Supplemental Interviews

70th
ANNIVERSARY

Separate ≠ Equal

Commemorating the 70th Anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*
May 17, 1954 – May 17, 2024

FPES
FLORIDA PRESS
EDUCATIONAL SERVICES INC.
FPESNIE.ORG

Tampa Bay Times
NIE
newspaper in education
tampabay.com/nie

Florida
HUMANITIES

Table of Contents

John Avery Page 3

Bobby Bowden Page 5

Randall Gainforth Page 8

Charles Fred Hearns Page 10

Dr. Rozelia Kennedy Page 14

Noreen Miller Page 18

John Avery

Florida native John Avery graduated from St. Petersburg High School in 1971. When he attended St. Petersburg High, he was “a member of the Human Relations Committee, a group of six Black and six white students with the goal of unifying the school and reducing potential conflicts.”

Avery says when he attended St. Petersburg High School, the school district had just redrawn the school boundaries, so students from Northeast St. Petersburg, Snell Island and the Gas Plant District all attended that school. Avery says the school was naturally integrated because the community was integrated. He does not recall students being bussed from other parts of the county.

Avery remembers the integration efforts at the school being peaceful. During the 1969-1970 school year, the administration formed a Human Relations Committee, of which Avery was a member. “It was a group of 12 students – six white and six Black – and we were tasked with hearing grievances. You know, trying to iron out problems before they erupted into something else. I think we were largely successful in that,” Avery notes.

Avery credits principal Ronald R. Hallam for creating the committee. Hallam served as principal at two of the county's larger high schools - St. Petersburg High and Dixie Hollins - in the 1970s, when the system was just desegregating, and racial tensions ran high.

Avery remembers the committee well; although, he doesn’t have a specific recollection of any grievances. “We would bounce ideas of how to put everyone on as equal a footing as possible,” he says.

“For example, one idea that came out of all of that was that St. Pete High elected their cheerleaders. I forget how many cheerleaders there were on the squad. Let's say there were eight or nine. So, you had eight or nine votes if you could cast any way you wanted to. You could give all nine votes to one person, or you could vote for nine different people. That was adopted as the method of electing the cheerleaders.”

Avery notes that the election policy “pretty much assured that, that there would be an integrated squad. It doesn't sound like much today, maybe, but it was a big deal at the time.”

Avery was on the Human Relations Committee during his junior year. He said the committee merged with the student advisory committee the following year. “We both co-existed for that one year, and then those responsibilities were simply handed off to the student Advisory committee.

Avery says the lack of chaos and violence in the school was a result of the way the school district drew the enrollment lines. He notes that the schools that had a lot of Black students bussed from various parts of the county had more turmoil, especially Dixie Hollins High School where the school was using the Confederate flag in their pep rallies.

About St. Petersburg High School Avery says, “I'm sure that there were prejudices, but they never got ugly or got to a point where, you know, it came to any kind of schoolyard violence or anything.”

While the school became integrated, the community was still segregated, according to Avery. “Most Black students lived in historically segregated areas,” he says. The Gas Plant District, the Deuces and Methodist Town are examples. In addition, St. Petersburg was a railroad town, Avery notes. He says St. Petersburg was nothing like it is today. The main city was deserted.

Avery notes that there was a time, especially in the South, when segregation was the law, and “I think that that's something that would be very foreign to a modern high school student today. They might not even believe it to be so, but I would assure them that yes, even at city hall the drinking fountains said ‘white’ and ‘colored.’”

Avery believes it is important to learn history. “We just need to tell it like it is. And does that mean beat up on white people? No, but I, but I think we can certainly acknowledge that, even in the Constitution as originally written, slaves, which predominantly overwhelmingly were Black, were not even counted as a full person.”

Avery says, “We're still debating whether there was ever racism in the United States. Look, we've come a long way. I get it. But, you know, were we an openly segregated and openly racist society at one time? Absolutely. Is that the fault of anyone in particular? No, because society changes and, slavery existed throughout the world, but virtually longest in the United States, and it took a very, very, very bloody filthy war to end it.”

Bobby Bowden

Bobby Bowden served as Tampa, Fla's Director of the Department of Community Affairs, previously known as the Metropolitan Development Agency, from 1986-1995. According to the University of South Florida digital commons, Bowden was employed by the city of Tampa from 1968 until February of 2004.

A Florida native, Bowden attended all-Black public schools in Tampa in the 1950s and '60s. He attended Lomax Elementary School, Booker T. Washington Junior High School and then Middleton High School, where he graduated in 1961.

