

THE HARLEM EXPERIMENT: GOOSE CREEK CONSOLIDATED INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT'S MOVE TO PEACEFUL INTEGRATION

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"... I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin . . ." *Kluger 757-8*). Like many blacks of the turbulent 1960s, Martin Luther King had a dream – the dream of equality. That dream faced a violent battle. The President of the United States, John F. Kennedy, helped establish the battle lines in 1963 by proposing a civil rights bill which no longer allowed for the idea of separate but equal *Kluger 756*). Forced integration by the federal government brought still more violence, but the passage of the civil rights bill would give the Justice Department power "to go to court in the name of black Americans who could ill afford the time, energy, and cost of suing sovereign states and their subdivisions whose laws and policies effectively frustrated the desegregation process" (*Kluger 757*). In many school districts the dream of equality – an integrated school system – was mandated by the Justice Department through the Federal courts (*Kluger 759*). An election in Richmond, California, demonstrated the controversy brought about by forced integration. On April 15, 1969, the voters of Richmond rejected a proposal to integrate their school system through busing. They also elected three new school board members who ran using the slogan, "Education. No Buses." These new board members replaced the only three board members who were for bused integration. Prior to the vote, the turmoil over the integration issue resulted in school disturbances, disrupted board meetings, and financial problems ("*Mixed Schools*" 70). Some school districts found, however, that integration did not always have to be accomplished through anger and busing; it could be a cooperative action that might result in a better education for everyone. As school districts throughout the South struggled to integrate their schools so did the school districts in Texas. In Baytown, Texas, thirty miles east of Houston, the Goose Creek Consolidated Independent School District proposed to integrate Harlem Elementary, an all black school, through an innovative education system.

The concerns with which Baytown struggled had long been concerns throughout the nation. After the *Brown vs Board of Education* decision in 1954, the process of integrating the nation's schools was slow to halting, with many areas deliberately resisting the spirit of the law. When George Wallace, the governor of Alabama, ignored federal court orders and refused to allow two blacks to attend the University of Alabama, President Kennedy retaliated by federalizing Alabama's National Guard to force Wallace to allow the black students into the university (*Kluger 756*). The entire episode so outraged President Kennedy that he appeared on national television that night with one of his most moving speeches on civil rights. Kennedy's powerful words were aimed at the nation's conscience – "If an American, because his skin is dark, . . . cannot send his children to the best public school available . . . , then who among us would be content to have the color of his skin changed and stand in his place?" He asked who had the patience to wait ". . . one hundred years . . . since President Lincoln freed the slaves" when "their heirs, their grand-

sons, are not fully free. . . . And this nation, for all its hopes and all its boasts, will not be fully free until all its citizens are free." He pointed to America's emphasis on freedom around the world and at home "except for the Negroes; that we have no second-class citizens, except Negroes; that we have no class or caste system, no ghettos, no master race except with respect to Negroes?" (*Kluger* 756). Then on June 19, 1963, President Kennedy made his boldest move towards equality for blacks by introducing the strongest civil rights bill ever brought before Congress. In August, the March on Washington occurred, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his "I Have a Dream" speech to two hundred thousand people who had gathered on the Mall. King's remarks, a bold appeal for solidarity, showed the nation the unity behind the civil rights movement. During the Johnson administration and exactly a year after President Kennedy introduced the civil right bill, the Senate passed the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act (*Kluger* 757-8), which gave notice to all school districts that they could no longer maintain a "dual system" of education; school districts had to integrate their schools – faculty and students.

Texas also felt the pressure to integrate their schools. In Baytown, a suburb of Houston, the Goose Creek school system accepted integration prior to the Civil Rights Act. By closing schools and then moving students to new facilities, they successfully accomplished integration of their schools with the sole exception of the all-black Harlem Elementary School. Harlem's history graphically illustrates the struggle between district officials and communities which resulted in an entirely new education system.

