

Transcript - John A. Stokes (2003-03-21)

CARRINGTON: May I have your name, sir, and your title.

STOKES: My name is John Arthur Stokes. My title, I'm retired principal, Baltimore City Public Schools.

CARRINGTON: And where were you born and where did you grow up?

STOKES: I was born in a place called Prince Edward County, and Farmville, Virginia.

CARRINGTON: And tell me about Prince Edward County and Farmville. What period of time was this that you lived there and tell me about your family.

STOKES: The period of time which I was born and raised into was a very critical time in that things were changing as far as folk were concerned -- I was born -- I grew up in an era whereby my brothers and sisters were serving in -- had just served -- were serving in World War II. I had three brothers who served and one sister. All of them served overseas in the European theater. As far as my family members are concerned my twin sister and I were the youngest of all of the individuals in the family.

CARRINGTON: How many people?

STOKES: There were eight of us, Mom and Daddy, and six children. I had an older brother, but he died before I knew anything about him because he died at 18 months, so I did not know him at all. But my mother and father were very, very religious. We were poverty stricken as the word would go, and that we were farmers, and we were truck farmers, and so we had to rely upon the soil, nature and the people for our survival.

Daddy and mother as I stated before were both very, very religious individuals, so I was -- we were brought up in a very strict religious environments to respect the soil, what God had given us to farm on and to respect nature and to respect people.

CARRINGTON: What else did your parents hold near and dear in terms of the needs for their children, discipline, education? Tell me about those things.

STOKES: Mother and Daddy are both held in high esteem the educational concepts of us within the family. It was a hub of educational activities all of the time by virtue of the fact that my brothers and sisters had set such a high stage of educational excellence until my twin sister and I sometimes, especially me, had a hard time trying to achieve those goals. All of my brothers had achieved very well.

One brother had graduated from Hampton Institute, and of course that had really set the curve in the family, which meant all of us had to attend college. And mother told us immediately, she

said, I handle money, but God will provide and you will go to college. And daddy, by being the reader that he was, taught us that education was the key to success. Daddy always bragged about the fact he was a third grade graduate, and as you know there's no such thing as a third grade graduate. Momma said she finished the fifth grade.

Daddy prided himself upon reading the newspapers, the Richmond Times-Dispatch, the Richmond News-Leader, the Farmer Herald [Farmville Herald]. Sometimes he'd get the Virginian Pilot, but very seldom. But he would always pick up the Afro American newspaper and the Gentleman Guide and of course the Farmer Herald [Farmville Herald]. So daddy was the type of person who could critique the data in the newspaper, and it always amazed me because here we have a third grade graduate, as he called himself, who could do all of these things. So basically he taught me what I took not only into the Army and through college as a teacher, but as a principal, he taught me the concepts of levels of reasoning and thinking because daddy actually, without even knowing it, was dealing with literal, interpretive, critical and creative thinking.

After he had read the paper he would say, well, what do you think about such and such a thing? That's creative. And of course literal, he would just break it down and say this is what the paper says. And each time he would do this, I was just so amazed, so when I became a fifth grader and could read almost as well as my daddy, I thought, I felt very proud of my achievement because here I'm able to not only read but interpret on the same level that my daddy has, and has been doing for many, many years. So it was a great achievement.

My Momma knew the Bible verbatim punctuator. She could quote all of the scriptures. So not only did we have the political side and the economic side from my daddy, we had the religious side from my momma because she would give us those scriptures to follow each day we leave, no matter where we would be going, whether we be going to the fields to work all day, or whether we be on our way to school, she would give us something to carry us on. So we had the guidance from both sides.

And to me, that was really a revelation, and it was as I look back now, it was one of the most beautiful environments that anyone could grow up in, although I saw it then as a very, very poor environment and because we were struggling to make ends meet.

CARRINGTON: Do you think that was the genesis of your development as a leader?

STOKES: Yes. I do believe that that particular environment was a nucleus of my beginnings as a leader, because I could see that with the little that they had, they were imparting on us the knowledge to achieve and to go forth and to do, and to look everyone in the eye, whites as well as blacks, and say I can do it. And amazingly enough, the whites in the neighborhood really respected my mom and my daddy. They respected them with the highest esteem.

I never will forget that many of the doctors who were surgeons at that time, surgical doctors and other doctors would after their operations or after their days in the office would come by and

mom would bake them bread and serve them jelly and bread and they would drink the buttermilk and all that, and eat the bread, and they would say, could you pray with me, please. I would like for you to pray with me. And mother would pray with them, and she would put hands on them and pray with them. And to me, that was very, very touching.

