

ORAL HISTORY RELEASE FORM

DATE: 4/23/02

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Signature of Interviewee: 

Name:

Address:

Name of Interviewer: Jerry F. Little, Jr.
Amir Abbassy

Special Restrictions:

ORAL HISTORY DATA SHEET (to be turned in with tapes & transcript)

PERSON INTERVIEWED: Dr. Theresa Clark

ADDRESS: Hull 227

DATE OF INTERVIEW: 4/23/02

PLACE OF INTERVIEW: Dr. Clark's office

INTERVIEWER/S:

TOPICS COVERED: Closing of schools in Prince Edward County

NUMBER OF TAPES: 1

Remember to label and date tapes.

Dr. Clark Interview

Jerry Little and Amir Abbassy

Amir Abbassy: okay ahh First could you please just state your name?

Dr. Clark: O By all means, Theresa A. Clark.

Amir Abbassy: Okay, uhm kind of just want to get involved want to know how old you were at the time the schools were closed?

Dr. Clark: Than you are going to know how old I am today right (laughing).

Mumbling and laughing from all parties involved

Dr. Clark: When the schools closed I was preparing to enter the first grade lets say I was about six or seven.

Amir Abbassy: okay where were you when you heard about the 1951 strike and what was your initial reaction or your families reaction in regards to it?

Dr. Clark: I think initially it was one of disbelief I was a young girl preparing to go to school, extremely excited ahhh about entering the school riding a big yellow school bus. And it happened towards the summer so I think that we thought everything would be resolved my mom and I when it was time for me to get on that big bus in September. It was than several months later (coughing), when September rolled around and I could not get on that bus could not go to school. That the full impact hit us; I had no school to go to.

Amir Abbassy: Do you have any older brothers or sisters who were already attending school?

Dr. Clark: I am an only child.

Amir Abbassy: Okay wonderful

Dr. Clark: giggling

Amir Abbassy: Um could you please share with us your experience of growing up in Prince Edward County and what feeling did you have than, reflecting back on your experience how do you feel about it now and maybe to clarify the question about sharing your experience as far as maybe the segregated schools?

Dr. Clark: Okay, I probably needed to back up just a few (pausing by her). My experience in terms of growing up in Prince Edward County I grew up in a rural area pretty much family oriented and cultural society. And actually Meherin Virginia, and

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thinking about the county itself uhm and the school systems and the closing I did not miss any school I did not fall behind because my mother provided a way for me to attend the schools in adjoining county. Now that adjoining county had restrictions on who could attend their school as soon as Prince Edward schools closed they uhm established certain criteria and actually I wasn't supposed to attend school in another county but I did and you probably well just let me share a brief little story with you. My mother looking at different modes of transportation for me to go into the other counties because we lived in Prince Edward, prince Edward you know the county lines are pretty close together. So uhm I can recall riding in my vehicle with someone I can I guess uhm my primary memory centers around a group of men giving me a ride early in the morning uhm who these individuals were going to a saw mill, were they actually cut wood and whatever else you do with wood. They gave me a ride, they let me ride in the cab and where it would be warm, they would take me across the county line each day drop me off where I could meet the school bus to go to this other county school one one particular day the teacher who is still living and I still see her now was calling each of the students to her desk and asking us for our address, mailing address and I told her my address was route 2 box 46, see how I remember this? Meherin, Virginia 23954 and she looked at me and she said oh no, if that's your address than you are not supposed to be in school here, and I did not want to be questioned about my knowledge because I knew what I was talking about, I knew my address none the less okay go sit down go home and talk to your mom about it and come back tomorrow and tell me. So when I got home this was probably, if you want to talk about a major impact on my life, more than the school closings itself, it was that day when I told my mother that I had shared my address with the teacher and she said it was wrong, and my mother she just went she became angry, and she did not do with me, and the final point was she was using an address in that county so, to have them think I live there and uhm (chuckling), I really got in trouble for that one. I remember it so very much because on that day my mother taught me to lie I had to lie to survive when I think about prince Edward county I have to think about being (telephone ringing) false uhm lying, etc. and that coming from your mother I also had to go back the next and talk to that teacher, I had to take it all back, I'm not quite as smart as I thought I was, I don't know my address, I feel hurt from that today from those two things. So prince Edward county taught me in one manner that you could not be yourself to survive, you have to be someone else you had to use almost any means necessary as Malcolm X would say to achieve what you needed to achieve my mom taught me we were going to survive and we survived education was important she sent me to school no matter how I got there as long as it was safe. Um you want to reiterate because when I start talking.

