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INTERVIEWEE: Joan Bluethenthal

INTERVIEWER: William Link

DATE: January 20, 1987

[Begin Tape 1, Side A]

WILLIAM LINK: This is William Link and the date is January 20, 1987. We're in the home of Mrs. Joan Bluethenthal. Mrs. Bluethenthal, I wonder if you could just give me some basic information about your background: where you were born, when you were born, where you were educated, that sort of thing.

JOANNE BLUETHENTHAL: Surely. This is Joan Bluethenthal talking and I was born February 28, 1928, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. I was educated in the public school system of Philadelphia and Elkin's Park, which is a suburb of Philadelphia. I attended Pennsylvania State University and moved to Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1950, when I married Arthur Bluethenthal.

WL: When you, when you came to Greensboro in 1950, when you first came to Greensboro in 1950, as a person from the North coming into the South, what were some of your first impressions about, about Greensboro?

JB: Well, I was impressed with it physically as a very beautiful community, lots of green spaces, and lots of lovely trees. Everything was like one big suburb of a city in the north.

I was somewhat depressed by the spectacle of segregation. And I, somehow the first form I remember about segregation is going to the movies and getting struck by the fact that there were two ways of going in and the black people were in the balconies and that sort of was shocking to me.

I was also aware of public transportation, and segregation in the transportation. Although I didn't do much going around on buses when I first came here, but I was certainly aware of that. And I think that the, as I think back on it, things that my black friends told me about the segregated system.

I remember particularly talking to Pauline Foster, who was a principal at Bluford Elementary School, which was formerly an all-black school and one of the first schools

to be desegregated. And she told me a story which I never forgot, which is what she did to protect her daughter from the reality of segregation when she was, her daughter, was growing up, so that her child would not grow up self-conscious and afraid. Instead of taking the bus downtown, from where she lived, and where they wanted to shopping, Pauline would take her daughter back and forth on a picnic walk. They would pack their lunch and then they'd walk halfway downtown to get good exercise and then they would have a picnic in the park or whatever place that they found and then continued the rest of the way for their shopping, and then they'd do the same thing on the way back rather than get onto a bus and be forced into a section of the bus.

And, that just really struck me at the heart and the gut to think that somebody would have to do that in order to help build the ego of a child.

WL: Was there much evidence of blacks and whites testing the system at all in the fifties, you think? Say, in the early fifties?

JB: Not testing the system, but there was the beginnings of preparation for something better, among a lot of people, and I did get involved in some of that. There were interracial groups that met very quietly, just simply to, really, get used to each other. And to talk about common problems and to develop strategies for dealing with common problems and for exposing [phone rings] their children to each other in very simple little ways like in play groups and that kind [phone rings] of thing. And, it wasn't a testing of the system but a recognition that something was going to have to happen eventually, and they need to be responsible people who knew each other and trusted each other and understood their goals, their common goals.

WL: These--by these sort-of interracial groups would represent--did they represent anyone in particular?

JB: They sort of came together, well, I guess they didn't come together haphazardly. It appeared to me that I somehow got into it in a haphazard fashion, but I think it probably started on a university level.

[Recorder turned off temporarily]

WL: Yes, we were talking about the interracial groups in the 1950s.

JB: It, they started at the university level. And they were--I remember Warren Ashby being the core of those, those initial, and also Marc and Clara Mae Friedlander, who were people who were involved with the university at UNCG [The University of North Carolina at Greensboro].

WL: Black groups who were on the university side as well?

JB: Yeah, or educators, school, public school people. And then they, in turn, reached out to people they knew and it was just sort of casually came together.

WL: And the objective was to simply increase contacts between whites and blacks?

JB: And to start, to start some little programs like an all-nursery school program amongst their children, that kind of thing. And then that grew and then, then as opportunities presented themselves, the group took advantage of those opportunities.

For instance, when the "freedom of choice" legislation was passed, then this group moved around in interracial teams of two and would visit homes of black residents and simply inform them of the opportunity to go to whatever school they wish to go to and to offer to facilitate that if people would be interested in that, which was considerably a rather daring thing to do in those times. But it wasn't really testing the system in the full sense of the word. But it wasn't a popular activity I would say.

WL: But it was moving toward integration. Obviously, you know--

JB: Yeah.

WL: --Pearsall plan with regard to--

JB: Right.

WL: --exploiting the Pearsall Plan.

JB: Yeah, right. Then we also went to places to eat together. That was all testing. Going to a diner or to a restaurant and sit down together and see what would happen.

WL: Do you remember any specific instances?

