

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

Interview with: Deloris Marie Johnson

Interviewed by: Reed Amadon

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Transcribed by: Suzanne Mascola

RA: What is your name?

DJ: My name is Deloris Marie Johnson.

RA: How long, Deloris, have you lived in Houston?

DJ: I have lived in Houston all of my life except for going to college. I left here to go to college.

RA: Can you describe what life was like here as when you were younger under segregation?

DJ: When I was younger, life under segregation was very, very hard, compared to what life is now. Everything was segregated. It was black and white. We had to go to black restrooms when we went downtown. If we were on the bus, we had to sit in the back of the bus behind the back door. That was usually where we sat. Also, when we went to any public event, there was always the black section or the colored section as they called it and it was vividly spelled out, that section, with some kind of sign that said "colored" and "white." I can remember some of the events even when we were young . . . there was our special holiday which was the 19th of June . . . there was an amusement park here which was called Playland Park. It was outside of Main. The whites were able to go to that park any time they so pleased to do so but we, as blacks, were only allowed to go . . .

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RA: You were talking about life under segregation and some of the things . . . you talked about a few things . . .

DJ: Well, I was talking about Playland Park. That particular park was a very eventful park. It had lots of amusement rides and everything, but we were only allowed to go there on the 19th of June. No other time. My father, once we went there, he wouldn't let us go back because of the conditions we had to go. Also, Mr. Holland, our principal, advised us not to go. It was really something. Our neighborhoods were segregated. The only people, for the most part, who were white in our neighborhoods were the people who had the corner stores. A lot of them were Italian people at that particular time, or later, the Chinese came in and bought them out. That is the way it was. Even when we went to the football games, the only people who participated at the football games were the persons who were selling the popcorn and the peanuts. And if we did go, we had to sit on the far end out of the way, so to speak. That is what it was like going to football games, if we did go.

RA: When people wanted to find work here at that time, what kind of work were they able to find from this neighborhood? What kinds of things did people do?

DJ: Well, a lot of the people in the neighborhood, the ladies who worked were people who worked in homes. They did day's work in homes or either they worked in some of the . . . we had some people who did laundry work. My mother, as a worker, she worked at home and she washed and ironed for people in River Oaks who brought their clothes here for her to do them. My father was a contractor, however. He was a paper hanger and painter and he also did remodeling work. A lot of his clients were in the River Oaks area. He did painting for many of the paint stores here like James Butes and Sherman

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Williams - some of those paint companies. We had people who were porters. We had people who worked on the railroad, other people who worked down at the waterfront. We had workers all over. We had some people who also worked in the restaurants as waiters. During that time, a lot of the men were waiters at the country clubs. Also, some of the young men who were in high school with us worked at the country clubs.

RA: What was your involvement with Yates High School? Talk a little bit about that.

DJ: At Yates High School, I was a student. Yes, I was a student at Yates High School from the 7th grade to the 12th grade. At that time, all of our school days were at one school, unlike now where you have the middle school and then you go to high school. We were there from 6th grade to 7th grade. While I was at Yates, I had very, very interesting teachers and a miraculous principal who was Professor William S. Holland. He was a man of great courage, of great responsibility and he just led his students to perfection. He told us we had to be the best that we could be because there was going to become a time when integration was going to come and we were going to have to be able to fit in, and we were going to have to be able to work in the work world. So now, we had to do the best we could. We were always competing. At Yates, we had many activities that we were in. We had the football teams, the basketball teams, volleyball teams. The brothers had gulf. They had the golf club. We had the Ryan Cadets which was the drill team. I was on the drill team. I was captain of the drummers. And also, I participated in competition with other schools. I was the Declaimer, a public speaker, and I went on to win the . . . I have some of my medals here . . . I went on to win the city championship which was a diamond studded medal. This is what is called the Julius Levy Award. Then, from there, I went to the District where I competed against schools

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in the District like Yates, Washington, Port Arthur, Beaumont, Central of Galveston . . . I am sorry - the city. We had Worthing, Phyllis Wheatley, and Jack Yates - those were the ones in our District. From there, I went to the state and that was at Prairie View. The state was at the same time the track boys were there. They were doing their state running. So, we had our declamation and I won state. I went against San Antonio, Austin, Port Arthur, Central of Galveston - many of the big schools in the state.

Yates was really a pleasurable journey for me. We had many exciting days at Yates and we were just driven to compete, to do the best that we could do.

