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IT WASN'T LITTLE ROCK

When the Supreme Court of the United States ruled in the 1954 case of *Brown vs. Board of Education* (347 U.S. 483) that state-sanctioned segregation of public schools was a violation of the 14th Amendment and therefore unconstitutional, my mother thought that meant I would begin tenth grade at nearby Washington and Lee (W&L) High School in Arlington, Virginia. Every day we rode the school bus past W&L and other neat and well-equipped white schools to Hoffman-Boston (H-B), our small, dilapidated school on Arlington's Southside. Some schools in nearby Washington, D. C. and Maryland were desegregated the fall after the decision. In Virginia, however, we were sent back to segregated schools.

Some of our "colored" teachers did not expect much from those of us who had come from a neighborhood composed mostly of day laborers and domestic workers. But one teacher, Miss Coles, let me know that she expected me to "step up to the bat" at H-B. Momma let me study in her bedroom after dinner. I got good grades.

Changes, however, were in the air. At our high school there had been no library, gymnasium, cafeteria, science lab or space in which to take home economics or shop classes. When it rained we put buckets around the physical education classroom to catch the water that leaked through the roof. All our textbooks—with names inscribed from previous users, were sent over to us from the white high schools.

Over the summer a new gymnasium, auditorium, cafeteria and chemistry lab were added to our school. Even though the lab had no equipment, the purpose of this renovation was to show that we were getting an "equal" education. A new principal and a crew of new young black teachers were hired. Students sent to the principal's office for disciplinary problems were put out of school for good. Every few months we were tested. Our scores were published and discussed. The Arlington County School Board said they were proof that we would never survive in white schools and that we were better off where we were.

Not long after that, Virginia initiated a strategy called "Massive Resistance." Officials vowed to close public schools rather than desegregate. This did not deter Momma. The fight had come to her doorsteps. In the spring of my tenth grade, she asked me if I was willing to be part of a school integration court case with other kids from the neighborhood. Even though I was happy about the Supreme Court's *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling, I was nervous about the idea of leaving H-B to go to what I thought of as unfriendly territory. But how you felt was not something you talked about. I knew what was expected of me.

That summer of 1955, Emmett Till, a 14-year-old black boy, was savagely killed in Mississippi for "speaking to a white woman." Two white men later described brutally beating him, taking him to the edge of the Tallahatchie River, shooting him in the head, fastening a large metal fan used for ginning cotton to his neck with barbed wire, and pushing the body into the river. Because he was just one year younger than me, the horror of the act seeped into my bones.

While reported in the mainstream press, Emmett's murder was not treated like the horrible crime it was. I felt outraged at the injustice of it. How was I going to sit in a white classroom?

During the fall of 1955, I returned to H-B for my eleventh grade year. Miles away in Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks was arrested in December for not moving to the back of a city bus. The bus boycott that followed was exciting news for us. "Colored" folk in the Deep South were fighting back. Mainstream newspaper photographs portrayed elderly black people walking miles to work. It inspired us to see the determination of our people, in a state that was less hospitable to blacks than Virginia. The Montgomery Bus Boycott was to last 381 days.

Meanwhile our teachers at H-B encouraged us to participate in the "I Speak for Democracy" contest. Having experienced two previous school trials, my essay was very strong and I won at school. Prior to the countywide competition, the drama teacher, Mr. Boyd, coached me after school hours to help me spruce up my presentation. The event was to be broadcast on the radio.

That evening, five of us were in the radio studio. Representing H-B, I was the only black student. One by one, we stood and spoke into the microphone. It was clear that mine was head and shoulders above the rest. The other students surrounded and congratulated me. However when the judges announced a white girl as the winner five minutes later, everyone became silent. My efforts were given third place. I could not make sense of what had happened. When someone gathered us to make a group picture, not knowing what to do, I smiled to keep from crying.

I don't remember much else about that night. Everything became a blur. At school the next day, my teachers expressed their anger. I felt deeply humiliated. Despite the Emmett Till case, I had wanted to believe that justice was somewhere in the universe. Perhaps my classmates who had been so cynical about school—and that was most of them—were right about not taking school seriously. It was my teachers who kept me going after that. They would not let me quit.

By the spring of eleventh grade, my name was entered as the lead plaintiff in our school desegregation class action suit filed in U.S. District Court.

A photograph of me, included in a newspaper article about it, made my image the "black face" on the case. During the court hearings, school officials used statistical charts to say only negative things about my schoolmates and me. Could they be right?

