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
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[00:00:00]

Merideth Taylor: November 24, and it's the English class as part of the Great Mills High School Oral History Project. And we have a dialogue this morning between Zora Siemasko and Jane Sypher, and they're gonna talk from their perspectives as former student, former teacher, and former principal. And we will begin.

[00:00:30]

Zora Siemasko: …taught several years at Esperanza [inaudible] as a teacher. I went to Leonardtown for three years as an assistant principal and came back here as an assistant principal for three years. And then I was principal there from 1985 through 1991. Mrs. Sypher lived just down the road from me, in fact. And I saw her grow up. And when I was principal here she was—when I was assistant principal she was a teacher. And when I was principal she became assistant principal. So we have known each other forever.

Jane Sypher: My family came to St. Mary's County in 1909. My grandparents bought a farm outside of Leonardtown. They weren't farmers. We hadn't a clue what possessed them to do this silly thing. They came down from Philadelphia and bought a farm. Built a big house, and in 1918 after World War II—er World War I, there was a slight depression and most of the young men in the Leonardtown area left to go to war or were taking jobs up in Baltimore. So there was nobody to harvest the crops and my grandparents lost that farm due to taxes. And they were able to recoup enough money to buy a piece of property over in what's now called the Mill Cove area, California, which is just about a mile and a half from where Zora Siemasko, her Mom and Dad lived. I was rai—raised in Montgomery County until I was in the second grade and we moved to St. Mary's County. My dad was an engineer. He worked in Washington then he got a job on the Base. I, too, when to Frank Knox Elementary, and then I went to Little Flower. Some of you may know it as "Big Weed." On the top of the hill in Great Mills. Went there third grade through eighth grade. Then I went to the academy for one year, and my parents and I came to the conclusion that where I really wanted be was at Great Mills High School, so I

came here in the fall of 1964 as a sophomore and graduated from Great Mills in 1967, ten years after Zora did. And I went down to St. Mary's College of Maryland, got a degree in Social Studies and came back here in 1974 as an English teacher, and worked here until 1991, went to Leonardtown High School for one year. And in 1992 took a job with the College of Southern Maryland, and I work at their campus in Leonardtown.

[00:03:20]

MT: Would you tell me again. I think I missed it. The years that you were assistant principal at Great Mills High—

JS: From 1986—I was assistant principal under Mrs. Siemasko from 1986 to 1991.

MT: And Mrs Siemasko, you were assistant principal…

ZS: Eighty-two [inaudible]

MT: Eighty-two [inaudible]

ZS: And I taught mathematics.

JS: She's the smart one.

[00:03:57]

MT: Okay. Well as you both know, we're particularly interested in the period of time that Great Mills High School was being desegregated, being integrated, and so in the sixties and through the very early seventies. And would you tell us a little bit about how things changed for you, if they did, going to an integrated school where you had—were always, the Catholic School, was it integrated?

JS: Yes—

MT: So there was no real change for you when you—

JS: Well no, I mean it was integrated, but it was majority white.

MT: All right. And for you, you had been teaching in a segregated—had the experience of teaching in a segregated school?

ZS: Well, No when I started—the first year I began to teach I taught for half a year at Frank Knox, because believe it or not there were no positions in Mathematics open. And, the first year I began teaching, it was '62. It was integrated, and there were about three minority students in the class. But, as I grew up, there were no minority students. We had no association with African Americans at all. None at all. Not in Girl Scouts, not in anything that we did. At Frank Knox there were three in the class that I had. **And when I**

taught at—I was at Esperanza during most of the sixties when I was teaching. But they had seventh, eighth, and ninth grade there. And one particular incident that I remember, you all probably know about Doctor Francine Dove Hawkins, And Francine was a student I had in mathematics, in Algebra II, and we gave awards every year. And I put in Francine's name to get the Algebra II award, and I was told that I couldn't give it to her. And I go "Why couldn't I give it to her?" Because, obviously, an African American could not be smart enough, couldn't get that award. And I had one battle to get her that award, but she got it. So that gives you an idea of the mindset at that time.

[00:06:24]

JS: The academy had a lot of minority students, but they were Hispanic, because the time that I went to the academy it was considered an incredibly elite boarding school for very wealthy Dominican Republic and Puerto Rican families. So there was a very large number of girls—it was an all girls school, who were from the Dominican Republic**. I came to Great Mills in 1964. George Washington Carver High School was still in existence at that time. '64-'65, '65-'66. And in the spring of 1966 George Washington Carver High School was closed. And so in my senior year, '66-'67, the faculty who were at George Washington Carver, Dolores Fleming, Mr. Moore, Bee Ellis, lots of those instructors came to Great Mills High School along with the students. I have nothing but wonderful, wonderful memories of my senior year here. We had already had our class elections and Washington Carver had already had their elections. And there was a group of us, and I'm proud to say that I was part of that group, who said "this isn't fair, they've already had their elections. We've had our's. You know, who, who's gonna make the decision here." And so what we did is had new elections. And my memory of this, trust me, is not crystal clear because it was—you can do the math. [laughs]**

MT: Mind fades with age [laughs]

JS: Yes it does. [laughs] Your name again? Anyway, **Cathy Jenkins became—was re-elected as president of the senior class, but a young man by the name of Curtis Kane became president of the Student Government Association, and he had been elected as the president of the class at George Washington Carver. And basically what that did, is that put Curtis Kane and the students from Washington Carver much more in the limelight than the senior officers. Because as you're well aware of, student government association oversees things for the entire school. Ninth grade, well at that time it was tenth grade, ninth grade through twelfth grade. So it was a year that was I think incredibly beneficial. Believe it or not we oft—we had some interracial dating almost immediately, which nobody seemed to, you know, get terribly, you know, shocked and awed about. It was after I graduated, and then Zora when did you come here to Great Mills to teach?**

ZS: In '72.

