

Transcript: Lin Forney

Interviewee: LF Lin Forney

Interviewer: AW Ashley West

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START OF INTERVIEW

Ashley West: My name is Ashley West. I am interviewing Lin Forney on October 24, 2014 at the Pigeon Development Center in Waynesville, North Carolina. For the record you are aware you are being recorded and you consent to this?

Lin Forney: Yes I am. And Yes I do.

AW: If you could begin by talking about your birth, your education, and years in Haywood County.

LF: Ok. I am 58 years old. I have lived in Haywood County all my life, born June 16, 1956. I went to school actually starting here at the Pigeon Street School—well elementary school until—well kindergarten through 4th grade. In 5th grade the schools were integrated and I went to Central Elementary. And then graduated from Tuscola High School in 74. Got married right away and had two children. So that's where I am, still back here at the Pigeon.

AW: Did you—your career? Did you work inside the home?

LF: I did. I worked inside the home until my girls started school. And then I helped my father, he owned a body repair shop for cars. I helped him, kept his books and several things for several years. I've worked at the sheriff's department with the 911 system. I dispatched for 6 years for that—it was when it first came to Haywood County. And I've worked in a greenhouse.

I have just done lots of things. So now I am here as the director or coordinator for the Pigeon Community Center.

AW: What kinds of things have you been involved in within Haywood community—like church, clubs--things of that nature?

LF: I go to and have been a member of Jones Temple AME Zion Church. And then community organizations, just 4H. I helped out a little bit with a neighborhood bible study group. And I have done—just helping other organizations through church activities.

AW: So as a child—I know you were younger during this period that we are going to be talking about. In what ways were you aware of the larger civil rights movement occurring in the nation and in the state at the time?

LF: I guess I wasn't really aware of it that much, because I think my parents tried to shelter all of us kids from that kind of thing. It was like it was a hard thing and they did not want to stress us out. Because you know I think that time period is so different from now because people just talk openly in front of their kids no matter what the topic or whatever is going on. But back then it wasn't that way. You were told to get out of the room this is grown folk's business--you just didn't sit around when adults were talking. So I didn't really know a lot about it—of course I knew or heard them just briefly talking about when Dr. King died, when Kennedy was shot. Those kind of things, but not so much about the civil rights movement going on. I didn't really know a lot about that then.

AW: Do you remember the reactions to hearing about Kennedy's and King's assassinations?

LF: Yeah. It was very like—I think people were very frightened and upset by it. And they were not sure—the sense I got—they were not sure how widespread it would be. Would it

be something you know that would affect them where they lived right at that moment? So it was kind of like people seemed to be guarded in a place where they just were not sure. I guess they were kind of just walking on egg shells than they generally had—but you know that was just part of it—just tip toeing around sometimes.

AW: And you mentioned that they were trying to protect you. Do you think not talking openly about what was going on, was just a way to shelter you and keep you protected from that?

LF: Yeah. I think it was that. And like I said they knew that we couldn't do anything about it. They just didn't—I think they allowed us to be kids. By not having that kind of thing hanging over us and not really going through our minds at all. Like I said of course we heard little bits. But it wasn't anything that we were real worried about, or frightened over. Because we just felt that it didn't really touch us at the moment, at that age.

AW: So in the early 1960s you have the Greensboro sit-ins. Were you aware of anything like that, that occurred within Haywood County? Any kind of activism like that?

LF: Not that I can remember. Nothing at all. I can't think of anything that happened here.

AW: Were your parents involved actively in the struggle for civil rights? I know that you said they didn't talk about it that much to you--.

LF: No, I don't think they really were that I am aware of. Now that may be different from their standpoint, but I don't remember them being actively involved in it.

AW: Knowing as you've grown up and learned—looking back now and knowing what was going on more nationally and state wide at the time, and looking back at your experiences as a child in Haywood County—how was Haywood County in your opinion different or the same to what was occurring larger?

LF: I think Haywood County then as really it still is to a large degree—is that because it never went through anything big like the sit-ins or any of that it was never openly discussed as a community. And I think that because of that it's harder to deal with that now, because it's never been up front. So I think it was things happened subtly, and they still are happening that way. So I think as a county we never really had to face it. I know we've had cross burnings, and those kind of situations, but again it's like hush hush sweep under the carpet. It's gone and never heard from again.

AW: You talked about things happening subtly. Can you talk a little more specific about what kind of things? Or just general?

LF: Well I say in general but things like you know people still being falsely accused, still being followed around the stores, still—those kind of things you know are still happening. There are still subtle they are not talked about. In mixed groups. I would think that the whites would talk about it in their groups and the blacks would talk about it in their groups. But I think together that so much hadn't happened and it's still going on that way.

AW: Before desegregation in Haywood County what were your interactions with the white community?

