

Carlvena Foster

Interviewee: Carlvena Foster

Interviewer(s): Andrew Jansen; Emily Yacuzzo

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Length: 30 minutes

Andrew Jansen (AJ): This is Andrew Jansen...

Emily Yacuzzo (EY): and Emily Yacuzzo...

AJ: We are interviewing Ms. Carlvena Foster, a graduate of the 1968 class from William Penn High School and we are doing this for the William Penn Project. Ms. Foster, do you just want to start us off by telling us a little bit about what it was like at William Penn High School?

Carlvena Foster (CF): I attended William Penn for all of my high school days, and back then high school started with the ninth grade, so I was there for four years. The William Penn experience is one I'll always treasure. I think that it really set the tone for who I am today. I lived on the south side of town, which is what we called the other side. William Penn is on the east side of town. We had to ride the public transportation to school; we didn't have a school bus. It cost us ten cents to ride the school bus. So, of course, if the bus was late, then you were late. Lots of challenges at William Penn, but back then you didn't really recognize the challenges or disparities that were in the education system. We were all happy, like one, big happy family. Going to school, you went to school in the rain, shine, sleet, or snow. You didn't have snow days. If the bus was running, you'd get to school. If you missed the bus, you walked. If you missed the bus home, you walked home. It was segregation, I went to school during segregation. My class, '68, was the end of William Penn. We were the last graduating class, signifying the end of segregation of schools in High Point and moving on to integration. We didn't really think about segregation and what we had or didn't have. We were getting a good education. It was during the era when teachers knew your family. So, if you didn't come to school or you didn't do what you were supposed to, that was a time where they would pick up the phone and call your parents and let them know exactly what you were doing or what you didn't do or what you needed to do, or if you got in trouble that day. Everybody knew the principal, the principal knew everybody's family, so it was the same thing. It was kind of a hereditary thing for me. My mom and dad both went to William Penn and my grandparents went to William Penn, but it was High Point Normal and Industrial, actually, when they went.

AJ: Okay

CF: Way back that far, but my mom and dad did graduate from William Penn. It's kind of the expectation that you have the same behaviors, your learning style is kind of patterned after what your parents do. My mom was pretty active in school, my dad was an athlete. It's always like, 'your mom and dad don't want you doing this or your mom and dad want you doing that,' pretty much. Books, we knew that we got hand-me-down books from High Point Central because they had High Point Central's name in them. I tried to be in the band, but during the band time they didn't have enough instruments to go around, so if you didn't get a band instrument, of course, you couldn't be in the band. My senior year I was pretty active, I was a cheerleader at William Penn. I dated the captain of the football team.

AJ and EY: Oh, there ya go.

CF: He was the captain of the basketball team. I was on the dance team. I was on the tennis team. So, you know I was pretty active. I would say the best years of my life were spent at William Penn, because you developed a lot of friendships, a lot of camaraderie, and from William Penn, I was able to go on to college. Because teachers back then, if they identified you as student that they thought could go to college, they made sure they went that extra step. Now, they would maybe know somebody at a college that they could pick up the phone and call, but they made sure you got everything done. We had one hundred seventy-seven people in our graduating class. I was about number twenty-six in the class. All of your friends went to William Penn, because there was not another school to go to. Everybody that you knew went to the same school. You developed lasting friendships. Now, people I went to school with are still my friends. We still get together for our high school reunions. It was just that William Penn experience was like none other that you could really explain.

AJ: So, would you say that it was an integral part of the community?

CF: Yes, it definitely was an integral part of the community. I went to Griffin, I actually went to Fairview, then I went to Griffin for my middle school. But we couldn't wait to get to William Penn. Everybody wanted to go to William Penn. You know, they had the grand marching band that always performed in the Christmas parades. Everybody would run to see the band perform because they were a high-stepping, fast-tempo band with a lot of moves and things. The band was great. The athletic program was great. Everything that we did centered around William Penn and everything that the community did, they did at William Penn. If you had a community program, it was at William Penn. So it was the center of the community.

AJ: Wow. You were saying the teachers really helped develop you to be prepared for the real world at William Penn. So, you attribute most of your success to William Penn?

