

Freedom of Choice in Education

**Pittsylvania County, VA
1964-1969**

**Honoring the minority students
that choose to attend the white schools
before full integration.**

Presented by:
Freedom of Choice Committee
March 2024

Made possible through:
Danville Regional Foundation
Make More Happen Grant

"In the 1964-65 school year, Freedom of Choice was introduced into Pittsylvania County Schools. Several students, showing remarkable Courage, Leadership, and Sacrifice were the first to help break the racial barrier in education. We recognize and celebrate these brave students who were instrumental in paving the way for the transition toward full integration in Pittsylvania County Schools."

Introduction

by Michael Brown:

I first heard of the brave and courageous students who made the choice to attend white schools from a colleague back in 1999 who had been a teacher at Chatham High School in 1965.

Mr. Wyatt and I were both teachers at George Washington High School, in Danville, VA, and were attending a presentation on minorities in the classroom in the GW library. The presenter said something to the effect of how the politicians, who were in control at that time of integration, should be recognized for their hard work to ensure that all students were treated equally.

Mr. Wyatt made the comment to me and the other teachers sitting at the table, "If anyone should be recognized, it should be the brave students who fought for their rights and were the only few Black students to attend the white schools."

Up until that moment, I had only heard of the forced integration of 1969 in Virginia. I had no idea that there had been Black students who had chosen to attend the white high schools.

Mr. Wyatt described a scene where he saw only one Black child on a bus who looked like she was scared sitting in the front. He began telling me about how much respect that he had for those black students who were strong enough to break the color barriers and who took advantage of their rights to attend the same schools as white children.

Mr. Wyatt, who taught Biology, English and Drama at Chatham High School, specifically mentioned to me that Clarissa Tanner Knight was an extremely talented musician. He also mentioned to me that a male student would always dress nicely and that he would always compliment him on his style.

I always remembered hearing about those brave students and, whenever I would meet someone who might have attended school during that period of time, I would ask them about which school they had chosen to attend.

Little did I know that two of my fellow faculty members at GW High School, over 20 years ago, were students during the "Freedom of Choice" era, Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Breakely. Mrs. Breakely even became our Dan River representative

While working at Gretna High School in 2000, I met Mr. Henry Myers. I began to discuss the era when the black students could choose to attend the white schools with him. Mr. Myers was the one who taught me that particular era was called "Freedom of Choice."

As the years went on, I would ask different people I would meet about the "Freedom of Choice" era.

I learned that Mrs. Janice Overby, then a fellow Spanish teacher at Chatham High School, had also been teaching at Chatham High School during that era.

One day, at lunch, I learned that both Mrs. Brenda Carter, whom I had known as an aide when I was a student in elementary school, and later on as a coworker at Chatham High School, had been one of the first Blacks to attend Tunstall High School.

Mrs. Anne Mayo spoke up and said that she had also chosen to attend a white school during Freedom of Choice. I learned that Mrs. Mayo had been one of Mrs. Overby's students during that time period.

I will always remember Mrs. Carter's telling me that her father told her that she would go to Tunstall so that she could get home earlier in order to work on the farm.

One day in 2020 as I was helping Mrs. Margie Richardson distribute the COVID packets for the students in the auditorium, I naturally asked her if she had attended school during the Freedom of Choice era. Margie informed me that she had not, but asked me why I was interested in that particular time period.

I explained to her that, 20 years prior, a colleague had made a huge impression on me when he described the courage and bravery of those first students who had broken the color barrier in Pittsylvania County Schools.

I mentioned to Margie that a former colleague had mentioned that those students would be recognized in some way. I added that if it was going to be done, that it needed to be done soon because that was a long time ago.

The following school year, Margie informed me that she would like to form a committee to recognize those Black students who attended during the "Freedom of Choice" era and asked me who all I knew that might be interested.

Margie got many of us together, spent time setting up appointments for newspaper interviews and radio broadcasts, contacted the Pittsylvania County Library, Historical Society and the NAACP on how they could help us.

