

Transcript of interview with Nell Benold by Carol Parsonage, November 18, 2008

CAROL PARSONAGE: My name is Carol Parsonage. Today, Tuesday, November 18, 2008, at 2:00 p.m. I am interviewing Mrs. Nell Benold at her home in Georgetown. This interview will become part of the Georgetown Public Library's oral history collection. This particular project focuses on people's memories of Marshall and Carver Schools and the issues and events of the 1950s and '60s that led to desegregation. I think the first question I'd like to ask you is when did you arrive in Georgetown?

NELL BENOLD: I came to Georgetown in 1946, to go to Southwestern, but Doug opened his office to practice medicine in April of 1950 and that's when we came to stay.

CAROL PARSONAGE: OK, so in 1946, when you came to Georgetown, I know you got involved in the Negro Fine Arts....

NELL BENOLD: Very peripherally.

CAROL PARSONAGE: Can you tell me a little about that?

NELL BENOLD: I can tell you about the Negro Fine Arts School. I did very little except set up some chairs, and do things like that. I had nothing to do with the.... The religious education class taught by Dr. Biff Jackson was studying...talking about...the inequities among the blacks and the whites. And Miss lola Bowden, her name was Bowden then, had three piano students in her class to teach them how to teach piano. And one of the students, Nettie Ruth Brooks, was in both classes, and she came up with the idea, well, why don't we teach these black children music? It would help us learn to teach, help them to learn music.

The problem was where it could be taught, because the black school was really a disgrace to Georgetown. I was out there a few times and you could see the ground under the floor. The students got the white school's castoff textbooks, castoff football uniforms, castoff band uniforms, all that sort of thing. And so, where would we teach them? At that time nearly every Sunday School room at the First Methodist Church had a piano in it, and we had a young minister that was very open to this thing, and so the church was offered for the children to come there and take piano lessons. And so it began.

These three girls and Ms. Chambers...Miss Bowden she was then, I keep saying Ms. Chambers because she married later in life...Miss Bowden would meet them up there on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons and started teaching them piano. The school board offered a bus, a school bus, to bring them over and take them back, and the children responded tremendously. They loved the idea of getting out of school and getting to go over there, and really learned a lot. Their recitals in the spring were just a big deal! They would dress up--they have beautiful pictures of them dressed in their white dresses. They really dressed up for the recital.

One of the students was the first black student ever admitted to Southwestern as a student and he went on to become...I'm not sure exactly what his position was in the Dallas schools, but I've heard that he was head of the music department in the Dallas schools. Beautiful...one young man I know had a beautiful singing voice and that was developed also. This planted the seed. This started in 1946. This planted the seed that nothing horrible was going to happen if we did things with the black children. It grew...the teachers grew more and more...I was not a good enough musician to actually teach. I've heard it said several hundred students took part in that school during those years.

CAROL PARSONAGE: Did you have any opportunity to interact with the black students, even in just the peripheral role that you...

NELL BENOLD: No. Not at all. If you want to learn about that, Nettie Ruth Bratton, who lives at Sun City, can tell you all you need to know about that school because she was one of the first of the three teachers.

CAROL PARSONAGE: OK.

NELL BENOLD: No, she lives at the Wesleyan. Did I say Sun City? I meant Wesleyan. At Estrella.

CAROL PARSONAGE: That's right. That's right down the road from us.

NELL BENOLD: She could give you a lot of information....

CAROL PARSONAGE: OK

NELL BENOLD: But, as a result of that, Ernest Clark, who lived in Round Rock, was the first student admitted to Southwestern.

CAROL PARSONAGE: And he came up here to go to the...

NELL BENOLD: To the Negro Fine Arts School....

CAROL PARSONAGE: Well, okay then, let's move forward a little bit. 1954, Roe v. Wade, or rather Brown v. the Board of Education--you can tell what I'm thinking--Brown v. Board of Education, which was the first beginnings for school desegregation. You were living in Georgetown. Your children...did you have children?

