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Tonia Merideth

Good afternoon. Thank you for joining us for an oral history interview for the Virginia Museum of History and Culture exhibit, "A Better Life for Their Children: Julius Rosenwald, Booker T. Washington, and the 4,978 Schools that Changed America." My name is Tonia Merideth, the oral historian. Could you please state your name and the school you attended?

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Dianne Davis

My name is Dianne Davis, and I attended Cape Charles Elementary School. I was born in Bayboro, North Carolina, which is in New Bern, to Mr. & Mrs. Joseph Davis. My mother was Ms. Alberta Davis, father Joseph Davis. Early in life we eventually moved to the Eastern Shore. We moved to Cape Charles. I have five - four siblings, I have three sisters and a brother, my parents are now deceased and I have a brother who is now deceased.

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Dianne Davis

One moved back here recently. One lives in Fayetteville, and the other one lives in Richmond. We grew up of course, my father passed at an early age when we were young. We then - my mother became a single parent who worked very hard so that we could get educated. We never went without. We didn't realize we were poor until we moved away.

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Dianne Davis

But she worked hard and she had excellent work ethics. We grew up in a wholesome household, which meant she taught us about the Bible. She lived the life. She was a perfect role model for me and I really thank her today for that. She was very concerned about us getting a good education. Those of us who wanted to go to college, we went.

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Dianne Davis

Those who wanted to go into the job market, they did that also. But she sacrificed so much for us. She did not - she would give her life for us. And that's why I sure appreciate her. And she passed at age of 96

and that was such a blessing. But like I said, the whole thing is that she kept us - my mother did not send us to church

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Dianne Davis

she took us to church and we went to church every Sunday and Sunday school. Now, she taught Sunday school where she worked with the young people and she was always concerned about young people. And once she passed, this is when I found out with different people coming to me, talking about how they would go to my mother for counseling

00:02:20:05 - 00:02:34:12

Dianne Davis

and all, which she never told me that. I said, "My mother didn't tell us those things." And they would go talk to her about the Bible, and asked the difficult questions, and that was very important. So, people did respect her here in the town, and other areas also.

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Tonia Merideth

Could you please tell us what your mother's occupation was?

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Dianne Davis

My mother's occupation being here on the Eastern Shore, you know, the jobs were very limited. The only things that people could do here during that time before integration, you either worked in the field, you go to the factory and some people worked as maids, which - that was all that we could do. And of course she worked at the factory, she worked in the field because we went out there and worked in the field during the summer.

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Dianne Davis

She never kept us out of school to work. We went to school basically every day and we had the perfect attendance records to show that. That's why I said that she was very concerned about us getting an education because we were so limited on the Eastern Shore. She knew that an education would help us

to do much better than what she did, which meant once we went to college, of course, the income did increase and all.

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Tonia Merideth

So, tell me about growing up here. Any childhood experiences that you remember with the other children?

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Dianne Davis

On Washington Avenue, we had a playground and that's where they had the basketball, sliding boards the swings. All those things for kids to do as we were growing up, believe it or not, today we don't have those things and this is supposed to be a modern society. And in front of the Carver Spot there was this large cement place where we could skate. We did our roller skating and everything there and the movie was right beside it.

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Dianne Davis

So we had the movies that we could actually go to also. So we had a good - we really enjoyed what we did. Well, of course you know it was during segregation, but we still enjoyed life. Those things that went on in other parts of town, we didn't have to deal with that until we went into those areas.

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Dianne Davis

But we just in our little area, we really enjoyed it. We did have the beach. And it's interesting when I talk to these people now when I - because it's now a tourist town, when we go down to the beach during that time, there was a Black section that was the only section that we could be at. We were restricted from the others.

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Dianne Davis

And I was telling somebody in one of the tours. If you ride the beach now, you will see a certain section where people from the road, you can walk up the steps and get to the boardwalk. That is where the

white section began. On the other side, we just had - you just walked and got up there, but it was - we had a good time down there.

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Dianne Davis

Water, we've always been around, so this is why it doesn't faze us - all this water. But it's bringing people in here who love the water. So everything was great. We enjoyed just playing with each other and we didn't have problems. You know, when you had - when you did something wrong, you were disciplined because my mother was a good disciplinarian as so many other people, because they'd been looking out for each other.

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Dianne Davis

And when we went out, we had a certain time that we had to be back home. And of course, if we're not home by a certain time, my mother met us at the corner and we knew what that meant. But yeah, but we really enjoyed what we did and just respecting each other. We spoke to people and all of that and my mother taught us to do all of that.

