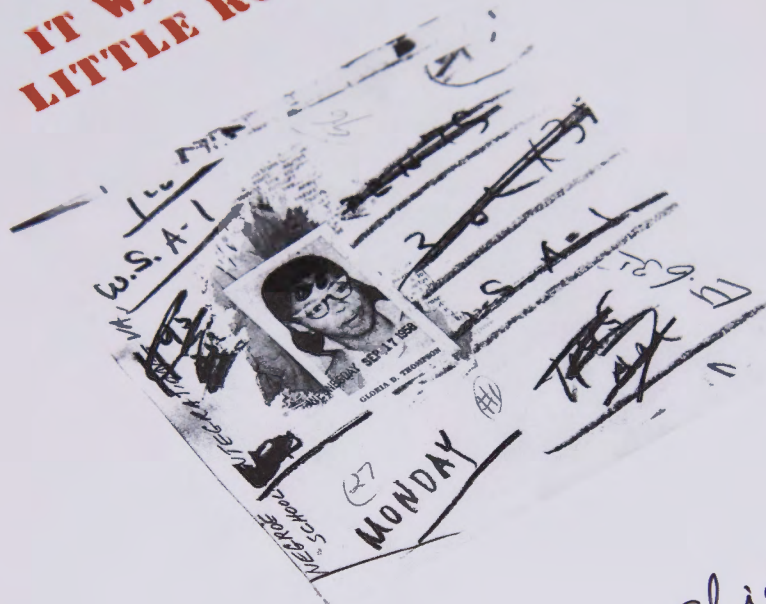




CLARISSA

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LITTLE ROCK

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Clarissa Sligh
CLARISSA SLIGH
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When the Supreme Court of the United States ruled in the 1954 case of *Brown vs. Board of Education* (347 U.S. 483) that state-sanctioned segregation of public schools was a violation of the 14th Amendment and therefore unconstitutional, my mother thought that would mean that I would begin tenth grade at nearby Washington and Lee (W&L) High School in Arlington, Virginia. Everyday we rode the school bus past W&L and other neat and well-equipped white schools to Hoffman's Boston (H-B), our small, dilapidated school on Arlington's southside. Some schools in nearby Washington, D. C., Maryland and Delaware were desegregated that fall after the decision. But in Virginia, we were sent back to segregated schools.

Some of our "colored" teachers expected little from those of us who came from Halls Hill, a neighborhood composed mostly of day laborers and domestic workers.

But one teacher, Miss Coles, let me know that she expected me to "step up to the bat" at H-B. As it slowly became my home away from home, Momma let me study in her bedroom after dinner. I got good grades.

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Mozelle loved farm life. But an untimely tragedy occurred after they had several years. This event changed her family's life. Except that her parents didn't place one, the obituary of her mother have read:

"Council Jordan, aged 45, died under violent circumstances in 1923, an apparent suicide. His body was brought to the homestead badly injured. He and his wife were bound, and his broken neck was the cause of his death. His parents, Irene and his sister, Oscar, 8, and Taffy."



Mozelle was inside the house but saw the group
of white men **pull Council's body from a
wagon and dump it on the ground.**
As they exited down the red dirt road from which
they had come, she ran out to help him.

Her parents were still in the fields.
Not able to accept that her brother was dead,
she
cradled his lifeless body into
her
lap and rocked him back and