Harlem, built in 1928, on land donated by Harry Johnson, a wealthy land owner in the area, was named Harlem to designate it as a black school. The community that developed around the school, McNair, was totally comprised of black families. Harlem had three rooms with dirt floors and outside bathrooms (*Roberts and Nichols*). When Miss Johnnie Walton, a long time black teacher at Harlem, joined the faculty in 1948, the conditions had not improved. The bathrooms remained outside (*Walton*), children served themselves in the cafeteria (*McPhail*), and available classroom space remained limited. The district added buildings, but no overall design determined the campus which appeared "haphazardly put together" (*Walton*). The school board put no real thought into the building plans of the school just as the board had put little thought into the education of the students at Harlem. Throughout the struggle, Harlem's teachers and students were made to feel like "second-class citizens." Harlem's students received all second-hand books and supplies. Even without administrative support, the faculty worked diligently to fulfill its dream of giving the students the best education possible (*Richard*).

In 1963 a bond issue passed giving \$410,000.00 toward the building of a black junior high school next to Harlem Elementary (*Boynton, "Trustees"*). E. F. Green, the McNair community spokesman as well as principal of the all black Carver High School, expressed the community's desire that the district not build a junior high school adjacent to Harlem since only "total integration" would answer the educational problems of the black community. Building a junior high in McNair would only serve to further segregate the black children (*Pendergrass*). The school board then decided to renovate Harlem, and the McNair community voiced strong opposition to this plan as well. Black leaders wanted Harlem torn down because they felt that a separate school would perpetuate segregation. McNair citizens suggested that their children be bused to other schools within the district (*Walton*). But the board, never listened to what the McNair residents said (*Coltharp*), nor did the board go to the campus to see the condition of the school. The community, knowing the de-

plorable condition of Harlem, wanted it closed; the school board decided to renovate Harlem (*Coltharp*). The district added an auditorium, library, five classrooms, and an administration building, improvements which required an additional \$67,000.00 from the district. Still, the school needed an additional \$23,000.00, which the school district paid, for air conditioning and a stove on which to prepare the students' lunches, which at the time, were prepared off campus at Highlands Junior High School. Ironically, Goose Creek Consolidated Independent School District spent the same total amount of money a year later to build the new Pumphrey Elementary School, in the center of an all-white neighborhood, that could house three times the number of students that Harlem could (*Boynton, "Trustees Hope"*). Conditions improved, but Harlem remained an all-black school.

To comply with the Civil Rights Act, Deputy Superintendent W. D. Hinson said, "Goose Creek would no longer have any all-white or all-Negro schools or faculties in the district (*"Faculty Desegregation" 1*). Without an acceptable plan of desegregation, the district could lose Federal funds (*"Compliance" 1*). Art Coltharp volunteered to move to Harlem as principal, becoming the first white employee on the campus. Contharp immediately began integrating the faculty. The "cross-over" teachers that came did so voluntarily with the understanding that they could leave at the end of the school year if they were displeased with their assignment. The community, although somewhat suspicious of the new faculty, continued to support the teachers (*Coltharp*).

Once the process of integrating the faculty had started, the district began recruiting white students to attend Harlem. Art Coltharp and the district administration began an integration program called "Freedom of Choice." To all the parents of elementary students, the district sent a "choice-of-school" form. Parents could choose any school within the district for their children to attend as long as overcrowding did not exist within the school or within the grade that the parents requested. Superintendent Gentry said, "Schools will operate in all respects without regard to race, color, or national origin" (*"Civil Rights Compliance" 18*). No member of the district could influence parents or students in their choice of schools. If overcrowding existed, the students living closest to the school would have priority over those living farther away from the school (*"Complete Text" 2*). The district had integration on their school buses, but it would not provide the students with transportation to any school other than their neighborhood school; therefore, many students did not have transportation to schools outside of their neighborhoods (*"More Inegration" 1*). Unfortunately the program did not result in the integration of Harlem. As one can see by the map included, Harlem sits alone in the middle of the McNair community, and white parents saw no need to transport their children across the district to a black community for the same education – or possibly an inferior one. Consequently, for the next three years Harlem remained an all-black school (*Coltharp*).