JB: Yeah, I do, because I went with a woman named Mrs. Edwards who was black, but she was very light skinned. And we went to a diner once for lunch and nobody paid any attention to us at all. And we walked out, we sort of looked at each other, we both had the same thought at the same time: wonder if anybody knew we were an interracial team? And we sort of laughed about it. But, those were the kinds of things that we did.

I don't remember there, you know in those days, there was not socializing, interracial socializing was done very carefully. It was a very careful process and there

wasn't very much of it. Usually when people got together, they had a mission, or there was a professional meeting, it wasn't anything casual.

WL: It was on a professional work level, not a social level.

JB: That's right.

WL: Was the--you say the genesis of this biracialism, or not biracialism, but "interracialism"--interracial groups of the fifties--a feeling that there was a lack of contact between whites and blacks, was this true do you think, based on your impressions that whites and blacks were isolated here—

JB: Yes. Yes, I think so. Unless you, as I remember it, unless you were brought together for a specific reason that had to do with your profession or whatever, there wasn't much going on. But there were a lot of people who were very concerned about the kind of system that existed and looking for opportunities to get a plan for something better.

WL: What was the general sort of reaction in Greensboro according to, the way you remember it, to the *Brown* [*v. Board of Education*] decision? That's a big question, but just your own impressions about how--I mean clearly, these interracial groups are one response, I mean, expectations that things are going to change.

JB: I think that people really didn't expect that much was going to happen anyway. You know, they were sort of, initial shock and some annoyance at the way responsible people responded. But I don't think anybody really knew exactly what to expect, except those who were looking for something better. I don't remember any big activity.

WL: General sense that it wouldn't make that much difference?

JB: Uh-huh.

WL: Why don't we talk about the subject of schools, just since that's something--how did you get involved with the public schools? How did you, you know--

JB: I had three children in public schools. And I got--it was sort of interesting. I wasn't really thrilled with the schools, and I was at an earlier time looking for a private day school, and was actually involved with a group of people who were trying to start one. And so--not really much interest, and then I became aware of the fact the schools really were going to be desegregated and I decided that was no longer an appropriate activity and sort of abandoned that and decided what one needed to be doing was raising money for the

public schools and raising the interest in the public school situation in preparation for what was coming--and try to make it a good thing.

So I abandoned the private school thing. The private school thing took off on its own once people realized the Swann [*v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*] decision was going to mandate something here. Then the private school got started very easily. And I just never, I didn't feel it was any longer appropriate. And so, I just happened to get involved in a study of public education which led me to the conclusion there were some things that private individuals could do to help prepare the schools. And so I became involved in an effort to raise money and to heighten sensitivity and to facilitate in any way possible, as a parent, the process which was certainly going to come about in the next year or so.

WL: Was the, what was the attitude of Greensboro in the 1950s and '60s toward, toward the schools? I gather there was a great deal of community support for schools? In white communities?

JB: Yeah, the schools, it was felt that the public school system was a very good system in Greensboro. This is one of the few communities, at that time, that did not have a day school. There was great support for the public school. People either sent their kids to public schools or they sent them off to prep school because there was a tradition of prep schools in families in the south, not for any other reason. That was a white community.

Now of course, at that point, I don't have the vaguest idea what, how the black community felt towards its school, but I think that school system, as it was--but I think there was a lot of pride in that system too. My main contact was with Pauline Foster. She was the first person I had ever really knew quite well who was involved with public education as a principal. And she ran a very tight ship. Her school was immaculately clean. And everybody marched back and forth to classes and to the lunch room like a military school almost. And her school became the most, the school that, when the schools were desegregated, white families felt most comfortable with Pauline Foster's school. And that was interesting because that was the longest bus ride. That was the school, that was Peeler School, that was way on the other side of town, it was quite a long bus ride to that school, but there was a lot of discipline in that school, it was quite rigid, and people were--the white parents were happy and satisfied to send their children there.

WL: How did you become acquainted with her?

JB: I think we did some community work together, as I remember.

WL: It came out of your involvement with the schools?

JB: No, it came out of my involvement with other things. I think it came, actually, we were both interested in day care for the children of working mothers and that's how we got to know each other.

WL: Was there a clear sense that there were disparities between blacks and whites, white schools before 1969, in the fifties and sixties, generally acknowledged? But you hear, I mean, you hear a lot about Dudley, especially reading Williams Chafe's book [*Civilities and Civil Rights*], about the quality of Dudley, Dudley High?

