

Transcription of Interview Regarding Decatur Student
Walkout

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George Grayned, Decatur: On Monday, November 25th, 1968, black students walked out of Decatur's 4 Public High Schools. During that time and since that time, the student walkout has caused a lot of controversy in this community. We have some people here today that were involved in that walkout. Incidentally, 2 days after the black students walked out, several hundred white students also walked out, some making their own demands and some walking out in favor and in support of the demands made by black students. I'd like to ask Kenny Echols, who was a student leader during that student walkout, what were some of the demands made at Stephen Decatur High School?

Ken Echols, Student, Decatur High School: Uh, at the time of the walkout, I was a student at Stephen Decatur High School, and I think the major grievance that we had at Stephen Decatur High School was that the black students weren't treated the same as the white students were, and that they had designated places where we were supposed to be at while white students roamed the building as they pleased. And some of the teachers were very unfair towards black students.

George Grayned, Decatur: What about at Lakeview, Joe?

Joe Link student, Decatur: Well, uh, our main concern was history. Well, uh, ya know nothin' out there would go right, such as well during, like they always teach about Abraham Lincoln and all those people, but we never learned anything about our what our people did, things like that, so we asked them to get us some black teachers to teach us something about what our people did, and uh, it hasn't been accomplished yet.

Stephanie Tate, Student, Decatur: We wanted to have some more black counselors because we felt that the other white

counselors weren't giving us the same advantages and telling us the things about college that would help us. A lot of them were telling us to get our high school education and go then work at some factory or something. And then we wanted some black children to give us, the black children something to look up to and to teach us black history also. Because we felt that white teachers weren't that well acquainted with the black history so they could teach it well enough.

Jake Harris, Assistant Dean, Decatur: I was deeply moved and concerned with the boycott at that time. I didn't think though the boycott should have taken place right then. I thought that uh some of these demands should have been made known. But on the other hand, I realized that the students did not have a channel of communication. Uh and Being deeply moved, I sat down and wrote a 5 point recommendation, uh, during that time, which was on Sunday, during that weekend. And uh several of these points have been submitted to the Board of Education, which have been accepted. Uh, one of those uh recommendations that were written up was concerning uh the forming of human relations committees within secondary schools which would give the students a channel to take their problem to the highest level, if possible. Uh, and also I the recommendation was written up concerning the recruiting of more black teachers. Because I feel if we do have black teachers and if it is necessary for black teachers to teach black history and if you have enough then you can place any teacher in the area in which they are best suited or which would best serve the purpose of the students in this school.

Lee Willett, Teacher, Decatur: When I first heard about the boycott, I was in favor of it. I think that it was long overdue. Some of the grievances were good, and on the other hand some of them weren't so good. Among the better grievances I thought that they were justified in asking for black history in our curriculum here in Decatur. I thought they were also justified in asking for more black cooks in our cafeterias here. But On the other hand, I thought that grievances such as uh black flag, black this, I thought that were a little on the ridiculous side.

Marilyn Gipson, Millikin University, Decatur: I was very impressed and I was pleased to see that black Decatur was unified, in their boycott effort, at the student level and

at the parental level. And uh I think that a lot of their grievances were legitimate. And well my impression of the Decatur board of education or the Decatur school system is that I feel that it is very inadequate at the social level while academically it may be superior or average but an important part of education in my mind is also social orientation and in Decatur they have very few people they can emulate and uhm, there are very few blacks who encourage them to go onto college in ways that well through experience, well through experience, that is to say there are very few blacks in Decatur who once they go to college who come back to the community to inspire the younger blacks.

Melvin Davis, Millikin University, Decatur: Basically, uhm, being from Gary Indiana and the product of an integrated school, Gay Edison, uh, I've found in Decatur that the overall view of the larger city as compared to a smaller city like Decatur that it's just not together. Basically, we had a togetherness that was forced upon us, not from the fact that we had to live together but the fact that we were living together and I think it is the same as in Chicago, New York, or any other large, uh urban city. Uhm, in comparing the, well to comment on the boycott itself as far as being together as opposed to being not together, I don't think that the boycott itself overall in Decatur was because of two statements you made. One was the fact the blacks went out one day and the whites went out the next. This is not really, as compared to the bigger cities, a boycott, this is just a, it's a, it's a, reaction, an impulsive reaction see, basically, black and white.

George Grayned, Decatur: Stephanie, how bout uh going off into how much planning you did before you even actually held the boycott?

