

## I N T R O D U C T I O N

This project is a study of the changes in Bridgeport neighborhoods from the viewpoint of selected Black residents during the historical periods of World War I, the Depression, World War II, and the 1960's.

By means of interviews, we have investigated the social and economic effects of each period on Black Bridgeporters. All persons interviewed have resided in Bridgeport during at least three of the targeted periods. We attempted to explore how their families, friends, and neighbors were affected during those turbulent times. We discovered the changes that occurred on their jobs, in their neighborhoods and in the city as a whole.

This kit contains a transcript and a tape recording of the interview along with suggested activities that are best suited for grades 5-8 and adaptable for high school students.

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PERSONAL DATA

Geraldine Whiting Farrar Johnson

1385 Chopsey Hill Road, Bridgeport

Born: Bridgeport, Connecticut, to Edward and Alice  
Farrar

Spouse:

Children: Adrienne Farrar Houel

Education: Post Graduate C. A. S.

Profession: Former Superintendent of Schools, Bridgeport  
Educator, Lecturer, Volunteer for United Fund

Travel: Europe, Caribbean, The Orient

Church: Golden Hill United Methodist

Organizations: YWCA Finance Committee  
Trustee, University of Bridgeport  
Trustee, Museum of Art, Science, and Industry  
Greater Bridgeport Area Foundation-Distribution  
Committee

"A Study of Bridgeport Neighborhoods:  
A Black Perspective, 1900 -- Present"

Interview by: Denise Foster-Bey  
Interview with: Geraldine Johnson  
Date: November 17, 1983

FOSTER-BEY : Mrs. Johnson, we're going to begin with your early childhood. Could you tell us a little bit about yourself as a child, your birth, your parents and what Bridgeport was like when you were younger?

JOHNSON: Well I was born in Bridgeport more than a half century ago to a large family. I grew up in a family of seven children and with very loving parents whom I felt demanded a great deal of us. I grew up in the East End of Bridgeport. At that time there were very few Blacks in Bridgeport. You might find a group of Blacks in the South End of Bridgeport and some, very few, in North End of Bridgeport and another section in the east end of Bridgeport. And most of the people who were Black you would know. It was a small community of Blacks and of course they worshipped together and had alot of their social affairs together so I grew up knowing other Blacks but it was just a small group of Blacks in Bridgeport. I did attend local schools along with my sisters and my one brother -- McKinley School in East End from which I graduated and years later went back and taught school at that same East End school. I cannot say I grew up without a great deal of prejudice around me because if you were Black you were different because there was so few of us. And I can't say that I wasn't called names and that I didn't face some discrimination. But I think because some of us came from very strong families  
[tape interrupted]

And we were given a pride in who we were and a pride about being Black -- and of course then the word was Negro. It wasn't Black. We were called colored or Negro. If someone called you a name that wasn't very complimentary, in fact which was insulting to you, we were just taught to ignore it because we were given perfectly good names. And I think we were given a fair amount of strap from our parents to be proud of whom we were.

DFB: Were your parents born in this area?

GJ: Both of my parents come from Virginia. One from Mecklenburg County way down at the southern tip of Virginia and my mother from Fauquier County up near Washington, but had been in Bridgeport for a long time.

DFB: Do you remember why they came to Bridgeport?

GJ: Well for new kinds of opportunities. Bridgeport at the time that my parents came was a light industrial place to come with entry level jobs for people. My father came here and got a job in Bridgeport Brass Shop and became one of their power mechanics in Bridgeport Brass Shop. My mother came here with her family because her father was looking for some new opportunities in the north. So they kind of migrated here in order to get jobs in an industrial city.

DFB: You mentioned that many of the Blacks in the city at the time socialized together. What kinds of places did you go to?

