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Oral History Interview on Sheff v. O'Neill (with video)

Denise Best

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Best, Denise

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Location: At her home in Hartford, CT

Recording format: digital video

File name: BestDenise_medium20110810

Length: 00:53:27

Transcribed by: Katie Campbell

Additional files: BestDenise_photoAniqueThompson20110810.JPG

Abstract: Denise Best (born 1953) discusses her involvement as a plaintiff parent in the Sheff v. O'Neill school desegregation case in Hartford, Connecticut, and offers her reflections on the compromises required during the remedy phase. She describes her experience as a black woman growing up in a racially diverse neighborhood in Boston, where she opposed busing for integration, and how her views changed after relocating to Hartford in 1980. She also recounts her reasons, as a mother and educator, for moving her daughter from a Hartford public school to a suburban private school, then to a suburban Catholic school. Best also discusses her connection to the Sheff lawyers through the ONE/CHANE organization, her work with the Hartford Police to eliminate drug dealing in her neighborhood, and being grandparent of children in magnet schools, her retirement from Trinity College and current role at the Christian Activities Council.

Additional comments: Submitted as part of the [OnTheLine web-book](http://OnTheLine.trincoll.edu) by Jack Dougherty and colleagues (<http://OnTheLine.trincoll.edu>).

Speaker key:

AT: Anique Thompson

DB: Denise Best

JD: Jack Dougherty

[all comments by transcriber in brackets]

AT: The basic breakdown of the interviews is three big questions. First I'm going to start with the origins: how you got involved with the case and what it was beginning? How you started out the journey? Then I'm going to move on to legal process, what the court situation was like, how were the relations with the lawyers and the judges? Then I'm going to end with long-term reflections. Things that you learned from the case and such. [00:00:30]

DB: Ok

AT: So my first question for you is what is your earliest memory about your role/involvement in the case?

DB: I guess I would have to say my discontent with the education here as a parent and as an educator myself. I was an elementary school teacher before I moved here to Hartford from Boston and when my daughter became of age to go to elementary school the elementary school that she would have been assigned to was at the time Thirman Milner school with only 11% of the children were reading on grade level. My daughter had been tested and deemed gifted and talented in her daycare so there was no way in the world I could put her in that school. So I went about trying to find what else I could do and a young woman - she was young at the time - Shelly Jones was working for ONE/CHANE and she came over. I knew her because we were both in a performing arts group. So she rang my bell one day and literally she said: "You're always complaining. You should get involved with this suit." And that's... the rest is history. So I said "What is it about?" She explained to me what it was all about and the plaintiffs were in the names of our children so my daughter Neiima was the actual plaintiff along with Milo and seven other wonderful children who are now all adults. I remember thinking that this was never going to affect my child because I didn't know how long it was going to take but I certainly figured that she would be at least out of elementary school by the time we really got started with it, or we came to some conclusions. And in fact that was the case for all of our children. But it was certainly a worthy endeavor. I was involved with the busing that went on in Boston at the time. I was a college student and when I say I was involved in it - I was running around passing out flyers telling people not to have their children bused. So there was a sort of a gag order on me because I was not a proponent of busing although I knew that there was a need to do something and since nothing was being done Sheff was the next best thing, the lesser of two evils. I acquiesced and realizing that there was going to be a need for some sort of busing, for some sort of transporting of students but I had hoped and what we had hoped for in trying to make sure we would have sort of equal busing if you will, whereas it wasn't black children being bused out of their neighborhood to a white neighborhood to get a better education but for there to be charter schools, magnet schools, what have you... where children came this way [hand gesture] to the schools. And in fact that's kind of what's working out now. I would say its a way its working now although even that there are issues with and we can talk about that as you go along if you want. [00:03:47]

JD: Could I ask you to slide this way a little bit?

AT: So why didn't you agree with busing students?

DB: It, you know, when I was at Boston I always felt that every child deserved to have the resources necessary for a great education. Teachers, good materials, good schools, good curriculums and I did not see the need - why it would be necessary for a child to go out o their neighborhood to get those basic services, those basic educational services. So that was why I was never a proponent for busing. [00:04:27]

AT: All right. What was the importance of being a plaintiff to you? Or having this responsibility.

DB: I think as an educator, as a concerned parent, I've always been one that says - as the young

lady said "You're always complaining" then do something. You know, try to do something. Because sitting back and complaining about it to your family or friends is not making any substantial changes or systemic changes so that's why it was important to me to get involved to see if I could have a positive impact, have some input in the decision making that was going to be taking place. [00:05:08]

AT: What was the journey like for you?

