

Oral History Collection

James O. Griffin

Interviewers: W. Marvin Dulaney and Alfred L. Roberts

Date: September 14, 2011

Place of interview: Dallas, Texas

Dr. Dulaney: We are picking up our interview with Mr. James Griffin. This is part two. [It's] September 14, 2011 and we're at the African-American Museum. Mr. Griffin, you were talking about how they were going to integrate the younger children, I guess in the elementary school, in Richardson.

Mr. Griffin: They made a decision that they were going to--when they decided what it was they were going to do,

we decided that the elementary kids would go to different schools and that white kids--we would get white kids into school. But they could volunteer to come to Hamilton Park and as a result that started the name--but it was going to be entirely different kind of school than it had been. And so we got the term Pacesetter from some white guy that gave the idea of this plan. What we did [was] we got--they had people volunteering to come by the school, volunteering their children. So, what we tried to [do is] keep it balanced and that's hard to do. So we had black kids that lived on the east side of Hamilton Park. Those would go to school with the--what we did [was] east side, west side behind the school and they would go to the schools in that--the white kids would come from those schools in those areas. As a result of that they would have to--the parents would have to volunteer, fill out a form and all of that business, so that we would have an idea how many of them was going to come because at that time we had--I'm trying to remember the exact number of kids in elementary school that we were

talking about. We were going to match those numbers with each other. We had--I think we had about ninety in one grade level. Then we were going to have to mix and match those numbers with the kids coming in. As a result, that's how we started trying to set it up. So it took quite a while to do that. In fact it took all summer until we had them. But it worked. It worked.

Dulaney: Well the goal was to get 250 students into Hamilton Park Elementary. Were you all successful in getting--250 white students let me say that.

Griffin: Oh yes. Yes they got excited about that. What was really amazing was that when they bumped the white kids over there, they came in on buses from different parts of Richardson. The morning that they were going to bring them we had a black--a giant parade. White folk came from everywhere. [Dulaney laughs] Black folk came from everywhere. [Dulaney laughs] Everybody wanted to see what was going to happen. And I was the person that met the buses.

Dulaney: Okay.

Griffin: I was the one that they asked to greet the children when they came from the various area.

Dulaney: Were you principal of the school?

Griffin: Yes I got to be the principal of the elementary school.

They after--because the kids that was in the high school they had already made their--we'd already separated them and sent them to the schools that they were going to go to by where they lived. And those kids that went to Richardson High School they went on--the west side kids they went to Richardson High School. The kids on north side went to [Lloyd V.] Berkner High School and the kids on the east side went to Lake Highlands High School. That was an easy part. That was the easy part of telling them where they're going and they go over and register and all that. And see it was right at the beginning of school. That's what really--when Judge Taylor made the decision of where they were going and he came down and kind of looked to see if everything was going fine. So we got a lot of politics and all that involved in it. But it worked. It really worked

and that fact about it got to be national and a lot of school districts picked up the idea of a Pacesetter type school because it was more of a magnet type. We ended up making a magnet elementary school. We had—we laughed about it, said, "We should have done this a long time ago" because we got to do some things for our kids that we would not have done had it not been done.

Dulaney: Tell me what was different about Hamilton Park Elementary School under the Pacesetter program as opposed to Hamilton Park Elementary School before. What was different?

Griffin: What was different?

Dulaney: Yes, in terms of curriculum and whatever.

Griffin: Well we had an opportunity to improve our curriculum and improve the people that were going to teach. Because they didn't have to worry about an overload of students because we tried to make sure that in each grade we had an equal balance of students, black and white. If we had say in one of the classrooms we had twenty-five kids

or if we had fifty kids well it was going to be matched. It was going to be matched with black and white. You going to have the same numbers. And those schools in that. We came up with an idea of getting teachers who were already in the school business and then we got what we called assistant teachers. We had assistant teachers so when we got ready to--a teacher needed to be absent we had a teacher already assigned to that classroom with those regular teachers that have to keep the balance and keep the teaching loads equal. And we were able to get all of our books and things that we needed. We just went kind of crazy with it. You know.

Dulaney: And so it worked?

Griffin: It worked.

Dulaney: What was the relationship between black and white children in the school? Did they get along?

