

Ursel Brown

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Interviewer: Fulton County Schools Archives, Teaching Museum South, Hapeville, Georgia

Interviewee: College Park, Georgia

Interview conducted via Microsoft Teams

Ursel (Miller) Brown is a native of College Park, having attended both J.F. Beavers Elementary School and Eva Thomas High School, graduating from the latter in 1970 – part of the last graduating class at that school. After graduation, Brown worked with the US Army Recruiters locally and served as a College Park City Council member.

Mike Santrock (MS):

So first of all, thanks for sharing your time with us. Uh, and I guess we'll just go ahead and get started with... Tell us about your background, your childhood, and your family, your parents, grandparents, any siblings. So, we'll start there.

Ursel Brown (UB):

OK. Uhm... My household consisted of four children. My parents, Reverend Joseph and Lottie Miller, my grandparents, Deacon Eugene and Alice Hunt. And me and my brother Daniel, Carl and Henrietta, my sister. Uhm, we all grew up in College Park. My mother was involved with the College Park Voters League. And she was an activist. Of course, she was also with EOA at that time which was... Economic Atlanta? My father worked for what is now... was Macy's, but was Rich's back then. My grandfather was a carpenter. And my grandmother was a stay-at-home grandmother. She took care of everything when everybody else was out.

We came home from school. We had hot meals and there was no such thing as McDonald's and Burger King. Uh, we had chores. Yeah, you came home, you did your homework, you did your chores, and everybody sat down at 5:30 or 6 o'clock and we all had dinner. There was no I don't want to eat this and no TV... everybody sat down at the table.

MS:

So everybody that you just spoke of you all lived in the same house.

UB:

We all lived in the same house. Most of the families in College Park. That's how they lived.

MS:

Yeah. OK, so, you know, I've been to College Park of but I'm not, you know, real familiar with it, and probably most of our researchers and maybe a lot of students who see this and hear this aren't familiar. If you were to talk to somebody who'd never been there, um... how would you? How would you describe College Park while you were growing up at the age you're talking about?

UB:

OK. College Park, the area I lived in, was directly behind City Hall... um, from Princeton Ave.

MS:

Did that area, I'm sorry, did that area have a name? That part of...

UB:

Um, that was Main Street. We were right, we were on the other side of Main Street. In fact, College Park was divided, you know College Park got his name because of the name of the colleges. Conley, Harvard and all of that. Well, you had a West Harvard which was the side I lived on. And then you had the east side, which is over by the MARTA station? And I think that's College Park Presbyterian Church, right there at the MARTA station... that was the east side.

So, it was West side was the black side. East side was the white side. And there was directly behind City Hall.

MS:

So, were there places that you would frequent as a child growing up, particular hangouts or places that your parents or grandparents took you?

UB:

Well, the local hangout for everybody was Mack's Drive-In, which was down at the bottom of Harvard Ave, which was right beside the old Goode Brother's chicken processing plant. That was the local hangout for most of us. Then we had a little area on... uh, Princeton. It was a store there. We used to hang out. And then there was of course Brady's Gym, that was the main hang out.

MS:

Was this a hang out with friends or just your siblings or...?

UB:

Well friends, all of us, because all of us knew each other. All of our siblings knew other siblings. So, it was a community thing.

MS:

So, speaking of community, and since you know we are the school system archives. Um, so our focus today will be kind of on education, uh... that you received back when you were a child. So, let's go back to your first memories as a student. Where did you attend school? Uh, earliest bit of scheme.

UB:

Well, right, I attended JF Beavers Elementary School. Uh, which is now College Park Elementary, but that's where I attended. Uh, kindergarten, yeah kindergarten through the 7th grade. At that time schools went from first... I'm sorry... from 1st to 7th grade. And from 7th grade we went to high school.

Uh, all of us... all of the kids in the community, that's where we went to school before they split us up and half of us went to JF Beavers and then the other half went to Sophie M. Avery, which is over off of Yale Ave, where the old Lottie Miller apartments used to be.

MS:

What happened to those apartments?

UB:

Well, the airport bought up that most of those the property now that you see in College Park, from Camp Creek all the way back to Main Street, was zoned commercial back in the early 60s. So, uh... when the airport took over, FAA guidelines says you can't have people living up under the guide

patterns of the airplanes because, where the apartments were, that was glide pattern for all the jets going into Hartsfield. And uh, on certain days you could see the fog of jet fuel they used to dump.

MS:

Wow.

UB:

So those apartments were eventually bought out like all the other houses were bought out by the airport and they were demolished. So right now, that land is sitting vacant with the possibility of building on it for the new construction thing they're having to do: Six West.¹

MS:

So you saw the development of the airport over your lifetime to what it is now. The growth there.

UB:

Oh yes.

MS:

And so the lot of land around College Park was kind of enveloped into that process, I guess.

UB:

Yes, a lot of it, um... most of their houses where College Park Elementary sits now... all of those houses were bought up by the airport except for a few, but the majority of the airport took them.

MS:

Uh-huh

UB:

I mean they sold to the airport; they didn't take them. They sold it to them. And some of the people, they didn't have house notes. They had house notes. Because a lot of the houses didn't cover the equitable amount for the homes that they had paid for. Some of those homes were 30 and 40 years old.

MS:

So what do you mean when you said they had house notes, but they did?

UB:

Well, most of the people, before the airport bought their homes... they weren't paying house notes. Their houses were paid for.