JB: But it produced some wonderful people, some wonderfully well-educated people one way or the other. When I became aware of great inequities were when we started to desegregate the schools and my black friends who had been leaders in those schools, people like Mel Swann, Fred Cundiff, Pauline [Foster], and other people. When we were preparing to desegregate, the summer we prepared for the desegregation of the schools, things happened in those black schools that hadn't happened for, for, had never happened. I remember talking to Mel Swann, who is now the assistant superintendent of the Greensboro public school system. He was our principal and he said it sort of was heartbreaking to him, although he was happy it was happening, to see the things happen to his school that he had tried to make happen all the time he's been involved with that school, such as a decent library, some air conditioning units, better equipment generally for everything, all those things that he'd asked for time and time again and had never gotten, he got in one month in preparation for white students coming into that school.

WL: Only once it was clear desegregation was coming to that school?

JB: Yeah, and a lot of my black friends told me, had similar kinds of feelings and also you suddenly saw people who for years had just been school teachers, men particularly, women too, in the black school system who were suddenly promoted to principals and even jump to assistant superintendent and suddenly given administrative roles because there was a need to show evidence that this was going to happen, the system was going to open up.

WL: But this was all actually before, immediately before desegregation?

JB: In preparation for desegregation. Greensboro did desegregate its faculty members first before the schools were actually desegregated--that happened a few years earlier.

WL: Let's back up a minute if--I don't want to confuse the situation here, but, going back to the fifties and the Pearsall plan. This is--I'm getting out of your own period of involvement, but what are your recollections of the Pearsall plan, particularly the first

attempts in Greensboro. I don't know if you have any memories of attempts to desegregate Greensboro Senior High.

JB: See, I was just observing at that point. But I had friends who took advantage of that freedom of choice, for instance, Shirley Frye. It wasn't my idea of a good way to start, needless to say, but it did ease things a little bit for some people. It was a very token, it was tokenism at its height. But after all, only the most, only people who first of all had cars, only mothers who didn't work, and only people who really put a high value on education were going to take advantage of that opportunity because it meant dragging their child all the way across town in your own car and picking them up. It also meant taking them into a situation about which you have no certainty what was going to happen, and to make your child a pawn in this kind of thing is not easy.

So only a certain group of people took advantage of it, but it was a beginning. I know that Shirley Frye took both of her boys and put them, I think, to Brooks School. I remember clearly the first black child in the Irving Park School because by then I had two little girls in elementary school there. And I remember my youngest child coming home one day saying that Mary Jones, who was a black child, I don't know what the child's name, whatever it was, was in her class and she didn't like her very much. My heart sank because I thought, "Oh dear, Anne is prejudiced."

And I said, "Well, Anne, I thought you did like Mary Jones. Why do you say that?"

And she said, "Well, you know what I mean."

And I said, "No, I don't know what you mean, tell me what you mean."

And she said, "Well, she knows everybody wants to be her friend and she's a snob and I don't like her."

And I sort of--you know, how interesting how you read into--because of your fears--into what your children are saying, something different than what they're saying.

On the other hand, I also remember that the first black teacher in the Irving Park School was Mrs. Chubbs, Howard Chubbs's wife. Howard Chubbs is a minister here in Greensboro. His wife was a very talented teacher. And she was the first one at Irving Park School and Anne had her as a teacher and loved her, just loved her, she was marvelous. She had her for a year and it was a very happy year in Anne's life.

And then Anne went on to the next grade and she had a typical crush on Mrs. Chubbs. So she constantly was going back to Mrs. Chubbs's class, and she didn't like her teacher this next year. And her teacher caught on to this thing that was going on with Anne always going in Mrs. Chubbs's class and taking her little notes and sending her little presents and she reprimanded Anne for that. And as a matter of fact, Anne was sent to the principal's office for wandering into Mrs. Chubbs's class when she didn't belong there. There was a great deal of anger and Mrs. Chubbs was so talented and I remember being quite disheartened about that, you know, being a bad experience for that little girl.

WL: I wonder when children begin to think about things like that, begin to think about race, you know, it's an interesting concept. I have a, my daughter's almost four and she has no concept at all of the--she has a slight concept of racial differences.

JB: Well, it's such a different time. But there are plenty of children your daughter's age who have a concept, believe me, and they get it from their parents. I mean this is my theory, but I think most people would agree. I'm sure you're not sitting around talking about it in a derogatory manner about people of different races, but if you would be, your children would be very sensitive to it.

I remember, just a couple of years ago, they did a documentary about desegregation. They went back to Irving Park School and they asked me to come over there. I spoke a little bit and I talked to some of the children and they asked me what I was doing, these black children. And they asked me what I was doing, so I tried to explain to them that we were talking about a time when children didn't come to this school who were black, and we were talking about segregation and desegregation. And I said, "Did you ever hear words like that?" And they said no. They didn't know what I was talking about. There was no way to explain to them what I was talking about. They couldn't, they didn't get it at all. And I didn't really want to go into any great detail about it [laughs]--I didn't think they needed to know about it right then.

