

## Oral History with Virgil Adams

April 20, 2011

Interviewers: Sam Grayson and Logan Smith

Logan: We're studying desegregation in Macon for our end of school product. Both of us as well as other students in the class are studying specifically Central High School and the integration and the gradual re-segregation of it. We would like to get some of your thoughts and experiences at Central.

Virgil Adams: Ok, we talked a little on the phone. I don't have really any negatives...Negative experiences that I could tell you about. My class was 1970—the first class that came over to Central. Before I was at Ballard Junior High, Central was basically Lanier and Miller. I remember coming over and the school was predominantly white. Can't really remember what the ratio was, black vs. white, but it was predominantly white. I don't recall any, quote, racial incidences. You had situations where most of the black students would congregate among themselves, but I think that's more of a force of habit than anything else. So when I came over, there was a group of friends that I already had and we ended up at the same school. We had been split up because if you were on one side of the street you went to one school and the other side the other. I had friends that were there, so we congregated together. But I made a lot of white friends.

One interesting class I remember. We had a Black History Class taught by Richard Bilington. We had a black teacher and one white guy in the class, real bright guy, star student that year. He chose Bilington as his favorite teacher, which I thought was pretty cool. He was a really quiet guy, but you could tell he was very free spirited. Thick rimmed glasses. I remember this guy would walk into class kind of late. Derrick a football player would start some Walton music and sing to him when he came in. It was so funny.

You know we had good experiences, made some real good friends. Calloway, who played at Georgia, who now coaches at Alabama Birmingham, He was the center for the Central Football team. We had a really good football team. But yeah, we got along really well. There were no fights, as long as racial fights. It was a pretty smooth transition I thought

Logan: What do you think is the biggest thing you've gained from your experiences?

Virgil Adams: Probably making friendships that I wouldn't have otherwise made. One of my classmates was vice president of the company who owns the building I'm in. So I probably wouldn't have made the friends I would have without integrating.

It was also you know, the first time I was around white students. I'm sure it was the same for the white students as well. I went from a situation from where everyone was black, now going to a school where we were in the minority. So it introduced me to what the world was truly about. And that is different people, and being about to talk, learn, and work with different people. When I went to law school, it was the same situation. Again, it wasn't culture shock. I had been in that situation before. But it was a great transition because I made so many life-long friends. And I think it's great because when you're around people who are different from you, you learn and grow. So I think it was a great experience.

Logan: Were you excited when you found out you were going to be one of the first to integrate Central High School?

Virgil Adams: Somewhere in between. I know I wasn't excited, because now I was going to a strange, totally different school, with a completely different atmosphere and people. Out of nowhere I was told I was going to Central, being integrated, I wasn't excited. But I was curious about starting a new experience. I wasn't too sad about it. I was just most upset that I wasn't going to school with all my close friends. Because for two years I knew all of my classmates, and we would have normally all shifted to the same high school. So I was scared I was going to completely lose contact with all my friends. I'm going to a place where I'll have friends, but it was a smaller group at Central.

Logan: What did your family think about the integration at Central?

Virgil Adams: I think there was some discussion about it. I feel like my Mom may have said something. But I lived with my Father. It wasn't anything that stood out in my mind. I think she basically said, "Do the same thing you were going to do at another high school at Central." That is: going to school and learn everything you can, do the best job you can, and behave while you're there. And that's it! Don't let them call me for any reason. The teachers over at Central didn't treat anyone else different. There might have been some but none that I ever experienced or saw. There were a few black students before me, so I think the teachers didn't have an extreme culture shock. Maybe a little cause they got so many black students. But, yeah, didn't have any issues there.

Logan: Did you ever think about trying to transfer out of Central?

Virgil Adams: I think one time, I thought about, maybe early on, transferring. But it wasn't a serious thought, it just crossed my mind. Some people thought about transferring just so they could go back to their friends. We were still zoned according to neighborhoods, so people who were in my neighborhood would end up going to Central. There was a big enough group of us so people didn't have to transfer to have more friends.

