

Interview with Ms. Alice Darden Davis

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Interviewed by Dr. Rosalee Martin

RM: You went to Anderson?

ADD: I went to Anderson, yes.

RM: And did you make the crossover?

ADD: Yes, I did.

RM: Would you please introduce yourself for us with your name and just a little bit about yourself.

ADD: My name is Alice Darden Davis. At this time, currently, I'm working as a work force development specialist for the Capital of Texas Work Force Center here in Austin. I have a long history and background in social work and social services.

RM: We're going to ask you a few questions because we're really interested in what happened in Austin during desegregation and specifically wanting to know how you fit within all of this. Could you tell me what schools did you go to while you were in Austin?

ADD: I attended all of the schools here in Austin, from elementary through junior high, high school. Junior high school, I attended all my undergrad here in Austin.

RM: Were they all segregated schools?

ADD: Yes, they were segregated schools initially until segregation started, and for the last two years I was a part of that crossover.

RM: So you were at Anderson High when integration occurred?

ADD: Yes, it was during my junior-senior year, and I had come from junior high school, which at that time went through--at Kealing [Junior High School] to the ninth grade year. Then we went to high school at [L. C.]Anderson [High School]. So I was there for my eleventh and twelfth, my junior and senior year.

RM: Your junior and senior year you were at—

ADD: At Anderson, L.C. Anderson and Reagan [High School].

RM: Oh, Reagan.

ADD: Yes, Reagan and L.C. Anderson.

RM: Could you tell me, just talk about your experiences at Anderson High before the crossover, what kind of extracurricular activities you were in? What about the curriculum? Let's just talk about Anderson High and experience there.

ADD: Okay. I felt like the experience—because it was very familiar to me to be a part of the community, of the people. The students that I went to school with were also a part of my community. Those were students that I went to school, to church, and lived in the same neighborhood with them. So during those years, basically, of segregation, you were very familiar with the support group and the extended families and extended community. The people that you saw, they were a part of your community. The ones that were part of the school system, they were a part of the community and they were part of your church life. Social activities, things that you were involved in, were basically—East Austin was our circle.

RM: Talk about the extracurricular activities at Anderson High. What were you involved in?

ADD: Extracurricular activities. I was really a part of more of--they called it VICA [?] at that time. It was vocational-industrial kinds of classes. There was seemingly steering of students that probably would not get a chance to go to college, that they would steer them towards more vocational classes. So at that time when I was at Anderson, I was participating in cosmetology. So that was a big part of the curriculum that I had there at Anderson.

As far as the extracurricular activities, just being a part of the pep rallies, the sports, sports days, being a part of whatever happened in the auditorium. At that time we would have all the students to come together as a student body and have an address from the principal and just really felt connected with everybody. We felt a part of the complete circle, being involved in the educational process.

RM: Would you talk a little bit about your teachers?

ADD: The teachers. My recollection of the teachers was you felt they had a real personal investment and interest in you. When they saw you, they not only saw you, but many of the teachers knew your family. They knew the community that you were from. They may have known even the church, your religious background. It was as if they were a part of being like social workers, educators, friends, people that you could really confide in. You really felt like they had a vested interest in you as a student, and your success was very much a part of what made them feel very important about their work.

RM: You spent two years at Anderson High, and you said you spent your last two at Reagan.

ADD: It was a combined year. Basically, my junior and senior year. Half day. I was one of those students that had half a day at L.C. Anderson and half a day at Reagan. My academic classes were taken at Reagan, and then the vocational classes were completed at L.C. Anderson. It really gave you an experience of having a complete split kind of day for a student, because a lot of that was transporting. In the middle of the day I had to be transported across town, which could have been, for a bus trip, a good twenty or thirty minutes' trip across town every day.

RM: So when you went to Reagan, what were some of your experiences?

ADD: You didn't feel the sense of connection. You didn't feel the investment of the teachers, the instructors, being really interested in you as an individual. You were just kind of placed there to find your way. As far as classes, you were given, this is where you're supposed to go and this is where you're supposed to show up at. It was more like you didn't have the sense of protection or supervision that you got when you were at the L.C. Anderson School.

RM: So any day you go to school and part of your days at Anderson, where you feel part of the community.

ADD: Oh, yes.

RM: You feel like they were concerned about your success.

ADD: Oh, yes.

RM: And then you would leave there, and you would go to Reagan.

ADD: And now I go to Reagan.

RM: And you felt disconnected.

ADD: I felt very disconnected. You would just basically--you were with people that were from places that you didn't know, and many times you were the only student, especially a minority student that was in my class. Seemingly every class I went to--to this very day I can't really tell you that I connected with a student that was at the Reagan experience. I was there, but it was as if you weren't there.