Stephanie Tate, Student, Decatur: Well, at first we had one meeting, when we had about 30 kids come down to our, Soul Center, Kafia. And we talked about whether we should walk out or not and the general consensus was we didn't have enough children to know the feelings, so we uhm got it and said "Let's go through the grapevine" and everybody called somebody and they had their friends call somebody and meet down there Sunday. Then we had about 100 and some odd children come down and we voted on whether we should walkout or not and so you see we did and we felt that we

had enough students backing us and we could really pull this thing out.

Ken Echols, Student, Decatur High School: I feel that it was together because from the beginning we had planned for it to be a black thing and we had said, "If uh, you can find out, uh are your white friends really with you, the ones that will come, bring them". And uh, the black students that didn't want to come out we hadn't planned on forcing them if they wanted to stay that was their business. I feel that it was together.

Marilyn Gipson, Millikin University, Decatur: I think the black students in Decatur were together, and uh, it very well could have served to test the white students and I think that it showed an autonomy on their part because they had the numbers-they had some 716 black students turn out with them and there aren't that many black students in Decatur anyway and percentage wise, you can compare any city in the nation where black kids boycotted and it was not nearly as solid or unified.

Ken Echols, Student, Decatur High School: I think that the reason why, uh many of the black parents and uhm black adults uh weren't uh well that they didn't know anything about it was because many of them wouldn't understand, wouldn't have understood. My mother, my mother for one well, well, she understood the problem but uh, uh, one of the best things that we've accomplished from the, from the walkout is that the black community is aware that there is a problem and the Decatur school administration and that maybe next time if the- if another problem arises that they will be with us.

Joe Link student, Decatur : I say if we had took it to the student council they would have just, would have, they would have probably ignored it or say took to other black adults they probably would have ignored it like you know certain people they will say uh well "you better stay on that school and get your education" and stuff like well, a lot didn't understand us.

George Grayned, Decatur: We're not worried about the quality of education.

Joe Link student, Decatur : Yeah, uh see, a lot didn't understand us so we all decided that we better take our

cause to someone that did understand us cuz someone that don't understand just can't help 'em.

Stephanie Tate, Student, Decatur: I felt one of the main reasons some of the white children walkout of school because they wanted long hair and wear mini dresses and to be able to wear beards and come to school anyway they wanted. I really didn't think this had anything to do with why the black children wanted to walked out because their things were more important because they wanted black history and some things that would really meaning something to them that would help them in their education than uhm wearing, having your hair long, I mean.

George Grayned, Decatur: We've all been talking about what precipitated, what caused the boycott and some of the demands that were made. Since that time there's been a lot of things happening. Uh, one thing in particular was the establishment of human relations commissions made up of students and teacher's advisors in the schools. Joe, you're on that commission, are, are they doing anything are we gaining anything?

Joe Link student, Decatur: Well, since I'm, I'm chairman on it and uh what they are trying to accomplish things, but yet all we doing is talking, we just talking, we still haven't accomplished really anything, I mean they haven't got any teachers, any black teachers or they haven't got any black history books or nothin' like that well we got one set of books and it's about three books up there in the whole library about black history. So really I don't think anything has been accomplished through the boycott as far as black history is concerned.

Jake Harris, Assistant Dean, Decatur: We must realize that this is the first time in Decatur history that human relations committees have been set up so we're sorta playing it by ear and we hope through these committees if there are any problems that arise that they could be solved at the lowest possible level which would be within their school. Then of course if they are not solved there they can move on through to what is known as a central human relations committee if the problem involves schools or if they involve secondary schools then of course secondary students which are represented on this committee can work on these problems, then the problem can go as far as the Board of Education, if need be.

George Grayned, Decatur: Now, Jake, I'm going to stick my neck out. I think what you're saying to me is a classic illustration of the reason why they establish those do nothing human relation commissions anyhow, so they can put another stop gap measure to blacks. They said, "Well look we can't stop this boycott, cuz it's already in progress, here's what we'll do". We're not really worried with solving the problem; as long as we keep people talkin' we ain't doing nothing about the problem. Now, I realize I'm stepping on your toe, but here you're talking about where you start with your human relations commission in your school, if that don't get it then you go to the central one if that don't get it then you go to the board, and all that is stop gap measures and say the problem was uhm sending the blacks to the cafeteria, Kenny. You're not solving the problem.

Jake Harris, Assistant Dean, Decatur: Here's the thing that you're overlooking on these human relations committees you have equal representation of students. You have the same number of black students as you have white students and the black students are supposed to be as effective or as powerful as the white student. Now if a black student or a white student sees something that exists, should be changed uh then they should make it known to these committees. On the other hand, we should realize how the formation of the committees came about and we want the committees to work in harmony.

