

Transcription of Interview with Henry Wrens  
October 5, 1995

My function was to implement decisions that had already been made uh... and of course I had..I had been a principle in Arlington county Wake Field High School which had almost as many students in that school as we had in the school as we had in the school system here. It wasn't a big transition for me in terms of size it was a major transition in terms of community attitudes. Um... because ahh... There was a lot of hesitating as what to expect. I won't say there was apprehension because there had been a limited amount of integration in the several years prior. Their had been some white teachers who had gone into predominately Black Schools and vice versa with the Black staff coming into the white schools. Ah... Not a great deal of uhh..Ahh.. student mixing, but in the decision among the decisions that were made a that were made a couple of things have worked very much to the advantage of the school system. Because we had only five plants...3 of them were designated as primary schools and they had basically . Ahh....communities to serve that were ...We weren't evolved in a great deal of busing. Because with only three primary schools in the city and county each had a rather substantial uhh....attendance area....They were all kept at basically the same size. There was some uhh.. Bussing. Some students who reasonable should have gone to Matthew Waley. Because it would be closer to some students that live in the grove community they were bussed to Wallsburg and that was before 199 was in so they basically drove by 199 to get to

Wallsburg to bring up the ratio of Black students at Wallsburg because Wallsburg was serving the subdivisions out this way (referring to the location of his home) which are predominantly white... uhh... We had one upper elementary school. Everyone in the entire system Black or White went to that school. And we had one high School. Because we used a junior high school at that point. So again it again served the entire community. And the same was true of the high school so being a relatively small situation that helped as great deal.....

---

My enfaist when school opened that fall ..... and was basically on that if we worked together we could basically do anything we wanted to do. And the focus had to be providing excellence in education for all people. Ahh...Things went well in the beginning. In the fall we had one serious incident...Ahh.. the from my point of view it was the result of extremely poor judgement by two White staff members.

Ahh... it was following a football game ahh.. the athletic director of the high school and the person who was responsible for counting the receipts they were in an office. A group of rather boisterous students they were predominately Black, but their was some white students involved too.. as best I can know..Ahh.. Came down the hallway and the Athletic Director to nones knowledge had a pistol and he drew the pistol.....Ahh. This cased tremendous reaction in the community, but not what you might expect. Because you live in a area where school systems

all over the county are taking very strong measures about weapons in the schools, but I was actually in Chicago when it happened and the ahh... My Wife choose not to tell me. But we had direct threats made against our children ahh My wife got phoned here at the house saying that little red head son of yours won't come home.. describing the kids to a T. It had become a pretty bitter situation. I took a very strong position with respect to the staff members involved as far as I was concerned. This behavior was totally unacceptable and inappropriate. AHH it ended up with a meeting in the auditorium of Matthew Waley School where basically and I don't know any other way to describe them. Upper county red necks were there in force. Fortunately I had the full support of the school board but ahhh. They were out for my scalp there is no question about it. Because they were defending this guy's right to have this gun in school. and I at the meeting proposed a policy which to my knowledge is still on the Books, prohibiting any staff or school member to carry any know of weapon in the school system, which the board adapted. That didn't solve everything . Because there was still the question of disciplining the teacher. And this simmered in the community for a while it was divisive issue.. Ah... the Black community was very quite about it however. It was largely the vocal group was the white male portion of the county. I think the black community was quite primarily because they knew it was a difficult situation. I think they supported what the school board was doing but there was no point getting into a shouting match. It wasn't going to give any purpose for anyone. We

didn't finally get the thing settled until Carl Almosin (name perhaps misspelled) who was the president of C.W. called a meeting that was hold held in ahh... one of the meeting rooms in the ahh... in the Williamsburg ??? motor house which involved some the myself and some of the school board members and a few other people .... in which it finally to what I had purposed. Which was to move the man as athletic director, but to allow him... to continue to teach in the school. By the following year he had found a position else where and it was the best thing that could have happened, but it would. ....

---

Then we hadn't gotten much beyond that than we got into a controversy over qualification of teachers.... ahh... on this one the Black Community ahh.. was ahh... very vocal,... Because ahh.. There was a young women who was a graduated Bruton Heights who had received her degree from one of the colleges in the area. I don't know which Norfolk state or it wasn't Hampton. I'm sure at any rate it was ahh... predominately Black college in the community ahh.. She did not have a masters degree which and she was applying for a position as a visiting teacher ahh.... she had a major in sociology. She had nor experience and did not meet certification requirements for the visiting teachers position ahh.. there was a very strong feeling in the Black community that she was qualified because she had the degree and I took the position which I would have taken with any applicant that .... the degree in itself does not certify you for a teaching

position. you have to meet certification requirements of the state for the position..... and for VT a visiting teacher required 3 years of teaching experience and advanced training experience ahh. In that one we ended up in a mass meeting in the Norge auditorium.....

---

(He talks at length about the segregation structure of neighborhoods in Williamsburg)

(Some discussion about the first step for securing a spot for a new school)

So when we got into the planning stages and of course a very difficult part of in a lot of communities especially when you haven't built a school for a number of year is what are you going to name the school..... Well the first suggestion was the Williamsburg James City /County High School. and the kids just no body could except that. Ahh so we got evolved in community but the kids basically came up with Lafayette High School. But is what is interesting about that as I'm sure both of you probably think that the school is named for the Marque de Lafayette because of the revolutionary war and what not in this area. That impart is true but it is also named for James Lafayette who was a young black slave who spied on the British and reported back to Washington's staff..... and there was it was

a very plan that the school had be named for both these the individuals and when they designed the class ring for Lafayette if you look at it you have depicted clasped hands and this is supposed to depict the Black and White. This naming of the school did a great deal in this community to help bring people together. ahh..Since that time of course ahh.. two of the elementary schools have been named for prominent Blacks in the community who have been in the school system.....

---

(Mention Ester Batchler and Matt Gi as great teachers who were part of integration process)

We were dealing with such..??.. that in 68 an Elementary school principle whom I will not name ahh... very much wanted to acquire a bath tub so she could wash the Black children when they come to school dirty that is the kind of attitude we were dealing with...ah...and it wasn't she did this was not mean spirited on her part ahh...by any means. Because she basically loved all children very much. she was very sincere, but something like that isn't s very inappropriate because it suggest ahh..that the Black parents weren't maintaining proper hygiene for their children which was not the case. You got little things like that coming up occasionally that uhh..you just had to deal with.....

Williamsburg Grassroots Theatre Project

PERMISSION FORM

Please give us your permission to use what you say in helping us fulfill our goals for the Grassroots project. Your signature below will grant us permission to transcribe your words from a tape recording and use them: 1) to build a theatre production for later presentation and, 2) to place this transcription and tape recording in a library archive for later use. Without your permission, we cannot proceed.

Please be assured that you will have another opportunity to withdraw your permission for the use of your words in the theatrical presentation. After we have constructed a script, we will again seek your permission before the presentation is shown to the public.

SIGNATURE:

Henry A. Renz III

DATE: 10-5-95

Please print name here:

HENRY A. RENZ III