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Shannon Vanderford, 2008

Item Type	Moving Image
Publisher	Rhodes College
Download date	2026-04-14 22:11:24
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/10267/33672

Lauren Turner: Okay. On behalf of the Crossroads of Freedom Project we would like to thank you for participating in this project with us. So for the record, could you state your name?

Shannon Vanderford: It's Shannon Vanderford.

Lauren Turner: And when were you born?

Shannon Vanderford: When? I was born August 20, 1950, in Memphis.

Lauren Turner: All right. Could you talk to us a little bit about your home life?

Shannon Vanderford: Okay. I was an only child. My parents were – well, we call them “old parents”. They already had gray hair when I was born. My mom was 40; my dad was 42, when I was born. They married late in life; had me late in life. I grew up in the Whitehaven area. I went to Whitehaven Elementary School and Westhaven Elementary School, and Whitehaven High School. I grew up in a completely racially segregated neighborhood – I didn't think it was strange; that's just the way it was. What else do you want to know? What was my childhood like?

[00:01:17]

Lauren Turner: Well, backtrack a little bit. What did your parents do for a living?

Shannon Vanderford: Oh, my parents? My mom was a teacher; she taught 1st grade at Westhaven Elementary School. And my dad was a Postal Service worker; he worked in claims administration at the main Post Office on Front Street.

Lauren Turner: Okay. So you mentioned you grew up in an all-white neighborhood –

Shannon Vanderford: Yes.

Lauren Turner: Born and raised –

Shannon Vanderford: Right.

Lauren Turner: Could you talk to us a little bit more about that, like what the neighborhood was actually like?

Shannon Vanderford: Okay. Well, there were a lot of kids my age or close to my age – boys and girls. You know, we did the usual – well, no, it's not usual any more. Back in those days, especially in the summertime,

you could go outside at 8:00 in the morning and tell your mom, “I’m going off on my bike and what time is supper?” And you could just be gone for like eight or nine hours. Nobody worried about it; there was no cell phones or anything, so you just packed a lunch and went off with your friends and just hung out and went down to the creek or out in the woods, or rode your bikes all day, or rode a mile or two away to a little convenience store or whatever.

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It was no problem – it was a real free feeling growing up here. I remember – I remember that; I remember thinking growing up was so cool because you could just go and be gone all day. And then afternoons after school during the school year I would come home, I would ride my bike or walk. School was about a mile from my house – I had a key, I let myself in. I never worried about being by myself or anything happening, and I’d get home an hour before my mother did. No big deal; nobody worried about anything. If you went to a neighbor’s house, you just left a note that said, “Here’s where I am.” It was carefree.

[00:03:10]

Lauren Turner: Were you involved in any church activities growing up?

Shannon Vanderford: Yep, I was. We were members of the Whitehaven United Methodist Church, so I was involved in Sunday school growing up, and youth choir, Methodist Youth Fellowship; all that.

Lauren Turner: Okay. You mentioned it earlier but I probably didn’t catch it. Your middle school – what middle school did you go to?

Shannon Vanderford: We didn’t have middle school. We had – elementary schools went through 8th grade, and then high school was 9 through 12, so we didn’t have any.

Lauren Turner: Okay, so where did you go to elementary school?

Shannon Vanderford: I went to Whitehaven for 1st and 2nd grade and to Westhaven 3rd through 8th, and then Whitehaven High School, 9 through 12.

Lauren Turner: So while you were in high school what kind of activities were you involved in?

[00:04:00]

Shannon Vanderford: I was involved in everything. I was in the band for four years; I was in the Beta Club; I was in Future Teachers of America. Gosh, what else – I was in an honor club called **Lowkettes**, which I don't know if they have any more. I guess it would be comparable to – I don't know. It wasn't a sorority; it was more like an honor club. What else did I do – oh, school musicals. I didn't act or anything; I was always in the orchestra for school musicals. Anything musical, I did it.

Lauren Turner: What do you remember was going on in Memphis while you were in high school?

