



Interview with **James Bash**

May 6, 1986

Charlottesville, Virginia

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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*.

00:00:01:00

[camera roll 212]

[sound roll 1155]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: ROLLING. MARKER PLEASE. ONE.

INTERVIEWER: OK, WE'RE GOING TO START BY GOING BACK TO THE BROWN DECISION. THE FIRST BROWN DECISION IN '54. CAN YOU REMEMBER THE REACTION OF THE TEACHERS AND THE NEWSPAPER HEADLINES IN FARMVILLE?

Bash: There wasn't much reaction that I recall. There was just another decision of the Supreme Court and it had some, something to do with Prince Edward and the Farmville High School in particular. But there wasn't much overt reaction, there was a lot of conversation, but so far as organizing and getting ready and that sort of thing, not too much at that point in time.

00:00:40:00

INTERVIEWER: WELL REMEMBER TO SAY TO THE BROWN DECISION, OR GET THAT, THAT SUBJECT—

Bash: You're right. OK.

INTERVIEWER: GET THAT ON THE NEXT ONE. WAS THERE MORE REACTION WHEN THE SECOND BROWN DECISION CAME DOWN AND WHEN THE DECISION ABOUT ALL DELIBERATE SPEED CAME DOWN?

Bash: Well, with respect to the Brown II, there was a considerable discussion and a great deal of organizing, as to what to do now. I'd say you have to remember that I was not in Farmville at the time Brown I came down so I couldn't speak with too much, authority about that, but when I was employed, after Brown I, in August following Brown I—

00:01:23:00

INTERVIEWER: I'M GOING TO STOP YOU.

Bash: Yeah sure.

INTERVIEWER: AND SAY TO YOU, LOOK AT ME. OK.

Bash: Yeah. Right.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

Bash: Yeah, OK, OK. It's all right.

00:01:29:00

INTERVIEWER: YOU CAN TAKE YOUR STORY FROM THERE.

Bash: Well, after Brown, I, I was employed by the school system and I was asked what would I do if the schools were to be desegregated and I said I would have to follow the Supreme Court decision and the school board, at that point in time employed me despite that position. So after Brown II, I'd been there a full year, the members of the faculty and members of the community apparently decided to organize to have a large meeting regarding what to do next.

00:02:03:00

INTERVIEWER: COULD YOU TELL US A LITTLE BIT ABOUT THAT MEETING?

Bash: Well, the meeting—

INTERVIEWER: MOTIONS.

Bash: Yeah. The meeting was very interesting to me, it was, set up in such a way that PTA presidents were on the stage of Jarmen auditorium and Longwood College and a lot of other, leading citizens, a man with the name of Morris Large was the person who headed the, who emceed the proceedings and each of the PTA presidents came to the microphone and made a

statement about, school desegregation and about having interviewed, and talked to all the patrons in their particular school area and not one was in favor of desegregation. So from then on—that time on after all of the PTA representatives had made their statements, they—it was, it was pretty much a foregone conclusion that the meeting was to decide, to make some kind of decision with respect to continuing public schools, if they had to desegregate.

00:03:08:00

INTERVIEWER: AND DID THEY TAKE A VOTE AT THAT MEETING? DID THEY, DID THEY ACTUALLY DECIDE THEY WOULD RATHER CLOSE THE SCHOOLS THAN, THAN DESEGREGATE AT THAT POINT?

Bash: Yes, I think that, although I can't remember the specific vote and the, the motion that was made or anything like that. I'm sorry I can't remember that, but there was a sense of, of, of agreement that the school should be closed and as a matter of fact there was some activity toward the pledging of monies toward the establishment of a private school at that meeting.

INTERVIEWER: CAN WE STOP FOR A MOMENT?

Bash: Mm-hmm.

[cut]

00:03:48:00

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARK. TWO. JUST HERE ONCE?

INTERVIEWER: MM-HMM.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: RIGHT HERE.

00:03:55:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, GO AHEAD.

Bash: Well at the time of the latter part of the meeting, of the, there was one teacher who said, that if you will pay my bills, I will teach your children. This had to do with, wherever the money came from, however the private school was set up, he was not too concerned about, how the money came into being, but that he had been there for so long and had known the community so well that he would be willing to teach the children if they would be willing to pay his bills.

00:04:30:00

INTERVIEWER: HE REALLY MEANT THAT IN TERMS OF A SEGREGATED SYSTEM?

Bash: Well, yes, yes, yeah, he would, he would—that was strictly as, as a segregated system, as a private school, you know. This was in response to whether or not to have a private school.

