

Interview with Dr. John Q. Taylor King

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Interviewed by Dr. David A. Williams

DAW: We're here at the site of old Anderson High School, a school that had a glorious past. Many great people and great things happened at this site. We're here with Dr. John Q. Taylor King, who is a product of the East Austin schools, and we're happy to talk with him. I'm going to ask Dr. King now to give us his thoughts about the background to the desegregation process, which started in 1971, which caused the closing of old Anderson High School.

JTK: Fine. Well, let's begin with the former Anderson High School. This, where we are now, was the second Anderson High School. The original Anderson High School was over on Pennsylvania Avenue where Kealing Middle School is now. There were, at that time, only two high schools in Austin. There was Austin High School and Anderson High School. Regardless as to where African-Americans lived, whether it was in Clarksville, which is West Austin, or South Austin, North Austin, or East Austin, when they graduated from junior high school they would go to Anderson High School. I mean the one over on Pennsylvania Avenue.

That's where I started in the first year of high school. It was not called L.C. Anderson High School then, just called Anderson High School. People refer to it now as the old Anderson High School. I don't put the "old" in front of it. I always say "the" Anderson High School because that was my school.

DAW: You say you attended Anderson High School when it was on Pennsylvania?

JTK: When it was on Pennsylvania.

DAW: Tell us about your experience there, some of the experiences you had as a student, and about the teachers that you had, the quality of teaching, the quality of the education you received there.

JTK: Well, I had very good teachers, very good teachers, in all of my subjects, very, very good. I learned a lot. One thing I must say about those teachers, if they thought that a student had the ability to do more than the student was doing, they would call the student in and sort of push the student. That's what they did to me. They said, "Now, you're not doing your best, and we know you can do better than you are doing. I'm sure you want to go to college," which I did want to go to college. "In order to get in college, you've got to have some good grades from high school, and not only that, your college courses will depend upon what you have learned all the way through your education career, particularly in high school."

I look back upon my English teachers, and they were just great. Miss A.M. Reed and Miss Frances Reeves, two of my great English teachers, taught me a lot. And my math teacher, Mr. C.R. Stewart, taught me my first course in high school algebra, and Mrs. Countee [phonetic] taught me algebra, and then Mr. Pickard, Mr. M.L. Pickard, taught me general science. Mr. Stewart also taught me general science, but Mr. Pickard taught me the second part of general science, and then he taught me chemistry, and I learned a lot. Mr. T.C. Calhoun taught me geometry, and I learned a lot from them.

Not only did I learn academically from them, but I learned a lot from them because of their personalities. They tried to weave themselves into the lives of their students so that the students

would see in them something important and sort of see them as role models. I did. I saw my teachers as role models, both male and female, saw them as role models, and I learned a lot. So when I graduated from the Anderson High School and went to Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, I was academically prepared because there were students at Fisk from the great high schools across the country, particularly the schools in Boston. You may remember they even referred to the schools in Boston as the Boston Latin schools. And the big schools in Chicago, schools in certain parts of upper state New York and in Cleveland and Philadelphia, as well as Atlanta and other places. So academically, I was prepared for college at Fisk University.

It was not only because of my high school teachers but because of my elementary school teachers. I learned how to build on what I had already developed. Elementary school prepared me for high school, and high school prepared me for college, and college prepared me for graduate school. So I pay in my own mind a deep debt of gratitude to all of my teachers but particularly to my high school teachers.

DAW: Do you think students today, African-American students, who attend desegregated schools have the same experience and could say the same thing that you have just said?

JTK: Well, some of them can, but I don't believe that all of them can. The teachers are good teachers. Our present teachers are good teachers, but that personal aspect which they poured into their classrooms and into their students I don't believe is the same as it was when I was in high school.

DAW: What was the social climate like at the Anderson High School?

