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William Henry Chafe Oral History Collection

INTERVIEWEE: Joanne Bluethenthal

INTERVIEWER: William Chafe

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WILLIAM CHAFE: Well, you've been a resident of Greensboro for many years?

JOANNE BLUETHENTHAL: I moved here in 1950 when I married.

WC: In 1950? And where did you grow up?

JB: Philadelphia.

WC: So you came into a Southern background. What was your sense of Greensboro when you came here? What image did you have of the town? Do you remember your perceptions of the place?

JB: I really wasn't quite sure what Greensboro was going to be all about, having never spent any time in the South. But after a year or so of getting used to living here, I was quite impressed with the opportunity existing here for people who were from far distant lands like Philadelphia to come and be a part of the community. It's kind of an open community in terms of leadership opportunities or opportunities to participate in what was happening, of change that might take place. I was very conscious of the fact that it was a segregated community, although there were opportunities to meet with black leadership.

WC: What kinds of opportunities?

JB: In some civic endeavors, there was some participation in city government. I can't really—

WC: Yeah, but you would have had some contact with some black leaders. Did you immediately become involved in civic kinds of activities when you came?

JB: Shortly after I came. Perhaps about a year or so after I came to Greensboro I got involved with the elderly, and from there on one thing led to another. Primarily through the [National] Council of Jewish Women, I got involved in working with the elderly people, and that led me at a later point into working in public housing, and that led me into working into programs and services for children. The Council of Jewish Women and public housing authority both were interested in daycare, and so being on the housing authority and being on the Council of Jewish Women, I got involved in daycare and public housing. These two organizations came together and daycare with the children of working mothers in public housing got its start in Greensboro.

WC: The Metropolitan Daycare Center[?] or nursery comes to my mind. When did that start? Did you start that?

JB: No, that was an effort of the black community to respond to its own needs, and that was the first daycare center, non-profit day care center, in the city of Greensboro. And the exact date that it started I don't know, but it was in existence for a long, long time. When the housing authority got into the day care business—The Metropolitan Day Nursery—and the people were interested and they started to help as they knew how to run a program—started to help those volunteers who were working in daycare setup their programs in public housing. And eventually, because Metropolitan received funding from the United Fund [now United Way of Greater Greensboro] and the daycare centers and public housing needed funding from the United Fund, the United Fund asked that all of the agencies providing daycare get together and study how they could work together. So ultimately, Metropolitan became a part of a bigger organization which included and incorporated the day care programs in public housing [unclear].

WC: So you were—you came to that through the Council of Jewish Women and the public housing authority. Were you on the [Greensboro] Housing Authority, a member of that?

JB: I wasn't when I first got into it. I was interested in daycare and I was working through the Council of Jewish Women, but shortly afterwards I was asked to go into the housing authority.

WC: You remember when that was—sometime in the fifties?

JB: Yeah, it's in the Greensboro [unclear] book. I have a chronology, though, I'll give you. I should have it in front of me and I can tell you the dates, but I will give you that information. But it was in the sixties that I got off the Greensboro Housing Authority I served on. And before that I was on the [unclear] Examining Commission. That was in the early sixties and the housing authority was in the middle sixties, and I resigned from the housing authority because my husband went into a business that was related to building, and I felt like there could be a conflict so I resigned. Then I got onto the Board of Education.

WC: Back in the fifties, were your children born at that point when the *Brown [v. Board of Education]* decision first came down?

JB: I had one child.

WC: Do you recall having any kind of perception of the Greensboro reaction to the *Brown* decision? People like superintendent [Ben] Smith or the ward chairman [D. E.] Hudgins, did you think—what was your perception, as you can recall it, of what Greensboro was going to do?

JB: This was way off from what I was doing at that time, and I really wasn't that aware of it. But I was aware, of course, of the Supreme Court decision, and I was also aware of the fact that when superintendent—you know, following the Supreme Court decision, he [unclear] in which he said simply that we will obey the law. I don't think he said much more than that, but that was a pretty strong statement at that point. And I was very well aware of the fact that he was terribly harassed from there on in, and his wife was threatened. I remember reading about that and hearing conversations about it and being dismayed about it. But that was kind of a peripheral thing for me at that point, just being concerned as anybody would.

WC: I wonder whether—I gathered at some point you became dissatisfied with the way in which the school board was proceeding. Do you recall when you first became discontented with the procedures?

