

## **Gloria Spratley Interview Summary**

Interviewee: Gloria Spratley

Interviewers: Marlena Williams and Devereaux Davis

Interview Date: October 11, 2023

Location: Virtual (Christopher Newport University and Gloria Spratley's home)

Length: 1 audio file, MP3 format, 38:07

**THE INTERVIEWEE.** Gloria Spratley, a Newport News native, was previously a student at Huntington High School until desegregation busing was enforced. This action resulted in Spratley having to attend and graduate from Warwick High School in 1972 as well as Huntington High School closing and becoming an intermediate school. She now resides in Suffolk, Virginia, and has work experience in accounting.

**THE INTERVIEWERS.** Marlena Williams and Devereaux Davis are currently students attending Christopher Newport University. Williams and Davis are working with the Hampton Oral History Project at Christopher Newport University, which is focused on the desegregation in Newport News.

**DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW.** The interview took place virtually on Blackboard Scholar Collaborate. However, the interviewers met in a study room at the Christopher Newport's, Paul and Rosemary Tribble Library to set up their electronics (computers and recording devices), as well as to ensure a quiet environment to conduct the interview. The interview started out with a biographical overview of Spratley's life and from there went on about Spratley's experience during the desegregation of schools. Things such as schooling, community, integration, and connections with classmates from Huntington were talked about in the interview. Spratley detailed her disappointment about the change throughout the interview while giving insight into what the experience taught her.

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### **START OF INTERVIEW**

Devereaux Davis: Good morning this is Devereaux Davis and this is my partner Marlena Williams. Today is October 11, 2023, we're interviewing Mrs. Gloria Spratley. This interview is being carried out by the part of the Hampton Roads Oral History Project at Christopher Newport University. Alright, good morning Mrs. Spratley. We're taking what is called a life history approach and would like to begin our interview with asking a few questions about your childhood. Alright, where and when were you born?

Gloria Spratley: I was born in Newport News, Virginia. April 2nd, '54.

DD: And what did your parents do for a living?

GS: My dad worked as an orderly and in the transportation department of Newport News shipyard. My mother was a homemaker.

DD: And have you always grown up in Newport News? And, if so, what was it like in terms of the race relations?

GS: I grew up in Newport News until I graduated from college. Race relations: we lived in a neighborhood that was about a block from where White people lived. We frequented a shopping center where everybody shopped there, and we didn't have a problem with other races.

Marlena Williams: So, would you say overall that that experience in terms of race relations, it wasn't too bad living in Newport News? At that time?

GS: Not from my family and I. My parents taught us to treat people as human beings no matter what color, or culture.

DD: Okay.

MW: And so, could you tell us what elementary school you went to?

GS: I went to Dunbar, Paul Laurence Dunbar Elementary.

MW: And so from—

GS: From first grade to seventh grade.

MW: And so from there, that's when you went to Huntington? Afterwards?

GS: That's right. I started in the eighth grade.

MW: Alright. And how was it like going to a segregated school?

GS: We didn't incur any problems going to a segregated school. That's what we were used to in school, in church, in the neighborhood. And, we had great teachers who cared about us and did their best to make sure we were afforded a good education.

MW: Did you feel like it was any different from any of the other schools around the area?

GS: Of the Black elementary schools?

MW: Yeah.

GS: Or?

MW: Just in general.

GS: Well, we felt—

MW: Like different from the White schools.

GS: We felt like—. Excuse me?

MW: Different from, like, the White schools. Did you notice any differences or is it all just, pretty similar?

GS: I didn't have any experiences as to how the White schools operated. All the schools in my neighborhood were Black. I went to Dunbar, but there were about three or four other Black high schools [elementary schools] that I could have gone to. Elementary schools.

MW: Do you have any favorite experiences when you went to Huntington?

GS: I enjoyed being a part of the marching band as a majorette. I was a part of the Honor Society and other clubs, and we had great football games. And it was just a lively spirit and a great time.

