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Segregated Proms in 2003

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Law Touched Our Hearts
A Generation Remembers
Brown v. Board of Education

Mildred Wigfall Robinson
and Richard J. Bonnie, Editors

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Contents

PART I

The Context—
1 Learni, Marina
2 Segreg, Alfred I
3 The W, Kate N
4 And tl Harvey
5 The C, Robert i

PART II

De Jure States

ALABAMA
6 Trainin, Paulette
7 Loss of Angela
Contents

Acknowledgments xi
Introduction 1
Richard J. Bonnie and Mildred Wigfall Robinson

PART I
The Context—Skin Color and Walls

1 Learning about Skin Color
Marina Angel 11

2 Segregated Proms in 2003
Alfred Dennis Mathewson 16

3 The Wall
Kate Nace Day 21

4 And the Walls Came Tumblin’ Down
Harvey A. Feldman 23

5 The Commutative Property of Arithmetic
Robert Laurence 26

PART II
De Jure States and the District of Columbia

ALABAMA

6 Training in Alabama
Paulette J. Delk 33

7 Loss of Innocence
Angela Mae Kupenda 36
8  Toto, I Have a Feeling  
   We Are Still in Kansas  
   Sharon E. Rush  
   43

FLORIDA

9  Becoming a Legal Troublemaker  
   Michael Allan Wolf  
   51

GEORGIA

10 Color-Blind in Georgia  
   Otis H. Stephens  
   59

LOUISIANA

11 Taking a Stand  
   Alex J. Hurder  
   65

MARYLAND

12 Seeing the Hollow  
   Robert A. Burt  
   67

13 A Glen Echo Passage  
   Robert B. Keiter  
   72

MISSISSIPPI

14 I Can't Play with You No More  
   Edward C. Brewer III  
   79

15 A White Boy from Mississippi  
   W. Lewis Burke  
   83

16 A Journey of Conscience  
   Samuel M. Davis  
   90

NORTH CAROLINA

17 Promise and Paradox  
   Charles E. Daye  
   95

18 A Different Kind of Education  
   Davison M. Douglas  
   103
SOUTH CAROLINA

19 Sacrifice, Opportunity, and the New South
Mildred Wigfall Robinson 107

TENNESSEE

20 Crossing Invisible Lines
Linda A. Malone 115

21 Segregation in Memphis
Phoebe Weaver Williams 123

VIRGINIA

22 What I Learned When Massive Resistance Closed My School
Richard J. Bonnie 135

23 Standing Up for Brown in Danville
Richard Bourne 143

24 Urgent Conversations
Earl C. Dudley Jr. 149

25 Virginia Confronts a “Statesmanlike Decision”
David W. Miller 153

26 Brown as Catalyst
Blake D. Morant 157

WASHINGTON, D.C.

27 Equality and Sorority during the Decade after Brown
Taunya Lovell Banks 161

28 “What Are You Doing Here?”
An Autobiographical Fragment
Louis Michael Seidman 166
PART III
De Facto States

CALIFORNIA

29  Brown's Ambiguous Legacy
    Alex M. Johnson Jr.  171

30  Public Education in Los Angeles: Past and Present
    Paul Marcus  176

ILLINOIS

31  The Discrete and Insular Majority
    Craig M. Bradley  181

32  Princess in the Tower
    Elaine W. Shoben  184

KANSAS

33  Shades of Brown
    Charles Marvin  191

MASSACHUSETTS

34  Brown Comes to Boston: A Courtside View
    Terry Jean Seligmann  195

MISSOURI

35  Checkerboard Segregation in the 1950s
    Larry I. Palmer  201
NEW JERSEY

36 With One Hand Waving Free
   Michael Perlin

NEW YORK

37 Indirect and Substantial Effect
   Anthony R. Baldwin

OHIO

38 Brown Goes North
   Michael H. Hoffheimer

WASHINGTON

39 The Virtues of Public Education
   Susan L. DeJarnatt

WISCONSIN

40 Entering Another's Circle
   Kathryn R. Urbonya

Appendix

The Survey
   Richard J. Bonnie and Mildred Wigfall Robinson
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Racially segregated high school proms are in the news. The coverage superficially depicts these incidents as vestiges of racism in rural Southern school districts. I moved away from the South over thirty years ago and I know there is far more to the story. There was no media scrutiny of the proms in 1971 when I graduated from Bertie Senior High School in Windsor, North Carolina. No one cared about them except the students who had gone to school for nearly twelve years and were looking forward to this rite of passage. You cannot appreciate what the proms meant in the South then without some idea of that nearly twelve-year journey. My own journey occurred in at least three schools, beginning at W. A. Patillo High School, a K-12 school in Tarboro, North Carolina.

