

Interview with Dr. June Brewer

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Interviewed by Dr. Rosalee Martin

RM: Dr. Brewer, thank you for coming.

JB: It's a pleasure.

RM: I want you just to begin by introducing yourself and just telling us just a little bit of what's important about you.

JB: Well, I'm one of those rare creatures, a native Austinite. I did all of my education here in Austin. I started at a school, an elementary school no longer in existence, Olive Street, then Kealing [Junior High School], [L.C.] Anderson [High School], Huston-Tillotson [College], and I got my master's at Howard University.

At that time, African-Americans could not get a master's degree anywhere in the state. So that's the reason I went to Howard. And fortunately, when I returned, the Sweatt [Sweatt v. Painter, 1950] case opened the university [the University of Texas] to African-Americans. I told one youngster not long ago, when I was speaking for black history, I said, "I'm before Sweatt."

"What does that mean?"

"Pre-Sweatt. "Pre" means before."

And the little boy looked at me, and he says, "You're so old, you were born in the Ice Age, before people started sweating." [Laughter] So I said, I'll find another segue next time. That one was really getting me.

But that was the significance. In fact, a classmate of mine, Dr. Wilhelmina Perry, and I decided to go to the university, and we were so anxious that we wrote our applications, and mine was opened first. So on the front page of Austin American Statesman: "Negro Woman Seeks Admission to the University." So that's what I mean by being before Sweatt. [Heman Marion] Sweatt, being admitted to law school, went in the fall when law school opened. But about--sometimes I've heard five and sometimes I've heard seven African-Americans--I have the clippings, I think that a newspaper said seven--went that summer. So that's what we meant by going before.

So I stayed at the university and earned the Ph.D. Most of my teaching experience has been at Huston-Tillotson. After graduating from Howard, getting the master's at Howard, I came back and started at Sam[uel] Huston [College] and stayed there until the merger and then came to Tillotson, my alma mater, and started--well, really, it was a merged school, Huston-Tillotson--and started teaching.

RM: Just listening to your education experiences, all of them have been in segregated environments. Could you just tell me something about school? What was it like being in a segregated environment?

JB: You know, sometimes it's difficult. Since you invited me to speak--I tell everybody I'm not the best person for remembering. I don't know, it seems to me I always look ahead. I'm afraid of nostalgia, that I'll look back and maybe see some golden days. When I contrast my college at a

predominantly black, historically black, college and then University of Texas, I had very pleasant experiences both places. I believe I ran into one professor at the university--and I had really extended my degree over a long period of time, I took, really, many courses ,and I ran into one that I would say was overtly racist.

But I had a dissertation--my Ph.D. advisor was the greatest person. I could miss an appointment and call and cancel, and he'd say, "No, you make another." He insisted that I got my degree. I don't think I have ever had a black teacher who was as concerned as he.

So I've had very good experiences both places. I don't know if I always tried to be the little model student. Sometimes I contrast Huston-Tillotson, when we say black teachers were so supportive, and with my own children, too, I have the contrast. I have one who had been tested and gifted, and right away with integration I transferred him to a predominantly white school. That's so often what happens, that we leave the black institutions deprived of these sometimes academic role models. My other son, who was more average in his achievement, I left at Anderson, and the other one. So I imagine many people did that, and that really deprived role models, studious--my student who was somewhat gifted was much more studious.

So I'm a little leery of contrast, because when we look back it's sort of difficult sometimes to be objective. I don't want to ever say that those were golden days, because what I remember, maybe I was over here in a supportive environment in Huston-Tillotson, but when I'd go down on Sixth Street to the Ritz Theater, it was the most humiliating experience in my life. You couldn't even walk up to the--there was a ticket-seller looking straight out at you, but you had to go to the side window for African-Americans and then go up into a little balcony. So I don't want to ever go downtown. No restrooms half the time, couldn't try on a garment. So I don't want to ever look back and say that those were the golden days.

