

Caroline Hatcher - Interviewed 3/29/76.

I. The first black teacher in Middletown and currently the director of the Head Start Program, as well as day care programs for Middletown, Connecticut,--Hello, Mrs. Hatcher.

A: How-do-you-do.

Q: First, I think it would be best if you'd just give us some background information on where your parents came from at the time that you were born, your education and that sort of thing.

A: Well, it's been a long time ago, in Columbia, South Carolina. My parents are both from South Carolina and I was the oldest of five children. Two of us were born in Columbia, my sister and myself. We came up here which was, I guess, when my dad was working at that time on the railroad and he had an older sister here who came up during the time of the Depression; and most of what happened at that time is rather vague. I guess we began by living on what is now the redevelopment area on Union Street in my aunt's house. I remember we were on Welfare. We were on Welfare for a period of time. My father worked on the bridge which runs from Middletown to Portland. () and then, too, I guess, just about all the schools around here, I know I started at Stillman School. When we moved on Miller Street I went to Macdonough School. Then I went from Macdonough School to Central School and I graduated from Central and went to Middletown High for about a year-and-a-half and finished the education at Woodrow Wilson. From there I went to Eastern, what is now Eastern State Teachers' College; then it was Willimantic State Teachers' College, and I graduated from there before I began teaching at Staddle Hill School.

Q: Where is Staddle Hill School located?

A: Staddle Hill School is now a church. It was just a temporary site because they were building Snow school at the time which was where you were assigned. I stayed on double sessions for, I guess, about six months and then they finished the first two wings of Snow School.

Q: Now this first school, was this a predominantly black school?

A: No, there were no schools that were predominantly black then.

Q: Now, between that time, let's say, 1954 and '64, where had your life taken you? What had you done before coming to Middletown?

A: Between '54 and '64? I think--

Q: You were in Middletown then? The entire period?

A: Yes, I graduated, as I said, from College in '54.

Q: And you came to Middletown in 1964 as the first black to teach?

A: Fifty-four, 5 - 4.

Q: As the first black?

A: At that time I wasn't aware that I WAS the first black.

Q: Oh, so this is '54?

A: Yes. So I--When I--let's see what I can make of this. When I graduated, from the time I went to school we really didn't have a placement office but we placed a lot of the students. I went to a school, as a matter of fact, there were two blacks in the class and there were three other positions open, and I found out later that they all hired the blacks; and I chose Middletown because I grew up here. I knew the people here and I preferred to come back here.

Q: Did you expect to encounter any trouble whatsoever?

A: I'm a rather headstrong and a rather dominant person, I think. I didn't expect any trouble because I knew the people here and I had quite a bit of support when I came back. I, again, didn't feel that being black was one of the ().

Q: Now, it's significant that you came to Middletown as a black teacher during the same period, the same year exactly, that the Supreme Court made their decision.

A: I wondered since if I was the token black, but then I always knew that I was a strong, pushy kind of person. I would have come back and not really expected much problems.

Q: Was there any strong reaction from the townspeople? Black or white?

A: No, I felt that at the time the whites, as you say, maybe it was because of the Supreme Court decision, maybe it's because they were unique, but they seemed a little more cooperative. I had one incident where the child, his parent said she didn't want her child in my room at that time but that worked out very well because from the time the child was halfway into his grade, the parent began asking to come back in. And because when we started there were six of us and we had no principal, we were all new, except for one of us teachers that taught a year, and we were all around the same age () and we had the decision to make ourselves who we had in our class. And I decided that since she decided she didn't want him in my class, I never kicked him out.

Q: So that was a major problem?

A: The thing that concerned me somewhat which, again, wasn't a problem but just a little awkwardness, is that at that time we had banquets. We were all teachers (), maybe some party, or something, retirement party, and I remember that one time we went (). I don't remember where it was, but one out of one hundred fifty, we tried to stand out, and I think they had a problem. They kept it from me pretty well, the seating, because I was there and I did hear (), and it seemed to have worked out very well. I felt that the people that were in the profession were rather protective of me because I was headstrong. I had problems, I went right to the superintendent because, again, there was no principal. We had a wonderful () in Miss Dorothy Fish and she kind of mother-henned us because we had no other supervision. But we were free. We were free as much as we wanted.

