

Interview with Ms. Vivian Howard

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Interviewed by Dr. Rosalee Martin

VH: Hi. My name is Mrs. Vivian Howard. I work for the City of Austin, Austin Energy, and I'm also a returning student here at Huston-Tillotson College since the year 2000. It's a pleasure for me to do this interview to talk about the crossover.

RM: Thank you. As you know, we are talking about the crossover as we looked at segregation and integration, so I invited you because you had a unique situation in terms of the fact that you volunteered to go to Reagan High [School]. Let's talk a little bit about your being at [L. C.] Anderson High [School] and then deciding to go to Reagan High and the reasons behind that.

VH: Okay. First of all, I did have one year at Anderson High School, which was the tenth grade, and they were going to be building the high school, Reagan High School. I lived in the community, the St. John's community, and I decided to go to Reagan High School before integration actually took place, before they started the busing, and the reason for me is because it was convenient for me. It was near my home. I was in walking distance, and I had an opportunity to attend activities or ball games, anything that I wanted to do in school, I had an opportunity to be a part of without trying to get a ride home or trying to put a burden on someone to pick me up. So this was really the reason why I went to Reagan High School.

Also, I didn't have a great fear of going to Reagan High School, because by me coming from the country, as they called St. John's community, and we rode the bus every day. We had to get up about five in the morning and we wouldn't get home until late in the evening, but when you arrived to the school, there's a—

RM: We're talking Anderson High now.

VH: Yes. When we arrived to Anderson High in the morning time, it was more like a ridicule. The kids, they just laughed and they would tease us. So really, I was an outcast at Anderson High School, which was a black school, because they felt we were just country children. So therefore it really wasn't a big decision for me to go to Reagan. So that's one of the reasons why I went.

RM: That's interesting, because as we think about Anderson High, we think of it as being a school for black kids and generally had the impression that all kids felt real comfortable there. That's not the case, according to what you say.

VH: Absolutely correct. We were from a total different community. We were not reared up in the East Austin community. We were reared up in the north part of Austin, which was considered back then, 1965, up until, considered country. So we were country children. So we just didn't fit in.

RM: So in that case, it was class that separated you from the other kids, not race.

VH: Right.

RM: We're talking about Anderson High.

VH: Right.

RM: When you went to Reagan, you spent two years there and graduated from Reagan?

VH: Yes.

RM: Did you participate in activities there?

VH: Yes, I participated in the chorus, and I had an opportunity to go to the football games and activities they had in the afternoons, pep rallies. I had a chance to attend those type of things.

RM: Were you with the first class entering Reagan?

VH: Yes.

RM: Did you go to Reagan when it first opened?

VH: Yes. I started Reagan in 1965. That was the first year it opened, and it was four young men, black, and one female, which was myself.

RM: So you actually, five of you, then integrated Reagan when it first opened.

VH: That's right.

RM: When you went to Reagan, then, would you say that the kids welcomed you there? How were you treated there?

VH: Basically, the children, they did not call me names, but they did not welcome me. Also the teachers, the faculty, they knew we were there, but they did not acknowledge us being there, and they saw us, but they didn't see us. They didn't welcome us in at all.

RM: So while you were in class, if you had your hands up, would they call on you? Did they respect you in any way?

VH: Usually no, and I really couldn't understand that. It took a long time for me to understand why they would not call upon me when I would hold my hand up to answer a question, until I just realized that where I am, I wasn't in Anderson High School or Kealing Junior High School; I was in a white facility. So therefore, they wanted the children that were already there, the white students, to shine, and they didn't give me an opportunity to do that. So basically I had a lot of fear during the time, the first year, but the second year I just went through with blazing colors because I realized I had the same amount of intelligence that the other children had.

RM: When you made the decision to go to Reagan and not be bused to Anderson, seeing that there were kids in your community who were bused to Anderson, what kind of dialogues did you all have?

VH: Well, the children who continued to go to Anderson, when I decided to go to Reagan, they couldn't understand it. They wanted to know why I wanted to go over there with the white folk, but I told them it's not white folks that I'm looking at going over there. Of course, that's how it was, but I was thinking about how it would be convenient for me and how I would be able to come home at a decent hour and get up in the morning time like the other children.

Also, when busing came in, I think it was in 1968 where they started busing the children to the white school, it was nothing new to us who lived in the north part of Austin because we had always been bused when we got into the junior high school. So it was nothing new.

RM: As you look back at that experience, what would you say were the most positive and most negative experiences during those years?

VH: I think the most positive thing that I think, for me, is because everything that I learned in the black school was beneficial. I learned self-esteem. I learned positiveness. I learned to feel good about myself, and I learned that I am just as good as anybody else, and those things came from the black community: home, church, school, and the teachers also. They let us know that you can do anything you want to do. They always told us that from grade school on up. And that was the most positive thing in my life.

