Shared Stories: African Americans in North Mecklenburg

Interview with Bee Jay Caldwell, September 8, 2016

Conducted by Jan Blodgett at the Torrence-Lytle Community Center in Huntersville, NC

Transcript edited by Andrés Paz '21

Summary: Betty Caldwell shares a colorful recollection of memories from her childhood and adult life, focusing on her experience living in the Pottstown neighborhood of Huntersville. She describes her experience attending a Rosenwald school and the days of the Huntersville Colored School, which became Torrence-Lytle High School in 1953/54. Her words describe much of the social life in Pottstown, with memories of picnics, sports, pictures, food, and the role of the AME Zion Church. Caldwell comments about the commercial aspect of the town and a few black-owned businesses. As she continues to talk about her life, she mentions community organizing, issues of civil rights and discrimination, and discusses racial integration especially related to education and educational labor spaces. Notably, she mentions being the author of the book "Historic Pottstown Families in Stories and Pictures," and finishes the interview with important comments about the current state of Huntersville and ongoing gentrification.

Jan Blodgett:

Let's start first, going back in time. Where were you born?

Bee Jay Caldwell:

I was born in a little shack on the corner of Eastfield and Alexandriana Road, in 1946. I was born at home, midwife. My Mom and Dad lived, well, my Mom was from this area; my Dad was from Cornelius NC. They met while they both worked at the TB sanatorium in Huntersville, because it was an employing Mecca for people of color during that time, because you could be assured of a job whether you were male or female, or a nurse. If you were male they had a boy's home, and you could live there, and a lot of the women could kind of live with people in the community. I'm not sure how that worked, there way. But anyway, that's where I was born.

I never shall forget in 1951-52, I was brought to this school here. This was a Rosenwald school, but it lost its designation because the windows have been altered, and hopefully somebody will come along and put the windows back so we can keep our Rosenwald school. And I was vaccinated in the back, we went up the steps in the back of the building and I just remember crying my heart out. In 1952, I did enter first grade right here, this was a four-room Rosenwald school. Rosenwald schools were built as a one- room, as a two, three, four or five-room school, but we had a four-room Rosenwald school. And this was first grade, second grade was where the kitchen is, third grade was where the restrooms are, and fourth grade was up here. And between third and fourth grade was a wall that they could raise and lower. And we were so excited about school, and at some point in time, in the early years before we got the Torrence-Lytle building, the Huntersville Colored School, we would have a Rosenwald Day in honor of Mr. Rosenwald, because we were so beholden as a race of people in the South. We are really beholden to him for his academicness in wanting to help educate Negro children. So he teamed up with Booker T. Washington. Mr. Rosenwald provided the money, and Mr. Washington provided the different architectural drawings for the different schools. So we are very grateful to both of those men. So anyway, this is where I entered first grade.

JB: How did you get to school?

BC: We walked. Let me put a pin in my story and go back to Pottstown. Even though I was born down at Alexandriana and that was still Huntersville, and we moved in 1950. Our Dad was in World War II, and when he came out he went to school on the GI Bill, and built our little four-room house with a little toilet on the back. So that was where we lived, and we had to walk to school. And in Pottstown there were three sections, even though there was one little Pottstown section of Huntersville. And in 1909, the governing body of Huntersville decided that was where Negro descendants of slaves would be relegated. And this was on the east side of the railroad track. But I have to tell you too, where the North Campus is, the Merancas campus is now, that is where the slave quarters were after the Civil War. There was always a site just outside of town where Negroes or descendants of slaves could live. So that was where Central Piedmont's North Campus

is now. As descendants of slaves were able to move forward, they would find a job, become self-employed or become an entrepreneur-minded person, and moved to a place where they didn't have to be a sharecropper, because sharecropping you only got one-third of what you produced and a lot of times that left you and your family wanting. It was not a good time for descendants of slaves.

Mr. Otha Potts was a mulatto, meaning he was almost white, pretty near, as we say. And he owned land, and he understood the value of being a landowner. So as the men with families who had been living in the quarters, as they became more and more able to find this land. So Pottstown, as it was known, had three different sections, We had "across the hill," and the reason it was across the hill, most Negroes who were descendants of slaves did not have a car. So you didn't want to cross the railroad track and walk down 115 or the railroad track to get to this site across the hill. So we just called it across the hill, and you went down a steep hill to get here. And down Holbrook Road there was farming land and people had always farmed there. So after the war my father went to school on the GI Bill. He was taught how to lay brick, and they paid him to farm cotton a couple of years. And so when you wanted to go down Holbrook Road, it was called the Bottom. So you had Pottstown, Across the Hill, and the Bottom. And even though this was considered Pottstown, it was not really that close in proximity, but it was still called Pottstown. So I had to walk across the hill and walk to school here every day. Some days they would have buses for some of the kids that came from Long Creek or Rich Hatchet Road area, 73 and Poplar Tent, some of them would have to come here too. But remember if you don't know, Poplar Tent had its own Rosenwald school on the site of Columbus Chapel church. It burned.

