

# A SLOW ROAD

## Desegregating Beaufort A look back 50 years after Brown v. Board

Stories by CRYSTAL STREUBER ■ Gazette staff writer  
Photos by MEGAN LOVETT ■ Gazette, Page design by KEN HAWKINS ■ Gazette



GAZETTE ARCHIVES  
The caption Peaceful First Day from this 1964 Beaufort Gazette photograph states that these two black children attended the first day at Mossy Oaks Elementary School without incident, and that late requests from 10 others to attend the previously all-white school were declined because of "crowded conditions."

### 1954

The Supreme Court rules on Brown v. Board of Education, declaring that segregated school districts are unconstitutional.

### 1964

Rowland Washington is the first black student to attend Beaufort High. His brother, Craig, and two other black students attend Beaufort Elementary School.

### 1970

The first year of mandatory school integration in Beaufort County and the last year for all-black Robert Smalls and St. Helena high schools.

## Bridging the divide



30 years ago Donald Gruel was a senior in the class of 1972 at Beaufort High School.

For Donald Gruel, the key to integration was a pigskin.

"The thing that went well was sports," said Gruel, a 1972 Beaufort High

graduate who played football. "If you watch 'Remember the Titans,' you can see how things went at Beaufort High School."

Today from the window in his principal's office at Mossy Oaks Elementary, Gruel can see the old Beaufort High, now Beaufort Middle School, where he was quarterback during the 1970s when integration forced black and white athletes to play together.

"The team spirit and unity you have from competing as a team made it easier. You forged some relationships that normally we would not have," he said.

Gruel was on the student council when integrated students from the all-black St. Helena and Robert Smalls high schools agreed to keep the Beaufort High name, the green and white colors from Robert Smalls and the eagle mascot from St. Helena. But new uniforms for the red-and-white Beaufort High Tidal Waves were already ordered, he said, so the first year's integrated team had a mixed-up identity.

"That may have caused some friction," he said. Above all, team relationships were cordial.

"That's where I first met Charles Henderson," Gruel said of his classmate, an African-American who is now principal at Whale Branch Elementary. "He was a running back. He and I are still close."



Donald Gruel is now the principal of Mossy Oaks Elementary School.

May 20, 1954, seemed like a typical day in Beaufort County. A photo of students who won an essay contest stretched across The Beaufort Gazette's front page. Beaufort High School announced the date of its graduation ceremony. Port Royal settled a dispute over a boundary line. The Breeze Theatre on Bay Street featured Rock Hudson and Donna Reed in "Gun Fury."

Nowhere on the front page of Beaufort's local newspaper was it mentioned that three days earlier the U.S. Supreme Court had sparked a chain of events that would forever change South Carolina and the nation. The May 17, 1954, Brown v. Board of Education decision that outlawed racial segregation in schools was buried in that week's Gazette, a news decision unfathomable 50 years later.

An editorial on Page Two titled "Whither Now?" lamented the court's unanimous decision to end the "separate but equal" education standard that had been the nation's norm for more than a half century. It also urged state lawmakers to uphold a referendum in which state

#### Today:

Day one of a two-day series about the past and present of public school integration.

#### Tomorrow:

A look at race and achievement in local public schools.

#### Inside:

"Separate but equal is the biggest lie in American education."



residents voted to close public schools rather than integrate.

The only other mention of the issue was an advertisement for then-gubernatorial candidate Lester Bates, who was "four-square for segregation."

Although it would take 16 years before the mandate of Brown v. Board was accepted in Beaufort County, the battle for educational equality began long before it seemed possible in a region entrenched in social segregation.

A group of black parents in the heart of South Carolina began the fight in 1948, seeking parity for their children in a lawsuit that

would become the cornerstone of the five cases bundled in the Supreme Court's Brown decision.

But it wasn't until 1970 that mandatory integration took hold in the county. That year, teenagers from the all-black Robert Smalls and St. Helena high schools were bused to Beaufort High School, which was so crowded it split the day into dual sessions. Elementary and middle schools that had been all-black for years admitted their first white students.

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**"My race needs no special defense,** for the past history of them in this country proves them to be the equal of any people anywhere. All they need is an equal chance in the battle of life."

