

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

CAROL POE
December 20, 2004

WILLOUGHBY ANDERSON: Today is Monday, December 20. The interviewer's name is Willoughby Anderson. We're here at the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute doing interviews for the Southern Oral History Program's Long Civil Rights Movement project and I am here interviewing Mrs. Carol Poe. And if you'll please say your name we'll see how you're picking up.

CAROL POE: Good afternoon, this is Carol Poe.

WA: So let's get started. We're going to, let me see, can you tell me a little bit about your family history and growing up and then about your early educational experiences.

CP: Okay. I was born in Birmingham in 1950. My father originally came to Birmingham from West Alabama, Marion County. His family had had a family farm. One of his brothers was very successful owner of businesses and a funeral home in Union Springs and two of my uncles were ministers. Anyway, he had a pretty large family of brothers. One moved to Las Vegas. I'm not quite sure what his occupation was. And I have an aunt who's now eighty-eight years old. She was a homemaker and a seamstress. My mother, my great grandmother, my mother's grandmother, her mother was half Indian. I'm not quite sure. I think it was Chickasaw, and my mama, Josephine. And my mother Josephine and my grandmother Georgia, who was also a seamstress, came to Birmingham in the 1880s from the Carver area, which is a little bit southwest I believe of Birmingham, in the southwest. My grandmother Georgia was very active in a lot of civic organizations, the American Woodmen and the Order

of the Eastern Star and very active in her church. My grandmother Mamie was the youngest of three girls and one son. My uncle Jerome left and went to World War I. He never returned. My Aunt Christine went to Alabama State College and she had a degree in like home economics, cosmetology, and she ran a successful beauty shop in New Orleans with her husband, who also had a funeral home. My grandmother sold insurance for a while and then she became a homemaker. My Aunt Sarah was a nurse. So they all had, were working women, were professional women. From the time they came to the city my great grandmother, Mama Georgia, was a well-known seamstress and she did a lot of sewing for families over the mountain and was really known for her sewing abilities. I can remember her house with the Victorian furniture. She did well. She lived good. She was mean.

And my mother was the only daughter that my grandmother had. She was the only child and my Aunt Christine and my Aunt Sarah, neither one of them had children. And my Uncle Julius, I had two other uncles, my grandmother, was Howard () and Julius Brewster and they were kind of entrepreneurs, both of them. So my mother was an only child. She was raised by her grandmother. She was born out of wedlock. My grandfather was successful, I guess you can call him an executive at the [Birmingham Post Herald]. He worked there for all his life. His name was Calvin Harold. So my mother was raised by my grandmother and then my mother and father met and when she graduated from high school and they married and he went to the war. When he came back he was pretty active in the veterans movement that was going on in the city of Birmingham at that time. They had bought a home in the Piney Hills area, which was an area that a lot of young veterans moved to and they had a

young civic league over there. He was active with trying to organize. He worked at the Lumberjack or one of those meatpacking houses. He was active in trying to get blacks to join a union, the meat package union. Eventually we had a cross burned in our front yard and my parents left and moved to Chicago.

When they moved to Chicago it was a bitter winter and it was just a different experience for my mother. She had been from the South. She had been sheltered by her grandmother and she was forced into a big city with small children. And anyway, my father did not want to come back to Alabama and he stayed in Chicago for a while and my mother came back. He eventually moved to California.

So from the beginning that was my start there, you know. After we moved back to Birmingham my mother was able to get into public housing. They had just built the Loveman's Village complex. They were new apartments so she was able to get over there. But my sister and I still spent quite a bit of time with my grandmother because we were still small and my two brothers and my mother basically stayed in that apartment until we became school age children because my grandmother was a homemaker. So we had an opportunity to go to kindergarten, which was not very common for black kids to have access to preschool training. But we went to kindergarten at the Slossville Center, which was a center that Sloss Industries had built in the North Birmingham area, which happened to be across the street from my grandmother's house. So they had a clinic in there, a general clinic, and my Aunt Sarah was a nurse and she worked there as well. So we had an opportunity to go to kindergarten.