The high visibility of the school case made the "real" me go underground. My discomfort with the spotlight made me withdraw into my coursework for the last year of high school. In the statewide science competition for Negro students, my wind-tunnel project was awarded a college tuition scholarship. Because of the school case, it was reported in the mainstream press.

Momma was proud. My teachers were proud.

A week later, the high school received a call from someone inquiring about my character. The caller wanted to meet me in person before deciding whether to give me an additional scholarship. It turned out that a colored man who was a chauffeur to a wealthy white man saw my picture in the newspaper and asked his employer, "Why don't you send this girl to college? You always said you'd send me one day when things got better!"

His boss, a Washington, D.C. corporate lawyer, replied, "Maybe I will!"

In the fall of 1957, supported with scholarships in the sciences from the school and my benefactor, I entered Hampton Institute in Virginia.

Arlington schools were not yet integrated, so Momma added my siblings Stephen, Gloria and Lillian to the school class action suit.

Meanwhile, in Little Rock, Central High School was to begin the school year desegregated. However, Arkansas Governor Faubus used the National Guard to keep the nine black students out. Finally, President Eisenhower ordered 1,000 paratroopers and

10,000 National Guardsmen to Little Rock, and on September 25, Central High School was desegregated. Photographs of crowds of white adults screaming obscenities appeared in all the newspapers. It was a terrifying sight.

In February 1959 my sister Gloria became one of four students to desegregate a Virginia junior high school. On the days leading up to it, I felt bad that it was she who had to face this situation, not I. When I tried to talk with one of my professors about my fear that something might happen to her, he had no idea of what I was talking about.

Going to Hampton from Arlington in 1957 was like entering a surrealistic world. Female students were to wear gloves, dresses and hats on Sundays. Freshmen women were tutored in proper behavior for afternoon tea. We were to attend, for two years, vespers and performances put on by traveling ballet and classical music groups. At first it seemed like the perfect place for me.

To keep my scholarships, I had to study long hours. In the classroom I felt at ease, but I was afraid that socially I would never fit in. None of the students or professors knew anything about the Arlington school case and I didn't say anything about it. Never, in any of my classes, was there a discussion about what was going on with black people in the real world outside of Hampton Institute. School desegregation, even in nearby Prince Edward County, one of the original five cases in the Supreme Court's Brown vs. Board of Education decision, was never mentioned. Across the river in Norfolk, schools were to be desegregated for the first time; Prince Edward County schools were to be shut down. Was not noticing supposed to protect the campus from the events outside the main gate? Was a conversation about desegregation off limits at a black school? It was as if Little Rock had never occurred.

Back home, my mother, Ethel Mozelle Thompson, had to return to court with lawyers from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) again and again to get my brother Stephen into a nearby high school in the fall of 1959 and my younger sister, Lillian, into junior high school the next year, 1960.

What did Ethel think about how her children got along in the formerly all white schools? For her, doing the work to remove racial barriers was not something she had to think about. It was what you did because you had to fight for your American democracy.

To understand why my mother, a shy girl from North Carolina, dreamed so boldly and fought so hard to get her children into integrated schools, you have to look back at her story. Ethel Thompson's lifetime and interests paralleled the period between the 1920s and the 1960s when African Americans went to court a number of times to challenge a wide range of racial laws and practices. This activity, which spawned the modern civil rights movement of 1954 – 1965, brought together black lawyers and plaintiffs throughout the United States to take aim at racial inequality, segregation and disfranchisement.

Mozelle Ethel Jordan was born to Irene Johnson Jordan and George Jordan on March 7, 1913 in Winston Salem, North Carolina. She was their first girl and second child. When she was four and her brother Council was six, the family moved to South Carolina to work on a tenant farm as sharecroppers. She was put to work helping with her younger brother and sister, ages two and one, while Council helped to feed the farm animals. Their house, a two-room wooden shack, was not much bigger than the shed that housed a horse, a cow and some chickens. A nearby fenced-in lean-to held a few pigs. Her parents worked in the fields seven days a week, growing asparagus, corn, tomatoes, watermelon and anything else that would help make ends meet.

Mozelle loved farm life. But an unexpected tragedy occurred after they had been there for six years. This event changed her family. Fear entered her life. Except that her parents had no money to place one, the obituary of her brother Council might have read:

Council Jordan, age 12, passed away under violent circumstances on August 15, 1923, an apparent lynching victim. His body was brought back to his parents' homestead badly beaten. His arms and legs were bound, and a thick rope hung from his broken neck. He is survived by his parents, Irene and George Jordan, and his sisters and brothers Mozelle, 10; Oscar, 8; Bessie, 7; Crawford, 6; Wilma, 4; and Taft, age 2.

