

Interview with Mrs. Cynthia Sauls Houston

Date: May 25, 2001

Interviewed by Dr. Rosalee Martin

RM: Thank you for coming for this interview.

CSH: You're welcome.

RM: Would you just tell us your name and a little about yourself and then we'll start asking some other questions.

CSH: Okay. My name is Cynthia Houston. I am an original. I'm from Austin, lived here all my life except for one year. Austin is special to me, always has been. I'm a teacher right now, currently, and that's just a little bit about me.

RM: You're a teacher now—

CSH: Yes.

RM: Which may indicate that you've had some great teachers in your life?

CSH: Yes.

RM: Why don't we talk about your education experience in Austin. You said that you are from Austin.

CSH: Yes.

RM: One of the rare persons here. Talk to me about your education experience from elementary school to college.

CSH: Okay. Well, I went to school starting elementary, L.L. Campbell. The old L.L. Campbell. Then from there I went to Kealing [Junior High School], and from there I went to the old L.C. Anderson [High School]. Then I continued higher education here at Huston-Tillotson College.

RM: I was going to say that—

CSH: Yes. Yes.

RM: Okay. We want to focus mainly on Anderson High and then the crossover to--you went to Reagan [High School]?

CSH: Yes.

RM: The crossover to Reagan High. Could you please talk a little bit about your experiences at Anderson High?

CSH: I remember Anderson as being--my experiences there were wonderful. It was like a family; everybody knew everybody. Coming from the neighborhood, we all grew up together. We went to the same elementary schools. So I think of L.C. Anderson, the old L.C. Anderson, that's what I think of, family. We knew everybody.

RM: When you talk about we, you're talking about the students and the teachers.

CSH: The students, teachers, everybody knew your family, just a whole connection.

RM: So teachers lived in neighborhoods with you as well, the teachers?

CSH: Yes, yes.

RM: You went to the same churches together?

CSH: Yes. Yes.

RM: So in a real sense you were the village.

CSH: Yes.

RM: You kind of raised each other [unclear].

CSH: Exactly. Exactly.

RM: What kind of extracurricular activities did you participate in?

CSH: I was a Yellowjacket.

RM: Which is?

CSH: Drill team. I was a drill team member. And that was a real exciting experience. We were very close, practiced long hours after school. But I was very proud to be a Yellowjacket, a member of the drill team. It was something I had seen other neighborhood young ladies be a part of. My family members had been either drill team members or majorettes, that kind of thing. So it was something that I had looked forward to for a long, long time and really enjoyed participating in.

RM: What about the curriculum at Anderson High?

CSH: The curriculum?

RM: In terms of English and math [unclear]?

CSH: As I remember, I had outstanding teachers. I remember teachers like Miss Phillips and Miss Hammond and my math teacher, Mr. Smith. Those teachers taught in a way that I thought was just very interesting and creative, and I felt like they really cared about my learning. I definitely met the challenges academically. My parents made sure of that. I thought those were real good experiences. They were very good teachers.

RM: You said that you spent two years in Anderson High and then two years at Reagan.

CSH: One year.

RM: One year at Reagan. Okay. Let's talk about that crossover. So what happened to you as you went from Anderson High to Reagan High?

CSH: Well, as I remember it--I'll have to take you back a little bit. It was in 1970, if I'm not mistaken, we had the opportunity to have white students to come over to our school, and I remember that experience. We were excited about that, and I think that was an attempt to achieve some form of integration. But I remember that experience. It only lasted for--I don't even think it lasted a week.

We prepared. I remember preparation for that, and we did signs and really did all that we could to make those students feel welcome. As I recall, I don't think most of them stayed a week, maybe a day, and then they were able to go back to their home schools. I think that was a school board decision, among things like political pressure, maybe parent input there.

But anyway, I went back there for a reason, because in 1971, that's when old L.C. Anderson was closed. We were shocked and surprised because we didn't think that was going to happen, and it did. We were not given the opportunity, it seems, to give our input about keeping our school open. Brand new uniforms had been bought and purchased for the drill team that I was a part of. The band had received brand-new uniforms the year before. So we just didn't think our school was going to be closed down. So when it was closed down it was a shock to us, and we were very angry, we were very resentful, we were very rebellious, we were very upset that it seems like the doors were just shut down and we were just shipped off to the other schools.

