

INTERVIEW

with

JULIUS WALKER

Principal  
Plymouth High School

January 20, 1991

by Goldie F. Wells

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Goldie: I'm in the home of Mr. Julius Walker, Roper, North Carolina. He is the principal of Plymouth High School and the date is January 20, 1991. Mr. Walker, I would like for you to introduce yourself and say that you know that this is being recorded.

Mr. Walker: I am Julius Walker, Jr., principal of Plymouth High School. I am aware that this interview is being recorded.

Goldie: I appreciate you answering my questionnaire. I am doing some research. I want to compare the role perceptions of Black high school principals. I am looking at principals who were principals in 1964, and principals in 1989. Back in 1964, there were over 200 Black high school principals and in 1989, when I wrote to the State Department and asked for a list of minorities they sent me a list of 41 and I found that some of those 41 were principals of schools that are not traditional high schools but alternative schools so there are less than 40. So I would like for you just to share with me-- I'll ask you some questions and you can respond to them for me. I wish you would tell me how you became a high school principal?

Mr. Walker: I've been a principal going on 17 years. I started out as an elementary school principal down at Drexal Elementary back in 1974. I was there for three years. The grades there were 4-7 and then I was transferred to Washington County Union School which was previously a Black high school. I stayed there 11 years as a middle school junior high principal. The Superintendent came and talked to me about transferring so they transferred me to Plymouth High School year before last and I've been there for 2 1/2 years as a high school principal. The reason why I have been moved around so much in the system because they consider me a person who is a rebuildier. Each principal job that I've had has sort of been down and so that is why I'm at Plymouth High School--to try to build it up again.

Goldie: Did you teach before you became principal?

Mr. Walker: Oh yes, I taught 7 years. I was a 7th-8th grade teacher and a coach.

Goldie: Now tell me something about Plymouth High School. About the size of the school and number of people that you have here.

Mr. Walker: Plymouth High School is a 2-A school. We have

approximately 700 students and about 55 teachers. The population of student enrollment as far as race is concerned is 60% Black and 40% White. We are in a community which is rural but we have a lot of community support with Booster Clubs and that type of thing. We have a Biking Club which consists of the Athletic Club and we have Band Boosters and we have an Academic Booster's Club which gives a number of scholarships annually. Last year our Booster's Club gave approximately \$80,000 in scholarships to our students who have an average of 85 or above. Some of them were full scholarships but most of them were partial scholarships to help the students with their financial obligations. That Academic Booster's Club is very sharp.

Goldie: Do you have any assistant principals?

Mr. Walker: I have one assistant principal. Last year I had two but with a cut in personnel support service I lost an assistant principal so now I have one assistant principal which really hurts with a school this size. In high school you really need two assistants because you're dealing with the finished products. I have to spend a lot of time this year dealing with discipline which takes away from the instructional process so that assistant principal we really need.

Goldie: I want you to tell me something about your school and the responsibilities that you have and I am going to give you different areas that I would like for you to address. First, supervision of personnel and your selection of teachers.

Mr. Walker: Okay I am responsible for the selection of teachers and also directly responsible for the supervision of my teachers. In our school system we have a committee to interview teachers. We have the person who is in charge of personnel, which is a central office personnel, and we have a principal and we also have a person who is responsible for the curriculum area. There are three of us on this committee and we interview several candidates and we sort of get together to naturally choose the best candidate that we feel will meet the needs of our students. The biggest problem that we have is getting minority teachers in this area.

Goldie: How many minority teachers do you have in this school?

Mr. Walker: In this high school I have a staff of 55 and 18 of those are minority teachers and the population is 60% Black and 40% White. We really need more you know for models and for good rapport and that type of thing. I'm not saying that our students don't get along with our White teachers but it helps. It really does in many cases.

Goldie: Since you only have one assistant principal, do you have to do a lot of the evaluations yourself?

Mr. Walker: Yes, I see everybody once. This year I see everybody twice because I lost the other assistant principal. Of course, as you are aware we have ICP's and non-tenure people we'll probably see them three times. Therefore I have to see those people twice and my assistant principal sees them once and that really helps.

Goldie: Curriculum and instruction. Tell me about your role in curriculum and instruction.

Mr. Walker: I'm responsible for the curriculum at Plymouth High School--setting it up and also instruction and assigning teachers to teach and that type of thing. That is one of my greatest responsibilities because what we teach is most important and since I've been at Plymouth High School and this is my third year--the first two years I left the curriculum and instruction mainly the way it was because you don't want to come in and make a drastic change. My third year what I've done I've sort of moved teachers around and I feel that meets the needs of the students and naturally at times we have teachers who want to teach the brighter students so this year I moved it around. For example we have an advanced biology course which students receive college credit for so this year I moved a teacher around. I thought the kids would get the best instruction from X teacher so I moved Y teacher into general biology and that type of thing. And next year after receiving our report card if we are below par in Washington County and so this year I have to look at the instruction and sometimes it can be the teacher and sometimes it can be the principal. Maybe I'm not giving the proper leadership so what I've done with my teachers--we met last week and I asked them to write down some barriers that are keeping them from teaching. I told them as long as it is constructive--if administration is the problem I need to know--not the administrator in school but at the central office or the superintendent. We are going to meet Tuesday and return to school and we are going over these options and just see where we are. We know that we have teachers in our school who are working hard but we definitely have to do some things differently.