JS: In ’72, it was that time period after graduation in 1967 and those subsequent years, of course in 1968 we lost Martin Luther King, we lost Bobby Kennedy, and in those late sixties, early seventees, things here at Great Mills were not as they had been.

ZS: Tell them your Bobby Kennedy story

[00:09:48]

JS: Ah my Bobby Kennedy story. When Bobby Kennedy was campaigning for his fath—for his brother Jack Kennedy, he came in by boat down to an area, it used to be Seven Gables Hotel. It’s now where the Boatel California is and there used to be a little bar there called Aubrey’s and then it became Neptunes. I don’t even think it’s open anymore. But my family, we had a boat, and we were down there. And in came this big yacht, and tied up at this pier, and off came this gentleman and my parents, being extremely active democrats, said “That’s Bobby Kennedy’s campaign for Jack Kennedy who’s running for president.” And I walked down, and I introduced myself. I was eleven years old at the time. No, not that old, do the math. ’49 to ’60, but anyway eleven, twelve. So I walked with Bobby Kennedy. He put his arm around me and we walked, and he was shaking hands with people. And I’ll always remember this one lady came running up and she went “My name’s Anne Howard, and I’m not gonna vote for your brother but I’d like to shake your hand.” I was a little taken aback by why would you admit your weren’t gonna vote for—I learned later why people do that. And the last thing—I walked with him back to the pier, he’s gonna get on the boat, and he tossled my hair and he said “we’ll see you again sometime.”

[00:11:14]

ZS: Do you remember the assembly that was held here when, when the kids came from Carver? It was a welcome assembly for the students.

JS: MmmHmm. Yeah. It was—I—It’s sad to think that things went so far astray. Because there was such a terrific coming-together, and it was, I think that we here at Great Mills were just incredibly sensitive to the fact that the students at Washington Carver and faculty had lost their history. I can walk back in this building—I can take you down the hallway and show you my locker when I was a senior in high school. It still stands there. The students from Washington Carver can’t do that. I mean, Deana Moore, who became, is now your supervisor of—

MT: Director of—

JS: Director of Assessment?

???: I think so.

JS: Director of Assessment, was a senior here at Great Mills High School at that time.

ZS: Charlie Richard who is the Director of Secondary Education

JS: Right, John—How many people know John Radford? He was a senior at Great Mills High School that year. He came from Washington Carver.

MT: What year did Tubby graduate?

JS: Tubby graduated in ’69. Yeah, but his older sister, Holly, came.
ZS: And then of course Ruanna (Sp?).

JS: **Yes, so it was a—it was really, it was—I bleed green and gold. I love Great Mills High School.** You notice I’ve got the green, its kind of yellow, I’m sorry.

ZS: I knew she would have green and gold on, so I thought being as old as dirt, you know when you get older you wear purple.

JS: And a red hat.

[inaudible]

JS: You know that song? Purple and a red hat. **So, so my experiences here at Great Mills were just great, and that’s the only thing that I can say**. Charles Newkirk, I didn’t know if any of you know the Newkirks, he graduated in 1967. And his wife is now my counterpart over at the Calvert Campus of the College of Southern Maryland.

ZS: And Gwen graduated, Gwen Newkirk graduated in ’76. **I remember when we sat with the black staff coming in. I don’t remember any awkwardness or anything. We just seemed to meld.**

[00:13:49]

MT: We actually had a chance to speak with Mr. Newkirk, Theodore, the father of Charles.

ZS: Ted Newkirk

MT: And interviewed him here in class, and then I think some of the students have interviewed Stuart Newkirk and I don’t know if anyone’s interviewing Charles, but he’s on the list as well.

JS: On your hit list.

MT: Well, you brought up several interesting stories, incidents that happened that I’d like to hear a little more about. The assembly, the welcome assembly, when did you find

out that there were going to be African Americans, that the school was going to be integrated and there were going to be African American students coming?

[00:14:29]

JS: Well there already were African American students here at the school. If you lived in the district then certainly you'd, you came to Great Mills High School**. I think the issue was the fact that George Washington Carver was an African American high school, and the court stepped in and said you can't—that school had to be closed. So it wasn't like the community said, you know, this is something that we ought to do. It was the federal government said "you must do this." Because Brown versus the Board of Education, those cases had already gone to the Supreme Court and you could not have, you could not have high schools that were designated as African American.** And I think that Banneker High School, did Banneker close at the same time or had it closed before?

ZS: I don't really remember.

JS: I don't know. It was interesting cause if you lived kind of in the southern end of the county you really didn't know what was going on up there.

ZS: And you didn't go in certain parts of the county by yourself.

JS: Yeah, it was kind of the wild west outside the seventh district, outside of Leonardtown.

