

my testimony

one little girl

At just 13, RHONDA JOY McLEAN was one of four Black students charged with integrating a North Carolina high school in 1965. Heckled and tormented, she was determined she would not fail. In celebration of Black History Month, she tells her story for the first time

AS TOLD TO KATTI GRAY PHOTO BY EMILY WILSON



McLean, the year she started at Smithfield High

In 1965 the sign posted at the entry to my Smithfield, North Carolina, hometown summed up that place: "Welcome to Johnston County. Help Fight Communism and Intergration." The misspelling of that word *integration* said a lot about the segregationists who created the sign and drove its message into the ground.

Most Black people in Smithfield lived on the proverbial other side of the railroad track, and we were encouraged to stay there. Fear was an undercurrent in almost every interaction between Blacks and Whites in that small town. But because my schoolteacher

parents were outsiders—from Chicago and Buffalo, New York—they did not drum into our heads the idea that we should be afraid. Of course, my younger brother and I were not stupid. In the South you could go from safety to danger in seconds, just by crossing the street—like Emmett Till did.

This was 11 years after *Brown v. Board of Education* had outlawed racially separate and unequal public education. Smithfield went kicking and screaming into that postsegregationist world only after a court order gave Black students the option of enrolling in the Whites-only local schools. Mrs. Cora Boyd—my surrogate grandmother, the woman who taught me to read when I was 3 and who was the superintendent

of the colored schools—went around telling all the Black eighth-graders how this new Freedom of Choice program worked. She explained that the books were better over there, and there were lab opportunities and higher-level math. Mrs. Boyd was looking for students who could withstand the challenges of bringing down a wall.

Three girls and one boy enlisted for what really was a war. And it was unrelenting: I believe the boy left after one semester. Of the girls, Jacqueline and Patricia were both 14; I had just turned 13. We had no clue about what we would come up against, but I am certain that we were in our right place, doing what God wanted us to do.

I went to my new school on that first day in 1965 with one of the other girls and her father. He dropped us off in front of Smithfield High. He didn't even walk us through the front door. To this day, my mother is apologizing for that, when really she had no way of knowing what would occur. That day we faced 500 jeering, spitting White students calling us niggers, a sheriff with a shotgun, and a principal who was the consummate redneck. Heading down that long hallway on that terrifying first morning, I concentrated on moving my feet. I was cleaner than clean. I had on a madras plaid blouse and skirt, navy socks and penny loafers, and my hair was done up like Diana Sands's—puffy bangs and a page boy. For a briefcase, I carried an old medical bag. I was out to prove that not only was I smarter than most of the White students, but I also was not unkempt. I didn't stink like an animal. These were the lies they told about us.

And there were other indignities. Stripping down in a locker room stall to get dressed for gym one day, in my gut I began to feel very uncomfortable. It turned out that some White girls had climbed up and were hovering at the top of my stall, peering over to see if I was the same color all over or had a tail or some other mark to confirm that I was not fully human. As they mocked and taunted me, for the first time my composure cracked. I broke down in front of them. I wept with hot shame, which meant to me that I had lost, that I had let down Jacqueline and Patricia and every Black person in Smithfield who was betting on the three of us.

The humiliations did not end there. We endured endless nigger jokes and rocks thrown at us from the back of the school bus. Someone could have gotten hurt—which is probably why something snapped in me a couple of years later when my little brother and other younger kids started riding that bus. One morning a rock hit one of the smaller Black children, and I marched to the back of that bus. I don't remember exactly what I said, but I sat down next to the kids who had been throwing the rocks and let them know you simply cannot throw rocks at a 6-year-old! I probably was as tall then as I am now, which is five-foot-nothing and not at all intimidating. But clearly I reached them because after that, the rock throwing ended.

A similar incident occurred in my junior year, around April 4, 1968,

the day Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated. There were about 13 Black students at the school by then, and we made a decision to have a silent prayer vigil on the front steps the next day. We were threatened with expulsion by the principal, but all of us showed up for the vigil anyway. When it was over, I went back to class and somebody said, "Your king is dead," and somebody else said, "Your boyfriend is dead." And they laughed. Something in me just took over. I stood up in that class and gave my own little lesson. I talked and talked and talked about Dr. King and the history of Black people in this country. And Mr. Floyd, the White history teacher, let me. Even if they did not want to, those kids listened.

I believe I was visited by spirits that morning, maybe the spirit of my Big Mama, my great great-grandmother who was 12 when slavery ended. I have always been strengthened by the faith that has sustained my whole family. I was brought up Baptist, and for 16 years I trained in classical music and played and sang at the First Missionary Baptist Church in Smithfield. I also directed a gospel choir in college and played piano at a Black Baptist church while in law school at Yale. God is at the center of everything I do, and I believe that God Himself chose my words during that history class on the morning after Dr. King was killed.

Each of us finds God in our own way. Every aspect of my life has been a matter of seeking God, of separating darkness from light. This includes the depression I suffered when, ten years after getting my bachelor's degree, all the suppressed, unresolved anger I felt at Smithfield began to take hold of me. I had graduated No. 3 in my high school class, won a National Achievement Scholarship and several other academic prizes. But none of these were announced, though every White scholarship winner was acknowledged publicly. I don't know what they thought three Black girls could do to them; at first we weren't even allowed to enroll in the same classes. We ate lunch together, but partly because no one else would eat with us. We endured so much in silence. We didn't tell our parents what was happening to us, and they didn't press. We didn't even talk to one another about it until much later. We didn't want anyone to feel they had made a mistake sending us to that White school.

So I pushed down all that anger, until years later it forced me into therapy. Raised as I had been in a fiercely self-reliant and faith-filled family, therapy at first was inconceivable to me, and my need for antidepressants during that period was a source of shame for a very long time. But I am no longer ashamed of that part of my history, and I've not been depressed in 25 years. I know now that in faith you move forward. During those difficult, hard-fought years at Smithfield High, what I learned most of all was to pray and keep moving my feet. □

Rhonda Joy McLean, associate general counsel for Time Inc., is cochair of the New York Women's Foundation board of directors and a member of The Links. She told her story to Katti Gray, who lives in New York.



Smithfield High School closed its doors in 1969. It will reopen as a museum this year.

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