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Ben Griffin

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Black History Research Project of Tampa

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Otis R. Anthony African Americans in Florida Oral History Project
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Ben Griffin: I came from Tuskegee, Alabama. I been in Tampa since 1934. In the same year, started teaching at Booker T. Washington Junior High School. One year after that I went to the University of Michigan, became a student, and got a master's degree in history and government. Coming back, I taught two years in Polk County, Bartow, and Union Academy, came back to Tampa to teach at Middleton High School for one year, and became principal of Holland Academy for thirteen years. From there, [I went] to Meacham School for seven years, to Booker T. Washington Jr. High for five years, to Just Junior High in West Tampa for three years. Then I was coordinator of community school at Booker T. Washington for four years. Then I taught in Sligh [Middle School] for one year [Sligh Middle School], Pierce [Middle School] four years. [At] Hillsborough High School, I taught mathematics and science for three years.

In all, I've taught school for forty-three years, and I retired for two years, having been an administrator for over thirty years. I've enjoyed my work in teaching very much, and during this time, of course, we've experienced quite a transition in economic and social structure. During that time, blacks came from a very low era of society throughout America to a much more prominent section where they are today. Experience and a great deal of changes and enjoyment in my work.

Otis Anthony: Okay, who were some of the pioneer educators who were in the system before you got there and during your tenure?

BG: Here in Tampa, we have an elderly man by the name of C. D. Frye. He was principal of Meacham School when I came here, but he became principal of Middleton High School. H. W. Blake, who at that time was principal of Booker T. Washington High

School, he was a very prominent man, and the school Blake High School was named following him. Anthony Majors had just left when I came here. And many others: A.J. Ferrell, who retired [as] principal. G.V. Stewart and I along together; he had retired as coordinator—not coordinator but a director of schools. And that’s about the essence of it.

OA: Mr. Griffin, what were the conditions of the schools, say in the thirties [1930s] or the forties [1940s]?

BG: At a very low rate economically, and I would think also there was not much emphasis places on black education, which was typical to our society. We just about ran the school we wanted if we wanted to do something. Okay, we did it—but you did have a genuine interest in the quality of black teachers at that time because they were accustomed to doing everything for themselves. We worked long hours and had many students who was above age, but you had the same teachers who felt morally obligated to get the best out of the student and carry him to the heights. It’s quite different from now. We knew everybody; we knew the parents, and what we said to the parents, we gave it back to the students and back to the parents.

We were the community within ourselves, though we were short of materials. We didn’t have much busing facilities and they didn’t have many books—current books, particularly, was short. There was no such thing as air conditioning. And we so often at that time would get eight months of school, and the whites would get nine. The salary we were receiving [was] approximately 51 percent of the white man’s salary at that time.

OA: Was there a high expulsion rate during the thirties [1930s], forties [1940s] and fifties [1950s]?

BG: No, no, there wasn’t any. Everything was pretty well under control.

OA: So, during the thirties [1930s], forties [1940s] and fifties [1950s], the black teachers as a whole controlled the discipline more so than the teachers today?

BG: Far so, far so. We did a far better job of having our say. We had a few problems now and then, but you had the black community supporting the teachers. Meantime, we was fighting for integration. Little by little we fight for integration, but we never failed to support our public discipline-wise, and all the other ways that the parents would give assistance to.

OA: Were there any problems associated with education during the period—I mean, the problems that the—could the principal go to, say, get more materials or instruction?

BG: Most of our materials came by way from the county, and we had a person over all black schools, who we called the Director of Negro Education in the county. In fact, that was structured throughout the state—the director of the black students throughout the state of Florida on a state level, and then each county had one. [In] Hillsborough County we had Mr. Frank Miles during the thirties [1930s], forties [1940s] and fifties [1950s],

and he was the man to whom we looked for direction and assistance. In fact, you were hired by the school board to handle such problems.

OA: Were there any black officials in higher than principal during this period?

BG: Not black. The highest you had were principals at that time. Later on—the later part of the fifties [1950s], we had one man, G.V. Stewart, [who] was promoted from Middleton to the courthouse about 1958, I believe.

OA: Are you familiar with Blanche Armwood?

BG: Yes, I am, that was my first wife's—of course, Blanche left here in the thirties [1930s], early thirties [1930s]. I happen to know her personally, because she was a relative and close friend of my first wife.

OA: Mr. Griffin, getting back to teachers' pay, how did the equalization of pay come about, and if so, what promise did black teachers incur in getting equalization of salaries?