But there were some positives. Now, when I spoke of Wilhelmina Perry earlier being my best friend, her father was dean, Dr. Jones, of Huston-Tillotson and later president of the college. So here I was, a little ditch-digger's daughter, I'm first-generation college, and had I not had this very close friend whose parents were both educated, highly educated, I probably would not have thought of graduate school immediately after finishing college.

That was one advantage of the segregated days, that there was not that class distinction that was often apparent after integration.

RM: You mentioned that you had two sons, one remained at Anderson High and one went to a white school? Which school?

JB: Yes. Now, he started off at Pearce [Junior High School] and later he went to Reagan [High School]. See, Reagan at that time, those schools were-- there were the unpleasant things. I was always bothered by the fact that the busing at that time was all on the backs of African-American students, so it really bothered me that there was not the cross-town busing. Now, later, the son who stayed in Anderson, the school closed and he went on to Austin High.

RM: So while Anderson was still in operation, some of the African-American students could still go to some of the other white schools?

JB: That was the way that it was integrated at first, that you had the choice, and many times the choice led black parents--it was like pulling them out for a private school. Many times I had wanted him to have a more stimulating academic climate, and I thought a private school would

have provided it, but I did not have the funds for a private school. So I felt that he would have more chances for stimulation, gifted courses and that type of thing.

RM: What about his social environment? Was he able to engage in extracurricular activities?

JB: You know, it's had to look back--oh, he played in the band. The band was very eventful for him. Now, that's another contrast that bothers me. When I look back at the old Anderson days when we had a band, I remember Mr. [B. L.] Joyce was our great band leader. In fact, my brother had been a part of the band that Mr. Joyce led. Then he continued with that academic activity. But today that is very much missing in integration for our youth.

I'm on the AISD [Austin Independent School District] board, a community working group that's looking at the magnet schools. I'm one of the rare persons, I hate to see those schools within the school, the magnet schools, go, because that is going to end almost--we're going to almost be back to a segregated situation. The schools in Northeast Austin are going to be predominantly minority once the magnet schools are gone.

At our recent meeting, one person said--I think they're going to end up moving the magnet schools and putting all the magnet schools on one campus, and one person said the band will go with the magnets. And that's something rare to me, that African-American youth are not in bands. There were some Patterson brothers who were also great band directors. That bothers me. I saw the Kealing Band not long ago playing all that beautiful Duke Ellington music, and not an African-American in that band. So we've lost that.

I'm concerned that African-Americans aren't concerned. Why are our kids no longer in the band? Do they not want the discipline of getting up early and maybe going to band rehearsals or staying late, practicing? Do they not have enough money? I think we have enough money to buy instruments, but if we don't, we ought to. And I've always been concerned that Huston-Tillotson did so little in the area of band.

Right now, if you see a great musician, a singer, coming to Austin, so often that person is backed by an all-white band. So it was a loss for us in that way. But really, with integration, the immediate effects of integration, I did not see that.

RM: That the bands—

JB: I saw black kids still in bands at the predominantly white institutions, but I see very little of that now.

RM: As we're talking about education as it evolved over the last few years, what would you say are the major problems facing our young people now in education?

JB: I see a serious motivation problem, and I know I'm a voice crying in the wilderness. Every time you pick up a paper, it's something now about the achievement gap. Schools are wanting to drop the SAT [Scholastic Aptitude Test] because, with affirmative action, our youngsters aren't making the grade. They aren't making the grade of GRE [Graduate Record Exam].

I'm trying right now with a nonprofit that I have to do SAT prep, do GRE prep. I have a couple of students from Huston-Tillotson this summer. Now, if we know these standardized tests are barriers, why aren't we doing more? Right now, with law school, all professional schools, there's going to come a time when we're not going to have black lawyers and black doctors if we don't do

something. But I don't hear our professionals concerned. I don't see Huston-Tillotson really concerned about that great loss. We can't get twenty students in UT's law school in a freshman class. I think this time I kept saying, "Oh, I want to see us make twenty."

