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-October 2013
W: This is Marna Weston recording for the Sam Proctor Oral History Project
at the Sunflower County Civil Rights Organization on September 13, 2008
in Indianola, Mississippi. I'm speaking with Gloria Carter Dickerson. Thank
you very much for agreeing to do the interview.

D: You're welcome.

W: Would you please spell your first and last name, please?

D: My first name, Gloria, is G-l-o-r-i-a and my last name is Dickerson, D-i-c-k-
e-r-s-o-n.

W: Could you please state your date of birth?

D: My date of birth is July 17, 1953.

W: And could you please state your place of birth?

D: My place of birth is Bolivar County, Cleveland, Mississippi.

W: Could you please state who your parents are?

D: My parents are Matthew Carter and Mae Bertha Carter.

W: And they have both passed?

D: They have both passed. My mom died in 1999, my dad died in 1988.

W: I'm very sorry. What was their place of residence, their primary residence?

D: Their place of residence was also Bolivar and Sunflower County,
Mississippi.

W: Okay. Did you have siblings?

D: Yes, my mom and dad had thirteen children. They had eight girls and five
boys, and I'm number nine out of the thirteen.
W: Okay, now this is an exercise we can go through—but we don’t have to, but can you name everybody and do you want to name them in order, or do you—

D: I can name them in order. I’ll start at the oldest. Her name is Etna, she’s Etna Threats now. Then there’s Bertha, Bertha Huckabee, Matthew Carter Jr., John Carter, Ruth Whittle, Larry Carter, Stanley Carter, myself, Gloria Dickerson, Pearl Owings, Beverly Carter, Deborah Smith, and Carl Carter.

W: Okay. Could you state, please, where you received your elementary school education?

D: I received my elementary school education from Hunter Elementary in Drew, Mississippi.

W: And middle and high school?

D: My junior high school, I started Drew High School in the seventh grade, so my junior high was at Drew High School as well as my high school, was Drew High School.

W: And your education past high school?

D: My education past high school, I received a Bachelors of Business Administration from the University of Mississippi in 1974, and then I received a Masters of Business Administration from Millsaps College in Jackson, Mississippi in 1992.

W: Okay. Are you now, or have you ever been, married?

D: I’m currently married. My husband’s name is Donald Dickerson.

W: Do you have children?
D: We have one son and his name is Dietrich Carter.

W: How old is Dietrich?

D: Dietrich is thirty-five years old, born in 1973.

W: Okay, thank you very much. The purpose of this interview has started because we just watched a phenomenal documentary called *Intolerable Burden*, based upon a book called *Silver Rights*. The premise of this movie and this book is the story of your family and your family's fortitude in dealing with segregation and desegregation in the Mississippi school system. Could you frame that story for the people who will be listening for this later on—what, in your words, is the significance of what has happened and what did happen that lead to our conversation?

D: What happened was that, in 1965, seven of my sisters and brothers—and I was one of those seven—we integrated the schools in Drew, Mississippi, which is Drew Public School District, and we did it on the Freedom of Choice Plan that the school district had sent out. What the plan said was that, any parent or any child could choose to go to any school that they wanted to in that particular district, regardless of their race, and we chose the white school versus choosing the all-black school. They did that because they were trying to keep the federal money and they had to come up with a plan to desegregate the schools and, of course, because of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. So they came up with this plan, and I suspect that they came up with the plan because they thought that the white parents would choose to send their kids back to the white schools and the black
parents would choose to send their kids back to the black school. They thought that because we lived on a plantation; we were sharecroppers, we were poor, we were living in poverty, and my family and I—my mom and dad—depended a lot on living on that plantation, they really didn’t own anything. So the people who grew up that plan thought that, since the black people had no other choice but to depend on white folks for their living, and because of the racism at the time, that we wouldn’t dare choose a white school rather than a black school.