Griffin: They got along no problem. We didn't have any problems. Every once and a while you might have a joker hit somebody and a joker might be a white boy or might be a little black boy. And the white

boy he'd get hit back. It was just a matter of--
-I think that what we were able to do was to
calm the waters. To keep the waters calm and
get them to understand as we gave instructions
about how we were going to do it. And got our
parents understanding. When the parents came to
enroll their children and to volunteer them to
come that was the only way they could get in.
You had to be a volunteer. You just didn't
decide one morning you were going to wake up
and go to Hamilton Park. That was not going to
be. You were going to have to go through the
process and help them to understand what it was
that we were doing and what Judge Taylor had
ordered to be done. And that was the, I guess,
the thing that broke the camel's back more or
less. That everybody was going to play by the
same rules. And so what happened was that I was
the overall principal of the situation. And we
had a white girl that was the--had been the
principal over at the closest elementary school
to Hamilton Park and that was over in the south
side of Forest Lane. That school over there. So
they were kind and we tried to pick everybody.

We tried to hand-pick the teachers and we were going to do the way that we thought it should be done. There wasn't going to be any of that "You do this. You do that's". You weren't going to mistreat anybody. If somebody didn't want to cooperate we had it understood with the superintendent that was in charge of registration of the teachers and kind teachers that we were going to do it a way that it was going to be for the betterment of all persons involved. It wasn't going to be any "You are not going to get rid of a black teacher and you are not going to get rid of a white teacher". If they could not perform together get rid of them both. So we tried to do it the best way we knew how.

Dulaney: Let's shift gears just a little bit. Where were you living when you were teaching in Hamilton Park?

Griffin: Who?

Dulaney: Where did you live in Dallas when you were teaching in Hamilton Park?

Griffin: Oak Cliff.

Dulaney: Oak Cliff?

Griffin: South Dallas. Right in front of Charles Wright School.

Dulaney: So, how were your children affected by desegregation that was taking place in Dallas or were they?

Griffin: My children? My personal children?

Dulaney: Yes.

Griffin: They went to--my daughter went to--during that time I think she was--I can't think what grade she was in, but she went to Charles Rice [Elementary School]. And she moved from Charles Rice on over to Holmes. And my wife was a librarian at Holmes Junior High School. Then my son, he went to--then we found him--later that year we had--we moved to Oak Cliff on Bonnie View Road right there in front of where they built Good Tree Baptist Church. We were there before Good Tree Baptist Church was. And so we and our kids moved to school there right in front of William Brown Miller [Elementary School] and so didn't anything change.

Dulaney: Nothing changed?

Griffin: They didn't change and nobody said anything about it.

They knew where I was living when they gave me the job. And we stayed right with the program.

Dulaney: So your children, basically, being in the Dallas system of the Dallas Independent School District didn't have the opportunity to participate in integrated schools.

Griffin: No.

Dulaney: How did you feel about that?

Griffin: What?

Dulaney: How did you feel about them not being able to go to an integrated school?

Griffin: Well

Dulaney: Given what you were doing?

Griffin: Doing what I was doing?

Dulaney: Given you were pioneering in Richardson.

Griffin: Well that, really it was--of course I didn't live in-- they understood that I didn't live in the area out there in Richardson Independent School District. Even though Hamilton Park was in

Dallas. And we did not--that part of Hamilton Park they had exchanged some land and as a result that's how Hamilton Park got to be in Richardson. When all of that happened--well that had happened before we did integration. And then some of the people that owned properties out there they gave land to Richardson before we did integration. So the Bonners [?] and the Loves and those people had given land. Those old men who had grown up out there all of their lives. They had given that land and as a result they stood their grounds. They stood their grounds. I mean, you would've been proud of those old men because you were just would be glad that they had fortitude that they would stand up for what they thought was best for their children. And they knew what was going to happen. And they were well informed. But I think the thing that they learned that people were going to have to respect them to move their children from one place to another place and that they were going to have to stand together as a community and speak up for the rights of their children and what they felt that

it ought to be. And they would go to the board meetings. They would go to all of their meetings and all of those various things that happened. So that made the difference. And some of those older people out there had gone through the Richardson school district. And their children's their children-parents of the ones that were going to school out there, they all stood their grounds for their children's rights. It made a difference. It made a difference.