ZS: And Ridge was another area at the time that was not very nice.

JS: Yeah. So the—I think we knew at the end of our, at the end of the school year, because if I remember the second Brown versus Board of Education was in 1966 I think, wasn't it? Oh I don't remember. The mind fades. **So we knew in the spring that Washington Carver was coming.**

ZS: But we met, there were meetings, community meetings, to discuss this. And I remember people going, you know, objecting. They didn't want, from both sides, the black community and the white community, objecting to the melding of the two schools. There were several meetings, and they got quite heated.

[00:16:31]

MT: And were you present at some of those meetings?

ZS: No but my sons were.

JS: Yeah, I was not present at those meetings. And I, my parents weren't either. My dad worked out on the base. And he worked with Ted Newkirk, and he was instrumental in a lawsuit which is another story. I don't know, did Ted talk about the lawsuit?

MT: I don't think he really got into the details at all. We still need to look at that.

JS: Okay, because **there was a suit against Patuxent River for discrimination. That was brought by Mr. Newkirk because he was treated so unfairly out there. And my father was the key witness for the defense. To identify—to testify, my father was the only white person who testified for Mr. Newkirk. Mr Newkirk won by the way.**

[00:17:22]

MT: Well that's another story. He didn't talk about that one. I think there was some litigation, maybe I misunderstood, about in terms of integrating Great Mills at one point. Whether it actually went to court I don't know, but there was apparently some sort of litigation. At least I had heard that.

ZS: Well the first two students who came here, they were—the black students who came here were Groves, hope I got the name right, and they lived on, as you go up 235, just before the CVS, there are some houses on the left, and they lived there. They came and it was all in the Enterprise and all they came with security [inaudible] But I don't think there were any incidents. I don't remember that there were any incidents. But I have often thought of each student coming to the school one of the most difficult things for them, [inaudible] could be a real [inaudible]. Think how it would be to go into that cafeteria not knowing anybody on your first day of school. And being that these two minority students coming to an all white school, how difficult it must have been for them. It was a girl and a boy, wasn't it?

JS: Mmmhmm. **But if you look at the '65-'66 yearbook, there are African American students in the yearbook at that time, but not many. And then if you look at the '66-'67, you know that the world has changed**. [inaudible]

ZS: This is a picture of the '57 graduating class. This is mine. And you can see how lily-white we are. All forty-one of us. You did everything. You were on the newspaper, you were a cheerleader, you played ball, because if you didn't do it it wasn't gonna get done because there weren't that many of us.

[***scan 58 year book]
[00:19:22]

MT: I'd like to ask a little bit more about the incident you talked about at Esperanza and then I'll give it up to you all. But that you put forward that Francine Dove, and now

Francine Dove Hawkin's name for an award. So what was the outcome after you said, you know…

ZS: Well she got the award.

MT: She got the award. And then did that lead to, was there tension following that? Or…

ZS: Probably tension on my part, **I don't know what my evaluation was that year, but I don't remember. I think it just, she deserved it. She got it. It wasn't a big—everybody knew she deserved it. She was by far the superior student in that class.**

[00:20:14]

MT: Were there other struggles at Esperanza?

ZS: I don't remember there being [inaudible]. I mean maybe it's just me and my mind, but I don't remember there being trouble. The kids seemed to get along all right. The teachers, I remember, got along all right. I don't remember kids objecting one way or the other to the teachers that they had. We had several black teachers. Mrs Thompson was a P.E. teacher. Oh gosh, Maggie Thompson was her name. We had our music teacher who later became principal McDonald. And he and I met one time years later and he said—I said I had just become principal and he said "you finally became the principal," he said, "I did too," he said "the two of us, minorities, one woman and one black" he said " it took us a while" and he was principal [inaudible].

[00:21:18]

JS: I don't remember there being race [inaudible]. I'm sure there were kids, you know, kids are kids. Wherever you go kids are kids.

ZS: And there were some conflicts that you see every day, but I don't remember there being any great conflict.

JS: I think part of that is because I think both Zora and I surround ourselves with like-minded people. So you know, if I were around somebody who made any kind of racist comments I wasn't gonna be around that person again. So when you surround yourself with like-minded people you hear like-minded things. So if you were to talk to people who don't think the way we do you may get a very different story. You may get a story, you know, of how horrible it was. But in my circle of friends, and the people that I associated with, and there were lots because I was involved with a lot of things here at school. We used to have a "pep bus" that would go to away basketball games and away football games and, you know, we would go up to games at Pamunky High School when I was a junior in High School. Pamunky, which then closed, was a predominantly African American school in Charles County and I mean here was this busload of students and we would go up to Pamunky to be able to support our football

team and, trust me, the people who were on that bus were not people that did not want to go to a predominantly black high school to see football games**. So our view is probably skewed to the best of times.**

[00:22:53]

ZS: I remember, I have two daughters, they both live here. I remember one was having a birthday party. And one of the students, she invited an African American student, and one of her other friends said "well, you know so and so is black" and my daughter said "well, some of the other girls might not want to come 'cause she's black" and she, she was just a little thing, she said "well then it will be their loss." [inaudible] was a sleepover. But all the girls came and they had a great time. But that was the mindset. Because you know youre afraid of something you don't understand. Youre afraid of things that you don't know anything about. That's what youre afraid of. Not what you know about, but what you don't understand. And that's what you've got to remember. Both sides, we didn't understand each other. We didn't know each other. And until you get that understanding you have fear. [00:24:04]

MT: Questions?