Shannon Vanderford: Well, when I was a senior in high school Martin Luther King was assassinated in April, and to be honest with you that was probably the first time I had ever heard of Martin Luther King in my whole life other than he had been in the newspaper for several weeks before that. And I read the newspaper, so I just barely knew who he was. When he was assassinated I remember school closed for a week or more. There were curfews; it was pretty scary. I don't really remember what I was afraid of, but I remember being afraid. I don't remember if there was rioting or anything like that, but I just remember it was very scary because all of a sudden you felt very restricted.

[00:05:42]

You couldn't go out, you know; you couldn't drive a car after – I don't know what the curfew was, maybe 8:00 or something? There were police everywhere; National Guard. It was just a frightening time.

Begin Segment 2: [05:58:14]

Lauren Turner: Do you remember anything that was going on prior to his assassination? I know you said you –

[00:06:05]

Shannon Vanderford: I remember there was a garbage strike – workers wanting equal pay, which to me seemed pretty logical. I mean I couldn't imagine why they didn't have equal pay, but, you know, I was a high school kid. You're not as interested in those things in high school; maybe you should be, but we weren't.

Lauren Turner: I understand. You mentioned school closing and I guess being so maybe disconnected from some of the issues that were happening,

how did you feel about school closing if there wasn't a direct correlation to what was going on with the world?

Shannon Vanderford: Yeah, you know I remember thinking at the time one of my huge concerns with school being closed was were we going to graduate on time, because I was a senior, so I was seriously concerned about was I going to have to go to school extra, or whatever. I didn't really look at it as a vacation because we had – you know, in senior classes I had projects due and things like that, so I used it to get stuff done. I didn't go out partying or anything like that, but it was a real confusing time, and I remember being afraid. I remember talking on the phone to friends and everything because our parents pretty much locked us up in the house.

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“Even though I have to go to work or whatever, you're not going out.” Of course, my mother was there, because she was a teacher so her schools were closed too, but I wasn't allowed to go out and do anything during that time. We talked at home about what was going on, and why it was a terrifying time and that somebody had been murdered. I talked about it with my parents.

[00:08:03]

Lauren Turner: Do you remember what those conversations were like when they tried to explain it to you?

Shannon Vanderford: You know, we just talked honestly about it, and I do remember my mother being a lot more concerned about it than my father, and I guess that's because she was an educator – I don't really know. It's been so long. But my mother was much more upset about it than my father was. My father was more of like, “Well, we need to get back to business as usual.” But my mother was more concerned about, “These people have a right to equal pay for equal work, and job opportunities” – but you know then they were both – assassination is not the way to solve the problem.

And they both told me that Martin Luther King stood for peace, and that he never promoted rioting or looting or any of those things that were being threatened; that he would've wanted a peaceful solution to the problem, and that that was what he was in Memphis to try to get was a peaceful solution. And then my dad would just get real mad about everything.

[00:09:21]

Lauren Turner: Do you remember if any members of your community or anyone you knew may have had some type of connection with what was involved in the things that were going on in Memphis?

Shannon Vanderford: I do remember that my boyfriend at the time went to the Lutheran church, and his pastor was involved in some marches downtown. And I remember that there was a big concern in the church – it was an all-white church, and he went down and marched arm in arm with all the black people who were marching downtown. And I remember there was a big stink in his church about, “Why did he do that? He’s not representing the church – he’s doing that on his own!” And I remember my boyfriend and I, our feeling was like, “Well, if that’s what he believes in, he ought to be down there doing what he’s doing,” and we were kind of proud of him. But I remember other people in that church were not proud of him at all.

Begin Segment 3: [10:32:26]

[00:10:33]

Lauren Turner: Do you remember at all the attitudes of the members of your church that you went to?

Shannon Vanderford: Pretty much ignoring things, as I recall. I don’t remember it being even really discussed at church, but at my boyfriend’s church it was a hot topic and I went with him about half the time because that’s what you did back in those days.

[00:11:01]

Lauren Turner: So do you feel like the lack of integration within your community and within your school during those years may have played a role in your views on it today and in your views on it then?

Shannon Vanderford: Yeah. I think that segregation in the schools was probably the worst thing that ever, ever, ever happened in this country, ever. I think we’re still suffering because of it. I think Memphis suffers more than some other communities that I’m familiar with and that I’ve lived in, and I’ve always tried to figure out in my own mind is that because Martin Luther King was assassinated here? Is that what makes Memphis so much more – what’s the word? There’s a hostile environment around here – there’s a racially hostile environment. I feel it. I think a lot of people feel it; I know a lot of people my age feel it.