After graduation, he attended the HBCU (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) Florida A&M University. He recalls that he couldn't afford to attend a different college, and the University of South Florida, in Tampa, was not accepting Black students at that time.

Bowden remembers the long, crowded Tampa Transit line bus rides from his home in College Hill to Booker T. Washington Junior High School. On his way to school, he remembers passing a lot of all-white schools. "If there had been integration, we would have gotten to school a lot quicker," Bowden says.

Bowden notes that when he was in junior high school and high school, he couldn't really participate in extracurricular activities because he lived far from the schools. He remembers the bus ride taking about 45 minutes.

"If I didn't catch the bus I would have to walk home," he says. He notes there were no real accommodations made so that students could participate in after school activities. He also remembers the books they used for class were in bad condition since the Black students received books after the white students finished with them.

Bowden notes that closing the Black schools was very upsetting for students. "Economically, a lot of the parents did not have cars or other modes of transportation," Bowden notes. "That is why I say it completely changed the Black schools. It was traumatic and a very disruptive aspect of desegregation. As I think about it, one of the most disruptive aspects of segregation and busing was that kids might not know from year to year which school they would be attending,"

He recalls that when integration began in 1971, schools had racial quotas that had to be fulfilled, so the people in charge changed school boundaries. The result was traumatic for Black students, Bowden says.

"You might be at one school the first year, and year two you might be at a completely different school to maintain those artificial numbers. Students couldn't really look forward to being in certain clubs or organizations or playing on certain athletic teams or coaches that they might be familiar with. It completely changed Black students. It really did."

According to Bowden, desegregation laws were a catalyst for the civil rights movement because a lot of the things that occurred in the civil rights arena are due to *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Bowden says it is important to pay homage to Oliver Brown and his daughter Linda for filing a lawsuit against segregation in schools. *Brown v. Board of Education* "changed the landscape of America in terms of people learning to get along with each other, To a certain extent was a good force. It was a catalyst for the civil rights movement, and so there's good and bad. At this point in time in our lives, as it relates to better race relations and of course you know we still have a long way to go because there are still those in this society that resent mixing of the races."

In 1971, when integration in schools became mandatory, Bowden was working for the Hillsborough County government. He was an employment counselor through President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society program. "I was in on the ground floor, and I saw what it did to help people – early childhood education and jobs to help people."

Bowden notes that before integration, Black people "knew where we could go and couldn't go – eating facilities, restaurants, theaters. It was something that we accepted and abided by the laws that were in effect at that time. The landmark legislation *Brown v. Board of Education* was a catalyst for the civil rights movement. Those laws were ineffective. It took a long time. We couldn't go to the theaters until the public accommodations law went into effect. It was very disconcerting."

He describes Black people as being strong and knowing what they had to do to endure the time period. "We knew what we had to do to survive," Bowden says.

Brown v. Board of Education was "a landmark decision that not only effected education, but it ruled that the United States laws establishing racial segregation in public schools were unconstitutional. So, it actually had a significant impact in other arenas, too because in that law, it ruled that separating children in public schools on the basis of race was unconstitutional. It basically signaled an end of legalized racial discrimination in the United States, especially in the South."

Bowden states, "That's why I want to pay homage to Oliver Brown and his daughter Linda because if you can imagine what they went through after that [lawsuit] was filed in Topeka, Kansas. I thought about what happened in Boston. They had parents throwing bricks and other items at the buses, but we did not have that here."

According to Bowden, he faced "some very negative experiences at one point in time" in his life. He remembers being overlooked in department stores. "I would just say to folks that are prone to those type of experiences just be vigilant and stand your ground."

One of the positive things Bowden remembers about attending all Black schools was the teachers. "We had Black teachers who really cared about us. They would make sure that we received a quality education."

Bowden recalls Middleton High School and Blake High School being community schools. Parent supported the sports teams. He remembers Blake High School having a dance team as well. Since Middleton was only five blocks from his home, Bowden did not have any issues with after school activities.

Bowden notes that it was distressing when students were forced to leave their community schools, especially since Blake and Middleton were rivals for team sports. He remembers it being a good rivalry.

Bowden says it is very important for people to know their history and the history of their communities. He advises students to "be vigilant. Know your rights and address them appropriately. If you can help one person every day, please try to do it."

Learn more about Bowden's experiences growing up in Tampa's public housing developments, from the late 1940s through 1961 by going to digitalcommons.usf.edu/freedman_ohp/19/.

Randall Gainforth

Born in Bay City, Mich., Randall Gainforth moved to Homestead, Fla., in 1967. He graduated from ninth grade at Redland Junior High School and then attended South Dade High School.