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Dianne Davis

So that's why I always think about how proud I was, not realizing how much she really meant, until we got to the age that we are and how much we knew others appreciated her also.

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Tonia Merideth

Could you please tell us what year you attended the Rosenwald School and how many years did you attend?

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Dianne Davis

I attended there seven years, I think it's 1963 - '62 is when I graduated from Cape Charles Elementary School. The interesting part about it, where we grew up on Fig Street, there was an alley right beside our

house. We could look right down the alley and see the school that we could not go to. So in the morning, of course, we walked over the hump and for us, because it was on Fig Street.

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Dianne Davis

It was just a matter of making a right walking straight until we came to the stairways to lead us up the hump. And during that particular time, we did not have a school bus, so we walked. And for those who did not walk, we had taxi - Davis' taxi, which was my uncle, he had that taxi business and he would carry some.

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Dianne Davis

But most of us, we couldn't afford a taxi to go to school. So we did walk and I always think about even now, walking up that the hump, walking to the steps and there was rail on one side and then on both sides because you know they had - you had the roads. The hump actually was an overpass because the trains and all was underneath. But we walked through them. We never had problems. We didn't have somebody get thrown off the hump and all like that. But we walked at night when we had activities we walked to the school, there was no light and there was a lady that only

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Dianne Davis

one that my mother would trust us to go to activities with, Mrs. Gholson, Eleanor Gholson. And she would take us over that hump to the school at night in the dark. I wouldn't do it today, but - and we had a good time. So we did have some activities and those things but we just think about having to walk over that hump.

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Dianne Davis

all that time. We did get a school bus during my seventh-grade year, so we were the first ones to have a school bus that would take us over to the school day by day, night by night. So that was good.

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Tonia Merideth

Okay, Thank you. So can you begin by telling us what a typical day was like for the school? What time did school start? What time did it end? And what a typical day was like.

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Dianne Davis

You know, really I never even thought about - I don't know when the school started 8, or 8:30. But basically once we got to school, some things I probably have forgotten. But some people do remember just like when we got there. So we had devotion. We had an auditorium and that's where we would go. We had devotion and that you would have your Bible, you would probably a prayer, probably get Bible verses and probably sang some songs.

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Dianne Davis

Then we went to our respective classes and this is some - so, you know, during that time the Bible was allowed in the schools and we had in the fifth grade, someone would come around and give Bibles to the fifth graders every year. So we had all of that. So that was the beginning of school. And of course, once we went to class, then we had recess.

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Dianne Davis

We went outside and played, whether it was basketball, softball. The boys played marbles during that time. I don't know what some of the other girls did. I loved playing sports so I played basketball with the boys if necessary, but with the softball, of course. There was dodge ball that you would play, hopscotch, jumping rope, all those things you would do. And after that you came back in.

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Dianne Davis

But we did have lunch. We did not have a cafeteria. So for lunch we had to take our own lunch to school every day. It wasn't like you at lunch time, you could go home. Now some of the kids who went to the school who's actually in town, those kids - students could go home and get their lunch and come back. But we had to take our lunch to school every day. They did sell milk at school.

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Dianne Davis

I think it was 3 cents.

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Tonia Merideth

Do you remember any of your teachers and can you describe what they were like?

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Dianne Davis

Yes, I remember my first-grade teacher - first and second grade, Ms. Alice Moses Ames. I think she taught everybody in Cape Charles. I mean, even the old people you were talking to the elderly, you would talk to them and she had taught them. She was my - one of my first teachers. She was strict, which was good, and she was really concerned. She wanted to make sure everybody could read.

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Dianne Davis

She was an excellent disciplinarian. When the principal had problems, with students, they would send them to her and she took care of it. So we had Mrs. Ames. After Mrs. Ames I had Ms. Eva Grace Spady, and I think I had her like in the third grade. The fourth grade, I had John Walton Nottingham, who was - we were his first, very first students. We were in fifth grade

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Dianne Davis

when he came. And we introduced him to teaching. We were good kids, so it was no problem. But umm- he's still living of all of our teachers, he is the only one that's still living, which is great. I talk to him from time to time. So we had him and then in the sixth and seventh grade, I'm thinking it was Mr. Jesse Hare and Mr. Hare was also the principal.

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Dianne Davis

So he taught as well as being the principal. And we just enjoyed what we did not knowing anything else.

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Tonia Merideth

How was discipline handled at the school?

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Dianne Davis

Okay, number one, we didn't have that - it was really not that many problems with discipline but for those who really got out of hand, they would send them to the principal. I'm talking the principal would send those students to Mrs. Alice Ames. She took care of it because everyone used to say she would hit you on their knuckles. I never got that, but she was an excellent disciplinarian and people respected her for what she did.

