Oral History Interview of Ruth Walsh

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Interview Summary

Ms. Ruth Walsh reflects on her experiences growing up in the Brighton neighborhood of Boston, Massachusetts, following the 1974 Garrity decision, which required students to be bused between Boston neighborhoods with the intention of creating racial balance in the public schools. Ms. Walsh discusses her education in the Boston Public Schools; the effects of the Garrity decision on her family and neighborhood; the experiences of her children in the Cambridge Public Schools; and her feelings about the decision and the importance of diversity.

Subject Headings

Boston Public Schools

Busing for school integration

Morgan v. Hennigan (379 F. Supp. 410)

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This interview took place on Thursday, March 10, 2005, at the John Joseph Moakley Law Library, Suffolk University Law School, 120 Tremont Street, Boston, MA.

Interview Transcript

STEPHANIE TAMILIO: Hi, my name is Stephanie Tamilio, and today is Thursday, March 10, 2005, and today I'm interviewing a woman who was involved in the desegregation/busing in Boston in 1974.[1] First I would like to begin our interview today by learning a little bit about you. What is your full name?

RUTH WALSH: Ruth Walsh.

TAMILIO: How old are you?

WALSH: Forty-three.

TAMILIO: Forty-three, okay. What race are you?

WALSH: I'm white.

TAMILIO: Where did you grow up?

WALSH: In Brighton.

TAMILIO: Brighton, okay. Where did you live when the busing/desegregation started?

WALSH: In Brighton.

[1] On June 21, 1974, Judge W. Arthur Garrity ruled in the case of *Tallulah Morgan et al. v. James Hennigan et al.* (379 F. Supp. 410) that the Boston School Committee had "intentionally brought about and maintained racial segregation" in the Boston Public Schools. When the school committee did not submit a workable desegregation plan as the opinion had required, the court established a plan that called for some students to be bused from their own neighborhoods to attend schools in other neighborhoods, with the goal of creating racial balance in the Boston Public Schools. (See http://www.lib.umb.edu/archives/garrity2.html for more information)

TAMILIO: In Brighton. Okay, so you've lived there—

WALSH: I lived there until I was twenty.

TAMILIO: Great, okay. How old were you then when it first started when you were in school?

WALSH: Twelve.

TAMILIO: Twelve, okay. Where did you go to school?

WALSH: At that time it was—the year it started I was at Edison Middle School—or junior high, I don't remember what they called it—in Brighton.

TAMILIO: And then, now—when it started, were you bused to another school?

WALSH: Well, that wasn't my neighborhood school. We had to go there because it would be integrated if they—we couldn't go to the Taft which was right by our house. So that was the way we were affected. It was still in Brighton. We had to go—we didn't have a choice.

TAMILIO: You had to go there.

WALSH: So we had to take a bus there.

TAMILIO: So right when you started going into middle school is when it began there?

WALSH: Right, in the seventh grade, yeah.

TAMILIO: And so normally, if the desegregation hadn't—

WALSH: I would have went to the one right by my house.

TAMILIO: So you were bused, then.

WALSH: Kind of, yeah.

TAMILIO: Right. Do you have brothers and sisters?

WALSH: Yes.

TAMILIO: Okay. Did they go to the same school as you when the busing/desegregation began?

WALSH: A couple of them.

TAMILIO: Okay. How many brothers and sisters do you have?

WALSH: Ten. (laughs)

TAMILIO: Ten! Oh my gosh! Where do you fall?

WALSH: I'm eighth.

TAMILIO: You're eighth. Okay, so all of the—were some of the older ones already out of school?

WALSH: They were already graduated. There was just four of us—five of us still in school.

TAMILIO: So five of you were still in school out of the ten (laughter) and—okay, so you had—so the two younger than you were obviously still in elementary school.

WALSH: Right. They weren't affected. They were still in their same elementary schools.

TAMILIO: They weren't affected.

WALSH: Right. One is the same age as me, so she was with me.

TAMILIO: You're a twin?

WALSH: Yeah, and then one a little bit older, so he was in high school.

TAMILIO: Did he have to change schools at all?

WALSH: No.

TAMILIO: So he wasn't affected. So you and the two—and the other sister who's your twin were affected.

WALSH: Right.

TAMILIO: Okay, great. What were you told about it when it was about to happen and what did you think when you were first told?

WALSH: (pauses to think) I remember it about to happen because it was very controversial and it was in the news. I remember family—my older sister and my mother arguing about it. I just—I thought it was ridiculous, although for different reasons than I think now it was ridiculous because now I can look back on it.

TAMILIO: So you think it is ridiculous now too but for different reasons?

WALSH: Yes, right, yeah. It was just disruptive. It totally changed the neighborhood I grew up in, because for the year from sixth grade to seventh grade it was a very white neighborhood,

so lots of my friends happened to be white—not everybody—and they all moved away from the city.

TAMILIO: They all moved.

WALSH: So that affected me more that way than it did in school I think.

TAMILIO: Right, with all your friends moving away in the neighborhood because of this.

WALSH: Right, like socially, more than educationally.

TAMILIO: Right. And so you were probably planning on going to the same school with all of those friends at the Taft School.

