

**Interview with Dr. Sheary Johnson**  
*Lucy F. Simms School Oral History Project*

**Interview status:** Open to the Public

**Name of interviewee:** Dr. Sheary Johnson

**Name of interviewers:** Emily Hernandez Alvarado and Owen Longacre

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**Duration of interview:** 00:57:01

**Place of interview:** Simms Center

**Language of interview:** English

## Interview with Dr. Sheary Johnson

**Owen Longacre 00:00**

Alright, and so we are officially recording. My name is Owen Longacre. The date is February 15th. It is 3:29 at the start of our interview with Dr. Sheary Johnson. Dr. Johnson, do you consent to this recording and the following interview?

**Dr. Sheary Johnson 00:18**

Yes, I do.

**Owen Longacre 00:20**

Perfect. Then at this case, we will go ahead and get started.

**Emely Hernandez Alvarado 00:25**

All right. Hi, my name is Emily Hernandez. It is February 15th. So today, we are here to get to know you. We weren't able to meet you our last time that we were scheduled to interview so, if you wouldn't mind just saying a little bit about yourself, a little bit of what you do, just to get to know you a little bit.

**Dr. Sheary Johnson 00:47**

Okay. I'm Dr. Sheary Johnson. I am a retired educator who's still teaching full time--different things to different people. I'm in full-time ministry now, but I was a librarian in elementary and high school. And I've taught students who wanted to become librarians at VCU. That was my career. But now I'm full-time ministry and I'm excited to be able to share with you about some of my experiences.

**Emely Hernandez Alvarado 01:37**

Okay, we're glad you're excited as well. So, can you tell us about any of your experiences from Lucy Simms? We know that you did attend eventually Harrisonburg, but we'd like to know, from what you remember what was Lucy Simms like to you?

**Dr. Sheary Johnson 01:55**

Lucy Simms was a good place to go to school in my elementary experience. I had very good elementary teachers. They were very serious about students giving their best and giving their all. I remember learning a lot of things. But it wasn't just in the classroom that we were learning. They did a lot of what we consider extracurricular activities with us. I remember the musicals and the choir. Especially at holidays. We would do a lot of things around the holidays. Christmas, May Day. May Day was a big occasion. In fact, former students came from all around for May Day. Have you all heard of May Day?

**Emely Hernandez Alvarado 03:03**

Yes, we did speak with Tom to learn a little bit about May Day when we did go to Lucy Simms. But if you have any personal experiences with that day, if you wouldn't mind sharing them.

**Dr. Sheary Johnson 03:14**

Well, I liked May Day because it was a full day in the spring. We were all outside and we learned how to wrap the maypole. I liked doing that, wrapping the maypole. That was an honor because they would choose people to be able to do that. Then they'd have a lot of games and other activities and food. It was just a great day of celebration that was planned by the school for the coming of spring, for the arrival of spring.

**Owen Longacre 04:00**

Dr. Johnson I wanted to add to that. We talked a lot about May Day when we did our research on the Simms project, using the website, but we also knew about May Day because I wanted to communicate to you did you know that the Harrisonburg City Public School's Waterman Elementary actually still celebrates May Day?

**Dr. Sheary Johnson 04:20**

Oh, it does? Oh!

**Owen Longacre 04:22**

Yes. And the reason I knew that was my wife is actually a second-grade teacher over at Waterman and she's been there for almost ten years, and we've always done the May Day celebration. It wasn't until we started this project that we realized that was a tradition that actually carried over from the Simms School and it was carried over by one of the teachers there, Mary Awkard.

**Dr. Sheary Johnson 04:47**

Yes.

**Owen Longacre** 04:48

When she was hired there. So there's--some of the traditions and the legacies from the Simms School are still living on in our community.

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 04:55

Well, that's good. Now, Miss Awkard--well, she did get married and her married name was Fairfax. Mrs. Fairfax was very instrumental in my life, not only at the Simms School but after I graduated from Madison and went to work. My first job as a librarian was at Waterman Elementary School.

**Owen Longacre** 05:30

Oh, no kidding.

