

CARRIE ABRAMSON

START OF TAPE ONE, SIDE A

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PAMELA GRUNDY: I thought I would start by saying that this is Pamela Grundy, and I am here interviewing Carrie Culp —.

CARRIE ABRAMSON: Abramson.

PG: Abramson. It is the twenty-first of February, 1999, in Charlotte, North Carolina. And I thought actually I would start before West Charlotte and ask you to tell me a little a bit about your earlier schooling, the different public schools that you went to in Charlotte.

CA: Okay. I started out in preschool, actually, at Central Piedmont Community College, which was actually, I think, probably a somewhat formative experience at a very early age, because it was a very social environment. Lots of little kids all together. My mother was a counselor, I guess, at that point, in the public school system. So I was there until three in the afternoon every day. So I started school at probably age three and kept going. Then I went to Dilworth Elementary, which is just up the street, two blocks from my house to typical Neighborhood School and attended school there for kindergarten and first grade. Then I moved to Elizabeth Elementary which was an open school. And that was my first move into the open school system which I then stayed in all the way through West Charlotte, and attended Elizabeth in second grade until it was actually made into a, what do they call it, a non-open school. [Laughter.] A closed school, but that is not the right word. A traditional school. It became a traditional school. It became Elizabeth Traditional, I believe when I was going into third grade. And then I went to Irwin Open Elementary School where I spent through fifth grade. At which point I moved to Piedmont Middle School, for six through nine, and spent my entire junior high years

there, which was a great experience. It was a very small junior high school which then fed into West Charlotte with people from three or four different junior highs. So that was probably one of the first times I'd really—we'd had a huge new influx of people—because going from Irwin to Piedmont was a pretty normal path. And then going from Piedmont to West Charlotte was normal, but then it became a much larger class. And so the open school at that point then became part of the larger high school and was a separate entity within the high school, although it was not—I don't think it was actually that separate. It was sort of different classes, but you often took classes with people who were not in the open school system per se. So are there other things that you would like to know?

PG: Well tell me about the open school program, what that was.

CA: Okay.

PG: Just what that was about.

CA: Okay. Well, the philosophy, as it was explained to me as a child of five, or however old I was at the time, the philosophy behind it was to allow children to move more at their own pace. To not have set school lesson plans that everybody did the same thing on the same day. Which was, for me, a really great experience, because I was a pretty naturally curious child and spent a lot of time reading anyway. So I spent most of my time in elementary school reading various books. But it was designed to let children move at their own pace, explore different areas, spend more time on the things they enjoyed doing, but while still meeting sort of the basic requirements in math. What it translated into for me, especially in elementary school, was classes based around—mom would know the word for this—like little centers. So you would go to the math center

and you would do math. And everybody would have their own card that said, okay, right now you are working on multiplication, and so you should do these different activities to work on your multiplication. And then there would be a reading center, and you would be at certain places in your reading, and you would focus on certain things. So it was a little more individualized, a little more focused on moving at your own pace, doing the things that you wanted to do. Which worked well for kids who were very motivated, and not so well for kids who weren't. And so I think that ultimately I firmly believe in what the school was trying to do, but I think for some kids it was a struggle. I guess it allowed the teachers in some senses to pay more attention to those kids than they did to the kids who were sort of moving on their own. But it was a great experience for me. A very free experience. A very exciting experience. A lot of art and gym and fun things that were sort of stretching and learning.

PG: When your parents explained this to you did they give you a choice? Did they ask you whether you wanted to do this, or did they say, "We're going to do this in this kind of school?"

CA: I don't really remember. I think that, I think I wanted to. I often initiated as a child playing sports or playing piano. I think I may have even initiated wanting to go because I had friends who were going. I think that the group of people my parents hung out with—their children, they were all into this kind of thing of, you know, letting their children study things they were excited about. But I don't remember if it was a choice. But I don't ever remember feeling like, "Oh, I have to go." I remember it being something that was sort of exciting and new. And there were a lot of kids from the

neighborhood who went, so I was no longer going to the school that was two blocks away, but there were still lots of other kids going.

PG: Were you living here in this house?

CA: Um-hum. Since age two. Or even one, maybe. We've lived in this same house. Yes, so there was no sort of geographic location change other than the school change.

PG: Did you have a sense that there was a kind of parent who sent their children to the open school?

CA: Yes. I mean, I think I grew up with that impression and—oh gosh—it will say a lot about my parents. I'm glad that they are not here. [Laughter.] But I think in my mind it was always people who were sort of more liberal, more politically liberal as well as sort of socially liberal in the sense of wanting kids to have a more diverse experience. One of the issues with the neighborhood school system which gets back to the segregation issue was that they were not very integrated, even when you had a school like Dilworth which I think actually did have a pretty relatively even mix of both black and white students. There were not always—they didn't feel integrated a lot. And so the open, optional school system—it was called both—gave a sense of you chose to be there. It was something you chose to do. So, therefore, you were all on even footing and you had all come from different places all over. And it removed some of the "I live a block away. You live ten blocks away. You get bussed. I don't get bussed, I walk." Because basically everybody was bussed. So that was sort of different. And the parents—it seemed to me that the parents had to have sort of a belief, as they do today, to step outside of the system that you are presented with you have to have some belief that there

is something better than that offers to your child. And so they were parents who were very engaged in their children's education and really paid a lot of attention to what they thought the right things were. And both my parents were educators, so it probably had something to do with that. And a lot of the kids who were there, their parents were educators. A lot of them were lawyers, people who had a pretty high level of education. And so I think—that was sort of the image I had in my mind.