WALSH: Right. I remember the first day of school at the Edison, and they were saying the names and we would say, Moved, moved. We'd answer for our friends who weren't there or at parochial school, which some of them would go to parochial school anyway because that's always been popular. So that was the biggest change. I mean, it was probably weird to go to a different school, but that was no big deal. It was still in Brighton. But to have the whole—a lot of the neighborhood change over less than a year was very unusual.

TAMILIO: Exactly. Wow. You mentioned that your mother and your sister had gotten into a fight, so were your parents for the desegregation/busing?

WALSH: No.

TAMILIO: No, not at all?

WALSH: No. Yeah, my mother was against it and my older sister was for it.

TAMILIO: Ok, and why would you say that you older sister were for it and you mother were against it?

WALSH: My mother was against it, and I totally—I remember—I don't know why I remember this—I guess because they never argued in front of me, and they did then. It was in the car. Because my mother saw it [as] what I still think it was, as a class issue. I remember her saying, and she's been dead a long time, "None of the school committee children are being affected—member children are being affected." She saw it as a class thing. She wasn't at all racist or anything. So she didn't mind about kids mixing in schools, that type of thing.

My sister was totally for it, because the schools were a mess and something—well, probably for a lot of children, but especially for children in the areas that were all black because it's been proven that they didn't get the money that the schools in white areas [did]. I've read a lot about it over the years. And I remember—my sister was just more liberal, she was in her twenties by then, so she was for it, but I don't know if she'd still be for it because she saw what—it didn't really work, I think. I mean, that's my opinion. (laughs)

I totally—and I don't remember my father—I don't remember him saying—what he ever said about it, but I remember my mother, and my mother saw it more as they were just moving around the lower working class kids more than anybody else. I don't know if she ever thought it—I don't know if she ever thought what it would do to the system but she just didn't think it was fair.

TAMILIO: So your mother was more outspoken about it than your father, and she didn't care—

WALSH: Yeah, I don't remember my dad—what he said about it at all. He might have, I just don't remember.

TAMILIO: Okay. Did you, at the time, being twelve years old, agree, or have any opinion at all about it?

WALSH: I think I didn't want it to happen because I didn't want anything to change. It wasn't like—the schools in Brighton themselves were often paired—were already paired with Mission Hill. Like Brighton High already—there was no public high school in Mission Hill then, so the students from there always went to Brighton High. So it was already integrated. So it wasn't like, "I've only gone to a school with kids who look like me and all of a sudden I'm going to be mixed and it's going to be different," or whatever, But it was more—you know, it was so disruptive. It was so disruptive.

TAMILIO: So the fact that—when you were twelve years old you might not have even actually thought about what—you know, [you didn't think,] Is this a good things for everybody to be mixing up?

WALSH: Exactly, right, right.

TAMILIO: [You didn't think,] Are we getting more funding for schools? You were obviously just thinking about, at twelve years old—

WALSH: Myself! And my neighborhood. (laughs)

TAMILIO: Right, which is normal. Right. So it was disruptive for you because of your social life.

WALSH: Social life, but not like *social life*. You know, just neighborhood demographics or friends leaving. All that kind of stuff.

TAMILIO: Right, friends leaving.

WALSH: People being nervous about it and all that.

TAMILIO: Okay. Do you remember vividly the first day? Would you like to describe the first day, particularly, for us, and what that was like?

WALSH: You know, I do remember—I think it's the first day, if not it's the first week. We had to take a bus, so that was unusual, even though we weren't going to another neighborhood—part of Boston—we were going to Brighton. So we got a bus, so that was weird to me. But whatever, that's okay, my kids always take buses to school. (laughs)

TAMILIO: But normally you would have been able to walk to the Taft School?

WALSH: I would have walked two blocks away to the Taft. So we got a bus, so that felt weird because the buses were also in the news and all that kind of stuff. People near the school at the Edison threw rocks at the buses, even though it was a bus from down the street. It didn't matter. It was the symbol, I think, of—they thought there were people coming from another part, or—I don't know what it was. But I remember all that kind of stuff happening the first week. Not in school, school was fine. But I remember the news. But it was nothing like it was, like, at Southie High[2] and stuff like that. It was just some little punks throwing rocks a couple days, and that was it. Other than that it was just a regular school year, as much as I can remember.

TAMILIO: Ok, so the first week—

WALSH: Like I loved the school.

TAMILIO: Oh good, so you ended up liking it. So the first week people—you witnessed people throwing rocks at your bus—

WALSH: At the bus I was on! (laughs)

TAMILIO: My gosh!

[2] "Southie" refers to South Boston, a neighborhood that was significantly affected by the Garrity decision. Many of its residents were adamantly opposed to the desegregation plan. Much of the violence that was a result of the plan happened in South Boston.

WALSH: It was like, "Ahh! I probably know you!" You know what I mean? (laughter) They probably didn't think about what they were doing. It was like, "Oh, there's a bus, and kids on TV are throwing rocks at buses, so I'm going to." You know what I mean?

TAMILIO: It was kind of a retaliation.

WALSH: I think so.

TAMILIO: So it wasn't parents or anything like that?

WALSH: No, it was nothing like that. No, no. Absolutely not.

TAMILIO: So just children being punks—

WALSH: I don't remember anything parents being verbally involved that I know.

TAMILIO: That you knew of.

WALSH: There might have been stuff like meetings or something, but I wouldn't have known about them.

TAMILIO: Right, at twelve years old. So you would go in school after that—once you got in school, even the first week, everything was normal?

