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## Oral History Interview of Patricia Kelly (OH-051)

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### Oral History Interview of Patricia Kelly

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**Interviewed by:** Joshua Steinberg, Suffolk University student from History 364: Oral History

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#### Interview Summary

Patricia Kelly, an administrator and former teacher in the Boston Public Schools, discusses her experiences as an African American teacher in the aftermath of the 1974 Garrity decision, which required students to be bused between Boston neighborhoods with the intention of creating racial balance in the public schools. The interview covers her teaching experiences in Charlestown; the racial tension in Charlestown during the 1970s; the impact of the Garrity decision on education in Boston; and her memories of her students and fellow teachers.

#### Subject Headings

Busing for school integration

Charlestown (Boston, Mass.)

Kelly, Patricia A.

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

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This interview took place on March 15, 2005.

### **Interview Transcript**

**JOSHUA STEINBERG:** Would you care to introduce yourself, give a brief description of your childhood? And we'll start from there.

**PATRICIA KELLY:** Okay. Alright. My name is Patricia Anne Kelly, and I grew up in the Bronx. I went to Catholic school from K to eight and then my parents moved us to New Jersey where I went to high school. So I lived in New Jersey for four years. After that I came up to Boston to go to Northeastern University. I graduated from there in 1974 and I started teaching immediately after I graduated. I started teaching in the Boston Public School system in 1974.

I went to—in elementary school I went to a predominantly white school. It was predominantly Italian. There were three kids of color in my grade. I still remember them: Haydee, Ralph, and me. And when we moved to New Jersey my parents were looking for a school system that was of high quality, so we moved to Tenafly, New Jersey, where, again, it was an all-white school and I was the only black student in the entire high school until we had an exchange student from Ethiopia. So I was the only black student there.

(pauses to think) And then I came up to Northeastern. I came up to Boston because my mother and I had researched a lot of schools—we started up there on the East Coast and Northeastern actually had a really good education department, which was unknown to most people because they are known for engineering and they are known as a commuter school. But I got an excellent education there. And my degree is in elementary education with a concentration in reading and Spanish.

**STEINBERG:** Now, when you started teaching right after Northeastern, where did you teach?

**KELLY:** I taught in Charlestown. I taught at the Holden School. It was the first year of busing for Boston,<sup>1</sup> but there was no busing in Charlestown that year. That summer the mayor had spent going around to the different communities talking to people about the fact that in September students would be bused. What was decided was that even though the kids would not be bused in Charlestown that year there would be black teachers taken from schools in black neighborhoods and moved to Charlestown, and some white teachers were sent to black schools in other parts of the city. Since I was brand new, I had no school to leave, but they placed me in Charlestown immediately. So I taught at the Holden School.

Initially, that year, because of busing all of the teachers had two weeks to set up their classrooms. So I was initially assigned to be the Title I teacher at the Holden School. Title I is a federally-funded grants program; basically I would be doing remedial reading. I know that the NAACP fought the fact that many of the new African American hires were placed in ancillary positions; they were not placed in classrooms. The day before school started the assistant principal came and told me that he had switched me to first grade. So I spent two weeks setting up my Title I classroom to find out the day before school started, actually that afternoon, that the next morning I would be teaching first grade.

**STEINBERG:** This is right when the busing was happening?

**KELLY:** This is right when busing was happening in the rest of the city.

**STEINBERG:** In the rest of the city, I see.

**KELLY:** So busing was not happening in Charlestown in 1974. Busing didn't come to Charlestown until 1975. So that year I had—there were in the school—in my school I was the

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<sup>1</sup> “Busing” refers to the result of the June 21, 1974, opinion filed by Judge Arthur W. Garrity in the case of *Tallulah Morgan et al. v. James Hennigan et al.* (379 F. Supp. 410). Judge 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>)

only black teacher. But across the street at the Warren Prescott, I think there were three black teachers there. Because the four of us commuted together. Wait a minute, no, there were two because we commuted together. I'm trying to think if there were two there.

