

Flora Davis Crittenden Interview Summary

Interviewee: Flora Davis Crittenden

Interviewers: Emily Caldwell and Ebony Tyler

Interview Date: Friday, November 16, 2012

Location: Downing-Gross Cultural Arts Center, Newport News, Virginia

Length: 1 audio file, MP3 format; approximately 120 minutes and 30 seconds

THE INTERVIEWEE: Mrs. Flora Davis Crittenden is an eighty-eight year old African-American woman. She is a native of Brooklyn, New York and moved to Hampton Roads as a young girl. She graduated from the former Huntington High School in Newport News, received her undergraduate degree from Virginia State University, and earned her Master of Science degree from Indiana University. She later continued her education with post-graduate study in advanced Guidance Theory at the University of Louisville.

Mrs. Crittenden worked for thirty-two years in the Newport News Public Schools. During this time, she fulfilled the duties of classroom teacher, extracurricular activity sponsor, department head, guidance counselor, and guidance director. In 1986, Mrs. Crittenden entered public office, serving first on the Newport News City Council before serving as a delegate to the General Assembly. Mrs. Crittenden has also been active in the NAACP (as both a life member and past president), the Trinity Baptist Church, and numerous civic organizations.

For her tireless contributions to the community, Mrs. Crittenden has received numerous awards. Among the most prestigious of these was the renaming of George Washington Carver High School in Newport News in her honor. Now known as the Flora D. Crittenden Middle School, the school functions as a magnet school for science and mathematics. She was also named by the *Daily Press* as one of the top ten most influential women on the Peninsula.

The information in the above summary has been drawn from "House Joint Resolution, No. 807, Commending Flora Davis Crittenden, former member of the House of Delegates of Virginia." See <https://leg1.state.va.us/cgi-bin/legp504.exe?051+ful+HJ807ER>

THE INTERVIEWERS: Emily Caldwell is an undergraduate student at Christopher Newport University, where she is studying History inside the M.A.T. Program. She is also working towards minors in Childhood Studies and Spanish. Ebony Tyler is an undergraduate student at Christopher Newport University, where she is studying psychology with a minor in civic engagement and social entrepreneurship. Both are currently enrolled in Dr. Laura Puaca's history class on "The Long Civil Rights Movement" and are conducting this interview as part of that course.

CONTENT OF THE INTERVIEW: The interview included a diverse range of topics and covered Mrs. Crittenden's childhood, education, and employment, as well as her experience living through the civil rights era. The interview also touched on Mrs. Crittenden's views on the civil rights movement in both Newport News and the United States more broadly.

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START OF RECORDING

EC: This is Emily Caldwell and Ebony Tyler interviewing Mrs. Flora Crittenden

ET: Can you please describe your childhood? What was it like growing up in Brooklyn, New York?

FDC: May I give you some background information before I tell you that?

ET and EC: Yes, of course. Please do.

FDC: I am Flora Davis Crittenden. I am eighty-eight years old and I still enjoy life. I have three children, five grandchildren, and eight great-grandchildren. My husband of sixty-five years, Raymond, passed away in January of 2010. I live alone now and must adjust to living without him. I have had a wide variety of experiences during my eighty-eight years and I feel really blessed. I am not an amen or overzealous Christian but I do believe in God and I believe that he has blessed my life richly. I did grow up in Brooklyn, New York. My experience was quite different in New York than in Newport News. People believe that there is great racial harmony and no discrimination in the North, but that is not true at all. There is discrimination in the North. When I lived in Brooklyn, I lived in an all-African American community. There was no segregation of schools, of course, but there was a difference in the way teachers treated minority students and white students in the schools. I tried very hard as a student in elementary school to

do all the right things, to study hard, to make good grades and to be a good citizen because I wanted so much to be recognized. You know, maybe a citizen of the week or some recognition for the good things that I did. But I never got that recognition. Of course, I never regretted having tried to do the right thing but I just didn't get the recognition that I wanted and it made me rather sad. Even in New York, I lived in different places and had different experiences regarding civil rights and the way I was treated. I lived in Scarsdale, New York, which was a very rich area of New York. I lived there not because my parents were rich but because my father and mother were asked to be caretakers of one of the big beautiful homes in Scarsdale and I lived there with them. That was very interesting. I had a huge play house in the backyard, which was two levels and it was large enough to stand up in. It was all furnished, it had electricity, and it was just a wonderful place to play. When I went to school, I was treated very well. Chauffeurs picked me up along with the children of families they worked for, and it was just really nice. The teachers treated me as well as they did the other students, they made no difference. They knew me and they knew my mother. But they did not know my father. Well, my mother was very fair with very straight hair and they thought, I found out later, that we were of Hispanic background. They did not know we were black. When they saw my father, who is much, much, browner, they knew we were black people. The chauffeur stopped picking me up to take me to school. They wouldn't hold my hand in Physical Education classes. They just had nothing else to do with me and that was really just a lonely experience.

EC: How old were you at this time?

FDC: Eight years old.

EC: Eight?