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 05:31

At Waterman Elementary School and Mrs. Fairfax was, I believe, the second grade teacher there. She really went from the role of being a teacher and a mentor to being a friend. She showed me how to make watermelon pickles [note: Dr. Johnson later shared that she meant to say 'cucumber pickles'], [laughs]. I used to give her rides back and forth to work after I started working at Waterman and so we became great friends.

**Emely Hernandez Alvarado** 06:13

So along with Miss Fairfax—wait, if you don't mind, what are watermelon pickles?

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 06:27

What are watermelon pickles?

**Emely Hernandez Alvarado** 06:29

Yeah.

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 06:30

They're pickles made out of cucumbers.

**Emely Hernandez Alvarado** 06:33

Pickles made out of cucumbers? So it—does it go through the same process of like pickling cucumbers?

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 06:40

Yes.

**Emely Hernandez Alvarado** 06:41

Okay, that sounds interesting. Along with Miss Fairfax, is there anyone that you'd say you'd have, you also had a strong relationship with at school, whether that be friends or another teacher that you could've considered a mentor?

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 06:58

Another teacher that I especially remember is Miss Barbara Blakey. Miss Blakey taught typing. She was a business teacher and she taught typing. I valued the lessons and experiences that I learned because typing helped me get through college. That's how I earned money. Because I could type—I was typing over 60 words a minute—because I could type I was able to get a job on campus at JMU, which helped give me spending money and helped make ends meet while I was on campus there. In the summertime, I used to get a job at the University of Virginia Hospital in Charlottesville, using my typing skills and transcribing the doctor's notes for the records there. So, typing was very—I was so glad that I had taken that class, and that she had taught it so well, that I was able to use that skill.

**Owen Longacre** 08:27

And just for reference, can you explain to us what ages you would have attended the Simms School? And maybe what years, if you can remember specifically when that might have been?

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 08:40

Well, I started Simms when I was six. I couldn't go when I was five because my birthday came after the first of October. So you had to wait another whole year to go to school. When I started school, I was six years old, and I started at Simms School. It was first grade there and then I stayed there until the 10th grade. I went to Harrisonburg High School, the 10th. I think I was about 15 when I changed schools.

**Emely Hernandez Alvarado** 09:41

Okay, yeah. So, from the stories that you have been telling us about those two people, would you say that Simms impacted you and pushed you to pursue the career you went into today?

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 10:01

I would say that indirectly, they prepared me to choose the career that I chose. And the reason I say that is because, a lot of the time, I finished the work that my teachers had for us--for the class--I finished early. So they would send me to the library a lot of the time. I spent a whole lot of time in the library and I would help the librarian do different things. I guess it was during those times that I achieved the love for library work. Even when the librarian went out on pregnancy leave, they did not get a substitute for her. I carried on the work that needed to be done during that time frame. Even to the point of ordering books. That was an awesome experience, to spend the money to buy the books for the library during that time. So I had a lot of experiences there. Maybe not planned, but that turned out to be something that was of value to me. And so when I went to Harrisonburg High School, I did join the library club there. Then I, eventually, got a job as a page at the public library in downtown Harrisonburg. By then, I had quite a bit of experience with libraries and knew well that I would like to do that when I went to Madison.

**Emely Hernandez Alvarado** 12:13

Okay.

**Owen Longacre** 12:15

Mind, if I ask? You, you mentioned a couple teachers, Miss Blakey, Miss Awkard. Do you remember the name of the librarian that seemed to help maybe navigate your path a little bit?

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 12:30

I want to say Miss Bates.

**Owen Longacre** 12:33

Bates?

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 12:34

Mm-hmm. [confirming]

**Owen Longacre** 12:36

And, and just thinking about those three teachers, how would you describe the staff at the Simms School? And what you remember in terms of expectations and the environment that they set up for you as a student? How did, how did those teachers maybe impact the lives of their students, and what was that environment like there at the school?

