



Oral History Interview of Henry Allen (OH-042)

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Oral History Interview of Henry L. Allen

Interview Date: February 28, 2005

Interviewed by: Rhea Ramjohn, Suffolk University Student enrolled in History 364: Oral History

Citation: Allen, Henry L. Interviewed by Rhea Ramjohn. John Joseph Moakley Oral History Project OH-042. 28 February 2005. Transcript and audio available. John Joseph Moakley Archive and Institute, Suffolk University, Boston, MA.

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Interview Summary

Henry L. Allen, a lifelong resident of Boston, reflects on the Boston Public Schools and the city itself during the time of the Garrity decision, which in 1974 required some students to be bused between Boston neighborhoods with the intention of creating racial balance in the public schools. In this interview, he discusses his extensive community work in support of school desegregation; his and his family's experiences with the Boston Public Schools; the racial dynamics of Boston from the late 1960s to the early 1990s; and his opinions of the current state of Boston and its schools.



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Subject Headings

Allen, Henry L.

Boston (Mass.)

Boston Public Schools

Busing for school integration

Magnet schools

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

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This interview took place on February 28, 2005, in the John Joseph Moakley Law Library at Suffolk University Law School.

Interview Transcript

RHEA RAMJOHN: Today's date is Monday, February 28, 2005, the time is approximately 1:10 P.M., and I, Rhea Ramjohn, am here with Mr. Henry Allen at the Suffolk University Law School conducting the interview about his experience during the 1970s with the desegregation order from the federal court.

So what is your full name, Mr. Allen?

HENRY ALLEN: It's Henry L. Allen.

RAMJOHN: Henry L. Allen. And where did you grow up?

ALLEN: I was born and raised in Roxbury.

RAMJOHN: And did you live there your whole life?

ALLEN: I've lived in Boston my whole life, and when I was fourteen, we moved from Roxbury to Mattapan. Was in high school through the years that we lived in Mattapan, and I went to college in Boston and my family lived in Brighton. So I've never left Boston. I've been here in different neighborhoods my entire life.

RAMJOHN: Oh, okay. What college did you go to?

ALLEN: I went to Boston State College, which was the old teachers college for the city of Boston. And in 1981 it was merged into UMass Boston, so it no longer exists.

RAMJOHN: I see, okay.

ALLEN: But it was the kind of formal, primary teacher training college for people who were going to teach in Boston. So over many, many decades the vast majority of people who taught in the Boston Public Schools were graduates of; it had different names, it was the Teachers' College of the City of Boston, Boston State Teachers College, so it went through many names, but it always had that prime purpose.

RAMJOHN: I see, okay. So you never really moved out of the city of Boston?

ALLEN: Just for graduate school.

RAMJOHN: Oh, okay, alright, I see. And what was it like to live in Roxbury and Mattapan?

ALLEN: I'm sixty-two, so this goes back to growing up in Roxbury in the 1940s and early fifties and Mattapan in the mid- to late fifties. Roxbury, when I was growing up, was predominantly a Jewish community. My family is Jewish. But it also was somewhat diverse even in the mid- to late forties, early fifties because as the African American community was growing in Boston after World War II and the kind of migration of the black community in Boston as a group was from Beacon Hill, South End, Lower Roxbury, so there was some degree of diversity in there, but it was a poor, working class community. In the section of Roxbury that I lived in, it was pretty substandard housing, people were renting—a significant number of people were renting from absentee landlords, so there was already a degree of disinvestment and kind of decline in the neighborhood beginning in the late forties, early fifties.

I don't know whether you read *Death of an American Jewish Community*,¹ but it's a history of the migration of the Jewish community from Roxbury to Mattapan and out of Mattapan, and my

¹ *Death of an American Jewish Community* was written by Hillel Levine and Lawrence Harmon and first published in 1991.

family was part of that, and some of that was a response to internal racism within the Jewish community, some of it was real estate speculation and blockbusting, so there was a lot of movement and some turmoil in the community when I was growing up and moving from Roxbury to Mattapan and then out of Mattapan. But in terms of the schools, the schools were places that we walked to. I went to schools in Roxbury and they were nothing to shake a foot at then; there were already problems in the Boston Public Schools that far preceded the desegregation orders.

RAMJOHN: And what schools did you go to?

ALLEN: I went to a small elementary school on Columbia Road called the Atherton, which had been torn down in the 1950s [1960s—corrected by narrator]. Then I went to the Christopher Gibson School, which is actually the school where Jonathan Kozol taught at when he wrote *Death at an Early Age*.² Then I went to Latin School³ for a few months and was a Latin School dropout, then I went to Patrick T. Campbell which later became the Martin Luther King, and high school, I went to Boston Technical High School.

RAMJOHN: I see, okay. And what was it like in high school then?

