We're Going to Go to School with White People

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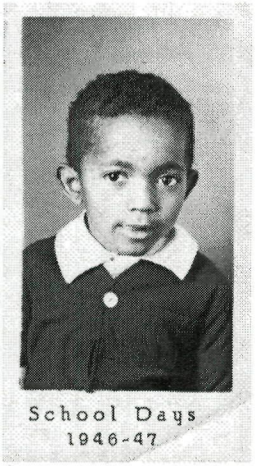
This narrative provides a snapshot of the author's "separate but equal" high school educational experience. Challenges inherent in this experience are discussed in relation to Brown vs. Board of Education *and its effects on subsequent periods of his life.*



The author in elementary school

"We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of separate but equal has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal."

Chief Justice Earl Warren, United States Supreme Court. Monday, May 17, 1954

Prologue

Before sharing my personal story with you, I think that it might be of value to convey how difficult it was for me to unearth this period of my life. It has been many years since I allowed myself to embrace willfully the choice of risking the danger of examining events and circumstances (intentional or unintentional) that were designed to harm me and other members of my race.

In order to write this article, a retrospective review of the context that shaped my formative years was necessary. This process of review aroused feelings associated with unhealed wounds and residual scars that bear witness to my past. The process of review also prompted a reassessment of the extent to which I still might be held captive by oppression that was disproportionately lodged in a bygone era. The degree of personal risk associated with this undertaking was considerable.

In spite of my concerns, I recall promising a valued friend of the journal that I would write an article for this special issue of *Reflections* celebrating the 50th anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Since keeping promises are of vital importance to me, I have endeavored to stare trepidation in the face, breathe deeply, and tell you my story.

One additional point before beginning: On the occasion of promising to do this article, I recall a brief discussion with guest issue editor, John Kayser, and the Editor of *Reflections*, Jillian Jimenez, regarding the idiosyncratic nature of a personal reflection on how my education and subsequent life choices might have been impacted by the *Brown* decision. Unlike the question, "What were you doing when you heard that President Kennedy had been shot?" What a Black person remembers about what s/he was doing and/or did shortly after 1:00 PM on Monday, May 17, 1954 is exceedingly complex. What is intended by my use of the word complex will, I hope, become more apparent as you read about my experience.

A Brighter Day is Comin'

"Vester Lou, Vester Lou," Bill shouted as he rushed down the crowded second floor hallway, "We're going to go to school with White people." Appearing annoyed, Vester Lou responded, "Oh shut up, Bill, you're always lying. Why do you make up stupid stories?" Undaunted by Vester's rebuke, Bill turned to me, "Tell her Johnny! That's why Mr. Lewis has called an assembly this morning. You know that we never have an assembly on any day but Friday, unless we've won a football or basketball championship." Unconvinced, Vester Lou turned and began

walking toward the north staircase that led to the first floor auditorium.

Bill and I remained on the second floor hastily developing a plan about what we would say if Annie Elizabeth or Carrie walked by. Surrounded by slamming lockers and a sea of gleeful boys and girls contemplating the prospects of missing Mr. McClure's algebra class and perhaps even Ms. Savage's biology class, Tuesday morning suddenly appeared to be more promising. Enjoyment gleaned from contemplating the prospects of missing one or two challenging classes was, however, short lived. Teachers with purposeful intent descended on the hallway, corralling malingering students and issuing explicit orders regarding our immediate presence in assembly.

The auditorium, which also served as our basketball gymnasium and theater, was filled from front to rear with metal-bottom chairs that were in various states of disrepair. The teachers always sat on the sides, front, and rear of the students, forming a perimeter. They clustered in two's and three's awaiting the arrival of Mr. Lewis. As always, he entered the auditorium walking briskly. Acknowledging no one, he ascended the five-step staircase leading to the auditorium stage. He stood erect behind the podium and, for a fleeting moment, whispers of "Be quiet! Be quiet! Sit down!" could be briefly heard. When there was absolute silence, Mr. Lewis spoke: "Yesterday, the Supreme Court of the United States decided that White children and Negro children would attend the same schools. Some of you have applied yourself, but some of you aren't ready. You will embarrass the race. You know who you are."