FDC: I was in the third grade. I was there for a year. So I had to suffer through that year without friends or contact from young people. Yet I still tried to do my best in school and do all the things that were expected of me. When I left Scarsdale, I went back to Brooklyn and I finished my elementary school career in Brooklyn. That was a very lonesome time for me as well. My mother was very strict and she didn't let me go out to play. In Brooklyn where we lived, there were no real recreation centers, neighborhood parks, or places like that where we could go and be safe. So, I was never allowed to go outside and play with other children. I had to invent my own games and just do my own things alone. That was a very, very lonesome time for me. Interestingly enough, I taught. I had a wonderful roll-top desk and I had a roll book. I made up the names of students and put them in the roll book. I taught as though I had a class full of students, giving them assignments and having interaction with them. I was the teacher and I was the student when I had to be. That was fun to me. I do not know why I did that but that was what I did to pass the time. I did have members of my family who were teachers but they lived in Newport News. They did not live in New York where I lived. I went to Newport News for holidays and summer vacation but vacation schedules differed so, sometimes, when I went to Newport News, school was in session and I would go to school with one of my aunts who taught. I think that may be how I became interested in teaching. When I left elementary school, I came to Newport News to live with my aunt, Agnes Davis Greene Buckner, and my grandmother, Laura Catherine Davis. They gave me all of the necessities in life including God and support. Had it not been for them, I certainly would not be the person I am today. I went to Huntington High School. I'm sure you've heard of Huntington High School! That was just a marvelous educational experience for me. At that time, African Americans were very, very interested in education. They thought this was the key to getting ahead and being accepted, so parents instilled

in their children the importance of education. You go to school to learn. The teachers were really engaged with young people because they also felt that education was what would put us ahead. It was just a marvelous experience for me because they were so interested in what we did, and they were so dedicated to us. I learned so much in high school, not just about academics but about life and how we needed to form our personalities and our actions so that they were acceptable, which I think was a good thing. That really was not the key to desegregation or obtaining civil rights but I think it made a very good person of me and other students who came along in that era.

EC: What would you say were the demographics of Huntington High when you went there?

FDC: Oh, all black! Huntington High School, I think, was established in 1921 and it was the only all-black high school for African Americans until Carver High School was built in 1949.

EC: And was that the same for teachers and administrators?

FDC: All black!

EC: So did you feel you had more friends in Newport News than when you were in New York?

FDC: Oh definitely! Of course, in high school, you had all sorts of organizations that you could join. We had music organizations. We had the choir and the band. We had drama club, debate society and just all sorts of organizations that we could be a part of. I participated in the band as a majorette. I was in the drama club and performed in a number of plays while I was in high school. I was in the choir and I enjoyed the choir. We traveled and I enjoyed singing so that was a pleasant experience for me. All of the activities that I engaged in during my high school career were not just fun but were developmental. Now, you may be surprised at this, but I graduated from Huntington in 1941 and my class still meets. There aren't many of us now. We have about ten members but we still meet. We have dine together and do other interesting things as a group.

I thought it might be interesting to you that, at eighty-eight years old, I'm still going to class meetings. [laughter]

EC: What was the community of Newport News like for you?

FDC: Well, of course, we were segregated. I lived in a totally segregated community. The way they depict African Americans during that era was not my experience. We had very fine communities. I lived in a community where we left our doors open all the time. We raised our windows in the summer. We had no problems whatsoever. It was quiet. Everybody looked out for everybody else. It was truly a village because the adults in the community were very, very strict with the young people. They didn't let them do things that they thought were wrong. They corrected us. It didn't make any difference whether they were related or not. They corrected us and they set us straight whenever we did things that weren't right. Of course, sometimes they told our parents so we were punished at home for things that we did in the community. It was just a wonderful childhood for me. I enjoyed it. It was different from New York in that I was able to associate with other young people in the afternoon. After I did my homework, I could play with the community kids and there were quite a few of them on my block. That was just a happy time for me.

ET: How did the demographics of the area change? You said that Newport News was segregated. Did you ever see the all-black neighborhoods integrate more? Or how was that?

FDC: Well, as far as housing is concerned, I don't see a great deal of difference. The neighborhood that I lived in when I was in growing up is still all-black. Now, in cases of rentals, you may see a little more integration but there is not that much of it. I lived in what they now call the Southeast Community and the Southeast Community is predominantly black.

EC: We had talked about this earlier, but I did want to get your opinion about what happened with the Shoe Lane Controversy.

FDC: Well, that area, which was called Morrison, was an area where black people had lived for years and years, almost since the beginning of time [smiles] and they were land owners. Most of the property in the Morrison area, as it was called, was owned by blacks and they had, for years, established their homes, businesses, and churches, such as the First Baptist Church of Morrison, and were very proud of the community. Of course, when Christopher Newport was built, they lost their homes. It was not just the fact that they lost homes but they lost their community. They lost that spirit of togetherness and the pride that they felt because this was an area that they had developed and they had lived there for many years. Naturally, it created a lot of animosity and there are people who still have a bad feeling about Christopher Newport University because of that. I think there is one house left on Shoe Lane that belongs to an elderly African American woman who just refuses to move. I think Christopher Newport University is trying to be very diplomatic in its negotiations with her and not force her out but to offer her an amount for her home that is acceptable to her. She just does not want to move. I think she might be almost as old as I am so this is just traumatic for her. Eventually, she will have to move because there is a parking lot right behind her house that she claims in on her property—there is a dispute about that. I can understand how people felt and I share their feelings. However, Christopher Newport is an asset to the community and its citizens. I feel that, in recent years, Christopher Newport has tried to do things for the community that would help repair the emotional damage that was done but there is still a feeling of dissatisfaction.

EC: What would you say influenced your decision to complete your undergraduate studies at Virginia State University?