W: But they were wrong. [Laughter]

D: They were wrong. We did it anyway. We decided, and my mama decided, that education meant so much to her—and she’d always said that she’d want her children to go to school and graduate and make a successful life for themselves, because she said that, as far back as she could remember, all her family had been in poverty. She came up in poverty, her mama was in poverty, her grandmother was in poverty, and she was just tired of everybody having to live in poverty and she didn’t want her children to live in poverty. She thought that the key and the way out of poverty was to get a good education. So, when the chance came for us to choose what we thought was a better school that was better-equipped and had been better teachers, probably, because of their education, that she would choose the school that was better. So that’s what we did, in the name of getting an education and getting out of the cotton fields and also lifting ourselves out of poverty. She kept saying that she was going to
break the cycle of poverty for her family, and she was determined that she was going to do that, and the way to do it was through education. So, that's why we chose to go to one of the all-white schools.

W: That decision was not popular in the community that you lived in, was it?
D: No, it was not. Most people were intimidated, they were afraid; even after we did it, the overseer at the plantation on which we lived came out and demanded that we withdraw from the school.

W: Do you recall his name?
D: His name is Thornton, Mr. Thornton. That's all I knew. He was not the plantation owner, he was what you call the overseer of the plantation, and he came out to tell my dad that he was upset about us being—that they had enrolled us in an all-white school, that he was shocked out about, and that he should immediately go out there and take us out of the white school.

W: Now, what was your mother's response to this man saying that—or trying to dictate where she should send her children to school?
D: My mama's dad came in and he told my mama, he said, Mr. Thornton out there, he told me that I needed to go out there and take the kids out of the school. He told me that he would go out there with me to take the kids out of the school. Then he told me to come in and talk to my wife about it and see what she has to say about it. So my mama said, at that time, she said, well, I tell you what. You go back out there and you tell that man that he does not tell me where to send my kids to school, and I would be crazy
trying to tell him where to send his kids to school. [Laughter] My dad’s response was that, well, Mary, I’m not going to tell him all that. I’m just going to tell him we’re going to keep our kids in the school. So that’s what he did; he went back out there and told them that.

W: That might be difficult for a listener, hearing this, to understand why this is so funny with you and me, but I’ve just seen the movie with you, so I’ve seen the strength and passion of your mother in the statements that she made, particularly statements toward the end of her life that were recorded in this video. So there was no way she was ever going to agree to that, was she?

D: No, she was not going to agree with that. She had made up her mind; this is my opportunity to get my kids in a good school, to keep them in school during all nine months, because at the black schools you had split sessions where the kids only went to school for six months out of a year. They were out of the school to go to the cotton field, either to pick cotton or chop cotton, and the white kids always went to school nine months out of the year. So, she was saying, this is my chance to get my kids in a school where education—where they can get a good education, and this is something that I’ve looked forward to all my life and thought about all my life, and now this is my opportunity and I’m not going to let anybody take that away from me.

W: So the district was systematically setting up young black children as labor in the agricultural system and denying them a third of the education, at
least, that the white kids were getting. And your parents weren’t going to have that.

D: They weren’t going to have that any longer. They lived with it for a while because—I remember my mama telling me that, telling us that, a lot of times she would get ready to send us to school at the all-black school, and then by the time the busses get ready to come, the overseer would come out to the plantation and say, well, your kids can’t go to school today; they need to stay home and go to the fields and get that cotton out of the fields. She would say she would go back in the house and she’d cry and cry and cry, and she’d say, this is not right. He’s stopping me from sending my kids to school because you want them to be laborers to get the cotton out of the field. She didn’t like that, that we couldn’t go to school. Even with the days that she would want to send us to school, they would stop her from sending her kids to school because they had to pick cotton or chop cotton.

