

FROM BROWN TO NOW: I DREAM OF FREEDOM

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This is a speech that James Solomon gave on February 27, 2004 to Hand Middle School in Columbia, South Carolina for their Black History Assembly, "From Brown to Now: I Dream of Freedom" in light of the National Black History theme, "Brown vs. the Board of Education (50th Anniversary)." The speech was preceded by a skit titled, "Young, Gifted, and Black: The Quest for Equality in Education."

It is amazing how quickly the conditions of history are lost from one generation to the next. Indeed, the social, economic and political conditions of my generation are ancient history to most of today's middle school students and are probably only vaguely remembered by many of their parents and grandparents. But if we do not know our history, then we don't fully understand how things have come to be as they are. And, if we don't understand how things came to be as they are, we are not likely to fully appreciate how fortunate we are, at this point in time, to be Americans, or to appreciate what our responsibilities are to future generations. In America today, with respect to social, economic, and political justice, we have come a long way but we still have a long way to go. So it becomes imperative that while we should appreciate where we are in America today, we must also appreciate our responsibility to future generations. This is why the visits by Thurgood Marshall and Ruby Bridges to the class in the skit were so important; and this is why, it is felt to be important to have visits, by people like myself, who know first hand of the struggles that have brought us, black and white, red and brown and all shades in between, to this place in history where we can all be proud to be Americans, but remain committed to continuing the struggle for social, economic, and political equality for all Americans and indeed, all the people of the world.

So I am here today, to share with you from my perspective:

- What life was like in much of America before Brown vs. Board of Education,
- To remind you of how much was sacrificed by so many so that we could have the opportunities that we now have,
- To share some of my experiences during those times of change, and
- To encourage you to continue the struggle for equality for all.

I hope that by doing this your school theme, "From Brown to Now: I Dream of Freedom" will motivate you to do your best, to prepare yourselves

to meet the challenges of your generation, in maintaining freedom here at home and in promoting freedom here around the world.

First, to give you a sense of what life in America before *Brown vs. the Board of Education* all that I need to do is to remind you that, 50 years ago the laws of all southern and border states mandated a separation of the races in schools, public transportation, public restrooms, eating establishments, and public buildings. Further, African Americans were systemically denied the right to vote and to participate in the political process. This system of separation perpetuated an environment of superiority among whites Americans and promoted the maltreatment of African Americans by whites socially, politically, and economically.

Furthermore, this system of segregation was legitimized by the United States Supreme Court under its “Separate but Equal” doctrine. This doctrine stipulated that “separation of the races in the use of public facilities (including public schools) was legal if the separate facilities were equal.” There was also the larger issue of the legal separation of the races. This is the issue that was overturned by the “*Brown vs. the Board of Education* 1954 Supreme Court Ruling.” It was this ruling that laid the foundation for all of the positive changes resulting from the “Civil Rights Movement.”

I must make the point that the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown vs. the Board of Education* was partly based on “*Briggs vs. Elliott*” which started in Summerton, SC in 1947.

It is important to note that it was in *Briggs vs. the Elliott*, that Clarendon County’s African Americans moved from simply pursuing equalization of facilities to attaching segregation in schools as being in violation of the US Constitution, as amended. The (District) court ruled against the petitioners on the issue of the legal separation of the races and ordered schools to be equalized; focusing on equalization and ignoring the broader question of the constitutionality of segregation. This action resulted in a NAACP appeal to the US Supreme Court. The *Briggs* case (then) became part of the *Brown* litigation.¹

Thurgood Marshall was the lead attorney for the NAACP in auguring this case before the US Supreme court. So, you can see why Thurgood Marshall is such an important part of the history of the civil rights movement and of American history.

The *Briggs* case evoked an extreme reaction in Clarendon County. All of the petitioners suffered swift and severe hardships for their courage. Harry *Briggs* was fired from his job. Annie Gibson lost her job as a motel maid and her husband lost land that had been in his family for eight decades. Rev. (J.A.) Delane saw his home burned to the ground. Federal Judge Walter

¹Excerpted from “*Brown v. Board of Education* Orientation Handbook-Combined *Brown* Cases, 1951-1954-*Briggs v. Elliott*”—<https://brownvboard.org/content/brown-case-briggs-v-elliott>

Waring, who sided with the petitioners' concerns, was forced to leave the state by a joint resolution of the South Carolina House of Representatives.²

The wording of the US Supreme Court in the *Brown vs. Board* ruling is profound. Listen to what the court said, "To separate them (meaning elementary and high school students) from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race," the ruling stated, "generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely to ever be undone . . . We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal."

'...But left hanging by this celebrated decision was the question of exactly how the thousands of school systems that separated children by race were to go about bringing them together.' In the final analysis, the Supreme Court created a monumental dilemma by sending '...the cases back to lower courts with instructions...' that students be admitted "to public schools on a racially nondiscriminatory basis with all deliberate speed."³

The "All Deliberate Speed" ruling led to long delays in the desegregation of public schools. It also led to the kind of situations that Ruby Bridges referenced in the skit. It was not until 1960 that 6-year old Ruby Bridges Hall became the first African American child to desegregate an elementary school.