— Robert Smalls, Nov. 1, 1895

Key events

**1896** The Supreme Court accepts "separate but equal" racially segregated facilities in its Plessy v. Ferguson decision.

**1925** Segregated Robert Smalls High School opens at Ribaut Road and Boundary Street.

**1951** A group of Clarendon County black parents sues the local school board chairman for equal education for their children and loses the case, Briggs v. Elliott. The case later becomes one of five suits appealed to the Supreme Court as Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kan.

**1951** The General Assembly creates a special committee to prevent school integration. It recommended a referendum deleting the state constitutional requirement for public schools — which passed overwhelmingly.

**1952** "The Committee of '52," a group of state leaders, publishes a report affirming the necessity of segregated schools to preserve "public education and domestic tranquility."

**1953** Fifty black northern Beaufort County residents sign a petition to the school district claiming that segregation is unconstitutional and that county black schools are not equal to white schools. All-black St. Helena High School opens with 308 students. There are 264 students at all-black Robert Smalls High and 573 at all-white Beaufort High.

**1954** The Supreme Court rules on the landmark Brown v. Board of Education case, declaring segregated school districts unconstitutional.

**1955** The Supreme Court orders public school districts across the nation to desegregate "with all deliberate speed." White citizens councils work against integration while blacks fighting for integration are persecuted, sometimes losing jobs or being run out of town.

# "Separate but equal is the biggest lie in American education." — Pat Conroy

## Eyewitness accounts

### Supreme Court's actions opened way

When Herman Gaither graduated from college in 1960, black men with advanced degrees could teach, preach or be undertakers. "Fifty-one people started in my (all-black) eighth-grade class. Seventeen graduated. Two went to college — me and my brother," Gaither said last month, sitting in his modest superintendent's office. "We were the exceptions." From humble roots in Great Falls, Gaither moved south in 1960 to teach math in Beaufort's all-black Robert Smalls High School. Thirty-five years later, he was the district's first black superintendent, after stepping through "windows," as he calls them, opened by the U.S. Supreme Court.

"When I go and speak to kids and they say, 'When did you plan to be a superintendent?' I say, 'Never.' It wasn't a possibility when I was little."

— Beaufort County Superintendent Herman Gaither

"When I go and speak to kids and they say, 'When did you plan to be a superintendent?' I say 'Never,'" Gaither said. "It wasn't a possibility when I was little." Gaither taught during Robert Smalls' 1970 transition to an integrated junior high. "The class of 1970 for me was very, very special," Gaither said. "I remember their names and faces even 34 years later. I used to play chess with

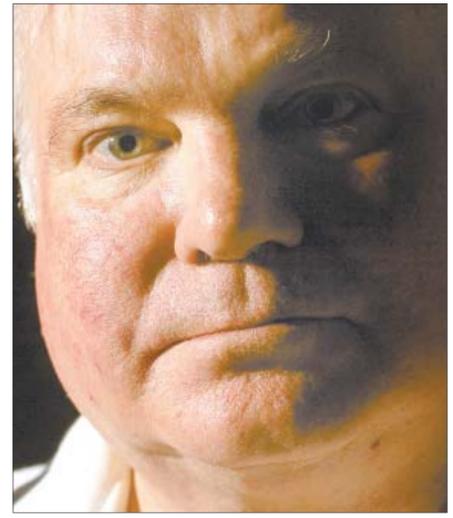
them during lunch every day." Gaither's success is a testament to the progress integration made possible. "We were the first post-Brown (v. the Board of Education) generation," he said. "We're the people who are feeling our way. We were alone. There were no black role models to show you how to do something. 'I have been extremely fortunate,'" Gaither said. "You have to be thankful."



### A move to Beaufort was a move to resegregation

"Being a military brat, integration came to us a long time ago. It wasn't a big deal to us. I was the only white kid the (Beaufort High) principal knew who had ever gone to school with black kids."

— Pat Conroy, senior class president in 1963, teacher at Beaufort High in 1967



Before Pat Conroy moved to Beaufort in 1961 it wasn't unusual for him to attend school with black students. But Beaufort County was still three years away from allowing white and black students to sit next to each other in a classroom. "Being a military brat, integration came to us a long time ago," the novelist said of he and his siblings. "It wasn't a big deal to us. I was the only white kid the (Beaufort High) principal knew who had ever gone to school with black kids."