W: I’d like to talk about what happened when you went to the school system, you and your brothers and sisters, but before then—just because of the time this is taking place, you know, the early 1960s, mid-1960s, what was taking place in your family in terms of the movement? Was your family aware of the things that were going on, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and COFO, and what was taking place in your family because of these things taking place around you?
D: Well, in the 1960s, I know Mama talked a lot about going to mass meetings. She actually took some of us—civil rights mass meetings—and she took some of us with her sometimes. She was all into the voter registration, going to voter registration, and my sisters were all into the marches, the marches that were taking place during Freedom Summer 1964. My sisters, two of my sisters, Ruth and Naomi—I think I missed her name, Naomi—came to Jackson, went to Jackson, Mississippi, to march for being able to sit down at lunch counters and that kind of thing. They were arrested and they went to jail, and my older sister, Naomi, she was over eighteen at the time, so she stayed in jail I think probably about nine days. My younger sister, Ruth, who was not eighteen, stayed in jail I’m thinking close to three days. But they talked a lot about that experience, of how they came and how they would put—and my mama talked a lot about that experience, how they took them to the fairgrounds and made them lay on the pavement because the jails were full, and so everybody had to go to the fairgrounds. We talked a lot about what was the purpose of the march and why were they marching and why were they singing these Freedom Songs. We sung a lot of Freedom Songs in our house at that time, also, while the movement was going on. I also remember one night, when Mama was going to a mass meeting, she took me and Dr. King was there, and he spoke at a church in Cleveland, Mississippi. I’ll never forget that night that he really spoke, it just inspired me so much to see him talking about people fighting for their rights and doing it in nonviolent ways
and let justice roll down to everybody. That inspired me so much. There was a mood in our house around fighting for your rights, fighting for justice. Mom and Dad had joined the NAACP, and she talked about it all the time, even before the Freedom of Choice Plans came out. She’d talked about it one day—soon, you all are going to be going to another school, and you won’t be going to school with just all-blacks, it’s going to be an integrated school. So the mood in the house, that’s why when we got the papers of Freedom of Choice, we’d say, oh, yeah, this is what Mama been talking about, that we would someday get to go to a better school. So we say, yeah, we want to do this. Even before we talked to Mama, we said, we want to do this, because this is what she’s been talking about, how we can get a good education and then we won’t have to pick cotton anymore and we won’t have to go hungry anymore and we can eat whenever we get ready to eat. So this was like, this is a dream come true; now, we can start preparing for a better day. Also, at that time, we knew about the civil rights workers that had been killed in Philadelphia and they had been buried and when they found them. We knew that was going on. We just knew things because we were watching some of it on T.V. We knew it was a tough time and we knew people were dying because it was a tough time; they were dying because they were trying to vote and trying to register and trying to sit at lunch counters and things like that. We knew it was a scary time, but somehow I didn’t connect the two. I didn’t connect that I would be in danger about going to school with all the
other things that were going on. I'm sure Mama and Dad did; they connected the two, that we were going to be in danger as well. I never really connected that; I was twelve years old. I knew that was going on, but I didn’t connect that I was going to be in danger once I went to the school.

W: So an official letter came to your house to let you know that the option existed?

D: Right.

W: Okay, and your family talked about it.

D: Right.

W: What happened when you went to school?

D: When we went to school, it was a different experience from what I expected. I expected it to be more friendly atmosphere than it was; it was a hostile environment. It was like no one wanted to get next to you, that you were a stranger, you were somewhere you’re not supposed to be. It was, you know, there were a lot of name-calling, nigger this and go back to your own school. Very hostile environment. And no one would talk to you or even get close to you, so that was the kind of environment that we walked into on a daily basis. Then, when we would come home in the evenings sometime, we realized that—I didn’t realize that Mama was afraid as she was for us, because she later told us that she would go to bed as soon as we left for school and she would just pray all day long. She lay in the bed, she couldn’t move, it’s like she was paralyzed, just
worried about her kids and saying, Lord, take care of my kids. And she says she didn’t say any fancy words, just, Lord take care of my kids. Then, when we would come on the bus, she would come out to the bus, she said, and she would count us one-by-one to make sure we all got off the bus. That was a signal that she thought that they may do something to one of us, may not come home one day. They may kidnap one of us or take one of us away, put us in the river or something like that, just to make an example out of what would happen to you if you did go to one of these schools. She was really concerned about that, that that would happen.

The bus driver was really mean to us, too.

W: Do you remember the bus driver’s name?