LF: Well like I said my father owned a body repair shop. He worked at the paper mill in Canton when I was much younger. But we had a lot of white people—his friends in and out of our house and in and out of our lives. Before desegregation I don't really remember playing so much with white kids in our neighborhood because there weren't any. So I didn't have that kind of interaction. But adult wise I remember the adults did have that. But as kids I didn't really play with white kids, or anything like that. I don't remember that happening.

AW: How were public facilities segregated in Haywood County?

LF: Well I remember I guess my grandparents—my mom's parents—lived up in the area called Nineveh. And there were several black families that lived there. And then we lived in this area, and there were several—but there was not a lot of mixed communities, and people just seemed to stay in their own little places. I don't—I don't remember the water fountains and that kind of thing. I remember my parents saying not to go into certain stores on Main Street. But I don't think it was because we couldn't go there, it may have been a history of some bad times, of black folks not really being welcome there but I don't remember it being openly—you know—this the colored section. Except one place and that was at a laundry mat on main street, that I know it had whites only. That's the only thing I can remember being whites only. They had it on the window and we could not go there. But as far as—you know—sitting down and restaurants and stuff like that—because we didn't really do that anyway.

AW: I know you talked about segregation—certain public facilities being segregated so much. But do you remember if racial lines were crossed and what happened--?

LF: If they were?

AW: Yeah.

LF: Well I know I said that, but going back we did have a segregated movie theater. Like the blacks would have to go to the balcony, and you just didn't do it. You did not go to the bottom floor. You knew where you were supposed to be and that is where you went. I know when schools were integrated-- particularly when we got to high school it was hard. Because people were still not ready for that. And it was a lot of conflict, a lot of fighting—so a lot of people were just not ready.

AW: What would have happened if you would have sat outside the balcony section?

LF: Probably you would have been asked to leave. Yeah I'm pretty sure that is what would have happened.

AW: Of course in 1954 you have the brown decision for integration. But Haywood County Board of Education I found in my own research, responded by building the Pigeon Street School. Have do you feel about this local response to the Supreme Court order of desegregation?

LF: Well like I said Haywood County just didn't face it, and when they did have to face it they waited until the very last minute—like forced to do it. Because instead of doing it then built a school and said—well I don't know what people said, but this is what I'm thinking—Maybe if we give the blacks a new school they'll be fine. They won't come and want to integrate. You know what I mean, and so I think that's how things were handled, instead of working things out. It was never dealt with in that way. So it still isn't.

AW: Do you think the failure of Haywood County to deal with things openly—how has that impacted the nature of race relations in the county?

LF: I think its made it to be—that division to continue. And not allowed for healing. And so I think its just created the division and the separation, and now that Haywood County is getting people from other areas that to them is going back in time to come here. Because they see it right away. So--.

AW: How so?

LF: Because people say that—you know—when they come here they right away notice that there is not black and white relationships just together. It's that division—they openly see it. Because blacks are still over here, whites are still over here and it's not very many blacks and that means they come into and it may be weeks, months, maybe even a year before they see

a black person. So that kind of thing, and they notice it. You—like where am I? [laughter] What have I done? It's like the twilight zone or something?

AW: I've been looking through local histories at the Haywood County Public Library, just to get a better sense of the county. And one of the local histories that I looked at said that when it came time for schools to integrate in Haywood County, the black community was mourning the loss of its school, they did not want to integrate. Is that true? And if so why?

LF: Yeah I think it is true. First of all they build us a new school, and then a few years later you have to move out of it. Why? Why can't we stay here and you can bring some white kids over here. That was the feeling. And I think our teachers as well as our parents knew that we would not get an equal education. We would not get the kind of nourishing and the one on one that we were getting at the black school. So I think that was part of—I think that was probably the biggest thing going through their minds at the time.

AW: And when you moved over—I'm sorry what school did--?

LF: Central Elementary.

AW: When you moved to Central Elementary did you notice that change in the school atmosphere?

LF: Absolutely.

AW: Can you talk a little about that?

LF: Yeah. Because you know when we were here, we were all black and all your friends, neighbors, whatever. You had that interaction in schools, in the neighborhood, in churches, and all that. But when we desegregated you usually were the only black person in your classroom. And it was that way all the rest of the way through my education. So that in itself was a huge—and then I felt like—as I'm sure others did that you knew you were not wanted there.

People were not open to you and friendly to you and treated you as an oddity, instead of their peers. And so that was totally different. We did not have the one on one relationships, or the warm, fuzzy—I guess—relationship with the teachers that we once had. Nor did our parents have that relationship with the teachers either.

AW: Was it because they just weren't welcome to? Or just the atmosphere of integration?

