

Unified Committee for Afro-American Contributions
Oral History Documentation Project

JOAN GROVES BRISCOE

Interviewed by Merideth Taylor
Videographer Aaron Brusset
August 8, 2007

[unknown location]

Transcribed by Michelle Marsich on February 10, 2009

Logged by Tania Jordon on August 15, 2009

A verbatim transcript is available

Original format is digital video

23 minutes, 15 seconds

[Begin compact disc 1, beginning of interview]

Merideth Taylor: So why don't we actually start with telling us your name and a little bit about your family and your background and how you ended up in St. Mary's County.

Joan Groves Briscoe: Well my name is Joan Groves Briscoe. And my parents were William and Rebecca Groves. And they lived in California, Maryland and I lived there with along there with them for a time. We came from New York. And we lived in East Elmhurst.

I had -- there were five of us, two girls and three boys. And I had gone to the public schools for colored kids originally. My father had heard about all of the enthusiasm that so many people had had about integrating the schools. He looked around in St. Mary's County, and there was no integration. So he thought, "Well, why wouldn't we try?" We would go ahead and try to integrate. And so he was a member of the NAACP and he found out from them what was going on and that there would have to

be a court case in order for us to be able to go to school -- it wasn't an automatic thing.

So the attorneys for the NAACP got all of the information from our family that they needed to go to court to request permission for us to go to school. And so the first school that we tried was Great Mills High School. Later on my brother went to Ryken High School, the Catholic High School in the area. And we took the case to court and we won the case, and so we were supposed to start school together, my brother and myself. And I was in the twelfth grade. I was going into the twelfth grade from the eleventh grade at the time. That's -- that's where I started.

MT: Oh, I was thinking the cup -- it should be someplace. Maybe you could move the cup over a little bit -- do you know what I mean? It's a lot closer -- no you could stay there. Could you just move your cup over a bit?

JB Oh, I see what you're saying.

MT: You can drink from that, it looks larger--.

MT: Okay, that was great. So it was your -- really your father's idea to --

JGB: Yes, it was.

MT: Could you just tell me about that again, a little bit. How that idea evolved. Maybe a little bit about your father? Tell us a little bit about your father.

JGB: Well my father was an entrepreneur, he was a licensed electrician. My father wanted to make a difference in the community. As far as I know, he was the first black licensed electrician in St. Mary's County. And we had been through a lot of things personally in our family. And he wanted to make a plus in our family life and in the community life. And one of the things that we all had complained about moving to St.

Mary's County was that the schools weren't integrated, we were going to have to go to a colored school and we didn't think that the black schools were in as good a shape as they should've been. And they weren't.

And so my father wanted to make a difference and so he decided to find out from the NAACP what did he have to do? What did anybody have to do? And that was how he got us interested. And he, after he found out from them, he came home and he talked to my mother. And then he talked to my brother and myself and asked us about going to an integrated school. And so since we had gone to integrated schools before -- that was not our first time going to an integrated school. And we told him it was fine, we had never had any problem. We had been doing that all -- we didn't know what it would be like to be the first ones, but we didn't have a problem with doing that at all.

MT: I was actually gonna ask you about how you felt about being the first ones?

JGB: Well we were the first ones in St. Mary's County, but not the first ones in our lives to go to integrated school. Ever since I had been going to school -- and remember I'm saying I was going into the twelfth grade now, but for eight, nine, ten years, I had been going to an integrated school in New York. So that was not my first time going to an integrated school. So it didn't bother me.

MT: Did you -- well you might have felt -- proud, I don't know. How did you feel?

JGB: I was glad, I was glad to go. I don't think I really realized what this was gonna mean to other kids -- I really don't think so. Because when I went to school before it never meant anything to anybody, I was just going to an integrated school (laughs).

So when I started in St. Mary's County I knew that this was the first time. And I knew that other kids would probably have a chance to go to. But I really did not -- I don't

think I realized how significant it would be if I had not gone to an integrated school before.

MT: Ok, great. So there's a -- there's a photo in *The Enterprise* -- there was a photo in *The Enterprise*?

JGB: Yes. I remember that.