JB: I didn't really become dissatisfied with the way the school board was. That's not what happened. What happened was it was just one of these funny kinds of things that falls into line and takes you in a certain direction. For years I have been involved with a group of women who through the foreign association were doing a great decision series. Are you familiar with that?

WC: Yeah.

JB: We went to the library and we participated in that, and a group of us gradually came together and decided that that was just superficial. We wanted to take that mark off the association booklet and concentrate on an area and do it ourselves. So we eventually put ourselves into a group of great decisions where then we would pick a subject and we would do it in depth for a year and each of us would write a paper and present it to the group. And initially it was much as the foreign association thought it was. Gradually we branched off into other things and studied social change, and as we studied social change, we decided to study Greensboro.

And that was in 1969, and my assignment was education, along with two other women. And [I] thought, "Now, how in the world are we going to study education?" And we decided that what we would do would be simply go around and interview the people who were involved in education. So with really no real focus on any question, we simply made an appointment with the superintendent, who was Dr. [Wayne] House, and interviewed him, and I started taking [unclear] notes of the interviews.

And from him we started going to other people. And after we had interviewed maybe four people, we thought, "Now, wait a minute. This is just—we're not doing this in any kind of orderly fashion. You know, we've got to concentrate on something." So we decided to interview everybody and ask them what their perception of the school was, and at the same time to say to them, "If you had all the funds and all the support you needed, what would you do to improve education?" And it was really kind of funny because people began to figure that we had—that we were a part of something bigger—you know, there had to be some reason why these three women were going all over town interviewing people. And it got so all we had to do was pick up the phone; we'd get an interview just like that. And then people would say, "What are you going to do with them?" And we would say, "Deliver a paper on education."

Well, as we did it, there began to be a focus of human relations as a problem. Everybody was thinking about that. They were really concerned about '69. They began to feel what was going to happen was going to happen pretty soon, and how well prepared were they for it, and were they doing anything? When we got to Doris Hutchinson, who was the director of [staff development fir the school system], she really felt strongly about this. And she said, "If I had all the money I could muster together, I would bring all of the people who have anything to do with public education together in a series of meetings, and help them look at the future and prepare for it. I don't know how or what exactly or how to do it, but it would be a very expensive thing. I'd want to take them away somewhere—parents and students and teachers and administrators and community leaders, black and white—and talk about what was going to happen and how we felt about—"

[Missing pages 4 and 5]

JB: —Mrs. John McIver[?], Mary Louise Gordon[?], whose paper is in here. The paper she presented to our study group is in here. Hers is a very scholarly paper and myself—so Mary Louise went to one, I think Anne went to one, and I went to one.

WC: And what would take place? There would be just kind of people coming together to focus on the questions?

JB: To focus on where education was and what they needed to do and prepare for what was going to be happening—just how they really felt about it [unclear] and to take it beyond that in a particular school [unclear].

WC: How were these people chosen?

JB: They volunteered.

WC: The people who went to the retreat volunteered? And would you have been involved in developing those lists, or would that have been Doris Hutchinson?

JB: Doris.

WC: So that you were confident that these people were representative of major constituencies in the community.

JB: Oh, yeah.

WC: Did you feel much opposition to this kind of effort from either the white community or the black community?

JB: No, because nobody was forced to go except the principals, of course, and I think some of them didn't like it very much. But some of the professionals probably wondered what these people were doing. But basically I think people appreciated the need to do something to get everybody ready and have everybody feel that they had some say in what was happening—at least an opportunity to have some say in what was happening. So I think probably all the central administrative staff and all of the leading administrators and assistants were at one of the three retreats and had to be. And I think all parents got some opportunity. I don't remember how we went around assuring that—how Doris did that [unclear]

WC: So your direct involvement then in the most active sense came out of this foreign policy association—

JB: Yeah.

WC: —background and this paper which you did in '69? At what point do you go on the Board of Education?

