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Oral History Interview of Kirsten Alexander (OH-040)

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Oral History Interview of Kirsten Alexander

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Interview Summary

Kirsten Alexander, who grew up in Jamaica Plain and Brookline, Massachusetts, during the 1970s, discusses the racial climate in the Boston Public Schools during that time period. The interview covers her family's community activism and support of desegregation; the experiences of her adopted brother, who was African American; the racism that she saw in some of the Boston Public Schools; the importance of living in a diverse society; and her hopes for the future of the Boston Public Schools.

Subject Headings

Alexander, Kirsten, 1969-

Boston (Mass.)

Boston Latin School (Mass.)

Busing for school integration

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

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This interview took place on February 22, 2005, at Suffolk University Law School's
John Joseph Moakley Law Library.

Interview Transcript

LAURA MULLER: Today is February 22, 2005, and we're here at the Suffolk Law School doing an interview for the Moakley Archives Oral History Project. The interview is with Kirsten Alexander. Kirsten, would you just tell us a little bit about yourself, where you're from, that kind of thing?

KIRSTEN ALEXANDER: Sure, I'm originally from Boston, I'm thirty-six years old, and I'm a marketing and editorial consultant. I've had my own business for about four years, and I moved back to Boston in 1995, after being away for school and graduate school.

MULLER: So you grew up in Boston?

ALEXANDER: Mm-hmm.

MULLER: What neighborhoods did you live in?

ALEXANDER: Well, let's see, when I was about—just a few months old, my parents moved to Roxbury and we lived there until our house was being torn down for urban renewal. My parents got bought out and bought a house in Jamaica Plain [JP]. My parents got divorced and my dad moved to Brookline eventually, so I spent some time there and ended up high school there, or finished high school, but stayed in JP. I now live in Dorchester.

MULLER: Okay. Where did you start school? What was the first school that you attended?

ALEXANDER: I started at the Dennis C. Haley School in Roslindale, which was a—I didn't realize it at the time, but I found out a couple of years ago that it was a math and science magnet school.¹

MULLER: What neighborhood were you living in when the Garrity decision² that required forced busing was made?

ALEXANDER: We were living in Jamaica Plain.

MULLER: Did you live in—you didn't live in the same neighborhood for your whole education.

ALEXANDER: Well, I did—I did.

MULLER: You did.

ALEXANDER: Until I left Boston.

MULLER: Okay. So the first school was the math and science magnet school. What other schools did you go to?

ALEXANDER: Then I got into the advanced placement classes and they made you jump around for those. For fifth grade—so I was at the Haley from kindergarten through fourth grade, and then at the Dennis C. Haley—sorry, the James Hennigan for fifth grade, then at the Martin

¹ 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.)

² 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>)

Luther King for sixth grade, also the advanced work classes, and then at Boston Latin School for seventh, eighth and ninth grade. Then I left to go to Brookline High School.

MULLER: So you chose those schools? Well, not chose them, but they were based on the fact that you were in the advanced placement program. That's why you—

ALEXANDER: Right. The reason we ended up—my brother is three months younger than I am, and he's African American. He's adopted. And I'm white, and we had a very hard time finding a school that would take both of us. Originally we wanted to go to the Trotter School, which was where all the kids on our street were going, but when we signed up they decided that our race would be assigned based on the race of the parents. Then when my brother got there, they said, No, he's not white, so he can't come here. So we had to scramble and find another school. I think I was at the Haley at that point. So he went to a neighborhood school for a week and then ended up at the Haley. But we couldn't go to the Trotter because both of us couldn't get in and my parents obviously wanted us to be together.

MULLER: Yeah. And that was your mother—or both parents—

ALEXANDER: And my dad.

MULLER: How old were you and what grade were you in when busing started?

ALEXANDER: I was five and starting first grade.

MULLER: So it was at the very beginning. Were you bused as part of the program? Were you bused to another school?

ALEXANDER: The magnet schools, everybody was bused to anyway, so we had already been bused for kindergarten. I was bused all throughout my school career, but it wasn't like they said, Sorry, you can't go to this school anymore, you have to go to a different school. But we certainly were on a bus.

MULLER: Do you remember what the first day of school was like after they started busing?