ALLEN: (pauses to think) Well, Technical was one of the exam schools even then, so there were three exam schools. So in that sense it was obviously different from the other high schools in the city because of that exam and nearly everyone who was at my school, the expectation was that you were on a college track, so that it was academic and it was focused on academics and college track and college entrance, so it was a serious academic preparation in that regard.

You know, the one thing I will say is that through all my years, which I think helped shape some of my values and attitudes, I had one African American, one teacher of color in my entire history of going to the Boston Public Schools, from kindergarten through twelfth grade, and that was in

² *Death at an Early Age: The Destruction of the Hearts and Minds of Negro Children in the Boston Public Schools* was written by Jonathan Kozol and first published in 1967.

³ Boston Latin School is a public exam school and the oldest public school in the United States.

high school; my high school health teacher was a man named John O'Bryant,⁴ who later became a member of the Boston School Committee. He and I remained very close friends for, you know, from the 1950s until his death, and I worked on his school committee campaigns. But it was a defining experience in that one began to see the segregation; certainly in the teaching and administration there wasn't a single black or Latino administrator or any other administrator of color that I ever met going through the public schools beginning in 1947 when I started kindergarten until I graduated in 1960. So the only person of color I saw in a classroom was John O'Bryant, and I never saw a single person of color in an administrative position. And that of course didn't change very much by the time that Garrity brought his court order⁵ because it also—his court order—you know how I talked about student assignment, but segregation in the teaching faculty as well.

RAMJOHN: Yes. So that brings us to your family. When did you first start your family?

ALLEN: Let's see, I got married in 1966, so a couple years after I graduated from college, which was in 1964. My wife was also at the same college I was at; we met in college and got married in '66 and we decided to live in Roxbury. It was mostly kind of a political decision, that we wanted to live in the heart of the black community, I think both in terms of our family values and our own values, and feeling like—believing in integration and that we should try to kind of live and understand and work in the African American community. So we lived in Roxbury for actually seven years until we had two children, and then we lived in an attic apartment, and so we decided to move out. And in 1972, we bought a house in Jamaica Plain, maybe ten minutes away from where we lived in Roxbury. So our daughter was born in 1969 and we adopted our son—he's African American—we adopted him a year and a half later. So they both spent their early years in Roxbury, going to school in Roxbury at the Trotter School.

⁴ John D. O'Bryant (1931-1992) was the first African American member of the Boston School Committee. Born and raised in Boston, O'Bryant attended the Boston Public Schools and Boston University. He lost his first bid for the school committee in 1975 but was elected two years later. In 1992, Boston Technical High School, where he taught for several years in the early 1960s, was renamed the John D. O'Bryant School of Mathematics and Science.

⁵ In his June 21, 1974, opinion in the case of *Tallulah Morgan et al. v. James Hennigan et al.* (379 F. Supp. 410) Judge W. Arthur Garrity ruled 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)

RAMJOHN: I see. What was it like to live there with your family in Jamaica Plain?

ALLEN: In JP [Jamaica Plain] or Roxbury, or both?

RAMJOHN: Both, yeah.

ALLEN: I mean, we were very comfortable in Roxbury; the community that we lived in was a very stable, family-oriented part of the community. People were warm and generous and their hospitality—we always felt very, very welcome living in Roxbury. We moved because we needed a house and we had an opportunity to buy this house in Jamaica Plain, very inexpensively. Jamaica Plain was and is a great place to raise a family. We enjoyed being there since 1972, where our children were raised. They continued in the Boston schools. I was very involved in the community affairs in Jamaica Plain, so it was another community where, because of its diversity, both ethnic and class diversity, it was a place that we felt very comfortable living and raising our family.

RAMJOHN: So did both your children attend the Trotter School?

ALLEN: They both went to the Trotter School; they both went then to the Wheatley Middle School in Roxbury. So when we moved to Jamaica Plain they were bused from Jamaica Plain to Roxbury to first the Trotter, then the Wheatley, and then they both went to Latin School. And my daughter graduated from Latin School in 1987, and my son lasted only two and a half years at the Latin School. It was not a positive experience and some of that was, what he and we ascribe to, I think, some troubling racial dynamics and attitudes on the part of some teachers and administrators at the school, not a lot of, at that time, a lot of strong support for minority students, and so he left Latin School in the middle of the ninth grade and actually became a Metco⁶ student so he went to Brookline High to finish high school.

⁶ The Metco Program is a grant program funded by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. It is a voluntary program intended to expand educational opportunities and reduce racial imbalance, by permitting students in certain cities to attend public schools in other communities that have agreed to participate. (Taken from the Massachusetts Department of Education website.)

RAMJOHN: I see. And did you all choose as a family for both your children to attend the schools that they went to?

ALLEN: We did. Even during the early years of desegregation, the magnet school system⁷ was somewhat exempt from the overall court orders and so children who were in those magnet schools could remain in those magnet schools; that was the Trotter,⁸ the Wheatley, and a couple others, and so our children could remain there. We chose to have them there, and of course in terms of the exam school, they took the test, and got admitted, so yeah, these were choices that we made for our children.

