

KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH BETTY A. GRAY

CONDUCTED, EDITED, AND INDEXED BY THOMAS A. SCOTT

for the

COBB COUNTY ORAL HISTORY SERIES, NO. 93

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Cobb County Oral History Series, No. 93
Interview with Betty A. Gray
Conducted, edited, and indexed by Thomas A. Scott
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TS: Betty, why don't we start with your background, maybe your education and where you went to school and those kinds of things and why a career in teaching?

BG: I decided to teach early on. I always wanted to teach. I started teaching swimming to kids when I was fourteen, and I realized that teaching is something you need to learn how to do. If you're going to teach, you need to know what you're teaching and how to teach it. Starting with that I knew in high school what I wanted to do. When I left high school I went to a junior college, at that time, West Georgia College.¹ I spent two years there and then transferred to Jacksonville [Alabama] State [Teachers College].² I got into the real process of teaching and loved the content courses in social studies and English. The content was challenging, and it was something I enjoyed. That's the other thing about teaching, I think. If you're not learning as much as your students, you're wasting your time. It's a dual kind of thing. You learn, they learn, and it advances whatever you do.

I finished with my master's at Auburn University. By that time I was married, and he and I were there at the same time. Then I decided maybe I ought to look at how school is managed. You walk in a school, and you see some facilities not used at all and others down the hall overcrowded. So I thought, "I've got space here. I'm going to take an administrative course and a supervision course." And I did. When I got into it, Wayne Teague was a professor at Auburn. He went on to be this Alabama education guru.³ So I really found that it was important that you, as a classroom teacher, have input into what's going on in your school. There was never any doubt in my mind that I wanted to be in a school. I never could see myself in the principal's shoes at that point. I wanted to be in the school, but at the same time I wanted to explain to somebody how to do something. I found that I could communicate ways of doing things—to teach paragraph writing when it was difficult and so on.

¹ West Georgia College (today's University of West Georgia) was a two-year school from 1933 to 1957, when it gained senior-college status.

² Founded in 1883, Jacksonville State Teachers College changed its name to Jacksonville State College in 1957 and Jacksonville State University in 1967.

³ Dr. Teague was superintendent of Auburn City Schools from 1969 to 1975. As Alabama State Superintendent of Education from 1975 to 1995, Teague developed a Plan of Excellence, a kindergarten program, and educator evaluations, among other innovations. During that time he was also a member of the Auburn University Board of Trustees.

Then I had an opportunity in Alexander City, Alabama, to work with Auburn University on its American History book and to write a how-to-study workbook to go along with my eleventh grade class. We had a delightful time. We learned. I learned, and they learned, and that set me on fire. I wanted to be involved with process. I wanted to see the end result, and I wanted to keep an eye on what the end result is because I may never want to do it that way again or I may want to broaden that base and let other people share in the process. With that drive I came to Cobb County. My husband came to Lockheed, and we settled in at South Cobb High School. South Cobb at that time had been opened three years in a consolidated move in the south Cobb community.

TS: This was in 1957?

BG: In 1957 I came here. In the interview situation, Mr. W.O. [Bill] Smitha was the principal, and he did the interview. I share this with my student teachers. I came for the interview with the little white hat and white gloves and the hose that had the seams, dressed to the nines. I used to wonder why that was important, but, apparently, it was with him. He expected his teachers to be interested in grooming and that kind of thing. We interviewed, and he asked me, “Why do you want to teach?” I said, “I want to teach because I want to learn, and I want to share learning with kids. I want kids to know that the most exciting thing in their life is to learn, to decide what it is, and go for it.” So, he said, “Well, you know, I have on the staff here the best senior English teacher in this area. She’s going with her husband to another assignment, so I’m looking for a good [replacement].” I said, “I’m not it because I don’t want to be good. If she was the best, I want to be better.” He was short, and he said, “Well, that’s a good bit to expect.” I said, “I work hard. I like kids, and I have a good rapport with kids.” Well, I stayed there for five years. That five years of teaching was a very exciting period for me. The beginning of the space program and the walk on the moon—it was a time in history that you could walk with kids through [world events].⁴ When John Glenn orbited the earth, we had one television in the whole school, and we stacked up at the end of the hall. It was an amazing time for those kids.

TS: Five years, so you taught at South Cobb High School from ’57 through ’62?

BG: I had a baby then, and I didn’t go back to South Cobb until later. The irony of it is once you step out into this area and you stay in this area, you have a lot of feedback from reality. Last April, I got an invitation to a birthday party. I get a lot of that because I’ve been here a long time. But it said, “This is a seventy-fifth birthday” for this kid. I thought, “That cannot be. If that 1959 high school graduate is seventy-five years old, what does that say about his teacher?”

⁴ In 1957 the Soviet Union launched Sputnik 1, creating a space race with the United States. In 1961 Alan Shepard became the first American to fly into space, and in 1962 John Glenn became the first American to go into orbit around the earth. In 1969 Neil Armstrong would become the first human to walk on the moon.

TS: You were a very young teacher.

BG: Yes. It gave me a chance to reflect. It's crucial that you continue to evaluate your process, what you're doing and how you're doing it. Back then I lived in a semi-rural setting. Those kids came from three different communities that finally merged. [South Cobb High School alumnus and former Georgia governor] Roy [E.] Barnes and I have had a conversation about all the opportunities that opened in the metro area at that time that we didn't know what we were going to do with. Kids were asking, "How do I fit? What am I going to do?" General Motors was hiring tons of people then. So in the community we started talking about how do our kids get into the work force? What do they take in the work force? Are we preparing them for Georgia Tech before they get there? Or is it a technical aspect in our schools? And so on. So we began to ask those questions. I got interested in those questions. So after I'd had my baby, I had a period at Osborne Middle and Senior High School. We had a unique learning situation where we were building new buildings because the kids were moving in faster than we could handle.

TS: Was the new Osborne High School open at that time?