So when the concept came up that the people got angry about us having a school bus to ride to school, I really couldn't understand that because these were the same color of people that momma and daddy dealt with, the Dr. Jeffreys, the other individuals, Dr. Jeffreys taught at Longwood College, very kind people, very kind people, and yet they were white, so our neighbors, our closest neighbors were white people, so it had nothing to do with whiteness, it had to do with equality when we did what we did when we moved forward.

CARRINGTON: In that leadership development, your daddy taught you about the Niagara Movement, right?

STOKES: About what, now?

CARRINGTON: The Niagara Movement.

STOKES: No.

CARRINGTON: I'm sorry.

STOKES: Manhattan Project. The Manhattan Project, yeah.

CARRINGTON: Okay.

STOKES: Yeah. Daddy broke it down for us, so we knew about John Grove, we knew about Oppenheimer and all the other persons who were involved in that project. We knew that, you know, that there was such a project out there, and that they had to deal in secrecy and that was the key to their successes. Yes, we knew about that.

CARRINGTON: Now as you live in Farmville, what were the educational conditions in your area? Give me a full blown description of what you had to deal with in the educational environment.

STOKES: I really, when you speak of the educational environment in Prince Edward County, Farmville, Virginia, even now it sort of brings tears to my eyes because of the fact that I knew it was deplorable, but as I grew older I realized how devastating it really was for us without us even realizing it. In the first place, my twin sister and I could not start the school until we were eight years old because there was no bus for black children. There were two buses for whites only that passed by our house every morning and picked up Jack Jeffreys, Bill Schueler, these were the white boys that I played with, these were the kids that's I played with, and yet my twin sister and I could not ride those buses.

Number one, we couldn't ride those buses were going to the wrong schools. They were going to all white schools. But we wondered why the blacks did not have buses. So mother and daddy kept us home until we were eight because of the fact that we had to walk five miles to school from near Wesham into Farmville, or we would have been required to walk from our house by Kingsville into Hampden-Sydney to school through the woods, basically, because at that time it was not built up. The roads are built up now. So through the woods, and mother and daddy did not trust that particular thing as far as us moving through the woods at that age because Carrie and I were not big at that time, we were small kids. We were not structured. You know we, didn't have the body build some of the other kids. We were on the frail side, so they feared for our safety.

So we had to walk into Farmville, and we started walking at eight years old, and within three months they -- the Lewis family, black family, supplied a bus, and mom and daddy had to pay 50 cents per month for us to ride that bus into Farmville to attend the elementary school which was under the -- which was under principalship of Mr. L. L. Hall, incidentally, who is still alive.

That was one of the features which was, as we -- as I learned later was minor. In the counties, there are six magisterial districts in Prince Edward County, and in each county there were multiplicity of schools, elementary schools for black children that were constructed of wood. In those schools, they -- the only heat supply would be wood stove, and in some cases they would have other types of fuel, but wood mostly, and in one case there my brother was the teacher and

principal at one of the schools. And it was at place called New Hope. Amazingly enough, most of the time when they built the schools for the black kids, they would put these schools in or near a church ground because they would use that same facility. They used the water, the pump water, and they would use the outdoor toilets, and we used to call them privates out there in order for the school children to have those types of facilities.

Now, there were around 10 or 12 of those buildings scattered throughout Prince Edward County at that time of wood construction, outdoor toilets, none of them had indoor plumbing, of course, and yet, in each of the magisterial districts for the white kids there was a school there, but it was of brick construction. And those students would have, of course, the privilege of having a bus that would take them to and from those schools. They built the schools for the blacks, we found out later, very closely knitted to the churches so that the kids would not have to walk too far, but some of them still had to walk pretty long distances to get to those schools.

But the most amazing thing was the fact that in our minds we just wondered how come the white kids had these beautiful brick buildings, with heat, number one, and no one had to go out there and gather wood every morning to start the fire; number two, they had running water, and when December came, they didn't have to go outdoors to the toilet.

And amazingly enough we could not find the answers to those questions. Something else that we were dealing with, the fact that we always had to use the hand-me-down books. We never got the new books. And sometimes when we would get those books, we had little nasty messages from

the white kids in the book saying certain nasty things, because those -- sometimes the ink could not be erased, if you took that page you would lose some of the content of the book.