RM: What are some of the emotional feelings that this discussion triggers in terms of that crossover?

ADD: The feelings that you felt is that you felt that you weren't significant and that you didn't have a contribution. I remember some of the experiences I had in class as curriculum was presented to us. I remember raising my hand to answer a question and the entire room stopping and turning, looking around at you, and you'd speak, and it was as if you could hear your own voice for the silence, and then they would just turn back around and continue with wherever they stopped before you spoke, not really addressing your questions. You felt like either you didn't know what you were asking or what you asked was not important even to answer. I remember experiencing those kinds of feelings, which made you pretty reluctant sometimes to even interact and to collaborate with your student body or with your teachers.

RM: Was there any time that violence occurred because you or other minority students were there?

ADD: At that time I don't remember any outbreaks of violence. It was basically just a silent--you were in a state of shock, I think. You didn't know what to think of the experience that you were having at the time.

RM: Was there anybody you could process these thoughts with, you could talk about it to?

ADD: As I remember, today, when there is any kind of social issues that occur in school systems, there's always someone there, a counselor or teachers or someone who's designated to address any social stressful issues. But as I remember, that did not exist. Students were really left alone to unsort or to answer their own questions. There was no addressing of the fact that there was crossover. There was no addressing of the fact that you were there. It was as if you didn't exist.

RM: Let's talk a little bit about the community. You said that in East Austin, you felt like you were a part of that community. Families knew each other. Teachers knew each other. What

happened when you went to stores though outside the community or when you left East Austin and went to Greater Austin, Central Austin, other parts of Austin?

ADD: As I remember, and our family was not so affluent they were able to do any elaborate shopping--I come from a family of seven children. They all have gone to school right here in Austin schools, and I don't remember having any great elaborate shopping spree as we do it now. Basically, it would probably be on like Saturdays. I remember the bus route going to school, it would stop on Congress, I believe, and about Eighth. Was that where the old Woolco—I believe that old Woolco store was in Austin, and that was the big place where you just kind of stopped. Kids were not—they didn't welcome our presence in the stores. If you'd stop in to get a soda or candy or whatever just for your trip on the bus, it was always as if you felt that you were not really welcome, and if you came, to make your coming very short and get back to the bus stop. So those were the kind of experiences that I remember like in the inner city.

Now, of course, the community stores that we were familiar with going to with our parents, usually with supervision, that was okay as long as your parents were there. But to venture out much, it wasn't much of that that went on with us as students. No.

RM: I want to bring you up a little. Now that you look back on those experiences, how would you compare the segregated experience with the integrated experience, even for yourself? Do you have children as well?

ADD: I have no children. I have nieces and nephews. I consider myself a part of their life.

RM: How would you compare those experiences? You actually had it simultaneously.

ADD: Yes.

RM: So you were able to compare some of those. As you're looking back out and understand what's going on in our school district, do you think we gained from integration or did we lose from it?

ADD: In all honesty, I feel that certainly there have been gains that we can't refuse to acknowledge. The gains have been in exposure, a community of experiences and education that is now available and accessible in many different mediums that was not years ago, of course. The thing that I feel on the other hand, the things that were lost was the connection of the community where it actually was a part of--a student could leave his home and realize that he was a part of a community, and as we oftentimes refer back to the slogan that says it takes a community to raise a child. You felt very much connected to that community. Even if you misbehaved, you always had eyes in the community that either knew your parents or knew someone who knew you, or whether they knew you or not, if you were a child and you were in that neighborhood you could be corrected and even held or presented to your parents if that was the case. I think that those were some of the benefits that we had as a close community.

The opportunities to--I don't even know if I want to use the word opportunity—the lack of the supervision that we had the students don't have, that caring, guiding hand as they had in those times.

I kind of vacillate back and forth between both gains and things that we lost. The things that the students have lost is that they don't have places to go. They don't have people that really have vested interest in them, as we had then. Whether it was the minister or whether it was the

neighbor, someone was always there seemingly in the neighborhood for every child, and today I don't see that happening.

It's almost as if the community looks for a child with a problem to accentuate whatever the problem is, whether that problem is financial, whether that problem is sexual acting out, if the parents have a problem, instead of being ministers or hands that touch and heal and guide and make whole. It's as if you are strange because you have a parent that doesn't have money or doesn't have the transportation or you don't have an education. Those were not the things that were a part of the community. Those things, I think, were lost.

If every person had value because of who they were not because of what they had or didn't have, I don't see that kind of reflections in this system now. The children are left alone to find their own way still.

