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Interview with Delores Brooks

by Dr. Joseph Watras

October 11, 1990

JW: I'm talking with Delores Brooks. You were a teacher at Center City School in 1971. You were one of the original teachers. How did you happen to become involved with the school?

DB: I knew Lois Hyman from teacher training at Wright State. She was an instructor of mine. It's an interesting story because she was a very hard task master. I remember I was taking a methods course, Language Arts, (that was her forte). The next semester I was to be student teaching and I knew that she was a student teaching supervisor and I prayed that she would not be my supervisor.

JW: Your prayer was not answered!

DB: My prayer was not answered. The first day of student teaching I was working in Kettering and she came in and I couldn't believe it. At first I didn't recognize her because in class she had always worn a blond wig in those days when we had those big boufant wigs. When she came to my class to observe me, she didn't have her wig on. And I thought, "Who is this lady?" Then I looked at her and I recognized her face as Lois Hyman. That was the beginning of a very happy relationship. Because we worked very well together. She was a different person on a one-to-one basis than as an instructor. We had no problems at all. Anyway, I had graduated from Wright State in 1971 and was looking for a teaching position and I noticed an article in the newspaper during the summer of 1971 about this new private

school being started in downtown Dayton and it had her picture in the paper. So I called her and I asked her if she remembered me and if she did could I come for an interview. And she said yes, of course. That's how it all started. I came down to the church and we talked and I was hired.

JW: There were 4 teachers that first year?

DB: There were 4 teachers. I think she had originally hired 5, depending on the enrollment and we didn't have enough students to warrant an extra teacher. So we had 4 and my first class was a 3rd and 4th grade with 5 children. The first day of class I had 5 children. Three 4th graders and 2 5th graders. It eventually grew throughout the year but I closed the year with 10. Our maximum enrollment was 18. We never had more than 18. But if you've been in the building and see the rooms, you'll know why we had small classes.

JW: There are some pictures of the kids climbing around on sculptures - is it an atrium?

DB: An atrium, yes. That really wasn't done a lot. We didn't go out there; that was strictly an artistic viewpoint.

JW: The aim of the school began as a Christian school, but that seemed to have drop out...In the original statement of purpose it says that it was to be a Christian school, but that seems to have not been a part of the founding of the school. It was nonsectarian, at best.

DB: Absolutely. In fact, that was stressed that we not bring religion into the school at all. Which was a

little difficult for me at first when holidays came up, for example. We were discouraged from any kind of association with the holidays: Christmas, there were to be no Santa Clauses, no Christmas trees, no decorations whatsoever. Now we could talk about it and we could teach about these holidays; in fact, one of the - I don't know if the school board who insisted on this, or our headmaster - but as the teacher of the older children I was to teach a unit on the broad religions every year. And I did this at Christmastime. We talked about Christmas, in that context, but then we also talked about other holidays. We had, in the beginning, a sizeable number of Jewish children. So we included the Hanakkuah and other Jewish holidays. But there was to be no connection with any religion whatsoever.

JW: The school was originally started, at least when a group of parents got together out in Dayton View, they said that what they were trying to do was to show that integrated education could work in the Dayton schools. Was that stressed as an important part of the school? That it have a social aim?

DB: It could be, although from my point of view it was always stressed that we were to be an example of how the...

JW: ...individual education?

DB: Not just that. That there can be a good education found in the city. I always understood it that we were there to bring life to the city, which our founders felt that the city was dying out. The people were leaving Dayton because of the busing problems, white flight. We were to be a mecca to draw them back; that there is a place to come for

a good education, if you're worried about that. In fact, it was stressed that our city was our learning lab. That was one of the exciting parts of teaching there because the city was out learning lab. We could walk to different places in town and field trips were encouraged and visiting speakers were encouraged to come. So I thought it was a place to bring people back to the city, to see that it was a good school and that something vibrant could occur in the heart of the city. Which I think is a neat concept, really.

JW: In that sense, it wasn't in competition with the public schools, it was in cooperation with the public schools. Did teachers from the public schools come to visit Center City School at all? Or the administrators?

DB: We had a lot of visitors, as I recall. In fact, we just didn't even look up after awhile, because Lois was always coming to the door with somebody. We had a lot of media coverage in the beginning. That died down after awhile. But it seemed like she was always bringing visits around and who they were, I don't really know. They could have been teachers or interested parents. But there was always somebody there.

JW: How successful do you think you were in that aim of revitalizing the city? In looking back?

DB: On a large scale?

JW: Or a small scale.

DB: On a small scale, I feel we were successful in the time that we existed. I think we met that objective, especially those first 5 years. I think we were very successful. We had a lot of wonderful learning experiences

in the city. Well, when you have a small class, there's a lot you can do, so the size helped, too, of course. And we had a lot of connections with community members, people who were either members of the church or had their children in our school and they helped a great deal. We went to the courthouse and the Winter's Bank and the top of the bank. The Barber College. I mean it, you name it, and we went.

JW: So the city really was a resource?

