

An Interview with

Mrs. Marina Irvin

Interviewed by

Todd Spjeldet

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Interviewee: Marina Irvin  
Interviewer: Todd Spjeldet

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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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SPJELDET: What was the general feeling of the teachers when they found out that the schools were going to be integrated?

IRVIN: There was a mixed feeling of fear and anticipation.

SPJELDET: Were there many black teachers in school at this time? Did the public schools have black teachers?

IRVIN: Yes, there were black teachers teaching in the all-white or predominantly white schools.

SPJELDET: Did the black teachers have any---were there any uncomfortable feelings shown toward them or between the teachers, knowing that the schools were going to be integrated?

IRVIN: If there was I was unaware of it because I was new that year. The one black teacher that I knew quite well was very excited about integration and at times hostile to some people but in general she was just excited about the opportunity the black children would have. She believed that the black children had not---blacks had not made progress particularly because they were in all-black schools.

SPJELDET: Did you as a parent see any---did you have any apprehensions about sending your children to school

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in Jackson?

IRVIN: I had none whatsoever until the \_\_\_\_\_ plan came out and I saw that I was going to have to send one of my children to a school which was very far from home and I did not like this at all.

SPJELDET: Well, once the schools were integrated, how long did it take for your classes to get back to work. Was there any time lapse---

IRVIN: My children never have gotten back down to work completely. The shock came the first day of school. The new youngsters came in and we anticipated absolutely no problems and the children - the white children who had stayed - were quite excited about it really and could see no problem until we started reading out loud in my English class and immediately it was obvious that there was a great reading difference between black children and the white children and it immediately caused hostility.

SPJELDET: Do you see any kind of problem between the students? Do you think it's more the parents' hangups that caused problems for the kids at school?

IRVIN: Well, of course, prejudice is a taught thing but the main problems, and it is agreed among all the teachers, is not the whites against the blacks but the blacks against the whites. They pick on the white children, they harass them and the good black child, the nice black child, does nothing and he does nothing to stop the harassment.

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SPJELDET: Do you see any of the white children trying to make friends with the blacks, trying to go along, you know, other than just at school? I've noticed, like at high school \_\_\_\_\_.

IRVIN: There is no dating on the junior high level much at all but certainly some of the white children have parties to which some of the blacks are invited, but the blacks do not invite the whites, however, and this has caused some hurt feelings.

SPJELDET: Do you see any problems with the way the schools are being run - the administration of the schools?

IRVIN: I think in many cases from what I hear from other teachers the consensus is that administrators are not chosen for their ability to handle a particular job. They are chosen because of race or they are chosen because of sex or they are chosen because they have been in a teaching position and a job comes along - say a principal or assistant principal - and they are slammed into that job with no preparation.

SPJELDET: You'd rather see someone with more experience?

IRVIN: Well, I'd like to see someone with more--- for example, for principal, first of all they need a business degree, they need to be able to handle the \_\_\_\_\_ and they need to be able to shuffle a great deal of paper work and

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be able to do detail work, they must be detail oriented.

SPJELDET: Do you think the teachers need to have better qualifications than the ones now?

IRVIN: I think the qualifications need to be looked at very carefully and I think that there should be a period of time, say three years, that a teacher is on probation, and I think that the administrators should quit being so frightened of firing a teacher who is not doing the job.

SPJELDET: For fear of some sort of kickback like racial or sexist or something?

IRVIN: Right.

SPJELDET: What about, getting to the students, do you see any changes in the students since you've taught, any dramatic changes over the years?

IRVIN: The reading level is up. I think there has been a change in the black children getting off of what we think of as the welfare kingdom. They're very slowly realizing, at least at my school, that simply being there will not earn them a passing grade. They must produce and this I think is bring about a better \_\_\_\_\_.

SPJELDET: Is there a lot of violence at the public schools that you know of?

IRVIN: Yes, there is. Of course, it depends on what you call violence. Violence is youngsters fighting - one attacking another - and there is a great deal more than the

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public knows about.

SPJELDET: Are there any things brought into the public schools - there's an occasional knife picked up but anything more than that?

IRVIN: In the junior high we don't have any problem with guns but we do have a lot of knives. I would venture to say that probably ninety percent of our children carry knives, not necessarily with any intention of using them. It's sort of a - it's a preventive medicine. If the others know that they have one they are less likely to bother them.

SPJELDET: But they aren't likely to pull it out?

IRVIN: No, no, and they will vehemently deny that they even have one.

SPJELDET: Do you see a need for more disciplinary action, suspension or---

IRVIN: Yes, I do. I think that the possible two percent of the students that cause all of the trouble should be dealt with quickly and firmly and immediately to protect the ninety-eight percent who are such fine children.

SPJELDET: Do these two percent ever intimidate the teachers? Are there any teachers at school that can be intimidated by the students?

IRVIN: There are teachers who are scared to death of certain students and there are administrators who are frightened of certain students. Now your black administrators,

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some of them have a special problem. These students threaten to hurt these principals' children or teachers' children and if they live in the same area with them that can be a very real fear. I'm fortunate, I don't have to worry about that.

SPJELDET: Well, what do you feel about the students who break the school policies? Would you like to see them have to stay after school to make improvements on it or other than just sending them home for two or three days?

IRVIN: I'd like to see them spend time working. I don't think they should be sent home. I think they should be kept at school and they should be working and anything that they damage, I think that they should have to make up for by putting in hours at a minimum wage that would pay for the damage done.

SPJELDET: Do you see the reason in the schools for the apathetic atmosphere - the boredom the students have - the reason for not really caring whether they're at school or not?

IRVIN: The reason?

SPJELDET: Yes, the reason for it.