PG: Was that true for the black children as well as the white children, was that the same image?

CA: Some portion, but not as many, especially once we got to Piedmont, because there was more of a neighborhood element there and we were located very close to Piedmont Courts which is one of the large housing projects. So it was not as much, it was not as clear to me there as it felt like it was at Irwin, although I was very young at the point, and so it is quite possible that it wasn't that way. But there were always a lot of, a good number of black children in my class who had come from probably relatively even socio-economic background, similar to the one I came from. And in some cases, actually, probably higher income than the one I came from. When I think back to the people I actually knew all the way through to high school. By that point I could tell more. Their parents actually made more than my parents did. But it was not necessarily as clear to me in elementary and junior high.

PG: So at this time in elementary and junior high did you feel integrated? Did the school feel integrated?

CA: It did to me. And I definitely would not have noticed at that age. I mean, that changed when I got to high school. But I definitely would not have noticed at that

age as much that it wasn't, but it did feel very integrated to me. I played a lot of sports, especially in junior high. And those teams were very integrated. I also was involved in theater and drama, and those classes were very integrated. When I think back on it, the one area, and this continued through high school that did not feel as integrated were advanced academic classes. At the point when you started to differentiate advanced from non-advanced, there definitely seemed to be a break. And there were always black children, or African-American children in those classes, but it was definitely a far lower proportion than they were represented in the school. And I don't think I ever recognized that until I got to high school. And I'm not even sure, although I would like to think I was much more aware at that point, I'm not even sure I even questioned it when I was in high school. I think it was probably when I got to college that I looked back and I said, "That was not as integrated an experience as I might have wanted or thought it was." And I'm not sure I realized that at the time, that I was as sort of politically aware as I might have been.

PG: Were you aware when you were, again, really talking about your ( ), the early experience, were you aware that this was an unusual thing, or did it seem like an unusual thing that you went to an integrated school where black and white students did the same kinds of things?

CA: No. It seemed completely normal. Even, I mean, at all levels. From a very early age it never occurred to me. I mean, I understood what segregation was, and especially by high school I understood a lot about what it had been, and I knew a lot of people who had been involved in the desegregation in the schools, like my father, and Maggie Ray, and so I had a real awareness of what that had been, and what was different.



But it never—it just felt normal to me. It never would have occurred to me that there wouldn't be Asian students, or black students, or anybody from a different race in my class. Because from kindergarten on, they were.

PG: Was that the same with outside activities outside the school, in your neighborhood? Did you do things outside the school?

CA: A ton of things. Yeah. No. It wasn't. I did a lot of different things. I'll try to categorize. Outside of school I was involved in a variety of different activities. From a very early age I was involved in a lot of stuff at my church. Completely not integrated at all. Probably, at various times, there was a black child there, but never consistently. And, in fact, when we adopted two Ethiopian children when I was in junior high and high school, they were probably the only two black children in our church. Soccer, I played soccer a lot from a very young age. Very few. There were some children who were involved and it was a community league, so it wasn't private, per se, it was public, in the sense that basically everybody was welcome. But it was not particularly integrated. It was sort of centered in the Dilworth neighborhood, so there were not a lot of black children who played. I played basketball, at church, and that was not integrated at all. Other community activities I did would be things like community service activities. Children's theater which was more integrated, but in a similar sense to the way the open schools were. People from all over Charlotte came to take classes there, but it still was not, it was not on an even level. Probably not at the representative level of the city in terms of mixture of black and white. But there were always a few. But it probably—most of my activities probably reflected the level of integration in Dilworth, I mean, since that was where I was spending most of my time. My church was located here. My

soccer league was here. Everything was basically sort of in this neighborhood. And, you know, at the time there were a handful of black families who all lived within about two blocks of us, in the sort of twelve block radius that probably was my neighborhood and where I grew up at the time.

PG: Again, were you aware of this disparity between your school experience and your other experiences? Or, is that also something that --?

CA: I don't think I was. I mean, I look back at it now, and I am very aware. But at the time I don't think I was. I mean, I played with children in my neighborhood. The Watts lived down the street and had kids right around our age. The Ricks lived down the street and had kids our age. And so I played with kids who were black in my neighborhood. But it never occurred to me that my soccer team was all white, which I think it was, most years. I think I just wasn't—it's funny, because it was such a expectation for me that everybody was the same. I mean, I definitely grew up with this impression that everybody's the same. That when I sort of eventually found out that everybody wasn't the same, or wasn't treated the same by other people, that—it was really surprising to me. So I think as a child I was very naïve about the sort of reality of that. I had grown up in a home that tried to treat everybody very similarly. And so it just didn't occur to me to notice those differences.

