

Desegregation pioneers

COMMENTARY AND SIDEBAR NOTES BY DAYNA DURBIN GLEAVES

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As you read...

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Madge Hopkins

1. How did Madge Hopkins know Dorothy Counts?
2. Why do you think Ms. Hopkins would not have wanted to be the first student to integrate a school?

Sheila Florence

1. Why did Sheila Florence dress up for her first day of attending an integrated school?
2. What do you think Ms. Florence may have been scared of on her first day?
3. What were some of the difficult experiences she had at the new school?

Daisy Bates

1. Why did Minnie get expelled?
2. Why do you think she was punished, but the boys who harassed her weren't?
3. How would you have reacted in Minnie's place?

Madge Hopkins

Madge Hopkins attended segregated schools in Charlotte, North Carolina. She remembers hearing about Dorothy Counts, a young woman she knew through church, becoming one of the first four students to desegregate Charlotte's schools. Counts struggled with verbal and physical harassment: Her brother's car windshield was broken when he picked her up from school, she was taunted on a daily basis, and her family received many threats of violence. The harassment continued for weeks, and Counts' parents decided to withdraw her from school to protect her safety.

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Madge Hopkins

I became aware of school desegregation and the issue when I was at Northwest and Dorothy Counts began integrating the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools and we all talked about it and everybody knew about it.

Pamela Grundy (interviewer)

When you say you all talked about it, what did you talk about? What did you all say about it?

Madge Hopkins

What was going on and what was happening to her. You overheard teachers talking. I'm sure — I think Dorothy had been through Northwest and so we were all aware of that.

Pamela Grundy (interviewer)

Because her parents worked at Smith, I believe.

Madge Hopkins

Hm-hm. Yeah. And at one time, and we probably, yeah, we talked about it at church. Her father at one time had been, I don't think he... he had been a supply — I remember seeing her because her father had been a guest minister or supplied minister at my church. Which is a Presbyterian Church, same church I still attend and he was a Presbyterian minister. And I remember seeing her and her family so I could identify with her although she wasn't at Northwest.

Pamela Grundy (interviewer)

What were you thinking? Did that seem... I guess what were your feelings about that and maybe even related to yourself and this situation, changing situation.

Madge Hopkins

I didn't relate to it in terms of myself, in terms of my attending a school other than Northwest because at that time I was at Northwest. I thought she was brave and... not something that I wanted to do, didn't have any desire to do that.

Sheila Florence

Sheila Florence was one of the first students to desegregate schools in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. When she began attending Chapel Hill Junior High School in 1962, she endured hurtful treatment from her white classmates, who refused to sit by her, used racial slurs, and threw spitballs at her. Here, Ms. Florence remembers her first day of integration.

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Bob Gilgor (interviewer)

So you were one of the first four students to go to Chapel Hill Junior High School?

Sheila Florence

Junior High School. Right.

Bob Gilgor (interviewer)

Do you remember your first day?

Sheila Florence

Oh yeah, I remember. That's something you never forget.

Bob Gilgor (interviewer)

Can you share it with me?

Sheila Florence

Well, I got all dressed up so I would look nice, I was thinking I was going to fit in, so I looked nice. And, because it was like 2 or 3 blocks from where I lived, I walked to school so therefore I missed riding on the school bus. So, I walked, I think I went alone. And, I can't remember — no I think one, my next door neighbor might have been with me, I can't remember who was along. But I know I was scared to death to go. So I went and found my homeroom class and everybody was looking at me, cause I guess I was different. What else was there, I was called names and people shunned me, first day. And I felt out of place. But, I just told myself it was gonna get better. And what else was it... that was about it the first day.

Bob Gilgor (interviewer)

Did it get better?

Sheila Florence

Not much better... Well, I didn't have any friends, everybody shunned me and I was sort of alone, and I felt lost, didn't know where I was going. And by being in a new school, I didn't have someone to take me under their wing and say, "we supposed to go to this place," or "I'll help you find where we need to go."