JS: Oh come on it's early in the morning! We got up, we're perky! We're old! Perk up! Ask a question. Come on. You don't want me to start asking you questions, trust me.

ZS: Well when I started here, the building that I started in no longer stands. Down in the library there's a model of a wooden schoolhouse, an old wooden schoolhouse, and that's what I started in. Times were, times were different. I grew up in the Flat Tops. I lived at 44 Salamaua Court. Everybody lived in the Flat Tops. Well you didn't, you were—

JS: I did afterwards! When I got my, decided that my parents didn't know how to raise me correctly and after all I was in college, so I moved into the Flat Tops for a short period of time. Lei Drive.

ZS: What number?

JS: I think it was 14.

ZS: The place to move was Patuxent Park, in the Patuxent Park houses. That was the place to move.

Student Question: Why was that the place to move from?

ZS: What?

JS: It was the nicest housing in Lexington Park. That was it. There was nothing else. Town Creek wasn't here. Esperanza Farms wasn't here.

MT: Does that surprise you, Julian?

Julian: Yeah, [inaudible] boondocks.

[00:25:36]

ZS: Well, you see, back in the early days those of us who were foreigners coming in, it was very difficult to get loans to build a house. The county didn't want us [inaudible] and it was difficult to get a loan. And it was not until, what maybe the sixties? That you could get loans to build a house. So it was difficult. And we didn't have credit cards. And we didn't have all the credit that you do now. If you didn't have the money in-hand you couldn't do it.

[00:26:15]

JS: Let me tell you what it was like being a student at Great Mills High School in the evenings, okay? You guys have not much to do, I know that's probably a complaint of yours. There's nothing to do. Let me talk about nothing to do. There was, there was one little place, it was called Duff's Drive In. It was over across from, kind of in back of where the Roost is. Where those round buildings are now on Willows Road. And it was run by the crabbiest old guy, cannot imagine—

ZS: His name's Greg, he died.

JS: He did, poor guy. He was crabby, he had lovely children but he really was a cranky man. And he did not like the high school students coming in there in the evenings. And so what he would do on the nights there was a football game is he would close the drive in early. You know, and you could also go in and sit down inside and eat, so there was a group of us who would make the decision "Okay, who's gonna leave the game early and go down and order a coke and a burger at Duff's and keep 'em open 'til we get there?" So we didn't pick who was going to go. Charles Newkirk might go, I might go, whatever. And you'd go, you'd go in there with one other person and you'd sit down and you'd order something then you would sit there and sit there until the game was over and in would come all the students from the football game. And then, he had the first franchise for the first McDonalds in St. Mary's County, which is still right there on Great Mills Road.

ZS: And if you didn't behave you weren't in there.

JS: Oh no, you got kicked out.

ZS: You got kicked out and he would fuss at you, or maybe even call your parents. And as grumpy as he was, up until like the week before he died, he and his wife would go to Green Holly every day and read to the students.

[00:27:59]

JS: So that was it. Duff's Drive In, that was it. There was, you know every place closed at six. You know we had a King's dime store, it was—you know you've got the teen center now over on Chancellor's. See, now look at, is it Gerome?

MT: Julian

JS: Julian's shaking his head about the teen center. There'll always be the complaint when youre your age that you're the betweeners. That there is not really any place to go.

[00:28:33]

ZS: Well I grew up, you know, here in the county, and all these Navy people came in and told how wonderful every place was. And I always thought this was the worst place in the world. Anyplace else had to be better. Well Matt retired in '91, my husband and I hopped in a motor home and we ran around the country for eight weeks. Then we would go to Europe, and we did a lot of traveling. Now I found out very [inaudible]. The kids are pretty good [inaudible]. The school is really good, it really is. Don't roll your eyes, you class.

JS: Not 'til you've been someplace else.

ZS: I mean, we have the top basketball coach graduate, and in country, graduate from Great Mills. We had the vice president of the World Bank, who happens to be an African American, who graduated from Great Mills. We have doctors and lawyers and on and on. If you look back, the graduates of Great Mills do as well as anybody else. Jane and I will always [inaudible]. "I always thought I couldn't do anything." It was a female student at Great Mills, couldn't do anything. [inaudible]. And you can outmatch Great Mills students or anybody on any day.

JS: And I'll match Great Mills students caring for their other students. I worked—Zora worked at Leonardtown High School, I worked at Leonardtown High School. And let me tell you, I, I was shocked—now this was back in '91, with the attitude of students at that particular point in time. Because I thought that the students here were much more polite. [30:16] Now, you'll hear language in the hallways that will make your hair curl, but if you come up to a student and go "excuse me" ninety-nine percent of the time they'll go "my fault, my fault." How many of you hear that all the time? "My fault" You know, to this day, I didn't find that at the other school. I don't find that other places where there is this concern about, you know, have I offended somebody else. There's always a space issue, you know, "don't get in my space." There were fights when Zora

and I were teaching here. I mean, I used to wade into some knock down drag outs, but they never escalated into something totally out of control. Ninety percent of the time it was because somebody had said something about somebody else or to somebody else, or space had been violated. You bumped me in the hallway. "You bumped me in the hallway!"