Q: So there were no adverse reactions from your colleagues or your supervisors?

A: No. Not in ().

Q: When did you come to the Head Start Program? Were you the initial director of the program?

A: No, I came into the Head Start Program through Day Care. Vivian McRae (Wesley) and my brother were working on the Board to set up a day care center at the "Y", and at that time I had had my daughter and I wasn't working. I was doing some substituting but I really wasn't interested in working full time and I thought that the Day Care would be less time-consuming. So they asked if I would set it up and I told them I'd be glad to, and so I worked at the "Y" as assistant director and set up the day care center at the "Y". And then about three years ago they decided they wanted to consolidate with the Head Start Program () but they wanted to consolidate it out of the agency, and they did (). () able to function. I got it. [Voice from background: Excuse me, may I ask a quick question?] ().

Q: When did this program begin?

A: The program at the "Y" began in '70 and I became director there in '73.

Q: O.K. Could you tell me--you said that the Head Start Program receives funds--

A: Federal funds.

Q: Federal funds. And the Day Care Program received State funds. What degrees here of political influence in what you do or what the program does?

A: The Head Start Program, well, in both programs the performance and standards are (). They are done on a national level and there are certain activities that must be included in each program. Now I speak () the Head Start Program is broken down into education, social services, psychological services, health, education, nutrition () the procedure that you probably earmarked, and it tells you what kinds of services are available to parents, tells you what kinds of services that the program should allow. The State is set up loosely on the same kind of schedule but, for the most part, each individual program writes out the kinds of activities that they would do to receive these components or guidelines.

Q: What I'm trying to get at is that, correct me if I'm wrong, programs like Head Start, Day Care Programs, would you consider those programs done by liberals, let's say Democrats? Would you associate these types of programs with the Democrats, let's say, more so than the Republicans?

A: Well, having lived through both Democratic and Republican periods, I would feel, this is my personal feeling, Democrats are a little more concerned about those people that are underprivileged and that have economical problems because I've noticed in the last term by the Republicans that a lot of the services have been making not so much (), whereas with the Democrats you felt you were freer about asking for funds for specific things.

Q: So while the Republicans are in office, if they had been in office during the time when this program was in session, have you at any time ever felt that the program was in jeopardy? Because of lack--

A: We live in fear constantly. We budget from year-to-year. We live in constant fear that some of the programs will be cut back or that they will be cut out.

Q: O.K. Let's see. Seeing that you've grown up in Middletown, you've worked here, could you give me some information as far as the economic opportunities for blacks? Have they increased, decreased? If so--

because of agencies like these where people are involved in going out and looking and seeing if there is an interest in what there is, even in private concerns. They have better programs built in here where for a period of time the agency () real estate, Labor Department, or the Federal grants to put people to work and put them into these places like, well, the "Y", for instance, and as these people grow and learn these jobs, as positions open in these agencies ().

Q: I believe, pardon me if I'm wrong. The first black members in Middletown, most of them were attracted to working positions in factories or work in cotton in up-state Connecticut, or, I'm sorry, not cotton, tobacco, really. Now, since then what opportunities are available as far as migration--those that migrate from the South, or wherever?

A: I don't know if I'm the wrong one qualified to--

Q: I'm just asking as an observer.

A: I know that many people, when I was growing up, did work in the factories and I, myself, worked in a factory at one time. But I think, maybe, such things as aides in hospitals or, I think, primarily would be aides or a lot of people to work in hospitals, but the larger money and larger opportunities (). Because I know many people look pretty longingly at Pratt & Whitney, EIS and, I guess, other places where there are people that don't have that to go into such things as the insurance business ().

Q: O.K. Could you enlighten me on one thing? You came here in 1954.

A: No, I came here--

Q: I mean, you taught, you began teaching. I'm sorry.

A: Yes.

Q: You began teaching in '54. Now that's twenty-two years ago.

A: That long? [Chuckle].

Q: Now, correct me if I'm wrong once again. I've done a little research and I found that there are approximately 387 teachers in Middletown. Of these 387 teachers, I believe, no more than 28 are black. Now, obviously there has been an improvement, but what are your feelings about this number? Should it increase? Will it increase?