RM: What do you think we need to do to get back some of those positives of the past?

ADD: There are definitely some things that need to be done. I think we need to look at the complete--the why's, the political structure behind what happens in the school, how the funding comes. We need to look at what the goal of education is and exactly what are we trying to do through the system. Sometimes people may feel that I have this isolated tunnel that I'm to work with, and if I'm teaching reading and writing and arithmetic, that's my whole world. Whether or not this is a complete and whole person, that they're given an opportunity for an education, I don't feel that that is really having the chance to be addressed.

I don't know if I want to lay it all at the teachers' hand. I think the complete structure, whether it's the political structure or whether it's just the way that administration is handling their sense of responsibility or whether or not it's just the lostness of the system of parents not having the connection to offer the guidance for their family members as they would like to do. Time factor, I think, is a big thing now.

RM: That leads me to the next question, the question of parents and what role do they play in all this. In the past what did they do, and now how do you see parents, you know, if you look at children, school-age kids?

ADD: I think parents were very much a part of the educational system. They worked collaboratively with teachers, and they were invited to be a part of the educational process of their students. That's the way I remember it. I remember parents going and feeling happy to go to PTA meetings. At that time we had Miss [Hon. Wilhelmina] Delco [phonetic] there as a representative in our neighborhood. And as a president of PTA, that's where she really got started, was very active. Her children were right there with the other students and were a part of the same school system they were a part of. So we had someone that we knew that was interested in their children as they were interested in your children and saw parents as a part of that complete process.

Today, whether it's time, whether it's money, whether it's just a system of things, parents, I think, are doomed if they do and they're doomed if they don't if you don't know how to address the educational system. Even if they go, they feel at a loss. I don't think that they're welcome to be a part of that process. In fact, sometimes they can even be a hindrance to a child. The minute that the system sees what the parents does not have whatever it is, all of a sudden that becomes the child's baggage to carry along instead of taking each individual child and seeing their potential and guiding them through the process to attain their very best skills, whatever they can attain in life.

RM: I want to ask you a question about old Anderson High and the new Anderson High. Do you have any feelings about what happened in terms of the Anderson High that now exists as it compares to the old Anderson High?

ADD: In all honesty, I have no—I remember old Anderson High, but I think it just kind of slipped in my mind when I think of the new Anderson High. I don't think any of the old Anderson High principals went along with the new Anderson because it was out of the community, there was not a part of what old Anderson was really all about and what it meant to the East Austin neighborhood. It's just kind of out there. It has no meaning to me.

RM: Would it have been better if they just gave it a new name [unclear]?

ADD: In my mind it certainly would have been better if they had just said give it a new name rather than to say that this is old Anderson High and take none of those principals and none of the kinds of things that we had attained as an Anderson community along with it. I don't know exactly what happened. It was as if that history was wiped away in my mind as far as the new one is concerned.

RM: As you think about the community during the crossover, we also had black businesses in East Austin. Were there more black businesses then than now?

ADD: It really seemed like there was many more black businesses at that time that it is now. I don't know whether that has to do with economics or just what all the issues are surrounding it, but East Austin neighborhood had plenty of black businesses that could really take care of the community of people that it served.

RM: Such as?

ADD: Such as stores, any recreational needs. We had our parks, our places where we could go and really had our fellowships together, whether it was churches or—all of it was there for the community, and the black businesses are not there. Now even in East Austin, if you go to a park, you have to go somewhere else to get entrance into your own park. You don't have the sense of this is where we can socialize or recreate together, together as a community.

RM: Would you say that young persons such as yourself during the crossover were more motivated educationally than they are now to learn, motivated to learn then than now?

ADD: We had every reason to be motivated. There was a connection to their history. There was a connection to their past. There was connection to their families. They knew who they were. They knew where they came from. And they had a clear idea of what they can contribute to their community, certainly. Now kids don't really have that kind of structure. They've assimilated to the--it's as if they wanted to lose their past. This generation doesn't hold the values that we had before the crossover. I really just don't think that it exists, period.

RM: If you were part of a task force, and one of the tasks that you had was to evaluate our current educational system and to make recommendations to, let's say, the board of education, the superintendent, or other administrators, what would be some of those recommendations you think that you would contribute?

ADD: Some of the recommendations I think you can only solve a problem where a problem really is, and I think that what we're looking at, we're looking at a political issue here that has really divided and labeled and stigmatized a people for failure. Removing those labels and stigmatism and allowing every student an opportunity, whether that student comes from what now is defined as--and I before had never heard of the terminology—"at risk."