BG: The new Osborne High School was in the process, and Campbell High School had sent their children to us at the little Osborne Middle School, the old campus. So did Sprayberry High School as they were building those new facilities. So, we had an opportunity with ninth graders to look at a whole bunch of things in talking about accessing the high school. I had a six-year degree in counseling at that time, so I came back to South Cobb as a counselor and spent a lot of time and energy in connecting kids with what's going to happen after high school. We had a great time. Kids are wonderful. When you've had a bad day, you need to sit down with them and find out what kind of day they had. Counseling allowed me to do that.

We talked about Roy Barnes a minute ago. He was always interested in something community oriented: "What can we do? It's Christmas time, and we can paint old bicycles"—that kind of thing. I think the thing that impressed me most about the young people at that time is they really did have a desire to serve, to take whatever they had and share it in a community sense. They did that; they did a good job with that. I spent time in counseling, and then we had a superintendent, Dr. Alton [C.] Crews [1967-1972]. One day he came by the school and asked to see me. I said, "The superintendent wants to see me? What's going to happen?" He came into my office and said, "I've been following your career." That's scary. But he said, "I want you to get out of this role of counseling, and I want you to go into administration. I want you to work with our teachers. You enjoyed the kids and I hear the things you've done." By that time I had done the handbook kinds of things and really helped the kids find out who they were as nearly as we could. So, he said, "I want you to go into administration."

I guess this would have been about 1972. Remember, I'm a female. I thought when he said "administration," he meant I'll get to count the papers in the book room. But we talked about what the job would be, and I was to become assistant principal at Wheeler High School. Larry Hinds was the principal. He's still here. He said, "I want you to be

the curriculum person at this school.” That was a real challenge. That’s really what I thought you needed to be in that role. Let the counselors handle the absentees and that sort of thing. You make sure that when that kid walks in that classroom that the teacher knows what’s going to happen, what they are going to do, what their responsibilities are content-wise. And you need to always emphasize that you are using the content to get to children. It’s yours, but as long as you own it and don’t share it, you’ve got a problem. We had a great group of young teachers, and we worked so hard at Wheeler. Larry, the head administrator, wanted a high school curriculum to be functional and to make sure that whether a kid went to Tech or went into business or medicine or became a plumber that they would become the best plumbers in the world. In fact, some of the young retirees in this county who are plumbers and have a corporation talked about our help.

Teachers wanted help. They wanted to be able to sit down like we are and talk about the things that were not going well in their math class. The questions we asked and the answers we sought made a difference in the classroom with a kid, right there. We didn’t have to wait. We didn’t go through the state department. We sat down with our kids at Wheeler and with our teaching staff with a principal that let us do that with confidence that we could try some things. We did.

Then the county went to the quarter system, which was a real challenge registering kids three times a year. So we worked with scheduling. Teachers needed to be involved in that. Somebody sitting in our office couldn’t do all that. Then my role was a multi-layered thing, wherever I needed to be to make sure that we could at the end of the year say, “Here’s our curriculum content. Here’s what’s happened to our kids. Look at our test scores.” You have to do that. People talk a lot about that. Yes, you have to have some measure. You need to measure who you are, what you’re about, and what happened as a result of you. Teachers are uncomfortable with that, I find. But once they get over the shock, they need to know what they need. If they need to come to you and say, “I’m having difficulty teaching this math class,” you better provide them some support and the confidence level to do that. Then I left Wheeler and went to an elementary principalship.

TS: What year was that?

BG: It was in 1974. I was the first woman principal [in the Cobb County School District]. Well, I didn’t know what that meant. People would say, “You’re going to an elementary school? The principal of an elementary school?” Let me tell you, there have been women principals in this nation since infinity.

TS: I was going to say in Marietta if you go back to Mary [Hall] Swain [principal of Marietta High School, 1949-1959].

BG: I knew her well. The paper picked it up, and with my smart mouth I said, “I can chew gum and walk at the same time, so I think we will be all right.” But we were in a time of open classrooms, and there were challenges. Make no mistake about that. That’s when

Stanley [R.] Wrinkle left in October to open Walton High School. I came in to take his place.

TS: I see! Which school was this?

BG: Sedalia Park. People wondered with a question mark. Let me tell you who had the real question mark. It was the classroom teachers. They were like, “Who is this?” I had been working at Wheeler right up the street. They must have known that I had a high energy level. If you don’t have a high energy level, you don’t need to teach. So right away I didn’t provide a lot of lounge time, so I had to struggle. I’ve always tried to be fair to people. If you see something I’m not doing, then call attention to it. Let’s have the confidence and respect for each other in our roles here to get it done. Let’s get it done. Kids are waiting. Well, they reminded me that patience is a virtue. I’ll share a story with you after a while about that. But I learned a lot that you do have to give people a chance to grow. Time is a factor, and you have to take a long look. The difference between growth in a time period and just wasting time is significant in education. As educators we’ve done that. We’ve said, “We’re going to do this because it’s September 1.” Well, September 1 may be an inappropriate day for us. We may need to wait until the 10th to do it or not do it at all. We make that judgment on who our kids are.

People asked, “What made you want to teach?” I said, “I like working with kids whether it’s teaching them swimming or teaching reading.” The most support I ever had was when my husband and I were flitting around trying to decide what we wanted to do after college. We spent six months in St. Augustine, Florida. I went to teach at one of their schools in St. Johns County. I taught first grade. They had an opening, and I learned more about teaching reading in a reality situation than from all of the experts I had at the reading lab at Auburn. It was a great experience. Education needs to be fluid. It needs to move as needs move. If you’re in education, you have to move along. I was not temperamentally suited to be in one situation forever and for them to say, “She’s retiring after teaching sixth grade for thirty-five years.” Well, good for her if she liked it. I’m glad for you. But not for me.

TS: You jumped all around from first grade through high school.

