

Gwendolyn Black (Class of 1979), interviewed by Erisa Apantaku on April 3rd, 2018.

Erisa Apantaku (EA): What is your name and please spell it?

Gwendolyn Black (GB): Gwendolyn Black.

EA: When did you start attending Robeson?

GB: Started attending Robeson and actually Parker in 1975, Robeson I started in 1977.

EA: When did you graduate from Robeson?

GB: 1979

EA: Very cool, so the second class ever?

GB: Second class

EA: Why did you attend Robeson?

GB: It was my neighborhood school and that's the school that my mom decided to put me in. Her plans were to let me go to Parker and then transfer my sophomore year, however, I loved the school so much I **wound** up staying the whole four years.

1:00

EA: What did you love about it?

GB: I loved the curricular? I loved the teachers I had friends by my sophomore year and I didn't want to leave.

EA: When you went in to Parker, did your mom have a plan for where you would transfer to?

GB: She did, her plan was to transfer me to Jones Commercial my junior year.

EA: Jones Commercial, where was that?

GB: Located in the loop.

EA: So it's now Jones College Prep right?

GB: Yes it is

EA: What made her want you to transfer there?

GB: The business setting

EA: Cool. When you made the decision for you to stay at Parker, was there pushback from your parents or was everyone pretty much on board with it?

GB: Everyone was on board, there wasn't push back.

EA: That's cool. That echoes something else I heard from someone else I interviewed, he started at Whitney Young but then it just wasn't a good fit for him, and he actually found the classes at Robeson to be better and more developed more critical thinking from those classes.

Do you remember the names of any teachers that were particularly influential?

GB: Yes, Mr. Hicks, Ms. Riley, Ms. Johnson, Coach Pruitt, Coach Curry, (inaudible), Ms. Perry, Mr. Calvin.

EA: Can you walk me through what those teachers taught and what you liked about them?

GB: Mr. Hicks was a social studies teacher, and he was my homeroom teacher. He was a great mentor to me and a great teacher. Ms. Riley was the English Teacher. One thing that sticks out to me that made me, she got on my nerves about Shakespeare. But when I got older I was like wow it was such a great story and when my children had to study Shakespeare I was like oh wow she was just so in tune, she took ownership over the teaching of Shakespeare.

EA: Do you remember which Shakespeare story you read? Haha. Yeah they kind of all blend together at a certain point.

GB: I just remember Guinevere. No I don't remember.

3:45

EA: What about other staff? Do you remember any other staff at Robeson?

GB: I do— assistant principal Bonner. Awesome man. Great, great mentor. I've watched him. He was just so ... As an assistant principal we used to say "why you wanna be our principal?" But now I do have clarity and I do understand because I have a sister that's in the school system as an AP and she won't do the principal thing. A lot of students looked up to him, and because of Mr. Bonner, it was a lot of students that were able to get out of high school and pursue careers through him. He was more like a motivator and pusher.

EA: That's cool. I have heard that from a couple people so far. Talk to me about your friend group. What did you guys do outside of school or in school?

GB: I had two very close friends, maybe three, maybe more. But we were like-minded and we liked to do some of the same things. We are all still friends right to this day but one of them I am still in communication with. It's been almost 40 years, 39 years. Then I saw one of the others ones just Saturday. I was shopping and I ran into her. I had very good friends. The school itself was close. It was like a close knit school. It was pretty family oriented. My friends that I picked, you know we had some of the same goals and they were motivating me in school. They were great people.

EA: What were some of those goals?

5:45

GB: To graduate. We wanted to go to college, and make careers. So all four of us pretty much did some good things.

EA: You also said you were all like-minded and liked the same sorts of things. What sorts of things do you do, in school or out of school?

GB: Some of the things we liked to do, it's like I tell my children – CROWDS. We would pretty much say “ma” we wasn't smoking, we didn't drink and we each was leaders. Sometimes they would say I was more bossy, but I was the baby in the group. Some of the things we liked, we liked to hang out, we got close with one each other's families. We motivated and when we needed each during crisis we was there for one another.

EA: Did you do any extracurricular activities at Robeson?

GB: I did, we had a pep squad so me and my friends were very involved. We loved sports, we had music so we were in the chorus, we had sewing. I did that. I loved that. I remember when I first got to Parker, we had a Jazz band that was awesome so we loved to hear them sing.

EA: The sewing club, do you remember any particular stories from sewing club?

GB: I do, we had to make a pant suit. And me and my friends we pretty much had the same pattern. I remember mine it was a navy blue pantsuit.

EA: That's cool! Do you still have it?

GB: I don't. My mom might have it but I don't.