CF: Yes, I do attribute a lot of my success to William Penn, because it was a stable environment. And when you have people that really care about you and want you to succeed, and they go that extra mile. It certainly makes you want to do the best that you

can do. Before then, I really didn't have any aspirations to go to college. But it was the teachers there, particularly the one teacher there that really took an interest in me, exposed me to different colleges, and made sure that I would get to go to college. That I was prepared and everything that I needed to transition and even as far as applications and applying and all of that, they made sure all of that got done.

AJ: Wait, and who was that teacher?

CF: Sandra Chavis.

AJ: Really? Wow, okay.

CF: Yes, Sandra Chavis. She was the PE teacher and she also was the dance coach and of course over the cheerleaders.

AJ: Mhmm. So, did you, I mean you said that were growing up during a segregated time, did you feel that? I know you said you really didn't feel that in the school community, but did you feel it in the community you were growing up in?

CF: Oh yes, you definitely felt that in the community that you were growing up in. If you went downtown you had the colored water, you had the white water. You had to go in the back, you couldn't go in the front. You couldn't sit at the lunch counter. They had a Kress store downtown, a Woolworth's, I mean everybody knows about Woolworth's. But they had a Kress store and a Woolworth's store and they would sell hot dogs at the lunch counter but we would have to kind of get our hot dogs out of the back door and couldn't sit. And I was a child and you didn't really understand all of that but you knew what was going on because you were old enough to know what was going on. Even in the theater, there was a movie theater downtown, the blacks had to sit in the balcony and the whites sat below, and things like that. Yeah, you were a product of segregation, but because of the community and the support that you had it really didn't alienate you. It was just until high school when people started to say we need to end segregation and start integration. But really, segregation molded me. It helped me be who I am. Because my brother, who's just a year younger than me, didn't get to go to, well he did get to go to William Penn but he graduated from High Point Central. So, his whole demeanor and focus on life is totally different from mine because he had a different experience in high school.

AJ: So you were talking about, near the end of your high school career is really when all of that started to take hold. Were you an active part of the student protests?

CF: I was not. Like I said, we lived on the south side of town. So the south side of town was just a little bit different. There's like Vail St. and all of that.

AJ: Yes ma'am.

CF: Because we have a close affinity to the south side community.

AJ: Everyone's got their own.

CF: Yeah, everybody does that. I was not in particular, I was eighteen-years-old and I had parents who were always afraid. We'd watch things on TV, just like you see now in movies when they have the hoses, hosing people down and lots of police. So I was not an active part of that.

AJ: All right, but did you know anyone who really was?

CF: I did. Because people who were just a year ahead of me in school or two years ahead of me in school, they were participating. Like Mary Lou Andrews Blakeney, we lived in the same neighborhood but she was older. And the Fountain sisters were the first two people to actually integrate schools before 1968. Well their mom did hair, so they lived in the south side community, right around the corner from me. She did our hair, so I knew them. Erline and Thomasine Moore (?), everybody who lived on the south side we, of course, knew. I knew people on the east side too, they were just a year or two ahead of me.

AJ: Okay, and you were saying you didn't really feel the impact but did you feel like there was a sense of change going on around you, or did it all of a sudden just happen?

CF: We knew that there was a sense of change going on around us. You would have conversations with people you went to school with. The people in the community and you did get to the point where you wanted to know why did you have to have hand-me-down books? Why didn't you have enough books or instruments? Why things were different from one school to the other? Because when they decided they were going to close William Penn, and I think this was a very unique experience, and open Andrews then we, as cheerleaders, got to choose cheerleaders for the next school year. Because of integration. The first couple of days, we chose cheerleaders for Andrews. T. Wingate Andrews because it was kind of the replacement school.

EY: Mhmm.

CF: Everybody tried out. We had cheerleaders from High Point Central and cheerleaders from William Penn. Everybody tried out and we agreed on picking cheerleaders and we had, of course, African-American cheerleaders and white cheerleaders that we chose for Andrews. Next day, when we were choosing cheerleaders for High Point Central, the cheerleaders from High Point Central didn't want any black cheerleaders on the Central squad. Which really made us feel, some kind of way. Their reasoning was, that black kids had a natural rhythm that didn't fit in with the Central culture. That was just their thinking. And up until that time, as we were going through this process we thought we'd developed friendships. We were laughing, talking, sharing lunches and food but when it came down to the High Point Central, it was just their mentality. They really weren't open to integration or full integration, having us participate 100% in everything. It was a different but unique experience.