WALSH: Oh yeah, it was just a normal middle school.

TAMILIO: Besides that people on the first day might have called out their names, you would say they moved.

WALSH: Yeah, that was kind of weird. But yeah, that happened again when I went to high school because then people continued to leave the system.

TAMILIO: Okay, so people just kept leaving?

WALSH: Yeah, yeah. People that I knew or had already been in school with for years.

TAMILIO: Alright, so that—violence happened during the first week. Can you remember any then, since the first week was really where you remember any violence, was there any—so other than the rock throwing, is there any violence you can think of that might have happened?

WALSH: No, not at all. I would probably have known. It wasn't a big school. I think I would have—or through my siblings, but not that I know of.

TAMILIO: Yeah. And how were you treated? Just normally?

WALSH: Oh, fine. Oh, yeah. (laughs)

TAMILIO: You said that you did notice the news and stuff, so were you aware of the media?

WALSH: Yes.

TAMILIO: How did that make you feel? Did that make you nervous, or—

WALSH: It made me a little nervous to take a bus, in a way, but we ended up walking a lot because it wasn't that far away. It just made me nervous thinking that it could spread. It did happen a tiny bit, but that it could happen more—but I think I knew it wasn't going to happen in Brighton, or I hadn't gotten the feeling it was, but it did make me a bit nervous. Just riding on the bus and feeling like everyone's looking at the bus because it was an unusual thing in Brighton to have school buses. (laughs) Except for like one or two that went to boys' Catholic schools or something in West Roxbury—you know, like chartered buses.

TAMILIO: So in hindsight, and I think you mentioned this, but do you think that the desegregation motive worked successfully at all?

WALSH: Did it work successfully?

TAMILIO: Mm-hmm.

WALSH: I don't know statistics, a lot, but no, I don't think it worked. No.

TAMILIO: Right. And why would you say that?

WALSH: First of all it pitted working class people against working class people. They just were different colors, but if you pictured some of the communities where there was trouble—it didn't involve everybody in the city, or every school, and it didn't really help the schools. The schools lost a lot of students. They lost a lot of families who had more money, who were typically the voters, so then the school committee isn't so beholden to the voters, I think. I think that that that's how it is. Not that other people don't vote, but just the people who give to their campaigns and were maybe more politically active. And so I don't—I know there are some schools that are fine in Boston, but I wouldn't—I'd be worried about them if I had to send my kids there.

TAMILIO: Right. So you think that the people that had the money to give to the schools in the first place—

WALSH: To give to the school committee.

TAMILIO: —also had the money to move at that time?

WALSH: Right, like those kind of—the people whose votes they were really after. That's how it still works today. But they left the system. They didn't always move away, they just went into

private schools. But they had less invested in the schools, and I think the school committee then wasn't so accountable. And I know lots of them [school committee members] had kids who never went to public schools, and to me that doesn't make any sense.

TAMILIO: In the school committee.

WALSH: If you're in the committee (laughs), I mean, their kids should be there.

TAMILIO: Right. Exactly.

WALSH: So I see it—no, I don't think it worked at all. At least in Brighton it didn't work.

TAMILIO: Looking back thirty years later, I know you said for different reasons—so you obviously—you feel the same but you said for different reasons now?

WALSH: Right, because then I didn't understand what it would do to the population of the city and to neighborhoods as much. When I was younger it was just more what was—thinking immediately around me. And now I just think as a whole (pauses) goal to integrate—I think it's great to have integrated schools, I just don't like how they did it.

TAMILIO: How they did it.

WALSH: I believe in schools being integrated. I guess I should say that because I don't want to come across as thinking everyone should be segregated. But I think it should be equal, and the money should be equal and it should be a lot of parent—parental choice, which is what I've had in Cambridge for fourteen years. So I think there is other ways to do it, but I also think they didn't know how to do it a lot back then. But it was too much of a—it was too drastic at the time.

TAMILIO: Okay. Right. So you're—are you living in Cambridge now?

WALSH: Yeah.

TAMILIO: Is Cambridge the only other city you've lived in since Brighton?

WALSH: Basically. Other than New York a little while. But yeah, Cambridge basically.

TAMILIO: Cambridge. Is Cambridge still doing busing?

WALSH: They—it's voluntary so you pick your—and it's only at the elementary school level, K to eight, and you pick your top so many schools and as long as it matches—well, this is how it used to be—as long as it matches by race and boys and girls, stuff like that, you'd get your top choice and there are free school buses to wherever you want to go. So your neighborhood schools had a little bit of preference but not totally. So you don't really get to pick easily your neighborhood school but there's thirteen—now there's eleven, but there were thirteen elementary schools and all of them had slightly different bends to how they taught and all that kind of stuff. Now they are actually doing it by economics. I'm not so sure that that's a good way to do it either, but that started a couple of years ago. So now it's actually less about race and more about economics. So it goes by people's income—and that's only for the elementary because there is only one public high school, so everyone just goes there (laughs) if they went to public schools.

TAMILIO: So everyone will be together then?

WALSH: Yeah.

TAMILIO: Do you have children now?

WALSH: Yup.

TAMILIO: Okay, and how many children do you have?

WALSH: Two.

TAMILIO: Two. And what is their ages and genders?