PG: When and how did you discover that everybody wasn't treated the same.

CA: (Chuckle.) That's a great question. (Pause.) I don't know. I don't have an experience in my mind that says, "This is when it happened." Which—my mom and I were talking about this earlier—I don't think I remember negatives. [Laughter.] I don't think I remember negative things. I still learn it every day. Like I still—the most vivid



experience I remember, and this is because it's probably more recent—was I took a class at Stanford Business School where we had small discussion groups and we talked about this in discussion group. And it was shocking to me to learn how differently a woman who was a black professional felt like she was treated from me, as a white woman professional. So I don't remember when I first realized that.

PG: Do you have a sense of about how old you might have been?

CA: Probably high school. I think, I'm sure it happened in high school. High school was the first time that it felt that people were more separate. Although we were integrated and although West Charlotte—and I don't even know the proportions, white to black—but it felt pretty even. It didn't feel like one was much more dominant than the other. I didn't hang out with as many—and part of this is I didn't play as many integrated sports. I played only soccer in high school. And I didn't play basketball, which when I was in junior high had been a big integrator for me. Because the women on the team were both black and white and pretty even proportions. So I think it happened in high school. I think that's when I first started to realize that most of the black people were friends, and they were not necessarily friends with most of the white people. And that there was a group, that I aspired to be part of, and I think at times I probably was and at times probably wasn't, that was more integrated. But there was sort of this big mass on the black side and this big mass on the white side, and then there was this little group in the middle that sort of branched over that. And it happened at different points through sports. Though some classes, electives, that people took that they had in common. But this disparity, in terms of sort of, honor classes and non-honor classes became more and more distinct. And the honor classes tended to be sort of 90

percent white. And so, I think at that point, that's when I started to realize it wasn't as integrated. And I don't know that I knew what it was that caused that. I know I attribute a lot of it to economic disparity, but at the time I don't think I saw what was causing it. But I think I noticed it.

PG: And you said that you aspired to be part of this small, little group. How did one go about becoming part of that group, or was that something you did consciously, or did it just happen?

CA: I think for some people it probably did happen consciously. I think for me it was less conscious. I grew up, you know, a block away from Brian Watt, who Brian was, who is Mel Watt's son. And I don't know if that names has come up. Brian was probably a year older than I was, or two years. And so I was friends with him, and I'd known him since I was little. And so I had sort of a friend who was black already. And then I had a group of friends from junior high who I'd played basketball with in junior high school, and they were black. And so I had these connections. And I think this is how it happened for most people. You had these connections with people, either from before, from junior high school, or from playing basketball in high school. Or, something like that, that created more of a connection. And so, and then there were kids, probably both white kids and black kids, although I don't know as well about the other junior highs, but I felt like there were white kids who came in who didn't have any black friends from their junior high school. And I don't know if that's—I don't know what they were like, so I don't know if there were no black kids at their junior high school or if it was just not very integrated and that maybe Piedmont was different. But there were kids in that middle group from AG and from Piedmont. There were a lot from Piedmont

and some of that may have just been an effect of the environment there that carried over to high school. But I felt as I got more distant, like in tenth grade, I was probably more integrated into that group. And as I got more distant from it, from junior high and moved toward senior year, I probably, I still had a group of friends who were black, but I think I was probably less integrated into that than I had been. And I think part of that was academic, in that by my senior year I was in basically honors classes, but also I was totally wrapped up in soccer. I was playing soccer all the time which was not very integrated. And I was doing a bunch of stuff after school, so I wasn't probably seeking it as much as I had when I was young.

PG: Well, that's interesting, the idea that you need to have something in common that you're doing at school. Some kind of activity or something like that. I hadn't thought about that.

CA: I think it just helped create context. I mean it helped—when you were walking past someone in the hall. That was where it was the most visible to me. As that, when people congregated at lunch and in the hall, it was almost always sort of always divided racially. And what caused people to break over that and to go over to cross that boundary was that so-and-so played on their basketball team with me. And you walked up and said, "So, you know, are you going to be at practice?" Or so-and-so is in my Spanish class. And so I would walk up to here and say, "Did you do the homework." Or, but it was having a common, something in common at school. Because I didn't interact that much with people outside of school from that environment. So I think it was important.

PG: Who were your good friends in school?

CA: When I was in high school, when I first, probably in tenth grade, my closest friends were definitely people from Piedmont. They were probably, during my first year, it was probably Kate Merrill, Betsy Ray, Joy Berry, mainly women. Huh, that's interesting. [Laughter.] ( ) guys a chance. Let's see. Who else was I close to? Those are the ones, those are actually the ones that carried throughout high school. That's why I probably remember them better. People from the soccer team, like Cassandra Smith or Netha Valder, or, who else? Betsy was also on the soccer team. Can I cheat and look at my yearbook? [Laughter.]