00:04:45:00

INTERVIEWER: DID YOU RAISE QUESTIONS ABOUT PUBLIC EDUCATION AT THIS MEETING?

Bash: Yes, I did. Perhaps that was my undoing because it did not go over very well—

00:04:56:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, INCORPORATE, “I RAISED QUESTIONS” YOU’VE GOT TO INCORPORATE MY QUESTION INTO YOUR ANSWER.

Bash: Well, the questions that I raised had to do with whether or not in teaching children in a private school or where would they find a building to house the children, church basements, at best were not adequate. Certainly there were not the usual plumbing facilities that were adequate as they are in a school. There would not be enough rooms in one church in the community to handle the total number of children who might be enrolled. There were warehouses in the community and these warehouses were not adequately equipped with plumbing facilities. So, my questions had to do with, how would, the teachers handle the classrooms and how—what limitations would there be on numbers of children. Also the questions had to do with, with the teachers’ professional relationships, relationships to the professional organizations if they were teaching for schools that, or a school that was designed to circumvent the Supreme Court decision. What would that do to their, insurance policies with the professional association that they were members of? Another question I raised is a who’s, who, to whom would teachers be responsible if there was a large contributor whose child was not very bright and who might even fail a course, would, would this influence the teacher’s decision with respect to whether that child should fail or pass just because the contributor was a large or small contributor? Would there be a school board that would be responsible to the contributors and so on? My questions were professional in nature and not so much related to segregation and desegregation.

00:07:00:00

INTERVIEWER: NOW WHAT MADE IT WORTHWHILE DO YOU THINK TO THESE WHITE PARENTS, WORTHWHILE TO DENY THEIR CHILDREN A PUBLIC EDUCATION, IN ORDER TO NOT HAVE IT BE PUBLIC INTEGRATED EDUCATION?

Bash: Well, the nature of Prince Edward County was that, there was about a forty-five

percent black population, fifty-five percent white population and it was closer to fifty-fifty when—so far as the young people were concerned, child—children of school age. And there was a great deal of fear with respect to doing something differently than they had done it for generations and generations and I think that fear was the greatest thing that bothered them. Fear of the unknown and fear of what might happen. I would have to offer an opinion at this point I think that, and that is that people in Prince Edward, now this is strictly a judgment of mine, people in Prince Edward, white people in Prince Edward County, did these things because it was their opinion that this is the way things were supposed to be. They had been raised into the kinds of situation that they were in. And they were not too concerned about others, mean—meaning black persons. But—so far as education is concerned, but they simply did not want things to change, and so while they seemingly did these things illegally, I'd say that's not a very good word, it seemed to be illegal, they did it out of a conviction within their hearts. This is not to say that all was well, but it simply is to say that they did these things because they thought it was the right thing to do for their children.

INTERVIEWER: LOVELY. CAN WE STOP FOR A MOMENT?

[cut]

00:09:10:00

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARK. JUST A MOMENT.

INTERVIEWER: YOU WERE GOING TO TELL US A, A STORY.

Bash: Well, as an illustration of, one of things that would come up from time to time. There was a gentleman who was an owner of a furniture store in, Farmville, who came to me one time, well I won't say he came to me, I was walking down the street and I walked into his store and he walked up to me and he said, look Bash, he said, I want to tell you something, and I want to tell you in a hurry because I don't want to be seen standing here with you. I'm in favor of what you're doing, but he said I can't be associated with it because it would kill my business. He said I'm afraid too and everybody else is afraid, so, he said, I just wanted you to know that, he said, if you're principal here next year, my child will listen to you and you can rest assured of that, but, I just can't publicly be associated with what you're fighting for. [pause] Course there were a lot on the other side too you know, of, there was some, there was some hate mail and there was a lot of avoidance behavior on the street, even in the grocery stores. The check-out clerks would sometimes turn their backs to us when we'd go through the checkout stands, in an effort to disassociate themselves with us, which was kind of sad, 'cause we didn't feel like we were a threat to anybody, that is, my wife and I.

00:10:48:00

INTERVIEWER: NOW, HOW MUCH DO YOU THINK THAT PEOPLE WERE BELIEVING—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: VERY SHORT ON FILM.

INTERVIEWER: STOP PLEASE THEN.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: YEAH.

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARK. FOUR.

[roll out/wild audio]

INTERVIEWER: —A BIT OF A QUICK ANSWER.

Bash: Surely.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: GO AHEAD.

Bash: The, sense of local—

INTERVIEWER: SORRY.

[slate]

[change to camera roll 213]

00:11:10:00

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: AND FIVE. MARK. JUST A MOMENT. GO AHEAD.