MS:

Oh, I see what you mean.

UB:

And when they, uh, the airport bought them up, they had to give them a home that was equal to what they had. And of course, they being the airport, we all knew that wasn't happening.

¹ At the time of this interview, a mixed-use construction project was underway in the area of College Park, Georgia, west of the town's MARTA station.

MS:

Right? Sure.

UB:

So they ended up having small notes.

MS:

The, so this development is going on... is it is it affecting inequitably certain people? Like, I guess I'm speaking specifically of Black neighborhoods. Is that where the property for the... was that kind of most of the development from the airport?

UB:

Six West? Are you talking of Six West?

MS:

Uh, I'm talking about. Uh, I guess I'm talking historically, as the airport was expanding?

UB:

OK, uh... because we were so close to the runway.

MS:

Yeah.

UB:

...the fifth runway... uh, and I had served on the City Council. I found out that you can't have people up on the runways. So, the noise level was like... it was over 75. It had gotten so bad you could set your clock about what time certain planes would come over; what time certain TV shows, you couldn't watch. It had gotten just that bad.

MS:

Right...

UB:

So that's why they bought out a lot of the people.

MS:

So let's return to the to JF. Beavers, uh... and talk a little bit about that. What was that school like? What was the building like? We'll start there.

UB:

OK. Well, JF Beavers was really two buildings. We had one that was located where... right across from Brady Center. It was a smaller building for smaller kids. Uh, I think it went up to... the second. Then we had the larger red brick building that was on the other side. We could... we had a walkway; we could cross over to the other side and that building had 3rd through 7th grade in it. It was upstairs and downstairs. Um, the cafeteria was downstairs. Most of your classrooms were upstairs. Uh, we had no air conditioner. It was only fans. Uh, we had I called floor to ceiling windows. We had some big windows. So, in the summertime we had those huge fans and that's what kept us cool. That's all we had back then.

Um, the food was excellent because a lot of the cooks or women that we knew, we had grown up with. And we had home cooked meals. And when I say home cooked... I mean they made bread from

scratch. They made... most of the best vegetables, if they were canned or frozen, you thought they were made from scratch. We just had good meals. I'm not like that stuff we got now. That stuff we got now. No, no, no, no.

MS:

[laughs] Couldn't do that.

UB:

No, couldn't do that did back then. There was no such thing as gluten free... [inaudible]. There was no such thing as gluten free sugar, caffeine and stuff like that. We just had good meals.

MS:

Right. So, um... take us through, you know, I know that you went there for several grades, but what was your kind of your average day? What time did you start?

UB:

See, I think we usually started about... 8:20... 8:25. Um... Our average day went about 3:00 o'clock. Uh... of course, we had to put up our coats and everything and get ready for the day. We had the pledge of allegiance and devotion. Um, and then our teachers would tell us what was planned for that day, that particular day. Sometimes we would have special guests. Uh, but most of the time we just worked.

MS:

Do you remember any other special guests?

UB:

Oh yes. Our area Superintendent. Her last name was Miss Sinclair. She was not a friendly person.

MS:

Oh no.

UB:

No, she was not a friendly person. She would come in and make remarks and say, "Well, you know..." when they talk about careers where I never will forget. She said, "Well, you know, we have some good maids and bricklayers and domestics here." And we all kind of looked at her like, "Oh really? OK." But uh, she would come every other month to see how the schools - quote, unquote - were doing in her area.

MS:

Right, and she was area Superintendent for Fulton County schools, right?

UB:

Uh huh, at that time.

MS:

Yeah, so how did you get to and from school back then?

UB:

Well, we walked. JF Beavers was walking distance. Uh and most of us walked because we were nowhere from the school. It's like sitting smack dab in the middle of the area and we all walked from everywhere. Uh, we didn't have to worry about nobody snatching us because all the streets...

neighbors were on each side, so the kids didn't have to worry about anything because Miss Jones was at work... and her kids went to school, then Miss Allen, who was across the street – that didn't work – she would be watching out. So, everybody had a kind of safeguard... watching out for their kids.

MS:

I remember... so you and I, uh...on one of our previous meetings, talked about the kind of sense of community, and I think it even came up to where a lot of the teachers or uh, just everybody knew each other and kind of, you know, it was almost like... raising children using the village, right? ... is that right, yeah?

UB:

Right, that's right. My third-grade teacher, Miss McCree, lived 3 doors up from me on Conley. And my 4th grade teacher, Miss Hattie Jones, which would later become the principal, she lived 3 streets over. So, there's no saying you're going to get away with something because all she said was, "I'll tell your mother."

MS:

[laughs]

UB:

And parents then, they stayed with the schools. They were in contact with the schools... and they told you up front. If the teacher has called me... because we did have some people think we didn't have phones, but we did it. If the teacher has to call me to come to the school. I'm going to handle my business right there.

MS:

[laughs] Ah.

UB:

You didn't have... and some people might say no, but you didn't have the discipline problems we have now in schools because parents took care. And they supported the teachers. There's something you won't find: a teacher that mistreated the child, especially when you lived in a community where everybody knew you. That wasn't going to happen... and they weren't going to allow anybody else to come in and do the same thing.

MS:

Right. So, speaking of teachers does, is there any that kind of... from your time at Beavers... is there any kind of... stick out to you... as leaving one bigger impression than another? Or any memories about any teachers specifically?

