

Interview with Ms. Dorothy Orebo

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Interviewed by Dr. David A. Williams

DW: Good afternoon. We are here with Ms. Dorothy Orebo. We've had many good persons to come and be interviewed, but I think she is the kind of people to be interviewed. I'd like to start by asking her to tell us something about her experiences in the Austin Independent School District, first as a student.

DO: Okay. Well, I had a very limited length of time as a student in Austin public schools because I came from California in November of '53, and I graduated from [L.C.] Anderson High School in May of '53. So I was only here a little bit more than a semester. After that, I came to Huston-Tillotson [College] in '53, and I graduated from Huston-Tillotson in '57. I was one of those person that worked my way through school. I didn't get a scholarship, so I worked at night at Nighthawk [Restaurant], and I went to school in the daytime, and I was able to finish in four years, on time.

After finishing from Huston-Tillotson, the first year I didn't work in the school system. I was working at Nighthawk, and I guess I didn't actively look. I had a friend that I was helping her more than I was helping myself. So the following year, in '58, I went to work in Abilene, Texas, at the old Carter G. Woodson High School. It was a combination of junior high and high school. So I worked there for two years, and in 1960 I came to Austin to work at Kealing [Junior High School]. So I worked at Kealing from 1960 to '66.

I went on maternity leave in '66, and then I came back to Austin to work in '68, and I went to Johnston High School in January of '68. At that time you had to wait until the child was a year old before you could come back. So I came back in '68, and I was at Johnston for three years in the classroom, and then I became dean of women. Dean at that time was entry level into administration. So I was dean of women for four years, and from that time I left Johnston and became assistant principal at LBJ [Lyndon Baines Johnson] High School. It had a house-within-a-house concept. I was considered a house principal. So I was that for one year. Then I became associate principal for six years. Then I was principal of LBJ High School for ten years.

So I've been retired now for a few years, but what I do is go back and work in the district as an administrator at whichever level they want me. It may be in an elementary school. I had had no experience in an elementary school. It was very rewarding. I've been at middle school and at high school. I've been at three different high schools and about four or five different middle schools and elementary schools. So that's kind of the array of my profession.

DW: One of the observations that many make, beginning in 1971, when the schools were desegregated, they feel that there was something missing in the East Austin community after the school was desegregated. Do you see this as being a reality, or is it just a myth that people have?

DO: I don't think it's a myth. I think that when they desegregated and closed Anderson High School, I thought it made a big difference in the community. Number one, that was a place that everybody went. Everybody knew everybody who went there, and it was just like a piece of a person's body had been cut off and they no longer had that. So there's a void there. I certainly think that closing the school really did make a difference in the community, the total community, and it brought about problems that may not have occurred had they not closed Anderson High School.

DW: Tell us about some of those problems, please.

DO: Well, I looked at when you go to a school, although people are saying—and this is when you're first integrating, people are saying, "Oh, yes, we want you here. We'll do everything we can to make you comfortable and to make you happy." But when you go to someone's home, no matter how much they tell you that this is your home, you know that there are limitations. This really isn't your home to say. I think that that was one of things, is not being accepted. Although you're saying it, it wasn't in all instances where you were.

The other thing that I looked at is the number of kids that were not involved in extra and co-curricular activities during the integration. Anderson had a nice band, had nice football, basketball, all of the co-curricular and extracurricular activities.

DW: This is old Anderson?

DO: This is old Anderson. When they went to integrate, many of those kids did not transfer directly from band to band or from football to football or basketball to basketball, and those kids who were not involved then became disillusioned and disinterested and what have you, and then they started not coming to school and finding reasons to have behavior problems and what have you. So I think that that was a big contribution to some of the ills of the black students, is not being part of, and they had been or had the opportunity to be a part of at the old Anderson. And it isn't just—I'm speaking of Anderson, but I mean all secondary schools, the middle schools as well.

DW: What about busing? What effect did that have on the children?

DO: I know that busing is an imposition on everybody, and I've dealt with the busing problems a lot of times, and busing is the same. I think that having to get up early, having to spend some time on the bus, and the bus not always on time, and sometimes you had an attitude by the time you got to school because of the bus ride itself. Situations happen on the buses and what have you. I can't specifically say that the busing itself caused problems, but just the idea of riding a bus from Point A to Point B and getting there and getting off the bus and being confronted with "I'm sent here. This is not where I want to be," and I think it created some problems with kids.

DW: Would a student feel that they were being displaced, that is, lose identity with the local area?

