

1958 Arlington

The Year That Something Happened

By Bill Fogarty

On February 2, 1959, four Black students from the Hall's Hill neighborhood in Arlington County desegregated the all-White Stratford Junior High School. Various histories written about this day have referred to it as “The Day Nothing Happened” (Fig. 1).¹

The use of this phrase is linked to the belief that something *would* happen that day—that acts of violence could occur on the first day of desegregation. As a precautionary matter, the police chief assigned nearly 100 of his 169 police officers to the Stratford area, both inside and outside the school.² Some people feared that a bombing might occur.³ In fact, bomb threats were phoned in that day, but the authorities decided not to evacuate the school building.⁴

Why would folks think that a bomb might be exploded at Stratford Junior High that day in 1959? To explore that question, it helps to look at various events in 1958, when White resistance to integration culminated in a series of disturbing events, including a bomb threat that interrupted a church service and the arrest of an Arlington resident at Bon Air Park for the crime of being Black.

Fig. 1: On February 2, 1959, the day public schools in Virginia were desegregated, the four Black students permitted by court order to attend Stratford Junior High begin their walk home, under the watchful eye of an Arlington County police officer.



Courtesy of Center for Local History,
Arlington Public Library

The Arrest

On Sunday, June 1, 1958, the Unitarian Church of Arlington was holding its annual church picnic at Bon Air Park on Wilson Boulevard, with several hundred church members in attendance. The church had a permit for the use of the park, and there were no other groups using it.⁵ To the dismay of church members, two motorcycle police officers came roaring into the park, circling a few times around the area where the picnic was held.⁶ What was going on?

Mildred Eldridge, a Black member of the church, was at the picnic with her two young children. Arlington police officers approached Mrs. Eldridge and other Black adults in attendance and told them they were in violation of state laws forbidding racially integrated public assemblies.⁷ The police officers asked them to leave the park. The other Black members left, but Mrs. Eldridge refused.

According to the arresting officer the “police acted on the complaint of an unnamed informant that several Negroes were in the park, which is customarily reserved for whites.”⁸

The police officers decided to arrest Mrs. Eldridge, with an initial charge of conduct tending to incite a riot. Mrs. Eldridge, whose husband was working that day, asked friends to take her two children home. The officers took Mrs. Eldridge to police headquarters, where she was fingerprinted and photographed. Her minister, Rev. Ross Weston, and other church members joined Mrs. Eldridge at the station.⁹

At the police headquarters, the officers and the magistrate realized they had a problem. With what crime would they charge Mrs. Eldridge?

The 1926 Public Assemblages Act required segregated seating at public assemblages. It is for this reason that meetings of the Arlington School Board, for example, required separate seating for Blacks and Whites. But was a picnic held by a private organization a “public assemblage” that required separate seating?

Adding to the dilemma, two Circuit Court judges in Arlington had issued conflicting opinions on the constitutionality of the Public Assemblages Act.¹⁰ A phone call was placed to the Commonwealth’s Attorney, William Hassan, asking for his advice. Mr. Hassan advised the magistrate to charge Mrs. Eldridge with disorderly conduct. According to the Commonwealth’s Attorney, her conduct was “reasonably calculated to cause a breach of the peace.”¹¹

The church paid Mildred's bail of \$16.25, and a court date was set for Monday, June 9. The church hired an attorney, Karl Sorg, to represent Mrs. Eldridge.¹²

On Sunday, June 8, 1958, Rev. Weston delivered a blistering sermon to his congregation that was reported in the *Northern Virginia Sun*.¹³ Referring to the County's charge of disorderly conduct, Weston challenged the Arlington authorities to prosecute the case to the fullest extent of the law, and "to tear away the sham behind which they are hiding, and to meet this issue head-on!" Weston closed his sermon with a reflection on the effect of this arrest on the Eldridge's nine-year-old son, Bobby:

The person I feel most sorry for in this entire episode is little Bobby Eldridge. When his mother came home Sunday night from the police station, he said to her: "Mommy, why don't they leave us alone?" That is a very good question, and I am not sure whether many of us have the real answer to it.¹⁴

1957

In 1957, the Eldridge family moved from the District of Columbia to Arlington, as they bought a house in the Penrose neighborhood, at 2716 First Street South, near South Fillmore Street. Bob Eldridge was a detective with the Washington Metropolitan Police Department, and Mildred was a clerk at the Washington Naval Yard.¹⁵

The Eldridges, with their two children, joined the Unitarian Church of Arlington, located at the intersection of Route 50 and George Mason Drive (Fig. 2). Their son Bobby, then eight years old, and his younger sister, Sheila, took part in the Sunday religious education classes, and in the interracial summer workshop the church had been sponsoring since 1949.¹⁶

The family lived within walking distance to two White elementary schools in Arlington, Patrick Henry Elementary and Fillmore Elementary (now called Long Branch).

