Dixie, and it had some of the lyrics. It was, it says "I wish I were in the land of cotton, old times there are not forgotten, give them hell, give them hell, give them hell, Frazier L." It was Frazier L. Banks High School. So no, it was still that when I was in high school. I don't know. It might have changed afterwards. But up through '79 that was it.

WA: Okay. So tell me a little bit about the neighborhood that Robinson is in. Is it the same? Is it near Banks High School? Are they sort of down the street from one another?

JA: They're relatively near to one another. Let's see that was on First. It's probably about a mile, sort of a half a mile to a mile from one another. There were several schools that were in that fed into Banks, and one was Christian, which was the more sort of suburban, upscale elementary in, not too far from Banks. Another one, South East Lake which was still sort of mostly upper middle class and then Robinson, a little further away, and you were getting into a little more poorer neighborhoods, and then Barrett, which was even poorer than and even further away. Those, as I recall those were the four schools that fed into Banks.

WA: You said Robinson, that that neighborhood was mostly white, right?

JA: Yeah, it was mostly white when I was living there. It is now changed. It is a mostly black neighborhood now.

WA: what about the other, for those other elementary schools? If they, for Banks when the rezoning of desegregation happened, was it drawing about, from equal black and white neighborhoods or—

JA: Yeah, it was. Christian, the one that was more upper middle class was still, remained all white. South East Lake, which was still sort of more on the upper middle class end, remained mostly white. I don't, I didn't, I don't recall any black students that I knew who had gone to South East Lake. Maybe a couple but not a large amount, and Robinson being more sort of lower middle class and had probably thirty percent black, and then Barrett which was even, was pretty poor had even more black students. So you can see there's not just a race element happening, but there's an income class dynamic that sort of fed into what schools got integrated and which schools did not.

WA: Right. So you had mentioned that you were on the cheerleading team in the eighth grade.

JA: Right. Right.

WA: Tell me a little bit about that.

JA: Well, I know and I'm such a feminist now. I can't imagine myself as a cheerleader. I don't know what kind of thing happened. But when I was in sixth grade and then again in eighth grade, I cheered for the little basketball team. I don't remember in sixth grade. I just don't remember that experience very well, but in eighth grade, I remember that one relatively well, and we were, we might have had equal numbers of blacks and whites on the squad. I don't remember everyone. I just remember the girls that I was particularly fond of. So I was a cheerleader. My friend Jenny or Peanut as we called her was a cheerleader and then two black girls named Verlin and Cheryl. She was always adamant that we pronounce her name correctly. It was not Cheryl (with SH sound). It was Cheryl (with CH sound). So Cheryl and Verlin and we all sort of hung out together and were pretty much, not what am I trying to say. The kind of friendships that within that society were possible. I would go spend the night at Peanut's house, and she would come to mine, but I never went to Verlin's or Cheryl's house. We were friends at school only kind of thing.

WA: Were other extracurricular groups, like was the sports team integrated? Was the basketball team integrated?

JA: Yes. Yes. I don't really remember any other kinds of extracurricular groups because I wasn't involved in them, but I know that the basketball team was pretty well mixed just like the

cheerleaders were pretty well mixed.

WA: Was there any conflict around integrating the basketball team or the cheerleading squad or it was just something that happened in the school?

JA: I think it was something that just happened when the school was integrated itself. It was really integrated in all aspects that I remember. Teachers, students, extracurricular activities, pretty much everything.

WA: Why do you think it went so smoothly?

