

The Ghost of Jim Crow at The Prom:

The Separation of The Races in the post-Jim Crow South

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Abstract

Racism is a perpetual problem that continues to thrive even today. However, in recent decades, there have been significant steps in the direction of acceptance. Although racial discrimination has not been completely eradicated, recent racial progress has been demonstrated within Southern high schools. These educational establishments had hosted segregated events up until the not too distant past. This paper tracks the slow but essential transformation from segregation to integration, leading to wider interracial mingling within the Southern cultural context.

Introduction

The high school prom has long been an American tradition. And within that tradition, the South has had its own long-standing approach: segregated proms. Culturally enforced social events had long exacerbated racial tensions, as the fear of change and the distrust of the unfamiliar prevented fluid ethnic diversity. However, in spite of the loud voices calling for the continuous suppression of white/black interaction, some individuals courageously fought to overthrow the status quo and establish a new racial normal. They sought to foster interracial unity through the use of integration. This has been a positive change because it has broken down color barriers and diminished dependency on established cultural practices, paving the way for discussion about why certain practices are in place and if they should remain that way. What groups of people spearheaded the conversation of integrated proms in southern states? The voices of advocacy range from the biracial community to outside media with the support of

internal protestors who were locals seeking to encourage a new way of life. The Deep South witnessed change at the hearts of Alabama, Mississippi, and Georgia in the not too distant past. The prom in Alabama faced reconstruction when confronted by the reality of mixed-race students. Mississippi was pressured at the hand of outside media that threatened to expose deeply buried secrets. Lastly, Georgia's transformation came about as a result of outside journalists joining forces with internal protestors who identified an opportunity to take a stand.

The Prom in Alabama

Prom, for nearly all-American high school students, is a huge rite of passage regardless of race. Teens dress in their finest attire before dancing the night away in a celebration of youth and community. It is as American as apple pie or football. Yet, for decades, high schools in the South kept their students' proms racially segregated through private sponsors (to avoid legal trouble). However, this was about to change in the town of Eufaula, Alabama. Eufaula High School finally had its first integrated prom without incident in 1991. It received little outside media attention. One year prior, Associated Press writer Jay Reeves had written about Eufaula High School's separate black-and-white proms in a column of *The South Bend Tribune* entitled "Racially Segregated Proms Still Rite of Spring in Southern Town."¹

Introducing the colorful setting of rural Alabama, Reeves wrote "Change comes slowly to this Old South town of stately mansions and Confederate flags on pickup trucks, where dogwood blossoms and racially segregated proms are sure signs of spring."² Of course, Reeves noted signs

¹ Jay Reeves, "Racially segregated proms still rite of spring in Southern town." *The South Bend Tribune*. 6 May 1990. Downloaded on 27 April 2020.

² Reeves.

of racial progress: though sixty-percent of the “modern, red-brick” school students were white, the president of the student body and the president of the 180-member senior class were black, as were the basketball and football homecoming queens. Yet, this progress had been undermined by the two segregated proms, sponsored by private parties rather than the school in an underhanded maneuver to prevent lawsuits against Eufaula High School being found in violation of federal desegregation orders. Carmen Campbell, an 18-year-old white senior and friend of the black senior class president, James Samuel, stated one reason for the *de facto* segregation of proms was fear of racially induced violence. “They seem to think that if we go to dances together, there will be racial flare-ups, a fight,” remarked Campbell.³

The “They” Campbell spoke of consisted of people like Superintendent Dan Parker, school board President Billy Houston, and school board member W.D. Moorner, who denied race as the basis for the separate dances. “Alcohol usually gets to be a problem,” said Parker, a superintendent of the 2,900-student system since 1978, who stated the school district removed itself from the dances so as not to be held liable for students getting intoxicated from illegally purchased alcohol. “They leave, get drunk, and then come back. Why should the board or teachers assume liability for that?”⁴

For Houston, the two proms were “a case of individual preference by the students.” Houston’s daughter, Marie, served as president of Youth Enterprises, which sponsored Eufaula’s annual white prom, while Young Blacks in Action sponsored the black prom. Proms were not the only social functions that the school system refused to sponsor for two decades; homecoming

³ Reeves.

⁴ Reeves.

dances and sock-hops were also left up to private sponsors. The school made one exception that year with an ROTC banquet held in late May that year. “If the whites don’t want to have a prom with the blacks, you can’t make them, and vice versa,” said Moorer, who had been on the school board since the 1950s. “I don’t think it’s been a big issue, but it might be now.”⁵

Moorer’s qualified statement notwithstanding, other black residents saw things differently. Rose Jordan, a member of the local N.A.A.C.P. chapter, recounted that black parents had gone before the school board in 1987 to request that the board approve an integrated, school-sponsored prom. “We have gone to the Board of Education, the superintendent of education [Dan Parker] and the principal, and they just give us the run-around,” she remarked wistfully. However, if a few of the white adults in charge of the school system were not keen on a racially joint prom, the majority of students at Eufaula were, as they cheered when Samuel suggested, back in a fall class meeting, that the school hold a single, interracial prom. Even the new principal, Wayne Fiquett, a middle-aged white man, had talked with students and faculty about such a possibility and boasted that quite a few of the teachers were “very willing” to chaperone the event.⁶

But Parker, on the other hand, was certain the school board would not be open to the will of the students. “The senior class might be 90 percent in favor of going to the Bahamas too, or abortion, or all coming to school naked, but that doesn’t mean we’re going to do it.” He concluded his remarks with “Children learn from experiences, but the school system cannot

⁵ Reeves.

⁶ Reeves.

provide all of life's experiences."⁷ That a school superintendent would compare student support for something as sensible and progressive as a mixed-race dance to something as costly as a trip to the Bahamas, or as controversial as abortion or outrageous as public nudity said more about him than it did the Eufaula High School students. As it was, Parker and each member of the school board was certain that the life experience of an interracial prom was not something the students needed, no matter how much they wanted it. For the school board, it would only end badly. As noted by scholars like Joseph Bagley, who has written on Southern school systems, segregationists had learned to use color-blind language in order to hide their racial motivations behind "law and order" rhetoric.⁸

Fortunately for the integrated prom advocates, the next year the Associated Press reported in *The Tuscaloosa News* that the school's first biracial prom was held without incident. There were 250 juniors and seniors in attendance, half white and the other half black.⁹ The article makes no mention of how many couples were interracial, if there were any at all. But that such a prom could be held in southeastern Eufaula without any of the supposed problems that the board feared would take place proves the baseless nature of those concerns. The prom success in Eufaula contrasted sharply with the imbroglio that would occur in the northeastern town of Wedowee three years later, whose school system had long courted racial controversy without notice.