So these are some of the negativisms that we found that we had to deal with. One of the greatest eye sores that occurred was the fact that once R. R. Moton High School, the second high school was built, it was built for around 180 students, and when I became a senior, we were housing around 400 -- between 450 and 480, I don't know the exact count. So we were sort of bursting at the seams, to say the least.

So in order to accommodate us, they built tar-paper shacks, and no toilets, no running water, just a little pot-belly stove in the corner. So in the summertime or in the spring of the year, we would burn up, and in the wintertime those who were not sitting on top of that pot-belly stove would freeze. And of course, the janitor would make rounds and fire it and put coal in it, but it was indeed a pathetic situation.

CARRINGTON: Tell me about your role in 1951 strike at Moton High School, how it developed and the role of you and your sister and the rest of your students.

STOKES: What happened, in -- on the 23rd of April, 1951, just didn't happen. It was not as if someone had put gas down and lit a match to it and it just flamed up. It was not that. It was well planned. It was well constructed, and as I stated before, it was similar to the Manhattan Project. I took a page out of that book because of the fact we knew we had Uncle Tom in the school. We

had black Uncle Toms and white Uncle Toms throughout Prince Edward County and if we permitted our concepts to get out, we'd be dead ducks, we knew that, and our lives would be ruined. So what happened is the fact that we -- I have to take you back in order to explain exactly what happened on that particular day. It just didn't start on that day. Mr. L. Frances -- I messed up.

CARRINGTON: Don't worry about it.

STOKES: Mr. L. Francis --

CARRINGTON: Hold on.

STOKES: Yeah. Can you stop it for a second? [Discussion held off tape.]

STOKES: What prompted the activity on the 23rd of April, 1951, what prompted it was a situation that was festering for a long, long time. It had been festering. Just as I stated, we knew that we were dealing with a power structure that had ignored our pleas. My twin sister and I were taken to every PTA meeting they held and on no occasion that we attended the PTA meeting did we receive any, any type of positive response from Mr. McIlwayne or any of his crew members, or any of the board members. What they would do, instead of Mr. McIlwayne coming up there himself, he would send a peon and the peon would never have the answers that we needed to hear, when were we going to have these schools, these tar-paper shacks replaced?

Mr. John Lancaster, Dr. Griffin, Dr. L. Francis Griffin, Mr. Lancaster's father had tried, other PTA groups had tried, my aunt had tried, Ms. Mary Brown. So we knew that we were fighting a losing battle and they weren't hearing anything that we were saying so the students even before I became a senior had spoken of walking out. Some of them had spoken of stopping the traffic on Route 15, which at that time was a major route to the south. It was a major route, you know. [Interstate] 95 had not been built at that time.

So we knew that we had a problem, so when Barbara came to us, Barbara Johns approached my twin sister and I, first she approached me, and Barbara was a very unusual person, she was very, very, very -- very quiet, very, very, very quiet but highly intelligent, and when she approached me, I had heard this before about striking, about boycott and things like that, so it was nothing new, but she was so persistent, so around October I said, look, we'll look into it.

So then we started meeting. And we came up with a plan whereby we would be able to walk out of school, and we were hoping that the news media will pick up our cause and pick up our case, and focus it so that we'd get responses nationally, but of course there was a complete news blackout. The Farmers Herald did us a disservice in that they did not -- they would not come forward. They didn't even come forward except to say something negative when there was a cross burned on the school ground.

So to go back in what you asked me, we knew that in order to do something, it was just so hopeless, in order to do something we had to develop a plan, and the plan was to get the students out of the school, protest, because we knew it wasn't going to last over five or seven days. We knew that the board of supervisors, board of education, Mr. McIlwayne would say, look, we'll put a new building up, and we knew that was going to be it, but it didn't happen that way. They rebelled against us, and they called us a few names that I can't put on tape and became very, very upset with us because of the fact that they felt that we were doing something wrong, and they failed to realize that we knew that the 14 or 15 schools in the county, the property was only worth around \$330,000. You know, they didn't think that we as young kids would know all this. And that we knew that the properties that their buildings were on were worth \$1,200,000. That's a difference in around \$870 some thousand dollars, so this was not equality. This was not equality at all.

So, and see, I think they played us real cheap because of the fact that they did not think that we had the abilities to do what we did. So once we walked out and some students did come back, of course, and -- but we had planned it, we had planned it very well, when those students hit the grounds we would have cars and take them on home. And it happened for about three days. And after then they did not come back to school on the buses anymore. These were bus students.