Mozelle was inside the house but saw the group of white men pull Council's body from a wagon and dump it on the ground. As they exited down the red dirt road from which they had come, she ran out to help him. Her parents were still in the fields. Not able to accept that her brother was dead, she cradled his lifeless body in her lap and rocked him back and forth.

Mozelle's parents built a pine box in which to bury their oldest son. They seemed to be in a daze. After the box containing Council's body was covered with dirt, Mozelle began to realize that her brother could not come back. Rage welled inside her body. She was furious, unable to contain her anger and grief. Snot and tears ran down her face as she screamed over and over again:

"How could you just sit there and do nothing about it?"

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"How could you just sit there and do nothing about it?"

A huge hand came from out of nowhere and slapped her face. "Shut up before the same thing happens to you!"

With heavy hearts, Irene and George returned to their work in the fields. Each day before leaving the yard, the grief-stricken parents placed their sons Oscar and Crawford into separate burlap sacks. The bags were tied shut and hung from trees. The parents were taking no chances that the boys might wander away from the farm. To protect them from their older brother's fate, the boys were hung in sacks. Hung to protect them. Hung from trees.

The days seemed like a blur. Mozelle rocked herself to sleep at night. Her mother, Irene, began to sit and rock and moan for hours at a time. Her father, George, struggled to keep things going, but without his wife's help, he fell further and further behind.

Before the year was out he moved the family to the town of Hickory, North Carolina, where he found work in a sawmill. Irene, however, failed to recover. Within six months after moving, at the age of thirty-one, she died, leaving behind eleven year-old Mozelle to mother herself as well as her five younger brothers and sisters.

At first nearby neighbors helped her to run the house, but their assistance fell off quickly as they turned back to their own difficult lives. Mozelle dropped out of school to stay home with babies Wilma and Taft, who were five and three.

Three years later, George Jordan married a woman named Addie, whose son, James, was the same age as his son Crawford. A washerwoman, Addie had a big clientele and her income would help make their life easier. Mozelle was to work in Addie's business, but she begged her father to allow her to return to school.

He gave his permission, but she had to promise that assisting Addie would come before anything else. Thus fourteen-year-old Mozelle entered the sixth grade class at the public school for coloreds.

Mozelle graduated from Ridgeview High School at the age of twenty-one. Ambitious, able and willing to work hard, she left home and moved to Washington, D. C. in 1934. Determined to be her own person, her first official act was to change her name from Mozelle to Ethel M.

Once settled in a rooming house for colored ladies, she took the Federal examinations and obtained a job as a messenger in one of the government agencies.

Mozelle, now Ethel, enjoyed her life in the city. After a few years, one of her girl friends introduced her to Clarence Thompson, an outgoing and gregarious young widower. He swept her off her feet and they married shortly afterwards.

Clarence's mother, Mrs. Thompson, was caring for his two sons, Junior, seven, and Carroll, age six. Her two-story wood frame house had five bedrooms, an eat-in kitchen with a wood-burning stove, and a closed-in porch that surrounded a well and icebox. Clarence and his new wife moved in with her in Arlington, Virginia. Within the first year, in 1939, a baby girl was born. They named me Clarissa. Two months later, Ethel returned to her job to help save money for the two-bedroom wood frame bungalow they were building on a lot next door.

After moving to the new house in 1942, they had a son, Stephen. Another son who died at birth arrived in 1944; then followed daughters Gloria, 1946; Lillian, 1947; and Jean, 1948. Six of the Thompson children—Junior, Carroll, Clarissa, Stephen, Gloria and Lillian—lived to adulthood.

Though surrounded by children, Ethel felt lonely and isolated. Arlington was Clarence's hometown, not hers. After leaving his job each day, he went drinking with his cousins and friends. She stayed home. While her children were still young, however, she returned to work, this time as a domestic worker cleaning white folks' homes.

Having few close friends, Ethel confided in me, her oldest daughter. She told me stories about Paul Robeson, his beautiful voice, his public stands against the oppression of people around the world, his persecution by the government and the attacks on him by black leaders. She introduced me to ideas that made me feel special. Over the years of my growing up, my mother railed against the public fear generated by the House Un-American Activities Committee, the prosecution of Ethel Rosenberg, the second class citizenship of Negroes and the upswing in lynching of black men throughout the country.