The Department of Health, Education, and Welfare – the agency responsible for strictly enforcing the integration rules set forth in The 1964 Civil Rights Act – used threats of lawsuits and termination of federal funds to force school districts to integrate. All-black schools within an all-black neighborhood did not meet HEW's standards. Obviously, because of Harlem's racial make-up, the district did not meet the racial criteria set forth by HEW; therefore, it had to find a way to integrate Harlem so that the district could continue receiving federal funds (*Boynton, "Trustees Hope" 1-2*).

The Goose Creek school board then began long, often secret, meetings on

what new program they should use to integrate Harlem. F. Philip Dignam, a board member at the time, felt the board used executive meetings to discuss programs inappropriately. "I told them that if they did not stop the discussion, I would leave the meeting and go straight to the people and the press waiting outside and tell them exactly what was going on." And there *were* many people waiting outside. The people overflowed the board room and covered the lawn surrounding the building. The board felt threatened by the vocal, white Highlands community, so several members found it necessary to have closed executive meetings. Highlands and McNair differed strongly as to which of the district's ideas the board should implement. The Board discussed three plans: zoning, pairing, and closing Harlem. Several of these provoked intense anger within both communities; therefore, the board tried to avoid a confrontation with either Highlands or McNair until all the board members agreed on one program. Mr. Dignam disagreed with what he considered the board's deceptive tactics, and the meetings became public board meetings. The board opened the windows so everyone could hear and received comments from the communities involved. Some of these comments came in the form of speeches; some were simply shouted from the crowd (*Dignam*).

The first program, zoning, which would increase Harlem's attendance area to include white families, caused anger in both Highlands, the white community involved, and McNair, the black community involved (*Boynton, "Zoning" 1*). Highlands felt the district would infringe upon its rights by forcing Highland's children to ride buses to school when they had a neighborhood school. One parent quoted in the *Baytown Sun* said that "she did not mind integration, she just did not want her child going to school in their [the black] community (*G.C.C.I.S.D. Minutes 2-24-69*). McNair also opposed the zoning program because it would only add approximately thirty white students to the school, and that number did not meet HEW's standards (*G.C.C.I.S.D. Minutes 2-24-69*). Dignam realized that by pulling the children of angry Highland parents into Harlem, a peaceful integration could not possibly happen (*Dignam*).

The second plan the board discussed, pairing, contained ideas similar to zoning. The district would use Harlem for kindergarten through the second grade and Highlands Elementary for the grades three through six. Again, the suggestion angered the Highlands parents. Dr. Dan Golden, spokesman for Highlands' Committee for Individual Rights in Education, said, "They, as a united community wished to go on record, here and now, that they were unalterably opposed to pairing or zoning of Highlands Elementary School and the Harlem Elementary School" (*G.S.C.C.I.S.D. Minutes 2-24-69*). Several reasons determined Golden's argument: such procedures 1) would cause the students to lose their right of freedom of choice, 2) would not satisfy HEW, 3) would be inconvenient because of time for busing, 4) would create a safety hazard by forcing children to unnecessarily ride buses twice a day, 5) would increase the district's costs but would not improve the students' education and 6) would make it difficult to respond to the school in case of an emergency. The Highlands community did not oppose integration; it opposed mandatory busing (*G.C.C.I.S.D. Minutes 2-24-69*). These same families who said they did not oppose integration had deep concerns about their property values dropping if the district forced their children to attend Harlem (*Dignam*). Pairing, the most feasible program for the McNair community, would leave their newly renovated community school open and supply a well-rounded education to all of the students. This program also fulfilled the HEW requirements (*G.C.C.I.S.D. Minutes 2-24-69*). Reverend Sherman Gray, Jr., the McNair community representative, said,

"A child should grow up realizing that all people are not white, middle class, protestants, etc. Part of their education should include knowing people of all walks of life" (*G.C.C.I.S.D. Minutes 2-24-69*). Again, Dignam realized that this option brought many of the same problems as zoning, especially the problem of angry parents (*Dignam*).