ALEXANDER: No, I mean, there was—we had a fantastic principle, Mr. Barry, and he knew every kid in the school. Our school was sort of in a weird place. It's not in a residential neighborhood. It's right on the highway. It's not a place where people would go and demonstrate, necessarily. So I don't remember anything special about the first day of school. I was probably more excited just because it was the first day of school, generally. (laughs)

MULLER: Did you have neighborhood friends that were going to that school, too?

ALEXANDER: No.

MULLER: You didn't?

ALEXANDER: No, they all went to the Trotter School, which was tough on us because all of our friends were going to a different school.

MULLER: Did they experience any busing or anything like that that you know of?

ALEXANDER: Well, we all did to the same degree. The Trotter was also a magnet school. It was an arts and music magnet school.

MULLER: Did you lose contact with any of your friends because of going to a different school than them?

ALEXANDER: No, we were such little kids, and they lived on our street or were close family friends so we still saw them.

MULLER: So you had a brother who was in the school system, too.

ALEXANDER: Right.

MULLER: He's the only other sibling?

ALEXANDER: No, then I have a younger sister who's five years younger, and she ended up at the Trotter when she entered the public schools.

MULLER: Was the experience hard on your brother, do you think?

ALEXANDER: Yeah. Not so much at the Haley, but once we were at different schools, and certainly once he got to Latin School, his experience as an African American boy in a white family was extremely hard on him. The racism that he experienced was very different from what I experienced.

MULLER: How did your parents feel about the busing issue, considering that they had a racially mixed family?

ALEXANDER: Well, they certainly felt it was important to have racially mixed schools. We knew Charlie Glenn,³ who was one of the people who wrote the desegregation plan, so our neighborhood I think was pretty supportive of desegregation. And my parents went to information sessions to find out what was going on and I know my mother was really angry at the behavior of a lot of the other parents who would march into meetings and disrupt them. Obviously the attacks on children in buses were really scary for us so our family avoided certain neighborhoods in the city for a very long time. We didn't go to South Boston; we didn't go to Charlestown because we felt that it wasn't safe.

MULLER: Were those places you had been familiar with before the situation?

³ Charles Glenn is a professor at Boston University who from 1979 to 1991 served as director of urban education and equity efforts for the Massachusetts Department of Education where he oversaw the administration of state funds for magnet schools and desegregation and was responsible for the nation's first state bilingual education mandates. (from the Boston University website, <http://www.bu.edu/uni/faculty/profiles/glenn.html>)

ALEXANDER: Not really. We'd done a little bit of tourist stuff. We'd gone to Castle Island in South Boston, we'd gone to the Bunker Hill Monument, to the [USS] *Constitution*. The only other times that I remember going to those neighborhoods when I was a kid was when we had swim meets, and that was always a group of us.

MULLER: Were they [her parents] involved in anything outside of just the meetings and things like that? Did they get involved in any groups in the community?

ALEXANDER: Yeah, they were very active in the community. That was why they moved to Roxbury. They were—my dad was working on Model Cities, I think as a staff person, while he was in graduate school. I think my mother was on the board, of maybe Model Cities or something else like that. They were very active in the community, and still are very active in the community.

MULLER: What is Model Cities?

ALEXANDER: It was a program that brought urban planning into the neighborhoods so that community residents were coming up with the vision for what they wanted for their neighborhoods rather than it coming from the top down.

MULLER: So that played into their opinions of the busing and desegregation?

ALEXANDER: Yeah, and it also—I mean, it's very strange for a white family to move to Roxbury in 1969. It was a volatile time, but they actually felt safer in Roxbury than where they had been living in Cambridge because they knew a lot of people and people knew them, and it's true, we were fine.

MULLER: Do you think they would have felt the same way if they hadn't had a child who could have been a target for some kind of hatred?

ALEXANDER: (pauses) I think it was certainly more personal, but they were—(pauses)—they were really working for social justice, so I don't think they would have felt dramatically different. And the parents in our neighborhood, it seemed like, felt the same way, even when they just had white kids. So we had a lot of friends with interracial families, particularly through adoption.

MULLER: So there wasn't really any tension in your neighborhood?

ALEXANDER: I don't think so. There was one family on our block that we—we lived on a tiny dead end street, and one family sent their kids to parochial school. I don't think they were supportive of busing. Everybody else sent their kids to the public schools, at least in the beginning and at least with our generation of kids, and my sister's generation I mean, it's only five years later, but several of them ended up in private school.