RAMJOHN: I understand. Okay, with the federal court's decision to desegregate the Boston Public Schools, how did you find out that day?

ALLEN: Well, a little context and background. Since the early 1960s, I had been involved in working around school reform and school desegregation issues. So this didn't come as a surprise or a shock, it was something that my wife and I completely supported and felt like it was the absolutely just and moral thing to have happen and was long overdue. So I had worked on various school committee campaigns starting in the 1960s actually, when I was in college. There were reform organizations; the Citizens from Boston Schools was one, which was not dealing explicitly with issues of racial segregation but was dealing with issues of the quality of education. So I was involved in working with some early campaigns. I got involved, as I said, in working on John O'Bryant's school committee campaigns [and] Jean McGuire's run for the school committee.

I had worked in the sixties as a volunteer with the Urban League and with Operation Exodus and with other community organizations that were really focused on school desegregation. I think it's fair to say that in Boston, the primary focus of the civil rights struggle in the late fifties

⁷ Magnet schools are schools offering special courses not available in the regular school curriculum and designed, often as an aid to school desegregation, to attract students on a voluntary basis from all parts of a school district without reference to the usual attendance zone rules. (Definition from the Library of Congress.)

⁸ The William Monroe Trotter School, which opened in Boston's Roxbury neighborhood in 1969, was the country's second magnet school. The first magnet school was McCarver Elementary School in Tacoma, Washington.

through the sixties and early, midseventies were the schools. And in other communities, housing or public facilities or whatever it was, was kind of a key focus of the civil rights struggle, but in Boston, it really was the schools and that started—really, it's a longer history that goes back to the nineteenth century, but beginning in the late 1950s, there were activists like Ruth Babson and Ellen Jackson and others, and the local NAACP and the Urban League who were trying to bring issues of equity and fairness and justice and fighting against segregated schools.

And of course the history of the court order, details, as Judge Garrity does, not only the unwillingness but the deepening of the actions of the school committee to further segregation even while it was denying there was such a thing as segregation and even while it was completely stonewalling the forces within the African American community and its allies that were trying to get the school committee to admit that there was actual segregation within the schools. So I was somewhat involved in the politics of school desegregation in Boston in the sixties and seventies and was aware of the court case, and so when it came, I and my family were very strong supporters of that.

RAMJOHN: I see. And so what was your profession at the time?

ALLEN: Let's see, when I graduated from Boston State in '64 I went to graduate school [at] New York University, got a master's degree in history, came back, and for one year I taught in the Boston schools. I taught at an old high school called Boston Trade High School, which has been closed for decades, so that was my one year of teaching experience in the Boston schools. And then I went back to teach, starting in 1966, to teach U.S. history at Boston State College, where I had graduated from. Because Boston State was very much implicated in the segregation of the Boston Public Schools teaching faculty, I did with others a lot of work to try to desegregate the student body at Boston State. At that time, Boston State was on Huntington Avenue, right across the street from Mission Hill and just a short distance from Roxbury, and Boston State itself, as I said, was very segregated. In my graduating class in 1964 of three hundred students, only two African American students, and no Latino students or any other students, maybe one or two Asian. And that pattern continued, so if Boston State was one of the main feeders for teachers in the schools and Boston State was segregated, guess what?

So I taught at Boston State for eight years, from 1966 to 1974 during all of that turmoil around school desegregation. And what I and other faculty did there was to work to integrate the student body and the teaching body, and so we worked to get more black students into the school, special programs. We supported black students when they had sit-ins and demonstrations, took over the school, forced the school to hire black faculty, admit more black students. And that began to have some impact, therefore, as students came into Boston [State], black students, graduating, teaching in the Boston schools. So I was teaching and organizing within the schools and also during this time working as a volunteer for places like the Urban League and other groups. And then in '74 I was actually fired from my teaching position at Boston State, in part for the work that I was doing around desegregating the student body and the faculty, and also that was during the years of the anti-war movement and I had been active in that and working with other faculty and students, so I was fired.

Then I went to work for an adult education center that was working with people involved in workplace and community organizing. So we were like a school where people came and took workshops and courses around the political situation and understanding the schools. We had a whole program on the schools and school desegregation and school reform. And when desegregation occurred, we at this school had a lot of workshops and courses for parents who were involved in parent councils to give them an understanding of the history of the Boston schools, the politics of the schools, the history of desegregation. We used Judge Garrity's decision, the printed decision, as a text, so people could understand where that segregation came from, why he ruled the way he did.

And at the same time, beginning in '75, our kids were in the schools. I was elected to the parent councils that were set up by Judge Garrity, so, between '74, '75, and '83, while I was working at this Boston community school, this adult education center, I did a lot of work on those parent councils and eventually became the co-chair of the Citywide Parent Advisory Council for three to four years. That was my major involvement besides the Boston community school, and the education work we were doing with parents who were on councils. I myself was directly involved, as a member, in doing—whereas Judge Garrity set these councils up to monitor the

desegregation effort, many of us felt that we had to go beyond monitoring and the parents had to become an active, vibrant voice for desegregation for school reform.

