

At the TJ Class of 1965's brunch on Sunday, October 3, 2010, I spoke about Johnny Squire (a fellow Black classmate who is deceased), who encouraged me and other Black students at Maggie L. Walker High School (MLWHS) to test Richmond, VA's "open school enrollment policy" in 1963. Our target high school was Thomas Jefferson High School. There was only one Black student there during the 1962-1963 school year out of a total student body population of approximately 2,000.

At the time, I thought this was just a test and nothing more. I was more than happy with MLWHS. It was my second year attending a public school after attending a Catholic parochial school (Van de Vyver – St Joseph's Parish) from first through eighth grades. If you ever attended a parochial school, you know of their strict discipline style, and can relate to my elation with attending a public school. I was having a great time at school both academically and socially. I had no idea that my life would change so much after my sophomore year at MLWHS.

A little background: My mother died when I was eleven years old. Subsequently, my younger brother and I stayed with my older sister in Boston during the summer months after her death. As a result of my summering in Boston, I did not find out about my approved transfer (via my father) until late August 1963. I remember telling my father that we were only testing the open enrollment policy of the Richmond Public Schools, and I would straighten out the transfer once I returned to Richmond (again in late August 1963). In this case, "straighten out" meant that I would have my transfer to TJ changed so I would return to MLWHS in September 1963.

Well, to make a long story short, I was told that I had to spend at least one school year at TJ before requesting another transfer. Upon hearing this news, I was not a happy camper. I knew no one at TJ, and I had no real desire to spend my last two years in high school in a predominantly White high school. But to paraphrase the Latin phrase "Alea iacta est", "the die was cast".

So, in September 1963, I prepared to attend TJ. We, the Black student testers, were told that we weren't going to make our first day at TJ an event. We were to take the public city bus (VTC) to school the same as any other student. We were to make this day as normal as we possibly could.

So, Johnny Squire, Veronica Staples, Sandra Staples and I took the bus from the lower West End of Richmond (the Bird Park area) to TJ. I remember we all got off the bus on the corner of Monument Avenue and Westwood Avenue, and walked the block and a half to TJ.

I remember arriving at the front of TJ. All the students were there discussing what students discuss on their first day of school. We – The Black student testers - walked up the stairs to the front entrance, and although the stairs were crowded with students, a path opened to allow us to enter the school. There were no racial slurs or any derogatory remarks made to us by the TJ students, nor were there any other outward signs denoting that we shouldn't be there or were not welcome there. I remember one girl and later a

boy saying to me that they thought that we were very brave, and that they didn't think that they could do what we were doing (if they were in our place).

We – the Black student testers - were assigned classes and everything went off with no problem whatsoever.

Although four Black kids rode the city public bus to school that day, it was a total of six Black kids who attended TJ that year; And, after that school year, Sandra Staples became the first Black to graduate from TJ with the class of 1964. The following year, Johnny Squire and I became the first Black males to graduate from TJ with the class of 1965.

My two years at TJ were very uneventful (a very good thing). Our fellow students treated us with the same respect as any other student. I can't say that we had an active social life there, but we really didn't expect that. Attending TJ was like a job. We attended TJ for an education, and that is what we received (and, after becoming an adult with a wide range of experience and exposure, I discovered how great an education I obtained from TJ).

As I stated at the brunch, my daughter attended "The Park School" in Brookline, Massachusetts (a well known private school). I remember meeting an Asian couple there at our first parent school dinner. The husband and wife were both medical doctors in the Boston area, and their son, Ben, was attending The Park School for the first time along with my daughter. For some reason, we struck up a conversation, and discovered that Ben's father was from Richmond (Ben's grandfather owned a laundry on 2nd Street). Ben's father, whose name escapes me now, attended John Marshall High School. I also remember Ben's father saying to me after discovering that I had graduated from TJ that he knew I could write well because TJ students always wrote very well. I'm not sure if that applied in my case, but it was good to hear that from a rival school alumnus.

I mentioned what Ben's father said to me to emphasize that the two years I spent at TJ has assisted me throughout my life (both academically and professionally). I also remember being referred to a doctor, after having trouble keeping my blood pressure in check (Dr. Reese of Reese Associates in Brookline, Massachusetts), who was also an alumnus of TJ. He was the first doctor that was able to keep my blood pressure under control. Bottom line - my TJ education has helped me immensely not only in undergrad and in law school, but also through my life's journey.

Again, I would like to thank the alumni and faculty at TJ who were there at the time I was there for being so "civil" and making my experience there a fruitful and pleasant learning journey.