No one else knew what Ethel thought. She was a quiet, passive-seeming woman who cautioned her daughter not to say anything to anybody because, "You never know who you are talking to." Yet she joined the local branch of the NAACP, a bold move. Many were afraid to join

because of the perceived subversive nature of the organization's activities. She took me with her to the meetings. One of the group's primary goals was to eliminate lynching and obtain fair trials for blacks.

Often the young lawyers from the NAACP's Legal Defense and Education Fund came to the meetings to talk about their fieldwork in the South. They gave firsthand accounts about local resistances to "Jim Crow" practices. These details were what Ethel wanted know. When money was collected to help file the numerous little-noticed legal briefs, she always donated twenty-five to fifty cents—a lot of money for her to give away.

These small court cases were the prelude to the filing of *Brown vs. Board of Education* before the Supreme Court.

My sister Gloria was the one in our family who actually helped integrate the Arlington Schools. She was 12 years old. Here's the way she recalls it:

"I remember going to court. At first all the attention was fun. Our black teachers tried to make sure we were on the same skills level as the white students. We went to sensitivity sessions at the church to learn how to behave, how to react to people. Momma went shopping for new clothes. Aunt Naomi paid for me to have my hair done every two weeks.

"On that first day in February of 1959 when four of us went to Stratford Junior High School, me, Michael Jones, Ronald Deskins and Lance Newman, there were 99 policemen, 25 for each of us. We entered through the back door. It was a long walk down the sidewalk into the school to the principal's office. I remember that the cleaning people (black) at Stratford smiled and clapped when we arrived. So we felt there were some friendly faces among all those people.

"The white kids were waiting for us to come, too! I heard one of them say, "Here they come!"

"But after we settled into school, it wasn't fun. It was very isolating. They weren't such great times for me personally. That first semester, we were always picked up after school because of threats. If somebody called us a "Nigger," we were to ignore it. We had to bite our tongue, be totally passive, totally nonviolent. They didn't prepare us for what would happen with the adults, but with the other students—our peer group.

"You could tell which teacher was prejudiced, who didn't want you there. Some of them didn't say anything to us or about us. When we did something we thought was better, they tried to act as though it had not happened. We understood that they were trying to say that there was no room for us inside white schools.

"Our blackness—the thing that had always made us so visible—now made us disappear.

"But our parents were determined that we would stay. To them, the abuse was just taken for granted. They would tell us that if we got the same training as white students and worked twice as hard, the world would see our talents and opportunities would open up for us.

So it wasn't something you came home and told your parents about. Not in our family anyway. We were not to create any incident that could be construed as negative, that would affect this whole scenario of school integration or impact it negatively because of possible consequences, so that they could say, 'See they don't really belong with us.'

"More black students came the next semester in September. There was lots of support that first semester to make sure the "experiment" went well and it did go well, overall. But after that we

had no support, though it was still needed. Our white classmates, picking up our white teachers' cues, tried not to see what was going on. As our isolation mounted, we could not name what was happening to us, but we knew how it felt. If we tried to speak of it, we were asked, 'What are you talking about?' or 'Why are you so sensitive?' As we walked home from school, white kids would drive by and call us names or throw eggs at us. We hoped that they would be brave enough to stop and get out of the car and confront us directly, but they would shoot on by.

"I'll never forget a history class at Washington and Lee—this day we had a substitute teacher. And this man said, 'Negroes liked being slaves and picking cotton.'

"And I'm thinking, 'Oh No! Why would we like that? Why would we like being slaves?' I didn't challenge this teacher. When they're white and you're black you don't challenge them. We hid our anger at the distortion and exclusion of our reality. We didn't realize it at the time, but part of coping was searching for different ways of being in the world, of drawing on other sources of strength.

"Certainly the experience of going to integrated schools made me more militant. When I was in the twelfth grade, the church in Birmingham was bombed and the four little girls died from that. There was no protection for little black girls.

"I was so angry when I went to school the next day. I don't think I stopped being angry for a long time after that.

"I became more and more militant. I began to hear about the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) sitting in at the lunch counters. A group of them came to our area from Washington, D.C. to "sit in" at the drug store counter on the highway. The news must have gone through the community just like that (snapping her fingers). I wanted to see who these people were.

"On weekends we would picket at the housing offices of the local apartment complexes, at the theaters, and restaurants. Then on Monday, I would go back to school. It was like I had another life.

"On weekends, I picketed. I was a militant. On weekdays, I was a nice docile student.

For us it was
Go to the white high school.
Suck Wind.
Go to the prom.
Waltz.