When we became school age we moved with my mother. We stayed with her, you know, she would come and get us on the weekends and that kind of stuff, but basically we moved in with our brothers and the family came together when we became school age kids. I went to elementary school in the Titusville area at Washington Elementary School. My siblings, we all attended that same school. All the time I went it was strange that I always thought it was George Washington but it was for Booker T. Washington. And they really have a permanent sign up there now that says Booker T. Washington. And it may have been Booker T. Washington then but I didn't know it. I don't remember that, but I do remember in elementary school we were taught our history, you know. It was integrated into all our subject matter – the music program, all our cultural programs and holidays and everything would always infuse the African American experience into learning experience in school.

And we had typical problems at the school. Washington Elementary School was located in an area that had a lot of ditches. I can remember a couple of kids that drowned going to school in one of the open ditches that was in the Titusville area when I was growing up. But the school was, it was a nice school. It still sits there. It was a traditional school. It was well built except for the water problem. Evidently it's in the flood plain and was not noted during construction. But the first floor would flood and the first grade, second grade, we were all on the first floor. But I can remember I think the principal bought my sister and me a pair of red galoshes and there were other teachers who would also do things like that for kids, so that when the water would stand and you know we would have those shoes. And they used to put

bags and stuff just so we could go through. It didn't bother us. We knew that it was going to get wet and we still had to do our same little school activities.

My first grade teacher was a member of my church and she was also my Sunday school teacher at church so I knew her going in and she happened to be my first grade teacher. And I just remember, that we all, we were well mannered in school. You know we didn't have disciplinary problems that we have [now]. You know we had little chit chat things but everything was just, it was a good experience you know. Going to school was a fun time and being able to participate on programs and, maybe go to the office or be a hall monitor. All those things were good. I was in the band. I went out in band. I was a majorette and a Girl Scout. Me and my sister was in the band and the Girl Scout experience extended from the school you know. We would go on hikes. We would go to, we had our own Girl Scout camp and we would go out there for a week or two in the summertime and in the fall we would go out and have sleep outs once we got to be older Girl Scouts, sleep out, camp out on the ground, put our tents out, so you know all of that was good.

Everything was, it was peace and harmony was in the community. I think I may have mentioned before we had in our community a black cleaners and variety stores, a grocery store, a black post office, postmaster, and shoe shine shops, bakeries. You know, we had things that we needed, doctor's office, dental clinic. The community was self-contained more or less. The main thing we didn't have was like merchandise like clothing and so you know naturally we would go downtown to buy clothes and shoes and things like that. But most of the services that we needed, personal services, and things that were commonly needed like shoe repair and cleaning

and Laundromats and that kind of stuff, when Laundromats came into being, we had them in our community, grocery stores.

Of course we had Italian grocery stores in our community as well. We had Italians that lived in the black community. A lot of them had homes behind or attached to the side of their stores and their kids kind of grew up in the community. And in the extended community from where I grew up in Titusville to Smithfield then you move on over between Smithfield and () Heights was a very large Italian community. And I can remember riding the bus – was the trolley – and when we would come down Sixth Avenue to Eighteenth Street down where UAB is then you would turn over and go downtown and then you see the buildings and stuff. But when we went to our grandmother's house we would go to North Birmingham so the trolley would go up Nineteenth Street and there were a lot of apartments that were, well, kind of looked like an eastern city, you know, with the high rise apartments, four or five levels with the little windows and stuff. And when you would go through the community the smells of the Italian meatballs and the sauces and all that, the community. I can remember the sense of smell of going and you see clothes maybe hanging out, you know, on the line like you would see on TV. And that was different because in Titusville we just had normal one-level houses and, of course, in the public housing community they had some apartments in the back or we had townhouses because they all had bedrooms upstairs. But you know it was just a different sense of city. You could tell when you moved through the city you'd get a sense of the ethnicity of the city and go to Ensley and you will see a larger Italian community there. And the Italians and the African Americans just kind of mingled, one next to

each other, you know, for many, many years in Birmingham. So that was the closest we got to multi-cultural.

WA: So the Italian kids in the neighborhood, were they going to separate schools?

