

Witness To Dissent has been installed at *Art in General* in New York City, Jan. 18 to Feb. 29, 1992 and at the WPA in Washington, D.C., June 22 to August 18, 1991.

"Witness To Dissent: It Wasn't Little Rock", IKON #12/13, 1992.

As a visual artist who uses words and photographic methods to create narratives which derive from life experiences, I go back to resurrect and reinterpret the past. Much of my work I refer to as reframing the past.

In June of 1991, I went to Washington, D.C. to research the Civil Rights Movement. I was more interested in people's personal lives than in various interpretations of history. I looked through photographs, newspapers, and legal briefs. I interviewed neighbors, family, friends and Civil Rights activists who are now living and working in the Washington area.

My own connection with "the movement" began during my adolescence. As the lead plaintiff in *Clarissa Thompson et al. v. County School Board of Arlington County* (June 1956), I was forced to confront the issues of racism at a time when "Jim Crow" laws were brutally enforced by the police and the courts. When they write about school desegregation or about "the movement," they never write about my community because it wasn't bloody enough, it wasn't violent enough. It wasn't Little Rock. Many communities were like mine. Many people became involved. Oppressive practices do not just end by themselves. Too many people benefit from them.

Why is the Civil Rights movement important to me now? At the time we decided to take on the system, there had been no space to speak of our fears. We could only speak of what had to be done, of the next step. Each step taken by each of us in small groups throughout the South became many steps throughout the country as more and more people in other groups realized that they could do something too.

I grew up in the shadow of the Washington Monument. I saw various special interest groups win the national elections, move into the White House surrounded by all their friends and supporters, implement their laws and policy, and move out as the next group moved in. Each spring, I watched hordes of Americans, mostly white, come to see their nation's capitol. It was very pretty when the Japanese Cherry trees bloomed. A Cherry Blossom festival with a queen and parade made it into a special event. At that time I did not think of myself as an American, even though I was born here. I knew I was an outsider to the mainstream culture and had no rights under the United States Constitution and Bill of Rights, which they all took for granted. I was forced to learn about them in school, but for me these documents were empty words on worthless pieces of paper.

In May of 1954, racial segregation in public schools was declared unconstitutional by the United States Supreme Court. A ruling on four state cases, including *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, and another involving Washington, D.C., outlawed the practice of "separate but equal" facilities in public school systems. Schools

in the District of Columbia were desegregated the following year. In Virginia where I lived, the government took on a position of “massive resistance” and school districts which the courts ordered to desegregate were closed down.

As various states wrote and defended against it, the word desegregation became integration. It was supposed to be a word that was like a red flag. When waved, it was supposed to stir up Southern white rage. Therefore in many towns in many states, we had to go to court for a number of years in order to secure what was supposed to be our right under the law. As the battle grew, we kids were expected to do our part.

In 1955, I had been in the 10th grade when my mother asked me if I was willing to be in the first group of Negro¹ students to go to the white high school near our house. I could tell she really wanted me to do it. I did not want to disappoint her, so I said yes. Parents met in groups and with lawyers to strategize how to proceed with the court case.

A year went by before my Mom talked with me about it again. She asked me if I was willing to be one of the students considered as the lead plaintiff in the suit. Some of the other students were graduating. I had one more year of high school to go. They felt sure that the case would be heard over the summer, and that I would be admitted to school in the fall. My stomach felt hard and cold inside, but I told her it would be okay.

Ever since I was about twelve, or maybe even earlier, my mother had taken or sent me to NAACP conferences. If she stayed home with my younger brother, who was nine, and my younger sisters, who were four and three, I traveled in the care of a neighbor or church member. When I returned home, she expected me to tell her everything that was said, so I had to really pay attention to what was going on.

People, both Negro and white, came from chapters all over the state or country depending on whether the meeting was organized at the state or national level. The meetings always took on a sense of urgency, as community organizers, lawyers, and preachers discussed ways to break down the walls of racial segregation. There were very few youth delegate sessions. Mostly we attended workshops with the adults.

So even though I knew that this was one of the organization’s goals, I really couldn’t imagine that it had anything to do with me. I couldn’t imagine that I’d be asked to begin to attend a white school as a twelfth grader. I did not want to leave my Black classmates, but I felt I did not have a choice in the matter. I understood what was expected of me.