BG: Equalization we happen to— [There] was a federal court edict resulting from the local teachers bringing the county into court, federal court, and after two years of litigation we won equal salary—at that time. I said a few minutes ago we got 51 percent of the white's salary. Over a period of forty-two months, we was given (illegible) that they had to pay us equal salary.

And of course, we paid for the suit ourselves. The blacks—to access, we organized and assessed each one \$17.50 which to pay the salary. At that time we must had about 225 teachers, black teachers, in the county, and they [were] throughout the county. I would say about 60 percent of them paid the \$17.50—when you say \$17.50, you thinking about—the current need of money, I would say about thirty-five or forty dollars, but that was \$17.50 then. And most teachers paid; about 40 percent did not pay.

OA: Can you go in a little detail [about] some of the court cases which brought this to the attention of the county?

BG: Yes, we had followed the guidelines of a case in Virginia when the federal court says we was entitled—this was in district court—said that you was entitled to your salary and that race could not be a case of discrimination, based upon the Fourteenth Amendment¹ of the Constitution [of the United States]. We got the idea from that case entirely here in Hillsborough County.

At that time, Thurgood Marshall, who's on the Supreme Court now, a lawyer for the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People], we asked him to

¹ The Fourteenth Amendment and its Equal Protection Clause was one of the points used in *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. The Virginia case BG mentions is probably *Davis v. County School Board of Prince Edward County, Virginia*, which was consolidated with four other cases into *Brown v. the Board of Education* when it appeared before the Supreme Court.

come down and give us advice. He did that—not only legal advice, but he served as the attorney to push the case. We had a local attorney here with us, Mr. Attorney George Goebel; at that time, he was our attorney. We had two lawyers out of Jacksonville to handle our case. And we had to corral the teachers, because most teachers knew nothing about legal procedures. Very few knew. We corralled them and organized.

I was named president of the local group, and we worked for a period of—before pretty soon, it was about five months—trying to collect members' support. Then we find out the people wasn't going to pay their money. Then we gave several activities. [A] big testimonial banquet was one activity that brought most of our money, and we had several organizational—[the] longshoremen volunteered and gave us some money to help fight it. And we had some of the prominent citizens of Tampa, and we had one or two whites to volunteer to help us fight—volunteer to give finance to help us fight.

And we had the ship union to write an article in behalf of us, [an] editorial. The *Tampa Daily Times* owned by two different companies at that time. They both wrote editorials supporting our effort for organization. They seem to have felt that there was some justification of having 49 to 51 percent was really too differential. But there were those two articles that—only two articles written in our behalf—editorials, I mean, written in our behalf. But they were very, very dear, and kind of set the tone for the way.

Of course, the white teacher association opposed us and this court here, saying that they won't be a party to the suit because they—[if] there had been a raise in salary, [that] would've meant a cut in their salary. Of course, the judge ruled (illegible) them on that, saying that his court had nothing to do with raising of the money nor the salary. How much they get? One thing he was concerned with that whatever was given will be given on an equal basis, and that race will not be used as a method of discriminating or creating two salary schedules.

Then they went appeal theirs to the order circuit court, federal circuit court. And of course, they got the same reaction down there. And after, then they come back, and we was able to—and black teachers and the white got together. And [the] result was that we—executive secretary serve both of us. They both paid the salary; we paid one-third, they paid two-thirds of the salary. And from then on, we had one program. And of course, when the court first gave us the equalization, I—when we were through with the equalization, not for the equivalence, but they ask who that by putting in a rating system and paid that it applied to both races, in which they would put all the teachers in one of three groups. That's—we had three different levels, the first, second and third grade level.

But they made a mistake, and put most of the blacks, 99 percent of them, in the third group, and the whites were put in the first and second group. And all principals, with the exception of me, was out in the first group, being white or black! And they made an error there. So, we wrote a suit against the county school board system, and the judge ruled that the rating system was fair, nothing was wrong with it, but he would be concerned about how it would be administered. They were going to use that to make up the salaries

to be equal, but of course we could bring them back to court on that. And we reminded them that that was a very good statement, because it meant that everything would have to be equal then.

We were ready to go to court because of the way it's being handled (illegible), because they didn't test that case. So the superintendent immediately got permission from the school board to prepare a salary scale, based upon the element of academic training—whether they have a degree or not, because so many teachers don't have a degree. And the other element would be the number of years they have been teaching. So that meant there was no longer a rating system. That's where we are today. It was decided that all of us would get the equal salaries.

OA: Were there any attempts [to] strike by white teachers over the black teachers over this issue?

