

[0:00:00]

Ashleigh Taylor: Okay. Good afternoon. This is Crossroads to Freedom 2012 – 2010. I’m Ashleigh Taylor and this is-

Bing Ren: Bing.

Ashleigh Taylor: And this is our fifth interview of the summer, Ms. Phyllis Buehler. So we’re going to start off our questions with Bing.

Bing Ren: Yes, so Ms. Phyllis, what’s your name?

Ms. Phyllis Buehler: Phyllis Buehler.

Bing Ren: And when were you born?

Ms. Phyllis Buehler: I was born May 22, 1954.

Bing Ren: So where were you raised?

Ms. Phyllis Buehler: Where was I raised?

Bing Ren: Yeah.

Ms. Phyllis Buehler: I was raised in Memphis, in the north area. Then I moved to the south area, then back to the northeast area.

Bing Ren: That’s interesting. So what’s your occupation?

Ms. Phyllis Buehler: My occupation? I’m a schoolteacher.

Bing Ren: Oh. So who are your parents? Who are your parents?

Ms. Phyllis Buehler: My parents,-

[0:01:00] **-Geraldine Riemy** and **James L. Riemy**. My father, James, was born in Woodstock, Tennessee. My mother was born in Memphis, Tennessee, graduated from Manassas High School.

Bing Ren: What their occupations?

Ms. Phyllis Buehler: My father was a sign-builder; my mom was a secretary and stay-at-home-mom.

Bing Ren: Can you say something about your brothers and sisters, if you have any?

Ms. Phyllis Buehler: Yes. I have a bunch of them. I have two sisters and three brothers. I'm the oldest; my sister is a year-and-a-half younger than I. Her name is Sandra, **Sandra Riemy-Modley**. My brother, who is about two years younger than she is – and as they get older I forget how old they are. So my brother is James Jr.

[0:02:00] My next brother is Michael, then it was a sister, Toya, and then my youngest brother, Terrance.

Bing Ren: Can you tell me about your neighborhood you grew up in?

Ms. Phyllis Buehler: All right. I eventually moved to the Hollywood/Hyde Park area. In 1964 I was in the fourth grade. So before then I was born in an area called – well, near the Manassas High School area. Then we moved with my grandmother to the South Memphis area. That particular area, again, I don't – by me being so young, the only thing I can remember is nice homes, nice people. I went to kindergarten in South Memphis.

[0:03:00] Then we moved to North Memphis, near the Manassas area and I went to Grant Elementary School. Nice area. I'm learning things- -because I'm in the second and third grade. And only thing I can remember is just school, things that I did in school. And then I remember newspaper headlines. Didn't understand what was going on, but just remembered pictures such as the struggles that were going on in Alabama. And then I moved on to the Shannon area about fourth grade.

Bing Ren: What was your home life like?

Ms. Phyllis Buehler: Home life was very – to me it was very nice. With three girls and three boys, six children in the home, that was interesting. We moved from a one-bedroom apartment to a three-bedroom home, which was very, very nice to us. And I can remember how excited my mom and dad was to move into an area – of course that area was considered nice, and then to have a separate bedroom for boys, a separate bedroom for the-

[0:04:00] -girls was very nice. That's where I started going to church; I enjoyed that. I had – I enjoyed playing after school on the street in front of the house, 'cause we couldn't go very far.

Bing Ren: So what kind of activities were you involved in? You said you played, like-

Ms. Phyllis Buehler: Yeah, just usually chatting with the girls on the street. And then as I got older I got involved in some of the activities at the park, I

played volleyball and I played softball, and then I was in an oratorical program from the Park Commission.

Bing Ren: Mm hmm. Can you share some of the memories from your childhood that influenced you later in life?

Ms. Phyllis Buehler: Okay. I can remember going to Cypress. Of course, being in eighth grade, you know, I'm thinking I'm really big now and older, but I enjoyed that experience.