On August 15, 1957, Mr. Eldridge attempted to enroll Bobby in the 4th grade at Fillmore Elementary School, but he was refused admission. Working with attorneys from the NAACP, the Eldridges were added to a federal lawsuit that had been filed in 1956, seeking entrance by Black

students into Arlington's White school system (the "Clarissa Thompson Lawsuit"). By the start of the school year in 1957, six additional middle and high school students had been denied admission. On September 14, 1957, Judge Albert Bryan, of the Eastern District of Virginia, issued an order for the seven students to be enrolled.¹⁷ The Arlington County School Board then filed an appeal staying the enforcement of the order.

Meanwhile, Rev. Weston was in the metaphorical crosshairs of a group known as the Defenders of State Sovereignty and Individual Liberties.¹⁸ Weston was known for his outspoken sermons criticizing the Byrd Machine and Massive Resistance. In the fall of 1957, Weston preached a sermon denouncing the General Assembly's Thomson Committee, which was investigating (and harassing) the NAACP for its activities in Virginia. The Defenders of State Sovereignty distributed two circulars in Arlington attacking Rev. Weston, which included these chilling words:

It is now open season on squirrels. There is no bag limit on the two-legged variety this season [...]. Hunting with firearms or bow and arrow is prohibited in Arlington County, but the use of the horsewhip is still legal, and most effective. The 4400 block of Arlington Blvd. [the address of the church] is not a State game preserve.¹⁹

Fig. 2: Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington (UUCA), ca. 1958.



Courtesy of UUCA Archives.

When Jack Rathbone, the executive secretary of the Arlington branch of the Defenders, was asked if the horsewhip circular was a threat, he replied, “It’s in English. Read it and decide for yourself.”²⁰

Back to 1958

On January 13, 1958, Judge Walter McCarthy of the Arlington County Circuit Court reversed the General District Court conviction of a Black woman, Marjorie Taylor, for violating the Public Assemblages Act. Taylor had intentionally sat with a White friend in a Whites-only section of a political rally held at Swanson Junior High School. Judge McCarthy ruled that the Public Assemblages Act was unconstitutional.

A few months later, in the spring of 1958, the Unitarian Church held its annual all-church dinner at Kenmore Junior High, and Mr. Eldridge was in attendance. As recounted by Church Board Chair, Wade Lathram, church members were concerned with the possibility of arrest:

I remember our Every Member dinner of that year, held I believe in Kenmore School, with the police outside with a warrant for the arrest of Rev. Ross Weston, Bob Eldridge, and myself, because Bob was with us, in a public school! The warrant was not served.²¹

Possibly, the police did not know whether the segregated seating requirement had been violated.

For the Eldridges, the possibility of being arrested for “race-mixing” at church events remained a reality. Meanwhile, the Clarissa Thompson Lawsuit was continuing to be deliberated in the Federal courts, leaving the Eldridges uncertain whether their son Bobby would ever be admitted to his neighborhood school.

Mildred Eldridge’s Day in Court

On June 9, 1958, Judge Paul Brown of the Arlington County General District Court presided over the trial of Mildred Eldridge. Over fifty people came to support her. Judge Brown made it clear that the case involved the question of disorderly conduct, not racial segregation. The

police officers testified that the basis for their arrest was Mrs. Eldridge's refusal to leave the park, not disorder.

Judge Brown acquitted Mildred, ruling that the "mere refusal to move" did not constitute disorderly conduct. He found that there was no evidence of "definite misbehavior or misconduct in the sense that Mrs. Eldridge was disorderly or turbulent."²²

Mildred Eldridge exhibited remarkable courage the day she was arrested. Her "refusal to move" was not a calculated test of any laws, since she had no way to know that the police would be called in to investigate the "mixed race picnic." When confronted by two motorcycle cops, and asked to leave, the other Black picnickers departed, but she remained. What makes a person decide, on the spot, to stand one's ground?