I try to be a little humorous about my pessimism about the situation. That summer I went to UT before Sweatt, I was always looking for those other five or six black students because here was this big campus and I wanted to see somebody who looked like me. I tell everybody that was a "set" for me. I'm still, everywhere I go, looking to see how many African-Americans, and when I see that we make only about three percent of the university, our flagship university, it concerns me a great deal, and I'm just bothered that more people aren't.

RM: Are young people going to the historical black graduate programs, the law programs and medical schools?

JB: I don't think they're going to that great extent. And then you have another problem not long ago. Did you see the article in the Austin American, that they were stating the bar, results of taking the bar, ninety percent of the UT, ninety-eight or something percent of students who finish UT, had passed the bar on the first attempt. Only thirty-some percent of Texas Southern graduates had passed the bar on the first attempt.

So I think it's another concern of ours should be, what about the quality of education? What about the motivation? I think we do still have a serious motivation problem with our youth, and I really don't know the answer.

RM: So as you look at the motivational problem that you identify, would you say that during the segregated years, that black students were more motivated compared to now? You said you didn't want to go back.

JB: No, I don't mind going back, but I'm afraid that when I go back, it's that old nostalgia that—you know, I taught almost five decades, and so I have observed. I don't know what to say, because it seems to me that in those years, I don't know, we were getting a better quality of students, because, see, not having predominantly white institutions to go to, we were getting the best African-American students. So I really don't know. But at the time that I was here, I did feel that the quality of the students had diminished somewhat.

RM: You're talking specifically on the college level?

JB: Yes. I have done very little public school teaching. I really wanted to do some substitute teaching, because I'd like to write a book, and I'd like to get out there and feel. I've been sitting in on some classes in public schools, but I'd really like to know what is it like. I do feel that in public schools, as far as discipline, that there's a problem that we in the community should be much more concerned about and do many more supportive things in the community to get the achievement.

Because with the standards going up to pass the TAAS [Texas Assessment of Academic Skills] test, it's going to be a more difficult test in the future, and students are not going to be able to get their high school diplomas without passing that test. So I really feel that as a community, that we've got to get in there and see what is it that might be making our students poorly disciplined and not highly motivated.

RM: When you said "as a community," are you talking about the churches and government?

JB: Yes, and nonprofits. It's been very, very interesting that almost every grant I applied for at Huston-Tillotson College I received. You remember that FIPSE [?][phonetic] grant was one of the most competitive grants in higher education. Some people wondered how did I get it. I kind of wondered myself. But I think the attraction was bringing Hispanic students into a predominantly black college.

I've been writing as a nonprofit--I have a 501(c)3 nonprofit--to want to do things for African-American students, and everybody keeps saying, "That is not politically correct. That's why you're not getting funded." Well, if the achievement gap is there, and they're really many times making it much more prominent for African-Americans and for Hispanics, and because of demographics, Hispanics are getting much more.

For instance, with University of Texas, the system schools are predominantly in Hispanic neighborhoods. UT-El Paso has a program where students go for pre-law. They're prepped for summer, they get \$1,000 to do that program, and many of them are going to even Ivy League law schools when they get through. They are really achieving. I don't see comparable programs where our students are. I called down there to El Paso and asked how many African-Americans were in the program at the time I called. None were there. So I really feel that we've got to get more programs. Whatever gaps they have, we've got to close them.

RM: So how do you get the community motivated? You mentioned students are not motivated. Do you also find that community as a whole, they don't seem to be?

JB: Yes. I haven't had success with--right now with my GRE prep, I don't have funding, and I've been just searching to see if I could find some math teacher, maybe retired, to come over and prep for the math. If we get funding, that person would, but right now I could not personally pay, and I do not want to charge. Anybody can do prep if they want to go out to Kaplan or Princeton [Review] and pay \$1,000, but I want to prep free. I'm not finding--it could be that I'm not contacting, the word is not out well enough and enough persons are aware. But I feel there is some apathy in our community about this problem of an achievement gap. And it is widely publicized.