RM: So there was not a warning sign and there wasn't a discussion about closing Anderson High?

CSH: Not that I'm aware of. Not that I'm aware of. This is my senior year, my senior year. As I said, we thought the signs were that we were going to—I guess they were looking at closing us or something, but when we saw the brand new 'Jacket uniforms, brand new band uniforms, we thought, "Okay. We're going to be open, because there's a lot of money that's been invested here in us," and then the next year we were shut down.

So we were a little hurt because, like I said, back in '70, when the white students came over, we really took that as a sign. We did all that we could. We laid out the red carpet to make them feel welcome and to do our part. They'd heard horror stories about our school, that students walked around with chains and that they would get beat up, and that wasn't the case at all. When they got there they found that out. A few of them sent us letters back, and I can remember those being read over the PA system to us, but we still felt pretty slighted. I remember two students stayed, a young lady named Tracy and a young man that stayed, but the others went back. They had the opportunity to go back to their home schools. We were not given that opportunity.

RM: So when the white students were coming, they came with the intentions of staying? It wasn't just a visit?

CSH: No. We thought it was to stay, to become a part of our school, we thought. But it seemed like, if my interpretations of that are correct, if I remember correctly, I think there was a rescinding of the decision and then they were allowed to go back to their home schools.

RM: And at no time did they close down the home school, close the white school?

CSH: Not that I'm aware of. I believe they were coming from Austin High and—yes, yes.

RM: The decision to close Reagan[misstatement, she means Anderson], which was the only black high school, did not have input by those who were in decision making, black leaders in the community? Did they have any opportunity to talk about this?

CSH: The decision to close Anderson? I'm not aware—and, you know, again, I was a student at the time. I would hope they were offered that opportunity. I don't know. But I think if people who were real avid spokespeople at the time for us and I think of people like Delores Duffy [phonetic] and Mary Hurst [phonetic] and Miss Gregg [phonetic], and I've forgotten her—Vivien [Virginia] Gregg, I think, is her first name--who were speaking up for us and would go to school board meetings and speak up for us. So I would hope they had that opportunity, but as far as I know, the year before, there was this—the white students that had come over and didn't stay a week, I don't believe. It was, as far as I recall, maybe a day. Then the next year school closed and we were shipped out to the other schools.

RM: I hear you say "shipped out."

CSH: That's how it felt. I felt I was being shipped out.

RM: Let's first talk about what happened at Reagan when you went and then let's talk about your feelings about it.

CSH: Well, I was very resentful. I was very hurt. I did not participate because of that. I wanted to continue to be a Yellowjacket. I wanted to be a part of the drill team. So because of that, I didn't participate. It was my senior year. I didn't buy a senior ring for that reason, because I wanted to have a Yellowjacket ring.

My experience at Reagan, I remember we caught the bus. I was very upset about that because that meant having to get up extra early, and that meant having to be in the rain and cold and the heat to go to school, and I couldn't understand that at the time, why we were having to do that. So I just didn't participate in activities because I was very angry about that, very angry.

RM: What about their receiving you? How did they receive you into their school?

CSH: I cannot remember. We rode buses, and I don't remember a big welcoming committee as it seemed that we had done and the effort that we had put forth the year before, the year prior to that. I don't remember that. I remember getting off the bus, and I guess getting a schedule, going to class. I remember sitting in a class and thinking, "What am I doing here?" I can almost see where I was sitting in the middle of that class. It was a French class, and I can remember sitting there and all of a sudden looking around and I see a sea of blonde hair and there are a few minority students, but I remember thinking, "What am I doing here?"

RM: Did all of the students go to Reagan, or did they go elsewhere?

CSH: Went to different schools across the district, yes.

RM: So what they did to integrate the schools was to send the blacks out but not to bring the whites in?

CSH: No.

RM: So all the efforts for integration was borne by the black students?

CSH: Yes. Yes.

RM: I want to ask you for your advice. If you had an opportunity to speak to the school board about what happened, what would you say to them? How would you address them?

CSH: I would have liked to have been given an opportunity for input. I don't remember anybody talking to us students about their decision, the impending decision. It would have been nice for them to have heard from us. I would have liked to have that opportunity. There was a lot of hostility that year. I remember practically every day you would read about in different schools across the district, whether it be McCallum [High School], Reagan, Austin High [School], Lanier [High School], there were some type of altercations, and we were just very resentful.