The first grade class that I had was an all-white class. Most of the kids came from the projects. I think I had around twenty, twenty-one kids. And the Holden School had four teachers including me. There were two kindergarten teachers. I was the first grade teacher. There was one other teacher who was a second grade teacher. She was the teacher in charge. And then we had a Title I teacher who came occasionally, who took my place. Because basically what they did was switch me with the first grade teacher, who was supposed to be the first grade teacher.

**STEINBERG:** Now did they—you said how in 1974 they were rearranging teachers. Did they specifically put you in Charlestown because you were black?

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**KELLY:** Yes.

**STEINBERG:** And how did that—what was it like being in Charlestown at that time, being the only black teacher?

**KELLY:** That year I lived in Roxbury so I commuted by train to Charlestown, and it was a tough year. The first—well, first of all, the school that I was in, the four teachers there—the teachers didn't speak to me because they were mad about busing. So I was basically on my own. I really didn't have supervision and at the time, Charlestown had one principal for the four elementary schools. So the school had—each school had an assistant principal, but because we were so small we had a head teacher. The assistant principal was across the street at the Warren Prescott School. So I saw the principal that year one time. He came and introduced himself to me; it was during—when we were doing the Pledge of Allegiance. And then he left and I didn't see him again until many years later when I had long since left Charlestown.

Since I came to school by train, I had to walk through the neighborhood, and the neighborhood was not receptive to knowing that busing was coming nor to the black teachers. There was one

time when I was walking past the boys' club and I was surrounded by a group of men there who were picketing about something there at the boys' club, and I was trying to walk past them and they started calling me a nigger. I was responding back to them. And fortunately the police came and they took me off and took me to school. Because—and there were other times when I would be walking to school and kids would pass me and call me names. The staff was also not—nothing was done with the staff, as far as, These are new teachers in the building, this would be—it's a tough time, we all have to work together. Nothing was done like that. So basically, we were really on our own. It was two other teachers at the Warren Prescott.

Teachers—basically, I would be walking up the hill in Charlestown and they would go by, be driving and toot their horn, wave, and [I would] keep on walking. At one point I was walking with a group of two white teachers, and some kids passed up and started taunting us. And they [the teachers] crossed the street because it wasn't safe for them to be with me either. It was an unsafe time. Eventually, what I did was I went to the police station in the morning, which was the stop before I had to get off. That train is gone now; it was the Orange Line then. I would get off at the stop before and go to the police station, and they would drive me to work so that I could be safe. So it was a hard time.

**STEINBERG:** I never realized it was that bad.

**KELLY:** The kids were totally receptive. The kids loved me. I loved them. It was my first real class. I was real excited about them. They knew it. But it was me and the kids. I didn't eat with anybody. There was nobody—we had different lunchtimes so I ate alone except on Wednesday when the nurse came in. We didn't have specialists, so I was with the kids all day. I had a huge turnout for open house because their parents had heard that they had a black teacher and they wanted to know who I was. The teacher next to us said she had some of these kids' brothers and sisters and she hadn't seen their parents. But the parents came out to see me.

The kids realized that it was not safe for me. They also realized that they were not in a safe neighborhood. One child one time invited me to her house for a birthday party and then told me

that I wouldn't be safe because her mother carried a gun. So—(pauses)—not that she thought her mother would shoot *me*, but she felt like her neighborhood wasn't safe. So—. (pauses)

**STEINBERG:** So this was all before the busing?

**KELLY:** Before busing started, right. This was the year before. But, remember, busing was happening in the rest of the city; lots of things were happening in South Boston at the time. So people are seeing this and I'm seeing it on TV every day. And, you know, people—I mean, one child said to me—actually it wasn't that year he said it to me, it was the next year when busing started—that he had never seen a black person. So this was brand new. Charlestown was very insular; it's one square mile. It was predominantly Catholic—Irish-Catholic. People had Irish and Italian [backgrounds]. And people had grown up and lived there for years; this was their neighborhood. Boston already had a reputation of not being receptive and people stayed in their own areas. So this was really big to have black teachers come in and be teaching their kids. That was the first year.