Regrettably, this news, which he delivered as an admonishment, was too brief. Only one half of Ms. Savage's biology class was cancelled and none of the algebra class. The remainder of the school day was uneventful. As I walked the three-and-one-half miles from Bridgeforth High School to my home on College Street, there were no indications of the decision reflected in the behavior of local residents or merchants.

The historic decision made by the Supreme Court on May 17, 1954, did not result in celebrations by Blacks who lived in Pulaski, Tennessee, nor did it produce acts of recrimination by Whites who opposed the decision. In the immediate period following the decision, the number of special events, emergency municipal meetings, dramatic newspaper headlines, and radio shows devoted to shaping an acceptable public response were insignificant. Thus, emergence of a local socio-political context that could have defined and attached an affirmative definition and meaning to the decision for public education was essentially missing. The net impact of this non-response served to constrain the importance of the moment and to support the absence of an intended outcome.

In the days, weeks, months, and years following this historic decision, Tennesseans continued the practice of differentially allocating societal resources and opportunities along racial lines. They remained oblivious to a decision that would, over time, fundamentally alter the course of American history.

In 1954 when the decision was made, I was a freshman in a segregated high school. Four years later, I graduated from the same segregated high school. Although I was in a position to be a beneficiary of the *Brown* decision, it did not affect my high school experience. My secondary educational experience, while not contoured by the *Brown* decision, was indeed colored by the myriad disadvantages of segregation and adjustments made by Black educators to the limitations inherent within this form of social control.

Pulaski Public Schools: Pre Brown v. Board of Education

Pulaski is located in Giles County. The 1950 U.S. Census listed the county

population as 26,961; the population of Pulaski was less than 5,000. The town of my birth is located 73 miles south of Nashville and only 17 miles from the Alabama state line. This small town served as the point of commerce for surrounding farming communities. It was also the seat of the county school district, and the headquarters for one of the earliest Ku Klux Klan chapters in the United States. In the years preceding the *Brown* decision, Pulaski was rigidly segregated. But like most systems of exclusion and separation, one can always identify exceptions to the rule. For example, in the 1950s, while Blacks were allowed to purchase food and clothing from local outlets, separate customer lines were provided. At the two local theaters, Blacks used a side entrance and were segregated in the balcony. Blacks seldom received treatment in the local hospital, nor were they the patients of White physicians. In public venues, Blacks were expected to drink from separate water fountains, use separate restrooms, and be buried in separate cemeteries. We were barred from eating at restaurants owned by Whites, attending common church services, entering public libraries, swimming in municipal pools, and, of course, attending the same schools. Signs were frequently posted to remind Blacks of expected behavior: "Colored entrance," "No colored people allowed," "Whites only." Adult men and women were seldom referred to as Mr. or Mrs. or by their family names. First names, and "Ace," Tom," "Jane," and "n*****" were commonly used.

Pulaski contained several elementary schools. One school educated Black children. There were two high schools: Giles County High School was attended by Whites and Bridgeforth High School was attended by Blacks. Noteworthy, the White high school was less than six blocks from my house. Bridgeforth was over three miles.

In the period from 1896 to the *Brown* decision in 1954, public schools were operated under the separate but equal doctrine established in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision. Under this doctrine, equality of treatment is accorded when races are provided substantially equal facilities, even though these facilities are separate. My classmates and I were the products of exceedingly oppressive aspects of "separate but equal" education. I will share a few select examples of my experiences that will help to convey the scope of psychic and cognitive damage unfurled under this doctrine.