When I entered first grade in 1959 five years after Brown v. Board of Education was decided, the schools were segregated, and they stayed that way until strange things started happening during my junior high school years. Then we heard of something called freedom-of-choice plans, under which children could attend any public school of their parents’ choice. Of course, this meant that black children could choose to attend the much better financed white schools. I believe we were the third black family to go to the white schools in Tarboro when my mother chose to send my younger brothers to Bridgers Elementary in the spring of 1967. They have stories to tell. It was my turn to go when I entered ninth grade, but we moved to Ahoskie and I attended the white school there, where integration had advanced beyond that in Tarboro. There, many black students opted for Ahoskie High School over the all-black R. L. Vann High School.

My family moved twice more so that I wound up finishing at Bertie, where freedom-of-choice plans had progressed to consolidation. In 1963, Bertie County built two identical high schools—one white and one black. By the time we moved there in 1969, the white high school had become the county high school for all students and the black high school had been designated the junior high school for all students. It was majority black.

Back then there was no prom, black or white, in Bertie County. The school board had eliminated the homecoming dance and the prom upon consolida-
tion, along with virtually every other social event at which white girls might socialize with black boys. Integration created problems even with the cheerleading squads. When no black girl made the squad during my freshman year at Ahoskie High, black football players organized a boycott of classes by black students. There had been a competition, but none of the black cheerleaders who had left R. L. Vann had been deemed good enough to make the squad. Faced with the decimation of a state championship contender, the school reconsidered and a black cheerleader was added.

The wave of separate proms today has been defended on the grounds that this is the way things have always been. Lost in these apologias are the stories of the black and white students who tried to make integration work, students who tried to do things a different way. The prom, or rather the absence of the prom, was a unifying event for my senior class. My classmates in the class of 1971 believed that a prom was a fundamental right. Several of us, black and white, girls and boys, got together and decided we did not need the permission of the school board, superintendent, or principal to have a prom. If they would not give us one, we would give ourselves a prom. We arranged to have it at the National Guard Armory. When the authorities learned of our plans, they capitulated. If there was going to be a prom, it was going to be held somewhere they could monitor the situation. It was held in the gymnasium instead.

We had a wonderful time. The last thing on our minds as we danced the penguin was that the prom was integrated. We were teenagers—juniors and seniors having a dance. I did not take my girlfriend home until 3:00 AM, ruining my reputation with her parents as a nice young man. After the prom, we went to a segregated club, not because it was segregated but because it was where we could go. I presume my white friends did the same.

Our bringing the prom back was not an act of courage. We were merely obstreperous teenagers. The most courageous stand I saw occurred in my sophomore year while I was attending Selma (North Carolina) High School. There were a handful of black students in the senior class—freedom of choice was still in effect. The seniors cast a black girl and a white girl as sisters in the senior class play. The principal and the school board said, "No way," but the class refused to back down. The school board played hardball. The students were given an ultimatum: Either they would recast the play or there would be no play. The seniors, the overwhelming majority of whom were white, chose to have no play. That was not merely an act of courage; it was an act of personal sacrifice recognizing that they were all just students.

I left the South a long time ago. I have heard of the separate proms, and separate reunions. I attended one two years ago but not for my high school. My friends at W. A. Patillo were forcibly removed from there to Tarboro High School through consolidation in their senior year. One year of Tarboro High could not break the bonds formed and the nurturing received through eleven
grades. The commemorative T-shirts said Tarboro High School but it was really a reunion of the W. A. Patillo High School class of 1971. They invited me back because I had been with them for eight years. I went back not because they were black. I went back because they were the people who taught me how to hit a baseball, play basketball, and dance. These were the friends who comforted me when my father died, who came to my twelfth birthday party even though we did not have indoor plumbing. It was not about race, it was about the bonds of friendship.

When I heard the story about the separate proms in Taylor, Georgia, I thought about this point. My class at Bertie held an integrated prom, but it was virtually our only social event together. I never visited a white friend's home while in high school, and no white friend ever visited mine. In fact, to the best of my knowledge no white person, other than an insurance salesman, ever set foot in my mother's house. You cannot expect students to hold integrated proms or reunions if they do not or will not forge social bonds outside school. The classes of 2002 and 2003 in Taylor both held integrated proms. The difference this year was that many white students also held a whites-only prom. If those white students had gone through trials and triumphs outside school with their black classmates, I suspect the white kids would have been far less likely to exclude them.

