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## Reflections on Brown vs. Board of Education: Four Law Librarians Share Their Experiences Growing Up During the Brown Era

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Photo credit: AP Photo

Two of six black children who joined classes in the formerly all white Ft. Myer, Virginia elementary school listen to opening announcements by Mrs. Louise M. Snee, third grade teacher, at the school opening September 7, 1954. There were 380 pupils in the federally operated school on the military post, and six were black.

## Reflections on *Brown vs. Board of Education*

Four Law Librarians Share  
Their Experiences Growing  
up during the *Brown* Era

compiled by April Schwartz

To commemorate the 50th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the landmark U.S.

Supreme Court opinion ending racial segregation in education, four of our colleagues graciously shared their recollections of the period and the part *Brown* played in their lives.

### Triumph over Adversity

Marvin R. Anderson

Retired Minnesota State Law Library Director

In 1958, I set foot in Georgia to attend Morehouse College in Atlanta. It was the first time I had been in the South, and it was the first time that I encountered students who had attended all-black schools. What I learned from those students radically changed my perceptions about segregated schools and made me realize the intangible benefits from attending an all-black public school that would be lost because of the *Brown* decision.

Up North, I had been led to believe that there was nothing good about segregated schools. Media images depicted black students sitting in overcrowded classrooms in dilapidated buildings reading from hand-me-down books. That part—that elected officials used public funds to improve all-white schools to the detriment of black schools—the media got right. This action was justifiably condemned by the *Brown* decision.

What the media failed to convey, however, was the resilience and creativity with which the administrators, teachers, and students confronted the invidiousness of segregation and how they overcame these obstacles to achieve remarkable educational gains despite the brutal physical conditions.

Knowing that barriers to the avenues of knowledge were forever being raised against them made everyone work twice as hard to accomplish educational assignments and tasks Northerners like me took for granted. I was told of close relationships between teachers and families where a student's failure to live up to the family's educational standards were reported by the teachers to the parents. Students studied hard not only to improve their personal lots in life but also to effectuate positive changes in their communities.

It is said adversity brings out the best in people, and I came to realize that this would explain my more mature, more studious classmates who attended segregated schools. It was an eye-opener, to say the least, and it developed in me a far greater respect for my college classmates from the South.

In no way do I condone segregated schools, nor is it my intention to dismiss the importance of *Brown v. Board of Education*. I am certain that far more benefits have derived from it than would have had the court ruled otherwise. My point is to convey a personal snapshot of my experience when I first went south and encountered a way of community schooling and concern that is no longer a common practice since *Brown* outlawed segregated schools.

### The End of an Era

Yvonne Chandler

Associate Professor, University of North Texas  
School of Library and Information Sciences

I am a child of desegregation. Growing up in Birmingham, Alabama, I was keenly aware of the history of discrimination, segregation, racism, and civil rights unrest that is the legacy of my hometown. However, my education began after the *Brown* ruling and the monumental passage of the *Civil Rights Act* of 1964.

I attended desegregated schools throughout my educational career. When I entered high school, I was bused to a formerly segregated high school as Birmingham finally moved from a tradition of "separate but equal" schools. My generation benefited from the pain and sacrifice, as well as the successes and triumphs, of the civil rights movement.

I have been blessed throughout my matriculation from elementary school to graduate school with the privilege of attending any school of my choice. Selecting a historically black college for my undergraduate degree was my choice, although attending the University of Alabama or any other school in the nation was also available to me.

While I value my doctorate from the University of Michigan, as a librarian I am most proud of the master's degree that I hold from Atlanta University. Founded in 1865 by the American Missionary Association with later assistance from the Freedman's Bureau, Atlanta University, now Clark Atlanta University (the university consolidated with Clark College in 1988), is the nation's oldest graduate institution serving a predominantly African-American student body. For librarianship, this institution holds a rich history.

By the late 1870s, Atlanta University was supplying trained black librarians to the public schools of the South. The School of Library Service was officially established in 1941 in response to the need for black librarians to develop collections at schools, colleges, and universities throughout the South, the nation, and ultimately the world. The first dean, Eliza Atkins Gleason, was the first African-American to earn a doctoral degree in library science.