**STEINBERG:** What was it like—now the second year, 1975, did Charlestown then start busing?

**KELLY:** Right. Charlestown bused. The second year I was moved to a different school. I was moved to the Bunker Hill School, which is on the other end of Charlestown. That year busing did start in Charlestown. And the first day of school what they decided was that—there were five black teachers who were in Boston—in Charlestown. There were two at the Harvard-Kent, two at the Warren Prescott, and then I was at the Bunker Hill School. What they decided was that to ensure our safety, they would put us in a van. We would meet a van in Charlestown and they would basically bus us in. And that would keep us safe. So the first day of school what they did was had us meet at the Bunker Hill Community College over there. And this van driver was to drive us in. Now we could see on TV that it would be important not to go up Bunker Hill Street because people out in the street and they were—I don't want to say rioting, but they were not happy. It was not a happy crowd out there.

The driver claimed that he knew the schools in Charlestown but the first school he took us to was—the Harvard-Kent had been combined and I don't know if it was the Harvard he took us to—I think it was the Harvard School he took us to, which had been closed for years. It was an abandoned building, so he didn't know the schools. He knew them from way past. And he ended up taking us—taking the two teachers who went to the Harvard-Kent school—he took them there first; dropped them off. And then in the van—the three of us were in the van going up Bunker Hill Street. So people were seeing us go by there in the streets. It was a really scary time. Then they dropped off the two teachers at the Warren Prescott and then he continued on Bunker Hill Street and took me to Bunker Hill School. Which meant that it was me and this driver in the van, alone. People were looking in the van, and frankly, I would say that it was probably one of the first times I feared for my life. Because I didn't know if—how the people were going to receive me. I didn't know if I would be safe. You know, I don't know the community, I don't recall seeing the police. What I do recall is when we were sitting at Bunker Hill Community College waiting for the van, lined up along the highway there were the motorcycle police; there were helicopters above us. And the presence of the police was astounding. I mean, it was very—it felt like you were in an area of siege. You could see that this was not, I'm going to school and teaching my lesson today and nothing's going to happen. You could feel the tension in the air. Everybody was on patrol and on heightened alert during that time.

Anyway, that day, at the end of the day, my school—the schools were on different starting times and ending times because of the busing. Because they had to use the buses for multiple runs, what they did was some schools were early schools and some schools were late schools. So an early school might start at 8:10 and a late school might start at like 9:10. Those times are probably not accurate, but they are close. I was on an early school and the two teachers at the Warren Prescott were on a late school schedule—later school schedule. The van drive—I was very specific to the can drive, I said, “You need to pick me up first,” because we got out at 2:20 and the other schools got out closer to three o'clock. Well, that first day at the end of the school day the teachers all left and I sat in the school. Then I think it was the principal who left and he said, “I'll see you tomorrow.” And then a little while later, the custodian left and he said, “I really need to lock up the building.” So I sat on the front steps in Charlestown waiting for this



van to pick me up, not knowing if anybody were going to come down the street, where the crowds were at this point, what was going to happen. The van driver came to pick me up at this point and I said to the other teachers in the van, "This is my last day in the van. I am not safe taking this van. I will take my chances in my own car."

Now by then I had moved to New Hampshire so I was a lot safer in my own car because I could come right off the highway and go straight to the Bunker Hill School without going down Bunker Hill Street, without going down Main Street. The school was several blocks from the border of Charlestown so people were not at that end. So it was much easier for me just to come in, come to school, go out, get out of town. The school is right up the street from where Schrafft's used to be. It's now condominiums so it's no longer there. So that was the end of me riding the van.

I had a first grade—what did I teach that year? I think I had a first grade class that year but I'm not positive. I'll have to go back and figure that out. I think I had first grade that year. And I had a very small class and those kids were bused in. So I had very few white kids because Charlestown kids were—many of them had left, many of them had gone to Catholic school. Some of them had gone up to New Hampshire. Some of them were going to school where their relatives lived. So I did have a very integrated class. I had Asians, blacks, and a few whites. But I had a very small class.