MW: And did you find any teachers, that you can remember, who made an impact on your experience at Huntington?

GS: Oh sure. Science teacher in ninth grade, we had Quantitative Physical Science, Mrs. Ricks-Spencer. All my English teachers were great. History teacher, when they integrated the faculty, Mr. Onderdonk, took us to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania for a day. And that's about it, that I can think of.

DD: Alright. Okay, and we'd love to hear a little more about your experience with the integration process. We understand that you helped integrate by participating in the court-ordered busing. When the news of you having to attend Warwick—due to the desegregation—broke, what was your reaction?

GS: Well, that particular year, 1971, we were rising seniors. We had always anticipated graduating from Huntington. So it was a great disappointment. To me, it was, at that time, it was like a nightmare. That we were not going to be able to graduate from Huntington.

DD: And did you have any doubts about going to Warwick? Any desire to stay? You already stated your desire. But did you have any doubts [about] going to Warwick?

GS: No I didn't. That was a school that I was zoned to go to and the rest is history.

DD: And through this process, did you end up separating from any of your friends from Huntington?

GS: Yes. I had four main girlfriends and only one of them was zoned for Warwick, also. But we tried to keep in touch as best we could. But it was different.

DD: And through this process do you remember how your family responded or the people in your community?

GS: I remember how my parents responded. I found out years later how other people responded but, at the time, my father told me to, mainly, just go to Warwick, handle your business, graduate, and keep it moving.

MW: And so, when it came time to go to Warwick, could you tell us exactly how the commute was?

GS: We rode the school bus. It was about fifteen, twenty minutes, give or take, to get there.

MW: Did it seem longer to go to Warwick than Huntington? Or was it just the same distance from both?

GS: No, we walked to Huntington. I was about ten, eleven blocks in distance from Huntington. So it was a different experience but, you know, that's what we had to do.

MW: Yeah. And so with the school itself, what was the actual-like transition from Huntington to Warwick? Like academically?

GS: Academically, I had courses that I probably would have had if I had attended Huntington and I was in school for part-time because I had already completed most of my requirement classes. And there were teachers that I knew from Huntington and also other students. And I just made the best of it.

DD: Alright, and what was the racial composition of Warwick? Like for example, what was the racial composition of the students?

GS: It was supposed to be sixty-forty. Sixty [percent] White and forty [percent] Black.

DD: And the faculty and staff, did you notice any racial composition, anything about that?

GS: Not really, not until after I graduated and looked at my yearbook. I had both Black and White teachers.

DD: Okay. Did you encounter any resistance to your attending of Warwick? Were there any instances in which you felt unsafe going to school?

GS: No, I didn't feel unsafe. There were a few incidents that I heard about and I was even asked to participate in something like a protest. But I had already received instructions from my parents, and so I didn't participate and I didn't feel unsafe.

MW: And so, when you went to Warwick, I know you briefly talked about it in previous questions, but did you find it difficult to complete your studies in a new environment?

GS: No, no I didn't. The main course that I had—. Well, English, AP English, and Government were the two courses I remember distinctly. And my English teacher was from Huntington and so I didn't encounter any problems.

MW: And so, were there any other students, particularly White students or teachers, that often lent support to your learning, at Warwick?

GS: No. Not that I can think of.

MW: [to DD] Oh sorry, I read your questions.

DD: [to MW] No, you're fine. Where are you at?

MW: [to DD] The involvement.

DD: Oh yeah, were there any White students or teachers in your school that wanted to help you?

MW: I already read that one.

DD: Oh you did, I'm sorry.

DD: Did you get the opportunity to be involved in your last year at Warwick?

GS: No, I didn't. I did not participate in the band or hardly any clubs. I just wanted to get the year over, as fast as possible.

DD: Was there any desire to be in the band when you transferred over? Or were you just dead set on finishing the year?

GS: Set on finishing the year, plus the band director was at Ferguson [High School] so I just wasn't interested.