A: I would think that it will increase. It should increase. I know that when I left, one of the blacks that we have now trained under me. She's from Oklahoma and I was pregnant

at that time and they asked me what was my preference and I said () because I think at that time there was myself and Vivian (Weseley) who, I believe, had gone into teaching which took her pretty much away from the classroom. And I don't think there were any others so () from Wesleyan. She was a music teacher (). Now how much it's increased, I don't know. My daughter has two black teachers out at Lawrence School, but I haven't really kept in close contact. But I know that the ratio of black to white is rather critical. I also know that when we have openings here, because we advertise for teachers who have been certified and teacher aides, I find that many of the blacks haven't been able to complete the educational certification.

Q: Do you think it's a problem of recruitment in that it's impossible to attract students, teachers, rather, to Middletown?

A: I think part might be due to that but I think also that part might come out of the background education or the background certification is such that would cost ().

Q: O.K. Let's see. Have you been involved in the politics in Middletown?

A: I try not to be.

Q: Why? Why is that?

A: Well, probably because--

Q: I mean, in many ways what you do is political and your existence is political.

A: I'm hoping that I do the politics enough so that I am well informed as to what's happening and that I feel that any injustices that I find, to speak of, (), but as far as being actively campaigning is involved ().

Q: What is your relationship with, let's say, the Board of Education? Or is there one now since you're involved with Head Start?

A: Yes. I'm on a committee that's doing an evaluation on the Individual Guided Education Program, and I was invited to be on that. I feel that, well, I felt at one point that () but, I guess, its partly my fault it's () going in separate directions but I feel that when I request something from them, or request something from the school superintendent, I don't have a problem getting it. Sometimes I feel that maybe they stand in awe of me as the first black that made it by words when I say that this is an injustice; it might be harmful.

Q: What has the level of political involvement on the part of blacks been?

A: I think lately, within the last couple of years, the blacks are becoming much more involved in politics. I think in the beginning, a couple of years back, just trying to survive, but I believe that lately blacks are a lot more verbal. I'm not saying blacks are in, and I think that those do get some chances.

Q: So you feel that right now blacks are still in?

A: Yes. I think if they're loud enough and verbal enough and, you know, promise publicity, they will get much, not as much, and I'm not going to say not as much as they should have, but not as quickly as it should happen.

Q: Do you feel that it's curtailed, curtailed since the vanguard of black awareness throughout the 60's?

A: I think people are becoming complacent and kind of say, well, ()

Q: This complacency that you spoke of, do you feel that it is part of a social cycle that people will once again become aware of the problems that black people as a whole encounter?

Q: This complacency that you spoke of. Do you feel that it is part of a social cycle that people will once again become aware of the problems that black people as a whole encounter?

A: Yes, I'm pretty sure they do () because everyone, I say complacency, because everyone isn't asking questions. The younger people ask the questions because they're, I think, a little more aggressive than blacks were when I was coming along and I would think even a lot more aware than blacks were some ten years ago. They see what this struggle has brought about. The younger people are still dissatisfied. So I think they'll come on probably a lot more verbally, a lot more visibly than they did ten years ago.

Q: So what direction do you think it will take now, the black consciousness?

A: I don't know. I don't know; I can't say. I just think it bears watching and see.

Q: Do you think that there will be a social cycle in that, let's say, for about--It's a social cycle in that every 35-40 years we become profitable. We're commodities, let's say during reconstruction. Then after the Civil War we were commodities. Then the Harlem Renaissance came. We were once again commodities. People wanted to know what we were doing, what we were about. The same occurred in the '60's. It's about 35-40 years. Do you think we'll have to wait for another 35-40 years? That will be the turn of the century.

A: No, I don't because--I doubt very much because, as I said, the younger people now are restless. They know these facts, that it takes-- those movements to get things moving. I don't think they're going to wait. They're much more aware. They do look around to see what's happening to people that are obviously their peers, black or white, and they want their share and they know now that they are entitled to it and they're not going to become to the point where they say, "Well, a couple of us have it so let's be satisfied with that".

