

Blaire Smith: Today is June 17th and on behalf of Crossroads to Freedom, Rhodes College, and Team for Success, I want to thank you for taking the time to share your story with us today. We are honored to meet you and learn from your inspirational story. Today's interview will be archived at the Crossroads to Freedom website. But, just for starters, can we get you to state some basic background information starting with your name?

Debra Holliman: My name is Debra K. Holliman.

Blaire Smith: All right. And, what is – can you state the year you were born, if you're comfortable with that?

Debra Holliman: 1955.

Blaire Smith: Perfect. And, were you born and raised here in Lake County?

Debra Holliman: Yes, I was, except for about four years I lived in Gibson County.

Blaire Smith: Okay, cool. Well, can you talk a little bit about your experience growing up here?

Debra Holliman: I grew up in a time where everybody knew everybody. Neighbors would watch out for other neighbors. My mother worked and we would be at home, and she knew we would be okay because the people down the street would watch. And, if we went somewhere and weren't supposed to, they would tell on us. But, it was a good time. Innocence – everybody knew everybody, trusted, there was no crime. We didn't hear about child abuse or kids being abducted. It was safe. You could play and it was a good time.

Blaire Smith: And, what was your educational experience like growing up?

Debra Holliman: I was born in Lake County in '55, and about '59 my mother moved us back to Gibson County. Her parents were sick. And, I attended a school; it was out in the county – in Gibson County – called Phillips Elementary. It was a three-room school, grades one through eight.

2:00

And, the first and second grade I had a teacher named Mrs. Williams. And, she taught first, second, and third grade. So, I had her for two years. That was a neat experience when I look back on it. It was like six rows – two rows first grade, two rows second, two rows third grade. And, it was interesting when I look back on that time. Country people rode the bus in, brought our lunches in, went outside to use the bathroom. A water pump that we drank

water – we didn't have water fountains in the school. A coal stove heated the school. But, everybody learned. When I was in the third grade we moved back to Lake County and I went to Lincoln. And, three through eight I went to Lincoln school – community school. Everybody supported the school. Everybody knew everybody. It was a goodtime.

Blair Smith: All right. So, you said you went to Lincoln school, correct?

Debra Holliman: I did.

Blair Smith: Can you tell us more about what Lincoln school was like? Physically, how did it look? Or, just a couple of points on Lincoln school?

Debra Holliman: Well, now, you gotta remember coming from a three room school out in the middle of nowhere to a one through eight building, and a wooden building, and then there was a high school that was brick. So, that was really special. So, being in the old building, it had wooden floors. And, I remember the smell of oil where they kept the floors clean and tried to keep it up. I remember the lunchroom – it was a new cafeteria. And, I remember they had great food that was Ms. Anna May and Ms. Aida May. They could really cook. And, we always had good lunches.

3:59

The teachers – they were caring and they pushed us. There were some that were slow, some on grade level, and some that worked a little bit above. But, they tried to get you to do all that you could do. And, they always encouraged us. Toward the latter part of my elementary years, six, seventh, and eighth – of course, integration was starting. They were phasing out Lincoln. And, they worked really hard to get us ready because they knew we were going to go into a different environment. And, we were going to be compared to the white students who came from their white schools, which had better equipment, more modern facilities. Because, our books were second hand books. Our books had been used by the white kids for five years and then when we got them, there was a new stamp in there for the start of the Lincoln kids. So, we had to prove – I felt that we had to prove that we could do the same work at the same level that they could.

Blair Smith: So, you said that, you know, Lincoln becoming integrated.

Debra Holliman: No, Lincoln didn't become integrated. They faded Lincoln out.

Blair Smith: So, when you did change from the Lincoln school to –

Debra Holliman: I went to Lake County high school.

Blair Smith: So, you said that whole experience you just felt like you needed to prove yourself that entire time?

Debra Holliman: I did.

Blair Smith: So, how was it different when Lincoln school – like, were you around when it was torn down?

Debra Holliman: Yes.

Blair Smith: You were? And, how did that affect you, personally?

Debra Holliman: I hated to see it go because I had a lot of good memories of that. That was our school. It was in our neighborhood. It was the hub of our community. Lake County High School was not in our community at that time. It was in a white neighborhood, did not know any of the teachers except for two. But, all of the teachers at Lincoln we knew. We would sometimes see them in church. They were a part of our community.