JA: That's a good question and I don't know. I don't, I don't know. I wonder if it did go smoothly or if I just remember it that way. Because for me it went smoothly. You know what I'm saying. For me everything was pretty much okay except for some incidents in eighth grade. But in retrospect I also remember a lot of racism from other students and also particularly from teachers. That to me was very shocking even as a fourth grader or fifth grader, the kinds of things that happened, and I think for me it really became, it became a real, it became a real education in more subtle forms of racism. So I guess to say it went smoothly, maybe it only went smoothly on the surface, and in other ways it did not. Two things kind of stand out to me which was one, in when I was in fifth grade or maybe sixth, I don't remember exactly, but I had a little school friend named Howard who was a black boy. We played together on the playground and that sort of thing. One day it was a cold day and we exchanged hats. I don't remember what my hat was, but he had one of those sort of wool like a ski mask-style hat and I thought it was really cool because I had never seen one before. So I wanted to wear it. So I wore his little knitted ski mask, and he put on my hat, whatever that was. The teacher flipped out, and she said, she came over there, and she raced over there, and she pulled the hat off his head and made me take my hat off, take his off and give it back to him. She said right there in front of him, you shouldn't exchange, don't swap hats with a black kid. They have lice. So I guess that's not really a subtle form of racism. Hello! But that was something that made me think, “Wow! I can't believe you say that. He's my friend. He doesn't have lice. He's just a kid.” So that was pretty shocking to me that someone would actually, number one that they would say it and number two, that she would say it in front of him, which was really

upsetting.

A second incident that I remember or it was not, sort of an ongoing thing, but in fourth grade which was the first year that Robinson was integrated, for some reason I made all A’s that year, like no B’s ever, ever. I was sort of competitive academically with a black girl named Laurette. She was making all A’s too. So every six weeks or whatever that we would get our report cards, we would compare notes. “Did you get all A’s?” “I got all A’s.” “Oh boy.” “Well, what did you make on this test?” “Well, I got better than you.” “No, I got better than you,” and that sort of thing. I remember it being sort of in good spirit and fun and competition, not like we disliked each other or anything. But toward the end of the school year I remember the teacher saying something to me Mrs.—let's see what was her name. I can't remember her name either. I remember saying something to me like, “You and Laurette are, you're, you have a pretty fun grade game going there don't you.” I said, “Yes, I do.” She said, “Who do you think will win?” I said, “I don't know. Maybe we'll tie or maybe I'll win or maybe she will. I don't really know.” She said, “Well, don't worry you'll win.” It sort of, that stuck with me because in the very last term, when Laurette got her report card, she got a B. It was like the only B that she had gotten, and I think it was like in something weird, vaguely defined like citizenship. So I won the competition, and she got this B that didn't quite make sense at all. So those kind of incidents were things that made me think like some thing's—as a student and being involved with or getting to meet black people for the first time and seeing they didn't quite match the stereotypes that other people had and also seeing the kind of obvious ways that teachers were being racist. I think it struck a chord with me in some way. I don't know.

WA: So did you carry that on to Banks High School when you moved there in 1979?

JA: Yeah. I did. I can't ever say that, I can't ever say that I lived a really integrated life then. I mean most of my friends were white and the kinds of real friendship that you have, or that I had were with white people. But I did have, I did remain friendly with black kids at school, but for the most part everybody lived a very segregated life at school. You had white lunch tables. You had black lunch tables. Very rarely did people mix with one another. When there were pep rallies, the white kids would all be sitting together and the black kids would be all sitting together. I may be

wrong about this. Maybe this is just my memory, but I remember now that I think about it that Banks might have actually been a little more segregated than we were in elementary school. Because in elementary school I remember that we all sat in classes where we weren't alphabetized, and we could sit anywhere, that people weren't as set apart as they were in high school. In high school all the black kids would sit together. All the white kids would sit together. But it wasn't that way in elementary school and at lunch tables and that sort of thing. At Robinson, I mean, at Banks the sports teams were integrated, like football and basketball, but all the cheerleaders were white. That sort of thing. There were clubs that were all black o! r mostly black and clubs that were all white or mostly white and that sort of thing. So it might have been a little bit more obviously segregated in high school. So I didn't have, there were [black] students that I was friendly with, and most of them were students that I had gone to elementary school with.

WA: Okay.

JA: Yeah, so I sort of carried on that, sit next to someone in class because you knew them from elementary school and that sort of thing. Had a couple of male friends, school friends, one named Andre and one named Jason, and we would give Jason rides home from school every now and then, and Andre helped me maintain my grade point average in math because he helped me cheat. Out with it right now. I cheated my way through Algebra I, Algebra II, Geometry and that's as far as I went. I made Cs all the way through, and if it weren't for cheating, I would've made worse. Andre helped. He went on to be an engineer.

