WITH GRACE AND STYLE; THE DESEGREGATION OF THE GREENVILLE COUNTY SCHOOLS IN 1970

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To understand or even begin to understand the magnitude of the school desegregation event of February 17, 1970, in Greenville, one must comprehend the cultural traditions and environment of that time and the pervading tensions and fears accompanying root shaking social change. Perhaps only a native of the South prior to the 1970's could know or would feel this apprehension brought on with fears of riots and violence confronting children and the social structure, events that had occurred in other Southern cities. Surely only a black reared in the South, denied rights and opportunities throughout life could comprehend their dissatisfaction with the demeaning status quo and the lack of economic opportunities for them.

Culturally, blacks and whites in the South prior to federal legislation simply did not mix, except in an employee-employer relationship, not at church or at school or at restaurants or anywhere else. Although there were black servants in homes and white parents were content to relegate much of the rearing of their children to blacks, colored people never knocked on the front door, and separate facilities, i.e. bathrooms, were maintained even there. Older homes reflect this with the bathroom in the basement or off of the kitchen. When employees drove the help home in the family car, the blacks, few of whom even drove, sat in the back seat, as they did on buses. In public the races shared no facilities — water fountains, bathrooms, bus seats, lunch counters, movies, libraries, and even cemeteries. If one took the nurse along to a vacation house, much planning was needed to be certain no overnights were involved along the way; hotels that served whites did not admit blacks.

Schools reflected the segregated cultural environment. Under the 1935 Plessy vs. Ferguson Supreme Court decision states were required to provide separate but equal facilities for the races. At that time all the Southern states were spending 50 cents per black child for every dollar spent on a white child's education. In 1940 South Carolina spent 30 cents per black child for every dollar spent per white child, but by 1950 the figure had risen to 60 cents and in 1957 80 cents. In Greenville about $30 per year more was spent on black children than was spent in rural areas of the state but still only 80% of the amount spent

for each white child.[1] In South Carolina under Gov. James F. Byrnes, a three percent sales tax was imposed in 1951 for school equalization, and in Greenville 60% of all building funds from 1951-54 was allocated for black schools.[2] The establishment was moving to improve black schools under a separate but equal goal.

Salaries of teachers also reflected the disparities of the culture. In 1940 salaries for black teachers were one-half that of whites, but by 1957 the salary disparity had changed in urban school districts such as Greenville to about three percent.[3] When schools desegregated in Greenville County, many white parents whose children were transferred to previously all black schools so questioned the maintenance and cleanliness of these schools that they themselves cleaned the bathrooms and painted classrooms prior to the changeover, a concrete statement of the differences in the schools.

Events for many years had been leading to the move to a unitary school system. In 1951 the Greenville County School District had been formed with the consolidation of some 87 small districts from throughout the county. On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court decreed in Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka that public school segregation was unconstitutional, a decree received with howls of rage locally. The *Greenville News* editorialized, "that the ruling in effect is to put the state on notice that segregation is on the way out." However, it urged readers "to keep cool."[4]

In spite of the court order, no Greenville schools were integrated until 1963 when A.J. Whittenberg, a black filling station owner on Green Avenue, requested that his daughter, Elaine, be admitted to Anderson Street School several blocks away from his business. When the black child was not admitted, Whittenberg and four other black families filed a class action suit to desegregate the schools. In March 1964 at a preliminary hearing Judge Robert Martin granted the school board 30 days to reconsider the black students' transfer applications and to outline policy on what it planned to do about future black transfers. Under this pressure the School Board voted to transfer the students in the fall and to assign pupils "without regard to race, color, or creed" under freedom of choice. The court accepted the Board's actions and in July 1964, 55 black students, 18 elementary and 37 high school, applied for transfer to 16 schools scattered throughout the district. A tutorial program for the integrating black students held in Springfield Baptist Church was organized by Sarah Lowrey, retired from Furman University. On September 1, 1964, 49 of the 55 applying black students began to study in 15 Greenville schools. The next

year 226 black students applied for transfer but only 100 actually changed schools. In September 1965 there were 146 black students in school with whites.[5]

During the turbulent racial years 1955-60, the YWCA, the League of Women Voters, the AAUW, and the Council of Church Women spoke up for racial moderation in Greenville with the YWCA providing one of the few places in Greenville where blacks and whites could meet together and probably the only place in the white community where meal facilities for interracial meetings were available. A bi-racial committee of business leaders, chaired by Dr. L.P. Hollis, did much to bridge racial tensions during these years.