RA: You really had a lot of stuff going on. Let's say, in 1958, you really had a lot of stuff going on. The Civil Rights struggle was going on all around you. How did it affect the school and yourself and even Mr. Holland?

DJ: Well, it affected us in many ways. Number one, we didn't get new books the way that the white schools had new books. They gave us the books from the white schools. Also, we still had to compete. As far as the testing was concerned, we still had the Iowa Test, the basic skills and the other tests that they gave us, the Otis Test at that time, but with that, we were able to go to college and compete with the other students no matter where we were. And many of us were first of our color to compete with students at some of the other colleges. That made us real proud. That made us really proud of all the sacrifices that had been made by our teachers, our parents, and also Mr. Holland, who really stuck his neck out for us because, at that time, whenever we had parades like they have now, they would put us behind the horses, and Mr. Holland told them, who were responsible for the parades, that his students were not going to march behind the horses.

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There were many days that we didn't march in parades. We had a good band, we had a good marching corps, and they wanted us but no, he wouldn't let us do it.

As far as our teachers were concerned, we had top notch teachers. Our teachers were great. Our teachers were really like parents to us. They were concerned about us. They were concerned about our work ethics. The main thing was we didn't have libraries that we could go to after school like kids go after school now. We had no tutors. That was not at that age. What we really did was we would come home at night and work with one another over the telephone as students to help one another.

RA: Did you know Eldrewey Sterns?

DJ: I knew him as far as his going to Texas Southern University, being a student there, and all of the publicity that had come about with him being in the Civil Rights Movement here. As a particular personality and a close friend, no, I did not know him but I knew of all the works that he had done as far as the Civil Rights. He was very, very much into the Civil Rights Movement here in Houston.

RA: Did you know Reverend Lawson?

DJ: Yes, I do know Reverend Lawson. Reverend Lawson goes all the way back to Jack Yates High School with us. Very proud to know Reverend Lawson. Reverend Lawson is my pastor emeritus. He is a great man. He is great with the Civil Rights Movement. When he came here, it must have been in the mid 1950s and at that time, he would come to Jack Yates High School and be with us for our assembly programs where many, many times, he was the guest speaker for American Education Day or Texas History Day or some big day at the school like that. He was there for the parents, he was there for the teachers, especially the students.

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RA: What about Quentin Mease? Did you know Quentin Mease?

DJ: Yes, I do know Mr. Mease. Reverend Lawson and some other very courageous people in Houston, were very, very prominent with the Civil Rights Movement here. Mr. Mease, at that time, was head of the Houston Businessmen's Club, I think, here in Houston, and he was also the director of the YMCA which is about 2 blocks away from my house here. As a matter of fact, some of my classmates and I were on the team council at the YMCA and we met there every week with Mr. Mease and the director of the program that we were working with which was the canteen that we had on Friday nights. Mr. Mease's daughter was one of our classmates. She was in the class right behind us. But Mr. Mease was quite a gentleman.

RA: How did you and your fellow students think about and feel about the events unfolding around you and throughout the South? How did you feel about the activities that were going on in other places?

DJ: My classmates and I had really, really fearful feelings about many of the things that were going on around us. Number one, our biggest fear was were we going to be able to, should I say, pass the grade? Were we going to be able to meet the requirements? Another fear was just the fear of all of the turmoil with segregation and then the crossover, the bridging into integration. We had heard about Little Rock and what had happened there. We had heard about things that were happening with Martin Luther King in other areas. However, at that particular time, some of us were at Hampton University. We had left here and gone to Hampton University and there, we were in the marches. As a matter of fact, Thelma Robbins Gould, who was there with me from Jack Yates . . . we left Jack Yates and went to Hampton . . . we had the sit-ins and we also had

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the marches. We, in particular, were in the marches. That was a way from here but I don't think they had as much here in Houston that was participated in as we did over in that area. I understand that here in Houston, we had a peaceful quiet bridge from segregation into integration and I think Reverend Lawson and Mr. Quentin Mease and some others were very, very instrumental in that.

RA: What happened when they integrated Jack Yates High School?

