Gordon School

An Episode from Memphis

By Sophia Mason
Many thanks to Sharone Malone and Sheila Malone Conway for sharing their experiences and inspiring this piece.

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Thanks also to Professor Kiel for his research and the Memphis and Shelby County Room for inviting more research.
There's no other way for us to show the board we intend to force the matter.

Do Sheila and Sharon give you as much trouble?

No, they don't, but they've been late a few times too.

Come inside for a minute.

The school board has approved Sheila and Sharon's transfers. They can go to school tomorrow.

Mary, I better be going.

Okay, goodbye, Margaret. Now what can we do for the NAACP today?

Hello there! Margaret, this is Maxine Smith. She's the one who's been organizing the protests downtown. And this is Mrs. Margaret Jones, my next door neighbor.

How do you do?

Are the other parents going through with it?

There's no other way for us to show the board we intend to force the matter.

Now why were you two late? I was about to come lookin' for you.

Why?

I told him, if he doesn't get his things together the night before, I'm going to have a little chat with his father.

No, they don't, but they've been late a few times too.

Hello! How do you do?

Okay, goodbye, Margaret. Now what can we do for the NAACP today?

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We were late this morning.
Gordon School

Based on true stories

Written by Sophia Mason
Pencilling by Sophia Mason
Inking by Sophia Mason

With Sheila Conway, Sharon Malone, and Frankie Walton
Mrs. Malone: It’s Russell Sugarman. The police have been briefed again and everything is in place. I’ll be there in ten minutes.
Stay away from the windows, Sheika.

Press is out there already, but hopefully the police will keep them at a distance from the school itself.

Are you ready to go to school?

A few questions--

Why do your children want to attend Gordon?

Police Chief--

What's your name?

Girls, are you afraid?

Are you afraid to go to a school you are not welcomed at?

Are you married?

Does the violence in Little Rock, in Nashville, or most recently in New Orleans make you want to return your children to their school?
We are not allowing any press beyond this point.

Sir, return to the press area.

One question, officer--

Bzzt. Roger, Bzzt.

All clear. Out.

There will be an officer stationed outside each of your children's classrooms, equipped with radios to report any incident. I'll call you if we hear that they are in any danger.

I will meet you here at 2:00.

I'm Mrs. Patton. Our classroom is right this way.

Be good, girls.

Be good.
Yes-
terday the family
had enough cake left
over for each member
to---

Let
go of me!

Isaiah, look
at me,
Michael---

Mrs. King, excuse
us for interrupting, but may we
please have a minute?

Mrs. King! Can
I PLEAASSEE
go to the
restroom?

We have a visiting student for
you.

No one notified me before now that I’d have a student
visiting, or one this late in the day.

I know,
we’re sorry about that...

Don’t
dilly-dally.

No!
Sharon! You
have to ASK
first!

Teacher: Come
on in, Wayne.

BOOM! BANG!
You and Sharon are always cutting up! Pick up your desk and move it by the blackboard! Sharon, get the desk there and move it here for our new student.

NO!

Stacy hasn’t come back from the restroom. Do you want me to go get her?”

Class. This is Wayne. His family just moved into the neighborhood. Now, how much cake should each family member get?

Deez. My hair look like it’s standing on end? Because it feels like it is.

I feel the same way.

What happened?

Wayne! What’s going on?

I—I don’t know. It was a typical day.

Well, if a typical day causes this, then we will not be staying.
It's ridiculous how little you can buy with an honest wage these days. How was your day?

It was fine.

Maybe next year will be better.
"Oh I, I can make a castle from a single grain of sand, I can make a ship sail, oh, on dry land."

I wasn't sure it was on. Okay. Thanks.

Ooh, I am so sick of that song!

Rhonda? Black Monday, it's on. My mother just called me. No point stickin' around.

Did you wear black last Monday?

I'm gettin' back in bed!

We've got another Black Monday?

AACF. She's a member.

I heard if we keep this up, the school system will go bankrupt.
Good Morning, Mr. Thompson.

Are you going to stay, Mr. Thompson?

Well, good morning!

Well, the board deducts our pay $20 a day when we don't show up, and that just means more money for the board. so... How about you?

Ooh.

Ms. Greene! Now if you don't plan to stay today, that's one thing, but I cannot allow you to disturb those who are staying and promote truant behavior.

Yes Ma'am.

Oooh-weee! I hope they're sweatin' now!

Let's make it 300,000 today!

Wanna ride, sweet thing?
Marlena, will you read the page aloud for us?

Nah, my cousin's one and they wouldn't.

Newspaper's sayin' the Invaders are responsible...

Mrs. Morris said it was on. They were out last night—

No, they gained some ground with the school board, so they called it off.

I'm sick of our people selling us down the river!
NAACP's compromising. It's too soon to compromise.

It wasn't a good idea in the first place. All it does is harm.

You got to be able to stand up and take your licks and fight back! WE WILL OVERCOME!

Take it outside, young men.

WE WILL OVERCOME!

All power to the people!

Man, they aren't takin' any initiative!

We gotta keep this thing going!

We WILL OVERCOME!

Free our brothers!

NORTHSIDE MEMPHIS

RIDERS
Yesterday many students mandated to integrate public schools found themselves waiting up to an hour for full buses to return to pick them up.

Shaykay! What happened? You’re soaking wet too!

Other bus drivers were hard-pressed to carry even one child to school considering the exodus of families from city schools. Parents also withheld their children from school to protest mandated integration.

Last weekend Citizens Against Busing raised the funds to buy a bus which they buried in a six-foot grave.
Huff! It’s so hot.

Still not talking to your mom?

No.

Oh, stop complaining. You don’t have to walk more than a block. When Sheila and I were kids—

It’s a long way!

Aren’t you still at Gordon?

There weren’t enough students going there to keep it open. Gordon’s closed.
I gotta walk all the way down Decatur street.
In 1961, Sheila Malone Conway and Sharon Malone were two of the first, black, first-graders who enrolled at the previously all-white, Gordon Elementary School in Memphis, Tennessee.

Unlike the violence and hatred that erupted due to public education integration in other parts of the South, those involved with Gordon Elementary’s integration carried out a plan that proceeded relatively peacefully. Sheila and Sharon also had comparably good experiences while at Gordon, although this is not to overshadow the fear and danger they faced considering what they knew could happen.

By the time Sheila and Sharon entered their fifth grade, Gordon served an almost entirely black student body. That year black students made up half of Memphis City School System’s student body, yet less than three percent of black students were attending demonstrably integrated schools. White students had now “fled” to different, predominately white public schools, private schools, or Shelby County public schools.

Schools in Memphis continue to operate as segregated and unequal communities. “It takes planning and coordination among parties with disparate interests to move a city forward sensibly and peacefully”.

Further Reading


Also Visit

The Memphis and Shelby County Room at the Benjamin L. Hooks Public Library.