GJ: Well we had a Y.W.C.A. in those days. It was the Phyllis Wheatley Y.W.C.A. and it was a separate Y.W.C.A. It was a Y.W.C.A. on Beach Street in the East Side of Bridgeport to which we could walk. And they had Girl Reserves and they had Little Bluebird clubs. They had dancing classes. They had all kinds of little clubs. It was really kind of a haven for Black people. So my mother was on the Board of Managers for that Phyllis Wheatley Branch Y.W.C.A. We grew up going to the "Y" for dancing lessons and for clubs and for things like that. Other than that you socialized by being part of church clubs involved in. You participated in school events. You took lessons and had lots to do because in those days you took music lessons. You took dancing lessons. You took all kinds of lessons that kept you busy. At least my family did. I'm not sure that all families did. But my family kept us awfully busy with music lessons because we were a musical family. And with little clubs that we were in mostly under the aegis of the Y.W.C.A. the Phyllis Wheatley branch. And of course we were proud because Phyllis Wheatley was one of our Black poets who I understand lived in Connecticut for awhile. And this branch was named in honor of her and had all Black participants in it. It did mean at that time that we were not welcome at the main Y.W.C.A. to be members. And that's part of the discriminatory process that I think I'm talking about. That there was

truly a separation of the races. We could be educated together but when it came to socialization and somewhat when it came to worship, churches were separate and social institutions were pretty separate in Bridgeport, Connecticut.

DFB: What church did you attend?

GJ: Some neighbors of ours who were white neighbors came to our house and asked my mother if they could take us to church so I grew up in basically a white church. They took us to a neighborhood church which was Newfield Methodist Church on the corner of Central Avenue and Stratford Avenue. And whereas my mother was organist at the A.M.E. Zion Church in the South End of Bridgeport, it was fairly expensive to take up this whole family of children which had to go by bus then or trolley car across town to church. So she was very happy to have the neighbors take us down to Newfield Church, another Methodist church and we grew up in the Sunday school and the church of Newfield Methodist Church just because it was in our neighborhood and we could walk down to church. So I did grow up. My father attended Messiah Baptist Church. My mother attended Walter's Memorial A.M.E. Zion Church and we visited those churches a good deal with our parents. But each Sunday we walked down to Sunday School and we became members of the Newfield Methodist Church in the East End of Bridgeport just three blocks from our home.

DFB: You mentioned discrimination in Bridgeport and just

generally that you experienced as you were growing up. What was the relationship between teachers and students at that time? Did you have any Black teachers? Did you have any problems with white teachers?

GJ: Well my mother's sister, Lillian Whiting, was the first Black teacher in Bridgeport. She attended Bridgeport Normal School, graduated from there and became a special education teacher in McKinley School just two blocks away from where we lived. She was my godmother and I always had great liking and respect for her and she was probably one of the reasons why I decided to become a teacher. She did not have an easy time becoming a teacher. She didn't have that difficult time finishing school but because she was Black they implied that it was going to be very hard for her to get a job. However, she did. She got a job and for awhile she was the only Black teacher in Bridgeport. However, in those days if you married you could not teach. Shortly after she started teaching for a year or two she became engaged and got married and of course she had to stop teaching. There was another Black woman in Bridgeport prepared, however, to go into teaching and that was Marion Williams. Marion Williams Jennings now. Mrs. Jennings became a teacher and for a very long period of time was the only Black teacher in Bridgeport. I guess I have to say I was the third Black teacher in Bridgeport. When I began teaching in 1944 Marion Jennings and I were the only

two Black teachers in the elementary school with the exception of Robert Thompson who had become a high school teacher. And so for a very long time the three of us were the only ones teaching in Bridgeport. And I say discrimination because although there had been two others who went into teaching and had gotten positions in Bridgeport when I graduated from Harding High School and was slated to go to Bridgeport Normal School I was very frankly being discouraged from going. And the reason was that the advisor at Harding High School was very busy telling me that she had no doubt but that I could get through school because I was an honor student but that when I would get through I would have a very hard time getting a job because white parents would not want me to teach their children. Now to me that's discriminatory. And if I hadn't had strong parents who insisted that they were paying taxes and that, yes, I would go to that school you know I too might not have pursued teaching as a profession.

: The Bridgeport Normal School -- was that almost like a public school?