The most negative thing, I think, is when I did get to Reagan, it wasn't what I thought it was going to be. I didn't realize that I was going to miss my friends so much that I did have at Anderson, or the loneliness, not having anybody to go to lunch with, not having anybody to talk with, not having anybody to study with. I think that was the worst part about it for me.

RM: In that you were in both the segregated initially and the integrated experience, do you think integration was good for our young people?

VH: Now, I have some negatives and positives. I think integration was good to the standpoint if they provided the facilities for our young children, because we know that when we were going to school, the books that we had were normally used books, the materials that we had were materials that had already been handed down to us from other facilities at the white schools.

I really think when integration started, the black children lost the basics, because in the segregated schools, the faculty, the teachers, they also not only academically taught us, they also taught us about being proud of yourself, self-esteem, and being well groomed. That is most important. That is what really has interfered with our young children since integration, because now they think that they can get a job and not have a professional look or not speak professionally. This has hurt them, because they can't understand. They might have it academically, but they don't understand they also have to have that personality and that look for that position. That's what hurt us in integration, because our children, the black children, they felt that doing like the white children was the right way and they forgot about the morals and values that they had in the black schools.

RM: You said that in St. Johns the young people were bused to Anderson High and that because of that, many of them were not able to participate in extracurricular activities.

VH: Right.

RM: So in some ways, having a school in your neighborhood gave you an opportunity to participate.

VH: Right.

RM: Could you just talk about that a little more in terms of how you felt for that?

VH: During the time I went to Anderson and Kealing Junior High School, we had to be able to catch the bus on time. If you didn't catch that bus when it leaves out of the parking lot, you didn't have a ride home. Some of the children, they had parents who could pick them up and take them home, but in my case I didn't have that situation, because my mother, who was a single parent, she had to work, and it was five of us so she didn't have an opportunity to take me back and forth here and there to school.

I always liked to sing, and I really wanted to be in the choir in Anderson and participate in basketball. I liked to play basketball. But by me not having transportation or someone to come pick me up to take me to the game, I wasn't able to do it.

RM: And you were at Reagan?

VH: I was at Anderson one year.

RM: But at Reagan were you able to sing in the choir?

VH: Right. I sang in the choir.

RM: I want you to think about your neighborhood, the St. John area, just in terms of businesses and church and the community. Talk a little bit about your community and how you were raised in that community.

VH: In St. John's community we were a family. All the families that were there knew all the children. If any child was doing anything that was wrong in the community, you could go to their parent and let them know that the child is doing this, and the parent would give that person, the adult person, permission to punish this child as this child was doing right.

I can remember when I was a little girl, they would kill a hog, and that time would just really excite me because you would see all the people in the neighborhood, they would gather around this big fire, and it was a lot of love and caring for each other. When they had tragedy or death in the community of a family, they didn't have to worry about them being there and being supportive, because they were right there. They had so many large families. My mother, she came from a family of sixteen. There were other families that came from families larger. So we all just really cared for each other and did whatever needed to be done whenever there was a crisis that we had to handle within the community.

RM: What was your perception of East Austin?

VH: My perception of East Austin, I really didn't know very much about it because I didn't actually have an opportunity to--I did go to the movies sometimes with my cousins, who lived in East Austin. I think there was a Harlem Theater back then. But I really kind of felt like the children or the kids that I saw basically really didn't want to associate with kids from the country. They kind of teased them a lot.

But as far as East Austin, the community during that time was a clean community and the schools and the churches, so far as it being clean and comfortable, but the children, they really didn't understand about what it does to tease another child.

RM: In your neighborhood you had churches as well?

VH: Oh, definitely.

RM: You just didn't have any schools. There were no schools in St. John's?

VH: We had one, St. John's Elementary School. I went to St. John's Elementary School.

RM: But then you fed into Kealing and into Anderson.

VH: Right.

RM: As you're looking back at that experience, is there anything you wish were done differently in terms of your education, in terms of your coming up?

VH: Well, I think anything that I could say could have been done differently from my perspective, I feel that if I would have been able to really have, I'll say, the opportunities as far as a car, nowadays kids have a car and they get an opportunity to drive and go when they get ready to go and to these high school affairs. I think that's about really the only thing that I can complain about, just not being able to go here and there like the other students. When I got to Reagan, that was something that I was impressed by, because most of the students had a car. I just was impressed by that, because they had a car. But I understood also that materialistic things is not what's going to make you the person you are in life.

RM: Was there anything else about Reagan that impressed you? Would you say the curriculum was better?

VH: I wouldn't say it's better, but I would say their curriculum that they had, it wasn't as if you had that connection with a counselor or with a teacher or with someone that I can confide in and ask what do I need to take and the schedule. You were basically out there alone. I didn't have anyone that I could really confide in. And that's the difference in the black school.