AJ: [*To Emily*] Do you have anything?

EY: After you graduated, what did you go on to do? Did the school have a big role in what you did after high school?

CF: It did. Like I said, Sandra Chavis was instrumental in me going to school. I actually went to Fayetteville State which was an HBCU. I started at Fayetteville State, but I actually got my degree from Shaw. I was a cheerleader my first year. A good adjustment and then I graduated from Shaw University which was another HBCU. I think I was more well-rounded because of my experience and I actually got my Master's from High Point University. Which is totally different from any HBCU, a private, Methodist school. And I've actually completed all of my coursework for a Doctorial Degree from the University of Phoenix: I'm A.B.D. But this is also my second term serving on the Guilford County Board of Education and I'm happy because I represent Penn Griffin. Penn Griffin is the school that's in my district. I've been able to come back to my hometown. Well, I never really left, except for school. But to make a remarkable difference, serving on the Board of Education, from district one representing the schools I actually attended. Because Fairview is one of the schools I represent as well, in district one. And in this last election I was just voted as County Commissioner for district one as well, so I move into that role on December one. And even my husband graduated from High Point Central because he was just a year behind me, but he also went to High Point University and played baseball: Otis Foster. Our experiences are different, totally different with him having graduated from High Point Central. We grew up in the same neighborhood on the south side of town but like I said, he and my brothers, their experiences were different. They don't understand the camaraderie or the family atmosphere that we had at William Penn, because all of the William Penn things that we do every year we're just the same people. They don't understand all of that. They can't really relate to that. It's almost like anybody you went to school with at William Penn, if you need anything, you can just pick up the phone and call them. If anything happens to one of our classmates from William Penn, then we all gather, because we still have that connection and that bond and that pride about William Penn.

AJ: Now, would you attribute that type of camaraderie because of the fact that it was an all-black school?

CF: I do because of the segregation. Because you learn in a community, and we considered that a community, our culture, that they have to look out for each other, so you grow up looking out for one another. That kinda stays with you, you know, every year they have this big William Penn, or Pointers, reunion and it's moved from city to city- it's hosted in DC, hosted in Atlanta- and this past August it was hosted here. But you have people that come from everywhere that went to William Penn to participate. And anything that goes on with anybody, it's like a pipeline, you immediately know that something is going on and people just respond.

AJ: So what would you say is, now, the difference between the community you grew up in- I don't want to say an all-black community, but the South Side of High Point versus now? What differences do you see?

CF: There is a difference in that community, and in fact I go to church in that community, because my church sits there, that's what I tell people- I live, and I work, and I worship in the community that I represent. But the community demographics have changed on the South side, right where we grew up, you know, our house was there for a long time. And particularly me, we lived with our grandparents. Our parents lived with our grandparents. We lived in a house, you know, we had an inside bathroom while most people on the South side had an outside bathroom. And my grandparents owned a little store that was right next door to our house, so I think that we had everything that we needed, then when you have parents that work and you all live in one house and you're able to, to accumulate a little bit more. But now when you go in that neighborhood, you know, the houses are torn down, there are apartments there, and its more...Hispanics in that community, so it's a lot of Hispanics and blacks that live there in the same community.

AJ: So, did you ever spend any time on the Washington Street area?

CF: Oh yes, my grandfather actually ran a pool room on Washington. So my maternal grandparents lived on the East side of town, so we were back and forth all the time from one side of town to the other side. And I was the first grandchild, so I had to spend time with both of them. My grandfather was actually the first black licensed plumber in High Point. He was one of the founders of Pearson Memorial Church right beside Penn-Griffin, he was one of the founders of that church as well. So yeah, I was back and forth a lot from the East side. I hung out on Washington Street a lot, because he ran that pool room. So it was easy, when we got out of school in the afternoons, to walk to that pool room sometimes if they're open and get a dollar and hang around the pool room. And then the YW and YMCA was right there on Fourth Street as well, so we participated in activities at the YWCA. The gym was in the middle and the YMCA was on the other side, it separated it. All of the activities that we did besides church, we did on the Washington Drive side of town. The drug store was on Washington as well; everything was kind of on Washington Drive, because that was the business end.

AJ: Yeah I was about to say, so you'd say it's like the more exciting part of life was all around there?