In July 1969 Judge Robert Martin issued an order directing the school district to implement the Freedom of Choice plan throughout the school system and to submit an additional plan which "effectively achieves a unitary non-racial school system beyond the 1969-70 school year."[6] The district prepared a plan but under pressure from the Supreme Court, the Fourth Circuit United States Court of Appeals, chaired by Greenvillian Clement F. Haynsworth, ruled that the former rule of integration with all deliberate speed was unacceptable. Schools were directed to achieve unitary systems immediately. Freedom of Choice alone was not acceptable to accomplish this. On January 8, 1970, in the middle of the school year the School Board appealed for relief to the Fourth Circuit County in Richmond. On January 19 the court ruled that the schools must submit a plan to create a unitary system by January 23, four days later and must implement that plan by February 9, three weeks later. On February 2 the district presented its plan to Judge Martin who issued the final order for integration changing the date of implementation to February 16 instead of the ninth.

The School District plan, as accepted, proposed a clustering of schools. The United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare had proposed a pairing of schools with some becoming over 50% black. The district proposed an approximate 80-20 ratio of whites to blacks throughout the county including both students and teachers. According to the proposed plan's statement of policy, "The Board of Trustees does not pretend to understand any such proposition of law or constitutional principle which purports to thrust upon the school children of Greenville the immediate reorganization of the entire school system in mid-year at all costs, and finds it inconceivable that this could be the law of the land or that it could be imposed with such apparent brutal unconcern for the consequences by the highest court

in the land. No definition of a unitary system has ever been provided by the federal courtss, and no method of achieving any such objective, vague as it is, in a large and complex school district, practically overnight, has ever been submitted by the courts," it continues. "No one can say just how long or severe will be the disruption because such a thing has never been attempted, certainly by the Greenville School District, and perhaps by any school district anywhere. There is no question that the cost to our school children will be great."[7] Except for Blythe, Donaldson, and Laurel Schools, which already had black ratios between 19 and 32 percent, elementary schools were clustered. Grades 1-5 were integrated in previously all white schools and in each cluster a previously all black school became a sixth grade for that cluster. Special arrangements were made for rural schools where few blacks lived. Three black elementary schools were closed and one, Hattie Duckett, was converted to a special education school.

On the secondary level black Beck High School became a seventh and eighth grade school, its high school students transferred mainly to J.L. Mann. Black Washington High became a sixth grade school. Sterling and Lincoln Highs were closed in September 1970 when Southside opened. White high schools and junior highs received black students in varying numbers. All pupils who were reassigned to new schools were promised bus transportation provided the new assignment was more than one and a half miles from their homes. The state had to purchase 12 new schoolbuses and eight reconditioned ones. To plan for 58,000 students in 105 schools, transferring 12,000 students (5,000 white and 7,000 black) and 500 teachers, books, equipment, and furniture between February 5 when Judge Martin issued the final order and February 16, less than two weeks later, was overwhelming.

Leadership for compliance was provided by Gov. Robert McNair, who suggested that submission to the court order was the only alternative left to the people, and by Mayor Cooper White who stated publicly, "I have three children in public schools with one more to begin next year. They all will remain within the public schools and will attend the schools to which they are assigned. It behooves all of us to cooperate in every way possible in the implementation of the court order."[8] Mayor White's statement was in sharp contrast to the feelings of many parents within the district. By the fall of 1970 Shannon Forest School had been organized and Washington in West Greenville greatly enlarged as private school alternatives.

Although blacks were dissatisfied with much of the plan because of the closing of black schools and the subsequent busing of black children, support for compliance by that group came from Dr. W.F. Gibson, NAACP leader and acting chairman of the local Human Relations Council.