MT: Tell us a little bit about that first day and the media and how you thought your parents felt. And just that first day and right before it too, how you felt.

JGB: Well the night before I was excited about getting my clothes ready and all my school supplies and things like that. I was excited about going to an integrated school for the first time down in St. Mary's. And when we were leaving the house to come to school, we didn't go on an integrated bus. As I remember it, the bus came and there was nobody on it except my brother and myself. And when we stood at the door of the house to come out, my mother and father came out with me and I remember some pictures being taken. I know that there was a policeman; there was a state trooper that accompanied us to school. That's what I -- that's what I can remember. And on the school bus there was just my brother and myself, that was it. That was odd; we always went to school with a bunch of kids. That when we got to school, I don't remember what happened going in. I remember -- the only thing I remember is -- I remember some kids calling us names and saying ugly things. Saying what they were going to do to us and that type of thing.

But I don't remember a whole lot about that, I really don't. I remember the teachers being very kind and very good to us. There were only a few teachers that had

segregation on their mind. The teachers that had been born and raised in St. Mary's County, they had a problem. But the other teachers, the other teachers didn't.

I remember there was one guy that taught me English and -- very nice guy, a young man, and he was just as kind as he could be to me. I remember my business teacher; she was just as kind as she could be to me. She wasn't from St. Mary's County.

That's the kind of things -- those are the kinds of things that I remember. I remember those two people significantly. I'm not saying there weren't others, but in my mind, those are the two that I remember. Those are the two that stand out.

MT: How did you know that those other -- some of those teachers weren't -- how did you know that they had segregation on their minds?

JGB: Well, Miss Mattingly I think was the principal. And I believe that her brother might have been a -- an elected official. And I know that I believe from my father discussing different things with me, that they were not for integration. And so I remember, I remember her having a problem with it. I don't remember if she had a sister teaching there at the school, too. But I remember that they were not -- they were not for integration like my English teacher and my business teacher. I remember that very specifically.

MT: I was wondering if there was anything about the way they behaved or their actions or anything that told you that --

JGB: She never did anything that I can remember, pointedly, that showed me that she was not for integration, no.

MT: Okay, I think we talked a little bit before about Conrad's experience. Do you feel that your brother's experience was significantly different? Can you talk a bit about your

brother's experience there and what you were aware of, or what he may have talked about afterwards?

JGB: I remember from what my brother told me that I think kids may have been meaner to him than they were to me. Maybe they weren't. Maybe I just didn't pay any attention to them. Because it didn't -- it really didn't bother me. As long as I got to school, as long as I got my homework, as long as I knew what was going on in the classroom, it didn't bother me about what people thought about me and what they said about me. That didn't bother me.

But my brother was a different person. Each child is different and some things bother one child that didn't bother another child. And so I think my brother really was hurt because of the way that he talked when he came home, and the things that he said people said to him. They wanted to beat him up -- that kind of stuff. And maybe because he was a boy -- he didn't want to sit back for that. I don't know. I never paid any attention to that, I just said, "Well, you can catch me," or "if you can find me," or "if you wanna do that," you know, and so forth. But it didn't really bother me the way that it bothered him. But I know it did bother him, I could tell.

MT: What -- how did your family -- what was your family's experience like through the year as far as what did that mean to your family, the experience of your ... of you and Conrad going to Great Mills?

JGB: Well they were just concerned that nothing would happen to us physically at school. And it didn't, we never got into a big fight with anybody that whole year that I went to school there.

My mother and father were very, very interested in what happened each day. They wanted to know so that if there was anything to take to the NAACP or to the school board, that they would do it. I don't remember if my father was on the school board at that time or not but I know that my father had been on the school board. I think he had been on the school board before that time and all I know is that they were very active in taking care of anything -- anything that would come up or any questions that he had or anything that wasn't right. They were very involved in that.

MT: I just realized that we haven't actually said what year that was that you went to Great Mills.

JGB: Well, I graduated in 1959 so I grad -- so I came to school in 1958.

MT: Ok. And when you look back on that -- your experience, what were the highs and the lows of that year now when you look back on it?