[0:05:00] And of course, my mom and dad stressed education, so I was gung ho about doing well in school. And when I was at Cypress I took Algebra I in the ninth grade, and I had a very unusual teacher, because not only did he teach us Algebra I, but he taught us things about life. And he would tell us, "You all are from the city. You all do not know anything. So I'm going to tell you about other things, like farm living and everything." So to me that was very, very exciting and interesting. Even though we did learn the math, and I think because of his influence I became a math teacher.

CUT [0:05:40]

Bing Ren: Yeah. We can see that you have a lot of good memory about the schools. So can you tell us like where did you go to your elementary school?

Ms. Phyllis Buehler: Okay. From the beginning?

Bing Ren: Yeah.

Ms. Phyllis Buehler: All right. I started first grade in Lincoln Elementary in South Memphis. Then we moved to Grant in North Memphis-
[0:06:00] -Grant Elementary, second and third grade. Then we moved to the Hollywood/Hyde Park area, where I went to Shannon fourth, fifth and sixth grade. I went to Hollywood Elementary School – at that time it was an elementary seventh grade, so I went there in the seventh grade. Well, we went there in the seventh grade because they were still building onto Cypress. And then the next, the following year, even though it was not completely finished, we started school, at least the eighth graders started school at Cypress, seventh and eighth graders.

And while we were still attending classes, the workers were still inside the school, workers. We'd be in the middle of class and you'd see painters just walking through the middle of the class with their ladders and their paint. So I enjoyed the experience.

Bing Ren: Yeah. And can you talk a little bit more about your middle school and high school?

Ms. Phyllis Buehler: Okay. At Cypress, where I went to school eighth and ninth grade, I was involved in-
[0:07:00] -volleyball, I was involved in the band. And then I left Cypress and I went to Shannon. A lot of my classmates went to North Side and Douglas, but I went to Central. And at Central I was involved in the band and volleyball also, and then focused more on college preparatory.

Bing Ren: So what did you do after you left high school?

Ms. Phyllis Buehler: Okay, after I left high school I attended the University of Tennessee at Martin. At that particular time I didn't know what I wanted to major in. We had to declare a major, so I just put down pre – I put down elementary. After a semester I decided to go into premed because I was interested in science and mathematics. Then I got married, stayed at UT Martin for another year, then my husband had to transfer to Knoxville to finish up his classes, so I-
[0:08:00] -transferred to University of Tennessee Knoxville.

He finished up – I wasn't quite finished, but he wanted to come back to Memphis, so I transferred to the University of Memphis, where I changed my major to secondary education. And I graduated from the University of Memphis with secondary education with a concentration in mathematics.

Bing Ren: Okay. What was school like for you?

Ms. Phyllis Buehler: High school?

Bing Ren: Just generally.

Ms. Phyllis Buehler: I enjoyed it. I enjoyed the experience of talking with other students, talking about my life, their lives, comparing my life to theirs, and the activities that we had, just comparing activities. So that was a good experience. I also enjoyed the experiences that the teachers shared with us. And it seemed like all the teachers always wanted us to have expectations of what can be done after school, and they also shared experience – I had one fifth grade teacher that-
[0:09:00] -shared about her experience; every summer their family would go traveling to California, to different places like that. And to me, see, we didn't travel when I was at home. So that was fascinating,

to get somewhere – go somewhere other than Memphis. So that was nice.

Bing Ren: Yeah. Did you experience the integration and the segregations? How do segregation impact your education experience?

Ms. Phyllis Buehler: Now segregation, that all kind of started when I was still kind of young, didn't know what was going on. However, because of things that went on during that time period, it did kind of impact me just a little bit in regards to the '70s. There was one change that was made here in Memphis in 1971 where they wanted to integrate the schools, and they did it by bussing-
 [0:10:00] -or making students go to certain schools. And in my particular case, I was live in Hollywood/Hyde Park area, and they transferred me to North Side. At that time North Side was predominantly white. However, because I was attending a school that placed me in the minority, I had a choice to stay where I was, and given the opportunity to ride the bus free. So that was how they compensated for bussing; instead of putting us on a bus, we could use the public transportation to go to the school where we would be in a minority.