DD: Were there any aspects of Warwick that you particularly enjoyed? Any subjects or extracurriculars that you were able to be involved in?

GS: Well, like I said, my English and Government teachers, they were great and classes were fun. Wasn't that easy in English but, when I got to college, the English class really paid off. And activities: I only attended sports activities—basketball and football.

MW: I know you had previously said that one of your friends also ended up at Warwick. Did you guys share any classes together?

GS: Yes, we were in the same English class.

MW: Um, I know—

GS: And we rode the school bus together.

MW: Sorry. Did you end up making any new friends when you went to Warwick that probably went to the other previously segregated schools?

GS: Maybe a few, but none that really stand out.

MW: [to DD] Oh, she already answered that.

DD: [to MW] Okay. We did that.

MW: [to DD] Mmm-hmm.

DD: How did your life change outside of school after desegregation?

GS: Well it was an experience that taught me that life is not constant and there will be interruptions in your life that you had no clue about or caring. And I learned that you have to be able to go through experiences that aren't planned and make the best decisions to handle them.

DD: And how were people in your community treating you? Did you notice any change in the people around you at home? Anyone treating you differently after desegregation?

GS: No, I didn't.

DD: Did changing schools impact what you wanted to do later in life?

GS: No, no. Changing schools—I had my eye on possibly becoming the valedictorian, and there were some changes in how that was done with the classes we had taken, and that was a disappointment. But other than that, that's all I can think of. That continued my plans to attend college and I did and I graduated.

MW: And if you could talk about the civil rights movement, I guess as a whole, do you think there is any unfinished business with that? Like do you think there's anything that still needs to be done in terms of relations or the systems in place that, I guess, dictate how schools are?

GS: Say that again, please.

MW: So in terms of civil rights, do you think there is any unfinished business with it? Like any other things that need to be done? In terms of just like, I guess schools or in general, just rights.

GS: There's probably some things that could be done to try to make the situation better for everyone. At that time, we just were disappointed, thoroughly, because we were seniors and we didn't feel that we should have had—, We thought they could have come up with a different way



that the system could be eased into rather than all at one time and everybody just had to change everything to adapt to their policy.

MW: Do you think that they should have done the integration schools, like after you graduated?

Do you think that would have made everything a little bit easier?

GS: For us, but then the next class would have felt the same as we did.

DD: Yeah.

MW: Yeah.

GS: Another thing it was—. We had a few weeks before school started, that year when we found out that we weren't going to be attending the previous schools. And we thought that wasn't right.

DD: Do you think, regarding that, do you think that being notified, let's say a year prior or at the end of your junior year, that you would be going to a new school—do you think that would have helped the process into integration? Do you think that would have been better for you and the others that were in your situation? As opposed to the couple weeks prior?

GS: It would've helped. You know, we still wouldn't have liked it but I think it would have helped, you know. Two weeks out or so, you know, right before you're looking forward to your same school. And then after all, the year we were born, 1954, was when they made the decision to integrate and so they had all this time. And we know why it wasn't done. But you know, all of that played a part.

MW: [to DD] How do I formulate this question? I mean. I don't know.

DD: [to MW] I don't have any questions.

MW: Well, I have a question, I'm just trying to figure out how to formulate it.

DD: Yeah.

MW: I know that it was, you talked about like, no one wanting to go to these schools. Did you know a few other people who were excited at least? About changing schools? Or maybe saw it as like a good thing? Or maybe they wanted, like, another change?

GS: I didn't encounter, at the time, too many people that were satisfied with the change. And, like I said, I just want to reemphasize the fact that I just wanted to graduate from Huntington.

MW: Yeah.

GS: And that was more a big part of it than going to another school. Just wanted, you know, we had been there four years, and looking forward to a great graduation and things we were going to do during our senior year. And so, it just, you know, kept us from being able to do that at the time.

