

Theodore Newkirk

Unified Committee for Afro-American Contributions
Oral History Documentation Project

Theodore Newkirk

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Date of Birth:
Place of Birth: Wilmington, North Carolina

Interviewer: Bob Lewis and the English 12 class of Jill McKean
Interview dates: November 10, 2003, 8:45 AM
Interview location: Great Mills High School room F08

Education:
Occupation:

Spouse: Virginia

Maternal Grandparents:
Paternal Grandparents:
Mother:
Father:
Siblings:
Children: Stuart, Charles, Gloria
Grandchildren:

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Theodore Newkirk

Interviewed November 10, 2003, 8:45 AM
by Bob Lewis and the English 12 class of Jill McKean
at Great Mills High School, Great Mills, Maryland

[Start of Tape 1 of 1, copy 2]

Introduction by Bob Lewis: This is a project of Great Mills High School and the Unified Committee for Afro-American Contributions. Today, November 10th, 2003 we are interviewing Theodore Newkirk. The interviewer is Bob Lewis.

[tape shuts off and starts again]

Bob Lewis: We're ready.

Theodore Newkirk: My name is Theodore Newkirk.

BL: Okay. One more time.

TN: My name Theodore Newkirk.

BL: Mr. Newkirk, would you tell us a little bit about yourself, where you were born and raised, and brought you to St. Mary's County?

TN: I was born in Wilmington, North Carolina. And from Wilmington, North Carolina in to Baltimore, Maryland, from Baltimore, Maryland to St. Mary's County. What brought me to St. Mary's County was employment. I worked aboard the station since '54--1954 until 1986.

BL: Okay. Can you tell us the story about how you became involved with Great Mills High School?

TN: As a matter of fact, part of my project with St. Mary's County was [with] this guy here, Fred Talbert. [holds up UCAC brochure with Fred Talbert's photograph] Fred and I were involved in Carver [Elementary School] in PTA. At the time I met Ted [Fred] I was president of Carver PTA and we ran a survey throughout the county. Fred Talbert was one of the members that worked on this survey. And the Black community to determine, if we could determine, why so many Black kids refused to

complete high school. As a result of that interview, [school bell rings] I also worked with Fred on recruiting Blacks to enroll in this school [Great Mills High School] at that time. We had a segregated system even though we had the Supreme Court [*Brown v. Board of Education 1954*] to say all schools should be integrated. With cooperation with Fred and others throughout the community, that didn't happen in '54 here. That happened quite some time later. As a matter of fact, I think it was about twelve years later. And I could go on and on but, that's okay.

BL: So that brought us to Great Mills High School.

TN: Yes.

BL: What was your specific involvement? Tell me more about it?

TN: In the beginning, I was the [school bell rings] vice president of St. Mary's County Integration of Schools. Mr. Lester Colson was the chairman of that committee. Mr. Henderson, Larnce R. Henderson, was the president of the [local branch of the] NAACP at that time. There we met with the Board of Education, including our two attorneys from Baltimore, to determine why nothing was being done about the integration of the local schools in St. Mary's County. If you wish for me to tell some of the things that went on at that meeting, I will. Would you like that?

BL: Yes, please.

TN: We were somewhat disappointed in what we heard from the Board of Education at that time. From the chairman of the Board, she could not understand why Blacks were trying to integrate the schools because they were paying such little county taxes. Mr.--no Mrs.--. Oh I'll think of her name in a few minutes. At that time, she [May Russell] was the president of St. Mary's College - it was only a two-year operation at that time. Her statement was that she couldn't understand why we would want to integrate the schools because at Carver we had the cutest little toilets of anybody in the county for Black students. And I was really surprised professionals would suggest that was the reason for not wanting to integrate the schools. Well, our attorneys--they, wasn't acceptance but it was something that we never thought we would hear at that level. But as time went on, to integrate the schools we had some other things that were far more disappointing as a result--more or less, their reply as to why we should not integrate the schools. And this thing went on for approximately eight years before we went into the integration of schools.

BL: And this issue was the toilets?

TN: Toilets. This is one of the excuses as to they couldn't see why we wanted to integrate the schools because we had the best little toilets in the county. This man was there. [Hold up photograph of Fred Talbert]

BL: I have to know something more about these toilets. What made them the best?
[laughter through the room]

TN: [laughs] What they are referring to over at Carver Heights, I think they tore the building down or maybe there now; you had enlisted men's club. In fact you had a club where all Black military personnel congregated sometimes. After that they turned it over to St. Mary's County Public Schools. Now the government, when they constructed the building which was a recreation facility for enlisted personnel, they had small toilets for the children at the younger age-- to play do what they wanted but it [the toilets] was for them. Okay? That was an excuse that was given to us at that time why we should not integrate the schools because of the toilets. I was there and a matter of fact I was vice president of that committee.