CUT [0:10:40]

Bing Ren: Can you talk a little bit more about the bussing?

Ms. Phyllis Buehler: About the?

Bing Ren: Bus – the bussing?

Ashleigh Taylor: With the integration.

Ms. Phyllis Buehler: Talk more about the integration?

Bing Ren: Mm hmm.

Ashleigh Taylor: Mm hmm.

Ms. Phyllis Buehler: From what, my aspect of – and from what I've heard, for me to have left Cypress to go to a-
 [0:11:00] -predominantly white school, that was kind of different. There were like seven or eight of us chose to go to Central. And at that particular time, of course, it was our own choice to go, because I just wanted something completely different, just to go to a school in a completely different area.

So, of course, going to Central, being a minority, that was different. Because I had heard that as a whole white people didn't like black people, black people did not like white people. That's what I heard. However, I was also taught at Cypress and Shannon that the best for me and for all of us was to get an education. Plus my mom and dad drilled that, so I was determined to get an education. I felt like this thing between the races was kind of silly. How can you dislike someone because of the color of their skin when you have no – you can't help that, they can't-

[0:12:00]

-help that? So why – how can you deal with something that you can't change? So I totally ignored that and focused on what my particular plans was going to be, and I felt like if I ran across somebody that didn't like me because of the color of my skin, that was their problem. I still was going to go ahead and drive towards my particular goal.

And I was able to run into people at Central, white people, that were very, very nice, that were very, very caring about people trying to get their education. So that's what I focused on, made sure I was around positive people. And even with the classmates, I had no problems. I had – I was I guess fortunate to run into students that were – they were concerned maybe not with education, but concerned with having a good time. But they didn't have any prejudice, and so that was my experience. I was determined not to carry on the negative-ness-

[0:13:00]

-of integration.

Bing Ren:

That's good. Did you belong to your church growing up?

Ms. Phyllis Buehler:

Yes, I did. I started attending church when I was in the fourth grade, and it turned out that that church was pastored by a white man and his family, and everybody else in the congregation was all black. And here again, these were positive people that were determined to help people. That particular pastor, not only did he pastor the church, he also was a professor at LeMoyne-Owens College; he taught chemistry at LeMoyne-Owens College. So my experience at church was very, very good. This was my opportunity to understand about the Supreme Being.

Bing Ren:

So can you tell us what's the name of the church?

Ms. Phyllis Buehler:

The church was the First Church of God, located in the Douglas area, located on Locust and Chelsea.

[0:14:00]

Bing Ren:

Can you describe a little bit more about the church?

Ms. Phyllis Buehler: It was compo-

Bing Ren: Or people in the church?

Ms. Phyllis Buehler: Composed of struggling people. I guess you would say I felt like we all were struggling. And we may all have been poor, but we just didn't know we were poor. People that loved God. The older people or the parents of the church all had the goal that they wanted their children to get education, go as far as they could, also don't forget the message of God, because that's where you're going to get your strength from.

[0:15:00] The pastor's wife was also an educator, and she made a lot of the church activities educated – had an educational background. So she made it very, very interesting. She had meetings on-Saturdays at her home. And here was a white family taking in so-called black people, that they weren't supposed to do. But these people did that; they did something that was above the norm. And of course, I enjoyed that.

Bing Ren: Yeah. They were very nice person.

Ms. Phyllis Buehler: They were.

Bing Ren: Mm hmm. So you are talking about you were married. So what's your husband's occupation?

Ms. Phyllis Buehler: My husband's occupation, he was majoring in landscaping, in horticulture. That's where he got his degree. Oh, by the way, my husband was also the minister's son, so – and we all grew up in the same school. He also attended Douglas, went to Cypress. High school he went to **Tresvent**.

Bing Ren: So do you have children?

Ms. Phyllis Buehler: I have two daughters.

[0:16:00]

Now they are – the youngest one is 26 and the oldest one is 34. And of course I was educational-driven, they were also. I told them when they were in the fourth grade that they would go to college. I should've told them what they should major in, but I didn't go that far. But I told them that they would go to college, and both of them have finished college and one is working on a graduate degree and the other one has already received her Masters. She may get a doctorate one day.