Bash: I don't think there was too much concern by the locality of people, people in the locality that is the general run of the mill person in the locality about what was going on at the state level or the national level. They were more concerned about what was going on in Farmville itself, and at the high school in particular. There were people of course who were involved with the defenders of liberty and individual sov—state sovereignty, but they, and they were sort of in the wings of local organizations, working with the PTAs and so on but so far as taking the local leadership openly, was concerned, they did not.

00:11:56:00

INTERVIEWER: WHY DO YOU THINK IT WAS IN FACT THAT VIRGINIA WAS SUCH A LEADER ON THIS RESISTANCE? THIS IS ACROSS THIS, THIS PERIOD, FOUR, FIVE YEARS, GENERALLY, VIRGINIA GIVES THE NAME MASSIVE

RESISTANCE TO IT. WRITES LAWS—WAS A DETERMINED OPPONENT OF THE BROWN DECISION. WAS THERE SOMETHING IN VIRGINIA'S HISTORY THAT WOULD MAKE SENSE OF THIS?

Bash: Well, I would assume that you have the possible reference to the Byrd Machine, the Byrd Organization, it's called the Byrd machine. I suppose a lot of people would just call it good organization so far as a political process was concerned. But there is no question about it that there was considerable dependence on the political leaders of the time to help Farmville, Front Royal, Norfolk City, a great number of places in the state which were faced eventually with the school desegregation problems. And there were schools that were closed all over the state as a result of the legislative enacted what is popularly called massive resistance legislation. But I think that eventually when, they had run the, the gamut of litigation, it was Governor Almond who said that, well we've got to, we've gone as far as we can go, we now need to turn the ship around and go in another direction. We've taken it as far as we can go and, and as a result, by the way, his—he was not looked upon with favor subsequent to that decision of his own, with the political powers in the state at, at that time.

00:13:45:00

INTERVIEWER: WONDER IF YOU COULD GIVE US YOUR THOUGHTS, THIS IS A, JUST AN OPINION QUESTION. WHETHER THE PEOPLE IN FARMVILLE WERE ACTING IN ANY SENSE OUT OF STATES' RIGHTS, YOU KNOW, THAT SORT OF CONSTITUTIONAL LEGAL QUESTION, OUT OF A PURE RACISM, THEY SIMPLY DIDN'T WANT ANYTHING TO DO WITH BLACK CHILDREN OR, OR WHAT?

Bash: Well, I don't think—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: START AGAIN.

INTERVIEWER: GO ON.

Bash: I don't think that there was any, deep seated racism per se, as we define it today. I think that there was a resistance to change popularly known as, if it ain't broke don't fix it. Things were working all right for them, that is for white citizens and they were in control and so what else is wrong. [laughs] Kind of unwilling to listen to anything that was wrong since it was working so good. The football team was winning, the basketball team was winning, you know, what else could you want? Any rate I don't think that, there was too much concern about states' rights and, some other things its just that at the local level of the masses, of the white citizens felt that it was just wrong to change the way we're doing things.

00:15:08:00

INTERVIEWER: LET ME STOP FOR A MINUTE AND THINK ABOUT THIS.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: STOP FOR A MINUTE?

00:15:15:00

INTERVIEWER: ACTUALLY WHEN YOU LEFT FARMVILLE, DID YOU SEE THE BEGINNINGS OF THESE PLANS FOR THE PRIVATE SCHOOLS? I MEAN DID YOU SEE PEOPLE WHO, ORGANIZING THEMSELVES, TELL US A LITTLE BIT ABOUT HOW A COMMUNITY ORGANIZES.

Bash: Well, there was an informal group of people who finally constituted themselves as the board of directors of the Prince Edward, what came to be the Prince Edward Academy and there were a lot of volunteers who were seeking contributions and pledges. I, if I, my memory doesn't fail, in the neighborhood of \$200,000. They thought they would need \$200,000 to start the school and they were not going for the money at that point in time, merely the pledges. As a matter of fact at the, that May meeting that I referred to before, that late May meeting held in Jarmen auditorium there was some activity, at that time, going for pledges. People were going for pledges, and even contributions of money to support the, private school. It was not really envisioned, I don't think, it was not really envisioned that these pledges would, would ever have to be called, I may be wrong about that, but I don't think they really went into it with the idea they'd ever have to call in the pledges. Never the less, the pledges were sought and there's one little funny anecdote associated with that. We, my family and I lived on the outskirts of Farmville, in the county outside the city—town limits, and one lady was making, the, rounds and she came to our house. I was not home. My wife was home. She, she was invited in and she told all about—told my wife all about the necessity for the private school and how it would be handled and, I suppose filling in the cracks of unknown administrative processes and so on in her own mind, any rate, she finally said now, I'd like to put you down for an amount of money, what can I put you down for and what is your name? And she said, my wife said, my name is Mrs. James Bash, upon which the lady [laughs] did the backstroke out the door. There were some funny things associated with it, but, were, since then amusing but at the time were rather dreadful.

