

Voices of Freedom
Virginia Civil Rights Movement Video Initiative
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Interview with Elizabeth Cooper and Jane Cooper Johnson, 2003.

EC Elizabeth Cooper, I'm from Richmond.

JCJ My name is Jane Cooper Johnson and I'm from Richmond, Virginia. I grew up in the far west end in the neighborhood of Westwood. It was a close-knit community of family and friends.

It was a small black community surrounded by adjacent white communities.

EC During that time, I guess when this decision from the Supreme Court came about, people just didn't expect it if they felt like I did. And when it came about, I felt it was a privilege. It just made you think and you think about where you had come from and what you had experienced in life. Well, as far as transportation, we had to sit at the back of the bus. We could not go into the restaurants and feel comfortable. In fact, it just was a no-no. And only what I didn't like in the restrooms, they had colored white and colored.

JCJ My recollection of segregation, of course, I attended an all-black elementary school.

And my neighborhood was all black, so all of my associates were all black. Well, at the time, I was quite young, so I really didn't give a lot of thought as to the curriculum and as to how well it was. I didn't give a lot of thought to that, except that when my mom expressed to me about going to West Hampton Elementary School,

EC I wanted her to go to West Hampton because of the convenience. We had to, in fact, she would get the bus in the mornings and she would have to travel five miles to Carver Elementary School.

And this was, you know, very different from what she could be doing, to walk four and a half blocks to West Hampton Elementary School. I had to apply for, in fact, I had to file an application.

And I went to lawyer Oliver Hill for support. I needed that support because I did not know what to expect from the reaction of filing an application. He told us this is the right thing to do, to file an application with the school board.

JCJ I felt, you know, comfortable because I had that support.

EC And that was just like the gist of it. You know, then we went back home and we were notified when to come to court. And it came out, it was in there on newspaper that we had been denied. So when I went to the court, when I was contacted, I knew that they had denied our application.

JCJ Well, the application was initially filed in 1958, so I would have been 10 years old at the time. I had to miss quite a bit of time from school attending court.

Beyond that, it received a lot of publicity, but beyond that I was quite not too long about it. But I want to back up. The application was initially filed with the Richmond City School Board. Then it was forwarded to the Virginia Pupil Placement Board. And then the placement, the state board was asked to submit a plan for the desegregation of schools. And of course, they denied the application.

EC There were two other families that found out that we were applying, and so they wanted to do the same thing. And I have, after going to court in the, you know, the first year,

my lawyer Oliver Hill came to my home and he told me that my daughter would be alone because the other families had with the Drew. I was concerned, you know, about this, my daughter, concerned about her safety.

And I told him that I just could not give him the immediate answer to give me, you know, a short while, maybe overnight, to think about this. So the next morning, my daughter, without my asking her, she sort of sensed my feelings and she was always supportive of me. And we were like, you know, mother and daughter and friends. So she told me that she was willing to go all the way. And I sort of lit up at the time because I was proud of her that I did not have to ask her because I really wanted her decision.

JCJ Well, I really didn't want to disappoint her. And I know when Attorney Hill had been to our home to ask my mom if she wanted to still be a plaintiff in the case.

I mean, looking at their faces, I really didn't want to disappoint either one of them. I didn't really understand the magnitude of what we were asking. So I really didn't give a lot of thought to it. And so the next morning, I woke up and I told my mom that I wanted to go forth in going to West Hampton. My mom was elated and I was very happy about it. The seriousness of it was redirected to me when I was advised the summer prior to actually going to West Hampton. I was advised to refrain from answering the door and to refrain from playing outside considerably for my safety. So at that point, I began to recognize from a smaller scale still the seriousness of the matter. There were mixed emotions. Some were afraid of losing their jobs. Some were afraid of the possible repercussions coming from the white community. Because prior to my going to West Hampton, a group of white males drove through the neighborhood and through rocks and bricks and bottles at our homes and through the windows.

So a lot of apprehension resulted from that. So as the parents of the neighborhood children, my peers became more apprehensive. The relationship between my peers and me slowly diminished and it resulted in spoken and unspoken exasperation. And it was more or less the fear of the unknown.

EC Well, during the trial, we were just in suspense as to what was happening. But other than that, we didn't really have to go through that much no more than coping with people and their emotions.

But as far as a code procedure, it wasn't that disturbing other than we just wanted to a reaction from the court of what we wanted.