BL: When did the first African American students enter Great Mills High School?

TN: That was prior to '69. I believe that was back in '63.

BL: Okay. Can you turn that into a sentence for me? The first students--.

TN: The first student that entered this [Great Mills High] school was the Groves kid--two of them, brother and sister. And that was in the early '60s. Put it that way. And we only had two, at that time, to integrate the public school system in St. Mary's County. Then later on, the Board of Education decided that we would integrate Great Mills High School but it was a volunteer situation. At that time, I entered my three younger kids, the youngest I had, in Lexington Park Elementary School. However, at that time, the Board of Education did not integrate the transportation and the school system at the same time. Transportation was a segregated transportation system. Believe it or not, I'm living in Carver Heights, my family; I withdrew my children from Carver Elementary School because I wanted them to have an integrated education. It wasn't that the teachers were inferior, but I wanted them to know what Black and White was all about - an integrated education. My children had private [segregated public] transportation which I thought was really ridiculous but that was the system at that time.

BL: What was it like for those first students at Great Mills High School? Tell me about their day?

TN: It was an unwanted situation.

BL: Okay. Can you put context into that sentence. The first students--.

TN: For Joanne and her brother--I was a very good friend of the family, Mr. Groves--what it was like was being on a foreign soil where someone else is speaking one language and they were speaking another. And even if they communicated, it wasn't a friendly welcome atmosphere at all. It was a scorn, a resentful attitude as if you had taken

something from me. It was disgusting how they were treated here. Well, it was disgusting.

BL: So in time--. At that time I think what you are suggesting, and I want you to tell me, this was just an elective. Tell me about that. I mean, if you were African American you had to get your own transportation? This is what you're--

TN: Oh eventually--. No, no let's back up. The Board of Education at the time supplied a segregated transportation for my children. At that time I was the one that said I going to accept this transportation or this integration that you offer. So I had no problem with getting transportation for my children. But I'm referring to is that that was the system at that time which I considered to be ridiculous as far as transportation is concerned. The overall school system was a segregated system. And let's not forget now we had a problem getting Blacks to attend this so-called volunteer integrated system. Blacks were not climbing the fence to integrate, by no means. We did not get integration until it was consider a forcible situation from the Board of Education. If you want to say Whites wanted to go to Carver and Blacks wanted to come to Great Mills, forget it. (chuckles) It wasn't like that. No one was climbing the fence to go one way or the other. It was completely satisfied, status quo. That's what we lived with in St. Mary's County for some time well into the '60s.

BL: So what did it take for the Board of Education to end segregation, to close the doors of segregated schools? Did it take litigation?

TN: Oh yes, we had attorneys--

BL: Okay, can you--

TN: --we had our attorneys--

BL: Can you start with "To get the school desegregated, it took," something like that?

TN: Yes. Legal advice from the--

BL: I want you to say it. I want you to tell me as a story. Say, "To get the schools integrated we had to have litigation", something like that.

TN: All right. Let me--. All right. To integrate the schools in St. Mary's County after the Groves children forced the integration per say then what we wanted to do was to integrate the entire St. Mary's County. That we had to go back to our attorneys and they made preparations to take this county to court for that. We did not have to go that far, then they came up and an idea that they would integrate the public school system in St. Mary's County. Which they did. And I've just pointed out the way they went about doing it. As a matter of fact, it was just one of those things where I think--. If I remember correctly--in fact I'm sure, it was one of the things they had to-- , it wasn't that the Board of Education wanted to do it. And let's not think for one

moment that they did, even though when we integrated and we employed Dr. King, Bob King, Robert King, that was an improvement. I will have to give him credit. He had the ingenuity and the intelligence to maneuver the Board of Education as well as the community and most specifically, the Black community. I would give him credit for giving us a way out. Because by that time I was president of the NAACP and I wasn't exactly, what you could say, an easy guy to get along with. (chuckles) I was mean. And I was dissatisfied with what we were confronted with in St. Mary's County, a civilized county, civilized people, intelligent people. But when time came for integration, we acted something terrible. As a matter of fact, I think, in fact I know, probably no one here remembers the last "White Only" sign was taken down right there at the Base [Patuxent Naval Air Station] gate. And that was the way we conducted ourselves and to some extent you could just about say it was well accepted. You looked forward to that.