PG: ( )

CA: Yeah, because it definitely changed over time. Oh, Kim Kim Foster would have been a really good friend. She was a friend from junior high. This is my tenth grade yearbook so it is more clear to me. Andy Baxter would have been a friend both from high school. Patricia Addis was a really good friend who I met who was from AG. So we met for the first time in tenth grade. And she became a really good friend and is still a good friend. But most of those, it's funny, because they are actually people I went—the first ones—were people I went through elementary, junior high and high school with, and I'm still in contact with most of them today. Um, let's see. Andy Sumlin. Who else? I said Kate Merrill. Victoria Phelps, who I played soccer with. That's probably a good start. Over time I became closer friends with more people who I had not known. Jay Ferguson was somebody I knew pretty well, but probably was never really close friends with. He and Andy Baxter were good friends. And Andy and I were probably closer. But I got to know more people from other schools, and eventually like roomed in college with Donna Duncan who went to AG, was a good friend of Trish

Addis's. So people like that. And then some went on to Carolina with me and so I knew them well. Andy Semlin was one of those who I knew well afterwards. So it was a mixture of people, but a lot whom I had gone to school with from a very young age.

PG: Well, thinking about these earlier schools, did you always know you were going to go to West Charlotte High School? Was that something that was just—?

CA: Un-huh.

PG: When did you become aware that West Charlotte High School existed.

CA: In junior high. When I was in junior—at Piedmont. Because most people from Piedmont went to West Charlotte. Most people in my neighborhood and at my church went to Myers Park. And so I knew that there was a choice there, and that there was the opportunity to go to Myers Park if that was something I wanted to do. And I don't I ever really seriously considered it. I mean, I think that I just, most people I knew were going to West Charlotte, and I knew a lot of people who were at West Charlotte already, and so I just naturally assumed that I would go there. There was also, I also had an affinity for the open school. There was something positive in that, to me, that did make me different. Or us different. It would have been us at Piedmont. We were different because we were in the open school. And that was a very positive connotation in my mind about what that meant for us as a group. And we were a group. I mean, there was a lot of pride at Piedmont, and we were all proud of the things that we did. We had things that were different than other schools, in terms of the things we could do and the types of classes we had. And so I think we felt like we were different. And so the concept—a lot of people did, I mean a lot of people did leave and go to other schools. Not a lot, that would be a slight exaggeration. Not very many, but a few did. But I think

the majority went on to West Charlotte. And I think—I don't know what that was. For me, I could have gone to Myers Park, which was also a very good high school. For some probably their home school was probably not as good a choice, or didn't offer as much in terms of—I mean, West Charlotte was a highly ranked school in Charlotte. Or considered one of the better high schools in Charlotte, I think, at the time.

PG: Did you continue to have that feeling of being special at West Charlotte?

CA: Hum, not really. I don't think so. The open school wasn't as separate there. So I think by the time I got to West Charlotte, I mean, there was a lot of pride in West Charlotte as well, in the school, but not in the open program. I guess that would be the difference. I didn't feel the pride as much around being in the open program as being at West Charlotte, which was considered a very good school. We were great at athletics, you know. I mean we had a very—we had strong programs in debate, and in theater, and won lots of prizes for those, and people really respected them. So I think there was a lot of pride around that. I really liked being in the open program. And there were probably times during my tenth grade year where that was more of a, "What is the open program" question. You know, I mean, people would ask that. "Why do you take so-and-so for biology. Why do you take Maggie Ray for biology, instead of the class I'm taking." And I think, actually, probably at times the open school classes seemed better. Especially in the early years, because by the time I was a senior—yeah, a senior in high school, I guess—I didn't, I don't think I took that many open classes. I mean, we became pretty integrated. But at first you did. And Maggie Ray was one of those, biology. And so there were teachers who were—I mean there were all these rumors, right, about, you could sit on your desk in Maggie Ray's class. You could do these things that you weren't



allowed to do other places. And so the open school system, the open program was more liberal. And you could. You could do things you couldn't do other places in the school. And I think I had a perception and part of this is probably, is also probably because of my parents and from knowing Maggie through them, but I had an impression that the open school teachers were more fun. I mean, were more open and were more excited about what they were teaching. And I have no idea of that is true. [Laughter.] But it seemed that way.

PG: It sounds like you had fun, then, in classes.

CA: Oh, yeah. I definitely think so. But I mean, I had fun in most of my classes, and not all of them were open. I mean I had wonderful teachers who were non-open, but just traditional teachers. And I think it was a pretty strong academic environment, at least through my experience at West Charlotte in general, across all the different classes.

PG: How much of a sense when you were there did you have of West Charlotte's African-American history, of the history of West Charlotte as a black high school, if any?

CA: I definitely had some, and I'm trying to separate on my mind what I knew because of my father had been, had gone to teach there as part of the integration, so he had told me about it. But I'm trying to separate that, I mean, I think the times that we saw it the most were at homecoming and things like that. Because there was such a swell of support at homecoming from all of the community around, and so many people—and it was much more of an African American event in terms of the proportion of people who were there. And most of the older people who were there, who looked older, who were adults were African American. And so there was a very strong—you noticed it a lot at homecoming, at the homecoming football game, and things like that. That the

community was really there, and the community was definitely more African American than it was white. Although it never felt like we were outnumbered, or that in some way we weren't welcome. I mean it was always a very, it was a very strong heritage for the school, and it didn't feel like there was any animosity toward the fact that it wasn't the way it had been, in any sense. But I didn't get a lot of sense of the history of the school other than probably during those homecoming, during that homecoming sort of time. Although I wasn't a big football game person, so it's quite possible that, in fact, that happened on a regular basis at the football games, which had always been a real strength of the high school for a long period of time. I mean, we'd always had such a strong program. So, it's possible that there was more there than I saw on a regular basis, but I tended to notice it around the homecoming time.

