

DeKalb History Center

Lithonia Community Engagement Oral History

Allene Smith Harper

Speaker 1 ([00:01](#)):

Okay, Ms. Allene.

Speaker 2 ([00:03](#)):

Okay. You ready?

Speaker 1 ([00:04](#)):

Yes, ma'am.

Speaker 2 ([00:05](#)):

My name is Allene Smith Harper. I was born here in DeKalb County. I am the daughter of Willie and Essie Smith. There were 10 of us, and I am the last one. I grew up in what's called Belmont, which is right here in the Lithonia area. I attended the big Middle Grove Baptist Church, and that is where I went to school from first grade, second grade, third grade, because our schools were burned down, and that was four schools burned down at the same time. Big Miller Grove, Flat Rock and Linwood Park. In the fourth grade is when I started attending the Bruce Street School.

Speaker 1 ([01:06](#)):

Got some things you want to share? Go ahead and let's talk about that.

Speaker 2 ([01:12](#)):

Well, I attended Bruce Street School and I was just looking at some notes that I have, and it's talking about Bruce Street being the first black school, and it said that it was in the 1800s, just about 15 years after slavery was abolished, that the first school for black children was opened in Lithonia. It said it was housed in two of the community black churches, which was Antioch Baptist Church and St. Paul. The white schools at that time was the black schools that said that they were on tuition fees and community contributions because there were no money for black schools. So we had two tuition fees, it said, and it said in 1938 were funds raised by the Yellow River School Board of Trustees and the PTA. The school purchased six acres on Bruce Street to build a new school. It says a fire destroyed, which I just told you the in 1935, those schools were destroyed.

([02:35](#)):

It says that Mrs. Elfa Johnson was the school principal during that time. The two schools became affiliated in 1909 when the Yellow River Benevolent Society organized to open the Yellow River Grammar School, it was located in the hills behind the present location of the Union Baptist Church on Bruce Street. I don't know if you've heard any of this information before, which funded help from DeKalb County, which took over the operations of the school. At the time, the first Bruce Street School was built for \$18,000. The new school was known as Lithonia Negro Colored School, served grade one through 11th. Students who wanted to complete their senior year had to travel to Decatur to attend a city school there. It said later it was called Lithonia Colored School. While Lithonia White School was

located across town on Randall Street, present sight of the Lithonia High School, Albert Brooks was the first principal of the new school, followed by Mr. MCS Green, who served for only one year and CCE Flag, principal from 1944 until integration ended and the era of black schools in 1968. So that's solid information.

Speaker 1 ([04:48](#)):

Yes, it is. And is that in a local paper?

Speaker 2 ([04:51](#)):

This was in the Lithonia Observer, and there is much more, but you might want to move on to something else.

Speaker 1 ([05:04](#)):

Let's focus on that.

Speaker 2 ([05:05](#)):

Okay.

Speaker 1 ([05:09](#)):

So tell me more about the teachers. Tell me

Speaker 2 ([05:15](#)):

The teachers, Mr. C Flag was our principal when I started, and Mr. Howard was his assistant, and we had good teachers because they were teachers like Ms. Edwards, Mr How Mr. What was his name? Mr. Hector. So many other teachers, a homemaking teacher, but our teachers at that time, they were interested in us as black children getting a good education so that we would be able to function in the society. I mean, they didn't just teach because they were wanting to get their paycheck. They were teaching because they wanted us to learn and have a successful life.

Speaker 1 ([06:09](#)):

Excellent. So that had to be traumatic to have four schools burned on the same night.

Speaker 2 ([06:20](#)):

It was, and I don't remember that. I just heard my parents and everybody talking about it because we were going to school in the church. So I was like six years old. We didn't have gas and electricity. We had this big black, we call it the Potbelly School, a stove that you had to put wood or coal in, and that's how we were heated. And the year that the fourth grade, when DeKalb County start furnishing the first bus for us to ride to Lithonia school, we had to stand out beside the cold road. And Mr. Dole Benton, who lived near the street because the road was dirt, he would come out and make a fire for us to stand by in the mornings to keep warming. The school bus came and then when we left, he would put the fire out and then we would ride the school bus from Redan. It picked up in Redan first, picked up in Miller Grove next, and then it picked up in Flat Rock and brought us to Bruce Street on the dirt roads.

Speaker 1 ([07:30](#)):

I can kind of see that school bus sliding around in that mud right now.

Speaker 2 ([07:34](#)):

Yes. And dust flying behind it.

Speaker 1 ([07:41](#)):

Well, that's a lot about Bruce Street School, and I think that's really going to be a big focus when it comes to the history of the area. But do you want to take a peek through this?