GJ: It was a city supported school to train all of the elementary teachers that would teach in the Bridgeport elementary schools. If you didn't come out of the Bridgeport Normal School at the time when I grew up you could not get an elementary position in Bridgeport. All of the teachers that taught in Bridgeport were the product of the Bridgeport Normal School until it became

a defunct institution in 1939. But until that time from its early beginnings way back there in the early 1900's or the late 1800's that is the school that produced all of the elementary teachers in Bridgeport.

: Where was that located?

GJ: It was on Warren Street in the south end of Bridgeport. It became Roosevelt School. It was in the old Roosevelt School which was on Warren Street and Prospect Street in Bridgeport. It was the training institution for the elementary teachers. I did go there and graduated from there. When I graduated it was a three year institution and you had to take your fourth year at one of the state teacher's colleges. So I went to New Haven Teacher's College and got my degree. Right after the three years at Bridgeport Normal School you got your fourth year in the State Teacher's College. But again with the strength of adults and the older people in Bridgeport who just helped to overcome some of the discrimination by being determined that their children, their young people were going to get what was due them. And so you know some of those battles were very subtly fought and won because they should have been.

: Were there any Black political organizations that you were aware of as you were growing up?

GJ: Well N.A.A.C.P. was an institution that was very important. I remember my father used to go to all the Tuesday night meetings that they held somewhere on

Stratford Avenue. I grew up knowing there was an N.A.A.C.P. and that it was a strong institution to support the rights of Black people. That was the main one. I think the Black churches in Bridgeport have always been strong institutions because you always felt you could go to the Black minister and ask for support or help for projects or things that you felt needed to be accomplished. So I would say that the Black church was a very strong institution and so was the N.A.A.C.P. as I came along.

DFB: I'm going to kind of skip World War I unless you can recall anything you might have picked up as you were growing up about the affects of World War I on the population of Bridgeport.

GJ: I really don't know too much about that. World War I was before I came along so I don't know too much about that.

DFB: What recollections do you have of the depression era?

GJ: I grew up in the depression.

DFB: Right. What was Bridgeport like? How did it fare through that period?

GJ: Well I'm sure that by any yardstick that you would measure today that I grew up in a family that was basically poor. You know poor from not having alot of money. But I never felt disadvantaged because there were ways that families those days could cope with not having alot of money. So that I cannot say that I ever felt poor because I know that my mother did not work.

She took care of the family. My father worked every day. But in order to overcome some of the lack of money to buy alot of necessities for a big family -- we were a family of nine -- there are alot of things that our family did. My father had gardens and raised all of the vegetables that we ate. We bought no vegetables. Raised the fruits and vegetables and we canned them in the summertime. Maybe young people don't know what canning is now you freeze things. But in those days you washed glass jars and you had boilers that you put these glass jars filled with fruits and vegetables in and you canned your fruits to prepare for wintertime when you did not have those.

My mother sewed and made all of our clothes. So we didn't go without appropriate clothing because she sewed and taught us how to sew. And when they canned we had to help with that. We all had chores to do. We all had help that we had to give at home. For instance my father would buy coal and I remember they would bring coal and dump it outside our cellar window. My father would be very busy shoveling the coal from outside into a coal bin that you would have in your cellar. And even though we were girls and there was only one boy we all came home from school, changed our clothes -- there were such things as school clothes and home clothes in those days. You changed your clothes in order to save your clothes so they would be good and you would get into your everyday clothes and

you would help with chores. Or he would buy wood and they would come and dump the wood outside the cellar window and we would all get out there and help to heave the wood from outside into the wood bin in order to have heat that we needed. And that saved a great deal of money because we could not afford to buy the kind of services that made it easier for a family to have those things. Of course the dollar went a great deal further in those days than it does today. But with only having to buy the meat that a family would eat, producing all the vegetables and fruits and the clothing and living simply, we were able to make it through a depression and even help some other people who were poor. But the spirit of families helping each other and the spirit of neighbors helping each other.