CF: Oh yeah, the other movie theater was on Washington Drive, the more rich people went there, which now they're trying to revive. Even after graduation, my third job that I got was director of a resource center on Washington Drive. I've just been in this area all of my life

AJ: So now, what are some of the anecdotes that you would want to tell a student. Emily goes to Penn-Griffin right now, so

EY: Yeah, we don't have the sense of family that you're talking about. We're a small school, but we don't really have a sense like that

AJ: So what would you want to tell a student about William Penn, where their school comes from?

CF: Oh, I mean there are some really, really great memories at William Penn. But there are also some really great people that graduated from William Penn, Penn-Griffin. You know just in my class alone- the class of '68 -we have doctors, we have lawyers, we have, one of my classmates was the first African American female warden to serve in a prison, so we have business owners and, we all keep in touch, which is a good thing. I think that if you make the effort to form friendships with everybody, because Penn-Griffin is small, particularly as you go up to the graduating class. And its...I guess yours is different because people live in different areas of the town, because it's a magnet school, people come from everywhere, all directions, and you don't, what we did in the community carried over in school. You know, we'd walk to school together, we rode the bus- the city bus- together. Everything we did, we did with the same people because our choices were limited, and we lived in the same neighborhoods. But the friendships that you form in high school, are the real true friendships that carry you through life.

AJ: So what would you say...you're waking up the morning of your senior year, what would you say the average day in the life of a William Penn student looked like?

CF: Well, we went to school at 8:30, and we didn't have breakfast at school, but we had lunch at school, we had free and reduced lunch like most schools do. But the highlight of our day, every day, was in the courtyard, and the courtyard was in the back of the school.

EY: We still eat our lunch out there!

CF: Yeah! We had lunch out there every day and in the warm weather, you know, people would be in their little groups, and it was almost like, people that had talent, we'd have people singing in the courtyard, like we were at a concert, and running around and laughing and playing. I mean we had this girl, we used to think she sang like Aretha Franklin. So every day we would beg her out there to just sing. And we'd all just be standing around and just enjoying that, you know, lunches and sharing lunches, because some people brought lunches and some people bought lunches and we would just kind of share lunches and have a good time. It was just like a gathering place for us every day. If you had a boyfriend, you'd be out there with your boyfriend sitting around, or, you know just kind of enjoying each other. It was, you know like I said, it was just the greatest time of my life, when I look back on it. Just being there, my high school days were my best days. We didn't have fighting and things like that in school then. And if people did act like they were going to fight, somebody would always get between them and stop them, because it was just not the thing that you would want to ever have to deal with.

AJ: Now would you- do you think that's special to William Penn itself, or do you think that was more of just the time?

CF: I think it was a little of both. I think it was more of the time, but more of William Penn because it really helps if all of the teachers know you and all the teachers know your parents, and you know that if you get in trouble, they're gonna call your parents and you're gonna be in trouble at home. And if they didn't call YOUR parents, they could call somebody else's parent because it didn't matter- if you were in trouble and if we were friends and we were all in trouble and they couldn't get my mom and dad, then they would get your mom and dad, and your mom and dad are gonna tell you, "That's not right", then they're also going to call your mom and dad as well, so there were a lot of consequences for not doing the right thing. And I had the opportunity to speak at my class reunion last year, and one of the things that I can remember saying to my classmates is that we were poor, but we didn't know we were poor. So it really didn't matter whether you have, or you didn't have. One thing, too, that we all had in common is that we all went to church. We went to church and you had that religious, that grounding, you were grounded and rooted. And what you learned in church, you'd carry with you while you were in school. We were very respectful, we listened to teachers. You'd always have a few who didn't, you know, but they were just so few in number that it really didn't make a big difference to your education and what you were doing in class.

AJ: And you felt that this, this sense of community is really what has driven you-

CF: That sense of community, yes, that "oneness" that you had, that one thing you had in common. It didn't matter where you lived or what side of town you lived or how far out of town you lived, everyone came to William Penn, everybody came together when they came to school

AJ: Okay. And is that what you're trying to promote now, in your position?