PG: What kinds of connections, if any, did you feel to these people who, from the neighborhood, who came to these games that had been at the school at a different time. Did you see yourself as being connected to them in some way?

CA: By the school, but not, I mean, it was a sense of pride in the school, I think. And, I mean, probably because I only ever saw it in that context. I mean, it was always around the excitement around the game and the excitement around—and everybody shared that, and everybody smiled at each other, and everybody was excited, and we all cheered together, and we all said the same cheers, and they knew all the same cheers we knew, and it was—so I mean, yeah. I mean, I do think I did feel a sense of connection in the sense that I felt like they were as much a part of that community as I was, even though I was a current student, and I was there, and I knew all the players on the football team. I felt like they were—I was proud of the fact that people still came to the football

games. Here I am, an alum, who never goes. But I live in New York. That's my excuse. But I was proud of the fact that people still came, and still supported the school and the team, and were so involved in what went on there.

PG: Did you have any connections at all, outside of this ( ) neighborhood around the school? Did you ever go out into the neighborhood, or did you spend your spare time—?

CA: No, I don't think so. I mean, around in the afternoons between getting out of school and going to soccer practice, things like that. We would go to the convenience store, or we would go to the McDonald's, or something like that. But not, we didn't do a lot, when I think back on it, I don't think we did a lot of sort of neighborhood outreach type projects as a school, in terms of, I'm not sure what they would be, but you know, doing car washes in the community or doing volunteer work. I don't think we did a lot of that. We did do fund raising, but I can't remember if we did community specific fund raising. Because there was a pretty strong, you know, value system in sort of giving back to the community and doing community service projects through the different organizations on campus, the clubs. But I can't remember if we ever did a community based project. Not that I remember. Which could be a fault of my memory. [Laughter.] I hate to say that, but—.

PG: ( ). Well, your father, when I was talking to him, described some measures that were taken at the school, particularly, I think, student elections, to ensure that there was some kind of balance of black and white representation.

CA: Um-hum.

PG: I gather, perhaps, in a variety of aspects of the school. How aware were you of those kinds of things?

CA: Absolutely aware. People definitely knew. It was just accepted. And I don't think, I don't recall there being animosity about it. Like, I don't recall people feeling angry or, "That's not fair." I think it was more that it is fair, because we are fifty-fifty in terms of the population, more or less. And it is fair for everybody to be represented. I don't think it was perceived as negative. I mean—I think—the one I remember the best, I think it was homecoming queen alternated every year, I think. And I don't know that that was actually a rule, but I think everybody thought it was a rule. So, I don't actually know if that was true, but, and then we had Carousel Princess, or Carousel Queen, or something. And those alternated too, I think. One year the Carousel Queen was white, then the homecoming queen would be black, or visa-versa. And I have no idea if that was ever actually true, because I never tested it. But I think that there was always a perception that that was somehow controlled.

PG: Were there other aspects of school life that you remember that being—?

CA: I remember noticing that. Only in poli—only in like the representa—the councils. The student councils, and things like. Student activities. But those would be the only ones. And, I guess, the elected positions. I don't know if in other clubs that was true. I never had any perception that it was. A lot of the more social clubs were less integrated. And I don't actually know if there was, I mean they were somewhat integrated. Like I was in Ambassadors, and there were African-American women in Ambassadors. But I don't know if there was pressure on the club to do that. I don't

know that there were—I was never involved in really thinking about that. I was involved in a lot of the clubs, but I don't remember there being pressure in a specific way.

PG: Your father seems to have been arguing against it, sometimes.

CA: Oh really?

PG: I don't know if that's—he, he—.

CA: I don't remember that. Did he give a specific example?

PG: I think he said, he was talking about the student elections, and I gather that much of the attempt to balance the student elections was to actually give white students representation.

CA: It might have been, yeah.

PG: And that he seemed to recall that you thought that white students should be able—they couldn't get black student's votes, then that was just too bad.

CA: Oh. That's funny. I don't really remember that. I mean, that's interesting. [Pause.] I don't know. That's really interesting. I don't remember arguing with him about that. I'm trying to think if I actually still believe that. I can believe I believed it at the time. Because I had a very strong sense, of sort of politics. If you can't get the votes, you can't win. You know. That's just the way it is. But I don't remember arguing with him about that. That's funny. That he remembers that.

PG: Did you have discussions at home about West Charlotte, and about integration, and about those kinds of issues?

CA: Yeah. Yeah. We definitely did. Um—go ahead.

PG: What did you talk about?

