

**GREENSBORO VOICES/GREENSBORO CIVIL RIGHTS ORAL HISTORY  
COLLECTION**

INTERVIEWEE: David Hellburg

INTERVIEWER: William Link

DATE: April 11, 1989

[Begin Tape 1, Side A]

WILLIAM LINK: [muffled talking in background]. This is William Link, and the date is April 12, 1989. I'm in my office here at UNCG [The University of North Carolina at Greensboro] and with me is Mr. David Hellburg. I wonder if you'd mind telling me a little bit about your background, how you came to be in Greensboro, where you were educated, where you were born.

DAVID HELLBURG: I was educated in Chicago. I went to the American Conservatory of Music for an undergraduate degree in music education. I went to Illinois Institute of Technology to get an undergraduate degree in academics, arts and sciences. [My] graduate work was at Northwestern University.

I came to Greensboro from a town called Maiden, North Carolina. Prior to that I was in Gastonia, North Carolina, and Newton, North Carolina. So I was in North Carolina for two years before I came to Greensboro. But there was a three year stint in the Army. After the Army, I went back to Newton, North Carolina, for one year to fulfill a promise I had made to them as band, orchestra, and choir director and history teacher. Then I came to Greensboro as a band, orchestra, and choir director itinerant teacher. When Sternberger [Elementary] School was built, I was appointed principal of that school, which was a one through six [grade] school for children in the Starmount area of Greensboro.

WL: Were you from--where were you from originally?

DH: Chicago.

WL: Chicago. So how did you end up in North Carolina?

DH: I wanted to get out of the big city, and I was invited to North Carolina by the administrator of the North Carolina Orthopedic Hospital, hospital for crippled children, to organize a music program for the children who were there a minimum of nine months. And the state organized a twelve-month school at the North Carolina Orthopedic Hospital, and we had a staff of about twelve teachers. So that was my first year of teaching.

WL: You were at the Sternberger school as a teacher or a principal?

DH: No, I went there as a part-time principal. I had eight teachers and was principal, but I also taught band and orchestra and choir at two other schools in the city in the morning. So I was for two years a part-time principal, and then as the school grew I was given a full-time staff position.

WL: I wonder if you'd mind saying a little bit about how the school system in Greensboro was, how did you find it when you came in--

DH: Oh, I found it very friendly, very organized. The superintendent of schools was a very fine gentleman by the name of Dr. Ben Smith. He supported his teachers, he supported the law. As a matter of fact, in '48 when the Supreme Court made a decision about integrating schools, the very next day Dr. Smith called a meeting of his entire staff, principals and supervisors, and from then on we met together. Prior to that [we] met separately. And Dr. Smith said, "If it's the law of the land, that's our law." Although the schools didn't integrate at that time, because it would have taken too much time to do that, he did integrate his staff immediately. And there were no problems from then on.

WL: So the joint meetings between--these would be joint meetings with black teachers and white teachers--took place from nineteen, this would be 1954, the *Brown* [v. *Board of Education*] decision.

DH: It all took place together, and the administrative staff, the principals and supervisors, met together. They used to meet separately.

WL: I see. So this was part of an initial attempt to do something concrete.

DH: Correct, correct.

WL: Was there much--what sort of expectations were there after that from your school? Did you--was there much reception that--

DH: Are you speaking of--

WL: The *Brown* decision.

DH: --Sternberger school or from the central office?

WL: Both, Sternberger school maybe, if you want to consider--

DH: Well, the central office wasn't too difficult, because our goals and objectives were pretty much the same for both black and white schools. But in the individual schools there was quite a difference in the change that needed to be made on a local basis. Do you want me to go into that?

WL: Sure.

DH: Well, to prepare for that, the first year that we integrated, we hired, with the cooperation of the PTA [Parent Teacher Association], we hired a bus. And the first day that the teachers returned, we took a trip to our new school district, which was the other end of town, maybe eight, ten miles away, so that the teachers would get an idea of where these children were coming from.

The average IQ of the students at Sternberger school prior to integration was 114, average IQ. Of course that dropped tremendously and also meant that lesson plans and the goals and the expectations of teachers had to be changed. And I felt that the first thing to do is to let them know what kind of housing these children come from, where they come from, to better understand the children. You can't ask a child to write about their experiences when the most exciting experience he has is the bus ride from his home to school. But you can capitalize on even that bus ride if you ask them to look at the stores or the places that he passes on the way to school. That's the type of change that we had to make.