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 13:03

The elementary and some of the high school teachers—they they were very dedicated and had a firm hand on the students. They weren't afraid of the students at all. If if somebody needed to be corrected, they would correct them. They were very serious about children giving their best. They wanted to get the best out of the children. The expectations were high. It wasn't until I was in the high school part that I did run into some teachers who were not as focused. And unfortunately, those subjects were serious subjects. So I realized that I needed to change environments if I was going to get out of school what I needed to get out of school for my future. At that point I talked with my parents, and they decided to go to the school board and ask if we could change schools. They asked for me, if I could change schools. Then, when they granted the permission, some other parents wanted their children to change too. So there were six of us who integrated Harrisonburg High School.

**Owen Longacre** 14:59

Do you know what year that would have been?

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 15:03

I graduated in '66, so that would have been probably '64.

**Owen Longacre** 15:10

Interesting. I did not know that. So you transferred in 10th grade you said, so you possibly could have graduated from the Simms School, but you chose to go to Harrisonburg. I did not know that.

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 15:28

No, they had not integrated at the time that I graduated, but after I graduated from high school, the total integration came.

**Emely Hernandez Alvarado** 15:43

Okay, so we know that—oh, sorry. Along with spending your time at the library, was there any other things—oh, whether it was a different class or just another activity—oh, that you enjoyed doing at Simms?

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 16:00

At Simms? [pause] The choir. I remember Mr. Moore was the choir director and Miss Fairfax played. She was the pianist.

**Owen Longacre** 16:19

That's right, I remember hearing that.

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 16:21

Yes. We did a lot of songs, a lot of music—classical music, all genres of music—we sang. And the Christmas songs. Those stick out in my mind. In fact, that's one thing that I wish that our youth today could experience more of—those those holiday songs that we had. Of course, today they don't really sing the sacred music in schools much, but we used to do the sacred Christmas songs as well.

**Emely Hernandez Alvarado** 17:12

So were you part of the Operettas? I know that was one of the singing groups that they had there as well.

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 17:20

The Operettas? I don't remember that name. But I did sing in the choir. Maybe that was something that happened later. I'm not sure.

**Owen Longacre** 17:39

Did that choir travel around or anything? Or was that mostly within the school building?

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 17:44

It was mostly within the school, that particular choir. We did extra programs at night and on the weekend or something like that. But I don't remember us traveling much with the Simms choir. We traveled some with the Harrisonburg High School choir. And then I traveled in my choir with Madison.

**Emely Hernandez Alvarado** 18:18

Alright. I know we already asked you if you had any specific friends or anything, but what I want to know is how was the environment in your classrooms? Specifically with the students there and your friends that you had? What was it like, if you remember? What was it like—like a school day? If you can run down like a school day that you had.

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 18:48

Like a school day?

**Emely Hernandez Alvarado** 18:49

Yeah.

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 18:51

Oh, I can remember coming in in the morning and the first thing we'd do, of course, you would have your attendance. We would have, over the loudspeaker, we would have the Pledge of Allegiance. We used to do the Lord's Prayer. In fact, I remember there used to be a religious group that would come in and teach us Bible lessons. After a while, there was a trailer that they would bring that would be there beside the school, and then we would go out to the trailer for the Bible lessons. I don't know—it might have been something that happened as far as the change in the religion in school, and all of that, that made that change necessary for them to be able to still do what they did, but that's just a memory. That was a very valuable thing for me because even though my father's a pastor, and I've been in lots of study groups and things, I still feel like that has served me well over the years because part of that program was memorizing Bible scriptures. You memorize so many scriptures and get a prize, memorize so many more scriptures get another prize. And I kept on doing that. The highest was if you remembered 300 scriptures, you would get to go to camp for a week. So my goal was to go to camp. That was awesome. They had a great camp over near Culpeper. We would go and stay the whole week. That experience was one that happened there at the school. But anyway, you asked me what a typical day was like. After the devotional part, the teacher would collect our lunch money because we had to pay for lunch. She would collect the lunch money and then we'd go into our lessons. Like I said, the elementary teachers really had their lesson plans and their schedule that they kept and so we worked until it was time for lunch. Then after lunch—the lunches were really very good. The cooks fixed homemade meals. They were better than I've seen [phone ringing loudly in background] most school lunches today. We had homemade meals for lunch. [phone continues to ring, caller ID announcement] We had recess, going outside and playing ball. Different ball games, like baseball, kickball, volleyball, you know—

**Owen Longacre** 22:44

Which one of those sports did you play? Well, let's say it this way. Whenever they were picking the teams, I was the last one they would pick. [All laughing] So choir was more your speciality.