JB: Well, let me say that after the retreats, there came a [unclear]. We all sat down again. We said, "What happened [unclear] and where do we need to go from here? We obviously need to do something else." So out of that we decided we need a Human Relations Advisory Committee to the Board of Education, and so a group of us conceptualized that and went to the board and asked them to make it an official body. And I became chairman of it, and for the next year or so I was chairman of that, and some of the people who came out of the [unclear] retreats as leaders became part of the Human Relations Advisory Committee to the board. And what we did was everything we could think of during that first year that would help in any way, and you will find pieces of this again in this information. We did things like, first of all, we tried to make the leaders in the public schools, we tried to make them public figures. We tried to let people know who they were, who was Dr. House, who were the administrators in the central office, and what were they doing—as much as we could do to put the principals [unclear]. That was one thing we did. So it was a public relations kind of thing. We set up information. We helped to set up an information center in the schools and we had volunteers in there helping the information people to man the center. We decided that the thing that was most unsettling to parents was the bus ride, so we developed a bus aide system and we had volunteers in the buses. Mrs. Ken Brugh[?], Mary Alice Brugh[?], was the chairperson of that effort, and that was really a tremendous undertaking.

WC: And this was all taking place during the school year '71-'72? Now does that mean that busing does not take place fully until the fall of '72, or did it take place in the fall of '72?

JB: [Nineteen] seventy-one.

WC: Fall '71, so during the year when busing was occurring, this is when your human relations advisory council is doing all these activities, was the rumor control center? Was that set up in the summer before the busing, or did it coincide with the busing?

JB: It coincided with the busing.

WC: Wasn't there also a mass visitation program that took place?

JB: Yeah, right before school started. And that was one of the things people said at [unclear] retreats. A lot of these things came out. You know, they were saying, “We’re scared about our kids on buses. We don’t know the schools our kids are going to.” And so we decided to have a series of open houses, and I think the Jaycees [The United States Junior Chamber] helped with that. Some of these groups came in to play. It was chaos in a way, but somehow it was fairly orderly chaos, if there is such a thing. People came in and said, “Oh, here’s another need.” And some group [would] say, “Okay, we’ll take that piece of the pie.” And I think the Jaycees—I’m not positive about that. The Jaycees alone was a lot of volunteers, and other people did that open house—series of open houses that people got into the schools to at least see where their kids were going to.

WC: Was part of this funded by the federal government under a special grant?

JB: The [Greensboro] Chamber of Commerce got a grant and the Concerned Citizens [for Schools] group came out of that through Harold[?], and they helped pay for some of this. Also at that time—I’m sorry, it’s going to be just a glob, no dates, but other people throw those things in—but I believe at the same time, to backtrack a little bit, when the Board of Education went to the county commissioner with their budget for the ’71-’70 school year, it probably preceded the court order because the budgeting takes place in April, and because a chunk of the budget was not—there was a piece that was not funded which had kind of predicted that they would be desegregated. They would need to bring back principals back earlier and they would need to have additional kinds of administrative people in the schools. And that was a fairly large amount of money, about 300,000 dollars. So when the court order came and the desegregation was obvious, a group of concerned citizens—of which I was a part and Shirley Frye was a part and Hal Sieber was a part and Reverend Meyers[?—his name was Meyers, maybe his first name will come to me—was a part—we went to a special meeting of the county commissioners and we said we wanted that money put back in the budget. And their speeches are in here. There’s Hal Sieber’s and my speech and Shirley’s speech and Meyers’ speech, in which we told them they had to give us back [unclear] or whatever it was to get those schools ready. And if they didn’t, they would have to bear the burden of responsibility for not making preparation. And so they put the money back into the budget. See, there were federal funds that came in, and the county commissioners put additional money in, and the chamber of commerce put money in its way, and United Community Services put its money in.

WC: So you were active then in the Concerned Citizens group, as well as the human relations—

JB: Yeah.

WC: —advisory council?

JB: Not real active, but we would cooperate. We were in contact with each other, and if there was a big program—like we had a big meeting at the library and I went and made my little presentation, we were in [unclear] purposes and we were all working together.

WC: Now how about groups like [unclear], is that what it was called?

JB: Yeah.

WC: Where do you think those groups were coming from? Who was behind those groups?

JB: I guess they were basically parents who were concerned, too, and felt that perhaps that they were going to receive a larger part of the burden of this. And they were either opposed or opposed to the kinds of plans that were coming out, and so they banded together and tried to fight it. And I was only, again, vaguely aware of them. The group I was involved with said “We’re going to do the positive things and we’re not going to be concerned with the negative things that are going on. We couldn’t fight anything that somebody else was doing that was negative”—there were other people whose responsibility was to do that. “What we’re going to do is to bring the forces that we could to bear on the schools in a positive way, period.” And so I didn’t really concern myself. The only time I became aware of them—and they didn’t concern themselves with us either. We weren’t fighting them. We were just saying “if it’s going to happen anyway,” and a lot of them were saying “it ain’t going to happen.” And so we were conscious of them only when we would attend school board meetings and they would come in with their concerns and they were fighting, you know, against.