Bing Ren: That's amazing.

CUT [0:16:37]

Ashleigh Taylor: Mm hmm. Okay, so now we're getting into the point of the interview that we actually talk about the Civil Rights movement, the time between the '50s and the '70s. Do you remember the Civil Rights movement in Memphis?

Ms. Phyllis Buehler: Barely. .

Ashleigh Taylor: Barely?

Ms. Phyllis Buehler: The Civil Rights movement, I think the first sit-in that they started having was in 1955. Of course, in 1955 I was just-
[0:17:00] -one year old. So the only thing I can remember, I remember newspaper articles with people sitting at the counter. Of course, I saw these pictures after I was older. So I really didn't know what the Civil Rights movement was about at that particular time. Of course, I learned about it as I got older. I can re – you know, that's about all I can remember.

I remember seeing on TV how they would take the water hose and would spray it on people, but I did not understand what was going on. Even though I'm hearing different things about what's going on, by me being so young I didn't understand, but I did gather, okay, there is this thing with the difference of people. That's about the only thing I could perceive at that time.

Ashleigh Taylor: So when you attended Central High School did they ever have any teachings of the Civil Rights movement or participation in it?

[0:18:00]

Ms. Phyllis Buehler: Sort of. Keep in mind Central is a college preparatory school, so their concentration was on reading, writing, and arithmetic. However, in my history classes, the history books at that particular time, they made mention certain things about Civil Rights, but it was a short lesson on that, so we didn't get into it in-depth. However, I can recall, even though we didn't get that grounded information, we still were aware of the fact that there were some people that made a difference in us and that we also realized that was unfair.

I can recall there was a tryout, cheerleading tryout, and the year I was there, my tenth grade year, they had one black cheerleader in I think it was a total of 12 cheerleaders.

[0:19:00]

So the following year they had tryouts for cheerleaders. Now I don't know how many blacks tried out, because my thing was not in cheerleading, so I would do my lesson, go home, because I had a weekend job. So I didn't know what was going on; the only thing I would hear is what people would tell me. However, they did have cheerleading tryouts and they only picked one black. And of course, the black students did not like that, and so they decided that they would protest against that. And a particular time they decided they would walk out of class, go to the Board of Education to protest the fact that they only chose one black young lady to be on the cheerleading squad, when we have – the percentage was not the same. We have more than a few blacks at the Central, so they were figuring that the squad should show representation of the student body.

[0:20:00]

So they felt like that was unfair-

-so they protested. But the agreement that they came up with, and again, I'm hearing this by what someone is telling me, however, I do realize that for a while they started having the black students would meet early in the mornings. Of course, I always got to school late, so I never did attend those meetings. It was just a struggle for me to get to school.

[0:21:00]

So they protested and they decided at a certain time that they would walk out of class and march from Central High School to the Board of Education. Well the time that they chose to walk out was during my Algebra II class, and I figured out of all classes I was not going to leave my Algebra II class, 'cause I liked Algebra II and I knew that I needed that in college. So I said, "No, I can't leave out of my Algebra II class." Then again, not understanding the details, I couldn't say that they were wrong for only-
-choosing one black, 'cause I don't know how many total blacks – for all I know, only one black could've tried out. Plus I had an aunt that was teaching there; she told me I wasn't walking out anyway.

Bing Ren:

Right.

Ms. Phyllis Buehler:

But other than that, that's the only experience that I could say that I kind of had firsthand information on and the repercussion of the differences in the races.

Ashleigh Taylor: So do you remember the day that Dr. Martin Luther King was shot in Memphis?

Ms. Phyllis Buehler: Yes, he was April 4, 1998. I was in the eighth grade at Cypress. I remember the day before in the newspaper they had a picture of men walking with the sign, "I am a man" and I can recall that there was a dispute over the garbage. Again, didn't know the details because we were in the eighth grade, 13, I wasn't focused on the-
 [0:22:00] -news. And so I can recall that there was going to be a demonstration that next day.

