

# Segregation Side Effects – Revisited From The Other Perspective

## Outstanding Black Women of Yalobusha County: The Project Continues

Last November, this column featured an article about the integration of Water Valley High in 1966. In February, in "Segregation Side Effects – I Feel Cheated – Do You?", we presented an account of the total integration of Water Valley public schools when the black Davidson schools and the predominately white Water Valley schools merged. Davidson High School graduated its last class in 1970, and all the future students enrolled in Water Valley High, Davidson Middle and Elementary in the fall of 1970.

I was a member of that last Davidson Class of 1970 and recall a watch and wait state of mind. I was not sure what to expect following the enrollment of the first three black students at WVHS in 1966. If I remember correctly they were followed by a few others in the subsequent years, and all was perceived as peaceful. By the fall of 1970 mandatory integration came as the freedom of choice option ended. I remember feeling relieved that my class and I had been spared the transition. I could not bear the thought of riding a

bus with the same white kids who jeered at me every day for almost 12 years as I waited each morning for my bus. In my latter high school years, I could see WVHS from my bus stop, with nary an urge to set foot in the building.

In the meantime, at Davidson we were subjected to a lot of standardized testing, whose purpose I never understood, nor do I recall if it was ever made clear to us students. We also acquired white teachers including a white male guidance counselor.

How ironic, I thought. We had never had a guidance counselor before and now a white one. He was also a minister who went back and forth between the two schools, WVHS and DHS. The majority of Davidson students gave him a hard time, and sometimes I felt sorry for him because he tried really hard to convince us that he had our best interest at heart. He was the lead administrator in the standardized testing. Very few of us sought his counseling advice aside from signing up to take the ACT, which was required to complete applications for college.

Shortchanged, misunderstood and abused is how I and I believe most of my classmates felt in 1969 as we realized we juniors would be the last class to graduate from DHS. The junior class of 1968 had taken the seniors on a trip to New Orleans. It had been a tradition that the junior class sponsor a trip, a picnic or something for the senior class based on what had been given to the previous class.

The administrators decided that we were too immature and rebellious and forbade us to take the seniors on an out-of-town trip. We were sure this was punishment for the way we treated the white guidance counselor. Alas, we could not work out a fair solution. We were a small class, fewer than 30 students, and both the senior and sophomore classes of '69 were twice our size. We did not feel that it would be appropriate to ask the upcoming junior class of 1970 to participate in the tradition since they would be heading to WVHS in the fall. Nor would it be fair to offer the senior class of 1969 anything less than a trip to New Orleans or a comparable location.

Nor could we accept the administration's assessment of our class.

Financial concerns also played a part because neither we nor the junior class of '70 would be repaid. Ultimately, we ended up not giving the seniors anything, and the tradition was lost with that class, much to our chagrin. Needless to say, our junior and senior years at Davidson were not the most enjoyable. We just muddled through, our days clouded by a lingering sadness, a fear of the unknown and a resentment of losing our school, our teachers and our traditions. Since then there have been some great Davidson school reunions for all classes, but none recently. Some individual class reunions still occur, and the love for Davidson lives on. So in the words of our teacher, Hugh Percy Lark, "We will love our alma mater and to thee be true, Hail to thee our dear old Davidson, Hail oh hail to thee."

Now take a look at what came next as Davidson's junior class of 1970 went on to become members and graduates of the 1971 class of WVHS.

Danita Hall, an exceptional



By Dottie Chapman Reed

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She has launched a project to compile and share info about women in the county who have made an impact on the African American community.

Her column appears bi-monthly, with occasional exceptions.

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and outstanding woman in her own right, offers her candid perspective. Danita is a Senior Accountant – Finance Department with Youth For Understanding USA.

## My Experience as a member of the WVHS Class of 1971

by Danita Hall

For the WVHS class of '71 it was a very, very tense first month or two of total integration of the previously all white school. Davidson High, the black school was closed, the last class having graduated in May 1970. We would be the first class to graduate following the merger. Everyone (from what I remember) at least had the decency to speak to us, but nothing much more than that until the following happened:

Ms. Rhonda Gardei, who hailed from Florida, was our literature instructor. She was a very petite

woman – tanned to the max, with blond hair. She was notorious for dividing her classroom where kids sat to her left and to her right in front of her. She liked to walk down the wide middle of the two sections when she taught. She told us to pick a book to read and bring it to her during our lunch period for her approval.

Well, I chose "Native Son" by Richard Wright. The day I went to get her approval, Trent Howell was behind me to get his book approved as well. She took a look at the book's cover and said yes. A week or two later when I stood at the podium in front of the class to give my oral report, she went off, saying my book was inappropriate and she didn't approve it. [This is why I became very good friends with Trent.]

"Yes, you did," I said.

"No, I didn't, and you need to stop right now and take your seat." She retorted.

"Yes, you did, Ms. Gardei," I repeated, my voice changing by then because I was getting mad.