The chairman of the county Republican Party also urged cooperation, and the local newspapers issued pleas for law and order and cooperation with school officials.

Opposition to the order, however, was vocal and threatening. A group named Citizens for Freedom of Choice, chaired by R.L. Eskew, held a mass meeting attended by over 3,000 at Parker High School, handed out 10,000 petitions opposing the busing of students. A petition against the order was presented by Don Bolt to Dr. M.T. Anderson, Superintendent of the Greenville County Schools. This organization continued to meet, opening an office downtown. They bought a full page newspaper advertisement asking for $5 donations to defray expenses, for letters to Vice President Spiro Agnew supporting freedom of choice for schools, and for the burning of car headlights as a protest. Freedom of choice advocates pushed four write-in candidates for school board elections in February, none of whom were elected. During these troubled days not only was the school board reconstituted and nine members elected instead of the former 17, but a search was on for a new superintendent.

From the Freedom of Choice group Parents in Action, another protest organization grew. Centered around Armstrong School, they favored stronger action against the court order such as boycotting the schools. This group urged the passage of laws to supercede the Supreme Court decision and endorsed Florida's Gov. Kirk's order to his school boards to defy the Supreme Court order.

Another dissenting group, the Citizens' Committee to Prevent Busing was led by future congressman and governor Carroll Campbell. They organized a motorcade to Columbia, claiming some 3,000 cars stretching 20 miles made the trip. After reading a petition in front of the capitol Campbell had a private talk with Gov. McNair. Campbell also spoke at the Greenville-Pickens Speedway where some urged a boycott of the schools.

Still another dissenting group, Silent Americans Speak Out (SASO) was organized with Chester Holmes as chairman. Meeting at Northwood School and at Hillcrest High School and Memorial Auditorium, they refused to support or encourage violence.

Black parents, too, were concerned with the plan. Chaired by Rev. H.L. Sullivan, a group sent a letter to the Board of Trustees asking (1) that seniors be permitted to remain in schools that they were then attending, (2) that at least one black high school and one elementary school be preserved, (3) that there be a black representative on the School Board (neither of the two blacks running was subsequently elected), and (4) that there be an integration of the school administration on the same ratio as the schools. The Concerned Black Parents, as they called themselves, continued to meet. Black attorney Donald Sampson filed papers in Columbia to change the Greenville school board plan while NAACP lawyer, Matthew Perry, speaking at Springfield Baptist Church urged calm and restraint. Black high school students meeting under the auspices of GRIPE, Grass Rooters Interested in Poverty Elimination, charged a deliberate effort to destroy black high schools and discriminate against black teachers and principals.

During these turbulent days threats were received by school officials and others supporting compliance and obedience of the law, and bomb threats emptied schools many days with bomb drills, a new form of the old fire drill. Others supporting the order were the objects of name calling telephone calls and letters, and Judge Martin, who issued the final order and himself had grandchildren in the public schools, was under state police protection. A meeting between school officials and Sara Collins, PTA members was thick with tension and participants reported relief in ending the meeting with no physical conflict. Davenport Junior High School in Greer burned during these days, attributed to probable arson. Seven members of the Greenville County Legislative Delegation, Choppy Patterson, John Earle, Beattie Huff, Herbert Granger, Lloyd Hunt, Charles Garrett, and Tom Wofford, began proceedings in the State House to repeal the compulsory school attendance laws.

Confronting a tremendous upheaval within the district and reactionary waves of anger throughout the county, the school board with Harley Bonds as chairman turned to the citizens for help. With trustee W.N. Page serving as liaison with the board thirty citizens were asked to serve on a bi-racial committee to assist the district in the transition. Clelia Hendrix, Coordinator of Public Information, was assigned to give staff assistance. Dr. Ernest E. Harrill, professor of history at Furman University, was elected chairman, observers said because this task would not jeopardize his employment.