The only thing I can remember is on – this wasn't on April the 4th; it may have been April the 3rd or whenever, that a lot of parents came to the school, checking out their students. And of course I'm asking, "What's going on? What's going on?" It just so happened I was walking past a window and I saw my dad's truck, company truck coming over. I said, "Why is my dad coming over to the school in the middle of the day? I haven't done anything wrong." And come to find out the parents were checking out their students because there had been a riot downtown from that demonstration.

And then I think that particular night, that's when Martin Luther King had his speech at the church, at Mason Temple Church, and then of course the next day he was assassinated. And of course, I was at home – we were at home about 6:00 p.m.-
 [0:23:00] -that evening, just kind of watching – my mom always watched the 6:00 news with Walter Cronkite. And I remember us sitting there and we had the breaking news that Martin Luther King had been shot in Memphis, Tennessee. We all looked at each other, "Wait a minute, that's here. We're in Memphis. This is" – you know, and I was sitting, "What?" You know, we just totally shocked.

And of course my mom just started calling different people in her family. And of course, that particular night there was just huge riots, just, I mean just seemed like the city had gone crazy. Of course, we were at home and we just heard about, you know, the riots, but of course, we were not involved because we were too young, we were too small, plus my mom and dad wouldn't let us out of the house anyway. But that's what I can remember about the announcement of Martin Luther King being shot.

CUT [0:23:55]

Ashleigh Taylor: So in your college years did you ever experience the stigma of integration?

[0:24:00]

Ms. Phyllis Buehler: I didn't, because I refused to. I felt like if anybody didn't like my – I mean didn't like the reason I'm there because of my color, that was their problem. I was determined to get my education. I had no problems at UT Martin, had no problems at UT Knoxville. None whatsoever.

Ashleigh Taylor: So what school do you teach at now?

Ms. Phyllis Buehler: Now I teach at Central High School. I teach mathematics at Central. And graduated from there.

Ashleigh Taylor: So have you seen the pattern of change that's happening? Can you explain some of the changes that you see and notice?

Ms. Phyllis Buehler: The change that I see in regards to the students, there is no concentration on a group, the blacks or the whites; however, now the students are well aware of unfairness and fairness, they'll pick up on that very-

[0:25:00]

-quickly. And because the emphasis no longer is on races so to speak, at least with black and white, now we have other nationalities. And again, I think the fairness is always there, the concentration on being fair to all groups. And at Central, Central is a college preparatory school because it takes in students from all over the city, not necessarily just the neighborhood kids. Children all over the city. It's an optional school, so it takes in everybody. And if you're there your first concentration is college preparatory.

And from what I have found, because of the diversity, they get along so well, especially in our student body. We have students from all nationalities, and they work well, they do-

[0:26:00]

-a lot of different projects to make sure there's teamwork. They do activities; they give them an opportunity to converse with each other and understand everybody else's diversibility. So I like that about the school.

The only thing I can see a difference as compared to during the Civil Rights, now also the Civil Rights stretched equal opportunity of getting an education. Now that we have this equal opportunity to get an education, the students do not take advantage of it because I believe – I feel like the parents of these students, for whatever reason, do not give that lesson of valuing education. And so these students don't understand the importance of it. Some do, some do not. And that's the only difference that I can see.

[0:27:00] And I'm constantly telling them-
-you know, "There have been people that struggled, that some people gave their lives so that you all today can have an equal opportunity, you need to take advantage of it." And the only way for these students to understand is for people to keep telling them and telling them, because since they didn't live during that, they don't understand that. That's the difference that I can see; the value of education is not there.

Ashleigh Taylor: So how do you think the city of Memphis has changed since when you grew up to the present time?

Ms. Phyllis Buehler: I think people are more aware of people's color and trying not to make it a negative thing. Of course, now we have a black mayor, we have our second black mayor. We have more blacks involved in the politics. We didn't see that back then. I think that the opportunity to do what you want to do, to become whatever you want to do is there, as compared to when I was coming up.

