

Oral History Collection

Mavis B. Knight

Interviewer: W. Marvin Dulaney and Malik H. Dulaney

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Dr. Malik H. Dulaney: Today is Friday, August 26, 2011 and we have Mrs. Mavis Knight here. Mrs. Knight, are you ready to begin?

Mrs. Knight: Yes

Malik Dulaney: Let's start off with your childhood and background. Tell us where you were born and how long you lived in Dallas and a little about your childhood.

Knight: I was born in Durham, North Carolina. I had a single parent. My father died when I was four years old. My mother had only a fourth grade education because she lived on a farm and farm work was more important than education at that

time. Very creative, intelligent mother who could have gone any place her imagination allowed her had she been given the opportunity to be educated and to travel. We were instilled very strong values. In fact, we called it the Whitley [?] stubbornness because the women in our family are very, very strong. It takes a special man to deal with us. So growing up in that single parent household and because she did not have an education it was imperative to her that we be educated, so both my sister and I have college degrees. I have a masters in psychology. I have worked as a social services eligibility specialist. I taught at the college level for three years. I stopped working when I started having my children supposedly to start work when they went to elementary school-first grade, but I kind of like getting up, setting my own agenda for the day, so I never really went back to work full-time. I became a community volunteer instead. My home town was so progressive in terms of the African-American community and it followed Greensboro in terms of the commitment

to the Civil Rights Movement. We had the marches, the demonstrations. My sister was jailed a number of times. And that was one of the contrasts to me when we moved to Dallas. I never really felt that Dallas had a Civil Rights Movement in terms of the marches and the protests and the leadership that developed as a result of activism the Civil Rights Movement brought about in my home town. That was lacking to me in Dallas, though I was not here during the 1960s during the Civil Rights Movement was in full swing. It's just the aftermath. I had that lingering impression that they really hadn't gone through the Civil Rights Movement in terms of [unclear] and activism.

Malik Dulaney: Can you talk a little more about your educational background?

Knight: Went to Hillside High School in Durham, North Carolina. Graduated in 1964. I'm telling my age. And I graduated from my hometown college. At that time it was North Carolina College in Durham and it later became a part of the university system in North Carolina and it was

renamed North Carolina Central University. So I did my bachelors and my masters in psychology at North Carolina Central University. I was in a work-study program during that time and I worked in the reading laboratory at Central. Helped to assist reading tests and distributed materials that would enhance the reading skills of students who came through the laboratory. Then I worked for the Chairman of the Psychology Department filing, working with equipment that would be used for demonstrations and various psychological principles. Had a really solid education. At that time your parents as well as your teachers raised you. There was real sense of community at that time. And of course we had a rival school Merrick-Moore which was a county school. At Central the Aggies in Greensboro was our rivals. So, fun times.

Malik Dulaney: Can you tell me what organizations that you are a member of?

Knight: Currently I serve on a north Texas coalition that looks after the mental health of veterans. I also serve on Rights of Passage Program for

Girls, Incorporated board. This is a program for girls from sixth grade through twelfth to encourage them and motivate them to be lady-like with their behavior, to have time management skills, to practice abstinence. It's a biblical based program. The culminating trip for the girls at the end of the six years that they've been in the program is a trip to Africa. I also serve on the advisory committee for the Metro Superintendent's District of the North Texas Conference. Recently we had a reception to welcome the new pastors who have been assigned to the Metro District. This is of course with the United Methodist Church. I have cut back on my organizational activities for health reasons and I'm steadily looking for my young professional replacement. Of course the thing that takes the most of my time now is serving on the State Board of Education.

Malik Dulaney: Now, are you a member of the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] or Urban League or SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee]?

Knight: I am a member of the NAACP and when I grew up in North Carolina the NAACP was a very active organization. I still see the relevance of the organization today and that's why I am a member. Because even though we have made progress I see an erosion of the progress that we have made in the area of civil rights. So I think that organization is still crucial to the interests of the African-American community.

Malik Dulaney: I applaud you for your community activities. Can you talk a little bit, maybe from a social conscious perspective, about why you joined these organizations?

Knight: I really got involved with volunteerism because I noticed when I looked around in my community, even as a child, the people who were taking care of the needs in my community were other ethnicities, especially Caucasians. I thought something was wrong with that picture because I knew that we had capable people in our community who should have been involved. So I decided I can start as an example of one and maybe others will join me. At that time the

Easter Seals sold poppies-little paper flowers as one of their fundraising activities. I was the only African-American student who participated in that activity. And from that point on I became committed that I would definitely show that there were people in the African-American community that had the interest and the capability and the time to do community service.

Malik Dulaney: Okay. I'm going to switch gears a little bit and talk about the desegregation process with DISD [Dallas Independent School District]. I'd like to go over your role in it, if any, or what your thoughts are on that. You spoke about the differences with where you are from what you see in Dallas.