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 22:59

[laughing] Right.

**Owen Longacre** 23:02

Well, you've mentioned so many things that happened outside of the building with extracurriculars. You've mentioned some nightly performances from the choir. I wanted to take a moment maybe just to ask about how did the Simms School serve a role in the community at large? And was it seen as a center for the for the Newtown community? Did they have

community events at the school? How did the school also serve the larger confines of the Harrisonburg community?

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 23:42

I believe the school was more like the center—it was at the center of the community. It would have the games and things. People would look forward to that and come back to that. Homecoming. I believe that people enjoyed coming back to the high school and having things. In fact, it was about the only place other than church. It was about the only place you could have something. [The only way to] have an event of any kind would be to use the school.

**Owen Longacre** 24:33

You mentioned it's the only place. Can you elaborate on that a little bit?

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 24:37

When I say the only place... When I grew up, all African Americans sort of stayed on one side of town, on the—you know where Gay Street or—well, it's still on the same side where Waterman is but it didn't go up as far as Waterman school. It didn't go past... I guess that's Main Street? It didn't go past Main Street. So the Blacks had... Whenever they did anything it was within the community. The Black community was from Gay Street going over to Johnston Street, over in that area. In that time—I don't know what's there now—but during that time, there wasn't anything in that area that you could have a function in other than a church or the school.

**Owen Longacre** 25:59

We have spent time looking at some older maps of Harrisonburg and talking about that division. I was interested to see if that's similar to your experience and it sounds like, of course, that would be. So I want to transition, and you talked about leaving—eventually, that you did leave the Simms school, and that maybe, I wanted to ask, was it your choice and your initiative to eventually leave the Simms school in your high school years? Or was that something that was pushed from your parents? And if it was your decision, how did your parents feel about that when that went on? And how did they react to that decision?

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 26:44

Well, it was my choice. Something happened as far as... One of the valedictorians from the Simms school went to Virginia State and she ended up taking remedial classes before she could get into her regular classes. When when I found that out, I thought that should not have happened, in my opinion. Because if you're at the top of your class—of your high school class—you should be able to go to a college and at least go in regular classes if not classes that were extra hard. The other thing was a couple of the teachers that I had in high school at Simms allowed the students to get them off the subject and the whole period, they'd be talking about sports, basketball games, football games, and it wasn't a gym class. It wasn't a PE class. Well, that was not good. So, just a couple things were happening that let me know that I needed to go somewhere where education was treated more seriously. The other thing that I was aware of was that we didn't have new books. We would get the old books from the high school. They would get brand new books and give us the old books. Well, that meant we were studying from



old information. Some information was probably going to be about the same, but others—like science and courses like that—the information changes and you need to have up-to-date materials. Our teachers basically did extra things for us out of their own pockets. The teachers that we had were dedicated to doing extra things for us, but as far as funds, they had to pay for it themselves. So, all of that together, I sat down with my parents and just explained to them that I thought that I needed to go somewhere else to school. So then my father and mother went to the school board and asked if I could go to the high school— [computer alert noise] Harrisonburg High.

**Owen Longacre** 30:25

That must have been a tough decision at the time and something unique at the moment. How did your friends at the Simms School—did they have any reaction to thinking about you leaving and going somewhere else?

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 30:47

Well, since five of them also left at the same time, I guess they could see why I wanted to go and decided they wanted to go as well. Or their parents decided. I don't know exactly how it was with them—who actually made the decision—but I'm sure that the student was involved in the decision making.

**Emely Hernandez Alvarado** 31:30

So once you got to Harrisonburg, were the changes that you were expecting noticeable? How were the teachers different or students different from Simms?

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 31:42

I would say the changes were noticeable [laughs]. The subject matter was a lot harder. The demands for learning—I was in the college bound classes—the demands were a lot stiffer. But I needed that. I needed to be ready to move forward academically. So it was worthwhile doing.