Amir Abbassy, Jerry Little, and Dr. Clark laughing

Amir Abbassy says no that's fine so basically in so many ways they pushed you in a sense to have to lie.

Dr. Clark: Oh yeah

Amir Abbassy: I mean it wasn't something your family values had taught you to do that but it was because of the situation

Dr. Clark: Right

Amir Abbassy: They pushed you to be in that situation where you had to lie.

Dr. Clark: They caused me to feel so very small, a much smaller person and I had to deal with that over the years because that that because that can be harmful to your self-esteem, self perception, you name it.

Amir Abbassy: So that was the first day of school.

Dr. Clark: not the first day of school

Amir Abbassy: but the first year of your education

Dr. Clark: first year of my education and uhm that's when the full impact of what had occurred in Prince Edward county really hit me or that I understood.

Amir Abbassy: Thank you for sharing that.

Dr. Clark: Sure

Amir Abbassy: Uhm do you believe I guess this is you kind of already answered this in a way do you believe that it was the county's stubbornness to close the schools rather than integrate and if you could voice your opinion now what would you say?

Jerry Little: Cause they tried to present it like more stubbornness than anything else I guess were kind of asking was it stubbornness or do you believe it was more along the lines of hate, did they just not care about what happened to the black community or was it stubbornness like some of them argue?

Dr. Clark: OK, my perception leads me to believe that this was truly a way of life for people in Prince Edward county to some degree stubbornness was a part perhaps more than hate because this being the way of life this is what we know why is someone going to step in and make us change uhm peoples belief systems were very strong they did not believe blacks and whites should be educated together so again uhm this was a part of the times apart of where we were geographic area and the true beliefs that blacks were really inferior to whites and no government was going to come into Prince Edward county and tell it what to do.

Amir Abbassy: uhm looking at the situation I guess retroactively what did you learn from the schools being closed and what do you hope others will learn from that whole experience when the schools being closed, because you did say that during those five years that they were closed you did find another method to go to school so you were affected from it from not just from a county sense kind of indirectly emotionally,

spiritually so what way could we say for people to understand how this society is they way it was and the way it is now.

Dr. Clark: Why don't I start out with what...pause...what did I learn from the schools being closed, I learned a lot I especially about personal characteristics about the color of your skin, I learned a lot at that point about being treated differently simply because of the who I was, and I had no control over how I was born. Uhm what would I do to help other or to tell others? That they have to preserve I would tell other individuals and Prince Edward county, you cannot allow individuals to judge you by not just the color of your skin but by some of your characteristics you must find a way to make proven the best word, prove to other individuals your worth and dignity and you cannot allow anyone to strip that from you no matter what, and I don't allow that and whenever I have the opportunity to speak to others especially young individuals in the school system, family, churches, etc. I remind them constantly of how importantly they are and sometimes just those few words come back to me that you are IMPORTANT, you're not to allow anyone to take that from you, so its, it is something in this county you must have in you to survive. No one on the outside is going to help you.

Amir Abbassy: Okay uhm we wanted to know if you had any children and if so were they raised in Prince Edward County, and uhm and I want to I guess we want to know the attitude knowing because when I think of that situation whether it be Jerry and I, and I don't want to speak on his behalf but I take from conversation I don't know if I would be able to raise my children in the same society where I feel like I was denied an equal education?

Dr. Clark: Oh I have two children they were raised in the county they were educated in this county and not for one second did I ever fear they would not be educated properly because I was there with them. I was there from the first day they entered school until the last day they graduated, I was on committees I was in the classroom observing I was encouraging my children when I thought they were not being treated fairly I was there. In addition to myself my husband was very vocal in their education. I dare say the Prince Edward County public schools are very very happy that our two children have graduated.