My children, even then didn't--I mean, they never came back and told me, Mrs. Chubbs, they had a black teacher named Mrs. Chubbs, they just said, Anne just said, "Mrs. Chubbs was a wonderful teacher." And she loved her. She never told me she was black. So, it just depends on what--you know, what the environment is.

I also remember the busing thing. My children really were not bused, it just so happened we almost always lived within walking distance from schools at that time. But I do remember friends who lived in this area whose children had to be bused to Hampton School which was really across town and they were, these were kindergarten--elementary school children.

There was one couple, Bonnie and Dan McAllister, who lived way up past, beyond Irving Park School, and their kids were to go to Hampton. They put their children on the bus and nobody else in that area did. And they put some children on the bus who were going to kindergarten--no, first grade, and they were on the bus alone. There were maybe three children on that bus and nobody else, that first year went.

WL: An empty bus essentially.

JB: And they also were sending those three little white children to a school that was going to be all black, because I think nobody else in the white community was supporting it at that point. And that was, that was really putting your convictions to work. And it was, it took

a lot of courage, a lot of courage. And then I remember that Bonnie McAllister then volunteered at that school because she really did want to see what was going to happen. And spent several years working there. Eventually more and more people did, you know, go, and it did become a good situation.

WL: The changes in schools come--you mentioned that these changes come right before desegregation in 1971.

JB: Physical changes? Moving of things, improving of physical setups.

WL: Yeah. Or, how would you characterize the 1960s with, say, the 1960s compared to 1971 in the schools, insofar as you can answer that question? Is there, sort of a freeze in terms of change or is there a steady--

JB: In 1960 to 1971?

WL: Yeah, before, you know, before the busing program became, or at least not the comprehensive desegregation-–is there a--how much change actually occurs is what I'm trying to get, in between the *Brown* decision and the final decision that occurs?

JB: There was, you know--I wasn't really actively involved, again, so it's hard for me to tell you until the latter part of the sixties what was happening. But obviously there were people who were preparing. The superintendent--the *Brown* decision, the superintendent then was, who was it, do you know? I can't remember.

WL: The Greensboro superintendent?

JB: Yes.

WL: Ben Smith?

JB: Ben Smith. And Ben Smith said something innocuous like whatever the law is we'll obey it, and that was absolutely revolutionary. He got threatening phone calls. He had a terrible time after he said that. It didn't really do that much, but that was, it really got people nervous. But there was obviously, there was communication and there were the beginnings of communication going on between some people. I don't know at what point it became formalized. I'm really not at all sure about that.

WL: But the schools themselves, actually, you do see a little bit of desegregation during the late fifties, early sixties. To what extent do you see actually integration of faculties that

you mentioned before in the case of your own daughter, a little bit of that occurs in the sixties?

JB: A little bit of that, yeah, starts in the sixties.

WL: A little bit—

JB: A little bit, quite a–-gradually, well, it started with a few and it was obvious, and I can't remember. I don't know about the chronology of it; I can't remember anymore. But I certainly was aware of initially. We were all keenly aware of the fact that it was the very best black teachers and administrators who began to be a part of the process. It was very carefully thought out, who was going. And it stayed that way for a long time so that people would be somewhat comfortable at that point.

But then as it got towards the later part of the sixties and the faculties were quite desegregated, you know, all kinds of people came and were sent in all directions and people--there was a heightened sense of what kind of teacher your child had. People who were pretty casual about who their children's teachers were before the faculties were desegregated became very concerned about who the teachers were and went in and monitored classes to see what kind of teaching was going on, and there were all kinds of concerns about proper evaluations and that kind of thing.

I'm not sure that that was all bad, you know. It was bad because of its motivation, but there was a heightened sense of responsibility in terms of the public school system for those people whose children were in it, which is never altogether bad, even if the reasons aren't so good.

People really went to bat for their schools. Because there were going to be all those, all those things were going on in those schools, they wanted to at least be sure they were good teachers and that there were, that there was physically a good setup. For their own children, all children benefited from that.

Interesting things, you know, like traffic lights went up all over town where they'd never been before at dangerous intersections. I mean, let's face it, it's because white children were going to be crossing those intersections. The intersections had always been dangerous.

As I told you, libraries improved. PTAs got extremely active as it got closer and closer, as this thing got closer and closer to reality. And the PTAs went out and raised money like you never saw, particularly for the previously all-black schools, to do what they saw needed to be done. Fathers became involved like they'd never been before. All kinds of in-service training programs at the public school system was a--became a very important program.

WL: What is that exactly?

JB: That was, well, that's an opportunity for teachers who are actively teaching to take additional courses.