UB:

We had a lot of teachers. Ms. T. Jones, her first name was Thelma, we called her Ms. T. Jones, was my first-grade teacher. Very soft-spoken, firm, but she loved children, and she loved teaching. It was nothing that she wouldn't do for you. Very giving person. Uh, there was Miss Huggins. She was a singer. At any program, she would sing, and she taught music. She was a second-grade teacher, but she taught music. Um, there was Miss Clark... my fourth-grade teacher. No, she's my um... she worked with my 4th grade teacher. Miss Clark was a little short lady. She looked almost like a child. But she, but she was like Roosevelt. She spoke softly and carried a big stick. She didn't have no problems, none. There was a Ms. Rowe. And at that time, you know paddling was permitted. And

she had her buddy... and her buddy was called Doctor Pepper. You did not want Doctor Pepper, because Ms. Rowe would call your parent. And you all would have a meeting in the bathroom. Wouldn't have no problems with... with you know, Doctor Pepper. [laughs]

MS:

So, the... so if I'm getting this straight, the paddle was named Doctor Pepper?

UB:

It wasn't a paddle. It was a piece of leather. And she had it cut. Like um... yeah, like a paddle, but she named it Doctor Pepper and it was brown just like the drink, Doctor Pepper.

MS:

Right. Got it.

UB:

Ah, there was Mr. Stevens. Mr. Stevens was our choral teacher, music teacher. Mr. Stevens was a sharp dresser. I mean he dressed real sharp, sharp, sharp... church sharp. Everything he wore was coordinated. But he loved music. He loved music and he taught choral music. And then there's Mr. Patterson, our band teacher. Ah, course, at that time they were all traveling. Mr. Patterson was really good. In fact, he's still alive now. Been trying to get in touch with him. He teaches at Clark Atlanta University and he's over the jazz orchestra at Clark. So those are some of the teachers that left a big impression on me.

MS:

Interesting. Were you musical?

UB:

Yes, I played the clarinet and the piano.

MS:

So did you all have any music programs back... at Beavers. Did you all?

UB:

Oh now yes, Christmas. We always had a big Christmas production, and we always had it at the gym. We would have a choral singing. We would have skits. Uh, we would have dance and that's [inaudible] We had two big programs for the year. We had the Christmas concert in December. And right before, or either after spring break, we would have a Big Spring concert. And Mr. Stevens, Miss Huggins and Mr. Patterson... they would all work together. And we would have different things. Like I said, choral singing, band... the band would have... we played a couple of tunes. So, it was a big production.

MS:

Sure, you said that these teachers. Uh... You said they were traveling. They would go from school to school?

UB:

They went school to school, yes.

MS:

So, a music teacher, say at Beavers might also go over to Avery.

UB:

Yes.

MS:

And teach there too. OK, that's... That's interesting, because we think now about how each school has its own, you know, specials, teachers everywhere. So, that's really an interesting point. This would have been back around 1960s, early 60s, probably.

UB:

Yeah, the early 60s. Now we did have special ed. Unfortunately, back then you were responsible for getting your child to school. They didn't have buses. So, the parents were responsible for getting them to school. They didn't teach them like they're teaching them now. It was more so, like we had the severe and mild... in the same room. There was no differentiation. Uh, they were all taught the same things. And you know, in some cases, depending on the severity, um, they wouldn't let the child come to school.

MS:

Sure.

UB:

And I don't think they had services going to the homes back then.

MS:

Right, right. So, special ed would have been one that was like at each school, kind of a permanent... Yeah, so did you have any favorite subjects yourself?

UB:

Uh-huh yeah. Science.

MS:

Science, any particular science?

UB:

Ah well, back then it was just one. You had physical science. And that covered everything.

MS:

I see.

UB:

Oh and history. I was big history buff.

MS:

Yeah. Um... So... You know, I know when we're... when we're that young, friends mean a lot to us. Did you have any particular... buddies, friends that you hung out with that you could remember and speak to?

UB:

Well, let's see. I had Shirley Lemons. Her brothers and sisters went to... we all went to the same school. Um, there was Marjorie Ellis. Her brothers and sisters went to the same school. [laughs]

UB:

The Hightowers...

MS:

...who it sounds like we'll be talking to at some point.

UB:

Yes, you will. Who else? Um, Brenda Reeves. Well, her name was Reeves, but her married name is Dill now...and Charles. We were all classmates, so we all hung.

MS:

And was this like, you would go to school together, and you'd play together or after school or whatever. So yeah, again, back to that whole community.

UB:

Exactly. Exactly. Sometimes we would. Some of us would be in the same classroom.

MS:

Right.

UB:

Or we'll be across the hall from each other, but when we had recess, everybody was outside, so... we would all get together then. Then we also saw each other at church because we were all members of the same church, or we were... members of either Shiloh, Lasters Chapel, Mount Zion, Friendship or Mount Olive. So, one way or another we were going to see each other.

MS:

I'm glad you brought up Mount Zion. I was going to... we're going to talk about that in a few minutes. But um... one of the things, and I want to acknowledge this right now... one of the things that brought you and I into contact was the story over the JF Beavers Elementary School. I was wondering when you were younger and going there, or even after you left there, did you have a sense of who Jefferson Franklin Beavers was? Or was that just you know, a name on the school to you?