6:00

We were going to Lake County High School where the librarian and the guidance counselor – we knew them. But, everybody else – they were all white. We had never seen them before, had no idea who they were. It was just a totally new experience. When I was in the seventh and eighth grade, I had a white teacher. They had sent a couple of teachers to Lincoln to work on reading skills and some enrichment activities because they were trying to get us, too, for high school. I think they felt we were going to be so far behind. I'm not sure what the motivation was for that. So, I had had a white teacher before I had got to Lake County High School, but it was like for 30 or 45 minutes a day. I never had all of my instruction from a white teacher until I got to the high school. And, so that was – I didn't know what to expect. The first day I started Lake County High School I knew that – and the classes I had signed up for that I had been put in were advanced classes. So, a lot of them I was the only black in the class. I always got on the first row, first seat because if anything happened, I was going to be out the door. That was just part of my thinking that first coming. It was totally new. So, I just felt like I had to prove because I want white people to realize that we can learn just like they could. And, I wanted them to realize our teachers taught. And, we had some good teachers in Lincoln. And, I felt like if I didn't learn, that

would be a reflection on them. That would be a reflection on me as a student, also. So, I had all these complexes and these things built in.

7:54

Blair Smith: You mentioned that you were placed in advanced classes, and most of the time you were the only African American in those classes. How was your interaction with the other students at Lake County High School when you first got there? You said you had all ready had some ideas of what was going to happen. But, how did you face these issues between whites and blacks coming into Lake County High School?

Debra Holliman: It really – I never had any problems. Nobody ever said anything directly to me. I never felt intimidated or harassed by white students. I did not go out of my way to make friendships. I went to class to do my work. If you spoke to me, I spoke to you. If you wanted to talk to me, I would talk to you. But, I did not go out of my way to try to befriend my white classmates. I didn't do that. I didn't socialize. I mean, there may have been some students who did, but there was no social – I did not socialize with my white classmates. I saw them at school in class and that was it.

Blair Smith: So, would you say there was a definite separation between your school life and your home life?

Debra Holliman: Yes. Now, of course, my black classmates, I saw them outside of school. And, we hung out and did things – went to ballgames together, and we did things together. But, I did not with my white classmates.

Blair Smith: All right. Well, moving on, please correct me if I'm wrong, but we were told that you were actually the first African American valedictorian of Lake County High School and the first African American principal of Lake County High School. Is that correct?

Debra Holliman: That is correct. I have been blessed. I was valedictorian of class of 1973. And, I served at my alma mater as high school principal for two years. I served as assistant principal for three and a half years prior to that. So, really my life was spent at Lake County High School.

10:00

I couldn't leave it. I graduated. I came back in '77. I started teaching. I was a classroom teacher for 27 years, then I was assistant principal three and a half, and two years as principal all at Lake County High School.

Blaire Smith: Wow. Can you tell us a little bit about the experience of you getting valedictorian, and on top of that, becoming the first black principal of Lake County? Was there a big deal? Was that a big deal when that happened? Or, was there any special moment?

Debra Holliman: It was a big deal, I think, in '73. It wouldn't be now, but I think it was then because I had not gone to Lara Kendall my middle school years. That was the county school – that's where the white kids went. I remember when the announcement came out, because for a little town it's big news in the local paper. And, my mother worked at a factory – HIS. Henry I. Siegel, where they made blue jeans back then. And, this white lady made the comment at work that I would not have been valedictorian if this white girl had not gotten sick during our school year. She had been the valedictorian at Lara Kendall. And, it kind of upset my mother, and she came home from work and mentioned it to me. I said, "Well, Mama," I said, "You should have told her, 'Well, she might not have been valedictorian at Lara Kendall if I had gone to Lara Kendall.' But I went to Lincoln." So, it was a little comments – little things like that. But, overall the big moment for me, I guess, was giving the speech – the valedictory address at commencement. That was big. You know,

12:00

the gym was packed and all, and here I get called up to do the valedictory address. So, I think that's a moment I'll always remember. I will. My mom and dad that night – I will always remember that.

Blaire Smith: And, coming back being principal, the first black principal, was it just kind of like a full circle type of situation? Or, how did you feel when you came back to Lake County High School?

Debra Holliman: Well, I thought it was – it was not difficult being principal, and the reason it wasn't difficult is I had worked at the school for all those years as a classroom teacher. I had good relationships with my coworkers. And, they knew that I would do the best I could at the job, and that I would treat them fairly. And, I think the transition from teacher to administrator wasn't that difficult.

Blaire Smith: Good. Good. Well, not I actually want to talk a little bit more about your childhood and you growing up. More about the community. Can you tell us a little bit about church growing up here?

Debra Holliman: Sure. I grew up in the Methodist church – Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. It was a small church. You had older people

there who would always correct you if you did something wrong. I felt comfortable with my church family. They were very supportive of me. They always had me up in prayer when I went to college and they were very supportive of me. And, I always felt like I had somebody other than my parents – I knew they were in my corner. But, I knew that the church was behind them.

Blaire Smith: So, the church was more like a home away from home. Correct?

Debra Holliman: Yes, ma'am.

Blaire Smith: Good. Good. And, when you were growing up, who would you say your role models were?

Debra Holliman: Well, other than my parents, I'd have to say teachers. I've always been inspired by teachers.

