

Interview with Ada M. Harden
Date: June 4, 2001
Interviewed by Dr. David A. Williams

DW: Good morning. We're here with Mrs. Ada M. Harden, who is an icon in the media world in general and in particular in the Austin area. She's a product of the Austin Independent School District [AISD], also worked with the Media Center in that area, which she'll tell you a little bit about that, I'm sure.

Ms. Harden, we're glad to have you with us this morning, and you're in a dual role, both as a student-- [Recording interrupted]

...and with the Austin Independent School District. But first let's look at your experience, your history as a student in the Austin Independent School District. Tell us about the schools you attended.

AH: As a student in the Austin Independent School District, you're asking me to go way back. [Laughter] Well, yes, I did, I attended the Austin Independent School public schools, Olive Street [Elementary School] for a short period of time. Some people might not even remember Olive Street, but Olive Street was one of the all-black schools, should I say, at the time. After being there for a short period of time, I believe it burned down, and then my parents moved further into East Austin on Hackberry Street.

My brother and I attended Blackshear [Elementary School] at that time, and I went from Blackshear to Kealing [Junior High School] to the old [L. C.] Anderson [High School], which was located on Pennsylvania Avenue, and that's where I attended the high school. Of course, now, I dropped out of school. I got pregnant, had a baby, and got married. Of course, they don't do that too much nowadays, but I did, and you know, the interesting thing about it is that I stayed out. By the time I was twenty-one, I had four kids. With about a 10B--I think at that time they were doing like the 10B, the 9B, 10B,

11B, 12th and graduation, and I stayed out. By the time I was twenty-one I had four kids, four kids, and a tenth-grade education. I always like to bring that out because I always like to encourage young people, and especially young women, that if you--I don't even like to call it a mistake, you know. If you have an experience of that nature, then it's not the end of the world. You can make something out of your life.

DW: How supportive were the teachers and the East Austin community at this time?

AH: Well, at that time, you know, if you had children, you could not go back to school. You could at night, you know. But right now I think that the teachers were not as supportive then, under those circumstances, as they are today, because there are all kinds of programs and what have you that assist women, young women, young girls, with those kinds of situations.

DW: This reflects a change, then, doesn't it, in the attitudes?

AH: Yes, it does. It does. I think the change would possibly be that young people then, versus now, have a greater opportunity to be able to move on and move their lives on forward and become productive individuals.

DW: Before you dropped out of school, was there a teacher or an administrator who played a role in your life and helped you to shape your life?

AH: Yes. I always wanted to be a P.E. teacher, always. I would say Mrs. Ona B. Conely was my role model, and she still is. There were several. There were lots of them there that really, really did take our interest at heart. They really cared about the students. I mean, if we were to be unruly or do something we had no business doing, our parents would

know about it by the time we got home. So, yes, they were very supportive in that nature, and I think that had a lot to do with our ability to learn and to become successful.

DW: Do you remember the condition of the buildings, starting with Olive and right through, and can you compare them with the buildings of schools that were non-African-American?

AH: At that time?

DW: Yes.

AH: Well, to tell you the truth, we didn't have an opportunity really to go into them. I guess we had an opportunity. As long as our tax dollars were taking care and paying for the schools, we could have gone, I would imagine, but we didn't, I didn't, and I'm pretty sure a lot of them didn't. I understand that we were given the textbooks after they'd been used in the other schools. I know that there were times that I did have textbooks that did have names in them, other names. A lot of times the textbooks were not very well kept, and they were used and they were torn, and some of the backs were off and things, but we managed to learn. We actually managed to overcome that. Whether those books--I don't think kids even carry books to school this day and time.

DW: Where did the motivation come from? I notice you said that the learning still took place in spite of the conditions. Where did the motivation come from?

AH: It came from the teachers. It came from the principals. I'm not even quite sure in those days that we had counselors, because I considered all my teachers as my counselor as well as the churches and the environment that the churches had with the schools. We

would do programs, we would have programs, and the whole church would come or we would take the programs to the church.

Parents had a lot more involvement with their kids in terms of being at PTA meetings and different kinds of things like spaghetti suppers and those kinds of things, the little fairs and everything. One of the other things that I remember is that we talk about the TOS test now, we had tests every day, it seemed like to me, and especially on Friday, because we reviewed everything we had during that week, and that was an excellent, excellent learning process, I think.

DW: Come '71, schools desegregated, East Austin schools, some were closed and students were moved other places. From your experience, from whatever source, do you think that our students got the kind of attention that you just mentioned in the other schools, the school that they crossed over to?

AH: I would hope so. I really would. I would hope so. But you know, that particular era, I did not go through that. I was too old to go through that, and then my kids were too young to go through that situation. So by the time my kids became of age to go to public school, that had already been passed and settled and whatever. So I can't really say honestly--I did, however, have a nephew, a couple of nephews, I think, who went through that transition. I don't really remember them having too difficult of a time. At one point a couple of my nephews, Norman Carter and Calvin Carter, they were going through that process, and we all lived together, and I don't really remember them having that difficult of a time, but I would imagine that they were difficult times for some people, but not for us.

DW: Do you remember what effect the moving of Anderson and the making of Kealing a magnet school had on the East Austin community as a whole? Did it have any effect on

the community as a whole?

AH: Yes, I think it did, but not one to the extent that we should be too disturbed about it at the time that it happened, because I think that when they developed that system and put it into the system, I was a part of working for the district at that time. I remember some of us having gone down to Houston to travel around and look to how they did it and how they had that particular process working.