The school was known as the home of the rebels, Gainforth recalls. The fight song was “Dixie’s Land,” and the band uniforms were Confederate army uniforms.

Gainforth played football until the middle of his senior year when he quit the team. “Vietnam hung heavily over me in my high school years,” Gainforth says. “I had friends that went to Vietnam and didn't come back.” He says he was worried about being drafted and being sent to Vietnam, and, therefore had a conflict playing football “because it was such a violent sport.”

Gainforth remembers the song “Dixie’s Land” playing and Confederate flags flying at football games. He notes that it was uncomfortable, and he “kind of got caught up in it before realizing how racist it was.” He remembers several times his high school closed down in the middle of the day for violent outbreaks. He vividly recalls the first week of school when there was an assembly to welcome all the Black students from Mays High School to their new school. The assembly did not go well.

When the Mays High School student council president took the stage, he flipped off the school and principal, Gainforth says. “They closed down the school for the first of many times,” Gainforth notes. There were announcements over the speakers. ‘Go to your buses. We are closing the school for the day.’ That happened repeatedly over the rest of that year and the following year.”

Gainforth doesn’t recall what would start the violence, but he says, “There would just be occasions where there would be a buzz as students knew something was happening.” Roaming groups of Black and white students would be in the hallways.” He remembers the administration telling everybody to stay in their classrooms, but most student did not listen.

Another interesting byproduct of integration was when the football team was banned from playing at Harris Field due to a fight on a bus that resulted in the bus driver being stuck with a knife, Gainforth says. “The city of Homestead was outraged, and they banned the sports team from the field for the rest of my high school career. The football team spent the rest of the year playing only away games.”

It was during this time period that Gainforth remembers both the Ku Klux Klan and the Black Panthers were actively having rallies in the area. “They were taking advantage of the racial upheaval to influence people,” Gainforth says.

When Gainforth entered his senior year, a new principal, Ludwig “Sonny” Gross took over and removed the Confederate flags and unforms. The school teams stopped being called the Rebels.

“The interesting thing about Sonny Gross is when he came in, and, and this is probably why the whole thing is such a poignant memory for me, is one of the first things he did was form a student committee to help deescalate the violence on campus,” Gainforth says.

“One day I get a note to report to the office, and I show up and, and 15 sticks out in my memory. I'm not sure if that's accurate or not, but there's like 15 students in this room with the principal,” Gainforth says. He describes the group as an interesting combination of students that represented the various groups in the school, with Gainforth being the “hippie athlete.”

“He literally met with us to say, I want to use you guys as a resource. What can we do to heal this school? What can we do to fix this school?” Gainforth remembers. “It stands out in my memory so powerfully because, you know, here we had the principal of the school coming to us, the students and expressing that he wanted to hear what we thought about this. Like, what do you guys think? What do we need to do?”

Gainforth remembers there was a large police presence at the school for weeks at a time. “I don't know if it was constant, but it was a lot,” he says. During the riots that broke out at the school, “all of a sudden, police would show up with automatic weapons.” The police would be in the intersection of hallways.”

Gainforth says the police presence created more tension at the school. “We were like under the gun, literally. So, it was interesting because when he said, what do we need to do to bring down the temperature to get some healing in this school, several of the students said, get rid of the cops.”

According to Gainforth, Gross was concerned about safety. He asked how the administration would know there were issues going on or fights breaking out. Gainforth said the students in his office would help patrol the school. “’Give us a radio,’ we said. If anything happens, we’ll let you know.

“The next day the cops were gone. He also opened up the campus,” Gainforth recalls. You know, if you were on a study hall period, or if you were on one of the lunch periods, you could go out to the parking lot, get in your car, go down to U.S. 1, go to the A & W, have some lunch.” Gainforth says that with the open campus and the elimination of the armed police, the tensions eased. The school was not as much of a “pressure cooker.”

“I think it really turned the corner on getting us past all the fighting and all the conflict and kind of took the temperature of the school down,” Gainforth says. “It seems like we rose to the occasion.”

Charles Fred Hearns

Charles Fred Hearns' professional career began as a newspaper journalist for the Florida Sentinel Bulletin, St. Petersburg Times, Tampa Tribune and Ft. Lauderdale Sun Sentinel. In 1975, he began a 32-year tenure with the City of Tampa Department of Community Affairs, reaching the pinnacle as the department's director in 2007. Since October 2021, Hearns has served as the Tampa Bay History Center's Curator of Black History.

Born in the Bronx, New York, Hearns has lived in Florida since the age of one. Hearns attended College Hill Elementary School, Booker T. Washington Junior High School and Middleton High School, all located in Hillsborough County, Fla. He graduated from Middleton High School in 1966.

