

2012.3.404

“The Atlanta Nine”
Recorded at First Iconium Baptist Church
Atlanta, Georgia
July 16, 2013

UNIDENTIFIED MALE PRESENTER, *from the front of the sanctuary of First Iconium Baptist Church*: [Sound quality is adversely affected by echo.] It is with great admiration that we welcome these two sisters to First Iconium Baptist Church. When I thought about doing the welcome, I thought about the spirit of the Little Rock Nine in Arkansas, about the students that [inaudible], students that led [inaudible] back in the late sixties. Then also I gave thought to James Meredith, who integrated the University of Mississippi, so it's with great pleasure that we're here tonight honoring and recognizing Martha Holmes-Jackson and Mrs. Rosalyn Walton-Lees. Our church is an activist church. We have [inaudible] as a servant church, also known as Holy Ghost Headquarters. As you know, Reverend Mac [Timothy McDonald] is very, very busy; but each Sunday morning from 7:45 service, 10:45 service, you are welcome to come and worship with us. We hope you have a very [inaudible] and enjoyable night; and we always like to coin the phrase, “Nobody can do everything, but everybody can do something.” Amen. Welcome. Now, I'd like to bring up Brother Henry Bryant, who's going to present to you some information from the DeKalb History Museum. Henry. [*Hands microphone to HENRY BRYANT*]

HENRY BRYANT: What the camera is about tonight is that Eddie Anderson is here to tape this so it will go into the archives of the DeKalb History Center, and we'll have this as a permanent record of DeKalb County. These ladies made history. I want to say a little bit about myself and about the organization, B*ATL, so that you'll know what this is about really. I'm Henry Bryant, and I'm chairman of B-A-T-L, or B*ATL [pronounced “battle”]. I'm a thirty-two-year resident of East Atlanta, and I live about three blocks away. And I also would like to thank First Iconium for hosting this event tonight and Reverend McDonald [inaudible]. I would also like to welcome the special—everyone here—to the special Civil War and Civil Rights program of the B*ATL Week 2013.

B*ATL was organized about nine years ago to commemorate the Battle of Atlanta, which happened on the ground where you're sitting. The B*ATL organization puts on over fifty programs over a week-long period. Most of them are happening this

coming Saturday, and many are designed for families; so bring your families—come on out. Most of them are free. You may also want to check out our Civil War and Civil Rights stand, which will be around Flat Shoals in East Atlanta Village, where there will be a history performance. And Stephanie, who's here tonight, has organized a wonderful program of people who will portray people from history to tell the story of how we got from 1864 to 1964 and to today.

Why does an event like B*ATL include civil rights as a part of the commemoration of a Civil War battle? For one thing, we take the approach that our history is not just a snapshot. It's a whole photo album with a series of connected events and connected pictures, things that happened before, during, and after that rely on each other to exist. In the case of the story tonight, there would not have been a story for the movie *Lincoln* to portray if he had not been reelected in November of 1864. That reelection was doubtful until the Battle of Atlanta in July of that year and the surrender of the city that September. The abolition of slavery and the movement for civil rights started at that point.

In the Battle of Atlanta there were two generals who were killed, one of them Union and one of them Confederate from Georgia. There are two battlefield monuments--if you live in this area, you might be familiar with them—which we are working to restore. They're both located near here. You may have seen the memorial marker—the memorial monument—to Confederate General Walker, whose marker [inaudible] by I-20. You might pass there tonight. You might pass there every day and not know what it was all about. He was shot and killed by snipers who were crouched on the hillside at what today is Crim High School. The building that's there was built in the 1940s and was called Murphy High School. We're here tonight to learn about the school's further place in history, the history that happened almost a hundred years after the Civil War battle that was begun there. The fight and the history has always been about our rights as citizens.

Tonight we have the pleasure of having with us Dr. Cliff Kuhn, who is a professor of history at Georgia State University and a leading authority on Atlanta history. He has written two books on it, one of which will be for sale here tonight. You can get him to sign it and personalize it for you if you'd like to purchase a copy. You may have heard him on WABE radio with his program, *This Day in Atlanta History*. He

has [inaudible] oral history, and he is nationally recognized for this, which makes him the perfect person to lead this evening's talk.

We would not have a program tonight, though, without our special guests, Ms. Martha Holmes-Jackson and Ms. Rosalyn Walton-Lees. They are truly heroes of our time and icons of a historic time in our city and country. So now let us get on with hearing their stories. Please help me welcome them. Thank you both—all three of you—for coming. [Applause]

CLIFF KUHN: [*Dr. Kuhn is seated at a table next to MARTHA HOLMES-JACKSON and ROSALYN WALTON-LEES.*] Good evening. I just wanted to spend a minute or two putting the stories that we're going to hear in a larger context. Part of that context, I would say, in 1958, most—certainly most white residents in the state of Georgia--never thought that desegregation would occur, no matter what the Supreme Court of the United States had said. That year, the governor's race in 1958, the more moderate of the two candidates, Governor Ernest Vandiver, campaigned on the promise that no, not one black child would ever sit next to a white child while he was governor of Georgia; and he was the more moderate of the two candidates that year who was running for governor. So I think as late as 1958 most residents of the state of Georgia—certainly most white residents—never thought desegregation would occur.

But there were things afoot, both in other states and in Atlanta, that kind of undermined that position. There were certainly things going on in other states: Little Rock had desegregated, the nation seeing on television the confrontation at the schoolhouse door. The Little Rock Nine had to be escorted in by members of the United States National Guard Air Force Reserve. New Orleans 1960: Again the nation had seen a six-year-old child, Ruby Bridges, spat on, cursed at, as she was the one student to enter the previously all-white William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans. Little Rock closed down Central High School for an entire school year, the school year '58-'59. There were school districts in Virginia that closed down rather than desegregate, and we began to realize the implications of massive resistance might mean schools actually did close down. So you had that going on.