⁷ Reeves.

⁸ Joseph Bagley, *The Politics of White Rights: Race, Justice, and Integrating Alabama's Schools*, (Athens: The University of Georgia Press), 49.

⁹ The Associated Press. "No incidents at school's first integrated prom." *The Tuscaloosa News*, 22 May 1991.

The Southern Mistake

In February 1994, the small town of Wedowee, Alabama, made headlines when Hulond Humphries, the white principal of Randolph County High School, threatened to cancel the school's prom if any interracial couples attended. Humphries, a man of large stature in his fifties with the demeanor of a military sergeant, stood before the students in assembly. He called them together to ask for a show of hands to one question: of the juniors and seniors going to the prom, how many planned to attend it with a date of another race? More than a few hands shot up. With that, the principal declared prom cancelled. One junior student, Revonda Bowen, the daughter of a white father and black mother, asked him who she was supposed to bring as her date in place of her white boyfriend. According to Bowen, Humphries told her that was her problem because her parents made a "mistake" in having her and as long as he was the principal, he was going to prevent other students from doing the same thing. His outrageous threat and racial insult soon triggered setbacks to race relations, angry student and parent protests, and an approved settlement between the Justice Department and the county school board that banned him from contact with students until July 1997. In spite of the travesty he created, he was placed in an administrative job to oversee the rebuilding of a new school and later won the local Democratic bid for county superintendent, claiming his 25 years as a principal gave him name recognition¹⁰ (that, and many voters likely sympathized with his racial views).

But thanks to Revonda Bowen, the biracial student he insulted, Humphries' attitudes and actions called into question how much rural America accepted romantic and sexual relationships between whites and non-whites. Scholar Renee C. Romano, herself a white woman who married

¹⁰ Anonymous, *White Alabama principal who made racist prom threat wins bid for county superintendent* (Jet; Jul 15, 1996; 90, 9; ProQuest Central), pg. 7-8.

a black man, writing on the topic of interracial unions in Postwar America, states that “The taboo on intimate personal relationships between blacks and whites served a crucial function in creating the American racial order.”¹¹ Segregated proms were still an issue as a result of cultural peer-pressure, but also due to cultural preference. The reality of mixed-race students remained a taboo for both white and black communities. They were a minority within a minority. As such, Revonda Bowen lacked a stable identity. The American teenager would expose underlying racial tensions that had been swept under the rug since the 1960s.

Humphries’ remarks sparked a huge media explosion as Bowen and the Southern Poverty Law Center sued him and the entire school board for discrimination. Facing such backlash and pressure, Humphries, without apologizing to Bowen, reneged on his threat to cancel prom but claimed his reason for the initial cancellation was due to concern over potential violence against interracial student couples. To add insult to injury, Humphries accused Bowen of “telling a bunch of lies.”¹² By this point, justification came too little, too late; the damage was already done. Eventually, the national firestorm around the prom culminated in the literal burning of the school in August, a fitting metaphor for the underlying racial powder-keg.

In the wee morning hours of August 6 that year, Randolph County High School caught fire. First to the scene was Hulond Humphries and Bill Gill, a black cameraman from WVTM in Birmingham. While filming the fire, Gill was accosted by Humphries and several other white men; “Why don’t you get out of here?” Humphries told him. One of the men with Humphries put his hand on Gill’s video camera lens and shoved him, saying, “You black sons of bitches burned

¹¹ Renee C. Romano, *Race Mixing: Black-White Marriage in Postwar America* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 3.

¹² Dennis R. Miller. *Wedowee*. (Eu Claire: America’s Heartbeat Publishing House, 2015), 27.

this school!”¹³ Suspicions of arson were ubiquitous in Wedowee. Sheriff Larry Colley, in comments to the media, stated that investigators were “99%” sure that the fire was arson. His feelings towards the media coverage of black protestors chanting “We Shall Overcome” were less than warm; “Where were you people this morning when Hulond Humphries was out there fighting that fire with his bare hands? Where were these damn blacks?”¹⁴ Sheriff Colley’s inflammatory remarks were a fitting summary of the burning racial tension between the black and white communities of Wedowee.

One reporter who well-captured the racial tensions in this town was Sally Jacobs.

Writing for *Rolling Stone* in 1995, Sally Jacobs’ 46-paragraph article gave the local townsfolk, black and white, a voice to be heard for their history to be explored and exposed.¹⁵ Many of the folks interviewed were alumni of the Randolph County High School. Their stories revealed to the world what was then only local knowledge of Humphries’ less-than-savory record of conduct with black students and interracial couples. One woman in particular, Charlotte Clark-Frieson, the head of the local NAACP chapter and sole black member of the school board, spoke for many in the black community when she stated that they could no longer rely on the courts for justice.¹⁶ Ultimately, Clark-Frieson put the blame on “...hillbillies here who just don’t know that mainstream society has gotten beyond this certain thing.”¹⁷

¹³ The Associated Press, “FBI To Probe Fire In School Involved in Racial Flap.” *Los Angeles Times*, August 7, 1994. Accessed September 10, 2020.

¹⁴ Associated Press

¹⁵ Sally Jacobs, “Wedowee: When an Alabama principal said no to interracial dating, a small community was forced to confront its racist heritage.” *Rolling Stone*. May 18, 1995.

¹⁶ Jacobs.

¹⁷ Romano, 252.