WALSH: They're both girls, and one is nineteen and one is twelve.

TAMILIO: And one's twelve. And they're in the Boston Public Schools, are they?

WALSH: Well, the nineteen-year-old is in college.

TAMILIO: She's in college. And was she in the Boston Public School system?

WALSH: In the Cambridge Public Schools, not Boston.

TAMILIO: Okay, and the twelve-year-old—

WALSH: The twelve-year-old is in the Cambridge Public Schools.

TAMILIO: Okay, great. And so you obviously weren't so affected by the busing that you wouldn't have put your own children in it. Is that the way you feel about it, or do you feel—

WALSH: Probably. I don't know if I would have had a choice at the time they started school anyway to send a kid to private school, but I love the idea of public schools. Even if I lived in Boston I probably would have at least started out in a public school. Because I also know, because I went to a public high school, what people's perception of it is often totally different than what the school was. I always got really dumb comments about my school. You know, "I see knives," and "Do people bring guns?" And this was even more before you heard of kids bringing weapons around. This is the seventies. (laughs) So I also know that even though you hear things about schools, it's not always true.

TAMILIO: It's not always true. Right.

WALSH: So you just have to experience and see—or look into it more. Both the girls went through—either went through or are going through public, but one's now in college.

TAMILIO: Do you have any other—do you have any sons or any—?

WALSH: No, just two girls.

TAMILIO: Is there anything else you would like to say about your experience that you haven't already mentioned?

WALSH: (pauses to think) I don't know. I don't think so. I'm not sure. Well, I think it was horrible for Boston. It really hurt Boston. There were other factors that hurt Boston around the same time—businesses and different things that affected the economy. But I really think busing was one of the worst things they could have done to it in terms of just losing a lot of the population that may have stayed. I mean, people always moved out of the city, and lots of new people have come into the city, which is fine. But just for it changing so quickly I don't think was good. And part of—of the friends I had who stayed in Boston, none of them used the public schools. Even the ones that I believe couldn't afford—the public schools, with four kids or whatever, none of them used it. My brother left West Roxbury after a few years because he had four kids and he didn't want to deal with the public schools. And just a lot of people I know have done that, and so I think that's a shame because you might want to stay in the neighborhood you are in and if you're afraid of the schools—and they're not afraid of the schools because of busing. They are afraid of what happened to the schools, partially as a result of funding, partially it's because of funding. It's a big system and it's hard to run, probably—lots of different reasons.

TAMILIO: Right. Lots of different reasons. And what do you think that—do you have anything that you think would have been a better solution, because I know you said busing you don't think was the solution to the desegregation—what would you say—

WALSH: At least the busing the way they did—the forced busing. I'm not sure how you could really do it to make it a perfect world, but it was more—if money was more equally distributed that every kid got the same type of education, it wouldn't have pit communities against each other who were both very similar in terms of economics and all that kind of thing. It may not have made a lot of people leave the city who would have stayed and invested in the city, bought their own houses and things like that. Like in Brighton, everyone who left their house, it would turn into student housing. Nothing against students—my daughter's a student (laughs)—but that doesn't make a family neighborhood. Well, it does—a mix does, but there's whole streets where there's no families; they can't afford it. You know, the rents are higher where there's so many students. Which is—there's a lot of good things about that, but it changed the way—it seemed like it felt like a town. It still feels like a town, but it's weird that the schools aren't something that a lot of people—people don't use them.

TAMILIO: Okay. And how do you think—you said that Cambridge uses economics as their way of desegregating. Do you think that that seems like a better way?

WALSH: I think there should be some combination of the two because I think it's important to have a balance racially, but I also see that it's also economical, and income level of families also makes a huge difference—but not always so. I kind of thought Cambridge should have stayed with what they were doing. It's a little—because personally in Cambridge, we have so many people that are just there for a while because there are so many graduate student families. So there are people from all over the world, which is nice, but their income level is really, really, really low because they are graduate students. So no matter what their color is or whatever, they can mix them in. But they're families who aren't staying anyway because they are only here for a couple of years—which is fine, they have a right to do that.

But it doesn't—people know that people who are in school—it doesn't matter what your income level is, you're going to eventually be really wealthy, or maybe you won't, but it doesn't make a whole lot of sense because people's incomes change all the time. I was laid off a year and a half ago so for a year my income looked horrible, but it was never that before. And no matter what my income level is I think I've always been encouraging my kids for their education. So you can

argue it all over the place, I think, because you can be really poor and still be—it's sort of insulting that they act like, Well, we have to match because the wealthier kids' families are more into their education than the poorer kids' families. Which isn't necessarily true.

