

Interview with **Kathy Stapleton**

Date: April 4, 1989

Interviewer: Jacqueline Shearer

Camera Rolls: 4113-4114

Sound Rolls: 449

Team: D

Interview gathered as part of *Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads, 1965-mid 1980s*. Produced by Blackside, Inc. Housed at the Washington University Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

Preferred Citation

Interview with Kathy Stapleton, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on April 4, 1989 for *Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads, 1965-mid 1980s*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

Note: These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in ***bold italics*** was used in the final version of *Eyes on the Prize II*.

[camera roll #4113]

[sound roll #449]

00:00:11:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

Camera Crew Member #2:

This is camera roll four, one, one three. Sound four, four nine.

[slate]

Interviewer:

OK?

Camera Crew Member #3:

Mm-hmm.

00:00:21:00

Interviewer:

So in 1974, you were going into your senior year at high school. Tell me what your expectations were. What were you looking forward to about senior year?

00:00:33:00

Kathy Stapleton:

Well, a lot of good times, [laughs] a lot of fun. My senior prom, class day, being finished with high school, graduating. That sort of thing, preparing for college, getting that straightened out.

00:00:50:00

Interviewer:

So, I'm remembering back when I was in high school, and you go through all these lower rungs looking forward to being the king of the hill, the top of the—tell me what your expectation was in terms of, of, Southie. I mean, what was South Boston High good for in terms of, of high school?

00:01:07:00

Kathy Stapleton:

South Boston High, I remember it. I was excited to be a senior, being a senior always made you important. And it meant your, your classes eased up a little. You did have a lot more fun than you had the previous years, because hopefully you had your grades in order, and you were all set to, to go on. It was a wonderful school. We had a great time. I had a, I had a great three years at South Boston High School up until goin' into my senior year. So, I expected my senior year to be a continuation of the previous good three years that I had. I was doing well. I had a lot of friends. I was having a lot of fun. I was in—I was anticipating a great year.

00:01:52:00

Interviewer:

OK, now when busing—

Camera Crew Member #1:

[coughs]

Interviewer:

—was first declared, a lot of kids boycotted. Tell me about kids you knew who boycotted.

00:02:03:00

Kathy Stapleton:

Well, people boycotted, a lot of children did boycott school for, for different reasons. Safety reasons, peer pressure...certain groups of people, you know, that, that would antagonize children who did go to school when they felt that a boycott would be effective in some way. I did not boycott. I, I stayed out of school when the majority of children stayed out of school, mostly for safety reasons, on days that I didn't think it was safe to be in the building, or it was not a good idea, but basically I did try to go as often as I could.

00:02:45:00

Interviewer:

What about kids who did boycott? What, what did they do? What happened to them?

00:02:49:00

Kathy Stapleton:

Well, most of them, I, I would think, you know...the, they boycotted the school. I mean, the children and families that I knew that had the means and the money would leave the system, go to public, I mean, public schools in other cities, a lot of families moved right out of South Boston, out of, out of Boston, to get into better public schools, and the people who could afford to send their children to private schools or parochial schools. And some, I, I would guess a lot, just dropped out, out of the system completely.

00:03:24:00

Interviewer:

OK. Cut.

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, so cut.

[cut]

00:03:27:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:03:33:00

Interviewer:

I'll wait for them to put the slate down. So, describe for us the typical school day morning. Getting from home to homeroom.

00:03:42:00

Kathy Stapleton:

OK, well, you'd get up. Late usually, but you'd get dressed, get all dressed for high school. Of course your appearance is a, a very big deal. You wanna impress everybody, so you take a lot of time getting dressed, and I remember going to school, and my high school happened to be across the street. Which is about a two-minute walk, so I'd get to the front door, and they would hand you, at this point we had metal detectors, so what they would do is hand us, a, a blue, plastic bowl, and you'd have to start by, you take your earrings off that you just put on, and you take your rings off, and your medals or necklace. Shoes, sometimes, depending on what they were. Belts, empty them. You have to dump everything, all these clothes [laughs] that you, that you had just taken all the time to get dressed, and you have to half undress in the front entranceway of the school and put it in a bowl, and then go through the metal detector. And sometimes, on a lot of girls, they would still beep, and they had a, a room at that point, where you had to go in and be frisked, and a lot of time it would be a bra, a metal bra strap or a buckle on a shoe. It could be, you know, just a metal snap on your clothing that would go off, but you would at that point then be taken aside and frisked by a woman state trooper, or a man. And they would also go through our lunch. They took your lunch bag, your pocketbook, and they would dump your whole bag. So, you have to think twice about what you were gonna put in your pocketbook that mornin', because everybody was gonna see what was in there. So, it was, it was pretty odd. You know, going, *it was pretty aggravating actually, to, to go. And we're put all through this before you even step out at a day at school, you know? It's kinda ridiculous for a seventeen-year-old person to be treated this way.* It was insulting.

00:05:34:00

Interviewer:

Now, tell me, describe to me what interactions were, were like, what were relations like between Black kids and White kids? I remember you said stuff about taunts from the bus, and describing what the inside of the school was like.

00:05:49:00

Kathy Stapleton:

Well, regarding taunts from the bus, I feel that...I remember buses pulling up, and, and there would be, at the very beginning especially, there would be crowds of, of parents and children outside, and, and students coming in on the buses, would say to us, I heard, you know, I would hear them say, We have your school. How does it feel? You know, It's our school now. You know, because these children were actually going in where we were, on the outside, at that, at that point in time, at the beginning. And inside the school, it was not, it was not very good. I think both the students that were bussed in and the students that were there, that did not know how to react to each other, and there was not much interaction at all. It was still basically segregated for safety reasons. They felt that they had to keep the Black and the White students apart most of the time. They had separate doors going in, when the, when the buses would be unloaded. And if the buses would be unloading, and you were coming into school, they would actually ask you to wait and let the bus, the, the kids off the buses come in first, and they had, if there was an altercation, they had what they called a White holding room and a Black holding room. And we would be released from school at the end of the day. Everybody would go to their homeroom, and they would announce that the children being bused, which were the Black children, would have to leave first, and that the walkers, the Whites, would have to sit in class till school emptied out. So, it was not what it usually was. The bell rang, and everybody filed out. It just didn't work that way. There was a lot of segregation within the school, which was really silly, because, or stupid, because, I mean, what is the point? What is the whole point here, it was...it didn't make any sense at all.

00:07:47:00

Interviewer:

OK. Cut.

Camera Crew Member #1:

That's a cut.

[cut]

00:07:50:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:07:55:00

Interviewer:

So, how would a typical fight start?

00:07:57:00

Kathy Stapleton:

Well, a typical fight could start any way, just it could be a push, or a shove, in a small group of people, which would turn into...everybody was very defensive about everything. You know, everybody took it, offense at the slightest thing. It could be a comment, you know, a little comment. Then it would go back and forth, and, you know, two people arguing would turn into four or six, and then it would be groups of people, and it would turn into a...everybody seemed to get involved. Teachers would come running, police would come running, and before you knew it, it was out of control. And most people involved in an altercation had no idea what started it. It would just, came out of nowhere. It was just explosive all the time. You know, most people did not know what the pushing and shoving was about, or why, or who started it, or it was just, it was almost as if it was expected. The kids in this school, both Black and White, felt that they were there to be defensive, and that they were—*the White kids felt intimidated that they had Black kids in the school. The Black kids were intimidated, because they were in this White school, and they did not want to be pushed around. It, just the slightest thing would set it off.* And I don't think either side knew what was going on, and I think a lot of the pressure on both sides probably came from outside the school, and these kids went to school with the idea that this is the way it was.

00:09:38:00

Interviewer:

OK, cut.

[cut]

[camera roll #4114]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it, please.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Camera roll four, one, one, four.

[slate]

00:09:47:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, Jackie.

00:09:48:00

Interviewer:

OK, so, the Michael Faith episode. You began it before by saying, "One day, a classmate of mine got stabbed." So, if you could just take us through the whole story as you experienced it.