CP: Yes. They did go to separate schools but mostly they went to the Catholic schools. It was not uncommon for African Americans who were Catholic to also attend like Holy Family or (). And so it was, you know, you didn't think anything of it. You just knew that they went to parochial schools and that was because of their religion and that was what they did. So it wasn't a problem about that.

WA: So you stayed at Washington, you were at Washington Elementary through the ninth grade?

CP: Through the eighth grade.

WS: Through the eighth grade and then is that when you went to Ramsey or you went to another school between?

CP: I went to Ullmann. I went to Ullmann High in '63 and that was when the demonstrations really started and we were active. My mother had allowed my older brothers to go to the meetings and they would take, when ones that were in our community that we could walk to, we would go because we could walk with them. So we would go in the Ingeridge area back to Sardis and it was an Ingeeridge United Methodist Church. They had meetings there. We would go to South () Baptist Church. Meetings were there. New Pilgrim and later on at Sixth Avenue, we were members at Sixth Avenue. We would go to meetings at Sixth Avenue. We would go. That was another thing about our community, when we were growing up we went to

all the churches anyway because in the summertime all of the churches would have vacation Bible school. And they would kind of situate them so that kids could come and attend, you know, and they would be during the daytime. Now they have them at night. But they would be in the daytime so it gave the kids something to do. We would go to like Westminster Presbyterian Church and that's where Reverend Weiss was the minister at that time. That's Condoleezza's father. And we would go over there to Bible school and we would go to St. Paul Lutheran Church. The Church of Christ didn't have Bible school but they would have other kinds of things. We'd go to Church of Christ. We were Baptists. We would go to all of them. So going to different churches, when it came time for the movement it was easy to do that because we had that kind of familiarity with our community and with our churches. There was just a connectedness. It wasn't all of this my church is better than your church, you know, or we got the biggest church or all this that I think we have now with the big mega-churches. But that's a whole 'nother story.

WA: So you went to movement meetings in '63. Did you go to the demonstrations? Were you active in the demonstrations in '63.?

CP: Yeah, I did, my sister and I. I never was arrested but we did march. We used to help make sandwiches and put them out for the demonstrators in the basement of Sixteenth Street. And I went to the classes. We would go down the street to the classes, the non-violent classes. They would tell you what you were supposed to do when you marched and how you're supposed to react and what you can't do and all this kind of stuff, how you were supposed to stay abreast, two or three or whatever the leader said, you know. We went to those demonstration classes and like I said, we

worked. I can remember working back in the kitchen just doing things that little girls could do. My brothers were arrested but my sister and I never, we didn't. I'm glad we didn't.

But we did march. I can remember one guy. We called him Sunshine. And we would go downtown with him and he would always take like five or six kids. And we would go down to the Woolworth's and different places, going with him, not as a mass demonstration but smaller groups that would do test things. So we did do that.

And so in '65 when they got ready to integrate the schools, they had integrated the schools in '63 and some of the schools had, most of the kids that had gone had been twelfth graders or eleventh graders. I think West End may have had one or two kids still there. At Ramsey there was only person. That was Richard Walker. He went there by himself in '65. Then from the '66 school year there were no African Americans at Ramsey. So in '64, I mean in the '64 year. And then in 1965 there were thirteen of us that went to Ramsey. So that was probably the largest single number of kids at school that went in. So I think we were able to have maybe a little greater impact because we did have someone to talk to and each other to a greater extent. And they put us in the same classes you know so that was good too. We had each other to respond to in terms of what was going on in the classroom.

WA: So why did you decide to go to Ramsey in '65?

CP: Well, I had always been taught that I was not inferior, that education was the key, and that if I studied hard and if I did what was expected, you know, that I would be successful. And so it was the part of me that likes a challenge and it was also we felt obligated to put the movement into effect, to not just march and sing but

to make it happen, you know. We thought we were doing what was the best thing to do. And they kind of screened us, the ministers. My minister and some others screened the students that they wanted to select to go to make sure that, you know, they sent some of the better students. My sister was really smart so I just went along with her.

WA: So how did you feel about going to Ramsey on the first day?