MULLER: Did your parents' feelings influence your feelings? Did you basically feel the same way they did?

ALEXANDER: Well, I lived through it as a student, so I think it's different than as a parent. I've been to a number of these busing events and most of the people there, almost all of the people there, have been the parents, and they still have this huge amount of resentment and anger at what was quote/unquote "done" to them. I don't think that's true for the kids. I think it's a very different thing that we went through. For me, I don't know how much of what happened to my brother, in terms of racism, we shared with our parents. In that sense it was different. But I certainly agreed that busing and the goals of busing were positive.

MULLER: Did you witness or experience any violence being on a bus, going to school everyday?

ALEXANDER: Yeah. When I was in sixth grade at the King School we were driving through Roxbury and a kid, a black kid, actually, threw a rock at our bus and it went through the window, shattered the window right in front of me. It was a really sunny day, and I remember the shards

of glass landing on my friend Tommy's head. He had an Afro at the time. It was this sparkly, almost diamonds, all over his head. We had all ducked. It was terrifying. It's funny, his mother doesn't remember that happening. She insisted that it never happened, but I have such a clear memory of it. I knew at the time it wasn't us per se, it was just sort of residual anger, and that's what you do when you see a school bus, you throw rocks at it. Which is a horrible thing to have happen.

I think what was more difficult for me were the assumptions that if I was white, I was racist. That happened to me once. I sat down on the bus next to a white kid instead of a black kid, and the black kid said, "Oh, you're a racist because you wouldn't sit next to me." And the white kid that I sat down next to was a neighbor and he said, "You don't know what you're talking about. Her brother's black. She's not a racist." And the guy was like, "Oh, okay, sorry."

Or the racist behavior by teachers, particularly, or actually only, at Latin School. The institutional racism that I saw at the King School where we were racially mixed advanced placement kids who were only there for a year—the rest of the kids were stuck in this horrific school that had a gym where the boards were poking up. You couldn't run around in the gym; you would trip over the floor. No space to play outside except what was covered—the parking lot. Staff that didn't care very much for them. You got the sense that they were just being written off. We were the special kids, we were gonna go to Latin School, we were gonna do well, we were gonna go to college. And we were white.

MULLER: So you noticed the differences between—

ALEXANDER: Absolutely.

MULLER: I can imagine that having an effect on the way you saw it. Did you deal with any blatant opposition to the way you feel from people who were against it? Did you ever have any confrontations or anything like that with anyone?

ALEXANDER: (pauses) No, I think by the time I really met a lot of other kids who were maybe from families who opposed busing it was at Latin School, and I think they knew enough not to talk about it. I think a lot of people, a lot of kids left. The people who were really opposed to it, they just left Boston, or they left the public schools. So there was actually probably a lot less anger within the schools themselves than you might think.

There were racist incidents. Latin School was heavily Irish Catholic, and I'm not Irish or Catholic, and that could feel intimidating sometimes, like around St. Patrick's Day. There was a lot of pressure to wear green, and Irish pride. Some of that to me represented the bad stuff that had happened earlier. I never felt comfortable with that. I saw kids saying anti-Semitic things. You certainly heard racist things. I think I once got slapped by an African American girl in gym class for really no reason, except maybe that I was white. I don't know.

MULLER: Do you remember how old you were when that happened?

ALEXANDER: Seventh or eighth grade, I think. I mean, the school system still had all of this residual—(pauses)—racism. Blacks could get in in higher numbers, but they didn't get any extra help. Literally my brother went up to the teacher after class and said, "I didn't understand this. Can you help me?" and he said, "If you didn't understand it the first time, you don't belong here." Just no support.

MULLER: Whereas a white student, they would help them.

ALEXANDER: I don't know, but certainly it wasn't encouraging. You had lower test scores to get in, so you probably needed extra help, but there wasn't any. And so as a result, by senior year, there were very few African American students left.

MULLER: Do you think that was as a result of the administration, or do you think it was just the teachers personally having issues?

ALEXANDER: I think it was mostly the teachers. Teaching in Latin School is a plum job. You get there because you have a lot of seniority, and you don't want to see kids fighting, so you go to Latin. But a lot of the teachers, to me, seemed very burnt out. They didn't have that spark, or they just didn't care that much. They weren't—maybe they had started out as good teachers but they weren't particularly good teachers anymore. (laughs) Anything that was going to be extra effort they didn't want anything to do with.