**Owen Longacre** 32:19

You seem like a very motivated person, very self-guided in a way. Did the other five classmates that came with you, did you feel like they had similar experiences at Harrisonburg? Or, was your experience similar in any ways? Or did you feel like maybe everybody had a different experience?

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 32:41

I found out years later—many years later—that their experiences were not remembered as fondly as I remembered mine. I kind of moved in a different track, so to speak, by being in college bound classes, by being in the operettas and the extra... The kinds of things that I was involved in were different from the ones they were involved in. They were moving in another path. And, unfortunately, they had some experiences that were negative. And [both speaking—unclear]

**Emely Hernandez Alvarado** 33:36

Sorry.

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 33:38

So that meant their memories were not as fond as my mine were of my time there.

**Emely Hernandez Alvarado** 33:47

So, could you say, from your experiences, did you feel comfortable attending Harrisonburg? Did you have any negative experiences going there?

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 34:05

I really don't remember any that were that negative beyond... Well, everybody's not going to want to be your friend anyway. That's kind of the way I look at it. Even if I were in an all-Black environment, everybody's not going to want to be your friend. So when that happened in a white environment, you know, people think differently. However they think, that's the way they think. But then there were enough other people who welcomed me and befriended me that it really didn't matter.

**Owen Longacre** 35:01

Can you describe what some of those circles were like where you felt the most comfortable in? Were there any particular teachers in Harrisonburg, or were you able to join the choir at the new Harrisonburg High School, or what are maybe some of your fondest memories of of your time there?

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 35:19

I did join the choir there. Miss Hackman was the choir director. The music was definitely one of the good memories that I still remember and reflect on. Again, the Christmas music and all of the extra activities that the choir had. I was in a special touring group with that choir.

**Emely Hernandez Alvarado** 36:01

Along with joining choir again, were there any other groups you might have been part of whether it was like another club or maybe even just other friends that you shared experiences there with?

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 36:17

Other than music and the library club and—that was about it. [laughs]

**Emely Hernandez Alvarado** 36:30

So in the end, did you like attending Harrisonburg?

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 36:35

Yes. It was a long walk, but it was worth it. I walked all the way from where Simms School is, in that community, all the way over to Harrisonburg High School, and that's not a short walk. Have you walked that far? Have you been between the two places? [laughing]

**Emely Hernandez Alvarado** 37:03

I don't think I have.

**Owen Longacre** 37:05

The previous school, not where Harrisonburg would currently be, but where I guess... It's now called Memorial Hall over at JMU.

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 37:14

Oh, okay.

**Owen Longacre** 37:15

I believe that's the building we're talking about. Is that correct?

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 37:20

It wasn't the new building. They built another high school.

**Owen Longacre** 37:27

Right.

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 37:28

That was Harrisonburg High School. The one that I graduated from was the old Harrisonburg High School.

**Owen Longacre** 37:36

Right. I think it's called Memorial Hall now.

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 37:40

Okay.

**Owen Longacre** 37:41

Just for reference for them and it's funny we're talking about that because they're now building a new new high school in Harrisonburg.

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 37:50

And where are they building that?

**Owen Longacre** 37:52

It is on the south side of the city, and they're calling it Rocktown High.

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 37:58

Rocktown?

**Owen Longacre** 37:59

Yeah. That was the name they came up with and it is slated to be finished, I believe in the fall of 2024. So they're in the process of building it, but the city is continuing to grow.

**Dr. Sheary Johnson 38:12**

Alright.

**Owen Longacre 38:14**

So we we know that eventually when you graduated Harrisonburg, you went on to enroll at James Madison University. Did, did that process happen immediately? And how did you—can you describe your process of how you ended up at JMU? And what that was like?

**Dr. Sheary Johnson 38:35**

Since I wanted to be a librarian, I started looking for schools that had the library science program. In Virginia, Madison had it, Longwood, and Virginia State had the program. Of course, being from Harrisonburg, Madison was closest to me. So that's where I decided I'd like to go. I filled out the application for early admission, or at least for them to decide that I could come there. So in December of my senior year, I did receive my early acceptance to go to Madison and I went there. I graduated [high school] in June of '66 and then in August, I went to Madison.