UB:

No, they told us who Jefferson Beavers was. The portrait hung at old Beavers. It hung right as you come into the door in the office. And that's something we learned day one. Black History Month. That's who we talked about. People in our community, what their status was, and what they had done. And he was one of them. And also Ms. Eva Thomas.

MS:

Sure.

UB:

So we knew why the school was named for him and what he had done for the community.

MS:

What, to you, had he done?

UB:

Well, he worked for the Postal Service, but he was also a member of Mount Zion AME Church, so he did a lot of community work inside College Park and also outside College Park. He was also a... I think he was a mason.

MS:

Uh-huh.

UB:

Masons... my grandfather was a mason. My grandmother was an Eastern Star and a lot of them were in College Park. A lot of your deacons and deaconesses, my grandparents, and their friends. A lot of them belong to the Eastern Star, so um...

MS:

Sure.

UB:

He did a lot. Helped people with housing and food and different things.

MS:

Did you ever meet him?

UB:

No, unfortunately by the time I was of age, he had... he was deceased.

MS:

Right. So, speaking of that. Black education, and I'm speaking specifically now of Beavers, and it's a question... You know that that would have a lot of context here, as an elementary school student... obviously, schools in Fulton County were still segregated by race back then. Did you have a sense as a child, or was your community so close that you were kind of insulated from the fact that you were going to a school that was segregated? What did that mean to you as a child?

UB:

Well, first of all, we knew we were in the segregated system. I mean, anytime you go to school, and you open up a book and it says S. R. Young Elementary or Kathleen Mitchell [Elementary].

MS:

Which were... which were schools for white children?

UB:

Right, we knew that we were second class. They wanted us... they treated us as second class. That was number 1. Number 2, our parents raised us to the point where we were told you'll never be second class. Just because somebody says that about you doesn't mean that's you. You could prove them wrong. You do what you have to do, remember your education, and whatever you dream, make your dream possible. That was... they would always tell us that. And number 3: we grew up in civil rights... during the civil rights time, so we knew about the protests and all of that. And the people I grew up with, we were ready because we had seen how our parents were treated. I mean, during the time I grew up, I knew what it was to go to the colored fountain and to the colored bathrooms and ride in the back of the bus. I grew up during that time, uh... you had to wait even though you're in line. If somebody wanted something and you were not white, then you just had to wait your turn and that's whenever they felt like serving. So, we knew where we were. It's just the way we had to adapt to it.

MS:

And for the record, this is College Park, is part of suburban Atlanta, so that's the kind of the context we're talking about here.

UB:

Uh-huh

MS:

So, uhm... I want to transition now and kind of move into where you're going into high school at Eva Thomas and I was thinking maybe the best way to do it is kind of divide it up into two kind of conversations... and the first being the school itself, which was opened in 1964 according to our records. Uh, so... I think in a previous conversation you mentioned you would have gone to... is it Booker T. Washington High School had Eva Thomas not been there? Or I can't remember...

UB:

No, we would have gone to South Fulton in East Point.

MS:

South Fulton in East Point. Yes, OK.

UB:

South Fulton took kids from College Park, East Point and Fairburn... and part of Hapeville.

MS:

So, this would've been the school for Black students to go to high school in the South Fulton area...

UB:

Right.

MS:

...just south of downtown Atlanta. So, do you remember the kind of... the construction of the school? I know we get into kind of an urban renewal project, which involves the building of this school, among other things. Can you maybe talk a little bit about your memory of that or what you know now about that?

UB:

Well, it was, it was. It was interesting because where the school sits now, like Dowdell² said, there were churches and houses back there. Some of the streets in College Park were not paved. Napoleon was one of them and that's where the school sits on top of it. Um... we knew it was a building coming up, but we didn't know exactly what kind of building, and it was not until later on they told us they were building the school down there. So, everybody was excited because South Fulton had become overcrowded... and um... they weren't going to let us go to College Park High. And they sure weren't going to let us go to Russell, so we had to have our own building.

MS:

So and you knew you would be going there eventually as it was being built. So what year, what year did you start at Eva Thomas?

² Charles Dowdell, graduate of South Fulton High School (Class of 1960) and volunteer athletic coach at Eva Thomas High School.

UB:

Ooh... Eva Thomas with built in '64... '66.

MS:

Did you eventually graduate from there?

UB:

I was a member of the last graduating class of Eva Thomas. We graduated in 1970.

MS:

1970.

UB:

Uh-huh

MS:

So um... we have records and just before I go on and move on to the next subject, we have records about the project of the construction of the school, that there may have been some families that were displaced. And certainly, it's a universal theme with urban renewal across the country that it affected certain people more than it affected others. Did you know of anybody that the project affected... whether positively or negatively?

UB:

Ah well, the whole that whole block... it had Ms. Burton and had Mr. Bussey. Uh, Shiloh Baptist Church. Ah, you had at least ten families on Napoleon alone, because most of the streets used to go straight through. Uh, I don't know if you noticed or not, but when you were at the school, there was a street that had steps on it. That used to be Napoleon and it went straight through all the way down to Virginia. What is now Virginia Ave, toward where Mount Cavalry is. It went all the way down through there. So, I had to be about 30 families that were that were misplaced.

MS:

Yeah, where did they go? Do you know?

UB:

Um... some of them went to East Point. Some of them went, uh... maybe Fairburn.

MS:

Uh huh.

UB:

Uh, they went other places.

MS:

OK, so you start Eva Thomas. Do you remember your first day?