In Atlanta you had some people who were beginning to try to keep the schools open rather than shut down. Marvin Griffin, the governor of Georgia, said, "If one black child enters Henry Grady High School, I can close down every school in the city of Atlanta." And he could, under existing state law at that time. But there was a group

called HOPE—Help Our Public Education, a group of white women that organized in December of '58, [and] began to agitate to keep the schools open. In 1960 there was a commission on the schools called the Sibley Commission, and they held hearings on the school situation in every one of the congressional districts in Georgia. The one in Atlanta that was probably the most important was at Grady High School. So many people came there to speak at that hearing that they had to have a second week of hearings. Several hundred people spoke at Grady High School. That was where the idea of local option came forth, that each individual school system could do as they saw fit concerning desegregation.

There had been a court case finally. It's called *Calhoun v. Latimer*, initiated in 1958 by about ten black parents. And it wasn't just a token case; it was a case really challenging the city's segregated school system. And these court cases were working up through the courts at this time. And in the spring of 1959 Judge Frank Hooper said that we have to obey the law of the land. There has to be some sort of desegregation in Atlanta eventually. You can't stall forever; you can't resist forever. So that's in 1959. But [inaudible] a year to figure out what was going to happen; and in the meantime in January 1961, the University of Georgia desegregated. Hamilton Holmes and Charlayne Hunter, two students from Atlanta, desegregated the University of Georgia. The courts ordered the Georgia university not to stall any longer. It ordered those two students to be admitted in January. A riot [skip in recording] ordered the University of Georgia back open and kept it open.

So this set the stage really for what we're going to talk about tonight. There were—I would say the city of Atlanta obeyed the letter of the law and not the spirit of the law in *Brown [v. The Board of Education]*, so that made it very hard to kind of transfer to a previously all-white school. And the momentum overwhelmingly came from within the black community, from black students and black families, black parents, and black community leaders. Three hundred thirty students picked up transfer applications in May 1961. You only had a week or two to fill them out. They gave them a very brief window to do this. A hundred thirty-three completed their forms by the deadline. They had to undergo all sorts of tests. Sixteen made the final round of interviews, ten had their requests for transfer approved, and nine actually made the move to transfer to previously all-white high schools—Northside; Grady; Brown High School, on the west side of town; and Murphy High School, which is now

Crim today. So we're going to bring you two of the nine who were out of the one hundred thirty-three who applied for transfer originally, who filled out the transfer requests and was reduced to the nine, two of whom we're going to be talking to tonight.

It was something that the city fathers were very mindful of. They were very mindful of the bad publicity that Little Rock had received in the aftermath of Governor Faubus's and others' trying to prevent the desegregation of Little Rock Central High School. They were very mindful of the bad publicity that New Orleans had perceived [sic; received?] when the nation saw these mobs spitting on six-year-old Ruby Bridges, an episode recorded by author John Steinbeck and later made famous in Norman Rockwell's painting, *The Trouble* [sic; means *Problem*] *We All Live With*. So they were mindful of that. They were very—did not want that to happen in Atlanta. So as we're going to hear, the actual desegregation of Atlanta [schools] was very carefully organized; and it was something of a public relations coup for the city because of its relatively peaceful desegregation, or so it seemed on that day. I think the reality—what we're going to hear tonight—is a much more complex reality; and I look forward to hearing it.

Let me just start, really, by chatting up, first of all [MS. HOLMES-JACKSON and MS. WALTON-LEES laugh], and asking you to talk a little bit about your family and your neighborhood, especially Martha, because you grew up not too terribly far from where we are right now. So please talk about the community you grew up in. I believe you grew up in Reynoldstown, right?

MARTHA HOLMES-JACKSON: I did.

DR. KUHN: So [*Gestures to pass conversation on to her*]

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: I grew up in Reynoldstown, the youngest of five children born to Lewis, Sr., and Ora L. Holmes. I had a good childhood, and I credit my oldest sister, Marian, who's here tonight, with getting me off to a good start educationally. So by the time I got to elementary school, I was on roll, had a successful school life. I was salutatorian from my elementary school; and when I got to high school, I got misplaced in the wrong homeroom, I think. I wasn't in the fast-track homeroom, but I was able to keep up with the other students nonetheless, even though I wasn't in that homeroom. So I had a successful high school experience, which is what led to wanting—led me wanting to participate in the desegregation of Atlanta schools.

My dad was a self-employed carpenter, handyman. My mom worked domestic. We—I guess we were poor, but we didn't know it. [*Audience laughter*] Not really. We were striving to get to the middle class. We weren't there, but we were striving to get there. And my mom and dad did value education. They weren't able to complete their schooling, but they valued it; and they were encouraging. People in the neighborhood were the same way; the elderly people who had not been able to complete their schooling encouraged all of the young ones to do the best that you could do in school. And church—I grew up at St. Phillip A.M.E. Church. Our mentors and directors there also encouraged us to do well in school.

And I also want to say that I came along at a time when black teachers pushed children to achieve. And we were receptive; we understood the importance. We wanted to achieve. I went into education myself, so I ended up trying to be encouraging to my students the same as my teachers had been to me. But there was a difference because we valued the education. We could see beyond the twelfth grade and hoped that we could get to college. Many of the students that I taught weren't interested in college; they would just want to get to jobs that paid fairly well. They wanted the money. They couldn't see the—farther into the future and didn't value—they didn't have the same set of values that we had, let me put it that way.

DR. KUHN: So what led you to leave this nurturing environment, with teachers who were really looking after your interests or the community that was looking after your interests?

