



## Oral History Interview of Joanne Sweeney (OH-049)

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### Oral History Interview of Joanne Sweeney

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**Interviewed by:** Matthew Wilding, Suffolk University Student from History 364: Oral History

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#### Interview Summary

Joanne Sweeney, a lifelong resident of South Boston, discusses the impact 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 the reaction to the decision in South Boston; her family's community activism; that state of the Boston Public Schools; and her feelings about the portrayal of South Boston as "racist".

#### Subject Headlines

Busing for school integration

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

South Boston (Boston, Mass.)

Sweeney, Joanne

#### Table of Contents

<b>Ms. Sweeney's background</b>	<b>p. 3</b> (00:02)
<b>Reactions to the Garrity decision and community activism in South Boston</b>	<b>p. 4</b> (00:40)
<b>Violence and media coverage</b>	<b>p. 8</b> (08:07)
<b>Impact of the Garrity decision on South Boston</b>	<b>p. 11</b> (14:26)
<b>Reflections on the Boston Public Schools and</b>	

**perceptions of South Boston**

**p. 14 (21:32)**

**Interview Transcript**

**MATT WILDING:** It is April 2, 2005. I am in the Moakley Archive in the Suffolk Law Library interviewing Joanne Sweeney. Interviewer name, Matt Wilding. Could you say your full name please?

**JOANNE SWEENEY:** Joanne Sweeney.

**WILDING:** Okay, and where are you from?

**SWEENEY:** South Boston.

**WILDING:** How long have you lived there?

**SWEENEY:** I've lived there all my life, forty-five years.

**WILDING:** And where did you go to school?

**SWEENEY:** I went to St. Brigid's for elementary school, then I went to Girls' Latin<sup>1</sup> for high school.

**WILDING:** And that's a test school?

**SWEENEY:** An exam school, yes.

**WILDING:** Do you have any siblings?

**SWEENEY:** I have one sister.

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<sup>1</sup> Girls' Latin School was a public exam school that was founded in Boston in 1877. It had several locations throughout its history, including the South End, the Fenway neighborhood, and Dorchester. It became Boston Latin Academy in the 1970s after the Boston School Committee ordered that it comply with a state law that ended sex discrimination in public schools. Boston Latin Academy is now located in Boston's Roxbury neighborhood.

**WILDING:** And where did she go to school?

**SWEENEY:** She also went to Girls' Latin.

**WILDING:** What grade were you in when the Garrity decision<sup>2</sup> came down?

**SWEENEY:** I was about in the ninth grade, I think, at the time.

**WILDING:** Okay, and had you already been accepted to the Latin School by that time?

**SWEENEY:** Yes.

**WILDING:** So did the decision directly affect you in your education in any way?

**SWEENEY:** In terms of which school I was going to or—?

**WILDING:** Yeah, like was there a difference in the population of the school? Were more black students admitted as a result of this or—?

**SWEENEY:** At the time, no. Girls' Latin School at that time wasn't very diverse. There were few minorities, there were Chinese, black students, but it was predominantly white. The decision really didn't affect me in terms of which school I was going to; I already knew I was going to go to that school. It wasn't affected by busing because it was an exam school.

**WILDING:** And how did this decision affect your community?

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<sup>2</sup> The Garrity decision refers to the June 21, 1974, opinion filed by Judge W. Arthur 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> for more information)

**SWEENEY:** It affected my community greatly, in several ways. It ripped the community apart, but it also pulled it together. It ripped the community apart in terms of people fled the city, they felt they had no options of where they wanted to send their children to school. They couldn't, so they chose to leave and utilize other towns' school systems. But it really brought the community together, being together to fight the decision. You know, just growing up there, I felt that there was a fierce pride in the community. We were going to come together against this decision.

**WILDING:** What was your initial reaction to the decision when it came down, initially?

**SWEENEY:** The original decision was sort of, everybody felt like, "Hell no! We won't go!" and that was sort of the battle cry. And even though, like I said, it didn't affect me—I wasn't going to be attending a school that was affected—we just felt we were going to come together and support everyone it did affect. So that was our initial reaction: Nope, you're not going to do it to us.

**WILDING:** And was your opinion affected by your parents at all or was this your decision?

**SWEENEY:** It probably was influenced by my parents, but I did feel that way. But I was only fourteen at the time, so I think it was heavily influenced by my parents.

**WILDING:** You mentioned to me, aside from this interview, that you sort of became an activist against it. At what point did you actively get involved in opposing the position?