WA: Well, there you go. So why do you think—

JA: Maybe I shouldn't give permission for that part of the interview.

WA: I think the statute of limitations has probably gone by. I don't think they'll take it away. So why do you think that Banks High was seemingly more segregated among the students than Robinson Elementary.

JA: I don't know. That would be something worth thinking. I wonder if it maybe did have that, well, I'm talking and thinking at the same time. I think well, one thing is that Banks was a fairly new school, and it was built in 1961, '60 or '61. It was a fairly new school that had, that was built in a

white neighborhood and had basically always been white whereas a school like Woodlawn, which had been kind of in a border white/black neighborhood for so long, maybe did not have the same issues. But Banks was born as sort of a product of the post-Brown decision and had always been in a white neighborhood and so forth. So that might have had something to do with it. It might have had something to do with the kind of class dynamic that was involved because there were, there were some neighborhoods that were pretty well heeled and very white and so forth and so that, the class issue might have had something to do with it. It might have also had something to do with just kids being older because then you get into that whole sort of southern fear of race mixing, and you wouldn't want your daughter to marry one of those, kinds of things. So maybe that sort of fear of races getting too cozy with one another played into it as well. I don't really, I don't know. But there was something not hugely different but enough that it's worth noticing or worth pointing out.

WA: So let's go through your high school experience. You went to Banks in 1979.

JA: Right.

WA: You came in in the ninth grade. How old were you?

JA: Fourteen.

WA: When you were entering Banks, did you know about when it was first desegregated and what had happened when it was desegregated?

JA: No. I did not. I did not because that was just sort of beyond my realm of experience. I do remember that I had, there were some girls who were a little older than me and they sometimes would baby-sit me after school, and they were in high school. They were majorettes, two sisters. They live right around the corner from us, and they were very, I remember them being particularly afraid of black guys. They were always, like they would meet me at school and walk me home to their house, and they were always sort of looking over their shoulder and they were sure that black guys were following them. They were always afraid that some black guy was going to attack them, and I don't know, sort of weirdly obsessive about that sort of thing. Always would, you see that guy, he was looking at me. Sort of strange that way, but that's the only real memory I have of what was going on in high school before I got there.

WA: What sort of influence do you think parents had on children's attitudes at that time? Like looking back and thinking about those majorettes? Do you think that their family had a lot to do with what they were thinking about race or not?

JA: Well, I think it was just, it was so much part of the culture at the time. Most of the white people that I knew were so racist, and so even if one's parents, I don't even remember any parents being particularly liberal or not or particularly accepting or not. I think it was just so engrained in the culture still in the 1970s that I think even if one's parents didn't have an influence then, every one else's parents and every other kid would have. So it's hard for me to separate the parental dynamic from others. Although I will have to say that my, I don't know. I will say that my grandmother even though she did have some really racist attitudes, still put Christianity over that and would say you're supposed to love everyone, and you're supposed to treat everyone equally because God says so. Even though she didn't usually practice it, that was what was preached. So I don't know if that had any influence on my sort of more tolerant levels or not.

WA: So when you got there in the ninth grade, what was the racial make up of the students and also the faculty?

JA: I think for both it was probably around twenty to thirty percent black, and there was a good mix of black teachers. I had almost as many black teachers as I did white teachers. I remember the student body being pretty. Not equally mixed but yeah, twenty to thirty percent or so.

WA: Over the four years that you were there, did that change?

JA: No. I remember it being pretty much the same. The, I do recall that the black people were still being bussed in. Most white kids would walk to school or drive their own cars, and then black people usually came in on busses, and there would be several school buses lined up in a row right before class, and the only people getting off those buses were blacks. So they were coming in from neighborhoods that were further away.

WA: So as a student you didn't have much knowledge of the laws and policies that were driving desegregation in Birmingham.

JA: Oh gosh, no. I don't think I learned that until college. Maybe after.

WA: Okay. Tell me about your first few days at Banks High if, to the extent that you can recall.