Yet, Clark-Frieson's views on federally mandated school desegregation was nuanced to say the least. Speaking to Amy Goodman of Pacifica Radio's Democracy Now!, three years after the controversy, she stated:

I realized that the NAACP fought harder than probably any other organization for desegregation but in many ways, desegregation hurt black children, it hurt black parents, it had hurt black professionals because black professionals became like endangered species. Black administrators, you know, became rare... children were not seeing as many black role models as they really needed to see in the public school. So yes, our children were hurt and to be absolutely honest I don't know if integration has really done it. It has not really accomplished much of what it should have accomplished or what we wish it had accomplished.¹⁸

Indeed, she was not wrong in her forgone conclusion. The Department of Justice, Jacobs noted, once heavily invested in ousting Humphries, became "curiously compliant" after the November elections. The FBI refused to name suspects in the school arson, under the pretense it would only further stoke racial tensions. Exacerbating the situation, the local school board, which had previously removed Humphries from his principal position, gave him the new job of consultant to the board, and even put him in charge of rebuilding the school. No doubt, these decisions emboldened the man to announce that he would run for the office of the county's schools' superintendent come next year.¹⁹

But as Sally Jacobs soon discovered, Humphries was no stranger to controversy. Lawrence O'Neal, a retired TV repairman and the father of six children who attended Randolph County High School in the late 1970s and early 1980s, recounted the run-ins they had with Humphries back in the day. One time, he said, his daughter overheard the man remark that he wanted to send the black students back to "black schools." Another time, Humphries barred O'Neal's son from the junior basketball team for not shaving. O'Neal objected to this conduct

¹⁸ Democracy Now! – Amy Goodman-Charlotte Clark-Frieson July 7, 1997 Interview. Accessed 3 May 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_YW3HVqlaIs&t=1078s.

¹⁹ Jacobs.

but his objections to the school board fell on deaf ears; he tried to sue them in federal court but lost the case. Undeterred, O'Neal began writing letters to the federal government, but to no avail. Equating himself to Daniel in the Bible, O'Neal believed God had called upon him to expose the real problem: the school board, and the people who elected the board members.²⁰

The prom fiasco, for many of the established white residents, was one of morality and discipline, or so they claimed. Jimmy McCain, a retired coordinator of federal programs for the schools, in an attempt to take a pot-shot at Revonda Bowen's status as an unwed mother, gave this befuddling response: "Okay, we're talking morality here, right? A big guy picking on a little girl isn't moral. Well, having a baby out of wedlock isn't moral... When the girl asked her question, Hulond [Humphries] should have said 'You bring the father of your child to the prom.'" ²¹ For Grady J. Wakefield, a semi-retired employee of the county's agricultural agency whose daughters graduated from the high school, a "small segment" of people in town (implying the black residents) just wanted to get back at Humphries for being a "tough but fair" disciplinarian with all students. "Hulond [Humphries] has stepped on some toes with that."²² (Perhaps it would be more accurate to say he stomped on some feet).

Mr. Wakefield was not alone in his sentiment on Humphries' heavy-handed behavior being misunderstood by outsiders. Two white students, Bryant Heard and James Gilbert, contended that Mr. Humphries had disciplined white students- usually with a paddle-for misbehavior just as much as the black students, "And maybe more so" said Heard. Gilbert

²⁰ Jacobs.

²¹ Jacobs.

²² Jacobs.

backed Heard's sentiment with the remark, "I mean, it was just part of his job." He further contested that the black students blew things out of proportion due to, in his estimate, a lack of discipline in their homes. Yet, the Justice Department's findings that year told a different story. Even though black students only made up 38 percent of the high school's student population, they constituted 63 percent of disciplinary actions taken in the 1993-1994 school year.²³ If black residents like O'Neal saw their fight for justice as biblical in nature, white residents also saw the Lord on their side. "The Lord did not intend for the races to mix," Gilbert stated, though he added the caveat "But he didn't say they couldn't look good. I seen some goooooood-lookin' black girls, that is for sure."²⁴

At the center of this unfolding drama was Revonda Bowen. Long before she became a litigant in a class-action lawsuit against her own high school, she was active in her school's extra-curricular activities, from hitter on the Lady Tigers volleyball team to junior class officer. Her class of seventy or so students was made up of both black and white teenagers, each of them sporting the fashion aesthetic of '90s kids, a'la *Saved by The Bell* if it were in Dixie.²⁵ For most of her life until that fateful day in assembly, she never recalled anyone harassing her or her parents for their interracial union, nor did anyone object to her past relationships with boys of other races, who ranged from black, white, Korean "and everybody else."²⁶ Rachel F. Moran, writing on the topic of biracial children, remarked, "When couples cross the color line to form a

²³ Jacobs.

²⁴ Jacobs.

²⁵ Randolph County High School. *94 Larger Than Life: R.C.H.S. Tigers*. Wedowee, Alabama: 1994. Randolph County High School.

²⁶ See Jacobs.

family, their children develop flexible notions of race.”²⁷ Bowen demonstrated this lax view of race in her dating history and social approach.

Whether or not most people in Wedowee secretly disapproved of her past beaus or parents’ marriage, it is unclear. Perhaps their sense of manners made them bite their tongues. Humphries apparently didn’t have such manners; his effrontery would be the straw that broke the camel’s back. His blustering attempt to quell interracial unions pushed Bowen and others like her to be more open about their culturally taboo unions. He certainly found an enemy in the outside reporters and state and regional civil rights groups that marched in the hundreds in support of Bowen and other black students, demanding a boycott of the school in front of the courthouse. The surrounding media attention forced the U.S. Justice Department’s hand after decades of turning a blind eye. If Wedowee had never been shaken by the civil rights demonstrations that riled Selma, Montgomery, and Birmingham in the 1960s, it would be in the 1990s. The local black churches even established two “freedom schools,” staffed by volunteers and parents and partly funded with donations.²⁸

Yet, one wonders if, ironically, the black residents who pulled their children out of the Randolph County school and enrolled them in the freedom schools, roughly 110 students, unwittingly helped Humphries and his supporters (at least in part) by doing what he had failed to do: reducing the school’s black student population and separating them from their white classmates, something his critics say he had been trying to do for years.²⁹ In spite of this, Bowen

²⁷ Rachel F. Moran, *Interracial Intimacy: The Regulation of Race and Romance*. (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 155.

²⁸ Jacobs.

²⁹ Jacobs.

stayed at her school, to not give her principal that satisfaction. She was already taking him to court to show her clout.