"What has integration given African Americans? More access?"

Our brother Stephen was next. Here are his memories:

O "When four of us integrated Washington and Lee High School in September of 1959, I was in the twelfth grade. There had been no time to narrow the gap between the (white and black) schools. I was surprised to be selected because I had no interest in the books. It was a real different experience—some people threw slurs at you. Some teachers were indifferent, some courteous. You did not know any of the people at the school. You didn't get a

lot of input from people in the community except that everybody seemed to be proud of you—‘that you’re turning this thing around.’ So it was a lonely experience inside the school as well as outside the school. I knew we were supposed to be nonviolent, but I would fight anybody who called me a Nigger. They were worried about the black guys wanting their white girls. Why would I want a white girl when I can get a black girl who looks just as white?

“A lot of the black high schools in the nation were closed because of integration. A lot of our past is lost. I went to the black high school from the seventh through the eleventh grade, but I was not invited to class reunions. You pay a price. Your personal life gets lost. It was a sacrifice. It might have helped African Americans, but the damage done to us individually is still there. We had to live differently.

“Am I better off today? I don’t know. Are African Americans better off today? I don’t think so. I saw that students were better prepared for the outside world than we had been at Hoffman-Boston, but the teachers there took more interest in us and were concerned about whether or not we succeeded.”

illian, our younger sister, has her own memories of integration in Arlington:
L “When Mother and Clarissa went to court four years earlier, they were taking a stand. I knew what was going on but I didn’t think it was related to me. However, they were my role models.

“I felt left behind when Gloria and Stephen entered integrated schools closer to home. I very much wanted to go. Mine was the third group of students to be admitted to Stratford under court order in February of 1960. Sitting in that courtroom, listening to the arguments, about whether I had the right to go, whether I was good enough, had a great impact on me.

“It was also different for me (than for Gloria and Stephen) in other ways. They were thrown into the white school alone. Gloria had been adored at the black high school. She was cute and the boys ran after her. Then to be isolated like that, I understand her pain.

“A year later, there were more black students but we were definitely in the minority. I was scared and anxious, but I said to myself, ‘Doggone it, I’m going to push through this and I’m going to succeed.’

“That’s what I got out of integration. I continued taking on more and more challenges just to prove I could do it.

“But Stratford was a totally different culture. There was coldness... I never felt I belonged but I liked that it was an environment for learning. I wasn’t encouraged, but I wasn’t stopped either. The broad range of opportunities for learning broadened my horizons. I was terrified, but when I could express myself, I saw it was just a different perspective.

“The place and the people were new. I felt like an inadequate foreigner. Then I tried to imitate them, but I felt later that part of me got lost. I remember when the principal at Stratford Junior High set a group of us down and said, ‘You could be principals and teachers in African countries.’ I thought that was an interesting concept.

“In high school there was a structure that assisted students in getting scholarships but it also helped weaker students become stronger. I had a vision problem and a slow reading average, and the school’s resources made a big difference for me. For me, academic life was more of a personal struggle. My goal was to try to get through the classes.

“In terms of my social life, school and the community were separate environments. At home I played sports and danced. At school I did track and field, basketball and volleyball.

“After high school, I went to Howard University and majored in fine arts. The pressure of acceptability was no longer an issue. I still worked hard but now friendships were possible. High school was not like that. But I had already learned how to study, how to think.

“When I went to Pratt Institute in New York, a white school again, I knew how to struggle in that environment. It was about learning, not being accepted.

“After growing up I discovered that as a black person many negatives are projected on you. It is assumed that you can’t do something. If someone says you can’t do it, or ‘You’re black get back,’ I work to prove a point. Today people feel they have a choice and they don’t have to prove anything.

“I feel like we gave up a lot to help the development of another people, to help them expand their view of the world and to become part of the universe. White folk are more acculturated to us than they think even though they have this “nigger conversation” which we have to hit back. Our struggle benefited all oppressed people in this culture.

“Integration may have given us certain opportunities but it didn’t force us to deal with ourselves. We get an opportunity to participate in more things, but for most of us the ceiling is very low. We tried to forget who we were. Maybe we needed a strategy like “Look, we’re integrating this school but we’re staying black.”

“James Baldwin said our struggle is that we want to be white. Not even blacks want to be black. Now I ask, “Who am I? Who is the African American?” After integration I am a question mark!”

The above memoir and images are excerpted and adapted from an artist’s book prototype of the same title to be published in a paperback edition by Visual Studies Workshop in Spring 2005.

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