**SWEENEY:** We probably started—I'm trying to think if it was—sorry—

**WILDING:** That's fine, don't worry about it. Got all the time you need.

**SWEENEY:** Okay, we just probably—while the decision was being made, before they came down with the definite decision, and we just started protests and wanted to have our opinions made known.

**WILDING:** Now was this an organized effort or were people just turning up at city hall meetings? How did you go about doing this?

**SWEENEY:** The ones that I was involved in were organized. I think that people were sort of just showing up at different places. They decided to, I think, formally organize—they, South Boston. And I think some of the other communities had information centers, we had a South Boston Information Center, and that was sort of like a clearing house of information where people could call there and see what was happening and when, and so they started planning a lot of rallies and marches and motorcades and things like that.

**WILDING:** And what was your role in all of this? Were you an activist or did you get involved in the planning or—?

**SWEENEY:** Well at the time I wasn't involved in planning; I was really too young. My mother was involved more with that, so I was more of an activist. I went on marches and rallies and things like that.

**WILDING:** You mentioned your mother being involved in organization; she was a member of ROAR? And what does ROAR stand for?

**SWEENEY:** Restore Our Alienated Rights.

**WILDING:** Can you talk a bit about ROAR specifically?

**SWEENEY:** ROAR was just more the same thing, people just meeting and deciding how they could share their opinions and viewpoints, and they organized the marches and rallies. We marched to city hall once, and actually different sections of the city all got together and we left from South Boston, people from Charlestown, we all met at City Hall Plaza, huge rally there. We had motorcades too, just around South Boston. We drove to Judge Garrity's house one time.

**WILDING:** How did that go?

**SWEENEY:** I think he wasn't home when we got there but it really brought people together and people just felt very strongly. Another big rally we had at Farragut Park in South Boston; it was South Shore Supports Busing, so a lot of South Shore communities had people get together in a motorcade and they all met in South Boston for a final rally. Farragut Park. So it was sort of beyond South Boston.

**WILDING:** Now, is it South Shore Supports Busing you say?

**SWEENEY:** I'm sorry—opposes. But supports South Boston in against the fight, is what I meant to say. I'm sorry.

**WILDING:** That's fine, I just wanted to clarify. You mentioned the city hall rally, was that *the* city hall rally where the gentlemen was stabbed or prodded with the pole?

**SWEENEY:** I'm not sure because I was at the city hall rally so I think it was, but I'm not 100 percent sure. I didn't actually see that happening. I knew the person that did that and of course saw the picture.<sup>3</sup>

**WILDING:** Yeah, everyone's see the picture. So from your standpoint, what was the climate like at the city hall protest that you were at?

**SWEENEY:** I didn't see violent acts or things like that. I saw a lot of families there protesting with signs, and there were speakers all speaking out against it and just everybody coming together to fight a cause.

**WILDING:** And you might not even remember this, but do you recall how many people you

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<sup>3</sup> Ms. Sweeney is referring to a Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph taken by Stanley J. Forman which depicts Joseph Rakes, who is white, lunging at Ted Landsmark, who is black, with the staff of an American flag. The photograph was taken in April of 1976 at an anti-busing protest on City Hall Plaza.

thought at the time were there? Did it seem like a million people?

**SWEENEY:** The City Hall Plaza was just filled wall to wall; it was big.

**WILDING:** Excellent. Going to Latin School, did you feel removed from the problems at the high school in South Boston?

**SWEENEY:** I did. Going to Latin School, we were just a total separate entity. We didn't have anything to do with any of this, but I had friends that were involved. I remember driving—we were coming home from school one day, riding along the bus route on just the public transportation, and we looked up at the high school and there was a big riot going on and it was just there. We saw it, everyday. But actually being in Latin School was a completely different world there.

**WILDING:** So you saw the riots from public transportation?

**SWEENEY:** Well, yeah, I was driving by on the way home, and actually we came home from school, my sister and I, and my mother wasn't home, which was unusual. And I actually live on 6th Street, and South Boston High is at the top of 6<sup>th</sup> Street. We looked up the street and saw a big riot and we weren't sure what we should do. My mother was always wanting to grab her movie camera and run so she would film a lot of the events, so we did go up and saw some of what was going on up there. And actually, that particular day came to be known, I believe, as Black Tuesday. It was the day that one of the students, Michael Faith, was stabbed in the high school, so it really caused a big riot.<sup>4</sup>

**WILDING:** From your perspective of seeing it because the media has a—what a lot of people would say was a biased take on a lot of that. From where you were standing, what did it look like was happening?

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<sup>4</sup> On December 11, 1974, Michael Faith, a white student at South Boston High School, was stabbed by James White, a black student, in a hallway at the high school.