In the 1960s, "there weren't a lot of other choices," Hearns says. "If you were Black in Tampa, you went to Booker T. Washington, which was the largest junior high school for Black students. Later on, Young Junior High opened. I was already at Middleton High School. Just Junior High opened in 1962, my last year in Booker T. Washington."

During that time, there were no school buses, Hearns says. If your family did have a car, you could get dropped off, but if not, you walked or rode the city bus.

After attending all-Black schools through high school, Hearns decided to attend the University of South Florida (USF), also in Hillsborough County, after he graduated from high school.

At that time, "There were like 25 full-time Black students my freshman year at USF," Hearns notes. Hearns notes that "USF is the first state university in the state of Florida that opened to Black students and female students as well as white male students."

Hearns had two reasons to go to USF. The first is he had a band scholarship, and the second is he could live at home to eat his mom's home cooking.

"I played in the band. I had a band scholarship. Most of my friends were going to Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University if they went to college anywhere at all. But I always kind of wanted to take a different path. I didn't want to do what everybody else was doing.

"When I graduated from high school, I had the option. I had the grades. You had to take the senior exam. There was no SAT or ACT at that time, so everybody had to take the senior exam. I had a pretty good score, a high score, so I qualified, plus I could stay at home and work part-time, if I wanted to. I didn't have to change my lifestyle. I didn't have to worry about room and board or meals, anything like that."

Hearns graduated from the University of South Florida four years later. He majored in English journalism.

In 1970, in his senior year, he interned at the St. Petersburg Times (now the Tampa Bay Times). When he graduated college, he went to work for Fort Lauderdale Sun Sentinel. “I did not work there very long,” Hearns says, “I had just gotten married, and my plan was to save enough money working out of Fort Lauderdale to bring my wife down there, but I had a change of mind. I decided that she had a lot of family in Tampa.”

Hearns came back to Tampa and worked for the Florida Central Bulletin, Hillsborough County’s Black newspaper.

Herns says it was very different attending USF, a predominantly white school, coming from a background of only attending Black schools. Before USF, he had only one white teacher and no white classmates. “But going to USF, I went into an almost all white world academically,” Hearns recalls.

While attending USF, Hearns worked part time as a porter for Sears. “I pulled a basket around; I emptied the trash cans. If somebody spilled something, they'd call me. I'd come and mop it up. I worked there for a while. Hearns remembers that some of his white classmates had the opportunity to be salesmen at the store, but he did not have that opportunity.

“Then I went to work for the Florida Sentinel Bulletin,” Hearns says. The Florida Sentinel Bulletin is Florida's largest African American newspaper. Founded in 1919 in Jacksonville, the newspaper relocated to Tampa in 1945. The paper publishes twice weekly.

Hearns notes, while on campus life was integrated, society was still segregated.

“When you left campus, you went into that dual world: one Black, one white,” Hearns notes. Although the Civil Rights Act, which passed in 1964, did open things up for integration, Hearns says many stores and restaurants did not want to serve Black people. He says, “You knew when you were not welcome. You could just feel it.”

Hearns recalls an incident where he was invited to a birthday party for a white college classmate at a condo on St. Petersburg Beach. After being there a short time, the host asked him to leave because the people who owned the condo called the host and told him Hearns needed to leave the premises.

“I wasn't angry at him at all because I knew it didn't come from him. He invited me. So, he didn't know he was violating an agreement,” Hearns says. This was just before the Fair Housing Act passed, in 1968.” He says there was an understanding that Black people could not visit or live in that building. His college friend “broke that rule when he invited me.”

Ten years ago, Hearns bought property on that same beach.

Hearns notes the *Brown v. Board of Education* verdict came in 1954, “and it was supposed to desegregate schools with deliberate speed,” which he notes did not happen. “It took 17 years in Hillsborough County,” Hearns says.” I don't think it was accepted by most people, but it was the law. Hillsborough County didn't have a choice. If they wanted to continue to receive federal funding. They had to desegregate.”

Hearns remembers the Black parents marching down to the Hillsborough County School Board building to protest. “I remember that year when the schools were being desegregated. “I think they had the first real fight or fights. Black students were fighting white students almost every day in Hillsborough County.”

Hearns asserts that the all-Black schools provided a quality education for the students. “While the school materials – such as books, uniforms and band instrument – were subpar, the schools Black children attended were not inferior due to the “will and the dedication of our teachers.