For us the NAACP was also a kind of underground movement. It was against the law for Negroes and whites to be involved in any kind of “mixed race” activities in Virginia and most of the meetings we went to were held in the southern part of the state where the laws were strictly enforced. By this I mean, it was there that I saw my first colored and white water fountains and waiting rooms in a public bus station and posted signs that said “White Only.”

My Mom and Dad had whispered about the NAACP being investigated by the House Un-American Activities Committee. I heard them say that they wanted to contribute to the NAACP, but they did not want their name on a list that would end up in front of “that committee.” This was during the McCarthy era. A lot of people had been “blackballed” and had lost their jobs because their name had been on such a list.

I also heard them talk about how that committee had banned Paul Robeson, the Negro opera singer, from being able to sing in this country. Mom didn't listen to opera, but she loved Paul Robeson. She said they did it mostly because white women liked him.

She also could not believe that they were going to execute the Rosenbergs because somebody said they were spies. I knew that it was a terrible thing, because all the grown ups seemed so scared. We did not talk about these things in school, but I heard Momma and lot of other grown ups say that the federal government was just on a witch hunt, trying to shut up a lot of Americans who did not think like they did. But Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were put to death in the electric chair in 1953.

Talking about the 50's: Here I am on the left in a photograph which was printed in the *Washington Post* and *Times Herald* on June 1, 1956. Ann Marx is on the right. I was a sixteen-year-old eleventh grader and she was an eight-year-old third grader. We were two of twenty-two students who had been named in a school desegregation suit in Arlington, Virginia. The photographer met us at Ann's house in Falls Church. Her mother was vice president of the local NAACP.

I felt really nervous. It was in a white neighborhood. It was the first and only time I went there. First, the photographer asked us to hold a book at waist level. He took a few shots. Then, he asked us to carry the book and walk toward him. I don't know how many times he shot it before he got what he wanted.

The article accompanying the photograph was entitled, "Suit Charges Bias Against White Pupils." It was about the families of the three white students who were named in the school desegregation suit. I was spoken of as the lead plaintiff. The photograph presented me as an attractive, neat, clean and smiling Negro girl. You can't see my terror or that I didn't want to be there.

After the article came out, crosses were burned on Ann Marx's mother's house. My father was afraid he would lose his government job. My school grades and behavior became public information.

Finally, it was time for us to go to court. I listened as the country school board administrators and lawyers discussed my standardized test scores, my psychological stability, my school grades, my race and socialization and the kind of school I was currently attending. They presented statistics and charts as evidence to show why I would not be able to compete with the white students. They said I would be better off at the Negro high school. Their goal was to diminish me and to prove that I was inferior. This went on for days and days, I would get so upset that my mom finally told me I didn't have to go there and listen to it anymore.

In such a state, it was hard to remember that there were many things about my life that were good. We did not have much money, but I was pretty and smart, liked to dance, play basketball, go out on dates, neck with my boyfriend, shoot and print photographs to give to my friends, and pretend I was a lead rock and roll singer. I knew that I always had to behave a certain way in public and that it would be more than a terrible disgrace if I got pregnant or something. It seemed to me that others always saw me as that girl in the newspaper photograph. I felt it was hard to have normal relationships with people. I did not like being "different." It has been something which has dogged me all my life.

My mom was proud of me. As a young woman, she had started out as a secretary/clerk-typist in the federal government. But after each baby, she had to re-take an entrance exam in order to regain her job. Each time it happened, she lost a little bit more of her confidence until finally she couldn't pass the test at all. The temporary domestic day work she took on began to last from one year to the next. And before she knew it—she was working at a different white lady's house each day of the week. She referred to them as Mrs. Smith or Mrs. Rice. They referred to her as Ethel.

I had done well in school most of my life. It was one of the reasons I was chosen to be a lead plaintiff. My teachers were surprised when the news article came out. Some of them talked about being afraid that they would lose their jobs when integration came. I felt bad because I knew they might be right.

Despite any ambivalence they might have had, my teachers continued to give me a lot of support and encouragement in my schoolwork and science projects. I did not want to let them down. I studied hard even though I knew I would pass my courses. I could not imagine that any white teacher would give me any support. I had visions of not doing well if I got transferred to a white school. I knew if that happened, it would not just be failing. It would be “see I told you that Negroes are inferior.”