[00:31:16]

ZS: I am not aware of any [recording cuts out]

JS: And it was in, I wanna say '68-'69 timeframe. And that happened the same time that there were riots in Washington, riots in Cambridge, riots out in L.A. It was, it was this explosion of, I think, pent up feelings that erupted with the catalyst of Martin Luther King being assassinated. And Bobby Kennedy being assassinated.

ZS: If you can imagine. I was at Esperanza when King was assassinated. When I drove home there was not a car on the road. It was dead quiet. You cannot imagine. It was…

JS: It was a sad April.

ZS: It was quiet the whole way, and I lived down below Lexington Park. Not a car on the road.

JS: So, and the school was locked down. If I remember correctly they did a lockdown. They did lockdowns at Bladensburg High School and Fairmont High Schools up in Prince Georges County. And Thomas Stone and high schools up in there I think it was La Plata, and Lackey High School. And times then changed. Times did change. I think there was a definite kind of pulling apart of African Americans and whites. And I don't know why it happened, and maybe some of your parents, your grandparents, have got a, maybe, better recollection of why it occurred and, you know, you probably have a much different perception of even the way things are now. I mean if we were to go around the room. I mean what a nice cross section of, you know, of racial diversity in this classroom. And if we went around the room and said you know, do you think there's racism today? Do you think people are bigoted today? You probably are gonna say yes. Because I think there always are gonna be people who think that way and I don't know how you convince people to think differently. And perhaps you cant, but I think the important thing is is that you don't allow the way other people behave and think to affect the way you believe. Behave and think.

[00:33:53]

ZS: I think the one thing that disgusts me is that I see some students who get taken advantage of, or [inaudible]. There is intelligence and there is being smart. Intelligence doesn't have a lot to do with how much education you have. Being smart does. You can

be very intelligent and not be very smart. And you have such an opportunity here to get an education, and an education is the key that opens the door to let you do what you want to do in life. And it disturbs me seeing some of the students wasting the [inaudible] that you have. This lady has years of experience to stand here in this classroom. Teachers today have to be very well educated [loud noise recorded on tape]. And whether you are African American or Spanish or whatever. To waste what you have. Think about how much money its costing for you to sit here today. What is the point of getting an education. And this is whether youre black or youre white or whatever. And that disturbs me when I see students wasting that. And not a lot of them get…[inaudible] but you have such an opportunity. And education, of course, doesn't necessarily mean that your bankroll's gonna be bigger. It might be, but it changes the quality of your life. How many of you all's parents went here to Great Mills?

[00:35:32]

JS: Name? Name?

Student #1: My grandfather and my mother

JS: What are their names?

Student #1: Anna Fenwick.
ZS: What? Anna?

Student #1: Anastasia, Anna Schubritz…

JS: Oh sure! Any relation to Mark? Mark Schubritz

ZS: How 'bout Calvin?

JS: Is Mark Schubritz your cousin?

[00:35:54]

ZS: Is Calvin an uncle?

Student #1: Yeah

ZS & JS: Ahhh

ZS: This is the [inaudible] right here.

JS: See!

Student #2: Lisa Murray

ZS: Murray…

JS: Is Russel Murray related to you?

ZS: No it's a girl Murray

Student #2: Vanessa

JS: Oh Vanessa. But no, not Russel? Russel Murray, he runs with…

ZS: How about Dennis, who is the [inaudible]

JS: See, yeah! Oh okay.

[00:36:16]

ZS: I probably went to school with [inaudible] or parents or grandparents.

JS: Well let's see, how many years do we have together?

ZS: Oh gee.

JS: I have thirty. And, and you have—but then you've continued after you've retired. So probably seventy years of experience here.

ZS: With Great Mills.

[00:36:44]

MT: Well this is, that's wonderful to have this length of time, this perspective. So have you seen changes? Are kids—you said kids are kids, I mean, are young people different today or not?

ZS: Well I was away…

MT: And in what way are they different?

ZS: Well I was away from the school for ten years, and when I was principal one of the major problems that I found with African American students was that it was difficult being accepted by their peers if they excelled. You all have heard of [first name garbled] Hughes, who was the elected—went to the Olympics. The only Olympian from the tri-county area went to Great Mills High School. Now [first name] was a straight-A student, and I remember her telling me "it's very difficult, because when I do well my friends, my black friends, make fun of me and tell me I'm trying to be white." We had very few minority students in upper level classes. Very few taking academic courses. I was totally away from the school for ten years. **When I**

came back I see many more African American students in advanced placement courses, in the upper level courses. Many more of them taking their courses seriously. Many, many more going onto college. I was the only female from my graduating class who went directly out of high school into college. Now since then many have gotten degrees, but I was the only one who went directly to college. And one change that I see in the African American population is that many more of them are taking their studies seriously, and very [voice hidden by background noise] studies. And a big part of that is that [garbled] visiting the college, the Leonardtown branch of the College of Southern Maryland. Have I got that right?

???: Yes you do

ZS: Alright, and she has [class bell rings] worked very hard for all students who do a continuing education program. But I see much more seriousness. Much, many more students realizing what education can do for you. And it's just a marked change.

[00:39:09]

MT: Questions!

JS: Oh something you're just dying to know.