MW: Yeah. Did Warwick, because they were getting new students, were they trying to at least make some of it better for the students who obviously weren't really happy and kind of were looking forward to certain things?

GS: I think so. We were—. I was part of a committee that met before school started, the student council. And we discussed some things that we thought would help the situation be a little better. And so most, if not all, of those decisions took place. So, I think, you know, that was a great effort.

DD: And I'm not sure if you answered this already, but do you know if—. Was there ever a thought in your mind as of a better way, or another way of integrating schools? Do you think they could've executed that whole process better? Or do you feel like they kind of just tried to do it as soon as possible, after being pushed, pushed, and pushed to do it? Do you think it was just kind of they did it or do you think there could have been a better, better integration process?

GS: I think they had several months to come up with a plan and, I don't know, but I think they came up with that plan and that was it. But I think it could have been done a different way to try to appease most people.

MW: If you don't mind me asking, what would that exactly look like? From your perspective.

GS: Well, like I said, I think they could have allowed the seniors to continue at Huntington, or Carver, or Newport News High, Warwick, Ferguson, and the other schools and some sort of way [to] try to ease into everyone under our class going into another school.

DD: So would you say that you think that they should have given you guys an option, whether you wanted to stay at whatever school you wanted to? And if so, do you think that many of the people around you, the people you went to high school with when you were still at Huntington, would you think they would've all chose to stay their senior year at Huntington? Or do you think that some of them might've wanted to branch out to other schools?

GS: Some may have wanted to but [with regard to the] conversations I've had and people I know, I think we all wanted to graduate from Huntington. And the other people that I met later or during my senior year that went to Carver, in particular, they wanted to graduate from those schools.

MW: And just to get an understanding, sorry if it's a little redundant, but you guys had like no choice of going to a different segregated school. It depended on your district zone, correct?

GS: That's correct.

MW: Okay. So I know you said you tried to keep in contact with your friends afterwards. Are you still in contact with any of them, to this day?

GS: Yes, I am. One in particular, we both lived in the same zone to attend Warwick and we rode the same school bus together. We still keep in touch. She went to UVA and I went to VCU, and we have always kept in touch ever since.

DD: The whole integration and you being a big part of it, you and your class—. Do you feel a sense of accomplishment being a part of that generation that got to integrate schools? Do you feel like, now, like after school when you were in college after, was that always something that you felt like you really helped the next generation? Or does it feel like a little hiccup? What are your thoughts on that?

GS: Okay, like I said in the beginning, we lived in a neighborhood that was a block from the White neighborhood. And the fact that my parents, you know, taught us how to deal with all people—it did make it easier when I went to college because that was a predominantly White school, but I had no problems. I had a White roommate my first semester and we got along great and as far as I could tell, everybody got along on the campus.

MW: So you would say by the time you were graduating and going to college, everything, in terms of, I guess, interaction with White people, everything was pretty mellow? There was nothing really that stuck out that was really, I guess, discriminatory that you would probably end up facing?

GS: I can only speak for myself. I didn't encounter any problems, like I said. I was in school till noon, I had a job, and so I didn't really mingle with, I guess, everybody that I could have, by not being in school all day. And graduation came, I attended my graduation. I had "Warwick High School" on my diploma because I was concerned—people get things mixed up sometimes and I didn't want them looking for Huntington, knowing that Huntington was not a high school anymore. So, I had Warwick on my diploma, and that's how I handled it.

MW: Circling back to your time in Warwick—. Sorry if we're all over the place. Can you, like, detail your first day?

GS: Say that—. Can I do what?

MW: Could you detail your first day at Warwick? Or was it just very standard?

GS: My first day?

MW: Mmm-hmm.

GS: Pretty much for me, you know, we had homeroom and, you know, you see your classmates that are in your homeroom. You figure out how to get to your classes, and you attend classes. And that's it.

MW: And so, if there is, is there anything that you would like— Do you think there is anything else that is really important to your story, in terms of desegregation of schools?