JB: I was speaking to someone last night who lived in that area but went to Ada Jenkins in the 60s.

BC: This was prior to '53-54, because our Rosenwald school we attended until '53-54, that school year.

JB: How many grades were here? You had four rooms, so grades one through four?

BC: One through four. And the fifth grade, I'm not real sure how it worked, but there was a school in Long Creek and my brother attended it. I'm not real sure if it were a Rosenwald school or what it was, but there was a school in Long Creek, on Neck Road. And that was where he attended. When I was in school this was grades one through four. The fifth and sixth grades were somewhere, and seventh and eighth, I don't really know where. In '53, they added another wing to Huntersville Colored School, and in '53-54 it became Torrance-Lytle in honor of the men who had lobbied so hard to the county commissioners of Mecklenburg County to obtain a school, because before, if you wanted to further your education from the sixth grade, you had to attend a boarding school in another city, like Salisbury or Kannapolis or Concord, and that's pretty much all I can recall. Once in 1937, when they built Huntersville Colored School, the seventh grade was added to Huntersville Colored School, so fifth and sixth grades were somewhere in Long Creek. And when they added the cafeteria portion to Torrance-Lytle, the name changed from Huntersville Colored School to Torrance-Lytle in honor of Mr. Lytle and Mr. Torrance, and that was when all the little Rosenwald schools were closed, and everyone moved to Torrance-Lytle, which was right out my back door.

JB: More convenient.

BC: Yep, more convenient. And so we walked to school every day, there was no problem, no one was ever afraid. There was only one man who had a dog, that was Mr. Henry Pharr, and once you passed him you were pretty safe to go. People would be on their porches, and passing by their houses they would see you walking and they would call out to you, speaking to you and so forth so on.

JB: Did your teachers live in Pottstown as well?

BC: Now when I was over here, these teachers lived in Charlotte or somewhere, I don't know where they lived. But later on when I started school at the site where Torrance-Lytle is now, Mr. Wynn and his wife lived there, they lived and died there, they still have two daughters living there, and the home place is still there. And Mr. F.M. Jones was our biology teacher; he taught us about RNA and DNA back then, and you had to have a slide rule to get in and out of arithmetic. So those were the two teachers who lived there, and as I recall, the rest of them drove in from Charlotte.

JB: So once you got to Torrance-Lytle, and you left before fourth grade, right?
BC: In the fourth grade we walked through the woods over to Torrence-Lytle and that is when we met kinds from Mallard Creek, Derita and Charlotte. North of 85, that was considered county, and so that was when we started to meet them.

JB: So, when you got to Torrance-Lytle, did you join any clubs? What kind of activities did you have?

BC: We didn't have that many clubs back then. In the fourth grade you had glee club. In the upper grades you may have had some things, but all we had was the glee club. If you read the most number of books, you got a certificate or an award, but we just didn't have all the things that people have today. There was no art, your teacher had to provide the art. I remember Miss Adams, who became Mrs. the different birds, and go take a paper bag and make them, and use a pipe stem for their little legs and feet and everything. The teachers had to be very well-rounded. I can remember coming over here to the Rosenwald school, and on the wall, on the blackboard, you would have membership in enrollment, attendance and absence. And there were thirty-some students in our class, and there were no discipline problems, because your parents relied on you to be good boys and girls so that the teacher could teach you, because education was a very important part of our lives. Because we knew that if we didn't get an education, we would be relegated to being in Pottstown forever and ever, amen.

JB: I've heard people, particularly ones who lived in Davidson and went to Ada Jenkins, that the teachers were from the area, and that the teachers knew that you had acted up before you got home.

BC: We didn't have telephones, and our parents worked long hours and it was not conducive for them to get off work, because people who employed them were not concerned about their children, they just needed them to be at work for that employee to get what they needed done for them, to heck with the children and anything else. So we were always taught to be mannerly and good at school, and sometimes I wasn't that good. One time, a guy was messing with my cousin, going to

beat up on him, and I got an umbrella, and I hit him over the head. I was in the third grade, but he learned not to mess with any of us, because you just didn't do that. And he was a new guy in town. Anyway, to make a long story short, he would learn his lesson. But I got beat, spanked at school. I don't think my mom knew, I don't know if they told her or not, but I did. Anyway, I got my little legs tore up, my cousin got hers tore up too. She didn't do anything, she was just there looking, she came and told me and that was it. When I was over here in grades one through four, I was such a mature little lady, I was very mature. So, at the end of the day I was entrusted with the attendance report, to take to the big office to Mr. Graham.

JB: So, did that involve walking across, was his office in this building.

BC: No, you had to go across the hill to go back to the big school and go to the office, and leave it with the secretary, because that was my job every day. I loved school every day, so very seldom was I absent. Back in that day, you had the measles, maybe three types of measles: red measles, black measles…What kind of measles were those? They had three measles.

JB: There was something they called "seven-day," or the fifth disease.