School Supplies

There are endless pre-*Brown* reports and audits that consistently show the discrepancy between school supplies provided for Black schools and those provided for White schools. The shortfall of resources allocated for Black schools was all- encompassing. Janitorial and general cleaning products were always in short supply; so were books, laboratory equipment, reproduction and copying equipment, and classroom materials needed to enhance learning effectiveness. I remember that there were never enough books. Indeed, a disproportionate share of the ones we did receive were in need of repair, often with missing pages, cracked and brittle spines and partially anchored or completely separated covers.

At the start of each year, most of our teachers would encourage us to purchase and/or make covers to protect the books. Focusing on our sense of racial pride and their belief that we all shared a collective obligation to always engage in behaviors that advanced the race, they would say: "We must show that we value books and public property, by returning these books in better condition than we received them." I remember feeling confused and hurt that my teachers expected such behavior. After all, some of my classmates didn't even get books. I remember one year asking my mother to help me make book covers. She looked at me puzzled and

sternly explained that I should spend my time learning what was in the book, not worrying about protecting it.

Perhaps the most dramatic example of a shortage of school supplies was experienced in biology classes. Our school was allocated one microscope. This piece of equipment remained covered almost all of the time because of a concern that we might break it. Apparently, the hypothesis was that if we didn't break the microscope, it would provide a signal to the school board that we knew how to use it, perhaps resulting in an increased allocation. In the absence of slides, microscopes, and dissection supplies, our mastery of the content was dependent on the artistic talents of our teachers and, in particular, their ability to paint verbal pictures of vital information.

While it's virtually impossible for me to calculate the degree to which the denial of the necessary tools needed for learning might have eroded my chances of establishing a sound foundation for future asset development, I am acutely aware of select losses. My experience in applying for college at both the undergraduate and graduate levels provided reminders of the disadvantages associated with having attended segregated schools.

Regardless of one's level of achievement or ability to meet published standards, a past mired in unbounded assumptions associated with being a Black student who was a product of segregated schooling was, and is, often unbearable:

Mr. Oliver, you scored very high on your entrance examination We also wish to congratulate you on achieving the second highest grade point average in your high school graduating class. However, we can't admit you at this time due to your science background. We would be happy to consider you again next year, if you were to complete three science courses at Santa Monica Junior College with a "B" or better average.

I had a similar experience when I first applied to graduate school: "Mr. Oliver, not everyone should attend a graduate school of social work. Your background will make it hard for you to succeed." Although I had a good undergraduate academic record, once my past segregated school experience was factored into the decision, my chances of admission were compromised.

School Relationships

In the period following the *Brown* decision, Giles County School administrators initiated contact with Bridgeforth High School to propose that we exchange tickets to football games and theatrical performances. In retrospect, the exchange, when fully implemented, was as imbalanced as other initiatives designed from segregationists' philosophical framework and value stance. For example, football tickets to Giles County High School's games were subject to game attendance. The seats were clustered in the end zone section on the visitor's sideline and segregated from other fans. When tickets to Bridgeforth games were redeemed, our Giles County High visitors sat on the 50-yard line on the home team's sideline. The same inequity existed with respect to the theatrical performances. We reserved front row tickets for Giles County faculty who redeemed tickets. Often, when Bridgeforth faculty attempted to attend Giles County plays, they were turned away. If admitted, they were restricted to the rear of the auditorium, separated from other persons in attendance.

When I was in the eleventh grade, I was selected for a role in our annual school play. I recall being happy that I was chosen for the production. On the night of the play, when my parents arrived, they were unable to find a seat. As I waited backstage, a separation in the stage curtain permitted an observation of

their challenge. The gap in the curtain also provided a clear view of our guests from Giles County High being escorted past the standing Black parents to reserved seats at the front of the auditorium.

I still remember the feelings of embarrassment for my parents and my classmates' parents. I also remember discussing my discomfort and anger regarding the situation with my mother and daddy. Their immediate response was to discontinue granting permission for me to attend the Giles County High Bridgeforth events. They explained the importance of self-love and self-care. In this instance, it meant not exposing myself to situations where the outcomes were predictably negative.