JA: Let's see. I actually most everything that I remember from those days--we had high school sororities. I don't know if you had that in your school. But a lot of the schools in Birmingham had sororities. So the Saturday before, the Saturday before school started I was rushed for a sorority, and most everything that happened to me during those first few days of school was involved in sorority life. Of course now all the sororities were white, and we had, we might have had one fraternity too. So all of those were white. They were all white and there were no black sororities or black fraternities or anything like that. It was decidedly a white thing. So most everything that happened to me in my first, probably my first semester at school was white, white, white, white. I just remember being so wrapped up in that and so caught up in that I don't remember anything related to integration or desegregation or any of that.

WA: Well, tell me about the classes that you were taking? What kinds of classes were you taking? Did you have to take math again?

JA: Yes. One thing that I did notice, and this is sort of my first introduction to the tracking system. Is that we were tracked into certain, what am I trying to say, certain courses that one would take. The constellation of courses that one would take in high school. For the most part students who went to Christian and South East Lake were put in the going on to college track. Students from Robinson and Barrett were put into the mo! re going to work in the steel mill, going to work in retail, those kinds of, going to be secretaries or automotive mechanics or that sort of thing more the industrial or service industry tracks. I was a little bit different because I had tested pretty high IQ so or at least pretty good. I had done pretty well in school. So that I kind of, I went into some of those college courses or college-dictated courses mostly the ones having to deal with English. So it was sort of weird. I started in a sophomore or junior level English class as a freshman. Then went on and took Latin and things that would get me to college, but I also took courses that were the more sort of service industry kinds of classes. They registered me for this weird course called careers

where we went to Asipco, one of the mills, and learned how to fill out job applications for the mill and I was in the retail club, the Distributive Education things. So I sort of straddled some tracks there. But without question the on-the-college tracks were populated by white students. The service industry tracks and the industrial tracks were populated by black students. I noticed that especially as I got older, like junior and senior. Like some of my classes would be all white students and some of my classes would be mixed. So it was a pretty obvious kind of thing what was going on there. I'm not sure if I answered your question. I might have gone off into another tangent.

WA: That's fine. That's fine. Well, tell me a little bit about your teachers. You said you had about maybe twenty or thirty percent black teachers and white teachers. Did you have any favorite teachers, any teachers that stand out in your mind?

JA: Yeah. Actually I remember something about a class. So I'll go back to that in a second I'll tell you about the teachers. There were some, our class, our teachers at Banks were very mixed, and I don't mean racially mixed, I mean mixed in terms of ability in that there were some really amazing dynamic teachers. And there were some really bad, I can't believe these, minimally competent kinds of teachers. That didn't, it didn't really have much to do in terms of race in that way. But two of my favorite teachers, one was Mrs. Thornton who was English teacher and white, and one, another one Mr. Moore who was a psychology teacher and black. I think he went on to be a principal at Winona High School. But I just had such, they were so just such excellent kinds of role models for what a teacher and what an adult should be. But we also had some really poor teachers, and some of them were, I would say of the teachers who were barely competent, a couple of those I think more of those were black than they were white. I mean, there was one Mr. Lewis who you could always smell alcohol on his breath, and he was always falling asleep in class. Another woman Miss Pugh who taught economics, and she couldn't pronounce words, very obvious kinds of words. It was sort of embarrassing. Then but there were some white teachers too that were the same way. But I think at least in my memory some of the really bad teachers I had were black teachers. I don't know what to make of that.

WA: Were you going to tell me about a classroom experience that you remember?