But we also had an instance where my parents went in for a parent-teacher meeting, and they were sitting in the room when the teachers were talking about my brother. One of them used the n-word, not realizing that my white parents were my black brother's parents and were of course shocked when my dad stood up and confronted the teacher. That was sort of the feeling at the school at the time.

MULLER: How did the teacher react to that?

ALEXANDER: Oh, they were mortified, I think. They should have been mortified at what they said, but they were more mortified that the parent was there.

MULLER: Do you think the anger on the part of the teachers was—could be contributed to busing? Do you think that made it worse? Or do you think—?

ALEXANDER: Well, I heard teachers talk about how they were there the first day at South Boston High School, or Charlestown High School, and they'd been through a lot and I don't think most of them were racist, but they certainly were angry at what had happened to the school system because there had been enormous changes. At that point, they were close to retirement and they just wanted to end their days teaching as soon as they could. I think there was, like everywhere else in society, there were some who were racist, or racist to some degree, whether they knew it or not.

MULLER: Did you notice any media around ever during your schooling?

ALEXANDER: Not really. We were out in Roslindale (laughs), so it didn't really come to us, I think. We had a quiet school that was integrated. My brother and I were not the only siblings that were black and white, for instance. There were lots of kids of all different backgrounds who wanted to be there because it was a good school. (inaudible)

MULLER: Do you think the whole program was a good solution to try and end the de facto segregation that existed?

ALEXANDER: I think—was it a good solution? I don't think there was much choice at the time. The city council and the school committee really didn't do anything, so it ended up falling back into the lap of the court, and they came up with a plan that—the plan they came up with was the plan they came up with. There was a short period of time to implement it, and it didn't go very well. People were upset. But I think—I don't know how the schools are today as much, but I certainly had a good experience there. It was integrated. It made a big impact on my life being in integrated schools. (pauses) A really big impact on my life.

MULLER: Do you think it had the same effect on your siblings? Was there any sort of evolution in the process that you saw, given that your sister was five years younger than you? Do you think you had the same sort of experiences?

ALEXANDER: (pauses) Because my brother and I were the same age—I mean, we were like twins—I saw what happened to him much closer than she [her younger sister] did. But in terms of being in a school that was integrated I think we had similar experiences. It allowed us to get to know other kids as kids, with all sorts of backgrounds. I learned about kids with different religions. Like Jehovah's Witnesses. We had a girl who was a Jehovah's Witness, and she couldn't participate in any of the holiday celebrations we had. So that was an eye-opener for me because I didn't know anything about that. Even meeting friends who were Catholic and hearing about confirmation, and going home and saying, "Why can't I get a confirmation?" (laughs) I think those were all really important. And then knowing kids who were—who came from immigrant families from all over. Kids who spoke Spanish at home, kids who spoke Russian at

home. And then also just kids from all the different neighborhoods, just mixing it up. It was great.

MULLER: So that, sort of, end of the whole busing/desegregation is what you and your parents hoped would be achieved?

ALEXANDER: Yeah, I think we all benefit by living in a desegregated and really blended society. We're becoming more and more that way, and the more of us that are comfortable with it, the better off we are. (pauses) I worry about the trends of people who have the means living in communities that are very isolated and just hold people like themselves, who look like themselves, who have the same kind of backgrounds. I think it's kind of stifling, really.

And I've made a point of living in communities where my brother can come to visit me and I don't have to worry about the police stopping him on the street. I saw that in Brookline when I moved in with my dad in tenth grade because I wasn't happy at Latin School and went to Brookline High School, which was worlds better for me. But the first day of school at the end of the day I said, "There's something weird." And I just couldn't put my finger on it at first and then I realized that there had only been a very small number of black kids in my classes, and mostly the same kids. And I was in the advanced classes, or the honors classes, or whatever, and it wasn't until I went into classes that were not tracked, hard classes that there were more minority kids. I just felt really weird, like this just isn't right.

MULLER: Do you think this had something to do with the fact that schools weren't racially mixed, and they weren't—

ALEXANDER: Well, Brookline is one of the Metco⁴ schools, so it has quite a few students from Boston who are minorities, but they weren't being placed into the honors classes. And you can debate why that was happening, but I don't think it was because they were dumb. (laughs)

⁴ 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.)