At its first meeting the committee unanimously adopted three principles proposed by Dr. Harrill to insure that all were involved in this team effort. "(1) The Citizens Committee of the School District of Greenville County believes in public education of the highest calibre possible, (2) The Committee believes in obedience to the law of the land and is committed to working to secure individual and collective preferences within legally acceptable frameworks and by legally accepted procedures. And (3) We, as members of the committee, commit ourselves in whatever action we take as a group to work in accordance with the principles for the on-going and continued improvement of the public schools of Greenville County.'"[9] Also at its first meeting on January 30 the committee requested two students, one white and one black, and two principals, one elementary and one high school, be added as ex-officio members of the group.

The committee divided into subcommittees — Business and Industry, Volunteer, Community Clubs and Organizations, Students, Principals and Teachers, and Publicity. With Chairman Gerald Bartels, Executive Vice President of the Chamber of Commerce and members Marion Beasley, a black funeral director from Fountain Inn; James Cox of Greer; and Shaefer Kendrick, a Greenville attorney; the Business and Industry Committee raised $3,000 from business for a campaign entitled "The Important Thing Is Education." An essay and poster contest was held to promote the theme and over 75,000 buttons imprinted with the education slogan and distributed throughout the county. The Chamber of Commerce in a letter urged its members to promote obedience of the law among their employees and asked for assistance in the physical transfer of books and materials from one school to another. Homelite, GE, Dan River, and Cryovac were cited for their cooperation, and Texize sent a model letter to its employees urging peaceful integration. Robert Toomey, Director of Greenville Hospital System, distributed a similar one. Tom Roe, then President of the Chamber of Commerce, made speeches in several churches for the cause.

The Community Clubs and Organizations Committee, chaired by black dentist, Dr. W.F. Gibson, included Mrs. Clyde Hart from the Area III PTA, Virgina Rubin from the Greenville Human Relations Committee and Rev. Ed Hopper, minister at Fourth Presbyterian Church. They were given the task of forming a speakers' bureau.

The Students Committee was co-chaired by Episcopal minister Clyde Ireland and black minister N.J. Brockman with legislator Carolyn Frederick, future governor Dick Riley, former solicitor B.O. Thomason, and students Rita McKinney of Wade Hampton and Charles Kilgore

of Greenville High School serving on it. They arranged a meeting with the staff of the Mental Health Center who led students in discussion of the change at the First Baptist Church the day before integration actually took place. At that time students shared ideas on what could be done to ease the transition and its accompanying fears. Suggestions were made for orientation committees, student guides, meetings of student body officers prior to the combining of schools and rewriting student government constitutions. Students also began to understand the apprehensions and concerns of each other, and steps were taken to involve the Inter High Council in the change over. Small groups discussed the need for more information and the effects of integration in curriculum, honor societies, and graduation requirements.

Jack Powers from Simpsonville chaired the Principals and Teachers Committee with committee members Marvin Pearson, a Greer barber; Rev. W.C. Sullivan, a black minister and employee of Fouke Fur; Jane Satterfield, a district teacher and later the first Volunteer Coordinator hired by the district; and two principals, Homer Voyles and Mrs. Edris Walker. During the entire process of integrating there was concern that faculty and principals were not promptly and adequately informed of events nor their opinions and suggestions readily heard.

Phillips Hungerford, President of First Piedmont Bank and Trust, and Dave Partridge of WFBC radio and television constituted the Publicity Committee.

The Volunteer Committee was charged with organizing the community for actual assistance in the move, with answering the thousands of questions posed by citizens, and with influencing community feelings through involvement. An office was set up at district headquarters and manned by volunteers who determined volunteer manpower needs of the individual schools, solicited and received offers of help from the citizenry, and trained and gave advice to those involved. Within the few days before the changeover over 300 individuals were recruited through the volunteer office and close to 2,000 were enlisted at individual schools. Betty Stall and Terry Walters co-chaired the committee. Members included Palmer Covil, an insulating company owner from Berea, Madelyn Porter of the Office of Economic Opportunity, and Wilma Dohar, PTA leader from Sirrine School.

