*Essays*

# Education, Community, and Race: 50 years after Brown vs. the Board of Education

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***by***
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The story of Brown vs. Board of Education is familiar. We know that on May 17, 1954 the United States Supreme Court ruled that "separate but equal facilities are inherently unequal", referring to racial segregation in public education. We know that a year later the Brown II ruling, "with all deliberate speed", provided an "out" or postponement of immediate action for compliance with the earlier ruling. And for the next eight years or so, "freedom of choice" practices were utilized as a means to resist and frustrate the process of dismantling segregated schools.

That is not what I am going to speak to you about today. What I am going to share is my own personal story, as one of the students who participated in actions resulting from the Brown v. Board ruling. I will tell you about our experiences, how we were treated, what I learned and how it influenced the course of my life and the work that I am doing today. I will also share my thoughts on where we go from here, the view of a community activist.

It was New Year's Day, January 1, 1966, and my older sister, Debra, several of my younger siblings and a cousin had attended the annual Elmore County Emancipation Proclamation Celebration (the observance of Abraham Lincoln's signing the proclamation freeing Blacks from slavery). The guest speaker for this occasion was a Birmingham Civil Rights preacher, Rev. Jesse Douglas, whose powerful message and melodious voice singing "I told Jesus that it would be all right, if he changed my name", had the audience on its feet for most of his sermon. Little did I know that he was preparing us for the most traumatic experience of our lives, which would take place in less than four hours. We went home, excitedly sharing with our parents the experiences of the evening with this wonderful Civil Rights preacher. Our parents listened and allowed us an opportunity to get settled, before giving us the final warning to cut off the light and go to sleep. At around 1:00 a.m., less than two hours after our arrival at home, three homemade firebombs hit three different sides of our home. Exploding flames blocked all exits, except one. There were eleven of us in our home, and nine were asleep. Thank God we all made it out safely; our home was completely destroyed. This act of hatred occurred on the eve of my sister's return to school. She had been expelled for a semester, for hitting back a White boy who had pelted her in the back with a rock from a slingshot.

My sister and I were among the first Black students to attend Wetumpka High School under a Freedom of Choice plan. It was a decision made with my parents, reached without the support and preparation of an organized effort. Although I will hasten to add that my family was active in the NAACP. My uncle was Chapter President, and my sister and I were both in leadership roles in the Youth Chapter. Our motive was simple: we wanted the best education possible in order to attend Tuskegee Institute. That early fall day in 1965, seven Black students and five mothers arrived at the school to face a sea of angry, jeering, mostly White, men. There were no police escorts and there was no form of protection. Even today I remember with reverence the extraordinary courage it took for those mothers to leave their children in what was clearly imminent danger and return to their homes to wait, and to hope and pray that their children would return home safely. This anniversary is also about celebrating those who made sacrifices, like my mother and the other mothers that day in 1965, and especially those who made the ultimate sacrifice with their lives.

Immediately the harassment began, as my new peers taunted us daily, fought with us, and called us names. The bus driver sped home each day, trying to outrun the fights that lurked just below the surface. The night our house was bombed I felt a huge sense of both terror and calm—I had known that something like this would happen. I remember that throughout all of this, we knew our actions were about something bigger. We were doing this, as my mother said, "for the advancement of the race." She, along with others in our community, would encourage us with words like, "We are so proud of you" and "You are a credit to your race". On Thursday evenings, the Elmore County Civic and Improvement League recruited Black teachers to tutor us, and help us process spiteful and punitive assignments by White teachers. We sang freedom songs as a way to build our spirit and renew our focus.

The fight that sparked the arrest, jailing and expulsion of my sister happened two weeks into the school term. Here's a snippet of life in the Bracy family at the time: I was trying to adjust to daily taunts at school by students, and teachers who ignored my hand and skipped over me during class participation. My father was dealing with a hostile White landowner, who was making threats based on the smallest of things and actively trying to block the school bus from coming across his property to pick us up. My mother was frantically trying to talk to anybody she could to get my sister back in school. Four months later, after being admitted and then rejected by three school systems, with the help of lawyers from the United States Department of Justice, Debra returned to Wetumpka High. On the following day our home was bombed. Because our family was so large, we were scattered out in the homes of four of our neighbors, wearing clothes that were given as charity. We did not miss one day of school.

With the help of American Friends Service Committee's (AFSC) Family Aid Fund, our family survived a year of makeshift living arrangements before returning to a normal home life. It was through the staff of AFSC that we learned about the NAACP's Legal Defense Fund. I received scholarships to attend Alabama Christian College and Auburn University, formerly all-White schools.

What did I learn and how did it influence the course of my life?