And that was the time—and I still remember this child's name, his name is Bobby Yandle. He said to me he had never—he didn't know any black people. Because what happened was at the end of the day so the kids could get out, we would dismiss the kids who were bused, who were all black kids. We dismissed them first and hold the white kids until the buses had gone, and then we would dismiss the rest of the school. So one day when he and I were sitting there, he said to me he didn't know any black people. And I asked him—no, he started off the conversation: "You know, we don't like black people." And I said, "Why?" And he said, "Because they kill and murder people." And I said, "Well, do you know any black people?" And he said, "No." I said, "Do you remember the little girl who was sitting next to you today in class?" I said, "She's black." He said, "Really?" and I said, "I'm black." He was surprised. So he didn't know any—

he had never met a black person. So he didn't even know what a black person looked like or—it was a concept to him. It was nothing that was real. And he and this little girl were very good friends. Now they never played together outside of school, but they definitely played together in school, and in school you know there were not—we didn't use racial epithets. There were—the kids got along together. We didn't have racial fights. We were in an elementary school.

Now these were happening in Charlestown High School and other things were happening there. But we were at our own end in Charlestown and the kids got along. Now as far as the teachers go, there were a lot of questions for me. There were a lot of—I was the first black teacher they had worked with. I had questions about my hair, where I lived. One teacher did one time invite me to her home and when I went to shake her parents' hand they took their hand away. (pauses) So it was very interesting times. What would happen at the end of the day for me is I was driving my car out and I would pull out—I would always leave with the teachers so I was—never stayed after school alone. I would pull out with the teachers and I would get either snowballed—there were neighborhood kids who would just blast me with snowballs or rocks or whatever was available to throw. One time in the teachers' room I mentioned that this is what was happening to me every day.

**STEINBERG:** And these were older kids who were doing it?

**KELLY:** Yeah, these were older kids, not my students, though one of them was the older brother of one of my kids. And his mother was my lunch attendant in my classroom. So I knew the family, you know? I knew the mother and the youngest son. But the other son was pummeling me with rocks at the end of the day. I mentioned it in the teacher's room one day and everybody said, Oh, no, that's not happening, not for real. You know, whatever.

**STEINBERG:** So they didn't believe you?

**KELLY:** Yeah, nobody believed that anybody—because they knew—these were their neighbors. Teachers in this school had also grown up in Charlestown. So these were their

neighbors, their friends, kids that they had taught. So they didn't believe that they could be doing that.

Well, one day we had a big snowstorm; it was really tough to walk. And I'll never forget Alice Slater. She grew up in the neighborhood. She lived around the corner. She was *teeny*. She was around seventy years old. They had just changed the retirement age so that she didn't have to retire. She had taught there all her life. She had taught in Charlestown and lived in Charlestown all her life. And I offered her a ride because she was an elderly woman and I thought, You've got to walk down this hill—it's all icy. We pulled out in my car and I got blasted with snowballs. All in the windows—you know, hitting the windows, the sides of the car. And it broke off the body side molding of my car. So I stopped the car and I got out to pick up the body side—it had turned it up—so I got out to take it off the car and stick it in the car and Alice jumped out of the car. And I said, "Oh, Alice, that's okay. They will leave us alone now. Don't worry about it." This little old lady ran into the school playground area and started running across the lot. And I'm like, "Alice, come back! It's slippery out there." She turns around; she comes back and she said, "I know those kids. I taught those kids. I taught their parents, and I grew up with their grandparents. This has got to stop! I'm getting on the phone tonight." And I said, "Well, don't worry about it. This happens every day." I dropped her off at her house and I went home. That was the last time that I was ever hit with a snowball there.