Strangely, if Bowen had a friend in *Rolling Stone Magazine* and other media “outsiders,” she had the one odd detractor in Gregory P. Kane, a black East Coast reporter for *The Baltimore Sun*. If Humphries saw enemies in outside reporters and journalists, he found one ally in this journalist outsider. And if Sally Jacobs’ Rolling Stone piece was for the most part neutral in its tone, allowing the interviewed townsfolk to speak for themselves, Kane’s guest column was most certainly opinionated. Published a year prior to Jacobs’ article, Kane’s article made clear his support for the principal’s initial decision to cancel the prom, taking at face-value Humphries’ claim that it was done to prevent violence he feared would befall black students with white dates. Kane himself bemoaned that his son had dated a white girl, stating that the relationship-while he didn’t interfere in it-was more trouble than it was worth, given the problems his son already had being black and male.³⁰ While uncritically accepting Humphries’ word that he was only trying to play the role of peacekeeper, Kane’s article curiously omitted any mention of Bowen and her accusation that the principal called her a “mistake.” His fears for his son were not ill-founded. In his estimate, black people were better off sticking with their own kind. For another freelance writer, Charles Michael Byrd, a man of mixed-race heritage, the fiasco was an opportunity missed for biracial groups to speak up for Bowen. In an article entitled “Wedowee: Opportunity Missed!” in *Interracial Voice*, Byrd bemoaned that “The third leg of the racial triad [the mixed-race community] was missing,” with their “buttocks-on-hands” while Bowen fought solo³¹

³⁰ Gregory P. Kane. “The Last Racial Taboo.” *The Baltimore Sun*. May 24, 1994.

³¹ Charles Michael Byrd. “From The Editor: Wedowee: Opportunity Missed!” *Interracial Voice*. September 1994. Accessed April 12, 2020.

Yet, if Kane and Byrd were cynical that the United States would ever accept interracial couples and biracial individuals, Bowen kept hope while acknowledging the long road that lay ahead. In the late 2000s, an older Bowen shared her musings on love and race on her blog site, revonda.wordpress.com. Above her pictures read: *..revonda bowen's view.. [sic] It's not all just Black and White*. Against a black backdrop, her posts are typed in white 12-point Times New Roman font. Her topics range from race, sex, and politics. Most are archived from April to November 2008. One post in particular is "Prom Night and Racism (Barack Obama)". The post is only five paragraphs long, but it is clear in its message. One passage of it cut to the core:

The past 14 years I have learned so much about my self [sic] and the U.S.A.. Do you think that the same mind set [sic] that some people have about Barack Obama is identical to the mind set and ignorant thinking that the principle had against me? Some would rather vote for a different party than the vote for him to be president. My mom is Black, my dad is White. To sum it all up I am not 100% white and neither is Barack Obama. I am very thankful, grateful and blessed to be the person that God made me to be. My parents have been married over 31 years. Why was I called "a mistake" and he (the principle) was canceling the prom to prevent others like me....I do not know but what I have come to realize is that God does not make mistakes. Hatred and racism is alive and seen in much of today's society.³²

Twelve years since that post, Bowen agreed to a long-distance interview via phone call from her Atlanta home. Now in her early forties, Bowen, recalled her childhood and teenage years in northeast Alabama. Quite the free spirit, she never categorized herself as either black or white, preferring the label "biracial." Moreover, she was fine with most labels, but disdained the *mulatto* racial label for someone of mixed-race parentage. For Bowen, it was a slur that sounded like *mutt*. But early in her life, she was never even aware that people viewed her as different from them. That was, until her first day in the third grade. On that day, she recalled that a tall black girl and bandana-clad white girl in her class asked her "What are you?" It was a question she had never been asked before. Confused, Bowen says she did not know what her classmate

³² Revonda.wordpress.com. "Prom Night and Racism (Barack Obama). Accessed 2 May 2020.

meant by that. Up until then, she had never even thought of herself in terms of race and color. Her reply was a colorful play-on-a-word: “I’m Mix-a-can.”³³

In the words of academic Alex Lubin, who has written on American civil rights and race, “Racial belonging represents the ways that race functions as a system of identity and of identification.”³⁴ Being biracial made it difficult for Bowen to relate to any one community. One of the few biracial girls in that class, she recalled a nickname her classmates chanted at her during a game of Red Rover at recess: “Red Rover, red rover, send *the zebra* right over!” It took her only a few seconds to realize she was “the zebra.” Yet, she laughed it off. Despite that day, the rest of her school years went off without a hitch. That would change in her junior year. As the interview progressed, she shared details not mentioned in any press coverage about her parents. Secretly married by a black pastor in his home, her white father and black mother raised her in their respective churches, culturally segregated by race. Due to racial prejudices in his white church, her father attended it less, while her mother attended her black church regularly. If the racial ostracization her father faced at church wasn’t enough, a club of which he was the proprietor burned to the ground under suspicious circumstances, some years before her high school burned down in a similar manner. To this day, Bowen contends the Ku Klux Klan was behind the club fire, yet the authorities (for reasons which can only be speculated) never opened up an official investigation into the matter.³⁵

³³ Revonda Bowen, telephone conversation with author, April 30, 2020.

³⁴ Alex Lubin, *Romance and Rights: The Politics of Interracial Intimacy, 1945-1954*. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 124.

³⁵ Bowen interview.

When the subject moved to her junior year, she shared the emotional aftermath of her principal calling her a “mistake” in front of her classmates. “I am not a mistake! God loves me and my parents love me!” she yelled before she got up and went into the girl’s dressing room and broke down crying. Friends tried to comfort her. “Rebo, you’re not a mistake!” she recounts them saying to her. All her friends who comforted her that day were black. But when the media came, many of those black friends left her side; ninety percent of her white friends did the same. She recounted the rift that formed between one white friend in particular, Tiffani Humphries.³⁶

A senior and the daughter of Hulond Humphries, Tiffani chose to support her father and Bowen’s opposition. However, despite Tiffani’s stance, Bowen shared something not mentioned in the press coverage: Tiffani, like her, was also in an interracial relationship. But unlike Bowen, who made no secret of her relationship with her white boyfriend, Tiffani dated her black boyfriend behind her prejudiced father’s back. Likely due to stigma she’d face if her secret came out, she made the decision to side against her own friend. “A lot of these people want to have the status quo,” Bowen remarked. In spite of her friend’s betrayal, Bowen said Tiffani reached out to her years later via a Facebook friend request, an olive branch of sorts that did not exist in their high school days.³⁷

Throughout the interview, Bowen showed herself knowledgeable on Alabama’s long, racist history. She knew of the infamous moment in 1963 when George Wallace, the staunch segregationist governor, stood in the doorway of the University of Alabama to block the first black students from entering it. But, as a teenager in the ‘90s, civil rights were not on her mind,

³⁶ Bowen interview.