Where we were accustomed to teaching children who had traveled all over the United States, we now had to gear our goals to children who have had no experiences, and that was one of the biggest problems we had with the black child that came to our school. That was--they had no experiences, they hadn't been anywhere. They didn't have anything to write about. They didn't have anything to write about, "What did you do last summer?" They were home.

We had to try very hard to make them feel comfortable in a school so far away from their homes. We had to have a new concept of the community. What's the community? We had to make parents feel comfortable coming into a neighborhood that was socio-economically higher than where they were from. We had to make them feel comfortable. We had to say over and over again that students had always been assigned to Sternberger school, and whoever is assigned is a student of the school. It doesn't matter about color or where he came from. We had students from New Jersey. It didn't make any difference whether they were from New Jersey or from east Greensboro. Once they step into Sternberger, they're a student of the school and we teach them accordingly. That's the attitude we tried to get across.

WL: What was the attitude of teachers about integration?

DH: Some teachers accepted it quicker than others. I remember one incident where there was a lice epidemic at the school and it spread throughout the children. It was up to the teacher to test for lice. And I had one teacher who said, "I'll teach them, but I won't touch them." Well, that attitude had to be changed, and you just couldn't tell her to change it. It had to be done slowly and sympathetically. But she changed. And that whole attitude had to change. We had to change the attitude that, well, they're never going to learn anything anyway. That had to be changed. And it was a very, very difficult but exciting time in the life of teachers and all of us who went through this period.

WL: It must have made your job busier. I mean there was a lot more as an administrator you

had to do, I suppose.

DH: Yes, we met more often with the faculty, we had more discussions with the faculty. We were--we won a scholarship to a training session in Winston-Salem at a special school--it's now closed--where we took the entire faculty and four parents, teaching on getting along together, how to integrate more smoothly. And that was a very fine workshop. So when we came back in September with this background, it helped. It helped a great deal to coordinate and cement the relationships of teachers and parents.

WL: This is after you've gone through a year or so of--

DH: No, this was the first summer. We had written for, we had written for this grant and it was accepted. And we had four parents who wanted to come, and we had two black teachers who were assigned to our school that attended.

WL: I see. What other efforts were there done during that summer before? This was--of course, it all came very suddenly, didn't it? The court decision and then--in May?

DH: Yeah, the decision was made in the spring, and in the fall we were at it. It was a great help to have the principal on the payroll for twelve months, because the principal went through all sorts of training periods. Our staff development people went to work. The state department helped a great deal.

WL: They had special people assigned?

DH: Special people would come down to lecture. It was a very exciting period in education. And of course, coming from Chicago, I wasn't as unfamiliar as some of the folks, because in Chicago we had integrated schools.

WL: What other sorts of things went on in the summer?

DH: Being a member of the minority group, I could feel for some of those, I could empathize with the student who comes in and feels a little awkward and unaccepted. But we did a lot to make them feel acceptable.

WL: What was the posture of the central administration? Was there generally harmonious relationships as a principal?

DH: Yes, yes, there was, there was. And principals would work together. The principal's association in Greensboro integrated and that helped. You see, the leadership of Dr. Smith helped a great deal in setting the philosophy for the school system.

WL: Yeah, so we're back in the 1950s now?

DH: Back in the fifties, and there was a strong board of education that also believed that if this is the law of the land, this is what we're going to do in Greensboro.

WL: Do you think that--of course the first court decision, the big court decision, *Brown v. Board of Education*, was in 1954, and Greensboro--we've just been talking about Greensboro integrating, that's 1971. That's seventeen years. Do you think it was impossible or it would have been much more difficult in 1954 to accomplish integration?

DH: In 1954 is when we integrated the administrative staff. But we were in the courts for a long time trying to--working under the proposition that--let's see if I can remember. Freedom of choice, yeah, freedom of choice. And until we went through the courts--and the reason we went through the courts was to satisfy the public more so than the educators. It was to satisfy the public that we've tried everything we can and this is the answer. And of course, there was a lot of excitement when the school board of education came out with a plan for integration. But we went through it, we grit our teeth, and I think finally became a success and did good under the conditions.

But it was a great change, it was a great change on the part of teachers and some principals to accept this. But for a long time we were fighting the case and finally there was no point in fighting it anymore, we had lost the case. And we were--even after we integrated, we were in the courts for several years. We're not any longer.

WL: Supervising--the court had jurisdiction over it.

DH: The court had to approve all plans.

WL: Right, right. How--one of the big features that occurred, one of the big, sort of results of integration in 1971 was massive busing. I suppose that's the thing the parents got most excited about, or did they?