We were the only Black people on our street but the white were very good neighbors to us. And we were good neighbors to them. We had some very poor neighbors that would come over and borrow sugar or borrow flour. We never borrowed anything because my mother didn't believe in borrowing. But if someone came to the house and asked for something because they had families and they needed something that even though we were a big family and basically I felt we were poor there was always enough to help somebody else have a meal or to send somebody a box of something or to take somebody some vegetables or to share. So I do remember the

depression. I don't think we suffered from it however. I think it gave us some strength that later on we could use all the rest of our lives knowing how to take care of our finances, take care of our possessions, respect property, know that things don't come easy to alot of people and that you take care of things. You know how to put things together. We ate alot of soup, alot of stews and alot of the kinds of things my mother knew how to prepare that stretched meals, that were very nourishing. Were very good but weren't fancy. So how to feed a family I think all of us know how to do because we grew up in a depression and we were well nourished and well clothed. I have lots of memories of the depression and people suffering.

DFB : Were there soup lines and things like that in Bridgeport?

GJ: I don't recall soup lines in our particular area. But yes there were soup lines in Bridgeport and there were places where people could get help that they needed because -- because they just didn't have resources during that time. They were pretty tough times for people but I just think that my family protected us from those tough times because we all pitched in. We didn't know how tough it might have been for other people who didn't have those same resources.

DFB : But you said your father was employed the entire time?

GJ: I never remember in life when he was out of

work. He was employed but didn't make a great deal of money. And less during the times of depression.

DFB: Were there any more Black people living in the area?

GJ: Not during the depression. The Black population in Bridgeport didn't increase until the Second World War.

DFB: Right.

GJ: And at that time many many people came into Bridgeport for Remington Arms, G.E., the airplane factory.

Especially Remington and G.E. Lots of people. And some of the steel mills and things. They came from all over. Especially out of the south, north, because it was around-the-clock work and people were looking. The industries were looking for employees, and evidently put out the call all over the country and lots of people came. People were renting rooms. Some of them were renting rooms in shifts.

Bridgeport stayed lit up twenty-four hours. Day and night. It was not unusual that there were three shifts in most of these factories. The factories were humming and the whole city was extremely busy. But that was the Second World War.

DFB: Now just about the time the United States got involved in the Second World War you started teaching, or just before?

GJ: Yes I started teaching in 1944, and we had gotten into the war.

DFB: Been there for awhile. Before you started teaching did you or your sisters and brother, did you try to get

jobs in any of these factories? Was it difficult for Blacks to be employed in these places?

GJ: Let's see. I came out of school in 1940 and there wasn't any teaching job for me at that time. I substituted for a few years before I got a regular job teaching. And I substituted in the Bridgeport schools. You had to if you graduated from Normal School you waited for your turn on the list to be appointed. Wherever you were in your class you knew when you were going to be appointed. You knew who was before you who was after you. You knew whether the class before you had exhausted its list. You were appointed by the year you graduated by your standing in the class etcetera. So I knew I could keep track about when I might expect to be appointed and I knew it would be a few years. I basically substituted and I didn't have any trouble getting substitute jobs. I prepared to go out every day. Sometimes to different schools. Sometimes to stay a week, two or three weeks. But I was able to live at home and to work and save a little money. And I finally married before I got my permanent job. Had a baby before I got my permanent job [chuckle] and right after I had my baby I was called to teach and got a permanent job. So it wasn't that difficult. I think everyone knew there was no way of avoiding giving me a job because I had come from the Normal School. I was on a list. They couldn't really skip over me without a true legal case. At the time of the

war most of my sisters were either in high school, one was out at Fisk University, one had taken up hair dressing and was working at that time with my mother who owned and operated a beauty shop. By those years her family had grown and she decided that she'd like to go into beauty culture. So she went to school, got her license and opened a beauty shop and my sister worked with her. Everyone else was in school and was not looking for a job. We never really got into working in the war industries because we were either in school or involved in some other way.

DFB : Now you mentioned that after the war and during the war the population of Bridgeport just exploded as everybody moved in. Were there pockets of Black neighborhoods around? Were Blacks able to come in and live anywhere and did they still have certain pockets?