CP: On the first day I was apprehensive. I wasn't afraid but, you know, just still I was fifteen years old. It would be the same experience going to a new school anywhere. And when we got there, there were demonstrators out. A lot of kids had come from others areas and it was a very controlled environment. We didn't have any violence that day so we kind of eased in and we stayed a couple of hours and then we came back that first day. They let us out early maybe for a couple of days and then after that we went into a full regular schedule.

WA: So you were doing the regular changing classes and all that?

CP: Oh, yeah.

WA: Okay. Can you tell me about the principals and administrators at Ramsey? What were they doing to make desegregation go smoothly?

CP: Well, the principal was an Italian guy and I think he had some sensitivity to the whole African American experience. Ramsey was a multi-cultural school. It wasn't like sitting right in the middle of redneck Ville. So you had Jewish kids, Italians, a large Lebanese population, some people of German descent. So when we came, then you had you know your Anglo Saxons, but when we came it was just in a sense another mixture, another culture that was being involved once you get past your

basic introductions. You sit in a classroom with kids who have some sense of another America. So it wasn't so bad. It wasn't so bad. We did have, you know, some of them would do things. They would throw pennies at us and I had one incident that I may have told you about where the guys jammed me into the locker and I threw my books at them. That was the only confrontation that I ever had. The principal kind of handled it and he smoothed it out, you know. We were both made to apologize to each other and I told them that I didn't feel like that I had to apologize because they initiated it and all that. But I also told them that I would get my brothers to come up there if they bothered me again so they kind of left me alone.

I don't know. Some of the guys may have had some different experiences. You would have, one guy I know I can remember, Percy had a beard and you know they were constantly on him about cutting his beard, you know, that they wanted him to shave and that kind of stuff. I had a couple of teachers that wanted me to sit in the back of the class and I told them I never sit in the back of the class. I always sat in the front of the class. I got to see what's going on. But anyway, that kind of worked out, you know. One teacher particularly she wanted to make sure that we did not sit in front of any of the white kids. That was an English teacher. It was just inbred in her and it was hard for her to make the change. She'd say, like if she sent somebody back to their seat she wouldn't say just, "Go sit down." She'd say, "Go over there and sit over there by that Niggra," you know. It was her, you know just always, just had to make sure that she, you know, said that. And I would say, "I can't understand why you can't say Negro," you know. "I said it Niggra." "No you didn't," you know. So it's just that kind of little thing with her. But most of them were experienced

educators and they did okay. We didn't get any invitations that first year into any of the clubs and other kinds of things that were going on. But the second year we did have one girl that made the cheerleading squad and we had a guy on the basketball team and I think we got one or two guys that got in the Latin club or the German club, one of those language clubs. We began to make some inroads at the school. The second year we also had maybe another twenty or twenty-five people that came. It seems like we had, you know, thirty-five or forty people. You could go in the lunchroom it may be ten people in there, you know, so you don't feel so isolated.

WA: And so the faculty was still not desegregated at Ramsey?

CP: No.

WA: Did any African American teachers come while you were there?

CP: No, I think one may have, Mrs. Shepherd Wilder was her name prior. She may have come my senior year. If not, she came the next year.

WA: Okay. So tell me a little bit more about your experience with the other students. Did you make new friends at Ramsey or did you hang out with your old friends from Ullmann or?

CP: No, we didn't really make friends. I can remember we went to one girl's home for some like making some banners or something for homecoming or a basketball game or something of that nature that was coming up. My sister was on the homecoming court the senior year so that may have been that year. My sister did have one girl that they talked on the phone together after school about things that were going on. But I didn't. Our first year we would leave, when we left school we would go everyday back down to Ullmann to wait for them to get out of school. We'd walk

down there so we could walk home with our friends. And we just kept up with everything that was going. It was like we still went there. It was like we were, you know, at an extension program or something. We always stayed, well, I did, well, my sister too. Most of us that came from Ullmann, we stayed connected to that class and we considered it as our class and I still participate with the Ullmann class reunion. We're going on a cruise next year. So you know they accept me as part of their graduating class and they always send me the notices and, you know, that's what I feel like, that's my real class.

WA: So tell me a little bit more about academics at Ramsey, the classes that you took.

