

An Interview With

Bea Donley

Interviewed by

Mary Paul Jabaley

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Interviewee: Bee Donley  
Interviewer: Mary Powel Jabaley

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Scope Note: Murrah High School students, with assistance from the  
Mississippi Department of Archives and History,  
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involved in the Jackson Public Schools integration. The  
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eleventh grade advanced history class led by Diane  
Canterbury.

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JABALEY: Murrah didn't have anything to do with your being changed, did they?

DONLEY: Well, you know, that's an interesting thing that I would like to know the answer to. Supposedly we were chosen by names being put in a hat and pulled out. There were a lot of strange things.

JABALEY:

DONLEY: I'm not sure exactly how that happened. I don't think we know exactly what happened because once I got to Brinkley - and it was fine, once I got there - I wept tears because I was leaving Murrah where I would have stayed forever. I think that the strange thing is that there were teachers who were left at a number of schools with absolutely nothing to do.

JABALEY: No classes to teach?

DONLEY: No, and at Brinkley there was a very bad situation for the kids. Each day great numbers of them were just sent to the auditorium because there were no teachers and instead of going to a class they would go to the auditorium.

JABALEY: What would they do there?

DONLEY: Oh, whatever. Sit. Do homework. But there was no one to teach them and this was the problem because so many of their teachers had been sent to other schools and maybe some of the teachers who were sent to Brinkley refused to go or some came and stayed two days and left.

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JABALEY: Where did they go if they left? Did they just quit teaching?

DONLEY: Yes, they quit teaching. We did get some very fine teachers over there. A young man - who is a friend of mine - who had just graduated from law school, decided he would like to teach for a while so he came and picked up the social studies class. Ann Allin, Bishop Allin's wife, was concerned when I told her about all the kids just sitting and although she had not used her degree, she did have a degree in home economics, so she came over and applied for that job and got it. As it turned out we had a good faculty, but for a long, long time there were students with no teacher and teachers at a number of schools who didn't have anything to do. It was a mess.

JABALEY: How long was it before that was straightened out?

DONLEY: Oh, weeks. Weeks and weeks, and I guess one thing that helped the black-white faculty at Brinkley was the fact that Superintendent Martin - wasn't he, or whatever - he came to talk to us and either perhaps he was confused about the facts - he certainly did not give them to us straight and we knew \_\_\_\_\_ what the situation was both black and white teachers---

JABALEY: What situation?

DONLEY: Just a number of things - about there not being enough teachers going around, that we knew about

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\_\_\_\_\_ and so many things that it helped unity.

JABALEY: Were you resentful of the teachers that did leave - that refused to teach at Brinkley?

DONLEY: No, I don't think I ever bothered about it one way or another. I resented the fact that the kids were left with no teachers. Of the teachers who left there were a number who had personal problems. They couldn't cope with it.

JABALEY: What made you finally leave the public school system?

DONLEY: Oh, I'd love to tell you about that. I tried so hard to stay. Well, for one thing I had always taught senior English and the year after I was first at Brinkley, it was made into a tenth grade center, so I had never taught tenth grade, I did not think that was what I wanted to do. What I did very well was to get along with the students over there and their parents and I did go in and I did talk to Dr. Martin about staying in the public schools and maybe working in some position where I could do this which is what I felt that I could do well, work with the parents and the students and, oh, maybe liaison of some sort, but he urged me to leave the public schools and go into private school teaching.

JABALEY: Do you know why he did that?

DONLEY: I think he truly thought he had my welfare at heart and I think he was very honest about it.

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JABALEY: Yes, and you went to Prep. Why did you choose Prep?

DONLEY: At that moment it seemed like the school that perhaps had the most to offer. The way I heard about it it was to be a very innovative school. It was to offer all new opportunities, it was certainly not to be the Klan school that the Council Schools---

JABALEY: Segregation academies?

DONLEY: Yes, as it turned out, of course, it was a segregated place, but in the beginning it was supposed to be a place where the kids could---well, it was modeled after Murrah. It still is, that was the model and the plan was to have good teachers, all sorts of new ideas and interested students.

JABALEY: You don't think it was like that?

DONLEY: No, I think they've had some really good students out there and excellent teachers but narrow in its viewpoint. I'm not sure what they would do if a black student were to register or to attempt to register, I really don't know.

JABALEY: Do you think it was academically superior to the public schools at that time?

DONLEY: I suppose so, at that time. It didn't compare to Murrah as I knew it in the old days, but by the time the faculties were so mixed up, the principals didn't have that much say-so about what teachers they were hiring so---

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JABALEY: So with the faculty the way it was, it didn't really work out too well for the students?

DONLEY: I think that's certainly a valid statement.

JABALEY: Were the students themselves more hard-working at Prep?

DONLEY: Than where?