On the Saturday morning that I was supposed to take the Scholastic Aptitude Test for college entrance application, I woke up really sick. It had been something I was dreading. One of my teachers had told me that Negro students did not usually do well. I didn't realize it at the time, but I am willing to bet that my illness was just probably a lot of terror.

On May 3, 1957, my picture was again published in the *Washington Post*. Through my science project, I had won tuition scholarships to two Black colleges in southern Virginia. The first sentence of the article read, “Clarissa Thompson, a 17-year old whose name will go down in the law books because of the Arlington School Board segregation suit, has won the top award in a state-wide science contest.” The article did not mention, but made it clear, that it was a Negro state-wide contest. I was happy to win, but I knew I might not be able to go because the scholarships covered only a fraction of the expenses. As a mailroom clerk at the Bureau of Engraving, my Dad's paycheck barely made ends meet.

Within a few days after the article appeared, a telephone query about me came into my school. An owning class white man wanted to interview me with my science teacher to determine if he would give me an additional scholarship. He sent his chauffeur to pick us up and bring us to his office. When he arrived, my teacher sat up front and talked with him. In the back seat of the limosine, I felt very anxious and lonely. I could not imagine what would be expected of me.

Later I learned that the chauffeur, who had had the same job for more than twenty years, had shown the newspaper photograph and article to his employer. He asked, “Why don't you send this girl to college?”

The employer responded, “I might!”

He then went into his office and called my school. After we met, he wanted me to go his alumnus, Grinnell College. I did not want to go to a white school, and I found two

excuses which he accepted. There was no room for me to live on campus and my mom thought it was too far away from home. In that way, I got to go to the school of my choice: Hampton Institute in Virginia. The financial support he provided me was enough to cover everything. For me it was a dream come true.

In a later news article, Mr. Burling was mentioned as an anonymous benefactor. But I knew who he was. At his request, I wrote him regularly from school and visited him when I came home a couple of times each year.

In September of 1957, I left home to go to college. I was glad to get away from school desegregation issues. I wanted to bury that part of my life. Future friends were not to know about it. I did not want to be “different” anymore. Yet, at the same time I felt guilty about how I felt because my family was still in the thick of it.

In February of 1959 my younger sister, Gloria, became the only girl and one of four children to enter a white school in Virginia. As they entered the seventh grade, they became the first Negro children to desegregate schools in Virginia.

As I began to dig up the past in Washington, D.C., I realized that we had never really talked about what it had been like for her. In my interview with her, she referred to it as one of the most interesting and different times of her life.

She said, “It was very exciting. The teachers at Hoffman-Boston (the Negro high school) made sure our grades were up and that we would be ready. At the Baptist church, we had enrichment (classes) to be sure we were on the same level as the other students. We were given sessions on how to behave if we were (harassed) or called names. We were told to ignore them. Momma went shopping for new clothes. Aunt Naomi paid for me to get my hair done every week—which I didn’t like!

“On the first day of school, we entered through the back for security reasons. There were twenty-five police for each of us. I was twelve. It was isolating. I’m not sure I’d want to do it again.”

As my sister entered that school in 1959, I was in Hampton feeling more scared than she was for herself. As I talked with her in 1991, questions began to surface. Was it worth it? What did it get us? Would we do it again?

But it got us Martin and Malcolm and a lot of ordinary people connected and involved in taking a stand about their lives.

*Witness To Dissent*² is a series of site-specific installations. It has become a healing journey. I no longer have to feel like I did back then—terrified, isolated, powerless, like a pawn on a board between the forces of right and wrong. The voices of the witness testimony have helped me realize that I had never been alone during the 1960s and that I am not alone on the journey now. Testifying of those times in these days is meant to be a healing process for all of us.

¹ I use the term “Negro” versus “Black” or “African American” because it was the most respectable term during most of the period that I speak of. Many people had fought, lost

their blood or their lives over the right to be called a “Negro”. As African countries gained measures of independence from colonialist domination, as the hopes for a nonviolent movement died, and our consciousness about how we had internalized the oppression got raised, we became “black” and after that we became “African Americans”.

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