WL: Oh, I see.

JB: It's training opportunities for teachers out of the classroom just for a short periods of time. Excuse me.

WL: Further education of teachers.

JB: All kinds of communication groups got set up and, to help parents communicate better and to help students communicate better and enhance the quality of extra-curricular life. And then, of course, once you got into segregation, and the schools were desegregated, there were things you had to do for a while. All kinds of quotas that had to be imposed on teams and extra-curricular activities and student governments, that sort of, you know--it was people's best effort to see that everybody got represented, eventually, and I think today we don't have those anymore. And so we've gotten over that, the need for that.

I'm getting way ahead of my story, but I mean really, certainly the quality of education improved, although many people would disagree with me. The opportunity for children at all ends of the spectrum to get the kind of education they needed presented itself in special ways with psychologists on board and people who could properly evaluate the needs of students. They had special classes for enrichment, what have you, they never had before.

WL: The system as a whole improved you think?

JB: I think it did.

WL: Let's talk about the move to busing. If you remember or have some sense of when it became clear that busing, or a comprehensive desegregation plan, was going to be inevitable. Was there ever that--?

JB: You know, that happened very quickly.

WL: Seems to have.

JB: It happened very quickly. Suddenly the courts mandated that there be a plan or else one was going to be imposed. I think that was in '69. And the board of education had to put one together, and so it happened very fast and they, they--that was under the leadership of

Al Lineberry, he was chairman of the board of education. And they put one together in the summer and everybody rallied around. It happened so fast that I don't know how much input anybody could have on the board of education, they had that big responsibility.

WL: When the board comes up with a plan which--

JB: I think the first plan was unacceptable to the community. I can't remember how that all took place. I was busy doing other things at that point with students and teachers and stuff. But that, the first--and I didn't attend those board meetings--but I believe the first plan was unacceptable to parents generally, it was such an uproar that they--I think probably what they started out doing--and you probably already know all of this anyway– it was pairing schools for the most part. And that left great inequities in terms of how desegregated some schools were, and so that was unacceptable and so in order to make it a more equitable situation in terms of distribution of black and white children--

[End of Side 1, Tape A]

WL: --some of the changes that come at that point have been truly moved to the comprehensive busing plan. I guess one thing I'm interested in is the response of the Greensboro community, which by 1971 seems to move very rapidly in support of busing. Why do you think this was so, why did the white community favor busing?

JB: Well, they didn't have any choice and I think when you don't have any choice and you're going to get put into a situation, you want to make it as good as possible. That's one way of looking at it. Another way is to say that there were all these meetings and attempts to improve race relations early on, way before this became a reality. And those people rose quickly to help mobilize the community.

The institutions in the community responded really very generously and with a good keen sense of responsibility for--always considered, Greensboro's always considered to be a fairly progressive community. After all, we had a lot--we had all these institutions of higher learning here and a fairly good history of race relations, you know, in a context of a segregated society. And once they knew, once there was no choice, people just really moved fast to make it as good as possible.

And the Chamber of Commerce got, Chamber of Commerce got very involved when they happened to have some people on their staff who were quite committed to desegregation anyway and were able to at that point offer some opportunities for action, positive action. The Chamber of Commerce put money into the process and lots of volunteers and lots of their staff. The United Way did the same thing. Lots of corporations did the same thing. And parents who were generally concerned that this be a

peaceful transition, since it was going to have to be a transition anyway, all mobilized together in a way that really very few communities did as good a job as fast as Greensboro did.

A lot of attention was focused on Charlotte at that time, and I remember for those of us who were really involved in getting ready, we heaved a sigh of relief that Charlotte got credit for doing it well and we didn't. Because if we had had cameras and publicity and television, and whatever, you know, at that point, it would have distracted us pretty much from what we were doing. And it would not have gone well for us we felt, so we were happy that that didn't happen.

But people mobilized in a way that--I remember a group of us went to the county commissioners and demanded they put back about $90,000 back in the budget for the public schools that they had not agreed to include in preparation for public, for desegregation. I mean, we really waved our fingers at them and said, "You don't do this. You're responsible for what happens." Because that money was specifically to move materials and to do things in preparation for the opening of school. And we told them, "You'll be responsible if this is not a peaceful opening." And they gave us back the $90,000.

People just asserted themselves in appropriate fashions for the most part. Of course, there were plenty of people who were also asserting themselves in other ways, but they never made a big, a big statement, even though they paid close attention.

WL: This was an interracial effort?

JB: It was always an interracial effort, yeah.

WL: What sorts of forms did the interracial contacts, interracial--if there was any organization--what kinds of forms did they take?