To recruit workers and involve citizens positively in the changeover, PTA leaders were contacted in each school for a recommendation for a Volunteer Coordinator for their school. Principals were also asked to identify citizen support in their area, to name jobs for

which they needed volunteers, and to use citizens for many jobs in their school during the transition. The effectiveness of the volunteer effort in each school was in direct proportion to the principal's enthusiasm for having non-professionals assume tasks in his school.

A cut-out was published in the *Greenville News* and in many church bulletins seeking volunteers. Radio and television solicitations were made. Citizens volunteered to be clerical assistants, library helpers, bus duty assistants, school patrol assistants, guides and greeters, recreation aides, material movers, telephoners, and tutors. At the district office others manned a bank of constantly ringing telephones answering questions from anxious parents and typing and delivering materials throughout this far-flung county. The art museum and the Red Cross offered their volunteer corps to help; a local mortuary provided hearses and manpower to move books and equipment and on the morning of the first day under the new system hundreds of adults rose early to be at schools to smooth the transition for frightened children. First Piedmont Bank sent many of their employees at 7 a.m. to meet school buses carrying children to their new schools. Even the conductor of the Greenville Symphony Orchestra became a volunteer guide on that historic morning.

Prior to the move thirty women worked in the Area III offices filling out assignments for students, and Furman University fraternity members moved books to new schools during the weekend immediately prior to the transition. On February 17, the first day in the new schools Buncombe Street Methodist Church offered a free nursery for young children of parents working in schools.

A telephone hotline manned by volunteers mainly from the Junior League, the AAUW, and PTAs was set up early in the transition to answer questions from anxious citizens. The questions came frantically and answers found. Where will my child meet his bus? Buses were color coded and pupils given a written bus assignment card. Will the quality of education be lowered? What will be the status of the non-graded primary? Team teaching? Accelerated programs? Funding and administration of Title I funds? Pupil-teacher ratios? What about health standards? Health rooms? They were then manned entirely by volunteers. Are kitchens sanitary? Bathrooms? What will happen to seniors? To commencement? To accelerated programs? To yearbooks? To curriculum? This was not the same from school to school. How will disruptions be handled? Will bus schedules provide for after school activities? How will grievances be handled? How can PTAs be combined? Will accreditation be threatened? The school

district was in the midst of a program to accredit all schools including elementary, and only 72 had achieved that status. What will happen to library books, purchased in many cases by PTAs? To equipment? How will discipline be maintained? What will happen to basketball teams whose season was incomplete? Mann's season subsequently improved greatly with the transfer from Beck of Clyde Mays, later a Furman basketball star. What will happen to track and baseball? To other spring sports? To school trophies? To school clubs? To newspapers and yearbooks? To bands and choruses? Will textbooks change? The questions came on and on. Answers were sought for everything asked, and *The Greenville News* printed a free two-page supplement written by Terry Walters and others answering questions that were posed. Copies of the supplement were also sent home from school with students.

To coordinate efforts and to offer simple guidelines for volunteers in the short time available, a meeting was held on February 11 for Volunteer Coordinators from the district's schools at the district office. Over 100 attended to receive samples of scheduling for volunteers, simple instructions for being effective and acceptable volunteers, to hear Shirley Lemons, Volunteer Coordinator for the Community Action Program of the Office of Economic Opportunity, speak on the human relations aspects of working with people and to receive names of volunteers recruited by other volunteers in the central office for their school.

Teachers, many of whom were transferred, bore much of the brunt of the transition. Only ten resigned in this period. Others returned to teaching. It was especially difficult for the all-sixth grade schools where 80 percent of the teachers and students were new to the black neighborhoods and this less than optimum teaching model. A system of cooperative teaching was worked out for these schools so that students would have a familiar teacher at least part of the day.

On Friday at one o'clock schools dismissed students to reopen on an integrated basis on Tuesday morning. Monday was designated as a work day, and the week-end became the same. Furniture to fit pupils was moved, textbooks transferred, approximately ten library books per pupil shifted, and teachers and volunteers prepared classrooms to receive new students.

On Tuesday morning, February 17, 1970, students in Greenville County came to a unitary school system for the first time. Some buses were late that morning, but the violence that had been feared did not

then flare up. The only pickets that morning were at Armstrong Elementary School.