And so there were, during this period of time—which I think is one of the untold stories of school desegregation in Boston—there were literally hundreds upon hundreds of white parents who were actively involved in the school parent councils. And who were, even if on the one hand they may have been committed to school desegregation or they may have just had their kids in schools and were being bused. There were parents that said, Our kids are in these schools and we want these schools to work and we want them to be safe, we want them to be places where they can learn and we need to be involved. And Judge Garrity knew that he had limits to what he could do with his federal court order, which really had to do with school desegregation, but he was always very supportive of parent involvement, parent engagement. He had us, and I testified in his court a number of times around what we as parents were seeing in the schools and I think, and I know this, in more sort of off line conversations with him, that he felt the more power the parents could have to engage the schools and to hold the schools accountable was something that he supported.

RAMJOHN: What did you see in the schools? What was it that you were testifying about?

ALLEN: (pauses to think) There were really two things that we were focused on as parent activists and organizers. One was to do as much as we could to support desegregation because we saw desegregation no longer as a question of absolute justice for minority parents and students, but that entwined in the very definition of a quality education is a diverse education, is people knowing and understanding different communities and cultures and learning from one another. So part of our effort was to ensure as much as we could that schools were safe and welcoming and that diverse parents were very much involved in these parent councils to help create that kind of environment and role models that everyone could see.

And the other thrust was of course about a range of issues that had to do with quality of education, that could be anything from the condition of the buildings and organizing and advocating for more money to fix up buildings, to pushing the school system to hire more and

more minority teachers, because the court order said there had to be a minimum and we were always pushing beyond the minimum. It could mean the quality of the curriculum, it could mean that parents had a right to know what their children were supposed to be learning and how to hold the schools accountable to make sure their children were learning what the system was supposed to teach them, and if the children were having challenges then what was the system doing to provide support services. These are very similar issues to what people are talking about today and they were very much present in the seventies and early eighties when I was involved as a parent activist.

And so we found, of course, things were very uneven in the schools. There were schools where there was good administrative leadership, strong teachers, always room for improvement, but then other schools where the education was much weaker, and what was the school system doing about removing principals or teachers that weren't cutting it? So our role as parents was to gain as much information and knowledge about the school, the school system, curriculum, teaching, learning, and to hold the schools accountable to us as parents.

RAMJOHN: Exactly.

ALLEN: And I think this was all in the context, of course, of supporting desegregation; we know that there was a parallel movement obviously through '74, through the late seventies, early eighties, of others who were opposing desegregation who wanted to take the school system back, pre-1974, and who would argue that the schools were fine and we should have neighborhood schools. Having taught in the Boston schools before desegregation—my wife also taught in the Boston public schools before desegregation; she taught at South Boston High School, which was an entirely white school and she saw what was happening there in terms of overcrowded classes, a very small percentage of students going on to higher education, a very high drop out rate, violence against students of color who tried to enroll there in the late sixties when she taught there—everything that would give the lie to people arguing that these schools were functioning well, and that our children were getting good education. What Garrity, of course, argues in his court order is that this is endemic through most of the entire school system and that desegregation became a way, if people could only realize it, of not only bringing justice to

minority students but radically transforming the quality of education for all students, and that was what my commitment was to at this time.

RAMJOHN: Yes, so obviously you had the support of your wife during this time, but how did your children feel about the decision? Did they understand what was going on?

ALLEN: They were quite young when it started in '74 and '75, so I don't think there was a clear understanding of that. One always hopes that as a parent that you're inculcating certain values into your children and I think—I think we're quite fortunate that our children are 35 and 33. My son is a Boston Public School teacher himself now and he's very committed to teaching in Boston. Our daughter manages a non-profit organization. So they have certain values and I think, as they went through the Boston Public Schools, because they went to the integrated schools they had experiences that were absolutely vital to their development as whole human beings.

I remember when Judge Garrity died and my wife and I went to the wake and then the funeral—but at the wake we met his family and my wife and I both said to his family—to his two daughters that we met, that our lives and our children's lives were completely enriched and made whole by school desegregation. Then his daughter started crying and we started crying because he had been so vilified and he had to have Secret Service protection for him and his family through all of those years, and even at the funeral, there were federal marshals at the wake and the funeral because of continuing death threats against his family. So I always thought he was an extraordinarily courageous man who did the right thing, and I think our children understood and believed that this was the right thing as well.

And their experiences were generally positive. My son, as I said, being African American has experiences different from my daughter's, who is white. He had some very difficult times at Latin School, because of course Latin School was, up until '75, '76, almost entirely white until Judge Garrity ordered desegregation of the exam schools. I think it was very difficult for students of color at the Latin School. Where did you go to school?