[00:12:07]

And I haven't felt that in two other cities I've lived in, which were both in the deep South. One was Little Rock and one was Montgomery, Alabama. I did not notice that to the degree that I notice it here, and I don't know why it is. I don't know. And yes, I think that being raised in an all-white school was a drawback. I had three black students in my high school the year that I graduated – in the whole school – and I graduated in a class of like almost 400 people. One of those was in my graduating class, and you know, that's 400 to 1 odds – that's crazy. When I went to the University of Memphis as a freshman the very next fall there was integration.

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I mean there were plenty of black students and Mexican students and students from everywhere in my classes. And I had just never had any association at all with people of other races – I just hadn't. I never thought of that as strange until I was there, and then I thought, "Wow! There are people that are way different from me – raised different from me, have different opinions." It was a shocker!

Lauren Turner:

So how did you try to make that transition coming from an all-white high school to go to university?

[00:14:02]

Shannon Vanderford: I tried to go completely the other way, like I think a lot of people did. I became – I guess I could describe myself growing up in high school and all as being very conservative, being from a very conservative family, and when I went to college I pretty much was, "Well, everything I learned was wrong, and I'm gonna forget all that and throw it all out." Of course, since then I've kind of found the happy medium I guess, but you know there were a couple of years there, the first couple of years of college, I was just like all my values and everything are wrong, because I didn't learn what was real. I didn't learn the real world. This is the real world in college, where I am, and that other world was not real.

Lauren Turner:

Can you talk to us a little bit more about the experiences that may have made you question the values that you had learned previously?

Shannon Vanderford: Just getting to know people from other races – African-American, Indian, Hispanic, Vietnamese – just getting to know people. And I lived in the dorm, so that was a plus because a lot of people at the U of M live at home and commute and they don't really interact that much. They're just like going to school and going to work,

but I was immersed in the campus. I lived in the dorm, so I lived there all the time and I made friends with people in the dorm that were not like me, which was kind of cool. My parents didn't think it was so cool, but they got used to it and after a while they were okay with it too.

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Begin Segment 4: [15:45:20]

Lauren Turner: How did those conversations go, introducing your friends?

Shannon Vanderford: Oh, rocky at first – yeah. You know, I'd talk about a new friend and Mother'd say, "Oh, you haven't mentioned that friend before." And I'd say, "Well, she's from Vietnam," or whatever. "Oh – they have Vietnamese students there?" There are 21,000 students – you're gonna get some people from other places, and you know I just wanted to learn about other people because I felt like I'd missed out on a lot. And I'm not blaming my parents – it wasn't their fault. It was the way they were raised too. It's just passed on from generation to generation, and so I think I broke that generational mold – maybe.

[00:16:31]

Lauren Turner: What kind of activities were you involved in in college?

Shannon Vanderford: In college – well, I did a lot there too. Let's see – first year basically I just protested everything that came along; didn't get too involved in anything. I was in a sorority, but not until my junior year; I mainly did that because my parents had been in them and they kept putting pressure on me, so I finally joined one. I did sorority activities for junior and senior year; I was involved in Young Republicans Club. What else did I do – studied a lot. Oh, I was involved in musical organizations there too, the first two years, because I started out as a music major and then I changed to an education major. I was involved in the future teachers group – man, it's been a long time. I'm sure there's more, but that's all I can call off the top of my head.

[00:17:46]

Lauren Turner: Okay. Do you remember – you talked about University of Memphis being a lot more diverse than where you were growing up.

Shannon Vanderford: Oh, yeah!

Lauren Turner: Do you remember any personal experience or experience you heard about from maybe the students of color there, or?

[00:18:02]

Shannon Vanderford: Not anything that I could just quote directly; nothing that just jumps out at me. I just remember having conversations, mainly in the dorm late at night, with people that were different from me and that had different viewpoints; that came from different parts of the country or even from other parts of Memphis. Just about growing up differently and living differently and I do remember a few things. I do remember there was one African-American girl in the dorm named Gwen, and she was a year older than I was and one time I asked her, very innocently, how did she rank being so special as to get a dorm room by herself?