Knight: Actually, my role in the desegregation movement came after DISD had become integrated. I served on the African-American Advisory Committee to the superintendent for a number of years. We did papers and had discussions with the superintendent about looking after the African-American students to close that achievement gap. I also did testimonies in

front of the State Board of Education, especially when they declared the system unitary. I still think that there is a need for activism as it relates to Dallas Independent School District because I have noticed that as the population becomes more, brown, less attention seems to be given to closing the achievement gap as it related to specific needs of the African-American students, especially African-American males. I see some progress. I'm happy that they have the all-boys academy as a start. I'm hoping there will be additional academies opening up because we have so much talent in our community, but our males are not getting the nurturing that they really need to pursue academics. So I think we need to channel a lot of our resources to those students. Not neglecting the other students, but I notice a lot of grants and funds available for the Hispanic students, but there's not that same concentration of effort for the African-American students. For example, you have the special English language learning program or

the bilingual program for the Hispanic students. Well, there's students in our community whose dialect is not what it should be as it relates to being able to use, what is called, the King's English to advance themselves in school and in careers and in other professions. So I think we ought to pay attention to bringing up their dialect. Meeting them where they are and helping them to know when it is appropriate to use the King's English and when you can relax and use your social language in other kinds of settings.

Malik Dulaney: With that in mind would you say that desegregation was successful in DISD?

Knight: To the extent that you have the freedom now to attend any school that you want to, theoretically, and you don't have the concentration of schools for African-Americans here and schools for other ethnicities here. Better equipment over here verses poor or no equipment in the African-American or minority community. So from the standpoint of our getting better resources [and] from the

standpoint of teachers being able to teach in any community there's been progress. But, I still do not feel that there has been enough effort to close the achievement gap. Even though it is closing we still have too many students leaving the third grade not reading on grade level and that should not be. I know we are trying to catch that now by having that third grade test being given, but there should not be a student who leaves elementary school without being able to read at or above grade level. So as we have gotten integrated that closeness that you had in terms of a community support system that bolstered what the teachers did for you I find that lacking in our community today. So many families are working, there's a lot of mobility, and we just don't have that sense of being responsible for each other as we did prior to integration. So desegregation has its pluses and its minuses.

Malik Dulaney: Okay. Let's talk more about education. Can you discuss with us about the text book issue that occurred recently? Give us a background

of it, your role in it, and your thoughts in general on it.

Knight: The State Board of Education is made up of fifteen members from fifteen State Board of Education districts. The board is partisan in the sense that we run on a ticket-either Democrat, Republican, libertarian, what have you. When I first joined the board there were ten Republicans and five Democrats. There were only two minorities, Alma Allen and myself. And there were two Hispanics. Right now, there are eleven Republicans and four Democrats. Out of the Republicans we had seven very strong right-wing social conservatives and they bring that right-wing social conservative agenda to the policies that are set on the State Board of Education. If you listen to them talk about their values--they are abstinence only, they don't believe in evolution, they have a creationist stance, they don't believe in gender-equity portrayal in the text books. For example, when we were doing the social studies test of essential knowledge and skills or the social studies standards there was a [unclear]

that addressed the fact of the gender of individuals. We have gay, we have lesbian, and we have bisexual students in our school system. They interpreted that passage about gender as being, "you were opening the doors to teach about homosexuality", as if you taught the subject matter you would encourage students to become homosexual. I think that's absurd and I think we need to address the fact that we have these students in our system and that we should acknowledge the fact and perhaps have a frank and open discussion about gender and sexuality. You can stop some of the bullying that goes on as it relates to those students who have, what I guess society would call, mixed gender identification. They fought the inclusion of that particular [unclear] in the social studies standards in the area of sociology. It's important, I felt, to have that standard. Not only in terms of the students we have in the school system, but these are students who might become our social workers and active in other fields of sociology. So they would need to have that

kind of background as they pursue additional studies in the area of sociology. But because they are anti-homosexuality that passage was eliminated. They don't believe in global warming. That was an issue when it came to our biology standards also along with how we were created. So you can parallel their values, their Republican platform and track that into the standards that we have adopted. When we got to the Civil Rights Movement as a part of the social studies standards much to do was made of that fact that it was the majority who gave the minority their rights as if they were being so benevolent to look out one day and see that we needed to have people have equal opportunities. There was no acknowledgement of the role that the sit-ins, the demonstrations had in the Civil Rights Movement. It was, you didn't get your rights until the majority decided that you needed to have your rights. So there was much discussing about that as well as the role that ethnic minorities played in the development of this country. Our chairman of the board at that time indicated

that there were individuals who did not rise to the level of the work of our founding fathers. Well, that was a different time frame and perhaps if we had freedom during that time we might have risen to the level of our founding fathers. Patriotism--they believe in American exceptionalism and so they want American exceptionalism included in the standards which it is, but they did not want any divergent point about American exceptionalism. Because everybody does not-- and I'm talking about academic individuals-- that there are points and counter points to American exceptionalism, but they only wanted the positives about American exceptionalism included in the standards. The same thing about McCarthy and his actions. They say that he was justified. Well there are people in the academic world who say that he was not justified and that he did not really uncover the spies that were here in relation to everything that he did to blackball individuals, etcetera. But hey, the Venona Papers justified McCarthy and his actions.