BG: Absolutely! I wanted to see how a first grader learns to read. If you can’t read, I don’t care how many social network opportunities you have; you’ve got a limit that’s unbelievably hard and harsh. I wanted to know how to do it. I still work with small groups of children in my community when they need a little bit of help. But I didn’t want to teach forever. I had three schools. I had Sedalia Park that was in neighborhoods that were just beginning to change. They had some affluence over at the country club, but they were beginning to get the trailer parks. The population was beginning to change. I went to Clarkdale Elementary, which was a little school that was isolated. In fact, it washed away a few years ago.

TS: Right, in 2009, wasn’t it?

BG: Yes, it was '09. I was there two years, and then the superintendent, Mr. [Kermit] Keenum, came by my office one afternoon. As isolated as we were, you knew it couldn't be a casual visit. He said, "We're going to do some shifting, and you're going to be the principal at Compton Elementary School." This was 1980. So I went to Compton Elementary [New Macland Road, Powder Springs].

TS: You went from East Cobb to Clarkdale to Powder Springs.

BG: Absolutely. Clarkdale was right off the mill village, so a whole different population there. The families had been there since the mills opened, and the mills were closing. The parents were losing jobs and retirement benefits. So, yes, I have worked in communities that have all kinds of things. Powder Springs was growing at that time, and Compton was down the street from McEachern High School. McEachern had a unique funding plan [with its foundation]. When the SPLOST money funded various things, you had to be involved. People say, "Don't worry about that." Well, you better. If you're in the school business, you better. You need to know who's making decisions about how many dollars you're going to get to spend on technology. So I've always been politically involved on the side. I stayed at Compton for ten years, from 1980 to 1990.

Then I decided I wanted to retire. Well, they couldn't believe it. They said, "What are you going to do?" And I said, "I'm going to travel, and then I'm going to think about something else. In the meantime, Kennesaw State College had a grant that was going to challenge the schools of education and business to learn how to be of service to the community. Dr. [Betty L.] Siegel had a real commitment to being involved in the community. It was a three-year grant, so I thought, "Well, I'm going to apply." I was interviewed, and I've never seen such an interview as we had. There were eight or ten people there, I guess, and we really talked. Finally, it's about three hours, and I said, "Is Dr. Siegel's job available? Is that why I'm here?" But we talked about a lot of things, and I took the three-year grant, and it put me in the community where I really wanted to be, in Marietta primarily because we had a unit in Marietta, and one in Wills High School. Our challenge on campus was to make sure I was campus-based enough to get enough people to participate. It was a great experience. Kids came, and we worked with kids in our community. I've really tried hard to stay involved in the educational process, and to see it and participate in its change.

We were in a business association one day, and they were talking. They said, "Betty, why don't you run for the [Cobb County] school board? There's a vacancy." I said, "Well, you know my tongue wouldn't be controlled enough to do that." But I decided under a little pressure in 1992 that I would run for the school board. I would stop talking about what needed to be done and participate in doing it. It was interesting. I served four terms and as chair a couple of times, and I really learned what the system was from beginning to end. The one thing that I learned is that you have to have a school that fits the community, and you have to have teachers that understand the community. And you have to have challenges that can be measured. Success is the ultimate, but getting there step-by-step has to have support. It has to have concrete support, salaries and so on, but more than that it has to have a buy-in that's as much emotional as anything. You have to

want to teach, and you have to want to be in the school. If you don't, then stay out of the school. Then I worked at Kennesaw for a period of time after the grant in their [Bagwell College of Education] in the field observing student teachers.

TS: About how long did you do that?

BG: I had that grant through 1993, and so I guess from 1994 to 2011, although I took a semester or two off in there.

TS: Almost twenty years altogether?

BG: It was almost twenty years. I really tried hard. Every time she saw me Dr. Siegel said to me, "Well, how is our book going?" Or "how is your book on how to teach going?" I said, "Well, it's not in print yet." So we laughed. But I really have had a cross-section of educational experience that has had value, I think, in sharing with student teachers. It's been interesting since I left in 2011 how many of them I still am in contact with. They'll give me a call every once in a while. They say, "I'm having problems with this or that." Over the years, moving from Ms. Gray to Betty was a delight. For example, I had taught one of my teachers that later came to work for me. She told some of the staff, "Oh, I couldn't call her Betty; my tongue would fall out." That was from the five years of senior classes that I had at South Cobb. "Betty," no, no, it was "Ms. Gray."

But seriously, the perception that teaching is easy is deceptive to start with because there is nothing easy about teaching. There is an urgency about teaching that doesn't let you delay. It is a now time, and it's a now time every day. There's no time off. It's an attitude kind of thing. If you can't develop that kind of approach, don't try to teach because everybody suffers. You suffer, and the kids sure do. I love teaching. I never would have done anything else. There is a core value that is not in the textbook. You need an attitude to learn, and then you need the ability to take care of yourself. Teachers are not allowed to take care of themselves. I worry. They need a support base like the kids do, and that's what I think a Board of Education can help support. It's been a great run, and I would do it again. I would do it differently, but I would do it again. I'd work with kids, and I'd work in a school setting.

TS: You've given a great overview of your career. Let me go back and ask some questions along the way. First, we were talking earlier about Roy Barnes. I know a lot of people are interested in what kind of student he was.

BG: He was a student. I define a student as an individual who has a desire to learn, is willing to let progress be measured, and has an urge to be accepted and to challenge. With that kind of preamble, Roy was a good student. He was headed for something big because he was able to see big. He could see the big picture and knew that to get to the big pictures there were steps to take. You could create the steps to get to the big picture, or if you didn't, you had to challenge somebody else to. I guess his political astuteness developed early when he could challenge others to see his viewpoint. That's what the process is about, and if you can do it with a sense of humor, well, he had a delightful sense of

humor. He was a real master at using humor to get to the serious situations. Yet he could be serious in an analysis of a literary piece or an event that had occurred in the class setting. He could be analytical, but with feeling. So Roy's accomplishments have just started. He always says a shelf life for a former governor is fifteen minutes, but he'll have a long fifteen minutes in something else.