DB: It was a wonderful journey because I met so many wonderful people. You know, the other plaintiffs were all bright. They were positive, they were educated, they were compassionate about education, they were compassionate about diversity. I think that was one of that major things that - one of the major impacts on me was that there were people - they were Latino, they were White, they were Black but we were all passionate about having a well-rounded diverse education for our students and a lot of those parents who were White already had their children in schools that were more diverse than others. So that was a real - of real importance to them and I think that to me stood out. The other thing is that we were, we had so much input in terms of working with the attorneys. I don't think - wow, it's been said that there's never been a plaintiff group that had that much, as much input in what went on and what was done as we did. We worked in constant with them. It wasn't them against us. Or them telling us what to do, or the other way around. We met, we had potlucks, so we sat, we ate, we socialized, and then we got down to business at a team. Team effort. [00:06:44]

JD: You're doing great, I'm just trying to make sure I get a better [unclear]. Can I turn on this light? Or this light?

DB: Either one. Push that button. And yeah, the switch broke and so it won't go up or down.

AT: I have a document here and I wanted to - this is the original complaint that was filed and I wanted to see if this brought back any memories. I circled where your daughter is listed as one of those plaintiffs. And that's just the first page. So why don't you just take a look at that.

DB: Ah yeah, I realize that I had already taken her out of public school at that point. I had forgotten that. Yeah, she was at Cedar Court Catholic School. 12 years old. Yeah, you know I had forgotten some of the names. I remember all of the faces. Carol and Tom still very, very active and Eugene Leach was my professor at Trinity.

AT: Really?

DB: So... actually when I went to Trinity, he was one of the people that interviewed me and I'm speaking of the beginning I will never ever forget that sitting at the interview and someone said... "So, I understand you're involved with Sheff v. O'Neill." and I'm thinking: "Is this gonna be a good thing? Or is this gonna be a bad thing?" And I'm trying to weigh it out real quickly before I say.... "Yes!" and not: "No, I never heard of Sheff." But you know, Trinity is wonderful and liberal and just great faculty and supportive and of course Gene Leach was going to be involved and I didn't realize that at the time. So yeah, it was, I didn't know what kind of stigma might come with you know, being in a suit against the governor. But that was the only time that I really

was concerned about it. [00:09:17]

AT: So you mentioned that you took Neima, is that how I pronounce it?

DB: Yes.

AT: You took her out of public school. Why and like how was the process? Was she in the Choice program or...

DB: No, cause there was no way I was going to have her bused. She was at the Mark Twain School. Which was actually a very good school. Had a superb teacher - principal. Had some great teachers too. I forgot the woman's name now but there was a woman who had actually designed the gifted and talented program for the Hartford Public School system and - but she left town before it was actually implemented so I'll keep my comments as positive as possible. The school system decided to implement sort of a watered down gifted and talented program and it started out with a conference that parents and kids went to and I'll never forget what - first of all, let me say she [Neima] was skipped ahead so she went, she skipped Kindergarten, went to First grade so she was younger than all the other kids in the school. I remember she used to say: "Mommy it's too long at school." You know it was like a long day for her. But what happened was the principals were asked - the principals asked their teachers rather "Who would be willing to take these exceptionally bright children and challenge them in your classroom?" As an educator I know you need to be trained to deal with gifted and talented children and as you need to be trained with students on the other end of the spectrum who have other special needs. Gifted and talented children are generally not gifted and talented across the board. They have strengths, they have weaknesses and those have to be recognized, documented, and then taught to the strength or the weakness depending on what it is. So while the teachers who agreed to do that had their hearts in the right place, they didn't necessarily have the training to do that. Because of my educational background, a graduate of Lesley University I knew that and we went to a conference where we were only one of the black parents. I think there were two other black families involved and when I found out what was going on in the other schools around the state I was just incensed. In the end what made me take her out of that particular school was that the teacher that she had in the fourth grade simply refused to address her needs. She just wouldn't do it. And she said that she wouldn't do it in a meeting with the principal and he was very angry. I'll never forget as an educator, as a teacher, I know that the principal is going to be as far as the parent's concerned - he's going to be with that teacher. Now after the parent leaves, he may give the teacher the what for. But he was so angry he literally banged on the table because she was just saying "No. I'm not going to do it." She had not particularly agreed to work with these children but now my daughter started there first grade. This is not fourth grade, third grade, fourth grade - something I don't remember. So she was like "No I'm not doing that." So I said "Well then I guess I'll be taking her out of the school." And that's when I put her in Catholic School. [00:12:39]

AT: The next question I have for you is could you describe the neighborhood that you lived in and the schools that your daughter attended?