DH: Oh, yeah. They weren't so worried about the busing as they were where they're going to get off the bus. And in the case of the minority students, they were very concerned that they wouldn't get on the right bus. And many children would stand and wait for brothers and sisters before they would get on the bus, which meant that the home had taught them, "Don't you come home without your brother, don't you come out without your sister." And regardless of what our rules were about getting on the bus with your class, there were some children who just wouldn't get on the bus without their little brothers and sisters, which was a good sign. And of course we accommodated them.

It was very difficult at the beginning. They couldn't read in the first grade. They couldn't write. They couldn't read numbers. They didn't recognize the buses because they were all the same color. And it was a real challenge that first year--that first month of getting the right children on the right bus. That's a very difficult situation to work out.

WL: So it was very confused or there was the possibility for confusion.

DH: You had to work out ways in which to lessen the confusion. But we had to work those out. Today we have examples that we can give the teachers and principals, but in those days we had to work out those examples.

WL: How did, how did the integration of faculties transpire? You had said you had two minority faculty.

DH: We had two minority on the faculty, and it helped a great deal to be able to include them into the workshop prior to that first year. They were selected people, though. They were people who had proven themselves in the classroom. The administration, central administration, assigned the teachers, and they were very carefully selected at the beginning.

WL: So as to avoid problems.

DH: To avoid conflicts.

WL: And to set a good example presumably.

DH: Yes, and especially people who were easy to get along with, people who didn't harbor resentment. Yeah, we had two of those.

WL: So that was fairly smooth in terms of integrating the faculty?

DH: Yes, yes. Now I'm only speaking for myself. It was fairly smooth at our school. I didn't have that--I didn't have what some schools had, when a black teacher walked in the teacher's lounge all the others walk out. I didn't have any of that.

WL: That happened at other schools?

DH: From what I hear.

WL: What about the parents and the PTA? How did the PTA--

DH: The PTA--we had a PTA that had won a national, a state prize for service to children. And at that time the state superintendent chided me about, "Well, sure you've got a school with all these good kids and high IQs. It's easy to get that--those people to work for you." In those days mothers were not employed as much as they are today, and we had a very fine, excellent, best-in-the-state PTA. And the superintendent at the time of the presentation said, "I'd like to see you do that when you integrate." And so I took that challenge. And indeed after the first year, or second year, we did win that plaque again with service to children.

We involved the PTA. It was very difficult because those parents were working, it was difficult to get them. What we did was to, again, rent a bus. And if we had a choir concert at night for a PTA meeting, we sent the bus out to pick up the children and the parents at the school expense, PTA expense. And we found that a good many parents were working, but the children came. And they were well dressed and appropriately dressed and enjoyed singing, but they just didn't sing to their parents. The group that attended was the group in the immediate vicinity of the school.

We did all we could to get those folks down. We had a day that we called parent

visitation day and parents would come as they could. I remember we had one blind man and we sent our counselor out to pick him up to bring him to the school so he could feel the atmosphere of the school and talk to the teachers about his child. That's the kind of effort we made to help.

WL: How did parents react to desegregation? Was there general support?

DH: Well, they were on all committees. Number one is that we did find some parents--we were from the very low socioeconomic black neighborhood. It was really very low and higher socioeconomic groups. The pairing of the school was socially, economically not level at all.

WL: Acute?

DH: Yes, it was acute, at different ends.

WL: So it was fairly affluent white with fairly poor black?

DH: Yes, yes. And we got, we got as many parents as we could to be on committees of the PTA and the board, but they could only do so much. You can't do much with parents who are on the second and third shift coming to PTA meetings. They just can't get off. But we tried to keep them as informed as we could. But the relationship was not antagonistic.

WL: It was generally supportive? Is that how you'd characterize the way parents--

DH: Oh yes. Oh yes, yes. You know, black tears are just as wet as white tears. And they were very interested in their children, especially at that grade level. Now I don't know about the upper grades, but they were very interested in having their children come to school. First of all, it freed them to go to work. And second of all, they wanted them to learn. They wanted them to read and write.

Then we had remedial classes. Even during the day we organized so that we would take care of the--we didn't say that the third grade child was in the second grade. What we created was a second and third grade for remedial work of the third graders, but they were still called third graders, and second graders who were about the middle group. So that's what I mean by teachers had to change their goals and objectives, because they had to reorganize their lesson plans for multi-grouping rather than, you know, just one or two groups or three groups even.

WL: So the curriculum had to be revised as well?