00:17:40:00

INTERVIEWER: LET ME ASK YOU GENERALLY, YOU KNOW, IN ALL THESE SCHOOL CLOSINGS, WHITE CHILDREN AND BLACK CHILDREN BEING DENIED PUBLIC EDUCATION. WHAT DO YOU THINK PAID—DO YOU THINK EVERYONE REALLY PAID A PRICE FOR THIS, OR DO YOU THINK IT WAS ONE GROUP OR ANOTHER?

Bash: Well, if you're talking in dollars and cents I think the price was rather inestimable, but the price was there because, for example, in the city of Norfolk I know that 185 gifted children left the city, when the schools were closed in Virginia, that is in Norfolk City and they did not return once schools were reopened and they went off to other institutions, other schools and subsequently to colleges and universities across the country and they did not return to the city of Norfolk and that was for, in my judgment a loss of potential leadership in the city of Norfolk. Now how do you estimate that in terms of loss in dollars and cents, I

don't know. How you estimate it in terms of loss of leadership. I think you might take a look at that and see what could have happened if, and we can play the "if only" game a long time.

00:18:54:00

INTERVIEWER: CAN WE STOP? THAT'S A VERY INTERESTING ANSWER. I HADN'T THOUGHT OF THAT. THAT IS, THAT IS INTERESTING. CAN WE STOP FOR A MOMENT?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MM-HMM.

[cut]

00:19:01:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SIX. MARK.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: I GUESS THE QUESTION IS—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: GO.

INTERVIEWER: —YOU KNOW, THE MOTIVATIONS AGAIN.

Bash: I think that most people in Farmville, and Prince Edward County in general, were more convinced, that is I have to qualify that, most people, the white people were convinced that—

INTERVIEWER: WHY DON'T YOU START THE SENTENCE AGAIN THEN?

Bash: Yeah, OK. I think that most people in—God. Start it again. I think most white people—

INTERVIEWER: STOP FOR A MOMENT. CACTH YOUR BREATH.

Bash: [laughs] God!

00:19:32:00

INTERVIEWER: CATCH YOUR BREATH.

Bash: OK, straighten up, Jim—I think most white people in Prince Edward County and in, more specifically, in Farmville felt that, it was unnecessary to change the situation so far as their children was concerned because they were doing very well in school. There was, if my recollection is correct, a rather large percentage of youngsters graduating from Farmville High School where I was principal who were going on to college to some substantial

institutions in the North as well as the South and of course Longwood College was right in town, and it was relatively easy for them to, get into Longwood College if they did not, choose to go, elsewhere. So the general situation was, as I recall it, that people simply didn't want to make any changes, while they had what, Harry Golden called, standup integration and sit down desegregation. They still didn't really want to, make any changes in the school system. They felt that what was going on was all right, why change it?

00:20:44:00

INTERVIEWER: DID THEY FEEL ANYTHING TOWARDS THE BLACK CHILDREN? ANY FEELING ABOUT WHAT THEIR SITUATION WAS?

Bash: Not any animosity at all. As a matter of fact, after they had their own school for white children set up, private school for white children set up, they offered to set up a school for the black children. It was presumably a bona fide offer, with a lot of talent and a lot of material and a lot of money, but that was not accepted because in accepting that I think the black community felt that they would be accepting, again, a second rate school system.

00:21:23:00

INTERVIEWER: WAS THEIR SCHOOL SYSTEM SECOND RATE WHEN YOU WERE THERE?

Bash: Well, it was alleged to be second rate. I knew only vaguely the principal of the high school, the black high school, who subsequently came to Charlottesville and became an assistant principal in the Burly High School in Charlottesville and we talked after we both got to Charlottesville. But, I think that, the likelihood is quite strong that, black education in Prince Edward as well as throughout the state was a little less than, white education.

[roll out]

00:22:01:00

INTERVIEWER: CAN WE STOP PLEASE?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: THAT'S THE END OF THE ROLE.

INTERVIEWER: I THINK THAT'S IT. PERFECT!

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: I THINK WE GOT IT ALL.

00:22:08:00