Bob Gilgor (interviewer)

Nobody was helping you?

Sheila Florence

No.

Bob Gilgor (interviewer)

Whereas you had those role models at Lincoln High School that you told me about just a minute ago, that you looked up to, did you have any people like that at the new school?

Sheila Florence

No, didn't have people like that. And then at lunchtime I'd sit at the table, nobody wanted to sit over there with me.

Bob Gilgor (interviewer)

Nobody sat with you?

Sheila Florence

No, I had to eat alone, whereas at Lincoln, you know, you had your own, your little buddies and up there, since I didn't know anybody, I'd eat by myself. And I'd just feel alone. People'd be looking, and whispering, and talking, calling me names, and throwing things. It was just a bad experience.

Daisy Bates

Daisy Bates was a civil rights activist and the head of the state chapter of the NAACP. She served as advisor to the Little Rock Nine, nine black students who enrolled at the all-white Central High School in Little Rock, Alabama in 1957. She helped the students cope with the harassment they suffered from white students by organizing daily after school meetings at her home where the students could talk about their frustrations and learn the non-violence strategies practiced by Martin Luther King, Jr. Here, Ms. Bates recalls Minnijean Brown, one of the nine, being expelled for fighting back against students who taunted her. After leaving Central, Minnie was enrolled in and graduated from an integrated school in New York.

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Elizabeth Jacoway (interviewer)

But that harassment continued all the time.

Daisy Bates

All during the school year, all during school.

Elizabeth Jacoway (interviewer)

Just every day there was something, wasn't there?

Daisy Bates

Mm-hm, something. They would pick on the vulnerable ones, like Minnie. They knew Minnie had a temper. They were trying to get them, one by one. So Minnie came in that afternoon, and she said [unclear] and the kids all looked at me.

Elizabeth Jacoway (interviewer)

That day she had been expelled?

Daisy Bates

The day she'd been expelled. And I said, "And so what's the matter now? What happened? What happened?" "You tell her." "No, you tell her." So Jeff said well that, "Minnie hit a boy on the head today with some chili." We were practicing non-violence, and we'd meet here everyday. I said, "Well, Minnie, what happened?" She said she got up, and she went between the tables as she went to the counter to get the chili; and she was going up between the tables when the boy pushed his chair back to block her. And when she came back, when she got to the boy, he pushed his chair back. So she was standing there. She said, hollered out, "Will you please move your chair in so I can pass?" So he went, "Oh!" you know, pretending he didn't know she was there. So it got on down to about the fifth boy that did this, and Minnie was mad. (Laughs) So she had this chili. And when he pushed his chair, that came down on his head. (Laughs)

Elizabeth Jacoway (interviewer)

Oh, boy.

Daisy Bates

The chili went all over the boy, and of course they expelled Minnie.

Elizabeth Jacoway (interviewer)

Yeah, and not the boy.

Daisy Bates

Not the boy.

On the web

School desegregation pioneers

<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/2714>

In this lesson, students will learn about the challenges faced by the first students to desegregate Southern schools. Students will hear oral histories telling the story of desegregation pioneers from Alabama and North Carolina and critically analyze images of school desegregation. They will synthesize the information by writing a narrative from the point of view of a black student desegregating a white school.

With an Even Hand: Brown v. Board at Fifty

<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/brown/>

An online exhibit from the Library of Congress. Includes photographs of some of the first black students to attend formerly all-white schools, including Dorothy Geraldine Counts of Charlotte.

With All Deliberate Speed: School Desegregation in Buncombe County

<http://www.diversityed.org/deliberate-speed>

An online exhibit with oral histories from the Center for Diversity Education.

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About the author

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Dayna Durbin Gleaves completed her MLS degree at the School of Information and Library Science at UNC-Chapel Hill in 2007, and is licensed as a school media specialist in North Carolina. Her areas of interest include school libraries, children's and young adult literature, and using digital library collections in teaching and learning.