It looked like it was working very well in Houston. I don't know. I didn't live in Houston and really didn't converse with anyone in Houston too much about it, other than that day that we made the trip down there, but it seemed like a very good program. It seemed like it was something that we could have here to work. I really can't say honestly why it did or didn't work or is or isn't working. I just basically pray that it does work eventually, because I think it's a good program. I think that it might need some fine-tuning or something like that.

I think the basic thing is that I really wish that we had people and teachers and counselors and principals who were as dedicated to all children as they were back in the day that I was in the public school. Also, not to lay it on the administration, not to lay it on teachers and principals and counselors, but parents need to be like they were then. We need on some things to go back to the old way, and I really think the learning process is one. I don't think I turned out too bad.

I mean, you know, the other thing is that discipline is a big problem. If you can't get kids settled into a classroom and get their attention, you're not going to be able to teach them. They're not going to learn.

DW: Now we've looked at Ada M. Harden the student and with school experiences and have gotten her opinion about the effects of desegregation on the East Austin community.

Now let's look at the other life of Ada M. Harden, Ada M. Harden the professional who

has gone to refine and complete her education and is now working for the Austin Independent School District. Tell us about that experience, what you did and how you enjoyed it and so on.

AH: Well, to bring you up to date, I'm not with the system any longer, but it was a wonderful experience. I took an early retirement because there were other things that I wanted to do, back about three years ago, I think, this summer. Working for the school district really taught me a lot.

DW: What did you do?

AH: What did I do? I was the volunteer resource coordinator, and part of my job was to support teachers and administrators with bringing different kinds of volunteers into the school system to assist with different things with students, for students, and with teachers. They did a variety of things. They worked in the offices, and they tutored, and they were role models.

One of the most proud things that I did with the system was to develop a television show called "It's Your Future." That just sort of came to me one day because I realized that kids watch a lot of television, and in doing so they learn a lot of things. They learn a lot of good things; they learn a lot of bad things. In doing the TV show, my focus was to bring in different kinds of people, people with different kinds of careers, to give young people an opportunity to see these people in different careers so that they could have an idea about how to plan their futures. To this day, I guess we did about 185 shows. What that also did was it gave me an opportunity to be able to expand my skills and abilities to be able to do television. From this show I've had an opportunity to do a lot of things, movies and some commercials.

The main thing for me is to have young people see that even though I dropped out of

school, I was a dropout, I was a teenage parent, but I've overcome that and I've become somebody that my kids can be proud of and I'm certainly proud of. I just want to encourage young women especially, because I've served as a commissioner for the City of Austin for women's issues and was sent to Washington, D.C., by the mayor a couple of years ago to represent Austin women. I just want to put the word out to them that, you know, if you made a mistake or whatever, it's okay. Get over it and be real and come back and make something out of your life, because you can.

DW: I notice you said that your inspiration came from some very special teachers and administrators in the segregated school situation. One thing we haven't talked about, though, that inspiration also led you to an acting career, I understand. Is this true?

AH: That's true.

DW: Tell us about that.

AH: Well, yes, it is not at the peak of which I'd like for it to be, not right now, but I have faith. I really have wonderful faith in God. If that's for me to be and if He has that in store for me, I'll get it, but I'll move on, you know, and every opportunity that I receive, I evaluate the opportunity and then act on it. That's what I would like to tell people, is that God has his own way of speaking to you. You know, sometimes people say, "I should have listened to my . Something told me," this, that, whatever. A lot of times that's God speaking to you, and you just need to listen and act on it.

DW: If you were given the opportunity to speak to a group of students, particularly students who are sort of floundering now, who are from East Austin and in these other situations, integrated situation or desegregated situation, if you were asked to speak to a group of

them and tell them and give them some very foundational advice, what would that advice be? What would you say to them?

AH: Try to get along. I'd like to teach people what my mother taught us all. I'm the baby of nine children, raised right here in East Austin about four blocks over, and I was very fortunate to have both a mother and a father until I became an adult. They always taught us to do unto others as you would have them do unto you. That simply means that you need to treat everybody, no matter what color they are, green, red, yellow, black, white, it doesn't matter, you treat everybody like you want to be treated, that's the key, like you want to be treated. If you want to be treated nice, then you treat people nicely.

That's probably why I have a lot of friends, because I treat everybody like I want to be treated. Whatever the situation is, wherever we are, whatever group, agency, schools, whatever, I treat everybody the same, and that would be what I would tell them. Because when you do that, number one, you're going to build your friends up. You're going to have friends. You're going to have people that really care about you.

My mama always said, too, that whoever you cross going up the ladder, if you're not careful, when you start coming back down the ladder you're going to pass those same people, and if you misuse those people down there, it's going to hit you, everyone you pass that you misuse. It'll be like Oprah [Winfrey] said one time. She said that when she makes it--she told her friend this--she said, "When I make it, I want you to invite all the people who were not nice to me to a big party so they can see where I am today." And she's really there today. I don't know whether she had the party or not. It was probably something she just said. But that's true. You have to treat people right.

DW: You've proven that with a positive attitude it can be done.

AH: Exactly. You've got to keep a positive attitude about things. I think that with a positive

attitude things will work out. They're not going to work out the first time ever, I don't think, but you just have to hang in there. If you had a bad marriage or something, you've got to move forward, because God leads us all here for a purpose. We're here for a reason. You just have to keep searching until you find out what that reason is, and it'll come. It'll come. It'll come to you.

DW: Thank you very much. We've certainly enjoyed this interview. It's been quite interesting, and it's certainly different from any one I've done. Thank you, Ada.

AH: Thank you.

[End of interview]