No Rest for The Weary

Racial discrimination was an ever-present reality for Black Arlingtonians, a reality documented in the local newspapers of that time. On the front page of the June 2nd *Northern Virginia Sun* appeared three stories dealing with integration and discrimination.

One article trumpeted the formation of the Organizing Committee to Preserve Schools, created by twenty-three citizens whose goal was to keep Arlington's public schools open during Massive Resistance. Federal courts had ordered nine White schools in Warren County, Charlottesville, and Norfolk to admit Black students, and in response to those orders, Governor James Almond closed the nine schools.

The Organizing Committee announced it would pursue every legal means to keep the public schools open but did not promote integration. The group claimed, "We are concerned neither with perpetuating segregation in schools, nor hastening integration."²³

It had to be obvious to Black parents that the White power structure in Arlington would not be advocating for the integration of the schools. In fact, the Committee restricted its membership to Whites only, and it was growing.²⁴

Black parents faced additional worries about the integration process. If the plaintiffs in the Clarissa Thompson Lawsuit obtained a court order for admission to Arlington's White schools, would Governor

Almond close them? If that happened, would there be repercussions from the White community?

In the summer of 1958, the Black parents and their attorneys had a difficult strategic decision to make. The lawyers from the NAACP had counseled the parents to disregard parts of Virginia's Massive Resistance laws. Students seeking admission to a new school had to be approved by a state commission known as the Pupil Placement Board. State appointees were given the power to deny Black students admission to White schools based on allegedly neutral factors, including sociological and psychological concerns. This process included testing, interviews, and a psychological evaluation.

At first the NAACP contested the validity of the Pupil Placement Boards. Based on that strategy, when Mr. Eldridge submitted the application for his son in 1957, he purposely did not complete the required Pupil Placement form.

In the summer of 1958, the NAACP reversed course. Over twenty Black students (including Bobby Eldridge), and their parents, filled out the form and were scheduled for interviews in August.

The stakes were high for all, but for the Eldridges, there was an added pressure. On May 23, 1958, an influential segregationist and journalist in Virginia, James J. Kilpatrick, wrote an editorial setting forth strategies for dealing with Black students attempting to gain admission to White schools. Kilpatrick devoted three paragraphs to analyzing how Whites could retaliate if Fillmore Elementary School in Arlington was integrated. He stated: "If Negroes insist upon an action that will close Fillmore, then whites may counter-move with an action that would close Kemper [a Black school]—pawn for pawn, knight for knight."²⁵

Bobby Eldridge was the only Black student applying to Fillmore. The implication was clear: if Bobby Eldridge (and his parents) persisted in gaining admission, Black schools could be closed.

In the summer of 1958, an Arlington group known as the Tenth District Education Corporation distributed the Kilpatrick editorial in one of their handouts. This group was closely allied to the Defenders of State Sovereignty, with the same spokesman, Jack Rathbone.

Rathbone made a request to the Pupil Placement Board for the names of Black children seeking entry into White schools. He said the

Defenders had drawn up a plan to close Black schools in Arlington by having White parents volunteer to enroll their children in the Black schools.²⁶

By August, the Defenders had recruited parents of two White children to apply to Black schools, and those students had interviews with the Pupil Placement Board.²⁷

Meanwhile, the Pupil Placement Board requested to interview all Black applicants and their parents on Monday, August 18 (which meant that parents would have to take time off from work). The attorneys for the applicants were not allowed in the interview room.

Twenty-eight of thirty Black applicants were interviewed that day. The children, and their parents, met at the Eldridge house, which was less than a mile from the interview location. The first parents to be interviewed informed the waiting parents about the specific questions they would be asked. One question was especially odious: “Is this application for transfer being made solely to enforce the so-called constitutional right?”

One parent, Mr. Leslie Hamm, responded bluntly: “There is the so-called again. I do not know what you call it, but so far as I am concerned—it is a law.”

Within a week the Pupil Placement Board rejected all the Black applicants in Arlington, including Bobby Eldridge.²⁸ The NAACP attorneys filed an appeal, and on September 2, Judge Bryan allowed Arlington schools to open on a segregated basis in early September while he considered the new filings.