JA: Oh yeah. You had asked me about classes that I took. One of the classes that I took as a freshman was called Foods where we learned to cook. So some credit hours that were wasted when I could've been taking something more intellectually stimulating, but I was in Foods, and it was a really bad experience because there were some very popular, really bitchy cheerleader girls in there. There were some students that I had gone to elementary school with, and then were just some various other students. Some of the girls that I had gone to elementary school with who were trying to be popular sort of teamed up with the bitchy girls, and I was taunted and harassed in a major way. It was just very, very painful. They, one day they pulled all the stuff out of my purse, and they started throwing my tampons around, and you can imagine when you're fourteen what that's like. One day I came in, and I think I had on this blue eyeshadow, another bad fashion choice, "What's on your eyes." "You've got mold on your eyes." "Ew, you're gross." That sort of thing. It got to the point where it was just really, it was really painful, and I didn't even really want to go to that class. The, we sat in tables. We sat in tables and each sort of little clique had its own table. So there was the popular girls, and then there were the sort of loser girls, and then there were two tables, two other tables and one was mostly black basketball players. So I had, I decided I wanted to leave the table and move to a different one because I was being harassed so much. So I left where my friends were sitting and I had choice. Okay, where could I go. I couldn't go with the loser girls because that, you just wouldn't do that at fourteen. So I went to sit at the black basketball players table, and they were really sweet to—

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WA: Okay, go ahead.

JA: It wasn't like they were trying to, "Oh let us heal your pain," kind of things, but they were decent to me. They were nice to me, and they didn't, they saw what had happened, and they just treated me like a normal person. We ultimately had a food competition in the class, and they were

excited because they were basketball players. They were in Foods because they needed the class. They didn't care anything about cooking, but they had a girl at their table. So we made this homemade southern breakfast with bacon and biscuits, and we had to make homemade jelly and all that kind of stuff, and so we actually worked really hard on making this breakfast. We did and we won the competition, and we were so psyched. It was just kind of funny that way. That we really just beat the pants off the popular, white bitchy girls. They were all very happy for various reasons.

WA: So did you continue cheerleading at Banks?

JA: No, no, no. Actually I was involved in a sorority, and you didn't, you couldn't be a cheerleader and in a sorority too. So I didn't and besides I wasn't good enough. To get up to that level to be able to do actual gymnastics and stuff. I just yell really loud.

WA: So besides this sorority were you in any clubs or—

JA: We, I think everybody pretty much had to be in some kind of club or else if we didn't, when we had club days or whatever then we had to go--. If we didn't go to a club thing, we had to go to study hall. So you went, you joined a club. There were things that I cared about that I liked. There were things that I was involved in the club just because I had to be in one. I don't really remember much about them. But I did year book staff, and I did that my junior and senior year, really enjoyed that. That was an all white experience. Everyone on the staff, and that was one of those kind of, there were certain student activities that had more prestige than others. Being on the newspaper staff was one. Being on the yearbook staff was another, and you had to be elected by your peers like the people in the newspaper staff would elect people for next year's staff. The people on the year book staff would elect people for the next year's staff. Those were all white in my memory because it had that sort of clubbishness to it, old boy network kind of thing to it. So I was involved in yearbook. I was, I got out of the sorority when I was a sophomore. So I didn't do that afterwards, and I was involved in the Distributive Education club mainly because that's where all the groovy kids, who did bad things that I'm not going to admit to, hung out. So I was involved in that one. Let's see I was in a couple of honor societies too, which were for the most part white as well.

WA: So we talked a little bit about Banks being more segregated in terms of students socializing than Robinson. So did you see any difference in black and white and student interaction in the classroom versus extracurriculars or outside or after school?

JA: I think for the most part it wasn't that people got along. I think for the most part people just avoided each other. You just really didn't have anything to do with one another. There was just no socializing whatsoever. I don't think that's positive at all. It was more people just stayed away.

WA: What about interracial dating?

JA: Oh that never, ever, ever happened at my school. I don't remember that at all. I do remember I worked, and I wasn't involved in a huge amount of activities in high school because I started working, and I worked as much as I could in a legal job, and then I also did babysitting and stuff like that. So most of my time was devoted that way. But I do remember when I was working in, at Great American Hamburger, which was at Eastwood Mall, had a little friend, a friend there named Derrick that went to, I think he went to Woodlawn. We always used to joke that we were going to go to each other's prom just to freak out the students. He's like I'll go your prom with you if you'll go my prom with me. We'll shock everyone, and we're going to be really daring and all of that kind of stuff. We didn't do it. We were just joking around and stuff. That was the extent of that.