GJ: There still were pockets. The people who came in during the war years either rented or got rooms in Black homes in those same pockets that I mentioned -- East End of Bridgeport, the South End of Bridgeport, a few in the North End and a few in the West End. Basically the families that had been here for many years opened their homes and took people in. I remember that my mother on the top floor of our house had some rooms. And some of the people who worked up at G.E. and could walk right up Central Avenue -- several of the rooms on the top floor of our house that had three floors -- lived there and went up to the

factories to work. Many families opened their homes and rooms they weren't using they rented out to people. Or if they had friends who had any space the areas that were already existing just began to bulge with lots of people coming in. I did not see that alot of areas got expanded into streets and sections that had not had any Blacks on them.

DFB: What about the relations between the Blacks and the whites at this time? Did you feel any strain as more and more Blacks came into the area?

GJ: I don't think at that particular time there was a great deal of strain. Everybody was too busy working. Working some more than one shift. Just being relieved to get home and relax. I don't think that there was an opportunity except that in the Second World War the army and navy and air force opened up and so there was no further discrimination in the services. It gave much more of an opportunity for Blacks and whites and all ethnic groups to relate to each other which was sort of a cornerstone in our history. However, back home life went on and people stayed very very busy in the war effort, having not a great deal of time to socialize. Not a great deal of time to sound each other out for opinions, etcetera. Alot of the factories, however, that had not heretofor a great many Blacks working in them had many more Blacks than ever because they had put out the call for employees and many Blacks answered that call. So that

was kind of new to some of the factories who weren't used to having a great many Blacks work for them.

DFB: And how was it in the school system? By this time you were working. Did you have any big problems or little problems or anything?

GJ: No the schools were fairly unchanged. By that time we had a few projects that had been built. I taught at Prospect School in the South End as my first job. And at that time Marina Village and the Marina Apartments and the Pequonnock had opened and there were a great many more Blacks in the South End. And so I had a well integrated classroom you know. I had Blacks. I had whites. By no means was it heavily populated by minority students where I taught but there were a number of Blacks. Getting along very well. At that time I would say fairly well motivated. The teachers who cared a great deal. I remember teaching with one teacher who was godmother to most of the Black children [laughter]. They loved her and she was their godmother. She's still alive and she has more godchildren down the South End. She had been in Prospect School for many years.

[end of side one ]

DFB: Okay, we were talking about the relationship between students --

GJ: Yes. The relationships between the students and the teachers and the families were very close relationships. A lot of demand was made of the students. My first

teaching job I had forty-one first graders. You talk about class size. And I was a new teacher. And everybody in that school worked extremely hard. Those forty-one kids had to learn how to read. That's all there was to it. They could not go on to the next grade unless they knew how to read. I had a good many Black students in my room. I couldn't see any difference between their motivation and anybody else's. The teachers made them really really work hard or we'd send for the parents if anything happened that we didn't like. The parents would come running up to school and we'd get everything straightened out. But our classes were large and those kids had to learn. Of course they had a great respect for school. It was a nice place to come and it was a nice old-fashioned school. With the exception of very few kids at the end of the year they knew how to read first readers and parallel first readers and they went on to second grade.

DFB: Did you have any other ethnic groups in the South End at that time.

GJ: Yes. Greeks, there were a number of Greeks. A number of Polish people. There were very few Hispanics. A few, not many during that period in Bridgeport. That was a little before numbers of them came to Bridgeport. But lots of other. Some Hungarians. And you had a nice mix in your classroom of you know alot of different backgrounds of children. And all getting along well except for the kinds of arguments and fights

that kids pick if you get in front of them in line or if you take something that belongs to them. That kind of thing went on of course. But nothing that I could call really racial. I thought the relationships were good and everybody got along very well as far as I could see. I thought teacher attitude and pupil relationships were very good in that school.

DFB: During this time or a little before this time you said you got married and you had your daughter I believe. Was it difficult working and raising a child at the same time?