**SWEENEY:** Absolutely. Well I actually came home from school and had no clue as to what was happening at the time so I just saw a riot going on; there were police men on horses, people were running, there were at the time tactical police force—TPF they were called—and they just used to line the street in riot gear. So I really just came upon this riot scene and I didn't get too close to it but we knew something had happened in the high school at that point, but we weren't sure what. We knew definitely some event happened; it wasn't just your average day of busing.

**WILDING:** Was there any other violence that you recall in South Boston or elsewhere in regards to this?

**SWEENEY:** I knew of a lot of violence. I didn't actually witness a lot of it but I knew of a lot of cars being overturned, rocks being thrown, unfortunately a black bus driver on the T was beaten, things like that.

**WILDING:** I wasn't aware of that.

**SWEENEY:** Also, can I add to that too that at one point David Duke from the KKK<sup>5</sup> came in and, you know, the media sort of portrayed us as being racist, so they came in and thought they were going to band together the community and get everybody to join the KKK. And actually they asked the community to meet up at Dorchester Heights, it was sort of an after-hours at night type of thing and a lot of teenagers were up there and David Duke and his cohorts were sort of beaten and driven out. So, you know, the media tried to portray South Boston as being racist, and it really had nothing to do with us being racist because I think if we were racist, they would've joined the KKK, they would've said, Sure! What can you do to help us? But no, they were beaten and driven out.

**WILDING:** Wow, were you at that incident?

**SWEENEY:** I wasn't, but I do know people that were.

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<sup>5</sup> David Duke (1950- ) is a former republican member of the Louisiana House of Representatives and a member of the Ku Klux Klan. He founded the sub-group Knights of the Ku Klux Klan in Louisiana in 1976.

**WILDING:** And was that covered by the media at all? The beating?

**SWEENEY:** No, not that I know of. I'm not really sure.

**WILDING:** That's really interesting, but it wasn't like front-page news the next day?

**SWEENEY:** No, no, and that's why I feel a definite slant against South Boston through the media perspective.

**WILDING:** Now, your impression of the media then, obviously that it's biased. Were there any specific media organizations that were more biased than others or was this across the board?

**SWEENEY:** Well, I pretty much feel it was across the board, but of course South Boston has been known to not like the *[Boston] Globe* newspaper; they really painted a definite picture that we felt wasn't accurate.

**WILDING:** And this relates to that, today, what paper do you read?

**SWEENEY:** I read the *[Boston] Herald*, I do get the *Sunday Globe*, but yes I read the *Herald*. I still don't like the *Globe*.

**WILDING:** Do you think that the presence of the media—there was a regular presence of the media at this time in South Boston particularly around the high school; do you think that influenced the activities that were going on?

**SWEENEY:** Absolutely, it absolutely did.

**WILDING:** In what way?

**SWEENEY:** Well I feel that initially, the whole thing was just about trying to improve schools

and they wanted to desegregate and get people to just mix up the schools, but the media made it into a racial issue where I don't think that it was, in our minds, a racial issue. We were just being told to do something that we didn't feel we should be told to do and they just really put a racial slant on it.

**WILDING:** You mentioned that some of your friends had been directly affected; what were affects on them education-wise and just socially? Did you see changes in people as a result of it?

**SWEENEY:** Oh yes, absolutely. Education was basically interrupted into varying degrees. Some kids missed months of school, other kids missed maybe a year or so of school and there were kids that dropped out completely and then there were the families that just up and left. And it also affected—what was the other half of the question?

**WILDING:** How did it affect them socially?

**SWEENEY:** Socially? In different ways—it was interesting that people really came together to fight a cause. It was really like we were fighting a battle, fighting a war, and people just really kind of came together with that. But I do think that with the media, the way they put a spin on it, where it didn't start out with racial overtones—I think with teenagers, a black face on a school bus just came to symbolize what it was all about for them, so a lot of people I think maybe they would not have necessarily been racist, it just they ended up— race became the main focal point for a lot of the teenagers I think.

**WILDING:** So did you see any positives in the busing or was this an across-the-board negative affect?

**SWEENEY:** The only positive I can see is really the way the community came together to fight a cause that they didn't feel was just. I really still feel, to this day, very proud of my community. It's interesting, I have a seventeen year old daughter and she's sort of embarrassed to be from South Boston because to this day we still have a stigma attached to us. Growing up in the community, people just think of you in a certain way. So it's hard for her. She now is at Latin

School, so she's out with a lot of different people, and they have a preconceived notion of who she is because of where she comes from. But I feel just the opposite coming from South Boston, and I think it's because we all went through that, we all went through something together.