Dulaney: Okay. Dr. Roberts, do you have any questions?

Dr. Roberts: I have a few. When did the integration take place for the athletics? Do you remember?

Griffin: Of the athletics?

Roberts: Right.

Griffin: [Laughs] That's funny. What happened--see, when we did the integration for the athletics, those kids that went to high school they were immediately accepted into the athletic programs or the band programs or whatever it was that they were into. When they got ready to integrate Lake Highlands

[High School] for instance, the quarterback at Hamilton Park was one of the quarterbacks at Lake Highlands High School. The running backs, all of the athletes they got places on the team. Whatever they were doing at Hamilton Park they were given that opportunity to do it in the high schools. At Richardson-at Berkner [High School]. I saw one of the girls this summer and she said, "You remember when I went to Berkner High School?" I said, "Yeah, you were the one in the middle of the drill team." I said, "Because you were tallest and you had the short girl--the black girls on the end. Y'all set the parameters for the drill team." And so it was some--Richardson made a change really because there were a lot of people in Richardson. You know, it was an old segregated town and still had some people who had some feelings about integration. But the people in the PTAs [Parent-Teacher Associations] and all of those things, they had a chance to participate with black folk. And black folk was able to stand up and participate and tell them how they felt. And that made a difference.

Roberts: What year did the Pacesetter program go into operation?

Griffin: If I can remember the year--I was trying to think of
the year it started. Because we--

Dulaney: 1976

Roberts: Thank you.

Griffin: That's right. When we decided to do it--the Pacesetter--
some of the strange things was that some of
the teachers that worked for the school
district--the gal over the public relations
thing for the whole school district, they would
always come and ask me questions about when you
going to change the name of Hamilton Park to
Pacesetter. We said, "Well we're not going to
change it. It's going to still be Hamilton Park.
I said, "Because our kids have got to learn to
adjust to the change." And I said, "We're not
going to change." I said, "If they're going to
change it they need to vote [about] it on the
school board. You're not going to come out here
and change it. Because that's not your job." So
we had to stand tall in what we believed too.
We didn't give up anything just because we were

integrating. We gave up things that we thought was best for our children. And I tell you, it was a difficult thing for some black folks to want to make that change. All of them did not want to make that change and as a result it causes us problems sometimes within our ranks when we don't want to make a change. So everybody wanted to know, said, "Well Griffin, what are they going to let you do?" I said, "They going to let Griff' kept his job." [Laughter] And because I felt strong about what we were doing and I didn't want to--I was not going to just lay down and let somebody walk on me. I said, "Because if they get pushy," I said, "I'll push a lawyer in here on them." [Laughter]

Roberts: Who were your top black administrators during the time you integrated in 1976?

Griffin: What do you mean?

Roberts: Who was at central office at that time?

Griffin: We didn't have anybody at central office.

Roberts: Oh, you didn't?

Griffin: No. We didn't have anybody.

Roberts: That's interesting.

Griffin: See, what happened was that you didn't have any black administrators in Richardson. No more that at Hamilton Park School.

Roberts: Did that change?

Griffin: Eventually.

Roberts: Because I've heard about another name of a central office person. Did they eventually select someone to go down to the central office?

Griffin: Who?

Roberts: I'm saying they had it. Most districts would move somebody down to say they had somebody.

Griffin: Well, I ended up being the--I guess I was it. I guess I was it.

Roberts: So what was your position?

Griffin: My position, I ended up being the--let me tell the story. [Laughter]

Dulaney: That's good, that's what we want to hear. [Laughter]

Roberts: What happened was after we had gotten it we took two, three years to get it really smooth and working

properly, the way we thought it should be. Then they wanted to make a change and they wanted me to do something different. So I stood my grounds in that I told them that for me to make that change they would have to make sure that they had a black person who was going to serve as one of the principals at Hamilton Park School. And Laura Muckleroy [?] got to be the principal, one of the elementary principals at Hamilton Park School. They wanted me to set up a program called the Volunteer Program. We already had a program at Hamilton Park to get parents to participate in volunteer activities at Hamilton Park School. So I was given a job only if they made Laura Muckleroy the principal at the school. And I stood my grounds on that because I thought it was very important that we needed to make sure that we had somebody there that had given a lot of her time and life to Hamilton Park Elementary School. And Laura Muckleroy was one of the leaders in our elementary programs, so she got to be the principal at Hamilton Park. So then we started to get more people in. We got black counselors that was in the elementary