UB:

Oh yeah, it was exciting. It was a big building. And we had to get used to a lot of space. Now one thing about Eva Thomas before they... you notice a lot of the newer buildings have green spaces. Ah, we had a green space in our building. It was a large courtyard, and we had a huge... what kind of tree was... cedar tree, huge cedar tree. And we would have lunch at that. And at that time, they taught carpentry in schools. So, they built tables where we could go out and have lunch in the green

space. On nice days, sometimes we would have birthday parties, or the teachers would set up something for us, or other teachers, even parents. It was a large green space and we utilized it, Um... we had a home ec. center, which will they don't know where that is now.

MS:

Right. [laughs]

UB:

[laughs] ...with stoves and things to cook. We had sewing machines. Business classes had um... typewriters. That's all they had, typewriters. Um, adding machines, dictating. We did Gregg Shorthand, which they don't do anymore either. So, we had different rules for different things. We had a chemistry room. We had a biology room. Um... we had a clinic. We had a teachers lounge. So, we had everything that most of the schools have now. Only thing that's missing is drivers ed. And everybody, they should have never taken that out of schools, never.

MS:

Right. Sounds like a beautiful school.

UB:

It was, it was... it was a beautiful building, and we had a lot of natural light. Like I said, you notice the buildings now have a lot of floor-to-ceiling windows.

MS:

Uh-huh.

UB:

That's where we had our building, I think. On one of the stations, either WSB or Channel 5. They showed you the building. And how we had windows in the walkway. So, we had we had a lot of natural light.

MS:

What was that first day like?

UB:

Hectic... all turned around trying to find my classrooms. We were used to everybody being in the same classroom. Well, we had to get used to being separated, but we were still in the same hall. I might be in Ms. Harrison's Room and Brenda might be in Mr. Dingle's room and we'll be three doors down. So, the only time we really see each other is when we changed classes. And if we were lucky, we might end up in the same class. Now everybody ended up in gym. That was fun too. We had to change out... so.

MS:

What was your... did you, uh... involve yourself in stuff outside the classroom? Did you... [do] extracurriculars?

UB:

Uh, let's see, I was with FBLA. And that's about it... because I was busy doing church activities, so I only took up one. And I was in... oh, I take that back, chorus. I was in chorus.

MS:

Um... So, did Eva Thomas have a lot of extra curriculums, I mean sports? And obviously they had chorus and a music program... obviously.

UB:

Yeah, we had the basketball team, the football team... girls and boys. ... had a football team. We had the chorus. We had the band. We had um... FBLA. We had the Honor Society, Science Club.

MS:

Science still your favorite subject going into high school?

UB:

Yep. Yep.

MS:

So, what did you want to do after high school?

UB:

Well, I took a lot of business courses and I wanted to focus on business administration. So, after I left Eva Thomas, I went to Atlanta Area Tech and took computer courses. Now you know how archaic computers were back then. We had to wire our own boards to make the thing do what we wanted to do. But I did that and... worked for the United States Army recruiters for about four years. And then I went into [laughs] politics... [laughs again]

MS:

So you're laughing. [laughing]

UB:

Of course, I started work in the school system back in '98 because my kids were in school, and I got noseey because I wanted... I already knew how the schools operated. I really wanted to get noseey and see how they operate now, because there was a lot of things that needed to be changed.

MS:

Sure. OK well. Let's go, let's go back to Eva Thomas... is there anything before we move into how the school closed and the events that had occurred around that... is there anything that you would want some students or researchers... anything you would add to your experience at Eva Thomas that made it special enough that you're still commemorating that today? ...besides the closing.

UB:

Well, that's a part of my history and a part of... our community's history. Um... we always preach about we want to learn from history, but we're too busy trying to bury it. History is not pretty.

MS:

Right.

UB:

And get over it. It is what it is. Because you're supposed to learn from your mistakes and that's what I want the youth to realize. Now we're not going to be here always. So, we want to preserve what we have. Everything is special for a reason. And we want you to remember that. And if you can make it better, do so. If not, sit down, close your mouth, don't say nothing.

MS:

So, just for our listeners and our viewers, Eva Thomas was... in 1969, um... the late summer of 1969... the Board announced that it would close the school. Uh, in the face of um... desegregating the entire Fulton County School district. So how did you find out... when and how did you find out that the school – your school – was going to be closed?

UB:

Well, like I said, my mother worked with the College Park neighborhood voters league. And they got wind of some information. Uh, we didn't know anything about it. The students didn't know anything about it until maybe three or four weeks after school closed. And that's when they decided. Well, we'll tell them, and they can't do anything about it. It's almost like they wanted to wait till the last minute so nothing could be done.

MS:

They, being the Board.³

UB:

Yeah, they, being the Board. Now what they didn't tell anybody was they had already decided what students were going to what schools. You would think that they would let all of us come to College Park High. No, they didn't do it that way. All the athletes went to College Park High. All your advanced or scholastically high students went to College Park High. Everybody else was scattered out. So, they had already divvied up, who they wanted, which made it even worse because you know months ago that you were going to do this, but you didn't tell us about it.

MS:

Um... so, how many students, would you care to guess, were at Eva Thomas at the time it closed... entire student population? And what percentage ended up going to College Park as opposed to the rest?

UB:

OK, if I let's say... I would have to say close to 400 students.

MS:

Entirely. In total.

UB:

In total. At that time, you know schools were built to hold a whole lot of kids. It had to be at least four, maybe 425, 450.