BC: You had whooping cough, you had the three measles, you had chicken pox, you had impetigo, that was sores. We thought they were tomatoes, we ate a lot of tomatoes, you got these big sores on your legs, and I think its impetigo, I'm not real sure.

JB: What did you do summers?

BC: We ran and played all day, we went to the plum fields twice a day. We went early in the mornings and late in the afternoon because we'd get the ones right from the tree, we didn't pick them up from the ground. And so we had breakfast at home, but who wanted that? We wanted to go to the plum thickets, rambling in the woods. And we'd come home, because our mom worked at the hospital and she got off at 1:00, and she had a rest hour. So she would come home and rest between one and three. And we had to be home, while she was there, but the minute she left we were back in the woods rambling again, and we soon learned what trees and bushes to stay away from. And there were never any animals, we didn't see any, and if they heard us coming they

vamoosed. And we just learned to eat…There was one thing I thought about the other day, one place I was I saw a locust tree—do you know what a locust tree is?

JB: I've heard of them but I wouldn't recognize one.

BC: It's kind of like something about this size (very thin, about twelve inches tall), and it had a gooey kind of [fruit], it was good.

JB: Like a sap?

BC: You could eat it. It had seeds in it, it was pretty good. I thought it was real neat. The only place we saw that was at my uncle's house, he lived back down in the woods along with my grandmother. And so what we thought was great was to go walking through the woods to grandmother's house and Uncle Claude's house. And they had a spring—and I have to put a pin in the story and tell you here, the people in Pottstown did not have water until the late '40s or early '50s. What happened, we had to get water from the spring. There is a spring where you cross the hill, and that's where a lot of the people got their wash water, drinking water and washed their clothes there. And Miss Daisy Potts and Mr. Otha Potts, the house where they lived, they had a pump. And someone else had a spring, and they had put a pipe in the spring to get the water to come close to their home. But we didn't have any water. And the good people up town, the elected officials, did not see the need for people in Pottstown to have running water. So one of the men who used to live here, Mr. Alexander Henderson, he had lived in big cities before and he knew his way around a lot more than the people around who were just local, and he was a plasterer. And he continually went up town to talk with the commissioners or mayor, whomever, about getting running water down Delwood Drive to Church Street, up to where the House of Prayer is. And so he finally got permission from them to go buy the galvanized pipe and to dig the trenches themselves. And he was able to get that from Camp Green, if you know anything about Charlotte you know there's a Camp Green Street.

JB: It was the World War II training camp.

BC: Yeah. It had closed up shop, and so that's where he got the water (pipes), and that's how we got water in Pottstown. And so we really feel alienated from the town, we've always felt that way, because people who won't help you get water, what else in the world do you think they're going to give you? Air? If they had controlled that we wouldn't get it either. Anyway, that's the sentiment of a lot of people, especially my mother's and dad's generation, and it's not much different from now.

JB: So, if your dad was from Cornelius, how did you end up in Pottstown instead of Smithville?

BC: He needed a job, so he worked in the hospital. He and my mom met while they were working there. It was an employee mecca. Everyone in my family has worked there.
JB: What was your mom's maiden name?

BC: Turner, well, Johnson.

JB: So tell me a little bit about after fourth grade and going through Torrance-Lytle; you went all the way through?

BC: All the way through, yes, and a lot of the people I started out with in this little group right here, we went to school twelve years together.

JB: And how long did you go, when you started school had they already linked in the school year so that it was mostly nine months?

BC: Nine months. We had a nine-month school year, from September to June. It ended almost immediately in June, and I don't remember much about Labor Day growing up. That was not a holiday we did much with, that was more of a Northern holiday. So we just played, The big event for us was the Fourth of July. We always got a little something new. Not that we were celebrating America; our freedom or whatever, we were not doing that, no.

JB: Did you ever celebrate Juneteenth?

BC: We did not celebrate Juneteenth until the '90s. Never heard of it. A guy came from Africa and introduced us to it. How about that? Very good, though.

JB: So did you have fireworks to celebrate the Fourth of July?

BC: Fireworks were outlawed; you could go to jail for fireworks in Mecklenburg County. Some people did it anyway, but we always had, the men always had shotguns, mostly shotguns, because the buckshot would spray and it wasn't going to hurt, it wasn't going to show up here if you shot it over there. So that's mostly what we did. We had picnics. We had to be industrious because there was no outlet for us. We were relegated to the east side of the railroad track, so we had picnics and camp meetings. The reason we did this was because we had to have some source of joy and fun to release the anxiety and tensions that we had, and so we had that. And people became entrepreneurs. You soon learned that if you were going to have a picnic, you had to have somebody to sell the fish, hot dogs and drinks, or popcorn and for somebody to take the twenty-five cent photographs. That's how we accumulated a lot of photographs. We had a Brownie camera, but that was not until about '55. And so we depended on Mr. Stanley to have his little 25 cent picture machine. Oh and that was such a big event for us. Summers were great. Almost every week you would have a picnic.