WA: I was about to ask you about prom. Did your school have prom and was it, were there two separate proms or—

JA: No, it was, there was one prom, and I did not go to it. I will confess that in high school I was a loser. I was very much a loser, and I just didn't get a lot of dates, and I didn't have a date to prom, and I avoided that like the plague. Some people would go with a group of friends and be there without a date, but that just would've been too much for my little psyche. So I did not go. But I will say I was going through the, I was going through my high school year book earlier, I had my senior year, and I was looking at various people and what they did. I noticed that there were several black students on the prom committee. So I assume that it was probably was a more integrated thing than you'd get in a lot of southern schools.

WA: Right. So do you think that there is any difference between boys and girls and their experience with the desegregated school? Do you think it affected boys and girls differently?

JA: I don't know. I don't have any kind of sense at all of that. So it would be hard for me to say. Yeah, I just can't say. Don't know.

WA: That's fine. So is there anything that I haven't asked you about your high school experience that you'd like to talk about?

JA: I'm looking over my chronology here and trying to see. One thing that is not necessarily related to Banks but just sort of my experience with that time period, well, two things. One thing is on the one hand my sophomore year my mom moved away from my grandmother's house, and we moved a little further out into the sort of Huffman Center Point area. I was actually zoned to go to Hewitt-Trussville, but I did not want to go there because I perceived that to be too redneck for me. So I had my own little class prejudices there. I didn't want to go so I kept going to Banks. I'm, that was actually the right decision because there was a lot of--. The further one moved out toward that kind of area, it's different now, but in the mid `70s it was pretty redneck. So there were a lot of kids who I knew who went to Hewitt-Trussville who were far more overtly racist than I was or my friends were or the other people that I knew. Racist to a really scary extent like there was this guy Rechio, Billy Rechio or something that. He was older than us. But he was always in the area recruiting people for Klan activities. He was putting fliers around on people's cars and that kind of stuff. So there were more at that other school more kind of traditionally scary racist people than there were at my school. I remember thinking, "Wow, I'm glad I go to Banks because it's so much cooler than this other place." So on the one hand my life at home was being surrounded by people that sort of wigged me out, but my life at school I perceived as being much more sort of integrated at the time.

Another thing that I think and all these things I guess sort of heightened my experience or my understanding of race and racism and made me sort of conscious of it, maybe, in a way that a lot of other people might not have, some of my peers might not have been conscious of it, when I went to work at Great American Hamburger, which was very mixed. We had waitresses and bus boys and

cooks, and my bosses were about half black, half white. It was pretty mixed in that way. I started working with a lot of kids from Mountain Brook High School because it's right there in that sort of border land. It's on the eastern side of town where sort of east and south come together. So I had a lot of kids from Mountain Brook there too. I remember these boys asking me one time, “So what's it like to go to school with black people,” because I don't think there were any blacks at Mountain Brook. I said, “Well, I don't know. It's just like school. It's not much to say.” They asked me some other questions, and I don't remember them exactly. But the one thing that stood out to me is they said, “Well, it can't be any worse than going to school with Jews,” and then they started going off on Jews, and I just remember thinking, “How do you even know who's Jewish." In Birmingham everything is so black and white in terms of people’s prejudices that it didn't even occur to me that people would have prejudices against Jewish people. It's just like, and I was so ignorant that I didn't even know who was, sort of, Jewish and who wasn't. But then they started going off on Jewish people, and they were using this name sort of stereotypes that people in my end of town would use to characterize blacks. Like they smell and they're violent and they're dirty and they're stupid, throw in some other sort of money grubbing things that didn't apply to blacks. But for the most part the stereotypes they used to characterize the Jewish kids were the same ones that others used to characterize blacks, which I thought was just weird.

WA: Right.

JA: So anyway. Worth mentioning.

WA: Well, why don't we, we've been talking for about an hour. So why don't I—

JA: That went quickly.

WA: It does. So why don't I end up with some of the general questions on school desegregation, and then we'll talk a little bit about your life after high school at the end.

JA: Okay. Okay.

WA: So with our general questions, the first one is when you first entered high school, what did you consider to be the goals of school desegregation?