It really talked about the power of one person. The tight-knit (tape skips) neighborhood. And the pride in that this was unacceptable. And I'll never forget her. I will never forget Alice Slater. She was the second grade teacher when I was—and I taught second grade with her that year. It was quite a powerful lesson that I think we all could have learned from her. (pauses) She stopped that. So when you think about it, this one elderly woman had all this power to stop one person from being basically tortured every day. And what was I doing? I'm teaching. I wasn't coming in there to harm anybody. And it makes you think in retrospect: What could have the priests done? What could the mayor have done? What could the politicians have done to have stopped the ugliness that was going on in the city? I mean, they were multiple people. They were people who *were* in power. This was one person. And she was not—nobody knows her name. Her name is not up someplace. But she stopped it for me.

And she was funny because she was—she claimed—she said, “I’m not prejudiced. The only people I don’t like are people—I don’t care if you’re black, white, you know, whatever. The only people I don’t like are people who are on welfare and stealing from the system!” (laughs) So I wouldn’t get into political debates with her. But she also was a teacher who—every kid left her room knowing how to read. They could read, write—they could read and do math. Those were her two subjects and she drilled them until they got reading. She didn’t make them not like reading but even the toughest kid she got to read. Now she didn’t teach any social studies or science, or anything else. But those kids left reading. So I will always remember her for that. Those were my beginning years in teaching.

**STEINBERG:** Now do you feel—I know how you mentioned the mayor wasn’t doing anything.

**KELLY:** Well the mayor was. He was going around—it was Mayor [Kevin] White at the time—he was going around to different communities saying, “We need to be calm. We need to do okay.” And I don’t remember anything else the mayor did. And I don’t remember what the superintendent did. But I’m not so sure how genuine all the politicians were. I mean, they had spent twenty years fighting busing. So it’s not like overnight they’re going to say, Oh, yeah, we embrace it, deciding segregation. They are not overnight going to say, Oh, yes, we love this plan, or, You really should give this a chance. There were a lot of outs to—a lot of ways to avoid going to school that year. And, you know, people just—the people in power, I feel—I feel that they could have done more. (pauses) I mean, we were a lost voice. I mean, here I am paying union dues to the Boston Teachers Union and at that time they were fighting desegregating the teachers. So I’m like, “Can I have my money back?”

**STEINBERG:** Yeah, you are wondering what you’re paying your dues for.

**KELLY:** Am I fighting this so that I can be out of a job? There was no sense of, Let’s pull this faculty together, or, Now it’s happened, so you are in the union, so we have to figure out how to protect you, too. Now before it started though, there had been workshops on—for teachers. And I don’t know if they were just for new teachers but I remember attending some of these

workshops where they talked about, So, how do you work with different races in the classroom? Sort of lessons about how to live together, kind of thing. It was an ongoing professional development for us. But I don't know if there was ongoing professional development around anything at that point.

**STEINBERG:** Yeah, it seems like they just kind of threw you into the mix and said, Here you go.

**KELLY:** Here you go, good luck.

**STEINBERG:** Especially with the principal leaving you the first year.

**KELLY:** Yeah.

**STEINBERG:** So did you believe that busing was the correct decision to do or did you think they could have done something else?

**KELLY:** Well, I think that—of course, it's how many years in retrospect?

**STEINBERG:** I think like thirty.

**KELLY:** Yeah, thirty years hindsight. I think that there was a whole lot lost in the school committee fighting the desegregation for twenty years. I think they set people up. The school system wasn't that great to begin with and people thought that they were losing a lot. They really weren't losing *a lot*. I think at that point—and, I mean, you'd have to check the statistics—but I think only two percent of the kids who went to South Boston High were going to college. That is not a great percentage.

**STEINBERG:** No, it's not.

**KELLY:** Yeah, so that's not exactly, Oh, we are getting ready—now we are getting ready to go over to Harvard to school. Nobody was getting a good education. I think that I understand why they didn't do it gradually. I think it might have been easier if you'd desegregated your kindergarten, your elementary schools first. I mean, elementary school kids are more tolerant. But the parents would have been crazy sending their kids, their young kids, to another neighborhood. So there were—every solution had its negatives to it. Busing cost a whole lot. There has been so much white flight that at this point school is predominantly kids of color. And it's taken a long time for there to be some—lots of pockets of really good education going on. And the reputation hasn't changed. People still think of Boston as having a substandard education. Now, I was principal in Boston for five years. I know that there are pockets of wonderful things happening in the system. I don't think that a lot of people know about these pockets. I think more and more are getting them.