RAMJOHN: I actually grew up in Trinidad.

ALLEN: Oh, okay.

RAMJOHN: But I went to high school here. I went to Fontbonne Academy. But I understand the Latin School system. Now, what I understand at this time was that the race of the children often fell under what the race of the parent was so that your son, for instance, would be listed officially as white. Was that true?

ALLEN: No, we would list our son [as African American]; I mean people could play that game if they wanted to, and some did I think. You could determine the racial ethnic identity of your children. Yeah, we did that, so he was always—as he got older he determined his own identity. He's of mixed parentage, so his birth mother is white, his birth father is African American and Cape Verdean, but he always defines himself as African American.

RAMJOHN: And how do you feel your community reacted to Judge Garrity's decision? The community in which you lived at the time?

ALLEN: We lived in Jamaica Plain at the time and again, I think its fair to say that Jamaica Plain was one of the neighborhoods where there was much more acceptance of Judge Garrity's ruling and its implications and effects on the community, that while it was disruptive to some families and resulted in children being bused to schools outside the neighborhood, you never had in Jamaica Plain what happened in South Boston or parts of Dorchester. It was just the opposite. I think you had, generally, an acceptance and a belief that at least we'll try this or we're wholeheartedly in support of it, but you didn't have the kind of resistance that you had in other neighborhoods.

RAMJOHN: I see. And do you feel that your neighbors were supportive of you and your role in being a parent activist?

ALLEN: (inaudible, followed by quiet laughter) We actually lived on a small, dead end street where most of our neighbors were quite elderly and did not have school aged children. There were people that had lived there for decades. And we had very good relations with our neighbors, sort of friendly. I would say they tended to be somewhat more conservative. They were predominantly white, but didn't have school aged children for the most part. But we never felt any hostility. I mean they certainly knew who I was; I was in the newspapers, I testified in Judge Garrity's court, or I was leading a demonstration, or whatever it might be. Who I was and my position was quite clear, and I never felt any hostility from my neighbors about my role in supporting school desegregation or our children going to desegregated schools.

RAMJOHN: Did you have any fears as a parent for your children?

ALLEN: I think, besides all the other normal fears that parents have for children (laughter), I think we certainly had concerns about our son and what was happening with him at Latin School. I also ran for Boston School Committee in 1983; it was the first year where people were running for city council and school committee as a result of redistricting and so there used to be, before '83, a five member at-large school committee. And beginning in 1983, the school committee was elected four at-large and nine districts, so I ran from the Jamaica Plain/West Roxbury district. And that certainly caused—because West Roxbury was in fact a neighborhood that resisted desegregation, not in the violent way that may have happened in South Boston, but still a lot of resistance.

So I was a very public figure in support of desegregation and that did have some impact on both of our kids at Latin School in that there were insults hurled at them. Our son was actually assaulted once by some white students from West Roxbury. And so I think they did, to some extent, especially our son, pay the price for our own activism in support of desegregation.

RAMJOHN: I see. I'm sorry to hear that. What did you tell your children about school that year?

ALLEN: Well, I mean, this was sort of an ongoing education for all of us, and as they went through the Boston schools, in the mid- to late seventies, early eighties. And we did what all parents tried to do in terms of giving them support and talking to them about what was going on in the schools and the turmoil. They were somewhat removed from some of that because the Trotter and the Wheatley were already integrated. And Latin School was Latin School, and it was bad for a lot of kids, white, black and other. It was not a very nurturing or warm environment, and it was sometimes much more difficult for students of color, so all you can do is give them the support and try to explain what's going on and why.

RAMJOHN: And did the school administration—did the city ever contact you to prepare you, to prepare your child for the first day of school? Did they give you any suggestions or guidelines about how to speak with your children about what was going on in the schools that year?

ALLEN: Now which year are you talking about?

RAMJOHN: In 1974.

ALLEN: Okay, so that year—our daughter was just in kindergarten that year and our son wasn't yet in. So at the precise time of the court order, because I was talking more about the kind of period [from] '74 to early eighties, but right at that point in time, I cannot recall what, if anything, the school system did. I would doubt if the school system did very much; perhaps they sent out something. But again because our daughter was at the Trotter, it was already sort of a nurturing, supporting environment, the teachers, the administration, so I think that was an exception.

RAMJOHN: Did you ever pull your children out of school?

ALLEN: No, no, we were always totally committed to school desegregation, and they were attending the Boston Public Schools.

RAMJOHN: But your son was the only one who ever switched schools because of discrimination?

ALLEN: Right, so I suppose actually I have to take back what I just said because yes, we did pull him out. He pulled himself out; he said he no longer wanted to stay in Latin School and we looked at a lot of alternatives and because he was African American we applied to Metco and he got accepted and went to Brookline High for the end of his sophomore [freshman—corrected by narrator] year, and then his junior and senior year.

RAMJOHN: And how did your children commute to school?