Speaker 2 ([07:56](#)):

I will. And tell me what you see.

Speaker 1 ([08:08](#)):

That had to be something to see all the old pictures. I've got to go to Leo and see.

Speaker 2 ([08:15](#)):

Yes, I remember all of these teachers and oh my goodness, Ms. Narvie J. Harris. At that time, we didn't have superintendents, but she was a black superintendent, not called a superintendent, but she was over all the black schools. And I never will forget. She would ride around and she had a baby girl, and she would ride from school to school with that baby on a pillar in her car, no seat belts or anything like that. But she would visit the schools and sometimes she would bring that baby with her. And she was at that time called a supervisor of all the black school. We also had a nurse because we weren't allowed to go to the clinics to get our vaccinations and shots, and her name was Nurse Ivory. And we knew when Nurse Ivory was on the school premises because as soon as she opened her door, you could smell the alcohol and we would get so afraid we didn't want shots. We would start running and screaming and hollering and didn't want a shot because we knew that Nurse Ivory was going to give us a shot in our arm. So that was the most frightening thing to us. And to this day, I am still fearful of a shot. When I go to the doctor and sit in the chair and they got a needle, the first thing I tell them is I'm afraid of shots. I don't like shots, and I still don't to this day.

Speaker 1 ([09:44](#)):

Some things stick with.

Speaker 2 ([09:45](#)):

Yes.

Speaker 1 ([09:46](#)):

So go ahead and talk through that.

Speaker 2 ([09:49](#)):

Okay. I remember all of these teachers, Mrs. Copeland. I remember them. I remember our, oh, yes, Ms. Lee. I remember her because I spent many nights at her house,

Speaker 1 ([10:01](#)):

Ms. Tempe,

Speaker 2 ([10:02](#)):

Tempe Lee.

Speaker 1 ([10:03](#)):

Tell me about that.

Speaker 2 ([10:04](#)):

Ms. Tempe Lee was the sweetest teacher, her daughter, and I was in the same class. And I lived, like I say, up in Miller Grove area, which was Belmont. So that meant that when I was on this side of town and didn't have to ride the school bus back because of rehearsal, I would go home with my friend Louise and spend the night at Ms. Temple's house. And she had a sister-in-law who was named Ms, what was her name? What was her name? I can't think of her name right now. But she would cook breakfast, have the best biscuits, and we would eat those biscuits in the morning. And believe it or not, her son, Howard Lee became the mayor and was it North Carolina? I believe it was Howard Lee. So I spent many nights at their house and was entertained by her siblings. So I enjoyed that time of my life with them.

Speaker 1 ([11:11](#)):

That's a good, beautiful story. We interviewed Mr. Lee extensively.

Speaker 2 ([11:17](#)):

Okay.

Speaker 1 ([11:18](#)):

Maybe 10 years ago. So he's part of the collection as well. So this is going to be a very rich collection of historic type information. I always go back to the train because

Speaker 2 ([11:38](#)):

Okay, I remember the train and I do remember the depot that was there. But very soon after I moved to the Lithonia area in 1962, after I got married, like I say, I started school in the fourth grade. I met my husband in the fourth grade, didn't really know him, know him at that time. But by the time I got to the 11th grade, we started dating because at that time, my dad wouldn't let me date. I couldn't talk to boys, I couldn't have phone calls. But by the 11th grade, he started letting me talk to boys. And so we met in the 11th grade, even though we was in the same class from the fourth grade up. So we got married in 1958 and we bought a house, and we lived in Latonia area from 1962. And I'm still living in that same house now. So that is how I met and married my husband and I do remember the depot, but soon after I moved to the Lithonia area, they tow it down, which I think now if we had had this historic stuff going on now, it probably wouldn't be torn down because it was a historical item,

Speaker 1 ([13:08](#)):

Thought more about saving it.

Speaker 2 ([13:10](#)):

I'm not sure what year it was that it was torn down, but I know it was soon after I moved to Lithonia.

Speaker 1 ([13:17](#)):

So you live right in the city limits?

Speaker 2 ([13:19](#)):

I do. I'm in the city limits right now. What street is that? I'm on Braswell Street. Okay.

Speaker 1 ([13:24](#)):

Now we know that a lot of the granite men, they cut stone.

Speaker 2 ([13:31](#)):

Yes.

Speaker 1 ([13:32](#)):

Made the curbs. When did they finally get some paved roads there?