DB: [sirens blaring in background, Best smiles] My neighborhood. [00:12:51]

AT: Yeah, I'm used to it. Could you describe the neighborhood that you lived in and the schools that your daughter attended while the case was going on?

DB: This neighborhood, it's the same neighborhood, was drug infested, drug dealer infested at the time. Drive-by. This street in particular was probably about 40 percent home owner occupied at the time, so when we bought our house, you know, coming from Boston, if you... You bought a home in a neighborhood and a street like this, you would find most of the owners lived on one floor or the other and then then rented the other floors. But I was dismayed to find that most of these houses were owned by absentee landlords and all of the units were rentals, so there was no buying. People did not care. The owners were not providing management of the properties so that someone would pick up and clean and do the lawn or what have you. So it was... I was quite disappointed. I moved here in the winter time and was unable to see... Never buy a home in the winter. I was unable to see what it was actually going to be like and in the summertime, the people behind... the street behind me... People were so used to walking through that yard. They literally tore down our stockade fence... [00:14:21]

AT: Wow.

DB: ... so that they could continue to use that as a pathway from Lenox Street to Deerfield Avenue. So it was rough. There were... there was police on the street a lot. There were drug dealers who literally torn down my fence by leaning on it like this [demonstrating] during the day. The majority of the people actually worked on the street so that it was, you know, open season for drug dealers who did not, by the way, live on the street and often not only didn't live in the neighborhood, but one notorious drug dealer lived in Springfield, Massachusetts. So during the day when we were at work, they were here doing their business. So it was a battle. And I'll tell you the truth. I called the police a lot, you know, I didn't know who was who, I didn't know a lot of people here at the time and one day I decided to... rather than calling 9-1-1, you've got very little service that way. You wait for, you know, 30 minutes, 45, an hour before someone would even come. By then, it's too late. I called Vice Squad, and believe it or not, I got Sargent Daryl Roberts and he helped me. I mean, really, he single handedly cleaned the drugs off of this street. He set up several stings. He would call me and say... There was a shooting gallery across the street. The owners absentee. The tenants all Section 8. This is not disparaging against Section 8, but just to... They were all Section 8 tenants, and that's all they cared about, was getting the money, that's why I say Section 8, because that was guaranteed rental every month. So they really didn't care who was in there, they didn't screen, and people would... The basement door was always open. People would go in there, they would shoot up, they would sit out on the stairs, there would be arguments. There was all kinds of drug trafficking and finally, after meeting with Daryl getting him to meet with my neighbors, setting up... Getting standing complaints with the police department, where you go and you fill... you sign a form saying that the police actually have a right to come and get people off of your property. And then we all got signs that said "No Loitering". And then on one particular day, he called me and he said "Look out the window. See those guys sitting on the steps?" "Yes." He said, "Those are my guys." So people who came from the suburbs and from the insurance companies generally white people in suits and ties would come during the day to buy drugs. So they would come, the cops would sell them the drugs and, you know, my street has a... it goes up a little bit on an incline and when they came down the

other side, there was a police van pulling them over and taking them to jail, or to, you know, the police station. So that's... that was the beginning of it and he's, you know, worked with us... He's still working with us. Now I work with him on a whole other capacity. You know, he's the Chief of Police, I'm in community development. We have a wonderful community policing program with him and a wonderful community service office. It's just great. I can go on and on about that, but that's not what this is about. But that's what the street was like when I moved here and I really didn't think I was going to stay. I really did not. I was concerned that my daughter would be hurt or killed out here with the kind of activity that was going on but little by little, there were many factions that changed the complexion of the street, the quality of the street, and so now, you know, it's a wonderful place to live. It really is. [00:17:59]

AT: Where was Cedar Court located?