[00:19:02]

And she said, “You white people think you’re the only ones that are special, don’t you?” And I remember that was like somebody slapping me across the face because that was the way she viewed my question, when really all I wanted to know was how did you do it because I want to do it too. But it really struck me as, “Wow, she’s got a chip on her shoulder!” And of course I had one too, but I do remember that one little incident, and it hurt my feelings because I wasn’t asking to be a smart-aleck. I was asking because I wanted one of those rooms by myself because I had a turkey for a roommate.

Lauren Turner: Being on the college campus do you remember anything that was going on, on the college campus, like students getting involved in

[00:20:02]

Shannon Vanderford: One huge thing that I remember – it’s not really racially-oriented, but the Kent State event happened in 1970 with the riots on that campus that had to do with the war, and I remember a lot about that because there were sit-ins on the campus. This was students of all races that got involved in protesting and sitting in and protesting the fact that students had been murdered at Kent State and shot. I remember teachers protesting; I remember professors wearing black armbands, black headbands. I had one professor who shaved his head and wore solid black; he tied armbands all over himself, headbands, sat in the middle of his desk.

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He came in one day and swept the papers off of his desk in front of the room, sat in the middle of it like in a yoga position, and hummed for the entire hour and a half of class and never said a word.

Begin Segment 5: [21:20:09]

Which I thought, “Gee, my parents are getting ripped off financially for this class,” because we just all sat there and anytime anybody would ask him a question or try to figure out what was going on, he would just (*hum*). I remember that – I can still see him doing that. I remember police being there. I remember they brought buses on campus to try to herd up students and haul them off in buses downtown to arrest them, and I remember them hauling people off from sit-ins on the campus.

I remember students sitting out there for hours, overnight, and people getting hauled off. I watched it, but I didn’t sit in.

[00:22:05]

Lauren Turner: Do you remember the kind of effect that may have had on the campus? Like you mentioned the coming together of all the different races and age groups; do you remember what kind of affect that might’ve had on the campus?

Shannon Vanderford: I think it got a lot more dialogue going; I really do, even though it was more war-related and not racially-related, people were unified behind protesting the war. It didn’t matter what color they were – nobody wanted to go get shot at. It didn’t matter what color they were. I was extremely against the war, but I was way too chicken to go sit in and get hauled off in a bus because my parents had already told me, “If you get arrested and hauled off downtown we’re not bailing your butt out.” So I was too chicken.

[00:23:01]

Lauren Turner: When did you decide – you mentioned you changed your major from music to education – when did you decide to become a teacher?

Shannon Vanderford: Kind of end of sophomore year.

Lauren Turner: What was going on that made you – kind of helped that change?

Shannon Vanderford: The Bachelor of Music degree had changed from a four-year program to a five-year program. I didn't want to spend an extra year in college, and that was one thing. That's a lame reason, isn't it? Well, I did a lot of lame things in college. Another reason was I suddenly realized that it would be pretty hard to make a living as a musician, and not near as hard to make a living as a teacher. My mother was a teacher, my grandmother had been one, and I thought, "It's a noble profession and I can do this," and I liked helping people.

Lauren Turner: Okay. So when you – when you major in general education, then you're a teacher, how does that work? Or did you go and do like a –

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Shannon Vanderford: I did a secondary education major with the intention of going on and getting a graduate degree and possibly working on college level. I did not go on and pursue a graduate degree, however, so I just majored in secondary ed, and I had endorsements to teach Spanish and history on a high school level and I did student teaching in Spanish at Ridgeway High School in Memphis.

Lauren Turner: Okay, so what was the climate like there at Ridgeway? Was it still all –

Shannon Vanderford: Ridgeway was – it was pretty much an all-white school as I remember; wealthy kids. There was a drug problem there, and an alcohol problem, big-time.

[00:25:15]

Lauren Turner: Okay. So you mentioned drugs and alcohol problems; what other kind of things like going on in the media, news, or anything around Memphis may have affected the students there?