Everyone now is under the label of being "at risk" in spite of anything else that they may have attained. The system does not look at the complete person. It's very fragmented. You're "at risk" if you're black. You're "at risk" if you're female. You're "at risk" if you're a black male between the ages of birth to twenty-five. You're "at risk" if you live on the east side of Austin. You're "at risk" if your mother had a felony. You're "at risk" if--you're just "at risk" for being part of the community now, and especially if you're a minority in the east side of Austin. I think we have some political issues that we have to tear down those stigmas and allow every student, whether they have learning disabilities or learning challenges--I want to use that terminology rather than disabled because I think we all have challenges that we can overcome. If the labeling is removed, then students will be able to function at their fullest potential and allow the educators to do the job of the basics, to teach our students and to allow them to explore their own potential-- **[Tape recorder turned off.]**

RM: We've been talking about school and why you thought it was much more successful in the past, during the segregated era. Would you say something about discipline in terms of how students were disciplined then as it compares to now?

ADD: I think discipline is much different today than it was then. Teachers and parents alike did not have limitations on--once they had reached the age of accountability, they had been presented to the community as an instructor, as a teacher, I think we took for granted that through all their actions, that they were a responsible adult person that could make a judgment when there was a behavior that needed to be addressed and they had the full leverage to make it right. If that meant that they had to talk to a student very directly, they would do that. If they felt it was appropriate that they would take that student and make a definite impression with the child, causing them to really pay attention, the teachers had the leverage to do that, even in the schools, without the fear of they'll lose their jobs or will someone come through and not support them in their judgment. I think they had the leverage at that time completely. I can't remember a case where a teacher was reprimanded in any way for the end results of what they did in their discipline.

As far as parents were concerned, I know my parents always said, "Now, listen, the teacher is the teacher and you are the student, and you go to school, I send you there to learn, and if you misbehave, then you are going to be accountable." So my parents were in support of the teachers. They were in support of the administrators. With that kind of relaxed environment so that they could actually do their job and focus on the needs of the child, I think the discipline was excellent whatever the issues were. I'm certain we had some of the same growing up pains that any student would have. Girls liked guys; guys liked girls. If they misbehaved, they didn't put them in jail if they kissed someone being six years old. They didn't incarcerate them because they smiled at a girl and called it sexual harassment.

In this day we have a whole different array of things to be afraid of. We're afraid if we speak. We're afraid if we don't speak. We're afraid if we raise our voice to a level, that that's called verbal abuse. If you place a child in silence for a while, that's isolation. There are terminologies to discipline that were not there before the crossover, and I think that if we could change anything, we would have to acknowledge, and maybe there will never be a meeting of the minds where that culture will be acknowledged in discipline. Maybe that will never occur. Maybe this time will

always say that, be you black, white, Hispanic, whatever culture you've come from, you must discipline your child the way I approve, and if you don't, then you're in violation.

I don't know if we'll ever have a meeting of the minds, but I know in the community that I grew up in, that even corporal discipline was not tabooed. If a child was given a paddle, if a child was—turn their hand over and spank it, it was not considered a violation of the child's will, or the parents were not put down as total illiterate or violent or people that didn't know how to address their children. They got the job done, and it was done to the success of very large families. I come from a family of seven, of seven children that grew up right here in Austin, East Side, and went to all these Austin schools. Every single one of us graduated from high school and attended higher learning. I just completed my masters at Southwest Texas State University in education. I would not say that the discipline was in any way negative. I felt like, for those students that I grew up with, it was very positive. When we'd come back together and we talk about how our parents or our teachers or our community disciplined us—I mean, there were people we had absolute respect for. They could have been the general in—

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

ADD: —talked, we listened. If they were a minister or a teacher or a parent or an adult, they had our undivided attention and respect. Those things, I think, are very different from today. You can be the doctor, lawyer, Indian chief today, and you can speak to a child and be demoted to less than his imaginary playmate. You have about that much power.

So I think it's a significant difference between the way that we are handling discipline and allowing children to wholesomely develop in their educational, in their social development, and I think that it is carrying on not only through the schools. Children are not able to understand the word "no." They're not able to understand in this day the word "yes." It is totally out of their vocabulary.

RM: Thank you so much. I really appreciate your honesty and openness. Do you have any final words that you'd like to have?

ADD: Well, I'm just very thankful to be able to, I consider myself a survivor. Because in spite of all the things that were thrown at my generation, I feel that we have continued to survive. We continue to develop and become entrepreneurs. We are having our own businesses. We're developing the areas that years ago were never even thought could ever happen. I believe through my generation that have come through the kind of discipline and educational system we've come through, we can be very proud of what challenges we've faced and have been very victorious at it. I thank you for the interview.

[End of interview]