MS:

Sure.

UB:

But that was everybody that was in the community. I would say... 15%.

MS:

Went to College Park?

³ Fulton County Board of Education

UB:

Went to College Park.

MS:

Yeah. And the rest would go to one particular school? Or many schools?

UB:

Oh, many schools because at that time you had College Park High, Woodland High. You had, um... what's the other high school? [pauses] I can't think of it now, but you had those two. Oh, Russell. Excuse me, Russell High School. Those three, that's what everybody else was divided up amongst.

MS:

K. Sure... So, I kind of, in preparation for our conversation, kind of put together a little timeline that involves August and September of 1969. This is the beginning of the school year, when this... after it had been announced that it would be closed. I mean, what an eventful, you know, summer, right? We have the moon landing just like a few weeks before school starts. Woodstock was going on in New York. I mean, of all things, the Manson murders are going on in August too. I mean it's just...

UB:

It was a freaky time.

MS:

It was a freaky time, right? Did you have a sense of this kind of thing? The moon? This whole... that that year was so eventful.

UB:

Well, we kept up with everything with the moon landings and everything. Woodstock? It was alright, but most of the time we thought about the moon, but we were excited because we were getting ready to graduate.

MS:

Yeah, yeah.

UB:

That was '69-'70. That was our school year. We had already made plans. We were working on senior trips and stuff like that for graduation and then you throw this at us. We were not happy at all.

MS:

Yeah. Well, so let's talk a little bit about that if we can. So, it's... it's August and a lot of this timeline that I have is based off *Atlanta Constitution* articles that come from that time period. And you've... you've made a donation that includes these articles to the archive. Uh, and so it looks like... there was a demonstration that occurred about mid-August. The *Atlanta Constitution* reported that demonstrators, possibly a few hundred, marched to the Fulton County Courthouse to present the Board with the petition, uh, with many, many signatures demanding the reopening of the school. Were you a part of that, or were you aware that that was happening at?

UB:

In the courthouse? Or did we go to the Fulton County Board of Education building?

MS:

I think maybe you're that's correct. Yes, I may have mistyped it.

UB:

OK, that was on Cleveland Ave.

MS:

Yes, on Cleveland Ave in East Point.

UB:

No, I wasn't with that group. It was two groups. Um... most of the ones that went in that group... a lot of parents were involved in it. The College Park neighborhood Voters League was involved in it, and some of the churches were.

MS:

Were your parents part of that group?

UB:

My mom, my mother was yes.

MS:

Yeah. OK.

UB:

My mom, Mr. WJ Freeman, who the Health Center is named after... he... he was instrumental in that; Mr. Johnny Robinson, uh, and of course, Mr. Morris Dillard.

MS:

So the NAACP was already...

UB:

Yes.

MS:

...on the scene.

UB:

Already on the scene.

MS:

And we are... and you and I are speaking just a just a few weeks, possibly after Mr. Dillard's passing. So, when I mentioned that this interview is taking place in that context as well.

UB:

Right. Right.

MS:

So... it looks like at the very beginning of the school year, they're getting... they're holding a registration at College Park High... and I assume at the other high schools. Um... and it looks like that some of the, some of the Eva Thomas students are having issues registering. Is that correct?

UB:

That's correct.

MS:

And why would they have trouble?

UB:

Well, for one thing, they weren't part of the chosen group. See, if you weren't chosen to go, you couldn't register.

MS:

So we're assuming that there was a list of students names, yeah?

UB:

Oh, it was a list. Oh yeah, because they had already... they had already promised them... I said promised them who they were going to send to the school because College Park High then didn't have a good... athletic department. They sucked.

MS:

OK. [laughs]

UB:

Because we use to beat them all the time.

MS:

Sure, oh so... so, you all did play against white...

UB:

Oh yeah, we played them. They didn't have a good... they didn't have a good athletic thing. Not when it came to us. Now I don't know what they did with other schools, but not when it came to us.

MS:

So, take us through what happened next, after this registration... or this failed registration attempt. So, what happened next?

UB:

Well, they decided that we would do a sit-in.

MS:

At Eva Thomas.

UB:

At Eva Thomas. What they didn't realize was, it was going to be more than just a sit-in. It was going to be a live-in.

MS:

And that was the plan from the very beginning?

UB:

That was the plan. That was the plan.

MS:

With the ultimatum that they keep the school open.

UB:

That's it. That's it.

MS:

Were you there?

UB:

Oh yeah. I spent many a night there... and days.

MS:

Can you talk about that?

UB:

Well, it was, um... that's why Ms. Geraldine Lewis came in. Ms. Andrew Farnell, Ms. Irene Spear. The Neighborhood Voters League, and all the churches. They made sure that we got meals because we couldn't use anything in the kitchens. Kitchens were locked down so food had to be brought in. Um, we didn't have to worry about nobody coming in bum rushing us because all the men in the community... see Eva Thomas then didn't [inaudible] now. So, they could see anything that went on down there... and believe me, they were always down there. Um... we slept on the floor. We slept on tables. We slept on lawn chairs. We had blanket; so, we were taken care of. See, it was the summertime, so it wasn't that bad. Oh, and we didn't have air back then either, so we opened the windows and got a nice breeze. But it was fun. We had a good time.