The men had to have some sort of outlet, too, so baseball was one of the biggest sports that they had, and a lot of the men played baseball. Some were very good, and some were not so good. It was an opportunity for us to get out on Saturday and what was unique about it, the AME Zion churches were very instrumental. Everywhere there was a little pocket of descendants of slaves they would have a little AME Zion church, and usually it had enough land so you could have a ball field and so you could play ball there. And we had a ball field here, you could always play ball here. And there was one over on Church Street, it's Huntersville AME Zion, and you had another one at Catawba Presbyterian, you had one at Columbus Chapel, they had a ball field. And

so when you played ball you had a picnic, and so it was really a rallying cry for all the people to come. You could see all your friends during the summer, so that was really big doings.

JB: So the teams, I just got a photograph recently from Caroline Mundy who grew up in the Davidson area, and she had an uncle who was on an early African American team.

BC: I bet it was Clifford Caldwell, Daddy's brother.

JB: Oh, so you're related to Caroline?

BC: His mom had two different husbands. Her first husband was a Mundy, but she died so young and left a lot of children, Jethro, Aunt Sis, James, my Daddy and Clifford. Jethro was a Mundy, and Clifford was their younger brother, and he played. All of them played ball. That was the sport of choice, like football and basketball are now. Baseball was it, number one.

JB: So they formed teams around—

BC: Every town. You had the local teams. The local Cornelius team would play the local Huntersville team, the local Long Creek team. It was kind of like what we have now, except it wasn't the National Football League, it was just towns. And, believe or not, a lot of them still have these little teams.

JB: Where did you go to church?

BC: I had two different churches. Let me tell you a little bit about this first. We had Bible school during the summer, and St. Philip's was right here, and Huntersville AME Zion, we called it "Little Mission," and then the House of Prayer never participated, and then we had, New Friendship used to be Huntersville Presbyterian Colored Church, and then we had Chapel Hill Missionary Baptist Church down Mount Holly-Huntersville Road, and for the most part people would take us to church, Miss Emma Sloan would take us to New Friendship because we were Presbyterian. And

then my great-great-great-great uncle was one of the founders of Huntersville AME Zion Church, little mission. So my grandmother and some of her children are buried there. But growing up, we became attached to Chapel Hill Missionary Baptist Church, because we lived up on Church Street, and Miss Lilly Berry was one of the members of Chapel Hill, and Chapel Hill had a bus. The bus was at Miss Lilly's house, so we could just catch the bus and get a ride to Chapel Hill, and you know you always want a ride somewhere. Our family didn't have a car until '58 or '59, so we enjoyed riding the bus. So that was my church of choice, and I attended up until '78, but now I'm a member of Mt. Carmel Baptist Church in Charlotte, but my church of choice in Huntersville is Huntersville AME Zion. That's the church of my ancestors, that's what I call it.

JB: So did you have choir and Wednesday night meetings, or how much social life did the church include?

BC: The church at Chapel Hill usually had a prayer meeting, and a revival in the spring and fall. Sometimes we got to go because we would ride the bus, because our family didn't have a car. So that was basically it. I don't want to say this, but we would go to the House of Prayer and look in the window, because they had a band in there, and a guitar, and the music was such a draw, but we couldn't attend because we were children and our parents were not members and they were not interested in becoming a member. So we could not just go in like you do now. Now, if you want to go to the House of Prayer you just go. But as children you could not do that, you had to have your parents' permission to attend the House of Prayer. And so we didn't have our parents' permission, so we stood and listened. We got close enough to hear, but far enough to run home.

JB: And what about shopping? When you shopped for groceries were there any little stores here, because you mentioned entrepreneurs, were there black businesses?

BC: There were two stores: Sherrill's grocery, and they provided most of what the people needed; then you had something called Youngblood's, it was where the Rock Store was, right below North (high school), and they moved the road and put the car lots there. It was called the Rock Store, but it was owned by the Youngblood family. We could shop there for groceries. Then there was

another store, almost to 21. We didn't shop there much, because it was too far and we didn't have a car. We had to shop local pretty much.

JB: I presume you had a family garden, or did you? Did you plant vegetables?

BC: No. Sometimes Mom would have a tomato plant, not a big garden. But one year right after my dad got out of World War II, when they paid him go to school and grow cotton, we planted everything. Potatoes, sweet potatoes, peanuts, watermelons and all that, but that was just it.

JB: Where did he go to school?

BC: He went to Cornelius, whatever was up there. I think the school he went to is under Lake Norman. Caldwell?

JB: But when he did the GI Bill?

BC: Down at the Quartermaster down in Charlotte, where Old Edwards was.

JB: OK, because I wondered if he got to go to Johnson C. Smith, but it was a military program he went through.

BC: Yes. With a family, it wasn't something he really could have done. He was more rural. If you grew up in Charlotte, you might know you wanted to go to college. But if you grew up rural, you knew you just needed a job, so that was not in his future. He was a very smart person.

JB: Now, back to you. You're in high school now, so are there more clubs, more opportunities? Are you working part time?

BC: No, there was nothing to do, no, goodness no. To be black, to be a Negro and get a job, that was unheard of. The only thing you could do was work in somebody's kitchen or pick cotton.