CF: Well, in my position on the school board, it's very important to me that the resources of a school district are distributed equitably throughout the county. That every school has what they need to meet the needs of the students. I think it's very important that parents play an active role, and that's what I really try to promote is to get parents interested in the child's education, and to realize how much power they actually do have as parents. Because parents, really, can run the district if they realize that if they band together and they go to the school, then there's power in numbers. But you have to play an active role in your child's education. It's not the school's responsibility to discipline your child, or make sure that your child comes to school prepared- that's your role as a parent. The school's responsibility is to educate children, and they can't educate children fully you always have to address discipline issues or if children are hungry, or if children need clothes, or have other issues that parents should be taking some responsibility for.

AJ: And do you, does that hearken back to your experience? Is that what your education was like?

CF: Yeah, I mean, pretty much. When we went to school, we had everything that we needed when we went to school. We didn't go to saying the school is gonna be sure that we eat, or the school is gonna be sure we have pencil and paper, or the school is gonna be sure that we have all the clothes that we need and that we're appropriately dressed, you know, because we could not wear pants to school. If we wore pants, we had to wear a dress over them.

AJ: So even, so you had to be wearing a dress or a skirt or something.

CF: Yeah, and you had the pants on under them, so that was kind of different. That even if you were walking to school in the snow, and you had on pants, you know, you still had on pants, but you had a dress on over them.

AJ: Ah, okay, okay. Would you say, though, as a student, your parents were involved, and that's why you want parents to be involved?

CF: Yeah, my parents were involved in our education. And I think that when students know that their parents are actively interested in their education, then they tend to do better. Because, most of the time you don't really want to disappoint your parents unless you really have to. But if you think that your parents really don't care- and I'm not saying that they don't, because I think that all parents care and they want the best for their children, but not all parents today know how to go about making sure that their children are taken care of, making sure that their children even know that they're interested in their education. There's a difference when parents don't come to the school, or don't respond when teachers call them or send home news, but when you take a cell phone or take a hat, then they're right there. Then I think that kind of sends the wrong message to the child. Yeah, 'cause I was actually in a school yesterday where they were having some difficulty with a student and they were going to call the student in to talk to him, with the principal and the assistant principal and all these people I said, "Well I'm just going to sit in and listen", but then it occurred to me that I probably shouldn't. Because the first thing that the student said when he came in there is that, "You can't talk to me without my parents around." And then we just didn't want the parents to think that, hey, we have all of these people in here with my child, and we're not here, so they did pick up the phone and call the parents. The parent did tell the child to go ahead and cooperate, but, you know, for a child- for a student to come in and say, "You can't talk to me because my parents aren't here" that kind of sends the wrong message, like, "I can do what I want to and you can't do anything with me because my parents aren't here".

EY: A lot of kids are like that now...

CF: Yeah, but then what do you do with that child for the rest of the day, if the parents can't be there?

AJ: Exactly.

CF: You either send them back to the classroom, or you send them to ISS when the child has an attitude, and the parents are going to be offended as well. It makes a difficult learning environment.

AJ: Yeah, that's incredibly different

CF: Yes, it's incredibly different, that's right. If you did something, and whether they could call your parents or not, they were going to take whatever action they needed to take at that particular moment. And you knew that, so...

AJ: So that's why you didn't-

CF: That's right: if you get at trouble in school, then you're gonna be in trouble at home.

AJ: So what would you say, you know you have all these alumni reunions and everything, what do you all talk about then? Do you all talk about what you are doing now, or do you more talk about what you did back then?

CF: We talk about both. We talk a lot about what we did when we were back in school. We talk about the good times that we had when we were in school, and everybody can remember some funny stories or some good stories about other classmates and then we talk about where we are now, sometimes. But mostly it's about what we did when we were in school. It's just good memories.

AJ: I mean, it sounds like you have a lot of good memories.

CF: Yeah, we do have a lot of good memories. And even if there's a death of somebody that went to William Penn, then we all try to be there to support that family.

AJ: It sounds like it all hearkens back to that sense of community

CF: It does

AJ: Is there anything else you wanna say about that, or really about William Penn at all? It seems- you've been able to say a lot in only half an hour. Is there really, I mean we could keep going, or, anything else you want to keep saying?

CF: No, well I hope somebody brought you a yearbook.

AJ: Well, no- oh yeah but that's very- are these your books?

CF: Yes, that's my yearbook, and I brought my diploma, and my cheerleading picture.

AJ: Aww, look at that! So do you want me, I mean I can stop recording...

CF: Unless you have some questions

AJ: No unless, do you have any more questions?

EY: No...

AJ: I mean you've really given us a lot, so I'll stop it