JABALEY: Than at Brinkley?

DONLEY: Yes, but that is not exactly a fair question. You'd have to go back to the background of the students who were at Brinkley. Obviously they had not had the teachers they might have had.

JABALEY: Would you say that the students at Prep were of a higher class than those that had been at Murrah?

DONLEY: Oh, heavens no. No way.

JABALEY: Do you think that was their fault or the teachers' fault?

DONLEY: No, no, no. I think it was just about like a Murrah group. You have to understand that there were some bright, bright students at Brinkley, really bright students but many of them had been changed from one school to another. The system in itself was, well, difficult certainly for the children and there were a lot of problems. Even at that time the problem of being out of class as much as they were with no teacher. Then you had a problem with the rainy days, getting everyone there. That was the year of the Jackson State student death, you remember, and they were

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out a lot, there were marches, you don't remember all of that.

JABALEY: No, I wasn't here.

DONLEY: You were too young. You weren't here, right. Well, there were all sorts of problems.

JABALEY: Why did you leave Prep?

DONLEY: Because, I'm not sure that I should say this \_\_\_\_\_ to the public. I didn't agree with the philosophy. I guess that's the reason.

JABALEY: Were there any other schools that you considered when you were leaving Prep?

DONLEY: No, I guess I didn't. St. Andrews called and asked me to teach there and I liked what they were doing plus the philosophy of the school.

JABALEY: Do you think you could have gotten a job with the public school system if you had wanted to?

DONLEY: I think so. I certainly hope so.

JABALEY: At a different school?

DONLEY: Yes, I think so. I don't know where I would have been sent.

JABALEY: But that would have been the trick. You would just have to apply and accept wherever they wanted you---

DONLEY: Yes, I think so.

JABALEY: What were the differences between St. Andrews and Prep besides the philosophy? Say the students?

DONLEY: I don't know that very much difference in the student body except that St. Andrews students have a great deal more freedom.

JABALEY: Then and now.

DONLEY: I think so. I think that's true. I think the philosophy at St. Andrews has always been to give students responsibility with freedom and certainly we encourage black students, foreign students. This is something St. Andrews has always done.

JABALEY: Do you think that's because it's a parochial school or something about the administration?

DONLEY: I think it's very much a philosophy of the school. We have five Iranian students now, one Japanese, I'm not sure how many Indian children and I really don't know how many black students but <sup>it's very cosmopolitan</sup> they cause no problem.

JABALEY: So you're happy at St. Andrews?

DONLEY: Yes.

JABALEY: How long do you plan to go on teaching there?

DONLEY: I don't know. It's interesting to think about going back to public schools. I would be interested in that.

JABALEY: Do you think you would like \_\_\_\_\_?

DONLEY: Perhaps.

JABALEY: Was this school like any of the schools that you taught at? During this period of racial turmoil?

DONLEY: What school?

JABALEY: The school you went to growing up - in high school.

DONLEY: No, no, because it was an all-white school.

JABALEY: Where did you grow up?

DONLEY: Drew.

JABALEY: Mississippi? A typical small-town high school?

DONLEY: Typical - well not too typical because it was a school that brought in students from all the towns around and it was not particularly small.

JABALEY: About like a county school?

DONLEY: Well, let's see. There's a name for it you know, and I can't think what you call it. What do you call these schools where they come in from the little towns? But there were many little towns that sent students to Drew so certainly it was much bigger than St. Andrews.

JABALEY: Maybe the size of one of the Jackson high schools?

DONLEY: Not the high school. I don't think the high school was that big. As big as Prep though certainly.

JABALEY: Do you think your experiences at that school affected your opinions and philosophies?

DONLEY: No, not at all.

JABALEY: What formed those?

DONLEY: Oh, I don't know. I learned so much

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teaching at Brinkley. That was a marvelous experience.

JABALEY: You enjoyed it?

DONLEY: Oh, thoroughly. It was great. I taught speech which I had not taught before and it was great fun. My speech class did an assembly program using Paul Laurence Dunbar's poetry and I did very little about it except help the kids. They did the choreography, they put it to music, it was stupendous. Too bad we didn't videotape it - really good.

JABALEY: So, you really enjoyed teaching speech?

DONLEY: Yes.

JABALEY: Have you ever thought of teaching that?

DONLEY: \_\_\_\_\_ I hate it that I'm being \_\_\_\_\_ by this cold. I can't even come through to you, I've got such a cold but no, I don't think I'm qualified, really.

JABALEY: So, wherever you taught you'd teach English?

DONLEY: Yes. Counseling is what I'd really like to get into. I really think that would be interesting.

JABALEY: You haven't done any of that, though?

DONLEY: I do it constantly so I would like to do it professionally in school. I do it all the time anyway.

JABALEY: O.K. well, thank you very much.

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