TS: I was surprised to learn that he was a Republican before he was a Democrat.

BG: He tells that story all the time. I said, "That must mean I'm the only Democrat in the world." He said, "No, but it eases people a little bit when they hear a Republican." That I think is an example of how communities change and needs change, and if they do, those in the community change, and so the leadership there in the community changes. It's been fascinating. And it's been fascinating to see it in a geographic area that has had challenges and continues to, but it's small enough that he knew a lot about the community. And then he came into Marietta. His Cobb County experience has been unique, I think, and it's getting to know people. He learned very early that a softer touch is better than harshness and that you don't have to be some kind of jerk. You can make it without that, and that's a skill he's used from beginning to end. And that got the [Georgia] flag changed [during the 2001 legislative session]. So that's a good example I think of the kind of individual he is. Of course, I'm biased in that area. He's ours.

TS: Right. Did Woody and Steve Thompson go through any of your classes?

BG: I missed both of those boys in classroom settings, but they had a cleaning service right there on the corner of what then was Gordon Road and Veterans Memorial now. Their dad was the "local mayor." I mean, he sat in a big chair and he was a big guy. The boys were in and out, so I got to know the boys really well. Then as we got into the political field, I supported them in their campaigns. I knew Woody probably better than I did Steve. He was younger. I knew the family, and that was a pretty typical family. We talk about change. They had a business that now couldn't compete. They were very personally involved in the community, and that's how the boys got interested. Then they delivered. They got caught up in changes in the population of our community and so on and the lack of definition of what the big picture is. You see, we lost the big picture, and it became individual personalities, and when it does, you know it's an awkward position.

TS: I know you came through the integration period in the schools. How did that affect your career? Where were you at that time?

BG: Well, we measure that in terms of the political push. It was no longer an option. You had to do it. I guess I would start with South Cobb High School. It's a small area, so kids regardless of color or anything else had played together forever. They swam together in the summers, and they played. When they went to high school, the white kids came to South Cobb, and the black children went to Lemon Street [in Marietta] on a bus right by us. I guess everybody questioned that that doesn't make any sense. So, when it came into the classroom, it was no big deal at South Cobb. The attitudes changed as the Atlanta Southside began to move to Cobb County in sort of a white flight kind of thing.

That group of families brought their children, and there were some that [opposed integration]. But do you know what really brought us to the front in our area in South Cobb was athletics. If you were a good basketball player, it didn't make any difference what your color was; you played. Football was a competitive kind of thing with kids, and we didn't have the harshness that has occurred certainly in that section of Atlanta moving out here.

For me personally it was not a problem to begin with. I grew up in a period of time post-World War II, if you can picture this in your mind, having been born in 1933. I've lived through a lot of conflicts and resolution of conflicts, and that's how it was in our schools. It changed only as the numbers changed, as the community changed. With the white flight in the south side of Atlanta, they had to move somewhere. They moved here, but if they were looking for an all-white area, it wasn't going to happen. Now our Pebblebrook High School is about 90 percent black. I guess it was a situation that required attention probably is the best way to say it. As problems were defined, solutions were forthcoming. Now the value of the solution is still waiting in some areas. A good example of that is what happened to the Thompson boys because they got caught up in [the demographic change]. When I ran in 2008 for a fifth term, I planned to retire after that. But that's the year Obama ran, and the black population all over Cobb County became a force because of that. So that kind of numbers situation brought about a change in culture.⁵

Needs were different. For example, in the South Cobb area it was much more awkward in terms of defining the problem and looking for solutions as Hispanic families came in from southern Mexico with children that had no education at all in a formal school setting. They came into our schools, and we had to be prepared to accommodate them. I judge it by the school. My whole life has been schools and education. Once you define problems, I think support in the community has been good. We've had very little of the violence that they've had in other areas.

When I went back to take a course at the Auburn campus during this period of time, the University of Arkansas wanted to send a group to the campus at Auburn to deal with questions of race in education. I guess it was a sociology class as I remember. They were all black from Arkansas, and Auburn furnished twenty-five black and twenty-five white students that were connected to the educational system. That was the prerequisite. It was an interesting summer for me. I don't have a gene to hate. I hate anger. I think if you will just take a minute and define your problem, you might find a solution. You

⁵ Editor's note: As the demographics of South Cobb changed, all three lost their last campaign for reelection. Steve Thompson served in the Georgia House of Representatives from 1980 to 1990 and the Georgia Senate from 1990 to 2014. He was senior floor leader during the administration of Governor Barnes. In 2014 he was defeated in his bid for reelection in the Democratic primary by Dr. Michael Rnett. His brother Woody Thompson served on the Cobb County Commission for eleven years before losing in the Democratic primary in 2012 to Lisa Cupid. After sixteen years on the Cobb County School Board, Betty Gray lost in 2008 to David Morgan. At the time of this interview, Rnett, Cupid, and Morgan were still in office.

won't if you're not defining your problem. If you already have a solution that's not working for you, then you need to modify the problem and define it. It was interesting to work with them because they were in education, and they were really concerned about a curriculum content type approach that would have enough wiggle room in it for kids who hadn't had much background in public school to come in and survive, and not just *survive* survive but learn. I thought it was interesting.

I had a good summer. It was a frustrating summer because I certainly wasn't a very popular member of the class. I mean, I couldn't understand why education couldn't solve their problem. Let's work on deciding what our problem is. Is it color, and you don't like blacks? Is it color and you don't like whites? Is it because my speech is different with the Hispanic group? I saw a master teacher at one of our schools that came out of the Atlanta University Complex with dreads. He wasn't big as a minute, but was a kindergarten teacher, had his credentials and so forth. He walked into a classroom over there after we had had a summer of housing apartments that had sold to a different corporation that had moved in a lot of families that had not had schools. He came in and was wonderful with kindergarteners. The non-Hispanic kids left there with as much Spanish knowledge as the Spanish kids had of English. You couldn't get a crayon or pencil in there unless you knew it in both languages. They loved him. Well, everybody wanted him, and he left Cobb County and went to somewhere in the city of Atlanta as a leader. That's the other thing about Roy [Barnes]. He had a natural bent toward leadership. Your education process should encourage leadership because it is badly needed right now.