While I no longer sit in the end zones of football stadiums in a segregated section, or witness the anger and pain on the faces of parents being discounted or rendered invisible by segregated education practices, I still carry permanent images that were a part of my youth.

Differential Staffing

During the decades of the 40's and 50's, many U.S. secondary educational systems were characterized by differential staffing patterns. While the patterns varied across states and along regional and county lines, the most extreme variations occurred within segregated school systems along racial lines. Disparities in the quality of staffing were particularly noticeable in schools located in small towns and in rural settings. For example, in these schools Black children were frequently taught by non-credentialed teachers whose mean educational level was significantly lower than teacher qualifications in segregated White schools.

In prior sections of this narrative, brief examples were provided of how critical resources needed for learning and teaching effectiveness were withheld. If one added poor teacher preparation to the resource deficiency, a disturbing picture of education as a means of controlling Blacks by educationally handicapping them emerges. I hasten to add that this picture is contrary to the dominant one espoused by Blacks during this era. Since early emancipation, Blacks viewed education as the great equalizer. Education was the path to a better future and it was believed to be our ultimate salvation as a people.

In spite of unjust and unequal allocation of school resources, students who attended Bridgeforth thrived. Bridgeforth was not characterized by a deficient teaching staff. Instead, all of our teachers possessed college degrees and were credentialed. Therefore, my "separate but equal" educational experience produced a variety of positive unintentional outcomes. Most significantly, my high school experience provided an opportunity for me to consider, internalize, and assimilate salient aspects of Black culture that filled me with pride, resolve, and a vision of life unbounded by circumstances of birth or country.

"Lift every voice and sing, till earth and heaven ring, ring with the harmonies of liberty; let our rejoicing rise high as the listening sky, let it resound loud as the rolling sea" (Gannett, 1961, p. 277). During my years in high school, my classmates and I would stand and sing these words every Friday morning in assembly. Professors from Tennessee State and Fisk University would often provide inspirational speeches regarding "our obligation." We were expected to advance the race. The ideas of Booker T. Washington, Franklin Frazier, Paul Robeson, Mary McCloud Bethune, Fredrick Douglass, William Trotter, William Burghardt DuBois, John Hope Franklin, and countless other Black scholars were provided as beacons of hope. Photographs of Black intellectuals, poets, and industrialists were passed among students in classes for inspection and as a means of identifying with those who had succeeded against great odds.

Because the school board provided only marginal oversight for Bridgeforth, teachers enjoyed considerable latitude in determining significant aspects of the curriculum. In literature, we read, memorized sections of and debated the works of major Black novelists and poets. It was not uncommon to overhear my peers reciting sections from poems in unison. "Little brown baby with sparkling eyes/ Come to your poppy and sit on his knee./ What you been doing sir, making sand pies? / Look at that bib – you's as dirty as me" (Hill, 1964, p. 269). When they finished, they would chuckle, and invariably someone would scream out the poet's name: "Dunbar! Dunbar!"

High school, in part, provided an insulation against the injustice of daily life in Pulaski. High school helped to cultivate my dreams and nurture my aspirations. My parents and my teachers expected me to succeed. Repeatedly, we were told that the windows of opportunity discovered and pried open by our grandparents, parents, and community were to be opened wider for those who would follow. For me to fail to try my hardest, or to not do so, was unthinkable. When my efforts didn't measure up to expectations, Daddy would firmly place both of his hands on my shoulders, peer directly into my eyes, and simply say, "Always remember that we are Olivers."

Ain't Nutin' Gonna Happen: Post Brown Experience

The *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling in 1896 by the Supreme Court declared segregation legal, provided separate but equal facilities existed. This decision by the Supreme Court established the basis upon which most twentieth century segregation laws were based.

The legal fiction of separate but equal gave moral sanction to a process of social interaction that applied to most aspects of daily living. The ruling has a lasting effect on residential housing, family and community fiscal assets, residential housing patterns, type and patterns of employment, quality of public education, and relative position in the social order. (Oliver, 1974, p.22).