And of course the NAACP met us at the First Baptist Church one night, and Mr. Hill, and Mr. Robertson, and Dr. Henderson came, and the next time Mr. Lester Banks came and met with us and talked with us. And amazingly enough, what sort of -- sort of bothered me initially was the

fact that the NAACP group members tried to talk us out of it. They said, how do you know what you are doing is right? And you know, they -- we thought they were trying to talk us out of it. Actually, they were testing us to see how strong we were. And of course when they told us that the only way they could take the case would be to take it for the purpose of integration, we had to take a vote on that, and we voted on everything before we went forward as a group. We had to vote on everything.

So the coalition group that started it moved forward and got other students. We had gotten other students to work with us, you see, and we selected those students very carefully, because we did not wish any, any of the students to be Uncle Toms and things like that. Now, of course, we sent false feelers out there too from time to time so that no one would know exactly when the strike was going to happen. We knew when it was going to happen because on the 22nd of April, 1951 we had our last planning meeting at my mother's house. And my brother, Leslie, was there, who was attending Livingstone College at the time.

And we had a question, and the question was, what if we go to jail? And so we called him in just to ask him that question. And he said, how many students are in your school? We said 400 something. He said, how big is the Farmville jail? And we knew then we were on a roll. And the rest is history.

CARRINGTON: Now, tell me more about your strategy, the people that were involved in the strategic plan, and what were the things that you knew you had to do in order not to be subterfuged by the Uncle Toms that you talked about?

STOKES: Well, in order to get around the Uncle Toms in order to plan well, what we did, we selected one student from each magisterial district, we selected one student that we could trust from each of the districts initially because of the fact that we knew if that -- if we -- if those students had influence -- and see, what had happened is the fact that we had traveled widely educationally. We had been involved with clubs, with other organizations. At that time I was the president of an organization called the New Farmers of America. I was not only regional president, which covered around three to five counties, I was also the state president, so we had traveled, we had seen other schools and other facilities that supposedly had less money per capita but, yet, those schools had equal -- I wouldn't say equal facilities, better facilities for black kids. And so based upon that, we knew that some of the students that we selected had also had those experiences, and so those students served as a nucleus for us as we moved along, so they got to all of the children in the district. For instance, there are six different magisterial districts in Prince Edward County, so we got a student from the Lockey district, got a student from the Lee District, the Hampden, the Buffalo, Prospect and of course Farmville, which is right in Farmville. And we just dealt with the situation as we saw it because we knew that these students knew the chemistry of the students within their own district because, you see, the students in Farmville reacted differently than the students who are in the county because the students in Farmville had gone to an all-brick school, which later became Mary E. Branch, but the students

in the county had gone to shacks, so they had a different mind set as to what we were all about. So we had to use a different formula for the students in the city. We couldn't deal with the housing for them. We had to deal with the other facilities that were not equal, such as the books, and such as the fact that we didn't have a gymnasium, we didn't have a cafeteria. Now, that really got to the hearts of the students in the city.

So we worked upon their knowledge and yet we worked upon their emotions in order to deal with the situation and get them to the high point of saying, yes, we want to walk out. And just the fact that we were in those tar-paper shacks, you know, in school, there were no one who was excluded from not having at least one class in those tar-paper shacks. So they were irritated with that alone because those tar-paper shacks were eyesores, and those folks who were traveling to Florida and other places would come by; they would ask us where the cows were because, you know, they looked like barns, they looked like barns, they looked like chicken coops.

CARRINGTON: Who were the leaders of this group and what were their roles?

STOKES: Each leader, each leader had a different role. And I can't go into all the details --

CARRINGTON: Your sister was part of it.

STOKES: Yes, my sister.

CARRINGTON: Barbara Johns was part of it.

STOKES: Yes.

CARRINGTON: Can you tell me what their roles were?

STOKES: Their roles were monitoring the situation, putting everything -- for instance, they made the calls to the NAACP. A lot of people are not aware of that.

CARRINGTON: Now, who made the call to the NAACP, your sister or Barbara?

STOKES: Carrie -- they were together.

CARRINGTON: Okay.

STOKES: And they made the call from Ms. Sims' office because she had a phone in there. It's never been tracked before. This is the first time this has been said. They made a call from that office. And if they didn't make it from that office, they made it from the secretary's office, one of those two offices they made that phone call. That was their job.