WC: Did you have the sense that the black community was pretty—or what was your sense of the black community’s position on this question?

JB: Well, of course, the black community had initiated the suit which resulted in the court ordered desegregation plan, although it was a plan written by the Board of Education [unclear] to write the plan and they were there to see that it was done. But, again, my involvement with the black parents was the same involvement that it was for the white parents. We were together, working together to see that our children were safe and sound and that education went on and survived, and anybody who wanted to be a part of that movement could.

WC: Did the PTAs [Parent Teacher Association]—at what point did the PTAs get mobilized?

JB: The PTAs were very involved. And [unclear] Diller is somebody you ought to talk to, and she is not a [unclear] woman, but she's somebody you ought to talk to right away, because I don't know how much longer she is going to live.

WC: [unclear]

JB: Mrs. Robert Diller[?]. She was president of the PTA council and she was very, very involved. And what a time to be president of the PTA. I mean it was so confusing. But she was working, and all of the people, and she can give you a whole list of people who through the PTA were doing what they could to bring parents together and to explain which schools they were now going to be having [to attend]. Here is a parent who thought that they were president of the PTA at Irving Park, and suddenly their children are going to Hampton Homes, which they have never even heard of, or a school which they never heard of, and so she was trying to get them more organized and coordinate the PTAs where there were three instead of one. She was trying to set up cluster PTA groups or pair PTA groups. She worked like a dog on that, and so did Dr. Shaw[?] of A&T [North Carolina A&T State University], who I think was the vice president at that time. A whole group of people [was] working with her on that and we were working with that.

WC: So this is really all happening over the summer? You only have about four months to get it all together? How about the media? Was someone especially assigned to work with the media?

JB: We had—the Human Relations Advisory Committee had media parts we were working. We did some media presentations [unclear] and I can't remember who in the media was really working on this at that time.

WC: WFMY did some programs, I think, in the mornings.

JB: Well, they've always done the Good Morning Show. They have a school days program, and I'm sure that they zeroed in on this. I just don't remember.

WC: Do you remember whose idea it was to do the bumper stickers?

JB: That was the chamber thing, Concerned Citizens.

WC: And they got pretty widely distributed, I gather.

JB: And they helped. Then we had a piece that we distributed. We had a bus on the front of it and had lots of information about the schools on the inside that we did together.

WC: At this time Al Lineberry was the chairperson of the board. Was it your sense that the board was strongly in support of this plan, or was there a division of the board?

JB: I don't know what went on inside the board, but I've always contended and believed very strongly that one of the reasons the board was unanimous in—they moved with unanimity with everything they did during that period, and I think they had the freedom to do that because they were an appointed school board. And I think that is one of the crucial differences between what happened here and what happened in Charlotte, Winston[-Salem], and any other place. Whether you believe in an appointed or elected school board is beside the point, but at that time, the fact that those people on the school board were not responsible to a particular geographic section of the community had to have made a difference. The pressure that they received they did not have to respond to in terms of being re-elected. If they cared about remaining on the board, they had to respond to it as sensible citizens appointed by the [Greensboro] City Council to represent the total community and to see what was best for the total community, and they could do that. They weren't going to have to stand to an election. And I think for that reason, all of them looked at the whole city and they said, "You know, we're going to sit here and argue about this until we agree what is best for the total community," and that's what they did. So I don't know how many hours—God only knows how many hours they spent, how many days and weeks, working out that plan and going through that first year. But when they came out publicly, they said, "This is what we're going to do. We all agree." And that final decision may have represented a considerable compromise on each person's part, but they did compromise, and I think that's really a key point.

WC: So that the extent to which the board was acting together would limit the political ramifications of what they did?

JB: They had nothing to gain politically. They had nothing to gain, period. I mean they were the most [unclear] group of people. They took tremendous abuse. They were the focal—obviously, the place where people could focus.

And Al Lineberry was a magnificent leader. I mean there's simply no question about it. He's a deeply religious man, and he feels as though everything in his life was centered on that. This was going to be his task, and he had the objectivity that I don't think many people would have sustained. I can remember talking to him at that time, hearing what he said, and wishing I had that much faith myself. No matter what somebody said to him, he would say to them, "I'm sorry you feel that. If you [unclear] so differently, would you mind giving me a call? Thank you very much for calling."