Goldie: Do you work closely with the department chair?

Mr. Walker: Oh sure. Most definitely. We meet three times a month and I expect them to meet with other people three times a month to get their report back to me on their findings or whatever.

Goldie: What about discipline?

Mr. Walker: Discipline--I deal with a lot of discipline and I'm going to tell you why. As a principal I feel that,



especially at the high school and the junior high level, that the students respect the system probably more than they do the principal. They're going to respect me too. I deal with a lot of discipline at Plymouth High School because when I went there discipline was one of the problems. So as principal I spend a lot of time with discipline because I believe in law and order. When I walk down the hall with the assistant principal and teachers or anyone working at Plymouth High they're going to respect me and I give them a lot of discipline. I think in order to do the best job you have to have some control--not to the point where you can hear a pin drop in a class I don't mean that, but when you change class and that type of thing you don't have to be yelling and screaming. You walk to the right as much as possible so the hall won't get congested and we just want them to respect not only the adults but also their peers. And that is one thing that I really drill about.

Goldie: What about transportation?

Mr. Walker: Transportation--I don't deal with transportation that much. One of my guidance counselors deals with transportation setting up the routes and that type of thing. He does a good job and I tell him if he needs me to call me.

Goldie: How many buses do you have coming to your school?

Mr. Walker: I have ten buses. We had more but they were taken away because most of the high school students drive to school.

Goldie: Utilization of funds.

Mr. Walker: My assistant principal deals with the vocational funds. There are State funds and local funds--I handle that. For instruction and that type of thing, I receive a lot of input from my teachers and we prioritize what we are going to spend and that type of thing and I handle all the funding at Plymouth High School except for vocational and I have delegated that to my assistant principal so that he can learn how to handle funds and that type of thing. Because so many times assistant principals just handle discipline and there is more to operating a school than discipline. I have had two assistant principals. When I was at Washington County Union I had one and I've always delegated them other responsibilities besides discipline because there is more to operating a school than discipline--the students you know. There a lot of things going on in the background that individuals who are not familiar with schools are just not familiar with. So he handles vocational funds and those types of things.

Goldie: Cafeteria management.

Mr. Walker: I deal a with that. I deal with the personnel aspect but we also have a lady from the central office who does a lot of that. I don't do anything but plan the menus and that type of thing. As far as personnel itself or work hours and that type of thing, I do that.

Goldie: Do you select the cafeteria manager?

Mr. Walker: Yes. So when I was assigned to Plymouth High School I had to make changes in all areas. There were problems everywhere.

Goldie: Buildings and grounds.

Mr. Walker: I have delegated that to him. He deals with the buildings and grounds and cleanliness of the building and type of thing and when time to hire personnel I'm involved in the interviews.

Goldie: How is the community relationship at Plymouth High School?

Mr. Walker: The community relationship is excellent. When I was asked to go to Plymouth High School, when my superintendent talked to me about going that was one of the things I discussed with him. First about being the first minority. I want to make this clear because I never have been the type of person who would take a position because of clout. When I accept a position I want to be comfortable in it and also I don't want the position to say that I'm the first Black that has ever been there. To me those things are not important. We are not in the sixties anymore. I don't want to talk about that. I was given the job because I could do the job--capable of doing the job, and there has been more support at Plymouth High School in the last 2 1/2 years than there has ever been. My superintendent has told me that over and over again. The publics given support and there hasn't been any problems in dealing with the public. Do you understand what I'm saying.

Goldie: Yes, I understand. By you being at the other schools the children knew you so you are dealing with some of the children you had had earlier.

Mr. Walker: The same kids so that is why I have been successful because they know me. They have gained a lot of respect for me since I have been in the schools so long and that is one reason why I've been able to move. The transition is smooth.

Goldie: How much administrative power or control do you think you have over your school site and your responsibilities?

Mr. Walker: I have very much power. My superintendent and the Board of Education respect me highly.

Goldie: Have you known your superintendent for a long time?

Mr. Walker: Oh yes, he's been here since 1977. I have a good rapport with him, open door communication--I don't have that problem.

Goldie: How did the desegregation of schools affect your role as principal?

Mr. Walker: When I became principal, the schools were already integrated and as a teacher it was better than I anticipated. Naturally you had a few problems but overall it went smoothly in Washington County-- especially out here. Some of the other schools it didn't but we had a principal at that time who was well respected, E.V. Wilkins. He had been here a long time and had a lot of respect and I think that had a lot to do with it. The key at that time, I think, until everybody got to know each other was to match teachers up with students to try not to have as many problems. I think that was the key and then after the first two years rolled by and after everybody got to know everybody these teachers, parents both realized that they want what is best for their child.