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: Well, the teachers encouraged us. When we knew that desegregation was going to happen, the teachers said, "Well, we know you can represent us well. And why don't you go down and get an application and just see?" We didn't know at the time that we were going to have to take the achievement tests, I guess. But when that came along, they said, "Oh, you can do it. You can do well." And as it turned out, we did because we had people who—families who believed in us, teachers who believed in us. We believed in ourselves, and we were determined to come out on top. [*To ROSALYN WALTON-LEES, seated beside her*] Rosalyn? [*Audience laughter*]

MS. WALTON-LEES: Well, I was raised by a single mother because my father died when I was two years old. I'm the middle child of five children; and my oldest brother is the person who encouraged me, because he didn't have a high school education.

But he ran a business, he worked a job, and he helped my mother raise four children; and I always credit him with saving us from being poor. We were poor; but we didn't know we were poor, like Martha said, because we had whatever we needed. We didn't have all the things that we wanted, but we had what we needed.

DR. KUHN: I think it's important to realize that the two of you and your counterparts weren't the cream—the elite. You didn't come from college-educated families, you know, and I think, you know, sometimes we hear about, you know, the people who have gone to Morehouse or their fathers have gone to Morehouse or [their mothers have gone to] Spelman or whatever; but I think practically all of the nine students who desegregated the Atlanta Public Schools came from kind of working families.

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: Except for-- [*Pauses, possibly trying to remember name.*]

DR. KUHN: Practically all.

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: Yeah, right. OK.

DR. KUHN: So again, maybe you could speak about what motivated each of you personally to take this step.

MS. WALTON-LEES: Well, it was [*laughs*—you know how, in high school, you always have your group of little friends. So we all thought that we were the cream of the crop. So we were going to turn over the world, and so we all took the test. But there I was and Martha and nine others, and the rest didn't make it. And there were ten, but one decided that they didn't want to go. But I never, ever had in my mind to go back to Howard, once I got to Murphy; I never wanted to go back.

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: Mm-mm [*Nods in agreement.*]

MS. WALTON-LEES: Even though it was hard, and there was troubles, and, you know, I missed out on a lot of things that I would have had a chance to do had I been at Howard, I just never thought of going back. Never thought of going back.

DR. KUHN: Why not?

MS. WALTON-LEES: Because I thought it was just—once I started something, I couldn't give up.

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: Mm-hmm [*Nods in agreement.*]

MS. WALTON-LEES: I couldn't give up. I couldn't let them beat me. And if I had turned around and went back to Howard, they would have won.

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: Mm-hmm [*Nods in agreement.*]

MS. WALTON-LEES: That's just my thought. I thought that they would have won if I had gone back.

DR. KUHN: How about you, Martha? What was your personal—

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: Pretty much the same as Rosalyn.

DR. KUHN: You told me once in the past that you were inspired by the students who were sitting in at the lunch counters in '60 and '61.

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: Yes. And I was not old enough to do it, even though I wanted to go, and because my daddy was afraid. He said, "Oh, no. Don't you go anywhere near there." Because he thought we would be put in jail, and he wouldn't have money to get me out. [*Audience laughter*] So [I] didn't do that; but when the opportunity came for us to attempt to go to the previously all-white schools, I jumped right on it. And of course, we had encouragement from black businessmen and our teachers as well. [We] said, "You know, this is what we've got to do. We've got to start somewhere." And they also told us, "You go, and you represent us well." And we had the weight of the black community on our shoulders, and we weren't going to let them down. We were determined that we would get through this.

And of course, we had a lot of help and encouragement, not just from people in the black community, but as far as socialization goes, there were volunteers—I call this one person my "social mentor," I guess. I think it came about through—I think it was the League of Women Voters—

DR. KUHN, *nodding*: The League of Women Voters was involved.

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: Right.

MS. WALTON-LEES: And the Quakers [Atlanta Friends Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends].

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: The Quakers, right. And we had those Sunday afternoon sessions at Quaker House. They invited white students to come, and we just talked. It was like a Sunday afternoon tea, I guess. But they were attempting to make us feel comfortable being around whites. But I already felt comfortable, because my great-aunt lived with us; and she worked for a white family who was only about two blocks from where we lived. And before I started school, I went to work with her; and there were two white boys in the family, and we played together in the yard with no problems at all. And, of course, my mother was a domestic; and I was accustomed to

going with my daddy when he went to pick her up from wherever he went to drop her off and, of course, got to know the families and the children. And then, during my early teenage years, I worked as a baby-sitter. My—one of the older girls in the church had a job, and they needed—the family next door needed someone to baby-sit; and she asked me if I wanted to go, so I was just accustomed to dealing with whites.

And Reynoldstown—there—as I say, just two blocks down the street is where the white families started. I don't know whether you're familiar with it, but Weatherby Street is where the whites lived—from Weatherby to Moreland. And then around Flat Shoals there were whites, so we were kind of around them all the time. And it was a peaceful coexistence—no socializing, but nobody was bothering anybody else. So we had—I was comfortable being around whites, but the sessions at Quaker House and then the mentors that we were assigned helped to make us feel more comfortable around whites. And it was certainly a big help, because I might have been a little nervous on the first day of school, but I wasn't so afraid that I couldn't talk. And in the classes, when it was time to respond, I raised my hand to respond; so I felt quite comfortable.

DR. KUHN: I had heard or read that your family got threats, and the Ku Klux Klan publicized the names and addresses of the transfer students. Did you know anything about this?

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: No—if I did, I forgot it [*laughs*]. As I told you earlier—

MS. WALTON-LEES: [*Laughing*] I don't remember.

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: --it was such a traumatizing experience that when I graduated, I kind of forgot on purpose--I didn't want to remember--some of the things that happened. We were just glad to get through it, to be done with it and thankful that we did not let our people down, because we had to represent; and we were determined that we were not going to fail.