FDC: I majored in physical education at Virginia State University. I have to tell you a little story about going to college. I knew that I would go to college. There was no reason to think otherwise because my aunts before me had gone to college and, of course, I was in their care and I knew that I would go to college. I had an older sister. Her name was Thelma Juanita. She was just a year and a half older than I and she went to Spellman College in Atlanta, Georgia. I had an aunt who taught chemistry at Spellman. I wanted to go to Spellman College because I wanted to be with my sister and my aunt. In the meantime, I was offered a scholarship to major in physical education at [what was then] Virginia State College for Negroes. Well, I didn't want to major in physical education either! Believe it or not, I was an excellent math student and I wanted to major in math. I was shipped off to Virginia State College. I had to be there for four years. I had nowhere else to go. But my first year, I was very unhappy! I cried a lot and then I decided, "Well this is crazy. You might as well stop crying and try to enjoy your tenure at Virginia State College." And I did. I was also a majorette there so that was a nice experience for me. I didn't particularly enjoy physical education but I was a very good major. When I finished Virginia State, I came to Newport News and I taught at Carver High School, which had just opened. I taught Health and Physical Education and I also taught Social Studies and English.

EC: What was the community as Virginia State like?

FDC: Let me say this. First of all, it was an all-black school and they were steeped in tradition—. You knew if you came here you had certain rules and regulations that you had to follow. You had to abide by their principles. You had to be a good spokesman for Virginia State College and that kind of thing. We didn't have very many privileges, so social life was not much. We couldn't even go off campus without being chaperoned and we had to be in the dormitory by six o'clock. Now, if we wanted to go to the library after six o'clock, we had to sign in and sign

out. They just had very strict rules but we enjoyed life in the dormitory. We had a lot of fun in the dormitory. So I enjoyed my experiences at Virginia State University, but it just was not what I wanted to do.

ET: While you were at Virginia State University, is that when you became a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Incorporated?

FDC: No, I was pledged but I just didn't have time. In physical education, you had to take so many classes and you didn't get the same hours as you did in regular classes. For example, if I had a class in physical education that I had to attend for one hour, five days a week I may only get one hour of credit for it. So that meant that we had more courses to take than other students because we didn't get the same number of hours for our major courses that other students received. It was very difficult in physical education because physical education was demanding and I worked as well. I worked as the secretary in the girl's physical education office. So trying to follow the schedule in physical ed. and trying to do the work in the office and trying to do extracurricular activities was just very difficult. So although I pledged, I decided I wouldn't go over. I broke my pledge and went into the graduate chapter.

ET: Okay. What role would you say Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Incorporated, or the National Pan-Hellenic Council, has had in regards to the civil rights movement and civil rights issues in the community or in different phases in your life?

FDC: Well, I think they have been supportive of the movement. I wouldn't say, to my knowledge, that they really had a big impact on the civil rights movement but they were certainly supportive.

EC: After you finished your undergraduate studies, you came back to Newport News. How long were you in Newport News until you pursued Indiana University?

FDC: I started teaching in 1949. I went to Indiana in 1956, so I had I taught for seven years before I went to Indiana University. I went to Indiana for several reasons. First of all, we could not go to white universities in the state of Virginia. Secondly, there were only two colleges that I knew about where you could get a major in physical education, health education, or recreation. Indiana University was one of them and there was also a college in New York—I think it was Springfield—and we could have gotten a master's there in our area. I didn't really want to get a master's in health or physical education. I wanted to get a master's in counseling because, at that time, I was interested in counseling. But the state would not pay for a master's degree unless it was in the field that you were teaching. So, there were always restrictions that I kind of had to go another way to do what I wanted to do. But, nevertheless, while I was at Indiana I was able to get certified for counseling. I left the College of Health, Physical Education, and Recreation and went to the School of Education to certify for guidance and counseling. That was really difficult too because here I am in two different schools. But I was able to get my master's in health education and in counseling.

EC: What would you say your experience was like when you were at Indiana University?

FDC: It was similar to my home experience because Indiana was a very, very segregated state but we didn't feel it as much on campus. It was only when you went to the city and, when we went to Indiana, my whole family went. My husband got his master's at the same time and we took the children. So we lived in married housing facilities and, of course, we had to go to the city to do our shopping and the community was very segregated. No one bothered us, really, but they weren't friendly either. You'd go in a store and maybe not get waited on for a length of time because the manager and the clerks just didn't want you in there. So, you might have to wait around for a little while and ask for service to get whatever it was that you needed. The campus

was different. We didn't feel racial discord or we didn't feel that our rights were denied in any way, so that was a good experience.

EC: When did you meet your husband? Was that in Newport News or when you were in college?

FDC: I met him at Virginia State College. We both majored in physical education. We both loved to swim and I met him at the swimming pool. He was two years behind me in school

EC: Was he from this area as well?

FDC: No, his home was Richmond, Virginia. He was an athlete, a very outstanding athlete. He was a football player and basketball player.

EC: And he taught in Newport News as well?

FDC: Yes, he did. He taught at Huntington High School. He taught health and physical education and coached.

EC: How old were your children when you were at Indiana University?

FDC: My oldest was born in '45, so he was eleven. My daughter, Thursa, was eight and my son, Alonzo, was five.

EC: Could you tell anything about their education experiences while you were in Indiana? I'm guessing that your two were of school age, correct?

FDC: They were of school age and they went to school. They went to campus elementary school and I thought their experiences were great. One thing—. They tested my children and they knew exactly what their abilities were and how to work with them in the classroom and my oldest son was very gifted. I had a special conference where they explained to me how gifted he was and what kind of program he needed so that, when we came back to Newport News, I could go to the school and inform the school of where he was and what he needed. But they didn't pay any

attention to that. School officials didn't pay any attention to that. He was handled just like any other child in the school system.

EC: When your children were at Indiana, was that a predominantly African American school?

FDC: No, that was a campus elementary school so it was integrated. But it was predominantly white.

ET: When did you attend the University of Louisville? When was that?