TS: Well, when I asked my question, I was thinking of the 1960s, but you really define integration as an ongoing reality.

BG: It is, it really is. If you get lost in the 1960s, there were some ugly experiences. But I'll share a story with you. I told you I was at Osborne briefly, and I was going to South Cobb the next year. So I went to all the basketball games. I think that's important for educators to be out where you're being seen and where you see what's happening to your kids. They have a hero, Willie Gay. I won't ever forget his name. He was a big black kid, and he was a basketball player. He was so outstanding at a playoff game at Osborne High School that he got a standing ovation. It was unbelievable. That's how far things have come now for a young black man. It was just right at the beginning of the integration, and everybody could appreciate the talent that kid had. In competition race doesn't make any difference. If you could shoot a three pointer from halfway down the court, then you are okay. That's a solution. That's resolved a lot of hate and anger. Kids could share the experience. Kids might not like it that he's a better athlete, or he might not like something. But that gives promise that a kid can learn to solve problems rather than being a part of the problem. If you talk about race now, right now it's the most tenuous I've seen it since the 1960s. I think last summer and the summer before with our black males and that kind of thing, it's a tense time. It's an educational problem. Part of it is.

TS: Well, from a counselor's perspective in the 1960s, did you have students coming in with problems that dealt with race that you had to deal with?

BG: I did, especially girls. The two communities that were represented in the high school were different. The culture was different. Poverty probably existed everywhere, but in the black community the jobs were limited. It was hard. Incomes were minimal. They went through a period in that era of going to Detroit. But girls, white and black girls, had conflicts. The only time I ever had a physical situation over race was with little tenth grade girls that had a personal problem with each other. They just didn't like each other, a kind of anger that's dangerous. They were in a fight in the girls' restroom. It was the only time I ever saw anything physical. The little black girl scratched my arm. It was just unbelievable. They thought, "What are you going to do about it?" I said, "The same thing we always do. She's going to get three days, and then she's going to come back. And then we will work on a solution." That was critical. By the way she grew up, and I've seen her since, and she has turned out fine.

Physical contact in school has always been intolerable, even with the little ones when I was an elementary principal. But you have to be careful about how you're treating it. Who's going to help solve that problem, and what are you going to do after the physical contact? Are kids going to drop out or are they going to stay angry? Gangs came out of that kind of culture when you don't get resolution early enough so that they know who they are and where they are. I still think if you give a kid an opportunity to find a base that's positive, they'll go to the positive. It takes some direction. That's where you get the good teacher. Sometimes I think it's the informal behavior that precipitates that kind of anger. If you can get them in a classroom, and the kids are learning, all of a sudden the discussion makes sense. Then you don't have much time for pushing and shoving. And inappropriate language, there's cultural language that's really antagonizing. You know, Kennesaw has, I'm sure, a problem that continues to escalate in terms of different cultures on the campus now. Your new president, [Samuel S.] Sam Olens, I've known Sam for a long time. When I was chairman of the school board, we had meetings with Sam. So I've known Sam for a long time. But school ought to be a place of learning, all kinds of learning, and to do that you've got to have good teachers. That's the focus. I don't care how you get them and how much money it costs, and you ought to pay them after you get them.

TS: Sure. Let's see, you were at Compton in the 1980s . . .

BG: Ten years.

TS: Before that Sedalia and Clarkdale . . .

BG: Clarkdale in-between. Three very different elementary schools, but great kids. They are in their sixties and seventies now, and I see them, and that's always interesting. Not long ago I went to Pikes to buy some plants, and someone that was working there said, "Oh, Ms. Gray, you remember when . . ." I couldn't think who he was, and then finally I remembered where he sat in the lunchroom. He was so elated he couldn't stand it. He

said, “You do remember me?” I said, “Yes.” That’s all I remembered, the table where he sat in the lunchroom. Teachers say, “Why do you keep teaching?” That’s why you do because you get to see your results. It’s true that it is not always measured by success on a test, but it’s interesting and it’s been a great career. I’ve been blessed, and as I told you earlier, I would do it again, with some changes for things I’ve learned along the way.

TS: What were the main things you learned as a principal?

BG: There’s no excuse for not having a good organization. It needs to be structured on need, and it needs to be practiced, and it needs to be evaluated. Everybody needs to participate in it. The principalship is not a solo act. I like to think it’s a leadership role and that you’re utilizing everybody’s strengths and acknowledging all their weaknesses. Does that make sense?

TS: Yes.

BG: I always tried to do that. At each of the three schools I had to work at that. The easiest situation was probably Clarkdale. It was small enough that I could have them over for a cookout at my house. As the faculty grew larger you had to work out some other strategies.

TS: Why do you think there’s been such great turnover in teachers?

BG: They don’t know what’s expected. They really don’t know what a teacher is. That’s what Dr. Siegel and I have talked about. What is a teacher? You hear all the glory. Teaching affects the future. Of course, it does, but what does that really mean? It means that I take, first of all, who I am and do something with it. I have to do that first. I’ve had to replace teachers in the firing process. It was the most unpleasant thing I ever did. I thought about it. You pray about it. It was a serious thing when you start taking somebody’s career away from them, but maybe some people ought not to go into teaching. As the counselors say, “This is not your thing, this is not going to be your bag. Let’s look at what you can do well. What about this?”