The school received its initial accreditation from the American Library Association in 1942, remaining accredited for more than 60 years. The existence of this program—one of only two graduate programs based at historically black colleges or universities in the country—has made a major contribution to the diversity of America's library profession. More than 2,000 students, most of them black librarians, have graduated from the graduate program at Clark Atlanta University and taken leadership roles in the library world.

By the time I entered the school in 1978, I was able to profit from the many years of segregated education and few scholarship opportunities for students of color and received federal funding to complete my graduate education. The curriculum stressed the knowledge and skills necessary to become a competent library professional, but also a study of the history and tradition of black librarianship. This program of study connected every student to the segregated past as well as the diverse future that we live and work in as library professionals.

In the introductory class, my professor assigned us to research and write the biography of a famous black librarian. To my subsequent surprise and pleasure, my assigned librarian was a library educator who would become my colleague and mentor 20 years later.

As a doctoral student attending the University of Michigan, I met and was inspired by Dr. Eliza Atkins Gleason, who

walked the same path that I was pursuing as a student at the University of Chicago. As I completed my degree, I thought, if Dr. Gleason could do this in the 1930s without the financial support and mentoring that I had, certainly I could make it in the 1990s. In addition, my major professor and advisor through my doctoral degree was not only a full professor of color, but also a graduate of the Atlanta University program.

As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of *Brown*, we also sadly anticipate the closing of the Clark Atlanta University library school in 2005. This institution and its graduates are living success stories demonstrating the history and tradition of education prior to the *Brown* decision, as well as the importance and contribution of integration and diversity to our country. At the time of this venerable program's closing,

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—Marvin  
R. Anderson

it is a wonderful opportunity to applaud the contribution of this school to the library profession through its existence and graduates.

### The Freedom to Choose

Ruth J. Hill

Head of Reference Services, Loyola Law School, Los Angeles

In September 1954, I began my public school education in the segregated school system of Austin, Texas. I was excited about the prospect of going to school every day. What I didn't know was that my "separate but equal" elementary school had been declared unconstitutional in May of 1954.

As a first-grader, I had no knowledge of the landmark legal decision made by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of*

*Education*. While I embraced the joys of learning, I also watched as many cities fought the implementation of *Brown* in their schools. At that point I hoped that the dogs, water hoses, and beatings I saw on television would not rear their ugly heads in our community as they had in places like Little Rock, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, and Boston.

In an effort to avoid the busing dilemma of other areas of the country, the Austin school system permitted minority students to choose where they wanted to attend school. We had the opportunity to go to any school within the district. When I made my decision about high school, I chose to attend all-black Anderson High School for a number of reasons.

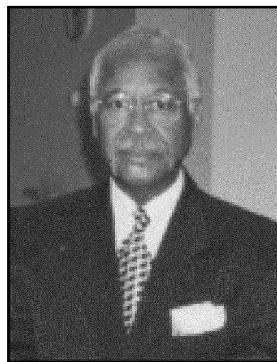
My mother and father—along with most of my aunts, uncles, and cousins—had attended Anderson; it was a family tradition to wear the school colors of black and gold. I received a chance to develop leadership skills and the opportunity to participate in many school activities. In fact, my first introduction to librarianship was when I was selected to serve as band librarian my senior year. It was the *Brown* decision that gave me a choice.

Because of *Brown* I was able to attend the University of Texas at Austin without suffering many of the toils and tribulations of Herman Sweatt. Sweatt tried to integrate the UT law school several years before *Brown* was decided (see "*Brown's Legacy Then and Now*" on page 8). Still operating under the *Plessy* doctrine of "separate but equal," Sweatt was allowed to attend law school in isolation without the benefit of interaction with other law students. Needless to say, this was not an ideal learning

environment. However, thanks to *Brown*, I was able to fully participate in and enjoy my collegiate experience at UT.