I learned so much from working with what was to become the "Freedom of Choice Committee."

I learned that some were not informed about their option to attend another school, but some areas had community meetings on the topic.

One topic that came from several of the Black students who attended during the "Freedom of Choice" era was whether or not to show their true abilities.

They simply did not know how they would be received if they were to outperform a white student. Most of them said that they would only answer if called on.

Many former students expressed that there was a perception that students who attended Southside and Northside High Schools were not as well prepared as those who attended those other high schools, although a former Southside student was accepted to Harvard.

I spoke to Mr. Wyatt in February of 2024 to ask him what he thought made him different from the other teachers of his time,

"I grew up on a farm with no one around me.

The only other children I knew were the children of the sharecroppers.

I never saw them as different from me. I was just happy to have playmates.

When I was at Chatham High, I knew those children were scared.

I knew what I had to do to help them, and I did.

It was just that simple."

STAR-TRIBUNE

Few students braved crossing color line

By DIANA MCFARLAND

Star-Tribune News Editor

Feb 12, 2022



Yearbooks from the county's four high schools show how few black students made the decision to attend a white high school during the era known as Freedom of Choice.

Clarissa Knight felt the same first day jitters of any eighth grader facing his or her first day at high school. Running through her mind were typical questions for a 13-year old girl: “Is this the right outfit? Does my hair look O.K.? Should I take a book bag? What about lunch, buy or carry?”

But this wasn't an ordinary first day for Knight at Chatham High School. It was 1966 and public schools in Virginia were still not fully integrated, although it had been 12 years since the U.S. Supreme Court had ruled on *Brown vs. Board of Education*, that deemed racial segregation to be unconstitutional.

During the 1960s, Chatham, Gretna, Dan River and Tunstall were the white high schools, with Northside and Southside for black students in Pittsylvania County. Since *Brown*, Virginia had instituted a concept called “Freedom of Choice,” where students, black or white, could choose to attend each other's schools. Few black students choose that option and so far, there is no record

of a white student opting to attend a black high school during that time in Pittsylvania County, according to Margie Richardson, who is heading up the Freedom of Choice in Education project at Chatham High School.

Knight's parents had made the decision for her to attend Chatham, as did Calvin Yarbrough's parents, who made that choice for him and his brothers to attend Tunstall High School. In a narrative provided to the Freedom of Choice in Education project, Yarbrough said it was a way for his parents to support the local NAACP initiative to begin integrating the schools.

Along with his two brothers, four other black students from his neighborhood joined Yarbrough in that effort. But that didn't mean he saw them frequently during the day.

"Once the bell rang and I began attending classes, there were classes where, more often than not, I was the only black student," wrote Yarbrough.

Yarbrough wrote of one white student with whom he was often seated next to, who once shared a can of soda with him. "In my mind, I think that was his way of showing that we were all the same," wrote Yarbrough.

Knight was a piano player and soon gained the admiration of her peers and parents. She joined the band and choir. However, weekends were spent with her friends who still attended Northside, and Knight missed the spirit-filled athletic competitions at her former school.

Alice Jeanette Devins was one of the earliest black students to attend Tunstall, arriving in 1965. Devins wanted to attend a school that provided benefits not accessible at the black Southside High School, such as hot running water, heated school buses and air-conditioning in the warmer months.

Devins, who initially knew of other black students who intended to brave the new world of integration with her, was surprised when many changed their minds and remained at Southside. "On day one I was the only eighth grade black girl, along with eight black boys. It was a little scary because the white students didn't want us there and made it known by calling us the N-word. They were not accustomed to being up close and personal with black students," she wrote in her narrative for the project.

After one snowstorm, Devins remembers the white kids reaching outside the bus for ice sickles and throwing them at her and her friend. "The bus driver would drive the bus as if he did not see or hear anything," wrote Devins. "These were the kinds of petty things we faced. We were outnumbered so we had to endure it," she wrote.