**WILDING:** So your children are in public school?

**SWEENEY:** Well my daughter is. I have two in parochial school and actually my son will be going to Latin School next year.

**WILDING:** So did your experience in school influence what you wanted your kids to go through?

**SWEENEY:** In terms of?

**WILDING:** Did you want them to be in public school or does it not matter to you?

**SWEENEY:** I guess I just want them to be in a good school; if I felt that the public schools had something good to offer, then I would send them there. At this point I feel that actually this whole thing destroyed the public school system as it stands today. I feel the only people that really utilize Boston public schools are people that have no choice. They just can't afford to send their children to private school and I think the only exceptions, really, are the exam schools.

**WILDING:** You mentioned to me, previous to this interview, that your best friend in high school was black and lived in Mattapan. Did that relationship affect your opinions regarding segregation and race and things of that nature?

**SWEENEY:** Could you just repeat that?

**WILDING:** Just saying that your best friend was a black student from Mattapan, and did that affect your opinions regarding segregation and race?

**SWEENEY:** I don't think the friendship really affected my opinions; this was the whole point was we weren't racist to begin with. So I went to school, and I just had black friends and my best friend was black and I don't think that relationship affected how I viewed things, but I think that the whole issue affected my relationship with her because it was limited to what we could do. She only came to my house once and we literally had to smuggle her in the back seat of a car; she had to hide, and when she came out of the car we had to run her into my house and literally almost caused a car crash. There was a guy driving down the street and did a double-take, couldn't believe that there was a black person going into somebody's house in South Boston. And I never went to her house and she later moved to Stoughton and I could go visit her. We largely went to an after school program at the Museum of Fine Arts, so we did that kind of stuff together. It was sort of neutral ground really.

**WILDING:** Did she move to Stoughton while you guys were still in school?

**SWEENEY:** She did, in senior year of high school.

**WILDING:** Could you go into that relationship, how the communities on both sides were taking it? Was it completely, across-the-board, common that black people wouldn't be in Southie and white people wouldn't be in Mattapan?

**SWEENEY:** Pretty much, you know, before the whole thing, there were black people that lived in South Boston. The tensions flared during the whole decision period, and it just became a racial issue and black people couldn't go to South Boston without fearing for their lives, literally. And the other way around, white people were fearful of going to Dorchester, Roxbury; they were fearful for their lives. Things happened in South Boston, but things also happened in Roxbury, Dorchester that weren't reported in the media and it was always portrayed that it was South Boston, we were racist; but the same things were going on in Roxbury, Dorchester, against whites, but I just feel like that wasn't reported.

**WILDING:** And where did you two meet? Was it at the Latin School?

**SWEENEY:** We met at Latin School.

**WILDING:** Did you, at the time, think that segregation was a problem? And if so, did it need to be addressed or was it just a non-problem that was created?

**SWEENEY:** The way I see it, I don't think that it was segregation as much as the school system itself needed to be fixed. And people just wanted to go to their neighborhood schools and that includes people from Dorchester, Roxbury, white people, black people, everybody just wanted to walk to their neighborhood schools. At a lot of the marches and rallies, there were black families protesting against it because they wanted their children to go to the neighborhood school. So I feel that the whole issue really was just the inequality of the schools themselves.

**WILDING:** Regarding the court case obviously, there was the de facto segregation aspect of it; was there any other way to solve this?

**SWEENEY:** Any other way, besides busing?

**WILDING:** Yeah.

**SWEENEY:** I just feel that they should have put the money into the school system itself: repair the schools, buy some books. The money that they have spent on buses alone—if they just took that money and put it into the schools, I think we'd all be in a much better place right now.

**WILDING:** From a political standpoint, in the period, this got to court, some would say, as a result of the politicians not dealing with it. Do you think there's truth to that or do you think they just didn't see it as something that needed to be done?

**SWEENEY:** I'm not really sure. I think I do see truth in that statement; I don't think it should've ever gotten to that level. It should have been dealt with before that.

**WILDING:** Looking back, do you still feel the same way about all of this as you did then? Have

you changed your opinions at all?

**SWEENEY:** No, I still feel the same way. I really don't see why children have to be bused clear across the city, especially young children. I feel the same.

**WILDING:** Is there anything else that you want on record, regarding this?

**SWEENEY:** Well, I guess just from the whole thing, I still feel badly that South Boston has this stigma attached to it. I just don't feel that it's fair or deserved. People have an opinion of us, as South Bostonians, especially the people that grew up there, and it's not deserved.

**WILDING:** Okay.

**END OF INTERVIEW**