

Jacqueline R. Matthews

A Transcription Of An Oral Interview

Urbana High School
Aug. 9, 1983

Interviewed by:
Melinda Roundtree
and Patrick Tyler

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Introduction

This interview is with Mrs. Jacqueline Matthews, presently a counselor at the Urbana Senior High School, Urbana. Mrs. Matthews' first arrival to this area was in 1970, when she attended the University of Illinois. She has been in the Urbana School District since her first arrival here.

This interview is being conducted on Aug. 9, 1983, at Urbana Senior High School, Urbana, in the attendance office on the second floor. The interviewers are Patrick Tyler and Melinda Roundtree, representing the Urbana Free Library Archives department.

Melinda Roundtree: Okay. First of all Mrs. Matthews, could you tell us your date and place of birth?

Jacqueline Matthews: Okay. I was born April 14, 1948, in Hickory, North Carolina.

Roundtree: Okay. Could you tell us a little about your family background?

Matthews: Well, I'm the youngest of two children. I was raised in the extended family in that we stayed with my grandmother until I was 6 years old. And my grandmother, grandfather, mother and father and my brother we all stayed together. My grandmother ruled the house.

Roundtree: Could you give us your parents' names, what they did?

Matthews: Okay. Well, my mother is Lucy Rendleman. My father's Tillis Rendleman. My mother's a beautician. She has been for over 35 years. She also works as a teacher's aide in the local school system. And the surprising point about her getting that job is that in 1973 I started to leave Champaign-Urbana and go home and I went in for an interview at the school system and my mother went with me to the interview and they hired both of us. So she's been there ever since '73.

My father, he works at a local department store. He had been an employee of the railroad but then he was injured in a train accident. He lost a leg so he was no longer able to be employed there.

Roundtree: All right. Could you tell us a little bit about your childhood, growing up in North Carolina, some of your experiences?

Matthews: Well, I would consider myself to have had a good life in North Carolina. Again, growing up around grandparents, they had certain values that they tried to instill within me and my brother. My father, my grandfather, made us go to the library everyday. And the first thing we were to do when we went to the library is that we were to pick up the paper outside of the library everyday that other people left and then we had to help the librarian clean, clean up, dust, sweep, whatever she wanted us to do, clean out the bathrooms. Everything was for free. And in turn, after we finished that, he expected us to read books and to write and to bring something home to show him. And the interesting thing about that was that my grandfather, he couldn't read or write but he wanted to make sure that we were able to.

Again, I had all the types of experiences, I guess, in a normal childhood. I liked to play outside as often as I could. And we imitated the things that happened on TV, television, quite a bit. We had a clubhouse which my grandfather built for us. And then we were trying to be like the Little Rascals, we had secret codes and for Superman we all made capes. And we had outfits. We tried jumping from building to building. We did a lot of climbing of trees because again, then, you know, there were a lot of fruit trees in

North Carolina. One thing that we did and we got in trouble about, is that we took the water hose to knock down a lady's pears from her tree and she didn't want us to bother with her pears. So she called the police. So again, I had a very good life and a lot of friends, a lot of support from my community.

Roundtree: How many brothers and sisters do you have and what are their names?

Matthews: Well, I just have one brother. His name is Tillis Rendleman the third, I mean the second, sorry about that.

Roundtree: All right. Did you go to school in North Carolina?

Matthews: Yes I did go to school in North Carolina. I went to elementary and high school at Ridgeview, and Ridgeview was a school that had grades one through 12. So I was at the same campus all 12 years. My mother graduated from the same high school – we had some of the same teachers. Most of the buildings that were there when she was there, they were there when I was there. After leaving high school, I received a scholarship and I went to school in Fayetteville, North Carolina, and I completed my schooling there. After leaving Fayetteville, I received a fellowship to come to the University of Illinois to study in the college of education. I came in 1970 with the intention of staying one year, but I ended up staying, well, until the present time.

Roundtree: What did you study at . . .?

Matthews: At Fayetteville, I studied elementary education. I graduated with a degree in elementary education.

Roundtree: Did you have any relatives here?

Matthews: In Illinois? No. I didn't know anyone in Champaign-Urbana. There is a lady from my hometown that lives in Chicago, but that's the only thing I knew about Chicago was the one lady that I know that is from my hometown. Again, when I came to campus, I didn't know anyone. I didn't know anything about the school other than articles that I had read within the last week. I had no idea though that the school was as large as it was. I came by myself. I cried all the way from Indianapolis to Champaign because again it looked so dreary. I was accustomed to the mountains of North Carolina and then when I was riding on the bus, all I saw was corn and soybeans. And everything was flat – it was just depressing. And again, not knowing anybody and everybody seemed much colder. They weren't as personable as Southerners were so again, I almost turned around, you know, the first day that _____.