TAMILIO: It's almost like they're saying—

WALSH: So in a way it's better to have it racially integrated, but how do you do that? Races are so mixed. My second daughter's adopted, and she's biracial. I don't even know some of her heritage, because her birth mother was adopted. So how do you totally mix races, too, if you don't even know what some people really—what they are supposed to be or whatever. I mean, I know she's half African American, but—I don't know, it just can get a little—

I remember in school—I probably should have said this earlier—at attendance, they would take—divided it by race, and they had white, black, or other. Some Chinese kids wanted to be called other. Sometimes the Greek kids would want to be others, because they didn't think of themselves as white Americans. Maybe because they were—Brighton had a lot of—they were just firstborn American Greeks. So if we had a sub, she would just say, "White," and whoever thought they were white would raise their hand. (laughs) I remember a sub saying to a boy who was Greek, "What's your background?" and he said, "Greek," and she didn't think of it as non-white. It's just so—it doesn't always work—it's not so clear-cut. (laughs)

TAMILIO: So they had it divided on the attendance as different—

WALSH: White, black, and other. But some Asian Americans think of themselves as more white, or some want themselves as other, and some want their own category. And anybody can come up with—you know, anybody can think that. I remember thinking, That's just bizarre! (laughs) Why are they doing this? It was just dumb. When I was in high school I remember that. I don't know what it was like in junior high; I don't remember. But I remember the poor subs going crazy trying to figure out who was other, who was white and (laughs)—and they didn't have a Hispanic one, and of course lots of kids were Hispanic. Some were fair-skinned and some were dark-skinned. What do they want to be? (laughs)

TAMILIO: So it made a big confusion on top of it all. Oh my. Now, you said your second daughter was adopted and she's biracial. How is she treated at school in Cambridge would you say?

WALSH: (pauses) I think she's treated fine, but I'm more aware that she's not white basically because my other daughter is biologically—both her dad and I are white. I think I was probably more worried about it at first. The only thing I saw us treated differently before was at the airport.

TAMILIO: At the airport?

WALSH: By a security person. And that was more to do with—it was before he—I'm a single parent, and I was traveling with her and we were coming back from England, and he said, "Does her father know she was gone," or something, "from the country?" Now, her birth father died years ago, she doesn't know him, and I'm single. And I'm trying to make sure she doesn't notice this man asking this. I was a travel agent for years and I've traveled tons of times with my older daughter, and I was also single. No one ever asked me that type of thing, but it was obvious that—I don't know if it was—he might have just been doing his job, but I felt like—no one asked me when I traveled with a white girl, why are you asking me now? Because I stood out a little bit, or we stood out. But it terms of school, I don't think so—

TAMILIO: She never mentions feeling—

WALSH: Never, ever. And I used to have to—I remember when she was younger, especially after school, when I would pick her up from school, if I didn't have my glasses on, there'd be twelve other girls that were the same color as her (laughs) because she looks Hispanic, she—whatever, it's very mixed. No, I don't—I haven't seen anything and she hasn't said anything.

TAMILIO: Which is great.

WALSH: I think I thought something at first but it may have been more because they knew she was just adopted. It wasn't—because when she was halfway through kindergarten I adopted her, and she came from the Boston Public Schools—she was in Boston Public Schools when I adopted her.

TAMILIO: So she was already in Boston Public Schools?

WALSH: Yes, only for like five month, and then I adopted her and she moved to Cambridge. So that was interesting because I got to spend a lot of time in school. (laughter)

TAMILIO: So it seems like, then, for as far as we know, that your daughter is treated pretty fairly at school.

WALSH: Oh, yeah, yeah.

TAMILIO: Going back thirty years, if you were a parent and she was your daughter at the time going to school, do you feel like she would have been treated the same as she is now?

WALSH: No, absolutely not.

TAMILIO: No?

WALSH: No, I don't even know if in Cambridge she would have been, but definitely not in Boston she wouldn't have been. At least not in Brighton. No. She would have still been a little different even though Brighton was a bit integrated already. The schools were. The town wasn't, but the schools were. (laughs)

TAMILIO: Now I know that other people have had issues with this, so now that you have a white daughter and you have a mixed racial daughter, do you think that sending them both to school—this is hypothetically, if you were back thirty years with your two daughters, sending them to school—do you feel like they would be sent to the same school if they were—?

WALSH: Oh, that's interesting.

TAMILIO: Or if that would—

WALSH: I have no idea what they would have done with a biracial baby—person. When I signed her up for kindergarten I happened to know that the kindergarten teacher wanted to get her in his class. He had had my daughter and he had my nephew—you know, a family friend. I said, "What color do you need?" And he told me, because at the school department in Cambridge when you register your kid and they are biracial, you pick a color. There's no biracial. So I called her—I don't even know what I called her, it was either white or black. Whatever he needed to balance his class. So, I have no idea how Boston does it, because I said, "She's not white and she's not just black," and they said, "You have to pick one." Isn't that bizarre, in 2005? (laughs)

TAMILIO: It is bizarre.

WALSH: Because there are so many families that they're biracial, so I can't believe they can't come up with a box for that. They have Asian/Pacific Islander, which we don't have many of in New England. (laughs) I mean, in her class there are lots of other kids that are biracial.

TAMILIO: Right. They should just make a box. (laughter)

WALSH: Exactly! Or no boxes.

TAMILIO: Or no boxes at all would be even better.

WALSH: But I have no idea what Boston would have—how they classify biracial students, so what they would have done. I know what they would have done with my older daughter, but I don't know what they would have done with my younger daughter.

TAMILIO: Right. So do you feel like it's evident to you the difference between thirty years ago and now about how a biracial student would have been treated, because—

WALSH: Well, I don't have any proof of how it is, but my guess it it's very different. My guess is it's hugely different,

TAMILIO: Yeah, definitely. You also said that before the busing/desegregation began, that your neighborhood was mostly white, and you had mostly white friends—

WALSH: Probably like two-thirds white and one-third black. It was a housing project so it was a little bit mixed, but not much.

