

UNIFIED COMMITTEE FOR AFRO-AMERICAN CONTRIBUTIONS
Great Mills High School Oral History Project

Zora Siemasko & Jane Sypher

November 24, 2003

Interviewed by Merideth Taylor and the English 12 class of Ms. McKean

In Ms. McKean's classroom in Great Mills High School

Transcribed by Andrew Bove on January 5, 2009

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Original formats are one cassette tape

1 hour, 2 minutes, 38 seconds

Audio CD 1 of 1

Track 01

0:00 Introduction. Zora Siemasko (ZS) was a assistance principal at Leonardtown, and then came to GMHS as assistant principal. When she became principal at GMHS, Jane Sypher (JS) became the assistant principal.

1:14 Sypher family came to St. Mary's County from Philadelphia in 1909 and bought a farm in Leonardtown. They lost the farm when all of the workers went off to World War 1 – they could not harvest the crop and the bank repossessed the property. They bought a small parcel in Mill Cove. JS was raised in Montgomery County until second grade – went to Frank Knox Elementary, Little Flower, St. Mary's Academy (1 year), and then GMHS in fall of 1964 as a sophomore – class of 1967. Went to St. Mary's College for a bachelor's in social studies then taught English at GMHS from 1977 through 1986 – then assistant principal from 1986 through 1991. Currently works at the College of Southern Maryland.

3:26 ZS taught mathematics at GMHS until 1982 when she became assistant principal.

Track 02

3:57 JS attended an integrated (majority white) catholic school prior to GMHS. ZS began teaching at GMHS in 1962 when there were a few black students. When she went to school, there were only a couple black students at Frank Knox School. It was a segregated system elsewhere. ZS recounts the struggle she had to garner a black student, Francine Dove, the award and recognition that she deserved (does she say at Esperanza School?).

6:25 JS: St. Mary's Academy (all girls' school) has some minority students – a large number of students of Dominican Republic and Puerto Rican decent. Came to GMHS at 1964 when the black school, George Washington Carver School, was still an all-black institution. But in her senior year, 1966-1967, Carver closed as a high school and the students were transferred to GMHS. Many of the black teachers also came to GMHS – Dolores Fleming, Mr. Moore, Bee Ellis. JS recalls many wonderful memories of her senior year. The students held class elections again in order to accommodate the new students. The class president, Cathy Jenkins was re-elected. But another position changed and Curtis Kane became president of the student government – he was the former student president at Carver School.

Track 03

8:53 JS: There was inter-racial dating in that first year. It was a fairly calm environment until the next year when Martin Luther King was assassinated. That led to racial tensions into the early 1970s.

9:47 JS: Bobby Kennedy came to Seven Gables Hotel (Town Creek) to campaign for his brother. Her parents were active Democrats and so they were there – Jane was ten-eleven years old. She walked with Kennedy back to the boat and he “tossled” her hair and said, “See you again.”

11:15 Assembly was held at GMHS to welcome the Carver students. The coming together of the students did not last. Things got worse over the first few years. Charlie Ridgel taught there that first year. John Brafford graduated in 1967; Tubby Smith graduated in 1969. JS had great experiences at GMHS. Charles Newkirk graduated in 1967. Brenda Newkirk graduated in 1976.

Track 04

13:50 This class interviewed the father, Ted Newkirk. There were African American students at GMHS prior to closing Carver High School – it was elective and a few attended GMHS. Students knew that Carver was closing and that all the black students would be coming to GMHS. There had been many community meetings to discuss integration. Mention of Ted Newkirk litigation with the Base – JS's father was a witness for Newkirk.

Track 05

17:28 Litigation began the process of black students attending GMHS. The Groves children, Joan and Conrad, attended in the fall of 1958. It was a difficult time for them. They were not welcome. ZS graduated in 1957 – 41 all white student graduates.

19:24 ZS had put forth a black student for an award at Esperanza School. It was a stressful occasion for ZS. The student, Francine Dove, got the award. ZS does not remember much tension or racial problems at Esperanza. Both ZS and JS spent their time with like-minded people and so they may have not been aware of racial tensions.

Track 06

22:12 There was a “Pep Bus” to carry students to away football games. They would pile in and go to Pamunkey High School – an all-black high school. They did not avoid the game.