JB: Well, the one I was involved with was the Human Relations Advisory Committee, which was an interracial group that got together to help with the process. And we set some goals for ourselves and raised money to implement those goals, working with some people in the public school system, some of them professionals and lots of volunteers.

The Chamber of Commerce was doing a similar thing, but they weren't directly involved with us. And they got money from, from the--they got government funds and we got volunteer funds, volunteer dollars.

And we did things like take groups of parents and high school students and professional people away for periods of two to three days at a time off to the Chinqua-Penn Plantation, what were called the Chinqua-Penn Retreats, where we came together and talked about our concerns and our fears and apprehensions as parents and as administrators and as teachers; it was just a mixed group of people. And we had

professional people that had come help us deal with those concerns and fears and to work out plans for helping other people who had obviously had the same concerns.

WL: Do you remember any of their fears and concerns that parents expressed at the retreats?

JB: Well, it was just--there were concerns about the business of putting young children on buses, I would say that's an obvious one, very young children, what would they think? They would be so frightened; they'd be so far away from home.

There were fears of people who worked, if their children were so far away, how would they get to them if there were an emergency? You know, just common, everyday kind of things. What if they missed the bus? What would happen?

There were fears about black children being unruly. Were black children more aggressive than white children? Would they pick on their children? And there were also fears that the black parents had exactly the same concerns about white children. And what would they do about them?

And then we talked about parental attitudes. And how we developed good and positive attitudes for yourself, how you dealt with those fears, how you didn't convey them to your children. And out of those simple really mundane kinds of things that you would expect people would feel, if you recognized what life was like in those days in terms of race and experiences between the races, then you worked out strategies for them and then we shared those strategies. And we worked through the PTAs to give them information about how to talk to your children about busing, about a bus ride, how to talk to your children about the desegregated schools, classrooms. We tried to have people available to work with, you know, just to work with people who were afraid.

We arranged, after those retreats, everybody arranged to have little groups meet in people's homes, interracial groups of parents who were going to the same school meeting. We alerted the PTAs as to ways that they could help. And the PTA, at that time, which was under the leadership of, there was a PTA Council under the leadership of a woman named Hermine[?] Miller. And the PTA held open houses at these schools, way before schools started, and then just days before school started, so parents could come to the schools and see what they looked like physically.

And they had, we had, people were afraid of what was going to happen on the bus. People had terrible ideas about was going to happen on the buses. And so we had volunteers on the buses to help the bus drivers and help the children onto their bus and to keep things quiet and calm and to oversee what was going on there. And we had--what would it be like, people were like, what would happen in the middle of the day if there was an emergency, so we had an emergency phone line set up so that if you were worried about your child, you could call and we could check for you, so that the schools wouldn't be bombarded with phone calls from worried parents, which there were quite a large number. Just things like that.

WL: How long did you think this would go on, your efforts? Through 1971?

JB: Well, the Human Relations Advisory Committee went on for quite a few years, way, way after that. The bus monitoring, with the telephone systems, that probably went on for two years, maybe not even that long. But just ‘til people got comfortable, or a little more comfortable with what was happening. And then after that, the logical organizations took over those kinds of activities which would have been the PTAs and other kinds of groups like that.

Q: Was there any--I gather there was no organized opposition to busing in Greensboro in this period?

A: Yes, there were. There were organizations that were opposed to busing. They had names like ARP or whatever; I don’t remember, you know, initials. They were very much opposed to it. And there were, of course, at every board of education meeting--you can get more about them from Al Lineberry--I didn’t go to that many. But people would come to the board meetings and rant and rave, and carry on, and threaten. Yes, there were lots of displays of anger about this.

The people were angry because their choices were gone and their neighborhood schools were gone and some people bore a bigger part of the responsibility or burden, I don’t know how you want to look at it, for desegregating the schools. Some people were in areas, transitional kinds areas of town, geographically, that meant they got a bigger hunk of, a bigger taste of the desegregation than others. There was no way to make it so—called equitable, and so some people were very angry. And the board of education members were threatened and abused.

WL: So in that sense, it was a difficult and very traumatic kind of thing.

JB: Oh, yeah. But there weren’t any huge marches on the school system.

WL: Right. No “Boston style.”

JB: No big outbursts of violence that I remember.

WL: Would you say this kind of opposition was mainly parental concern about changes in their neighborhood schools?

JB: Concern and anger. Yeah, concern and anger. And It wasn’t just all white. There were black parents who were also angry about it.

WL: Yeah, I was going to ask you.

JB: Yeah, I think that sort of surprised--you know, everybody was sort of surprised by tha,t but there were plenty of black parents who were very upset about it. They didn't want their children getting bused long ways either; they weren't sure what was going to happen to their children. Take them all the way into the deep pocket of Irving Park or Starmount; what in the world was going to happen to them?