BG: No, there was no strike, but of course there was some bitter people about the situation. They tried to put two suits in court, but they failed also. And at a later date when we began interviewing, there was quite a few who didn't want to be bothered. When we started integration you did find that whites, more now than in the past, all wanted to teach at the same school, and they didn't want to come in the black community and teach at the black schools. The superintendent said that those teachers who didn't want to work in the black schools could turn in their resignation.

At that time, you only had very few schools in the South that were integrated, and also they had some troublesome riots. There was Alabama, Missouri, Mississippi, and two or three other states that wouldn't accept that. And Louisville, Kentucky was the first to accept this change, but they were not really willing for themselves but for the kids, than to have a rioting school with poor teaching. So they saw it was better to go along with the court's decision to integrate, and they made it pretty plain that they were doing it for the child.

OA: Being an administrator in the black schools, how would you rate the teachers in the segregated school and desegregated, as to black or white teachers?

BG: The teachers are very good, right on; it's just a new ball game now all together from what it was then. We started out with integration, which was a new setup, new to the blacks and whites. We have never gone to school with them. We hadn't been to school meetings with them before. But we start out with a very open front, just integrated the teachers, integrated the students.

Now, you have many whites who didn't know how to handle blacks. So, you would often have the white teacher call a black person to solve the problem with a black kid. But I think on a whole, of many of the schools were moving right along with it. We can get far more than we had now than we could when the blacks were dealing with blacks. Whenever we had a problem with a black, we would call him in for a conference [and] get to the problem straight.

But now, you are dealing with the whites, in which their mind is not sure about what to do. The black kids are aware of their rights, and the history of mistreatment has always faced us, and the whites themselves were aware how they have always treated us, and many of them hold on to that. And we feel that white man is so often not sincere in his dealings with the black children: two different cultures there conflicting with each other.

Some of the whites were have far less disinterest than others. Some of them are really interested in not seeing the color but the child as a child, and that kind of person I'm more sympathetic with. They're interested in the child [more] than the color, and get a more interesting result. On the other hand, [you] have some them that deal with black children as economic (illegible). They teach the child, but really don't want to be bothered with the child. They are not sympathetic; don't want to know any of the child's shortcomings, any of his trouble. And the black kids do have problems.

Man, the whites, many of them came prepared to handle what force what may [come]. The black children's parents don't come to the school to see about them and to support them. We have more white teachers than blacks in the every school—the ratio is around twenty to eighty—so he is taught more by the whites than blacks. But he at the same time cannot say that the white man is not interested in the cause of all our problems. He is a problem. He is a problem, because many of the homes he comes from have racial problems in the background. If you don't have background training, you just don't [have] any training.

Most of the children today are children that are quite young, and the parents don't care whether they go to school or not, and don't look after their problems. And their fathers are not even living in the home. They are divorced, or they're just not together because of other problems. They don't realize that it takes two to raise a child. And then it is the result of the home situation that helps in the classroom. We see it and we know it, but we may not want to talk about it most of the time. The absence of a parent in many cases is the cause of black children acting as they do.

Of course they are a problem, a real problem, but course we do believe the white man is responsible for that because he kept us in captivity for so long. So, we would have to blame him for the condition that we are in to a long part. He is ahead of us because he has always been treated and taught in a different manor. We were took on the other side of the railroad tracks to live. We didn't have paved streets, we didn't have swimming pools, we didn't have the Gulf [of Mexico] to get into to swim. Our neighborhood was run down, being cursed not to be anything worth visiting. We were paid very little for our work. The black man did the hardest work. The whites were made rich off the black slaves.

We were treated the same way in the school system. We were given 40 to 50 percent of the white man's check, yet we had to work just as hard. We had to pay the same amount for our automobiles, food, clothing, homes, our what have you, so we were encouraged not to be men. Black men who are men become men because they want to be a man, but

the white man did everything possible to deprive them of the quality to become a man, the head of the family.

I even see it today with my wife. The people call her about a bill or something, they ask to speak to my wife, not me, about anything in the household, because that's typical about men in the black family situation. But I don't bite my tongue about letting them know that I'm the head of this household rightfully and also legally, so I handle all the responsibilities of the household. My wife has enough to do. But the business part is mine, so contact me.

Now, getting back to your question, we do have a problem, and it's whites handling blacks, and it becomes insensitive. If we just had to handle it, it wouldn't be so bad. The black child is very sensitive of his place of rights, and he expresses it in many ways. I know I walk in the classroom and students [are] walking around, and I say, "Everybody, take your seat," invariably a . . .

[Transcriber's Note: The transcript cuts off at this point, although the interview is clearly not finished. At this time, the Oral History Program does not have any additional pages to this transcript.]