If we had maybe been given an opportunity, that might have helped to alleviate some of that. For whatever reason they decided to close it down, it would have helped for us to be able to get some input on how we felt about it. Maybe we would not have gone with those kind of resentments and hostilities. It might have helped lessen that. Because I remember that time. It was a time of turmoil, a lot of fighting. I remember at Reagan, there was a week and there had been rumors that there was going to be—it was called Black Friday, and all week long there were rumors and talk of Black Friday coming.

I can just remember leading up to that week, and that Friday finally arrived, and we were in class, and we thought—we had made it through lunch, and we thought, well, nothing's going to happen, and then I guess—I remember being in art class and all of a sudden hearing sirens, and we thought, "Ah-oh. Trouble," and the rioting and fighting had started.

RM: Was your brother [unclear]?

CSH: My brother was a part of it, yes. To tell you the truth, I don't know how he ended up being a part of it, but I was in my art class, and being the children that we were, you know, at the time, we of course were curious. We wanted to go out, see what was going on. I remember my friends and I talking about that. Then it must have not even been five minutes later that someone ran in and told me that my brother had been stabbed. What had happened was he had been corralled up against some lockers, and some boys had stabbed him. It happened to be not with a knife, with a pencil, but the doctor told us it was about an eighth of an inch away from his lung. So it could have been very fatal.

I remember lots of—there were books thrown and police were called in. The police used Mace to disperse the crowd, and one young lady got Mace in her eyes. So it was a very ugly scene, a very ugly scene.

RM: What emotions do you have, even as you're talking about it now?

CSH: Still anger, still resentment. I felt robbed of my opportunity to graduate with my classmates that I had gone to school with. I felt we were just robbed. So I just think if it have been brought to the table, getting input at all levels, it might have helped, but I don't know. I think there may have been a better way to do it.

RM: As we talk about that era in your life, let's talk a little about the churches and the community and businesses around there. Can you remember? How was life like in East Austin during the late sixties, early seventies?

CSH: Life in East Austin, as I remember, was really good. Again, everybody knew everybody. You know, you're walking down the street, and you knew Miss Coleman, which we called Grandma Coleman. There was that sense of family, a sense of caring. And the churches, the teachers were in the churches with you. They lived in the community with you. It was a sense of smallness but closeness. As far as smallness, I'm saying as far as familiarity. Everybody knew everybody and cared about everybody. You didn't have to worry about—you know, if you were doing something wrong, you would be disciplined, no matter who it was, and then you'd get it again at home if need be, you know.

So when I think about the life at that time, that's what comes to my mind. Businesses I can remember, core businesses, Galway's [phonetic] Roofing and a beauty salon right there, you know, along one corridor, and I can remember barbecue places. Now when I think of businesses, and I believe there are black businesses, but they're more dispersed. You don't have that sense of their being in one corridor.

RM: In terms of your churches, were the ministers also a part of your life? Did you have a strong religious upbringing?

CSH: Yes, very much so. Very much so. Yes.

RM: I know your grandma and your mom.

CSH: Yes. Yes, definitely. Yes.

RM: I want you to think about--because you've had the unique experience of being in a segregated school and an integrated school, and now you are a teacher in Blackshear [Elementary School], which is predominantly minority, predominantly Hispanic, right?

CSH: Right.

RM: Okay. So that you really had a perspective of what it's like to be segregated, integrated, and then somewhat similar to segregated again. Let's talk a little about the transition.

CSH: Well, when I think about schools today, I still see that segregation. I still see students, black students, who hang with their friends. I still see Hispanic students who hang with their friends. Very few situations where you have the intermingling. Although I know they are classmates and they appreciate each other, I think, and I do believe they respect each other, but when it comes down to the bottom line, that familiarity is still—they still cling with their own. So it makes me wonder, now, you know, compared to where we've been and where we are now, it's like we've gone full circle, and I don't see a lot of the real purpose of it, I guess, because we still have that in all of the schools at all levels. So it makes me wonder.

RM: Since the purpose of integration was for racial ethnic groups to come together and appreciate each other, interact, you're saying that really doesn't occur.