A few board members were also opposed to pairing. One board member commented that "Negro students were [one and a half to three] grades behind white children (*G.C.C.I.S.D. Minutes 2-24-69*). Some board members "felt that there was a possibility of white children being hurt academically if they met and went to school in Negro areas" (*G.C.C.I.S.D. Minutes 2-24-69*). Dignam realized that by trying to pull into Harlem the group of students least likely to deal well with integration, little would be accomplished. Along with integration would come anger and resentment on the part of the white students and their parents. Phil Dignam had a dream to find an innovative idea that he could use to entice white parents and their children to Harlem (*Dignam*).

The McNair community strongly opposed the third proposal – to close Harlem and bus the students to other schools. McNair "had gone along with the school district's desegregation plans up to now, but was it possible that the district wanted all of their students bused out of the community where they had a modern school available?" (*G.C.C.I.S.D. Minutes 2-24-69*). Since the renovation of Harlem Elementary School, it had become the center of the Community just as a community school should. The citizens of McNair had grown very proud of the facility and wanted their children to remain in their own community. As yet the district had not developed a plan that could solve the integration problem and please the people of both communities.

Dignam, very concerned about the problem, went to E. F. Green, the former principal of the all-black Carver High School, and asked Green what type of program he would like established for an elementary school if he had all the money needed and a building in which to enact the program. Green replied that he would like to have a program suited to the student. If the student read above level, he could work above level in school, and if his math skills fell below level then he could work at his level in math. All students would not work at the same level. The programs would also include enriched science, art, and music programs. The teachers in this dream school would work diligently to make the materials interesting so the students would not become bored in the classroom. "The idea is that children vary in their abilities and in the speed at which they develop these abilities; instead of fitting the child into a limited grade division, the study materials are fitted around the child. He is allowed to progress as fast as he is able" (*Boynton, "Trustees Hope"*). Dignam, enthused by Green's ideas, went before the board and proposed this innovative program as an "individualized program."

In his proposal Dignam included open transportation. Any student who wanted to attend Harlem would have access to district bus transportation. Also, any student from Harlem who chose to leave Harlem, would receive transportation to the school of his choice. Mr. Dignam felt that instead of using forced busing to integrate Harlem, the board could offer voluntary busing and persuade the parents, through the use of enriched programing, to send their children to Harlem (*Dignam*). He understood that it was an "... adventurous approach" (*Boynton, "Trustees Hope"*) that might take some time for the community to accept, but he also knew it would benefit everyone who became involved with the program. The board enthusiastically received Dignam's proposal with only once change. Board member Bob Wahrmond

proposed that if not enough white students enrolled in Harlem by June 10, that the district then close Harlem. Dignam did not agree; he felt that HEW should set a date to make the evaluation, not the district. He also felt that the evaluation should not occur before the completion of Pumphrey School. The board decided to evaluate the program as an integration tool at the end of the 1969-70 school year. Phil Dignam, the member who had proposed the program, became the only member to vote against the proposition – in protest to the closing clause (*Boynton, "Trustees Hope"*).

Superintendent Gentry did not see the program as a feasible solution, but he accepted the board's decision (*G.C.C.I.S.D. Minutes 2-24-69*). The board, "relieved" to have a possible solution to the problem, gave a "blank check" to the program because it was cheaper than paying for the pending lawsuit with HEW. Dignam said, "They'd pay anything to get the government off their backs" (*Dignam*). Art Coltharp, the principal at Harlem, enthusiastically received the idea and immediately began working on his dream – integration for Harlem.