I think that there are probably other solutions but I don't think that there was the will to really sit down and determine what they might be. And also time had run out. Something had to be done. People were upset. I mean, one thing might have been to build better schools and put better teachers in schools that had been neglected for years, which all of those schools were predominantly in the neighborhoods where people of color lived. So there are—now we can look back and see what other solutions might have been.

**STEINBERG:** But at the time—

**KELLY:** I think at the time that's what had to happen. I don't think that there were—because they were really out of time. If they had—when *Brown v. Board of Education* had first happened in 1954 if the school committee had said, Okay, let's recognize our problem here and let's take five years to figure out what the good solutions would be, and to go to people and say, Look, we are going to spend five years planning, then in 1960 they would have had a plan. But, you know, they didn't. They spent twenty years resisting it and spending lots of money fighting it. And so now you've wasted all this money; you've wasted all this time. And Garrity puts this solution on and bang, it has to happen.

You know, suburbs didn't touch it. Brookline is located in the middle of Boston, surrounded by Boston. They're not touching it. The suburbs got out of it. So that—I think that by waiting there ended up being fewer resolutions. So I think that's what had to happen.

**STEINBERG:** Now, you mentioned how in the first year—was it the first year that a lot of the white kids left immediately, or was it a gradual process where you noticed that towards the end of it—?

**KELLY:** No, I think the first year they were gone. In '74 I had a full class of white kids. In '75 I did not. So I think that they exited pretty quickly in Charlestown. I don't know what happened at other schools. I know that our enrollment at our school was pretty low. Even though I had changed schools, you know, you could tell. One year I had a class of seven kids. (laughs)

**STEINBERG:** Now did—so in 1975 did the parents come to you first and say like, Look, I do not like this—

**KELLY:** No. No—

**STEINBERG:** They just up and left?

**KELLY:** No, no, they were just gone.

**STEINBERG:** Just gone?

**KELLY:** No, they didn't—I don't recall parents—I don't recall very many parents in the school at all. They were just gone. They—you know—now, I wouldn't have known who they were because I hadn't had their kids the year before because I had been in a different school. But the class size was low and the class was predominantly kids of color who don't live there, who are being bused in every day. And nobody runs a class of seven kids. But that year we had to because of—I had a class of thirteen kids one year. Class sizes are usually twenty-five.

**STEINBERG:** Yeah, twenty-seven.

**KELLY:** You're missing somebody. (laughs)

**STEINBERG:** Now, but did the—

**KELLY:** And those were the beginning years that I was there because eventually the schools—the schools in Charlestown are small. Two of the small schools were eventually closed. The Holden School is now a special needs. As I said before the Bunker Hill School is condominiums. Expensive condominiums now, too. I'd love to go see my classroom. (laughs)

**STEINBERG:** Now how did the kids feel? I know you said a lot of them were minorities. Did they enjoy being bused or—where were they bused from? How far away?

**KELLY:** You know, I had a first and second grade. You don't know at that point that you are being bused. You get on a bus in the morning because your parents put you on a bus and you go to school just like you walk to school. And you go to school. It's not like when you're five you say, "Oh, Mommy, I would prefer not to go to this school. I would rather go to *this* school." You are not talking about kids who are entitled kids. These kids did what their parents said to do and their parents were taking a risk. I'm not so sure how I would feel putting my kid on a bus going into an unsafe area. And I can remember standing in the window at my classroom watching this bus come up the hill with these kids—these little faces peering out of the window, watching things go on and thinking just right up the street there are people who are throwing rocks at these buses with these little five-, six-, seven-, and eight-year-olds on the buses. I just didn't understand how people could do that. And this was a religious—(inaudible; tape change)

**STEINBERG:** We were talking about kids reactions—

**KELLY:** I was saying I didn't understand how people could do this to little kids. Throw rocks at buses or bricks or be out there chanting ugly things. When you're talking about people who were—went to church on Sunday. And this is what I'm talking about with the power of leaders.