JCJ My first day, well, Dr. Wendell P. Russell, who was the Dean of Students at Virginia Union University, and he was also Minister of the Westwood Baptist Church. He met my mom and me at

our home and together we walked to West Hampton. And like my mother said, it was only four and a half blocks away.

It seemed to have been a real hush like setting over the entire community.

I don't remember seeing anyone except those traveling to and from in their cars.

But it helped to give me a sense of calmness. I was told that there would be a police presence at the school. However, I never saw a policeman.

I didn't see anyone from the media. But obviously, someone was there because my mother's and Dr. Russell's and my picture appeared in the Richmond News Leader that evening.

So, but Roland Galvin, the principal, had advised me prior to that day to arrive after the beginning time of school because he was holding a special assembly to talk about me. And he had assured me that no one was going to bother me. And should there be anyone who did cause me any problems, that there would be severe consequences. So, from day one at West Hampton throughout that entire year of my eighth grade, and that's actually when I finally did, was granted admission to attend West Hampton was when I was entering the eighth grade. My year there was actually untroublesome. It was untroublesome, yet polite, but unfriendly.

EC When I walked down the street, I had a certain sense of calmness. And at the same time, I still was concerned about her safety. But I felt comfortable because Dr. Russell, the dean of students at Virginia Union University, he accompanied us to give us support. He walked with us to the school.

Mr. Galvin, the principal of West Hampton Elementary School, he was very supportive. And since that he had taken the initiative to do what he did for her to be comfortable and to see that things go OK, that made me feel comfortable. In order to help her to get through this, I would help her with her lessons and I would talk to her and listen to her. And I just would try to be calm. I had to brace myself up even when there were any doubts or whatever. I had to brace myself up for her because I know that if I was not brave, she would not be brave.

JCJ I was the first because when I graduated from West Hampton, it was "automatically understood" that I would go on to TJ. So I had the challenge initially of deciding whether or not I wanted to attend the All-Black Maggie L. Walker High School or to attend Thomas Jefferson, known as TJ. Of course, I knew what I had to do. So I went to TJ and enrolled to TJ. I received a lot of name calling, being picked on, just harassment.

Not hurt physically, but a lot of emotional trauma.

Well, my first year, I encountered the most opposition. When I would go to class, to math class, I had to encounter a group of boys I had to pass by their shop class. And every day, when going to class, they would interlock arms, and I had to walk under their arms. And while they would call me names or spit at me, they never touched me, hit me or anything. But they just wanted to intimidate me. So finally, I approached William Brock, the principal, about it. And he told me that I would have to give a more definitive description of the boys. So from that, I learned to be a self-taught detective. And I learned the value of vigilance because I was able to describe them, the color of their hair, the color of their clothes, their socks, their shoes, even down to their shoestrings.

And of course, I reported my, quote, findings to Mr. Brock, and eventually those boys disappeared. Throughout that first year, my ninth grade at TJ, like I said, I received a lot of teasing. Lunchtime was, I despised going to lunch because the students would often cut in front of me, so which made me eat lunch rather late, or either I would have to hunt for a seat or they would throw food at me. So my first year was very hard, but I was elated during my sophomore year when five additional black students enrolled at TJ. I mean, I actually looked forward to going to school.

And from that point on, it was all uphill. I enjoyed school. Of course, I encountered one difficulty with one of my teachers, and that was my U.S. history teacher in the 11th grade. And she seized the opportunity to humiliate me in front of the class.

She would often refer to Negro as a Negro, and she would often accuse me of plagiarism whenever I did an assignment. In fact, on one occasion, she requested that I remain after school and to redo a report in her presence. And of course, I tried to let her know that it was indeed my own work, but I did end up complying and remaining after school, and I did end up receiving an acceptable passing grade.

So it taught me to further appreciate, even though I received indifference from her, it taught me still to show respect for authority.

EC She seemed to be more and more courageous, and she was, like I said, being independent. She just didn't come home crying.

JCJ It made me a better person, and my experiences have taught me not to allow obstacles or barriers to keep me from striving towards accomplishing goals.

EC You have goals, and you proceed with these goals to do the best that you can, and you'd be persistent that you can accomplish these goals.

JCJ My encouragement for youth today would be if one feels that he has been mistreated or treated unjustly, it's never an excuse for negative behavior.

So my encouragement would be to set positive, realistic goals.