So I think we need to be very cautious about shoving people into education. I heard one person say, “Well, you know, I can teach till my husband gets a better job.” I don’t want that one. That one’s not one of mine. I want you to come to this school because you really want to teach. Here’s the second part of that. You asked about being a principal. My job is to say to new teachers, “I’m going to help you. If you really want to, and your heart is in the right place, and you’ve got the potential. But if you don’t have it, I don’t hesitate to share that you might want to look elsewhere. You might want to think about selling books.” That’s the other thing. You better have a sense of humor. If you don’t have a sense of humor, your days will get long and your nights longer. A sense of humor is crucial. I think that being said, when you’re selected, then you’re going to have to recognize, the selection process is important, but the support base is critical. Just because Kennesaw gives you a little piece of paper that says you are a college graduate, it’s just the start, and that’s what we haven’t recognized.

I saw Chris Ragsdale [Cobb County school superintendent] yesterday. I've known Chris for years. His hearts in the right place. I was on the school board when we hired him. His heart's in the right place. He knows it's tough for teachers, and he's willing to sit down with dollars out here and put the dollars where they will help a teacher. See, if you can't do that, people say, "Well, they make good money; we pay their insurance." What's good money when the children they teach grow up and years later are in medical research and they can save you? What was the dollar amount you spent on them in their elementary program? That's the other thing, being a principal or a teacher, you need to sell what you do. You've got to be your own disciple. I think you've got to make sure that the public understands. It's a challenge, and I don't know that everybody needs to teach. We just need to be a little bit more selective, and when they select, we need to go ahead and get them in a working program.

TS: Have parents changed over the years in terms of support for the schools?

BG: Yes, parents have changed because parents aren't always the same; the families change. The picture of the family is different. The significant members in a household are not always the natural parents, so with every family situation you have to be aware. It's crucial for the teachers and for all of us to know that the house looks very different. Some don't care if they have a house. They will live in their cars. Being homeless doesn't bother them. The picture of the traditional home where we have a mom and dad and two and a half children is gone. We have to find out what is the family life of a child, and we have to find it out pretty soon. That's pre-K. Put your dollars in Pre-K and find out who this kid is. Does he or she have a parent? Is the parent a drug addict? Does the parent speak a different language in the neighborhood? There are just so many things. We've got to support the family.

I always fuss about my millennials. Their attitude is, "What can you do for me?" The give back from parents is not the same. When I was at South Cobb High School, if you had had to call a parent about a child, the child would probably have gotten skinned. The family was so involved and so accepting of our educational program and that the programs were good for the kids. They would do anything to ensure that that child had exposure to the programs. They'd come on Saturdays and paint bicycles, and they'd come and fry chicken after a football game. That's gone. That's gone because the family is different. The family struggles. You know, I forgive it sometimes because often the families are single women with children with no two-parent emphasis any more. The male and female may well not be married. Who provides the guidance in the school? See, it comes down to the teacher. You better pay the teacher because she's going to identify for that child a support base. It used to be in the home with the parent coming in and talking with you. You'd sit down and have the greatest time. It's the hardest thing in the world to get parents in, especially in the high school. David Morgan who's on the school board now, wanted it to be a prerequisite that if parents didn't come in and talk about their graduating senior, they weren't going to let you have a seat at the graduation. Well, that probably is impractical now.

We have to know who we are teaching. We're teaching a different family than we used to. Like the Thompson boys; their mother and their dad were right there. They married local girls. The family was defined, and they had grandmothers and great-grandmothers right there in the community. That picture is gone. I think the family is significant. Somehow or another we have to reconnect with the families.

TS: So the schools really have a harder job now than ever because they have to act as the parents?

BG: Yes, they do. They have a harder job than ever. It's harder to identify problems because for a long time you started in the first grade, and you stayed in that area into the twelfth grade. Well, by the time you got to the twelfth grade, the school knew everything about you. As soon as we can, we need to find out what makes this kid tick. We have so much on the technical end of that. For example, we know what it takes to teach a kid to read. But the magic is that teacher that motivates the child to learn. We diagnose all sorts of physical and emotional problems that children bring to school now. We have the school nurse who gives diabetics their insulin during the day. So we've worked hard at this, but it is hard and costly work, and it has to be respected, I think. The parents are weak in that respect.

TS: Let me ask you a few questions about when you were on the school board. I know that evolution became an issue while you were there about the disclaimers in the textbooks. Can you tell me a little about that?

BG: Yes, there are many things different about public education now. One difference is the role of the courts. If they don't like something, they are going to sue, and they do every day. That makes things more difficult, I think. Evolution is going to be on the table forever. There's no easy definition of what evolution is, and there certainly is no guideline for a textbook company to sit down and take out things because down here in Cobb County they don't like evolution. It was a difficult concept. The most difficult question I ever answered was when a federal judge asked, "Well, Ms. Gray, would you not say that your faith is a part of your decision making?" I said, "Oh, yes. Indeed, it is. It most assuredly is." And so, then he said, "How can you be objective about evolution?" Make no mistake; my objectivity would be very limited. You asked me about the content in a textbook. But see, that was all that was really being judged there. If the science textbook has evolution in there, and the school tears it out, is that illegal? That was the question. I thought that was a local decision, and I still do. But just read your newspaper. The question of religion in the schools is coming up right now.

TS: Oh, yes, over whether the school board can prevent a satanic club in a school.⁶

⁶ Editor's note: During the 2016-17 school year the Atlanta Chapter of the Satanic Temple applied for an After School Satan club at Still Elementary in Cobb County in an attempt to force the school board to terminate religion-based after-school programs such as the Good News Club.

BG: Right, and I'm not going to deny my faith-based background just to make a clinical decision about something that can be handled in a classroom. If you're teaching world history, for example, there are plenty of controversial topics that teachers have to handle. But the courts have been harsh on occasion, and they've been soft on occasion, and that's why I think such decisions can be handled best on the local level. You may be sure that in Cobb County, Georgia, there is a lot of anti-evolutionary sentiment. I'm a Methodist. You can always say that the good Baptist brothers are not very tolerant. No, I think that you have to take who you are and where you are and look at it. Furthermore, it was not the children that raised the issue of evolution in the textbooks. It was parents who found it in the textbooks and wanted it taken out. Kids are much more pliable than they used to be. You can give them information, and they can sort information.