DB: It was and it still is on Park Road in West Hartford. It's connected to a... I can't think of the name of the church now. That's a shame. Well, it's the Sisters of St. Joseph's, I can remember that much. Before she went there, she went to the Master's School in Simsbury which was a horrible, horrible experience for me, for her. Well for me, more so for me I think because the first thing they did was they put her back a grade because she had skipped a grade, and I agreed, because I said "Well, you know, it's possible that she doesn't have, she's not the same skill level that she would have been had she been in the school all along." So they took her from fifth and they put her back in fourth, which put her in her regular grade, so it wasn't like she was being put back but... Then I found out that they didn't have a real curriculum there, because, you know, I'm an elementary school teacher, so I asked "What basal reading series are you using?" and such and they didn't have as many answers as I would have liked. I found that there was a lot of racial disparities there, not just in the population of students, but just in the attitude of the staff. I'll just leave it at that. So after a year, and five thousand dollars, I took her out of there and I put her in Cedar Court and they tested her and said she was reading on an eighth grade level. So here's a school the previous year who took her out of fifth grade and put her in fourth grade. There you go. Now she goes to a Catholic School and, oh my god, she's on an eighth grade level. So Cedar Court was a good experience for her, small classrooms. She was always a very studious person, even to this day, loves to do research. I never once had to say "Go do your homework." Even on Christmas vacation she would do her homework that first weekend. I guess because as a... in Kindergarten and daycare, I would say to her "You know, if you do your homework as soon as you get home from school, you have the whole rest of the day to play." And I remember I could see her mind going "Really? Yeah." And so that sort of... it was that way all the way through college. She did her work right away. If there was a project due, she did it right away, got it out of the way. She was always a great, great student and always deserved the best that she... that I could provide for her. [00:20:36]

JD: Pardon me again, I lied. I'm going to ask you one more time. Can you sit right there?

DB: [laughs] Okay. Oh, too funny. [00:20:52]

JD: I told you I was... That's why I bring two cameras, just so I can try to get this right, since I am not a professional. And you've got a good... great story. Please continue, sorry to interrupt.

AT: Okay. When the Sheff case was moving through the legal process, what was your role?

DB: Um, I don't think my role was any different than any other Plaintiff. I think we all were charged with getting... educating as many people as we possibly could, getting as many people on board with what we were proposing. Yeah, I didn't have anything specific. I mean, it felt to me like Elizabeth was doing all the real work. She was so passionate and so knowledgeable. I was kind of like... just kind of following along and learning as I went. The attorneys though were just awesome. John Brittain and Wesley... Wesley, Wesley, Wesley...Let me look at this again. What are the names? [laughs] They, you know, they would just... [00:22:08]

AT: Horton?

JD: Horton, she said it.

DB: I'm sorry? [00:22:11]

AT: Oh, I said Horton. I think it was Wesley Horton.

DB: Horton. Thank you, right. Horton, that's right. Wesley Horton. They were just tremendous and the ACLU folks, just really, just what you read about in books, you know, when you are reading history and you read about these movements and the passion that these people have. That's... that describes them. I mean, they were always there, they were always ready, they were always thinking, they were always pushing us to think, they always wanted to know what our thoughts were and they were supportive of us. We supported each other. It was quite a unique experience. But as I said, I didn't have any specific role other than to do speaking engagements. We went to various towns to do that. I remember Glastonbury was so receptive, they were so wonderful. Glastonbury, East Hartford. Really interested in being a part of this and creating diversity for their schools as well and that was so encouraging. I remember thinking that there are so many more good people than not. Yeah, yeah. [00:23:26]

AT: Okay. What do you remember most about the court case?

DB: I remember the set-backs, I remember the disappointments, I remember not getting exactly what we had hoped we would get. I remember having to settle for things. I remember being angry at Blumenthal. I remember how majestic John Brittain was. Man, that guy, I'll tell you, he would have you spellbound, just the way in which he presented himself. I remember thinking that he was quite an awesome guy. And Wesley, who had a knack for details, I mean, they were just superb. But I remember the disappointments, I remember us hoping that we would... that not only would we win, but that we would actually get something, a product that was worth having. I remember that, being pervasive. You know, concern that we're not going to get all of this, you know, it's not going to work exactly how we envision it, but it is going to be better than it was and knowing that if we had to settle, we had still made a mark. [00:24:52]

AT: How did your friends and family feel about your involvement in the case?

