

An Interview With

Dr. Robert Fortenberry

Interviewed by

Kandy Jones

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Interviewee: Dr. Robert N. Fortenberry  
Interviewer: Kandye Jones

Title: An interview with Dr. Robert N. Fortenberry, March 1978/ interviewed by Kandye Jones

Collection Title: Murrah High School Advanced History Class Oral History Project, Integration

Scope Note: Murrah High School students, with assistance from the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, conducted oral history interviews with local citizens involved in the Jackson Public Schools integration. The interviews were conducted in the spring of 1978 by the eleventh grade advanced history class led by Diane Canterbury.

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JONES: This is Kandy Jones interviewing Dr. Robert Fortenberry. What interested you in JPS and how did you become involved with it?

FORTENBERRY: Several years ago I got very disenchanted with Mississippi politics and left Mississippi saying I would never come back, and in the meantime I went a lot of places and worked in a lot of other places. One time I was on a fishing trip on vacation and they called me about coming to Jackson as superintendent of schools. I didn't really think I would be interested but because some friends of mine asked me to do it I came here. I looked at the job and I found that the people were really committed to public education and also the politics in Mississippi had changed particularly so that everybody would have a pretty equal change, so I decided to take a chance on it. I think the thing that made up my mind was the changes I had seen taking place in the state and number two was the commitment that some of the people in Jackson had to public education. So it was a good decision. I've enjoyed it. I've had five good years. It's a very challenging job, a very rewarding one.

JONES: What are the most significant changes you've seen in JPS over these last five years?

FORTENBERRY: The most significant change that I've

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seen, I think, would be the growing awareness on the part of both town people and educators that we must improve the educational system and for part of this period and still continuing some but not as much as when I first came here, there was a primary effort of just maintaining the schools and getting over the problem of school desegregation. We are moving now beyond the problem of school desegregation and beginning to center much more on teaching all the children.

JONES: How did you feel about integration?

FORTENBERRY: Well, now that I can look back on it with some historical prospective, I feel a good bit different about it. I did not understand what integration was all about when it first began to take place and was somewhat bitter about it because I saw school systems in the nation being torn apart and I thought there must be a better way to do it than was being done. Now then though I realize that what occurred was essential to the development of the country. In order for us to get out of the problems that related to segregation we had to go through a pretty traumatic period of time. I understand now the absolute essential nature of what has taken place and why it had to take place. I think it was a massive step in the development of this country and we're going to have a better country because it occurred. I wish that the churches had played a more active role in it rather than trying to be solved by the schools, but the courts and the Congress and the people of the country decided

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that public schools were the social organization to deal with desegregation and we have dealt with it and done a pretty good job. I still think it's primarily a moral issue and I think the churches should supply more leadership than they have.

JONES: What major improvements do you see for JPS in the next few years?

FORTENBERRY: We're going to have to do a better job of teaching all of our pupils. We've done a pretty good job of teaching some of the children. We've done an adequate job of teaching most of the children but there are some children that we're not teaching very much, so we have to improve the instructional program and I think we are improving. Now I speak both as a parent and an educator when I say we've done a pretty good job. Our children have received a pretty good education, I think, have and are receiving a good education, but we need to improve. We need to improve our facilities too. We need to try to pass a bond issue in the school district and get rid of portable classrooms. We need to build parking lots. We need to build two or three more schools. We need to consider air conditioning facilities. These are some of the things that we need to do. I'm very proud of the fact that we have built some new facilities. We built a Career Development Center, we're building a new junior high school, a new elementary school, a significant addition to Hill but we need to build some more

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facilities. We need to do a little bit better job of discipline in the school district. We have not dealt with that problem adequately as we should have because we've been buying peace and we've accepted some things we should not have. We've got to do a little bit better job of discipline. We have to do a little bit better job of monitoring what all employees \_\_\_\_\_. These are some of the improvements I feel are needed.

JONES: Along these lines of education, what are your views of testing procedures in Jackson Public Schools.

FORTENBERRY: As long as tests are used for diagnostic purposes, that is to determine what students have learned, it serves a good purpose. But to use to pass students or to compare school districts or to attempt to determine how well teachers taught, that is a misuse of tests. They should not be used for that purpose. They should only be used to help teachers determine what students need to learn.

JONES: Are there any plans in the future for rezoning school districts?

FORTENBERRY: Yes, there are some studies underway at the present time and perhaps by the time you get this report written there will be some announcements made concerning rezoning. Rezoning is a thing that will continually take place in the years ahead because the population of the school

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district moves all the time. There's a constant movement of population, if for no other reason, you're going to have to rezone for a long time to come. There's a significant movement to the north, northwest, south and southwest in the city right now. As population continues to shift we'll have to shift the school zone lines. I see this continuing for quite some time.

JONES: In your opinion, overall, where has the system been a success and where a failure?

FORTENBERRY: I think overall the greatest success we've had is demonstrating that you can have quality, safe, integrated education. I think that's the number one thing. I think we've had the greatest failure in selling this to some people in this community because there are some people who believe yet that you cannot have quality, safe, integrated education and our greatest failure is our inability to make them aware of this.

JONES: Thank you.

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