CA: We talked about it in probably a pretty broad context. I mean, we definitely talked about the history of West Charlotte, and how West Charlotte was integrated. And Dad would talk about that experience and what that was like. And we would talk about what it was like at West Charlotte today, in terms of whether it felt integrated, and how it often didn't to me. I mean I often didn't feel like it was integrated. Although it was interesting, because at my tenth, my ten-year high school reunion which we had last August, it felt incredibly integrated. And I don't know, I mean, I felt like I knew all the black people who were there. And it was interesting because I don't know if just the ones I didn't know didn't come, or if I knew more than I thought I did. Which is possible. But we would talk about it in that context as well.

PG: Was there ever a discussion at the school itself, of people attempting to, on a maybe a more institutional level break down some race barriers, or cross some of those lines?

CA: There absolutely were, informally. I can't remember if there was anything that was formal. But I remember being on the student, the sophomore class council, which was my only elected political position in high school. But, and having discussions around planning events, and planning parties, and things like that for the class, that we wanted to focus on getting people to know each other. And part of it was, was it was our first year in high school. And we were all coming from different backgrounds, so we didn't all know each other. But, I remember in that context there being a lot of discussions around how can we get people to interact, and how can we sort of break down some of those barriers. Because there was, if I remember correctly, there was equal representation on the class council. And, and that was not always comfortable. It



wasn't always comfortable, for me anyway, to acknowledge the fact that there was tension there in terms of everybody not knowing—admitting that you didn't all know each other and that there was separation there. So I wasn't always comfortable with that. But it was a reality. I think it was something people understood was true, and did try very hard to create opportunities for people to get to know each other and to remove some of those barriers. And there were a lot of great activities like that. Like we had a, I can't remember what it was called, but it was like a big festival, basically, where all the different clubs sponsored booths and everybody would go. I want to call it Spring Fling, but I don't think that's right. I think that may have been junior high. But all the clubs sponsored booths. And everybody—it was around homecoming. And everybody would go. And you would buy things. Like some of it was candy related, and some balloons, and like just sort of random things by each club came up with their own thing that they wanted to do. And so it was like a big festival. And everything was designed around everybody being very integrated and not having all of the African-American clubs on one side and the white clubs on the other. But having everybody be very mixed in together, so that you would have more interaction. And I think that's one of the times where it really did happen. There's a picture that's on the front of this book, actually, it was just when I picked this up earlier it reminded me of it. That was taken at that sort of whatever it is, homecoming festival day, or whatever. And it's a pretty integrated picture. And I think that that, that event was one of the ones that really—and like I said, it was focused around the sporting event, but it really gave people an opportunity to interact, probably more than always, than what happened necessarily otherwise. And, to be honest, there was separation not only racially, but economically. I mean, there were whole groups,

there were, you know, whole groups of whites who didn't interact either. Because they were in different classes, or they were in, had different interests. And so the classes that they took in terms of their electives, and things like that, were more focused on different areas. And so there were people who we never interacted with in that way as well. So. It wasn't just racial, I guess.

PG: Well, does that, how am I going to ask it? Was it value—what did it, what do you think did it mean then to have a high school where there were all those groups of people even if they didn't interact?

CA: I think it, I mean, I think it's incredibly valuable, because I think it is just so much more representative of the world. I mean, especially as someone now who has now, you know, moved to New York City which is, you know, the polyglot culture of the U.S. It was so critical to me. It's so funny, because at this point in my life I often feel that I don't know enough about African Americans and how they feel about their experience, especially based on this experience in graduate school. But, it blows my mind when I meet people who didn't grow up with African Americans at all in their lives. And, so, in a sense, they don't even have any idea that they don't know anything. Like that it's even different. And I meet people like that all the time, who just don't have any sense that there's a different experience out there. I, at least, know enough that there's a different experience, but I still don't feel like I understand what it is and how to alleviate that. And so I think that that's, I mean I think having, at least having been exposed to knowing people from different races is critical. And was critical in my high school experience in terms of getting used to being around each other. I mean, I meet people who went to school in the North East, to private schools, that had absolutely no

one of any other race except white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant. And that blows my mind. That they just don't really have a context for, you know, what the rest of the world deals with on a day-to-day basis. And I have moved into an environment that is pretty not integrated. I mean, I went to a graduate school where there were probably twenty percent minorities, thirty percent women, you know, so that leaves a lot of people who are not a minority or a woman. [Laughter.] But, so, you know, it's a very different, a very different world, and sort of the professional world out there. And so I think people can still survive without having understood what it was like to be, to interact with other races. But I think that's becoming less and less true over time, and professional organizations and schools are recognizing that there is more to it than being white and being male. And that it is important for, it's important to have diversity for the sake of diversity. Because, in order to, I mean, the company I work for really firmly believes that you need to hire people, that we need to hire the smartest people in the world. And that the smartest people in the world are not all the same. And don't all come from the same background. And so at times you have to actually go look in new places to find the other smart people who haven't come through the normal channels of Harvard or the Ivy League schools, because you're not getting a full picture of what it looks like. And that's been really interesting for me. But I feel like, coming from a background that was at least integrated through school, I've always felt comfortable interacting with people, and treating people as equals, and feeling comfortable with, you know, their abilities that I might not have felt otherwise.