Q: So be being entitled to it, the problem still remains that they have to attain it or get it somehow. Now you are working with Head Start and it's interesting that the program that you coordinate prepares the children, the small kids, how old are they? Three?

A: Three and four.

Q: Three and four. You prepare them for school. Now what I want you to address yourself to is the Upward Bound Program that operates within this area which prepares these students for college. Do you see any philosophical differences between the two programs and, if so, what are they?

A: I think both these programs are saying to these children that couldn't do it on their

own that the opportunity is there. You have the ability to attain it. Don't stop thinking. Use every resource. That's one thing that Head Start does for the parents to introduce them to these resources; help them get the medical, psychological, financial, any kind of assistance that they need to have the kind of life that they would have, rather than grubbing and scrubbing and (baking). And I have seen that the Upward Bound Program can teach a child the independence, the self-help kinds of skills that they need to keep going once they've left this program.

Q: Have you dealt with the Upward Bound Program at all?

A: I had some children working in our program that were working there and having them supplement to their income by working with Upward Bound.

Q: I am familiar with the Upward Bound Program and I do know that part of the philosophy is to build self respect, to encourage one to do better but also to, let's say, impose more of a philosophy to the student. Could you address yourself to these philosophies?

A: No, I'm not too much aware of--

Q: But your impression of self-respect and building self-respect, is this what you try to do?

A: Self-help. Self- help because many times it's, let's say that it takes financial support. But that was in my own case. As I said, we grew up on Welfare. We had help. I had help going to school. With five children my mother had a bad time trying to support us all. There was no way you could do it alone. So I was helped. The last thing in my mind when I was in high school, I was told when I was in high school not to take the college course because there was just no way that I could go to college. But when I became a senior in high school, I was told to go to college. I didn't go to be a teacher. I went to be a journalist. And as I worked there, a person that was a benefactor that was helpful talked to administrators and supervisor. She said you have the ability to teach. Go ahead and finish school. I was only going for two years and at that point I was inspired to go ahead and complete it. Now everyone isn't that fortunate, but there are programs that are open to help those people that are determined to get ahead.

Q: Now what I was trying to get to earlier is that with a program like Head Start in which you deal with the smaller children, with the young mind, and you see the potential, to what degree do you influence them as far as moral philosophy and ethics?

A: Could you elaborate on that a little?

Q: Well, ethics, morals of society. Do you feel that a teacher, or teachers, it's their responsibility?

A: I think that they should have an understanding and have a respect for the children and the parents that we work with so that they, in turn, can instill this kind of self-respect in small children.

Q: But by instilling this self-respect, that's saying that these children don't come into the program with self-respect?

A: No. They come in very proud and that's why I say that each teacher should know about these children's backgrounds so that they can build on that ground.

Q: As far as ethics, do you think a teacher has the right to influence a small child? Ethically?

A: Influence him, how?

Q: Oh, by being the teacher. That we assume roles and many times the teacher feels that it is his or her responsibility to, if not influence, build ethical--

A: You mean in, well, in building one type of ethics. What I'm hearing is that you feel that they tear down another.

Q: If you will, yes.

A: I don't know if that's the answer.

Q: In morals. Because many times students and teachers, the morals of the parents, the parents' morals are different from the teacher's morals and in that sense the child is unsure of the authority figure.

A: I see what you're saying. No, I don't believe that education can exist without a co-existence between teacher and parent.

Q: Yet some teachers feel that it is their right to instill values and ethics.

A: Well, I don't really go along with that because I feel that education is not just going into a classroom or into a program and learning what's there. I believe education is an on-going process. It has to be, and I tell teachers when you have these children seven and eight hours a day you can't educate them properly. You only have them a short period of time. The kind of education you are to give them has to have something for the family. That's one thing that Head Start insists on, that not just the children are down here but the parents are down here to see the kind of education their children are getting and having input into the kinds of things they want them to be taught. We have parent meetings. We have a Policy Board which is also made up of people from the community. These are the people that talk about our day-to-day procedures and the kinds of things that should happen in a classroom. It isn't an isolated learning center when they're sent to Head Start or to Day Care, which is just as well. This is what they're being taught; nothing else. It is parent and community input into those programs which builds the education, the whole ().