[0:28:00]

Ashleigh Taylor: So do you think that integration, it was worthwhile in schools, especially since _____ yourself?

Ms. Phyllis Buehler: I think it had its – I think it had its advantage, because I remember at Shannon we would get books that would have other schools' names printed in it. So we would get the school, the books, textbooks from white schools after they've used it, and then they would send it to the black schools. Now of course us not knowing it's coming from a white school, the only thing we knew it's coming from, "Oh, this is such-and-such school." However, the teachers made a point to make sure they emphasized the substance of a book. So that's the only thing that I can recall.

[0:29:00] And I think it's important for people to realize that you had-
-to – you needed an equal education. Some people felt like – some whites felt like it doesn't make any difference. You know, if they grew up with a certain mindset, regardless of what went on, they still had that same mindset. And I think integration came along and it came at a point where it needed to change the mindsets of people, and to change that mindset, yes, just because you feel like certain people are inferior people, they don't deserve what you have, I think that's what integration, the positiveness of it, to get to peoples' mindset so they could change.

Ashleigh Taylor: So since you came back to Memphis after college and you actually lived that, so what can you tell a student that's kind of hesitant to come back to Memphis after graduation, since they don't see most of their opportunities elsewhere?

Ms. Phyllis Buehler: The only thing I could do is keep saying-
[0:30:00] -now "Just don't forget where you came from." It is important that to give back to your community. You may not want to live there, because the homes have gone down. You may not want to live there; however, you can still come back and work in the community. I am part of Cypress Alumni Association. We try to come back and do whatever we can to help Cypress, whatever the principal wants. Or I can recall they had some type of dance, I guess complimenting the students that did well on the TCAP, and they needed chaperones. And so some of the Cypress Alumni Students came back and we chaperoned a party.

[0:31:00] Also they had some type of picnic where we all got our – had our Cypress Alumni shirts and we came back to the picnic to participate in some of the activities.
And we did several things; there was a basketball game that we did there, and I was one of the alumni cheerleaders, so that was interesting.

And also doing the evaluation of the school. There were some questions that were asked to the students, and they were asked, "What is the most important experience or enjoyable experience that you can say about Cypress?" And one student said that they appreciate the fact that they had a Cypress Alumni Association, older people that can come back to the school to help and to show that they're concerned about us. So that was one of the things that he pointed out in regard to the school's evaluation. So we thought, hey, we must be doing something positive. So we're trying to keep the Association going on. So that's my way of giving back to the neighborhood.

Ashleigh Taylor: So do you see a difference in Cypress as a school when you-
[0:32:00] -attended it to now?

Ms. Phyllis Buehler: The change that I see is the same change that the society has gone through, which is all over the country. I think the school kind of mimics what the society is doing. But I still see the students still have an eagerness to learn; they want to learn, they want to be disciplined. And when they see us coming over there, I mean they're just like, "Oh wow, you used to go to Cypress? Oh wow,

you must be real important.” You know, for them to see like old folks still coming around.

And then it also helps them remember Cypress has been here a long time. So it’s been here this long and it’s still going, must be something kind of basic and it must have a strong foundation. So this is what we want to kind of give to the students, at least send that message.

Ashleigh Taylor: If you could give advice to your younger self-
[0:33:00] -about anything in the world, what would it be and why?

Ms. Phyllis Buehler: If I could give advice to my younger?

Ashleigh Taylor: Self.

Ms. Phyllis Buehler: To me?

Ashleigh Taylor: Mm hmm.

Ms. Phyllis Buehler: Other than education is the key to success. I would keep sending that message.

Ashleigh Taylor: Awesome. So is there anything else that you would like to add to the interview, since we’re winding down?

Ms. Phyllis Buehler: No, but I just want to say I really appreciate this experience.

Ashleigh Taylor: Well thank you. Thank you. You gave us a wealth of information.

Ms. Phyllis Buehler: Oh, okay. Thank you.

Ashleigh Taylor: Well this concludes our-

[End of Audio]