DH: Curriculum, and then we had to buy books to fit the children. A workbook was just not valuable at all, because all the children were not on the [same level]. But if you took a workbook and tore out the pages and gave it to the individual students, your workbook could help, because that was extra work that the teachers didn't have to think up and the children didn't have to think up. It was already done by a professional, additional

arithmetic. They didn't need six pages of one problem. What they did was to give those six pages out, tear them out of the book and give them to six different children.

WL: Was this a fairly smooth and successful process, specifically these curriculum changes and things that were going on in the classroom?

DH: Well, we had no riots. You know, smooth is a relative term.

WL: Relative term, sure. But as an administrator you perceived this as being successful by the end of the first year, perhaps?

DH: That too is a relative term. It was very difficult. You may have gotten some children and you didn't get others. And I don't know, we did the best we could. I would not compare it with the kind of success that I would define earlier days. We adjusted our goals and tried to keep up with them and do the best we can. The main thing was that we wanted the children to want to come to school in the morning and not to feel any anxieties because they were in a school in a white residential area.

WL: And they didn't. Or they did?

DH: Well, we tried. I think we did a good bit towards succeeding.

WL: How did the, how did the--in retrospect, how did integration change or not change Sternberger school?

DH: Well, it changed. I don't think it changed the reputation of Sternberger school as being a good school. I think that the change was internal. The change was that we did a lot of good for newly assigned students. I think that we succeeded in 80 percent of the cases to teach both the black and the white students that they can get along together. The playgrounds were not segregated, teams were not picked by race. The teachers saw to that. The teachers saw to that. And occasionally we'd have some problems, but you have problems at any school.

WL: It was presumably a big change--would be the change from a neighborhood school--

DH: To a community school.

WL: --to a community school, right.

DH: See we had two neighborhoods now, and they were diversely different.

WL: What kind of effect did that have? Was there a loss, for example? I mean, some people would argue that there would be a loss, some loss of parental participation and interest because they lose that, sort of, community.

DH: Not if, you see, not if the teacher had planned different goals for different children. She



didn't have the large groups of common grounds. She didn't have the large groups where the intelligence level was within 10 points, and she had to revise her material. But we gave her as much as we could in the way of supplementary material for those children who needed it. And we kept reminding her to challenge those other children.

We had one teacher who offered a class in playing bridge before school opened. Now that was a challenge to children in the immediate area, because they could get there early enough. The others had to wait for the bus to bring them. That's one way to challenge the brighter child. We couldn't keep the children after school as we had before because they had to go home on the bus, there was no other way to get them home. If a child missed the bus, the teacher had to take him home.

We used to visit the homes of the children, but we were told that this may not be a good idea because the parent may not be home, the parent may be working, or the parent may be embarrassed for a teacher to come into her home. And I remember in one workshop, the leader said, "If you go into the home of a minority student and they offer you a chair, and if you turn around first and look at the chair, you've already defeated your purpose, because normally you don't have to examine a chair before you sit in it. You've already insulted the people." And we had to be that careful. But we learned these things. And finally we did not expect, we did not expect the teachers to go into all the homes because all the homes didn't want them in. Does this make sense?

WL: Sure, yeah. So some teachers did and some didn't?

DH: Well, first we required it of teachers to visit in every home. But later, all I did was require teachers to talk with the parents in every home.

WL: Was that a departure? I mean, was that--

DH: Yes, that was a departure. We used to visit every home.

WL: You used to do that.

DH: And the teacher was welcome in the home before integration.

WL: Before integration.

DH: After integration it was just too difficult for teachers to get into the new neighborhoods and they weren't always welcome in the homes.

WL: Right. I didn't realize that was a practice before.

DH: It was in my school. I'm speaking only from--

WL: Yeah, yeah it was only your--

DH: --my philosophy.

WL: You went to central administration a little later on in the seventies?

DH: The assistant superintendent for elementary schools, and then I went in for assistant superintendent for administration.

WL: I see. Did--why did you make this change, what--

DH: Well, the children were getting younger and I was getting older, and I wasn't--my program had been set and I was ready to do some work on a broader level. In other words, work with principals to teachers to students rather than just working with students in one school. It was a bigger challenge and I appreciated the opportunity to do that.

WL: From that vantage point, what did--what sorts of things did you notice about--

[recorder paused]

DH: --[management by] objectives, and it was part of my job to explain that to principals. And we were going into an evaluation process, and this needed to be explained to principals and teachers. We were giving standardized tests, and that had to be explained. And I was doing a great deal of that.

WL: Management by objectives, what does that mean?