CP: Okay. I took basically I took the college preparatory classes. They had more language classes at Ramsey. I think at Ullmann we only had French. At Ramsey they had the Latin class. They had German and French. Of course, there were differences in the labs, biology and chemistry, the availability of instruments and frogs. You know, they had more. The classes they just had more. We had better books because we were still getting hand-me-down books in African American schools. We always got our books were two years behind the other public schools because they would give them to the white kids and then after the second year then they would pass them down to us. Of course, we had newer books. I'm not quite sure if our books were different from the other kids at Ullmann. I'm not sure about that. I don't think I even checked to see. I don't remember if we had different books but I know they had newer books. It would have been a newer edition at Ramsey.

I took sewing. I elected to take sewing. Like I say, there's a long line of seamstresses in my family. My mother taught us how to sew when we were seven or eight or nine years old. So I had taken sewing at Washington and just loved sewing so I took sewing at Ramsey. And, of course, we had new machines you know, electric machines. The equipment at Ullmann was not quite up to par in terms of the sewing stuff. With your supplies, at Ullmann you had to buy everything. You had to buy your own scissors. We had to buy our own cloth and patterns and stuff like that. But when I was at Ramsey we had to buy our own cloth but you had plenty of supplies and things to use for that. The food was, I guess the food was about the same at both schools in the cafeteria.

I don't know what else. That's about it. Sometimes you have conflict. I can remember the biggest thing was like to me, and impacting my mind right now is the teacher wanted us to sit in the back of the class. I did have students that after a period of time when they realized that we could do the work, you know, they want you to let them copy off your paper. That was common, that kind of stuff that goes on in schools. I wasn't going to let them do that.

WA: So you were at Ramsey for two years or three years?

CP: Two years.

WA: For two years. And was the second year, there were more African American students who came the second year?

CP: Right.

WA: Was it different from your first year?

CP: Yeah, we had, it was more cordial, you know. Even though you didn't make friends you had acquaintances, people that you had had in classes and stuff may have had to participate in group projects with them. And once you start participating in group projects you see everybody's got strengths and weaknesses. So you do have some kind of connection you know. It's like being your freshman year and your sophomore year. So it was better. We had more African Americans there so you know you had more people to see in the hallway or to go to basketball games. We had a black guy on the basketball game so we became more involved in what was going on because we had some stake in it. There would be enough presence at a basketball that And in my senior year we also we started going to there was this place the Cascade (). Anyway, they used to have the big parties out there and they would have, I can't think of their names, the people that was big back then and we managed, somehow it was integrated. And we started going out there so you would go out sometime you may see somebody that go to Ramsey, you know, and you get a bond. Somebody from Phillips was coming in. They would say something about somebody from Ramsey, you know, (). You know how teenagers do. But we started going out there. They didn't call them sock-hops but they would have, you wouldn't know if I called their name. And I can't call their name because I can't remember. But we started doing some of that.

Also, by us being on the Southside, the Southside always did have a different air than the rest of the city. And we started, you know, in your senior year you can kind of leave off campus and we would go down to () to get us a sandwich, you know. You may see somebody down there or somebody may say well, will you bring me

one. We said, well yeah, I'll bring you one back. And then at the time there were some more African American kids that had gone to John Carroll and they would walk down from John Carroll to the Southside so we started We had another area. We didn't have to just run to Ullmann everyday after school because we started having other kinds of meetings and just other teenagers that we became familiar with. So the second year was not so bad.

But even with that, the other thing is I guess you want to know [how] I feel about that. I still wish that I had stayed at Ullmann. I still think that in my heart I regret doing it for, like what I said one of the reasons was kind of trying to prove something, you know. And I just, I don't want to prove anything else anymore, you know. I just see it that it was, it was just like a failed experiment because in the end it has not worked out with the integration of schools because they're still segregated basically. And even the same things that we did early on in the integration process, you know, sitting at the same lunchroom table, getting together to go in a group to a basketball game, that stuff still goes on in an integrated situation. So there has been no progress made, that much progress made, with the schools you know. I don't know if they still do things like have private parties like they did, private proms and all that kind of stuff. But I don't know how much of, I'm having my birthday party, my special sixteenth birthday party and you're invited, you know, especially if it's in a situation where like at a country club or something like that. You still don't have that kind of basic interaction even on the upper class level where you have African American doctors and stuff like that whose kids go to school at Indian Springs or something like that. I don't think they, you know, they're not doing it because the

ones that I know they still come back to the black community for debutants and all that, to go to church and to their sororities and all that kind of stuff. They have to come back from over-the-mountain back to the valley to get fulfillment.