GJ: Well at the time I had built a house in Stratford. We had built a house in Stratford and my grandmother, my mother's mother had come to live with me. And she was a very straight-laced woman. Very demanding. Very knowledgeable. Knew how to do wonderful things. Knew how to sew. Was a wonderful cook and was very particular. And she came to live with us which was great because she would get my daughter off to school. You know, we'd all get up and get ourselves ready but I didn't have to worry about what was happening back home because I knew that grandmother was there to get my daughter off and to receive her back home. And to teach her many many things that she knew how to do which was quite a wonderful thing. So I was fortunate enough to have my grandmother live with me from the time my daughter was about three or four years old until my daughter went to college. She died at

ninety-two and so she really had a long stretch and was very key in helping me to raise my daughter.

DFB: What was Stratford like at the time?

GJ: Again, Stratford had very few Blacks. My daughter went to Birdsey School which was in the south end of Stratford and there were a few families in the south end of Stratford. So there were a few Blacks in her school. I think if they weren't in Birdsey School, however, they weren't anywhere else you know. Except maybe one or two somewhere else. But very few. So she was raised with some students down at Birdsey School and at Johnson Junior High School which was built while she was in elementary school. Again a pretty isolated kind of life because there weren't a whole lot of Blacks around. But I guess you kind of train your children the way you've been trained and she was so busy with Brownies and Girl Scouts and Sterling House and music lessons and dancing lessons and schoolwork that there wasn't a great deal for her -- and her church, I stayed at Newfield Church and she grew up in Newfield Church. So between church and home and school there were lots of things. She was a very busy girl and so I don't think that she felt as though she was lacking a great deal. She had friends in the neighborhood and friends at school. But you know that was a small town without alot of Blacks around. I think fairly good relationships and I felt a good place to bring up a child in and a good school system

in which she could grow up.

DFB: I'm going to move on to the 1960's. Did you participate in any of the civil rights movements during the 1960's?

GJ: I was one of the founders of A.B.C.D. which was the action agency that was formed around 1963-1964, in the mid-sixties. Which I think came to grips with an awful lot of the needs of Black folks. I also was associated with the N.A.A.C.P. in the 1960's which I, again, feel was a catalyst for alot of action that went on. I'm a life member of the N.A.A.C.P. and strongly believe in what they're doing. We were never able to get an Urban League formed in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Maybe one day we will but efforts were made. I was part of committees and meetings where we talked about having an Urban League and that didn't come to fruition. Way back there in the 1960's we began to talk about school desegregation. People didn't even know what desegregation meant but I remember going down to Bridgeport Library and N.A.A.C.P. with Charlie Tisdale and June Shackaloft and Ella Anderson a whole lot of people addressing that whole problem of school desegregation way back there just prior to that 1966 report coming out about Bridgeport Schools and the need for desegregation.

I remember alot of activity that went on during the 1960's that Bridgeport may not have been directly involved in but was watching across the nation, and helping with collections and efforts the N.A.A.C.P.

was doing to send money where it would help. I remember the Freedom Fund and all the fighting that went on and all the pleas for funds so that the legal defense of people who were caught up in activities in other places could get the appropriate legal help.

DFB : Do you think there was any one person in Bridgeport who might have been considered a civil rights leader?

GJ: Well John Lancaster was very much a person involved with N.A.A.C.P. for years and years and years. McDonald Isaacs was another who was very involved with that. Ella Anderson always stands out as a real fighter. She was president of the N.A.A.C.P. when alot of things went on where N.A.A.C.P. got right out in the vanguard for action that they felt needed to be taken on alot of things. She stands out very much.

Charlie Tisdale stands out in his efforts with the N.A.A.C.P. I'm sure that you always leave people out that you should remember but you know as I think about it those were some of the real leaders and fighters for justice for alot of people.

DFB : Across the country there were riots and things like that. Did anything similar to that occur in Bridgeport?