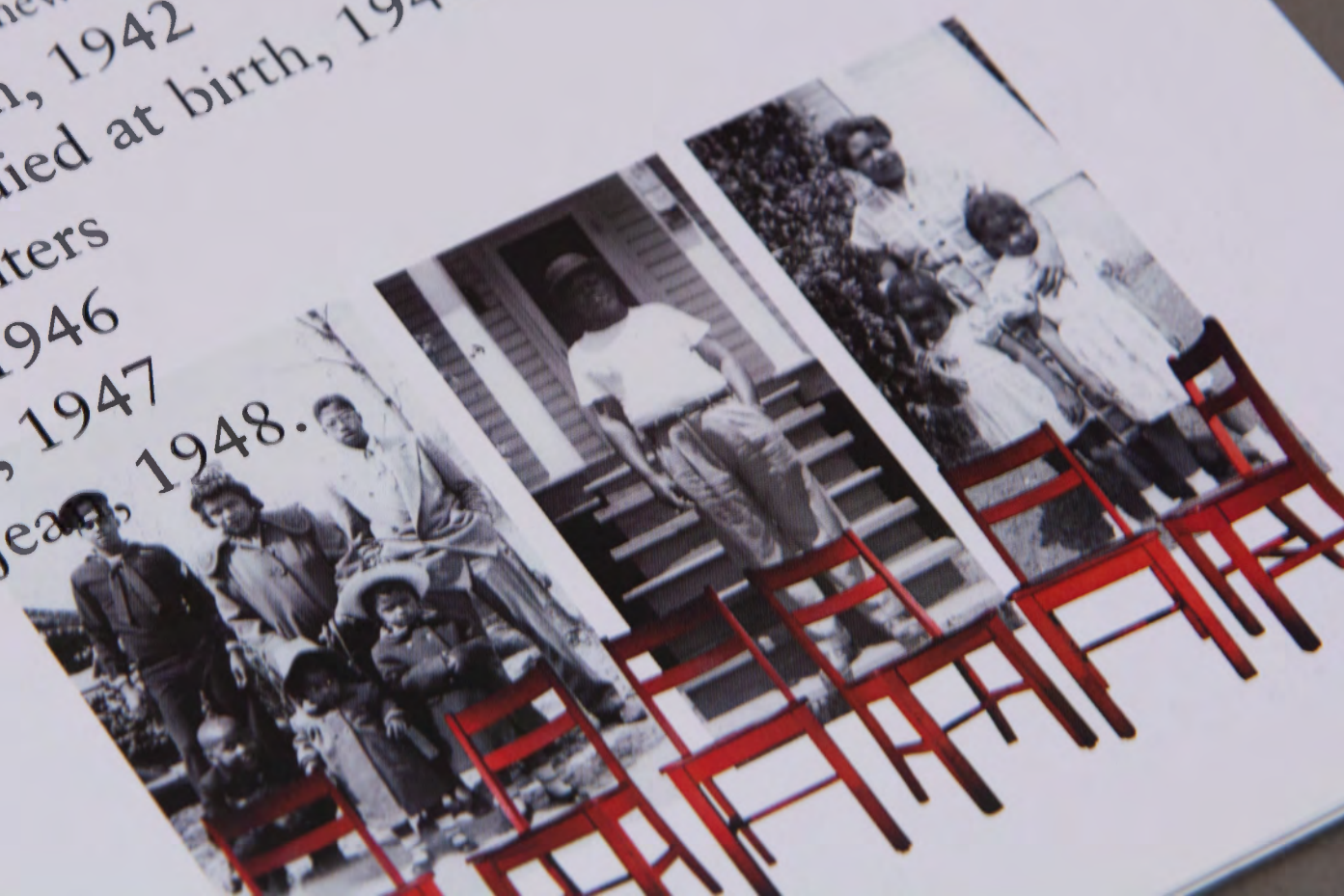


with heavy
their work in the fields.
yard, they placed their sons,
Crawford, into separate
sacks.
No chances could be taken
that the boys might wander
away from the farm.

The bags were tied shut and hung from trees
to protect them from their older brother's
fate. Hung
to protect them.
Hung
from
trees.

oms, an eat-in
osed in porch that surrou
d his new wife moved in with her,
Within the first year, their baby
was born. Two months later, Ethel returned to help
help save money for the new family's two-bedroom wood
frame bungalow that was being built on a lot next door.