DR. KUHN: You know the city of Atlanta was trying to make sure that the kind of schoolhouse-door confrontations that had gone on in Little Rock and New Orleans did not happen here, so there were police at the four different high schools. Quote “rabble rousers” were apprehended early on. You all, if I'm not mistaken, came in fifteen minutes after the bell—

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: Yes. And we were also escorted by City of Atlanta detectives. They picked us up at home and drove us to school. I don't remember how

long it went on, but they would drive us back home. And I do remember that, at some point, we came to be on our own, because I remember one incident—Rosalyn can't remember—but we were walking up Clifton headed toward Boulevard Drive, and there were some apartment buildings. We had gone past all the houses; but when we got to this particular set of little apartments, there was a lady back in there—I guess she had come to the door and seen us approaching. We couldn't see her—you know, you can't see inside through a screen door. But she was cursing and fussing and calling us all kinds of names; and that made us a little uneasy, but we just kept walking and not looking back. Of course, nothing happened, but it was because the city of Atlanta civic leaders, officials, to the time to ensure that Atlanta wouldn't be a repeat of Little Rock.

MS. WALTON-LEES: And what they did was--when we went to school fifteen minutes late, that meant that no kids were out; and all of the agitators were kept across the street. So nobody was ever able to get near us.

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: Yeah.

DR. KUHN: So you wouldn't have these mob scenes at the school—

MS. WALTON-LEES: No, they were across the street. They never let them come across the street where the school was.

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: Yeah.

DR. KUHN, *to MS. WALTON-LEES*: What do you remember about the first day, Rosalyn?

MS. WALTON-LEES: Nerve-wracking. [*She and MS. HOLMES-JACKSON laugh.*] It was just—you know, I can't hardly remember what went on that very first day. It's just little things that happened, like in the classroom there was one guy who threw spitballs every single day at me—every single day, the whole class, he threw spitballs. And this one time I just got so mad. I knew I was supposed to keep my temper under control, but I threw a book; and then I took myself to the principal's office [*laughter*]. And he never did it again. Never did it again.

DR. KUHN: Well, what kinds of things did you experience in the hallways, the cafeteria, in the classroom?

MS. WALTON-LEES: You know, the girls, they didn't want to talk to you while you were in the hall where other people could see them. But if you went into the bathroom, where there was just one person, they would actually talk to you.

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: Mm-hmm.

DR. KUHN: That's interesting.

MS. WALTON-LEES: But in the hallway, you know, they would not say anything, not acknowledge that you were there; but if one was in the bathroom when you were there, they talked to you.

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: [*Nodding*] Oh, yeah.

DR. KUHN: And more than that, I mean, not only did they not [sic] ignore you, but I've heard elsewhere that kids would get tripped or have gum put in their hair or—

MS. WALTON-LEES: I didn't experience any of that.

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: I didn't experience the gum or the tripping, but I do recall that there was a boy in particular—I'm not going to call his name, because he's passed away now. But he would just bump my shoulder as hard as he could—you know, in passing in the hallway—just run right into me. So I learned to brace myself so we were going to bump each other [*laughter*]. So he—I gave as good as I got. And there were times when we would—[*To MS. WALTON-LEES*] I don't know if you ever found a note in your locker, did you?

MS. WALTON-LEES: No. Not that I can remember.

MRS. HOLMES-JACKSON: I remember--one in particular I remember was, "Go back to Africa, jungle bunny." And I thought it was silly [*laughter*]. And I don't know if I mentioned it in my English class or in my social studies class; but anyway, whoever wrote it didn't really upset me. The only other thing I can remember is that once in social studies class—I wore my hair curly all over, and I thought I could feel a little something touching my hair. And I'd look around; and, of course, everybody was busy doing what they were supposed to be doing. And I kept feeling these little thumps, and it turns out that a boy in the class was tossing wire nails. You know the little bitty finishing nails? Just tossing them. And when I went to brush my hair, there were several falling out on the desk. Of course, the teacher got him about that. But the cafeteria—we had a reserved table for how long, Rosalyn?

MS. WALTON-LEES: For a long while.

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: Long time. It was a table reserved just for us. And I think eventually, didn't somebody—one of the students—come over to sit with us?

MS. WALTON-LEES, *nodding*: Mm-hmm.

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: And then after we stopped the reserved table, we did go through the experience of having students move to another table if we sat down where

they were. Not all of them would get up to leave, but many of them did leave. And after a while that stopped.

MS. WALTON-LEES: Mm-hmm.

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: So they kind of got used to us.

DR. KUHN: How about the teachers? How did they treat you?

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: Oh, the teachers were very good to us. And I suspect that the way they arranged our class schedule, they chose teachers who were—

MS. WALTON-LEES: Tolerant.

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: --tolerant, yes. Racially tolerant. Because we didn't have any problems with the teachers.

MS. WALTON-LEES: No.

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: I can't think of any—

MS. WALTON-LEES: But if you look at our yearbook, Martha and I are sitting in the exact same place: the second row, first seat, so that only one person had to sit by us [*laughs*].

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: Oh, yeah. That's right. In the graduation, yeah.

DR. KUHN: What about the principal?

MS. WALTON-LEES, *shaking her head*: He was just the principal.

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON, *laughing*: Yeah. We dealt more with the counselor, Mr. Russell. The principal didn't have much to say one way or the other.

DR. KUHN: I came across something where the principal said to one of you—I think it was to Martha--this is from an article in 1961—that [*reading from paper*] “when reports of the attacks reached his office, he refused to intervene. ‘He tried to tell me things happened because I was just another student,’ Martha remembered, ‘not because I was colored.’”

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: Yeah, he tried to smooth things over—I guess that's what I want to say.

DR. KUHN: And I came across something else—one class, [*to MS. HOLMES-JACKSON*] I think it was in your class, Martha, your physics class. You were interviewed in the newspaper, I think sometime that year.

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: Mm-hmm.

DR. KUHN, *reading from paper*: “The boy who acted as the teacher’s aide would mark her examination booklets with a swastika or the words ‘NAACP approved.’” Do you remember anything like this?

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: I don’t remember.

DR. KUHN, *reading*: “In English class the boy who distributed test papers refused to hand Martha hers. He simply threw them at her.”