GJ: I cannot remember in the 1960's. I just think of Bridgeport as being supportive to efforts across the nation. Kind of the listening ear and the sending of money, sympathetic, doing what we could to help others. I don't remember incidents of things that really erupted in Bridgeport in the 1960's. And maybe it's

just that I have forgotten it because nationally there were so many big things that happened certainly as result of legal matters and changes came. When I was growing up you couldn't go to Reads or Howlands or any of those stores and sit in a tea room. You just could not. You could go into the stores and shop. You could not go into restaurants and eat. And that includes the restaurant at Reads Department Store, at Howlands that had a restaurant. You could not do that. Now as civil rights opened up the rights for everybody and discarded the separate but equal idea it opened the doors to everybody for those kinds of accommodations in hotels and in restaurants. We never had to sit in any particular place on a bus in Bridgeport. But we could not eat in regular establishments. You just didn't go inside those places to eat. Someone says to me that at one time we had to sit in the balcony of the theaters. I don't remember the big downtown theaters and having the sit in the balcony. I just don't remember it. Maybe that was true. But I can't comprehend it now. I don't remember having to go up into the balcony. But some of those things were understood and people did them automatically. And nobody had a contest because as they used to say, you know your place. You just did what you were expected to do. But I do know that we could not go into the restaurants and the hotels.

DFB: Did you have any difficulty getting your position as a

principal?

GJ: I took a civil service test and came out number one so they had no choice but to give me the first job on the list. I have to say I would not have become a principal if a very very precious white supervisor had not told me I ought to be one. You know I really enjoyed being a teacher and had not thought about administration. But my supervisor told me one day she thought I ought to be a principal. And I decided if she thinks so I ought to be. So I went down to New York University and did all my graduate work and got my credentials. And then when the civil service test -- in those days you had to take a civil service test to go into administration -- when the civil service test came up I prepared to take it. I guess about 40 or 50 people took it, mostly men, just a few women but mostly men who got army service, which I didn't have. So I was delighted. Because I didn't think I could make it against them with all the credits that they could get that I couldn't get. But I came out number one. And that meant that the next job was mine. So I didn't have to fight for that. That was their own system, which I truly believe we have to know alot about and that we have to go through that system and decide that we're going to beat the system by really preparing to get in that system and come out on top.

So anyhow, I did not have a hard time because of the process of becoming a principal. So I can't say

that I did. I didn't have a hard time becoming a teacher because again I went through the system and waited my turn and I knew what my turn was and I got my turn. Did have a little hard time becoming a superintendent [laughter].

DFB: [laughter]

GJ: And that's because the system was truly a subjective one and that's a hard system to beat.

DFB: When you became principal how was your relationships with the parents, with the teachers? How did

GJ: Wonderful, loved it. I was principal of two schools. And neither one is in existence now -- Washington School next to St. Augustine Church, now it's a parking lot for St. Augustine Church [chuckle] and Wheeler School which is now a center for A.B.C.D. and for some other programs in the city. But two wonderful little schools, each with eight rooms. Each with around 300, 350 students and I was principal of two schools. I had to, you know, go between those two. But only a couple of blocks apart. But wonderful schools. Fairly well integrated with kids who needed alot of help. I'm going to say poor, but you know, without a whole lot of advantages and a whole lot of money. But wonderful children and good parents who related very well to me. I thought fine teachers, just wonderful teachers. And I liked the experience. I had to be asked to come out of that because I liked

what I was doing. A very family kind of school. Little old school houses with kids but they were attractive and colorful. In those days it was unusual to have rooms that were painted pretty pink, pretty blue, pretty lavender. We had pretty painted rooms and teachers who did artistic and creative things. Kids who loved their teachers and liked their principal. And we were just big happy families. Yes. Really, really nice. And I would have stayed in something like that except I was asked, you know, to do something different.

DFB: To go on. Could you tell us a little bit about your experience as a superintendent of Bridgeport schools?