Then Trent stood up and very politely told her that she did indeed approve my book because he was standing in line behind me that particular day. She was dumbfounded but allowed me to continue. I got an A-plus on the book report in the end.



Danita Hall – Class Of 1971

She had objected to my oral report because she had asked us to include at a minimum the following in the report: Protagonist - Bigger Thomas, Theme, Antagonist and Symbolisms (here we go): I said that the snow represented white people and repression. Everywhere Bigger looked prior to his death was repression -snow and white people. That was pretty much how I felt going to WVHS during the first month or two. It's interesting that "Native Son" recently played on HBO. That report got everyone's attention, needless to say.

Second incident – same instructor. Ms. Gardei asked us to read "The Illiad" by Homer. I had grown a little wiser and knew from my older sister (Patricia) that CliffsNotes were available. She bought this particular pamphlet for me at the Ole Miss book store. Ms. Gardei gave us a test which consisted of four questions. Afterwards she pranced up and down the aisle berating the entire class for failing the test as she was handing our test papers back.

You have to remember that if you get 1-2 right, you fail, 3 gets you a C, and naturally 4 equals an A. Well, she said the entire class had basically failed this test with the exception of one person.

At this point, everyone started looking around at Ca-

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mille Fly, Trent Howell, Van Hedges, and a couple of others (the academic, white heavy hitters in my class). I sat in the middle section, and I noticed how one would mouth to another, "is it you?" when they were handed back their tests from Ms. Gardei.

He/she would shake their head no. I had no idea who that person was either. After she had passed out all of the test papers, one person was brave enough to ask her to throw out the grade. She said that she had thought about it, but that it wouldn't be fair to the person who had scored 100.

Then she said she would let that person make the decision to throw out the grade or keep it. Again, they all looked around trying to figure out who it was. After some very tense minutes, she finally told them that it was Danita Hall. Mouths dropped open in disbelief. Then she said,

reach across the table. It is time for some to offer apologies, to tell the truth, to educate their children and to face the realities.

Remember – our complete history has not been told, has not been printed and is not being taught in our schools. If there was ever a time for truth, it is now. We must exert all efforts to make America whole again.

Finally, I must share the following comments regarding the article that appeared on May 23rd about Danita's mother, Mrs. Ruby Hall. They come from one of her former students, Sean Carothers:

"I just returned home to see a copy of the North Miss Herald laying on my kitchen counter. My wife had appar-

ently gotten it because of an article about a friend's son on the front page. I don't subscribe to it, and I don't keep up much with what is going on in Water Valley.

It made me smile when I opened it up and saw Mrs. Hall's picture. The wonderful picture you portrayed of what a fine woman she was, and what a positive influence she made on so many lives was understated. In fact, I don't know if there are words that could do it justice. Mrs. Hall taught me 5th grade I think. Lulu was my classmate and Tony was my friend. I played ball with Tony and Marvin. I was occasionally in their home. Their whole family has always impressed me so. Particularly given the times we were living in. As you know their mother cared for everyone. Care is all I ever felt from

her. I have thought so many times of things she said and her demeanor and attitude. She was surely a beacon of light. One of my favorite (memories) that I think about often is her response when someone decided they were sick. Her response would be 'you just sick of living and scared of dying.' I have quoted it often. I consider Mrs. Hall one of the most influential people in my younger years, and as you know, those are the people who mold you into what you become as an adult. I noticed your bio said that you were sharing info about women in the county that have made an impact on the African American community.

Rest assured, Mrs. Hall's impact was much more far reaching than the African American community. I can testify to that.

## More Input From Classmates

Upon hearing that this article was in the works, Danita's classmate Dorothy Caulfield Wiman wrote the following:

"So glad Danita is writing about our senior year. I can hardly believe this year marks our 48th year since graduation. I think it was a wonderful year of meeting new people and getting outside our comfort zone. I think we students had a greater appreciation for each other and a genuine caring for each other unlike previous generations. I'm not saying we did everything right, but I remember our superintendent, Mr. Clovis Steele, addressed us on the first day of school and said something to the ef-

fect that there is no black and white and that we would treat each other with respect. Not that we weren't who we are, but that there would be no favoritism. I just wish that I had known black history and understood the deep hurt, profound fear, and humiliation suffered by African Americans. I still have so much to learn, but my dearest African American friends have taught me a lot. They have been very patient with me."

Another classmate, Camille Fly Dautrich, also acknowledged beautiful and lasting friendships in her February article about her experience in the 1971 WVHS Class. While they probably never crossed paths before WVHS, both

women developed mutual respect for each other. They grew up on different sides of town, a black side and a white side, and under different lifestyles, one of privilege and one lacking privilege.

Some of the former Davidson students, however, remain scarred from their experience at WVHS. Wounds heal but leave marks as a constant reminder. Time has passed, and the playing field has leveled somewhat. But we still struggle with and suffer from the negative effects of slavery and segregation. Alas, racism and hate crimes are on the rise, but we still have time to make amends, to educate and to