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Tonia Merideth

What do you remember about the building itself?

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Dianne Davis

The building - I remember it was well-structured, remember, thankfully to Booker T. Washington and Julius Rosenwald, because if it wasn't for Booker T. Washington there wouldn't been a Rosenwald and sometimes it seemed like to me, Booker T. Washington's left out of that because he's the one who made the contact with Julius Rosenwald. But with the building, remember, this is one of the better structured ones.

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Dianne Davis

We had a brick facade, which most of them did not have that. And when you go into the building, go up the steps, there are the double doors, once you enter those double doors, there were four steps you went up. And on the right-hand side was the principal's office, and they told me it was a small library, which I never went into

00:12:46:10 - 00:13:08:02

Dianne Davis



So, I'm going by what they said. Okay, so that was his office. And when you made that right turn, that was where you would go to walk straight and you go to the first and second grade classroom where Mrs. Alice Ames was actually located with her students. And right beside of that particular classroom was the sixth and seventh that was taught by Mr. Jesse Hare.

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Dianne Davis

And as you continue to make the circle around, then you came to our auditorium, which is actually when you came up the steps - those double doors, the auditorium, you walked directly into the auditorium after going a distance - so we had our auditorium, which is very nice. We didn't know any better. Everything looked good to us.

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Dianne Davis

As far as the facility was, and after passing the auditorium then you continue to go down the hall and that is where Mr. John Walton Nottingham was with us, the fourth and fifth graders. Right beside him was Ms. Eva Grace Spady who had the third graders and all, so that included the whole school at that particular point.

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Dianne Davis

And they did the work and you noticed. I have said two classes in one. And it's amazing when you think today about two classes being in one - I use Mr. Nottingham's class as an example. Once he had taught us he gave us all assignment and then he went to the other side and taught the fourth graders. But you know what we did our work. We did not have to worry about him stopping us.

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Dianne Davis

He didn't have to stop to tell us to stop talking and all. So we did our work, and see because - they were concerned about our education and we were blessed for that. They did what they could to make sure that we learned the things that we need to learn. And I can't express that enough. Education was very important.

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Tonia Merideth

Can you tell us how the school was warmed in the winter?

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Dianne Davis

We had radiators. Radiator heat. Yes, we were blessed. See those older ones did not. We had radiator heat.

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Tonia Merideth

And what about chores? Did the boys and girls have chores that they had to do during the school day?

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Dianne Davis

If we did the chores maybe – well, erasing the board wasn't a chore because erasing the board, everybody liked to do. Well you know when you'd erase it, they'd call you teacher's pet and you'd got to erase board and do things for them but no, basically because like I said erasing the boards and dusting the eraser off and all - but that was about it. Now we did have safety patrols where - I don't know whether you want to mention that - we had safety patrols. I was a lieutenant during my time and that meant that when we were going home from school we would of course walk and when we got to the road, which is

00:15:38:07 - 00:16:00:02

Dianne Davis

Mason Avenue after they came down the hump and down the steps, we were out there so we could stop traffic so the kids could cross and go on down the street to their respective homes and all. So we did have that and that was - I loved - I loved being able to stop traffic. But yes, so we did that.

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Tonia Merideth

And then I assume this is a more modern building. So you guys had indoor bathrooms?

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Dianne Davis

Oh yes, we did. We did not - We had indoor plumbing. Some of the others said, "Say you did?" We would take it for granted. But yes, we did have indoor plumbing.

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Tonia Merideth

Then the other question I had was about the special activities like May Day. Did you guys have those events during school?

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Dianne Davis

Yes. They did. Now May Day was done in May. That's why they call it May Day. That was in May. That is when we could take off our winter clothes. We started wearing our sneakers. Because we did not wear sneakers in the winter. We took off our - we wore our sneakers. The shorts and all those things during that particular time and on May Day

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Dianne Davis

that was a special occasion because like we had the wrapping of the May pole and I remember and I don't know what it was called - I remember I had to wear a yellow skirt with a bib and with some type of activity that we had to do that called for that. Then of course with the wrapping of the May pole, you know, the girls normally had on the color that matched the particular ribbon that they were using to wrap the May pole. I'm trying to think was the tumbling during high school or was it during elementary

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Dianne Davis

I'm not sure. But that was in enjoyable. We had the Queen and the King, all of those because the queen and the king was always like in seventh grade, because they were the older ones. But yes, that was something that we looked forward to. And I think eventually that did stop as time went on that those latter years because there wasn't as many kids.

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Tonia Merideth

And what about school friends or best friends during school. Do you remember any of those?