DO: By all means. As I mentioned, I think co-curricular and extracurricular activities play a whole lot in educating a child, and you don't just go for the curriculum itself, the academics. There are a lot of things that complete a child and educate a child in high school, and a void of either one of those certainly would make a difference in how successful a child is and how the child sees himself. When the child can put on a uniform on a Friday evening and demonstrate his ability and show the community some of his abilities, it makes him feel good, and when that's taken away or when it's not offered, whatever the reasons may have been or he may have chosen or she may have chosen not to, it makes a difference.

Then you don't have something to occupy your time other than the books. You know, when you're in a co- and extracurricular activity you've got practice, you have times that you have to be places at a certain time. So there's a span of time that you are not occupied, your mind is not occupied, you're physically not occupied. So then this leads you to start thinking of yourself, maybe, in a negative manner. When you start thinking in a negative manner, you start acting

negatively. I think this is the cause of a lot of problems, is that they didn't belong or they didn't have the feeling of belonging and didn't participate.

DW: Alienation is bad. I've heard some parents who say that they would like to have seen their students involved not only in football, basketball, track and like that, but some of the activities that were in performing and creative arts.

DO: That's right.

DW: How does this relate to what you've seen in the schools where you've worked?

DO: Well, I wasn't working in a high school in '71, and I'm basing all of my information on high school because I had never worked at that time in an elementary school. I did work in a middle school for just a little bit, a junior high school. As I mentioned before, if a student doesn't have something other than academics to be involved in, it certainly doesn't create a well-rounded student for life. That's what you're looking at, is what are you doing in high school to prepare that child for life.

People need to know how to talk to people, how to react with people, how to do things with people and what have you, and if you just go to school and just do the academics, I think there is a void in education. You're not a well-rounded person. I mentioned the areas that are most known, but I meant all the extra and co-curricular activities. Statistics have shown, and I don't have the statistics to say it right now, statistics have shown that many students the first couple of years did not participate in large numbers when they went to the other schools.

DW: What about parents? Was there parental involvement?

DO: Well, parental involvement is still a problem now. We still don't have as many parents involved with their kids as there should be. That's one of our problems as well. So the parents didn't go either. The kids may not have even told the parents, may have said, "Oh, you don't have to go." You know, they didn't invite the parent because they didn't feel as comfortable as they should have so therefore they didn't want their parent to come.

DW: So far as you know, did parents really get involved, say, when schools were not desegregated?

DO: Well, I thought that they were far more involved when the kids were in the neighborhood. I think the parents were more involved at all levels. Now, there is a tendency when you're in secondary school that your parents are not as involved because they think the kid can make decisions on their own. They're not physically involved. They're emotionally involved, but not physically involved as much in secondary as they are in elementary. Even today, many parents are not as involved in their kids' education as they should be at all levels.

DW: Although there is this feeling of remoteness and therefore they're not involved, what can the district do as a whole to encourage parental involvement?

DO: If I knew the answer to that, I'd make a whole lot of money, because I have been in instances where we didn't have the parent participation and we did all the things that I thought we could do in order to get more parents to come out. We even had another parent to go by and pick up the people and what have you. That is something that if I had a magic wand and I knew what to do or

what to say that would make that happen, I would certainly share it with all people, but I just don't know.

And today it isn't lack of transportation in all instances. It's just parents are just not as involved with their childrearing today as they were twenty years ago. They just aren't. They expect the child to do independent thinking, independent doing, and what have you. When you don't have structure and don't have limitations and don't say, "This is what I expect of you. If you don't do this, these are the consequences," then many kids are rearing themselves, and that's what's unfortunate.

And single parenthood has nothing to do with rearing yourself. It means that the parents are just not there. Either they're working two jobs or whatever the reasons are, they're just not there, and they're not visible in the child's rearing in many instances.

DW: That's something to think about. Some people have talked about the difference in facilities, buildings, textbooks, and things like that.

DO: You mean today or yesterday?

DW: Today and yesterday, and they're still making those comparisons.

DO: Well, I do know that there are some buildings that may not have had as much attention as they should have some time ago, but from my experience in the buildings that I've worked, we got what we asked for. I know of other instances where they do drag their feet and don't do things in a timely manner and don't do them as well as they should in some parts of town, and I'm not saying that that's—that's a reality, yes. That's a reality.

DW: What about teachers? Is there a difference between the attitude of teachers in one situation over against another situation? And I think you know what I mean. I can spell it out if you want me to.

