

[Editor's Note: In the spring of 2014, the Arlington Historical Society and Columbia Masonic Lodge #285 co-sponsored the second annual Arlington History Essay Contest, intended to encourage interest and research in local history. The contest was open to 11<sup>th</sup> graders from H-B Woodlawn, Wakefield, Washington-Lee, and Yorktown High Schools. The theme of the contest was "To what extent was Arlington County heroic or quixotic in its pursuit of school integration, considering contemporary trends?" The Arlington Historical Society is proud to publish the winning essay, below.]

## **School Integration Heroic or Quixotic?**

*BY NOAH L. KENNEDY*

*(WASHINGTON-LEE HIGH SCHOOL)*

Last Friday, at approximately 10:45, first period at Washington-Lee High School took a brief hiatus for the annual black heritage assembly. For half an hour, the auditorium was crowded with an audience of just under a thousand teenagers. They sat attentively, with the occasional whisper, as they listened to skits, poetry, and anecdotes about people ranging from Malcolm X, to Rosa Parks, to Nelson Mandela, and then to Trayvon Martin. Although the assembly was both creative and educational, and showed its audience how far we've come as a nation, it missed one important part of black heritage and civil rights that strikes a bit closer to home: the history of our own county's civil rights movement, and more specifically, the bravery that surrounded the integration of Arlington County Public Schools. Despite the overwhelming resistance against school integration in Virginia, Arlington County's school board and its citizens showed enormous bravery and fortitude by opposing the popular belief and law of its state. This heroism is especially evident through the tenacity with which Arlingtonians fought for school integration and the relative speediness with which this was accomplished.

One of the most important chapters in the story of American civil rights took place in 1954, when the Supreme Court concluded that racial segregation of public schools was unconstitutional (McBride, 2006). As the case of *Brown vs. Board of Education* was decided in favor of the plaintiff, Oliver Brown, America took its first step towards racial equality in its school systems. However, despite this national victory, many individual states fought integration. Virginia was one of those states. In 1956, Senator Harry F. Byrd led a movement known as "Massive Resistance" (Virginia Historical Society). This movement was driven

by a conglomeration of laws centered on sustaining school segregation, laws that mandated expropriation of school funding and closing of schools upon their integration. (History – Integration in Arlington).

In the mid-1950's, the force of Massive Resistance swept through Virginia, and attempted to put a stop to school integration. Arlington proved to be an outlier of Massive Resistance, however, and quickly showed through its school board and citizens that Arlington itself was also a force to be reckoned with.

In 1956, two major events happened that showed the resilience of Arlingtonians in their campaign for integration. The first event was a class-action suit: *Thompson v. County School Board of Arlington County Public Schools*, filed by the families of three white students and nineteen black students (Thompson, 1994). Soon before the case, however, the brutal murder and beating of a black teenager named Emmett Till occurred. Several days after Till supposedly talked or whistled at a white woman (different sources say different things), he was kidnapped from his home, beaten brutally until his face was no longer recognizable, and thrown into a river with rocks tied to his ankles (Brunner, 2007). News of Till's grotesque murder swept the nation, sending fear into the heart of every black parent nationwide. Although many of the plaintiffs were terrified, they stayed in the case and testified in court. The namesake of the case, Clarissa Thompson, said in a later article that "Terrible images flashed through my adolescent mind: of Emmett Till being killed for saying something to a white woman" (Thompson, 1994). If not for her mother, Clarissa would have dropped out of the case like many of the other students. However, with the help of her mother, she realized that she was a part of history, and that other people around the nation were looking up to her. Clarissa Thompson, when asked by her mother if she wanted to stay in the case, said that she "swallowed her fear and told her mama she would" (Thompson, 1994). Although their class-action lawsuit did not singlehandedly bring about the integration of Arlington Public Schools, it was an important element in the fight for integration. Clarissa and the other twenty-one families bravely stuck with the case and showed that they wouldn't quit until they reached their goal.

The second event of 1956 was an action taken by the Arlington County School Board itself, a board elected by Arlington citizens. During the same time as the Thompson court case, the school board had developed a two-year plan to integrate schools (Gibbs, 2008). Soon after the board proposed the plan, the state of Virginia used its legislative power to dissolve the county-elected school board, and replace it with a school board of their own choosing: a message from the state that quite clearly said "You have no say in this." However, this didn't dissuade Arlington, but rather pushed it to fight segregation even more. The lawsuit went through as planned, and support increased throughout the community.