To me, I felt that school was an integrated place, and to be in a classroom that wasn't integrated just felt awkward to me.

MULLER: So you have a daughter who is very young.

ALEXANDER: Yes, she's almost two.

MULLER: How do you feel about her education, and being educated in the Boston Public Schools?

ALEXANDER: Well, it's a tricky situation. I mean, you want what's best for your kid, and I've seen many people that I know have kids leave the city, sort of the trend. The assumption, really. As soon as I got pregnant, people started asking me when I was moving. This isn't—the perception is that this isn't a place to live if you're middle class or wealthy, and you have kids. Or you send them to private school or parochial school, but God forbid you should send them to public schools. What a disaster [said sarcastically]. When in fact I've done enough work with the schools that I know there are plenty of good schools. And I also know the schools that people think are good, like Latin School, aren't necessarily good, from firsthand experience.

If we stay in Boston, we will certainly look at the public schools for our daughter, who is showing every indication of being really bright. I think now, just as it was then, the people who understand the system, understand when the deadlines are and which schools are the good schools, that they end up working the system pretty well, but it's a lot of work. My mom volunteered at our school, and then became a paid parent coordinator eventually when we were little, and I can see that happening again with us.

I've also watched the charter school movement really closely and I volunteered with kids in one of the charter schools, so I see that as a really promising development, even though it's not the liberal thing. I don't really care, whatever is—it seems like the public schools in cities all over the country have been deserted by the middle class and that the teachers unions are not generating enough energy, and principals can't get enough done to really make the changes that

need to be done, but that charter schools and some private schools like the Epiphany School in Dorchester have made *huge* strides with kids that in the public schools would have been written off.

MULLER: What kind of work did you do with the public schools? Was it just volunteer work?

ALEXANDER: There's a school right near where I live that needed community support for some grants that it was doing and also for fairs and things like that, so I volunteered at the science tables. We were giving out worms and seeds. The kids were planting seeds. Things like that. Also I was on the committee to help raise some money for the school. And then through my work, I work for a national children's foundation. We met repeatedly with the superintendent's office with a parent organizing group called BPON [Boston Parent Organizing Network], so we saw a lot about what was going on in the schools, talked to a lot of people involved in those things. Then I track what's going on with test scores, charter schools, all that stuff.

MULLER: Have you worked with any children that are in the public schools? You said you worked with some charter school kids. Do you know anything about their experiences in the public schools?

ALEXANDER: Sure. There are several kids in the religious education program at our church who are at Latin School now and other Boston Public Schools, so I'm teaching that program right now. Actually, we're doing oral histories. (laughs) So I talk with them about their experiences, and their parents.

MULLER: Have any of them been bused, or—? Because they're still doing it now.

ALEXANDER: Sure, I mean, this is a big gaping wound that is still really fresh for a lot of people. (pauses) Yes, many of them have to take buses. (pauses) The busing term is so loaded in a lot of ways. Do you call it desegregation, do you call it busing, is it forced busing, all of that stuff. I think the reality is, until you have enough good schools in the neighborhoods, that people

are going to want to get bused—in our neighborhood they finally built a couple new schools, but they hadn't built anything in years, and we have the most kids in the whole city. There was no way for all of the Dorchester kids to go to school in Dorchester. There just isn't any way.

MULLER: So you think it's still hard for students today to deal with the kinds of things that people were dealing with when you were in school?

ALEXANDER: Well, the schools have changed a lot. They're so heavily minority now. A lot of people who could afford to leave the system did, and so what you're left with is, in most cases, schools that don't have a lot of parental involvement, or the parents need a lot of help being involved. If you're like our neighbors, and you come from Cape Verde, and you didn't go to school yourself, you don't really know what to ask for. Versus if you're my parents and you have master's degrees from Harvard. (laughs)

MULLER: So do you—?

ALEXANDER: You should push. (laughs)

MULLER: Do you think it's too different to compare now to then?

ALEXANDER: (pauses) I think that so many people have written off the public schools that it's just a whole different animal now. A lot of white parents who try the public schools end up in private schools eventually. Or they start off in parochial school and end up in Latin School. It's this shuffling of resources. I did actually visit one of the public schools for work. I was interviewing a French teacher who had won an award, and sat in on her class in the first week of school a couple years ago. She was fantastic. A wonderful teacher. But there weren't enough chairs in the classroom for all the kids to sit in. It was just shocking to me how many kids were in that class. And the assumption was that there would be attrition and the kids would leave, but what kind of message does that send to a child that you literally don't have a seat?