Q: O.K., now. We were talking about students and educational opportunities, and do you see the opportunity decreasing? What I'm saying, is the possibility of options to the student to continue his or her education through college?

A: Yes. Yes, I see a lot of that. Decreasing just recent, just recently.

Q: What would you attribute that to?

A: I would attribute it to probably the cutting back of a lot of the programs that did offer

some financial assistance to the student. Well, the whole economic, I would say the whole economic situation as it is now. I noticed that, maybe it's just because I just became aware of it, I notice that kids are beginning again to drop out of school in 6th grade to get a job and I don't know whether it's because they need help from the home or the Board looking for the kind of education they need. I can't say what it is, but I feel that no matter how much a struggle it is, that the child should be helped to at least get that first step to high school.

Q: You mean help by the State and the Government?

A: The State, Government, the City, whoever, and the school itself, whoever is in a position to help them to at least finish those high school years.

Q: And after that?

A: After that? If this is what they desire, if they feel that they want to go on, and I think they should feel that. But I think it's kind of hard with community colleges turning people away now because of the old problem with them being cut in funds and cutting staff. It has jeopardized a lot of the education that people can just make it out of high school but maybe can hold out a job and take a couple of courses after work. It's cutting ().

Q: Is it spherical or linear, let's say? After you finish school you go to college and you're supposed to get a job but--

A: That isn't always true these days.

Q: Exactly. That's what I'm saying because--

A: No, I think they should have the opportunity. Let's say that someone doesn't want to go to be a teacher or doesn't want to become a nurse but needs some kind of courses to be a master mechanic or to go into horticulture. I think that that opportunity should be open for them to go into.

Q: But in order for that opportunity to be available, someone has to make this opportunity available.

A: Yes.

Q: O.K. And since we're being allowed to assume positions or take on positions, or being offered positions, and these positions aren't offered to us, we have no job, so in that sense is it cyclical in that we [end of tape]----have that job?

A: I think that's the way it's always going to be.

Q: It always will be like that?

A: And I don't think it has to do with black or white. I think if someone doesn't want you in that position there is no way ().

Q: You said you don't think this deals with black or white?

A: No. I've seen a lot of white people being held out of positions.

Q: Because of, what?

A: Because they were poor or just didn't have the kind of () push that they needed. But here we deal with black and white and I've seen them (). Not from here itself, but the fellow that I was mentioning to you before had some really bad things happen to him, real bad. Because they had no one to go to. Or because you're poor doesn't mean you're not able to do this. People have a way that if they don't want you, I don't care if you're rich or poor, black or white, tall or short, there is a way.

Q: Let's see, is there anything else you'd like to comment on or address yourself to before we bring this interview to a close?

A: Other than when, as I said, when I was talking about myself, that there was a benefactor that helped myself and my sisters to go to school, and the opportunity opened for my brothers as well, that I've been helped by blacks and whites. I knew probably () the direction of whites because at that time they were the ones that were home. They were the ones that took an interest in us.

Q: Well, why did they take an interest, that's what I'm trying to get at, in your educational pursuits?

A: I don't know. I don't believe that I was any more intelligent or brighter than anyone else. The only thing I can say is that I was more aggressive (). --taming my hide. My hide was a little more thicker than anyone else's. I know my mother and father were the greatest as they were people that they even felt () and told me that this is what they wanted me to do and () almost constantly. My mother did housework. She is one of the people that did help us very, very much by doing housework for us. My father was doing () and they approached several people and (). They approached () and on there (). But, again, as I say, it's my mother and father ().

Q: So the motivation came from home?

A: Oh, yes. Definitely. Because I was a girl. And it was when opportunities come, black or white, whenever girls, twenty-some-odd years ago, girls were supposed to get married and have children, be good housekeepers. And I was a CRUMMY housekeeper, so the only thing to do was to find me some kind of career, I guess. But I know that my mother and father said, "Go for it--Go", and they were constant. I wanted to quit. No, especially not me. I had (). And these people had that kind of confidence in them that they contributed to my support, my education ().

I: Thank you very much. I've enjoyed the interview.

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