Teacher Marian Keyes said that the black students often had to provide their own transportation if they wanted to attend the white high school. She said her sister and brother had to walk to the white neighborhood to catch the bus.

Reginald Rice attended Gretna High School beginning in 1968 during Freedom of Choice — a decision made by his father and for which was given short notice. During that first year, Rice made the baseball team. It was during a game with Tunstall that a white Gretna player made a racial statement to a Tunstall player, wrote Rice in his narrative for the Freedom of Choice in

Education project. Rice wrote that the coaches failed to do or say anything. Rice started to do something, but changed his mind and quit the team shortly after that.

Frederick Fowler was a science and biology teacher and just one of two black teachers at Chatham in 1967. He was offered the job and decided to take it, having left South Carolina for more opportunities. Initially Fowler felt he was invading someone else's territory and didn't feel accepted. Despite that, Fowler decided that he was there to teach biology, to teach the subject and not focus so much on individuals. Fowler believes the students accepted him, although the atmosphere in the hallways was more tense. "They used the N word several times," he said, but decided to press on. "I was there to do a job and I didn't let that deter me," he said, adding that the administration supported his work in the classroom but had less control of what went on in the hallway and other parts of the school. During his first year, Fowler brought his lunch to work. He was uncomfortable in the cafeteria and was hesitant to go into a place where he could experience rejection. "You tried to stay away from problems," he said.

Janice Overby was a white teacher at Chatham, having come there in 1968 after teaching in Richmond. Overby remembers being rather unaware of the tensions under the surface and did not know that her black students were there because they decided to be there under Freedom of Choice, as she had taught in a more integrated school in Richmond. For her, that was the way it was. Today, Overby, 80, admits to being a bit embarrassed that she did not know about, or understand, the deep undercurrents and chasms as Virginia moved toward full integration. Growing up in Danville, Overby had always attended segregated schools and said the work of Martin Luther King Jr. was not discussed among those she knew. Overby remembers herself as a young teacher trying to keep up with her workload and being accustomed to having black students in the classroom after coming from Richmond. Mostly, those topics were not openly talked about, she said. Her lack of awareness hit home when she and another teacher, a black woman, were driving together to Virginia Beach to attend some training event. The trip took them through many small Virginia towns, and one with a particularly bustling Main Street. The car windows were rolled down, Overby said, and soon they became an object of interest. "The people just looked so mean," said Overby, to which her companion replied, "You don't know?" "They are mad because the two of us are riding in a car together."

Fowler noticed a change once integration became complete in 1970. First of all, there were more black students, and secondly, the white students appeared to feel freer to accept a black teacher, he said "They seemed to appreciate you as an individual as time progressed," he said.

Chatham was fully integrated by the time Knight was a junior. There was some resentment, as the black kids didn't want to be there and the white kids didn't want them there, she said. For Knight and her Freedom of Choice peers, they felt empowered to shoot for leadership position now the school was fully integrated. The support of her fellow black students decreased the resistance from the white community and Knight went on to be All-State choir, student body president, homecoming representative, runner-up for Miss Chatham High and the lead in two musicals. She graduated in 1971. Knight credits Hampton Benton, a white teacher who nurtured his Freedom of Choice students, many of which went on to professional careers. Knight herself became a music teacher and later an administrator.

Yarbrough felt his mission at Tunstall during those years was to prove to white people — students, teachers, administrators and coaches — that black students were just as smart and

capable, if not more so. Yarbrough said the experience of having to work with those of a different race in times of tension has served him well as an adult and in his professional career. He often still finds himself the only black person in the room, in a meeting or an event. “The confidence and ability to navigate such situations was learned and nurtured during my experiences while at Tunstall High School,” he said.

Project seeks to gather stories

Chatham High School Spanish teacher Michael Brown became intrigued by the Freedom of Choice era when just 23 and working at George Washington High School. It began with a presentation about how to relate to students of other races, he said.