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: Oh, yeah, and I do remember that. He sort of like, you know, if he was passing it out, he would let it drop out of his hand before I could get it.

DR. KUHN: So how did you steel yourself or have the resolve to kind of get through that, either of you?

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: We were representing, and we were determined not to fail. We weren’t going to let them provoke us to be violent, except for that one time [*smiles, referring to the thrown book incident, when MS. WALTON-LEES turned herself in to the principal’s office*] [*laughter*].

MS. WALTON-LEES: But once I did it, it never happened again [*laughter*].

DR. KUHN: So did you--like when you were walking to school, did you fortify each other, you know, and when you were walking home from school--?

MS. WALTON-LEES: We had to. We only had each other.

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: Yeah, we would.

MS. WALTON-LEES: We only had each other.

DR. KUHN: And walking back from school, talk, kind of debrief, from what happened that day? And then, what would you say about any of this to your parents or your family?

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: I guess we probably told them it was OK.

MS. WALTON-LEES: We probably didn’t want to worry them.

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: Yeah.

MS. WALTON-LEES: We probably smoothed it over and said it was just fine.

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: Mm-hmm.

MS. WALTON-LEES: So they wouldn’t worry too much.

DR. KUHN: What about extracurricular activities, like—

MS. WALTON-LEES: None of those. Nothing.

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON, *shaking her head*: Nothing.

DR. KUHN: You were not invited. You were not welcome?

MS. WALTON-LEES: We were not involved, and we were not invited.

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: They might have told us not to expect to participate in anything. I was in band and some other afterschool activities—you know, school clubs and things [at Howard, before transferring to Murphy]. But we didn't go expecting to participate in any of that; and as I said before, I think we might have been told not to expect.

DR. KUHN: What about, like, senior class trip, or--?

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: Oh, no.

MS. WALTON-LEES: No. Not even the prom.

DR. KUHN: I was going to get to the prom.

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: I attended my prom, now.

MS. WALTON-LEES: I did not.

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: I did. But the senior class trip, the principal—this one time the principal did call me to the office to talk to me—he said that he wanted me to know that I had every right as a senior to attend the class picnic or whatever the outing might have been, but it was held at a place where blacks weren't allowed. And in so many words he was saying, "Now, I would kind of hate for all of those other students to miss out on their senior activity because you can't go to the place. But, now, you know you have every right." [Laughter] And I told them, well, I didn't really want to go. Because by the time we had gone through that whole year, forgive me, but I was sick of them. I was ready to be gone away from them. Glad that we had made it through, but--Rosalyn, you had a second year. I don't know how you did it. [Laughter] I'm not sure that--

MS. WALTON-LEES: Well, by the second year there were lots of blacks [inaudible].

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: OK.

MS. WALTON-LEES: I wasn't alone at that point; there was lots of blacks at that point. But to this day I celebrate my class reunions with Howard High School class.

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: Oh, yes.

MS. WALTON-LEES: Every year I have—I go to their reunion. They still love me, they still claim me as their own, and that's who I have my reunions with.

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: And I'm going to piggyback on that and tell you about something that happened last year. It was my fiftieth high school reunion. And over the years—oh, I participated with Howard as well—but over the years I had gotten invitations—announcements—about the activities for the Murphy High class of '62; but I wasn't interested. I really didn't know them. I couldn't remember [more than] two or three people who were actually genuinely friendly; and I decided that I didn't want to go, because I didn't know the others—had not gotten to know the others. So I did not participate until last year. It just so happened that Murphy's fiftieth reunion was a dinner and dance--the celebration was a dinner and dance—at Stone Mountain Park. Howard High School's celebration was also headquartered at Stone Mountain Park, so I decided that I would surprise the Murphy High School reunioners [*laughter*]. I never told them I was coming. On the same day that they held the dinner and dance, we did the riverboat dinner with Howard. So when we came back from the riverboat, I told my classmates about it; and they say, "You ought to go!"

And I said, "I don't want to be bothered."

And, of course, I wasn't dressed for a dinner dance. And when we got back [from the riverboat], it was kind of late; so they said, "You better get on over there."

And I decided I would drop in on them, and they were shocked [*laughter*]. There was one person that I—well, three. There was Danny Tate, Brenda Clack, and Sherry Gaddy [spelling?]*—*they all—the girls have different names now. But I did notice that, when I walked into the gathering—they were just standing around talking, because they were ending their affair as well—Sherry was quite friendly. Oh, and Richard Corbett [spelling?]*—*I'll have to tell you about him, from the physics lab. But anyway, they came and acknowledged me; but all of the others just stood back and looked—some of them even walked out into the foyer. I guess they thought I was coming to them; but I really didn't know them, so they didn't have to worry about me bothering them. But I think they were shocked.

DR. KUHN: Wow.

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: And I'm glad that I let my Howard alumni encourage me to go, because I did develop a kind of a new relationship with Sherry. We've corresponded a couple of times. But, you know, I really didn't know them; so I never wanted to have a reunion with them. Just wanted to say that.

DR. KUHN: So as you're thinking back at these events over fifty years ago, are there any particular moments that kind of stand out as almost epitomizing moments that crystalize or kind of epitomize that year for you?

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: One thing in particular—well, maybe two—but one in particular: physics lab. I worked for, I guess, half the semester alone. I did all of my experiments, everything; nobody would even come to the work table—you know, the lab tables, how they're set up in a science lab. Nobody would come anywhere near me. So I worked and trudged along. And when they finally found out that I kind of knew what I was doing and happened to luck up on an A for midterm, when we gathered at the beginning of the week after the midterms, Richard Corbett [spelling?]-the same fellow that I mentioned from reunion—came over to the lab table and asked if he could be my partner; and I told him, "Sure." I don't know what prompted him to do it, but—

DR. KUHN: He was with an A student [*laughter*].

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: --but that stands out in my mind.