As senior class president in 1963, Conroy was sent to apologize to the principal at all-black Robert Smalls High School for racial slurs some Beaufort High students painted on the school's campus. Conroy saw integration firsthand again at The Citadel in 1966, when the school admitted its first black student. Conroy returned to Beaufort High to teach in 1967 during the county's early attempts at school desegregation. He got to know many of the black students and ended up teaching the school's first black history course at their request. "They didn't have a course in the state, so I wrote it. It was a first for a white boy teaching it in the state. They'd have gone crazy if they knew what we were teaching," Conroy said of the school administration. The class covered everyone from Harriet Tubman to Malcolm X, but he was forced to travel to the University of South Carolina library to find information. "For the times, we were cutting-edge."

Conroy said. "It was the happiest two years of my life, bar none." After two years at Beaufort High, Conroy requested a transfer to the all-black Daufuskie Island school, where he said students were so far behind they didn't know where Washington, D.C., was or that it was the Atlantic Ocean lapping at their shores. His year there is chronicled in his book "The Water is Wide." "The first black teacher I taught with was on Daufuskie," Conroy said. "Separate but equal is the biggest lie in American education. I found that out the first day."

### Student found Conroy's black-history class to be awakening

"The school told (Conroy) he couldn't teach it unless there were white kids in the class, too."

— Connie Hipp, high school student in 1969

Connie Hipp didn't know she was making history 35 years ago when she signed up as one of two white students in Beaufort High School's first-ever black history class. It was 1969, the year before the school board mandated integration, and Hipp went behind her father's back to take the course taught by Pat Conroy, who would go on to become a famous author. "I don't think it was that my dad didn't want me exposed to black students, it was just that he didn't want problems," Hipp said. "The school told (Conroy) he couldn't teach it unless there were white kids in the class, too. My dad said I couldn't take it, so I took it but it didn't show up on my report card. "I learned so much about black history that I wouldn't have because of the racial divides that existed," she said. "I absolutely loved it." One of Hipp's good friends was a black student named Grady Lights, which caused a stir among some residents. "To me, it was not strange to be good friends. But there were older people in the community who thought differently. He was just another friend," Hipp said. "I was very aware of the black-white differences. It was very pronounced around here." Hipp attended Beaufort High during the six years when black students could choose to attend the all-white school or one of the two local black high schools. Integration caused a few problems, she said, but it wasn't too bad. "There was some tension," Hipp said. "There was a definite division. They'd grown up that way."



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### First black students to integrate were isolated, worried

"I was one black student out of about 500 whites. I had some friends and I had some people who only pretended to be friends."

— Craig Washington, one of the first black students in Beaufort County to attend an integrated school

In a way, Craig Washington was the Ruby Bridges of Beaufort County. One of three black faces in a sea of white when Beaufort Elementary School started classes in the fall of 1964, Washington didn't face the jeering crowds that Bridges dealt with on her first day at an all-white New Orleans elementary school in 1960. But that doesn't mean Washington's first day of school wasn't as historic for South Carolina's small coastal county. Washington and his brother, Rowland, were two of the first three black students in the county to sign up to attend white schools. "There really was no way of knowing what was going to happen. Desegregation had really not gone so well over the rest of the South," Washington said. "The first thing I remember was standing in a huge crowd of people. For me it was anxiety (I felt) because I didn't know what was going to happen. "For the most part, things



WASHINGTON

were very cordial. I had only a couple accidents — brushing up against me," he said. "I was one black student out of about 500 whites. I had some friends and I had some people who only pretended to be friends." Craig Washington was the only one of the three black students who finished their first year at Beaufort Elementary. Six years later, he was named student council president at Beaufort High during its first year of mandatory integration. Being a guinea pig for desegregation was tough, Washington said. "Education was seen by my parents as a way of breaking some economic cycles," he said of his father, an attorney, and his mother, a teacher. "In some sense, when you look back on it, it's really just a kid going to school and it really shouldn't be made a big deal."

