Interview with **Jean McGuire**
Date: September 29, 1989
Interviewer: Jacqueline Shearer
Camera Rolls: 4136-4137
Sound Rolls: 480-481
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 Jean McGuire, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on September 29, 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 #4136]
[sound roll #480]

00:00:12:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Sorry, take eight.

Interviewer:

You ready, [unintelligible]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Yeah.

00:00:18:00

Interviewer:

So, I want you to tell me about your first teaching assignment in Boston, 1960, Louisa May Alcott School. What were the physical facilities? What was your class like? And maybe you could wind up by telling me about the music book that you were given to teach from.

00:00:34:00

Jean McGuire:

I remember going in as a student teaching to a number of schools in Boston, including the Dwight and the Farragut and the Tobin, but my long-term assignment was at the Louisa May, Louisa May Alcott, built in 1842, doors opened directly onto the streets, under the assistant principalship of Doris Warner, who'd been a member of St. Bartholomew's Church in Cambridge. And I trained in the third grade under Doris, and then I learned to teach first and second grade from a wonderful first grade teacher named Jewel Vanderhoop, and one of my first students was Mel King's daughter Judy King, who's now a daughter in Chicago. That class had forty-two students and thirty-six seats. We didn't have enough paper and soap and crayons and scissors. We just, everything was old, used, and not enough of it. And the books were old, they were 1920 Scott Foresman where the boys had dresses on with smock tops and little Mary Jane shoes with socks that hung down at the ankles. And the stories were of a time gone by. And of course there were no children of color in there whatsoever. No Asian children, no Hispanic children such as I had in front of me. And it, it was noticeable to me as a teacher that there weren't any references to the larger life [shouting in background] that was these children's experience. And we had what we call rote music books, and then we had some other music books which were very old, I think they were published in 1903 or 1904, and they had, you know, Victorian clothes and hairdos, sort of like the, the, the original Oz, Oz of, Wizard of Oz books, *Ozma of Oz*, the wild witch of the west and stuff like that with hairdos. And here was this book I found which had…it had the word "niggers" in it, Ten little niggers sitting on a fence. 9 little niggers playing in a line. And it was just like "Ten little Indians," 9 little Indians, and it was very offensive and I was very upset that that kind of book was in the classroom and had been there for all these years, 'cause these were old books, and I must have had about twenty-five or thirty in my room. They were dark green covers. And I collected them all and I went around to other teachers in the primary grades to see, Do any of you have any of these books? And of course some of them did, they had bits and pieces. I must have had a complete set. And I collected them all and I, I took them to the NAACP and I said, These are offensive. My principal said, Well just don't use them. And she said, A lotta people don't use 'em, they just use the rote song books. But these books had music in them, you know, with the G-clef and the F-clef and I wanted my children to learn how to read music. It was all I had. It, it was indicative of the state of affairs that was in Boston and probably the rest of America then. People accepted *Little Black Sambo* without comment. And I don't think you have to censor a book like that, but I think you have to use it as a teaching tool.

00:03:34:00

Interviewer:

So, then what was, what was the quality of the education like for a Black student in Boston in the 1960s?

Camera Crew Member #1:

Just need to stop one—

Interviewer:

What?

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #3:

Speed.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

[slate]

00:03:43:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Take nine.

00:03:46:00

Interviewer:

OK, so speaking as a Black teacher, what was the quality of the education provided for Black kids in the '60s?

00:03:53:00

Jean McGuire:

It was probably the same in terms of offerings as what was offered other children— in the school system.

Interviewer:

I'm sorry.

Jean McGuire:

—in the school system.

Interviewer:

Could you give us a complete sentence?

Jean McGuire:

Yes.

Interviewer:

OK.

Jean McGuire:

Mean repeat the question.

00:04:02:00

Interviewer:

Yeah.

00:04:02:00

Jean McGuire:

OK, I understand. [laughs] The quality of the education that was offered Black children was probably pretty much the same in terms of content as what was offered other children. There actually weren't that many Black children in any one classroom except in a few schools, like the one in which I taught, the Louisa May Alcott, because many of the schools, except for the Hyde and the Everett and the Sherwin and a few others, were sort of mixed. I mean, neighborhoods weren't totally segregated, but there was enough mixture so that you didn't get a completely different education as you do under other segregated situations. What was missing was that…in many ways, education was somewhat rigid. I didn't mind it being old-fashioned since I felt that much of the literature and many of the offerings were absolutely necessary for children to have, but they were very narrow in focus, it was probably the primary version of major British writers. And you did everything as the teacher. You taught music, you taught art, you taught physical education, you took the kids out to recess, you ate lunch with them, you helped them put their coats on, you wrote notes to their parents. It was not a time where you had teacher aides, and we had no audio-visuals, we had DC current in

that school, we didn't have enough lined paper. The school smelled of a hundred years of peanut butter and salami and bread and bananas and oranges. The stairs were worn down—

[rollout on sound roll]

[rollout on camera roll]

[cut]

[camera roll #4137]
[sound roll #481]

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, and.

Interviewer:

We can [unintelligible].

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Take ten.

Camera Crew Member #1:

New camera roll.

Camera Crew Member #2:

New camera roll.

Interviewer:

OK, we're ready?

00:06:09:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mm-hmm.

00:06:10:00

Interviewer:

So, I want you to go back in time. You're a beginning teaching, 1960. Give me the litany that you were just giving me of what you didn't have to work with.

00:06:20:00

Jean McGuire:

All right. If I can remember, the thing that hit me the most when I came in was the dichotomy between what I had seen as a student teacher and, and at the present doing some graduate work, you know, where I went out to Tufts and to BU and, and took courses to further my [car horn] master's, was that this school didn't have so many things that I thought we should be taking for granted. Didn't have primary typewriters. ***We didn't have new crayons, we had a box of old nubbly crayons. Pencils had to be collected at the end of the day so you would have enough for the children the next day. There wasn't enough white paper.*** The yellow paper was brown on the edges, it had been stored and saved and hoarded so there would be enough. And primary lined paper was very hard to come by. We didn't have a record player 'cause we had DC current. We didn't have a tape recorder. We didn't have a music teacher to come in. There were no music lessons. I bought flutophones for the parents who couldn't save up a dollar and we used to play music on the flutophones so I could teach music. There were no science labs. There was no gymnasium and the yard was so small, it was the size of maybe a large classroom, one for the boys and one for the girls. You couldn't do run games, Duck, Duck, Goose and name-ball and things like that where you stood in place, but you couldn't play tag or have relay races or any of the other things that were in the curriculum. There were no other kind of art labs or, or jewelry classes or any of the things that you would see in a school like Shady Hill where there's really wonderful facilities for children. There were just so many things that would've made life for the teachers and the students so much more exciting and so much more meaningful. And then, of course, our, our schools, in many parts, were very crowded, particularly in the areas where Blacks were complaining about the need for changes. There were books like *Little Black Sambo*. There, there, there were no pictures on the wall, anything that would let you know there were anything but White people in America. We had to read the *Bible* in school then, it was a Catholic Bible. And because I had Chinese and Asian kids, and kids from different religions, I used the Old Testament and stories like Esther and Ruth and Daniel in the Lion’s Den and Proverbs, things that were literature to, to, to make it.

00:08:23:00

Interviewer:

Great. Cut. Great, we got it. OK.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #3:

Speed.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Take eleven.

00:08:31:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Just lean back a little bit tighter. OK.

00:08:34:00

Interviewer:

OK. So, can you give me that topic sentence?

00:08:38:00

Jean McGuire:

Here I was a brand new teacher coming in to my first teaching experience, and I walked into this old building built in 1842, named after a wonderful New England writer, Louisa May Alcott, and I had forty-two students, thirty-six seats, and had to sit the kids at a kidney reading table, and not enough of anything to make it an easy teaching experience. And that was my entre to a school system that I had attended during 1938 and then again in, during the war in fort…'43, '44 when I had orchestra and music lessons from Vincent Sarker and, and French class and cooking at the, at the Dearborn School. It was all gone.

00:09:16:00

Interviewer:

Great, cut. Good, wonderful.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Take twelve.

[slate]

00:09:25:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

All right.

00:09:26:00

Interviewer:

I want you to tell me about the quality of the leadership that White elected officials provided as the desegregation process was under way.

00:09:34:00

Jean McGuire:

It was almost totally lacking. Basically, those who were pushing for access to the city's resources for their children were going it alone, so to speak. And that created in people a great deal of uncertainty as to whether or not city officials and city line departments like police and fire would perpetuate what had happened in the South. And I think in everybody's minds there was the picture of water hoses being used against civil rights activists and the police setting dogs against people in, in civil rights demonstrations in, in, in many states in the South, and the deaths of many college students at Florida State and Jackson State long before Kent State. And so, here we were in Boston with a man attacked in South Boston, a young Haitian worker who, in a mindless way, was, was attacked by people who had not been provided the kind of assurance that this was a city for all the people of Boston and that the Fourteenth Amendment guaranteed access to everyone in America not just certain people of a certain color or a certain class or a certain neighborhood, ***but this city shoulda been open to everyone and it wasn't. It was that fear that if you stepped out of your place you could be attacked. There was no leadership that said, That's off limits.*** You can't have an open season on people because of their color. And I think that carried over very clearly to young people and to teachers, and I think there's a certain legacy which is still here where people feel embittered by issues which were not explained, which were not discussed, for which there was no public discourse or dialogue around affirmative action, around curriculum change, around multicultural curriculum—

00:11:11:00

Interviewer:

I'm gonna interrupt you 'cause we're not gonna travel back to the present, right.

Jean McGuire:

OK.

Interviewer:

But what could elected officials have done that they didn't do?

00:11:18:00

Jean McGuire:

Well, basically, one of the things that Ruth Batson and Paul Parks and Mel King and many other leaders, Elmer Louis, were asking then were the things that we knew made for appropriate responses during school integration. And they were the things that changed the…they changed the atmosphere and the climate within the building and with, within the community. You have to understand what people bring with them, in terms of baggage, that you have to get rid of. None of that was discussed. Desegregation took place without discourse between teachers in districts, between parents and teachers, between book suppliers and people who supplied the school system with teachers, say the universities. It just, like, happened without any leadership to prepare the way. There were no roundtables, there were no Ford Hall, Hall forums. There were no in-service meetings where people discussed the need for, if you're going to put Black and White kids together, what would you want if you were integrating a few White students into an all-Black school system.

00:12:19:00

Interviewer:

Where would you have looked to for that kind of leadership?

00:12:22:00

Jean McGuire:

Well, from the mayor, first of all. The person who's leadership in the city. From your city councilors, from your state representatives, from the governor. Certainly from the federal government if that was necessary. But your local leadership is, is, is empowered to protect all the citizens of the city, and if you can't protect your children, you're, you're highly suspect in the minds of, of the public 'cause…

00:12:45:00

Interviewer:

I want you to bring it down to home a little bit. How did you personally feel? You've been a resident of this city, the city that's called the Cradle of Liberty. How did you feel watching all this go on?

00:12:56:00

Jean McGuire:

Basically, I listened to most of it. I didn't have a television then so I depended upon the print media, the newspapers, and my actual experiences then ha-having been in the system in the years prior to desegregation and then being director of METCO, where our buses, which were rolling as they had since '66 out to the suburbs, were catching much of the response to school desegregation 'cause the yellow bus was seen as an enemy, often by children who didn't know. I mean, even Black children didn't understand that the bus was carrying their brothers and sisters, too, and sometimes they would throw stones at them. Basically, we found that people would sometimes attack buses, or go by you, make obscene gestures, adults in cars, to the children and to the drivers, and you felt naked. You, you felt unprotected by that public environment which you as citizens say is for us. I mean, you know if you have a fire the firemen are gonna come. You know if there is a need for public safety, the police will come, or the state police, or, or whoever, the sheriff, whatever. You know they're supposed to be there for you. We did not feel that public government was there for us. We, we, we felt very much alone except for a few people who provided leadership and who joined with us and were often considered pariahs by Whites in their own community. It took a lot of healing to heal up the wounds that ne…didn't need to be opened in the first place.

00:14:23:00

Interviewer:

Great. Cut. Good.

[cut]

[slate]

00:14:28:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Take thirteen.

00:14:33:00

Interviewer:

Now, [car horn] I want you to remember not to come into the present. Speak from back then—

Jean McGuire:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

—and tell me if you felt that what the Black community was going through was worth it.

00:14:45:00

Jean McGuire:

I felt that what took place absolutely had to happen. It may not have had to happen that way, if there had been a different kind of leadership provided by White Bostonians of all classes and all neighborhoods. However, once labor starts, it doesn't stop, and the baby must be born and there isn't any turning back. And once you get caught up in the overarching feeling that that aspect of the two-century-long civil rights movement, you couldn't step outside of it. It was, it was in conversations at the supermarket, at the streetcar [car horn] stop, on the bus, in church, at the hairdressers. It was something that Black Americans talked about, getting our rights. We'd gotten rid of legal segregation. We'd gotten rid of public accommodations being segregated. We were fighting for access to jobs. Once the door is open, people pour through. You can't turn back the clock. It was worth every minute of it because you must go forward. I think that ***when you are the anvil, you bare, and when you're the hammer, you strike, and we were striking and there was no turning back.***

00:15:51:00

Interviewer:

Great. Cut. Good.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #3:

Speed.

Camera Crew Member #1:

And mark.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Take fourteen.

[slate]

Interviewer:

OK?

00:16:00:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Go ahead.

00:16:02:00

Interviewer:

So, I want you to speak as someone from Boston's formerly timid Black community to the process of self-definition that was part of this whole bigger process.

00:16:12:00

Jean McGuire:

I feel that my memories bring back to mind that…although there was fear out there whether you'd lose your job if you organized, people began to redefine who they were to change their name. You know, I asked Jesus if I could change my name and he said it would be all right if I changed my name. That was a very painful experience. Black teachers organized at the NAACP office in 1961, at the beginning…people concerned about desegregation, and continued that process by organizing the Massachusetts Negro Educators Association and then later on the Black Educators Alliance in Massachusetts. But, in an overarching way, there were new organizations, SNCC and CORE and all kinds of groups, say even like the Black Panthers, tutorial groups, the Ford Hill mental health chapter—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Jean McGuire:

—formed by Barb Elam, where people said, This is what we need—

[rollout on sound roll]

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:17:10:00