WL: Which suggests that there's sort of a common parental, well, natural sort of parental concern about a changing system--

JB: Sure, I think so. Some white parents think black parents have different interests than they do? Parents are parents.

WL: Sure. I was reading Chafe last night, in preparation for our conversation, and the interesting thing was the extent of black opposition right at the end and the almost undermining of the process right at the end because of the extent of black opposition.

JB: Well, because of the extent of those black children are being used to desegregate the white schools. And because unfortunately, it's easier to do that than it was to get white students to integrate the black schools. It was such a dilemma for the board of education. I was always thankful I wasn't on the board at that time. I don't think I would have had the wisdom, or whatever it took. But, you see, as quickly as you grab a group of white parents in an affluent part of town, they'd leave and go to private schools, so you couldn't get hold of them. Or you were just chasing them out of the system all together. And that was a problem, so what could you do?

But, part of what you do is move the black children in those schools and the other thing you could do is go after white children whose parents were at work and couldn't afford to go to a private school. And that's obviously a good hunk of what happened.

If you insisted on moving people from Grimsley and Page to Dudley, they just were going to leave, and they did, in large numbers. That's why some went to Greensboro Day School, and a number, God knows how many Christian academies came into existence. Churches were wonderful about allowing white children to come to them for private schools.

WL: So there was a, maybe unstated but very clear--or was it stated--notion that white flight had to be avoided in particularly affluent whites?

JB: Nobody said white flight had to be avoided, but they kept pointing to the fact that white flight was a big problem, which was the second thing that I was saying, the other way. But it was a reality. It was hard to deal with.

WL: Sure, and there were plenty of examples of systems which were more or less depopulated of affluent white students.

JB: There's also an interesting thing that was going on and that was that the black community wanted to maintain control of their best schools. And Dudley and Lincoln were the black junior high school and senior high school. There was a lot of ambivalence about how you desegregate them and maintain control of them. It's like trying to desegregate [North Carolina] A&T [State University]. I would suggest that you dare try to appoint a white chancellor at A&T. You have a lot better chance of putting a black chancellor at UNCG. And that was another problem to deal with.

WL: It's an interesting dilemma, you know--

JB: What's that?

WL: To a person who, I think, through their lifetime committed to the idea of integration--when integration is taken to the classical extreme, it means the end of black control over the schools and other institutions.

JB: I must say, you know, there was a--it appeared easier, much easier for the black principals around the country to sit on at a white school; as long as that person was competent, that was okay--but, I'd do the opposite and that's understandable.

You know, I talked, I remember talking to Walter Johnson, who was president of the school board in the seventies and chairman of the school board. And he was saying what a great experience it was to go to a black high school and a black college. That he had opportunities at those two institutions he would not have had had he been at a desegregated institution, in the early stages of desegregation. And he's being pretty modest, because Walter is an extremely bright guy and attractive and he probably would have had opportunities regardless of where he went.

As he sees things, in those days, he was the president of the student body at Dudley High School; he was everything at Dudley High School. He was also everything at A&T. He was chairman of the Debating Society. He had great opportunities to develop his natural talents and he said, you know, he was fortunate enough to grow up in a time when universities were looking for very talented black students. He said he had been invited to come to Duke because he had achieved so much at A&T. He, in his own mind,

doubted that he would have achieved that much had he had been at an integrated institution.

And he said he was invited to come to Duke, to go to Duke Law School; he was to be the first black at Duke Law School. And he said he was, you know, he was just cocky enough to say "I'm not coming by myself. If you want me to come to Duke Law School, then you'd better bring some other blacks into graduate schools at Duke. Otherwise I'm not coming by myself." So they went out and found a couple of other, maybe two, other blacks, to bring to Duke at that time.

And he feels that his success was due to the fact that he had a good strong ego and a good strong feeling about what he was capable of doing. He had great respect for himself as a black, and for black educators and black leaders because he experienced the very best. And he says, you know, there's something to be said for that. He was not speaking against desegregation--I know we're talking about this--but just for his own experiences.

WL: Sure. Well, the experience of integration obviously has got all kinds of complex, you know, costs and benefits and ramifications. How would you, I mean, since you were involved, have been involved in school affairs, for the last--at least since the seventies. Would you judge Greensboro, say from the vantage point of 1987, over fifteen years beyond the comprehensive plan, successful? Would you say it's successful? Or to what extent it's been successful? What have been the costs? What have been the benefits of desegregation?

JB: I think we've done an extremely good job in Greensboro. And as I said to you earlier, I think the schools are better today than they were.