### Students dealt with nonsocial issues

"If she didn't provide (transportation), we would've had no way. We missed having the community school. When I talk with my friends, we can't even remember our senior year ... it was just like 'let's make it through this year.'"

— Carolyn Banner, Beaufort High School Class of 1971



When Carolyn Banner transferred from St. Helena High School before her 1971 senior year, she saw adapting to the newly integrated Beaufort High as a challenge she could overcome. "I was determined I wasn't going to give up. I persisted and persevered and made friendships," Banner said. Thirty-four years later, she is the director of student services at Technical College of the Lowcountry. "Not everything is going to be easy. You have to know you can do it." In 1971, Banner was Beaufort High's only black cheerleader, captain of the squad and co-captain of the girls' basketball team. "It was real difficult," she said. "The thing to me was to be involved in everything I could. Athletes are looked upon differently. On the basketball team, you were looked at for your skill and not for your skin color." Coaches made the transition easier, Banner said. "One game I was standing on the sidelines because I didn't know the cheer," she said. "The coach said we're not going to do it if everyone doesn't know the cheers."

The basketball coach drove players home to St. Helena Island every day after practice because buses weren't provided. "If she didn't provide (transportation), we would've had no way. We missed having the community school," she said. "When I talk with my friends, we can't even remember our senior year. Most of us didn't go to the prom. It was so unthinkable. It was just like 'let's make it through this year.' You could have gotten lost in that environment."

## From the front

### A slow road

The story of Brown began years before Linda Brown's father fought for her right to attend an all-white Topeka elementary school. And it began in the tiny Clarendon County town of Summerton, where 24 black parents fed up with the poor quality of their children's education sued the Summerton school district in 1950.

The suit, spearheaded by parent Harry Briggs and minister Joseph DeLaine, fought for buses for black children, who walked many miles to and from school while white children had transportation, and for better facilities. Scott's Branch School in Summerton was heated by a wood stove and lit by kerosene lamps. Black teachers in the county were paid about a third of what white teachers earned and per-pupil spending was just as unequal. The case was against Summerton school board Chairman R.W. Elliott, who told parents, "We ain't got no money to buy a bus for your nigger children," according to University of South Carolina history professor Walter Edgar's book, "South Carolina: A History."

Summerton residents lost the Briggs v. Elliott case in 1951. Judge Matthew Perry, the South's first black federal district judge, sat in the Charleston court room to hear the ruling, fresh out of law school. "These parents simply wanted parity for their children," Perry said. "Lawyers transformed it into an all-out attack on South Carolina's mandated racially segregated school system." The suit became one of five segregation cases appealed to the Supreme Court. Other cases were from Delaware, Virginia, Kansas and the District of Columbia. "The (South Carolina) component of those five cases was the centerpiece case," Perry said. Although the Brown case was decided in 1954, and in 1955 the court ordered schools to desegregate "with all deliberate speed," South Carolina resisted the change for years. "It obviously meant different things to different people," Alan Wieder, a University of South Carolina educational psychology professor, said of the "deliberate speed" mandate. "For some people that meant many years ago that it

was long overdue, and for others it meant never. Then there were people who said we can do it on our own time." Even before the Brown decision, state lawmakers were looking for ways to prevent integration. In 1951, the General Assembly created a committee that recommended the referendum in which South Carolina voters supported eliminating the public school system; In 1952, the "Committee of '52," a group of state leaders, affirmed the importance of segregated schools; In 1955, a year after the Supreme Court's Brown ruling, white citizens councils that worked against desegregation sprung up across the state; In 1956, U.S. Sen. Strom Thurmond spoke out for segregation in a "Declaration of Southern Principles," a document that condemned the Brown decision and was signed by 19 of the South's 25 senators and 82 of its 106 House members; and In 1957, Thurmond filibustered for a record 24 hours and 18 minutes to stall a civil rights bill. In Beaufort County, the fight against segregation wasn't as loud or violent as in other parts of the South, but it was still palpable, many who lived through it say. Local black students didn't have the option of attending school with whites until 1964, when the local school board started a system called "freedom of choice."