Laughing by all

We were not going to be treated unfairly now for my children they are very much aware of what occurred in Prince Edward county uhm to some degree one of my daughters was I guess was labeled as a little militant by the school systems because she decided that she wasn't going to accept, she knows that she doesn't have to accept just because someone in authority says so or was written in a book doesn't mean it was true. She knows that she has her parents behind her so in one instance my daughter was prepared to lead another walk out because of where the school system wanted to have her graduation here on campus at Jarman she said im not graduating from Longwood College I am graduating from Prince Edward County High School, I will not go there and the graduation was held at Prince Edward County High School, and that was probably the only year. That gives you some indication, my children are very strong are a result of what the know I have

been through and they are achievers they go after what they want, and that is the only way to do it.

Amir Abbassy: Did you have any other family living in Prince Edward County, and what I mean by that is cousins, uncles, nieces, or where they also if you had any elders older cousins who were in the school system?

Dr. Clark: by all means I did many of those individuals never returned to school to graduate others were taken away from their families and sent anywhere they could to be educated, so the families were broken up here, and Prince Edward county black families were lack of education.

Amir Abbassy: We've learned about Barbara Johns and we would like to know, I know that you might have been young when she had led the strike?

Dr. Clark: Very young

Amir Abbassy: but even maybe the reaction you've learned from your older family.

Dr. Clark: Excuse me we can't even go there at all because I wasn't born.

Amir Abbassy: AHHHHHH

Amir Abbassy: I guess what we are trying to get at is when you think of Barbara Johns?

Jerry Little: The later people that were affected by that 51 strike as far as being locked out of school and how did people react to what she did, before them because it affected those that came along later, you know?

Dr. Clark: I think she deserves a great deal of respect and credit I am or have since that time and in recent years come to know several people that were involved with her or that were in the same class as her etc. etc. and I think I have learned that respect through them. And what she initiated. But than again im not to sure that she set out to change the world, just like Rose Parks didn't set out to change the world, they were simply tired and here was a move we could make. So revere and respect, somebody had to do it!

Jerry Little: Yeah... Amir Abbassy: I agree

Amir Abbassy: This question I guess do you think that Farmville and the greater Prince Edward County has changed for, have they learned from that whole process that had occurred during the times of the school closings before and after the school closings:

Dr. Clark: We would have to define what have they learned means, it has different definitions for different people in terms of Prince Edward county my perspective my interactions we aren't that much further along than we were in the 50's attitudes are very much the same, very few changes in some of the old good old boy systems, ideologies

and philosophies and its still there and unless, unfortunately unless you live it believe or not you can be emphatic and understand what people go through but unless you live it, it might be difficult for you to come in and see what is going on. So have we learned have we changed have we grown a little bit but what occurred in the 50's is occurring now but in a different form, a different manner, that may not be quite as clear as evident.

Amir Abbassy: We also know that you did not or were not around during the early times but we wanted to know if you heard or met people now that were in the white community who stood up for the black community, a name that comes to our mind is Dr. Gordon Moss we know that he had children that went to school here. Dr Clark cuts in and says one child. Amir Abbassy: one child that went to the free school.

Dr. Clark: Actually I know I knew him, I knew him very well.

Amir Abbassy: Could you speak briefly about him.

Dr. Clark: He taught me some of my some leadership skills, when I graduated from college and came back to this area I was able to serve on a committee with him the counsel of human relations Prince Edward County council of human relations was really trying to bridge the gap between the races in Prince Edward County I was very young he was a mentor to me, he even taught me how to handle or deal with the meetings we would have on a monthly basis and eventually had me move into his position which was the Presidency. He taught me so much in terms of selecting carefully the battle in which you will fight and not to just jump at any everything and anything that would come along. He was an awesome figure in this area, he clearly stated to us that he didn't have any blame for people in this area in terms of their beliefs but he taught me that people weren't readily open to learning and changing but again that was the belief system of the south that we should be segregated. Here lets try now is what he taught me to bridge this gap, your young enough to come to this county and start with some of the individuals and we worked very closely. Again he was just another profound person in my life, there was no front, he would even admit to you that he too believed the races should have been segregated initially but he learned and that is what education is all about.

Amir Abbassy: I guess this could tie in so many ways I don't know as far as since this course is taught by Longwood College if you know about Longwood's reaction to the school closings, we know that from learning one of the Presidents actually Dabney S. Lancaster has made a statement in Jarman in the 50's I believe I don't have a specific date, Longwood's reaction to the segregation and like I said it is very ironic because you work for Longwood College which to me and we have discussed it before, is uhm is very actually I don't know that's going to be another question. That is very courageous I mean you have to have a lot of bravado, because sometimes I take the way out and I see you went to the source and you came here and you were apart of Longwood College. I don't know really the history about Longwood College and what they thought about segregation actually we know about segregation but as far as integration.