**Owen Longacre 39:56**

Can you describe any of your emotions that you were feeling when you walked on campus for the first time and saw yourself as a college student there.

**Dr. Sheary Johnson 40:09**

Ah, well, it's a large place. Not as large as it is now. [laughs] To me, walking on—it's a beautiful campus. I enjoyed just walking around around the campus, especially at sunset. It's a beautiful campus. I enjoyed being there. The teachers, the faculty there, were very supportive. They always had an open door. Whenever I wanted to go and discuss my work or anything, if I was having any issues or what have you. They were always willing to listen and give support.

**Emely Hernandez Alvarado 41:13**

So, where was the change from being a librarian to studying to become a doctor [get a doctorate]? Was there anything or anyone that influenced you to change into that career?

**Dr. Sheary Johnson 41:29**

Well, when I went for school to get my doctorate, I chose to go to the University of Virginia because of the technology. When I decided to go back to school to get my doctorate, I had gone through Madison. We'd had some AV classes, a couple of AV classes, but the schools were beginning to do more and more with technology. So I went to University of Virginia, because they had a degree in technology and I always wanted to work on a degree. I felt like, just to go and take courses, without being in a planned program, you would end up with just a lot of hours, but I wanted the most that I could get from the hours. And that could only happen if you were in a planned program. It was an extension of my job because as the library media specialist at

Hopewell High School, I was in charge of the technology for the school. It was all in line with with my job that I had. [pause] I was not only interested in the technology, but how to combine the technology with learning. So, the fact that you had media—how was I going to help the teachers merge the media and the actual lesson plans together? That's what I was focusing on.

**Owen Longacre** 43:49

So it sounds to me like in the years after Simms School, between going to Harrisburg and James Madison, that you did stay local in the Harrisonburg community for a fair amount of time. Was there a point that you then moved away? And do you currently live in Harrisonburg, or I [unclear] from the beginning of our meeting that you don't live locally anymore.

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 44:13

No. I worked at Waterman Elementary School for 10 years, and I was happy there and enjoyed it. My husband graduated from Madison in '74.

**Owen Longacre** 44:29

Okay.

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 44:29

And he was not able to get the kind of job that he wanted to have, making the kind of money that he wanted to have as a family man. So he decided to come to Richmond and look for a job. And so he came to Richmond and he found a job, and I told him, well, I didn't want to move unless I had a job. Then I came to Richmond and spent a few days looking but didn't find anything right away. I went back home to Harrisonburg and received a call from Hopewell High School asking if I would come and work there as the head librarian. So, I did go to get a job at Hopewell High School. That fall in the fall of '78 we moved from Harrisonburg to Richmond, Virginia. And we've been here ever since.

**Owen Longacre** 45:57

Thank you for explaining. The reason I was asking was, we know that the Simms School of course shut down in '66. That was a part of the desegregation process. I'm interested, in the years after that, I know you had already left and gone to Harrisonburg, but did you have any experience with how the closing of the Simms School might have impacted the community? We mentioned earlier that it was kind of maybe the heart or the center of that community. When that building in that place shut down, how did that impact everyone else who still, of course, was going to other schools, but not having that particular place? Did you have any experience with how that that might have had an impact?

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 46:47

Well, since a lot of things happened there, beyond the classroom experience, I think it had a very big impact on the community not having Simms School there, because for a long time it was closed. So that cut out the more cultural side of the community. If people wanted to do something, they needed to go outside of the community. Then you had problems with transportation and knowing what to do, where to go, all of that. Then those things became

barriers. When people don't have positive things to do, then your crime rises, your—other negative things rise. And the community has changed a whole lot. Of course, I'm looking at it from visiting, not as from living there, now. But just visiting, I can see that a whole lot has changed.