FDC: I believe it was 1971 and it was a summer program. I received a scholarship to study advanced counseling techniques and theory.

ET: What were the demographics of that university?

FDC: Oh, it was a mostly white university. They had a few African Americans students there. I think there was one in my program.

ET: How were your experiences there?

FDC: Oh, it was a great experience. It was a unique experience because they partnered with General Electric to help counselors really understand the relationship between what kids learn in school and how to prepare them for careers. They also had a program there in Louisville. Students went to school for half day and they participated in a GE vocational program for half day. So they were learning vocational skills that they could use in industry but, at the same time, they were getting the core educational courses that they needed. That was a fine experience. As a result of that, I understood that, in counseling young people, I needed to help them understand what their abilities and their talents were. So, in helping them to understand what they were, I had to give them tests. I worked with the Virginia Employment Agency and they would test my students and give them tests of their abilities and also of their talents. This would help them know what their assets were. The students could also relate them to the courses that they were

taking in high school so that they would have the things they needed after high school to go into various occupational areas. That was very helpful. I learned a lot about career education in that program and, when I came back to Newport News, I introduced career education to the Newport News system and I established a career center at Carver High School. Students could actually do a study of their own interests, talents, and abilities and study various occupations that were available in the workforce and compare their assets with what was needed in certain occupational areas. This would help them decide on what they were going to major in in college or vocational school so that they could enter careers that were best suited for their talents and for their abilities. That was a wonderful program.

EC: When you returned [to Newport News], you went into counseling?

FDC: I was already in counseling but I was a part-time counselor and part-time teacher at that time. But when I became the director of the guidance department, I became a full-time counselor.

EC: So, you no longer taught?

FDC: Right. I taught fifteen years and I was a guidance counselor for seventeen years. So, I was in the system thirty-two years.

ET: What were your experiences like as a teacher or a counselor in the public education system?

FDC: I loved teaching. I liked the older students. I enjoyed working with kids. From 1949 to when they integrated in 1971, I worked strictly with high school students and I just enjoyed working with them. I think I was a successful teacher and counselor but I don't feel that I should take all of the credit for my success. I worked with a principal who was interested in helping young people grow and develop, and providing the kind of curriculum and extracurricular activities that would keep them interested in school. Of course, he worked with teachers to help them improve their teaching skills so that students could really learn. He was creative in the

programs that he set up to help young people so they had many experiences. His name was Homer L. Hines and Homer L. Hines was my high school chemistry teacher.

EC: Is Hines Middle School named after him?

FDC: Hines Middle School is named after him. He was an excellent teacher. He was very calm, very dedicated to his students. I was fortunate enough to come back to Newport News and to teach under my former teacher. He did things like—. He wanted an orchestra. His dream was to have a one hundred piece orchestra and he had a friend who was a music teacher and she was teaching in Texas. So, he brought her from Texas to Newport News to start the orchestra program at Carver High School and she did develop a full one hundred piece orchestra. It was the only orchestra in the city or on the peninsula or anywhere. They went and they traveled all over the United States because they were just so exceptional. They received invitations to go places to play. Of course, at first, she told him that she couldn't come to Newport News and leave her husband in Texas. He said, "Well, that's all right. We'll bring him here, too." So, he brought him to Carver and he became an assistant principal. We had a young lady, a Newport News native, who was an excellent drama student and she went to Howard University and studied theatre. When she came out of college, he wanted her to come to Carver to start the drama club. But she didn't have certification because she didn't take education courses. So, he said, "Okay, we'll bring you here and we'll arrange with the state department to let your first year of teaching be your student—. What do you call it when you have to take your—?"

EC: It's your student teaching.

FDC: Yeah. He said "That will satisfy the student teaching you have to have." So she did receive a salary but it was a reduced salary because she didn't have her credentials. But that first year served as her student teaching and she got her credentials and she was great. We had a drama

department out of this world. You just wouldn't believe what she did with those students. These were the kinds of things that he did that most principals didn't do. As I said, the orchestra was the only one on the peninsula, anywhere. And of course, there were drama clubs in other schools but they didn't produce plays like our drama person did. We had a very good debate club and he brought in the person he wanted to do debating.

ET: Earlier you mentioned integration. Do you remember your initial response to school integration as a teacher?

FDC: Well, when we integrated I was in counseling. I was no longer teaching. But the integration of schools in the city of Newport News went very well, I thought, because they didn't integrate the whole program at one time. What they did was integrate the administrative staff of the schools of Newport News and my husband was selected. He was the first African American to go to an all-white school. He was at Huntington and he went to Denbigh High School as an assistant principal. That is the way they started. After he went to Denbigh, the next year, they put other African Americans in administrative positions. Then, they integrated the teaching staff. I can't remember how long it was after the teaching staff was integrated before they had full integration with all of the students. It worked very well, I thought. Some of the citizens of Newport News that fought it—. I don't know if you'd heard about S.O.S. There was an organization called S.O.S., Save Our Schools, because they did not want integration. They were opposed to it and they predicted that there would be all sorts of problems when the schools were integrated. So, this organization came out to all of the various schools in Newport News to monitor what went on and, of course—

EC: Was this? I'm sorry, please continue.

FDC: They had policemen with them and there was just no disturbance whatsoever. The whites and blacks came to school that day. They went to class. There was no disorder, no problem whatsoever. It was just as smooth.

EC: Was the S.O.S. organization—. Who made that? Was it predominantly white?

Predominantly black?

FDC: Oh, it was all white.

EC: All white.

FDC: All white. They just thought that integrating schools would just destroy the whole school system and you would never recover from it. But that did not happen.