JGB: [{sighs}] The highs. The kids that were -- the kids and the teachers that were so kind to me. I really remember that. I really do. The ones that wanted to help me with my school work, that wanted to help me have a friend in class. The ones that treated me like I was a human being and not an animal. I remember that. That was great, that was really, really great.

I'm thinking I remember my commercial teacher's name, it might have been Miss [Slotkin?], I'm not sure. But that name is coming to my mind. I know she was very kind to me, very, very good to me. And there were those kinds of things. I -- I think I remember going to a dance or something that we had socially at school. And I'm pretty sure that my husband took me. That's what I think; I think I was going out with him then. And I remembered it being nice but I remember the kids bothering my

brother and I remember them saying things that weren't kind. But believe it or not now, some of the kids that I went to school with still communicate with me. And I don't get a chance to go down for the class reunion like I'd like to, but I've been invited to it. Here again, a lot of the kids whose parents were in the service or something like that -- were not natives of St. Mary's County, they're just as -- they've been very, very kind, very good to me. Yeah, I remember that.

MT: So not much in the way of lows, huh? That's good.

JGB: The lows don't really bother me, I don't know why. But I guess it's been so many years since I had them and maybe because I don't -- I didn't dwell on them, I don't really dwell on the lows. I really don't. I -- just thankful to God for the highs.

MT: When you -- in retrospect, how do you feel about the decision that your father, I guess more than your mother --

JGB: Umm Hmm.

MT: -- that your parents made versus maybe going through Cardinal Gibbons or --

JGB: Oh I know that that was right, I'm sure that that was right. I'm glad I had a chance to go to Great Mills, I really am. Cardinal Gibbons was a good high school. Jarboesville, that I went to, that was a good school, Banneker was a good school -- those were good black schools. But I'm glad that I had a chance to graduate from Great Mills. I believe that as I've gone on in life that graduating from Great Mills helped me as opposed to saying that I had graduated from Cardinal Gibbons or one of the segregated schools. Because after I got married my husband and I moved -- well I was already living in Washington when we got married, but I remember us getting jobs here in

Washington, and I believe that helped me, I really do, to say that I had graduated from Great Mills.

MT: To say that you had?

JGB: Umm hmm. To be able to report that on -- when I was filling out an application to -- for a job. I think that it did. Of course, at that particular time as I'm remembering it, things were not all that integrated in Washington. One of the first jobs that I had in the government, I don't remember anybody white being in that office. I'm not saying that there wasn't -- I don't remember it. If they were there, I don't remember it.

MT: Okay. [Aaron], do you have any questions? With an outside eye?

[Aaron]: None that I can think of right now.

MT: Is there anything else that you've thought about that you knew we were gonna come and do this that you feel like you haven't said in other interviews or this interviews and you'd like to say?

JGB: Well I guess I said that I was glad for it. I don't know but if not I wanna say that now. I'm glad for having had the experience to integrate a school. I'm glad for having gone to Great Mills. I'm not sorry one bit. I'm glad for every teacher and all of the experiences that we had. I don't regret it at all, I'm not sorry, I'm happy about it. Having you heard over the years all the black kids that have gone to Great Mills and the other schools -- I'm so happy for them, I really, really am. I'm so grateful to God for giving them a chance to go to an integrated school as opposed to having to go to Cardinal Gibbons and the other black schools. I know that those were better schools, I know that they, they were supplied better than the black schools. I know that they had good teachers, not that we didn't have good teachers because we had some of the best

teachers. But to be able to have the good supplies, the good schools, the good teachers and the kids. To come to an integrated school I know is better for us than to just have to go to a black school and use old textbooks and not have the best of everything to learn from. I don't know what the kids are doing with it now. I hope that they are utilizing it, because it wasn't that way when we were going to school. I hope that they are taking advantage of every opportunity they have to get a good education because that was not our opportunity at that particular time. And so I'm glad for that. I'm really, really, really glad and I'm hoping that the kids are taking advantage of it now.

MT: That's a great last word. I think we've got it.

JGB: Alright.

MT: That's wonderful. Thank you so much.

JGB: Yes indeed. Thank you for coming.

[End of compact disc 1, end of interview]