

Interview with Mr. Volma Overton

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Interviewed by Dr. David A. Williams

DW: Good afternoon. We're here with Mr. Volmar Overton, longtime leader in this community, worked with the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People], and the duties that he performed and the different tasks that he performed in the interest of the East Austin community are legend. But we're here today to talk about something is very central to our thinking and our doing, and that is the desegregation of the public schools in East Austin. Mr. Overton's approach will be quite different from some of those that we've talked about.

Mr. Overton, we're glad to have you with us.

VO: Thank you.

DW: I'd like to start by asking you to give us some background and thoughts on why it was necessary for you to take the legal approach that you did to get more children enrolled in the Austin public schools.

VO: Well, my daughter was the lead plaintiff in the case, however, it was for all the children of Austin. It wasn't just for her; it was for all the minority kids, the black kids, of Austin, Texas, who'd been in a segregated system for a long, long, long time, and we thought it was necessary that we get out of the box and start a new direction because Austin was not going to desegregate itself, period. They were not going to voluntarily do that.

DW: What were the indicators here that told you this? What made you decide this?

VO: Well, you know, they accepted--from the HEW [Department of Health, Education and Welfare] plan they accepted, freedom of choice. Well, freedom of choice, you know that it would not desegregate the schools because no whites would volunteer to go to the black schools, inadequate schools. I'm sure that the schools were inadequate in the East Austin community. Blacks would volunteer to go to the white school, but no whites would volunteer to go to the black. So therefore you wouldn't have any integration.

DW: Now, what are some the things you could point to that say that physical facility and books and things like that were so different in the two situations? For an example, the schools in East Austin did not have what, and the schools that we would go to would have?

VO: Well, it depends on how far you go back. See, I came through [L. C.] Anderson High School, and I can tell you that I never had a book that was new. All the books I had had either two names already issued, you know, in the books, which indicates they came from another part of the community. And the labs were inadequate in Anderson High School, and the facility was just poorly maintained. So there was no real opportunity for blacks in that school.

Now, some of us say, you know we want to save Anderson. Well, you can save Anderson, but think about the children and opportunities for them in other schools? Other kids had first-rate everything and we didn't, you know. So you need to have a different direction to go.

DW: Do you think that the students that went to school with you achieved a great deal in spite of the limitations, in spite of the lack of facilities?

VO: Yes, they did. They achieved a lot because there was a certain discipline from the parents that made them work hard and to do things that they wasn't accustomed to doing. See, there were a few achievers before us, but at this time they was wanting you to--you know, this is kind of wanting you to achieve, wanting you to succeed in doing something that very few have already done. So I guess today there are so many achievers now that you don't have that kind of discipline, where you really want to ape somebody else that's already doing something.

DW: Can you recall three or four teachers at Anderson--you went to Anderson, right?

VO: Yes.

DW: Can you recall three or four teachers at Anderson who really made a difference in your life?

VO: Well, one was Mr. Pickard. Pickard was the science teacher, and Mr. Calhoun was the math teacher. I guess the other one would be--Miss Bolin [phonetic] was the English teacher. These are just some that I can recall, but these are some that I recall were very hard on you and strict on you and made you get your work, wouldn't pass you for nothing.

DW: So in other words, they wouldn't take any fooling. You had to really earn what you got.

VO: You had to earn it.

DW: What about the extracurricular activities at Anderson? How freely were students able to participate in all phases of school life.

VO: Well, I wasn't an extracurricular activity guy. I was strictly in the books and go home. I was a poor kid, and there were a whole lot of football players, and everybody liked the football players, and if you weren't a football player, you didn't get the little extras. So that was one reason that I was never a popular guy. I would really just do my work and go home.

DW: What about things other than football?

VO: Well, there was basketball and track. I don't remember whether there was tennis. I don't think they had a tennis team or not, but I do recall basketball and track.

DW: What about the literary events?

VO: We had clubs, but I don't recall any that we would participate in.

DW: Do you recall whether or not you sent students to the Interscholastic League at Prairie View?