Speaker 2 ([13:37](#)):

Well, when I first moved on the street that I am now, my street was dirt. And I moved there in 1962. So I want to say maybe two to three years after I moved there, we had to pay a certain amount for however much your footage was for the curving and to in order to get our street paved. So we had to pay that money to get our street paved. And so we did, and we got our street paved. I never will forget, right in front of my house was this great big hill with a great big rock because it is a granite city. So they had to do a lot of blasting to get that rock out, to pave that street. So my house would be shaking and all of that during the time they did that. But thank God we finally got our street paved and dust that dust from the driving the cars, the mud from driving the cars. It was terrible. But that's all we knew at that time. So we did finally get our street paved. And even when I lived in Belmont, Covington Highway, the Miller Grove Road, all of that was dirt, no paving.

Speaker 1 ([14:57](#)):

Amazing. So what did you get first? Did you get

Speaker 2 ([15:07](#)):

It's probably at the parking lot. At the grocery store.

Speaker 1 ([15:10](#)):

At the grocery

Speaker 2 ([15:11](#)):

Store.

Speaker 1 ([15:12](#)):

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Okay. We'll get back to.

Speaker 1 ([00:00](#)):

And talk to me about that.

Speaker 2 ([00:03](#)):

Okay. I was saying that I remember one horrible thing that I remember living in the Lithonia area when my son was old enough to become a Cub Scout, Boy Scout, Cub Scout at that time, at that age. And I was working for a well-known family here in Lithonia. And I saw a note, a flyer on the counter that said, we are opening up for Cub Scouts to join our Cup Scout team, the date and everything, and bring your sons, bring your child to join Cub Scouts. So I was so excited. I went home and I told my husband about it, and we got ready and we went to the Cub Scout and got there. They had the tubs with the solders and stuff in it, the snacks and all of that. And all the kids enjoyed the snacks and the drinks, and we did too, and fill out the paperwork and everybody was going up and they was registering for that child to become a member. When it came my turn to come up to fill out, get my paperwork for my child, and I got up and sat down and a sad thing was told to me was, we are so sorry, but we are not taking any black kids in the Cub Scouts. And that was very horrifying for myself and of course for my son, but that was what happened at that time and in that day. So that is a horrible experience that I can remember that happened here in the Lithonia area.

Speaker 1 ([01:51](#)):

I understand there was a pool, couple pools, they had, a city had built a pool, and of course it was only for white kids, but I think Ms. Lester told me they went over there and pool. But tell me about the pool

Speaker 2 ([02:12](#)):

Now. I didn't go to the pool, but I did hear that story about them going to the pool and getting in the pool. I think they ran them out of the pool, but I never tried to go to the pool.

Speaker 1 ([02:24](#)):

And why didn't you go?

Speaker 2 ([02:27](#)):

I really think maybe because of the integration time at that time, and I just didn't feel like I should go because like I said, my parents, they wouldn't, probably wouldn't have approved of me going to the pool because during that time, I also remember the water fountains, black water fountain, white water fountain, black restroom, white restroom. So a part of that was still with me. And so I think maybe I just kind of figured that I wasn't supposed to, so I didn't try. But I do know that when they build the, no, but even before they build the rolling elementary school, I have the year written down, but there was talking about integration, the NAACP, I had a friend that worked very close to the NAACP and she came in and told me that she had gotten the news that they had to integrate Belt and Gallup department store in Decatur on Sycamore Street.

([03:59](#)):

And at that time it was named Belt and Gallup. And she says, I think you would be a good candidate. She says, go up and fill out an application. So I says, okay. So I got in my car and as someone had said before, the only thing to do was domestic work. You worked at the domestic work. So I went up and I did fill out the application and I did get hired. I was the first black to integrate, which was belts. After so many years, integrate that department store, I got hired, integrated that store. I was the only black in that

store and I was to work in the RY department. And of course they were only used to coming in and having only white people to wait on them. So they would come in and they would get their hoses and stuff, and they would walk around in that store 15 minutes and hold those hoses in their hand and would not come to my register.

(05:00):

They would wait until the white register was clear, then they would go to them and make their purchase. So the lines got very long one day, and I never will forget Mrs. Nash, she was one of the sales ladies. And so I was standing at my register and they was all in her line. She says, I tell you what, you all people in that line, there's another register open over there. Please go over to that register. And so they did start coming out of that line and got in my line and made their purchases. I was the first black to integrate that department store. Also, I was the first black to integrate Rowland Elementary School that's up there on, is it Indian Creek now? I think it is. I was the first black to integrate that school. We had one black in the cafeteria, which was myself, one black teacher and one black student, and that was her son. So I remember a lot about integration

Speaker 1 (06:04):

That had to be uncomfortable. Should I say it that way?