Well there are other historian who say that is not so. So we can get the students to engage in critical thinking about the veracity of the Venona Papers and this vindication of McCarthy.

Malik Dulaney: Okay. I want to back up just a little bit and I want to talk about your role on the State Board of Education-how you started there. Think about this because I'm seeing your name on the ballot and voting for you. If you could, talk a little bit about how you started there, how many terms you've run, and also talk about some of the resistance that you faced throughout.

Knight: Because of my experience working in PTA [Parent-Teacher Association] and being involved in my children's education because of my mother's personal story of not being able to get an education I have this compulsion to make certain that every opportunity is available out there for people to be educated. They are given that opportunity and policies are set in place so that people can take advantage of educational opportunities. So, at the urging

of my predecessor on the State Board of Education representing District 13, Dr. Rosie Sorrells, I was encouraged to run once she decided she wanted to retire from the position. That's how I came to run for the State Board of Education. I enjoy the work and becoming educated myself as we read the agenda and work through the policies that have to be set as a result of legislative mandate. We take our work as a result of legislative mandate. I enjoy that work, but what I don't enjoy is being with a group of people who are so closed minded that it is only their perspective and their perspective alone that is correct. They have all the answers for how students should be educated. Only the academic work of their experts is valued. Everybody else's expert is discounted. If you try to bridge differences in your perspective it doesn't happen unless it's something that will benefit what their voting bloc wants. So they rarely accept compromise or bridging differences when it's to their benefit, but when it's time for them to reciprocate then

they will be forsaking their principles if they compromise and didn't have it their way. So my role on the board, being in the minority voting bloc, is to always make them aware that they are not as astute as they think they are in imposing their agenda and thinking that people do not see through their actions. I'm always, I guess, the gadfly on that board in a respectful, polite manner. But I just want them to know that I am not stupid, that I well aware that even though they have such wonderful words to present their point of view they have not camouflaged the underlying motive behind what it is they are trying to impose on the teachers and the students in the school system.

Malik Dulaney: I want to pause right there.

Marvin Dulaney: You came to Dallas in 1980?

Knight: 1982

Marvin Dulaney: Okay. 1982. What was it like being the wife of--just looking at two sides because we actually got involved a lot yourself--what was it like being the wife of someone who was in

the news media every day? It's so interesting how it sort of switched for you and Richard.

Knight: It was not as difficult as people might think it would be because my husband and I have a kind of relationship where he's always been the first in his field for whatever activity he indulged. So, he has his activities and I have my activities. Because I'm involved in my own interests it's not as if I am having to be in the back spotlight because he is forefront always in the news media because his position dictated it at that time. So because I had my own world that I was still with it was very easy to not feel slighted or neglected because he was the headliner in the family. It was wonderful to see this African-American male break down those barriers. I thoroughly enjoyed seeing him excel in his positions. But had we not had that relationship wherein I had my activities and he had his activities I think it would have been a difficult adjustment. And then, no matter where we have been--I'm just country. [Laughter] I have enjoyed being able to bridge different worlds,

but it did not change my perception of myself and I didn't become over elated that I had this opportunity to move in these various different wealthy social circles, so to speak.

Marvin Dulaney: Given that, how did it feel a lot of times being the only one in those social circles in which you and Mr. Knight were traveling and operating?

Knight: I was always looking for where's the next African-American person, but I was glad that we were in a position to open the doors and let people know that people in the African-American community can articulate a point of view, that we know how to use the knife, the fork, the spoon, the soup spoon, the dessert fork, and those kinds of things. I saw it as an opportunity to educate others about the fact that we have the same goals, the same values as you do. It's just that you have made it more difficult for us to pursue our goals and our values and that we have made it in spite of what you have tried to keep us from accomplishing. It was great to be the one to

open the doors for others and to also show that we knew how to behave.

Marvin Dulaney: Talk about the suit that the NAACP has initiated because of the new social studies standards.