The scope of *Brown* was to level the playing field and offer equal opportunity. I think that the full effect of the *Brown* decision is yet to be realized. Our country is still struggling with issues concerning college admission standards, workplace diversity, and Americans with disabilities. The full impact of *Brown* on our society can only be realized if its goals and ideals continue to be an anchor for ever-expanding diversity in our day-to-day lives.

(continued on page 25)



## Indelible Memories

John Allen

Computer Services Manager, University of Minnesota Law School

I remember very well how the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision shaped my life. My parents settled in Port Arthur, Texas, because of the high number of jobs in the oil industry. We lived in a part of town where only blacks lived; later I realized it was considered the ghetto. The homes were called shotgun homes—you could see straight through them if the front and back doors were open at the same time.

The schools were all-black. There were only five, and three of them were grade schools. All were on the west side of town except one, Franklin Middle School, which was on the other side of the railroad tracks from where I lived. A few years later we moved to the east side of town.

When I started kindergarten, I went to a school called Lamar Elementary. The conditions were all right, but crowded. It was around 1960, right before the schools were integrated. During that time I was taught a lot about race and the hatred of some people for others. I never learned why they hated people like me, just that they did. I had to learn to act a certain way when around white people, like always say "yes, sir" or "no, sir," or "yes, ma'am" or "no, ma'am."

I attended this school for about four years. It did not have a very good building; it was old and not large enough for all students to attend classes in the main building. There were a number of small single-room buildings around the main building to accommodate the number of kids attending. There were not enough books to go around, and the ones we did have had been handed down to us from classes years ahead of us or from other schools that did not want to use them any longer.

Integration started around 1965 in Port Arthur. Grades one through six were integrated in 1965, and grades seven through 12 were integrated about 1967. I started attending De Queen Elementary School when it desegregated its student body. We were integrated, but very few blacks attended the school. It was far from my home, but my parents sent me there because they wanted me to have a good education. They felt that the black schools did not have the same resources as the white schools that were now integrated.

I spent only one year at De Queen. We had an auditorium for assembly, a

gymnasium, and new books. In 1966 I attended Woodrow Wilson Middle School. The school was 80 to 90 percent white. We had so much that the black schools never had, and we were taught a lot more than the basics. In 1967, busing of students was to be the law for all schools, but unfortunately, that is when a number of bad things started to happen to people in my community.

After busing began, the black kids that attended Woodrow Wilson were afraid because there were always fights at school and attacks on black kids. We would walk home in groups, never alone or in pairs. Groups of white young adults would find very small groups of black kids, chase them

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—Ruth Hill



down, and beat them. A lot of kids would plead to have parents walk them to school or drop them off.

I had a couple of white teachers that liked to browbeat us in class, trying to humiliate us in front of our peers. But I also had a lot of teachers who were very nice. I never gave them any trouble in school, I respected my teachers, and most of them respected me. At home, my sisters and brother and I would sit at the dining room table to do our homework, and we would talk about what happened at school. My older sister attended an all-black school, and she told us about it. I looked forward to going to another black school. I knew that if I lived through middle school, I was going to Lincoln, like my sister.

In 1970 I completed the eighth grade and entered Lincoln High School, which was starting to look more like the schools I had just left. I had white friends and neighbors who now attended Lincoln. The area that my family lived in was mostly white, and when the state started busing students to the nearest school, it meant that the whites that did not move far enough away had to attend the mostly black schools.

The black students were starting to pick fights with the white students. The school was 98 percent black, and I felt sorry for my white friends.

A positive aspect of school integration was that we now had more materials to work with and better equipment—better everything. But we were monitored. We were thought to be potential problem students, so we felt we could not say anything. We could not tell the teachers what we really felt about things happening to us or around us. We had to be careful of every word we said.

The *Brown v. Board of Education* decision was both good and bad for my brothers and sisters and me. We had new opportunities, but our feelings of safety and freedom to speak our minds in school were damaged during that time.

## After word

Thank you to these writers for sharing their insights into the period of desegregation of the United States educational system. Clearly, *Brown v. Board of Education* could not, in and of itself, end racism. And as noted in these pieces, there were losses as well as gains made in the process. Nevertheless, it is clear that the country has changed immensely for the better due to the profound impact of *Brown*.

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