Speaker 2 (06:11):

You can say that. But I have always been an outgoing person and I could mingle and mix with anybody and everybody. And I'm going to tell you an example. Even in the cafeteria, this was brought up in my face and I don't know how I felt about it at the time, but I was the only black in that cafeteria. Everybody else in there was white. And one day, and I'm going to tell you, every function they had, every party they had, they would invite me to it. I was never treated different. So one day we were sitting at the table in the back and we was talking and they got to talking about nationalities and all of this stuff. And they were saying, talking about this race and that race and this and the blacks and the white. And they were saying something about, I said, but I'm a black person. And they looked at me, they said, well, we don't consider you black. I said, well, what do you consider me as? I'm black? And so I couldn't figure out why they didn't figure that I was a black person. They never treated me like I was black. So I guess they just felt like I was, I don't know what they felt like, but that is what they said to me. I never was able to understand it, but I was always a person that could mix and mingle with anybody.

Speaker 1 (07:41):

That's good stuff. We've counsel. Is there anything you want to say about, for instance, we were going to sit down in the women's club and do the interview. What was that like? Was that a place where you could visit, go in?

Speaker 2 (08:04):

No. No. It was the library at that time and we were not allowed to go there. No, that was a women's club. It was all white and no blacks ever went.

Speaker 1 (08:18):

That's disturbing. Anything else you want to go through as far as,

Speaker 2 (08:25):

Well, I was looking here and I see Mrs. Murray, that's one of our teachers. She is still living as far as I know. And most all of these teachers in here. I do remember Ms. Murray was a very good teacher. She even taught my son. And when they had PTA and things like that, she would come to my house and get on my sofa and maybe eat a sandwich or something until time for the meeting. And a lot of these people I'm looking at in this book, I know them. A lot of 'em are grown now. Some of them are deceased now. But I do remember a lot of these people in this book. I remember as someone else stated, they're fun. We had, or we called it mayday. We would go outdoors. We'd do the egg race, the sack race, the maple planting. I remember the football. I was a cheerleader.

(09:28):

The boys didn't have a field gym to go in. We practice out there in the dirt, the red dirt. We did our cheerleading out there on the dirt. But it was fun. I really didn't enjoy it. And even though I grew up in that time, I tell everybody I enjoyed my life. Even having to not have running water had a well in the backyard that you had to draw the water up and drink out the dipper and go to the church and spread the dinner on the yard and kept it in the trunk all day long. And it never spoiled and made this big tub of lemonade. And I mean, it was just fun. It was a fun life. I'm glad of the experience I had. My dad was a farmer, he was a builder and we had chickens and the cows and the hogs and the pigs and it was cold. And they would put the pig down in this big barrel and pull it out and scrape it. And soon as that tenderloin came out, my mom would slice it and go fry some. That was some good eating,

Speaker 1 (10:40):

Living high on the home.

Speaker 2 (10:42):

Yes, yes, yes. So my life, I do, I did enjoy going to the hen house, getting the eggs out, the chicken, all of that kind of stuff. I remember milking the cow after my brother gave me 25 cents to learn how to milk. And then after I learned, he stopped paying me. So I remember all of that. But I enjoyed no electricity. When I first moved, where I grew up, there was no electricity. We had the lamps, the stove where you put the coal in, the wood in. I remember that. Two pair of socks. Wash one pair, hang one pair behind the stove while the other one dry. I experienced all of that, but how I grew up made me who I am today. And I was a survivor. I learned how to survive and I thank God that I grew up at that time because it taught me something. I appreciate my life.

Speaker 1 (11:43):

Amen. I'm going to stop for a minute.

Speaker 1 ([00:00](#)):

Okay. Now tell us a little bit about your husband, what kind of work he did and your family. Okay. My husband and I got married, as I said in 1958. He was a great provider. At that time, there were not many blacks that were building homes, but my husband worked two and three jobs and we were able to build a house. In 1962, we had two children. He worked on his job for 51 years. He worked at the Lithonia Lighting plant. He started here in Lithonia and worked here in the Lithonia at the Lithonia Lighting plant. He went to the military, came out of the military, went back to Lithonia Lighting, and that's where he retired. After 51 years, I retired from the DeKalb County School system after 40 something years, and we just enjoyed our lives together. We was church goers. We put God first and trusted him, and he got us through all situations that we were in. May not come out. We wanted it at all time, but we made it through. We were married for 57 years and I lost him eight years ago today, and I would marry him again. He was a wonderful guy. Well, that was special right there.

[\(01:46\)](#):

That was special. Okay, let's wrap it up.

Transcribed by REV AI
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Ms. Harper was interviewed in September 2023