I think there were other things besides busing. Proposition 2 ½, I remember that very clearly, when that happened, because all of a sudden we no longer were given pencils and paper. We had to bring our own.

MULLER: So Proposition 2 ½ was to—?

ALEXANDER: It limited the amount of money the city could tax people on for services, for property taxes, so immediately there were cuts in services all throughout the city. The redlining that happened also had a big impact on people moving, to the point where I think people—white people became afraid of black people moving into their school, moving into their neighborhood because they figured that that meant their property values were going to decline and be erased.

It's sort of layers on layers of things. There's racism. I still hear it, my husband still hears it if he goes to the bar, the white bar, or the white barber shop. He'll hear the most atrocious things said, to the point where he's said to the proprietor, "I'm gonna leave, and I'm not gonna come back, if I keep hearing this stuff."

But I think there's hope. I think the city in the last ten years since we've been back has changed a lot. A lot of new people are there, a lot of young families are trying. If you get enough people, then it'll turn around.

MULLER: Are you glad that you came back after being away?

ALEXANDER: Oh, yeah. It's been exciting to be part of the revitalization of Dorchester and to see change happen. Not just in the physical space but in people's brains. And to try to bring back a positive look on the future rather than a beaten-down feeling about the past.

MULLER: Do you have any last, final comments you want to make about the issue?

ALEXANDER: I think the main lesson to be learned is that there has to be a lot of discussion and a lot of community process, and that the government shouldn't get in the way of that. And I

don't mean the federal government, I mean the city government, which definitely got in the way. They knew this was coming, and they just didn't want to deal with it. They didn't want to put their political heads on the line. That was a big mistake, so I hope that doesn't happen again. I think people learned from that.

MULLER: Yeah. So you want to sort of carry on the whole revitalization thing and you want to keep your daughter involved.

ALEXANDER: Yes. I feel that—my daughter's already been to rallies. (laughs) We were big supporters of gay marriage, and we went down to the state house, and she was out there, you know, a tiny little baby, she's there holding a sign. (laughs) I think it's important to stand up for what you believe in and follow through, and I'm proud of my parents for sending us to the public schools even when it was tough. Not that they had a lot of choice, because they didn't have a lot of money back then. (laughs) (pauses) I didn't talk about it but I have a stepbrother also who's older, and he was at a local middle school, not bused, and it was so bad for him that that's why my dad decided to move to Brookline.

MULLER: So then he ended up in the Brookline schools?

ALEXANDER: He ended up in the Brookline Public Schools, and I ended up there. All of us ended up there eventually, actually. When my mother remarried when I was a sophomore in high school, she moved to Brookline also, where my stepfather lived. A lot of that had to do with our experience at Latin School. It just was clearly not going to be a place where my sister was happy.

MULLER: Right. And that's because of the racism?

ALEXANDER: Just the whole institutional attitude. It was a very repressive kind of place. They literally squashed the creativity out of you, and had a mold they were trying to squash you into. (laughs) I did fine academically, but I was just miserable. I lived with my dad for three years, not my mom, which was tough for her, but it made a big difference to me ultimately. It

also gave me a different perspective on what I'd been though, being in a different school system where kids were very liberal-minded. But we were studying apartheid once and somebody said, "Well, maybe we should go on a field trip to Roxbury," and I thought, My God, how offensive—to take a field trip (laughs), having lived there. But I just thought it was shocking that people living less than a mile away had never been to an historic African American community. But that's what it's like when you live a segregated life. You're just not exposed to as many things.

MULLER: I guess we can sum this up now, and I guess my last question is do you see the issue the same way now as you did then? It seems like you've kind of already touched on that from getting the legacy of your parents, and—

ALEXANDER: Really I have no idea what happened during busing. We were so sheltered. Nothing happened in our neighborhood. Nothing happened in our schools. Our parents protected us from everything. But I married a historian, and I started reading things like *Common Ground*⁵ about what had happened during the time I lived in Boston when I was a kid, and a lot of pieces came together for me. I feel like I understand a lot more about what was going on when I was a kid, and certainly the adults and how they've reacted over time.

MULLER: I think that's all we have for today, so thank you for your time.

ALEXANDER: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW

⁵ *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.