MT: How bout, having that viewpoint of thirty years or more of students that came in and out of Great Mills High School, or more about any of the incidents. I just, I was just interested in the detail, if you remember it, and it's not very fair to ask you to remember more of the details, Jane, **about the elections. That was really fascinating to me that you redid the elections when the schools…**

JS: That's my recollection of it, and I know that what we did was we talked about how we could make it fairer and also make this, this whole school, feel welcome here. And the fact that Curtis came and ended up as president of our SGA. And I'm trying to think if it was just an arbitrary decision---I know we went to the principal at the time, who was Marvin Joy, and I'm trying to think if, if Curtis came in and maybe been president of their senior class and we said "what are we gonna do?" So I, you're right, I don't have real good, clear, clear recollections on it at all. But I do know that the, the bottom line is that there was this feeling that we needed to make sure that the students who were coming felt that this, this was their school, also, because their—you know as I started to say I can go down the hallway and look at my locker, but the students that went to George Washington Carver don't have that option. It became a middle school and then an elementary school, and now it's closed.

[00:40:01]

ZS: Another thing that contributed to some of the tensions was Great Mills at that time was built for maybe a thousand students.

JS: Yes

ZS: And during this period during the melding of the two schools there were about seventeen hundred kids here.

JS: It was very crowded

ZS: In a building that was supposed to house about a thousand. We had trailer city out there. We had I don't know how many classes in trailers.

JS: Well we didn't have classes in trailers in '68.

ZS: We did in '72.

JS: Right 'cause it kept growing because when you go up to the intersection here where the water fountains are, there used to be a wall right there, and that's where the school ended.

ZS: And you have parallel halls now. Parallel halls in this part of the building and in the other part of the building. It was just one main hall.

JS: Yeah, main hall
ZS: And if you can imagine what it was like here…

JS: At that intersection

ZS: with seventeen hundred kids trying to get through this intersection

Student: ooooh

ZS: So regardless of the…

JS: Oh yeah [laughs]

ZS: it, there would have been.

[00:42:03]

JS: Now I can tell you that there was an incident at the school when you were principal that led to an investigation by the civil rights commission.

ZS: Well that was the one with the chair

JS: Right.

ZS: Because those two students, one was black and one was white…

JS: exactly

ZS: And the student who hit the one over the—and it was a nice kid, who hit the one over the head with a chair, and he was put up for expulsion and the other was suspended. And the one that was expelled was the black student. And there was a civil rights investigation. It went on for nine months. They investigated every suspension I had ever done in a report just like this. And they said "you did the right thing with the suspension."

JS: And what they found, I mean, it went—it was first kind of the state of Maryland looking at it and then it went federal. So these people came down from Philadelphia and they looked at all aspects of this school, and their determination was that it was fair and equitable, and that all the students were treated equally and with the same respect. And they, they walked away from it saying "nothing to be done." And that student came back to school…

ZS: He was a nice kid!

JS: Nice, nice young man.

ZS: He just lost it.

JS: He just lost it

ZS: And you can't lose it [garbled]

JS: Yeah, don't pick up the chair in hit somebody over the head.

ZS: …you can't do that regardless of what bad happened.

JS: They interviewed students. They interviewed faculty. They reviewed records. So that was 1987, '88. In that timeframe. So at that point in time there was a, you know, a major—I mean you could basically say it was a major investigation, and the federal government walked way giving Great Mills High School, you know, an A. You're fine.

MT: And the stabbing…Oh, go ahead.

Student: Like, was, was, like the fight about different races, or were…

JS: No, it was a comment that was made, it was—

ZS: Somebody bumped into somebody at a locker and…

JS: Yeah and they mouthed at each other, you know. "Naa naa naa naa" Then one student, you know picked up…

Student: So it wasn't really a racial thing

ZS: No.

JS: It wasn't a racial thing but because it was one black and one white the African American young man felt that the comments that had come from this other student, he felt that they were racially motivated. I don't think that there were any racial, any dictums, any racial language used. You know, but if I call you a, you know, a dumb box of rocks and I happen to be white and you happen to be a different race you could say, "you said that to me because of the color of my skin. You wouldn't have said that to, you know, one of your white friends, or whatever."

[00:45:06]

ZS: I had an incident here where I said to someone "Gee I really like the bright colors you're wearing" and they brought up a case against me 'cause they said they thought that I was saying that they had bright colors on because of their race. And well, I thought they looked nice in bright colors. I was a redhead, and I can't wear red. I can't wear bright pink. But they thought what I said was a racial comment, and I was stunned that they thought that. But I can understand why they did. And it's very hard to see things from the other side. If you step in somebody else's shoes, and take a look at what they're going through…

JS: The other thing that I think is real important is, you know, that things happen out in the community. And what we need to try and remember is that this really should be a safe and protected environment, and that when you walk through the door of Great Mills High School, you know, you don't have any control over basically whats going on out there in the community. You know, whether the police are treating everybody fairly, you know, whether you're being treated fairly when you walk into, you know, a store up at the mall or whatever, but when you walk through here you're in total control of yourself and of your environment. And as Zora said, I mean you have, you've had, because you're seniors, you know, just access to a top-notch education that I would put up against any education anywhere. And, and hopefully you've taken advantage of it, and if you'd like to continue your education at the College of Southern Maryland feel free to see me about that.