GS: Okay.. You know, if you look at things, try to remember what happened during that time, and then you look back, as they say, “Hindsight is twenty-twenty,” you know. I can say that, at the time, it was a big disappointment by not graduating from Huntington. Okay. So we had to go to the other schools, we went, I graduated, I did things in my life that I feel like I would have done if I had graduated from Huntington. And in 2002, we—the class of '72 from Huntington High School—had a graduation ceremony at the Huntington school. The principal that was there [was from] when we were there and that was a great occasion for us to have some sort of compensation, if you will, for what didn't happen. And I have learned that, you know, in life you're going to have challenges and you have to meet those challenges with courage, determination and a willingness to stand in the gap and not allow anything or anyone to get in your way and keep you from doing it, so that you can succeed at the things that you want to do as

adults. And so, it was like a dream deferred, but we have learned that that's a part of life and you can have new dreams. Did I answer your question?

MW: No, it was really good! [laughter]

DD: That was really good, thank you!

MW: It puts a lot of things in perspective. You guys—. Has there been another type of reunion or has that just been the only one that you've guys have had?

GS: No, our class at Huntington started with the tenth-year reunion, which most high schools have, and we've had a reunion every five years since that time. Last year, we celebrated our fiftieth-year reunion. And we had over a hundred people in attendance and we've always stayed together, had reunions, had sixtieth and sixty-fifth-year birthday parties as a class. And we're just, you know, a tight group of people that were classmates at Huntington and we continued to be that way.

MW: Wow.

DD: And thinking about now and through the years, is there either a student you went to school with, who was already at Warwick, so it was either a White student or teacher, that you're still in touch with? Or someone that you really connected with through this whole process? Is there anyone like that?

GS: No. No, not a student or a teacher.

MW: Well, when you were explaining the reunion, it sounded like it was a very small class. How many people were in your graduating class that came from Huntington?

GS: I have no idea. But when we were at Huntington, we had over five hundred students in our class.

MW: Oh.

GS: Mmm-hmm.

MW: I just assumed it would be smaller.

GS: No, that was probably [or] could have been the largest eighth-grade class that there was. But, you know, we started out with five-hundred plus and, then each year, you're gonna lose some. But, you know—. And everybody's not going to attend reunions. But we managed to always have somewhere around a hundred plus to come together.

DD: That's good to hear.

MW: I assume that everybody that goes to the reunions still live in Virginia?

GS: No. Most live out of town that attend.

GS: One other thing that I would like to add is that, during the time we met as a committee before school opened, there were concerns about the name for Warwick. [They] were "Farmers," that was the name. And we made a decision that the name would have to be changed from "Farmers" to something else. And we decided to change it to "Raiders" and that's what it still is today.

MW: That's really cool.

GS: And there was a plow in front of the school! And, not too long after school started, someone destroyed that.

MW: Oh.

GS: Just giving you some additional information! [laughing]

DD: No, yeah we love to hear it. We love to hear it.

MW: That's fine.

DD: Let's see. Any little, like any stories you can think of? Any last things you'd like to incorporate? So anything from going to Warwick, anything you feel would contribute?

GS: No, I think I pretty much said everything that comes to mind that is important or stands out.

DD: Yeah.

MW: Yeah. I'm glad you're willing to tell us these things.

DD: Yeah, we really appreciate it.

GS: Mmm-hmm.

DD: Think we're good?

MW: Yeah.

DD: Well, Mrs. Spratley, I'd just like to, I just want to give a great thanks. We really appreciate it. You're helping contribute not only to our education here, but also to all those who can hear your story, hear the things you went through, and your experience. I just want to just reiterate, I really, really appreciate it. We all appreciate you giving up your time. Thank you.

GS: Thank you for asking me to participate. I appreciate it.

MW: Of course.

DD: Well, you have a great rest of your day. Thank you.

GS: Thank you, you too.

**END OF INTERVIEW**

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