MS:

So you're actually yeah... How much of this? How much were you inspired by what you were seeing? I don't know if you watch too much TV back then... with all the protests and everything that had been going on in the previous years, did that kind of help inspire your efforts? Or do you feel like this was kind of an independent thing?

UB:

Well no, it helped because we all looked at the protests. We all looked at the sit-ins. Um... so that was part of our culture back then. Um, every time we turn around, somebody was protesting something, so we knew how to do it. Now what we had to learn is we didn't want to have a snitch. And that was the hardest thing because, you know, just some folks. You just wanted to snatch and just beat the snot out of him. But you couldn't do that. It's just like it is now. They would be harder on me than they would be on the other person. So, we had to learn to just keep our cool. And that's where Jessica and Morris came in. They were very soft spoken, um... and he just told us, he said, "You can't do that. They have to learn... you have to learn not to let people push your buttons, because that's what they want. Because they had already said we were beasts... and we didn't know how to act. And all of this stuff. He said, "You want to make liars out of them and that's basically what we did. When we went to the... when we took over his office... Dr. West's office.⁴ We had news cameras there from Channel 5 and Channel 2. Can't remember the reporters name at Channel 5, but they followed us in the office. We sat down in the office on the floor. We ate our lunch, we cleaned up. When West walked in the office, he pretended like we had feces all over his office and we left it a whole mess, and all of this. And when reporters asked him about it, he lied and said he didn't say that. So, it was like they wanted us to act out and we wouldn't do it. Even the day when they came down to the school with, uh... what's his name?

⁴ Paul D. West, Superintendent of Fulton County Schools, 1947-1971

MS:

Leroy Stynchcombe?⁵

UB:

Yeah... Stynchcombe... he came in and he was giving us, "Well, we know y'all some good kids and I've never had problems with you. Know you the first bunch..." and we said, "Uh huh." And you see, they had already told us he was going to come in to say this to us, right? So, he said, "Now you all are going to help us get you out of here, right?" Then we went, "No." He said, "What do you mean?" And he we all just stood up because we were in the gym, and we were sitting in the bleachers. We all stood up now. He had deputies there with him. We all stood up and we walked to the gym floor, and we all lied down. And Morris was the first one they took out. And he had already told us, he said, "They want you to fight. Don't fight them. Just let them take you out." So, they took him out first. They didn't drag us; you know they kind of... picked us up by the arm and we walked. We didn't tussle with them, or anything like that. But little did they know we had already... we knew about their plan. That's why we had a Plan B. And that's why we marched around the building and went right back in... in the back.

MS:

[laughs] So, they... basically it's not like they were arresting, they were removing.

UB:

Yeah, they had, um... West had given the order that he wanted us out of the building. From what I understand, he had called the Mayor of College Park. I don't remember who he was at that time.

MS:

Nolan.

UB:

Yes, Mayor Nolan, pilot for Eastern Airlines. Um, Nolan told him, "No." That was his ballpark. That's his ball game. He needed take... they wouldn't do anything. So, that's what they did.

MS:

I think the *Constitution* reported... and you can correct me if I'm wrong that... yeah... one point of clarification: Dr West was the Superintendent of Fulton County Schools from 1947 to 1971. Uh, and Morris Dillard, of course, with the NAACP. Um... you had mentioned a Jessica a little bit ago that Jessica and Morris had kind of kept the situation. Who was Jessica?

UB:

Jessica Allen. Her name is Mohammad. Now she was the spokesperson for all the students.

MS:

So she was a student herself.

UB:

Yes, Jessica was a student... her brothers and her sisters. Remember that this is a family thing. So, we had brothers and sisters in this thing too.

⁵ Chief Deputy of Fulton County Sheriff's office, Leroy Stynchcombe

MS:

Uh-huh

UB:

So, Jessica was chosen to be the spokesperson and she worked with Morris, Mr. Freeman, my mother, Johnny Robinson and Donna Edwards. They all worked together.

MS:

So, there was an organized leadership.

UB:

Yes.

MS:

Throughout.

UB:

Yes.

MS:

...beginning to end. Yeah, so I have seen in the records and through the newspapers that the mayor of College Park... Do you believe his intentions were to just let it play out and that eventually... I mean, do you... what do you think his motivations were for not interrupting or jumping in?

UB:

Well, [laughs] they wanted to keep their hands clean of the situation. They were already in it. Because they... they were contacting them, Fletcher Thompson and West. They had their meetings, but he wanted to be like, "No, this is your all's mess. Leave us out of it. But I mean, it was too late. We already knew. Because even though it's Fulton County... I learned later that even though it's Fulton County, the city of College Park does have some leeway, because they could have said OK. Fulton County property. The sheriff's deputies are on Fulton County property, but once you step off of Fulton County property, you're in the city of College Park and there's things that we're not going to allow.

MS:

I see. OK... and I should say, Fletcher Thompson was a Congressman, US Congressman from the 5th District,⁶ which was also part... of which College Park was... part of that district. So, OK... so how long were you in the school.? ...and I should, I should ask you... we've gone an hour here or so. Do you still have a little more time for us?

UB:

Uh huh, I have a little more time.

MS:

OK... um, so you [are] in the sit-in. How long was this... you've been removed... you've marched around the school and reentered the school. How long did the sit-in... live-in, as you call it... how long did that take place?

⁶ U.S. House of Representatives. In 1969, the 5th district in Georgia included Fulton, Dekalb and Rockdale Counties.

UB:

So all this... maybe till the end of September? October? Because I think we went back in. I think they opened the building in October. I think we went back in October.