[00:46:56]

ZS: As a, as a teacher of an integrated school I had some very good mentors. I heard you mention that [name garbled] was somebody you were…well her mother, Elvira Gaskin, was in the county. And she was a civilizer at the time. She was very helpful to me in understanding the [inaudible] and what I was trying to do. Elfreda Mathis, who was principal at Frank Knox. She and I used to go on [garbled word] trips

together. And I can remember going with her, [inaudible], and on to a friend of hers for dinner. And I was the white lady and [ ] was black relatives. And they treated me wonderfully. **And Elfreda was good to me. But there were several black educators who were quite helpful to those of us dealing with the black students. Because we didn't really talk much [inaudible] before, and we needed to understand. And if we did something we shouldn't they would come let us know.**

[00:48:09]

Student: In your household were you always raised open-minded that black or white, you are the same people.

ZS: I was raised in a house that was very prejudiced. My mother wouldn't even eat brown eggs. My father ran a business and he closed it when he had to integrate. I grew up just, I had almost no interaction with any kind of minority. And once I became an adult and began to realize that God don't make no junk, and people are people, and that my parents attitude was wrong. And it took a while for me to see this. But no, I was raised in a very prejudiced family. And I think that—my mother was from Southern Virginia. My father was raised in a relatively affluent family, as was Jane's father. Her father and my father went to Charlotte Hall Military Academy. And the mindset in my family was very prejudicial. And it did not take me very long after I became an adult to realize that their attitude was wrong.

[00:49:35]

JS: I was raised in a family that was very open-minded. My father took me as a young girl into Mrs. Siemasko's family's business, and when you went in there was a door over here that said "colored."

ZS: Yeah

JS: And it was a bar. My dad was gonna have a beer. And so my dad and I went into the side that said "colored only" and we sat there and Zora's dad, Mr. Siemasko, said "what the hell are you doing sitting down there, Ted Sypher?" And my dad said, "is the beer any different down here?"

ZS: And my father was an educated man, but he'd been brought up with this attitude.

JS: My par—my grandparents, this farm that they had over in Compton, they had tenant farmers. And I remember my father getting a letter from a woman, the daughter of a woman who had worked for my grandparents. She had her doctorate. She was African American. And she wrote this letter to my dad basically thanking my father for the fact

that she had access to the books that were in my grandparents house, and then in—in my grandparents house, that that had been her, such a love of reading and education. And my dad and my grandparents, they were older people. My grandmother died, I didn't know my grandfather, my grandmother died in 1954, so I can't speak to their open-mindedness. But I know that it was my father who was giving this young woman these books to read, and she went on and got her doctorate. So I come from a very, very open minded family. And as I said earlier, you know, I kind of surround myself with people who think the same way. So it's—

[00:51:43]

ZS: And you were, and you were probably already thinking your parents were wrong about a lot of things, but you were different. [garbled] in order to realize that you can make your own decisions. You were growing up in a different age, and the attitudes are different, your education is different. **And for them what they did, they thought it was right. I think, I think they began to understand that they were not right at the time they died.**

Student: Did you, like, ever try to change their minds or tell them…

ZS: My parents died, they've been dead almost forty years, thirty-five, forty years. And I don't think, I remember being at Esperanza one time and sitting down to lunch and, I've forgotten the teacher's name, it was…Maggie Thompso—Thomas,

JS: Thompson

ZS: was on one side, and there was a black man there on the other side. And we were sitting eating lunch, and my mother had died at the time, and I remember thinking my mother would roll over in her grave if she knew that I was sitting and eating with two black people. And yet I hadn't even thought about it. I never even thought about it. But I think that really by the time I got to the point of realizing that they were so wrong, that they were dead. They were dead. They've been dead a long time.

[00:53:17]

JS: The last time I saw my father cry was in 1968. He died in 1997. He was ninety. He had retired from the base in October of 1967, and so it would have been that April. And I was out doing something. When I came in my dad, my dad had worked in the television industry—in the electronics industry that developed television, so I grew up my whole life with a television. We had a television in 1950. And he had the tv on when I came in and my dad had tears running down his face and I thought, ah I knew my brother, he was in the air force in Okinawa during Vietnam or some, you know, I thought. You know, Whats happening here? And it was Martin Luther King had gotten assassinated.

ZS: Doctor Marge Martin used to teach in the county. She and her husband were in the, they went down and marched with Martin Luther King [inaudible]

MT: Marge and Ben Martin. Those were wonderful impressions that day.

JS: Yeah,

MT: Last chance

ZS: Now I'm here at school one day a week.

MT: Last chance right now.

ZS: I work with new teachers so if you run into me in the hall and you want to ask something go ahead. Don't run into me, but if you happen to…[laughs]

[class laughs as a group]

[00:54:42]

JS: Trust me, we know the world isn't perfect. We know you're gonna go out there in those hallways and youre gonna hear people today or tomorrow or the next day make comments that are absolutely inappropriate and have no place, as far as I'm concerned, in the world today. And so the only thing that I would like to leave you with is that—surround yourself with people that think the way that you think. And be broad-minded. Don't surround yourself and never think outside of it, but you know, if you're in a situation where youre thinking back on these two old ladies and going "oh were they" you know, "what the heck were they drinking that morning when they came in on the twenty-fourth of November" you know "to tell us that the world really is good." [laughs] And it's, you know, it can be and it should be. And now I'm gonna step out of my role a little bit. I'm very active politically, as is your English teacher's husband, by the way. But I'm not gonna say one way or the other, but get involved politically. Vote. Get registered to vote if you are not registered to vote yet, because you, you have a voice. You can make a difference. And become aware of what's going on in the world around you. Don't, don't get to a point of where you start complaining about "them" and not being an active participant.