DB: Yes, it was. We used the downtown library. We had no library, per se, at first. As far as I know we didn't end up with a very good one. So the downtown library was used frequently.

JW: You had trouble with a gymnasium, too, I guess you used the YMCA? The room downstairs?

DB: When I was teaching we used what we called the assembly room or the recess room. That's where they had recess. Yes, it was a small room and not the safest. That was the best we had. The children had to have a little break and there was no place to take them outside.

JW: No, there wasn't, that's true.

DB: On nice days we could take them for a walk, at least the children don't want to go for walks, they want to play.

JW: I've seen some pictures of kids filing out of the church in line. There is no play in that line.

DB: No. Now the Y must have been used later. That rings a bell, I've heard that before but I wasn't around then.

JW: You stayed there through Lois Hyman's tenure so you were there after she left in 1976?

DB: She left in 1976 and I quit teaching full-time at that time and I stayed on part-time as a science teacher until November and then I was off on maternity leave until the following September of 1977. Then I came back and worked another two years with Mr. Hoover. One year I worked, something similar to what I'm doing now, as a resource teacher. I worked a couple of days a week and I tried to organize what they called "the library." I worked with small groups of young children coming to the library and I had...it was sort of undefined. I was taking classes at Wright State at the time in supervision and curriculum and it was an ideal place for a practicum so I worked with teachers in a supervisory capacity, whenever they needed me for lesson planning or to talk to someone.

JW: Did parental involvement decline over those years that you were associated with it? Or was there more?

DB: There was a lot in the beginning.

JW: And was there less in Mr. Hoover's administration?

DB: It's hard for me to say since I was only there only a couple of days a week and I had no real involvement with parents myself. So I can't really answer that.

JW: The reason I ask is that in 1978, the last year that Mr. Hoover was there, an ad hoc committee distributed questionnaires to former teachers and present teachers, former students and present students and one of the findings was the change in parental involvement. Former teachers said that parental involvement had been a great advantage.

The present teachers said that it was difficult to get them involved.

DB: I think the population of the school changed a lot over the years. When you start something new, you have a lot of interested people; they want to get it off the ground; they work hard to make it happen. And then as their children grew up and left, we had different people coming in and the school was a little more established. We had more families with both parents working. Whereas in the beginning the mothers were at home and they could give us some time. I think just that the population also changed the type of involvement.

JW: It became progressively blacker, didn't it?

DB: Yes, it did.

JW: I guess in 1977 it became predominantly black.

DB: In the beginning we had a really good mix. And what I liked was not just the mixture along racial lines, but also of culture and religion, which I think was the whole idea of the school. To me, that's what it was. That we are a little melting pot and we can learn from each other no matter who we are and what our backgrounds are. It was very enriching.

JW: It seemed to me that the teaching staff was the same way, that it seemed multi-cultural. Someone from Hawaii, a black woman...

DB: Yes, yes. Edna Nelson. And then myself...I can't remember...Oh, I think that's all we had. Jane Smith had the kindergarten, Edna Nelson had the first and second grade, I had the 3rd and 4th grade and Lois Hyman was

the principal. So there were only 3 teachers that first year. She hired a fourth one, but because of our enrollment, did not meet expectations that the other teacher was somehow left out. But that was it that first year. I remember feeling more like a big sister to those children than a teacher. I was a lot younger, too. When you're working with such a small group and it's very informal, you develop a real closeness to them.

JW: Would you attribute whatever changes occurred in the school to Lois Hyman's leaving or the change in administration? What would you attribute the changes to? You said the population changed but nobody had any control over that. Did anybody have any control over that?

DB: I don't think so. In fact, didn't our enrollment, in our studies, drop in the last few years, too?

JW: At the very end there were only 60 kids there. But when Mr. Hoover was there, there were 112. It seemed to stay around 100-something and then it seemed to decline significantly under Arlene Brown.

DB: I think Lois Hyman was a tough act to follow. She ran a very tight ship and was good at motivating people to do their best. She was a terrific person to work for. I think when she left, as I mentioned before, there was also a big turnover among other staff members.

JW: There wasn't a big turnover when Lois Hyman was there?

DB: I think Mrs. Nelson left earlier, but we pretty much had the same group for five years. We had a lengthy search process for the new headmaster and I tried to think

of his name, I think it was Ned Hopkins. But anyway, that's not important. That occurred that summer. And two teachers, myself included, were part of that search process.

JW: Oh, do you take the blame, then?

DB: No, I was the only one who voted against Mr. Hopkins. We only had a half of a vote, the other teacher and myself had one vote together. She voted for Mr. Hopkins and I voted against him. It was getting so close to the start of school that I think they hired him in desperation, although there was another candidate who I would have gone with, but for one reason or another, they didn't want to. So that was disastrous, those months with him.

JW: He was gone in November.

DB: Was it that soon? It seemed like a long time. It seemed like ages because I remember the phone calls and the hours and hours of talking. Different people would call, parents or teachers, so many people upset with what was going on. Of course, like I said, with Lois Hyman being the way she was and then we come to somebody like him, it was disastrous. It was not good for the morale for the teachers. Of course, parents were upset and there was a lot and lot of hurt during those months. Then I think because Reverend Price knew Mr. Hoover, at least this is the way I understood it, he asked him to come on board and kind of help salvage the ship. I believe he was in retirement at the time.