An older white teacher later said there was no reason to bring in an expert on this subject, as there were many in the community who did just that during Freedom of Choice in the 1960s — when some black students made the decision to attend a white high school, as schools were not yet fully integrated in Virginia. This sparked Brown’s interest and he began asking those who may have been in high school at that time about their experiences.

That conversation has since evolved into what has become the Freedom of Choice in Education project. Brown teamed up with Margie Richardson with the Pittsylvania County Chapter of the NAACP, who said these personal stories are being told firsthand from those who lived through the experience.

The project, which is being conducted in conjunction with the Pittsylvania County Library and the Pittsylvania County Historical Society, seeks to collect narratives from teachers and students during the time of Freedom of Choice, roughly from 1963 to 1969. Schools in Virginia became fully integrated by 1970.

Currently, the project has received narratives and interviews from teachers and students from Chatham, Tunstall and Gretna and Dan River, said Richardson.

The black high schools during that time were Northside and Southside high schools. Once compiled, the narratives will be available at the library and the historical society.

“We want our children and grandchildren to know the history. But if we don’t get the information, it will be hearsay. We need to get it now,” said Richardson.



Back Row: Elizabeth Fitzgerald Mayo, Michael Brown, Pastor Reginald Carter, Glen Miller, Pastor Raymond Ramsey;
Front Row: Brenda Breedlove Carter, Margie Lanier Richardson, Henry Myers, Rhonda Griffin, Marian Shelton Keyes,
Inset: Calvin Yarbrough, Elma Patrick Lane, Lisa Tuite, Minister Gayle Hunt Breakley

FREEDOM OF CHOICE

Committee

Plaque Unveiling Ceremony.

Honoring the students who paved the way for integration
during the Freedom of Choice Era 1965-1969

GRETNA HIGH SCHOOL | FEB 3, 2024 AT 9:30 AM
TUNSTALL HIGH SCHOOL | FEB 3, 2024 AT 1:30 PM
DAN RIVER HIGH SCHOOL | FEB 17, 2024 AT 9:30 AM
CHATHAM HIGH SCHOOL | FEB 17, 2024 AT 1:30 PM

Entertainment and Food Provided

RSVP Contact 434-429-4030 OR 434-203-3466 OR 434-250-4021

Danville Register & Bee

Jan 29, 2024

Pittsylvania County Students who paved the way for integration in Pittsylvania County high schools to be honored.

On Saturday, the first two of four plaques will be unveiled honoring Freedom of Choice students, a scantily documented, yet pivotal moment in school integration in the late 1960s in Pittsylvania County.

The first event is planned at 9:30 a.m. Saturday at Gretna High School. Tunstall High School's program will be at 1:30 p.m. Saturday.

It all started two years ago when a teacher made a statement about integration, Henry Myers told the Register & Bee in a phone interview.

The conversation with another teacher of the era pivoted to asking why there were only one or two Black students on a bus.

Members of the Freedom of Choice committee include, Brenda Breedlove Carter, Margie Lanier Richardson, Henry Myers, Rhonda Griffin, Marian Shelton Keyes, Elizabeth Fitzgerald Mayo, Michael Brown, Reginald Carter, Glen Miller, Raymond Ramsey, Calvin Yarbrough, Elma Patrick Lane, Lisa Tuite, and Gayle Hunt Breakley.

Noting that the students had to be brave to go through that, it was suggested to come up with a way to honor them.

In October 2021, the group was launched.

It turns out that little has been committed to the history books on the program in Pittsylvania County.

The Freedom of Choice program was brought about because schools were not integrated fast enough, Myers, a member of the committee, said. I think the Freedom of Choice program really made the integration process in Pittsylvania County go so much smoother.

The plaques will be placed at all four high schools with names of Black students who decided to attend the county's white schools. Freedom of Choice ran from 1965 to 1969. It gave Black students the opportunity to attend white schools if they wanted to, Myers said. Ultimately the courts stepped in because the integration process was not moving along fast enough.