ET: So, how did the school year proceed, as they all integrated? Did it proceed well?

FDC: Oh, yes.

ET: Were there any disturbances ever?

FDC: We didn't have—. Well, I can speak for Carver High School.

ET: Okay, okay.

FDC: We didn't have any problems whatsoever. Everything went extremely well. The students were respectful. They got along fine. I think the only problem that we had which would not be noticed by everybody was that there were white teachers who felt that African American students couldn't learn on the same level with white students. So, they wanted them to be placed in lower level class. So we had "r" classes, which were remedial. We had "y" classes which were below average. We had average and above average classes and most of the blacks were assigned to below average or remedial.

[Interruption in recording]

EC: Would you be willing to describe your experiences as a representative in the House of Delegates for the state of Virginia?

FDC: Did I what?

EC: Could you tell your experiences—

FDC: Well, let me tell you first that I was on Newport News City Council. So that was my first elected experience. From 1986 to 1990, I served as a member of Newport News City Council. It was an interesting year. Jessie Ratley was the mayor. That was her first year as the mayor of the city of Newport News. She was very skillful and there wasn't, as far as I know, much objection to her mayorship and the way she operated the council and the things that we did for the city of Newport News. It was smooth. There was a majority of democrats [on council] when I first became a council member. We were able to get a lot of things through that we would not have been able to get through had we not been a predominately democratic council. It changed before I left. We still worked well together. We did not always see eye to eye on the direction of the city or certain projects that were brought before the council, but we worked well together. I was on council for four years but I did not win my reelection. So, some of my former students thought I should run for the House of Delegates. Bobby Scott had been in the House of Delegates and he moved to the Senate. And, at that time, Henry Maxwell—I don't know if you've heard of him or not—but Henry Maxwell ran for his House seat. So we had an African American in the House and an African American in the Senate. Well, when Bobby ran for Congress—. I know you know about Bobby Scott. You don't?

EC: I don't.

FDC: Well, he is our African American congressman from Newport News. He represents Newport News and parts of Hampton and, I believe, parts of Norfolk. When Bobby Scott, who

was then Senator Scott, ran for Congress, he won his seat and went to Congress. When Henry Maxwell, who was in the House of Delegates, ran for Bobby's Senate seat, he won. So that left an opening in the House of Delegates. My former students encouraged me to run for that seat so I did and I won. I stayed eleven years. I retired after eleven years.

EC: What was your experience like while being a delegate or representative in the House of Delegates?

FDC: Interesting. We were divided on many issues. When I first went to the House of Delegates, we were predominately a democratic House and Senate. Things went very well because democrats were more liberal in measures pertaining to African Americans and other minority groups. Things went extremely well, I thought, insofar as far as really passing measures that would help Virginia citizens. Democrats weren't as interested in big businesses and trying to pass measures that would support the big businesses. They were really interested in, I thought, the welfare of citizens. We pushed through a lot of measures because we were in the majority and we could do it. That benefited minorities. Of course, we were concerned about the entire state of Virginia and the welfare of all citizens but we were able to do things for the minorities. Once the Republicans took control, it was very difficult to get measures through that would benefit minorities. I think that was because the programs and all that we wanted financed were things that would bring—especially in education—our children up to the level that they should be. The Republicans didn't think money should be used for that purpose. It was very upsetting to me because they were very vocal in the discussions on the floor about these things. "When are we going to stop throwing money at 'those' people?" "They're just lazy." "They go to school and they learn like anybody else." It was that kind of attitude and it was really hurtful but you had to take it.

ET: Can you describe some of the programs that you were trying to implement that they were opposed to?

FDC: Well, one of the programs that I pushed through—it got through but it wasn't funded—was called "Families in Education." What it would do was provide a center in various localities where they could have information for parents. Parents could learn how to relate to the school, how to follow their children in school, what they needed to do in the home to help their children be more effective in the school setting, and things of that nature. It was a parental program really, although we said "Families in Education" so we could include all sorts of caregivers of children. It was passed but they wouldn't fund it. Newport News was interested in developing the program and they were willing to pay half of the cost if the state would pay half, and they wouldn't do that either. Other things—. The prison system is full of African Americans. We tried to change some of the laws that were unfair.

ET: Like what?

FDC: Well, for example, the sentence for using coke is far more strenuous than the ones for using cocaine. Coke is the drug of choice for African Americans because it's not as expensive. The penalty for using that is far more stringent than it is for cocaine. That's just one example that I can think of right now. With juveniles, there is a vast difference in the way juveniles are treated. When you hear of teenagers being tried as adults and sent to prison, they're African American youth, mostly African American men. The laws are unfair, biased, and many of them need to be changed. We made an effort to change some of those laws but we couldn't. People who've committed felonies but who come out of prison, satisfy all the provisions of parole, are integrated into the society and become really good citizens and contributing citizens, they have a difficult time getting their right to vote. In my opinion, the right to vote should not be taken from