NELL BENOLD: Yes, in '54 my children were still not in school. I had little children, but Doug...it was an unusual time. Doug and his partner became the only two doctors in town. And they literally worked 16 hours a day and it was not uncommon for him to make three house calls a night. There was, of course, no EMS, no emergency room, so he...when people called he went to wherever they were. And, 'course, he spent many, many hours over at what we called The Ridge, where the Negroes lived. And I guess I should say the blacks, but we called them the Negroes then. And he was trusted. They trusted him. In those days, a white person was not...would not be admitted readily to a black person's home because they were still very suspicious of what they might be after, you know, that sort of thing. And because he delivered babies over there, at home--he did lots of home deliveries--and just made lots of house calls of all sorts and had many,

many patients...of the black community, many were his patients, so that when our push to get desegregation started, he was able to interact with the black community very well.

CAROL PARSONAGE: OK. Did he serve as a bit of an interpreter between the white community and the black community?

NELL BENOLD: Yes, indeed. When desegregation was beginning to be.... To give you a little background on it...what actually started it in Georgetown was economics. The Board of Education in Austin said you've got to do something about your black school. It was a disgrace, or at least by the standards that it should have been. Children that went there loved it and they had good teachers and all that sort of thing, but the building...the facilities...were bad. Our tax base was very low, very, very low, and it was so low that we could not get bonds to build a new school. So, we had to start reevaluating the property in order to get enough tax rate...I don't know exactly how it works, but you have to have a big enough tax base before you can get tax-free bonds to do something like that. And Doug had been appointed to the school board to fill the vacancy of Mr. Jones that left Georgetown. And they appointed Doug to fill the vacancy. And although he was horribly busy he did, he took it and was on the school board and was president.

CAROL PARSONAGE: When was that...years?

NELL BENOLD: (Pause) Early '60s I think. The school board said we have to reevaluate. Doug's mother was very ill with multiple myeloma and was in bed. He had a sister who had never married who was a teacher in Houston, so she resigned her job in Houston and came to Georgetown to look after his mother. Well, he had to resign from the school board because you couldn't be on the school board and hire somebody in your family [to teach] at that time. It was nepotism, they thought. So he resigned from the board and when the next school board election came up there were a whole slate of officers who kind of ran on the platform "we're not going to school with the Negroes." But two of the men on the board had lots of property and this reevaluation was going to raise their property taxes and they used...I don't know whether I should put this on the tape of not...but they used this ploy of not going to school with the Negroes and they won a landslide. Had five men who were just very anti-...ah, integration. Then that is when the Committee for Better Schools was formed. Doug was not on the school board at this time but we gave money and he helped all he could. There was a big push going saying that Negroes don't want to go to school with the white children. They don't want to give up their school. So, the idea came up that we would build another school, another high school, for them and stay segregated...which is now the Carver Elementary School. So that..

CAROL PARSONAGE: Is that the school that was called Westside?

NELL BENOLD: Yes. They renamed it Carver. And it was built as cheaply as possible and not adequate at all for a good high school with labs and things like that. They lowered the tax rate. The minute this board got in they lowered the tax rate. Things were just sort of in turmoil...Doug's mother died and his sister went back to Houston. He was reelected to the school board.

CAROL PARSONAGE: OK, so he was able then again to...to be on the board.

NELL BENOLD: It might have even been publicized in the paper, I don't know, but...they said well, they don't want to...we're forcing them to do something they don't want to. Doug started...he would go over there [to The Ridge] at night and he would interview family after family after family. And he had a list of questions that he made up...Would you be willing for your child to be put back a grade, or even two grades, if it were deemed that they were not up to where they should be? Without...almost 100% said yes, they'd be willing for that to happen. The parents...there may have been a few that didn't want to, but not many. And he had this whole list of questions. When he got it all done, he got Birdie Shanklin and several of his nurses at the hospital to help him, and they got this thing and took it to the paper to print it, to refute this...that they don't want...and the paper refused to print it.

CAROL PARSONAGE: Is that right?

NELL BENOLD: Well, there were...two of the biggest supporters of the paper...I mean advertisers...were very rabid segregationists. They wouldn't print his interview that he'd spent days...time he didn't have, really...getting this thing together, you know. Then finally the Committee for Better Schools filed suit against the school board. People contributed money and Bill Lott, my neighbor across the street, was their lawyer that filed suit to force them to integrate.

CAROL PARSONAGE: Now, during the time that he was doing this interviewing of the black community, was your husband on the school board at that time?

NELL BENOLD: No, that was in that interim when he was off.