Pittsylvania County had some of the smoothest integrations in the state of Virginia, Myers said, noting that they found no major problems during research.

The celebrations come during Black History Month and also the 70th anniversary of Brown v. Board of Education. That's when the U.S. Supreme Court in 1954 ruled that children separated in public schools based on race was unconstitutional.

The first task was to find the names of the students. For that, committee members turned to yearbooks and started talking about the situation in Pittsylvania County at the time. That really inspired us, Myers said. As we started getting into the yearbooks, we started finding students.

Chatham proved the most difficult because the school didn't have yearbooks. Myers said they were turning new ground when researching. While information was found on the history of education in Pittsylvania County and particularly Blacks it didn't really address the Freedom of Choice in Virginia.

Finding names was the easy part. Tracking the people down was the time-consuming aspect. Once we found names, we had to then try to find a relative or someone in the community, then try to get in touch with the person themselves, Myers explained. We didn't want to miss anyone. Even last week people were still calling the committee back.

The former students provided written or video chronicles of their time during Freedom of Choice.

The Pittsylvania County Library, the Pittsylvania County School Board and the Danville Regional Foundation helped with the two-year project.

The interviews will be archived at the Pittsylvania County History Center, a part of the library system.

The Pittsylvania County History Center houses historical documents, online databases, local veterans' history, railroad histories, and numerous records and narratives on the history of Pittsylvania County, Pittsylvania County Library Director Rhonda Griffin said in a statement.

Each high school will have a plaque with the names of students. Tunstall High School has the most with about 110 students. Dan River and Chatham high schools have about 95 each.

Gretna High School has only around five. Gretna's low numbers are a result mostly of logistics, Myers explained. Northside High School a Black-only school was only a few minutes from Gretna High School.

However, say if someone lived in the Whitmell area of the county, there were miles away from either Northside or Southside High School, the other Black-only education facility. Attending Tunstall High School shaved a lot of time off of a drive to and from classes.

At one time, according to Myers, there were as many as a dozen white high schools in the county, yet only two for Black students. By comparison, Halifax had only one white and one Black high school for the entire county.

In addition to few details archived on the Freedom of Choice, Myers who graduated from Northside High School in 1976 didn't find out about the program until years later. Some people heard about Freedom of Choice and some didn't, he explained. I don't even remember hearing about it.

Looking back, he said he wasn't sure he would have wanted to leave the school that was part of his life since the first grade. My allegiance had always been to Northside, he explained. I had that real love in my heart at the school.

But Myers remembers the times growing up in the 1960s. There were white-only water fountains and others designated for Blacks.

It wasn't until he went into the Army in an integrated environment that it all became vivid to him. But at the same time, he didn't have much time to think about things like that with a raging war. When he returned back to Pittsylvania County in 1973, he started to wonder why school names had changed and learned what happened integration while he was away.

On Feb. 17, the plaques will be unveiled at the two other high schools. Dan Rivers presentation is planned at 9:30 a.m. and the one for Chatham is set at 1:30 p.m.

Entertainment and food will be provided at all four events. RSVPs are requested.

Charles Wilborn (434) 791-7976
cwilborn@registerbee.com
@CWilbornGDR on Twitter

The four plaques will be inscribed with "In the 1964-65 school year, Freedom of Choice was introduced into Pittsylvania County Schools. Several students, showing remarkable courage, leadership, and sacrifice were the first to help break the racial barrier in education. We recognize and celebrate these brave students who were instrumental in paving the way for the transition toward full integration in Pittsylvania County Schools.

The unveiling ceremonies are set this Saturday and Feb. 17

Feb 3, 2024

Gretna High School, 9:30 a.m.

Tunstall High School, 1:30 p.m.

Feb. 17, 2024

Dan River High School, 9:30 a.m.

Chatham High School, 1:30 p.m.