VO: No, I don't, and they might have. See, we didn't have counselors to push you into doing things. That was one of my things. You know, nobody--being a little guy from the country, nobody said, "You know, you should do this." So everybody was asking me when I got out of school, you know, "What are you going to do? Get you a job." **[Laughter]** But nobody told me about going to college or anything like that. "Get you a job."

So I have mixed emotions about this thing. Like some think being at Anderson was the best thing in the world, but it didn't to me because I was not privileged to being counseled and given

directions to which I should go, but just, "What are you going to do when you get out? Get you a job." And that was the kind of thing that happened in my time. I'm sure that's different now.

DW: No one was pushing you towards college prep, right?

VO: No one pushed me towards college. No one pushed me.

I mentioned about Mr. Calhoun because he taught the algebra and the math stuff.

DW: He was pretty tough, too.

VO: Yes. And everybody was really--but I liked him because I made good grades in mathematics and science with Mr. Pickard. When I went to college I majored in science, chemistry, and minored in mathematics.

DW: So those two teachers really gave you the foundation.

VO: Yes.

DW: All right. Let's look ahead a little bit, after graduation, after marriage, and the children are here, and you begin to think seriously about their education. Tell us some of the thoughts that ran through your mind as you prepared to seek the entrance of your children and on behalf of other children in East Austin into a desegregated situation rather than the segregated situation they were in.

VO: Well, you know, it was talked about all the time, you know, integration, an integrated school system, kids going to other schools. Now, there were some of the other kids, brighter kids or from well-to-do families, the kids were already going to other schools. Lots of kids were going to St. Stephens [Episcopal School], you know.

DW: That's a private school?

VO: Yes. They were sending their kids to private school, you know, like St. Stephens, and some of them were trying to transfer their kids to University Junior High [School]. I believe it was University Junior High. It used to be that during that time. Well, lots of people's families were sending their children to that school. You know, that was an elementary--University Junior High and to Austin High [School].

DW: [unclear] school run by the university?

VO: Yes. But they were going there. But those were perhaps the privileged ones that were able to do that and to go to St. Stephens, too. But the other kids were mired in the desegregated [misstatement, he means segregated] schools.

DW: And being mired in the desegregated school, you felt that it was now time to stop the foot-dragging and get AISD [Austin Independent School District] to move into the reality of things, the way things happen. Based on the Supreme Court decision, you felt that this was a right, a privilege that everyone should seek.

VO: But, you know, it was HEW that filed the suit on the system, on the desegregated school system. They're the one that filed the complaint against the system. But then, you know, it was in

1971, the President--of course, the plan required busing of kids, and I think that was a dirty word for President [Richard M.] Nixon because at that time he would be coming up for reelection, and no one in his camp wanted to talk about busing kids, especially white kids, to integrated schools. So he said, I think, that busing would be a very low priority in his administration and the writing was that this could be the last thing thought of.

So with that in mind, the national community of NAACP felt that communities needed to do something to change that, to get involved. The best way to get involved was for local communities to file court suits to force the desegregation of the system.

DW: Who was the attorney or attorneys of record for this?

VO: Well, what happened with us, it wasn't really the NAACP. It was the Legal Defense Fund at the time, and Thurgood Marshall was the attorney of record. See, during that time, the NAACP and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund were kind of part of--they were one thing, but they later separated. So the case was argued from--then we had a local attorney. We had to get a local attorney.

DW: Let me get this straight. Actually, Thurgood Marshall was the attorney of record because he was the attorney for the NAACP.

VO: Yes.

DW: Then a local attorney worked under him?

VO: Yes.

DW: Who was the local attorney?

VO: Sam Bisco. Sam Bisco was our representative, our attorney.

DW: You mean our county judge now?

VO: That's right.

DW: Tell us something about the activity of those two men. How sharp were they?

VO: Well, I was always impressed by Thurgood Marshall because I followed him through the Herman Marion Sweatt case. Every time they would argue the case in the courts here I would always be there to listen. It was just amazing how well he was versed in law.