“Here's the ironic thing about it,” Hearns says. “We had teachers who had master's degrees when you only had to have a bachelor's degree” to teach. He notes that the teachers were graduates of some of the top educational institutions in the country. At that time, Black students could not attend the University of Florida, “so the state of Florida paid their tuition to go out of state.”

According to Hearns, people cannot say the Black schools were inferior because there were brilliant people who came out of these schools. “I wouldn't describe myself that way, but I was a pretty good student in spite of the fact that I had one new textbook in the three years I was in high school. I'll never forget; it was a math book.”

Hearns recalls that his class, in the 1960s, got brand new band uniforms because they raised the money selling chocolate and flowers. He says they raised money for years before they finally got the new uniforms. He also notes that in 1965, the Middleton band was the first Black band to play at the Gasparilla Parade. “That was a big deal for us,” he says, “because we lived for parades and football games.”

Hearns was the co-captain of the band during his senior year. He remembers when the band director told them they would be in the parade. “We celebrated. We were so happy that we were going to get a chance to show our stuff to all of Tampa.” The Gasparilla Parade was the “biggest deal in Tampa,” Hearns notes.

He remembers the band was the first unit in the lineup. “In fact,” he says, “the rest of the parade was so far behind us, we couldn't even see the next unit. We were way out front from everybody else. They got us out of the way. And then I can remember when the Blake High School Band marched one year, maybe the next year, they were placed behind a unit that had horses, so they were marching around the horse droppings.”

In addition to not having the same materials as the other high schools, Middleton and Blake did not have stadiums. “All of our band performances and all of our football games were played at Phillips Field,” which is located near the University of Tampa, a private university.

Hearns says the students could walk from Blake High School to Phillips Field, but “that was a long walk from Middleton, so we had to catch a ride to get there the best way we could on football nights when we played.”

The first year there was desegregation, all the kids who were juniors at Blake and Middleton were split up when the schools closed. Hearns notes that these students had been looking forward to being seniors at these schools and walking across the stage at graduation,

“The kids who had been going to Middleton were bussed to eight different schools,” Hearns says. He notes that the students were bussed all over the county. “They felt like part of their teenage years were robbed from them. They didn't get a chance to walk across that stage.”

The teachers and administrators also had to find new jobs when they closed the two high schools.

Hearns notes that the Black students at Blake and Middleton high schools “were given all kinds of confidence” that they could achieve, excel and do everything the white students could.” He says they didn’t understand until they graduated from the all-Black schools that they could compete and do well. He remembers the Blake High School motto was “We can because we think we can. I love that. I always admired that.”

Hearns says forced integration had both positive and negative effects. “I guess we were naïve,” he says. “We thought the county was going to make these white parents send their white students to Middleton and we could've still had Middleton High School, and same thing with Blake, but it didn't happen.”

Hearns says high school students today need to know that the “roots were planted way back during the days of segregation with their parents and their grandparents, if they grew up in Tampa. “Maybe not their parents, but their grandparents, because today, you know, we’re in our seventies. Those of us who went to the all-Black schools, and then most of us who went to college went to HBCUs.”

“Most of the kids didn't go to schools like USF and University of Florida, even when they could. They didn't go during the early years,” Hearns notes.

“You have to really appreciate what your grandparents and your great-grandparents went through in Hillsborough County during the days of segregation. When society may have been telling us, ‘you are inferior. You're not worthy. You can't eat here. You can't stay in these hotels or hotels. You can't go to our schools. You can't live in our neighborhoods.’ That's what society told us every day. And yet, we remained optimistic, because our parents had gone through much worse conditions than we did. But we never thought that we couldn't do anything that we wanted to do. We just thought we could. We can because we think we can. We had that attitude.”

Learn more about Tampa Bay’s African American history through the Travails and Triumphs exhibit at the Tampa History Center at tampabayhistorycenter.org/exhibit/travails-and-triumphs/#centralave.

Dr. Rozelia Kennedy

Growing up in Ybor City, Fla., Dr. Rozelia Kennedy attended Mecham Elementary School, Booker T. Washington Junior High School and Middleton High School. “I didn't stay at Middleton very long,” she says. “In 1966, I transferred to King High School.”

Kennedy notes that Middleton High School, an all-Black school, was smaller than King, which in 1966 was an all-white school. She describes her time at Middleton as being with a family. “You knew people not only in school, but you knew them outside of school,” she says. “You probably went to the same church. You probably lived in the same neighborhood. At King High School, I didn't see any of those students outside of school.”