TS: As I understand it the school board thought they were presenting a compromise by putting a disclaimer in the front of the textbooks that evolution was theory and not fact.⁷

BG: Well, that's right. The directions from the legal department were to do it that way. But you know, this has never been resolved. It's still hanging out there. And it will be hanging out there when you and I both are gone. There's no easy resolution. I say that, but it may change, and then when it changes, the next judicial approach may be another answer. It will always be a different slant when it gets to the judicial arena. I don't want my child to be misguided with content. When there is an accepted theory, it makes no sense not to put it there. Surely, we've taught our kids well enough that they can make decisions on their own. But parents think they can't. Talking about parents, they came out of the woodwork to be involved in that kind of thing, but they don't come out of the woodwork for you to make sure their children are attending every day.

TS: Well, another issue that aroused parents was a balanced schedule as opposed to a traditional schedule.

BG: I think these are just sort of an itch that has to be scratched once in a while. People look at things that didn't work for them, and they judge the present. And the present is way more overwhelming. Maybe we ought to be doing more psychological preparation than we are because I think where we are now—and I won't be here to do it—but over the

⁷ Editor's note: In 2002 the Cobb County School Board authorized the placement of a sticker in the front of biology texts stating that evolution was theory and not fact with regard to the origin of living things. In 2005 the case of *Selman v. Cobb County School District* was heard in federal court in the Northern District of Georgia. Several parents claimed that the stickers violated the First Amendment's separation of church and state by bringing into question the consensus opinion of the vast majority of scientists. Judge Clarence Cooper sided with Selman and issued an injunction, ordering Cobb County to remove the stickers. Cobb County appealed to the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals, where in 2006 the decision was overturned. The case was remanded back to the trial court for a new trial. However, the case was settled out of court later that year in favor of the plaintiffs with Cobb County agreeing not to place the disclaimers in textbooks.

next few years what we're talking about right now is going to take a lot of time and energy and money. We ought to be dealing with developing healthy personalities in our young children, so that when they get to be adults, they have strategies that they can deal with. There are a lot of things in the world that I don't really like, but we can disagree. A healthy personality can make proper decisions, and that's part of the schools' responsibility. We ought to say that.

We dealt with race. In Cobb County I don't know what else we could have done. The furor we're having now, the angst that's out there, is coming through, I guess, the weapon of technology. In five seconds you can be exposed to events from far away. So we'll have to learn how to think about that and sort it out.

TS: I know you were involved with the computer controversy with [Superintendent] General Joseph Redden.⁸

BG: That was just a business decision. I wasn't involved with it. He was just a general. A general doesn't know any more about dollars and cents than anyone else. It's the taxpayers' money. I'm going to be very cautious about how you spend a hundred million dollars. And look how quickly it changed. If we had put that hundred million dollars into that program—it didn't make any sense.

TS: He wanted to give everybody a computer to take home?

BG: Take it home. Then you're going to have to update it, and you're going to have to maintain it. It's the school's responsibility if you're requiring it, but it made no sense economically. It's just like the courts. It made no sense that they were getting involved in one aspect of the curriculum. I'm concerned that there's enough science classes available that kids will know how to read a thermometer and know if they've got a fever, this kind of thing. People used to say, "Well, you're just making them drug addicts, wanting a nurse to give them medicine. I won't let you do it to my child." Well, you don't have to. If you won't sign this form we're not going to.

I think they thought that was going to happen with evolution—that it would be resolved by just saying, "Here's a little blurb; you can read that." But that didn't work. After the hearing, I was called to sit on a panel to see if there was some way we could resolve it. They had two attorneys, and we had one. I came from the county, along with somebody

⁸ Editor's note: In 2005 the Cobb County School District adopted a technology initiative called Power to Learn. Among other things, the initiative was to provide Apple laptop computers for all teachers and to experiment in four pilot high schools with a plan to provide laptops for individual student use. The technology upgrades were to be paid for with revenues from a 2003 SPLOST (special purpose local option sales tax) referendum. A taxpayer suit successfully argued that the SPLOST did not specifically authorize such expenditures. After an auditor's report also questioned the bidding process for the laptops, Superintendent Redden resigned in frustration on August 24, 2005.

else. But you can't resolve issues that are in the hearts of people unless you're willing to really do some strange things. And the public schools are not in the position to do that. Similarly, just because Apple offered all the administrators an Apple computer, I'm not going to give them sanctification for that and spend that money. Technology changes too quickly. Like with textbooks, we used a textbook five years and then we made a decision as to whether to keep it. But technology changes faster than that.

TS: I gather that General Redden wasn't your favorite superintendent. Who was your favorite superintendent?

BG: I think Alton Crews may have been, but I also loved Kermit [Keenum, superintendent, 1973-1981 and 1989-1992]. Alton Crews had the ability to see where education needed to go. He gave us the first push. He gave us a way to ask questions, and then he took the answers and did something with them. You know, is the same kind of kindergarten needed over in South Cobb as in an affluent area in East Cobb? He opened our eyes with concrete dollars and a mind-set as to how to spend dollars. Kermit and Stanley [Wrinkle] and I talk together, so it's not really fair to compare Dr. Crews and Mr. Kermit. We were all on a parallel level in the Cobb school system when we first knew each other.

I think probably [former South Cobb High School principal] Mr. Smitha—he served one term on the board—as an in-school operator was the most practical I ever saw. His pragmatism kept things at a level that you could deal with.

TS: So, you liked Kermit Keenum. What about [Thomas S.] Tom Tocco [superintendent, 1981-1989]?