WC: That's amazing isn't it? I expect, too, that the fact that there were two black members of the board and that they were different from—Dr. [George] Evans had something to do with it and that. I get the impression that Dr. Evans was not as assertive a spokesman for the black community as [Otis] Hairston and [Walter] Johnson would have been.

JB: Well, and of course, also Evans was put on the board at a time when that wasn't the style. People who—black leaders just didn't operate that way. But [Johnson] was a new, young—he was young and he'd been active. He'd been an activist, and Reverend Hairston had been involved with the A&T students, and they came from a different background.

WC: Right. I remember reading about when Johnson was appointed, and initially I think there was some doubt about his having been appointed, but then he clearly—

JB: When Walter was appointed?

WC: Yeah, well, there is an article in the [*Carolina*] *Peacemaker* questioning his appointment.

JB: Oh, really?

WC: But then they quickly rallied to his support. Now, obviously, you were here all that summer. You did not get away for a vacation that summer. [laughter] As things build up to the opening of school, was there any fear of violence? Do you recall threats by the [Ku Klux] Klan or other groups which would cause you to be afraid?

JB: I think there was lots of fear of violence. Parents were very concerned about what was going to happen in the schools, as well as outside in the community generally, and there are all kinds of stories, true and not true, about what actually did happen. And there were, I'm sure, scraps in the schools and fights. Everybody was confused and didn't know where they were; their friends weren't all with them. It was a very difficult time.

WC: Right, but the kids were—the kids seemed to be under control for the most part.

JB: They were. They really handled themselves beautifully.

WC: Did you have any specific intelligence information about where the Klan might make a problem?

JB: I wasn't aware of that. That was kind of being monitored more by the chamber and by the school people themselves, and we were doing things like providing information about schools and doing our little programs and doing our bus aides and trying to build up programs in the schools that would help things to move ahead. Other people were worried about those things.

WC: Tell me about the first time you came into contact with Hal Sieber. Did you call him [or] did he call you? Do you remember?

JB: I don't know when the first time was. I'm sure it wasn't because of this. It was probably before that in other things, but I really can't remember. Because Hal was somebody I was aware of, as many people were. He was always out in front in social change situations, whatever they were.

WC: Did you hear much conversation about him? I guess you did from your friends and—

JB: No, most of my friends wouldn't have even known about him, but my friends with whom I did my community work were aware of him. Some of them were working with him on one thing or another.

WC: Did you see him as being the [unclear] of the chamber, or were there other people who were as important, if not more important than him?

JB: Well, I think anything that he did had to have the at least placid agreement of the board, and certainly Bill Little, but he was very much out in front. The others were—

WC: I gather there were some good presidents of the chamber around that time, with [Al] Wannamaker.

JB: Yeah.

WC: Wasn't Lineberry head of the chamber at one point, too?

JB: Oh, he's been head of everything.

WC: Yeah.

JB: I don't know at which point he was president of the chamber.

WC: How—

JB: I think Hal Sieber—in my involvement in the schools, Hal probably came in and made himself a part of that process, because that's the way Hal [would] have worked. I wouldn't have been familiar as I am today with the chamber and how it works to the point I would have gone up there and asked their help. And probably he came in. Of course, I did go there for the funding.

WC: But when you say how he works, he would in a sense find out where the action was and then tie himself to it? What are the kinds of examples of that did you see in him?

JB: I just can't really pinpoint it. It's just my general impression of him. He would start something himself or would get into it fast if it was a movement that was going to cause social changes or if it was directing itself to a human need.

WC: Did you think that other people perceived just how far he wanted to go in this whole process? In other words, did people think of him as a radical?

JB: Eventually they did, and at what point that concept came to being, I'm not sure.

WC: Did you see him as a radical?

JB: I didn't really think in those terms.

WC: Okay, that's probably a bad word. That really is a terribly loaded word.

JB: I think there are always people who are—social change is an interesting thing to observe, and you know that there are people who see a need and who make it known and who try to mobilize for some plan. There are people who work out the plan, there are people who draw up the plan, and there are other people who get it to work and stay with it.

WC: Yeah.