TAMILIO: Okay, so when you went to school and—

WALSH: Yeah, I did, I lived there for a couple years and it was right around the time that busing started. I'm just trying to remember what years I was there.

TAMILIO: Okay. Do you feel that when you did end up going to school there was obviously more black children around you? Do you feel like that benefited you or didn't benefit you in any way when you were around more mixed races?

WALSH: (pauses to think) I certainly didn't think it was—I never thought it was bad. In high school I totally thought it benefited me. I don't know what I thought in middle schools. I just figured it was more like the real world to me. It was fine. I liked the fact that in school it was mixed. Other people, maybe outside of Boston, or other kids in my neighborhood who didn't go to public school thought it was weird or scary. I was like, "No, it's not." We would just tease, or make fun of those kids. (laughs) Or, "Go back to your school," or whatever. I thought it was good. I don't remember middle school. I think I just thought it was kind of interesting because there was a lot of kids that I wasn't in elementary school with. So that was—but it almost felt like moving towns, because so many kids left at the same time, so it was like—not everybody.

In fact, two of my best friends to this day both moved that winter—or that summer out to the suburbs, but they are two of my good friends still.

TAMILIO: Now were their families, your two friends that moved, just completely against the whole issue?

WALSH: Totally, totally. One family especially could not afford to do it and they did anyway. It was a dumb move. They would have been much better off staying. They were afraid—whatever they were afraid of never happened anyway. The instability it caused their family was horrible for years.

TAMILIO: Because of financially not being able to afford to—

WALSH: Because where they were—they lived in the housing project at that time and so it was fine because their dad was sick and whatever. Paying their bills was easier than when they moved out to Newton [a suburb west of Boston] and stuff. One family—I don't know how disruptive it was. It was disruptive to my friend. She was the youngest of the family. But her older siblings were all out of school. I can remember where she lived especially. There were like three other families that all moved that summer, because their parents didn't want to deal with it. It was scary the fact that you don't know where your kid might be going to school, and I can see why people don't want to send their kids far away to school no matter what the reason.

And I'm sure families who were African American probably moved as well for the same reason. Although, I know a lot of the families did it because it was racism, I'm sure. A lot of families did it for that reason. But racism because they were afraid of what they didn't know, I think. I don't know if they were totally racist, but it was more like that. So that was—it was weird in the neighborhood. We moved not that long after that, but just to another part of Brighton, so it had nothing to do with that.

TAMILIO: So you said that your friends' parents were maybe just afraid of what they didn't know, but you also mentioned that about two-thirds of your neighborhood were white and about one-third of them were black—

WALSH: Well, a little bit more white than that. Probably 80 percent, actually. I was wrong. And there was no trouble in the neighborhood. It was very kind of—

TAMILIO: Just everyone did their own—

WALSH: Everything was fine. I had friends who were both races. Probably not your closest friends because kids sort of go towards people who look just like them, I think, but it was a mix. The elementary school was mixed. But even some of the—I know some of those families left, too, because they didn't want to deal with it either.

TAMILIO: So do you feel like in your neighborhood that people kind of segregated themselves within the neighborhood even? Between the—if they were white, they hung out with the whites in the neighborhood, and the blacks—

WALSH: A little bit. Not too much. The kids didn't—I think the adults probably did, but the kids didn't.

TAMILIO: Not the kids, just the adults?

WALSH: Yes. Little kids didn't at all. As they got older, they probably did, but little kids didn't. It wasn't like a big issue. At least that I remember.

TAMILIO: Were your parents and your friends' parents—were they friendly with each other? Did they talk about the issue together?

WALSH: (pauses to think) I'm sure they did. I'm positive they did. I don't remember if they did, but they would have been totally against it, for sure. I know that for a—I'm positive about

that, so I must remember something. (laughs) But yeah, they would have all been totally against it.

TAMILIO: When it's all said and done, you have sort of mixed feeling about it. Because you did say that in high school you thought it was great, you liked having—did you meet all different kids of people?

WALSH: Well, Brighton High was already integrated, so whether there was busing or not it was an already integrated high school. They had a lot of white and black kids from Brighton and then a lot of kids of both colors, but mostly African American, from Mission Hill. So—but I guess if we did—Brighton was integrated anyway, but I'm glad that I went to a high school that was integrated. So whatever reason it was integrated, I think that's how it should be.

TAMILIO: For whatever reason, you think that's how it should be.

WALSH: And that's what I want for my kids too, even before I had a daughter who is not all white. So, you know, I just think it's better that way.

TAMILIO: Ok, great.

WALSH: If you live in a city. I mean, if you live somewhere it can't be, whatever. But people, they shouldn't have—be too segregated or whatever in the schools. Or anywhere.

TAMILIO: So you believe in desegregation, just not the busing part of it. Is that what you're saying?

WALSH: How Boston did it, or how the busing went in Boston. No, I totally disagree with what they did. But I totally disagree with how the schools were before that too, so I know they had to do something. Not all the schools. But I know—did you ever read that book about Boston Public Schools—(pauses to think)—I know I was going to look it up before the interview. He writes a lot about schools, and he wrote a book about the Bronx. Anyways, years

ago he was a sub in a Boston school that was all African American, and it was deplorable. I didn't read that as a kid. I don't know when it was published. But like I know that and many elementary schools were in bad shape. I know it was wrong how it was before, that the neighborhoods that were poorer had worse schools and all that. And that's not right either.