So in a sense I think that we should have, if we had sought to continue to strengthen our own schools, to demand the same equity in funding, books and maintenance, like the schools flooding and that kind of stuff, we could have maintained stronger schools.

And if we could have maintained stronger schools we could have maintained strong communities. A whole lot of what happened on the Southside, my church, my school, you know, a lot of the black businesses, all of it was just wiped out for UAB [the University of Alabama at Birmingham Medical Center], you know. Our church would have been eligible for the National Register because of its elegance and everything. But you know the children's hospital is setting on it. There's a black Catholic church back down there and there's something else setting on it. Just all of it, it's like one part of my whole life just was gone, you know. And then in the other part of the community is just gone, all the black businesses, the teachers that lived in the community, the clinics. I guess it's not, I don't know if it's just a phenomenon in the black community. It may have also happened with the white community because of suburbia, you know, and it was a whole change in marketing I guess. All of the little Mom and Pop stores are gone really so some of it is not crying just about integration, it's just time, you know, because bedroom communities and development areas and strategically placed things affected a lot of small businesses. In the black community though we haven't made the transition to that kind of rebuilding and I think it started

with the schools and attempts to put your better students in white schools to do this and to do that and the white community was not made to come to our community. And so, and then, ... I don't know. What else? Ask me another question before I ramble.

WA: That's fine. Really quick, I mean what you were talking about was one of my questions, which is how could desegregation have been handled differently, school desegregation? What I'm hearing is that you're saying that school desegregation was a failed experiment. Is there a way that it could have been handled differently?

CP: Well, I think that the black kids, we did all of the busing. They bused us to the other schools. The white community was not made to participate, only to yield a certain percentage of their territory, you know. Well, you take ten percent of them. And then the reaction from the white community was just to pull out of public schools, period, and to build Christian academies and all of the private church schools and what have you. So we should have just gotten equal funding. We should have gotten the money and continued to build from inside, continued to grow our leaders in our schools to continue to build the economic community around our schools as well, the things that would be needed, books stores and you know. We just lost all of that. The only thing I know is this. If we had had, if the whole community had been made to participate, not just African Americans, not just us moving.

Even when the teachers started the integration with the schools, I don't know what the percentage is now but it seems like to me there is a disproportionate number of white teachers on the lower elementary grades, one through six. And it's because

they don't want to deal with the disciplinary problems. When the black kids from the black community with all the anger and stuff that they have now, when they get to that middle school age when they become rebellious and leading up to the ninth and from the seventh through the ninth and tenth grade, we lose a lot of kids. We lose a lot of kids and I think some of the nurturing and the caring that you need from the first grade on up to the fifth where you still have a chance to mold and model, I think we miss a lot of that because our people are not teaching our kids at that level, not in the numbers that they need to be teaching. And we have no males, not many males in the school system, especially in that crucial seventh through ninth, tenth grade, you know. We don't have enough males in school that's doing that and they don't have role models. And a lot of females and then a lot of them have just, they have not developed the study skills, the discipline, and other things they need to guard them at that crucial time when they should be getting ready to go through the rites of passage and start taking on more concern for the community and you know strength and stuff like the Boy Scouts. So they join gangs. I know schools cannot do everything and a lot has to be done in the home and we miss the boat on a lot of stuff because now the grandmother's forty years old, you know, or thirty-nine or thirty-six because the child had a baby when she was fourteen and then that child had one when she was fifteen and then grandmamma ain't but thirty-nine. I mean, you know, where is that old grandmamma who can keep you like my grandmother kept us so Mama could go to work? It's not there. I don't know if that answered your question or not.

WA: It did. So really quick, I think this will be one of the last questions for stuff that did not get recorded last time. So tell me about your decision about where you went to college and tell me a little bit about that.