CSH: The mixing, yes. It still does not happen, not a whole lot. I get lunch, at lunch. I'm in an elementary setting, which is a little different from the middle school and high school setting,

where students have more choice about who they sit with, but when I was at middle school level for many, many, many years, until I came to Blackshear this year, my first year, I saw that, and I thought that was pretty interesting, because in the cafeteria, you still had Hispanic students hanging with Hispanic students for the most part. Blacks hung with black students for the most part. So, you know, I still wonder about that. You know, you still kind of hang with who you're familiar with.

But I do like the concept of integration in some respects as far as getting over that fear of the unknown at some levels, the unfamiliar, but I don't know in reality if we really practice that, making that effort. And I'm talking about all groups of people as a whole, as a whole.

RM: I know you come from a family of teachers.

CSH: Yes. Yes.

RM: During your Anderson High School years, was there anything about your teachers that helped to influence your decision, your career decision? Was it your family that helped to influence your career decision? What was it that—

CSH: It was a combination, a combination. Again, I had very strong, outstanding teachers. My love for English came from Miss Phillips. My love for social studies from Miss Hall, Jolene Hall, and Miss Williams, Mabel Williams. Not only that, coming from a family of teachers and just to have role models there made me want to become a teacher because I saw that they care, they cared, and they're still working with children. So those were my role models. I wanted to make a difference in children's lives, and I realized how much they impacted so many children over the years. So I wanted to follow that same road.

RM: If you were given the opportunity to make some decisions that would stick as it relates to AISD what decisions would they be?

CSH: I would like more collaboration, more input at all levels. I would like to see, I guess, more of a networking, I don't know, maybe a task force brought in so that parents don't feel intimidated. I would like for them to feel like there's a welcome door they can come in and give input no matter what it is. I do know that there has been some community meetings on, you know, familiar turf, and I think that's a good thing, but I'd like to see businesses and the political spectrum and administrators and teachers and the religious community, everybody involved in how to make it work for our children.

When I look at our children, I still—even though we're not literally at the back of the bus, it seems like we are in a lot of respects, in a lot of ways. I want us to be at the table to getting whatever's offered just as much as all the other groups.

RM: I know you're at Blackshear, and you said this is the first year. Blackshear has experienced tremendous turnover.

CSH: Yes.

RM: Why do you think that occurred? Why do you think Blackshear, historically a black school, now very much mixed, what happened there at Blackshear?

CSH: Well, for one, there have been some problems with leadership. There's been a big turnover as far as principals. So it's been kind of hard, I think, to get a good hold on what the school really

needs because of that turnover. So with more stability, hopefully, that will be alleviated somewhat.

I wanted to come back to the community, and I wanted to come back East side. I had been feeling that urge and that pull to come back and give to the community. Blackshear, as I remember it years ago, years ago when I was a little girl, was predominantly black. Now it's predominantly Hispanic. But to me it's still minority, and I have black children there. I have Hispanic children. I want to have children period and teach children. So I want to come back and do what I can here to help our children.

RM: What about the tests, the TAAS [Texas Assessment of Academic Skills] and all the tests students have now?

CSH: I feel there's too much stress on the test, because when I think back to my high school days and junior high days, although standardized tests were important, I believe they were, there was not as much stress and emphasis on THE test, and I think it causes a lot of anxieties on many levels, parents, teachers, students, administrators, on many levels. I think children can be successful and have been successful. Look at our generation that's proven it, and it wasn't just based on a test score, but it's a conjunction of things, looking at pride in who we are, and you can be successful in many, many ways just besides the academics.

So I think there's just too much—just much too much stress and emphasis on a test, and I'd like to see that--although it's important, I'd like for it to be de-emphasized and not just be a main component and the primary component to graduation. I just don't understand, you know, how a student can make A's and B's, and when it's time to graduate, because they cannot pass the test, they can't graduate, but yet and still they're good citizens and they make good choices and they've been successful in many other ways.

RM: Why do you think that's so? Is it something about the tests that separate people?

CSH: Not everybody is a good test taker. That doesn't mean I'm not a good person. It doesn't mean that I cannot be successful. It doesn't mean I don't have a good work ethic. I've heard of stories where children have upchucked because they were nervous, you know, nerves of steel, worrying about the test and the score. So, you know, I think it just needs to be looked at and just de-emphasized as far as how important it is and just look at the whole picture for children being successful. And that could be one component.

RM: Holistic approach.

CSH: Holistic, yes.

RM: As you think about your choice of teaching, what would you say are your major strengths as a teacher?