CAROL PARSONAGE: And your children by this time were in school, is that right?

NELL BENOLD: But they were not integrated then. It took quite a while. I should have had those dates....

CAROL PARSONAGE: I think...in fact I've got them here...schools were totally integrated in 1966. That was the first year that the entire school system...and in 1964 the first and second grades were integrated by freedom of choice...so I don't think until 1964 there was any integration.

NELL BENOLD: No.

CAROL PARSONAGE: So that would have been the first time....

NELL BENOLD: The only integration I remember...my children, of course, went to school down here [at Annie Pur]...I'd forgotten about first and second grades being...I know one of the members of the school board wanted to start integration just a grade at a time, so it would take twelve years, you know. But in 1966...

CAROL PARSONAGE: Yes, that was when they finally integrated all....So at the time that school integration actually came about, in 1966, were your children still in school?

NELL BENOLD: Yes, oh yes. Let me see, Stephen was born in '49 so in '66 he would have been 15 years old...

CAROL PARSONAGE: He must have been a sophomore...junior in high school?

NELL BENOLD: Yes. And Laurie Katherine would have been a freshman and Lynell would have been in seventh grade and Tara would have been in about the third grade. So they would have been in all the schools.

CAROL PARSONAGE: OK, so they were in all the schools at that time. Well, let me ask you, while your children were in school, were you active in some of the school things like PTA and things like that?

NELL BENOLD: I was active in the elementary school, but we didn't have a high school PTA and I think...we just had an elementary school and a high school, that's all. And, as far as I know, we didn't have a PTA in the high school. And I was president of the PTA one year, but I don't have any memory of any incidents or anything at all...

CAROL PARSONAGE: Or any interaction with...there was a PTA at Carver as well...

NELL BENOLD: Yes, but they didn't...as far as I remember...come over and join our PTA here...at least when I was involved in it.

CAROL PARSONAGE: OK, would you have been involved...if you had a child in third grade in 1966 when the blacks did come into the school, you might have seen them if the parents did become involved in the PTA?

NELL BENOLD: Oh, sure.

CAROL PARSONAGE: And you didn't?

NELL BENOLD: No. You know, it's possible that they were there and I just don't remember it.

CAROL PARSONAGE: Did you see...I mean, that year that the blacks began to come to the school...was there anything that struck you in that period of time...did you see anything different occur at any of those schools?

NELL BENOLD: Well, the only thing I remember that...I know there was some acting up that went on...the teachers, of course, knew more about that than I did. Children...there was one black student that sort of pestered my daughter a little bit...it didn't amount to anything, but, you know, she would report that that he followed her around and things like that. He was not...I don't think had any...they were just like children.

CAROL PARSONAGE: Was this your youngest daughter?

NELL BENOLD: No, oldest daughter, Laurie Katherine. But one incident I do remember...Doug was back on the school board by this time and they expelled several black boys for misconduct of some kind. Doug felt like they had been harshly expelled. It was...and he could tell you more about what exactly happened...but he went to bat...he said this is wrong. It's just an excuse to kick them out, you know. He got them reinstated. But it was the...there still was kind of an animosity feeling, but Georgetown never had any real trauma, as far as I knew. 'Course, I was so involved in answering the telephone

and fixing six meals a day and raising four children that I was really pretty stuck at home for a lot of that time.

CAROL PARSONAGE: Let me ask you, though, were your children very active in the schools?

NELL BENOLD: Very, very. You know I have two of them here [in Georgetown]. They might be interesting...Stephen was president of the student council and Laurie Katherine was drum major and on the student council and they were in every club that there was...back then, the school was small and you were just in everything if you wanted to be.

CAROL PARSONAGE: Right. Well, that sounds good. I think I'll check with the library and see...I think they've got some limit of how many interviews they're going to do, but...they might be good...

NELL BENOLD: They could tell you more about what went on at school.

CAROL PARSONAGE: How did you feel about your husband getting on the school board? Was that a discussion you had at home and what was your....?

NELL BENOLD: Well, he was involved in everything and I just assumed that was what you did and I just thought it was fine. But it was...looking back on it, it was really trying because they'd have long sessions...he'd be so tired after...he'd come home and have to make two house calls afterward, you know. It was really a trial. But it was just...he felt sort of like it was his duty, his civic duty, and he did it.