To continue that--. I getting a little off course here but if you don't mind. We had one McDonalds in St. Mary's County. And through that McDonalds, after we voluntarily more or less integrated the school system, we had a situation here [Great Mills High School] where the principal and one of his Black assistants would go to McDonalds fast food, pick up the Black kids that were skipping school, bring them here, and suspend them. How I found out about it - and I thought I was on top of everything, you know, being young and knowing everything, you know, compliments to me, okay? (chuckles)--. Ms. Delores Fleming, maybe some of you know her? She taught school throughout the county. She called me to inform me of what was going on. I didn't believe it. But anyway, I went to work, found out it was true [that] that was happening right in this school. I called Bob King. We got together immediately. We came here. We met with the principal--I won't even go there. It's so ridiculous. But anyway, as a result of that and in conjunction with the Board of Education, we decided in conjunction with the Board instead of suspending children from school, we will send them to Leonardtown High School.

And the Board, "We don't have the money."

But they instructed Bob King and myself to go to the county commissioners and ask for money. I give our county commissioners at that time credit--they allotted money for a trailer which was put in the back of Leonardtown High School. There we call this thing Staying in School Suspension. And children were transferred from here or any other school and they got training in school or at least they were supposed to have gotten training in school. So after that endeavor, Bob invited me over - Bob, Evelyn Holland, my wife [Virginia Newkirk], and I - and believe it or not, it was not training it was more or less a trailer where "I'm going to baby-sit." And that exactly what that young lady was doing. There's no way in hell she could have taught any one anything under those conditions. So we went back again, "Why can't you train-teach these children?" Bob I give credit. He added another personnel to that situation. And that continued until they decided to change this thing. I think you call it now--. What do you call it? It's called another name now. Anyway it's still there. I saw results of it in the paper about disorderly conduct. The same eye, same situation. I don't see

where any improvement has been done as far as teaching or instruction is concerned. So that leads us up to, as far as I'm concerned, what we are teaching. I don't see where we have achieved anything at all except these kids know one another - Black and White. But as far as the curriculum, I wouldn't know.

BL: Were the attitudes-- During this time of integration, were the attitudes the same for the White students as they were for the African American students?

TN: Oh, I'm glad you asked that. I made a couple notes on that. In the early '60s, up until '68 I think, my educational chairman was Mr. Melvin Holland. How we wanted to find out more about the attitudes was a results, in '69 if I remember correctly, when we had what you call a confrontation, some people even called it a race riot-- I never considered it that. I just called it more or less frustration on the sides of Whites as well as Blacks. But what we did, I instructed Melvin to interview Black students and their parents during and after that confrontation. And we weren't surprised but we wanted to give the parents as well as the students up with how you deal with something like this. So we had to ask, "How did the teachers treat you? What were their attitudes as far as you were concerned?" -- during this confrontation period. And better than 90% said that they felt that they were not wanted aboard station at all. And this really pointed out to me - have we really improved anything? Why were these kids so frustrated? Or so anti-this or anti-that? And most of our problem was right here [Great Mills High School] not knowing how to conduct themselves as educators. And that was-- And we went on for at least six months doing these interviews. And we went from home to home; this wasn't a big group in a one-structure building. These people were talking on their own behind closed doors. But when we compiled all this information we could only conclude, "hey, this is a segregated system that the federal government is saying they all-- we're integrating the schools and *boom-boom-boom*. We weren't doing anything. The stigma is here. The conduct of the people that were running this was here. They hadn't done anything to their heads at all--they were just as prejudice then. I wouldn't go as far as to say now--by no means would I. Plus I do believe someone has learned something down the line. You just can't continue being together and not being able to identify one's shortcomings. You automatically will learn something about that.

But it was quite useful in our endeavor to keep the NAACP alive, not making hasty decisions. Lets' get rid of the chip on the shoulder. You don't have anything to fight one another physically, mentally. You can take care of yourself; it was quite useful.

BL: Very interesting. Were there concerns that the African American teachers would be out of work?

TN: Oh there was no doubt about that.

BL: Okay, can you say, "there were concerns--"

TN: Yes.

BL: Can you say it though?

TN: Oh, I can. Yes, there was concern that the African [-American] teachers would be out of work. And the shrewd thing about that even though we were head over heels in a racist situation but that White establishment had the good sense to remove those better African-American teachers and put them in White schools. They did a very good job of that. They knew how to do that, and where, and when. And that's exactly what happened to--. I don't think any Black teachers lost their jobs but they did not have that freedom that they so desired in teaching Black children. Those Black teachers that had a good record as a teacher, most of those teachers were transferred to the White classrooms. This I know. I was president of the NAACP at that time.

BL: Were there any other incidents? You mentioned one there, I think you said in '69. Were there any incidents after that? Can you tell us about those?

TN: I think that was just about the one that you probably would say got the attention of everybody. But these other little--which I would consider--say you had to call the Sheriff because of a fight--it appears to me that's a routine thing. Even now. (chuckle) And that was a long time ago. So I would say '69 was the height of confrontation, put it that way.