BD: Well, I think they were proud. They were proud of me. They were not surprised because,

you know, as I said, even before I moved here, I was involved in the busing movement in Boston, Mass. So I don't think they were at all surprised, but I think that they were proud that I had taken this extra step, particularly because I was not a native of Hartford, and it made it a little more difficult, but the people... the other plaintiffs were very welcoming and there was... I didn't feel as I did in other arenas here that "Who does she think she is? She's not even from here." I never felt that with Sheff v. O'Neill. So yeah, family and friends were intrigued, they were proud, and you know, one thing that I didn't mention was that the kids got such and awesome education during this too. They didn't have as much input of course as the parents, but they were involved every step of the way. They were at all of these meetings, and so they absorbed what they could for their ages and I think that was very, very productive in terms of their development and the way in which my daughter handles herself now,... we... I have four beautiful grandchildren and thanks to Sheff v. O'Neill, they all went to University of Hartford Magnet School. My oldest granddaughter, who will be twelve next month, graduated from there and went to Two Rivers last year. This will be her second year at Two Rivers. She was accepted to every single magnet school she applied to and every private school she applied to. [00:26:49]

AT: Wow. That's great.

DB: There was no money attached to that, but she got the education that we were fighting for. That is an awesome school. I mean, what a community school that one is. The teachers, the parents, the students. I have a friend who has been in education her whole career, we went to lesson together, so 45 years or so, she's been in special ed. She was amazed at the level of calm and peace at University of Hartford Magnet School, that there was never anyone yelling at their students. There were never children running and screaming through the hall. She'd gone... my youngest grandson, he's not the youngest of the four, but he has Down Syndrome and she would come and sit in PPTs with us and she was amazed at the kind of support that they've always given him. He's been mainstream throughout. She couldn't say enough good things about it and I'm proud to say that Sheff v. O'Neill had a lot to do with that, and, you know, the successes of the other schools. Capitol Prep, come on now. You know, it's made national history. [00:28:02]

AT: Yeah, they are great.

DB: Yeah, so, it makes me proud to have been involved. Saddened that there's still children left behind. There's still schools that are not up to par, and unfortunately it's the parents... there are too many parents that are children raising children who are not focused, can't be. Some of them are illiterate themselves. Graduated from high schools here in the state, but yet still illiterate and don't know... don't have the wherewithal to make sure their children are in those lotteries. So what you have is what we did not want to see was the best and brightest children leaving the schools, these neighborhood schools and going to these magnet schools and leaving behind these children who don't have the same access simply because their parents are not looking for that for them. Maybe not aware of it, don't understand how to work through the system, or simply just not getting that lottery ticket. I mean, you know, it's a shame. I have a coworker who, actually I don't know where his daughter is going. She was on the list for Capital Prep. She was like number eleven and ten and nine. He's like this [holds hands in prayer form]. "Oh my god." You know, it's horrible. It's like going to the gas station and buying a lottery ticket. "Am I going to win or not?" And I don't think we should... our children's education should be based on a lottery

number. It's... I... It's just... It's nerve-wracking. I remember with my own grandchildren, we were lucky that one of them got in and at the time, if one got in, then they all went there. But it's sad. The system is flawed. It's a flawed system. Again I will say, it's probably one hundred percent better than it was, but there are still many issues that need to be addressed and there's still inequities. Still inequities. [00:30:15]

AT: Did you encounter opposition in your role in this case and if so what type?

DB: Never. I never encountered any opposition. Probably because I surround myself with like-minded people but really there were... I don't recall... even when we had public meetings and we were educating people, I can't ever recall anyone standing up saying "Oh, you know, this is ridiculous and what are you complaining about?" You know, you might read an article here or there that would say something, you know, like "This was... our facts were not accurate or whatever," but you know, open your eyes. You know, just go in a school and look and see what the materials are like and... there are far too many teachers who treat teaching as just a J-O-B and not a commitment, a profession, a responsibility in educating our children. Far too many that would... I can remember when I would pick up my Neima from Mark Twain. While there were a great many wonderful teachers there, there was one who always out just before the bell rang with visions of Bloomingdales in her head. I could see her thinking "Oh, that Tiffany lamp. I wonder if it's still there." And the kids would come out of the school and they would just run. They would just disperse and they'd run and their coats would be open and I was an elementary school teacher and I can remember lining my kid up saying "Put your hat on." "[in child's voice] I don't want to wear my hat." "You mother sent you to school with your hat, you're going to go home with you hat. Put you hat, put your gloves, button up, zip up," you know. Taking care of those children as though they were my own, that's the job of an elementary school teacher and far too often, we don't have that in our community. Far too often, our children are not nurtured the way that they would be if the teachers lived in the community. When we were growing up, you know, you knew Mrs. Wilson so you were good on the sidewalk, because you knew you were going to see her in school, and vice versa, you knew... you were good in school because she knew your mother and so you're gonna... you don't want her to come home to your neighborhood and say, you know, "Denise was acting up in school today." So, you know, we've lost that now, with teachers coming from god knows where into the inner city to teach our children. I would love to see... my ideal would be that teachers taught in their towns where they lived, children went to school, to the neighborhood school where they could walk and not spend hours in the morning getting to school and hours in the evening getting home. That would be, to me, a good educational system. But in lieu of that, we have what we have and we do the best that we can. [00:33:11]

AT: Do you still attend hearings follow changes made to the original hearing?