school that worked with all of the kids. And we had a black counselor, but she worked just with black kids because there was already somebody there at that time. So she decided she didn't want to work in Richardson anymore and she went somewhere else. I've forgotten who it was, but I remember that happened. So we got Fannie Fair [?] got to be one of the counselors. We got her and they kept saying to me, "If you going to get in trouble because you always changing, getting people." I said, "If that will get me out of here I'll go." But we have to try to get as many black folk in positions as we can. If you don't ask for nothing you're not going to get anything.

Roberts: What happened to the high school building?

Griffin: The who?

Roberts: The high school building for Hamilton Park.

Griffin: I didn't understand that.

Roberts: What happened to the high school building?

Griffin: It's still there.

Roberts: What is it now?

Griffin: It's Hamilton Park Pacesetter.

Roberts: Oh, so you had grades one through twelve?

Griffin: Right. It--the Pacesetter program was placed into Hamilton Park School. And Hamilton Park School was a twelve grade school. Then what happened was that when we did the integration--that's why I told you a lot of strange things happened. We got those--they brought all those workers in Richardson. They came back and made that school look brand new just like it was the day we walked in there, because they cleaned it up, they painted it up, put in new furnishings what we need[ed] [for] new furnishings. We got new equipment for the students. We got typewriters and all of that business in there. We had--that's why I said we had assistant teachers. We got assistant teachers that was an advantage for the Richardson schools.

Roberts: Now were the assistant teachers certified teachers?

Griffin: They were certified teachers, yes. And it was for the rest of the school as a result of--so what we

got the rest of the school and the Richardson School District got stuff because I would ask for what it was that--I would talk to the teachers and say, "Tell me what you want. Let's get what we need right now. This is the best time to get it."

Roberts: Two questions about the transition process. I know you sent all your kids to Richardson high schools. For sports the integration was probably smooth, but in terms of academics how did the students do at high school and elementary? Were they behind? Or did they have problems in terms of academic achievement? In some situations when there's a transition that massive some of the kids have difficulty.

Griffin: Well that was--we had some pretty smart kids at Hamilton Park. We had--the guy that made the highest scores on the various academic tests that they took, he was black. He was an outstanding student. He went to the Air Force Academy. His name was Timberlake. He was--he came out an officer from the Air Force Academy. And Timberlake was very smart. His sisters and

brothers were very smart. Other students, Ms. Riddick's son used to be the counselor at Matterson. And she was at Booker Washington when I went to Booker [T. Washington High School]. [Laughter] So as a result we had some pretty smart students at Hamilton Park. We had some good students, because we had some good teachers in the elementary schools. And as a result they were able hang in there tough with it.

Roberts: What about the socio-economic differences? As I understand Hamilton Park community it would probably be--would you say it would be middle-class? Upper, lower class?

Griffin: Kind of upper.

Roberts: Upper middle?

Griffin: Right.

Roberts: Okay. And as I understand Richardson which may not be the case there. I know some of Lake Highlands you think of as a high income situation.

Griffin: Partly. Partly. The reason why Lake Highlands made that jump in the economics out there was when they

started building TI [Texas Instruments] and some other things out at that area those people moved to that area. But that's why we were able to get things. It was because of who we were. Because our people didn't back down from wanting the best for their children. Because the people in Hamilton Park had gotten some good jobs as a result of TI sitting right there right across from what now is I-20--I mean [Highway] 635. See a lot of them in there--I was talking to somebody at a funeral the other day. We lost my assistant coach. We were at his funeral the other day. We were talking and they said, "Coach, you remember when we graduated from high school?" Said, "We went over to TI and we all got jobs and all of us are just retired." [Laughter]

Roberts: That's interesting. You mentioned your own kids and I happened to--they have been very successful. Would you tell us a little bit about that?

Griffin: Who my kids?

Roberts: Your kids.

Griffin: My son is a doctor at Southwest Medical School [University of Texas Southwestern Medical School]. He is the head of the anesthesiology department.

Dulaney: I didn't know that was your son. I met him. Last year. Wow. [Laughter] Wait till I see him.