TAMILIO: Okay. So something needed to be done, just not the way they did it.

WALSH: Something had to be done. It had to be, because it was a federal law too, I suppose. But not how they did it. I'm not sure how they should have done it, I haven't really thought about how they should have done it, but it really tore apart other places a lot more than it did where I lived. So it was just not done well.

TAMILIO: Right. Were you friends with anybody from other areas? From South Boston or anything like that?

WALSH: Not really. I mean, I may have known some people like cousins or friends' cousins, but no, not that I—

TAMILIO: Most people stayed—

WALSH: As an adult I met people who went sort of through it, but not at the time.

TAMILIO: Not at the time. And their experiences were—

WALSH: Were horrible.

TAMILIO: Horrible?

WALSH: Yeah, we had one friend who quit school and then she went to some prep school in Boston and barely finished. It was horrible, because she was told to go to a school far away and her mother didn't want her to. And she's my age, so it must been around the same year. So I do

know some stories like that too, but I don't know a whole lot because I mostly knew people where I lived at the time.

TAMILIO: Do you think that your education was better or worse because of it, or do you think—

WALSH: I think it's probably the same. I mean, we had teachers that were all there for—I mean, it looks the same as my sisters' yearbooks from the sixties practically. (laughs) Although having said that, it looked like it had—I don't know if it was a fiscal problem or what, but there were things that are better now in the building itself that weren't then. So I don't know if there was just less money because so much had to be spent on busing and stuff like that. But no, I think it was pretty much the—from what I heard from my older siblings it wasn't that different from how it was in the sixties.

And a few years after us, my younger sister—she went to parochial school. She was the only one. I'm not sure—I don't really know why she went, but we're all sure she got the worst education in the family. (laughs) But that was her, too. She could have been the same wherever she went. Who knows. But she jokes around. But her school, which was hard for my mom to pay for, had teachers who weren't certified who weren't making any money, because they didn't have to pay them. Because my brother worked for a time in a parochial school and nothing against them, but there were some things bad about the schools that you had to pay for, too. And they didn't have—we had a lot more opportunity in terms of clubs and sports and after-school activities than some of the smaller private schools did, so I liked that part about it, too. I think it was fine. It was what it was, but it wasn't affected by busing, at least then. I don't know if it changed after that.

TAMILIO: So your education just was what it was and it would have been that way probably—

WALSH: Yes, I think it would have been that way anyway.

TAMILIO: Do you think that your parents decided to send your sister to parochial school for maybe just having had enough with what had been going on, or do you think that—

WALSH: I'm not sure why they did it, because they almost sent me to parochial school, then they almost sent me to school in another town for high school because they were nervous about the high school. I forgot that. Because I have a lot of family in the suburbs and I was going to—my mom thought my sister and I—because you heard rumors about that high school, but that might happen a lot of places. So we almost went—we were going to stay somewhere with her sister-in-law during the week, which that was a dumb idea. But anyway, we almost did that, and then we almost went to a—there's a huge parochial school, or was, in Brighton—well, it's still there, I just don't know if it's big—for girls, but then my mother has weird things about all-girls' schools, so she didn't want to send us there anyway. (laughs) Which would have been fine. I mean, a lot of my nieces when there, and my cousins. But anyway, yeah, I think by then it was just my mom—I think she also just wanted a smaller school I think. I think there was a bunch of reasons. We lived right near it. I don't know, there was a bunch of reasons.

TAMILIO: Do you think the rumors about the high school were—I know everybody was going to be bused there—

WALSH: It was violence or—it wasn't really so much about the education because I remember my mother specifically saying that a lot of the education is up to the student. Usually the teachers are—you can get bad teachers no matter where you go, and the teachers are there to teach and what you choose to do with that—I mean, we were her eighth and ninth and tenth and eleventh kids, so she saw all kinds of learning. And my family—my older siblings, we lived in the suburbs, so they went to suburban high school. So she saw a few different kids, and she knew a lot of it by high school was up to you. No matter what your parents said or no matter where you went to school, you could choose to learn or not learn or goof off or not—you know, whatever. So I'm not sure why—I should ask my younger sister if she knows why she was in there. (laughs)

I think my mother—I do remember, though, when she went to kindergarten, my younger sister—she's the youngest, there's eleven of us all together, ten siblings—I do remember her coming home talking with a total African American accent. (laughs) I remember it freaking out my mother. We all thought it was kind of cute, but I think my mother wasn't comfortable with the changes. I don't think she was comfortable having my younger sister one of the only white children at whatever elementary school she was—in her class. She just thought that was weird, and again it wasn't like racism or anything because she was not at all racist, but I think it was just weird to her. I don't know what it was really—I'll have to ask my sister—but I do remember that, because it was my elementary school, but I think after a couple years of busing it just totally turned to almost all African American, from Brighton, from wherever, because of people moving. It was so funny, she would have a little accent, like a southern—and we used to tease her. (laughter)

TAMILIO: That's cute! Now, she was placed—when she went to the same elementary school that you had gone to—

WALSH: It was a neighborhood elementary school.

TAMILIO: Right. Was she in a classroom that had mostly black students? Was she the minority at that point?