LF: All of that I think. I mean I don't know that they were not welcome to. But I think when we treat other humans as if—because they are different from us—they are no longer human—they're some other species, you know? Then that makes it difficult to form a relationship, instead of just treating them like another human and trying to get to know them, you are already going in and thinking, well I got to do this different, because—you know. So I think all those issues is what kind of made it harder.

AW: You talked about you knew you weren't wanted when you integrated. Were individuals openly verbal---

LF: Yeah.

AW: In what ways?

LF: You know just saying go back to your school we don't want you here, you don't belong here, why are you here, why did you want to come to my school, you had your own school. And they would openly say that—kids—the adults wouldn't so much in our earshot anyway. But those kind of comments were made. Yes. Absolutely.

AW: During your time in the public school system did you have any black teachers or was that not during your time?

LF: I had one black substitute teacher in my whole—but other than that no. No.

AW: If you could talk a little more about the nature of education and your experience at Pigeon Street School before integration some more? Just go back a little bit.

LF: Well I think—like I said—that the education here was like our teachers knew that we were capable and able to learn whatever they were teaching us. They made sure that we knew it. They did not let us off the hook if we did not want to do it. They had the communication with the parents—like if we misbehaved in school, before we got home our parents already knew it—okay? So you know when you are in school, you are in school to learn. You won't be disrespectful, you will do your work, and you'll do it properly. So they did it in a loving kind of way. I mean we did not feel abused or mistreated or any of that. It was just like you knew that they cared. You knew that they really wanted you to succeed in life. And this was how you were going to be able to do it. So they made sure that you knew that. And of course when schools were integrated that was all gone. It was like people put it out there, if you got it good, if you didn't good. I'm just trying to put it out there, but don't ask for any extra. Because we were intimidated for being there, quite naturally we are not going to ask for anything. I guess I was on kind of a shy side, and I just wanted to come in there sit down and be kind of invisible and unnoticed. You know? I'm not raising my hand, even if I knew the answer. You know what I'm saying? Because we knew when we left here that we were ready to move on—as far as we knew what we knew. But I think because of that intimidation, we didn't always project that way.

AW: Do you feel—or let me rephrase that question—in my earlier interviews this week one of the biggest costs of integration that was discussed was the loss of community in the black community. Do you agree with this? And is so why?

LF: Yeah, I totally do. Because like I said you had the involvement in schools, in your neighborhood, in your churches, and all of that. And then when this building was used for a lot

of community activities. And when we were no longer here that kind of dwindled and came to a stop. You know? We just didn't gather together like we once did. And just kept getting bigger and bigger. We just didn't come together anymore like we once did. And some of the kids did go to the other schools when they could. So those kids were already kind of out of pocket. You know what I mean? So that started and it just kept building.

AW: How do you think this loss of community has impacted race relations throughout—since that period—since the 1960s?

LF: As far as--?

AW: In anyway.

LF: In anyway. Well I think we just—our mission for this organization is that we get back to having community as family, and I think that's what's missing. And I think that is what was lost. Because it used to be I remember growing up and my mother, my grandmothers, when a neighbor was sick they made sure I'm going to go there and I'm going to fix food, and I'm going to clean their house, and I'm gonna my grandfather is going to plow their fields—you know those kinds of things. And that doesn't happen anymore at all. Because people—I guess we have gotten so busy in our own lives that we can more easily explain well I can't do that because I got to do this. But I'm sure they had a lot more to do then, than we have today. I mean physical labor wise. And so I think it's just the mindset of I am my neighbor's keeper and my brother's keeper, and I am my brother's keeper—when we can get back to that, then I think we'll get back to community as a whole—when we look at each neighbor and not just because they are black or they are white, but because they are your neighbor. When I think we can do that, then this racial divide will stop, but we got to first realize that we are all in this together. And we're not going to all leave. You know? Any better than the other one, if we don't try to work together.

AW: Where did you attend high school after you got through Central Elementary?

LF: Tuscola High School.

AW: What were your experiences in high school?

LF: Oh in high school, like I said it was crazy there. The racial divide was huge then--

AW: Roughly what years was that?

LF: I graduated in 74. So 1970. It was just a lot of tension going on at that time with the blacks and the whites in high school.

AW: Do you remember any specific happenings or occurrences that showed that?

LF: Well nothing in particular, it was just that same name calling, and just didn't want you there. You know that kind of thing was still going on. But of course these were the same kids that we started out with. You know what I mean? And you think overtime it would have gotten better, but it really didn't. It didn't. It seemed to me that it kind of escalated some instead of getting better. I don't really know the reason, other than maybe the simple fact that maybe teenagers they just are trying to find themselves was probably part of the big picture too. I'm not sure--.

AW: Were you involved in band or sports or anything?

LF: No. Well I did do a little tiny bit of basketball, not really. But band no.

AW: Was that open to the black students?

LF: It was open.

AW: Did you feel welcome to do that?