³⁷ Bowen interview.

so she said. She just wanted to be a teenager and have her prom. And to make that happen, she hired Morris Dees of the Southern Poverty Law Center. Unfortunately, her pick of attorney angered the town's black residents—for them, it was an unspoken rule that a black person hires a black attorney in civil suits involving racial discrimination. Morris Dees was a Jewish white man. It soon became apparent to Bowen that she could not please everyone. In many ways, she felt she was being used as a pawn by her own black community.³⁸ Thankfully, she received many, many letters of support from people all over the U.S. (with only one hate letter referring to her as a “Mulatto” and “Nigger” from “A pure white family in Dothan, Ala. [sic]”).³⁹

Moreover, despite her success in getting prom reinstated, the school was far from united; her following senior year in 1994-1995 made that abundantly clear. As a result of the arson that burned the school down, classes were held in trailers and mobile homes that divided the classes “big time.” Enraged classmates told Bowen that the fire was all her fault. And attitudes towards interracial dating were not much better. A black friend of hers even had a cross burned in his yard for dating a white girl. Today, she says her now 25-year old son has continuously faced racism from the white family of his own father, Bowen's ex-high school boyfriend. Not even families are safe havens from the cruel nature of prejudice and racial hatred.

Twenty-six years later, Wedowee still exudes the small-town feel of rustic American life, with a vibrant fishing industry for tourists to fish in Lake Wedowee. The new Randolph County High School, built in 1996, sits atop a hill in a residential neighborhood, near the track and football field, Humphries Stadium, where a landline post has collapsed half the steel stands (an

³⁸ Bowen interview.

³⁹ Vickie Cox Edmondson, PH.D. *No Mistakes, No More Tears: The Revonda Bowen Story*. (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2005), 91.

apt metaphor for the damage the stadium's namesake inflicted on the school and town). The plaque on the wall in the entrance inscribes the name of Charlotte Clark-Frieson, former head of the NAACP, as a school board member and her rival, Humphries, as a consultant. Humphries remained unavailable for comment, but one resident, Vanessa Sorrell, a reporter for *The Randolph Leader* since the 1990s, provided articles from 1994 concerning the prom incident.⁴⁰ A white blonde woman in her forties, Sorrell initially was tight-lipped concerning her opinions on Bowen, but eventually opened up how the media storm had shaken the sleepy town. In many ways, she was not unlike the other white residents who wanted to put the whole predicament behind them.

If Vanessa Sorrell was initially reserved talking about the prom debacle, Charlotte Clark-Frieson was less reserved about her feelings. Now a senior lady, she recounted the events of 1994: personally, she never cared who Bowen took to the prom. What appalled her was the fact that Humphries believed he could openly voice his racist views to a student like Bowen. Such an attitude, she stated, had no place in the public-school system. However, on a personal level, she believed black men and women should stick with each other. She could not see herself with a non-black person. This was due to the belief that she had more in common with a black man than a white man as a "prospective partner." But unlike Humphries, she did not believe black women who date white men should be "brutalized or penalized because of it." Yet, she learned back then that whites opposed to interracial dating mistakenly believed that the NAACP was also against the races mixing. She had never heard such a "dumb idea," but it helped her understand how white people in Wedowee viewed the mission of the civil rights organization. Clark-Frieson felt

⁴⁰ Vanessa Sorrell, "RCHS prom back on after principal draws national attention with condemnation of interracial dating," *The Randolph Leader*, March 2, 1994.

that Bowen let down the black community, who encouraged her to hang in there with the school boycott so that they could address the many other longstanding racial issues as leverage to help the black students in the school system subjected to many abuses over a very long period of time. Instead, Bowen listened to her attorney Dees, who somewhat “forbade” her from the movement, and she remained at RCHS. Clark-Frieson blamed Bowen for being “too immature to think for herself and see what her involvement could have accomplished.” For Clark-Frieson, Bowen’s youthfulness was no excuse as plenty of other black teenagers were aware of the gravity of the situation and the potential for change. Discouraged, Clark-Frieson and the rest of the black community “pressed forward, in an attempt to resolve other racial issues within the school system.” The only thing that came out of the situation was a Federal Consent Decree. “For all the good it did. None,” remarked Clark-Frieson.⁴¹

Clark-Frieson’s disapproval of Bowen was only matched by her animosity towards her attorney Dees, whom she believed was only using Bowen to “create visibility and kudos for his law firm.” She denied Bowen even chose Dees; she contended that he heard about the controversial case in their county and “hunted her down.” She claimed he showed up at her office, asking for Bowen, who had no idea who he was at the time. So strong was her animus towards him that she did not even attempt to hide her glee when she found out that he had later been fired from the SPLC for sexual harassment allegations. “Well, that’s what I call ‘karma.’”⁴²

A consent order was filed in the United States District Court for The Middle District of Alabama Eastern Division on April 16, 2013. Stipulated in the consent order were the “remaining

⁴¹ Charlotte Clark-Frieson, personal interview with author, June 30, 2020.

⁴² Clark-Frieson.

issues” that the The Randolph County Board of Education must address in order to petition the court for a “declaration of unitary status.”⁴³ The court noted that the parties involved had acted in good faith in negotiating and agreeing to resolve the remaining issues (personnel hiring and assignment) to fully implement policies in accord with the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution and federal desegregation guidelines. Thus, would conclude a 19-year legal battle between the Randolph County school board and federal courts.