MS:

OK.

UB:

Yeah, because they had to go to court. And um... yeah, I, I think it was October because when we got the word, it was the end of September, right? Middle of the way September. So, I think it was October when we marched back in here. But it was in the same year. It was about... about, I would say, two months.

MS:

Wow. Are you familiar with the... if I were to say, Hightower V. West court case, does that ring a bell?

UB:

Hmm... it's been a long time.

MS:

The name, Effie Hightower?

UB:

Uh huh, that was one of the students.

MS:

OK. We have... I know that there was a...

UB:

I think, her mom.

MS:

Uh-huh

UB:

And her dad sued... Fulton County, because I think she was one of the ones that went to College Park High, and they denied her.

MS:

I see. Yeah so, from what we know about the case... it ended up being kind of a case that encompassed all of Fulton County, which originated at Eva Thomas. And it was obviously the Hightowers versus Paul D West: Hightower v. West and the ruling went to the US 5th Circuit Court of Appeals.

UB:

Uh-huh

MS:

Uh, which is, if you know... if we know our civil rights history. There was a lot of that... that certain 5th Circuit was all of the Deep South, so there were a lot of cases throughout that era... modern Civil

Rights Era... that went to that, and so that case did too... which is I've always kind of thought, thought an interesting point to make.

UB:

Right?

MS:

So, what happened... So, what happened then? So, OK... they decided to keep the school open? What... what happened after all of this?

UB:

Well, they decided to keep it open for a year as a high school. But they eventually shut it down and turned it into a middle school. I think it stayed a middle school for about... maybe four years... before they closed it down again and... moved JF Beavers. The kids that were in the old building, which was the brick building, because they had already closed down the smaller building. They moved them from [inaudible] over to where they are now...and turned it into an elementary school. And that's how it was Beavers-Thomas Elementary School and then they changed the name to College Park Elementary School.

MS:

Yes, so now currently, it is now College Park Elementary School, which kind of brings us full circle. To you, you had just held a commemorative event back in May at College Park Elementary School, site of the old Eva Thomas. And it was called, "Remembering Our Past," and there were, you know, several declarations, proclamations. And anyway, this spoke to me personally, as kind of this community event... that this community has stayed so close all these years later... all these years later.

UB:

Uh-huh.

MS:

And you seem to have kind of been this spearhead of that effort, although I'm sure it's involved a lot of people. Uh, so I just want to recognize that and kind of ask you if we wrap up this story, what do you... what do you kind of take away from your high school experience and that... the demonstration being a large part of it? And how did it kind of uh... affect how you acted... or what you did afterwards?

UB:

Well, I still have a sense of community. And we still get together. Ah me, my classmates and their families. We are still in touch with each other. And we talk about the old times. We also talk about the new times. But one thing we always remember is you never forget your past. You never forget from where you come from, because that's what made us into the people we are today. I still dip a little bit in politics. I have no problem with raising hell to nobody. I don't care who it is, but I know what's right. I know what... what should be right. And we have got to stand up and do what we need to do. A lot of times, things get brushed under the rug because people don't want to face them. Well, after you brush it under the rug, that lump gets kind of big to the point where you're just going to have to snatch it off and get rid of the lump. It's going to be ugly, but you're going to have to face it. And that's where I am now. I mean, it's ugly. You may not want to look at it, but the truth is the

truth. We just have to make it better. It's gotten a little better, but we still do little sneaky things under the table that people don't know about... that we think people don't know about.

MS:

What do you mean?

UB:

Well, let's see. We have programs in [inaudible] and that we don't have on the south side...and that... equality. Um... you give a north side school a program or athletic building or something before you do it on the south side. Case and point, the school that I used to work, S.L. Lewis, they promised them a brand-new building. Well, that was over 10 years ago. You have a building sitting smack dab in the middle of a community, knowing full well that the buildings that you're building now will wipe out every house on that street. You know that. You also know that's a commercial zone now, so the neighborhood... the kids are leaving the neighborhood. Why would you want to build a school there? You should have built the school there years ago, when you promised it, when you had kids to go there. Right now, Fulton County is suffering because they've lost enrollment... because kids have grown, they've moved out. And these huge buildings that they built... on the enrollment. That's the only reason why you want to go from kindergarten to 8th grade because you know you don't have... you've lost the student population and you've got to do something with these humongous buildings you got... or waste money. That's what I mean when you try to do stuff up under the table and it comes back to bite you.

MS:

I see. Well. Is there... is there any... final thoughts you may have, or anything that we've not addressed? I feel like we've talked quite a bit and got a clearer picture of the Eva Thomas story.

UB:

I just want people to be aware of the Teaching Museum South.

MS:

It's this... for the record, the Fulton County School Archives is located at the Teaching Museum. It's kind of one in the same department and what brought us together for this project.

UB:

Um... I want people to... this is a part of history. History should be recorded. And I want everybody that is within the sound of my voice, if you have any... any artifact of Sophie M. Avery, J.F. Beavers, Eva L. Thomas... whether it be a T shirt, a picture of Miss Benton, the principal... even... if you have anything please take it to the museum because this is our history. We want an exhibit there and we want people to actually see that we existed. I mean, we don't have any trophies. We don't have any of that stuff. And we just, uh... a mark in the dust, but we did exist. So, help bring our history to the forefront.

MS:

Thank you for saying that...