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Dianne Davis

We - because in a class we had about, I was trying to figure out roughly 14 to 15 students in a class. And - because I can name just about most of my classmates or what have you – and we would visit each other - I know we had well, I didn't - I never like visiting people a lot. And my mother didn't allow us to do so much.

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Dianne Davis

But there were some people she did allow us to visit and they would visit us. So I'll just think about in elementary school, there was the Beaches, Diane Beach, Gwendolyn Beach. They used to come around and play a while. But there were some ones that are some friends. My mother would go visit their house. There was one who was very great,

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Dianne Davis

Perry. We would go - we didn't have a television. So we would - we were allowed to go around to their house because our parents were friends and we could look at TV at night, those scary movies then had to walk home. But anyway, so many of us - there were the James boys with three brothers in one class, which I used to play basketball with them.

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Dianne Davis

So it was a lot. It was fun. It really was. And like I said, we had the playground so you could always go there and play.

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Tonia Merideth

What was a typical academic year? Did it begin in August or September?

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Dianne Davis

The school year started - we started school in September and it ended in June. And I do not remember ever being out of all the days that these people get - I don't even remember being a holidays, whether we got Christmas. But yes, I do not remember all those days, like they get today but yes and answer to your question, September through June.

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Tonia Merideth

Can you please tell us about the different materials and books that were used in the classroom?

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Dianne Davis

All right. In our particular classrooms, of course, we had used books. I think near the end, I remember one new book, but we knew the books were old because they were already marked in. But for our workbooks, I did bring you some workbooks that we could - we had during that time. The workbooks were new, but we knew that these books - where these books that come from, with all those marks and all.

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Dianne Davis

But regardless, we still waiting to get the education. We could read the verbs - some books, if the pages were torn out I think the teacher would - if we were reading out loud, we'd just use somebody else's book to do the reading. But it's just so unfortunate those things happen. But like I said, with all of that, we still got the education, the teachers we had, the good teachers,

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Dianne Davis

they were concerned about education. Our parents were concerned about education. So we got what we needed. Reading, writing and arithmetic. That doesn't change. I don't care what school you go to, what the nationality is. We were still taught that.

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Tonia Merideth

What did you think of the education you were receiving when you attended Cape Charles Elementary School at the time, and what do you think about now?

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Dianne Davis

The education, we received it. If we want it, we got it. And I think and the parents were concerned, they went to the PTA meeting. If there were problems, the teachers knew how to get in contact. Okay, we received - I think we got a good education.

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Tonia Merideth

What do you think of the efforts in your local area to collect the memories and legacies of the students like yourself who attended a Rosenwald Washington school?

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Dianne Davis

The efforts?

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Tonia Merideth

Like what we're - like, what we're doing now, in restoring the schools and having these, you know, different groups that are preserving the history of these schools. What do you think?

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Dianne Davis

I think it's great because the fact when I moved away, when I came back, the school basically - the town had sold it to a company. They turned into an eel factory. E-e-l. An eel factory. That's what it became. So when I moved back here, that's what it actually was. So it's great really, to see that a group of people who saw the vision, who had the vision to try to restore it, because I'd never heard of Rosenwald during my whole time at the school, I just heard about that being a Rosenwald school, when - as a matter of

fact in the eighties, when I was serving on the historical review board, a lady came from Richmond who worked with the historical society there. And we were talking about it and she told me, she says, "You know, I think that could've been a Rosenwald school."

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Dianne Davis

She went back, did research and she sent us pictures. And one of the pictures she sent was exactly like the one that we actually have. So it's great to see that that it's actually being restored. And the great part about it, even though, well, you know, the school was put over the hump because the whites didn't want it to be put over in their town so they had to go in - and the structure of it, they fought against that.

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Dianne Davis

But they ended up making that decision to make it a brick facade. But we - It was so important that we got that education. Today, that school, with what we're doing with the renovation will be a school for everybody, not a particular race. It would be open to everybody. This is a place where it will be a museum, hopefully the Lord will

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Dianne Davis

bless us to get where we all get enough money to do what we need to do. They're planning to partner with the Eastern Shore Community College to have some classes there because Eastern Shore Community College is located in Olney, which is quite a distance from here. And people don't have the transportation to get up there like they would want to.

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Dianne Davis

So we will have some classes there. They are planning a commercial kitchen, where people can come and use it for that. And some people have already asked about, it will be a meeting place today in the town of Cape Charles, someone really want to have a meeting or a reception or something.

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Dianne Davis

We really don't have that many places that you can have those activities and affordable places where we can have those activities. So many things will be put into that particular school. And I am so proud of what is happening with that and I'm looking forward to it. I wish I had the money that I could just give them that money so they could restore it to what it should be.