Coltharp sought to obtain the best faculty that he could possibly get – a dream faculty. He wanted young teachers just out of college who had not developed old-fashioned ideas about education and the classroom. He knew the importance of getting teachers who were open-minded about integration and who understood the need to work the many hours needed to accomplish their task, offering an enriched education to the students. He knew that if he did not have the complete support of his faculty the program could never succeed. "We were on the cutting edge" and to succeed they had to work as a team – administration, faculty, custodians, and cafeteria staff (*Coltharp*). But to accomplish this goal, he had to replace many teachers, black and white, already on Harlem's faculty. He tried to be "color blind," a difficult task, because the school also needed a well-integrated staff. To remove the teachers who did not meet his criteria, Coltharp had principals from the other elementary schools visit Harlem and observe the teachers in the classroom to decide whom they would accept as transfers to their schools. Many of the transferred teachers had taught at Harlem their entire careers and were unhappy with the transfers. One teacher, rather than transfer, retired, but the rest of the teachers accepted the move and continued their careers in other schools. Miss Walton, who had received a transfer, requested to stay, and gladly Coltharp allowed her to remain at the school where she had taught for twenty years. Unfortunately, the transformation of the faculty left only a few black teachers on staff (*Walton; Coltharp*).

Art Coltharp succeeded in obtaining his dream faculty and then along with Tom Royder, chairman of the Citizen's Committee (organized to promote Harlem), began publicizing the school through *The Baytown Sun* and the local radio station, K-BUK, hoping to entice white parents into sending their children to Harlem. Royder and Coltharp attended any organized meeting that would allow them to speak on the new program at Harlem. The district offered commitment forms to prospective parents that Tom Royder would hold until June so the parents could see the number of white children who would actually attend Harlem that year. Coltharp offered an open house so that parents in the Goose Creek district could see everything that Harlem had to offer (*Boynton, "About 100"*). Coltharp and Royder tried everything possible to entice white students to Harlem.

In September of 1969, fifty-nine white children had registered for Harlem Elementary, but so had two hundred and eighty-nine black children. The black population increased by eighteen leaving a total population increase at Harlem of seventy-seven (*G.C.C.I.S.D. Membership Report 9-29-69*). The board had ex-

pected several black children to transfer to other schools, but they did not transfer. Even with an increased enrollment, the newly integrated school had no real problems. The McNair community, the faculty and the children, all accepted the program and each other very well (*Coltharp; G.C.C.I.S.D. Membership Report 9-20-69, 10-1-68*).

Through district funds and the federally funded Title I program, Harlem obtained many new teaching tools. The school increased its texts, including two reading series instead of the usual one (*Ferguson; Coltharp; Walton*). Harlem students no longer felt like second class citizens; instead, many schools envied Harlem for all of the new educational tools and innovative ideas Harlem had obtained.

The district had accomplished desegregation for Harlem through the dreams of many people. F. Philip Dignam, E. F. Green, Art Coltharp, and Tom Royder all struggled to have peaceful integration, but also helped to create an enriched educational system. Congressman Bob Eckhardt said, "We're holding our empty promises to our children – black, white and brown – if we offer them integration measures alone. We must also give them better schools" ("*Forced Busing*"). McNair's struggle to fulfill its dream – an integrated community school – developed without violence or forced busing. Goose Creek managed to accomplish integration through an innovative peaceful plan, benefiting the district, the communities of Baytown, McNair, and Highlands, the faculty, and the students. Martin Luther King's dream of equal rights remains unfulfilled in many schools throughout this nation, but at one school, Harlem Elementary, every child receives an equal and enriched education.

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- *Several of the newspaper articles do not include dates or page numbers because they were obtained from a drawer at Harlem Elementary School.



This is the 1970 second grade class – the first year the school was integrated under the magnet plan.

MAP OF

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BAYTOWN, TEXAS