### Freedom of choice

It was Aug. 31, 1964. A sixth-grader named Craig Washington entered all-white Beaufort Elementary, following his father through the all-white crowds clustered around the front door, to become the school's first black student. Across town, his brother Rowland, took the first steps for black students into Beaufort High School.

"If you knew the conditions of Robert Smalls then — our textbooks were five to 10 years old by the time we got them," Craig Washington said of why he chose to transfer from all-black Robert Smalls Elementary. "If you've never lived through that type of segregation, there's no way to explain it."

The Washington brothers and one other student made history by announcing their intentions to integrate in July 1964. But when school started a month later, six more black students enrolled in previously all-white schools. It was the first year for "freedom of choice," the local school board's belated response to the Brown decision. "In the 1960s, there were small changes," said Beaufort County School District Superintendent Herman Gaither. A teacher at Robert Smalls High at the time, Gaither said the choice plan was unfair because it caused a one-way integration. No white students chose to attend black schools. "There was a lot more awareness. Everyone knew integration was coming. They were trying to see if we could do it through osmosis," Gaither said. Initial integration went relatively smoothly in Beaufort. But black students who lived through it say the period had its share of problems. "Beaufort is fortunate," a Gazette editorial

claimed in September 1964, a few days after school started. "We have had no looting, vandalism or destruction. We have no unrest or hatred. ... We can keep it this way if all our citizens will work diligently with the problems that are sure to arise."

Black students did face problems as they integrated into previously all-white schools. Carolyn Banner, now director of student services at the Technical College of the Lowcountry, transferred to all-white Beaufort Junior High from an all-black elementary school in 1965. "A day did not go by that I didn't feel that I wasn't safe. I never felt like I belonged," Banner said. "There was no one there who was really on your side. It was like they were (integrating) because they had to, and they didn't have to like it."

Although Washington faced some violence from white students during his first year at Beaufort Elementary, he remembers the teachers and principal who made his time there easier. "A lot of people took a lot of care about what they were doing," he said. "They may not have liked it, but they cared enough to do a professional job." Many white students had problems with the change, said local author Pat Conroy, who grad-

uated from Beaufort High in 1963 and came back to teach there in 1967. "I remember the question that made the black kids the angriest," Conroy said. "What are you doing at my school?" Black and white students were getting used to each other during the late '60s, Conroy said. White and black girls started copying fashion trends from each other and listening to each other's music. But many teachers were not so open-minded. "Many of the white teachers were racist. They simply grew up that way," Conroy said. "And the black kids knew it."

Some Beaufort residents actively resisted desegregation. Beaufort Academy was started in 1965 as one of many private schools established during what some call the South's "white flight" movement, when white parents took their children out of public schools. The academy had about 200 students in its first year in first through eighth grades, drawing from a public school system of about 8,000 students. "The reaction of adults (to integration) was to just write it off — forget about public schools," Gaither said. "Some started the white flight."

Voluntary integration was not enough to meet the demands of the Brown ruling, the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare told the school district in September 1965. The district spent the next five years trying to comply, writing and rewriting integration plans.

Finally in 1969 the school board adopted a plan to close the two black high schools on St. Helena Island and in Beaufort, force all high-schoolers to attend formerly all-white Beaufort High and shift enrollment to integrate the other schools. The plan was approved and during the 1970-71 school year, 16 years after the high court's Brown decision, Beaufort County schools desegregated completely.

**1956** The S.C. General Assembly is so preoccupied with dodging integration that one reporter dubs it the "Segregation Session."

**1957** U.S. Sen. Strom Thurmond filibusters for a record 24 hours in an attempt to block federal civil rights legislation.

**1964** Rowland Washington is the first black student to attend Beaufort High. His brother, Craig, and two other black students attend Beaufort Elementary School.

**1967** Lolita Pazant becomes the first black teacher at Beaufort High.

**1968** Agnes Sherman and Frieda Mitchell are the first black women elected to the Beaufort County Board of Education.

**1970** The first year of mandatory school integration in Beaufort County and the last year for all-black Robert Smalls and St. Helena high schools. The Federal Office of Civil Rights and the Beaufort County School District agree to desegregation through racially balanced attendance zones rather than forced busing. About 5,750 black and about 4,500 white students attend county schools.