JB: Okay, well, Hal is the first person in and I don't think that's radical-ness. I just think that very often people who identify human needs situations are not the people you can depend on to see them through.

WC: Right.

JB: They usually aren't. By the time they have identified the need, they've made so many people uncomfortable that they don't have any credibility for the long run. You know, the

most conservative people have to come on board at some point, and they are usually people who see you through.

WC: I guess the—sort of the question I was really aiming at was I would really like to be able to identify the point at which people began to feel uncomfortable with what Sieber was doing. In other words, there was probably a moment in time when instead of people saying, “Boy, he’s really doing a great job bringing people together,” some key people began to say, “That guy’s really going too far. I don’t like what he has in mind,” and I don’t know when that point is. Obviously at some point before he leaves the chamber, and I’m not sure how long before he leaves the chamber, there is that new perception of him. But I just wondered whether you had any recollection of the kind of change perception of his role that would have come at any given point in time.

JB: Are you assuming that because of his work in the desegregation process, that this is what happened to him?

WC: I think so, yeah. I think—I guess my sense is that he left the chamber really because his support base had eroded, and part of the reason that it had eroded was because of his being out front.

JB: His being out front, but I’m not sure. I think you have to be careful about pinpointing that to one cause. I think perhaps one of the most constructive things he did [is] he really worked through the group. He really worked the group process for the school thing with it. He did it with other things. I think it was after that.

WC: Oh, I think it was, too.

JB: It probably had a lot to do with his personal life. You have to be very careful about that because his personal life was kind of a mess, and that’s what ultimately got him into trouble, I think I believe.

WC: You had just made a point about his great achievement was giving the conservative people in the community a chance to participate, and I wondered if you could just sort of say that again.

JB: I think one of his great accomplishments was giving everybody in the community, including the [unclear] conservative elements, a chance through the chamber membership to contribute to the peaceful desegregation, orderly desegregation, of our schools by saying that. You know, that to contribute the 12,500 dollars to the human relations retreat was a valid contribution for the chamber to make, and all the members of the chamber

had a part in that. And I think the chamber has always felt that they had a responsibility to the public school system in Greensboro, because unless we have a strong high quality public school system, we are not going to be able to attract the kind of industry we would like to attract to Greensboro. Since industry and business is what the chamber is all about, there is a logical and almost a mandate to have a relationship. He's done some exciting things, incidentally, very recently.

WC: The chamber has?

JB: Yeah.

WC: What kinds of things?

JB: That gets you all the way to 1976-'77.

WC: And I don't want to get quite that far, but—

JB: Just put it in your notes that Jackson Junior High School task force is a project of the chamber. [That] was a unique experience in the cooperation between public school system and the chamber of commerce.

WC: That's interesting. It does seem to have been a very innovative group of people down there. Do you get a sense—do you have a sense that the major forces behind—let me ask the question another way. What role do you think the large economic enterprises in the community had in this entire period? Were they actively pushing for change with a sense of [unclear] supporting it? How would you—or did they have no definable role at all—people like Burlington [Industries], Cone [Mills], Western Electric [Company], people who would come from those places?

JB: I just wasn't—I just don't know. Again, I wasn't aware of them, their point, what they were doing. Again, they certainly are the people who control the chamber of commerce. Their people control the chamber, and if they had wanted to, they could have easily said, "The chamber will have nothing to do with this. We don't agree with it. We don't want the schools desegregated [unclear]." And obviously they did not do that. So, again, through the chamber in the years that I have been involved in the public schools, the big corporations have always lent a hand when asked to. I give you many examples of that in the present, and I'm sure that went on at that time, too, but I just wasn't in a position to be asking them or to be aware of what they were doing. It was early in my own civic career to assess that.

WC: In terms of—

JB: Let me just say one thing that comes to mind: you know, when I told you that Doris Hutchinson designed two programs that we funded, one was the human relations retreats, the other was the staff development thing, which was something [unclear] for a couple hundred-thousand dollars for. And we did [unclear]. We asked some of the large corporations and some of the big foundations to come to a meeting. At the point we did that, George Moorman[?] became president of our school board. I'm not exactly sure when Al Lineberry's term ended. You probably know more about that than I do. George Moorman became chairman right in the middle of all of that. We called in the foundations and corporations and we did get, let's see, Burlington Industries and the [Tannenbaum] Sternberger Foundation and Cy Boney[?] who is president of a foundation—it's the Richardson family foundation [Smith Richardson Foundation]. I can't remember what it's called. Anyway, those three foundations eventually each gave twenty-five thousand dollars to the schools for this staff development program and funded a three-year staff development program that also contributes substantial to this process. So there was—

WC: Significant participation? One of the things that have kind of puzzled me in looking at the years before '69 is that really from 1959 through 1968 or '69, the school board really does not seem very responsive to the question of school desegregation. Now, I guess that's my reading of the situation and it may not be yours or other people's, but I wonder whether you had any thoughts on that or heard other people kind of assess what might have been going on during that period. And what was most significant in creating the change, if there was a change that came in '69-'70?