Uncle Thomas owned the local Black pool hall. The pool hall was a large room at the top of two flights of stairs on the second floor above a Black barber shop and restaurant. Periodically, Uncle Thomas would allow me and my two friends, Bill and Haywood, to rack balls and fetch sandwiches for his customers from the downstairs restaurant. Occasionally, the men would discuss the *Brown* court decision. Always, the overwhelming consensus among the men was that the schools would never be integrated. Silas, an older man of about 60-65, would always become animated during the discussions. To insure that he commanded everyone's attention, Mr. Silas would bellow, "Ain't gonna happen, ain't never gonna happen. Y'all must be crazy! Do you really think they would risk you gettin' their jobs, hurtin' them playing football, or datin' their daughters? Hell No!"

Although the unanimous decision of the Supreme Court gave legal force to and reaffirmed ideals of the American dream, Black Pulaskians greeted the decision with mixed emotions. For example, many of the Black men and women who attended Daddy's church believed that the decision provided hope. They viewed the prospects of change embedded in the ruling as a badly needed balm from periodic cross burnings by the Klan and the largely ignored mysterious deaths of Black adolescent and adult males. The display of will and moral fortitude by the Court provided a degree of encouragement to risk the hazard of again contemplating a world where social and political decisions were made according to the precepts of justice and equity. Sunday after Sunday, Daddy would

lead the congregation in prayer, asking that the suffering and injustice that we endured at the hands of others be forgiven. He would stretch his arms high above his head, and in a calm and reassuring voice repeat his mantra, "God will provide. God will provide."

On the other end of the spectrum were those who were skeptical of White promises of a better life. The Supreme Court decision, they reasoned, like many others dating back to the 1865 Freedmen Bureau legislation, and the 1860 and 1870 Civil Rights bills, would most assuredly die due to an absence of public will. For them, the lists of betrayals were simply too numerous to sustain a belief that Pulaski's public schools would be integrated. Their truth was reflected in the words of Mr. Silas, "Ain't never gonna happen."

In the short run, Mr. Silas' words proved prophetic. Pulaski schools were not integrated during my high school years. They were, however, integrated eleven years later during the period when my baby brother was enrolled in high school.

On May 17, 1965, Bridgeforth High School held its last formal ceremony as a Black institution. Following failed attempts by local Whites to establish a private school system, plans to desegregate the county schools moved forward without incident. In its report to the U.S. Commission on Education, the Fisk University Desegregation Institute noted that "Giles County School System is the only county system in the state that completely desegregated without incident" (Giles County Historical Society, 1986, p. 69).

Aspects of the county school desegregation process that were exposed to the public assumed a posture of fairness and equity. However, operational aspects of the Pulaski desegregation process adhered rigidly to past oppressive practices. Black teachers were transferred in mass to county schools. Blacks were not among the cadre of newly hired teachers, nor were Blacks awarded service contracts. Bridgeforth High School historical documents and memorabilia (i.e., class photographs, band uniforms, literary works by Blacks, trophies) were carelessly tossed away. No provisions were made to preserve these treasures. The state public speaking trophy that I won now exists primarily in the memory of my family, children, and Bridgeforth classmates. Aspects of the public record that depicted the texture and substance of my high school career await the erosion of time.

Now That I'm in Charge

Perhaps the major overarching lesson learned from being socially marginalized and deprived of an array of opportunities is the importance of inclusion and social justice. The social reality of inclusion encompasses the full entitlement to rights, roles, assets, and obligations. Inherent in the recognition by others that you are included is a fundamental decision about power. To promote faculty, student, and staff decisions that are equitable and socially just, power must be conceptualized as a collectively generated and shared resource. To this end, I have endeavored to make collaborative program and organizational decisions by using broad-based input and consultation.