JTK: Well, it was very good. Of course, you can't compare the social life then with the social life now, because parents then did not let their students go out as much as parents nowadays do, and there were not as many places to go then as there are places to go now. Parents were not well traveled at that time, nor were the students well traveled. Students now, many of the students who begin high school, have been places other than Austin or Travis County or even other than Texas. But so many of the students in my class, my first year class of high school, had not been out of Austin, certainly had not been out of Travis County, to say nothing about going outside of the State of Texas. It's vastly different now. So the social atmosphere then is vastly different from the social atmosphere now.

DAW: What about the on-campus social life?

JTK: Well, we did not have too many activities on campus, social activities on campus. There were some clubs there, but I guess my social activities were more or less confined to the band. I was in Mr. B. L. Joyce's first Anderson High School band, and that was great for me. I learned how to play my trumpet, and when I went to college, I could play my trumpet, and several of us got together in my freshman year and organized a dance band. We were able to play for nightclubs when they didn't look at us and realize we were not old enough to get in the nightclub. We were able to play for nightclubs and play for dances on campus and play for people in the nearby community.

DAW: That's very interesting. But as you traveled with the band, was it to play at extracurricular activities like football games and other [unclear]?

JTK: Yes, it was. Our band played at football games, and we played at concerts, we gave concerts, and we played on other occasions when organizations would ask Mr. Joyce to please bring the band and let the band play for this particular occasion. We did.

DAW: I heard that there was one occasion that was rather consistent that happened in Rosewood Park. Tell us about that.

JTK: We played in Rosewood Park, but there were bands at Rosewood Park before Mr. Joyce organized the Anderson High School band. Mr. Timmons had a band. Not the Timmons who was the coach over at Anderson, but the band director Mr. Timmons had a band that played at Rosewood Park, and he taught a lot of young people how to play their instruments. He played the violin, and my mother wanted me to learn how to play a violin. I sort of balked at that because I just could not see myself sitting down sawing away on a violin.

I wanted to play an instrument. I really wanted the trumpet, but hadn't I been able to play the trumpet, saxophone would have been fine or trombone would have been fine. But I wanted to play the trumpet. I guess the main reason was that I had a cousin by the name of Cy Oliver [phonetic] who was a trumpet player with the old Jimmy Lunsford [phonetic] Band and later with the Tommy Dorsey Band. He sort of inspired me, and I guess mainly for that reason I wanted to learn how to play the trumpet, and Mr. Joyce taught me how to play the trumpet.

DAW: Speaking of that, I've been told that there were several outstanding musicians who had their first experience at Anderson High School. Do you recall any of those people in the field of music or the performing arts or the creative arts who would fit that mold?

JTK: Well, let's see. My mind goes back to Hermi Edwards. Hermi Edwards was a tremendous trumpet player. He played the coronet, was a tremendous, tremendous trumpet player. Of course, when he went away to college he played, and he played after graduating from college.

I'm trying to think of some of the others. Young fellow who lived over on Twelfth Street was in Mr. Joyce's band and went away to college to Wiley [College], and then he went to New York and became a very outstanding trumpet player, played with some of the big bands. I'm trying to think of his name now. I should never forget his name. But there were any number of persons who were in Mr. Joyce's band and went on to play professionally after that.

DAW: Very good. Now, another thing that I've been curious about with Anderson High School was, how many students who actually were inspired to become--say, aspired to the medical profession, other professional careers, due to the great hands-on experience they had with their teachers at Anderson?

JTK: Well, that's difficult to say because there were not too many African-Americans going to medical school at that time, and it was more because of insufficient funds. They had to go to college first and take their premedical course in college and then go on to medical school, and African-American families just did not have the money to send their children to college. Those who did go to college and who had to work, some of them went on to medical school and some of those who went to medical school after college, having worked in college, had to work in medical school. So it took them a little longer than the four years to graduate from college, and it also took them a little longer than the four years to graduate from medical school.

But World War II brought about a change in that. Beginning with World War II, African-American kids began to go more and more to college and after that began to go more and more to

medical school because they were exposed to physicians and dentists and people in the medical profession.