DO: I'd prefer you did, because I don't want to go off on talking about something.

DW: Some parents are saying that their children who are taught by white teachers are sometimes neglected, are not given the kind of attention that they think that they should be given or that they themselves received in a segregated situation. Do you see there is a difference there?

DO: I didn't see that at LBJ, the school that I was in. I did not see that. However, at the beginning of integration I am very much aware that many experienced and "qualified" teachers were sent to the "white" schools, and many of the inexperienced and the teachers that didn't have the highest rating were sent to the black schools or to the minority schools, and there was a difference in who was sent where. I think that that was very visible initially.

At the school that I was principal, I didn't see where white teachers didn't teach black kids as well as. Now, there's always going to be an instance where you have a conflict in personality, no matter what color you are. I've seen there are instances where black kids didn't get along with a black teacher or white kids didn't get along with a white teacher. So I didn't see that as a reason for the kid not to learn at the school that I was in.

But I did see initially, when the integration first took place, that the very qualified teachers, the most qualified teachers, were sent to the other schools and the least qualified would remain at the

predominantly minority school or the inexperienced people from the other area would come to the minority school. However, there were many instances that I know friends who were white that volunteered and were good and volunteered to go to the predominantly minority school.

DW: Why do we have so few African-American students on what they call the Dean's List or in the Honor Society?

DO: The only reason I can say, if you don't make the grades, you can't be in the Honor Society, and if they don't do well—I mean, that's the only reason I can tell you is that sometimes some kids are apathetic about grades. They don't care about grades, and they don't do what they could in order to be on the honor roll. The Honor Roll is not a big deal to them. That's the Dean's List. You're speaking of the Honor Roll. And some of them, "I just want to get out of here." They just want to do the minimum amount of work, and you can't make it doing the minimum amount of work. We have lots of minority kids that do extremely well and are on the honor roll, but it's a kind of a cross.

It's the age of apathy now. A lot of kids just don't possess the pizzazz that twenty years ago kids possessed, you know. And it's all kids. I can't put my finger on it. I wish I could, to say what is it about kids that are not—they're looking for someone to give them something more often than they're looking to give of themselves to receive something, and that's across the board.

DW: Is there anything that groups who care, who really care, and feel so hopeless looking at this kind of situation, is there anything in your opinion that can be done on their part?

DO: You know, I have been in instances where I have given a kid an application for a scholarship, "Fill it out." A couple of days later, "Where's the application?"

"I don't know. I lost it."

These are some examples. We're dealing with kids that just don't have the inner vim to make them want to do something. They're expecting someone else to do things for them. A long time ago, earlier, we knew we had to do for ourselves. You just couldn't expect someone else to do some things for you, you know. I don't know what that is, and I can't put my finger on it nor can I explain it to someone else what's going on, but that is sort of the attitude of many kids across the board. They're expecting someone to give them something, and they're unwilling to give of themselves to receive whatever this is that they want.

We have kids that are great athletes. You have to pass TAAS [Texas Assessment of Academic Skills]. You can't be playing in the hall when you haven't passed the TAAS to even graduate. So, you know, that's something that they knew they had to do, but a lot of kids took it very lightly, you know. We know a number of students that don't graduate with their class because they haven't passed the TAAS. The TAAS is, as you know, a state test that kids have to take. I don't know anything that you can make more important than saying, "Hey, be ready for the TAAS," and they don't care.

Like the athletes that want to be picked for a college or university on their athletic ability, take the SAT, take the ACT. I don't know what it is, but we can't, in some instances, get kids just to sit down, fill out the form, study, and go take it. I don't know what that is. I could work forever, and I don't think I'd be able to do that. And that's a combination of home and school. That isn't just the school. The parents have to help us as well.

DW: Do you think if by a miracle a high school was placed again in East Austin, that these kind of problems you highlight here, would they vanish or would they still prevail?

DO: No. They would still prevail.

DW: Why?

DO: Because society has taken a whole different turn from twenty years ago. It's a societal problem. And these same problems are over on the other side of town as well. So putting a school here I don't think would vanish what is going on now.

DW: And on the other side of the coin, that wouldn't work. Is there some way that we on this side of town and the people on the other side of town could come together in a common cause, since you've cited this as a common problem, and work together to rectify or eliminate this problem?

DO: When you say "this problem," I'm not sure what is this problem you're speaking of.

DW: The problem of apathy on the part of our students.