Knight: I think one of the positives of that controversy around the social standard is that people began to sit up and take note of the State Board of Education. For the most part the State Board of Education was not that well known and for people who vote a straight ballot you just automatically elect the individual as opposed to if you were down ballot and you are elected according to your party ticket. The suit that the NAACP brought has highlighted the fact that we really have people on the board who are pushing a particular agenda as opposed to looking at academically what do are students need to know to succeed as they compete not only in Texas, but as they compete outside the state of Texas [and] outside the United States. I think people who are more academically prone will begin to run for the State Board of Education

and you can really have that discussion about what do students need to know in order to bridge K-12 to higher education, whether it's a four-year college, an advanced degree or some kind of certification in a trade.

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Knight: --the same kind of critical thinking skills in both areas, so the suit as well as the behavior and the comments of our board members has highlighted the fact that we have issues on the State Board of Education and we need more qualified individuals whose only agenda is to provide the best academic education for our students, taking advantage of current research in the various fields of study in our core curriculum and our enrichment curriculum.

Marvin Dulaney: These are some final questions. Would you do all this again if you had to?

Knight: I would do it again if I had to because you cannot complain about a situation and be satisfied with your complaint if you have an opportunity to do something about it. You need to be in there trying to change it because it won't

change if people are not on the inside working to bring that change about. So yes, I would do it all over again because I like a good fight and I like putting people in their place when they're being so absolutely ignorant and absurd in their thought processes.

Marvin Dulaney: Have there been any whites on the board who've worked with you? You mentioned earlier that there were a few that they wouldn't coalitions or compromise. Have there been any in the time that you have served who have reached across the ideological divide to work with you and some of the other minority board members?

Knight: There are a few moderate Republicans on the board. The social conservatives call them "RINOs"- Republicans in Name Only. And they really dislike those individuals who can think for themselves and know how to bridge differences. So yes, when I say, "in that minority voting bloc", I include those moderate Republicans who really look at the issue and try and come up with the best possible scenario for our students. Unfortunately, it has not been

enough of those moderate Republicans to stem the tide of the voting bloc. But when we lost Don McLeroy and when Cynthia Dunbar decided not to run for reelection two additional moderate Republicans came on the board, so I think we're beginning to see the end of the dynasty that the social conservative voting bloc has on the board. And I think in 2012 when all of us have to run for reelection because of redistricting that there will be additional people elected to the board who will further erode that voting bloc. And I think we will really see some progress going forward from that election point for the students and the teachers in Texas.

Unfortunately, the standards that we have adopted this year--they're good for ten years, so there will be ten years of the impact of the English language arts curriculum, science curriculum, the social studies curriculum that the social conservatives have imposed on the students and the teachers in the state of Texas.

Marvin Dulaney: How does it feel to have a mayor in the family?

Knight: It is wonderful. And we did not see that coming. Our children have been active in the community, but Marcus has really embraced community service. But I never saw the political leanings in him and so we were shocked and pleased when he announced that he was going to run for the position of Mayor of Lancaster, [Texas]. We are quite pleased and proud of him. I say he has his father's skills because they are very, very, very sociable and they're going to greet everybody in the room. I like doing the work, but I don't like the glad-handing you have to do so--[Laughs] He's in his element.

Marvin Dulaney: I was going to ask you who do you think had the most influence on Marcus running for mayor, you or your husband, but you're saying Richard.

Knight: I think his father did.

Marvin Dulaney: Okay. Anything you want to add?

Knights: Only thing is that I'm grateful that I've had the opportunity to serve on the various nonprofit

boards and on various committees and in PTA where I was in the minority, but I also had the opportunity to bring some other minorities on or to open up the mindset, "Well hey, we can work with minority individuals." So, it's been a pleasure to be able to answer that call.

Marvin Dulaney: Well, we want to thank you. One question.

You've collected a lot of documents over the years that you've been active here. What are you going to do with all your papers? Have you made a decision about that yet?

Knight: I have not made a decision about that yet. In fact, I'm drowning in papers. [Laughter] Actually, one of the benefits of when we moved to Singapore [?] for about four years was I was forced to throw out some papers, but now I regret having to throw them out. So I need to think about what I want to do with all those agenda books that I have and some other things that I have.

Marvin Dulaney: Photographs, minutes, and just stuff that you've collected in over thirty years. So again, I want to put it on your mind that one,

you might want to donate them here or down at Texas Dallas Collection at the public library because they also have facilities to do that. It's important. Malik is going to take some pictures of you and if you have any pictures you want donate to us we would accept them. Just give us a holler and we'll come get them. Let me just put a date and time stamp again. This is August 26. We're in Dallas, Texas interviewing Mrs. Mavis B. Knight. And I want to thank you for the opportunity to interview you and preserve and document this history.

Malik Dulaney: Thank you very much Mrs. Knight. I've learned a lot.

Knight: You're very welcome. I've enjoyed it.

[End of Interview]