**Owen Longacre 48:31**

We've discussed a lot in our class about some of the unintended consequences of desegregation, and how there's always two sides to every story. I was interested, maybe if you could continue to elaborate maybe on what your opinion is about the fact that when the Simms School shut down, that it had maybe some of those unintended consequences, and—

**Dr. Sheary Johnson 48:57**

I think it did, too, especially for Black children. Because when when they went to white schools, they no longer saw Black role models.

**Owen Longacre 49:10**

Right.

**Dr. Sheary Johnson 49:11**

At the high school—not like they did at Simms School—they didn't see Black role models. They also missed out on that person who really pushed them to do their best. It means a lot when an adult will push you to do your best. Children just kind of want to get by sometimes, and they don't really need to get by, they need to go on and do their best. But, there has to be somebody who is pushing them whether it's their mother, grandmother, teacher—somebody to do the pushing, because you've got to get that good talent that's inside of those individuals to come out.

**Emely Hernandez Alvarado 50:25**

So once you went to Hopewell High School, did you feel the need to become that person for the students there? Did you make it a goal to push those students as well from the new school?

**Dr. Sheary Johnson 50:40**

Yes, I did. And I still do that now. I'm a pusher. I'm a person who tries to encourage—motivate—others to reach their goals.

**Owen Longacre 51:00**

Is it fair to say that, that might have been something instilled in you from your interaction with some of the teachers at the Simms School, even from your earliest days?

**Dr. Sheary Johnson 51:10**

Yes, I believe I picked that up from them—from their spirit, the way they did things. The way they involved us. I have utilized that in my programs here in Richmond. I have a nonprofit, Better People Incorporated, in which I take inner-city children, and involve them in activities that

they don't normally have, such as going to concerts, plays, going different places that they don't normally get to go, and meeting people. I think I picked that up from them as well.

**Emely Hernandez Alvarado** 52:19

Including your nonprofit, is there anything else that you went on to do after JMU?

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 52:33

Well, I'm very active in church. When I left VCU full-time ministry, I kind of just focused on our local church. I'm also active at the state level and at the national level in our church. So I've just been busy doing those kinds of things and encouraging people in the community and working with individuals, as best I can.

**Owen Longacre** 53:25

Well, we—we're getting close to the end in terms of our pre-created questions, but we've been, this has been wonderful kind of getting to know you and your story. A lot of what you said is near and dear to my heart as my wife is an educator and my mother is a librarian. So—

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 53:41

Oh, ok! Is she still a librarian?

**Owen Longacre** 53:44

I kind of—and as a teacher myself.

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 53:47

Is just still working or is she retired?

**Owen Longacre** 53:49

She just recently retired. She's about seventy years old now, so she's been retired for a few years, but—so I kind of grew up in that environment as well. I spent many days sitting around waiting for mom to finish up work and just reading a book and all that so—so I relate to a lot of what you've been talking about. So, as we come to a close, I just wanted to offer—was there anything else specific to the Simms School that you feel like we didn't get a chance to talk about in terms of memories of classmates or teachers or any special events? I know we've had a chance to talk about a lot of it, but wanted to offer if you had any final remarks or ideas that you feel like we might not have gotten a chance to get to.

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 54:41

Well, I know that at Simms School, children were bussed from all around the county, all around Harrisonburg to Simms School and some of them rode the bus for about an hour in the morning before getting to school, then have an hour to get back home. I just—I value, the fact that I did live in the city, and I could walk to school and be there in fifteen minutes and get home in fifteen minutes, but it was, it was a good experience for me up until the time I decided that I needed to do something different for academic reasons. To me that those are two different things, to have a nice environment, but academically, I needed more, and therefore I needed to be in another

environment. And I'm glad to know that now that they are doing some things at Simms, community-wise, they're doing some things. That gives some positive activity in the community for the children to go to as they need to. Although I haven't seen it in operation, but I understand there is something going on there now.

**Owen Longacre** 56:39

Oh, absolutely. Did you have any other questions?

**Emely Hernandez Alvarado** 56:43

No, I think I got pretty much all the ones I wanted answered and heard way more than I was expecting to.

**Owen Longacre** 56:49

Yeah.

**Dr. Sheary Johnson** 56:50

Good.

**Owen Longacre** 56:51

I'm going to go ahead and stop our recording.