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Oral History Interview on School Residency and Civil Rights (with video)

Milly Arciniegas

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Arciniegas, Milly

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Transcribed by: Richelle Benjamin, Trinity Class of '15

Additional files: n/a

Abstract:

Milly Arciniegas, founder of the Hartford Parent University, works in the community to help empower parents and encourage them to take control over their children's education. Her involvement in the city of Hartford also brings her into contact with residency issues within and outside the Hartford district, where she feels that district lines should not dictate a child's future in his or her early education. Milly recognizes a significant difference between the quality of schools in some districts versus others. She believes that a lack of adequate funding is largely to blame for these inequalities. Milly plans to continue being involved with residency issues and is optimistic about changes that could happen in the near future.

Speaker key:

RB: Richelle Benjamin

MA: Milly Arciniegas

[all comments by transcriber in brackets]

Richelle: Ok, Go ahead and introduce yourself to me first and tell me a little bit about what you do working the, um, Hartford Parent University.

MA: My name is Milly Arciniegas, um, I've been involved in the education system in Connecticut and nation-wide, uh, for the past thirteen years. And the Hartford Parent University, I am the director of that. And what we do there is we help parents navigate through the school system, and teach them the knowledge that they need so that they can better advocate for their children. [00:00:33.21]

Richelle: Mhm, and tell me a little bit about what kind of things you guys do, at the, at the parent university.

MA: Well, we work with parents from all over the district in Hartford. Um, we, basically we have, um, courses that they can take. And, based on their need, and uh, through these courses they learn a variety of things, anywhere from self-esteem, to um, monitoring their child's progress, to navigating the school system, um, and cultural competency, and how is that

integrated in the curriculum. Um, so, just various topics that they, that we offer them and we help them through that process and, then, they take that, whatever they learned in that training and they implement it in the school with their children. [00:01:20.11]

Richelle: Okay, um, and tell me when and why did you first become interested in school residency cases.

MA: I became interested in that because, um, I feel that all children should have equal access to a quality education. Um, I think that that should, that should be nation-wide. Um, education is very very important in a child's life, all the way from when he's born to, um, infinity, um, and I think that, um, if we don't have a quality education, equal access to a quality education for children, then that doesn't, there is, the future doesn't look bright, um, to us as a generation, um, my generation. Um, and even to them, I mean, there's jobs out there that are not, um, being filled because they're not qualified, or they don't have a college education. So if you don't start off right, you're not gonna end up right, so that's, that's why I um, I, I got involved in the first place is, in that area especially, because, um, we, we can't continue to have these lines dictate what type of, what type of education we're gonna have, so. [00:02:50.24]

Richelle: Right, um, so, tell me a little bit more about, um, I know Gwen [Samuel] is starting this End-Zip-Code-Laws thing, so can you tell me a little bit more about the idea behind that? I guess, why is this such a controversial issue?

MA: I think it's a controversial issue because the urban community has always been, um, uh, there is a stigma with the urban community as, you know, that we're not good parents, that, um, our chil- all children, all our children fail anyway, so they shouldn't be priority, um, and, um, and it's not true. That's the, that's just something that's out there. So, um, with Gwen, I mean the case where the, where the mother was homeless and she just picked a school that she felt that was quality, um, and ending up in jail, um, you know, that made me even think more about, you know, what if all schools were good? Then we wouldn't have this conversation. Um, so, I just think that they wouldn't want, because of this stigma, they don't, they wouldn't want that to come into their area. Because they pay their higher taxes, or whatever the reason, they don't want that to become, you know, to, to interfere, with what they've, they've grown in the own backyard. [00:04:22.07]

Richelle: Um, and what other things have you done with Gwen as far as advocacy or what have you, um, what kind of work have the two of you been doing?

MA: We worked on the uh, the school governance council legislation together, which was originally called the parent trigger. There was, originally there was a Hart- there was a school in Hartford. Um, it was a special education school, um, that was not, uh, providing a proper education to the children that had special needs. And this school, uh, year after year, was, was in the newspaper. Um, but the school kept moving from one location to the other. So I met Gwen

on a telephone conversation, and she came through this in her e-mail, the, this e-mail that talked about the parent trigger law in California. So she said, Milly, this might be a good way for us to put an end to that particular school. And so as we kept talking, I said, well, this is a good idea to put an end to all failing schools, because it's not just one school that is, that was failing. Many schools in the state of Connecticut, so. So that's what we did, we, we, we worked together to pass that legislation and work with other parents to get them to understand that, that, um, they can advocate for better, and they deserve better. [00:05:45.12]

Richelle: And then um, and going back to residency cases. What, what kind of stories have you heard about families, I mean, first of all, how are they doing this? How are they misrepresenting their, their addresses, or what have you, and why are they doing this? What are the main motives behind it?