The Prom in Mississippi

In 2009, Mississippi native and actor Morgan Freeman, with Canadian director Paul Saltzman, released the documentary *Prom Night in Mississippi*, which detailed the first integrated prom in the Mississippi town of Charleston in 2008. The school sign in front of Charleston High School reads “Striving for Excellence.” The auditorium is named after Morgan Freeman, the world-famous movie star and Charleston’s one-time resident. Due to his celebrity, Freeman became a pseudo-outsider. He distanced himself from his own community by moving to Hollywood. Whereas the other proms received national attention thanks to the journalists and the students, this prom was given the spotlight as a result of the combined force of A-lister Freeman and the work of its director Saltzman, who in the 1960s had worked in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in Mississippi. Thabi Moyo, a videographer and photographer from Jackson, Mississippi, was also on board the project as an associate producer. Together, this team, along with the students and administrators at Charleston High School, was about to put the small-town school on the map.

⁴³ 3:70-cv-847-MHT (WO) (M.D. Ala. Apr. 16, 2013)

Back in 1997, Morgan Freeman offered to fund the school's prom on one condition: that it be racially integrated.⁴⁴ His offer was declined. Eleven years later, in 2008, he made that same offer again. This time, it was accepted. In recorded interviews, Freeman met and spoke with the white Principal, Bucky Smith and the black Assistant Principal Gwen Lewis, who were extremely open to his vision; Smith himself bragged that the prom he attended at his high school in 1977 was integrated and he couldn't wait to begin a new trend in how Charleston did prom. Once an all-white school until integration in 1970, Charleston High School schooled a total of 415 students, 70% black and 30% white in 2008. Yet, in spite of its black majority, the parents of the white student minority kept the proms and homecomings segregated. This de facto segregation began the same year Mississippi schools integrated in 1970 when the white parents and school board, out of spite towards new integrationist policies, segregated the school's Graduation Dance. Eventually, this became the norm for the school's prom and homecoming events.

In spite of their parents' antiquated views on race, the juniors and seniors gathered together in the auditorium were very excited to make history upon seeing the star come in and announce to them that he was going to sponsor their first interracial prom. As part of the project, the white and black students were given video cameras to film their own video diaries. From these segments of the documentary, we get a view into the world they live in as they prepare for the big dance.

One white student agreed to be interviewed on condition of anonymity under the pseudonym "Billy Joe" with his visage blackened out and voice modulated. Through this

⁴⁴ *Prom Night in Mississippi*. Directed by Paul Saltzman. Toronto: Return to Mississippi Productions, 2009.

anonymity, he spoke of the town's race problems, including his own parents' racial prejudices. He knew he was the black sheep of his family, and that there was nothing he could do to change his folks' beliefs, but he was not going to let that stop him from loving the people he loved, black or white. His philosophy was simple: you should love the people you love if they make you happy, regardless of the color of their skin. He lived this philosophy as he admitted to having plenty of "black and white lovers."⁴⁵

Other students who submitted their video diaries were Chasidy, Omega, Ali'Lishia, Wachovia, Chance, Jessica, Brittany, and several others, black and white. A common sentiment among them was that they had no animosity among themselves, but their parents did. One parent provided an interview concerning his daughter's relationship with a black boy. Glen Sumner, a self-described redneck, admitted that he did not approve of his daughter Heather's choice of boyfriend. However, he would permit them to be together for the time being. However, he hoped they would grow apart after high school, a sentiment he admitted was selfish. Yet, he did not consider himself a racist.⁴⁶

Sharing the perspective of a white girl, Jessica described how difficult her life was being friendly with black people. Her stepfather threatened violence against her with a gun for "hangin' around a nigger" and she found it difficult to get a job in town due to her friendship with black people. For the youth of Charleston social stigma, being disowned by their families, and trouble finding jobs did much to discourage otherwise non-prejudiced white teenagers from getting too

⁴⁵ *Prom Night in Mississippi.*

⁴⁶ *Prom Night in Mississippi.*

friendly with their black neighbors. But people like Jessica and her white fiancé T.J. refused to conform to the norm, despite objections from the white parents.

If many of the white parents were hostile to black and white students wishing to make racial progress via a prom, black parents, like Linda Buckley, recounted her high school days of going to a black prom, with some of her white friends wanting to attend it with her, but being forbidden to go by their parents. For generations, hate beget hate.

As Charleston High School prepared for its first integrated prom, a group of white parents made plans to hold the annual white prom anyway in Batesville at the Mississippi National Guard Armory. Jeff Padget, an attorney, spoke on behalf of the group, who wished to keep their identities anonymous. These parents made it clear they did not want Paul Saltzman and his film crew on the armory's premises. Saltzman, in a special features segment, commented on the irony of the white parents not wanting the film crew on the premises, while they were illegally engaging in racial discrimination on federal government property.

Regardless of its illegality, the white prom was held March 21st. In interviews held afterwards with several white students, one student recalled an incident where a fight broke out between two guys over a girl. It ended with a mother slapping one of them in the face. For the white parents concerned that an integrated prom would lead to violence, this fight at their own prom undermined their beliefs that segregated proms were peaceful. Still, one white girl, Leanna, didn't think the problem was with the fact that the prom excluded black students, but that people were making a big deal about it. If no one made a big deal about it, then it wouldn't be a big deal. For other students, like Chance, the white prom was disappointing in every way, not just in terms of the racial exclusion, but even the food and entertainment. He was ready for a change.

Charleston's first integrated prom was held in the Corey Forum of Holmes Community College on April 19th, with black deputy sheriff Lyndon Johnson of the Tallahatchie County Sheriff's Office acting as security in case of violence. This would be unnecessary as the documentary depicts the students of both races having nothing but a good time, with the rapper Kamikaze⁴⁷ rapping for entertainment and Morgan Freeman appearing on a video slide to congratulate them for making history. As Bob Dylan once sang, "The times, they are a-changin'." In an interview with the Jackson Free Press, Chasidy Buckley remarked that the prom was "magnificent." "That night, when we stepped in that door, everybody just had a good time. We proved ourselves. We proved the community wrong, because they didn't think that it was going to happen." And if the school continued to hold an integrated prom every year, "... then our community will improve...It'll impact them, too, because once they see that blacks and whites can come together in school and have fun together, then they'll see that the community can change, too."⁴⁸

The Prom in Georgia

The most recent to integrate prom in the Cotton States was Georgia. In 2002, students at Taylor County High School in Butler, Georgia held their school's first single, desegregated prom in 31 years, only to reverse back the next year to the tradition of a private 'whites-only' dance

⁴⁷ The rapper, whose real name is Brad Franklin, would later share his thoughts on the monumental event in an article he contributed to the *Jackson Free Press*, entitled, ostensibly, "Prom Night," in which he praised the Charleston youth's bravery for their efforts to let "old racial wounds breathe and subsequently heal," and encouraging the adults to "take a cue from us 'whippersnappers.'" His article is archived on JFP's website: <https://www.jacksonfreepress.com/news/2008/apr/27/kamikaze-prom-night/>. Accessed August 10, 2020.