14:00

My first grade teacher – I fell in love with school. I always loved school. It was always something new to learn. My third grade teacher – she was outstanding – Mrs. Pendime. I'll never forget her. Mr. Jenkins, my history teacher – he opened my mind to that history was more than what the book had in it. That the books we had for American History – they didn't mention the accomplishments of African Americans. And, he always introduced that in class. And, he made history alive, and that we were a part of history. And, he was a motivating factor, Mr. Jenkins. I really admired him. And, I wanted to be a history teacher until I got to high school. Then I changed over to Latin. But, I enjoyed Latin. Teachers have been an important role in my life. My Latin teacher was very inspirational. A white woman, but she was very caring. She made me feel very welcome in her class. Very supportive. I really felt like she was my mentor.

Blaire Smith: And, so you definitely said that these people were mentors – Mr. Jenkins and your Latin teacher in high school. Would you say that they influenced your path – the path that you took after graduating from high school and going onto college?

Debra Holliman: Yes. My parents – I mean, my mom and dad always did not want me to be a laborer. They knew that I could do more. And, they always pushed, and encouraged, and fussed. So, I always knew that I was going to go to college and I was going to do something.

Blaire Smith: So, looking over your life, your early childhood, and leaving Lake County and coming back to Lake County, how would you say – has Lake County changed? Or, has it not changed?

Debra Holliman: Oh, yeah. It's changed a lot, just as the world has. I mean, you know, there's more interaction socially with black and white kids. I know as principal working in school that things had changed so much from when I started teaching to when I left the high school.

16:05

I mean, kids – they grow up together and they start kindergarten together – they know each other. There's not such a big deal to socialize. Communities have changed. Some neighborhoods, they used to be all white. And, now you have some black people living in neighborhoods that once were all white. Now, there's still some things that need to be changed. You know, there's nobody black working at the courthouse, and that's been that way for a long time. But, you know, I can see some changes, but there's still more to go.

Blair Smith: So, I mean, you mentioned that even though it has changed, there's still so much more that needs to be changed. In your mind, what do you think is the biggest thing in Lake County that needs to be changed?

Debra Holliman: We need more industry. We need something to pump up our economy. When our young people graduate, they have to leave because unless you want to work at the prison, there's no where else to work in the county. So, we need something to keep our young people here, to give them an option.

Blair Smith: Good. Good. Well, as an organization, Crossroads to Freedom focuses on asset-based community development, meaning that we focus on the institutions, ideals, and organizations that bring value to the communities. In your opinion, what are some of the greatest assets in Lake County?

Debra Holliman: I think our small school system is an asset. I think we have classes that are very reasonable in size. It's an opportunity for teachers and students to form a relationship. And, this relationship can extend outside the class. You know, when you go to the grocery store and you see your teacher, and they ask you how you doing and all that, that let's the student know that that teacher cares about me as a person. I think our school system is an asset. I think the community spirit – I think we have a good community.

18:02

It's small. We've got a lot of people, maybe not college educated, but I think that they want more for the community and their children.

Blair Smith: Now, if you could describe Lake County in one word, what would it be?

Debra Holliman: If I could describe Lake County in one word what it would be. Mm-hmm. Lake County in one word – what it would be?

Blair Smith: It's a hard question, I know.

Debra Holliman: It is because it's so many things. I think Lake County is underdeveloped.

Blair Smith: Underdeveloped. Can you expand a little bit on that?

Debra Holliman: I think that there are opportunities that haven't been taken advantage of, whether it's the kids – they don't take advantage of what they can do. Also, with the community, the chamber of commerce, and businesses. I think there's a lot of potential here to build, and I just don't think that everyone has tapped into what all they can do. And, that's from kids in kindergarten to their grandparents. People don't always take advantage of their opportunities.

Blair Smith: Now, you talked a lot about the youth here in Lake County and the school systems, and how you think that is an asset, and the youth growing up. What advice would you give to the youth today?

Debra Holliman: Be honest. Be honest, because I've noticed with young people, they are not honest. And, what's so unfortunate about it, they have people that believe everything they say – their parents. I have seen that on a lot of occasions that whatever that kids says, that's what their parent believes. And, children do not always tell the truth.

20:02

Blair Smith: So, honesty would definitely be –

Debra Holliman: Be honest.

Blair Smith: That's great advice. Well, we've talked about a lot of stuff today from integration, segregation, your childhood life growing up, and Lincoln School, and then having you transition to Lake County High School, and your advice to the youth. But, is there anything that you would like to add that we haven't spoken about today?

Debra Holliman: I can't think of anything.

Blaire Smith: Okay, well, we want to thank you for participating in the Crossroads to Freedom Project, and we enjoyed learning about your story today. So, thank you so much.

Debra Holliman: Well, thank you for asking me.

[End of Audio]