Every year at this time in the fall, there was a couple who lived down Holbrook Road. They would stop at the corner of Central and Holbrook and pick us up, and let us ride on the back of a truck to the Bottom, and we would shell peas, half a bushel for fifty cents and a bushel for a dollar. That's how we made our money, but you could do a lot with that. But our daddy gave us a quarter allowance every week, so we thought we were living large.

JB: So, high school years?

BC: There was nothing much to do. We had sock hops.

JB: Choirs? Any athletics?

BC: Football, basketball, I don't know if we had a baseball team.

JB: I guess at that time period the women didn't have much in the way of athletics.

BC: The women had a basketball team, but I don't know if we had it then. I was not athletic, I was not musically inclined, I couldn't draw; no, I wasn't part of that. Whenever I learned to take shorthand, I liked that. I liked clerical and that stuff, and I liked working in the library. So I became a library assistant, and in high school, my friend and I, you may remember Ethel Davis, she was in Cornelius, we were secretaries to the assistant principal the last year we went to school, '63-64.

JB: And outside of school, was there any library you had access to here, you had to drive, I would assume Huntersville didn't have one?

BC: We could walk uptown to the little library that was there, but I don't remember going in high school. Everything was so segregated, we just didn't go. But maybe closer to '64-65 you could go to the library, but before then I don't think we could go.

JB: I'd be surprised. So, after high school?

BC: After high school, I was given a scholarship to Southeastern Business College in Durham, and I thought by going to a two-year school I could make as much money as people did going to a four-year school. Wrong! That did not work, but anyway, I did go to Southeastern Business College in Durham. It was a good experience, but I could see that was not really what I needed.

JB: It was mostly secretarial?

BC: Yes.

JB: I presume it was an African-American college?

BC: Yes. Right down the street from North Carolina Central. And so I let everybody know that I was coming home after the first quarter, and I did, and I applied to and was accepted at Johnson C. Smith. And I didn't go, because Miss Esther Johnson, I had worked for her as a library helper in high school all four years. High school was ninth, tenth and eleventh grade. So when I returned home from Durham, I went over to the school, I was always over to the school, everybody knew me. I was telling Miss Johnson I had come home to go to Johnson C. Smith because I was not going back to Southeastern, it just wasn't what it was cracked up to be. It was too tiny, it just didn't fit what I thought. So believe it or not, there was an opening at the school. Back then, if anybody in the school got pregnant, teacher or whoever, you lost your job. So the head secretary was expecting and was going to lose her job. And Miss Johnson's secretary, who was Eva Reid, moved up to school secretary, and Miss Johnson asked me if I would like to work for her, and I said sure. So she and Mr. Graham talked about it, and they said yes, so I went down to the Board of Education with my little hat and my little gloves, and I was hired. So January 2, 1965, I was back at Torrance-Lytle as a staff member, after having graduated six months before.

JB: What was that like?

BC: It was just school all the time, it was never like I graduated or anything, I just always went to school. And I still miss it, going to school every fall.

JB: You must have known the seniors that year.

BC: Yes, all they had to do was call me Miss Caldwell, or Betty if they were close by, and I didn't tell them not to. It was just a real good experience, and it was not until 2013 that I thought that they must really have had a good opinion of me. Because I never thought about it, but that was just what they said. It was really quite shocking, that many years later, to discover. And I tell you who it was, in 2013 I was beginning to relive all the things that led up to my graduation. Because I never did get to Washington in '63, but I did go in 2013. It was just a time to reflect, and I got to thinking about that, and I thought, wow, you know that says something.

JB: Why were you going to Washington in '63? Did the school go, or was that just a dream you had?

BC: It was the March on Washington.

JB: You just wanted to be part of that.

BC: I don't remember it taking place, I don't remember the hoopla and fanfare of it. I remember I was working in some white woman's home with two little girls who were all over me when that was on TV, and that was my experience. I didn't know what to make of it. So I did want to be there fifty years later to get a better understanding of all that transpired.

JB: So in this community, in the school where you worked and you graduated, were you aware of the sit-ins in Charlotte, the sit-ins in Greensboro?

BC: Oh yes. I was ready. I was sitting on the edge of my seat, and I had been waiting and waiting and waiting because I love history. So I read and got dvds of Martin Luther King and everything, and I was so sad that I did not have an opportunity to participate in what they were doing at that time. But since then, I've had an opportunity to do some things. And one, there was a lady in

Montgomery who typed up all those flyers to tell the people don't ride the bus on Monday. And I said, I want to do that! I have typed so much, I have—

JB: carpal tunnel?

BC: Yes. And I have been hired as an organizer. I worked for HELP, Helping Empower Local People. I didn't know how good I'd be, but at least I had the opportunity, and it was really very interesting to see. And we're still light years away from being treated equal as a people, and I don't know if we ever will.

JB: So what happened to you at Torrence-Lytle when they closed it down and sent people to North?