⁴⁸ NPR. *Mississippi School Holds First Interracial Prom*. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=91371629>. Accessed April 16, 2020.

followed by an integrated prom. Both dances were sponsored by the parents and students, as the school officials, like those in Eufaula, Alabama, wanted to avoid the problems they believed stemmed from interracial dating while ignoring the other problems this de facto segregation created. Gericca McCrary, a black senior, was visibly upset by this decision reversal. “I cried. The black juniors said, ‘Our prom is open to everyone. If you want to come, come.’” It was a small number of white juniors, she said, that influenced the decision for the school to go back to separate proms.⁴⁹ Why the white juniors voted to resume their school’s tradition of segregated proms cannot be ascertained. Regardless, their vote opened up deep racial wounds that have inflicted rural Southern towns for decades.

Taylor County High School was not the only school in Georgia fighting hard to preserve the vestiges of the old Southern way of life. Susan Kent, an alumna of the Fitzgerald High School Class of 1988 in Ben Hill County, recounted during an NYC storytelling event her community’s “white prom” and “black prom,” as they were unashamedly called in her hometown of Fitzgerald. “I think it’s more prevalent in these small rural places than anyone realizes,” she stated, to the shock of many in the audience. She said everything changed in 2013 when students at another Georgia school, Wilcox County High School in Rochelle, “revolted and decided to have an integrated prom,”⁵⁰ the first in 40 years following federal desegregation. During those years of separate proms, black students at Wilcox like Mareshia Rucker decided to form their own prom with black, white, Asian and Hispanic students all welcome to it.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Elliot Minor. “Ga. Students Plan Whites-Only Prom.” *CBS News*. 1 May 2003. Accessed 29 April 2020.

⁵⁰ Harmon Leon. “Party Like It’s 1899: What It’s Like Growing Up With a Segregated Prom.” *Observer*. 4 May 2019. Accessed 15 April, 2020.

⁵¹ Jamie Gumbrecht. “Segregated prom tradition yields to unity.” *CNN*. 31 December 2013.

Perhaps the Georgia school to get the most documented attention to its tradition of “separate-but-equal” proms was Montgomery County High School in Mount Vernon. It became the subject of New York photographer and film-maker Gillian Laub’s photo-book and documentary, *Southern Rites*. Even in the title, there is a clever double-meaning: while it literally refers to rites-of-passage in Southern high schools, it is also a play-on-words with “Southern rights,” namely freedom of association, a popular segregationist platform for Jim Crow die-hards. For Laub, the project began back in 2002. As an outsider, Laub brought her own unique perspective and drew attention from outside communities.

In November 2002, Montgomery County High School student Anna Rich wrote a letter to the editors at *SPIN* magazine to inform them of her school’s segregationist practices. It included the time she, a white girl, was forbade from taking her black boyfriend Lonnie to the prom.⁵² Intrigued, Laub drove to Mount Vernon to extensively document through portraits, interviews, letters, and journal essays the biracial student coalition’s push for a racially-unified prom. One essay in particular stood out to her: *Prom*.

Dated May 3, 1999, Anna, then a junior, penned this essay with a note above it to the teacher: “Mrs. Brewer-pLEASE [sic] ReAD [sic] This [sic] ONE if NO othER [sic] ONE.” In the essay, she lambasted the students for their “barbaric (or...pre-Civil War/Rights) mindset” that kept them from dancing together in the biggest teenage rite-of-passage. “I for one boycotted the prom and even though I do feel strongly on this issue,” she wrote. “I promise you that it was still really hard to know that I was missing Junior [sic] prom. I have no memories to think back on. I have no pictures to show my children...I MISSED MY OWN JUNIOR PROM. I do have my

⁵² Gillian Laub. *Southern Rites*. Bologna: Damiani, 2015, pp. 10-11.

morals.” Yet, in spite of her sadness from not attending her junior prom, she wrote that she could tell her children she stood up for something she believed in because of her strong convictions. “I DID stand up for something I believed in. I WAS raised but was unaffected by its strange (demented??) [sic] ideas.”⁵³

She was nothing if not tenacious that if Montgomery County High School was to continue the separate proms, then for it to at least sponsor a “together” prom for students like her who had a problem “w/[sic] the way things continue to be.” “Next year,” she wrote, “if the proms are still segregated, I refuse to sit back and miss my Senior [sic] prom. I WILL WRITE LETTERS. Wouldn’t I just [love] to bring down the NAACP and other such affiliations?! As for the way things are now, it’s one big (if not horrific) joke, and an embarrassment to this establishment.” She included a P.S. “...I speak for all of us when I use the term, FED-UP!”⁵⁴

The written comments from her teacher Mrs. Brewer were rather mixed. Beneath the essay, she wrote that in 1995, the school had thrown a prom for all students. “The Blacks [sic] came and one white couple came. White parents were angry with the principal for pushing this and his contract was not renewed.” She continued that “The Student Council had a student referendum in 1996 on having a school prom and it was overwhelmingly defeated by both Blacks [sic] and whites. It will eventually be a reality.”⁵⁵ It is not clear if her comments were meant to be encouraging or passive-aggressive; the fact that the school’s first integrated prom in 1995 only had one white couple attend what would’ve otherwise been an all-black prom does not

⁵³ Laub, 14-15.

⁵⁴ Laub, 14-15.

⁵⁵ Laub, 14-15.

speak well of Mount Vernon's white community. Parental pressure possibly contributed to white students voting against another integrated prom.

Another one of Anna's classmates, Michelle, made her feelings clear about a "joined prom" in a note passed to Anna back in 1998: "...nobody in the 10th grade besides yall [sic] [Betsy, Kim and Anna] want a prom like that & I can tell you nobody is gonna [sic] come to it if it is that way. So, what's [sic] going on? (Just wondering)".⁵⁶ It's dubious that Michelle spoke for the whole 10th grade; but given the attitudes of not just teachers and administrators, but also some classmates, Anna and her friends had a long uphill battle to face within the social and cultural milieu of their school and town.