CP: Well, I decided that I was all ready for the black experience after Ramsey. I did it. I did what I could. I played my little part and good-bye to integration.

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BEGINNING OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

WA: So you were telling me about Tennessee State College.

CP: When I went to Tennessee State it was like a renewal in terms of the educational experience again, because then I had a chance to go back and kind of miss some of the things that I didn't get in high school, you know, leadership position in school. Student council and organizations that wanted you to be in them, that you could actively participate and have a voice in and all those things that aid the educational experience so that you're just not burnt out on just studying all the time. And then back to strong black leadership in the classroom with professors that were determined that we still about building the race and then also strong, in at Tennessee State, being in Nashville right at the point when Martin Luther King was killed. And so there we were with all the demonstrations and riots going on.

The city police couldn't come on the campus because it was state property so they called in the National Guard. And so here come all these young white guys who are in the National Guard because they don't want to go to Vietnam. So they came on campus and they ran us back into our dormitories, not that it cleared the campus, because it was riot day. Someone had burned the AF-ROTC building down. And all

of the stores, white business and stuff that were in the neighborhood, which wasn't that many of Nashville, Nashville still has a very strong black economic base. But the liquor stores and all of that, they had busted all the windows and, you know. they've got to look at us the first thing. And it was just riots and the city police was doing what they could. So anyway, they sent the National Guard and they got us all off the campus and cleared up the campus, put a curfew and got us out and we had to go back to our dorms. And they went into the boy's dormitory. They threw their stereos and their TVs out of the window on the ground. They took their bayonets and went in their closets like this [she makes a repeated stabbing motion] and cut up their clothes. They took their money, their wallets. It was, talk about how soldiers when they go into a town like pirates. This is what the National Guard, the Tennessee National Guard did at Tennessee State University. This is my life experience, okay. But anyway, I don't know.

And after the Martin Luther King experience and the riots and all, we had quite a few guys who came back from Vietnam, had a very large, they were going back to school on the GI bill, very large population of Vietnam veterans, black men and different things. Some of them coming back hooked on drugs, angry, ill, mean, mad, but anyway, they were politically active though. So we had a strong black awareness kind of thing at Tennessee State. Just, you know, the African and American culture, the African part of it began to just kind of permeate in the campus and the pride, the Afros and flags and, you know, the whole, the (). That part helped to soothe our presence, you know, in America, you know, being able to express and engulf Africanism. So that part was good. It was a healing kind of thing that you can get as a

people. So that part was good. Of course, it was big then, the whole black experience with reading books and doing poetry sessions and they called them rap sessions, and all of that, all these things we did to kind of heal ourselves after all the riots. So that was the experience I got at a black college that I would not have gotten if I had continued on this integration trek. I would have been crazy. So that was the whole thing and that was one of my decisions that I'm very pleased with that I did go to HBU. And I came back out and I finished school and I did social work. I worked at the NAACP and Urban League and I worked for a community action agency for fourteen years. Then I worked in community development for the city for eleven years. So I served my community once I finished school. That's it.

WA: Well, thank you so much. I really appreciate it.

CP: You're so welcome. You're welcome, sweetie.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

[In interviewed Carol Poe previously on October 28, 2004. The Side A of that tape did not record. This is the Side B of that first interview:]

BEGINNING OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

WA: So do you have any children who went through Birmingham public schools or are going to public schools right now?

CP: No, I have my son and I made the same mistake with him that I made for myself. When he was five he couldn't go to public school because his birthday started in November. So I put him into an all white school system, Christian school, you know. Now you know the Christian schools, they don't bus. All the white folks have left the Christian school in the city now. So anyway, I put him in a Christian school

and I had to fight some of the same battles with him initially, you know. And I said now, why do I put this boy through this. Then I realized what I was doing. But by the time he got to the seventh grade he told me, Mama, I am tired of going to school over there. I want to go to school where my friends go, because he was playing like little league football and baseball with his peers, his own friends. And by the time he got to middle school age he wanted to be with his own people and I understood that. So I let him go to public school and the first day he came and he said Mama, they were backing up (). Well, you wanted to go over there. He did go over there. He went to public school and he enjoyed his public school experience. I even got him, well, he scored high enough to enroll at Ramsey, which at that time was a magnet school, or whatever it's supposed to be over there at Ramsey now. And he went to Ramsey and he got over to Ramsey and he said Mama, I don't want to be over there. He wanted to go to Ensley. He wanted to play football so that's where he went. He went to Ensley. He was in the honors program at Ensley. He graduated with honors and he went to Miles College and finished there. But I guess some way or another my teaching, because I've always tried to teach racial pride to him, you know, take him so he can know who he is and where he came from, and so now he's just radical as his mom.