anybody. Even if they go to prison, when they come out, they should be able to maintain the right to vote. That's the way it is in the United States of America except Kentucky and Virginia. A person who has committed a felony and comes out of jail and is clean and is doing fine in their community has to apply to the governor to get their voting rights. The governor can restore those rights or the governor can throw all those applications in the trash can. There's no way that you can make the governor look at those applications and give former felons their voting rights back. That's unfair. The law doesn't allow felons to have jobs. Applications ask if you were ever arrested, if you were ever in jail, if you were ever convicted of a felony. If you've been convicted of a felony, you can't get a job. I have a friend who went to Vietnam and when he came out he had Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. For a while he used drugs, so during the time he was on drugs he committed a felony. He cleaned himself up and he became a good citizen. He had a business, and business was doing well. It was a transportation business and he transported disabled people. He was getting Medicare patients through the state of Virginia, and when they found out he was a former felon they dropped him from the list of participants. So he lost his business. That's unfair! He got letters from his minister, from the mayor of Newport News, from the state representatives, from the congressional representatives, and from so many people but still they said, "No. You're a former felon. We're not sending you anymore business." So there are still some things that we need to do to take care of people, to make the system fair. That is definitely a civil rights issue. That's something that comes to mind that I can relate to you but there are so many other things. Opportunities, for example. Blacks don't have the same opportunities for education, for housing, for employment and these are things that are necessary for a good life. But the system is still not equal. We have a lot that we need to do and most of it has to be done through the legal system. We do fall short. A lot has been done but we still don't

have equal rights. Civil rights simply means citizen rights and citizen rights should be the same for every single individual who is an American citizen. There should not be a difference.

ET: When in your life did you feel civil rights became this passionate thing in your life, recognizing that “It’s very important to me and my family”? Is there a certain experience where you said, “This is where I need to be. This is where I need to dedicate my time and advocacy”?

FDC: No, I’m not sure. I was involved in the civil rights movement during the sixties. I wasn’t out on the front lines but I was a member of the NAACP and I was president of the NAACP at one time. I did participate in the movement but I always thought that education was a way to improve race relations and to advance the cause of civil rights. I worked with my students all the time to try to prepare them for good citizenship and for contributing to the community, improving themselves and trying to establish good relations with others. I did that when we were all black and I did that when we integrated, because citizens have to fight for their own rights. Things will remain as they are unless we do something to gain our rights. Of course, this civil rights movement was great because it did give us the right to vote. There is some voter suppression building now and I think it’s because of our president. But there was a time we didn’t have the right to vote at all. As a matter of fact, American citizens have been restricted in the voting process for years. I think it was 1889 or something like that when women fought for their right to vote and, since then, there have been movements for the rights of African Americans to vote. Of course, the thrust was in the sixties, but it didn’t just happen in the sixties. I have a book here maybe you all could get. It’s *Students on Strike* and it’s written by John A. Stokes and I’m going to tell you about this book, *Students on Strike*. This is really a moving story about high school students who fought for civil rights. They organized and they set up strategies and they were a part of the court case. It’s just so interesting that high school students actually

had the courage and conviction to fight for their rights. They were fighting for a school. During the time that we didn't have equal rights, schools weren't equal. In many places in Virginia, black students went to schools in shacks, tar paper buildings, and houses that had no heat or running water. Carver High School was a result of a civil rights battle. We were in Warwick County at that time. We weren't a part of Newport News when Carver opened. The citizens of Warwick fought for years for a high school. They had what they called a high school, but it was in a four-room, two-story house with no running water and no heating system. The kids had to go to school early to make a fire in a potbelly stove in the center of the downstairs and the heat was supposed to go up to the second level. They had outhouses so they had to go to the bathroom outside. This was before Carver High School was built. Carver High school opened in 1949 but black citizens of Warwick had been fighting for ages for a high school equal to Warwick High School, which was the high school for whites in the city of Warwick. Newport News did a much better job for their black citizens because we had pretty good buildings. But they weren't equal to the white schools in the fact that they did not get books or materials like the white schools did. When I was in high school, we got the books that were discarded from Newport News High School. Those were the books that came to Huntington. Even when I started teaching at Carver High School, we got Warwick High School's old books. It was a challenge because when I first started teaching, I taught social studies and I had no books. I couldn't use the books that were discarded because the information was outdated. I didn't want to give my young people misinformation so I had to write my own curriculum. Everything that I taught, I had to prepare in advance for my students. It wasn't easy. The other thing is that we had about 100 black high schools in the state of Virginia. There are three left. When they integrated, they closed all of our high schools or made them intermediate schools or middle schools. The three that are left are

Armstrong in Richmond, Booker T. Washington in Norfolk, and Norcom in Portsmouth. Of course, we were not diligent in trying to keep our schools. In some instances, the schools were so poor that there was no need to try to keep them because they were not updated. They did not have the facilities and the equipment that you would need for a good education. In Newport News, Huntington was the high school before integration it is now a middle school. Crittenden was the high school—. Carver High School was the high school for blacks until integration. At first it was Homer L. Hines because he was the principal there. As a matter of fact, he was the only principal at Carver during its existence. They closed Hines, built a new school, and the name followed to the new school. It was decided that they needed the space at what was Carver and, when they renovated it, they renamed it and it opened as Crittenden.

ET: So when these predominately African American schools were closed, what happened to the memorabilia that was in them?

FDC: Oh, they threw most of it away. I was able to take some of the things out of Carver before I left but I didn't have any place to store all of those things. I gave it to different people for safe keeping and they just didn't keep the things like I thought they would. These were people who had buildings and places to store them. We had a picture of every graduating class and I put them in the Moton and they didn't take care of them. I'm going to try to have them refurbished and put them back in Crittenden School on the walls. I think they should be preserved. I was told that the medals and trophies that they won for athletics and drama and things like that were taken to the central administration building but, when I went to see if I could recoup some of the Carver trophies, they didn't know anything about them. So I assume they were just thrown away.

EC: Can you describe a moment to us that gave you hope of true equality?