RM: At Reagan you were kind of on your own in terms of the curriculum you took.

VH: Right. That's right.

RM: Did they track you? Did they, in other words, decide that you should go into home economics or put you in a certain curriculum?

VH: No.

RM: So you had an opportunity to enter into the academic curriculum that would prepare you for college.

VH: Right. Yes.

RM: I understand that you did start college.

VH: Yes, in 2000, January of 2000, for the second time. I'm a returning student. I started here at Huston-Tillotson College after I graduated from Reagan High School. I am a returning student, because I did not finish my educational goals, and now I am ready.

RM: Good. When you first went to HT [Huston-Tillotson College], had just finished Reagan, what were the things that motivated you even to think about going to college? Because that's important, too. Why did you want to go to college?

VH: The first thing that motivated me as far as coming back to HT, I wanted to get back into the mode of being with my own people. After I graduated from Reagan, I was just ready to be nurtured, I was just ready to be helped in an environment of the black community. The reason I wanted to go to school and go to college, one year I worked the summer, and I worked at Charity Inn. Charity Inn, that's a hotel that was just built. I was going to work to get money for my school clothes. That work was hard. I was a maid. Right then, after that summer was over, I said, "I'm going to get my education. I do not want to be cleaning up beds and vacuuming floors all my life." Because back then, as you know, the majority of the community, the blacks in the community, did domestic work, cleaning up houses, ironing for white people, keeping their children, keeping their yard clean, and those kinds of things.

So I wanted to be a professional. After I had my first job at Sims Elementary School, because first I was interested in elementary education. Now I've been with the City of Austin twenty-one years, at Austin Energy.

RM: As we think about St. John, did they have businesses?

VH: Businesses? Yes. A lot of businesses now.

RM: In the past?

VH: In the past, no.

VH: So for the most part, St. John was a residential community, for the most part.

VH: Yes, it was.

RM: And the businesses were in East Austin or Central Austin.

VH: Absolutely. That's right.

RM: What was the role of the churches in your development?

VH: Excellent. The roles in the church, when there is anyone in this community, the pastors, the members of the church, they did not exclude anyone. You didn't have to be someone who went to their church.

We also learned a lot in church as far as leadership. I can remember at the age of about ten years old I became the president of the Junior Mission, and I learned so much. I learned how to go through the rituals and all of the things that you had to do. I learned discipline, being able to talk to other young girls. The church was an essential element in the community.

RM: I just have another question, as we took you to the past, I want to bring you to the present.

VH: Okay.

RM: Think about the education system now, public school education. How do you think it compares to public school education when you were in school?

VH: That's an excellent question. The public school system now has really forgotten the basics of education. Our children have been lost. They have fell through the cracks. They have not gotten the curriculum that they need, the basics. Back then it wasn't a thing called special education when I went to school. All children learned their multiplication, all children learned the different English curriculum, nouns, pronoun. I mean, they didn't separate who was unable to learn and who could learn. Now the society has geared on a separation basis, and mostly our black children have been put in the mold of being incapable of learning.

I know from self-experience working in a black school, those children are capable of learning, but the main thing is you have to get their attention and they have to know that you are interested in them. When they feel that you are interested and you are sincere about what they're doing, they're going to do their best. This is what has been left out of the curriculum. Now they just put them all in one mold and that's it. Those who do excel, they're exceptional.

RM: If you were on a task force and they asked you for recommendations for changing the system as it exists now, what would be your recommendation?

VH: First of all, I think in the school system the recommendation that I have that's really important for our children's educational needs is these TAAS [Texas Assessment of Academic Skills] tests, these tests that they give these children, I know from experience when I would have tests at Reagan I would know the answer, but the way it was written, I didn't know the answer on paper. Then when I asked a question, I said, "Oh, is that what you were talking about?" They need to be able to relate and give them the understanding that they need for these tests.

They put a lot of emphasis on testing, and I think not all emphasis should be put on test scores, because there are a lot of our children who excel in creativity, who excel in poetry, who excel in so many things that you can't put on paper, that is unmeasurable. During my psychology class that I took, I have learned that the education and the creativity, the people who have the creativity are the ones who excel most.

RM: The final question would be, do you have any final comments?

VH: I enjoyed this interview, and it's an inspiration that you all are doing it because definitely there's a lot of young people who can learn from this interview and what they really need to learn, that education is there for them and they need to do everything they can to grasp it. Because in this day and time the technology, the skills that they need, they're going to have to have this education on a piece of paper, on a degree. They need this degree. It's important for them to excel, it's important for them to reach their goal, and it's important for them to get this education for the dream that they want in life. They can achieve it.

RM: I appreciate you accepting this interview and also presenting to us a different side of the crossover. I appreciate that.

VH: Thank you.

[End of interview]