IRVIN: I get a lot of different reasons. I think it's human nature to do the very least you can as long as you can get by and I think as long as we think---we have been permitting students to do this for the past oh, I'd say eighteen to twenty years. We are reaping what we have sown and I do not know of any particular reason. I only know of

what they tell me. In the case of high school students, a lot of times it's because they're working after school and they're very exhausted. They're too exhausted to get their work up - their homework. In the case of the junior high child, most of them try to get to school because it's so much better than what they have at home.

SPJELDET: Do you think it makes a difference in the age level, too, because if you're fifteen, sixteen, seventeen and have use of a car it's a lot easier not to go to school than if you're walking.

IRVIN: And also he can get a job where our little ones cannot get a job.

SPJELDET: Do you think it makes a difference whether both parents work full-time and the amount of time a student spends on their classwork or worrying about a project?

IRVIN: I think it makes a difference. I think that when the mother works she's too exhausted at night to worry about the children's homework and to keep track of it as she once did. Also in the case of a mother whose job requires that she be at work at three, let's say, and she works until close to midnight, she is not there to supervise and this gives the child a feeling of \_\_\_\_\_ and he's left very much on his own and it definitely has affected their whole life, not just their school work.

SPJELDET: Is there a different reaction in class? Do you notice students that you could almost say their parents

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do work by the way they act in class?

IRVIN: You mean behavior?

SPJELDET: Yes, behavior.

IRVIN: No, I don't think so. I think you've got to work that into the income level of the home because there are homes where the mothers work where certainly the children - you'd never guess that the mother wasn't home all the time.

SPJELDET: Do you think that the lack of discipline and respect comes from the home? Is it from parents working or is it---

IRVIN: I think a lot of it is from the parents' lack of respect for the children. This is where it starts. They have no respect for other adults in the neighborhood, they have no respect for their own children. The children then have no respect without force for other adults, but it's up to the teacher whether or not the child respects her or him. That's entirely in his hands.

SPJELDET: Do you think there is any difference depending on the race of the child or is that just---

IRVIN: Well, I think, Todd, we're talking here about cultural differences. Yes, I think there's a difference. The black boy, for example, is a much more reasonable person to deal with when he's very angry than the black girl and this is because traditionally the black society in America has been so strongly matriarchal and the mothers have related more to the girls. The boys are, therefore, not as spoiled as the girls are. Much more is expected of

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these boys and they grow up much too fast, I think, but they actually respond to a woman teacher much faster because they're looking for a mother figure.

SPJELDET: Are you seeing any signs of the drug trend that hit the high school level coming down to the junior high level?

IRVIN: Oh, yes, oh, yes. Some of them come in very, very laid back in the morning, and pot is a cheap way to escape their problems. No hard drugs that we're aware of.

SPJELDET: Is it mostly marijuana or are they drinking alcohol?

IRVIN: No, if there's any alcohol I'm certainly not aware of it. If the ninth graders were drinking, it would be vodka anyway and we wouldn't be able to tell it so I think it's mostly the pot.

SPJELDET: I think marijuana is also pretty much easier for them to get than drinking.

IRVIN: Oh, sure, it's cheaper too.

SPJELDET: Do you think they're getting these examples from older brothers and sisters or older friends?

IRVIN: Oh, I think it's a combination of parents, friends, siblings and television.

SPJELDET: That's just what I was going to ask.

IRVIN: Television has romanticized things which we've always had with us but which were kept very neatly under wraps, for example, my generation. The over-use of

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of drugs and loose sex both have been so romanticized on TV and at the movies that it's become the norm and so kids who really don't want to participate in either one and they're not ready for it yet feel that they should in order to live up to their TV or movie heroes and heroines.

SPJELDET: There have been some things said around the high school, I don't know about the junior high about teachers that more or less admit to their students that they do smoke. Do you think, although it's against the law but it's still being accepted, that those teachers should be reprimanded in some way because the students look up to them?

IRVIN: You mean smoke cigarettes?

SPJELDET: No, no, no, smoke marijuana. It's like knowing that these teachers do, but don't come to their class---

IRVIN: Well, I think it definitely is wrong - it is illegal. I mean certainly they've lessened the fines for first users because of the age of the user but I think that's terrible. I mean I'm shocked. All they're trying to do, you see Todd, is to make themselves look younger. They think that if they can say, "Hey, you seventeen-year-old, I'm doing what you do," then that makes them seventeen again and that's just terribly wrong.

SPJELDET: Then the students say, "Hey, the adults are doing it, why shouldn't we."

IRVIN: Right.

SPJELDET: Do you see the schools now coming kind of out of the slump they had and they're getting back to teaching subjects and basics and reading and math and trying to get away from the new subjects?

IRVIN: I don't know about the schools. I only know about myself and yes, I'm out of the slump because I have just absolutely just refused to go any further with what I didn't believe in, and I started using control groups to determine which method of teaching was best and I find that if you make the basic material very exciting and if you believe in what you're teaching, it becomes exciting to the child. Even something as dull as grammar can really become exciting and fun, and, now, Todd, it did when you were in my class. You know it did. It's fun if the teacher believes in it, and then I'm back to basics and I'm out of the slump because I believe in what I'm doing.

SPJELDET: If you could change anything in the Jackson Public Schools, what would it be?

IRVIN: I'd get rid of about, oh, fifty percent of the teachers because they don't know their material. Any English teacher who says, "he ain't got none," would be immediately fired if he didn't remedy his ways within two weeks and by the way, I don't believe that any teacher or administrator, and I am including coaches, has any right to use less than good standard every day English and I don't think it should be permitted and if they don't know their

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grammar then let them go back to school, or I think the English department would be only too glad to hold a tutoring session after school every day.

SPJELDET: Thank you very much.

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