Shannon Vanderford: You know, really hard for me to say. I don't think those kids were affected by anything other than there were a lot of really wealthy white kids there that huge allowances and drove fancy cars, and I really don't think they were affected by much of anything unless they didn't get their allowance. And it was pretty disgusting.

Lauren Turner: So coming from – you just came from this diverse place, University of Memphis –

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Shannon Vanderford: Yeah.

Lauren Turner: And grew a lot as a person –

Shannon Vanderford: Went back into an all-white environment in a high school.

Lauren Turner: How did you make that adjustment?

Shannon Vanderford: Quite frankly I couldn't wait to get done with student teaching and get out of it, because it was not very rewarding. I felt like I was kind of going back to the high school where I'd graduated from – it was like stepping back into the past, and I felt like most of the time I wanted to tell kids, "Grow up – get a life!" It wasn't a very pleasant experience, really.

Begin Segment 6: [26:42:01]

Lauren Turner: So where did you go after that?

Shannon Vanderford: Okay, when I graduated I took a teaching job in a Methodist school – elementary school, actually. I had applied with Memphis City Schools and Shelby County Schools to teach Spanish, and I guess there was plenty of Spanish teachers the year I graduated because there were not very many job openings. And I had an opportunity to get a job in an elementary school that was brand new – I mean it was a start-up school – and I went back immediately to summer school and got elementary certification, and I taught in this school for two years. The first year I taught 5th and 6th grade social studies and English, and I taught Spanish – I think we only had Spanish a couple of times a week.

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And the second year – I'm sorry, back up. The first year I taught 5th, 6th, 7th, and 8th grade social studies and Spanish, and the second year our school doubled in size and I taught 5th and 6th grade social studies and English, and that was the year Spanish was twice a week. The first year I was there, they taught Spanish, they decided to start Spanish in 5th and 6th grade. The second year they decided they didn't have time for that and so they bumped me down to 3rd and 4th grade for Spanish. I only taught two years. I really did not enjoy it that much. Parents were difficult to deal with, and so I quit teaching.

[00:28:30]

Lauren Turner: So if you quit teaching, what –

Shannon Vanderford: I went back and worked on my Masters degree for a year, and I did not finish it. I took 15 hours' worth of graduate work, and then I basically ran out of money and needed to get a job to make some money so that I could finish my graduate degree. So I'd always been very good at typing, secretarial work, so I took a job as a medical secretary and learned as I went, and I intended to do that for a few years and go back to graduate school and I ended up staying in the medical field for 28 years, doing all kinds of things, some more interesting than others. And then in 2004 I decided it was time to go back to teaching, so this is my 5th year back. And I've been at the same school, West Memphis, since 2004; this is my 5th year here.

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Lauren Turner: Were you married during the time?

Shannon Vanderford: Oh, yeah. Married right after I got out of college, and then divorced about 10 ½ years after that; then I remarried somebody different, not the same person. I hate to say "remarried." I married again, and my husband and I have been married almost 25 years, and we have one child. He's 21; he's a senior in college at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota, studying to be a secondary school English teacher.

[00:30:26]

Lauren Turner: Okay. You mentioned you were involved in Young Republicans –

Shannon Vanderford: Yep.

Lauren Turner: During that time – what were your experiences with politics during that time? What was going on?

Shannon Vanderford: My experience with politics was – well, it wasn't the greatest thing in the world because a couple of years after college I just ditched that completely. It seemed to be white versus black again. It seemed to be kind of a step back into the past – you know, "We're Republicans and we're gonna elect all white people because Democrats elect all black people." And again, I don't know if that's – it was mainly local politics. It wasn't Presidential or anything, it was local – Memphis, Shelby County. Again, I don't know whether that was just Memphis or whether that's what was going on everywhere.

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After a couple of years of fooling with that I just lost the taste for it completely. It seemed like there wasn't too much concern about were you a good candidate or did you know the issues or did you have a platform, but it was just, "Let's elect a white person," and I just had no taste for that.

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Begin Segment 7: [32:01:25]

Lauren Turner: Do you remember any specific experiences that may have turned you away from –

Shannon Vanderford: Just kind of those good old boy mentality – I don't know, I just got sick of it. There was no diversity in the Republican Party; none.