BC: I worked there. Listen, did you see my face? I am still, I am not there yet. I am so glad I didn't have to go to school with white folk, I just don't know what in the world to say, because having been rooted and grounded at Torrence-Lytle, when you left there you could face anybody, anywhere, going or coming. You didn't have any hesitations or reservations about who you were, what you were capable of or anything, you just knew you were there. And so, I don't have that, and I still, when I try to give directions I still people, 'up there by the white folks' school. Because that is kind of like imprinted.

JB: What was it like at Torrence-Lytle? You're working as a secretary when integration happens?
BC: The school closed in '66, so I had to help pack up everything.

JB: Was it sad?

BC: We thought it was going to be the best thing since Kentucky Fried Chicken. But it really has devastated our community to a certain degree. Whites just don't have it in their understanding, they don't have it in their DNA, that this little black boy who's got the hippy-hip, hoppy-hop, he's not overacting, he just has a lot of pent-up energy. He does not need to be on Ritalin, he just needs

to find something to challenge him and keep him challenged. And I know you can't do that with all these kids in the classroom now, but we had thirty-five in here, and everybody was working, and you just didn't have these people who were not conforming to an educational setting.

JB: And you had smaller schools, you knew everybody, and when you get larger schools it's really hard not to start warehousing the kids rather than teaching them.

BC: Frankly, I wouldn't know how to teach a bunch of white kids, because their experiences are so vastly different from mine. White people cannot really teach us unless you have some empathy and understanding, because you don't know what my life is like. You've been around the world, you've probably traveled to and fro and done all this stuff, you can't understand why I can't see that this is a new-fangled cupcake. My cupcakes, you always just had a cupcake, but now you've got a cupcake with icing on it and a cherry, what in the world is that, that's a cupcake? You've got to, they need time to assimilate, it's just not happening.

JB: You don't have the same cultural references, and it's really hard.

BC: It is. And most people nowadays, they go into teaching to reach up on the ladder. And so that was it, at Torrence-Lytle everyone was there, and you didn't have the TV telling you if you didn't have Nike shoes you weren't there.

JB: What was the outfit you most wanted in high school, what would have been cool?

BC: I wanted two pairs of shoes. Not one pair, and every time they tore up you got another pair. I wanted two.

JB: Saddle shoes or pumps, or what was the, do you remember what kind, or just two?

BC: It didn't matter. At some point, in the sixth or eighth grade, boots were popular, and I wanted a pair of boots. I got those boots, and man, you had to polish them, they looked real cool. I shouldn't

have gotten them. I should have gotten something that was a little more easy to attend to. But anyway, I got to wear them for Christmas, and got some more or something. But no, we didn't have any style setters or trend setters. But I was fat, and I didn't fit in with the normal group of people. What I liked was makeup at that time. But then, when I saw the girls from Davidson, and they put the stuff around their eyes, I didn't like that, not for me, but for them it was OK. I liked the lipstick and the high heels and the stockings, but I didn't want that around my eyes. So no, we didn't really have trendsetters, and I'm not a copycat person. I do my own thing.

JB: Did you have to take home economics classes? Was it divided up? I remember when I was in high school, still the women took home ec and the guys took shop.

BC: Yes. Well, they were in two different buildings so it was never in close proximity. And no boy wanted to take home ec, so that was good, and no girl wanted to take shop, so that was good, and you didn't have any issues. But yes, and we had to make a dress and I enjoyed that. I don't know where my dress is, I tried to keep it forever and ever, but I don't know where it is now.

JB: I made an apron, and I didn't keep it. Actually, I did make a dress too. I got to be a good sewer later.

BC: I'm glad I did because it helped me, every now and then I'll try to sew some. I can sew enough to make a garment without a sewing machine, just make it by hand. So sometimes I've done that, but it was a good experience. But I liked school, I liked sock hops, I liked Kilgo's Canteen. Are you a local person?

JB: I got here in '94. I know about the teen canteen in Davidson.

BC: Well, Kilgo's Canteen was a show on TV, and it was like Dick Clark. It was a local show, and I never got to go because they said I was fat. You'd be surprised at some of the things the teachers could say, they'd be ostracized today. My fifth-grade teacher said, and I still can't carry a tune, she said, don't you sing, you just work your mouth. And one of the teachers, the physical

ed teacher, was the one who would not select me to go dance on Kilgo's Canteen. And you know, I still have a little resentment about that, but anyway you live and learn, so I knew that I was fat and chubby, and there were certain things that chubby people just didn't do. And you did to save yourself the embarrassment, maybe not so much the embarrassment, but to keep from being provoked and retaliating or something, you just didn't do it. So, I didn't sing, I didn't dance, I couldn't draw. The only thing I liked to do, when Perry Mason came on TV and I saw Della (Street), I wanted to be a secretary. And that was what I got to be! So I enjoyed my work and my career.

JB: So, you were at Torrence-Lytle, and Torrence-Lytle closes 1966. Where did you become a secretary next?