Each person had a different job, but jobs also crossed. See, there were very few people who were really involved with the nucleus because we couldn't bring but too many people. We fed the people what we wanted them to know, and that's how we controlled what we were doing.

CARRINGTON: Now, your sister and Barbara got the NAACP to have a meeting. Tell me about that meeting you had with Joe Tucker and --

STOKES: Mr. Tucker wasn't there.

CARRINGTON: So it was Oliver Hill --

STOKES: Yeah. Spottswood Robinson, Dr. Henderson. Mr. Tucker could have been there. I don't remember that other person. I remember Mr. Henderson very, very well, but he was a cool cat, you know, he was real calm. Spottswood Robinson, boy, he walked the dogs on us that night. He was something, you know. In fact, amazingly enough, I said something that I got very ashamed of in later years, Spottswood Robinson was so hard on us telling us, you know, you know what you are doing, and that's what he started with. Then he said some of the students sometimes, you know, do things and then they regret it and things of that nature.

So then near the end of his conversation I raised my hand, I said, sir. He said, yes. I said, you know, I can understand understand why you are having a problem with us. He said, why is that? I said, because you are white. And he never corrected me. He was such a man. He never

corrected me. Reverend Griffin called me to the side, he said, young Stokes, let me tell you one thing. There are such people as light-complected Negroes, you know. The word was Negroes then, not black, you know. And I felt like I wanted to go through the floor, you know, here I am the President of New Farmers of America, you know, and I here I misinterpreted who the man was, and because I permitted my emotion, I realized then I permitted my emotion to get in the way of my thinking pattern. And we went on from there.

And they told us, they said, we are going to come back through Farmville, we are going to Pulaski, Virginia, and when we come back if you are not -- if you have decided not to go back to school we'll take your case, and they kept their promise. And that was the most amazing thing, they actually kept their promise and listened to what we had to say.

CARRINGTON: One second.

[Change tapes.]

CARRINGTON: Let's get back to that meeting. Did that meeting with Oliver Hill, the first meeting with Oliver Hill and the students, did that, what they were doing in terms of asking you guys those hard questions, did that dissuade you or how did it impact on the foment you all were doing?

STOKES: When Mr. Oliver Hill and those came to us and following that particular meeting, it really cemented us more firmly in our belief that we were right, they told us before they left, they said, you are right, you are right, but we have never seen a bunch of students with so much guts to try something like that, and that's why we asked you all these questions. They told us the reason. And you know, because of their rationale we trusted them. We knew we could trust them. We knew we could lean on them.

And of course the Reverend Griffin by being a mentor that he was, you know, sort of took us under his wing like a chicken does, you know, just like a hen does, you know, and to protect us, he guided us in the direction to move from that point. He said you can always use this facility whenever you wish to have any meeting you want to have.

CARRINGTON: Now when you answer this I want you to state what you all were trying to do in Prince Edward County when you answer this question. When the second meeting came around when the parents were there, how did the parents support you when the lawyers were there?

STOKES: Okay, can we do something before we get there, please? Okay, can we go to the point of how we decided to go with the NAACP, because I haven't said that.

CARRINGTON: Go for it.

STOKES: Okay. What happened, we had a decision to make and the decision were whether or not you are going to stay status quo segregated, ask for equality or whether you are going to go for integration. And Mr. Hill and those told us that the only way they could take the case would be to go for integration. And they said, get back to us, because we knew we had to vote. As a caucus group, we knew we had to vote, because we had some internal problems. You know, every group has a few little problems. And the vote went over, it won by one vote, and no one has ever said that before. That's how close it was. That's how close we came to not making history. If that other person had voted the other way, I wouldn't be sitting here right now, because it was a very, very -- and it was -- it was rough at that meeting that evening. It was rough.

We as students had to make a decision, because we really did not wish integration, because we knew integration would dismantle, number one, our educational system. We were very proud of our teachers and what they had done. Our teachers motivated us to be leaders. They were our motivators. And we knew we were going to lose that once integration took place, because our teachers were our role models just like our parents had been. They had motivated us. They would say, boy, you are going to college. I don't have any money. But you are going to college. And there was -- those were motivating factors. And so they had led us year after year to be leaders within arena in which we found ourselves.

So it was a hard task for us to determine to go for integration, which we knew would bring a few problems, or let it be status quo. So it went over by one vote. It went over by one vote. And that

was a very, very, very rough time for us as a committee. And it was at that time that I realized that we were really involved with something very, very serious because that's the only way the NAACP would take us, integration.