Dr. Clark: Obviously, the college did not take a strong stand to support blacks during this integration period. I want you to know that I took a course here in the summer in the year I graduated from High School. Prior to going on to Virginia State University and there were perhaps three. Four other black on campus at that time. Now remember that's your early seventies and Longwood college still had not opened its doors completely to black people. Laughing I actually stayed on campus to take that course and so many ways I was harassed then and I would have to say I could compare that harassment then to now. I recall, how do I say this.

Amir Abbassy: You can say this anyway

Dr. Clark: I was just going to give you some of the examples, I recall many other young ladies standing in my presence saying to me oh you are not a Longwood lady if you don't have or do such and such such and such. And of course obviously at that point I didn't have whatever it was they were talking about and I wasn't doing what they were talking. So I wasn't really considered a Longwood lady. I remember having a roommate that thought it was funny that there were young ladies on this campus who practiced witchcraft and leaving the door unlocked for them to come in and frighten me, which they did, to the point I got sick. I remember a young lady who had come from Northern Virginia and myself going to a church downtown and she being told get off the property. This is Farmville now back to Longwood I am who I am so I speak what I believe. Longwood has not come that far since that period of time, and what to I have to compare that too, statistic's, information in terms of the number of students, when I came to Longwood as an employee and I stumbled literally stumbled in to work, I was a graduate student, when I came to Longwood as an employee we had close to ten percent of the student population, undergrad student population who were African-American today we have somewhere in the neighborhood of nine or less. I go to opening faculty meetings I the year before last, I looked around to try to find anyone who had any of my characteristics in terms of color and out of over 150 faculty members in that room, there was not another black person I saw thirty five at least thirty five people hired that year and not one of those persons was black. Now I have to question a system are you saying to me not one black person for any one of these jobs is qualified or was interviewed or did we ever make an effort. So I see that we do not have the students, I see we do not have the faculty I hear people talking about community, I hear people talking about diversity, I hear people talking and talking and talking but If I don't see it, I don't see it and I don't see it. We have three black faculty in tenure track positions full time on this campus and they are right in this building and on the second floor, two of them are getting ready to retire that leave me. We have a person I do not believe he is in a tenure-track position he's an instructor Rodney Williams in dance and that's all I know of unless you all can tell me of some others. Now out of 150 faculty members three of us so what does that say for Longwood. Now should I add to that why am I here, you said im courageous I am here because I can be I'm here because I do have the qualifications, I am here because I thoroughly enjoy what I am doing. I've never enjoyed anything so much as teaching, and I never taught prior to coming to Longwood. So I am here because I enjoy the teaching, because I can be here, because I like new goals to work towards and in terms of education unless I was to go back to school to acquire a different degree I

have reached the top of that and I have always had challenges in my life I have tried to meet and right now what is my next challenge I know that I never would want to ever be an administrator even if I had the training I've served in administrative capacity here. So I can be here, I am here, I wouldn't mind having to leave either, that is why I can talk freely. I could go somewhere else; I've never been without an employment opportunity.

Amir Abbassy: Well than again the next question from what or were do you get your strength, cause we do now that you are a very courageous.

Dr. Clark: I get my strength from my belief system, my spirituality, my religion, constant practice and I don't mean to offend anyone but Uhm push pray until something happens. ASAP: Always say a little prayer, I don't go into a classroom without whispering a prayer, I don't do anything without whispering a prayer, when im driving to work. That the other part what is the worst thing that could happen to me I get fired, there are people across the United States of America look at the Presidents who has been pulled out of their position. So they keep on living so what, so I can get fired, I push because I know that I can make a difference, I push because I don't like to see people get mistreated I really don't. I do not like to see people who may not have certain understandings are taken advantage of, in other words I always go with the underdog. Maybe some people who are looking at ballgames etc. say they go with the underdog for the team who doesn't win. I am for the person who doesn't, so I represent a people who cant represent themselves and I don't mind doing it. Especially since I learned how to file bankruptcy. Laughing Laughing.

Just talking about where were headed

Jerry Little: In what ways do you feel like growing up in Prince Edward County has shaped who you are today?