[Skip in recording]

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: The gist of it was that I told the students that I knew that we were all caught up in a big social issue over which we had just a little control, so I wasn't expecting them to roll out the red carpet for me and bow down and give me any special treatment. I said, "I just want to be a student and do my best, just as I hope you're doing your best"—something to that effect. But afterwards a girl wrote me a note and told me that after I made that little speech, in her eyes I was ten feet tall. So it sort of changed the way those in that English class felt about me.

DR. KUHN: Rosalyn, any, like, epitomizing episode, one thing that—you know, as your kind of thinking today, anything--what came back to you as you were thinking?

MS. WALTON-LEES: That was—those two years were the worst two years of my life, and I have put those memories in the back of my mind; and I have forgotten about them. I don't ever think about them until something like this, somebody comes and asks us to talk about it. And so I don't have any great memories like Martha has, because I—they're gone. They're gone.

DR. KUHN: Martha, I interviewed you about twenty-five years ago; and that was the first time you had revisited this since you were a teenager, since you were at Murphy High School.

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: Yes.

DR. KUHN: And you told me then that—now that we’ve brought up all these things that you had suppressed for all those years, now we’re twenty-five years later, and, you know, so how are you reflecting back on what you did, what that year was like, whether it was worth it or not, sort of how it impacted you for the rest of your life?

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: That year confirmed what I kind of already knew, and that was that I could compete with the best of them. I said, well, if I was able to go to Murphy High School and get through with fairly decent grades—and, believe you me, they didn’t give me anything. I—we had to--

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON and MS. WALTON-LEES, *simultaneously*: earn

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: --the grades. They weren’t lenient because we were two little black girls in a previously all-white school. We worked. We earned our grades and our accolades. So it gave me the confidence that I could go on to bigger and better things. And the one good thing that came out of it was a scholarship to Spelman College. And I don’t think I would have gotten that scholarship had I not gone to Murphy. I think if I had stayed at Howard High School, I don’t think I would have been offered that scholarship.

DR. KUHN: Rosalyn, how did those two years shape you?

MS. WALTON-LEES: Well, it made me a better person, knowing that I could do anything that I set my mind to do. If I set my mind, I knew that I could do it. If I started out, I was going to finish it, no matter what. And so those are the kinds of things that pushed me to go on and do the things that I did in my life.

DR. KUHN, *to audience*: I think we’d like to open it up to questions that y’all might have for about ten or fifteen minutes. But first, let’s give a round—[*applause*]. So, if you all have any questions about any aspect of this?

HENRY BRYANT, *off-camera*: Rosalyn, I have talked to you as much over the phone and said—as well as I did to Martha, but I’d like, maybe, something--a response from both of you on it. Rosalyn, you weren’t very far from East Atlanta and what’s known now as East Atlanta Village. Rosalyn, would you talk a little bit—or Martha, you told me that you used to visit—I don’t know whether you [Rosalyn] did—where did you hang—Rosalyn, if you would talk about where you used to hung [sic] out, where your family went to from where you lived in the community and what you remember about that.

MS. WALTON-LEES: Well, I grew up in the Edgewood community, which is right off Boulevard Drive [now Hosea Williams Boulevard]—the Kirkwood area, but it's down where Crim Middle School is.

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON and DR. KUHN: Coan.

MS. WALTON-LEES: I mean Coan Middle School is. I went to church in that community, and now I live—I never left the Decatur area. I've always lived in the Decatur area all my life. Born and raised.

DR. KUHN: Martha, what was the Reynoldstown neighborhood like when you were coming up?

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: It was a good place to be—safe, as most neighborhoods were. I loved playing outside, and sometimes my mother had to send someone to find me to tell me to come home and eat; because once I left home, I just didn't go back [*laughter*]. I'd play all day long. And we were in walking distance of Auburn Avenue, so as youngsters we would walk to Auburn Avenue to the theater—the Royal Theatre, the movie. And I can remember when Atlanta Dairies used to have a retail window—loved that ice cream and milkshakes. And we'd walk down there sometimes. And as I said before, the whites were all around; but we tolerated each other. There was never any—well, maybe one time. I can remember walking home from elementary school up in Cabbagetown, as you come from underneath the underpass and start down Wylie Street—a row of houses between Pearl Street and Estoria—a teenage boy—it was in the springtime—sometimes they would let the dogs out to chase us.

[Skip in recording]

MS. WALTON-LEES: It hasn't changed that much. However, it's hidden. People tolerate you better. It's still there. It's still alive and well. [*MS. HOLMES-JACKSON laughs.*] We shouldn't forget that it is alive and well and to tell our children it is still alive and well, and they still have to do ten times better than anybody else to get one step ahead. I mean, that's just the reality.

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: Oh, yeah.

MS. WALTON-LEES: It's just the reality. I mean, just what happened with the little Trayvon Martin child being killed and then nobody being held accountable. But that's another story. But I think that it hasn't changed that much. It's just—we're tolerated, and it's hidden. But if you're in the back room, and you can listen to what's going on in the back room, you can see that it's not gone. It's still there.

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: Oh, yeah. It is. And I know that—and I think Rosalyn would share this, too, from our experience, we—when whites are in a group, and you're there—say, if it's a gathering where you must regularly encounter each other—it's all well and good as long as you're in that group. But if you see them out in public somewhere, they don't know you. And I found that to be true when I attended Florida State University. There were a couple of fellows in our class; and when we had study groups, somebody might have invited us over for a shrimp boil, we had a really, really, really great time. And then there was a dance—I decided to go to the public dance—Arthur Conley was there on the campus—and I decided to go, and I saw this fellow from my class; and I thought surely I'm going to get a chance to dance with him. And he acted like he didn't even know me. So that confirmed—further confirmed—what I already knew, that it's OK as long as you're in the group that you have to be in; but when you're out in the public--it's a kind of a subtle racism, I guess.