FDC: Oh, I still have hope about equality. I don't think we have true equality, not by a long shot. It's based on opportunity. Minorities in this country just do not have the same opportunities because there is a difference in economics. For example, usually when a child comes out of a home where there is enough wealth to provide them with books, art, classes in dance, music, to buy instruments and give them lessons, where there is enough money that they can take vacations—. What you see has a lot to do with how long you retain it. So what they see in books relative to geography and history, they go see it and they retain it. They come to school with more than is required for learning. That's what I mean by opportunity. Now, a lot of times, we supplement the opportunity for low-income families and their children but the opportunities are still not as great as for families who have money. There's just a big difference. Then, motivation is a factor. I'm not going to blame it all on the rights of individuals because you have the right to help develop yourself. Everybody does. But, if you are not motivated to do it, if you give excuses, if you don't try to do develop your talents, or if you don't try to make yourself acceptable in society, then that's your fault. We can't blame that on opportunity. So that is another factor. Of course, you just have to have a belief in yourself and the desire to move ahead. That's important. I guess both of you probably have seen families that maybe don't have all the things that one would need but some people in the family move beyond that and, because of their own efforts, they do things that you never thought they could do. Then others in the same family don't do a doggone thing. So it's a matter of motivation and desire. These are things that I tried to instill in my children when I was teaching. I'm very proud of them too, they have done well. They Commonwealth's Attorney is one of my former students. Joni Ivey, who is Senator Scott's chief of staff, is one of my former students. There was a person who was chief of the fire department and who has retired who is one of my former students, and I could just go on and on.

These are things that I tried to instill in them, “You got just as much talent and ability as anybody else. You just have to develop your skills and move ahead. You got it so work with it!”

ET: With that being said, you have done so much in your lifetime. What do you consider to be your greatest contribution to the advancement of African Americans in this area and in general?

FDC: I think the manner in which I helped to develop my students is my greatest contribution. They have given to communities all over the United States and I’m very proud of them. I think that’s my greatest contribution to society, my students, former students. Now, I don’t know if you want to know what I have done personally.

ET: Please go ahead.

FDC: You know, I never think about myself. What have I done personally? I don’t know. I’ve always thought that my work with my students was my main accomplishment. My contributions as an elected official were helpful, not just to African Americans but to all of citizens of Newport News and to all of the state of Virginia. I’ve always been an advocate of education and transportation. One of the things that I did was to work with the Peninsula Transportation Commission, which later became the Hampton Roads Transportation Commission. I was the chair of an ad-hoc committee that worked to consolidate the Peninsula Transportation group with the South Hampton Roads Transportation group. We consolidated them. I’m talking about the people who operate the buses and the trains. I was chair of the ad-hoc committee that consolidated those two groups, which expanded the transportation opportunities in all of Hampton Roads. We were operating separately on the Peninsula and on the Southside. On the Peninsula, we serviced Newport News, Hampton, and Williamsburg. On the other side, it was Norfolk, Portsmouth, Suffolk, Chesapeake, and one other. We were separate units. They had no interaction necessarily with one another. Well, the fact is that people who live on this side work

on the other side, and people who live on the other side work on this side. Families, friends—. We go to shop on the other side. So all of these things were important to consideration of providing a transportation system that would meet the needs of all of Hampton Roads. I chaired that committee and we worked five years to do that. I think that was a very important aspect of my career.

ET: So, in regards to the advancement of civil rights, what advice do you have for Americans, African Americans, white Americans, anyone on how to proceed now?

FDC: Well, I think we need to come together more and discuss the problems. I think they're doing more of that on the federal level now. But I think that we should be doing that as a community. Our state officials need to be talking about it. Federal officials need to be talking about it and plan strategies to make changes. Our relationships with one another are so important. We really don't have a great deal of contact. We are still basically a segregated society.

EC: How exciting is it for you to be named one of the ten influential Peninsula women?

FDC: Oh, that was a great honor. I had no idea that I was considered as an influential person, but I think that was one of the greatest honors I have ever had.

EC: How do you think your nomination would have been received forty or fifty years ago?

FDC: Oh, I would never have been nominated. I don't think I ever would have been nominated, especially by the *Daily Press* staff because, I hate to say this, but they have been racist throughout the years. They are much better now, much better. And I'll say, maybe in the last ten years, they have been giving more attention to African American citizens. So, even ten years ago, I don't think I would have been nominated for that.

EC: Do you have any other thoughts or experiences that you would like to contribute that we haven't inquired about?

FDC: One thing I want to say is that people talk about African Americans and their families and say that African Americans don't do as well as other people because there is no father in the home and children don't do well if they don't have two parents in the home. I hate that conversation because it stereotypes and, I think, it makes young people think, "You know, I'm not going to be anything anyway because I don't have a father." Well, that is not true! At all! I know wonderful people who have come out of single-parent homes. Sometimes there's just the mother. Sometimes there's just the father. I really believe that, whatever you bring to your situation, if it's good and sound and right, then children will do well. Children growing up really need attention and guidance. If they're in a home where the parent gives them what they need, whether there are two or whether there is one, those kids are going to do well. I think all of this attention to why black children don't develop as they should, why they're not an asset to society, why they go to jail and all of that is not good. It makes many kids feel bad, and it's not their fault that they grow up with one parent. It's not their fault that they don't have all of the necessities in life because of income. When they read these things it makes them feel, "I can't be anybody. I'm not going to do well." Many of them join gangs. They join gangs because they feel wanted, they feel an association and I think that the publicity they give to that is just wrong. If they're going to talk about anything in the newspapers and periodicals and all of the written material, or even on the internet, or whatever they put out for the public to digest, it should be things that would encourage people. You see these things sometimes. Sometimes, I see articles in the newspaper that are very encouraging to young people but so much of what they print is negative and I think that has an impact.

ET: Any other thoughts?