DB: Only when I'm forced to [laughs] and I say that because, you know, I... I've moved on and I am involved in so many things and I have so many hats. If need be, I will be there, but I really think it's important to have newer, younger parents invested in this process now. Certainly I still back them and if I get a phone call, I will come, but I'm not very much hands on. I really... I'm looking at working on the library, community policing, you know, quality of life, deferred maintenance, so many other issues in our neighborhoods that are now priorities for me.

[00:34:02]

AT: Okay. So I'm just going to take a little pause right there and I have something else to show you. This is a picture and I wanted you to just tell me whatever you can, whatever comes to mind, and explain what was going on, what you remember about that day [shows photo of the 2003 Sheff settlement.]

DB: Oh gosh. You know, I can't remember what phase this was, where we were, but we had won. We had won... we had won a battle and I can barely see myself and if I could see myself a little more, maybe I could say "Oh I remember wearing that and that mean this..." This particular day... I don't recall exactly which battle was won that day, I just remember how happy we were. I can see that, I can feel the joy, the success that we felt that particular day, but I'm sorry, I don't remember which... We had a few. We had a few successes and I can't pinpoint which one this was exactly. Sorry, sweetie [00:35:14]

AT: Okay, alright. Thank you. That's okay.

DB: Menopause. In the meantime, menopause has kicked in and the doctors say my memory will return someday. [laughs, with AT and JD] [00:35:24]

AT: Well, that's good.

JD: Just out of... I think it was... I think that's around 2003...

DB: Oh my goodness. [00:35:31]

JD: ... and there's... the settlement agreement with your friend Blumenthal and everyone else.

DB: Yes, yes. He had kind of... I remember when he sort of shifted to our side and I gained a lot of respect for him. Yeah. 2003, wow. That was eight years ago. No wonder I can't remember, now I don't feel so bad. We did. We had a few successes on the way and yeah, that was a great one, you're right. You're right. Thank you. [00:36:04]

AT: Yep, no problem. Oh well, for sure. So I'm going to run some long term reflections now. Looking back, what lessons have you learned from the Sheff case?

DB: Well, I think I learned to temper your idealism. You know, it's... I think in the beginning we were so idealistic that, you know, we couldn't see anything wrong with what we wanted. We couldn't see... we couldn't anticipate any resistance to what we wanted because it was well thought out, well planned, good intentioned, certainly necessary, a landmark and all of those things. So I think I learned that it's a long journey when you're trying to make systematic change. Long journey. Yeah, but it helps to be... that you're not alone, that you're with good people, that you have good attorneys who really cared. It wasn't about money for any of them. It was the principle. Yeah. [00:37:27]

AT: In hindsight, would you have done anything differently?

DB: [pauses] No, I don't think I would have. Perhaps we may have tried to get more of what we wanted, but I don't think we would have. I think we had to compromise. I think that compromise was necessary to continue to move forward. So, in hindsight, I don't think I... we could have done anything much different than we did. Yeah. [00:38:14]

AT: Okay. Did being involved in the Sheff case change your life in any way?

DB: It absolutely did change my life. Again, I just... you know... I gained a lot of respect for the ACLU, learned a lot about the organization and the wonderful things that they've done and continue to do. I don't think I would have known. I wouldn't have been that intimate with that had I not been involved with Sheff v. O'Neill. I met Elizabeth Sheff who, you know, we became friends and colleagues. She became a student in my graduate program at Trinity. I have a lot of respect for her and her intuitiveness, her intelligence, her compassion, her passion and as with the rest of the plaintiffs... and I think what I enjoyed most is looking at the young men and women who were eleven and twelve... nine, ten, eleven years old at the time to see what wonderful adults they've turned out to be due to their parents and their own involvement in this. I mean, this may have played a small part, but indeed it played a role in their development. I'm just excited what they are doing and again, when I look at my own daughter and the wonderful way in which she has educated her children, they're all bright, they're all beyond their years in terms of reading, development. The two eldest ones are in math Olympiads. You know, they read voraciously. I have a box of books in my car. We went to a... went to the Vineyard this summer and there was a sale at the library and I haven't brought them up because I can't carry them. We went and bought all these books because they all love to read. I... you put them in the car and just throw a book down and immediately, even the six and a half... she's six and a half... they'll immediately pick that book up. My grandson Russell with Down Syndrome has got that book, he's got that... you know, he's reading, he's talking about what's going on in the pictures. All of that came out of, you know, my daughter growing with the knowledge that education is foremost, education is the most important thing you can give your children, and she's been doing that consistently, being involved in the PTO at their schools, supporting their art project, their science projects and so forth and so on. Stemming from that, their music lessons. They play violin and cello and R.J., my grandson, who is now ten was in To Kill a Mockingbird with the Hartford Stage. Fifty four performances he did. So yeah, all of that kind of stemmed from that exposure to understanding that education is key, you know, and it's like that. When I conversations with the other plaintiff parents I know that it's the same way with their children. They've gone through high school, they've gone to college, they've graduated, they're working, they're doing such wonderful things and I think that... I know that being involved in the case had a lot of great influence on all of those children and the parents as well, for that matter. Yeah. [00:41:54]