Marilyn Gipson, Millikin University, Decatur: I think equality and harmony and all that is fine, but the thing is that when the kid has a complaint, he wants it settled, he doesn't care whether there's enmity in the group or what have you and the group can't solve what the kid is saying, well then, you know, what is it for? I think when you talk about human relations committee and somebody is saying on one hand "what we want is more black history books and black professors", that does not deal in the realm of kids talking about human relations that goes directly with the board of education supplying schools with these materials.

Jake Harris, Assistant Dean, Decatur: If a complaint comes to the committee and the committee feels it is legitimate, and of course the school hasn't done anything about it, then problems moves on up the channel, then that perhaps

would be the time to boycott, or something, or to take some other definite measures in order to solve the problem.

Ken Echols, Student, Decatur High School: I feel that the reason why the problem is not being solved, uh when it first goes to the human relations committee and then to the central committee and on up is because that some of the people to begin with aren't qualified to in be there.

George Grayned, Decatur: Some of the blacks or whites, Kenny?

Ken Echols, Student, Decatur High School: Some of the blacks AND the whites. Uh, the whites that aren't qualified to be in there, I feel some of them are racist and uh, the blacks that are in there that I don't feel are qualified are Toms, as I consider them as a Tom some of them that are in the human relations committee didn't even participate in the walkout and they're inclined to just agree instead of argue the issue.

Lee Willett, Teacher, Decatur: I want to ask one question. Who selected these people to serve on these committees?

Ken Echols, Student, Decatur High School: Well, the way I understood it, the black students, uh, voted for blacks but I don't know who counted..

George Grayned, Decatur: Now, Joe, you're shaking your head, what's up?

Joe Link student, Decatur: No, out at Lakeview, did nobody vote Ms. Stephens picked them; black council out there picked them. He picked them four, he picked four black and four white. Then we elected the other one.

Jake Harris, Assistant Dean, Decatur: The committees are set up where the black students could, could select or elect their black students, who they wanted to represent them, and uh, and this is the way it should have been even at Lakeview, but of course this the way it was not done at Lakeview, uh so they, uh, we wanted to get equal representation of all races (?). And this is as far as I'm concerned this is where the student council hasn't done because it has had, it has had representation of maybe the upper-crust of the students, and the students on the lower level have been omitted or forgotten.

George Grayned, Decatur: Well, I think this is just what...

Jake Harris, Assistant Dean, Decatur: And these are the ones you really have to take care of, because the other people will take care of themselves.

George Grayned, Decatur: Ok, you're talking about the upper-crust white students on the student council. This is that old, "hand picking your house niggers from the blacks" You want to pick, on these human relations commissions, you got black students on there that you know aren't going to rock the boat, you got the ones who could make it for themselves anyhow, and the kid who is probably going to be a dropout who is your problem, he really ain't got no representation, he ain't got no representation no where. You don't want Kenny Echols on there because Kenny going to tell you like it is, so whatta they do, they kinda squeeze Kenny out and they put Stephanie on there because she's a little more mild mannered and she's not going to...and I think that's why America, not just only the schools in Decatur, that's why America is going to blow up one of these days because ain't nobody dealing with the *problem!*

Lee Willett, Teacher, Decatur: I've noticed a couple of things that have been a result of this boycott and well, they are first of all the attitude in the children and secondly a there has been a change on the administrative level. As far as the attitude of these children is concerned, it's unbelievable the way these kids have suddenly become proud of their race, they've suddenly become proud that they're black and they are a member of the black race. On the administrative level, there have been a couple of changes. First of all, they included, not a whole lot but some supplementary material to the textbooks we're already using and they have assured us that there will be new history books coming out this fall-that they will be in effect this fall, ready for use.

George Grayned, Decatur: Lee, one thing I'd like to point out and that's that you're referring to these changes in the students and staff on an elementary school level.

Lee Willett, Teacher, Decatur: On the elementary level.

George Grayned, Decatur: Now, one thing about about Durfee (?). You teach at Durfee elementary school. What's the percentage of Blacks there? You remember? 68? 72? Something like that, right?

Lee Willett, Teacher, Decatur: I'm not sure, but I am sure it's over 50%.

George Grayned, Decatur: It' very high

Jake Harris, Assistant Dean, Decatur: 68

Lee Willett, Teacher, Decatur: I would say roughly between 60 and 70%.

George Grayned, Decatur: And you have noticed these two distinct changes in students and administrators.

Lee Willett, Teacher, Decatur: Yeah, and know it's a funny thing, it, it somehow it makes me feel really proud, to see these little children, you know, take a hold of ideas like this. Something that, well, you wouldn't even think that they come to school with things like this on their mind, but you can tell that they have been listening to their parents and they are aware of what is going on around them.