BG: He was fascinating. He was just really neat. I have a yellow rocking chair in my office, and it has Raggedy Ann and Raggedy Andy painted on the back. Kids would come in and crawl up in it and tell me their troubles. He was there one day when I had a kid in there sitting in my rocker. Every once in a while he would be in Powder Springs—they lived out there—and he would stop by and say, "I need the rocking chair today." I thought about that, but there's something about rocking chairs. I liked Dr. Tocco. He was not popular with teachers because he didn't know them, but as a principal I found it easy to work with him. I really did. He asked me to do something at an international convention. I liked him personally and professionally. I've not worked with anybody here that I couldn't work with again. And Kermit is a big picture guy. At the right time Kermit probably ought to have been the educational leader at the state level. I mean, he has all it takes. The timing just wasn't right. I didn't ever get to know how a college is set up. At Kennesaw I really was just a fringe addition there. But Tom Tocco had a real grasp of organizational structure. He could maximize a staff of talents and do a good job with it.

TS: There's a building named for you at Pebblebrook High School [the Betty A. Gray Building, completed in 2004]. How did that come about?

BG: I don't know. I guess because I live in the community near Pebblebrook and ran and walked on the track. That's the other thing. Your health is important, so I did a lot of running on the track and got to know the kids. Then I got to know Earl Reece, Jr. [chair of the Fine Arts Division and Performing Arts director at Pebblebrook, 1990-2004]. Earl and I decided we needed a theatre. We worked with the community and with the Board of Education, and we worked it through. The theatre offers so much opportunity for some of our children that don't have the dollars to go to private tutors and that kind of thing. Then all of a sudden there it was, and I was genuinely embarrassed. Yesterday, when I met with the retired teachers, Donald Murphy was there. He's been a principal in this county. He said, "Well, let me tell you about my grandson." He told me his grandson is an opera singer, started his development right there at Pebblebrook High School, and is opening in San Francisco this week.

So, it was a community location for me for my running. I ran into a student at a Publix grocery store, and he wanted to introduce me to his mom. He said, "Mom, this is Ms. Gray; you know I ain't never seen her in clothes before" [laughs]. I was just coming from a meeting, and I was all dressed up. The mother got hysterical she laughed so hard. But he hadn't ever seen me in the grocery store. He only saw me on that track. But I guess I knew every student, and one of the reasons I did was Randy Bynum. Randy was the principal there then. I don't think he is working in education right now. He went to South Carolina as a superintendent in one of the counties near Charleston, I think. But Randy was the kind of guy that you needed for Pebblebrook and did a good job. There are just a lot of people who came together at Pebblebrook at that time that could work together. It's all about staffing. I was on the school board, so I could sit down and say, "Well, Pebblebrook needs this for this reason." And I knew it did. It was not just general knowledge that you hear once or twice. Then again, I've had a great time. I really have been blessed.

TS: Well, there's been a Betty Gray Scholarship for a long time hasn't there?

BG: When I first started it, it was for teaching; I want young people to teach. I've told you how hard it is, but I want young people to teach.

TS: So, this was for people going into education?

BG: Well, at first it was, and then we just opened it up for all in need. But we had a good run with it, and community support came out. I worry about public education. I'm an advocate of public education. If you've got a child with special needs and you want to accelerate him [by putting him in a private school], and you've got the dollars in your pocket, go ahead. But don't take any dollars from public schools. I don't have any problem with private schools. I mean, it's your choice. But I have a problem if you take public dollars. I went to a hearing a year ago held by [State Senator] Lindsey Tippins. We had served on the school board together. I went down for a joint meeting with both the House and Senate about how we need to be a necessary instrument in making our county better. We don't need to fragment anything. If we're failing kids in public schools, why are we doing it? You don't label them to do that. If a kid can't read, he

needs to be taught to read. It's as simple as that. You don't need to scare a teacher to death.

Doris Billups-McClure, the principal of Riverside Primary School [South Gordon road, Mableton], went down with me. She took a little group of kids with just some help from the community, four years olds going to public kindergarten the next year. We met with them in the summer, and she took that little group of thirty-eight. At the time it looked like that probably half of them wouldn't get to go to first grade. She sat down and talked to her staff. Now she works pretty hard, so it's hard for her to keep good folks, but she was able to put every one of those children in a kindergarten class in the fall. She built an individualized plan for each child. She put that together and matched it with a teacher who could handle that kind of thing and made wonderful progress. It's those kinds of things that we need to support. However, it was not in the curriculum. She got really nervous about that, and I said, "You know, that's why you have Chris [Ragsdale], because he understands education." I think we have to be innovative, but innovation comes from within as much as without.

TS: Maybe just to wrap it up, what are you proudest of in your career?

BG: I don't know. I think the scholarship. It is a symbol of what I feel. I think being elected to the Board of Education four times without apology of who I am or what I want, the good with the bad. I think that indicates that I could reach a broad spectrum of people.

TS: Did you spend much money on your campaign? Did you have to raise money?

BG: No, I spent a lot less than people thought I did. I didn't take any big contributions. I never took anything over \$100.00 and not many of those. Most of mine were \$5.00 bills or a \$10.00 maybe from a kid I taught twenty years earlier. I'm proud of being on the school board not so much because I won or lost, but because it opened doors. I said what I believed and was willing to take a stand and do something about it. I loved the building [at Pebblebrook]. We laughed about the building. The kids said, "We didn't know you were supposed to have a building named after you if you're not dead." I think that's significant. I wish that some other things had been different. I really do wish we had gotten our act together a little sooner in the state picture. I think Lindsey Tippins by the way is doing a good job of that in the Senate. I've been really impressed with his grasp of it. He went to McEachern, of course. I had three high schools in my school board post: McEachern, South Cobb, and Pebblebrook. I still have connections with all of them and run by when they need a speaker or whatever because it gives me an opportunity to see them and for them to see me. You can come from the track and go to the grocery store, and scholarship recipients will come up and show you their diplomas. So I'm proud that I've had an opportunity to serve in a community where I could make a difference.

TS: Well, thank you very much.

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