DH: Setting up objectives for the school. For example, we're going to have one year's progress for one year's work. What's your objective, your goal for the year? And then there were certain forms that you filled out that would let you know whether you've achieved that or not. You might say that you wanted to, one of your objectives would be to improve the playground area, and you needed so much money to do it. At the end of the year we wanted to know if you did that, or how close did you get to it. Now we didn't rate you on points, but it gave you an excellent means of evaluating how far you got on your points. Then that would extend for the following year, and what you're going to prioritize, your goals for the following year.

It got to the point where standardized tests became a measure of the teachers' progress, of teachers' success. And that was erroneous, because if you say a student will gain one year's progress in one year's teaching, you mean really that from where he is to where he's going to be. Not that if you're teaching third grade, all third graders will be on a fourth grade level. And that had to be explained. We went all through that management by objectives. And I think it laid the groundwork for evaluation and that evaluations are not as simple as they seem. You can't evaluate a teacher on an SAT score of the students.

WL: Yes, that's a very difficult question. What about changes affecting the way that desegregation had taken place, or were there changes? For example, did the attendance zones hold up well in the 1970s? Was there much need for tinkering with the system? Or did the system that was established in 1971 in terms of pairings of schools, did that hold up fairly well?

DH: You know, truant officers went out of existence and they became counselors. And the visiting to the homes was done by home school teacher coordinators. I think in high school they called them cut cops [?]. But our attendance was not significantly changed, because we picked up the children by bus, all of them came by bus. And we fed them. That may have been the best meal they had all day--free federal aid meals.

WL: And the racial ratio stayed, both in--at Sternberger and at, you know, later on when you were at--

DH: Oh yes, it finally ended up about 48/52 black, 48/52 white. Some white parents took their children out of school, because they thought that our program would suffer. Some of them brought them back. But the ratio was very important at that time. But we tried to equalize them as much as possible.

WL: And that was maintained so there wasn't any--

DH: As close as possible. You know, you just, people move in and out of neighborhoods and the ratio changes. Ours was pretty close to 50/50.

WL: Yeah. Were there that many changes that came in the plan of 1971 subsequent to that?

DH: No, they did it by numbers. They knew how many children lived on every street, how many school-aged children on every street. What their age level was, what their school level was on every street, street-by-street study. That's why it took a long time. Oh yes, we knew who lived on every street and where.

WL: So was it necessary to redraw the lines?

DH: Oh yes. We redrew the lines, but we knew how many children would come from that section.

WL: So you could project what--

DH: So we could project the enrollment figures.

WL: Yeah. I have a concluding question I guess, and that is how you would evaluate the impact of desegregation. What were the positive effects and negative effects of the--

DH: Well, I think the positive effects way outweigh the negative effects, because the positive effects include many areas. They include not only academic areas, but they include the social areas, they include social areas in adulthood, social areas for children. They taught the children that--the minority children that they were not alone, that white children were, had the same problems. They may have come from different homes, but all our children came from different homes even when they were all white. But this was a whole new concept, social concept that the schools helped with.

I think that there were many plus factors in the integration. And if we had to give

credit, we have to give credit to children that got along with children. You know, if you saw--people were saying you couldn't do it by law, but children walked hand in hand down the hallway, black and white, and you could look at them walking down the hall and say, "Well, who said you couldn't do it by law." I mean, this was the right thing to do. I think the benefits to society in general far outweigh the negative.

One of the first observations I made was that the minority students had no experience to write about, and they can't write a paper if they've had no experience to write about. So we encouraged some black parents, I remember Mrs. Walter Johnson was one of them--and he was chairman of the school board later--but she came in with other parents to take the children on field trips. And the assignment was for them to write about the field trip when she took them out. These little black children who came from homes where they had absolutely no experiences to write about, and we were trying to teach them to write and teach them to create and to be original. They had no experiences to be original, and so we tried to create some experiences for them. And we got some fine cooperation from the black community. And the white community, but mainly the black.

WL: So what kind of experiences?

DH: Well, they took them in a little bus or they would take them in cars and take them out to a factory, or take them out to the woods, or take them to the dairy, or take them to another town with the objective of some things that they're going to look for, some things they're going to make notes about. When they come back they're going to talk about it, and then they're going to write it. Now when they have something on their minds to write about, they're going to use what they've learned in language arts. Some of them are going to draw pictures. Well, you know, to draw a picture you have to have some mental picture of your own. And that's what we were trying to give them, more experiences. They lacked experience. We worked on that. That was a very good program.

WL: Successful program.

DH: Well, we think so, you know.

WL: Yeah, it's relative again.

DH: Yeah

[End of Interview]