Marilyn Gipson, Millikin University, Decatur: Now you notice this in your classroom that is, you see this in your classroom that is the behavior of your pupils that they have a self image now or more of an identity. Well I know I was talking to some white student teachers that I know from Milliken who are student teaching in the elementary schools in Decatur and during Black History Week it was remarkable how many Black kids DO NOT have a sense of identity, who DO NOT have a sense of who th...who do not have an image and uhm, they still slink under their desks, you know, so you know when you talk about 29 black teachers, I think maybe 29 black teachers when they're teaching in THEIR classrooms, they see this behavior, but for all those other black kids that are in these elementary schools that have white teachers, I'd be willing to bet you that even though they sing "I'm Black and I'm Proud" and "Black is Beautiful" still slink under their desks when you talk about those two little paragraphs in the Negro history.

Lee Willett, Teacher, Decatur: I wouldn't doubt this.

George Grayned, Decatur: This gets right back into one of the major demands that all of the schools, not only in Decatur, black students made a demand of more Black teachers, but all over the country, this is a demand that is in every Black manifesto written, whether it be from elementary school level, up to college level.

Melvin Davis, Millikin University, Decatur: Uh, what's happening now in Decatur as uh, uhm, an institution to bring in say teachers and students themselves together? Is there, I had heard something recently about a, I think it was a bussing...?

George Grayned, Decatur: Mel, you were talking about the CCI which is the Community Commission on Integration. This was a cross section of laymen in the community, from doctors, lawyers, poor blacks, poor whites who were given a charge by the Board of Education to work out a plan to further integrate, on a racial and socio-economic level, ALL of the schools elementary and upper grades. What is happening now, the central issue has been centered around the term bussing. The whites have organized into a group called USA-United School Action Committee. And they're picking out all these little emotional things like a 6 year old child is too small to be bussed. And, Jake we were getting to that thing that before. You were saying that you didn't like that term bussing.

Jake Harris, Assistant Dean, Decatur: I don't like the term "bussing" because to me, bussing means just a movement of bodies without any real reason behind it. So, I think a more appropriate term would probably be "transporting" a student because this could mean there is a definite, definite educational plan behind this which would help all students.

George Grayned, Decatur: Well, how are things at Lakeview, Joe? Uh, which was, they never had any black students out there, now you've got what, 19 blacks out there? This is what everybody's worrying about, racial conflict within the school. How are you 19 blacks treated at Lakeview, what do you think of being isolated out there, away from your other black brothers?

Joe Link student, Decatur: Well, I mean, being isolated out there, it's, it's, nothing really good, cuz it's not enough us for it to really mean anything at the school. It

seems though everything that happens out there, you know it's happened the white people had it and, and, every time you get in something, you get kicked out for some reason, or nothing. So really, I don't think it's too good being away from all the ones that are at Stephen Decatur.

Melvin Davis, Millikin University, Decatur: That's 19 out of how many students, though? Total enrollment, do you know that?

Stephanie Tate, Student, Decatur: Either 800, or 900, I think there are.

George Grayned, Decatur: What about, what, how have you been treated there, Steph, what do you think of it?

Stephanie Tate, Student, Decatur: Well, I'm a magnet student out at Lakeview and I'm bussed out, uhm, transported out there because I thought that they have an independent study program that I'm in in Latin and I felt I couldn't get this opportunity out at my other schools, so that's one reason I'm here.

Ken Echols, Student, Decatur High School: I was transferred to Lakeview because of difficulties that I had at uh, Stephen Decatur High School. And uh, I feel that it's a really nice program, other than uh, well like me, I've had problems. They feel I should be obliged to them because uh, they said it a privilege for me to be there since, from all the trouble I've been in and they just constantly pound that into your head, and I guess they suppose that I'm supposed to, uh, kiss their tail, you know.

George Grayned, Decatur: Kenny, I, I, can say one thing-Mr. Hoffman, the principal at Lakeview feels as if that you have definite leadership capabilities. And I, I agree with him, you know of course that's no secret; I think you are a leader of your constituents. But they want you to be obligated to them, because this is the thing that he's trying to..."Kenny, you're out here, now you can really do good and what, you resent that".

Marilyn Gipson, Millikin University, Decatur: Well, something that I'd like to know is do these schools get money, federal money, as a result of having magnet students, that is Title 1 funding and this kind of thing.

Are any of these funds the kind of thing we see from the federal government a direct result of having the magnet program?

George Grayned, Decatur: Uh, it's a direct result of having a magnet program, but it's not based on integration, now something we should point out in all fairness to Lakeview, they've had this uh, magnet independent study team teaching and operation for approximately four years and they've gotten national attention and they're still receiving national attention. This is one why reason I as a member of task force three under CCI, uh, went along with the majority, of trying to attract black students out there because I thought it was a beautiful educationally sound program.