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Dianne Davis

But it is exciting. When we finally got that roof put on, people were excited so they knew something was coming. So that is where we are - people as time go on, just like with Tavia, which you've probably heard of - Griffin - who was the one started this initiative going, she never knew what the school was. So these younger people today doesn't know what it was.

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Dianne Davis

So they are learning. And so when they go by that school and they will see it, yes, this used to be a school, and then hopefully will stop in, and see all these different things and what they've done and what it used to be. And also we have really been blessed as we continue to do the work and hopefully you all can think about giving us a little donation too.

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Tonia Merideth

So during your time attending the Cape Charles Elementary School, do you remember any experiences of racial conflict in the community?

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Dianne Davis

Racial conflict in the community, definitely had that. Even though, like I said, we had the black section and white section. But if we were going downtown, we had to go through the white section in order to get down there basically. And sometimes walking down the street, they may call us names. And those type things, yes did happen whether people want to accept it or not.

00:25:05:22 - 00:25:28:12

Dianne Davis



It did happen during that particular time. You went to the stores. Of course, people always say the blacks would want to steal and I never thought about that. But you had that and if you went into some stores, I remember one place if you went in, you wanted some ice cream. As a matter of fact -it was Savage's drugstore- if you wanted ice cream, they had a counter with the stools and all like that.

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Dianne Davis

But African Americans, we had to stand at the corner, wait and get that ice cream, which I refused to do. So I just didn't get the ice cream. But yes, so that was complete discrimination and that - you had those stools there where we could have easily sat there. And that's the fact. But it happened. And as time go on - but all people were not like that.

00:25:52:23 - 00:26:00:22

Dianne Davis

That's the thing. All whites were not - all of them were not prejudiced or what have you. We did have to deal with some of those things.

00:26:00:24 - 00:26:03:26

Tonia Merideth

What school did you attend after you left Cape Charles Elementary School?

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Dianne Davis

Okay now, you're just talking about the high school. Is that what you're talking about there?

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Tonia Merideth

Right and then further education.

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Dianne Davis

Further education?

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Tonia Merideth

But I think you mentioned it. I think you touched on it earlier with the college.

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Dianne Davis

Once we finished Cape Charles Elementary School, we then were transported to Northampton County High School, which is in Machipongo more than 25 minutes away. We did have a bus, Mr. David Bailey, the school bus driver, and our bus number 25. Mr. Bailey did not go no faster than 25. The bus was cold, so we froze.

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Dianne Davis

But we had - that's where we went. At that point. It was only one high school. So all the kids in Northampton County, that's where all of us went to school. So we got to meet other people because in town during that time, Cape Charles kids - all of us went to Cape Charles School. Then of course, integration came and that's when a difference came about.

00:27:02:07 - 00:27:27:09

Dianne Davis

But Cape Charles students had to go to Cape Charles school. Kids out of town had to go out of town. And then I graduated from Northampton County High School in 1967. After that, I went on to higher ed and I got my degrees. I got one degree in - I went to in Norfolk State. I went to three different colleges, the same school. When I first went to school,

00:27:27:09 - 00:27:59:26

Dianne Davis

I received my first degree from Norfolk Division of Virginia State College. Then I received my degree in Business Education from Norfolk State College. And my master's from Norfolk State University. So I got all those changes and I got my master's in Urban Education. And the thing is, because education, they

are funds are there. See years ago they didn't have the opportunities that we did have because the fact the financial aid and all we were able to get that with my father

00:28:00:02 - 00:28:26:29

Dianne Davis

being deceased of course, you know, we got survivors insurance. So all of that helped - this is what I said. My mother couldn't afford to send us to college. She did what she could. But there were other means also, and people were very supportive. So I went on to further my education. I worked away for seven years and always said that if I ever taught, I wanted to come back home because I was in business and I was teaching careers and I want to come back to be a help to my people here on the Eastern Shore.

00:28:27:00 - 00:28:50:03

Dianne Davis

So I did come back and the skills that I taught, many of my students are using those things. I have some who are attorneys, some of them work in the business offices. They're doing so many different things, some are CPAs and all, so we are very proud of that and I said, this is coming from the Eastern Shore - those people and even today I tell kids, "If you want an education, you can get it.

00:28:50:05 - 00:29:00:24

Dianne Davis

But you got to want it. You have to have goals, of course." And then my mother, like I said, she was concerned about education. So she continued to encourage us to do our very best.

00:29:00:29 - 00:29:03:22

Tonia Merideth

Thank you so much for participating in our oral history interview.