BC: I didn't become a secretary then. What happened, everybody working at Torrence-Lytle had to be rehired, had to apply for a job, which was terrible. It was just awful, and if Mr. Graham put a bad mouth on you, you were in trouble. That did not happen to me, but I think it happened to a few of the people, and I guess not knowing he had to be as honest as he could so he could live with himself, but now you just give everybody an A and let them come on and sink or swim on their own merit, don't you help them along. Anyway, Mrs. Johnson used to love to tell that I was one of the first people to be hired in the new integration system, and I was hired at library technical services, that's where we processed the books for the schools, and I stayed there.

JB: Was it down in Charlotte?

BC: Yes, it was in Charlotte, over at Oakhurst School, and I lived in Huntersville.

JB: And the roads weren't that good back then.

BC: Yes, they were, there was not much traffic and everything was two-lane. My uncle helped me get a car. When did I get a car? It was a '64 Malibu. I got it in '65, when the school year was starting. In '65-66, we did not know yet that the school was going to close. Anyway, I had my little

car and I enrolled at Central Piedmont. I loved going to Central Piedmont, loved it, loved it, loved it! I thought I was so grown, driving into Charlotte and everything. Can't drive at night now, though.

JB: When did Central Piedmont integrate?

BC: It must have integrated in '63, because all the, let me see how that went. I used to remember it all, but I can't remember everything now. I graduated in '64, and I started in '65, September. It was already in place in '65, so I think it must have been '63. It was a school on Beatty's Ford Road, and Bonnie Cone and somebody said we were not going to have two separate schools, we were going to have one, so it was Central Piedmont.

JB: What did you take at Central Piedmont?

BC: Executive secretarial.

JB: Were you working at the same time?

BC: At the same time, I worked at library technical services. This was when Viet Nam was going on. First of all, I had to get the job. We closed, I went to work at technical services on June 13, 1966. The reason I remember this was it was Judy's birthday, one of the girls' birthday. So I went to work, and they were having a party-party! I thought that was really neat, and I really liked working with those white women, because I had not been in a close working relationship with whites, ever! It was such a wonderful experience, very good, everybody had his best foot forward, so it worked real well. I worked at library technical services over at Oakhurst. You didn't see white, you didn't see black, you Judy, Diane, Nancy, Miss Skinner, you saw people, and that was good. And from there we had to move from Oakhurst to Isabella White, and that worked out good. It was just a good experience. At the time, I was taking all these classes. I still wanted to work with education. You think you can remember all this, but you can't! I applied for a job at the central office as secretary for Head Start. And that went well, I got that job. In 1965, that summer I worked

at Torrence-Lytle, we had a Head Start program, and I worked at the first Head Start program. I've got a picture of those little kids, they were so sweet. That fall, I went to Central Piedmont, I already had my car. It must have been about '71-72 when I went to work for Head Start. No, that's not right. I got a roommate, met a girl at Central Piedmont. She was from Nebo, in the mountains. They said we sound alike, I said, oh Lord, no, we don't. We became roommates. That had to be in '71.

JB: So, that would put you working with library technical services about four years?

BC: Yes. I just can't get that clear in my head, but at some point I went to work for Head St, and worked at the central office. And that next year, I went to work for ESEA, the elementary and secondary education act of 1965. Everything keeps changing, and then I started to work, all in the same building. I became a curriculum secretary, helping teachers, work with them over at Cedarsville, then back to the ed center in '73, when Chernobyl was going on, I think. I worked there until '91. You've got the politics that they play with in these places, and they wanted my boss to fire someone who had worked there for years and done nothing, and so she said, I won't do it, I won't fire her. So, she went home and retired, and nobody fired her. So, then they got Harvey S. He got his job very underhandedly, it must have been '88-89 when he got the job. He wasn't a good steward of his job, so they closed our department, the director of instruction. It closed June 30 and opened up September 1. They hired new people, and that's how you got rid of folk. So, that's how I ended up at Davidson, because my job had ended, and I was picked up by "you got to apply again," by Emily S. Green over at Erwin Avenue. She was a monster person, she was not a good principal at all, you don't pass judgement, but she lacked any people skills, she had none. Zero. We were both writing memos on each other, and I knew the person with the most authority would soon win, that's just how it is. One day, we were having a fire drill, and Personnel called me and asked me if I would take the job at Davidson, and I said, yes, and by the time I came back from the fire drill, I was moving. That was kind of, sort of okay, but I wasn't welcomed at Davidson, either, because they had another lady that they had groomed for the position, one of the parents. So, it was a little unsettling for me, but what did I care? These people would not have wanted me anyway.

JB: This would have been Davidson Elementary School and not Middle?