DR. KUHN, *to off-camera audience members*: Another question?

DAPHNE DELK, *off-camera audience member*: This is not so much a question as I sit back here, I was reminiscing with both of you on the panel, because in 1963 and '64 in Cobb County I was the first black to integrate that school system. I went with another young lady who dropped out about two weeks after we started, so it meant I went a whole year alone—quite an experience. I [inaudible] with you and suffered the things you talked about, how you were escorted to the school, the detectives—they sat in the classroom next to me. I also laughed, as it became a running joke at two o'clock every day, there was going to be a call-in for a bomb threat. Now, granted, I was four blocks away from the headquarters of the Ku Klux Klan; so my challenge was quite a little bit different from yours.

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: Mm-hmm.

MS. DELK, *off camera*: I also felt the pain of being alone, but my mission was different. When I entered the school, I wasn't chosen to go; I chose the school. I had been exposed to books that were from 1930 in the high school where I was going. And I thought, "Something has to change," because I dreamed big; and my aspirations were way up there. And I thought, "I've got to go somewhere I can get what I need in order to be successful," which then prompted me to say, "Hey, why can't I go to this school?" And upon going to the school, I had to let them know why I really wanted to come; so I had to write an essay. And then they had to look at my grades [inaudible].

Myself, like you, I was not allowed to participate in any of the extracurricular activities for the first year. After then it was up to me. So after the first year I'm doing good, just getting good grades; so I chose not to [participate]. But I reminisce with you, I pain with you; but I enjoyed every day I was there, because I knew I was getting what I needed to make me successful in life.

DR. KUHN: Could you identify yourself please?

MS. DELK: I'm sorry. My name is Daphne Delk.

DR. KUHN: Thank you.

MS. DELK: I'm a member of this church, by the way. [*Laughter*]

CARLTON YOUNG, *off camera*: I have kind of a twofold question—not a question but a—kind of a—well, I'm not from the South—I'm not from Georgia. But I grew up in San [inaudible] in northern California, so I watched a lot of everything on television; and I used to ask myself, "What the heck are they doing out there?" I grew up with stuff like Huey Newton and the SLA [Symbionese Liberation Army], and getting through school was kind of difficult for me as well. I didn't experience what you experienced. So my question—my first question—is, why did we leave School A to go to School B? That was one thing I've always wondered about, the integration. The school that you were at--the all-white [sic; means "all-black"?] schools, weren't they equipped—or was it because they weren't equipped—I've never understood why we wanted to go over here to white schools.

MS. WALTON-LEES: It wasn't that they were equipped. It was a social issue that had to be addressed.

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: Mm-hmm.

MS. WALTON-LEES: And we were part of that solution, to be able to go to any school that you wanted to go to. Howard was a great school. I didn't have any problems with it. We didn't have old textbooks—we did pretty well at Howard. But we wanted to do the social—we wanted to be socially responsible. That's why we did it.

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: We chose to be pioneers. Somebody had to do it.

DR. YOUNG, *off camera*: There was just something I haven't really understood. I mean, what's wrong with the history book at this school that makes it different from the history book at that school?

MS. WALTON-LEES: Well, somebody had to do it; and the nine of us chose to do it.

[Skip in recording]

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: There were some things that might have been better at Murphy than I had at Howard in terms of materials, textbooks.

DR. YOUNG, *off camera*: I remember going to the elementary school that I went to—the schools [inaudible] for black and Hispanic kids where I came from--and for poor whites—like yourselves, we were poor and didn't know it [inaudible phrase]. But the teachers were white. There may have been one or two black teachers there. Now, I didn't experience racism the way you did—I know I didn't--but I experienced it with a conversation that I had with my sixth-grade teacher.

She asked everybody, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" Everybody wanted to be a [inaudible] fire truck.

I said, "I want to be a doctor."

She said, "Oh, no! You can't do that! Not you, uh-uh. You can't be a doctor."

So you sit there and look at that, so I really appreciate what you're saying about you couldn't remember and didn't want to remember that. Do you—I believe that you should never forget it; because if you forget what went on, you take away the history that we need to learn from, to grow from. Because I never forgot what that teacher told me, that I—"You can't be a doctor." My name is Doctor Carlton Young. [DR. KUHN, MS. HOLMES-JACKSON, and MS. WALTON LEES *laugh*.] And when she said—I remembered that growing up, what she said I couldn't be. But a lot of our parents said—my parents said the same thing. [Beginning of sentence inaudible] or join the military. But the thing of it is is forgetting. When you said that you can't remember it, I just think that is the key to our race problem today. This is different; but if we stop trying to forget, I think we can grow, through everything that's going on [inaudible]. The people talk about the Trayvon Martin Case, right—however you feel about it, the thing is, don't forget. Respect the decision, respect the law, but don't forget what happened. Just grow from it. Just keep it in mind. You don't—and that's why, when I hear you say you couldn't remember it—man! I wish I hadn't heard that. Because [inaudible] taking notes, [inaudible—sounds something like "my rights are being violated"]. I wish we could just never forget. Thank you [inaudible].

DR. KUHN: Maybe we have time for one more question perhaps? [*Pointing toward audience*] Yeah, there's one or two over here.

VOICE FROM AUDIENCE: Two?

DR. KUHN: Two questions. OK.

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON, *to MS. WALTON-LEES*: I think I know [him/her?].

UNIDENTIFIED MALE AUDIENCE MEMBER, *off camera*: Thank you so much.

Again, I want to say thanks to the ladies for being here and sharing your knowledge of your history. I, too, was about that same era. I was in a place called Scottdale, Georgia—

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: Oh, yes.