Her walk to school inspired the 1964 Norman Rockwell painting that he titled, "The Problem We Live With." This is a painting of a small black girl, escorted by four federal marshals, walking to school beside a wall bearing a scrawled racial slur and the letters KKK. Harvard psychiatry Professor Robert Coles witnessed the scene in New Orleans. Professor Coles has written a children's book about Ruby Bridges' experience called "The Story of Ruby Bridges." In the book Coles reminds children of the heroism of Bridges' action, showing her facing an empty classroom because angry parents kept their children home and all but one teacher refused to teach a black child.⁴

I can see why Ruby Bridges was included in your skit, she exhibited perseverance, effort, problem-solving, common sense, flexibility, courage, initiative, cooperation, integrity, responsibility and patience, in fighting racial injustice, all at 6-years of age.

The "All Deliberate Speed" ruling left to the states and in some cases individual communities the decision of when and how to desegregate its schools. In most instances this meant continuing to segregate the schools.

²Ibid

³CENTURY series - In Black and White - Education Week, 03/24/99, page 5—<https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/1999/03/24/28deseg.h18.html>

⁴Excerpted from The MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour: Conversation - Walking Tall - February 18, 1997, page 1—<https://www.americanarchive.org/catalog/cpb-aacip-507-vh5cc0vp4m>

It was during the 1960's that things started to move in South Carolina. The 1963 Souvenir Program for the Twenty-Second Annual NAACP Conference in South Carolina lists the following among highlights of civil rights activities in South Carolina from 1960 through 1963:

1960

- A Greenville Prayer Pilgrimage. Where 800 people marched on Greenville Municipal Airport to protest waiting-room segregation.
- Sit-in demonstrations begun at Rock Hill.
- 388 students of Claflin and South Carolina State Colleges were water-hosed and gassed during a protest March.
- Rev. C. A. Ivory, President of Rock Hill NAACP Branch, was jailed for picketing.
- Charleston Municipal Golf Course were ordered integrated by Judge Ashton H. Williams.
- Rev. I. DeQuincy Newman was jailed at Myrtle Beach and threatened by a lynch-bent mob after leading a Wade-in attempt.
- The first African American was registered to vote in McCormick County.
- Public Libraries were integrated in Greenville, Darlington, and Florence following "Read-Ins."
- John F. Kennedy carried South Carolina with the aid of African American vote.

1961

- 1,200 joined in a march pilgrimage to York County Chain Gang following the imprisonment of 15 students of Friendship Junior College for picketing.
- 16 lunch counters were desegregated in Columbia.
- African American parents sought to integrate schools in Darlington, Beaufort, and Charleston.
- A suit was filed to desegregate Sesqui Myrtle Beach, and all other state parks.

1962

- 61 non-traditional jobs were five African American [jobs] in Charleston following 24 weeks of picketing and complaints to the President's Committee.
- 16 lunch counters were desegregated in Columbia.
- A suit was filed in Federal Courts by Mrs. Gloria Rackley on behalf of her daughter, Jamelle, to desegregate the Orangeburg Regional Hospitals. (Mrs. Rackley had been fired from her job as a teacher for participating civil rights protests.)
- A suit was filed in Federal Court by Harvey Gantt for admission to Clemson.
- Conviction of 26 "Morris College Sit-In cases" was overturned by the South Carolina Supreme Court.

1963

- Harvey Gantt was admitted to Clemson.
- U.S. District Judge Robert Martin ordered all state parks integrated.
- Henri Monteith, Robert Anderson, and I were admitted to the University of South Carolina.

So as you can see a lot was going on when Clemson and University of South Carolina ordered desegregated.

Prior to Harvey's registration at Clemson, Harvey, Henri, Robert, and I participated in orientation sessions to prepare us for what we might expect upon entering. There had been problems in other states when the universities had desegregated, and there was tension and concern for what might happen at Clemson and USC. However, Harvey entered Clemson peacefully in the Spring of 1963, and it as now our turn.

On September 11, 1963, Henri, Robert, and I arrived on campus with a police escort and were registered individually. Immediately following registration, we were directed by campus officials to what was then called the Navy ROTC building where we held a news conference. Following the news conference Henri and Robert were escorted to their respective dormitory rooms by white students that had previously participated in our orientation sessions, and I went home to my family in Sumter. We began classes the next day, September 12th without incident.

You may wish to hear more about those early days, if so we can talk a little bit more about them during the question and answer period.

In closing, the point that I wish to make by all that I have said is that where we are today in America did not happen by chance. It took effort, courage and sacrifice on the part of a lot of people to bring America from where it was before "Brown" to where it is today, and it will take courage and effort by you and others in your generation to continue to move America closer to a position of social, economic and political justice for all. In the past, some people lost their job fighting for justice, some lost their homes, some lost their property, and some white and black lost their lives. Consequently, we have a responsibility and a solemn obligation too not only preserve what has been accomplished but to improve upon it for future generations.

I believe that we can do this and I believe that we will do this, because I believe in you and others like you throughout this land and country. You are our future, you are our hope, and if you do your best in school and in life, our hope will be fulfilled and our future will be secured.

Thank you.

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