DJ: When they integrated Jack Yates High School, it appears that that happened after we had graduated. I had gone to Hampton and come back . . . at that particular time, I became a speech pathologist in the Houston Independent Schools and in the 1960s, they had what they called the crossover. That is when they took the teachers from the white schools, sent them to the black schools and then vice-versa -- they took teachers from the white schools, the schools that were totally white, and sent them to the black schools. That is what they called the crossover. As a speech pathologist, I was in that crossover. I hate to say it but it was said by many people - that they took the best teachers from the black schools and sent them to the white schools and vice-versa. They took the poor teachers from the white schools and sent them to the inner-city schools or the so-called black schools. But we were able to survive as far as teachers were concerned. We were able to turn out good students wherever we went but it was just sad that many of us did not stay in our schools because I think the culture meant a lot. To keep your culture in your schools, you know, you have that statement that it takes a village to raise a child, and that is what we had at Jack Yates. We had a village. We had a village that was thriving and well. But that is how it was as far as segregation was concerned.

RA: We talked and you said you went away to college at Hampton College.

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DJ: Hampton University.

RA: Hampton University.

DJ: Yes, in Hampton, Virginia.

RA: O.K., well, tell us a little bit about . . . when you went there, you talked a little bit about your experience . . . talk a little bit about your experiences of getting there and some of the things you did while you were there. I thought that was a great story.

DJ: Getting there. My experiences in getting to Hampton. Well, first of all, you probably know already that Hampton is about 1,400 miles away from here. I had never been any further from here than San Antonio or Louisiana but there were several of us who left here. We got on the train, we will say, on a Friday night and we didn't make it to Hampton until Sunday. What we did - we left here and we went, of all places, to Little Rock, Arkansas during that time and it was 12 o'clock at night when the train would get into Little Rock. The policeman would get on the train and that was really, really frightening. We all really sat together. When we knew that we were getting into Little Rock, we made sure we were together. And it was very intimidating. They would get on the train and come on like you were prisoners or somebody and they would flash lights in your face and that kind of thing. But once we left there, we were O.K. because we were going further north. The next morning, we would land into St. Louis. We changed trains there and then we would go from St. Louis to Cincinnati, Ohio, where we would change trains again. That would be in the afternoon. So, during the night, we would go through Kentucky and Tennessee and West Virginia, in particular, and that is where all of these coal miners would get on the train. This was a different culture of people that we saw - the people from the Appalachians. But it wasn't until that next morning, the third

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morning, that we would get into Hampton and it was O.K. We had made the journey by then. As you may know, Hampton was a landmark area for us because it was the Emancipation Oath that was there on the campus of Hampton University where the slaves in the east or right there on the Atlantic Coast were told that they were free in the years. It was a delightful journey. It was an experience that I will never, ever forget. Every time I hear the word "Little Rock," it rings a bell and it brings all of that back to me.

RA: What happened when you came back from college, back here? Did you notice changes? When did you come back to Houston after going to college?

DJ: I came to Houston in 1962. Yes, I could see there were several changes. People were . . . the change wasn't complete at that particular time, by no means, but you could see that some changes were being made. You could see that when you went into stores, especially downtown, it was different. But then, too, it depended upon where you were whether you would see evidence that people had not really accepted the change. So, it took time. It took time for it to happen. It really took time. Even in the schools. You know, I had an experience myself. I had become supervisor in the Houston Independent School District and I had gone into this particular school where I had been the first black supervisor to appear at that school. And when I walked up to the desk, here I am, professionally dressed in my suit, heels, makeup, and the secretary tells me . . . I ask for the sign in sheet. "May I have your sign in sheet, please?" And she told me, "Well, the custodian sign in sheet is right over there. You need to get it." I told her, I said, "Ma'am, I am sorry. I am your supervisor. I am not your custodian." That was really, really something. That was real hard. Real hard. But once I had met the principal, it was hard

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for her to accept me at first but later, she kept calling my office for me to come out and help her, and that was a surprise and a change.

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You know, there is something even more than that that existed when I was even younger. That was earlier in the Yates years. I had family to come in and visit us one weekend from Louisiana and they had gone to vote and this was the first time that they had black people to attempt to vote in their hometown. And when they went to vote, they called for the ropes to hang them. They got out and they came straight to our house and stayed with us for about week. That was the worst experience I had ever had with segregation when it comes that close to your family. And we have a letter now that is in our family archives that is from the NAACP person who wrote to The National about it.

RA: When you look at just civil rights in general, what civil rights event do you remember most, the one that impacted you most?