Other valuable lessons from my past that have shaped my management style include an understanding of the power of forgiveness. By embracing forgiveness, I have developed the capacity to be as generous toward others for their faults as I am toward mine. This non-judgmental approach is not only freeing; it also establishes the foundation for faculty, student, and staff interactions that are more formative and less evaluative. Significantly, the past has also taught me that the experience of the oppression of segregated schooling is mediocre when compared to the exhilaration produced by the joy of discovering the magic of cognitive transcendence. For example, during my formative years, the presumed

"mark of oppression," whose shelf life was extended by an ever-present white voice, was kept at a safe distance from my family's interpersonal norms by a historical commitment to what Frederick Douglass (as cited in Quarles, 1960) called *intellectual heroism*. Douglass believed that as a people, we had an obligation to discover and then to accept a higher purpose that exceeded a purely self-serving existence.

Adherence to the tradition of intellectual heroism has served me well during my academic career. For example, as a Black faculty member and administrator, I am acutely aware of my relative standing and power in university interpersonal and organizational situations. I am also appreciative of the need to establish often the credibility of my ideas and the validity of data supporting my positions. The unending cycle of proving oneself, disproportionately so, remains as a manifestation of a bygone era of Black exclusion. My past has taught me that when my power is minimal, active opposition is not a viable option. Experience has also taught me that the credibility of my voice is enhanced by anchoring my expressed preferences and positions to moral and ethical principles of fairness and equity. This posture has mitigated against my voice being easily discounted.

Other lessons learned from my past experience include patience and sacrifice as an administrative tool. Taken from my past experience, patience and sacrifice are among the primary tools that I use almost daily in my work at the university. During the pre- and post *Brown v. Board of Education* period, my high school teachers, parents, and church leaders presented patience and sacrifice as desirable virtues that one should strive to develop. During my teen years, these virtues were often cast as desirable future accomplishments because they served as a means of protection in a society where insistence by Blacks that their preferences be acknowledged could prove life threatening.

In my work with students and faculty, patience and sacrifice are used as tools to stimulate dialogue and to signal a willingness to be influenced by ideas that are at variance with my preferences. Patience with the ideas and vested interest of others lets them know that you value and respect their input.

The differences between my segregated high school experience and the texture, pulse, and complexity of my current academic position are immeasurable. Although my past experiences continue to provide periodic insights, progress in the development of personal enlightenment often requires a relinquishment of this attachment. With regards to negative aspects of one's past, the words of Eckhart Tolle (2002) have proven instructive: "Living in the present removes time. Without time, no suffering, no negativity, can survive" (p. 52).

Epilogue

Twenty-nine years ago, in the preface of my dissertation, I wrote the following:

Perhaps more damaging than the great disparity between Black and White educational services were the psychological scars that resulted from this system of education. The terrible feeling that somehow my classmates and I were not good enough, along with the culturally induced notion that we would never become anyone of value to society, often resulted in reduced expectations, lowered self-esteem, and a preoccupation with the unsatisfying details of being second-class. (Oliver, 1974, p. ix)

In conveying my story regarding the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, I have emphasized that due to my exposure to a cadre of educated and committed teachers and the good fortune of being raised by parents who disdained the lack of personal effort, morality, and fairness, I was spared

the deep scarring associated with prolonged oppression. I was not, however, able to avoid a preoccupation with unfairness and unjust acts.

At times during my pre-college years and early phases of my career as an academic, I was often consumed by words and deeds, which I disproportionately defined through a prism of the past. My intense experience with discrimination resulted in my being locked in an ongoing state of emotional and mental alertness. I always responded quickly to actions which I perceived as unfair denials or as losses directly associated with my racial classification. Over time, as the losses mounted, and as perceived race-based unfair decisions that weren't based on performance or merit persisted, I became increasingly angry. Of course, I felt that my anger was justified because, after all, unfairness had to be confronted. I reasoned that if I stopped instances of personal unfairness, it not only modeled positive behavior for other Blacks, it also demonstrated the power of self-reliance.