D: I can’t remember his name, but the first couple of days, we would sit on the first, because it’s—the front rows of the bus. We were the first ones to get on the bus, and so we would sit on the front rows of the bus. About the third day, he told us to get up and go to the back of the bus, because you know your place on the bus. Niggers don’t sit on the front seat of the bus. [Laughter] So you just need to go back to the back. We, as young people, as children, followed his instructions and went back to the back of the bus. Like I say, it was a really hostile environment. Everybody seemed like they were angry with us, and we were just children, not really truly understanding why they were so angry with us.

W: What about school officials? The bus driver was mean, the other kids were mean, what about the principal or the teachers?
D: Some of the teachers were just as mean. The teachers were mean as well, I mean, the teachers saw what was going on in terms of the kids throwing the spitballs and throwing the chalk and pushing us around, and the teachers didn't say a word about it. Neither did the principal or anybody. Sometimes, they encouraged it. Sometimes the teachers would also say nigger in the classroom, in particular if they were teaching history class and they were talking about the Civil War. They would make a mockery out of the Civil War—and I say they, there was one particular teacher that I know that did that with my sister.

W: Do you remember his name or her name?

D: I can't remember his name or her name, either. But I know they used the word nigger this and nigger that, so that the teacher's weren't any better, the administrators weren't any better, we didn't have any friends at that school. Nobody was friendly, nobody cared about what people said to us or did to us.

W: How did you negotiate, then, as family members? Being the only black students in the school, you were all family, did you arrange to meet each other during the day or try to reinforce each other? Did you have any of the same classes or were you complete separated throughout the entire day?

D: We were, at the high school, we didn't have any classes together, no. So we were in the classrooms by ourselves. We didn't see each other during break because we didn't know where each other were, I guess, or had ten
minutes between classes, so we didn’t try to get in touch with each other.
We did get together every day at lunch. We would go sit on the steps of the gym every day at lunch, and we did that every day. We knew where we were going to meet for lunch. So, rather than eat in the cafeteria, we just went to the steps and just sit there and talked on the steps.

W: Was the cafeteria a particularly negative environment?

D: It was a particularly negative environment, because we didn’t go to the cafeteria at the same time. They did let us out by classes, so if I went to the cafeteria, I didn’t get to go with one of my sisters or brothers, I had to stand in the line with all of the white kids. Then, when I went to sit, no matter where I sit, everybody at that table would jump up or everybody in that aisle would jump up. So, having to go into a cafeteria every day and get your plate and get your lunch and go sit and see everybody jump up, it’s just something—it’s not something good to see.

W: Pause for a second.

[Break in interview]

D: Jump up and move somewhere else and leave you sitting there by yourself. So we just stopped eating in the cafeteria because it was just painful to eat in a cafeteria, to see that.

W: Were the cafeteria workers, the people that served the food, also mean?

D: The workers didn’t say very much, not that I can remember. Most of it would start after we would get our food, and then we would try to sit at a table. So that was kind of painful.
W: Were there any African American employees at the school at all?
D: Yeah, there were some janitors. We had some janitors at the school that were black.
W: Were you able to talk to them at all, or were they supportive—
D: No.
W: Okay, so they were also—
D: They didn’t talk to us, either. Nobody talked to us. They might have been afraid, I don’t know, but they never talked to us, either.
W: What was a typical school day like?
D: Typical school day like. Well, we’d get there in the mornings and go to your homeroom and nobody would say anything to you. Then, we’d change classes and you’d get into the hallway and people would skirt to the other side of the hall as you walk down the hall. Most of the time, we were assigned seats in the classroom, so we’d go in and—probably assigned by alphabetical order—and you’d go in and find your seat and sit. Then, in most classes, the person sitting either the front of you or the side of you would try to move their desk to get as far away from you as you could. We would go to lunch, and that’s when we would go outside and sit on the steps. After lunch, we may have a library period, and I would go to the library and nobody would share our table with me at the library so I’d spend my time studying in the library really hard, studying really hard and try to block out what people were saying around me, just keep my head in my book and not look up. I didn’t want to hear what they
had to say, so—and then, at the end of the day, we’d go home and we’d be hungry. We’d go in the . . . and then you got back, got up the next day and went and did it all over again.