ZS: If you want to change something you've got to get in a position. You gotta get [inaudible]. That's how I became an administrator. I always thought "I know I'm too smart, but I didn't think I'd be dumb enough to become an administrator." And I was talking and complaining about things, and someone said to me "well why don't you become an administrator? An assistant principal or principal?" And I went "Yeah Im not that dumb" and they said "well if youre not willing to get on the cutting edge" Do I dare say what they said? They said "quit your bitching." Nobody said that to this good little two-shoes, goody two shoes here. And I thought about that. So if you want to get

[inaudible] apply for this job. If you wanna be in, want to make change then get in a position to change it.

[00:57:01]

JS: And Mrs. Siemasko talked about mentors and the mentors that she had. I had a terrific mentor, and that was Mrs. Siemasko.

ZS: I made you grow up

JS: Yes, made me grow up, hired me as an assistant principal, and was marvelous. I loved working here. And I'm retiring in a year, a year from now. And I've said that I want to go back into the classroom and do some teaching and just do it part time, and if all else fails I'll substitute at Great Mills High School 'cause I walk in this school and just feel good.

ZS: What are you all planning to do?

JS: Yeah you're graduating. What are you gonna do? Quickly

ZS: What are you doing?

Student: Going back to school

JS: Good.

Student: I don't know

JS: You don't know?

Student: [inaudible]

JS: Oh that's okay. Just so long as you know of the next step. Come on, whatcha gonna do, Pretty-In-Pink?

Student: I don't know. I know I'm doing something. I'm not just gonna quit school and just—

JS: Just not real sure, okay.

[00:58:09]

ZS: We used to have something here called the "Goal Clock", and it was gold. And everybody had to have three goals on it. A long term goal, and a short term goal, and a pie-in-the-sky goal. And you'd walk down the hall and say "let me see your goal card." And you know that they did a study of the top business people in the country and

something like ninety-five percent of them who were successful had their goals written down. [inaudible]. Write 'em down. What you really want to do. It might be a football player. We used to have an assistant principal here who would tell people to say "that's fine, but your chance of being in professional football are about as good as walking on the moon." So you need to have a secondary goal. And write 'em down and strive for them. And I asked a kid one time "what is your goal?" and he said "I want your job." And that's fine. And I'm not sure he didn't get it. But you need to have goals. And you need to have realistic goals. Now I'm not one to say you shouldn't be doing anything that you want to do, but I could never be an electrician. Never. And I don't think I could ever be a physicist.

JS: You couldn't be a singer either, I've heard you.

ZS: No I couldn't. That's not realistic.

[class laughs]

JS: And be aware of the opportunities that you have right in your back yard. As far as jobs are concerned, training is concerned, education is concerned, you truly are very, very lucky folks even though you don't necessarily think St. Mary's County is the place that, you know. It's kind of like Green Acres or something. But you have opportunities that weren't there when I was growing up. Certainly weren't there when Zora was growing up. Werent here when David Taylor who's filming us was growing up.

ZS: And he's still growing

JS: He gets taller all the time.

[01:00:10]

ZS: I had, I had two daughters. They both graduated from here. One travels all over the world in her job. The other one is a immunologist, a PhD immunologist, and [inaudible]. She was a Great Mills High School graduate. Played in the Notre Dame [inaudible]. They've done everything. They've been to Everest, they've been to China, they've been all over because they had good education here. You have lots of contacts. You have Jane, you have Me. You have Bernadette Lewis who's in charge of the scholarship committee for many scholarships here in the county. Tubby if you're into sports. You have so many contacts. Take advantage of them. No matter what comes around.

[01:01:07]

MT: Well I think it's time to wrap up. Anybody have a last question?

JS: We didn't get to find out anybody's names and that drives me crazy. I'm gonna go around.

MT: Yeah let's go around. Slowly

JS: Name?

Student: Yphonne

JS: Last name?

Student: Sue Bantan-Banks

Student: Steve Torres

JS: Steve Torres

Student: Corey Reeder

JS: Corey Reeder? R-E-E-D-E-R? George Reeder?

Student: Yeah, he's my grandfather.

JS: He's your—George is your grandfather?

ZS: You have some very pretty aunts.

JS: You have some lovely aunts, and I taught them. Let's see. Aunts, great aunts. Yeah, Aunts. They all, Reeders all went here.

Student: And Weibel, that's the other side of my family.

JS: Oh Weibel. Paul Weibel? No.

Student: [inaudible] Collins.

JS: Collins

Student: Cheyanna Folk

Student: Ali Folk

Student: Chantieka Thomas (sp?)

JS: Okay it's nice to have met all of you.

ZS: I had two students in a class one time. They both had the same name and they had the same birthday. So I ended up [inaudible] and [inaudible]

[class laughs]

ZS: It was no way they had the exact—

[01:02:40]
Recording Ends