CARRINGTON: Now Tucker and Mr. Hill came back and told you to bring your parents back.

STOKES Yes.

CARRINGTON: What was that meeting like? What did they challenge the parents to do?

STOKES: Well, in the first place they laid out the entire format as to what we were dealing with. They told them it's going to be a real rough road because your students have voted for integration, and that's the only way we can go, so we cannot -- we can no longer ask for equality. It has not worked. And based upon that, you will have to do something to support us.

And of course, we had some opposition, and it was at that time Barbara Johns became famous, because when Mr. Provall stood up and said that he disagreed with what we were doing as students, and he was not happy at all that these students, these Negro students had decided to take it upon themselves to change what has been going on all the time, and that these white people had not done us any harm, and we have come a long ways, it was at that time -- it was at that time that Barbara Johns stood up and said, we are not going to listen to an Uncle Tom, in essence that's what she said, and there was a hush over that entire assembly. I mean a complete

hush. And we wanted to go through the floor, because, you know, we respected Mr. Provall. We never would have said that. But that's how Barbara was. Barbara was a beautiful person. Very quiet. Very, very quiet, very lady like, but when it came to this issue she became a tiger, and that's why we respected her as our leader, because she was quiescent otherwise, very lady like, but said something about where we needed to go, and she put on gloves and started fighting.

Of course, Mr. Provall went back in the corner, and at that meeting -- let me say this, there hadn't, up until that point there had not been an assembly of that magnitude in First Baptist Church. There were just as many people outside as there were inside, and we turned the press away, the white press, and of course they became very upset about that. But when we wanted them to come to us in the first three days, they didn't. So we said, we don't -- you know, Reverend Griffin said, we don't need need you now. We wanted you to listen to these students. If you had listened to them, we wouldn't be here now. We wouldn't be asking for integration. We would be asking for -- we would have had equality because you would have started digging a hole to build another school, to accommodate the overcrowdedness and other conditions.

So that particular meeting, at that particular meeting we had people who were really and truly in tune to what was going on. And to show how strong the black parents were, they stood like sentinels in the wild because they got up, came forward, and 69 parents signed for 117 students. It blew my mind. I mean -- and the most amazing part of it, some of the parents who had bragged and talked about, yes, we are going to support you, and we knew that they weren't going to, did not sign. Most of the parents who signed were rural.

CARRINGTON: Were you parents part of this?

STOKES: Say what?

CARRINGTON: Were your parents part of this?

STOKES: Alice Stokes signed.

CARRINGTON: How did that make you feel --

STOKES: Alice Stokes signed. Well, I knew momma was going to sign because, see, the first day we went on the strike, momma walked into the auditorium we were having that assembly that morning with Miss. Daisy Anderson, and I looked over there and I said, oh God, there's my momma. I said, oh Lord, she is going to turn this house out. And after I had finished what I had to do on stage, I walked down there, and I said, hi, Momma, how are you doing? She said, are you okay, son? I said, yes, ma'am. She said, you are sure you are all right? I said, yes, ma'am. She said, okay. And she turned, she turns and she walks out. And I knew then all systems were go. I knew then all systems were go.

CARRINGTON: What did your dad think about all that?

STOKES: Well, he went along with the program. My daddy was more radical than my momma. Daddy stayed behind the scene because he would say something wrong, he would hurt our feelings, so daddy knew how to be cool, how to be cool, you know. But at that particular meeting what happened was awesome because those folks went up there and they signed, and when they signed, it brought tears to most of our eyes, and we thanked them, because they stood with us, and stood by us.

And of course the next morning, as soon as -- not the next morning, as soon as the Farmers Herald found out who the persons, who were the petitioners, they put that in the newspaper and said something negative about, which we knew they were going to do anyway. And so that meeting was awesome. It was you awesome.

It was -- it was earth shaking. It was awesome. Very frightening to the power structures, to the police force. I mean they were out thinking there was going to be a fight or whatever, you know, when you get all those people together at one time, when there's no fighting and no drinking and all that, no cursing, everybody just moving in a business like way, it scared them, but we knew we could do it. We had set the stage.

The parents were really following the children at that time, then the parents took the lead by signing, and we were very, very proud of them.

CARRINGTON: What was the outcome of all this parental and student unity; what happened in Prince Edward? What was your outcome?