While the rest of Virginia continued to resist integration, Arlington rebelled.

After *Brown v. Board of Education*, the case was continued further by *Brown II*. This case added that states should proceed to integrate “at all deliberate speed” (Gibbs, 2008). Unlike the rest of Virginia, Arlington did just that. According to a poll in an edition of *The Washington Post* from July, 1958, 75% of Stratford High School

parents favored school integration (Shaver, 2013). While the rest of Virginia was busy participating in Senator Byrd’s “Massive Resistance”, and keeping schools segregated, Arlington had its own agenda. On February 2, 1959, Arlington made history by becoming the first county in all of Virginia to integrate its schools (Jones, 2013). Not only that, it integrated its school systems in half the time it took Virginia’s Prince Edward County. Prince Edward County closed its schools from 1959 to 1964 rather than allowing desegregation (Virginia Historical Society, 2013). Despite a senator and a state in favor of segregation, Arlington managed to hold fast to its convictions.

While Arlington’s battle for school integration was an act of extraordinary bravery in any circumstance, the real bravery was shown by how much they had to lose. By not complying with the laws set in place by Massive Resistance, Arlington’s schools could have closed like Prince Edward’s. By testifying in court, Clarissa Thompson and the other twenty-one students risked a fate similar to Emmett Till’s. A county is only as heroic as its people. Even though the whole state eventually became integrated, Arlington was ahead of its time, and ahead of the trend. It took well over a decade before all of the nation’s schools integrated. Although our county’s part in school integration had ended, we were one of the first. Thanks to Arlington, Black heritage assemblies like the one at Washington-Lee are possible. When kids sit in their U.S History class, and learn about school integration, they are learning about the legacy that Arlington started. To follow the trends of other people is normal, but to set the trends that others follow, that is heroic.

---

**A county is only as heroic as its people. Even though the whole state eventually became integrated, Arlington was ahead of its time, and ahead of the trend.**

---

## Works Cited

Brunner, Borgna. "The Murder of Emmitt Till." *Infoplease*. Infoplease, 1 Jan. 2007. Web. 27 Feb. 2014. <<http://www.infoplease.com/spot/bhmjustice5.html>>.

Gibbs, Michael. "History of HB / Summary of Dorothy Hamm's Book." *History of HB / Summary of Dorothy Hamm's Book*. N.p., 1 Jan. 2008. Web. 27 Feb. 2014. <<http://www.apsva.us/site/Default.aspx?PageID=7524>>.

"History of HB / Integration in Arlington - Stratford Jr. High." *History of HB / Integration in Arlington - Stratford Jr. High*. N.p., 6 Apr. 2011. Web. 27 Feb. 2014. <<http://www.apsva.us/Page/7525>>.

Jones, Mark. "WETA Home." *Boundary Stones: WETA's Washington DC History Blog*. N.p., 22 Feb. 2013. Web. 27 Feb. 2014. <<http://blogs.weta.org/boundarystones/2013/02/02/it-happened-here-first-arlington-students-integrate-virginia-schools>>.

McBride, Alex. "Brown v. Board of Education." *PBS*. PBS, 1 Dec. 2006. Web. 21 Feb. 2014. <[http://www.pbs.org/wnet/supremecourt/rights/landmark\\_brown.html](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/supremecourt/rights/landmark_brown.html)>.

Shaver, Les. "Crossing The Divide." - *Arlington Magazine*. N.p., 27 Feb. 2014. Web. 27 Feb. 2014. <<http://www.arlingtonmagazine.com/November-December-2013/Desegregation-of-Stratford-Junior-High/index.php?cparticle=2&siarticle=1>>.

Thompson, Clarissa. "Clarissa Sligh." *Clarissa Sligh*. N.p., n.d. Web. 27 Feb. 2014. <<http://clarissasligh.com/essays/plaintiff.html>>.

Virginia Historical Society. "Virginia Historical Society." *Massive Resistance*. N.p., n.d. Web. 27 Feb. 2014. <<http://www.vahistorical.org/collections-and-resources/virginia-history-explorer/civil-rights-movement-virginia/massive?legacy=true>>.