00:10:03:00

Kathy Stapleton:

OK, well, one day we were, I was in a, in the corridor coming from one of my classes with several of my friends, and a commotion broke out. Which wasn't, you know, that happened every five or ten minutes in school. But, the people...we kinda backed off, but then we started hearing people scream, you know? Really, really got out of control at that point, you know, sense, sense of something different happening, and we could hear people as we got a little closer, screaming that, He was stabbed, he was stabbed, and then they, people were running to, some were running away. At that point, there was, *oh jeez. There was, we were close enough that we saw, there was blood, you know, on the hallway floor* at that, at that point I left by myself, without my friends, out the side door of the building, and was physically sick. You know, I just went home. I lived very close to the school, out the side. I didn't go out the front, and I just went home, and I remember feeling just really sick to my stomach and frightened. That was probably the closest thing to a violent act I had ever come to in my life, you know? Especially...I didn't, never expected it to come from my high school in my own neighborhood close to home. You know, I, I guess you're never ready for anything that violent to happen. And I was afraid and pretty disgusted.

00:11:32:00

Interviewer:

Did you know who it was at the time?

00:11:34:00

Kathy Stapleton:

Yeah. Yeah, I did know who it was, and I, I knew him, Michael Faith. Not, not, I was an acquaintance, not very well. I didn't hang around with him or anything, but yeah, I was pretty, pretty upset. You know, no matter who it was, you know, it would've been upsetting

to have that kind of violence. That really—the reality sets in at that point, to say, This is really, this is pretty dangerous stuff.

00:11:58:00

Interviewer:

Did that change at all? Did it make things tenser, or worse, or anything in school, in terms of interactions?

00:12:08:00

Kathy Stapleton:

Well, it [sighs] jeez, I, I know that at the time the security is probably, at that point, when the security got very, very tight in school, and that's when they wouldn't let so much as a, a pointed comb go through. You know, you couldn't, you know, they really went through your things. Your sandwiches, they opened up people's sandwiches at that point and looked inside. You know, to make sure you weren't concealing weapons. In art classes, there was no scissors. I mean, in art class, they took away scissors, and, and anything that would be, be considered a weapon. As far as the, the students, I, I, I'm sure things were more tense, but it did not seem...nothing changed a whole lot. You know, it was just this, it was still the same. Maybe people were a little more angry, or maybe a little more afraid. I just, you know, I remember. [laughs]

00:13:12:00

Interviewer:

OK, cut.

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK to cut.

[cut]

00:13:14:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

00:13:19:00

Interviewer:

What do you think the effect was of busing on you as an individual, on the high school, and on South Boston as a community?

00:13:30:00

Kathy Stapleton:

I think busing had a lot of effects on, on me personally, my family and friends, and the community. I think myself, it made...it took away, it, it made us grow up a little faster. [laughs] Senior year, like, you know, I was saying before, is kind of a, a social year for, for kids, you know? It's important getting yourself into college and straightened away. But it's also social. The friends you make in your senior year of high school, girlfriends, boyfriends, are usually the friends for life, especially in a, in a tight-knit neighborhood community like South Boston. The school itself was...and any neighborhood in a city, I think especially in, in, in these cities, middle-class cities, people use the high school as a reason for getting together. We have good football teams, hockey teams, young boys aspire to be athletes. You know, they hope to get on the team. They hope to play hockey, or football, or basketball. This was taken away during busing, because all the sudden this neighborhood, everyone was proud. We had South Boston and Eastie games every Thanksgiving, you know? We played against the other town. It was a source of pride for the community. You know, if you had a good team or a good school, and this was taken away, because the kids were all taken out of the school and sent different ways. People left the community. Friends were split up, and so it took the, the—it took a source of pride away from the town, I guess, you know? Because it was, you know, you were from Southie, you go to Southie High, play for South. You know, you're on the team, and you're pretty proud of that fact. And, and, Dorchester, or, or any other parts of, of Boston. They all feel the same about their high school, and that was taken away, and I think that's a big dent in a community. Especially in the city, where kids need some direction. You know, they need something to aspire to or a reason for wanting to go to school. You know, and that was taken away. And families, too. You know, parents that wanted to, parents who were afraid for their kids. You know, they were upset. They didn't know whether they should send them to public school, or they should sell their house and send them to a private school. It just, it, it affected everybody. You know, families, friends, and, and the community as a whole, I think.