STOKES: Well, the outcome, really, is still being focused on today, because those signatures became a part of the Brown decision. They were the plaintiffs. We are the plaintiffs. So it is still growing today. It has not stopped. That was the initiation of something that was very, very, very strategic and very, very important for our nation as far as integration is concerned.

CARRINGTON: Now, high school for you, you went from -- you went to the 11th grade, right?

STOKES: Yes.

CARRINGTON: That's all they had?

STOKES: That's all they had.

CARRINGTON: Why not the 12th grade for black folks? I I mean, what was the rationale for not having 12th grade when white people went to the 12th grade?

STOKES: Oh, they didn't. They went to the 11th grade at that time, too.

CARRINGTON: Okay.

STOKES: No. That's not true. They only went to the 11th grade at that time. The 12th grade was added at another time, at a later year, during later years. No.

CARRINGTON: What happened to you after graduation; where did you go?

STOKES: Believe it or not, after graduation I had to stay home a whole year with my momma because my daddy was sick, so I went back to school to take some courses so I'd be better prepared for college, and so I spent another year at our abode. And then of course I went into the Army, then I went to Virginia State.

CARRINGTON: How did you get into the Army?

STOKES: How did I get into the Army?

CARRINGTON: Yeah. How did you get into the Army?

STOKES: Are you kidding? They had a way in Farmville, Virginia, Prince Edward County, seemingly as soon as we came of age, most of black boys went into service. We haven't figured that out yet. But anyway, we -- or most of us went into service one way or another. My counterpart that I still talk to today who went to Virginia State with me, we were in the same boat. We got our draft cards real early.

CARRINGTON: So you had to sign up for the draft?

STOKES: Oh, we had to. It was mandatory.

CARRINGTON: So all the black guys signed up, all the white guys signed up?

STOKES: Yes.

CARRINGTON: What happened if you compared the two?

STOKES: I don't know. I don't have the statistical data. I don't know.

CARRINGTON: But you went?

STOKES: I went.

CARRINGTON: Almost immediately?

STOKES: No. As soon as I got out of school. See, the thing about it, you could finish school, you see, you could get -- come out of school, see, but you had to go. You had to go. I was at Virginia State when they called me.

CARRINGTON: Oh, okay.

STOKES: See.

CARRINGTON: Were you involved in any other types of social demonstrations?

STOKES: No.

CARRINGTON: Sit-ins?

STOKES: No. After that I developed a very low profile because of the -- I did not know what the repercussions were going to be. I knew that there were going to be some because of Mr. -- a gentleman by the name of Mr. Lindsay Almond, I think that was his name at that time, I think he was the governor -- wasn't the governor -- anyway, the Byrd Machine was real heavy in Virginia at that time.

I never talked about the burning of the cross.

CARRINGTON: No, you didn't. Tell me about the burning of the cross.

STOKES: On Sunday morning following our meeting with the -- at the First Baptist Church, I got a call from my Aunt Mary. Incidentally, the principal lived with my aunt, Principal [inaudible], lived with my aunt. And the call was to let us know that there was a cross burning on the yard of our R. R. Moton High School, so we went down there. And certainly there was a cross smoldering, you know. And we called the Farmer Herald, asked them to come take a picture. They refused. Richmond Times-Dispatch. It is too far. Richmond News-Leader. It's too far. The Virginia Pilot. It's too far. So the Afro-American newspaper finally came and they took a picture of us standing underneath the cross.

It was a frightening experience because we knew that there was a sign of negativism and what bothered us more than anything else was the fact that we had already decided to go back to school, so that cross did not prompt us to go back to school on that Monday morning. See, the NAACP group members told us at that meeting at the First Baptist Church not to go back to school that Friday, see, Thursday or Friday. I don't remember whether we had one day or two days left in the week, but just to, you know, be patient, give the word that we'll be going back to school on Monday. That's what we did.

And I think the system got a little upset that the students were controlling the actions of what was happening, but we were controlling what was happening at that time. So we said we'd be back in school. Monday morning we were back in school and they were moving along well, except for that cross, you know.

CARRINGTON: What was the role that the black press played in the whole coverage of what was going on?

STOKES: The black press did a very good job. As you know, Richmond was the closest, and they would come down, take pictures and talk with us and things like that. And they ran articles in as to what had happened once -- once they were aware of what we were doing, they very much involved with what we were doing.

CARRINGTON: And how about the white press, what did they do?