DAW: There are those who still bemoan the fact that the closing of Anderson High School and the integration of Kealing [Junior] High School meant the disintegration of the community because the heart was taken out of the community. Would you say that this has some merit?

JTK: I'm not too sure that it did, but yet as I think about it very hurriedly, I think that might be right. The life in the community resided a lot in the schools of the community. Blackshear [Elementary School] is an example. Blackshear was sort of the hub of cultural life around that area along with Tillotson College, which was across the street, and later on Huston-Tillotson College, which was across the street. So there may be merit in that point of view.

DAW: There are others who say that we need to find some ingredient to put in the East Austin community to replace the strong influence that the public schools had through the professionals who worked at those schools. Does this have merit?

JTK: To some extent it has merit, but we also have to remember that along with the public schools, there were the churches, which lent a lot to those communities. The churches played a very important role in the development of the lives of young people. I would say the public schools and the churches were the background or backbone for the development of young African-American kids.

DAW: Finally, there are those who say that with the desegregation of schools, that our students, that African-American students, participate less in extracurricular activities, which sometimes become a strong foundation, a springboard, for students being inspired and going on to better things. Do you think that people are accurate when they make these kind of assertions?

JTK: Well, I don't know, but take the Anderson High School, which I attended. All of the activities there involved the students in the school, and now those African-American kids who go to Austin High School or Reagan [High School] or other schools, if they want to play football, then there's an opportunity for them to play football or basketball, or an opportunity for them to participate in other activities.

But at the Anderson High School, to which I went, there was a tendency and it was necessary for the faculty to encourage a student to participate so that they would have not only full participation on the part of the students but so that these activities would be ongoing.

DAW: So now it is said that we don't have hardly any students who belong to the great clubs which recognize high scholarship, such as the National Honor Society. What can the East Austin community do to help inspire our students so that they, too, can become members of the National Honor Society and get quality scholarships to leading universities and colleges? Is there anything that can be done?

JTK: Well, the home has got to take more of an active part in this. Parents have to assert themselves more so, and people in the community have to encourage the young people to study and to participate in activities within the school as well as activities in the community and to prepare themselves adequately so that when these opportunities present themselves they will be able to take advantage of it.

DAW: Dr. King, it's been a pleasure talking with you about this situation right here on the grounds of old Anderson High School or the Anderson High School, which was once down on Pennsylvania –

JTK: Pennsylvania Avenue, right.

DAW: --Pennsylvania Avenue and now sits on this beautiful hill. It's still a beautiful sight.

JTK: Yes.

DAW: But give us your closing remarks as to what your hopes are for the future of our young people and what you perceive as being the missing ingredient in their lives.

JTK: Well, I want to see all young people, not only African-American young people, but I want to see all young people take full advantage of the opportunities that are available to them, which means that they have got to participate in the academic programs of their schools, they've got to participate in the extracurricular activities of their schools to a great extent. I think if they do that, then their future will be bright, but if they don't do that, then I think those kids who do not will probably have a dismal future.

DAW: Very well put. Thank you, Dr. King. We appreciate it.

JTK: Surely. Thank you very much. My pleasure. [**Tape recorder turned off.**]

DAW: ...in the seventies, the early seventies, these were terrible times. But I'd like you to tell us something about your feelings during that terrible time when the school--how did you feel? Give us the expression of your feelings at that time, how you felt, how it affected you, and what you saw really happening to the community.

JTK: Well, of course, I'd been out of high school for a very long time. I'd been out of college for a very long time. I had been in World War II, and I continued to serve in the Army Reserve. When it was announced that Anderson High School was going to be closed, I felt pretty badly about that because I felt it would have been much better had they put more emphasis on Anderson High School to try to encourage students from all over the city to come here. Say the magnet school concept. If this facility, this Anderson High School, had had the magnet concept, that would have encouraged young people from all across the city to come here and participate in the programs that were available. But they didn't do that. They closed the school and tried to scatter the kids across to the other schools which are around. I felt very badly about that.

[End of interview]