There was still hope that justice would prevail. At the end of August, the Unitarian Church hosted an interracial buffet supper organized by its Youth Group. Over seventy high school students, including twenty-seven Black students, attended.²⁹

At the Federal court hearings held during the first week of September, the Arlington School Board presented their reasons for rejecting the thirty applicants. On September 17, 1958, Judge Bryan issued a

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detailed ruling. The ruling began by noting that twenty-four of the thirty students were, in his view, reasonably rejected by a combination of the following four factors: (i) academic accomplishment; (ii) psychological problems; (iii) overcrowding at Washington-Lee High School; and (iv) attendance districts. The reasoning in the opinion was strained. “Pupil No. 18” was denied solely based on the attendance district for the requested White middle school. Bryan conceded that the requested school was closer to this student’s residence than all Black Hoffman Boston School, but he upheld the rejection.

The remaining five students passed the gauntlet of those first four factors. However, all five failed the test of “Adaptability.” The principal witness on the criterion of adaptability was School Superintendent Rutt. He defined it as including “the ability to accept or conform to new and different education environments.” He believed the five students would “lose their present position of school superiority and leadership” by attending a White school. As explained by Judge Bryan in his opinion: “The Superintendent feels that this could be discouraging and possibly emotionally disturbing to them.”

One of the five students rejected under the adaptability factor was Bobby Eldridge (identified as “Pupil A”). The other four students were applying for admission to Stratford Junior High.

Judge Bryan ruled that the adaptability factor was not reasonable regarding the four students seeking admission to Stratford Junior High. “They have a common age of twelve years and they all would enter the first year of junior high school. They are a group formerly attending Langston Elementary School together, presumably friends having common interests.” The ruling set the stage for the desegregation of Stratford on February 2, 1959.

Meanwhile, Judge Bryan upheld the rejection of Bobby Eldridge on the grounds of adaptability even though Bobby had already completed a full year of integrated Sunday school classes at the Unitarian Church.

In response to this decision, the Board of Trustees at the Unitarian Church provided Bobby with a scholarship to attend Burgundy Farm County Day School in Alexandria, an integrated private school. There was hope that a year at an integrated school would convince the judge that Bobby could “pass” the adaptability test for the next school year.³⁰

Fall 1958: Defenders and Nazis

In the fall of 1958, racial issues in Arlington smoldered. The Arlington schools remained segregated, and Judge Bryan delayed his order to admit the four Black students to Stratford until January 1959. The threat by the Defenders of State Sovereignty to have a White child admitted to a Black school did not materialize.

In September, Rabbi Emmet Frank of the Beth El Hebrew Congregation in Alexandria preached a sermon criticizing Senator Byrd and Governor Almond, saying they had “wrought more disunity in the nation in the last few years than the Communists have in years of organized efforts.” Rabbi Frank went on to say that “a synonym for Godlessness is Byrdliness, which has done more harm to the stability of our country than McCarthyism.”³¹ The Defenders issued a statement condemning the “vicious attack” on Senator Byrd and challenging those of the Jewish faith to condemn the sermon.³² The *Northern Virginian Sun* also published letters critical of Rabbi Frank, though one letter writer chastised the Defenders for their attacks on Unitarian ministers and Jewish rabbis.³³

Fig. 3: Northern Virginia Sun front page headline on the bomb threat at the Unitarian Church of Arlington October 20, 1958.



Courtesy of UUCA Archives.

As a sign of support, Rev. Weston of the Unitarian Church invited Rabbi Frank to preach a sermon at the two Unitarian services to be held on October 19. Minutes before the 11:15 a.m. service, the church secretary answered the phone and heard a deep-voiced man shout: “Get the kids out of there. We are going to blow up the church.”³⁴

By chance, Beryl Dill Kneen, a reporter from the *Northern Virginia Sun* was in the crowd. She wrote a remarkable first-person account of the service:

It was almost 11:20 a.m. The service was scheduled for 11:15, the choir was seated at the rear of the church auditorium and the place was jammed. Rabbi Emmett Frank from Temple Beth El was expected to preach. The auditorium which holds 300 people was crowded, and there were 225 children in the Sunday school wing. The Reverend Ross Weston appeared beside the pulpit. The rabbi sat down behind him, and I noted he was not wearing his robe and shawl.