STOKES: Most of the data, one would have to decipher as far as the white press was concerned because involved with the scope of the news that they gave there were normally passages of negativism. I'll give you an example. For instance, when we went on strike one newspaper came out and said that the students -- the Negro students at R. R. Moton High School are playing hooky and the principal is not doing a thing about it. They did not know the impact of what we were doing. We knew the impact of what we were doing. We knew it would have lasting effects upon the world. We knew that. We didn't know how soon it would be, but we knew that we were going to do something that would cause people to have -- pay strict attention to the depravation that had taken place as far as our educational system was concerned.

CARRINGTON: You have an opportunity right now to talk to kids who will see this. Why don't you look in the camera and tell them what you think, or advise them on how they can continue that fight for equality in the United States.

STOKES: If I had to say anything to the students for the future, black and white, see, because as far as I'm concerned now, sometimes we have to make this thing color blind, I would say get an education, get an education, whatever you do, get an education and go as far as and as high as you can on the ladder of education, and do not forget God because if it weren't for God and our trust in him, we wouldn't have done what we did. We had to have faith. We have the faith of Abram. We have the faith of Abram. We walked out on faith. If we had not had that faith we wouldn't have made it. And each time that my group would meet, we would pray because we do -- we did at that time, and I still do now, believe in God. And God was our guide, and by doing so, by walking that way, it will also help what's stated in Chronicles and that is it will help with the healing process. The land has to be healed. And it is through faith in God and working together, blacks and whites, that the land will heal.

CARRINGTON: You have mentioned a couple of times meeting in churches. What was the role --

STOKES: I can't hear you.

CARRINGTON: What was the role of the clergy, the black church in what you guys did?

STOKES: I can only speak of one church, and that's Reverend Griffin's church, Reverend Griffin's church served as a focal point -- I'm speaking of him individually, now, not the entire church body, he served as the focal point and an oasis for civil rights. He was a civil rights man all of the way.

Some of the other ministers for some reason or another were Uncle Toms. They were scared to speak out. They were scared to speak for right. They were scared to tell us which direction to go and how to operate in our multiple society that we found ourselves a part. But Reverend Griffin was one who stood tall and long and spoke hard about equality.

CARRINGTON: What's going on with the R. R. Moton School now. Bring us up to date in 2003. What are you doing with the school now?

STOKES: Well, I think right -- I don't know. I'm going to be honest. I don't know. I would rather not say anything than make a mistake. I don't know what they are doing. I know that they are having a rough time as far as monetary -- as far as money is concerned.

CARRINGTON: Is there anything else you want to say that we haven't covered about your experience?

STOKES: I would like to say if it weren't for my -- the family is the foundation for all growth and all concepts. And I give credit to my mother and my father for the experiences that they exposed me to and for my sisters and my brothers for pushing me to another level, because if it weren't for them having faith in God and pushing me forward, I would not have made it, and we would not have been able to make a difference in our society because what we did, not only changed the face of society educationally, but it's also changed it politically, economically and other ways.

CARRINGTON: [question regarding who Dorothy Davis was prompted]

STOKES: The question was asked, who is Dorothy Davis? Dorothy Davis, Dorothy Davis' name became quite prominent in our lawsuit. Mr. Hill will support me on this. What happened is the fact that of the 117 names, and 69 parental -- 117 student names and 69 parental names, they had to select a name, and it just so happened that they selected Dorothy Davis' name. It was at random more than anything else. He did not select the name of any of the students who were members of the caucus group, the nucleus of the group, he just selected a name, and that's the reason it went forward under Davis versus -- initially, Davis versus Prince Edward County, that's how it went out initially. Dorothy Davis was a student whose name is listed as one of the plaintiffs in the case. Dorothy Davis is, you know, from Prince Edward County.

CARRINGTON: Thank you. [Discussion held off tape.]

CARRINGTON: Talk about the importance of education in order to keep the movement going.

STOKES: Okay. The question is, how important is education, what I need to say to students for the future as far as future references are concerned. I feel that all students in the first place need to have trust in God in order to move forward educationally. They have to develop a sound educational base so that they, too, will be able to take their places in history. They need to get as much education as they can.

God has given them a talent. God has given them skills. They need to utilize those skills to the utmost and because if they do not use those skills, then those skills will become dulled. They need to use them to the maximum so that they will be able to help someone else grow. And it has nothing to do with color. It has to do with utilizing what God has given you and pick up someone else along the way and help them to achieve so that they, too, will be able to work at their maximum.

CARRINGTON: Thank you. Okay, stop tape.