Kennedy voluntarily attended King High School “At that time, my parents asked me, ‘do you want to go to King High School? You understand the circumstances?’ Well, I did understand the circumstances because my brother was a Freedom Rider, and he was marching with Dr. Martin Luther King. Kennedy’s brother had been in Selma, Alabama, registering people to vote when he was almost killed. It was just all kinds of things that were going on, and I wanted to be a part of that. I said, ‘well, I can do my little bit. I'll be brave enough to go to King High School,’” Kennedy says.

Kennedy was one of three Black students who attended King High School that year. She notes that the three students didn’t interact much because they were all in different classes. “We kind of made our own way of going to King High School.”

Founded in 1960, King High School was a relatively new school when Kennedy attended. “I was excited because, to me, at that time, it was a new school. It was recently built, and everything was just so new to me. I remember going to the library and the books were new,” Kennedy recalls.

“They were new books, and I could smell the newness in them. I was so excited because when we were at our segregated Black schools we got hand-me-down books. We did not get books that were brand new. We got books that had been sent to several different schools or classes, and with different names in them. By the time we got them, students had already got new books, which meant they were learning new stuff, and they were ahead of us.”

Not only does she recall being excited about the new books, but she also realized rather quickly that she was behind in academics. “I had a lot of catching up to do in just about every class,” Kennedy says.

“I had to study hard,” Kennedy says. In addition, she didn’t have any real support at the school as there were no Black teachers or administrators. “The feeling was I was in a place where the students did not want me there, and they made that pretty obvious. I was pretty much ostracized. The teachers did not want me there. They made that pretty obvious. And the administrators did not want me there. So we were pretty much loners.”

Kennedy recalls incidents where teachers ignored her raised hand and a few times when students knocked down her books. She vividly recalls her time in the cafeteria. Wherever she sat down, the rest of the students would gather their possessions and leave.

“I would say that the children at that time were middle class students. They were very well dressed. They – the seniors, the upperclassmen – had had cars, and they had a parking lot where they parked their cars. They had a jukebox in the cafeteria, so they could go and play all the music that they wanted while we had lunch. I remember so many of those songs because I would hear them over and over again. They would play the Bee Gees, the Beach Boys, the Beatles, and I would hear those songs playing on the jukebox along with the chitter chatter of students at lunch.”

Kennedy remembers the first time she went to the school cafeteria for lunch. She recalls getting her tray and looking for an open spot to sit. ”The lunchroom was packed with students, some standing, some sitting, just, you know, eating lunch, having fun. I found a spot at the end of a table. I put my tray down, and every student at that table got up and left. And the cafeteria became quiet.

“The only thing I could hear was the jukebox playing. It was a Beatles song. I didn't know what to expect, but I wasn't surprised at the way that I was treated. The lunchroom staff did nothing. They just kind of peeked out the door to see what I was going to do.”

Kennedy says, “I put my tray down. I put my books down, and I sat there. And if you can imagine being 15 years old and people treating you that way, as if nobody wanted to sit near you, not even near you, not at the same table. Tears almost came in my eyes, but I fought them back. I really, really fought them back.”

Kennedy says, “The very next day, the exact same thing happened. It happened until around Thanksgiving.” Then one of the white girls from Kennedy’s homeroom sat in front of her at the table.

“I said, ‘what are you doing? You know, you're going to get in trouble.’ That's what I felt like at that time, that she was going to be ostracized, too. She just ignored that and just talked to me as if we were friends. She asked me about my family. She asked me about what I was going to do for Thanksgiving. We just had a conversation.”

Kennedy was concerned for the white student because she knew that white sympathizers were sometimes also beaten up. “In the case of Freedom Riders, sometimes they would beat them mercilessly because they were promoting integration of white and blacks, riding a bus together.”

Kennedy notes, “So, that was one experience that I had. But I've had a number of experiences at King High School. I had students that would ask me if I could wash off my brown skin, and there was white skin underneath. They all definitely wanted to touch your hair.”

Kennedy says, “I think this is why integration is so important, why we still need to have diversity in all areas, in medicine, engineering, everywhere. Because to me, that's the beauty of America, is that we have this diversity, and we could still be excellent in everything that we do and exceed in all areas. So I think it's important that we learn to value all different ethnic groups.”

Kennedy recalls that society was still transitioning at the time she went to King High School. She remembers seeing signs for that read “colored only” and “white only” for public water fountains and restrooms in Ybor City. She remembers having to go around to the back of a restaurant to get food.

According to Kennedy, Ybor City was more of a melting pot than other areas of the county. Many people of various ethnicities came to Tampa for the cigar factories. “You didn't really feel the segregation or the ‘Jim Crow’ laws as much in Ybor City as you did when you ventured outside of Ybor City. And once they kind of did away with Ybor City and, urban renewed it, then that's when you really felt the difference. You really felt the segregation of places you could not go.”