DJ: The one that impacted me most was Martin Luther King's march. That really impacted me a lot. Now, something else that has impacted me was my coming home to see documentaries of what happened here in Houston. That was a big impact. I can see Holly Hogelbrook sitting down at the counter, at the lunch counter, and some of the other people that I knew in high school, and who were then in college because I was in college also. That was a great impact on me because I am sure had I been here, I would have been with them. That had a big impact. But Martin Luther King marches, there is no greater impact than those. And then, the march on Washington - a great impact. Also, when I could come back home and you could go downtown, you could eat at Woolworths, you could buy a hoagie and sit down and eat it or a hot dog at Woolworths

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and eat it, that was a great impact because when we were little and we would go downtown, our parents wouldn't let us buy anything. We would eat before we left home or we would pack a lunch with us. We would have our sandwiches, cookies or cake, or whatever, and if we were going to be gone a long time, that is what we would do. And it is the same thing with traveling - the very same thing with traveling.

RA: Has there been progress in Houston, Texas? Has there been progress made in terms of civil rights and what is left to be done?

DJ: Oh, yes, a lot of progress has been made not only for blacks as far as civil rights is concerned in Houston - for all nationalities. Before, it was a black/white issue. Now, it is a multicultural issue because since then, we have had . . . and I think with Martin Luther King opening the door, he did not open it just for the blacks, he opened it for everybody. We have the Mexican American culture that has come in, we have the Vietnamese culture, we even have the culture from the other countries - the Indian people, all of the Asian people and other ethnic groups have come in. It is just a melting pot in Houston now. Houston is a big melting pot. I think if there had not been the changes and if we did not have what we have right now, we would have more protesting going on than we have right now. And, you know, we do have protests every now and then.

RA: There were gains with integration. Were there losses?

DJ: Yes, there were both. You asked me were there gains in integration and were there losses? Yes, there were both, gains and losses in integration. I think that as far as the gains were concerned, there were opportunities that were afforded that had not been afforded before but they came at a price, and the price that they came at was that

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neighborhoods changed, schools changed. Many of the social activities changed. Maybe we should start with the schools. At that particular time, we had primarily Yates, Wheatley, Washington, Cashmere Gardens and Worthing as our predominantly black high schools. And after integration, many of the students were dispersed into other schools. Many of them were dispersed voluntarily and then others were what they called the crossover. They may have had another name for it, where they bussed the children. Many students were bussed to white schools and the white students were bussed to the colored schools or the black schools. But with the intermingling, there was a loss. Many of our children did not do well. Some people said it was because, number one, distance - getting up early in the morning, having to catch the busses and go to the other schools. Then, some of the people said that the white teachers that were sent to the black schools were not good teachers, and many of our students lost. Many of our students lost. Maybe some of the other students lost, too, because they had to travel and vice versa. But our neighborhoods also suffered. Many of the blacks left the neighborhoods and they went into other neighborhoods. Then, the homeowners where we had homeowner property, it became rental property and some of our neighborhoods just went down, down, down. Not only that, some of our businesses also went down because people were in other areas, they did not shop in our areas anymore. However, they did come back for the barber shop and the barbecue. We had good barbecue places here. There was a loss. There was a loss that I don't think we will ever begin to regain because the strength of the community was lost.

RA: You talk about the high school experience here. Give us an idea of the high school Thanksgiving football game. The big game.

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DJ: The high school Thanksgiving game. It was tremendous. You are speaking of the Yates and Wheatley game? That was the main event. Oh, there is so much to tell about that. Everybody made it for that. Number one, you would be so surprised . . . we do have pictures of that and I hope you will be able to capture that. But people dressed up in their finest and after they ate their Thanksgiving dinner, they were out and on the way to the football game. It was at what is now the University of Houston stadium. At that time, it was called the High School Stadium or Jefferson Stadium. All of the high schools had their football games there. The whites had theirs there on Saturday night primarily or Friday night. The blacks had theirs on Thursday night or Wednesday nights. That is the way it was. And the Thanksgiving game, the two rivals, the two schools that were the black rivals in the city were Jack Yates High School and Wheatley. Now, if you had someone from Wheatley here at this time, they would say they won the most games but I dare to let them convince you of that. Yates won the most games. But we had like 35,000, 40,000, 50,000, people at those games and that was really miraculous for that particular time. We drew the biggest crowds ever and the most money that came into the District from extracurricular activities came from that particular game. However, we did not reap the benefits of it though and that was a loss. That was one of the losses. But everybody, be they in fox holes and other parts of the world, be they on trips around the world, but Thanksgiving Day, everybody knew about the Thanksgiving Yates and Wheatley game. That was something to see. Even they would bring out the school queens like Ms. Yates would sometimes come out in a helicopter on the field. Or they would have the fancy cars that they would come out in. Everybody would go for the half time, just to see the half time. It was really an event, an event of the year.