JA: I think that, and it's hard for me to remember this without filtering it through the

experiences that I've had later, but I do seem to recall knowing that the kids who had gone to the black schools in Birmingham were getting an inferior product – that the black schools weren't as nice. They didn't have the same academically challenging courses. The schools themselves were in states of disrepair and generally much poorer than the white schools in my area. So I was pretty aware that the kids, there was a separation, that white kids tended to go to better schools, schools that were better in all kinds of aspects. The black kids had been sort of forced to go to schools that were inferior in all kinds of aspects. So forcing people to come together I perceived it as being a very good thing. That bringing blacks into the white schools would give them opportunities that they wouldn't have normally had if they were sort of confined to some of the other schools in more inner city Birmingham.

WA: What about today, what would you consider to be the goals of school desegregation?

JA: Well, I think it's still related to that because schools in Alabama, definitely there are class aspects to it and there are race aspects to it, but the more affluent white kids tended to get a much better product than poorer kids and black kids. That was a way that I think the goals of desegregation were an attempt to kind of rectify that, to put everyone on an equal more equal footing. I don't necessarily think that goal has been reached yet, but I think that was the intent of it.

I don't know if this was the intent, but I think it was definitely a byproduct of that desegregation is that it brought people together. I know that is true in my case. If I had gone, if I had not gone to an integrated school, I don't think I would be where I am today. I wouldn't have the attitudes I have today. The people that I know who grew up in Birmingham itself, maybe not necessarily true of the suburbs and stuff, but the people I know who are my age who grew ! up in Birmingham and went to segregated schools or all white schools grew up much less tolerant and much less accepting and much less P.C., I guess is the word. Still there was, still, I don't know, I think it's hard to hold on to a lot of your racist attitudes if you go to a school where you're interacting with people who of a different race than you all the time. So I don't know if that was a goal, but it certainly was a byproduct of that.

WA: So let's go back to the goals, do you think that school desegregation has fulfilled its

goals?

JA: Well, no because what happened, and it's pretty clear in Birmingham that for me that when in not just schools but in other areas as well, when white people were sort of forced to! accept integration or desegregation that a lot of them just moved out. So schools were integrated within the city, but then white people moved out to the suburbs or they started sending their kids to these little Christian academies that started popping up all over the place. So what you were left with was a Birmingham, a city, that's mostly black surrounded by this suburbs that are mostly white. So I see that happening with, say, like public transportation too. Once the buses were integrated, people stopped riding the buses, and so the racism was so strong that even that kind of legislation that helped it and I think it changed things for the better, but I don't think it fixed things entirely. It's better. It's just not what it should be yet. There's still a huge amount of racism there. Even though it's not really socially acceptable anymore, it's still there.

WA: So what would you, what do you see as the benefits and drawbacks of school desegregation for Birmingham as a whole? You talked about this out-migration of white people to the suburbs.

JA: Well, let's see. The, I think the benefits of that sort of thing is that, for me something that I saw was a real benefit, was when Birmingham elected Richard Arrington as the mayor. Because of, maybe because of the demographic change there were enough critical mass of black people who could elect a black mayor, and I really think--. I think his administration got to be a little more corrupt at the end. But in the beginning was definitely doing a really wonderful job of pulling Birmingham into the twentieth century race relations wise. I thought that was just a really good thing, and I think in a not a maybe a direct way but a sort of direct way that was part of it. I think with desegregation it really, like I said, did force people to mix in ways that in Birmingham in 1950s and `40s, so forth, people did not mix before. That only happened, that could have a kind of positive outcome in that it made people get to know each other in a real way so they were no longer strangers. I don't really think you can hold as many prejudices as you had before if you're actually interacting with people who are different from you. That to me is another real benefit. Drawbacks

are that it didn't go as far as it could go.

WA: How do you think desegregation could have been handled differently in the schools?