One place Kennedy was excited to go when integration happened was the public library. Receiving her first library card was a great occasion. “I was so excited. I could actually go and check out books. To me, that was almost like a freebie, you know, you could check out books and bring them home, and read all kinds of things. I love to read.”

After Kennedy graduated high school and went to college, her sister also went to King High School. Three years later, things were very different. Her sister was in the Homecoming Court. Kennedy’s sister told her that was possible because of the students that opened the door for other Black students.

“I know some people don't think that a lot of progress has been made, but I think a lot of progress has been made. A lot of opportunity is there, the whole race thing, I think, I feel to a great extent, has been eliminated. If you want to soar, I think you can soar if you really want that.”

“When you think about that time, my senior year in high school was the same year that Dr. King was assassinated. I felt the pain of that. My brother was with him that same day that happened, and I know how it impacted him and actually set him on the course to what he's still doing today,” Kennedy says. “But other people in my school did not really even acknowledge it. It was like it didn't even happen. But I think that there were people like him, like Martin and others who made a big sacrifice, and some of them sacrificed their lives. There were things that happened that we know of that happened, and maybe other people don't acknowledge it.”

Kennedy notes that somebody had to take the first step for things to change. “Somebody has to be first – whatever field it is, Jackie Robinson, you know, boxers, anybody.” She says, “somebody has to be the first to break down that barrier. And that takes courage as well as some wisdom to know. Martin's philosophy of non-violence was really important to me because I knew about it, and I studied it. And, that's what my brother practiced. That’s what it was going to take. You can't fight violence with violence. It's only going to mean more violence, and you'll be forever fighting. So the nonviolent way, accepting the abuse, the ostracizing, all of the bullying, all the things that go along with it will help others come behind you and have a better way."

Kennedy says, "Once people realize that you're human, and that you have a right to the same things they have, then they look at you different and say, 'Okay, these people are just like we are. They want the same things. They have families. They have loved ones. They have pets. They have grandmothers, grandfathers, siblings. They want to have a happy, happy life just like we do. So why should we deny them that?'"

When Kennedy's parents first asked her if she wanted to go to King High School, she said yes "because I didn't know what to expect. I didn't know how bad it was going to be. You know, after you look at the things, the scenes that we saw on television … It was all to instill fear in us for wanting to do it. But a lot of people realized somebody's going to have to do this. Somebody's going to have to be first. Somebody's going to have to get beat up. Somebody's going to have to be treated badly."

According to Kennedy, diversity in society today is commonplace. "We don't even think anything of it. It doesn't even register with us. Everything was so segregated. Churches were segregated, movie theaters, entertainment, everything was so segregated until people did not associate with other people. But today, I think we've come a long way."

After Kennedy graduated in 1968, she decided to attend Florida Memorial College, a HBCU, in Miami. It was a completely different experience than high school. Her next step would be Harvard University, which was integrated. At Harvard, Kennedy didn't experience any racism, but it was an adjustment to deal with snow. Years later, Kennedy earned her Ph.D. from University of South Florida.

Kennedy says people need to be kind to each other. "We are all human beings. We all have red blood. We all have parts and body parts. Don't judge a person by something else that has happened or something somebody else did just because that person was the same color."

Kennedy's message to people today to not prejudge people. "Get to know people, and you'll learn something. You will learn to appreciate America because I think we are a very diverse country, and everything that we, we do, we are going to be doing it together. We should be doing it together for the betterment of this entire country."

Learn more about Kennedy and her work with the Rozelia Peace Institute at rozeliapeaceinstitute.com.

Noreen Miller

Florida native Noreen Miller grew up in Hillsborough County. She attended Dobyville Elementary School in Hyde Park. She then moved to Cocoa Beach and attended Monroe Junior High School for seventh grade. She returned to Tampa and attended Just Junior High School for eighth grade, and then she then attended Blake High School.

“I grew up in South Tampa.” Miller says. She notes there were a few Black people who lived in that area, but the children were not allowed to go to the closest school, Mitchell Elementary School, because it was for white children only. So instead, she attended Dobyville from first through sixth grade.

Dobyville Elementary School was a two-story house that was converted to an elementary school for Black students at that time. Miller recalls the school didn’t meet the “standards to even be a school.”

The books were missing pages and torn up, Miller says. The school desks were scratched up and derogatory words were carved into them. She also remembers the water fountain at the school, which was like a horse trough. She remembers cutting her lip on it one year.