MA: I think the main motives has always been, because this has been, this has been done for years. This is not new, um, where parents see that there is a quality education in a certain school and they use somebody else's address so that their children can go to that school. Every parent wants a quality education, so I think, eh, eh, with parents doing that, um, I don't fault them for doing that because we're supposed to have a quality education the way around. Um, so we're supposed to have high performing schools all the way around. I think that, that the state has, or, or some districts, and even the state knows the recipe for success already. Because they have high performing schools, so what are in those schools that are causing these schools to be high-performing? Or what's not being, what's, what, uh, population is not in that school so that they can become a high performing school. So they know this already, so why not do that, y'know, through the entire state? [00:07:23.19]

Richelle: Right, um, and, and then what ultimately needs to change? Um I know we have both the leg, the current legislation that was passed as well as the upcoming case, um, or the court date, uh, with Marie Menard. But what other things need to change in order to really fix this problem?

MA: I think that, um, we need to think differently about education and how we're educating our children. Um, and I think that, um, if we continue to operate the same way and putting the same money in the, in the same way, we're gonna get the same results. So I think that has been going on for a while, so I think there's a lot of things that they need to look at. The teachers', teachers' evaluation. That's one of the things that they need to look at. We want the best teachers in front of those classrooms. We also need to look at the other, uh, populations like the ELL populations, the special education populations. We can't over-crowd schools with those populations and expect them to have a high performing school. It's not gonna work. They know that it's not gonna work. But then they want these other schools to be high-performing schools. So, uh, there is a, there's a contradict there, because they already know this recipe of success. So they do need, they need, um, to either have more buildings to, to support the over-crowdedness and more teach- hire more teachers, hi. But you know the funding is, is, is a problem. It'll always be a

problem because they don't wanna, they don't wanna say that we need to fix this formula 'cause it's not working. So that's what needs to happen, first and foremost. They look at that form, formula and say, "Okay, can we continue to fund the teachers?" And I'm not just, just looking at the teachers. But, can we continue to sustain the teachers' salaries in the same way that we've been doing it for twenty years? And we need to be realistic. If we can't then we need to change that. Because right now, when I look at the budget, the majority of the budget goes to that, so, and, and there's like maybe one percent for program. So if, and if you don't have effective teachers in the classroom, out of all those teachers you don't have effective teachers in the classroom, then you're not gonna get great results at the end. So I, I do think they need to start with the funding. [00:09:56.28]

Richelle: Okay, and then, um, as far as your own involvement in this issue, are you going to continue being involved with residency cases? Things like this?

MA: Absolutely. I mean, I think, you know, I think the governor [Malloy] is a, is a, and the commissioner [of education, Stefan Pryor] is looking at this a little bit differently than others. Um, and they want to put an end to the status quo. Um, we can't do it over night, we got that. But I think they're taking smaller, small steps to get there, um, and so, y'know it's gonna take time but I think we're in the right direction. I feel that we're, we're making progress, um, but like I said before, every child deserves a quality education, so how do we do that for tomorrow? You know. I don't think we need to wait twenty years for that to happen. So, um, I think they're, they're taking steps to go to that direction, towards that direction, so I'm, I'm, I feel positive that we're, we're heading towards the right direction. [00:11:06.08]

Richelle: And, um, and what are your next steps? Do you have any, anything in the works?

MA: My next steps is to continue to provide parents the knowledge and the tools that they need so that they can advocate for their children in the school. I think the more we hold teachers, administrators, and staff, and everyone that has to do with education, accountable, the better results we'll get for our children. So if every parent does that individually for each, for their children, I think we're at, in the end we have to rely on ourselves to make it, make sure that our children get the quality education that they deserve, so, that's what I'm gonna work on. And I know that's a big ol' hill but, um, there is progress already, already done, so I feel, I feel good about it. [00:11:54.04]

Richelle: Okay, um, well that's all my questions. Do you have anything else to say?

MA: No, that's it.

Richelle: Alright, well thank you so much

MA: Thank you.