EA: Can you tell me about one of the classes you took, you mentioned a lot of the teachers who were influential. Can you tell me about one of those classes and an assignment you had in one of those classes and what made it special?

GB: Ok my algebra teacher Mr. Gaia. He was the algebra teacher and one of the assignments we had to learn how to do Algebra. I learned so much from his class because one of my goals was to be an

accountant. So I did well and I excelled but learning how to calculate and go to the nearest powers was one of the things that stood out for me. Balancing check books. He was able to break down step by step, which made it easy. Gave me the heart to be an accountant.

EA: I read an article that algebra is one of the biggest barriers to people getting their high school diploma.

GB: With his teaching method it was easy to learn. Yes. I am getting assistance from my best friend Doris. Dorothy McCoy is her name.

EA: Is that the friend you mentioned in the beginning that is very much a part of your life?

GB: Yes.

9:45

EA: Talk to me about the learning environment in general. Can you describe any positive experiences, or negative experiences?

GB: Yes, the learning environment was awesome. But if I look at times now, the teachers had more control of the classrooms. I have been involved in CPS now and with my older daughters going to school. The environment was good, it was calm. And I think that parents back then taught their children how to be respectful of adults. So yes, we would get out of order sometimes, but the teacher would bring us back into order.

EA: Any negative experiences or times where it was more challenging to learn?

GB: Not really negative experiences. I just remember our senior year, one of our classmates, which was an awesome basketball player, was murdered. He was murdered by mistaken identity and it affected a lot of the students because he was a great ball player. I think with the children and the classmates we motivated each other to keep our heads up and get past the hurt and the pain.

EA: Do you remember his name?

GB: His name was Donald. I can't remember his last name. But we called him Don.

EA: How did you get to Robeson?

GB: Walked

EA: How close were you to the school? Can you tell me what streets you walked down? How long it took you?

GB: I began my walk west on 71st street. I went to Wentworth to 70th and then I would go over to Princeton, walk to 69th and then go from there to Normal. So it probably took me a good 10 minutes.

EA: That can be fun in the warmer months, but not fun in the winter.

GB: Absolutely. I remember, I think '78, maybe '79 it was a snow storm and I remember walking through the snow and it was so hard, but I made it.

EA: What about getting home, once you got there?

GB: Getting home to me was always easy. I would take a different route sometimes getting home. Sometimes I would walk to Wentworth and walk 2 blocks down for home.

EA: You were there during the transitional period, between when it was switching from Parker to Robeson. Can you describe for me that experience of seeing the old building be torn down and a new building be built?

GB: The old building is still there, which is Parker. I think they tore down the elementary school. It was a great opportunity to see the new school being built. We would go into Parker. It's still there today. And we would look out the window or walk around the track and watch the new school being built.

13:30

EA: So it was exciting to see the new school being built, where I will be next?

GB: Yes. And once the school was built, Parker had so many students, we still had to utilize the old school Parker and the new school Robeson.

EA: Which classes did you take in Parker and which in Robeson?

GB: The classes we took over there that I remember, is science, gym and lunch was there.

EA: That was in the old school, which is now Parker Elementary, right?

GB: Those are the classes that Parker students went over to Robeson to take. I believe, if I am correct, the newer students, the first graduating full class, might have had all their classes over at Robeson. And it was juniors and seniors left at Parker, so we would commute over there.

EA: Oh, I see. So the new school, Robeson is where you took science and gym and ate lunch.

GB: Yes.

EA: So it was exciting. It was an exciting time.

GB: Yes. It was new, something new and something different.

EA: Were you at all sad you wouldn't be graduating from Parker High School?

GB: Never thought about it.

EA: So Robeson is going to town down and a new school is going up. There are a couple interesting things about it. One is that all current students of Robeson can't attend the new school. Have you heard that?

GB: Yes, I have.

EA: What is your response to that?

GB: I hate it. Because those students... where are they really gonna go? Are they really gonna get what they need? I believe that ... I know that what they're trying to do would be great, but I think it's not good for the community. With poverty and everything that's going on, I believe that they should have come up with another avenue for the community and the students. So since there are four schools being affected, maybe they could have combined all of those students into one school.

EA: I think the interesting thing that's different from your situation at Robeson and these current students is that you could see the school being built and you could go there. And these students will see it being built and know that they can't.

GB: Correct, and to me it's like do they lose hope? I hope not. We had hope and we knew that we had somewhere to go. So my heart goes out to those students for those that may be challenged in some of those places and where they will go next.

16:30

EA: How do you feel about the fact that Robeson, the place you graduated from is closing and will be torn down?

GB: It's hurtful, sad. Disappointing. I just feel that something more should have been done. You know we got the word probably last year that they were planning on tearing the school down to build a new one. I think that everything... CPS system to me has lost a lot, and if they are really being honest, do they really have the heart for children and for their learning now?