Now let's talk about the system as a whole. I think it's--sometimes you lose and you gain in the process because you are so concerned with numbers and percentages at a certain point in the process that it gets to be ridiculous, and you lose out on a lot of opportunities as well as gaining opportunities. But generally speaking, I think today, the needs, the genuine, valid needs of young children--of children of any age group going into the public school system--are being addressed today in a way that they never were before the schools were desegregated.

There is more opportunity for every child's needs to be met, whether that child be a child of lesser ability, average, or very, very talented. And I have to say, I'm quite convinced that that is, to a large part, due to the fact that our schools were desegregated. Parents were very concerned that everybody's needs be met, and "everybody's needs" means "my child's needs." And since everybody is different, there had to be a more and more complex system for addressing those needs.

So you only have to look at the kind staffing that goes on in the schools today and compare it to the staffing before desegregation. You're going to look at the central office

staff and compare it to before to see how much there is in the way of special kinds of people in the system to meet special needs and recognize that.

WL: So desegregation provided an opportunity to do other things as well is what you're saying?

JB: Provided a good excuse for doing a lot more than was ever done before, for all children. Before desegregation, Irving Park School was a great little school and all the parents whose children went to Irving Park School could see to it that their children got everything that they needed, if they had to pay for it themselves. But that didn't happen at every school, and today I think it really does.

And I think that beyond that there is the business of the human experience. What is education all about? It brings you closer to people, regardless of the color of their skin--because, after all, desegregation did bring together people not only of different races but of different socio-economic backgrounds. There was a great mixing up of that went on and that's what a democracy should be all about.

WL: Uh-huh. Different classes. How would you judge the--just from your own perspective, whatever thoughts you have on the idea--just the broad subject of race relations. What sort of effects schools--not necessarily just schools, but how would you characterize the atmosphere of 1987 in Greensboro?

JB: Well, I think the race relations are greatly improved, you know, during my life experience here in Greensboro--there's no question about it. I know that when--well, in everything I do, I don't think there's anything I do now that I'm not working with a mixture of people. I think it's just a much more comfortable situation.

I think there will always be a tug going on between people of different backgrounds for a variety of reasons. But there's certainly, where I travel, and one of the things I do out of respect, and a reputation of people's ability, not based on the color of their skin. I'm not naive to think that below the surface there still isn't plenty of antagonism, plenty of negative feelings towards people of different races and religions.

I belong to a minority myself, being Jewish. I know that beneath the surface that there will always be people who have negative feelings because I am somewhat different than they are. And when you add to that the color of your skin, there's a little bit more. But I think I notice a difference, a gradual difference in the attitude that black people have towards themselves and their comfort in moving in other, in the bigger community. I think it's a tremendously, vastly improved situation.

Now to you it may look quite different than it looks to me, because you don't go back as far as I do and you don't know how bad it was. So it would be interesting to some day-- [laughs] I'll come interview you and find out how you see things. There's still

plenty to do and there always will be, certainly. There's plenty to do in the economic area. The opportunities are vastly improved, but they still have a long way to go.

WL: It's interesting. A couple of years ago, we had a series of seminars as part as this project, kind of the initial opening ground, when A&T and UNCG were getting together on the idea. We asked this question at each of the seminars, each of which was on a separate topic, which is politics and education. And there seemed to be a clear difference between what whites said and what blacks said. Whites generally saw improvement, and blacks, many of them saw improvement, others did not. The assessment is much more mixed from the black perspective. And one gets the feeling--at least I get the feeling--that there's a difference, significant difference, between what blacks feel on the subject and whites feel. Any reactions to that?

JB: Oh, I don't think there's any question about that. And anyway, who am I to say, you know, as I sit here talking to you, who am I to say what the situation is anyway. Here I am sitting in Irving Park in a nice big house and being very comfortable and I'm not out there, you know? I don't really know what it's really like. I only can, I only see it from my perspective and I'm in a very privileged position here. You know, as a trustee of the university, you know I see it as great, everything's great. People have climbed up the ladder and have been very successful and their relationship is based on achievement, and that's just one area.

You know, if I was out there struggling, hoping for a better job and not having had an education, not having had a lot of opportunities, there's a great deal, still a great more to be done. And you know, there isn't this sense of urgency that there should be about something like that, because so many of us feel it's so much better. Or that we'd done our job, and there's not much more we can do.

But I do think that the biggest job you do as a responsible person is to see that doors are opened appropriately, that people have to--that there's a good educational system that helps people go through those doors. And a lot of it has to be done by the people who have the need. I can't come and--

WL: Sure.

JB: You know, you can't go out there and be so wise as to show people exactly how each one should do their thing in their lifetime.

WL: Well.

[End of Interview]