Logan: When you finally graduated, what kind of feelings did you have? Happy to leave Central?

Virgil Adams: Yeah, I think I was just happy to graduate from high school, period. Just looking forward to the next level. It was a bad experience thinking about leaving friends behind, that sort of thing. But I can't say this enough: my high school experience really was not bad at all. It was a good experience. And I guess primarily, as far as friends that were associated with each other, it was pretty much black students. But I did have a lot of white friends that I saw at school. I would call them friends and still call them friends. That was probably one of the best transitions during that time that I can remember, because we just did not have any issues. As far as racial slurs or anything like that, no one's car got scratched or whatever. We just didn't, you know, have those kinds of things you would see in an integrating school. I mean, it was school. We played ball together, didn't see a real issue.

Sam: Did you play any sports in high school?

Virgil Adams: Yeah I played basketball and baseball. Had some fun times that is for sure. Some interesting people over there. And I think as far as race, I think sports calms the issues because you know you're playing as a team. It teaches people to be with one another and play with camaraderie. I think that went a long ways, because Central back then was a powerhouse in football, great coaches, black and white, and players, black and white. Everywhere the football team went our whole school would follow. So I think that helped with any race issues because we all played together for each other. And we had a pretty good basketball team, not the best in the area, but met some close friends on there and that helped calm race issues as well. All those things going on, I think, really didn't allow people to get down into any racial issues. Everyone was so fired up about school and sports, that we didn't have any time to have any issues.

The only weird thing that would happen was when prom came around. We had our own different types of music and cultures. And trying to figure out how we were going to do prom was kind of an issue. We had our own ideas from prom. And white students were, well, just ok. You know? I remember we ended up having not a big deal prom. A group of black and white students came together and decided on what to do from the prom. It wasn't well attended because we couldn't really get together on how we wanted to do it. I remember going to the prom, there were some white students there, but it wasn't really a big deal where everyone goes now days. That was one issue that we had, not a controversial issue, but one that was weird because it didn't generate as much as you would think a prom would. That was really the only real issue. Other than that, that was pretty much it.

Logan: Looking back what memories stand out to you the most?

Virgil Adams: Well, a couple things, not so much negative. I think that when you look at, you know, me being the part of a class that integrated a school. I think what you automatically assume is, ok there must have been some things going on here. Like being called the N word or whatever. But I just didn't have that memory. I feel like that's what most people think of when talking about integration. It may have happened to other people. But if it did it must have been private because I don't recall anything of that nature.

But let me tell you a couple things that did stand out. Back then you had what you would call fraternities on campus. We started at Central, the first black fraternity. We kind of modeled it from historical black fraternities you'd see in colleges across the nation. We were befriended by a business man here who owned a clothing store. So we would congregate downtown at his store on Saturdays. So we started this club/fraternity. We called it...Omega Ki Alpha. I remember we had a football game, we all dressed in black and we had white headbands and we were going to march out in a line like fraternities do. So we marched around the stadium, and I think that caused a little stir? Because who are these black students with headbands, wristbands, black shirt and pants, marching around, and chanting a song. I do remember we got a little bit of a pushback from the administration there. But we kept the group. I'm sure that had some racial undertones, because again you had a group of black guys dressed in all black, people were asking, you know, what are they doing? It wasn't a real problem, but we did get a little bit of pushback on that. I do remember that, and what makes me remember that is maybe 6, 7, 8 years ago. Somebody mentioned that an organization at central was spun off what we did. They may have spun it

off of what we did, but we didn't have the same ideals. But that and the guy who owned the store stand out a bunch to me.

Another thing that stands out is just the football. How we were then, and how everybody came together on Fridays, you know. It was all about the big orange. The community was all behind the school and that helped. But yeah those are probably the things that I remember the most. Wherever we played on Friday, they would have busses for students. Wherever Central played football...We'd go, that's just the way it was. It was real real strong. We had a lot of fun doing that.