After moving to the new house they had
a son, Stephen, 1942
a son who died at birth, 1944
and daughters
Gloria, 1946
Lillian, 1947
and Jean, 1948.



SVB
CHILDREN



GLORIA



left behind
tools closer to home
Mine was the third group of students
under court order in February of 1971
courtroom, listening to the argument
I had the right to go, whether I was good (not)
great impact on me.

It was also different for me (than for Gloria and Stephen) in other
ways. They were essentially thrown into the white classrooms
alone. Gloria had been adored at the black high school. She was
cute and the boys ran after her. Then to be isolated like that,
I understand her pain.

A year later, there were more black students but we were
definitely in the minority. I was scared and anxious, but
I said to myself, "Doggone it, I'm going to push
through this and I'm going to succeed."

That's what I got out of integration. I continued taking on more
and more challenges just to "prove I could do it."

But Stratford was a totally different culture. There was a
business, which to them is the norm.

A BACKGROUND OF EVENTS

1863 - THE EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION

January 1, 1863
A proclamation issued by the President of the United States, Abraham Lincoln, that ordered that all persons held as slaves should be free.

1865 - AMENDMENT XIII

(to the United States Constitution)
Ratified December 18, 1865, the 13th Amendment outlawed slavery.

1866 - THE CIVIL RIGHTS ACT OF 1866

Was to give the newly emancipated Negro equality with whites before the law. The first section provided (1) that there should be no discrimination in civil rights on account of race; and (2) that inhabitants of every race shall have the same right to contract, sue, take and dispose of property, bring actions and give evidence, and to equal benefit of all laws for the security of the person and property.

1867 - THE ANTI-PEONAGE ACT OF 1867

Was aimed at the system of peonage that still existed in the Territory of New Mexico—a system inherited from the days of Spanish rule, prohibits the holding of anyone in peonage or involuntary servitude.

1868 - AMENDMENT XIV

(to the United States Constitution)
Ratified July 1868, the 14th Amendment conferred citizenship to all persons born or naturalized in the United States.

1870 - AMENDMENT XV

(to the United States Constitution)
Ratified March 30, 1870, the 15th Amendment gave all citizens the right to vote. Voting was not just a southern, but a national issue. In 1868, 11 of the 21 Northern states did not allow blacks to vote in elections. Most of the Border States, where one-sixth of the nation's black population resided, also refused to allow blacks to vote.

1870 - ENFORCEMENT ACT OF 1870

May 1870, was enacted to enforce the 14th and 15th Amendments. The law makes federal crimes of the bribing, intimidation, or racial discrimination of voters. The statute strengthens federal authority against anti-black groups like the Klu Klux Klan by outlawing conspiracies aimed at preventing the exercise of constitutional rights.

1871 - THE FORCE ACT OF 1871

February 28, 1871
Set up a system of federal supervision of elections within the states in order to stop illegal voter registration practices.

1871 - THE KLU KLUX KLAN ACT OF 1871

April 1871
Was designed to stem the rising tide of terrorism in the southern states, led by the Klu Klux Klan (established in 1866) against Negroes. In October 1871, President Ulysses Grant sent in troops to deal with the terrorist situation in nine South Carolina counties. By the time it finally ended, thousands of blacks and hundreds of whites had been massacred or driven from their homes and communities.

In 1970, Ethel's granddaughter, Tammy, entered public school in Arlington. She was living with her mother Clarissa in her grandparent's home.



staff was racially mixed and the principal was taught at Tammy's mother's high school.

Part of Tammy's young life had been lived in Africa. Her elementary teachers could not relate to much of what she told them. But the greatest negative impact on her school life was "internalized racism," the means by which we as black people perpetuate and "agree" with our own oppression. The 1970s was a period of opening and experimentation with Arlington's school integration policies. At Tammy's elementary school, the teaching principal was Mr. Griffin, who had

THOMASINA (TAMMY) SPEAKS

When I went to school in the first grade, I walked through an opening in a big wall between the back yards of the black neighborhood and the white neighborhood. The wall was so big that you couldn't see the rooftops of the houses. Legal (de jure) segregation had ended, but "that's the way it is" (de facto) segregation had not. We went through the opening in the wall to school, which was in the white neighborhood.