RM: What is it that makes you want to do this? What is it about you? What is it about your life experiences that have led you to wanting to really make a difference in the lives of African-Americans?

JB: I don't know. First place, you've got to believe we're not inherently inferior. So if you really believe that if we close these achievement gaps, many times students do need a little remediation and they've got to be comfortable to say they don't know.

Now, I have a gap now technologically, so I'd like to trade off. Occasionally I hear some professional people who are having a little trouble with past participles, and I'd like to say, "Come on. Teach this old moron a little bit about the computer and let me help me with your grammar." [Laughter]

And that's something else I say about our public schools. They are doing so little to teach our youngsters grammar, and I see so many of them who are really high achievers, and they have never heard of the rule of when you use the past participle. So I feel sometimes that we can fill gaps. I was thinking about my nonprofit, of filling gaps wherever students need them. I was always weak in math. I did well enough to get the GRE score up for my day, but I feel that we

could do more, even on a trade-off basis, and really not be embarrassed to work on problems where we have weaknesses.

RM: What do you think that parents can do? You talk about community, but parents are the ones who have the closest contact with their kids. What can we do to encourage them to be motivators and encouragers for their children?

JB: I don't know. There are organizations that try to reach parents, but I think they reach so few that--but I really feel that the parents are going to have to do a much bigger job. I don't know. There are people who, I just imagine, with your experience, you would probably be a greater leader in trying to get parental involvement. So if we'd bring all of our skills together, I'm more of a tutor, a mentoring type, but you would probably have more information of getting to parents and trying to reach them and changing study habits and having them cut off that TV and have a room where kids can quietly study. I think we could all just get together and play a role there.

RM: I'm going to ask you this question that is somewhat nostalgic. Do you think our world's in a better place now than it was twenty years, thirty years, forty years ago as it relates to education, as it relates to opportunities, as it relates to how we can gain in this world?

JB: You know, I'm somewhat wishy-washy on an answer like that. I swing sometimes toward--I'm very much concerned about all our black male youth in prisons. So to me that's something that's new. We didn't have that in the past.

Even with affirmative action, I don't think the barriers are there if we--with affirmative action taking race out of the equation, I still feel that if we know we've got to get that objective test score, whether it's SAT or GRE, I think we could do it. It just seems to me an institution ought to see if our--I'd like to see us at Huston-Tillotson and Dillard [University, New Orleans LA]. One of those schools in New Orleans has such a reputation of sending students to medical school. Is it Dillard? And I just think we could get a reputation of getting many of our students into graduate or professional schools if we really made a commitment that that is what we want to do.

So I'm pessimistic to see affirmative action come and take away some opportunities. I know it opened some doors for me, affirmative action, even when it was just a part of our culture, because much of it came in the sixties, after LBJ [Lyndon Baines Johnson]. But I don't look backward so much in nostalgia, but I think as far as maybe respect for authority and many of those things that they are missing now, even the work ethic. It worries me a great deal that employment--again, June Brewer running around looking for African-Americans. When I go into places of employment and see so few of our African-American youth working, it worries me a great deal and it makes me pessimistic.

RM: Dr. Brewer, I've known you for years, and I've always admired your enthusiasm and love for young people.

JB: Thank you.

RM: Are there any final words that you could give to young people, to teachers, educators, or parents, any words of advice, wisdom and such?

JB: I don't know if I could think of anything. I just would like to see us work harder and then work more cooperatively together, because it takes all of us to really make a difference and try to save more of our youth, because it's really frightening now, as we go into this new, technological

age, that so many of our youngsters are unprepared. So how we do it, I think it just takes all of us to do it.

RM: Thank you so much.

JB: Thank you for inviting me.

[End of interview]