EA: I was reading a study about school closings, and one of the biggest things about school closings is it's a way for them to consolidate money, and which obviously they are doing that so they can reinvest in students but it's like there's is a line there somewhere.

GB: Absolutely, and I just think that when the charter schools were allowed to come in to our city, that took a lot from the regular CPS. I don't think people thought it out, maybe parents really thought it out. But for my children, they stayed at CPS, I got one more to come out of CPS.

EA: Congratulations! What are the ages of your children, and where did they go to school?

GB: My oldest is 39, 30. They went to Simeon. My 20 year-old, she went to Bronzeville Scholastic Institute. And my last daughter who is 16 is at South Shore International College Prep IB program.

EA: Very interesting. We are planning on actually looking a little bit at the South Shore International College Prep because it was a similar situation where an old school was closed and a new one was opened. Did she go to the old school before the new school was built? Or what drew you to South Shore International College Prep?

GB: No she didn't. She started at the new school. She's a junior now. She actually started at Bronzeville Scholastic Institute, which was an IB program. I felt she wasn't being challenged enough at Bronzeville. And they had a turn around with the leadership there and it was a disaster. So I pulled her from Bronzeville into South Shore. I knew she had to be challenged to a higher level at South Shore. Right now, she's an A/B student, maybe one C.

EA: Congratulations! Do you feel like the school is doing good at challenging her? Does she enjoy her classes and her learning environment?

GB: Absolutely, she is being challenged now and she's doing well.

EA: What would you like to see in the new school? In the new high school being built where Robeson was?

20:00

GB: What I would love to see in that new school is that the children would be able to get in there from the neighborhood. From the Englewood community. That's what I would love to see and I would love to see them attach Robeson's name onto that new school. I think that can be a fight for now. And I would just love to see that school being put there that the children from Englewood would have a place to go.

EA: Basically that is actually remains an investment in the local community, and retains some of the legacy?

GB: Yes.

EA: Do you think that if it stayed Robeson and had stayed a neighborhood school, do you think all of the alumni of the old school would still see it as their school?

GB: Yes, absolutely.

EA: Do you think if the name was changed there would be a similar legacy?

GB: I believe if the name is changed with the alumni. They can tear the school down, but Robeson will still be in us. Does it stop us? Right now we are planning an all class reunion. Will it stop us? No. We can still go forward. But we would love to see Robeson be attached. Even if they don't want to put Robeson's name in the front of the school, they can put it behind. I think that would be beneficial to the alumni and to the community.

EA: What is one of your most striking memories of Robeson?

GB: We had an awesome football team. They were good. I believe they went down state and they won. One of the memories was being at the football games, the sports, they were awesome. We had awesome modern dance team. Our cheerleaders and our pom-poms they were awesome. So I think we had a great volleyball sports. The young lady's sports, they were good. Even though my baby sister went to Dunbar, she played ball for Dunbar. And when Dunbar came to play Robeson I was cheering for her and for Robeson. And then we had a dynamic band. The band was awesome. We do have some of our band members that, right today are doing professional. We have saxophone player Carlos Cannon. We have a DJ that is off the chain, DJ Tyrone. So they pursued their careers.

EA: That's cool. So overall just kind of a school spirit, the activities, people felt like they could find their place at Robeson.

23:00

GB: Absolutely. Sports was pretty much fair, and people were able to find their place. I remember some of the students. We had Alfredrick Hughes, that was the awesome player with Loyola. Arel Miller. Elton ... did some semi-pro. So we had some awesome athletes come out of Parker and Robeson. We had some really great people. We got ex-students on the police force. They just landed some great opportunities, fire department. Some good, it was good in the wood.

EA: What do you do?

GB: I am a crossing guard for the city of Chicago. I've done this for 10 years. Formerly before this I worked for Nabisco.

EA: What has your life been like since leaving Robeson?

GB: I can say it's been great; I didn't get caught up. Thankful to the Lord I didn't get caught up in the world of things. I look forward to more great things.

EA: How do you feel like Robeson prepared you for life after high school?

GB: I believe they did a good job, with preparing me. I had to take ownership, it's like a two-way street. We have to make choices, thank God for my upbringing. We had a father figured in high school. I lost my dad at the age of 7. Mr. Bonner was like a dad to us and we had some awesome teachers that became like dads and mothers. So I think from that backset I did great and it prepared me for life.

EA: Describe your Robeson experience in five words.

GB: Great. Awesome. Dynamic. Happy. Excitement.

EA: Dynamic. Can you explain that a little more?

GB: Powerful. Put powerful in dynamic.

EA: This is wonderful. Thank you so much.

GB: You're welcome.