Griffin: Yes [Laughter] so he is. And my daughter is a teacher in Atlanta, Georgia. She is the middle school teacher and she's leader of the seventh grade group. So she is--that's her thing. And she has three daughters and one of them is a teacher in Georgia. Another one is a lawyer and she got her degree at Georgetown [University] in Washington [D.C.]. She got married in the past year and her husband is a lieutenant in the Navy and he is on submarines. And she has been given a job to reorganize some department for the Navy that she's into. And so then we have the youngest granddaughter, she is teaching people how to dance and she learned to do that from Ann Williams' school here in Dallas [Dallas Black Dance Theater]. Because she came and stayed with us. And so she is into that area.

Then my...well I was trying think of something else, but I can't. [Laughter]

Roberts: Let me ask you about your academic preparation. I know you went to Jarvis [Christian College]. Where did you get your masters? I know that you're--

Griffin: North Texas State [College]

Roberts: I know that you're a Dr. Griffin. Also your wife is Dr. Griffin so tell us a little about where you acquired your advanced degrees.

Griffin: We both got our doctors from Jarvis. We got our honorary doctorates from Jarvis. I was--when Dr. Jones was the president at Jarvis they got rid of him, at--the board of trustees [did]. So they asked me if I would come and help them out during the summer--the summer after that happened. And I went down to Jarvis and I worked with Jarvis that summer because I told them, "It's time." I told them, "It's time now. I got to go back to Richardson." [Laughs] So I went back to Richardson, but I worked with them and Dr. Rand and Dr. Charles Berry. Dr. Rand took it and when he was time he got sick and Dr. Berry had told

us the board chairman who was the district attorney at Smith County [Texas]. He was a member of the Christian Church and he was on that board of directors at Jarvis. And Dr. Berry went down and took over at Jarvis, and so I helped him get organized and I worked with him. And my wife was a librarian here in Dallas and she left Lincoln High School and then went to Seagoville High School. And she left Seagoville High School and went to Jarvis and helped them [for] a couple of years. So that's where we got our degrees. They gave us honorary doctorates. But she got her degree in library science from Atlanta University in Georgia and I got my degree from North Texas State [University of North Texas] and I got my religious documentation from Texas Christian University.

Roberts: Thank you.

Dulaney: Alright. Anything you want to add, Dr. Griffin?

Griffin: [Laughter] [Claps] I'll answer anything you got. I don't have any secrets.

Dulaney: Well one last question here then and we're going to wrap it up. Given everything that you did from being in Richardson from 1954 I guess to about 1979, 1980. You said twenty-five years, so I'm projecting ahead. That's about 1979 or the 1980s. What would you change? Would you do it all over again the same way?

Griffin: I believe I would. I thought that the children in Hamilton Park, in our area there--I thought they really set a Pacesetters type of environment for Richardson School District. And as a result of the things that the teachers had done for getting them ready, not necessarily for integration, they were getting them ready to be good citizens, period. And when they got to that point and they were given that opportunity to integrate the school district and they wanted to integrate because there were some things that they did not have an opportunity to get. They wanted to get those things, so they started making enough noise and some of us who were not afraid to venture out took the journey with them. And as a result we

had a ball with them. And we had some young men who played football that were given scholarships to go to major colleges. We got some young people who were musicians [and] got that opportunity. Some of them were like the Timberlake boy and his family. He went to the Air Force Academy. And I was talking to somebody about him at the funeral the other day. They're four brothers--I mean the sisters and three brothers. All of them work for the U.S. Post Office Department and all of them are some kind of officer in the Post Office Department here in Dallas. So not only them, but Joe Williams' son--Dr. Williams. His son's name is Joe Williams Jr. He worked at the Southwest Medical School. He got his degree I think from down in Georgia somewhere. And then you got others that made some significant developments and opportunities for other kids because they encouraged them to, you know, "Get--you know--Don't be a thug. [Laughs] You know, but knew what it is that you need to do." You had--they had good opportunities as a result. And their parents got involved and they made sure that

the kids do those things that would be critical to them.

Dulaney: Okay. Well, Dr. Griffin, thank you very much for the interview. We are ending the second part of a two-part interview with Dr. James Griffin on September 14, 2011 in Dallas, Texas.

[End of Interview]