When Sam got the job of being our local representative, he came out from Dallas, and I was impressed by his operation. Matter of fact, Sam was hired out as my attorney in a suit against the post office. So I liked him very much, and he carried our case locally. And consulted with the national officers. See, Thurgood Marshall was never always here. He had a staff of attorneys that would be here to argue the case, represent us.

DW: Do you remember the judge or referee, whatever might have been the case, during the hearings that went on?

VO: Well, some of them argued against Judge Jack Roberts. Judge Roberts was—

DW: Tell us something about Judge Roberts.

VO: Yes. No case passed favorable for the black community under Judge Roberts. Nothing was favorable under him, and most of his cases were appealed to the Fifth Circuit, and then they would be reversed. But he was not a good judge.

DW: He was somewhat of a segregationist?

VO: He was certainly conservative. I don't know why he was, but he was certainly very conservative in his thoughts. Then later we got Judge Nylan [phonetic], I believe.

DW: Was Judge Nylan better than Judge Roberts?

VO: I would think so, but it was a very fine line between the two.

DW: What was the difference between Roberts and Nylan, as you see it?

VO: Well, I think Judge Nylan made better decisions and was more up-tempo than Judge Roberts. I can't recall the issues now, but I remember we had cases before him, too, not the school case but we had single-member district cases against—and he presided over the courts there.

DW: In the final analysis what happened with your suit? I mean your suit against AISD.

VO: That suit was remedied in 1980, yes, '80, when the courts found that the schools discriminated against blacks and Mexican-Americans and they ruled in our favor, after many, many appeals between '71 and that time. The school would appeal this one and this and this. See, trying to desegregate Austin was a problem for the schools because of the housing patterns in Austin. If the housing patterns in Austin were different, it would have been much easier to desegregate.

DW: Why so?

VO: Well, because all the blacks lived in one place, East Austin. If you have ten other schools and you want to integrate them, all the students would have to come from East Austin.

DW: You're right, but why do we have one-way busing?

VO: That was easier for the white folks. They don't mind you coming over to their class, but they don't want to send their children to East Austin.

DW: I'm curious to know, since your case was a little different, it looks like, going in the opposite direction—most people in East Austin were trying to push to get the schools to—you know, sort of the status quo, stay where they are, keep Anderson open [unclear], and at the same time you were saying it should go this way. How did that sit with the people in East Austin?

VO: Well, when it came to the final analysis, the blacks didn't want Anderson closed nor Kealing [Junior High School]. So this was the result: you have Kealing and Anderson being closed and we have bused kids to the other schools. No one wanted Anderson closed. They wanted integrated education, but they didn't want to sacrifice the school, to move from Anderson.

DW: Do you think that was reasonable?

VO: Well, it depends on what you want to get out of it. We don't need to have the shackles of segregation hanging on our shoulders if we can get something better.

DW: What about the community? Did the community suffer any with the closing of Anderson?

VO: It depends on what you think is "suffer." I don't think the community—we had the same people, the same situation. It was just a matter of having an institution in your community where people would like to—

DW: Some people bemoan the fact that the leadership left the community. Is there any credit to that?

VO: No. The people that were leaders, they didn't move. They were there. Now, if they wanted to take up their bed and move, they could do that, but the leadership, the people who wanted to be the leaders, they were here, they didn't move. The institution changed, but that was only for the children.

What we needed out of that was the leaders to say, "I'm going to run for this office and I'm going to run for this office, and we're going to change this community." With the Voting Rights Act, people started running for office, but it wasn't because of the schools. It was because of the Voting Rights Act.

DW: So the people who took this up as an issue really were not looking in the right direction?

VO: No, I don't think so. They're still probably bemoaning Anderson, but that time passed. Now we have Kealing, we have a new Kealing school right there, and I think that's a fine school.

DW: How do you feel about the magnet school in Kealing? Some people call it a school within a school. How do you feel about that?

VO: Well, it probably is a school within a school, but it should be an integrated system where all kids who are qualified to be in that school should be there.

DW: Is this really happening?

VO: Well, what I'm hearing, some people say it's not so, that more blacks are held out of being advanced students. Now, I'm not in the system, but this is what I'm hearing.