ALLEN: While we were in Jamaica Plain, they were bused to school from the bottom of our hill to the Trotter or the Wheatley. And when they went to Latin School they actually either took a bus or we would drive them.

RAMJOHN: Okay, so they would take the public transportation if you didn't drive, okay, I understand. Did they ever complain about any problems commuting to school?

ALLEN: Not that I recall.

RAMJOHN: Okay. And did you have a relationship with your children's teachers throughout their Boston Public School education?

ALLEN: We tended to be involved as parents, as parent activists. I think both of us did all of the standard stuff in terms of open houses and meetings with teachers. But I also was on the school parent councils, so I had a direct involvement in those schools. So yeah, we had relationships at least through the elementary and middle school, the Trotter and the Wheatley. Less so through high school and I think that's not atypical in terms of students beginning to kind of want some distance between themselves, their parents, and the school.

RAMJOHN: Yes. And did you find the teachers helpful?

ALLEN: Generally, yeah. I mean (pauses to think)—I think most of our experience with teachers was that if you were active and involved and knew your rights and knew the right questions to ask, then people would be responsive. But if parents were going and didn't know the system and didn't quite know what they could or should ask it was much more difficult so that's part of what I think is critical of parents knowing their rights and getting support from other parents, you know, how to engage teachers and administrators.

RAMJOHN: Did your views as a parent regarding the desegregation of the schools, did those views ever conflict with those of the teachers?

ALLEN: You know, I think that would be more with our experience with Latin School, which we found quite rigid, inflexible. The attitude was theirs that we've been doing it right for three hundred plus years, this is the way people get a good education, it's the best school in the country, etc., etc. So there was a rigidity at Latin School where there was much less openness to whether you were white or black, but I think that rigidity had a much more profound impact on black students and parents than it did on white because it was an added element of race on top of the element of this is just the way it is and it's not going to change. So I think that was our experience with Latin School.

RAMJOHN: And how do you feel overall about your children's education in the Boston Public Schools?

ALLEN: We think that our daughter certainly received a good education; she actually ended up liking Latin School. It was something that she could adjust to and it kind of connected to her strengths. She was a strong reader, and that's really at the core of that if you can read voluminously and whatever. And she went to Harvard from Latin School so she was happy and then she went to graduate school at UCal [University of California] Berkeley, and so she did very well. And our son, even though he had a very hard time [and] I think it was more difficult for him, he did fairly well at Brookline High School and then he went on to Sarah Lawrence

College, so they both got a very good education and part of that obviously has to be because of the Boston Public Schools.

RAMJOHN: And did your wife continue teaching at South Boston High?

ALLEN: No, she taught there just for a few years and then when the kids were born, she stopped teaching and then she did other work. She did actually go back teaching but to a girls' Catholic high school in South Boston called Cardinal Cushing High School. It closed down a number of years—she taught there for fifteen years until it closed and now she's a college professor. She teaches ethics and philosophy at Mass Bay Community College. But she went back to South Boston to teach at this school, Cardinal Cushing High School, for about fifteen years.

RAMJOHN: And did she herself experience any verbal attacks or assault for your family's participation in the desegregation?

ALLEN: (pauses to think) Verbal perhaps, arguments with people, but nothing that I think would be serious.

RAMJOHN: Did your community in Jamaica Plain change substantially after the decision was made?

ALLEN: Not immediately after, and I think the changes that took place in Jamaica Plain were much more the result of the speculative real estate market and gentrification. And so there had been sort of successive waves of gentrification in Jamaica Plain that had more to do with the housing market. Obviously schools are not unrelated to that and do have a role to play in the determination of the value of housing in a community, in a neighborhood. But I think what was really happening in Jamaica Plain in terms of the housing market was really, to a significant extent, independent of what was going on in the schools—that it became a very hot market and people simply couldn't afford to stay there, their kids couldn't afford to buy the houses they lived in or rented.

So there was a very radical change in substantial parts of Jamaica Plain beginning in the late seventies, early eighties, then again in the late eighties, then again in the early nineties, these successive waves, so that the value of real estate just was extraordinarily high, inflated over those years. I think that clearly as wealthier people moved into Jamaica Plain with school aged children, many of them, I think, rarely if ever gave the schools a fair chance in terms of looking at what was going on in these schools, what was the quality of education. There was a sense that, well, Boston's in turmoil, the schools aren't good, we're raising our children, but we're not going to send them to the public schools. And so they would choose private schools, alternative schools, or they would leave Jamaica Plain and move to a suburb. So they might have moved in when the market was heating up, had the money to pay more for a house, had no children—it's a syndrome. Then they'd have children, next day they were school-age; they might send them to kindergarten or preschool, then they'd leave. New people would come in who perhaps didn't have children, who had very young children; they weren't thinking necessarily immediately about the school, so the cycle kept going. Jamaica Plain, as a neighborhood, has radically changed since we've been there in terms of—especially, kind of, the class composition.