**1973** Battery Creek High School opens to alleviate crowding at newly integrated Beaufort High.

**1991** York Glover becomes the first black chairman of the Beaufort County Board of Education.

**1995** Herman Gaither becomes the first black superintendent of the Beaufort County School District.

**2004** Fifty years after the Supreme Court ruled that the nation's schools should be racially integrated, Beaufort County black students are passing state standardized tests at an average 27 percentage points below white students.

### Under-education

Ask anyone who was at Beaufort High School during the early 1970s about their high school years and two words come to mind: double sessions.

From 1970 to 1973 Beaufort High was the only high school in northern Beaufort County, and black and white students from Pocolaligo to Lands End were bussed there in an attempt to integrate schools. Robert Smalls and St. Helena high schools, the longtime alma maters for northern county black students, were turned into junior high schools. Beaufort High became a testing ground for equality as sports teams, clubs and classes tried to combine both races fairly. "I remember the first time I heard they were going to double sessions. I said, 'They'll never do that,'" Gaither said of the turbulent 1970-71 school year. "Even though we were 15 years after Brown, nothing had changed for us. 1970 was the first year things were remarkably different."

Gaither called the three years of double sessions "under-education for everyone." Students attended school in four-and-a-half-hour shifts. Juniors, seniors and most athletes attended in the morning and sophomores went in the afternoon. "Combining three high schools and their diverse populations was complicated. Student councils from the three schools had to settle the school's name, mascot and colors. The Beaufort High red and white Tidal Waves became the Beaufort High green and white Eagles, taking the colors from Robert Smalls and the mascot from St. Helena. "It was a lot more crowded," said Donald Gruel, who was on the student council at Beaufort High the year before integration and is

now principal of Soffey Oaks Elementary. "I think academically, we suffered more. I received a good education, but now it would have been different." A flip through the 1971 Beaufort High yearbook shows how hard school staff worked toward racial balance and harmony. Most athletic teams had a black and white coach and a black and white captain. Those efforts paid off, Banner, Gruel, Gaither and others said. It was in sports where students were most easily recognized for their skill, not their skin color. "In athletics, we had absolutely no problem," Gaither said. "Some of those teams just made the school work. On the ball field it wasn't about what color you were."

Black students, especially seniors, resented being moved from their home school, Banner said. After a year at all-white Beaufort Junior High in 1965 she attended St. Helena High until her senior year, when integration was made mandatory. She was the only black cheerleader at Beaufort High that year, was captain of the squad and co-captain of the girls' basketball team. "People asked why did we have to be the ones to go. Why can't the white kids come here? The senior experience was not something I enjoyed. You knew nobody wanted you there," Banner said. "You didn't feel like a senior. You were just there. It was so confusing."

White students also lost something that year, said Connie Hipp, who graduated from Beaufort High in 1969, the last year before the upheaval of integration. "I think the school was a lot more crowded," said Donald Gruel, who was on the student council at Beaufort High the year before integration and is

"You kind of gave up your school colors, but it was appropriate to do so," she said. "They lost their school and their colors, too. The only loss I felt was we were no longer the Tidal Waves."

Moving to Beaufort High meant more than losing school colors to black students, Gaither said. It meant losing a community. Robert Smalls was close-knit, and staff had high expectations for students. When they mixed with white students, with unfamiliar teachers, it was easy to get lost in the shuffle. Today, the communities of Beaufort High and other local schools are more colorblind than they were 30 years ago. Students cross the black-white divide with more ease. The story of local residents who struggled for equal education is on The Gazette's front page. There are no advertisements supporting segregation.

Yet the goals of Brown v. Board are not fully realized. The county's black students score consistently lower on state achievement tests than their white classmates. Educators in Beaufort County and across the nation are struggling to find solutions. Perhaps Banner, now in the education field herself, sets the best example. She overcame the trying years of integration and recently earned a doctoral degree. "Not everything is going to be easy. You have to know you can do it," she said. "I followed through in spite of obstacles. "Coming from (St. Helena), where you were nurtured, you were in another environment where there were unknown barriers you didn't have any control over," Banner said. "But you still had to persevere."

Contact Crystal Streuber at 986-5517 or cstreuber@beaufortgazette.com.