Miller says the school did not have a cafeteria or auditorium. Instead, there were concrete tables with concrete little benches outside where they went for lunch. There was an outside basketball court where the school would have assemblies, if they wanted to make announcements or if there was a school play being performed.

When President John F. Kennedy came to Tampa in 1963, Miller remembers seeing the motorcade. “That was a big deal for us,” Miller says. She remembers the entire student body walking down to see the motorcade. “We got to stand there and wave at him. That was profound for me,” Miller says.

“We had to endure,” Miller says. “We did. We endured. When I look back, I want to make sure that does not happen again. That's why I think that history is so important so that we know where we've been, so we don't go back that way.”

Miller notes her daughter, who is now 35 years old, was able to go to Mitchell Elementary School, which is right around the corner from the house she grew up in. “She had a very different experience,” Miller notes about her daughter. “Her foundation was much stronger because we didn't get the supplies that the white students got.”

Miller recalls that integration of the schools in Hillsborough County started on a voluntary basis around 1968 or 1969, but in 1970, there was forced integration.

When Miller reached 12th grade, her parents separated, and her mom moved to another side of town. Due to forced integration and new school zone boundaries, Miller had to attend Middleton High School in her senior year. She says the changes were “traumatic for students.”

Miller says she and her classmates were all excited about their senior year at Blake High School when they were told they had to go to different schools. Many of her classmates were split up and sent to different high schools, Miller notes. “I'm thinking, I'm getting ready to graduate and suddenly we were told we could not.

“I know that it was a lot of discourse with the seniors because we had been to Blake from ninth to 12th grade. Then suddenly there was this big, movement, whatever you want to call it. It was a big disturbance for us because we were just ordered to go to our neighborhood school or to another school. So that's how I ended up in Middleton in my senior year.”

“It was horrible because, of course, you know, Blake and Middleton were rivals. So I left one completely Black high school to go to another one,” Miller says. “I remember when I got in Middleton, there was one white girl that was there. Other than that, nobody else came. But they forced us to go.”

Miller recalls that many of her friends went to other area high schools. Some of her friends had worked hard to be the valedictorians of their schools, but then they were forced to leave those schools. She recalls, “Some ended up at Hillsborough and Plant (high schools), but they had no standing because they didn't acknowledge their academics because they already had their students in place at that those high schools.”

Miller thinks that had “Black students been treated equally as white seniors, then that would've made a difference. But since we were not given an option that was not done the right way. It was not equal because apparently, and I don't know what information our teachers got or what the schools got to tell the Black seniors, but I do know that we were told we had to go to the (different) school. We didn't have an option.

“But I know when my, some of my other friends went to Plant, they were very upset when they found out … that the white seniors did not have to leave their schools. People were angry.”

After graduating high school, she attended Brewster Technical School, which was integrated.

“It was integrated,” she notes, “But then there were certain restrictions on certain courses that they wanted you to take or not.” Miller did an internship at WFLA’s Channel 8. When she didn’t get hired at the television station, she joined the job corps and went to McKinney, Texas.

“I was in there for six months because I already had my high school diploma,” Miller says. “I just went into their business wheel because I had already taken a lot of those courses and I was able to do a data entry course there that I was not allowed to do at Brewster. At that time, they would select folks that did the data entry and the key punch as they called them back then.” After six months, she moved to Dallas, Texas.

Miller says, “There was some racial overtime in McKinney, Texas, in the little town, but in the big city it was totally different. We all worked in the same office space. We all had the same opportunities as far as I could see." Miller moved back to Tampa in 1975.

Things in Florida were better than when she left but not entirely equal. "A lot of our children now take things for granted. I have four daughters, and they know disparities. They know that their mother always advocated for them in school. I always made sure that they did extra curriculum stuff." Miller recalls becoming a Girl Scout Troop leader because there were no Black troop leaders at the time.

According to Miller, education is important. "I would tell high school students, stay in school. Value your education. Learn as much as you can. Read, get engaged in your community, in your political arena with your councilman, your commission and be on the school board. You have got to make sure that you are engaged and have input, not just showing up to say you're in the audience." She adds, "You have got to be a part of the process to make sure that we can be the best school district."

Miller says her experience makes her stronger. She says, "I am grateful. It made me more aware and appreciate education. When I look back at this age and look at what I went through in elementary school, it should've been enough to turn anybody off from finishing school. But we persevered and moved on. So, I can honestly say the experience I didn't value it at the time, but as I became an adult woman, I did.

"My journey was needed," Miller says. "I didn't understand it at the time, but where I'm at now in my life and reflect back on it, it was a journey that was needed, and someone needed to do it. We were chosen: the class of 71.