RAMJOHN: I see. And how did you feel about the politicians during this time?

ALLEN: Well, there were good ones, and mediocre ones, and bad ones. No, I mean, if you go back to the 19—to pre-desegregation, there were very few political leaders at any level in the city that one could say were civil rights activists and supporters. Generally the political establishment was resistant to school desegregation and other kinds of progressive reforms in the city. I think it was the year—I'm trying to think of the year John O'Bryant was first elected to the school committee—it was 19—. ⁹ When he was elected, he was the first African American to be elected to the school committee in the twentieth century. And only one person had been elected to the city council since the 1940s, and that was Tom Atkins, and so we had an almost exclusively white political class. And that only began to change in the late seventies, early eighties, and then with this district representation battle that took place in the early eighties, to elect people by districts rather than at-large. And this is a phenomenon around the country, where at-large dilutes minority voting strength.

⁹ John O'Bryant was elected to the school committee in 1977.

And so you did, beginning in the eighties, have more people of color elected both to the school committee and the city council. And of course you had the mayoral election of '83 in which Mel King ran and mobilized very significant constituencies within communities of color. And Ray Flynn won that election, and while he was an anti-busing activist in the seventies as a state rep from South Boston, most people agree he was not a hater and he was not vicious and he was not actively racist. He was someone who really, to a certain extent, worked, when he became mayor, to heal divisions and to be reaching out to the African American and the growing Latino community. And so I think as Boston's demographics changed, you could see a radical difference from the sixties and early seventies and to the mid- to late eighties. And so those changes have just taken place over time and I think the political leadership was clearly very resistant and hostile to school desegregation in the sixties and seventies and continued to be so throughout the seventies, and then I think it began to change in the eighties.

RAMJOHN: Did you ever feel abandoned by the politicians?

ALLEN: No, because most of them I never felt were with me in the first place. To be abandoned means that they were there and they left you, but if you believe that they weren't with us to begin with, then it was only we felt like they were on the wrong side of history. History was marching ahead and leaving them behind.

RAMJOHN: Did you have any contact with the media?

ALLEN: Yes.

RAMJOHN: And what kind of contact was that?

ALLEN: Mostly as a parent activist and organizer and my role on the Citywide Parents Council in mid- to late seventies, early eighties. And so I sometimes was a spokesperson for the Citywide Parents Council talking about either support for desegregation or in the different campaigns that the parents were leading around upgrading school facilities, preventing school

closings, arguing for reducing class size, arguing for parent role in evaluating principals and selecting principals. So there was media coverage, an obviously very intense media coverage of the schools.

It was always a struggle to get the media to recognize that parents were a legitimate constituency, and they were a voice to be heard and respected. And that voice needed to be represented in the media and that was never easy. It usually happened when there was a crisis, conflicts. We weren't ones that the media would normally turn to to get a comment; that was usually the elected officials or someone who was easily recognizable as a stalwart busing opponent would get talked to. But I think the press generally did a poor job of listening to and respecting the voices of particularly white parents who were involved in and supporting desegregation. There was always this myth that desegregation was this suburban conspiracy and was just black parents, and I think ignoring an important constituency that was in support of desegregation and aligned with black parents and white parents who kept their kids in the schools, joined parent councils and worked to make the schools safe and better.

RAMJOHN: So how do you feel you were portrayed by the media or in the press?

ALLEN: What would my memory tell me about that? (pauses to think) I mean, generally I would say it was a struggle to get the media to focus on the issues that we were talking about and the portrayal was more like, sometimes, can activists be trouble makers rather than what are the issues and these are our kids in the schools and we are trying to play a responsible role in holding the schools accountable. Occasionally, you'd get a good story, but it wasn't easy. I think mostly we were ignored.

RAMJOHN: And do you think the media played a major role in shaping people's opinions around the country at that time?

ALLEN: Oh, absolutely. I think what people saw in obviously in '74, or '75, '76 was buses rolling, buses being stoned, people being—students being assaulted, demonstrations against the integration of the schools. That was what people saw, that was the story. Clearly that was a

significant part of the story, but too often what they missed was how many schools where buses rolling up where there was no tension, where there was no violence, where people were trying to make this change work. And I think that's where the media did a disservice to the community, to black and white parents and students who were in favor of desegregation and trying to make it work.

RAMJOHN: Now some people would say that they were against busing because they shouldn't feel that their children should have to go to another city or another town—

ALLEN: Another neighborhood.

RAMJOHN: Another neighborhood—that's right—that they had never even been to and that that's the reason that they were against busing. How would you respond to that?