I remember the pride that Black teachers took in educating our children when schools were segregated. Schools in the Black community had a deep sense of the importance of our education. Certainly schools were horribly under-funded—we lacked books, learned in crumbling buildings, and used leftover supplies from White students. And yet, even in this climate, our teachers and principals often showed great love for learning. We believed that education was key to our development as human beings. Classroom walls were filled with images of Blacks who were a "credit to our race". Black history celebrations and assembly programs were opportunities for those personalities to be brought to life through dramatic presentations and performances by students. We were painfully reminded how unfair this system was by the worn school books with the names of White students, often expressing their love for another; the one microscope in our biology lab; and the old run-down bus that left us stranded at least once a week, while the White students rode in a more modern, newer school bus… Yes, we knew that this system was unjust and wrong.

We endured the insults. "Why do you all want to come to our school?" "Do you think that coming here will make you less of a nigger?" "You are not capable of learning." "My dog is smarter than you." Inherent in these statements were the beliefs that Blacks were of inferior intelligence, below that of most animals, and that our desire was to "be" with White people. Many White people couldn't imagine that we wanted anything different than to be a part of their world. In fact, desegregation was about the poor economic conditions of our schools and demands for quality education. It was assumed that we did not have the right to want the same prosperity and rights that were afforded every other American.

Desegregation was our strategy, not our purpose. My mother agreed to send us to Wetumpka High because she wanted a better education for her children. Yet desegregation turned into a movement for Blacks to integrate White institutions. In the end, the movement crushed many Black institutions in this country. We lost many of our schools, our principals, and our teachers. In many ways we lost part of ourselves, and the traditions of education that had been developed in the Black community.

The experience that I have shared with you engendered a passion in me that fuels me, even to this day, to fight injustice, anywhere, and especially when it leads to denial of basic human rights. My role models were the courageous mothers, teachers, organizers and community leaders who risked their lives and livelihoods to give my family and me a chance to make our lives better. Brown v. Board provided the foundation and inspiration for the leadership and development of many of my role models, as well as my own.

I know from my educational training and personal experiences how important a safe, nurturing environment is during the earliest years of a child's development. Today community-based childcare programs play the critical role that many Black schools played before integration. I know that many FOCAL members provide places of nurturing and education, and give children a profound sense of belonging. Many childcare programs are at the heart of their communities, and children are enveloped in a circle of caring adults who make lasting differences in their lives. I wish this care and education for all children.

Fifty years after Brown vs. board of education, we have made advances, and, at the same time, we have also lost parts of our history and ourselves. Today, more than ever, we need institutions that will nurture our children, give them a strong sense of worth, and instill in them lifelong values of education. As we continue the fight to eliminate inequality in education, we must utilize every possible resource available to us to teach our children about their history. This was made clearer to me during a Black History presentation this year at my home church. With nearly 25 youngsters present, under the age of 18, I shared the parts of my family's story that I have shared with you today. I have never seen a more attentive audience. Afterwards, several of the youngsters (eight-, ten- and eleven-year-olds) came up to talk with me. The youngest child expressed how sad she was about what had happened when our home was burned down and we didn't have a place to live. One asked, "Did all of that really happen to you all?" I learned later from the pastor that a 15-year-old, who had said that he was dropping out of school, changed his mind after hearing my story. Just as was the case before Brown v. Board, we must be intentional about what our children are taught, and we must be vigilant in helping them understand the importance of education to the betterment of their lives, their communities and their race. Yes, things have changed, but many things remain the same.

My wish on this anniversary is that we renew our commitment to our children at the deepest level. My wish is that we take up the call to provide children with an environment where they learn who they are, and that we begin to tap the infinite possibilities inherent in all of us. As we challenge institutional inequities, we must assume individual responsibility: responsibility to stand for what is right and to challenge injustices. During a recent experience at the State Legislature, I found myself and my organization in opposition to a piece of proposed legislation that was popular with many legislators and appeared to have strong public support. I was told by my friends to be very careful because FOCAL's reputation could be blemished if we were to take on this fight. It is amazing, however, how I respond when I believe that something is wrong. Although I may first weigh the consequences, I recognize in the face of it all that to not take a stand because of what might happen is really not an option.

I am certain that many of the individuals involved in Brown v. Board thought about consequences of their involvement. No doubt, Thurgood Marshall seriously considered the ramifications to his legal career before defending such a case. Where would we, individually and as a society, be today if the plaintiffs in Brown vs. Board of Education had not been willing to take risks? Each of us in this room today can model for our children the courage to stand up for what we believe, even when we know that our actions will bring on hardship. It is the greatest lesson from Brown v. Board that you and I can offer to our children.

Thank you.