CAROL PARSONAGE: As time has gone on, have you had more interaction with the African-American community in Georgetown?

NELL BENOLD: Oh, yes.

CAROL PARSONAGE: Can you tell me a little bit about how that began to happen? When did you begin to...?

NELL BENOLD: Well, you know, mainly the interaction was with the women that worked for us. Then I had a woman that worked for me and she was very...in the black history month we'd always go to the banquets that they had. When the church would have any kind of suppers or anything, well, we'd buy tickets to that. Then, 'course Doug had these wonderful black women who were cooks at the hospital.

One of the main interesting things, I think, was...he and Dr. Hal Gaddy owned the hospital. And he came home one time and he said, you know, Nell, our nurses are getting old. We had a lot of Swedish ladies that were nurses and nurse's aides and we only had one R.N., Miss Golden Munson, and he said...and Georgetown was not growing. This was in the years when we were just...stayed 5,000 people and had very few people move in except a minister's family or something like that. And he said, we're going to run out of nurses...we don't have any nurses. He and Dr. Gaddy hired a woman whose husband was the band director, but she had a B.S. in nurses education. And they paid her a salary for a year and she went all over the state and set up a nursing school--a vocational nursing school--in our hospital.

The first thing that came up was the black women wanted to be in that school because it gave them a profession. And he met a lot of opposition to it from the head nurse and people in the hospital. They said nobody will come to the hospital, you know...well, he prevailed and some of our very best nurses through the years were these black women. Some of them, well, I think Nora Rose and Birdie Shanklin have just retired...have worked at the hospital ever since and they sent their children to college and they made good money and it really was an economic boost to the...and they would aspire to come to that school like some kids would aspire to go to Harvard or something! It was a real help to get a profession. And they were good! Our chief nurse was an excellent teacher. Our students and our hospital scored number one in the state on their state boards for year after year. That was a big...we would have graduation services at the First Methodist Church and Doug would get specialists from Austin to come over and speak to them. It was a big deal. They had capping ceremonies with the white uniforms and I have pictures of them with the little (inaudible), you know, and it really was a big success. Finally, when we got the bigger hospital, the state took over the...well, I think it was Austin Community College took over the little school and then we don't have it any more.

CAROL PARSONAGE: I'm making an assumption here. Are you a member at First United Methodist Church?

NELL BENOLD: Yes.

CAROL PARSONAGE: Just from all the things you were saying...what about the church. Were there things happening in the church community, in your church community, as integration came along? Maybe helped? Aside from the Fine Arts School, which was definitely...

NELL BENOLD: We always welcomed the black people but we never had very many. We have had black families through the years but usually they were somebody at Southwestern, or somebody that didn't really feel comfortable in the black churches and came to our church, but we never had.... Our woman's society would meet...would have joint meetings once in a while. With the women...

CAROL PARSONAGE: Was there a black Methodist Church?

NELL BENOLD: Yes, Saint Paul's. And we would have joint meetings and luncheons and things like that, but...

CAROL PARSONAGE: Was that even as early as the '50s? Or did that come after school integration?

NELL BENOLD: Well, you know I can't say for sure, but it was early on...when I was a young woman. 'Course the Methodist Church has always been very socially forward, I think in its...and particularly our church, because we did have a lot of...have always been influenced a lot by the University.

CAROL PARSONAGE: Well, I've covered the set of questions that I ... we're at 25 minutes, which is pretty good.

NELL BENOLD: Well, that's about all I have to contribute because I was just on the edge of everything, I wasn't really in the firing line, like Doug was. He'll be able to tell you a lot more definite things.

CAROL PARSONAGE: This has been very good, though, some of the information, particularly about the hospital and the school at the hospital...

NELL BENOLD: He was very...without his insistence it wouldn't have happened. He finally prevailed and it really was a benefit to the hospital. It wasn't all...we had a lot of white women too...and the people who were against it, their premise was that we wouldn't get any white women if we had the Negroes, but we did, without any discord or trouble at all and became dear friends through the years, with each other. It just was a real wonderful thing, really, for the town...and it was done unobtrusively and nobody ever seemed to think much about it, you know, as far as I knew.

CAROL PARSONAGE: Well, I really thank you for sitting and talking.

NELL BENOLD: Yes! Nice to meet you!