WALSH: Totally. She was totally—a very small minority, I remember in her first couple years of school. It was a tiny school, and I'm not sure why exactly that demographic—it changed so quickly.

TAMILIO: Do you think that may have opened her up to other races and stuff at a very young age and helped her in the long run?

WALSH: Younger than some of us because the elementary school we started in, in a different part of Brighton, was probably mostly white. It was great for her. She loved it. It was fine. She

had the same teachers and she had lots of friends, and she's still to this day very—she's fine, it's not—

TAMILIO: It wasn't an issue?

WALSH: Oh, god no. Not at all. It was fine for her. She had fun through school. (laughs) She loves everybody.

TAMILIO: So that's something that maybe—you just said she loves everybody. Do you think that maybe if somebody had gone to school with all white students, maybe they wouldn't love everybody?

WALSH: Yes. Probably.

TAMILIO: So that's something that in a way—

WALSH: Because now we totally agree politically and stuff. But not on things like race and stuff, but politics we do because as I tell her, she lives out in the suburbs. (laughs) But that's okay, that's her opinion. But I don't know if it would have been her because my family being so large, and there's always lots of people around and she got a big view of the world. But I'm not sure. It probably did help her though, actually.

TAMILIO: Well, maybe in comparison, I know you have a lot of older siblings—did any of them go to maybe that same elementary school, and were they in a classroom with all whites and do you feel like maybe—

WALSH: Yeah, me.

TAMILIO: Oh, you did, right. There you go. So—

WALSH: And my one sister and younger brother. It was mostly—like ninety percent white. Not totally. I think there were maybe one or two kids who were African American. It totally switched in a matter of like three years. Great school—it was a great school, and my little sister was there, too. A little, tiny school. And it wasn't—I don't think other elementary schools in Brighton changed like that. I don't know why this one did. The color of the students totally changed in a couple of years.

TAMILIO: And you don't think that other elementary schools were affected as much?

WALSH: I'm pretty sure that a lot of them did eventually, but I don't think that they did—I think that they were in neighborhoods that were more white than where we lived at that time. I think that probably did it.

TAMILIO: That was the neighborhood that got bused into that one—

WALSH: Yeah, or something. I don't know why exactly. I would be interested to look back and see what happened. But then we moved to a different neighborhood and maybe that was part of the reason for going to the local—the Catholic school was right there and—I don't know. (pauses) What was good is she [her younger sister] made a lot of friends that were in the neighborhood. Because in high school lots of our friends were scattered all over the place. So it ended up that a lot of the friends we made around high school age actually didn't go to our school, because they lived in Brighton. So at CYO type things we'd meet them. Because you didn't—at least then, we didn't have cars as much as kids do now. So you weren't going to hop on a train every Friday night to go what we thought was far away, across the city, to meet somebody. So for my sister, that part was good about going to the local Catholic school because everybody was from the area. So her friends to this [day]—she's thirty-four—are all still the same people from high school basically, which is kind of nice.

TAMILIO: Right. That is nice. That's great. Earlier, just to clarify this, I know you had mentioned Mission Hill kids. They would all go—they didn't have a high school, right?

WALSH: No. They had no public high school.

TAMILIO: So they would all go to your high school?

WALSH: Yes. So they were kind of paired with Brighton.

TAMILIO: Okay, so demographically, where is Mission Hill, just to clarify to people who don't know?

WALSH: In Roxbury.

TAMILIO: Mission Hill's in Roxbury. Ok, great. Alright. Anything else that you would like to add to this interview or—

WALSH: I don't think so. It's funny the things that have popped up in my head since I started talking about this. (pauses to think) I don't think so. I just wish I knew what would have been a better way to do it.

TAMILIO: Right, you wish you had a solution.

WALSH: Because I know cities change anyway, but it didn't help Boston at all to lose all those people. And those teachers—I'm sure they lost lots of good teachers, too. Because then they had them where you had to live in the city, so if you didn't want to live in the city you went somewhere—I don't know, it just did a lot of stuff, I'm sure. But I think I was lucky because I was at the very beginning of it. Maybe I'm wrong, but I felt like the schools itself that I went to weren't, at least educationally, were probably pretty much the same as they had—and I think that's good because they seemed like good schools, in terms of everyone going on to college or getting a job.

But I don't know enough about them now to know how successful they are or not. But I do think there's enough—if a school turns mostly all minority, then I know that there's this hidden—not

hidden, but often things happen where they don't get as much money. It's not always blatant but I'm sure that happens sometimes. I worry about things like that, so if I lived in Boston now I don't know if—I doubt I'd send my kids to—I think I would to elementary school, but I'd be really worried about high schools, and that's what—I know that's what it's like now because everyone whose kids don't get into Latin[3] moves. It's a shame though, because I think they could have done better.

TAMILIO: Thank you so much for sharing your experience with us.

WALSH: Oh, thank you. I think it's so cool that someone's looking into this—whatever comes out of it. So this is the Moakley Institute, is that what it is?

TAMILIO: Yes.

WALSH: And it's part of Suffolk obviously, right? Because we're here.

TAMILIO: Yes. It's part of the library, right.

WALSH: Well, that's cool.

TAMILIO: Yes, and thank you so much. I'm sure everyone will be learning so much from your experience.

END OF INTERVIEW

[3] "Latin" refers to Boston Latin School, a public exam school and the oldest public school in the United States.