Goldie: Do you enjoy your job? Why?

Mr. Walker: Yes, I enjoy my job. Why? Because I have been successful at what I am doing and I don't work under pressure. Pressure I say, let me explain myself. Going to work worrying about my superiors, snooping around about and all that type thing. The job is tough enough as it is. If I have any stress because something hasn't gone right on the job, there is one thing that really gets me down and it's fighting. I hate to have a fight at school and things like that get to me. But as far as receiving pressure or stress from the Board of Education or from my superintendent or the people at central office, no. No, I really don't.

Goldie: What do you consider the major problem of your principalship?

Mr. Walker: One of the major problems that I see is cutting back on personnel and funding. We're expected to do a good job but, for instance, things like cutting my assistant principal. Things like that--it handicaps me from doing reconstruction. Another problem I see which also is a requirement--funding for the BEP and that type of thing. I think as a whole, things that we need to do require dollars--more research people and that type of thing. Those are some of the things that really hinder me, you know sometimes in making long-range plans. We were told the other day that we

couldn't hire any additional personnel and in some of the remedial areas we really need more people.

Goldie: What do you consider the most rewarding about your principalship?

Mr Walker: The most rewarding thing about my principalship is giving me the opportunity to meet a lot of people like you traveling throughout the state, I've had an opportunity to do a lot of traveling throughout the state and I've met a lot of people. I'm a people person. A lot of people when they first meet me don't think that but I've always gotten along with people well and it just gives me an opportunity to get to know people and that type of thing. You always see some kids that you have taught and been principal to and they walk up to you and say, "How are you doing Mr. Walker." When they meet me they are always telling me something and it was always something positive and last year in October the first class I taught was 7th-8th grade group which at that time we were segregated and E.V. gave me a 7th-8th grade combination. First year of teaching--a combination. Four in that classroom were potential dropouts, discipline problems. I wasn't aware up until about November one day I had them lined up in the hall and he came up to me and he said, you know you've done a good job with those boys. And that same class last year gave me an appreciation day. It made me shed some tears. Things like that are rewarding. Some kids they talk--they are adults now--they talk about some of the things that I have done for them and this gives them a lot of motivation and that type of thing. Some of those things I really wasn't aware of, things that I did but they remember. Things like that make it rewarding. Helping people--because a lot of people helped me because I was reared on the farm--which I am not ashamed of--I'm just trying to bring out a point. There were six of us and my father was a tenant farmer and we never stayed out of school to work. They made sure that we attended school and a lot of people in this community and a lot of teachers taught me and gave me a push saying, "Hey, you can do something, you're going to be something in life," and those small things. At that time I took them as small but they were big things--that motivation and that push. It gave you some of that desire to want to do. So I had a lot of people to help me. These things are what are so rewarding. Your former students you meet in the streets and the malls, this is what makes it so rewarding.

Goldie: I told you about the difference in the number of principals from 1964, to 1989. If you knew of a young Black who aspired to be a Black high school principal in the State of North Carolina what advice would you give him?

Mr. Walker: Naturally, being a minority your first principalship job is not going to be at a secondary level. I will tell him/her, if you aspire to be a principal which we



need some more, any administrative job which you decide to accept, do your best job. Try to learn from anyone who can help you, sometimes you have teachers on your staff who can help you, you do the best job, being fair and consistent because being a principal at any level you're being watched. You're under the microscope so to speak. You do the best job not only with the people but with the curriculum and that type of thing and then as you move up to the next step that you do a good job there and then when you get to be a secondary administrator, you're not invisible because there are more activities and that type of thing. You have to carry yourself in a proper manner, you have to be a good model. Most of all to be a successful principal other than being fair and consistent you got to be able to deal with people. If you're not a people-person, you're not going to make it in this business. Also prepare yourself academically, be well-versed. If you don't know something, try to learn. Have the ability to learn. I'm a secondary principal but don't misunderstand me, I'm willing to use some of these people, that's what the central office staff is for. Be willing to use people to help you. Then when you delegate something to be done, make sure you delegate it to the people who will get the task done. Don't delegate to X,Y,Z, because they are friends. You have to know who to delegate to. One of my things is, as I've been told, is the way I delegate personnel and get along with people. I've been told that a million times by teachers, supporting teachers and business like. Another thing in this business is you want the people in this business to trust you. That is most important.

Goldie: Do you think that someone in the other race has to give you a push to become a secondary administrator being a minority?

Mr. Walker: Yes, they do. You can't forget the political fact--and that is politics and politics. You have to have some pull from those people. When I say people, you have to have it from both angles. Then on the other hand it depends on where you work. You have to have support.

Goldie: Well, we've come to the end of my interview guide and I appreciate you sharing. This has been very interesting. I have 39 people on my list and you're number 18 so I'm going along and it has been really interesting. I am learning so much from you. All of you have certain qualities about you and I can see why you have been selected for your position and when we get the final copy I will send you a transcript of what we have said today and then when we get the final work done I will give you a copy of that. I appreciate you sharing on a Sunday afternoon.