PG: Even if in high school you didn't necessarily have good friends who were—.

CA: Yeah, I mean, I did have a few. There were a lot more who I wasn't good friends with. I had a few, you know, I had a few, I probably had three out of my ten closest friends in high school were probably black. But it was definitely, yeah, I think it was important. It's funny, because if I didn't interact with the majority, why was it still important? And I think, in a way, it was important, because even if I didn't interact with the guys who were on the football team, they did really amazing things. And won huge games and impacted my life, even though I didn't know them personally very well. And they contributed to the sense of pride in the school as much, or more than, probably most of the whites did, on the soccer team. Don't quote me on that. The soccer team will kill me. But I just think that, I think that even though we weren't interacting on a day-to-day basis, we were seeing each other's accomplishments. And we were seeing what each other could do.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

PG: You were saying—

CA: It was important because we were able to see each other's accomplishments. And even though we weren't really close, and maybe we didn't interact in a class environment, and so maybe it wasn't academic accomplishments as much, we were absolutely able to see, you know, other accomplishments in other areas, whether it was in the theater, or whether it was in sports. Or maybe it was in debate. But being able to see other people succeed, from different races, was really important. And even if we aren't as good at all being integrated as we would like, having that experience was pretty critical, I think, in shaping not only my sort of long-term view, but probably those of my

classmates as well. We were proud, I mean we were proud of the fact. When I got to college I was proud of the fact that I had gone to a high school where there were a lot of African Americans. I was proud of the fact that I had been in that environment. Because I'd met so many people who'd not been. I mean, who'd come from the eastern part of North Carolina and had not gone to school with people who were black, at all. And that, you know, to them it was completely alien, the concept of racial difference, was completely alien. Because they just didn't know anybody of a different race. They didn't understand that there was a difference. And there was a lot of racism. I mean, like overt—mainly language. But around racism. Not in high school, but when I got to college. And so having come from an environment that was integrated really helped me. It didn't help me necessarily deal with it as well when someone else would say something that was a racial slur, but it made me feel confident in that I disagreed with them and I knew why. And I had support for that, that "No, I didn't believe that all people of a different color were dumb." Because I knew people of a different color who were really, really smart, and were probably smarter than I had been, you know, and had accomplished things I wasn't able to accomplish. And that was important, at least for my own inner sense of knowing that I was right, essentially. So.

PG: How was your experience at UNC, would you characterize that as an integrated experience?

CA: No. I think it had a lot of the same pitfalls that West Charlotte did, but I think we were, I think UNC was a lot more aware of them. While I was at Carolina one of the big issues on the campus was trying to establish a Black Cultural Center. And, so there was a lot of open acknowledgment of, especially by the American Americans on

campus, but, in fact, I don't even know if it's called an African-American Cultural Center now. I don't think it is. I think it's still called a Black Cultural Center. But there was not an acknowledgment necessarily by the whites as much, but there was an acknowledgment by the blacks on campus that they needed a stronger sense of community at Carolina, because there wasn't, there really wasn't one. There wasn't a place for the blacks to congregate and to, and, to be honest, for whites to learn about blacks. I mean, one of the big arguments for having a Black Cultural Center was, "There are a lot of people who come here who don't know anything about blacks." And have a lot of other negative stereotypes, or just don't know anything. Don't know enough to know there is a difference. And that need something to create a forum for discussing race and discussing those issues. And so there was a lot more discussion there, although I felt like in some senses it was integrated, again, through some of the same ways of activities, and sports, and living conditions were more integrated. But there tended to be, over time, when you first started as a freshman living conditions were very integrated. But over time, people tended to move to where there were more people like them. And, I think, both probably, probably both blacks and whites were guilty of that. But that was a big difference. There was at least an acknowledgment of the fact that we were separate. And I think there may have been at West Charlotte, but I don't remember it as well. But I remember it clearly in college.

PG: Well, you might consider at West Charlotte there wouldn't necessarily have been a need for a Black Cultural Center.



CA: Well, it was a much bigger portion of the population. Right, than at Carolina, where it was—I don't even know what it was, but it was low. It was low overall number.

PG: Then, in a sense, I guess West Charlotte was a black cultural institution.

CA: Right. And it was in a black community, as well, which, so it was sort of a black community cultural center, in a sense. But it's interesting, because you're right in that there was much more of a black culture there. And there was just a much larger—part of it I just think was purely numbers. I mean, I think, the blacks at Carolina didn't feel as comfortable because they were such a noticeable minority, and so they felt the need to feel a stronger sense of community because there were so many fewer of them and they felt like in a way they were getting overwhelmed by everything else. Whereas at West Charlotte probably there was a large enough sense of community that you didn't necessarily feel like you were being, I don't know this, but that you weren't being as subsumed by the white culture as probably was happening at Carolina. So that was very different.

PG: How did you, since you had number of friends who went to schools other than West Charlotte, what was their approach to the school? How was West Charlotte viewed outside?

CA: Oh, I don't know.

PG: If you don't know, that's fine.