Dr. Clark: Uhm several ways first and foremost I truly think I am a more understanding person perhaps more patient I know that I have a strong character as a result and there are some things that might not be perceived as quite as positive though I construe that way I am always anxious to prove myself and sometimes that could be devastating that's tiring. I am always anxious to prove myself and to prove that I can survive that I have done it some of my actions to be honest with you have hurt me and they hurt me here at Longwood. But I'm stronger, there are very few things that I think I can't confront and be successful with.

Jerry Little: Do you think well I know most of probably aren't alive today a lot of them are but do you think they'll ever come to terms in and actually say that what they did as far as the school closings they way that they were living as far as segregation do you think that this community will ever admit that it was wrong?

Dr. Clark: NO, I was the very first female to ever be elected and appointed to the governing body that same governing body that had some of the same people on it that refused to appropriate funds to allow the public schools to operate and prior to my being

appointed I was interviewed by one of those men and in that interview his primary concern with me was, what were your feelings about the private schools of Prince Edward County, he was trying to determine if I guess I was going to be radical in anyway if I was going to bring up the past about the school closings he wanted to know all of my philosophies on that so I'm really surprised that I was appointed to that board.

Amir Abbassy: On that note were you aware of the Academy the private schools for Prince Edward County and I don't know if you were to young to come up with feeling towards that but how did you feel about that, especially knowing that there was not any private funded taken up from the county like what had happened in the Academy.

Dr. Clark: But do you know that was offered to us, I want to make sure that you know that.

Amir Abbassy, Jerry Little: okay

Dr. Clark: it was offered to the black as well as to the whites. The blacks led by Rev. L. Francis Griffin believed in the law and to develop or open a private school was not what a supreme court decision said so we did not accept that, now do I have feelings of course who wouldn't have feelings especially as a child seeing someone else have the opportunity to go to school so during that time we had to deal with they were better than I was, what's wrong with me and I'm sure there was a little animosity there I might not have been able to explain it but I'm sure it was. I had never been taught that I was anything less I thought I was a very special little girl. And than suddenly this big system said oh no your not so special.

Jerry Little: As far as I had your class and you were talking about how that small business center used to be your home do you think the way the went about that kind of reflects Longwood attitude on the whole history of this county, the evolution of this county?

Amir Abbassy: I don't mean to cut you off could you go back to not only could you explain what happened.

Dr. Clark: With the sale of the house.

Amir Abbassy: If you don't mind cause im not aware of it.

Dr. Clark: I don't mind. Longwood has traditionally expanded into the black neighborhood whether Longwood admits that or not, and in my instance houses were coming down around me for various reasons I had two small children, our lot was very small and Longwood was going to build parking lots as you can see them now all around. And I didn't want to raise my children like that so I tried to sell my house, I offered my house to Longwood at one price we went through several layers of negotiation because I thought my property was as valuable as some other prominent as other white people in Farmville. But I wasn't being offered the same price as those people and I couldn't

understand that because I know a lot just down one block around main street was purchased for more by Longwood than my entire house and nothing was on the lot. My husband and I agreed that given our circumstance we didn't want our children to live there it was not the best place for us. Longwood did not take our house my imminent domain but we were placed in such a position as to who wants to live there, why should my children be raised like that? Actually I tried to sell my land to Burger King but my next-door neighbor wouldn't and I would have gotten enough money to take care of us for a long time. So I ended up selling to Longwood and its still there its known as the Clark House the Small Business Economic Development Center. Notice there is a house behind it that's my neighbor we left here there, she's in her 80's. But I wasn't going to raise my children like that. So I Longwood wanted it bad enough they could have exercised the right of imminent domain. They did not in this case. We had a few battles with that.

Jerry Little: Do you think that this community goes out of its way to hide this?

Dr. Clark: Absolutely, they try very hard and for those who speak out again we can be and I have been punished. In ways again that may not be visible to the naked eye, but I know, yes they want to keep it, they don't want to Prince Edward County to be on the map for segregation they don't want it to be on the map, they don't want us to say this was the only place the schools were closed in Unites States of America for four years and if extend in some third world countries that was the only place they didn't have schools when you compare prince Edward county so what does that say about us.

