

## My Story

### Oris Griffin

My five siblings our mother and I lived with our grandparents in the small mill town of Kannapolis, NC. My mother, who never married, and my grandfather worked in the mill. Grandma stayed at home and always kept an eye on us. Our grandparents were very influential in our lives and we are better for having them as our model and our guide. They were also our primary caretakers and disciplinarians. As I reflect on these experiences, I can say that they have shaped who we are. We are all college educated, we are two teachers, a university professor, an engineer, a district representative for a large Fortune Five company, and an adult student. Following is my personal story and the accounts as I remember them.

I started school in a segregated church school in 1964. My siblings and I attended Mt. Calvary Lutheran School until it closed due to lack of funds. Each night we packed our lunch, did our homework and prepared for the next day. Each morning, in a single file, we would all go marching up the street to school. As a matter of fact, we were at that school seven days a week sometimes twice a day because we were also members of Mount Calvary Lutheran Church. This made it easy for Mrs. Lindsay to tell my grandparents how we behaved in school that week. Mrs. Lindsay, the school principal and my teacher, was so strict. We attended school during an era when it was acceptable to spank a child if he or she was misbehaving. The awful thing about this was not only were we embarrassed in front of our peers, but when we got home our grandma already knew about our misdeeds and we got another spanking when “Willie” got home. Willie is what grandma called granddaddy. As children, we heard this line almost everyday! My granddaddy was a very serious man. Whatever grandma said he went with it. It often surprised me how granddaddy would whip one of us based solely on what grandma had said and in some cases what grandma said that Mrs. Lindsay had said. Oh well.

The Lutheran school closed after my third grade year. As children we were never told why. But I later learned that it was due to finances. Of course my family had five children in the school. I'm sure we weren't paying a whole lot! There were many families in the same financial situation that we were in. In the fourth grade, I attended Carver school and I was miserable! This was still a segregated school, but it was public and across town. I felt so lonely in this school. It appeared to be so large. I was really afraid of getting lost, I guess. As I can remember we walked to school for a while, then my family somehow arranged for us to ride with someone else. Walking to Carver school was awful. When it rained or when it was cold we were miserable. We never missed school. In the Lutheran School I felt so comfortable. When I went to Carver I remember being pulled out of my 4<sup>th</sup> grade classroom and being taken into another class. This class was a third grade class! I was so embarrassed. I was being "put back". I was being labeled a dummy. Or so I and I'm sure others thought. This was a very bad time for me. Was I dumb? I remember the lady coming in asking me to get my things and to come with her. I went to the back of the classroom behind the wall that divided the place where we hung our coats and the actual classroom and gathered my things as I tried not to cry. Did I know what was going on? Maybe or maybe not. I don't recall. Could this have been handled in another manner?

After my fourth grade year integration started. This was a difficult time for everyone! There was chaos everywhere. Parents and children were upset. Many African-American teachers were displaced and principals were worried. I was told that integration was a good thing. We were finally going to get the education we deserved! Everyone had a right to quality education, but at what expense?

My siblings and I found ourselves again walking a mile to a white school in Jackson Park. I remember walking to school one very cold morning and having a white man throw coffee grounds out on us. I was so angry. We were taught to tell someone in authority if you were being mistreated. We learned this at Mt. Calvary. Somehow, somewhere I was also told to write down the license plate number as well. That morning I went straight to the principal's office and

told him what had happened. He asked me if I had written down the license plate number and I had. It was NJ869. I wonder if this person is still around? The principal then asked if I had kept any of the coffee grounds. Of course I had not. So he said that there was nothing we could do about it. I was so livid. No, I didn't tell my grandparents because remember, the teacher was smart and knew everything so there was no need to tell.

I attended Jackson Park Elementary School for two or three years. I can't quite remember. I really don't want to remember it either. I was so happy to leave that place. The principal, Mr. Misenheimer was not a friendly person. I guess he was doing the best he could at the time.

In 7<sup>th</sup> grade I went to Carver again. Carver by this time was only 7<sup>th</sup> grade. All the children in Kannapolis receiving a public education had to attend Carver for one year. During this time white parents were angry because they didn't want their children going to a school named for a black man. There was anger on both side of this issue. Finally the name was changed to Kannapolis Middle School. "White people won again", some said. During all of these years I felt completely lost within myself. I had gone from a small Black private church school to a Black public school to a public White school and back to a school that was once Black but was now integrated and found itself in a war over a name change.

In eighth grade I attended Cannon Junior High. It was Named for a white man who owned the textile mill. Black parents didn't even think about having the name changed. This is when I really saw Black people getting angry. Tempers were high and there were always fights. I guess in the earlier grades we didn't really know how to deal with our feelings. As we got older we figured it out, although not always in the most constructive manner. As I was completing my last year at the junior high school, which was across the parking lot from the high school, a fire broke out. The high school was on fire. I saw people crying! I couldn't understand any of it. When I asked my friend Joan why she was crying, she said because she had so looked forward to attending A.L. Brown High School. My attitude was nothing like hers. I was still numb from

having to leave Mt. Calvary Lutheran School. The fire at the high school meant absolutely nothing to me. By the time we were to start high school the next year the building was ready. Now we were in the largest school in Kannapolis. We were in high school and I hated it. I never felt like I was apart of the school. I thought the same people got selected all of the time. By this time my self-esteem was so low that I was just making it through until I could graduate. I didn't have any fun. I guess I never found my niche in high school. I can honestly say that I did not like school after Mt. Calvary.

In my senior year I had to decide what was I going to do after high school. I had worked in Cannon Mills for two summers. I didn't know what my calling was, but Cannon Mills was definitely not it. Joan's father was the guidance counselor and he encouraged Joan and me to apply to Winston-Salem State University (WSSU), a historically black university. I entered WSSU in the fall of 1977, and I found myself again. I was so happy. My older brother was in his second year at WSSU and this may have made the transition easier for me. There was someone there I knew. I thrived in that environment. I attended a lot of activities, I sang in the choir, I joined a sorority, and I had fun! To this day I attend homecoming whenever I can. I think this is where my life got on track again. The summer prior to attending WSSU I spent most of my time reading lots of books in preparation of my first year of college. I think I read more that summer than I read my entire time in high school. I graduated from WSSU in 1981.