The priests should have been out there. Priests should have been in the churches saying, Don't do this. You can't do this. This isn't right. You know, protest in another way. Go down to city hall and protest. But to stand there and be yelling things at little kids on buses, that was not right. Even big kids on buses, that's not right. Go where it is going to make a difference. This five-year-old is not the one who created busing. Me, as a teacher, it didn't make sense for the teachers not to speak to me. I'm teaching their kids too. For them not to speak to me—I didn't create busing; I didn't create the mess that the city was in that created busing. So these are—this is where people don't use the power that they have. They have the power in numbers. Go to city hall and protest. And eventually protest for everybody. But—

**STEINBERG:** So did the kids come to you and say like, “I can't believe this is happening”?

**KELLY:** No, no. Kids are unbelievable. They are resilient. They came every day. I had great attendance. We were almost isolated. They came into the classroom—in both years—the first year, I mean, I had my issues as far as the first group of kids that I had. I had poor kids. These were *really* poor kids. I was providing everything for them. I loved those kids to death. This was my all-white class. I mean, I can remember some of them. I can remember Ronald. I remember the kid who talked to me about how her sister was going to have a baby and she was happy, but the rest of the family wasn't happy. She was sixteen. Families—one family had a little boy who smelled every day so I had the mother in and I talked to her about it. The mother smelled. They had no hot water in their house. These were poor families who were trying to do the best they could and they got their kids to school every day. And I taught those kids how to read and how to write and how to do math, and I worked myself to death with them because I loved what I was doing. I made all my own materials. I would go to the store and buy stuff. And I had a great education at Northeastern and I just thought—I called my mother one day and said, “I think I have a bunch of geniuses in my class!” (laughs) And they weren't. They had leveled the kids that year and I had the lowest group, but I just thought that they were wonderful.

They next year I had an integrated class—I loved those kids. I thought they were wonderful too. And those kids came every day to school. They worked their heart out. Now I'm not saying I didn't have discipline issues. There were kids who were kids. But they were there every day

and they were not listening to—they heard what was going on around them, they couldn't miss it. But they were resilient and they were there to learn. I mean, it's kids—kids are the lifeblood. It was the parents and the older folks who were distracted by all the ugliness. I don't remember—I'm sure that there were probably some racists—some racial epithets said in the class because kids didn't know what they were saying because my kids were young. But the racist acts that happened to me were mainly with the adults—were all with the adults not with the kids.

**STEINBERG:** So over the years how did you learn how to—how did you learn how to cope with that? I can imagine that being pretty tough.

**KELLY:** Well, as an African American woman growing up in the United States I learned how to cope when I was probably two. My parents and all African American families teach their kids how to cope as a person of color in society. I mean, I'd listen—I heard racial epithets in the Catholic grammar school I went to. I remember in second grade the nun not calling on me and saying to—trying to find out why. What was wrong with me? Why wouldn't she?

It wasn't like this was brand new as an adult for me. In high school, I went to an all-white high school. I mean, I heard the word nigger. It wasn't the first time. I had—my mother had to go into the high school and tell the principal the French teacher needed to call on me and eventually I was switched out of the class. We learned strategies about how to cope being a person of color in an all-white—a predominantly white society. Well it *was* predominantly white. Not anymore. Getting less though.

It was my job to make sure the kids in my class would also be resilient and know that when they came to my classroom that they were in a safe place and that their job was to learn. That was what our focus was. And I have fond memories of being with them in the classroom. I'd love to know where some of them are right now. That was a long time ago.

**STEINBERG:** So looking back do you feel the same way about the Garrity decision now as you did then?

**KELLY:** Well, remember, I was a brand new teacher. While Garrity had an effect on my life it wasn't as I would be looking at is now reading the decision, studying it, weighing the pros and cons. I was an excited first-year teacher—first-, second-, third-, fourth-, fifth-year teacher—excited to have a job. I didn't care if I was going to be sent to Timbuktu to teach. Actually Timbuktu would have been pretty good. Height of education there. (laughs)

I was commuting. I loved what I was doing. I felt sad for the situation that a lot of my kids were in. And sad for myself—I was fearful for myself, too. I mean, I moved out of the city during my second year. I moved to New Hampshire.