DO: I don't know. I really don't know if a school right now would make a difference to high school kids. I just don't know. Because they're on a roll of destruction. I don't mean all of them. I meant that percent that we're talking about, that you're trying to reclaim, that we're trying to reclaim. I don't know if a school can reclaim it.

We have to get rid of the drugs. The drugs is the main thing that is causing our kids to completely have disrespect for themselves and for others, and that is the biggest problem that I'm looking at that is causing our youngsters to completely destroy themselves. A school is not going to get rid of that.

DW: What about a community, a caring community? This is what I'm talking about, unity of the communities. What if we would come together in a common cause, you know, as I said, black and white together, all of us together?

DO: I think we could improve it. We could definitely improve it, and we need to do that, but I don't think that we're—and it would be a process that will take more than three or four years. We're looking at a ten-year kind of thing, in my opinion, from looking at what is going on now in the community and in society, and we have to train parents to be parents. That's the main thing. Then if parents were parents at an early age, from the time that they come from the hospital, and doing the right things in front of their kids and being the right model for their kids and encouraging them to—you know, I believe there are three things important in a child's life: the home, the school, and the church, and I believe all three of them play a part in the making of a child. The omission of either one of those is not going to make the child a complete child.

I do believe that if we could start at the beginning and involve all three of those things and have good parenting skills—there are people—grandparents will show parents how to be parents, but we have so many children raising children and so many children that are going back recapturing their childhood because they gave it up to have a child, and so they're doing the same thing that kids are doing.

And this isn't just with the black kids. This is with kids, period. It's really sad to see, and I don't know what's going to turn us around. I'm talking about us meaning a group, a whole, all of us, the

human race. Affluency doesn't eliminate that, and education doesn't eliminate that. I don't know what we can do to reclaim our youth. The thing that I think is the most critical is the omission of parenting.

DW: Well, I think you have a point. Now, Mrs. Orebo, if you were to make a five-minute speech or a ten-minute speech to a group of parents from all over the Austin community, I mean the city as a whole, on behalf of future education, what are some of the things you would say to them?

DO: Begin even when you are carrying the child in the womb, begin thinking, what are some things that I'm going to do to make my child's life better than mine, educationally, lovingly, economically, spiritually, to make a complete child? Start thinking then. When the child comes, this is what you need to do. What are some things that you think are important?

Also, never forget about calling on other people, "Hey, this is going on. What do you think I should do?" I think it has to begin with the parent. This is the very first. You can't wait until a child goes to school to start teaching him to read and teaching him his alphabet, teaching him good behavior, teaching him to say thank you, please, and what have you. You can't wait for the school to do it. There are too many of us waiting for somebody else to do the right thing for our child, and in the meantime we're not being the role models—we meaning the parents—that you ought to be.

My greatest thing is you have to start from the beginning, "No" and meaning no, "yes," "thank you," "no." I mean, those are things that you have to start early, respect, respect for yourself and respect for others, sharing. I mean, it's almost simple, but it's so difficult for other people to see. To me it's simple. I raised a child, a very nice child. I'm very proud of her. But you can't wait for school. You can't wait for someone else. You have to be there. Absence is not a good thing to do, you know. You've got to be there.

I just don't know what else I could say except you've got to start early and involve the kid in every aspect of life and expose them to some of the nicer things of life. Take them to a restaurant, take them around other people, take them to large gatherings, let them have some experience that don't cost. These things don't even cost anymore. They used to cost, but they don't even cost. Take them to museums. Take them everywhere. Try to give them a well-rounded experience.

See, my parents wanted me to have a better education than they. They wanted me to have a better surrounding. Now the parents don't seem to think of that. "Well, you just have to do the best you can. Life is hard." They get negative, they get down, and the kids—but you know what? In some instances, in spite of how the environment is that a kid comes from, there are some great kids that come from very, very poor environments and very poor parenting, and I don't know what makes one child out of a group just excel and another child in that same group or family just don't care. I guess that's human nature. I don't know. If I knew how to do that, I would be telling it to everybody, but I don't know how to do it.

DW: I think you've given us an idea and pointed us in the right direction. If you are going to build good adults, you must start the foundation with the child that you've set. I think if we would take this as good examples or good information and use it, we wouldn't have to worry about our future, our future would be taken care of. Ms. Orebo, we thank you for coming.

DO: Thank you.

DW: And you've given us a good foundation to build on, and I think many parents will use it.

DO: Thank you. I hope so. Thank you very much.

[End of interview]