Mr. Weston said calmly, “We received a telephone call a few minutes ago saying the church is about to be blown up. So I am asking you to go out quietly and pick up your children who will be coming out of the education building. We will go out in sections.” The congregation filed out quietly and gathered in the parking lot around the building.³⁵

The police arrived within minutes and told the crowd to go home. As noted by the reporter, “As far as the attitude of the crowd was concerned, one might think they were turned out of their church every week” (Fig. 3).³⁶

This event sparked the question: who was the “we” referenced in the threat to bomb the church? The two likeliest culprits were the Defenders of State Sovereignty and a new group in Arlington headed by George Lincoln Rockwell (Fig. 4). Rockwell had moved to Arlington in the mid-1950s, and he formed a racist organization that was best known as the American Nazi Party.

Rabbi Frank was invited back to the church the next week and preached his sermon. The men’s group for the church conducted a vigil

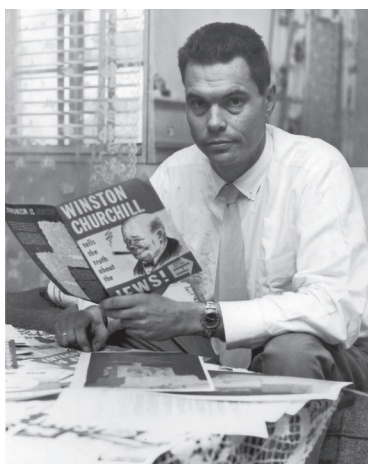
the night before to make certain there would be no bombs planted.³⁷ Church member Alan Mayer recalled a surprise guest showed up to hear the rabbi:

I was again the chief usher and I was standing in the back of the church, and there was a nice-looking man standing next to me. He introduced himself as George Lincoln Rockwell, who was the head of the American Nazi party. He was very well spoken, and he had come to say that they had nothing to do with this bomb threat. But standing out on the steps of the church were his stormtroopers with complete Nazi brownshirt regalia, with their swastika arm bands, which was a startling sight.

January and February 1959

As 1958 ended, school desegregation lawsuits remained mired in the Virginia Courts, and the admission date for the four Black students was postponed to February 2, 1959. This did not stop the Arlington County School Board from appealing to the US Supreme Court to block the desegregation of Stratford Junior High. On January 31, the high court denied the appeal. The four students had no more obstacles in their way, and on February 2, 1959—the day that nothing happened—they entered the seventh grade at Stratford Junior High.

Fig. 4: George Lincoln Rockwell, founder of the American Nazi Party, whose presence in Arlington in the '50s and '60s exacerbated racial tensions in the county, ca. 1960.



Courtesy of Center for Local History, Arlington Public Library.

Epilogue

In the fall of 1959, Bobby Eldridge was enrolled at Patrick Henry Elementary School. On his first day of school, the family, to their surprise, noticed a police car outside their house. Due to concern

about intimidation and harassment by the American Nazi Party, for the first month, the family either walked Bobby to school, or he went by police escort.³⁸

Bobby Eldridge adjusted well to school. He made friends, played the clarinet in the Patrick Henry school orchestra, and went through the Arlington school system right through graduation from Wakefield High School. Bobby went on to become a professional jazz musician.

About the Author

Bill Fogarty is a retired attorney who has lived and worked in Arlington for over 40 years. In an earlier life he was a high school English teacher, and in his current life he is helping to clean up the archives at his church, the Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington.