But what happened was that I decided that I'd try to make a go of it and I, after getting to the dormitory, a guy from China carried all my baggage to my room. After that, he showed me where I could go to get something to eat. And I saw some students that were there, some black students, and I went to their table. I said, 'You don't know me and I don't know you. But I'm going to sit down and I'm going to eat with you.' And from that day forth, those have been good friends of mine ever since. And after that,

students started arriving at the dormitory that I stayed in and I got to know quite a few people. I maintained great relationships with some of these people still today, you know, and some of them left in 1973, but again, we still keep contact with one another. So again I found some very good friends here from all over the United States.

Roundtree: Where did you live when you first came to Champaign?

Matthews: I lived in Daniels Hall, which is the graduate student residence hall, and I stayed there one year. I left there after the first year and I went to ISR where I worked as a residence counselor. And then the summer after that I lived in FAR and there I served as a head counselor for the Upward Bound Program. I left the university after the first two years and I, you know, got employed in the Urbana School District. Mr. Henry Mears is an individual from North Carolina and I called him, you know, because I was seeking employment and he, you know, got the job for me in Urbana.

Roundtree: What year did you ____ in Urbana?

Matthews: I started working in Urbana in 1972, August 1972.

Roundtree: Was that here at the high school?

Matthews: Yes, I've been at the high school since August of 1972. I've had many experiences here. I worked as a counselor I think for about nine of the years. The

other two I was in administration. And my primary job I guess in administration was working discipline. But again discipline was so unlike me that I, there was no way that I could handle that task.

Patrick Tyler: How has it been now, you know, as a counselor? How have the students been, you know, _____?

Matthews: Well, I find that the best approach to use with high school students is that you treat them I guess as they are children. I do not treat them as they are adults. I assume that they're children. I believe in giving them orders and I expect them to follow them. I don't ask them, Will you? I tell them, I want you to do this. And again I trust them, and the reason I say that is I enjoy leaving things around people because again I want them to know that I trust them. And again I found from that that I've had I think maybe one candy bar that has been stolen from me, you know, in my first 11 years here, and then again I don't know if I ate that or you know we counted wrong or what. But I may have had one candy bar.

And then this past year I had an experience with my keys and they were taken, but then they were returned. So again I try to trust students and consequently, I don't know, but they don't steal from me. And, you know, I just find that that's interesting. And again, with kids I treat them, I try to treat them all alike. You know, I try to, just say be fair with all and I try to treat them as I'd like to be treated. And again, you know, I find that with a lot of the kids I've established some very good relationships. I still see some today. I still hear from some today. And, you know, I don't know. And again, I

just like people. And the children that I've had here at school are like my family since I don't have any here.

Tyler: Are the black children here at the high school more active in school programs than they were in past when you first came?

Matthews: I'm not sure. I would say that we have about the same participation. We have students participating in certain activities. There are certain ones they participate in and certain others that they don't. And I would say that it may, you know, have been about the same since I have been here. I see a difference in some of the students and their desire for accomplishments but all through the years I've found that there have been students that have always wanted to go to college. Always wanted to achieve. I find that a lot of times, though, that our goals are sometimes a little mixed up and we decide we want to go to college a little late although there are those that decide they want to go their senior year and they still are able to, you know, go to college and receive a degree. But if they had started earlier then they would have been able to choose maybe a different institution. But again, you know, I think that students are basically the same. I've found that this coming year, though, that the students that I have they have better averages. You know, it seems that the students' accomplishments and their averages in the courses, that seems to be getting better. I hope that there won't be a change in that. But I have seen, like one example, this year, that's for 1983, there were three black students that were eligible for the National Honor Society. And that is an accomplishment. Is an accomplishment.

Roundtree: Do you feel that young blacks today, in your years in the high school, are, have been, motivated more so than in the past?

Matthews: Well, in my day, I went to an all-black elementary and high school. Everybody was all black, all the teachers, all the students, everybody. Again, the way that the teachers, you know, disciplined us, in like that we didn't have any disciplinarians in the schools. We were told to do something and we were to do it. Nobody did anything any different. I think the worst thing that happened in my school when I was there, and this was all the time that I was there, is somebody threw toilet paper on the ceiling and you know we all thought that that was such a terrible thing. But no, we didn't fight at school and again that was the only problem that we had. You know, the teachers didn't have problems with students because again we didn't have it.

But again, you find that with me for example, my mother knew everybody in the school. And again, they knew that they could go home, they could tell her and that she would deal with me. And again I think that one thing that we have here is that the teachers, we don't know all of the parents. But I find that the better I get to know the parents, the better I can deal with their students. Because once parents trust you, and their children know that, you know, that they trust you, they know that they will believe what you say. So again a lot of times I find that with parents that I know, their kids know right away that if I tell their mother something that they will believe it and they will not question what I say. Very seldom am I ever questioned. And again, with students such as that, they listen.

Tyler: Are the parents more involved with the students and their curriculum, you know?

Matthews: Well, there are parents that are, and you know I guess it would be the same percentage. We need other parents that are involved. I believe that parents should come out. All parents should come out at least twice a year and I think that a lot of times parents feel that once their children get in high school, that they don't need to follow them anymore. But I think that parents, and especially black parents, they need to come to every PTA meeting. They need to come to every school function that their child participates in. If your child plays basketball, baseball, if your child is in the choir, whatever, you should attend every function that your child has, unless you have a major conflict.