AT: Yeah. Do you still keep in touch with other plaintiffs or lawyers?

DB: I have not been in touch with any of the lawyers for a while, but I do keep in touch with some of the plaintiffs, yes. [00:42:07]

AT: Okay. How have public education opportunities changed in the Hartford area over time and what is your opinion of these changes?

DB: Well, you know, I have mixed feelings about them because you can't simply change the name of a school and you can't call an academy for excellence and there it is. It just doesn't work that way, and systemic change is slow and so we still have a long way to go, but I will say that I've met a number of teachers who work at a number of the different magnet schools and I think we have some every dedicated people who have bought into the idea, the components of what makes a magnet school a good one. But again, I worry about those children that are left behind in your Wish and your Waverly schools. I applaud Tyrone Richardson over here at the Milner Core Education Academy, I think that's what it's called now. He's a wonderful guy who has turned that school into a community school. Now there community school, a neighborhood school working well. It's not a magnet school, so it doesn't get that designation but at any given evening in... during the year that school is open. There are programs going on. He solicits help from Christian Activities Council, from Catholic Charities, and other groups to come in. There's mentoring, there's tutoring going on. It's open for community events, forums and so forth. That's what we need, you know, and if everyone could do what Tyrone Richardson is doing with the Milner Core Academy, then we would be... we could say we were truly successful, because then you could see that the magnet is just an option. We can still have a neighborhood school that works well. Here was the danger that I found is that... and I see it through his eyes... so many of the children in his neighborhood do not attend his school. So when you are trying to get parent involvement from the neighborhood, those children... those parents aren't involved because those children are going to University of Hartford Magnet, Metropolitan, and others. So it's sort of defeats the purpose almost, and that was, I think, one of our biggest fears and I see that coming to fruition. The kids that live in the neighborhood do not go to his school, you know, a lot of them don't and so some of the best kids are not there. Some of the best parents who are involved in their kids' education are not there. But you know, against all odds, he's doing a terrific job there and I'd live to see that happen and the other Hartford Public Schools that are not the magnet/charter type schools. I'd like to see more of that. [00:45:32]

AT: So those are all the questions I have about the Sheff case. [to JD] Did you have anything else?

JD: We should... Denise, this has been very helpful and it's a wonderful opportunity to listen. We should just ask a couple of biographical questions like what year were you born? Where were you born? And what brought you to Hartford?

AT: Yep.

DB: Okay. Well, I was born in 1953, way back in the 1900's. I was born in Boston, South End of Boston which was multiracial, multicultural and it wasn't planned that way, it's just the way it was and I grew up with and went to school with people of African American, West Indian American, Chinese American, Lebanese, Syrian, a couple of Japanese and later on Latino. Puerto Ricans came late to Boston area. So I grew up in what we're trying to create now and so I guess that's probably why I always knew the benefit of a diverse neighborhood, diverse schools. Boston was very racist. We use to call it the Mississippi of the North as we were growing up, but

in the South End... we may have had one or two teachers that were a little off but the neighborhood, the community was diverse and everyone got along. We celebrated each other's holidays and holy days and festivals and got to learn a lot about each other's cultures which is... and as I said, it was a natural cause, it wasn't forced and so that was wonderful. I came here in 1980 with my first husband. He had gotten a job offer with Travelers and they moved us here and when we first moved here, we lived on Asylum Hill which I liked because it had the same kind of South End feel that I was used to. It was diverse. Not quite as diverse as my Boston neighborhood, but it was diverse and I felt very comfortable there. But then we... After a year we started looking for a home to purchase and ended up over here. [00:47:58]

AT: What is your occupation?