Amir Abbassy: Could you describe or shed some light for people like me who are not aware of the affect that is has on Prince Edward county as far as the people who inhibit basically the people who are black that live here now because I see the town reactions when they say things about townies and when they refer to townies a mental picture comes to my mind and I don't just think of just white people I think of black people and in so many ways that statement reminds of the statement that Dabney S. Lancaster a former president of Longwood College made that we don't want these Negroes walking around in our streets so you better but them somewhere. So how has it affected people in and their motivation for either going to school here I see a lot of people are uneducated a lot of black people who are uneducated. And Jerry Little says abject property, Amir: poverty and what not.

Dr. Clark: We suffer from a number of social problems and I would say it is in Southside Virginia and of course they view Farmville as the hub, of all these seven counties. There has been a definite impact. Now we have individuals who are grandparents, or maybe great grandparents but still relatively young people who were affected by the school systems. If they cannot go to school if reading to them was not important if education classes going to classes teachers etc. didn't care about them. So what is it that you have to pass on to your child and grandchild etc? Our social problems that are very evident in our community include a high rate of illiteracy or people that are functionally illiterate, high believe it or not, high infant mortality rate, high low birth weight newborns, poverty, housing problems, still educations problems, because we have teachers in Prince Edward

County that really don't care about the little black students, and I didn't mean to say your black students, I meant to say you little black students. If they want to sleep all day in the classroom let them sleep they cant do anything anyway. They aren't going to do anything we got a teacher to take my place here when I was out sick and one of the basketball players was in my classroom and I respected him. With his talent and you have to be intelligent to play that game and I received back from him some feedback about how he was offended when that person said to him don't be late for my class anymore you aren't going to be whoever the most popular basketball player was at that time, just forget it that's not your at Longwood so don't come to my class late. So statements like that can really hurt a person. That's slow motivation and so I think that we do have some of the social problems because of the educational system not all of them but some of them, and where is the industry in Prince Edward County, or the industry that we have had or do have any industry likes very much to have the same population those without all those skills because than its slave mentality I can pay you what I want to pay you and don't think I don't know that. Any new industry that comes in here in order to bring a industry you have to have people that are trained, skilled, because economic development is one of the areas I have truly been interested and I work towards. These people look at Farmville, and they go I have to decided which school to send my child too I don't want to deal with that. You have people who are not trained and have no skills I don't want to deal with that, so they run. So there's a great impact.

Amir Abbassy: So a lot can be attributed.

Dr. Clark: I think if we really did the research there is a connection but no one wants to talk about that.

Jerry Little: exactly

Jerry Little: Talking to Amir Abbassy

Jerry Little: If you could explain what happened in one word and what would you say and why?

Dr. Clark: About the school closings, my word would be OPPRESSION. Oppressed, and that's a serious term people are not afforded opportunities, rights, not even civil rights they are placed in a subordinate or inferior position for so long they have no energy not in their thinking not in their action not in anything else to they cant be motivated to meet their needs or to just complete the basic tasks of everyday, oppressed, and that's a sad state, it takes everything away from a person.

Amir Abbassy: Has Prince Edward County evolved uhm I know that you have mentioned earlier that in some ways in hasn't been evolved as far as tolerance of blacks and what not, has there been any type of significant increase.

Dr. Clark: Economic Development.

Amir Abbassy: Yeah lets go with that.

Dr. Clark: I have lived in Farmville for maybe twenty five years and have gone from having two very strong black businesses to having lets see if I can cant any, hair dressers and barbers, I'm not downing those businesses but there was a store across from me owned and operated by a black individual. Mr. Cole's for years and years there was a master cleaners building up the street, operated by blacks for years and years strong supporters of the black neighborhood, one indicator of progress is through economic development. And now im really really trying to think we have always has black owned funeral homes their one shoe shop that I believe blacks purchased they were working there and were able to purchase it. But I can't think of any others, other than barbers and hairdressers, where are the businesses? So have we grown in that sense If you don't grow in your pockets and just think I was just telling you that I was not born in 1951 when you were asking me those questions but at the same time I was the first female to ever sit on that board in my lifetime, females have come since, but I was even the first and I'm tired of those firsts. Some people are so excited that this is the first this first that and when I left that board as usual they provided or presented me with a resolution, but my resolution was worded a little bit differently it had a paragraph which talked about if we would had known the contributions a women would have made earlier we would have.