**STEINBERG:** Did you move because of that?

**KELLY:** No. I moved out because rents were better. I got a bigger apartment. But it wasn't easy any place in the city. This was a tense, tense city. It was not a way for a new teacher to come in, with no support. I mean, my principal that second year was a wonderful man, but he was trying to cope too. And nobody was given skills about, So, this is what you do in this situation. Now we all have emergency plans about getting out of buildings. We have plans—none of my teachers leave here and get rocked. (laughs) And if something like that happened, we would be on it. Everybody would be on it. It wouldn't be like, Oh, nobody does that. That's not really real. We would deal with it. That didn't happen then. Everybody was worried about the atmosphere but nobody was doing anything about it.

So it wasn't like I saw every day and thought, Oh, is this the right decision Garrity made? I was sitting every day and thinking, How am I going to teach reading to Ronald tomorrow? And, What am I going to do about the two kids who wet their pants every day? That was my focus. So that's where I was at.

**STEINBERG:** Is there anything else you want to cover that we missed?

**KELLY:** No, I think—I think it’s funny to talk about this as historical times. I think of history as World War I and World War II. (laughs) I lived through this. (laughs) But I think it was a very, very important time that people don’t realize about. And really think about all of the different pieces. It also makes you realize that—it’s made me stronger as a principal now because you recognize that when you are dealing with any situation you have to make sure you look at the multiple constituents in that situation. In this busing there were kids that we had to deal with, parents, we had administrators. You also had teachers. And then you had the minority groups in each place. You had the white teachers who were now being sent to Roxbury, Dorchester, and possibly Mattapan. I don’t even know at that point. You also had the African American teachers who were being sent to white neighborhoods. So you have to look at how do you take care of all of those people? Because it wasn’t just about the kids and it wasn’t just about parents.

You know, *Common Ground*, the book that talks about busing—he highlights the politicians, he highlights the police.<sup>2</sup> A lot of those people—he highlighted three families there. And the families have to be dealt with too. You had to look at what was happening in homes when kids were coming home after going through hostile neighborhoods. But there were a lot of people who just were left—were forgotten. And I think that teachers were definitely forgotten and definitely—I know the five African American teachers that were in Charlestown were forgotten. I remember almost all of their names. Well, let’s see, Julia was one. Ernestine Alexander, she died there, actually. She stayed in Charlestown. I eventually left. Ora McFarlane(?) was the other one. Me. And I don’t remember the other woman and I can’t remember her name. She and I actually commuted together. I used to drive her in. It was the—what was Julia’s last name? Julia and Ora had come from the Trotter School. And they were—my understanding was they were pretty good. Ernestine, it was her first year teaching. It was my first year, Ernestine’s first year, and a teacher I can’t remember. It was her first year. I can see her now. Ernestine was an older woman coming back. I had gone to college with Ernestine’s son.

**STEINBERG:** So she was—

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<sup>2</sup> *Common Ground: A Turbulent Decade in the Lives of Three American Families* is a Pulitzer-prize winning book written by J. Anthony Lukas and published in 1986. Lukas chronicles the Garrity decision era from the perspective of three families, two white and one black.

**KELLY:** Yeah, she was—she had to be in her forties. Because we were twenty. I was twenty-three. So she was probably forty-something. She'd gone back to school to study teaching and then we ended up together. And her son, actually—I think James Alexander works for—I think he works for WGBH, or maybe *Chronicle*. Maybe Channel Five. I don't know, one of those TV stations. Small world.

**STEINBERG:** Well, I thank you for doing this. And I really appreciate it. If there is anything else I think that pretty much covers it.

**KELLY:** Yeah, well good luck on your project.

**STEINBERG:** Thank you.

**KELLY:** It was actually exciting.

**END OF INTERVIEW**