BC: Elementary. We were at the old building. I said, if you don't want me to do anything, that's fine with me. At the time, I was refurbishing my retirement home, so that gave me plenty of time to think. Because growing up black, you just don't become, you become desensitized to white people's looking down their noses at you. It just didn't bother me, because when I went home I was the construction boss at my house, and so that went well. Finally, they started to give me something to do, which was fine with me. Then there were days when the secretary was going to prove to me that she could do it all, and I thought, be my guest, because there's a lot of work in a school. Some days when she was sharing responsibilities, I'd have a cup of coffee when I went in, and it was still there when I went out. I had a sweater in my desk drawer I never got to put on because it was so crazy busy. So I was really glad to retire. They didn't know I was going to retire, but anyway, I went in on a Thursday and let them know I was retiring on Friday, and that was the end of that school. That worked for me. I've had other jobs, because I wanted to try a lot of new things. I went to Mooresville and got my CNA license. I didn't like that so hot, because I didn't like doing those personal things for people; some of them were grateful, and some of them were like, okay, I understand that. And sometimes your supervisors kind of had a disdain for you, and sometimes your peers formed an opinion that was unjust. And I thought, you know what, I'm going to let them have this, I don't really need the frustration. So I worked as a church secretary and just did little things, and as time passed Huntersville got more and more stuff. We got a bowling lane, we got Kohl's, and I worked there, I worked at Friendly's; just did little things.

JB: How did you get involved with the project to save Torrence-Lytle?

BC: It had been going around for years and years that it was going to be demolished. You know, I can't even really remember.

JB: Did you have a reunion group? Last night I was talking to Odell Black and he said it was 2013 when he and a friend got together and started doing a reunion group for the class of 1965. That they had never really gotten together.

BC: ’65 had many reunions, so I don’t know what he had to say. I’ve always had my hands in this stuff. I remember working with the Historic Landmarks Commission. I just can’t remember when.

JB: So it’s gone way back in time. Did your class have reunions?

BC: Yes. We had our first reunion ten years after we graduated, class of ’64.

JB: Did your class do its own reunions? When did you start doing all-school reunions?

BC: The blue and gold dance, this may have been the fortieth year, I’m not real sure.

JB: Did most people do the class and not the whole school?

BC: The class. I’m told by people that the class of ’64 was the first one to start with their class reunions. We did one in ’74, we had a luau. We had a dance with a band. We had the luau at Lake Norman, and we had the dance down at a hotel on Tryon Street, it’s Hope Haven now. That was what we did, and every year at least since then, we had at least ten-year reunion.

JB: Have you ever been on an organizing committee?

BC: I was on the organizing committee for the first one. But our class had cliques and I’m not a clique person. Cliques can really cause a lot of other people to go along, to get along. I’m like the third person on two’s company and three’s a crowd with the class of ’64. I just don’t want to be involved with cliquey situations.

JB: Did your class scatter much?

BC: Yes, I think they di

JB: So people moved to other states?

BC: No, a lot of them died. A lot of them chose not to participate. I wanted to have a real big doings for the 50th but the people in charge of the class of '64 didn't want to do it. So I my own big event, I thought it was big My own big event for my 50th graduation anniversary. I was able to rent the gym. I could hardly believe it, because I did it at the last minute and the lady at town hall said, "I don't know if it's available." The same day, like the 4th of June, fifty years later, and it was available. Out of all the people I invited only about 10 or 11 came. And I thought, "Okay, you've missed a real good invite."

JB: Do you visit any of the other reunions?

BC: I do, I do but I don't attend a $40 alumni dance, because that's a lot for me. It really is. Sometimes when I'm working and making $8 or $9 an hour, I have to look at that. And I can't justify that. Plus it's at night now and I can't drive at night, so I haven't been going. But I go to the freebie stuff, I always go to, attend the class of '65. They don't tend to have the cliques that the class of '64 had and our clique is still cliquing.

JB: Let me look at my list here. You've already said a whole lot here but is there anything you would want people to know about your experience? Either how things have changed over time here or just - if somebody is new to this area, what should they know?

BC: What they should know is that I've just written a book. That it's in the publishers and it's Historic Pottstown Families in Stories and Pictures. It's important to know that this area should not gentrify. The blacks should not have to be removed in order to let it live. The history of this area is really important because there is no history in Huntersville. Everything important and historic in Huntersville is on the east side of the railroad tracks. They try to play at making Main

Street historic and it is kind of because it is alongside the railroad track. But they tore down the depot. It's the Mill Hill and Pottstown that is important, it's historic. They don't want to hear it but I'm here in my lifetime to do what I can to get at least Pottstown declared historic. The Mill Hill, because if the Mill Hill had not been here all these years, there would not be any Huntersville.

JB: It's the economy.

BC: Yes and you really need to look at your roots. Don't try to find a new root. Go the end of the earth to find the root you already got. But we have new people to the area who don't see that. They want to bring what they had there, here. Which is not always bad, but see what you have here. I do want to be sure that I do all I can to keep Pottstown from gentrifying and I think people, it would be wonderful if people would co-exist. Let your neighbor live pretty much the way he wants to live, if he's keeping with all the codes. And if he's not, have him brought up to par, or do whatever is done with people who are not living up to code. My main thing is keep my school alive. We don't have many vestiges of what was important and dear to people of color, descendants of slaves and it's really important to me that we fight, go down fighting to preserve it.

JB: Thank you

End of Recording.