W: Did any of this affect your grades or the way you dealt with being a student?

D: I dealt with it—I delved into my studies. One of the reasons was to prove to them, and myself, that I was capable and that I could make grades, and that I could make the best grades in the class. So, I always studied really hard so that I could make good grades—not for their benefit, but for my benefit, to know that I could actually do that; I could actually take all this pressure and all this stuff around me and still make good grades. They knew that, if I got a good grade, I made a good grade because the teacher was not going to give me a good grade if I didn’t make a good grade, so.

W: Were you worried that the teacher would evaluate you harshly and you wouldn’t receive credit you should get for what you had done?

D: No, I never did. When we first started school, we watched that very carefully. Mama would make sure that we got the grades that we deserved; she may send them off to somebody or whatever. I think they were afraid not to give us our grade because they didn’t know what was going to happen to them if we did. We may report it. Mama did finally get some contacts at the Health, Education and Welfare where she would call if something was going wrong. People would check on us and make sure that we were being treated right at school, and so the administrators was
really afraid to do anything that was not on the up-and-up, so that was
good.

W: If you were to reflect on this entire experience with what you and your
family went through, and your mother’s and father’s sacrifices, and the
type of person that you are today, would you say that it was worth it?
Would you do it again? Or how would you describe the situation?

D: I would say it was worth it. I would say I would do it again. I would
describe it as some lessons that I learned in that, that it was good for me.
It prepared me for what I’m supposed to be doing with my life. In my life
purpose and life calling, it prepared me for that. I would say I learned a lot
about people and I learned a lot about racism, and I was like a fly on the
wall, I guess. I heard everything that they were feeling, I heard everything
that they were saying. I heard it, they didn’t hold back. I heard that, so
now, today, I know the way some people think because they would talk to
me about—they wouldn’t talk to me, they would talk to each other—about
what their parents were feeling, what their parents were telling them in
regard to racism and race and how much they hated black people or
niggers and that kind of stuff. So I heard all of that and I know all of that,
but I think I was put there in that place so that one day I would come out
and start to work against racism. I was put right in the midst of it to hear
about it, and I feel like this is something that I want to do, is to deal with
the racism part of what’s in this country, because I was put there for a
lesson. My mama always said, everybody have their purpose in life, and
whatever purpose you had in life, then God would build in those strengths and give you those skills and those tools so that you can carry out your purpose. I just think I was there to prepare myself for the way I'm supposed to live my life, and so I'm grateful for that experience, because the way I live my life now, I enjoy what I do, I enjoy my work, I love people and I'm always trying to help inspire other people to do great. So, I'm in a position to do that because of my experiences.

W: Thank you so much for the interview, I appreciate it. I'd like to ask you a closing question, but you don't have to answer it if you don't want to. It's about the election coming up. Can Barack Obama be elected President of the United States in 2008?

D: Yes, I think he can. Mm-hm, I think he can. I think it's possible, and I was shocked when I heard that—when he got to be a serious contender, it really, really shocked me. But now that we're getting more and more into it, I think he can win it. I think it's going to tough, because I think some people still have that racism and that hard line against black people advancing, and it's in their hearts. So, it's going to be tough, but I think some people have begun to see the light and their hearts are beginning to change somewhat, and so they're more accepting of a black person now than what they used to be back forty years ago, some people are. So I think he can win.

W: What do you think your mom would think about his candidacy?
D: Oh, she would love it. She would be thrilled to death. She would be thrilled to death. She would say, you know, all the work that we did has not been done in vain. You know, people died for this, I mean people went to jail for it, beat and all kinds of things. She would say, finally, we’re seeing some of that work pay off, and we have to be thankful to our ancestors for what they did for us, and that’s one reason I like to do work myself because there are others out there who have paved the way for me and I have to honor my ancestors. I’m obligated to honor my ancestors with giving back what I can give back because somebody gave back so that I could have. So she would be thrilled to death.

W: Thank you, Gloria Carter Dickerson, for the interview.

D: Oh, you’re welcome.

[End of interview]

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