GJ: Well I guess if it weren't for the public I may not have become a superintendent of schools. But it was something that I thought I had earned because I was an assistant to the superintendent of schools. I was an assistant superintendent of schools and I was the one when the superintendent went anywhere he left me in charge. And urged me when he got ready to leave to apply to be the next superintendent. And I wasn't that anxious to be a superintendent of schools. I was very happy being an assistant superintendent in charge of all the elementary schools. And then I had been a superintendent in charge of a district, a whole section including elementary, junior high, and high schools, too. But when he left I was in charge of all the elementary schools. And he had urged me to apply

for the superintendency. And I didn't think that it would be difficult because I was used to being at board meetings. Taking charge when he wasn't there. But anyhow I think most people know that the contest really became a heated one when they realized that a Black woman wanted the job. And a whole lot of things were done that shouldn't have been done to try to discourage me from pushing for that job.

But I finally got myself a very influential lawyer. And I think I had all the documentation to prove that I was being bypassed for reasons that were unfair. And the Board of Education finally realized that if I took the case to court, which I fully intended to do when I decided I wanted it, they changed their minds and decided they would invite me to be the superintendent of schools. However I do have to say that they had chosen two committees to search for a superintendent and each time they chose a committee I applied and was interviewed. And each time the committee came out with a recommendation that I get the job. So I did not feel that it was any kind of influence that gave me the job, it was their own committee recommendations that they would not recognize.

So, anyhow, I got the job and I feel that for five years I was able to provide leadership to a school system that I think was very troubled. Because when I went into that particular position we were on the edge of a teacher's strike, number one. That greeted me

immediately. And number two, we were headed right into the middle of a court desegregation suit. The teacher's strike, as everyone knows, became a very nasty kind of thing and teachers went to jail in that teacher's strike. Which was almost the first in the nation to have something like that happen. And possibly should not have happened but it did. And then the court desegregation suit is still going on. So that during the whole five years I sat in that chair the school system had a very very rough time. So it was not an easy time. It was a difficult time.

But I think that we accomplished alot of things. We were able to go to court and take some plans that helped us from getting somebody else that the court would have assigned here to run a school system. And some plans that I think can work pretty well. We took a magnet school plan and we took a redistribution of pupils plan which Bridgeport began to institute right away. And promised to build some new schools. And to do some other kinds of things. So I think that that kind of attitude that my staff and the board and I were able to work with prevented us from being treated very summarily by a court which was watching us very carefully. I felt that I was able to bring aboard a great many minority leadership persons who could contribute to the school system. And so during the time that I was there we had a number of principals appointed, a number of people in supervisory jobs, a

number of teachers. And I think the Black folks have needed a friend in court [laughter]. And I think they had one which has been important to education in Bridgeport.

But it was not an easy five years because I don't think the administration that we had in the city during those five years was a sympathetic administration to education. And so that was a battle that had to be fought all the time. And wasn't that helpful to a school system. And I think we're still suffering somewhat from things like that. But I think education is in good hands and, you know, will progress.

DFB: Okay. Well in closing is there anything that I might not have asked you that you think is important and would like to tell us.

GJ: I am very concerned that the motivation of young people in Bridgeport is less than it should be. I'm very concerned that the image of education for many young minority students is not as high as it should be. Or their aspirations are not what they ought to be. I'm very concerned about the number of kids that are just hanging around on Bridgeport streets doing nothing. I think there needs to be an awful lot of stimulation on everybody's part if we are to survive as a race. That our young people are going to have to have alot more input from a whole lot more people to move them along from where they are now. And I'm not talking about families that can do for themselves. I'm

talking about alot of young children that don't have parents, who don't have the interest of their home to push them along. And who need a push from somewhere. And it probably's going to have to rest on the schools. It's probably going to have to rest on the churches. And it's probably going to have to rest on the N.A.A.C.P. and agencies to really be concerned about what's happening to the young people in the city of Bridgeport. Because I think there is too little aspiration, too little motivation. And perhaps on the public's part, too little concern about what's happening to the young people. And thereby hangs the strength of a race, the strength of a city, and certainly the strength of a nation.

DFB: Thank you. And we hope that as children listen to these tapes they'll get some inspiration. Thank you very much Mrs. Johnson.

End of Interview