ALLEN: I think there are different levels of concern that parents had, and confusion, and I think ultimately one must respect the decision that any parent makes about the safety and education of their child. And that's a decision best left to the parent and there were choices of course in terms of saying, "No, they're going to parochial school or private school." And even within the school desegregation effort, eventually there were many more choices that parents had, but not initially like, "You're assigned to this school." And I think there were some remembering that Boston was a very segregated city; the housing patterns were almost entirely segregated. So white people and people of color of the city had very little opportunity to interact, to engage with one another around what do we have in common in terms of our children and our hopes and fears and our communities. And so busing did come as a shock given that lack of experience, that lack of opportunity that white and black parents had.

The work force was segregated, housing was segregated, and it's an argument that people make, that, Why don't we go slow? Why didn't we ease in desegregation? And the counterargument of course is that once Judge Garrity found that the children were being deprived of their constitutional rights, how do you say that these few children this year will get their rights but these other children will wait two, three, five, eight years? I mean you couldn't do that legally

and morally, and so yes, this is a dilemma, it's a challenge. You have the history and the context of Boston and the kind of community it is, and then you've got the rights of African American children, and in the balance you have to go with the rights of these children and the city had to make that work. And I think the lack of leadership on the part of the political class, elected officials, the media, to work day in and day out, to make it work. But of course you remember that the resistance to Judge Garrity's order was so intense right to the day that he issued the order, and the school committee kept taking actions to resist any kind of integration and elected officials kept resisting it.

And so I think it was a firestorm waiting to happen, but I don't know that there would be any way to deny the rights of those children. I think a lot could have been done to make the streets safer, the schools safer, to prepare parents. And one of the important things about the parent councils that Garrity set up was in fact they became one of the few places in the city where black and white parents could meet and talk. Those were the ones that sent their kids to the schools, those that were boycotting or not of course were left out of that dialogue, left out of finding common ground for themselves and their children.

RAMJOHN: So through your experiences, working for the desegregation, what was it that motivated you? What kept you going through this very difficult time?

ALLEN: I think it starts just with one's own ethical world view and sense of values and what you believe is the meaning of justice and what it means to have a conscience. You try to act on those values of an ethical world view and your sense of justice and remain true to that as much as you can, and the world is full of compromises as always, and you make those. But I think what kept us, my wife and I, our children, going was the particular set of values that we have and our belief that desegregation was absolutely the right thing to do, legally, ethically, morally. And that's what motivated us and our belief that this had to happen.

RAMJOHN: Looking back now do you think the court's decision affected the city of Boston in a positive way?

ALLEN: Oh, a profoundly positive way. I mean, it was with a great deal of pain and turmoil and some suffering and no one should discount how hard it is to have justice. If one could snap their finger and say we're all equal, we'd be living in Neverland. But in order to bring about this change, it was going to be traumatic, and of course in many ways, there is still some of that trauma. We're still trying to work forwards in this city, we still have segregated neighborhoods, our schools are re-segregated in some ways. Yet we don't have a school system which consciously discriminates against students of color, that are making policies everyday to discriminate; we don't have that. We may have a school system that needs vast improvement and changes, but we've ended legally sanctioned discrimination and segregation in our schools.

We have much more diversity in this city at all levels because I think in part the trauma that this city went through to dismantle segregated schools. And I think the city is far healthier for having gone through that at that point and I don't know what the alternative would be. The alternatives that people talk about is, well, let's take twelve or thirteen years, let's do it a grade at a time, or let's integrate housing and then schools would be integrated. And I think well, if people thought resistance to school desegregation was intense, how about resistance to housing integration? Dr. King and a lot of others tried it and maybe we'll have courts someday that rule that that has to end, but that wasn't an option then. What we had then was a federal judge finding legally sanctioned segregation, and that had to end.

RAMJOHN: Well, my final question for you today is how do you feel about the city of Boston today, especially the Boston Public Schools?

ALLEN: We're still living here; we have no intention of leaving. Our son lives in the city, as I said, teaches in the city, is raising their daughter in the city. We remain hopeful that Boston—being a place where it embraces diversity and embraces the rights of all people to live in all neighborhoods and to send their children to schools. We think that it's not only the kind of demographic changes that compel that, but also that people's attitudes and values are changing. We're not anywhere near where we need to be as a city and a community, but certainly that's changing.

And I think the Boston Public Schools have enormous challenges. Some of that is having to do with high stakes testing and graduation requirements and the lack of preparation of students to pass those tests, and the fact that much more money and resources are needed to upgrade the schools. I think parents need to achieve much greater power in the Boston Public Schools to hold those schools accountable; those are still battles that are going on. I think it's absolutely critical that organized parents and organized teachers, and the teachers union, become allies in fostering deep and profound change in the Boston Public Schools. I don't think the schools can change in Boston unless the teachers help to make it change and that means the union has to be a progressive force and I think the parents have to be a progressive powerful force. I see much more hope in that than I do in any top down reforms that come from business people or foundations or anyone that says, We're going to make these changes and try to force that without engaging the entire school community in a process of profound understanding of the changes that are needed. I remain hopeful that that will happen but it's still going to be a fight.

RAMJOHN: Well, thank you very much for today.

ALLEN: Great, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW