



Interview with **Phyllis Ellison**

Date: March 21, 1989

Interviewer: Jacqueline Shearer

Camera Rolls: 4109-4111

Sound Rolls: 447

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 Phyllis Ellison, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on March 21, 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 #4109]

[sound roll #447]

00:00:13:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marker.

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

00:00:20:00

Interviewer:

What was your reaction and your mother's when you first learned that you were assigned to Southie?

00:00:26:00

Phyllis Ellison:

When I first learned that I was assigned to South Boston High, I didn't know anything about South Boston High School, I didn't know what I was actually going into. My mother's reaction was she didn't want me to attend South Boston High School and she'd prefer that I go to a Catholic school.

Interviewer:

Go on.

Phyllis Ellison:

Oh. But I, I told her at that time that all my friends were assigned to South Boston High School because of the area in which I lived and that I wanted to go to a school with my friends and so she told me that if I didn't go to South Boston High School—I could go to South Boston High School or the Catholic school so she just let, I would quit—oh, golly. [laughs]

00:01:10:00

Interviewer:

That's OK. Cut.

Camera Crew Member #2:

[inaudible]

[cut]

[slate]

00:01:17:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

00:01:19:00

Interviewer:

So, when you first learned that you were assigned to South Boston High School, what was your reaction and what was your mother's?

00:01:25:00

Phyllis Ellison:

I didn't know much about South Boston High School at the time. I didn't know what I was getting myself into, that South Boston High School was part of busing or desegregation, I just knew that I was going to attend South Boston High School. My mother's reaction was, I was not going to attend South Boston High School, that I would go to a Catholic school. And I let her know that my friends were going to South Boston High and I wanted to attend there. And she, you know, wanted me to go to Catholic school. So, I said I would quit school if I had to go to a Catholic school because I wanted to be with my friends and none of my friends could go to Catholic school 'cause of affordability and I wanted to be with my friends.

00:02:06:00

Interviewer:

Now, did you have any feelings about the fact that you were assigned there, that you were in a sense being made to go there?

00:02:13:00

Phyllis Ellison:

I didn't know what desegregation was all about. I didn't know that, you know, about busing or being force bused to South Boston High School. I just know, knew that that was my assignment, South Boston High was my assignment, and that was my friends' assignment and I wanted to be with my friends.

00:02:28:00

Interviewer:

And what about the fact that some of the people in South Boston didn't want you to go to South Boston High. How did that make you feel?

00:02:35:00

Phyllis Ellison:

OK. That was the reason why, once I got to school, I wanted to continue to go South Boston High School because I felt that it was my civil rights duty to attend there and that it wasn't the fact that I was being force bused by Judge Garrity, it was the fact that the White people at South Boston, in South Boston, were saying to me that, You can't attend this school because you're Black, and I thought that was wrong.

00:03:02:00

Interviewer:

Now, tell me, describe for me what the bus ride from Bayside Mall up the hill was like. Were you scared?

00:03:10:00

Phyllis Ellison:

I remember my first day going on the bus to South Boston High School, I wasn't afraid because I felt important. I didn't know what to expect, what was waiting for me up the hill. We had police escorts, I think there was three motorcycle cops and then two police cruisers in front of the bus and so I felt really important at that time not knowing what was on the other side of the hill.

00:03:36:00

Interviewer:

Now, tell me what you heard and what you saw out the bus window.

00:03:41:00

Phyllis Ellison:

When we started up the hill, you can hear people saying, Niggers, go home. There were signs, they had made up signs saying, Black people stay out. We don't want any niggers in our school, and there were people on the corners holding bananas like we were apes, monkeys, monkeys get out, get up out of our neighborhood, we don't want you in our schools. So, you know, at that time, it did frighten me somewhat but I was more determined then to get inside South Boston High School because of the people that were outside.

00:04:11:00

Interviewer:

Now, inside the bus, tell me what you and the other students were doing and tell me how you reacted when you saw and heard what you did.

00:04:21:00

Phyllis Ellison:

Initially, when we first, we were on the bus initially, we reacted, we used to sing as we were going up to South Boston High School, we would sing "We Shall Overcome" and then duck so that the glass from someone throwing a rock wouldn't shatter into our eyes. We would sing and then duck down that "We Shall Overcome," and the police a lot of the times had the crowd maintained or they would catch the person that threw the rock or at least attempt to.

00:04:45:00

Interviewer:

And what about when people would...yell things at you or, say, throw an egg or something that you knew wasn't gonna break the window?

00:04:53:00

Phyllis Ellison:

Well, we, sometimes the students would stick their finger up at 'em or lick their tongue at 'em or, you know, say something back to them. And a lot of times, the aides that were on the bus tried to control but when there's forty students on the bus and there's only one aide, there's not a lot that the person can do if someone's in the back of the bus or the front of the bus.

00:05:12:00

Interviewer:

OK. Now, I want you to tell me how you felt, what it was like, when you got off the bus and had to go into the school.

00:05:21:00

Phyllis Ellison:

It was, first I, first of all, I felt important when I got off the bus because of the news media that was there. You saw, you know, Natalie Jacobson and, out in front of your school getting the story on your school. So, I felt really important going through the metal detectors and making sure that, you know, no one could come into the school armed. I felt important, I felt like this was a big deal to me to attend South Boston High School.

00:05:49:00

Interviewer:

OK. Cut.

Phyllis Ellison:

OK.

00:05:51:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Stop it down.

[cut]

[slate]

00:05:58:00

Interviewer:

OK. So, think back, you, you told me how important you felt. In what way did you feel important?

00:06:05:00

Phyllis Ellison:

I felt like I was making history because of, that was the first year of desegregation and all the controversies and conflicts at that time. I felt that the Black students there were making history.

00:06:17:00

Interviewer:

Now, also, you told me that your mother didn't want you to go to Southie, that she was afraid. What was she afraid of?

00:06:24:00

Phyllis Ellison:

She, my mother was afraid for my safety. She, you know, would see the South Boston High School being publicized on the evening news every night, every morning in the paper, and she did not want me to attend because she was afraid for my safety. But I thought that it was my civil rights and that my civil rights were being violated. Not so much by Judge Garrity but by the people at South Boston High in South Boston.

00:06:47:00

Interviewer:

Great. Cut.

Camera crew:

Stopping down it down.

[cut]

00:06:53:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

[slate]

00:06:56:00

Interviewer:

So, I want you to tell us about the day that Michael Faith was stabbed. How did you first learn that anything had happened? Describe what you saw and what you heard. Were you frightened and how did you leave school that day?

00:07:11:00

Phyllis Ellison:

I remember the day Michael Faith got stabbed vividly because I was in the principal's office and all of a sudden you heard a loud commotion and you heard kids screaming and yelling and saying, He's dead, he's dead. That Black nigger killed him, he's dead, he's dead. And then the principal running out of the office. And the, there, there was a loud commotion, there was screaming, yelling, hollering, Get the niggers at Sou—it was a riot, I mean, I was really afraid. And the principal came back into the office and said, Call the ambulance and said all the Black students that were in the office to stay there. And the police officer was in there and they were trying to get the White students out of the building because they had just gone on a rampage and they were just going to hurt the first Black student that they saw, anyone that was caught in the car, corridor that day would be hurt. Once that happened, it probably took about fifteen or twenty minutes for the, the police officers to get all the White students out and the Black students were locked in their rooms and no White students, all the White students were let go out of their classrooms. And the Black students were locked inside the classroom. I remember us going into a room and outside, you just saw a massive crowd of people, I mean, just so many people I can't even

count, they just looked like little bumblebees or something, there was that many. And that Louise Day Hicks was on top of the stairs saying, Let the niggers go back to Roxbury. Send them back to Roxbury. And the crowd booing her and, and Hicks is saying, No, no, no. We want to get 'em, we won't let 'em go. ***I remember the police cars coming up the street, attempting to, and turning over the police cars and I was just amazed that, that they could do something like that and, they, so they tried, the police tried to get horses up. They wouldn't let the horses get up. They stoned the horses, they stoned the cars. And I thought that day that we would never get out of South Boston High School.*** We had lunch and I remember they would not tell the students what was happening at any of the time, how they were gonna get us out of the school because I think the officials were really afraid too, because they did not know, after the police car was turned over, Louise Day Hicks couldn't control the crowd. And so they didn't really know how they were gonna get us out of the school and I think it was a big mystery to them. ***Finally, it must have been 2:30 p.m. or 3:00 p.m. that afternoon, all of a sudden, all you heard was, You're going out the back door, you're going out the back door. At that moment we had to run to the buses*** in the back door. They had used the buses as a decoy and they told us to get down and stay down. When we got on the bus, I remember the glass being shattered all over the floor and they told us to stay down because if one White person had saw us running through the back door, there would have been a mess. You know, there may have been some people even killed that day because they would have had to protect the students. I remember after we all went down Bayside Mall and all our mothers was waiting for us and saying that, you know, they would never let us go back to school again and at that point in time, I was really afraid. I didn't know what I was gonna do. After that, I think the next couple of days the school was closed just to get some law and order back and there had to be something done about what had happened. And the school officials had to figure out a way in which the Black students were going to be safe at South Boston High School because they knew that the White students wanted retaliation for Michael Faith's stabbing.

00:10:33:00

Interviewer:

Great. Cut.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Stopping down.

[cut]

[camera roll #4110]

00:10:35:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:10:41:00

Interviewer:

So, I'd like you to give us a sense of what it was like day to day in terms of the violence in the hallways at Southie and if you can specifically tell us about the time that you got jumped.

00:10:50:00

Phyllis Ellison:

OK. I remember coming out of my typing class, room 218, it was on the second floor, opening the door, going towards the locker. And the next thing I knew, all I could hear was my, all I could feel was my hair being pulled, me being pulled down to the ground, and three girls trying to get on top of me to fight. Calling me a nigger and I just wouldn't tolerate being called a nigger. The next thing I knew the police were...was separating us from each other and one of the girls didn't have on a bra when she got up, one of the White girls and there were, there was three, there were two others, and we were taken to the holding room. And at that time, there was a holding rooms for Blacks and holding rooms for Whites.

00:11:31:00

Interviewer:

So, was your attitude a nonviolent one at that time?

00:11:35:00

Phyllis Ellison:

My attitude was nonviolent but if my rights were being that vi-violated, I wasn't going be, take being called a nigger lying down or being smacked in the face and, and turn the other cheek. No, I, I wouldn't do that. When someone called me a nigger I'd say, White boy or White girl or whtie. I wouldn't turn the other cheek.

00:11:56:00

Interviewer:

And what was it like in terms of, I mean, give us a sense of what the violence was. How many fights a day would there be on a normal day?

Phyllis Ellison:

On a normal day anywhere between ten and fifteen.

Interviewer:

Could you give me that again in a full sentence?

00:12:08:00

Phyllis Ellison:

Yeah. OK. *On a normal day there would be anywhere between ten and fifteen fights per day. You can walk down the corridor and some, a Black person would bump into a White person or vice versa, that would be one fight, and they'd try to separate it. Because at that time, it was so, it was so much tension in the school* that one fight could just have the school dismissed for the entire day because it would just lead to another and another and another. And so they didn't want it to be a riot so the school could be dismissed, you know, after one or two fights for the day.

00:12:40:00

Interviewer:

Now, you told me that you thought that the media played an important part in the way that things happened.

00:12:47:00

Phyllis Ellison:

The students at that time and myself included knew that if we wanted to get out of school, if we wanted to feel important, that we'd just start a fight at, during a major, like third, after third period in the bathroom and so the students would be released for the day. We know we would go home or we'd go over to U Mass and we'd see it on, we'd watch it on six o'clock news. I think if the media hadn't played that role or, you know, every night South Boston High School's on the six o'clock news and the next morning it's the front page, hit the front page, that the students may not have fought so much or they, there wouldn't have been so much violence.

00:13:21:00

Interviewer:

In the midst of all this, did it ever happen that White kids and Black kids got along?

00:13:25:00

Phyllis Ellison:

Not from '74 to '77. The White kids were afraid of, of being friends with the Black students because they would be ostracized, they would be casted out, they weren't allowed to have Black friends, that they would be beat up.

00:13:40:00

Interviewer:

If you had it to do over again, would you?

00:13:43:00

Phyllis Ellison:

[laughs] Stop.

00:13:46:00

Interviewer:

Cut.

00:13:48:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Stopping down.

[cut]

[slate]

00:13:54:00

Interviewer:

So, give me the good and the bad of if you had it to do over again, would you?

00:14:00:00

Phyllis Ellison:

If I had to do it all over again because of my civil rights, I thought that they were being violated because a White person was not gonna tell me that I couldn't go to a White school, that I couldn't attend South Boston High School. But as far as the education, I think we spent a lot more time out of school in the holding rooms, fighting, and a lot could have been, I could've [plane flies over] gotten a better education 'cause I wouldn't have spent so much time with the, you know, court systems and the Judge Garrity and the school being closed. And a lot of the days were just half days, especially initially. And in '74, I don't think there was too many weeks in the beginning where we went to school every single day, that the school wasn't released early, at least one or two times that week.

00:14:45:00

Interviewer:

OK. Cut.

Camera Crew Member #1:

It was an airplane.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Yeah.

[cut]

Interviewer:

OK—

00:14:54:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

One second's a [inaudible]. OK.

00:14:56:00

Interviewer:

OK. So, again, giving me the good and the bad side of it, if you had it to do over again, would you?

00:15:02:00

Phyllis Ellison:

If I had it to do all over again for the civil rights part of it, I would do it over because I felt like my rights were being violated by the White people of South Boston telling me that I could not go to South Boston High School. As far as my education, I think I could have gotten a better education if I didn't spend so much time out of school with the fighting and the violence and being dismissed from school all, at least once or twice a week. We were allowed to go home early because there was just so much tension inside of the school that if we didn't someone may be killed or, or really seriously injured. And I think that I could have gotten a better education if I'd spent more time in school than out of school at that time.

00:15:43:00

Interviewer:

OK. Cut.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Stopping down.

[cut]

00:15:46:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

[dog barks] Mark it.

[slate]

00:15:51:00

Interviewer:

So, you were telling us about the atmosphere inside the school and inside the classrooms at that time.

00:15:58:00

Phyllis Ellison:

OK. The atmosphere inside the classroom was tense, you can't imagine how tense it was inside the classroom. A teacher was almost afraid to say the wrong thing 'cause they knew that that would excite the whole class, a disturbance in the classroom. [dog barks] And the teachers didn't want that in their classrooms and I can't blame them at that time because one

word could lead to another and there could be a fight and the, you know, the whole school could be dismissed for the day for that.

00:16:25:00

Interviewer:

Now, can you tell me the story about why you didn't get to go to the prom?

00:16:28:00

Phyllis Ellison:

I didn't go to my prom because I felt that it was a all-White prom. The Black students had no input in the prom, the planning of the prom whatsoever so it was as if we didn't exist. And there wasn't enough Black students to vote against the White students because there was more White students attending than Black. So, we had no voice, we had no say-so, and we didn't want to attend. So, we boycotted and there wasn't one Black student that attended the prom in '77.

00:16:56:00

Interviewer:

OK. Cut.

00:16:58:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Stopping down.

[cut]

[slate]

00:17:05:00

Interviewer:

So, tell us about the separation of the races in the classes and in the bathrooms.

00:17:10:00

Phyllis Ellison:

The classes were separated, the Black students sat on one side of the classes, the White students sat on the other side of the classes. The teacher didn't want to, to assign seating because there may be some problems in the classroom so the teachers basically let the students sit where they wanted to sit. When in the lunchrooms, the Black students sat on one side, the White students sat on the other side. And in ladies room, it was the same thing. The Black students went to the right of the ladies room, the White students went to the left of the ladies room. So, really, it was separate. I mean, we attended the same school but we really never did anything together. Gym classes, if the Blacks wanted to play basketball, the Whites wanted to play volleyball so we never played together. They would play volleyball, we would play basketball so it was separate.

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

00:17:57:00

Interviewer:

Great, OK. I think we got a—

Camera Crew Member #2:

Was that a rollout?

Interviewer:

Yes.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Yes it was.

Camera Crew Member #2

OK, that's a rollout on forty-one, ten.

00:18:04:00

Camera Crew Member #3:

What about [inaudible]—

[cut]

[camera roll #4109]

[slate]

00:18:09:00

Interviewer:

So, I want you to tell me again about this basketball, volleyball business in gym and, and talk [dog barks] about the tension, the racial tension.

00:18:17:00

Phyllis Ellison:

If we wanted to play basketball, if the Black students wanted to play basketball, the White students wanted to play volleyball. So, the Black students played basketball and the White students played volleyball. The tension, you can't imagine the tension that were, was in the classroom. And the teachers were afraid that if they said one thing, it would lead to another, and it may incite a riot. So, a lot...the teachers [dog barks] allowed the students to sit basically where they wanted to sit so it wouldn't be any racial tension. So, Black students sat on one side and White students sat on the other.

00:18:49:00

Interviewer:

OK. Do you wanna say that again?

Camera Crew Member #3:

We just rail—rolled out.

Phyllis Ellison:

[laughs]

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK, it's a rollout.

Interviewer:

So it's [unintelligible]—

Phyllis Ellison:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

—really truly—

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:18:58:00

Copyright 2021 Washington University Libraries