Chamber of Commerce President Tom Roe praised the schools, the children, the thousands of volunteers who produced what he called a miracle. Attention came from national media. *Newsweek* said, "And even the Southern desegregation story has occasional promising beginnings. Just last week in Greenville, S.C. whites at Wade Hampton High School hung out huge welcoming banners and student government president Bob Lentz met his black opposite number, Alister Deal, with a handshake when some 300 Negro students integrated the school under a court order issued by none other than U.S. Circuit Judge Clement F. Haynsworth."[10] *The Philadelphia Inquirer,* the *Mexico City Daily Bulletin,* the *Greensboro Daily News,* the *Indianapolis Star,* the *Charlotte Observer, The State, The New York Times, The Washington Post,* and CBS evening news all carried the story. Later districts from other regions interviewed participants for guidelines on the successful event.

The beginning of a unitary system had been achieved with a miraculous lack of violence. However, grievances and concerns were still smouldering. Black parents resented the closing of only black schools and the subsequent busing of their children. In April approximately 100 black educators drew up a list of grievances charging that black teachers, coaches, counselors, librarians, and principals were being discriminated against in hiring and advancement. Black students often felt displaced and disfranchised in the new situation. White parents believed that discipline had deteriorated terribly and feared for their children, their safety and their learning. Their fears were reinforced by the policemen stationed at school gates.

In the following November violence erupted at several schools, attributed by some to outsiders. On November 6 Berea High School was closed for a long weekend after sheriff's deputies were called to quell a disturbance. On November 17 windows were broken at Greenville High School, disturbances erupted at Wade Hampton, and at J.L. Mann tear gas was used to disperse a crowd. Three were arrested there, and one black was hit with a brick. Two hundred and seventy blacks were suspended from three schools.

On November 18 a fight broke out at Parker High School with 200 students drawn into the fracas, which was calmed by the state highway patrol, and on November 19 shots were fired from a car at Carolina High. *U.S. News and World Report* covered the story,

quoted Greg Barksdale, a student at Greenville High. "Students are fed up with having to take what's being handed out to them by the white man. We'd like black studies mandatory for all students."[11] In the wake of the disorders the school district appointed three ombudsmen to help communication between school administration and students.

In the long-term, some differences in the schools can be noted. Test scores after integration have risen although whites improved more than blacks. In 1970 sixth graders as a whole tested one year below national norms with blacks 2.5 to 3 years below. In 1980 the average of all sixth graders was near the national norm with blacks still testing two years below in reading and one year below in math. Schools today are integrated in varying percentages. Public access for blacks is accepted and their admission to movies, the library, restaurants and public places is the norm. Greenville and her schools are not the same.

In his statement to the press on that momentous Tuesday in ; 1970, Ernie Harrill said, "I believe that Greenville can never be the same. We did what we had to, but the people have done it with grace and style; and out of it must come something better for all the community. I believe Greenville can be proud . . . and can go back to work to improve our school system with hope and determination."[12]

FOOTNOTES

[1]William Bagwell, *School Desegregation in the Carolinas*, p. 41.

[2]*Ibid.*, p. 33.

[3]*Ibid.*, p. 43.

[4]*Greenville News*, May 18, 1954.

[5]*Op. cit.*, Bagwell, p. 184.

[6]*Greenville News*, July 27, 1969.

[7]Papers from the Citizens Committee.

[8]*Greenville News*, January 20, 1970.

[9]Papers from the Citizen's Committee meetings.

[10]*Newsweek*, March 2, 1970.

[11]*U.S. News and World Report*, December 7, 1970.

[12]*Greenville News*, February 18, 1970.

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Dr. Ernest E. Harrill, Chairman of the Citizens' Committee. Papers and interview.

Clelia Hendrix, Director of Public Information of Greenville County Schools during desegregation, interview.

Betty Stall, Co-Chairman of Volunteers, Citizens' Committee, papers.

Note: There is little information at the Greenville County School District Offices or the Greenville County Library.