See, if you take the magnet out of Kealing, you'll take all the white folks out. That's what they're saying. So that seems to be a problem. I mean, if it's magnet and the only ones that are in the magnet school are whites, there's something wrong with the system.

DW: There seems to be. It seems like there's no integration there.

VO: Yes. It's just like all the magnet kids are together. Initially what I think they tried to do is they would have them all there and they would be integrated, you know, socialize with different students and like that. But apparently that's not happening. I'm not sure. The same thing at LBJ [Lyndon Baines Johnson High School]. They have the problem. The kids in the magnet school have better opportunities than the regular kids.

DW: And the kids in the magnet school are usually white?

VO: For the most part, yes.

DW: How is it that our young people are not participating in the magnet school process in those two schools mentioned more?

VO: Probably there are some there, but probably it's less of them than it is white because there's more advanced students in the—I forget the word they use in the magnet, but there's more of them than us.

DW: Are we less academically proficient and are we less qualified to participate in the magnet school than our white counterparts?

VO: Well, no. I'm sure it's according to the grades. It's based upon—not on color. It's based upon academic achievement. I haven't worked on that and I haven't kept up on it, but I'm sure the system is that the students that are able to go to magnet schools are advanced students. And we have some black—

DW: Do you think the parents are involved enough to encourage our kids to achieve at the level that would put them in the magnet situation?

VO: Oh, yes. I'll tell you, a program in Austin right today that I would like to see—now, I could be talking about another group who is confronting the system wanting to do this for our children. But who needs to do this for our children? We do. We need to do for our children what we're asking the system to do. See, they have this thing called Partners in Education.

DW: Yes.

VO: And my church has Partners in Education. We participate in that Partners in Education. I participate in it. We're Partners in Education with Oak Springs[Elementary] School, and every day over there I'll bet you could count at least eight or ten people from my church daily tutoring and doing this and that and other things. And I work with the choir. We started a choir at Oak Springs.

So all of the people who are dissatisfied with the achievement of our kids, they ought to go to the school and say, "Hey, what can we do? What can we do?" You can read, and you can do some tutoring, and you can do a lot of things in the system. If ten black people come to one class and say, "I want to do something for these children," they've either got to open the door and let them do it or have a classroom where they can work with the kids to make them better students.

DW: In other words, if parents would care more and get involved.

VO: And get involved.

DW: It would make a difference.

VO: It would make a difference, yes. You've got to do it. Kids are not going to do it on their own, and the teacher is too busy, can't do it by herself.

DW: How can we generate, and we're talking about East Austin, how can we get this message over to our parents, especially our younger parents, our grandparents who are still concerned? How can we get this message over?

VO: It has to be done through the church or the organizations they join or they belong to and through the school itself, the PTA. Every group you belong to, there ought to be a message, whether it's a fraternity, a sorority, church or bridge club. Somewhere somebody ought to be teaching that message or having a flyer that says, "This can be done if we do this at such and such a school." We ought to have a lot of tutors.

See, we are retiring a whole lot of teachers. They don't need to sit home and play bridge. **[Laughter]** They need to go back to their school for free and do some volunteer work, and these kids will understand.

DW: In other words if we somehow could let the genie out of the bottle that would give us a volunteer corps dedicated—

VO: Dedicated, yes.

DW: —to our children and their progress, this would make a difference.

VO: Yes. I'm not a teacher, never was a teacher, but I work at the Oak Springs school, and I go over there once a week. It's a meaningful thing once you see the finished product.

DW: You would say to those who are critical of the situation as it stands now, your word would be "get involved"?

VO: Get involved. If you think it's bad, you get involved and change it. That's what I say.

DW: That's good. Mr. Overton, it's been enlightening, and you've given us, I think, one of the keys that would open the door to success in our revitalizing East Austin and making it, once again, a place where things happen in the interest of our kids. I wish we could take this message and broadcast it to everyone. I want to thank you for coming. It's been a treat, and we appreciate having you with us.

VO: I enjoyed it. I like to talk about the kids, especially when we see them developing.

DW: Thank you, sir, very much. That's it.

[End of interview]