DB: I am... I retired from Trinity in 2009 where I was a Director of Graduate Studies and Special Academic Programs, overseeing all of their adult, non-traditional programs. The non-traditional programs, whether they be adult or not and non-matriculating student programs. I retired from there and I started doing community development with Christian Activities Council. My title... official title is Coordinator of Comprehensive Community Development. [00:48:34]

AT: Okay. And how do you define your race or ethnicity?

DB: I consider myself a "Basian" American. Yeah. [00:48:45]

AT: All right. That's it.

DB: Thank you.

JD: You've been very kind, Denise. I... just one last thing to ask. The Boston connection. I don't think I've ever heard you say this story before. You were handing out fliers to try to get people to stop...

DB: Right, to not allow their children to get involved in the bussing because they... [00:49:04]

JD: Can you tell me more about that?

DB: You know, I was in college at the time and I just said "Why do black children have to move... leave their community and go to a white school to be educated?" I just didn't see it, I did not see it. We had METCO already at the time. I didn't want to expand on the METCO. I wanted to have equitable resources given to these schools and you know the funny thing about this that I will say that came out of the bussing in Boston? Because of the idea of white privilege, the white Irish Americans of South Boston naturally assumed that they were getting a better education than the African Americans in Roxbury, Dorchester and the inner city schools and bussing showed them that they were ever so wrong and that it wasn't about race at all, that it was about class because black people knew we were getting less quality materials. We fought all the time. We wanted better books, you know, we wanted blackboards, we wanted materials, we wanted telescopes... rather microscopes for our science labs and so forth, where in South Boston, they were thinking "Well, we're getting what everybody else is getting." So they were greatly surprised

and very much angered when their children started coming into our schools, because it was a switch. White children coming into black neighborhoods, black children going into white neighborhoods, Charlestown to South Boston and so forth... To find that our schools were actually better off than theirs were. So that was an interesting little take on that. But no, I... and to this day, I would love it if my grandchildren could walk to school with their little lunch box in their neighborhood and I think that... when we reach that, then we will have an ideal educational system in this country. [00:51:06]

JD: And there's one acronym you used. I don't know if the young people in the room know. You mentioned it was... you said it was Shelley Jones was an organizer of ONE/CHANE.

DB: Oh, ONE/CHANE, yes.

JD: [to AT] Do you know what that is?

AT: I do not.

JD: Would you mind explaining it?

DB: Let me see. ONE/CHANE. C-H-A-N-E. It was a neighborhood organization... social service organization. Community... what, I can't... I don't even... [00:51:37]

JD: The acronym doesn't matter, it was just...

DB: I don't remember the acronym, yeah. I don't remember. [00:51:40]

JD: Just describe what they did.

DB: Yes, that's what they did. Daycare and literacy programs, that kind of thing, yeah. Social service networking. And yeah, education was a big one for them. [00:51:58]

JD: So it was their organizer who got you connected with the Sheff people? Interesting.

DB: Yes. Yes. I believe... If I'm not mistaken, Eddie Perez was the Executive Director at that time, ONE/CHANE. He's done an incredible amount of wonderful works for the city of Hartford. [00:52:18]

AT: And how do you spell his last name?

DB: P-E-R-E-Z. [00:52:23]

JD: The former mayor.

AT: Oh, Eddie Perez. I say it differently.

DB: I say it the way he says it. [laughs] Yeah. Perez.

JD: So did you... you didn't... Did you know any of the plaintiffs before you met them?

DB: No.

JD: Before you met them for the suit?

DB: Right, no. I know what you mean. No, I didn't know any of them. I met them all when we got involved with the suit. [00:52:47]

JD: And do you think that ONE/CHANE got any other plaintiffs lined up for the suit like you? We've heard different people explain different pathways.

DB: Yeah, I don't know. [00:52:57]

JD: This is the first I've heard.

DB: Oh, then maybe I may have been the only one. [00:53:03]

JD: But we haven't heard everyone's story.

DB: Yeah, I don't... I don't know. I never... I never met a plaintiff who said "Oh, Shelley also..." or "Somebody from ONE/CHANE..." Yeah. I may have been the only one, that's interesting. Never thought about that. Yeah. [00:53:19]

JD: You've been articulate as always and your story's quite compelling and...

AT: Yes, thank you very...