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RA: When things happened at school and you had integration, did they still keep a lot of the same type of activities or did things not happen the way they used to happen?

DJ: Well, no, they didn't happen the way they used to happen because number one, the administration changed from Yates. After we left Yates in 1958, a very sad thing happened - in 1958, the new school was built. Mr. Holland helped design the school. When the school was built and it was time to go into the new school, because Mr. Holland was so controversial and because he spoke out about what he thought was best for his students no matter what it was, no matter to whom he was speaking, he did not bite his tongue about what was right and wrong in the community. So, they took the principal from our rival high school and sent him to the new high school. That is the way it was. So, the new school had lots of people from the rival high school to come in and many of our people who were very instrumental in keeping the tradition of Yates were left at the old school which became Ryan Middle School, and Mr. Holland was principal then. So, a lot of Yates changed. It wasn't the traditional Jack Yates High School.

RA: When you talk to your grandchildren today, when you talk about the 1950s and 1960s struggle, what do you tell your grandchildren? What do you want your grandchildren to know about that time?

DJ: I have no grandchildren. I have lots of nieces and nephews who are like my grandchildren. I tell them about the struggles that we had and I tell them about the need for having to stand up for principles, standing up for what is right, and also to just hold out and do the best that you can, be the best that you can be because what Mr. Holland instilled in us was you are tomorrow what you were yesterday, plus the few changes that you make today. And that is what I believed in all of this time. It has taken me around

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the world and back. It has taken me through many venues where I was the first black at work in the situation or to be in a situation. And one of the things that I am most proud of that is that . . . I was the speech coordinator for the Houston Independent School District and having been a student in the elementary schools who came from a family background that was from Louisiana, I was called "geche" because they couldn't understand me. I had a very heavy dialect. And being that there were no black speech pathologists in the black schools, they wouldn't let the white speech pathologists come in to the schools to help us. So, I said that when I became an adult, I was going to be a speech pathologist so I could help the black students, and I did. I did that. And not only that, I was supervisor for the 4th largest school district in the United States. The Governor, Ann Richards, supported me to the State Board of Examiners for speech pathologist and I was the first black on that board. I am really proud of that. Proud of what my teachers instilled in me and also Mr. Holland, and most of all, my parents. This is what I tell them - be the best that you can be and you will be.

RA: Any last thoughts for history? Any parting words? Well, actually, before we do that, are there other things you wanted to show us? You wanted to show us a book.

DJ: What I would like to show you in the book . . .

RA: Let me ask you this, give me your parting thought and then we will go to that.

DJ: O.K., my parting thoughts are if there are any students who will see this or will hear me, any parents of students, any teachers of students, I want you to know that life is like a mirror. It reflects the things you do. So, give the world the best you have and the best will come back to you. Be it your grades, be it your studies. Students, study. Study hard. That is what Mr. Holland taught us. We had to study. When we came home, we

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studied. If you had football practice, drill team practice, you still had to come home and study. And we had to make the grade . . . [end of side 1]

DJ: . . . the first blacks to graduate in the program. But when we first got there, the teacher would sit in front of us and she would give her lecture. She would say, "Did you hear? Did you understand?" They did that to us for 2 weeks. On Friday, the third Friday, we had our first exam. When we came back Monday morning, when we were in the hall, they were, "Hello, Ms. Johnson. Hello, Ms. Woods." We found out when we got into the class we had made the highest grades on the test. That is why I am saying, you can do it. You have the strength to do whatever you want to do. Parents, stay behind your students. See to it that they study. Students, study your books. You can find your lesson. Your lesson is there. The answers to all of the questions are there. You just have to find them.

RA: Is there something from the book you would like to show us?

DJ: Yes.

RA: This is the yearbook?

DJ: This is the yearbook from Jack Yates High School, 1958. The last class from the original Jack Yates High School, where our mascot was the lion and the lion has changed at the new school. He doesn't look like this. And I also want to show you our principal. This is our principal, Mr. William S. Holland. He was a great man. He first came to Yates as the coach under Mr. James D. Ryan who was the principal at that time. He was called Professor Ryan. Mr. Holland came in as his coach. When Professor Ryan died, Mr. Holland became the principal until 1958; from, I think it was like 1948 to 1958. There are some other things here that we might get a little later.