Lauren Turner: You mentioned that you've lived in Little Rock and Montgomery, and the difference.

Shannon Vanderford: Right.

Lauren Turner: Could you talk to us a little bit more about the difference in those two places and Memphis concerning like the racial climate?

Shannon Vanderford: Okay. I felt like – and I still feel like to this day – that Memphis has a hostile racial environment. I did not feel that in Montgomery at all, which is kind of strange because you think Montgomery, Rosa Parks, everything else that went on down there – George Wallace and what a racist man he was as Governor and everything. I did not feel the racial strain in Montgomery. I felt like Montgomery had moved way past that and that Memphis was still stuck on it. Little Rock – I don't remember any racial hostility there at all. I just don't remember any, and I know a lot happened in Little Rock too, because both of those places in the mid-'50s were just hotbeds of civil rights movements, completely.

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But I didn't feel that; I especially didn't feel it in Little Rock, and I know a lot of terrible things happened there, too – Governor Faubus and the groups of kids trying to go to school. I show that movie in my class every year in 5th grade after we study the Civil Rights Movement; I show them the movie about kids in Little Rock – the movie that starred – I can't call the name of it right now. *Crisis at Central High* is the name of the movie. It starred Joanne Woodward, and my kids, when they see that movie every year they can't believe it. They're like, "Is this real? Is this fiction?" I'm like, "No, this is a real movie; this is really what happened."

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But I don't remember racial tension when I lived in Little Rock, and very little of it in Montgomery. And then I came back to Memphis and it's just like, "Oh, here we go again – we're back to the '60s."

Lauren Turner: How was that, coming back to Memphis, coming from those more progressive areas?

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Shannon Vanderford: It was like stepping back into the past. It was – I couldn't see that any change had been made, and I still feel that way a lot of times.

Lauren Turner: I know you mentioned you show the movies to your students and things like that.

Shannon Vanderford: Yeah.

Lauren Turner: How do you try to explain to them the issues that were going on in Memphis during the time?

Shannon Vanderford: One of the things that really grabs my kids in our social studies book when we're studying the Civil Rights Movement, it has pictures of water fountains in a public building, and it says "colored" over one and it says "white" over one. And there's an obvious disparity between the two because the one that says "white" is a water cooler with refrigerated water, and the one that says "colored" is just, you know, the little porcelain bowl with the knob on it; it's not chilled water. And my kids look at that picture in the book and they say, "What does this mean?" My kids ask me, "What does colored mean?"

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They don't even know – they don't have a clue. Even the black kids in my class don't have a clue, because I think Catholic schools especially have done a real good job of integrating and assimilating everyone and making everyone equal. I really believe that. The kids don't realize differences in anything at all. I mean if you ask two kids in my class, "What's different about you two kids?" they would say things like, "Well, she's got Reeboks and I've got New Balance," or something. I mean they would never even mention race; they don't even see color. And when they see that picture in that book that shows children drinking from two different water fountains they're like, "Is this for real? This didn't really happen. This isn't a real picture, is it?"

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And I'm like, "Yes, it's a real picture. I remember it." And they're like, "Well, did it make you mad?" And I say, "No, it didn't make me mad, because you've gotta realize what I grew up in. I grew up in a time when we didn't think about was this right or wrong – this was just the way it was. Nobody ever told me that was wrong. Nobody ever mentioned that it was unequal or anything else. It's just the way it was."

Begin Segment 8: [37:40:29]

And my kids just think I'm horrible because I wasn't mad about that. And I say, "When you don't know any different – when you don't know the difference – when you've never been taught the difference – how am I supposed to feel like I was in the wrong if I didn't know any better?"

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And then they seem to kinda understand that, but they are really shocked that those pictures are real and that I remember it.

Lauren Turner: I know you mentioned your mother was a teacher –

Shannon Vanderford: Yes.

Lauren Turner: And she being a lot more concerned with the things that were going on –

Shannon Vanderford: Yes.

Lauren Turner: During the assassination. What do you think your role as an educator is to helping these kids understand and getting the word out about the things that were going on in Memphis during the time?