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON, MS. WALTON-LEES, and DR. KUHN all nod.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE AUDIENCE MEMBER, *off camera*: I went to a school called Hamilton High School. The teachers of that school knew all of us by name, by nickname, by street, by parents. And they would come to the house, and they would let your family know if you wasn't at school or you wasn't doing what you should be doing or if you were doing anything wrong. And I remember when they closed Hamilton, and it was a terrible time for all of us because they broke up Scottdale into about four to five different groups. And they sent us to about four or five different white schools, like Douglass.

I was, unfortunately, at Druid Hills High School; and the racism that I experienced there was tremendous. I even had a teacher to tell me that "I'm not talking to you." She's giving instructions for the lesson. I asked a question. I was told she wouldn't talk to me. And she made it a point to talk over me and not even look at me. And that wasn't in just one class; it was every class I had. So it was a hard time for me. I wasn't an A student to begin with, but I was willing to give it my best. And so mentally I got the idea, I'd just quit school and go to work. These people are not going to help me. I came to that conclusion; and I quit school, and I went to work. I worked two jobs, full time, not missing a day off either one for thirteen years, to raise my family. I tried to go back to school after I got grown, and it didn't work out because I've got a family, I've got to work. But, you know, I don't regret going to work. I do regret not getting the education I wanted, but I don't regret going to work. So I experienced what you're talking about.

Something else I experienced during those times at Hamilton High School, I remember distinctly the principal coming over the PA, system announcing to the students that we're going to be getting new supplies. We were so excited, because that meant we was going to have books with backs on them. We was going to have

workbooks with no writing in them. And so we was very much looking forward to that. Finally the new books arrived. And when they did, no backs was on them, all the workbooks had writing on it, and they called them “new.”

I remember one other incident. We were going to get new desks. Our desks was broken and rocky, and some of them didn't have tops on them. We got the new desks. But guess what? They were reconditioned desks. They were still rocky, they were still broken, they still had writing on them. We never got them [the new desks]. And we know that the white schools received them, because we were transferred to white schools; so we could see clearly where the money was being spent. OK? Well, we lost [inaudible—sounds something like “our struggle”?]. Thank you for this opportunity and this time. I'm married. We have six children—five boys and one girl; they're all doing fine. I've got a granddaughter that's going to be skipping middle school and going to college. All of my grandkids—fifteen of them—are either B students or A students; and I take pride in that. So even with all these experiences, I learned to love because I learned who God is. And having God in my life has brought me to where I am. And that's going to keep me and carry me to the end.

Now, whether or not I deal with racist white people, Indian people, Chinese people, Mexican people, it doesn't matter because what you think doesn't change who I am. I know who I am. Through all of my struggles, I know who I am. And because I know who I am, I can treat you with dignity and with respect; or I can forget you and walk away. It's just that simple. So again, ladies, thank you so much for sharing your history. Thank you for giving me a chance to share with [inaudible] all within my heart, [inaudible] haven't had a chance to share. But believe me, we have to keep on pushing. We have not yet arrived, but we're on the right road. Thank you.

DR. KUHN: Thank you.

VOICE FROM THE AUDIENCE, *off camera*: He sounds pretty educated to me.

DR. KUHN: One last question.

CLARA BRADFORD: Good evening. My name's Clara Bradford, and I am member of this church. I would just like to say, first of all, thank you all for coming; and I am so proud of you all for your dedication, your sacrificing, and the example that you have set—also Sister Delk, one of our members. I would say that [inaudible] has happened in our society, but I must also say that I have seen a lot of progress. Sure, we have a long way to go; but I know that progress has been made.

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: Oh, yes.

MS. BRADFORD: And it's going to continue to be made. I recently retired from Morningside Elementary School. I wasn't a teacher; I was an assistant teacher. But my role was greatly appreciated there. I worked with [inaudible] assisted the teachers there. And I can really say that over there my last twenty years I dearly enjoyed being there; and I saw all of the progress—all of the learning—that was taking place there, not only for white children but for black children also. Continue what you're doing. Don't forget the past. We travel it. We learn from it. I just thank you.

[Audience applause]

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: One thing I would like to clarify—the gentleman who said—and you, too, Ms. Bradford. Our paths crossed—we were coworkers somewhere.

MS. BRADFORD, *off camera from the audience*: Somewhere? Where? You look familiar.

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: Craddock? Was it Craddock?

DR. KUHN: Cora

MS. BRADFORD, *off camera from the audience*: Clara

DR. KUHN, *nodding*: Clara

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: Was it Craddock Elementary School? Or Kennedy?

MS. BRADFORD: My last twenty years was at Morningside Elementary School. I worked at Perkerson Elementary School, East Lake-Drew; and I also was a preschool teacher for approximately eight years.

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: Were you at Kennedy?

MS. BRADFORD, *off camera from the audience*: No

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: We worked somewhere together.

MS. BRADFORD, *off camera from the audience*: Somewhere [Laughter]

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: Anyway, we—when Rosalyn and I say we've forgotten a lot of it, we don't mean to say that the past is not valuable to us. We've not forgotten—we mean that we've forgotten some of the specific incidents--because there was more than one note put in my locker, but the "jungle bunny" one is the only one I remember. So we don't remember specific incidents, but we have not forgotten the importance of what we did. And I just needed to clarify that. We know how important it is to remember the past.

MS. WALTON-LEES: We still remember where we came from. No doubt about it.

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: Oh, yeah.

DR. KUHN: I think on that note, that lesson for all of us, let's again thank our [inaudible] [*Applause*]

MR. BRYANT: I really want to thank all three of you for being here and sharing with us. It means so much. We always say about B*ATL, we need to talk about all of this stuff so that we can learn from it. And we revisit our history and learn about our history. So thank you for sharing, because you are our history; and it's good to have you here.

MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: Thank you.

MR. BRYANT: I want to say a sincere thank you from the B*ATL organization, and I hope you'll accept this as a token of our appreciation. [*Gives each lady a sealed envelope.*] [*Applause*]

MS. WALTON-LEES and MS. HOLMES-JACKSON: Thank you.

END OF RECORDING