JW: Yes, he had just retired from the Dayton Public Schools as the supervisor.

DB: So he had a lot of work to do to shape things up. Mr. Hoover came from a public school. He was a good administrator as far as the paperwork that had to be done and that had not been done. And he worked well with teachers. He was a very friendly, congenial man. But I don't know if he had the vision that Lois Hyman had. And that initial group of what we were about here and where we wanted to go. I don't think he had that.

JW: Could you say once again what it is you were about and where you wanted to go? You mentioned that you were going to use the city as a resource, that you were going to revitalize the downtown...

DB: At least this was my vision. That we were to be there to be an example to the community that education with different kinds of people can work. It doesn't matter your religion, your color, your background. We can all work together and make it a very exciting place. We can learn from our differences. Differences do not have to draw us apart; but rather keep us together. That's very exciting, to look at it that way. Not that he didn't understand that, but that initial thrust was no longer present. It was becoming more of a private school.

JW: And, at least in the brochures, it seems the idea of individual attention and nurture and creativity received more attention than the social aspect.

DB: Well, that was always stressed; the individual attention and creativity. That was stressed from day one. But in the context of the multi-cultural context. You're family is from this country, what can you bring...? Oh, I

remember celebrating Hindu holidays. We had Indian children and the mothers would bring food from the country. That may not be in any scope and sequence of any social studies text, but we did it because it was appropriate to us and to the time and the season.

JW: Some people approved of what you were doing. You received accreditation very quickly, less than 2 years. It was in 1973 when the State Department accredited Center City School.

DB: I don't remember that. That sounds about right.

JW: That must have been an enormous amount of work to geet everything together. You were just getting the school together, when you think about it.

DB: I think she did that within a space of a few months. I think Lois was hired at the end of June and opened in September. She had her children down there helping. They were only 8 and 10 years old at the time. We had to start from scratch, but that's her nature, that's her personality. She loves a challenge. She rose to the occasion.

JW: Reverend Price was a real influence in the school, wasn't he?

DB: Yes, I was just going to mention him.

JW: For something that wasn't to be religious...

DB: Have you interviewed him?

JW: Yes, his presence seems to be very religious. He's a very religious person.

DB: Yes, he is. He's a very accepting person and accommodating. In fact, on a personal note, he officiated

at my wedding. ^{I'm} Catholic and my husband is not but that doesn't matter to him.

JW: To your husband or Reverend Price?

DB: Well, my husband or Reverend Price. We were married in the U.D. chapel and he was kind of a precedent that was set. Here was an Episcopal minister in a Catholic chapel. So we had a personal close relationship with him. He took a personal interest in the school. In fact, we always thought that this was his baby.

JW: The school?

DB: The school was his baby. I think he enjoyed having the children in the building knowing that they were there.

JW: Their presence?

DB: Their presence, because it gave life to that big church, that big building. And he felt they had the space upstairs; why not put it to some use during the week.

JW: I'm told he greeted the children in the morning.

DB: He probably did. He was around a lot. He came to visit them. He came to the assemblies. We had a lot of assemblies. For every holiday, we had an assembly. Well, Loise was big on making the children aware of our heritage and why do we celebrate Arbor Day, or Memorial Day, or Labor Day. These things just don't come and go. We had an assembly and we shared what we were learning about these holidays. Sometimes we had to plan the bigger programs, but basically they were times to share. She also stressed that there would be a lot of...She was an innovator in her time, I think. A lot of class grading and peer tutoring and the idea that we learn from each other; the fourth grade come

down to the first grade and tell us what you're doing, that kind of thing.

JW: I guess she set up learning stations.

DB: Yes, she did. Today, what is called whole language, in those days we called it the innovative curriculum. And we taught that way. To me, that was the only way to teach that made sense. She was very supportive of that. We had a lot in common. We thought along the same lines, so it was easy for me to work with her.

JW: If I was to ask you what lessons you learned from Center City, or what lessons the Center City School teaches, especially as the link to the question of the city, of the desegregation of the public schools, or the white flight from the city. If I was to ask you what lessons you learned from that Center City experience, what would you tell me? Say, for example, I was from another city and we were facing the same kinds of difficulties and I asked you if I should start a Center City school, would that help in my town? What would you tell me?

DB: I would say, yes. I would say, yes, go ahead and start. It's very possible; in fact, it's a shame that it folded. Because it was such a neat idea. What I've learned - I've learned that people from all backgrounds can work together and overcome any problems they may have, any differences, that it's possible through the children. With the children, that brings the adults together, of course. It's possible to live together peacefully and learn from each other. I think that's the thing I've learned: We learn from each other. I learn as teacher from you, my

student. You have a lot to bring to my class and tell me about your culture. And then I, too, will share my background. I think that's what I've learned.

JW: That's a good lesson. Well, thank you for spending this time with me.

DB: You're welcome.