Once I was comfortable with the route, I decided to go in another direction which was a round about way through the white neighborhood. I was always kind of a loner. One day, as I walked down the street there was this little blonde girl outside in her front yard. I was on the other side of the street. She smiled and I smiled. She waved and I waved. So I walked across the street and we talked. She asked me to play with her.

So I thought, "Why not?"

We went in her house. They had a big German Shepherd scared me. Her mother put the dog away. She invited us milk and cookies. We went to the basement and while her mother suggested that I call my grandmother know where I was.

I called Grandma. She was furious and said where you were and so on and so on.

I thought she was just mad because I was in someplace else. But when she came to see me she was really livid.

On the way home, she said over and over
"How could you go to those white people's house?
How could you go to those white people's house?
Don't you know that you're not suppose to do that?"

She was really upset that I had gone to the white girl's house.
I was never allowed to go back there again.

Grandma must have told somebody in her church who told
somebody else. When the kids in the neighborhood found out
that I had played with a little white girl, I was branded an
outcast. I was teased and taunted and chased home from school.
At six years old I was considered a traitor because
I had played with a little white girl.

That experience made me wary of interacting with people outside
my race, especially with people who are white. I don't initiate a
relationship. If we get to know each other at work, the
association ends if I move or go to another job.

On this day I don't remember any of the teachers from the
desegregated elementary school. But I remember the teachers from
kindergarten. They were like family because I saw them in and
out of school. And there was a warmth and an intimacy with
them that I did not experience in the integrated school in
Arlington.

In the integrated school, you were just another kid among the
rest of them. There was never "you are Mrs. Thompson's child
or granddaughter of this person or the
niece or nephew of that person."

My elementary school teachers were just dresses
walking around.
There was no face.
There was no personality.

When I first found out that my Aunt Gloria was one of the
people to desegregate schools here in Arlington, I was
proud that she had to be guarded by policemen,
that people would want to hurt her. I thought,
"Well why do we want to go to their schools anyway?"

But at the same time, I felt proud of her and of our family.
To me they were saying to the world, "We are not going
to let you move us around. We are not going to let you dictate to us what
we can and cannot do." When you are little you don't think of it in that
way. I was proud that our family had taken a stand. I was aware that
integration had to happen in that manner.

Today (1991) I wish black people could find a way to
sense of community, reestablish integrity with one another.
We are afraid of each other now.

For my generation, the message is that the likelihood
of a black woman marrying a black American man is
less than the likelihood that the black community will
be able to survive.



This artist's book was made to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the U. S. Supreme Court's *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954) decision which stated that "separate but equal" public schools were unconstitutional.

It continues a project that was initiated during an artist residency at the Washington Projects for the Arts (WPA), Washington, D.C. in 1991. A portion of the text was transcribed from videotaped interviews, of me with my family, shot by Philip Brookman, with the assistance of Debra Singer. I thank Philip for encouraging me to think about the WPA project in terms broader than I had thought possible.

My gratitude and thanks go especially to my mother, Ethel, on whose path I experienced a rich and eventful life. This project would not have been possible without the participation of my sisters, Gloria and Lillian, brother Stephen and my daughter Thomasina. We share this history with our first cousins, Nancy Evans, Frances Calloway, Lucille Lowe, and Taft Jordan.

Thanks also to Margaret Mandel for encouraging me to finish the story, my assistant Juan Recamán for helping me put the first book together, Ellen Eisenman who read it word for word, Mr. Edwin T. Ford 'the' chauffeur, and Mr. Edward B. Burling, the last survivor of the Bull Moose Party.

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Staff Photo

CLARISSA THOMPSON
... asks for equality

REQUEST
RED