CSH: As a teacher? I care about children. I want them to learn. When they're with me, I want them to leave with a knowledge of not just books but learning how to be good people, how to be decent people, make good choices. I want to make a difference in their lives. So every year I approach that “ what can I give my children?” I want it to go beyond books.

RM: As we get to the end of this interview, are there any words of wisdom that you would like to give to parents and students as well as to other teachers?

CSH: Well, as parents, I'd like to say stay involved, and if you're not involved, get involved. Ask questions. Don't be intimidated. You've got to be there for your children. As educators, as teachers, we're doing all that we can. I know that we cannot expect the perfect picture, that everybody is going to have that attitude. And that's why it's real important that as parents we do our part, be there when they have PTA meetings, go there when they get awards, when your child gets awards. If you have to take off from work, do it. Do what you have to do to be there for your child. So my words of wisdom would be those.

RM: And you are a parent.

CSH: I am a parent.

RM: Of children in AISD [Austin Independent School District]?

CSH: Yes.

RM: What grades are they in?

CSH: They're moving to sixth grade, and then I have one that's moving to fourth grade, a little girl.

RM: So we almost see your life full swing, right, as a student, as a teacher, as a parent with children in the school district. So you really have a very comprehensive view of the school district and its impact.

CSH: Yes.

RM: Your children will succeed primarily because of your involvement.

CSH: Yes.

RM: As well as the fact that they're also closest to our current school system as well, and I think that's important.

CSH: Definitely.

RM: Any final words?

CSH: Final words. I am so glad that our story is being told. I have a lot of pent-up feelings, as do my classmates, and we see each other. It's like a family reunion. We talk, we reminisce about the old days. I have no sense of connection with the Anderson as it exists today. What I remember is the old Anderson. I don't know if my old classmates will even see this interview, but I'd like to just take this opportunity to make a plea for us to come together when they have the old L.C. Anderson family reunion, because it is a family to us. I see the camaraderie from the graduates, those classes that graduated from the old Anderson, and I just admire and I applaud it. When I go to the reunions I miss that because I don't see as many of our classmates there.

RM: I said that was final, but I just want to raise another question since you mentioned the new Anderson High. What feelings or emotions do you have as it relates to where they placed

Anderson High, the new Anderson High, as well as the symbols and mascots. What feelings do you have?

CSH: Well, just as I told you they shipped us off, I feel like they put that school out there away from us. I have no sense of connection with it. I have no sense of pride. I have no connection. It's just a school out there. It's not me. The mascot, I don't believe, is the yellowjacket. I think they dropped--it's not L.C. Anderson, I don't believe. So it's just a school out there. I don't go by it. I've been there a few times because as a teacher I've had workshops there in a few instances, but it's just out there. There's no connection at all.

RM: Where are all the trophies and all the things that are—

CSH: I wonder. I have no idea. At one time I had heard, I think, they were down here at Doris Miller Auditorium at one time. But I also heard that at one point that they were just in a basement somewhere collecting dust. My understanding is, as I mentioned, Miss Duffy was responsible, from what I heard, was the one responsible for getting them out of that basement and wiping off the dust, and my understanding, I think they're at the new Anderson now, but I'm not certain about that.

RM: And is that a better place than where the dust is?

CSH: Well, it's a better place, but for those students that are out there, they don't know the stories that are behind those trophies. Again, when I go to the reunion I see the old football quarterbacks and I hear the stories, and I just admire that, that sense of family, you know. And I think it's a big vacation for a lot of people that graduated from the old Anderson. I see the excitement in their eyes when they come back to old Anderson. So that's another way that I feel robbed and cheated, because my class didn't have that. We were dispersed, so we don't have that.

I don't go to the Reagan reunions. They sent me, after ten years, they sent me a newsletter to come, and I almost went.

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CSH: I thought, well, if I take a picture, for what? They're not going to know me. I was only there a year. So I decided not to go. But I do go to the old Anderson reunion.

RM: That's where you identify.

CSH: That's where I identify.

RM: Thank you so much for this interview. We really appreciate your coming and sharing with us.

CSH: You're welcome. Thank you for the interview. I appreciate it.

RM: Thank you, Mr. David.

I don't know. I didn't introduce you. This is David Harrienger.

CSH: Okay. Nice to meet you. Nice to meet you.

[End of interview]