By the time students reach the senior year, too few interracial bonds have been formed. There are forces at work to prevent such bonds from forming. My youngest brother vividly remembers an experience from his year at Bridgers Elementary. He had made friends with the nephew of a very prominent politician. The friend invited him home after school a few times. One day the friend's mother permanently revoked the invitation and ordered him off the property. He was six years old at the time. When I turned eighteen, I vowed to vote against the politician. I do not recall if I did or not. White parents erected barriers to prevent the forming of interracial bonds.

Many people think that those days are gone. I remember nearly crying when my eldest daughter was invited to a birthday party when she was in kindergarten. The invitation that had been stripped from my brother had been re-extended. But any comfort I may have drawn that things had changed was removed when she was in elementary school. A parent of one of the kids in her class called me one day to ask if I was aware of what had happened. One of her classmates had a birthday party and brought invitations to school to everyone except my daughter. The birthday girl had told the class that she could not invite any blacks to the party. The informing parent became aware of the incident because the other kids refused to come without my daughter. There was good news in that her classmates felt some bond with her, but nevertheless, there was still that parental barrier. The birthday girl's parents invited us over through the other parents, perhaps as a result of pressure by the other parents,
and we eventually acceded. It remains our only contact with them. No bonds were formed.

It is easy to gravitate toward the view that the barriers to interracial bonds are a Southern phenomenon, but clearly they are not. My daughter's incident happened here in New Mexico, the multicultural Land of Enchantment. For whatever reason, the barriers to interracial bonds appear to be well entrenched by high school. As my daughter's experience demonstrates, some bonds do form. Her best friends—not merely her friends—continue to include people from an assortment of races. There are not, however, enough such bonds. Not all barriers are erected by the parents. Fellow students construct some barriers. On more than one occasion, I observed Anglo friends of my children subjected to ridicule for playing with them. I have been called by Anglo parents to commiserate about the harassment their children are receiving for associating with mine. It thus comes as no surprise that many white students in Taylor abandoned the interracial pioneer spirit that their upper classmates adopted the previous year.

It is no wonder then that too many students of all colors at the collegiate level reject interracial social bonds or find them undesirable, even painful, experiences. Those students who seek them and try to encourage them find themselves ostracized. The result is reflected in many of the problems occurring in integrated educational institutions today, as students from different backgrounds go to the same classes, attend the same events, and live in the same dormitories amidst institutional cultures that impede the formation of such bonds. Consequently, hate speech, hostile environments, and nonoptimum academic performances abound. These students then graduate and join gender- and race-based private clubs so that people of color and women seeking interracial and intergender social and business bonds are forced to obtain them with legal bayonets.

Perhaps they find too few role models in the generation of their parents. I have often commented that the civil rights warriors knew how to knock doors down, but they had no way of preparing the beneficiaries for what awaited them on the other side. It is equally true that white parents had no blueprint for dealing with the integration that followed. Parents on both sides of the door grew up in an era in which racial diversity was proscribed by law. In fact, the refusal to engage in racial diversity was legally permitted. The very essence of the Jim Crow laws was to prevent voluntary actions on the part of individuals and institutions to form such bonds. The efforts of individuals and institutions have met with mixed results ever since. Several years ago, my wife and I decided to take one small step to work toward making integration successful. We consciously broadened our social circle and sought experiences that led to interracial bonds. We have enjoyed interactions with colleagues, socialized with the parents of the friends of our children, and participated in a variety of
organizations. It is true that we belong to organizations that address issues of concern and provide support to professionals of color, and we will continue to do so. However, we do not belong to any organization that limits membership on the basis of race. Our social circle is not merely black and white; we have discovered a rich multicolored racial mosaic in America.

I did not march in the streets or stage a sit-in at a lunch counter during integration. I never met Bull Connor and my knowledge of the Freedom Riders is limited to what I have read. Somehow though, I do not believe that Martin Luther King saw segregated schools, neighborhoods, and workplaces in his dream. The unfinished business of the civil rights movement is to make its successes meaningful. If we are ever to achieve one America, then the generation of beneficiaries of all colors must rise to the task to engage in affirmative action to reach out and bond with others. The most logical starting places are educational institutions. The students are there, brought by their parents who attend school events. The interactions are there. Now, we just need to create bonds that last outside the school grounds and campuses.

Alfred Dennis Mathewson was born in May 1953 in Tarboro, North Carolina, and attended elementary and secondary schools in Tarboro and Ahoskie, North Carolina. He is now a professor of law at the University of New Mexico School of Law in Albuquerque.