Endnotes

1. "Day Nothing Happened," *The Bulletin of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith* (February 1959). Column written by David Krupshaw, the Chair of the Arlington County Board in 1959. The column generally concentrates on the preparation efforts of the County for that day, but the column ends with a peculiar statement that "we are still Virginians, and most Virginians do not welcome integration. But that was not the point."
2. "All Is Calm As Four Negroes Enter Stratford," *Northern Virginia Sun*, February 2, 1959, 1.
3. Cecilia Michelotti, "Arlington School Desegregation: A History," *The Arlington Historical Magazine*, 8, no. 4 (October 1988): 11.
4. "Segregation Era Ends in State Public Schools," *Richmond Times Dispatch*, February 3, 1959, 1, 4. See also, *ADL Bulletin*.
5. "Negro Woman Is Arrested at Picnic," *Richmond Times Dispatch*, June 2, 1958, 6.
6. Peggy Fisher, Oral interview with Anne Ulmschneider, 2007, Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington Archives.
7. "Negro Woman Arrested at Picnic."
8. "Integrated Picnic Ends in Arrest," *Northern Virginia Sun*, June 2, 1958, 1.
9. Ruth Tryon, *History of the Unitarian Church of Arlington*, 9; also, "Integrated Picnic Ends in Arrest."
10. "Negro Woman Arrested at Mixed Race Picnic," *Washington Evening Star*, June 2, 1958, 22.
11. "Integrated Picnic Ends in Arrest."

12. "Integrated Picnic Ends in Arrest." Mr. Sorg was already known for his willingness to serve as counsel in civil rights cases, having previously represented Faith Bissell, a Black woman from Arlington who had been arrested for sitting in the White section of a school meeting at Thomas Jefferson Middle School in 1956. *Faith Bissell v. Commonwealth of Virginia*, 199 Va. 397 (October 14, 1957).
13. "Park Race Mixing Case Before Judge," *Northern Virginia Sun*, June 9, 1958, 1.
14. Sermon Brief of Rev. Ross Allen Weston, June 8, 1958, Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington Archives.
15. "Negro Woman Arrested at Mixed Race Picnic."
16. "A Place Where You Learned To Relax," *Washington Daily News*, July 3, 1964; also, Handwritten notes from Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington Archives.
17. *Clarissa Thompson, et al v. County School Board of Arlington County*, 159 F. Supp. 567 (September 14, 1957).
18. The Defenders of Stave Sovereignty and Individual Liberties, a grassroots political organization created in 1954, was dedicated to preserving strict racial segregation, with many chapters throughout Virginia, including a branch in Arlington. Their Arlington meetings often achieved an audience of 150 people. "Writer Foresees Almond Victory," *Richmond News Leader*, October 5, 1957, 1.
19. "Defenders Vent Ire on Weston," *Washington Post*, October 11, 1957, C14.
20. Ibid.
21. Wade Latham Memoir, October 20, 1983, Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington Archives.
22. "Court Frees Woman in Mixed Race Picnic," *Washington Evening Star*, June 10, 1958, 5. See also, "Negro Woman Freed by Court After Arrest at Mixed Race Picnic," *Northern Virginia Sun*, June 10, 1958, 1.
23. "Citizens Called to Join Up in Saving Schools," *Northern Virginia Sun*, June 2, 1958, 1, 3.
24. James McGrath Morris, "A Chink in the Armor: The Black-Led Struggle for School Desegregation in Arlington, Virginia, and the End of Massive Resistance," *Journal of Policy History*, 13, no. 3 (2001): 29.
25. "Preparing For the Storm," *Richmond News Leader*, May 23, 1958, 10.
26. James McGrath Morris, 30.
27. "Defenders Go to State Board for Negro Names," *Northern Virginia Sun*, June 7, 1958, 1.
28. "Negro Boycott Against School Quiz Goes On," *Northern Virginia Sun*, August 13, 1958, 1; see also "State Placement Board Is Silent on Future of Arlington Negro Pupils," *Northern Virginia Sun*, August 12, 1958, 1.

29. James McGrath Morris, 33.
30. "Negro Boy Gets Grant from Church," *Washington Evening Star*, October 3, 1958, 4.
31. "Negro, White Pupils Eat, Sing," *Northern Virginia Sun*, September 1, 1958, 10.
32. "Rabbi Says Byrdliness is Godlessness," *Northern Virginia Sun*, September 25, 1958, 13.
33. "Defenders Rap Rabbi's Talk," *Northern Virginia Sun*, September 29, 1958, 3.
34. "Bomb Threat to Church Shocks Arlington," *Northern Virginia Sun*, October 20, 1958, 1.
35. "Crowd Awaited Sermon as Bomb Threat Hit," *Northern Virginia Sun*, October 20, 1958, 1.
36. Ibid.
37. Alan Mayer, Oral Interview, March 29, 1998, Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington Archives.
38. "First Black Student Recalls Experience," *Northern Virginia Sun*, March 8, 1986, 1.