(Laughter)

WA: So you talked to him about your experience at Ramsey?

CP: Oh, yeah, I tried to keep him enlightened. I don't try to raise a racist child but I want to raise an enlightened young man, you know. I want him to know his history and he majored in political science and right now he's working with, he's twenty-five and he's working with young males who dropped out of school, trying to

help them find jobs and stuff like that. He's frustrated with that and I got a nephew who says well, why are you always talking about preservation and trying to preserve these old civil rights churches and stuff. You need to be working with these young folks. I said, ya'll need to work with them. You need to work with your own generation. I'm trying to save what I can save. I cannot save ya'll because I don't know where ya'll are coming from. I don't know what happened to ya'll. Somebody dropped a bomb but you have no culture. You have no sense of pride about your race, your community or nothing else and until ya'll get that part, aspect, together, our community is not going to go anywhere. I can't deal with it anymore. I'm too old so let me do what I can do. That's what I do. I work with churches. Now what else? I don't want to talk no two hours now.

WA: No, we're just about at an hour so I'll ask you one more question. So is there anything that I haven't asked you about school desegregation that you think is important for us to preserve today?

CP: No, I think it's a failed experiment. I really do. I think the whole thing failed and I think it would have been more appropriate and more American like if they had just made them equal and allowed, not to force, the schools to desegregate. Give them all the same amount of money, have the same resources, make it equal, and make it available that if you want to go to another school outside of your community, I'll just say it like that. Maybe the community based thing is what it is, you know. You want to go to that you can but you're going because you want to. But the resources are the same here. You've got the same lab equipment. When we got to Ramsey they had four languages that we didn't have. They had much better lab facilities. I told

you my grandmother taught me how to sew so I've been sewing all my life. Even at the black schools we were doing it with those kind of machines and you get there and they've got electric sewing machines, you know. Make them the same. Make them equal. Even now you go in the county in Birmingham, Jefferson County, all of the white high schools have stadiums and facilities. There is not a stadium in Birmingham. The only one close to one is Woodmont because it was an all white school. But you know, none of the rest of the schools, they don't have stadiums. The boys can't go in the weight room or the girls, cheerleaders or whom ever, they don't have the same facilities even now. Even today it's just different you know. They're not the same and they're never going to be the same. Carver High School, they spent millions of dollars to build Carver High School. Well, Carver will never be a Spain-Park, you know. It's just not the same. You know, so now education is more or less black communities and, you know, the counties. And one county will vote to fund their school so they can get all the money they need to do their school. And then in another county like in Jefferson County they won't do it because they already have decent schools in Jefferson County.

So if you're talking about, you're talking about Birmingham schools, it all comes down to everything to me is still constantly black and white. It's still constantly black and white. The whites still have better communities. They still live better. You know, Fairfield is not a Hoover even though they might have the same and at one time been at the same point, you know. It's not just land lock you know. It's jobs that you don't have or you don't make the same kind of money. It's, you know, your educational system where your kids end up not finishing college, not

finishing high school, not being educated, can't pass. A twelfth grade student can't pass an eighth grade level exam. It's something wrong, you know. And so not only are we still separate and unequal, we are not even at the same level that we were before integration because we don't have the same impetus to drive us to want to be successful, you know. And we got so many other kind of role models, you know, athletes and singers and all this, you know. It used to be educators, you know, and professional people, you know, and doctors and lawyers, people we want to emulate. Now we want to be basketball players. I don't get it. It's way over my head. Now what's your next question?

WA: That was it. That's it. Thank you very much.

CP: You're welcome. I hope that helps you.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

TRANSCRIBED FEBRUARY 2005 BY CATHY MANN