Shannon Vanderford: Well, I just try to relate to them my personal experiences and tie that in with whatever we're studying. I try to tell them how important Memphis was during that time and how radically things have changed in some ways – in some ways – in Memphis. But I also try to tell them what's gotta change is people's hearts; you know, their hearts have to change. Because you can pass any amount of laws, you can write laws until you're blue in the face – but if people's hearts don't change then nothing's gonna change. And if people don't embrace each other as equal, and giving each other equal opportunities in education and in jobs and everything else – and we carry this all the way across.

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It's not just racial – it's men and women. If we don't consider human beings to all be equal, and all created by God to be equal –

because that's what we teach in Catholic schools – then if people's hearts don't believe that, nothing's gonna change them. And I also try to teach them, "Try not to be so mad about what happened in the past. Just make a vow to learn from history that this won't happen again." Just like why do we study Hitler? Why do we study World War II? Why do we study what happened to the Jews and other people that were persecuted? It's so it won't happen again, you know. It's okay to be mad about it, but move on; learn from it. That's how I try to use it.

[00:40:19]

Lauren Turner: So why do you think Memphis is stuck in that racial inequality type of mentality?

Shannon Vanderford: I think there's a whole bunch of reasons. I think that – you want just my honest personal opinion, don't you?

Lauren Turner: Yes, ma'am.

Shannon Vanderford: I think the Mayor of Memphis, the current Mayor of Memphis, is stuck in the past. I think he is so concerned about racial equality that he either intentionally or unintentionally promotes inequality. I think he goes overboard; I think he plays the race card when it's obviously not a race card. And I think he either has or has had some other people around him that foster those same beliefs. I'm not one of his fans; I think the Shelby County Mayor does a lot better job of being fair and being honest and being real. I think that's one thing. I also keep going back to the idea about this is where it happened, and for some reason we got stuck in an anger mode.

[00:42:13]

And I don't really know – because I don't remember back that far – was this because of the leadership at the time that just fostered that and made it just keep festering up like a wound, or what? It's been so long ago and I was so young at the time that I really don't remember. I don't have an answer to that, but I know that Memphis feels different as a city than other places I've lived, and I don't mean that in a good way.

Begin Segment 9: [42:47:13]

Lauren Turner: What do you think that Memphians here should do to try to be unstuck?

[00:42:58]

Shannon Vanderford: Throw out the baby with the bathwater. Get rid of the Mayor; start over. Just start over. Give somebody else a chance. I think there should be term limits on the Mayor; I think it's asinine for anybody to serve as long as he has. People get stale in a job after all these years; they think they don't have to do anything anymore. It's a bad idea. Presidents have term limits. They used to could serve over and over and over until Roosevelt, and now there's term limits. Mayors ought to have term limits too; I think that would be a huge help, new blood, new faces – new blood. I'm tired of the same-old, same-old.

I think a lot of people are tired of it. I do not live in the city limits of Memphis, so I cannot vote in the City of Memphis elections. I wish I could.

[00:44:08]

Lauren Turner: Could you talk a little bit more about the actual progressions and the regressions that Memphis has made, that you think Memphis has made?

Shannon Vanderford: Well, I think some of the progressions and regressions have happened in our public school system – in Memphis city schools especially. My mother taught – I have never taught in Memphis city schools or Shelby County schools. My mother taught in both. I feel like there was a period of time when the schools were making a lot of progress as far as not only integration but in equality, and I feel like some of the things that have happened in our national government that have trickled down education-wise have seriously hurt the schools, especially Memphis city schools. No Child Left Behind is a joke – it's an absolute joke.

[00:45:32]

It should be called “Every Child Left Behind” because when teachers are – and this doesn't have to do with integration. This is just across the board. This is areas where we have regressed, and African-American children have regressed and white children have regressed as well and all other brands of children. When you're required to teach for benchmarks and tests you lose the ability to teach. When you're being held up to some kind of standards that are not real, then you can't teach in a real way. That's why I don't teach here; that's why I teach over there, because I'm not held to that standard and I can really teach about things like civil rights, and this is wrong and this is right.