JB: I just wasn't aware of the school board at that time. My children were just starting school, and there were some black children who, through freedom of choice, were in schools. I guess it was in the early sixties. My child wanted one of the girls—one of the girls was at Irving Park School, and there was one black child in her class, and her name was Susie. Ann, my child, who was in school with her, came home and she said, "I just really don't even like Susie."

And I said, "Oh, my."

After all of what we had put our children through, she doesn't like a black child in her class. And I said, "Why is that?"

She said. "Well, you know, she's just taking advantage of everybody. She knows that everybody wants to be her friend because she's the only black child in the whole school, and she is just taking advantage of that situation, and I just don't think that's right." It gave me a sigh of relief. But, anyway, where little things like that were happening to my children, I was not at that point thinking about the school board or what

role was in anything but the PTA. Although I was involved in some of these groups that were beginning to talk interracial problems, I really wasn't far enough along.

WC: Had you been involved with the—you were in the Community Fellowship?

JB: Yeah, I was invited to come to some of their meetings.

WC: And you said earlier that it was an act of bravery to even go to those meetings. Why was that?

JB: Well, it just wasn't—the thing to do was not to go to those meetings, you know. You know, at the time when I was—the Human Relations Advisory Committee came into being, the thing to do is to get in there and do or get out. A lot of people chose to get out and went to a private school. But if you stay with the public schools, you know, you could feel perfectly comfortable about what you were doing. When those of us who first got started, when we first started meeting in interracial groups, that was definitely not the thing to do, and there were some pretty odd people, not the traditional leaders, were involved in those things. You went and you did and talked to the people who did it with you, and you didn't talk about it to anybody else. Not that you are afraid that anything was going to happen, there just wasn't anybody to talk to about it.

WC: So that it was a kind of self-selected deviant group?

JB: It wasn't exactly called deviant.

WC: No, deviant—I'm using "deviant" in a classic psychological sense, as being different from the norm.

JB: Yeah, they were. People [who] were just the most concerned, people who had deep-rooted, long-standing cares about the human condition, who did things quietly and who didn't have a great deal of power and couldn't really be initiators of change perhaps, but they wanted to sit and talk about it. What was the human condition at that time? Where do we fit into it? How can we—this was a very slow, slow thing that gradually grew until eventually people got into [it] who could initiate change.

WC: But the change, when it was initiated, did not come from the fellowship so much as it came from other groups?

JB: Well, the base of the fellowship had grown to a point where there were plenty of people who would, as the proper authority figures got into it, be there to support.

WC: Did the whole question of Black Power or black separatism ever become a significant issue in your deliberation, in your role with the Human Relations Advisory Committee, or just in your general association with this issue of the school question?

JB: Not really. [It did] more in public housing because I contended with that more than I did with the school thing. I can remember, you know, we had—oh, some of the students had feelings about—wanted to be with their own groups, the black students did, and there was much debate about what we called each other. And the word “black” was coming into—I remember many, many meetings where we just simply discussed what we were going to call each other. Some—

[End of Transcript]

Notes:

[Fred] Cundiff.

[She] speaks warmly of Shirley and Henry Frye. Notes that they were about to move to Irving Park and kids said, “Why go to a white neighborhood when all our friends are here?” So they bought a big house on Benbow Road instead.

[She] talks of Jesse Jackson’s magnetic attraction at recent event honoring Walter Johnson. She sees Walter Johnson as one of those who probably pulled the strings behind Jesse Jackson back in Greensboro, but never wanted any credit.

Talks of how upset Shirley Frye was having to fire white executive director when she became president of YW[CA]—Helen Ashby. Says Shirley Frye would go home and cry on Henry’s shoulder and he’d say, “If you can’t take it, get out.”