As the years passed, I won and lost many battles. Similar to a "fire house dog," when the racial injustice bell rang, I rushed forward. My anger increased. In retrospect, I now know that I was slowly moving through the process of grieving losses associated with a past that labeled me as inferior. Kenneth Doka (1989) labeled my type of grieving as *disenfranchised grief*. He described this as grief that persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported.

I can only speculate regarding the number of opportunities that I was unable to seize due to years of obsessing, grieving, and feeling angry about an unfair and confining past. It is plausible to assume that the magnitude of the loss is significant.

My mother was fond of saying, "in darkness there is always light." With the help of caring teachers, wise students, a loving family, and a confirming and reaffirming community, I eventually discovered a path washed in the light referenced in my mother's saying. My journey along this path began with discovering the power and healing embedded in forgiveness. For example, I have forgiven the army staff sergeant who ordered me to eat in the kitchen of the hotel instead of in the restaurant with my fellow soldiers. He didn't fully appreciate that as a volunteer, the act of making my life available to protect my country, I was as valuable and equal to any of the White soldiers. I have forgiven the police officers who savagely beat my brother to solicit a confession from him regarding a robbery. Upon failing to gain the confession, they committed him to a state mental facility. I'm certain that they believed that these measures were necessary to curtail crime. I have forgiven the priest and ministers who refused to marry my wife and me. They couldn't have known that our love transcended social conventions or sensibilities.

A second critical discovery that assisted me with addressing the disenfranchised grief associated with discriminatory losses was that of continuing education and re-education. For example, I now ascribe to theoretical perspectives and inclusive frames of reference grounded in precepts of equity and justice. This has enabled me to greatly expand how I define my experience and my reaction to them.

In summary, the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision helped to transform the American landscape. I am mindful of my debt to Thurgood Marshall and countless other men and women who made it possible for me to receive a quality education.

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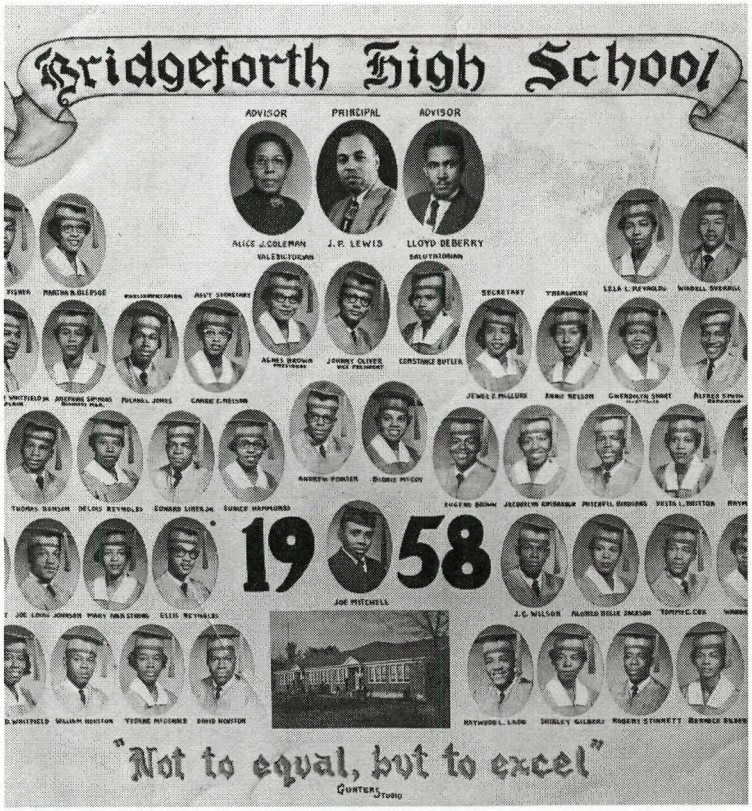

The author's senior class picture, 1958. He is pictured as class vice president