FDC: Well, I think I must say I have a lot of experiences that have been wholesome and have made me happy. I am a happy individual. I miss my husband but, other than that, I think that I'm doing very well for an eighty-eight year old woman. I think the experiences I have had help to fulfill me and the fact that I have the school named after me gives me great pleasure. I go to the school and talk to the students and do things with the students. Sometimes I take the students on little trips or to events and that's very gratifying. What is so wonderful is that they are so good to me. They include me in so many of the activities and, when I go there, the young people give me hugs and kisses. They make me feel that they're so happy to see me! It's just great. The other thing I want to tell you is that I did not grow up in a home with two parents. Sometimes I was with my mother and father. Sometimes my father was gone and I was with my mother. And sometimes I was with a grandmother and an aunt. So I was shifted around, but being shifted around I had some great experiences. That's why I feel that good experiences, love, and devotion in the home is what works. It doesn't make a difference who gives it to you. I had wonderful family members. My grandmother and my aunts—I had five aunts who had no children—and they all were mothers to me. They all gave to me. They all saw that I had the things that I needed to be a successful student and a successful person. This is why I'm so deeply involved with young people who don't have the solid background that they need. I try my best to supplement. All children have talents and abilities. If they're developed, they're going to be good people, they're going to be good citizens, they are going to contribute to society. It's just helping them to understand who they are and what they have to offer. I don't know whether that's done in the schools today or not. I know when I was teaching and counseling there were certain social graces—manners, respect, your behavior, your presence, the way you dressed—all of that to us

was important in working with students to help them become all they could be. But that's lacking today. They don't teach those kinds of things in school anymore. I don't know why. If kids don't get it at home, and they don't get it at school, where are they going to get it? I don't blame kids. When they tell me, "Oh, kids are so bad. They don't do this and they do that in school. You can't reach them," I don't put it on kids. I really think it's a societal thing. I think it's the home. I think it's the school. And I think it's the community. It's not the kids. Now, I'm sure most people would disagree with me but that's what I think. I have never worked with a kid who didn't receive what I had to offer or who did not change behavior or did not appreciate what I had to give them. That's why I believe that if we give students the proper environment, if we give them love and attention, and if we give them the kind of things that they need to grow and develop, they will be just fine. But it has to come from the home, the school, and the community. Well, I'll tell you something else about my family and then I'm going to shut up. [laughter] Our home was the place for everybody in the neighborhood. It was the place for everybody we taught. Our home was full of young people all the time. We tried to provide an environment where they would have things to do that they liked to do and they had a happy, good time. We built a house so that we could do this. We set up a family area where we had a pool table. We had ping-pong equipment, we had game tables, we had a swimming pool, and we just had a house-load of children all of the time. They just had good clean fun and it made a difference. Our kids sometimes got jealous, but you just have to be surrogate parents for kids that don't get what they need at home or in the community. Give them the attention they need, and this is what I would like to see people of means do for young folks instead of criticizing them all of the time.

EC: Well, we appreciate you taking the time to meet with us.

FDC: Well, I have enjoyed it, but I forgot to talk about my book. Did I say anything about this book?

EC: You said a little about it but if you would like to add some feel free.

FDC: Okay, well this is a story of students in a high school. These students fought for a high school because their high school was inadequate. They decided that they were going to fight for a school for themselves because the parents had been fighting for years for an adequate high school for their children and they hadn't gotten anywhere. It was in Farmville, Virginia. Students decided, "Well, our parents didn't get anywhere with this. We're going to fight." Well, they set up their strategies. They had meetings. They asked to speak with the school's superintendant but he never spoke with them. So they decided they were going on strike! They weren't going to that beat-up school. So they went on strike for two years! They did not go to school.

EC: What year was this?

FDC: This was in the fifties. 1951 was the year they went on strike. The author was one of those students.

EC: We were discussing that the name of the author sounded familiar, and it says right here that he was an original plaintiff in the *Brown v. Board* court case, so that's where we've heard his name.

FDC: That's right! And he was a student! What is so significant to me is that these students fought for their civil rights and as a result became a part of *Brown v. Board of Education*. He was a student when he became a part of that civil rights movement. You know, I love kids so I'm very fond of this book. It's very interesting. If you can, I'm sure it's in the library. I'd give you this one but it's autographed!

ET: Well, thank you so much for sharing your thoughts and experiences with us!

FDC: My pleasure. I just hope that I gave you what you wanted.

ET: I do have one more question for you! Do you have any recommendations for people we could interview in the future for this course?

FDC: Oh, how about the Commonwealth's Attorney, Howard Gwynn. I think you would enjoy him. Of course, if you want someone from the civil rights movement, most of them are dead. As told you, I wasn't really actively involved in the movement but I kept my students informed so they could get parents informed. I worked with the NAACP.

ET: Can you expand on your experiences in the NAACP? And being president?

FDC: Well, we weren't in the movement per se when I was president because I became president in 1981. The big movement was over and our thrust at the time was trying to reach citizens and get them involved in the political process and in the community. You see, at that time, many blacks in this area weren't even registered to vote. So we tried to get people registered and, once they were registered, to get out and vote. The other part of it is participating in the political process. Understanding what the issues are and having dialogue with your elected officials and being a part of the process. So these were things that the NAACP tried to get done during my tenure. We had citizen workshops and all sorts of programs and activities to inform them and to try to get them to do their civic duty. That is important even in gaining civil rights that you be active in the process and you know what's going on. So that was our thrust.

EC: Well, thank you again so much!

FDC: Well, I enjoyed it!

ET: As did we.

END OF RECORDING

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