ZS: You were more afraid of what you did not understand and what you had heard as rumors.

24:24 Debbie Kole, the librarian and member of this project speaks: The buildings that she attended at GMHS are no longer standing. She grew up in the flattops. JS spent a year in the flattops when she was 14. Many of the subdivisions that we know today were not built yet – Esperanza, Town Creek. The flattops were pretty typical housing. Money was tight and students had to find things to do without money.

Track 07

26:16 JS: In the evening the GMHS students went to Duck’s Drive In, which was run by a cranky man who did not like the high school students coming there. He closed early on nights of a football game. So one of the students would leave the game early and keep Duck’s open until the others could arrive. She suggests Charles Newkirk volunteered for this – he’d order a coke and hamburger and sit there.

27:33 The man became the first owner of a McDonald’s franchised in St. Mary’s County. All of the places closed at 6 PM – so there was little to do or places to go. Kole mentions that when she grew up she thought GMHS was the worst place in the world. But in retrospect, GMHS is a great school with many graduates who became famous – president of World Bank, famous basketball coach, doctors, lawyers, etc. JS: GMHS students care about each other. Attitudes at Leonardtown HS were not as good - there was less concern for each other.

Track 08 (side 2)

31:21 JS: There were riots all over the county in 1968-69 after King was assassinated. It was a sad time for many. GMHS was locked down. Times then changed as blacks and whites pulled apart. There will always be some people who are biased.

33:54 ZS: Some students take advantage of situations – and they make bad choices. There is a door of opportunity for every students and students today have to go through that door. No matter your ethnicity, education provides great opportunities and will change your quality of life experiences.

Track 09

35:29 Students whose parents and relatives attended GMHS – discussion with students.

36:44 ZS: She found that African American students had difficulty doing well in school because their friends criticized them for it. Today more female students go on to college. ZS was the only female from her class that attended college.

Track 10

39:34 JS: Recalls GMHS elections – they were held in the spring, which did not provide any opportunity for the black students who were coming in the fall. So elections were held again in the fall. ZS: The school became over-crowded in the fall of 1966. There were almost 1700 students in a school designed for 1000.

42:04 JS: An after school incident – one student hit another over the head with a chair – about the year 1988-89. A civil rights commission investigation followed for many months. It began as a state investigation but then became a federal investigation. The outcome was that the school was fair and equal. There were no recommendations for improvements. The students returned and were nice. The fight was not racially motivated but did involve a black and a white student. It was more an escalation of a push and shove incident.

Track 11

45:07 Another case was brought against ZS over her telling a black student what was appropriate attire. JS: Things that happened in the community sometimes came into the school. Students should leave those issues at the doorstep. Here at GMHS they have access to top-notch education.

47:54 ZS: There was a circle of Black educators who keep communication lines open and helped keep the system working. As a child, she had no experiences with minorities. Her parents were very prejudiced. But she quickly realized that their attitudes were wrong.

Track 12

49:34 JS: Her family was “very open minded.” She recalls her father taking her to a bar with a sign “colored only” in a back seating area. They sat there and the bartender announced that they were sitting in the wrong place. Her dad inquired, “Is the beer any different down here?” ZS: Her father was well educated but had been brought up with prejudice. JS: She had good access to books in her home as did her parents when they came up.

51:43 ZS: When you grow up you begin to see things through your own eyes and she saw things differently than her parents. Her parents died forty years ago and their attitudes never changed. She recalls a time after her mother had died when she was sitting next to a black person in the Esperanza School cafeteria, and thinking that her mother would die if she knew she was eating with a black person.

53:16 JS: Saw her father cry in April 1967 at the death of Martin Luther King.

Track 13

- 54:45 Students today have to realize that there are people who are narrow-minded. They should choose the people that associate with. Like-minded people work well together. JS: Get involved politically – register and vote. Don't complain about the politicians or policies – get involved and change them. Mentors can play a huge role later in your life.
- 57:47 Discussion: students comment on their plans after this year (they are seniors). ZS: Those who are most successful write down their goals.

Track 14

- 59:35 Students should make themselves aware of local opportunities in furthering their education or seeking employment. They end by going around the room and giving their names.