00:16:09:00

Interviewer:

Now, you just now, when we weren't rolling, talked about how there were some people who saw this as a heavy-duty political cause, and you said something about how you resented it when they tried to tell you what to do. Can you think of any exchange when someone was trying to tell you what to do back then?

00:16:28:00

Kathy Stapleton:

Well, there was, there there was pressure from all sorts of people. From the media. The media [laughs] as well as the civic groups. The media went up there hoping, you know? They...no, they, nobody said, Don't do this. Don't act up. You know, this, this isn't nice, you know? They, they, people wanted to see a story, you know? People en-encouraged it, you know? Nobody said, Don't do this. Political people said, You know, let's, you children should boycott. You children should not do this. You know, this is not right. You know, this is the mayor, or this is the police, you know, don't do this. And, and, so it, it put pressure on everybody. No one knew the right thing to do. I mean, I wanted to go to school, you know? I was trying to go to school. I resented people telling me I shouldn't be in school. [dog barks] I resented people telling us where we should go to school. You know, it just...and I hated, and I hated picking up the paper every day and seeing it in the paper. You know, it was really kind of a disgrace. I am very proud of my community, but I did not like what I saw on the media. I think, I think it hurt us all, you know, and, and, the attention, you know, was, was negative. The kids were the ones being hurt, and being told what to do. I mean, kids will do what they're told, usually, because they think these adults think we should do this, so we really, you know? They say we shouldn't go to school, let's not go to school today. Or, you know, we should do this, or we should fight, or we should, you know, stand up for ourselves. But it was not coming from the kids within. I think they were being pulled, many...we were all being pulled many, in many different directions, you know, between what was right and what was wrong.

00:18:20:00

Interviewer:

How did you, as a seventeen-year-old kid, understand all this?

00:18:25:00

Kathy Stapleton:

Well, I, I don't think I really understood it at all. I think [sighs] I, I think, you know, they wanted to, they said racially-mix the school, which, which I can understand. I could understand in one way, but it wasn't as if, I looked at my high school was a good high school, but it was a run-down building with mediocre—mediocre equipment. It didn't have, it didn't have, we didn't have a pool or a gym. I could not, for one...would see why people would really wanna come into this school. Because it was OK, but it was not any better than, than any other high school in the city. You know, I, it was just kind of putting kids from one OK school to another OK school, and it just did not, it just didn't make any sense. And from when I had gone to school, I had never heard...our neighborhood, yes, it is mostly a, a White community, but I had never, up until that point, heard, you know, of anybody being turned out, or not allowed because of their color, or race, or religion. And then all the sudden, when

the busing came, you know, it said, We're gonna force you to do this, because the school happens, you know, to be one color, and this school is one color, and we're gonna mix everybody up together. And I don't think anybody was particularly happy. I'm sure the kids coming in were nervous. The kids already there were nervous. It just was not, it was not a comfortable situation from the beginning. And, and we had no...there was no time or effort put into preparing us for this, for this turmoil. You know, we were just, one day, we all showed up for school, and the first day I was, I would—nobody could have prepared me for what, what I saw when I walked around the corner. It was mass confusion, it was pretty scary. It was upsetting, and, and it, I was not prepared for that, and didn't expect it. You know, I don't, I don't blame, I don't blame any...I don't blame the people in the—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Kathy Stapleton:

—community. I don't blame any of the kids in the schools, and I don't blame the people outside. I don't think anybody was prepared.

00:20:43:00

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Just rolled out.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Camera Crew Member #2:

That's a rollout, four, one, one, four.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:20:48:00

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