CA: Yeah. I think, this is sort of funny, but I mean, I knew a lot of kids who went to public schools, but I also knew a bunch who went to private. I think there were probably a couple of different impressions. The ones I think were strongest was probably

it was just another high school. Which West Charlotte would never have acknowledged. I mean, that was not true of us. We were not just another high school. And, well, I think there probably was—I don't know this and I hate to speculate because it's probably, I may be creating things that aren't there.

PG: If you don't want to speculate you don't have to. Don't feel bad.

CA: I won't speculate.

PG: Okay. ( ).

CA: Because I don't think I did, I mean, I think people who were at Myers Park felt like it was another high school. You know, it was just West Charlotte was a different high school and some of the kids from AG went to West Charlotte and some went to—I mean because it was a zoned school for a lot of people, it was zoned for a lot of the kids from AG to go to West Charlotte. It was just another high school, I think. That was my impression of it. With a really great football team and a really great basketball team. [Laughter.] But I didn't have a sense that there was a categorical impression from other places.

PG: Well, these are thoughts. I think I've asked most of the questions that I had. Are there any things that were important about your experience at West Charlotte or your experience with school in general that we haven't talked about?

CA: [Long pause.] Not really, other than when I look back on my school, one of the things that I'm really interested in long term is education, and improving the public education system. I feel like I have benefited from it in so many ways, that many others have not had the same opportunity to do. Not based on race at all, but just based on the quality of their own school system. And I think that my education in Charlotte and the

schools that I went to, particularly the open schools, but also the fact that we had racial integration has really, really shaped sort of my belief in the possibility of public schools and what public schools can do and are capable of. And when I look at things like charter schools and a lot of the new movements that are coming out in education, I'm very supportive of anything that improves the quality of education because I think that's critical. But I also have a really strong belief that they need to be integrated and that you need to have diverse cultural backgrounds as well as diverse racial backgrounds in order to have a truly broad educational experience. That no matter how good you are academically, if you don't give children that opportunity they will not grow up to be as productive and as focused on sort of the common good as they would in a more integrated community. And that that's critical to success in the U.S. public school system. So, having come from this background I think has been critical in thinking what I believe and what I see happening and what I notice and my political views and all of those things. And I wouldn't trade it for anything. I know a lot of people now, I know many more people now who have gone through very different educational systems, either private schools or the New York Public School System, or you know, completely different backgrounds. And I feel like my education was very, very strong in comparison. But what really sets it apart and makes it better was having a much more integrated experience. And that the people who have not had that opportunity do not have the same openness and sort of respect, I think, that is required to operate in the international world that we live in today, which I think is critical. So.

PG: You mention the sort of developing and understanding of the common good. How did your school experience help you to do that, relate to that?

CA: We had a lot of choices, and I think this must have, might have been something that was more open school system versus traditional. I don't know that for sure. It is one of the limits of only coming through one school system. You want to be able to go back and do it again and see what the difference is. But we had a lot of choice in what we could do as a class or as a group. What play to put on or what game to play. And there were a lot of values that were communicated from teachers in that environment about what people, you know, what the right answer is and what the right answer should look like. And that the right answer should be fair, and the right answer should include everybody, and nobody should be left out. And very communal, you know, sort of beliefs. And all the way through high school there was a big focus on, that there was—although there was an acknowledgment, probably, at least in my mind, that there were difference communities, or different cliques, or different groups within the high school, there was an acknowledgment that everybody needed to be included, and that everyone's viewpoint was as important as important as anyone else's. And that it was really important to have representation from different voices as well as listen—just listening to different voices. That that was important and that was expected, and it wasn't acceptable not to.

PG: Can you give specific examples?

CA: I knew as soon as I said that that you would ask for—um—. [Long pause.] I can't. I can't think of one.

PG: Would that be related to something like the prom, or something like that?

CA: Yeah. Everything, everything was planned by committee. I mean, that was one of the things. Right? So you had these committees that represented the class—the

sophomore class council, the junior class council. Then you had the overall sort of student body president. I'm trying to think of a specific example, and I can't. But I remember a heated discussion around the sophomore class council about, and it was a social event of some sort, it was either a dance, or something like that. I don't think it was homecoming, because we wouldn't have planned that, but, um, not alone. But I remember there just being a heated debate about the, you know, some portion of the population would just not come if you did that, and that that was not an acceptable answer. And that it was—and everybody on the committee, although we disagreed about what we wanted to do, acknowledged that that was not an acceptable answer, and that finding—and that you needed to find something in the middle and some common ground. And I don't think it actually always happened that way. I mean, I think we would plan events and then some group would show up and some group wouldn't. But there was an acknowledgment that you should try. And that, you know, when you knew it would cause people to be separated, that that was not acceptable. And that when you had the opportunity to encourage it, you should. But I can't remember a specific instance.

PG: Was there a particular band, perhaps, that people talked about?

CA: No. I can't, I can't remember. I'm sorry.

PG: That's all right. Well, I think that should—unless you think of anything?

CA: I don't think so.

PG: Anything else?

CA: I don't think so.

PG: Thank you so much.

CA: Oh, you're welcome.

PG: This has been, this has been wonderful.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B.

END OF INTERVIEW