Roundtree: From your years here at the high school, are more blacks continuing in higher education?

Matthews: No. I think again it's about the same. And, you know, we've had quite a few students since I've been here to have gone on to college. We have I'd say at least 40 to 50 percent of the minorities go every year, to some institution, at least 40 to 50 percent. And again, our students from here, they're going all over the United States.

Roundtree: Do you feel that they have been adequately prepared for college?

Matthews: Well, again, I would say that I think that there are those that could have done better if circumstances were different. Some circumstances that they brought on themselves, then some institutional problems that I see. But again, when I rate our students with other students, we tend to do better than students from most parts of the United States. So again, we've had students that have gone from here, and I don't think that they were that strong, but then they've been tops in their class. You know, there have been students from here that had problems getting out of English and one in particular received a standing ovation for a paper that he delivered. But his teacher here reported to me, 'Oh, I knew he could do it all the time. He just wouldn't do it. You know whenever he did work, it was good work.' So again, in the proper environment, this child, you know, his potential was realized, but again he worked harder. So again, I would say that our students are doing fairly well not as well as I'd like them to do but in comparison to the whole group in the country, we're doing pretty well.

Tyler: Has the black community been more involved in the school district as far as, you know, like for example what's happening with Dr. Young? You know, has the black community exhibited involvement in this situation?

Matthews: Well, I think that the black community gets involved in certain issues and at critical times, such as with Dr. Young and with other dismissals in the district. But again, that's not what we need to be about. We need to be a little bit more consistent. We need to be in the schools and on every issue that comes about – not just with something, such as Dr. Young. We should never let anything get that far along. We

need to be involved, from the groundwork on up, in everything that goes on in our school system. And we do not come out as we should, including myself, we do not go to all the board meetings and all the committee meetings. And again, we need to be involved in every part of the operation.

Roundtree: What kind of organizations have you joined or sororities?

Matthews: Well, I'm a member of AKA, Alpha Kappa Alpha, and I have been since 1967. I was a _____, which is the president of our chapter. But again, since coming to Champaign, Illinois, I have not been active. And I think that the reason is that I just haven't had the time. I do not just want to be on the rolls. I said I have to be a member that's willing to carry my share of the work. And again, until I'm able to do that, I will not join. I think though that I will be joining within the next two years. I am a member of Phi Delta Kappa and other than that, no. Nothing else.

Tyler: What church do you attend?

Matthews: I'm a member of Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church and I'm on the steward board there. I'm also secretary of the Willing Workers, a community-oriented group, service-oriented.

Tyler: How long have you been a member there?

Matthews: For about four years.

Roundtree: I have one last question to ask you. What improvements would you like to see in the future of UHS, with students, faculty members, whatever?

Matthews: Well, again, the progress that I've seen over the years I would not like for this to change. Again, there is a fear that I have, I guess I don't know if it's a personal fear or what, but again, with all the cutbacks and programs such as Title I, Title 4, Title 6, Title 7, I fear that eventually programs which are geared toward at helping minority students bridge the gap between the achievements and accomplishments of black and white students, again, I fear that they will be cut out. And there is a gap. We do not, black students are not coming to school as prepared as other students. And I think that is because a lot of times in the homes both parents are working, and when they come home, they're too tired to help the children.

In reference to travel, minorities are just not able to travel as much and again, they just haven't had the experiences that other students have had. There are programs outside of school in different academies at different settings, a lot of times minority students, and I mean black when I say minority, I'm talking about that minority, the parents are not able to afford the special programs, the special tutoring, the special math programs. And again, there is a gap. There's also a gap in that I think a lot times we are not as disciplined with our children and having them doing something consistently, such as after school each day I do not consistently have my children work on different subject areas. And I think that I need to do more of that. And, you know,

but again, hopefully, there will not be so many cutbacks in education wherein that we will not have the money available to help those students that need a little bit more help than others.

Roundtree: Those are all the questions that we have. Do you have anything that you want to tell us?

Matthews: Well, I don't have anything to tell you. But again in reference, I said earlier about Urbana students seem to be more qualified than others from some other places, I'd like to ask a question of you, Melinda. Do you find that I'm accurate with that statement or inaccurate?

Roundtree: I find that you are quite accurate.

Matthews: Thank you. What about you, Pat? Now I ask Melinda because again she's in Tougaloo in Mississippi and she's had the advantage of competing with students from all over the country. And again, I know that she's done well. And she's also had a sister that has done very well at another school in North Carolina. And again, that's one of the other reasons that I base my claims on such students as Melinda and her sister. Pat, can you speak to this issue?

Tyler: What's the question again?

Matthews: In reference to how do you feel that students from Urbana, the minority students, rate in accordance to other students from all over the country. Do you feel that your education has been as good as maybe some of the others?

Tyler: I feel that my education here at Urbana High has been very _____.

Matthews: Again we aren't saying that it's perfect but again, it has been better than most. And there's still a lot of room for improvement.

Tyler: Thank you.