Logan: Did you ever see any racial tension from other schools you played?

Virgil Adams: First round of state basketball championship, we went to Hardaway. Hardaway at that time was a fairly new school. Pretty much all white. Looked to be in a fairly affluent area. And I remember going over there to play and heard some things after the game, sort of racially toned. I was thinking about another time maybe. But it was actually a black school we had played that threw rocks at our bus. But uh yeah just a little bit in that instance. I don't remember any place else. The big rivalry was Warner Robins. But yeah I remember the Hardaway game was a little bit of an issue. But that's the only one I recall.

But like I said, it was pretty uneventful. It's a lot different now, you know, kids. You leave them alone, they'll be fine, and I feel like it's the parents that make all these race issues. If you leave kids alone, they'll be fine. They'll make friends with everyone. We've come a long way, still got a ways to go, but it's definitely come a long way. Interesting still the times we live in.

I look back a lot on how Macon has grown, A lot different now than it was when I was going up.

Sam: Was it a lot bigger back then?

Virgil Adams: No, more like right now. I reflect a lot on it. Over by Waffle House, our house set right there. There were rows of houses all around that area. There was a row of black businesses all around the block downtown. I remember there was this peanut store, and I can still smell those peanuts today man. But that's where most of the blacks in the community would gather on Fridays and Saturdays. You could just make an L down the street towards the Douglas than back around to the federal court house; those were all black owned businesses. That's kind of where people hung out. I remember all that.

One incident that I remember. When we lived by the Waffle House, one Saturday we were walking to the grocery store, and my grandmother was the kind that if there was something a nickel cheaper she wanted it over there, no matter how long it took to get over there. Mulberry market, which was the name of the store. So Saturday morning me and my cousin were walking down to the store at about ten in the morning, I remember we were walking, and all of a sudden this car pulls up and two city of Macon detectives, one guy with a cigar out of his mouth, and a baby little hat on. Looked like it was too small for his head. I probably was about 10 at the time and my cousin was about 15. And the detective said "Where you boys going?" and we said you know, were going to the store. "Where y'all coming from?"...Home. Then he kind of looked at us for a while then pulled off. It was a scary moment because

there was no one else around, we hadn't done anything, and police had a bad reputation at the time for treating blacks how they shouldn't be treated. So I reflect back on that and think about how close I was to being charged with something we did not do, which could have totally changed my life. I may not have even been sitting here right now.

Fast forward to probably, 1981. I became an assistant district attorney here. And we were handling grand jury case. The witnesses come in; you go over the case with the witness. So this police officer comes down to talk to first. And this guy has a cigar out of his mouth and a hat too small for his head. Same guy! Here he is 15 years later and here he is answering to me. I thought you know...Isn't this something! The worm has turned! But yeah I will never forget that. Absolutely incredible.

But, yeah, Macon has changed a lot. I remember as a kid the one thing that I was afraid of from just talking to parents and what not. I was afraid of the Klan. Our house was on a hill right on Riverside Drive. I remember on a Friday evening at about 5 or 5:30 pm, I was outside in the front yard. And then all of these motorcycles started to come down the street dressed in white. They didn't have anything over their faces, but they had the hats on. They were on these motorcycles with side cars. The side cars were terrifying to me because I had seen the Germans with these side cars. And they always make them look real menacing. I remember my Mother coming out and snatched me up real quick and telling me to get back in the house. They were coming back from a rally downtown. And yeah that was probably the most terrifying thing I experienced as kid. Because you read about the Klan, see stuff on TV burning crosses. And then all of a sudden you see it. It had to be a hundred people side by side in rows. And I'm telling you, that was absolutely frightening.

So when you say Macon has changed, yeah, it's changed a lot. Changed for the better.