LF: Yeah I think so. I think so. I know there were several in the band and of course football and I don't know I feel like, the guys particularly that were in sports then I think in the

end they felt very used. And I think just from my perspective of that I think that has created a lot of unrest with them. Even to this day.

AW: How so?

LF: Well I just feel like that never got over that because they felt they were so loved, needed, and wanted. But then when they realized when sports were over they didn't have their grades, they couldn't move forward. And probably looking back they thought—you know—what happened, I thought I was going to make it, they told me I was good. But I guess its just a big letdown. I just see a lot of them, kind of not moving on after that. They didn't really move forward with their life and be very successful.

AW: A couple of the people I interviewed earlier this week talked about how they were urged to leave the area because there were no opportunities here. Do you feel the same way, or do you feel that it was the same situation for you?

LF: It probably was the same situation. But I don't know for whatever reason—I think because I'm so family focused and oriented that I didn't want to leave my family. So I never really thought about leaving the area like that. I just wanted—I was telling Rosa—I just wanted to get married and have babies. That's what I wanted to do. I just felt like that was my calling and that's what I wanted to do. So I didn't enjoy school. So going to college was something I didn't want to do, I didn't really do.

AW: Do you feel that's because of integration? Because of what happened with the school system? Or did you just not enjoy school prior to that point?

LF: No, I kind of think I liked school before. I that probably had something to do with it. But I don't know for sure what that was. I think it was just family—I think that was just ingrained in my brain I think. And it might have been I watched my mom and my grandparents,

and I like what they were doing. And I was nurtured and I wanted to do that for my kids and wanted to give them that.

AW: I'm trying to think, because we have answered a lot of these. You kind of touched a little bit on this—in your experience being born and raised in Haywood County, and been through some big turning points in the nature of race relations in Haywood County. How have race relations improved or not improved since desegregation?

LF: That's a big question. Well I think we're still separated. I think that hasn't changed. I think there is not very many—I think relationships between blacks and whites. I think that it might be improving a teeny tiny bit. And I say that because we are doing the Change Makers for Racial Understanding. And we have been doing that for 3 years. And I think the fact that we have blacks—only a few—and whites, particular whites who for 3 years have come to the table once a month to really talk deeply and honestly about race relations in Haywood County. And for a lot of them to really get a different lens on it—you know? To really see it from my perspective how it is day to day living here that's improving. Because those people will go and talk to their friends, and again they will also hear from their friends and find out that they don't have the right lens--meaning their friends don't have the right lens. If they hadn't been sitting at the table for 3 years may never have recognized that. So I think that is improving a little bit just because of that. And I hope—my hope is that we will have more people at the table, so that we can really discuss it and make a change in our community where people really get the picture of what this race thing is all about and what the difference is. Did I answer that? I just want to make sure I answered that?

AW: Oh you did. I'm just trying to make sure that I haven't missed a question that I had written down. I don't know if we have touched on this or not—if we already have just tell

me. You graduated from Tuscola in 74, that was almost a decade after desegregation. Did you notice a change—I know you said the escalation—but did you see any other changes from when schools first integrated to when you graduated high school?

LF: Well I guess there was more acceptance for sure. You know? People started accepting you for who you were. And kind of I don't have to talk to them different because they are black. They're just a person, I just need to find out who they are and decide what this relationship, if any is going to look like. So I think that definitely changed, and people got a little more comfortable with each other. You know—just like--. And I guess just some of the tension eased is what I'm trying to say, it just eased up a little.

AW: Is there anything else you would like to add that I've missed or that my questions have jumped around or not entirely asked that you think is important for people to know about race relations or about Haywood County in general?

LF: No. But I would like to say that I have a son that is in 12th grade this year and I can see that the kids are still having some racial issues except—because they like us are not totally being heard. They are more accepting of the fact that they just see that people don't really or just want to listen, or don't have time or whatever. And instead of pushing or fighting like we would do, they just totally drop it. Like its gone don't discuss it. But they still are still carrying it around with them in a different way. And for me that is so sad because its been so long and it's still the same picture—you know? And I think now is not is not so much as their peers as it is the adults. And that makes it even harder. So that I hope somehow can get resolved and I think it's going to require coming to the table, and—although we are all human, blacks carry with them—I don't know if you have ever heard anybody say this but post-traumatic stress disorder. We definitely carry that around. And I think until people get that and understand that and that it is

not just mad black people—that there is there is a reason—and that sometimes you can't stop it from surfacing. Even me that has worked on this for ever and ever, its there and you can't stop it. But people need to realize—when people realize that it's not just me being angry for some reason it is just a pile up of things. And I think for the kids who can't control that as well as I can maybe then it manifests itself in a lot of more destructive ways.

AW: Well if there is nothing else you would like to add. Thank you so much for your time.

LF: Oh thank you Ashley very much.

END OF INTERVIEW