BL: That's great, that's wonderful. I'd like to open up the questions here to the students here in the class. If you raise your hand if you would like to ask a question? Somebody's got a question. I'm just going to wait until you--. Somebody break the ice.

Yu Fan Hsu: I will.

BL: Could you stand up? Tell us your name and then ask your question.

YH: Okay, my name is Yu Fan Hsu. My question is that if you had to go back and do it again, would you choose a Black school or a mixture of schools?

TN: Permit me to ask you, when you say if I had to go back again, at what period?

YH: When you [your children] were in high school when the segregation started--well, desegregation started.

TN: Oh I would do that all over again. Only thing about it, I would be more aggressive now than I was then. And I though I was pretty aggressive then but I would be far more aggressive now if I had to do it all over again.

YH: And what do you mean by more aggressive?

TN: For an example, it took this county somewhere about six years after the Supreme Court decision to even consider whether or not they were going to do anything about integration or not. In my position at that time, I would have been more aggressive in voicing my opinion about waiting that long. Which I considered ridiculous to wait that long.

YH: Do you think it has anything to do with it being the southern part of Maryland or do you just think that it's like that generally?

TN: You know, I'm glad you asked that. It's a very good question. I have worked throughout Maryland, at least I worked throughout Maryland during that time and one thing that I was told at the NAACP convention--we had monthly state meetings, quarterly or what have you--and there was one thing I got credit for: we were able to at least talk to one another. Some of your [other] counties--they didn't even talk with the NAACP. St. Mary's County never once closed the door. The door was always open. We didn't agree, but we manage to accomplish something. We did communicate. Put it that way throughout the situation.

YH: Okay.

BL: Thank you. Very good question. Can you stand up? Tell us your name first.

Shantea: My name is Shantea and my question is how did your kids feel about going to an integrated school?

TN: You know, believe it or not. I don't think they cared one way or the other. My children, with their father and mother trying to keep them in the right direction, and what I mean by that, we've always tried to instill in them - never accept an individual because of his or her color. Try and understand what it is to be decent. Be a decent human being. And my way of expressing myself I've always told my children "you can get a rotten *bang, bang, bang* in any color." [sniggle] That's one thing I've always instilled in my children.

For an example, let me--let me play something back here--happened a long time ago. My baby daughter, Gloria--she wanted to go to Frostburg to go to college. So she and Patty Myers wanted to borrowed my car to go up and take a look at the situation to--to just take a look. Young kid *bang, bang, bang*, you know. So on their way back--they left late and it was dark and it was up in Howard County and, believe it or not, they got lost and they ended up on a back road and there they saw this fire in a cross. So people at the gate to go--enter into where they saw this fire and the cross burning--so they pulled in to ask how to get out. [nervous titter] Now my daughter is home, she is telling me about this:

"Hey Daddy, you know what? We got lost coming back, and we saw these people had these sheets on."

I said, "What?"

"We saw these people and they had these sheets on. And we asked them how to get out of there to get back on"--I think it was 40 or something--coming back to Southern Maryland. "And they're nice people, Daddy." [sniggle]

I said, "Wait a minute now. Are we together here?"

She said, "Yes. I ask them how to get out from up there and they showed me how--pointed the direction for me to get out. And everything was A-okay." She said, "Daddy, what is the name of them people? You used to tell us about them."

[half gasp-half sniggle] That's right. Yeah I told them about that. But believe it or not she did not recognize that they were Klansmen. Right there I says, you know, if I had even tried to teach them how to be prejudice or, you know, just what have I done here? Because I definitely talked about the Klansmen and I didn't think they would have any problem at all identifying a Klansmen. I thought that I had instilled that in there little mind up there. But believe it or not, I had not. And when she told me that they were Klansmen and then the shocking thing--she was not able to recognize or identify. In other words, the picture never dawned on her at all that they were Klansmen and what they stood for. And it made me think, "have I accomplished anything?" [laughs - choked laughter in audience] You know.

And so, back to now. How do you identify people? I don't identify people--I'm about like my daughter. I know them but there are some decent people out here and I try to the best of my ability to instill in them - accept decent people. Not Black not White. And that's what I got from the local school, Lexington Park. When they were on that--their little private gig, I think--I don't think it was too much appreciated from the Black community. I'm living in a Black community and I withdrew my children from that community and the school and put them in a White school. Well, I was thinking about their attitude--what they would have towards a White when they become adults. I didn't want them confined to any one color. I wanted them to make a decision to say, "this individual is no good, or this individual is A-okay." That was my entire endeavor as far as moving them.

BL: Okay, that was wonderful. I think we are out of time. I would like to ask everybody or give everybody a chance to ask a question but I think I was told the class ends here in a few minutes and I'd like to--

[tape is turned off]