JA: Well, let's see. That might take more of a legal mind than I have. What happened really, maybe instead of it being, I think that I have to say this: I think that school desegregation itself is not necessarily a problem or a solution. I think that it is actually a byproduct of larger issues. To me the issue is the sort of neighborhood segregation that goes on. I mean, so you can say we're going to desegregate Birmingham schools, but then all the white people move away and then what do you do? You're left with the same problem. It's really an aspect of where people live and the kinds of attitudes that people still have. I mean, for a brief time in the `70s people were kind of forced to go to school with each other, but then it didn't, because of the ways that the demographics changed, it didn't, you could only keep that enforced for so long. So it's really a product of other issues I think. I mean it's, it had to happen, but I don't think it was enough to sort of fully change people's attitudes and stuff. It's more, it's like trying to cure a symptom and not trying to cure the disease, if that makes sense.

WA: So do you consider school desegregation to be an ongoing issue in Birmingham?

JA: I haven't lived there in twenty years at this point.

WA: Right.

JA: So I can't really say. But I know that it's still an issue in Saint Petersburg, Florida, where I live now, and they're still trying to wrestle with, we have this school choice program that is sort of the way around that, and the solution is messed up. The problem is still there, but the solution is almost as messed up as the problem. I can't really speak for Birmingham on that. But I know it's an issue across the South as a whole.

WA: So have you kept in touch with any of your fellow students from Banks? Do you go to reunions or anything like that?

JA: No. I don't. I really for other reasons that were more personal and not really related to school, but high school was just not such a great experience for me, and I did go to my ten-year

reunion and actually enjoyed it quite a bit. But I did not go to my twenty year reunion. I have not, my best friend now is the person who was my best friend in high school. We are still friends, but aside from her I am not in touch with any single person period I went to high school with. Probably at this point we've aged enough that if I saw them on the street, I might not recognize them anymore. I mean maybe a few people but not really. So no. I'm not in touch with any of them.

I did notice one thing though that I thought was kind of odd. When we had our twenty-year reunion, which was just a couple of years ago. Well, oh wow, six years ago at this point. When we had our twenty-year reunion, they sent out the list of people they couldn't find. The people that put together the reunion tends to be the more popular white kids from school. Those people who were on that reunion committee would send out a list of we haven't been in contact with the following people. If you know them, please let us know how to find them and that sort of thing. The list itself was overwhelmingly black, and it was all black people and all sort of poorer people, poorer white people, and there was a real race and class thing happening on that list. I called that to their attention. They probably thought I was a real witch, but I couldn't help it. I just thought that was sort of an odd thing that even though we all went to school together, and now we're all sort of middle aged, but those same kind of everybody's life was still sort of insulated, segregated in ways that it probably was back then too. Not much has really changed.

WA: So did your experience in these two desegregated schools have an impact on your later life and your choice of careers?

JA: Maybe not in terms of my choice of careers. I think I was probably born to teach English because I read so much. I was kind of geared into that from a long time, but I do think that it affected my the kind of specialty that I went into in dealing with civil rights and also teaching African American literature and southern literature and that sort of thing. Because I think on the one hand if you grow up in a place like Birmingham, which you may know, it makes you a little obsessive about race. Especially as a southerner if you go, I went to New York and was constantly having Birmingham come back to me like people asking me questions like, what was it like there and asking me all kinds of weird things. My experience was always coming back to me. But I think

that as, I was always a little obsessive about that kind of thing, which sort of led me to the kinds of thing I taught. But also I think that especially when I was putting together this chronology, I really realized I could see or I could sort of chart how my attitudes changed as I got older and as I went through different kinds of experiences. With each new experience it somehow exposed me to people, to more, a more kind of integrated life. I learned so much, and I think that if I had not had that experience of going to an integrated school that I probably would be a very different person. I'd probably be much like my cousins, for example, who are my age and who went to mostly white schools and still hold onto some really sort of overtly kinds of racist attitudes. I think that I'm different because I had a different experience when I was younger from them. But maybe it's part of, has something to do with moving away from Birmingham too, but I really, I can see roots of that. I can see it in fourth grade and eighth grade and all of that. So maybe I can be specific, but I don't know.

WA: Well, is there anything that I haven't asked you about that you wanted to talk about today?

JA: I cannot think of anything.

WA: Okay.

JA: Did I, was this helpful?

WA: Very helpful Here I'm going to, I'm going to thank you and turn off the recorder but still be on the line.

END OF INTERVIEW