[00:46:23]

And we can call things wrong that are wrong, and right that are right, but I think that Memphis city schools have gone through a lot of changes in the last several administrations. I happen to think that our current city Mayor was a fairly decent school superintendent and had things going along a pretty decent track, and when he said a year ago that he wanted to be school superintendent again I thought, "It's probably a good idea," because I think Dr. Carol Johnson did a pretty good job while she was here, but she wasn't here long enough to really make a huge effect.

[00:47:09]

The one before her was a washout; did more to undo progress than – oh my gosh! So I think some of the things that have happened in the schools are holding back racial equality, holding back education – and I believe that education – this is because I'm a teacher – but I believe that education is the only way for people to be free. And I think a lot of what's going on in Memphis City Schools right now could in no way be called education. It makes me sad. Does it make me wanna come over here and get a job? Not really.

Begin Segment 10: [48:00:19]

I guess if I was 30 years old, it might, but I like the freedom that I have to teach what I know needs to be taught for children to succeed in the world.

{00:48:15}

It doesn't matter what color they are. I have children of all kinds of colors and races and denominations and every other thing, and I teach all of them from here, and they're all gonna have the same chance when they get out.

Lauren Turner:

Looking back on the experiences that you've had in the path that your life has taken, are there any specific moments that you're most fond of or most proud of or?

Shannon Vanderford:

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. And I would say a lot of them are in the last almost five years since I've gone back to the classroom. Lots of great moments; lots of things like even last week when we decided to make trumpeter swans life-size out of papier-mâché. Life-size trumpeter swans have an 8-foot wingspan and they weigh 45 pounds, and they're like 4 ½ feet tall, but we had studied this and my kids wanted to do it, and I thought, "Lord, this is gonna be the biggest mess!" and I was right. We had paint everywhere. I had children every color you can think of with paint and glue and mess

everywhere, and I had kids sitting there saying, “This is so cool. I’m gonna remember this day for the rest of my life!”

[00:49:53]

Yep – makes it all worthwhile. That made the two hours I stayed after school hosing down the room worthwhile, just hearing some kid say that, or hearing some kid say – at the end of the year I always poll my kids and I say, “I want you to tell me things that you liked about 5th grade and things that you hated.” And I make a list and put it up on the board, likes and dislikes. Things that need to be kept, things that need to be tossed, and I encourage them to be very, very honest about it, and every year so far the kids have told me, “We love the part of American history where we studied about World War II and about the Civil Rights Movement.”

[00:50:39]

Every year, and that makes me happy because I think those are two things – if they don’t remember anything else about 5th grade American history, if they can remember World War II and the horrible things that happened during that time period in history, so that they can remember we can’t ever let this happen again. And the same with civil rights, you know; people got their civil rights as an act signed on a piece of paper, and we are still continuing to try to make sure that people are treated equally. It’s not what’s on a piece of paper; it’s what’s in here. And if they can just remember those lessons, that makes me happy.

[00:51:30]

It makes me feel like I’ve done something worthwhile as a person, and nothing else really matters, does it? In the long run, on my tombstone, what’s gonna go between the dashes. It’s gonna have 1950 and then dash and then hopefully some year way, way out there – and on the dash in between I want it to say, “She taught us about American history and to be aware of things so that bad things won’t happen again to people; so that people will be treated equally and fairly in the future.”

[00:52:07]

Lauren Turner: Why do you think the teaching of those two units is so influential to the students?

Shannon Vanderford: Just because if you don’t learn from history it will repeat itself. It will, just like the stock market junk that’s going on right now – we’ve been there before, done that before. Yeah, we’ve lost all this money before, but it’s because we haven’t learned, and hopefully – hopefully there will not be someone else who comes along and promotes a perfect race and tries to eradicate all the others. And hopefully there won’t be anyone else who comes

along and says, “Just because you’re this color or that color you can’t go to school and get an education.” I don’t want that to ever happen again – ever. And my son doesn’t either – he’s training to be a teacher.

[00:53:12]

Lauren Turner: Is there anything else that you wanna say?

Shannon Vanderford: No. I think it’s great that y’all are doing this. I’m glad to be able to throw in some information on it, just for what it’s worth – my two cents’ worth.

Lauren Turner: We just wanna thank you –

Shannon Vanderford: Okay.

Lauren Turner: For taking the time out and –

[End of Audio]