The same was also true for Anna's younger sister, Julie, who praised her for reaching out to Laub in a May 2008 interview. "I'm so proud of...Anna for being so brave and writing that letter. If it weren't for her, who knows if anyone would've known or cared about what was going on here." Like her older sister, Julie had also dated black guys. In a photo spread from 2002, Julie posed in a football jersey with her black boyfriend, Bubba.⁵⁷ "Bubba was my first love," she said. "We dated from eighth grade until my junior year in high school. When we started dating, everybody started to say, 'you're just like your sister.'" Julie initially took this as a compliment as she thought of Anna as a "pretty awesome and a great person." But before long, she realized the comparison was not meant to be complimentary. "Some friends started to tell me they couldn't hang out with me anymore. That hurt, because they were my friends since kindergarten." Yet, Julie didn't dismiss her former friends as bad people, "just scared." "I started

⁵⁶ Laub, 16.

⁵⁷ Laub, 12-13.

to realize that the difference between my family and the other families is that we were raised to believe that love doesn't see color. They seemed to be raised with fear. Changing who I am to make other people happy never seemed to cross my mind though."⁵⁸

Like her sister before her, Julie had tried to get the students behind an integrated prom. By her senior year in 2005, she was optimistic there would be such a prom to bring the black and white students together. But such hope was ill-founded, as Julie soon learned. Her black friends had no problem with her attending their prom. The organizers of the white prom, however, were much less welcoming. Their enmity towards her became clear when they explicitly told her she would be barred from the white prom if her date was black. In protest, she boycotted it, and with her black boyfriend Brandon, attended the black prom.⁵⁹

If Montgomery County High School's tradition of racially segregated proms frustrated students like Anna and Julie, its tradition of hosting both a black and white homecoming queen together at the same time did little to assuage their frustration. "I knew it wasn't right when I received the ballot to vote in homeroom and one column was for a white girl and the other for a black girl. I thought it was a joke," remarked Julie. "I asked people about it and they said it was a tradition in Montgomery County. I wasn't born here so I didn't know." In a two-page photo spread, the white homecoming queen and black homecoming queen are flanked by their homecoming maids. If one looks closely, there's a monochromatic pattern to the racial composition of their maids. To the left of the black homecoming queen (center right), her train of maids consists of two white maids and three black maids. To the right of the white homecoming

⁵⁸ Laub, 17.

⁵⁹ Laub, 24-25.

queen (center left), her train of maids is made up of two black maids and three white maids, mirroring the reverse of the black homecoming queen's train of maids.⁶⁰ Whatever the intentions of the school officials were for this racial structure at homecoming, it appeared that their attempts to keep everything fifty-fifty mostly bred resentment among the students who wanted to be viewed as individuals rather than members of culturally and socially constructed racial categories.

Yet, de facto segregation of school functions at Montgomery County High School was soon to come to an end; 2005 marked the year of the school's last segregated homecoming, but it would be another five years before the prom was integrated. One of the key advocates for change at the high school was junior Keyke Burns, who Laub photographed for a spread in 2002. She was ecstatic that she'd make history as the first black girl to attend the white prom in 2008. Dillon, her best friend, had invited her to it and she was eager for Laub to photograph her getting ready for the special night. Unfortunately, her hope was dashed when she was mysteriously disinvited, leaving her in tears. Still, Keyke was not one to let Laub miss a photo opportunity and asked her to come back in a few weeks to photograph her and her boyfriend at the "black folks" prom.⁶¹ This heartbreaking experience no doubt left her pessimistic that prom would ever be desegregated in her town. "There are some ignorant people, like grown and educated people, that have power here. So no, I don't think it's gonna change. Never. The white parents want to keep it this way."⁶²

⁶⁰ Laub, 20-21.

⁶¹ Laub, 27.

⁶² Laub, 31.

Indeed, that was the way the white parents wanted it. To them, Laub was *persona non grata*. An angry mother and slashed car tires made that clear to her. Laub left town the next day.⁶³ If old fashioned views of race still persisted in Mount Vernon, so did xenophobic views of outsiders, much like in 1994 Wedowee.

But Laub, ever the determined photo-essayist, was not gone for long. She had made Keyke a promise to photograph her black prom, and she was going to make good on it. Whatever reservations she had about returning, Keyke assured her she needn't worry; her father, a police chief, would give her protection from hostile whites. She needn't worry about hostility at the black prom. She'd be welcome there and "none of the white people would be there or care."⁶⁴

Of course, it was not entirely correct that no white people would be there; a white girl named Siarra attended with her black boyfriend Kent. As a couple, they were welcome to Keyke's prom but not the white prom. Keyke explained the complicated racial dynamics white girls like Siarra faced in their interactions with black guys like Kent in Mount Vernon: they can be friends with them, but that's it. If a white girl crosses the color line into romance with a black man, her family may disown her or take away her car, as happened with a girl in Keyke's grade. The girl's mother begged Keyke's father to separate her daughter and black boyfriend. But due to her daughter being eighteen years of age, Keyke's father made it clear that neither he nor she had any control over who her daughter dated. That fact did not stop this woman from taking away her daughter's car and kicking her out of the house, penniless. Watching this girl suffer harsh consequences derailed most of Keyke's classmates from race-crossing their parents. She didn't

⁶³ Laub, 33.

⁶⁴ Laub, 33.

blame them;⁶⁵ it would be bad enough for them to lose their car, the symbol of freedom for many a high schooler, especially in such a rural town with nothing but country for miles on end. To be kicked out of the house with no money to boot would be intolerable.

If the fear of losing home and privileges made white teenage girls in the town secretive or avoidant of biracial romance, so too did the stigma of having a baby with a black beau. Keyke explained to Laub that even if the child was fortunate enough to be doted on by her mother's family, its mixed parentage was ignored and the black father was simply invisible to them, a non-entity. Such was the case with a girl Keyke knew who broke that taboo.⁶⁶ Whether Keyke had heard of Revonda Bowen, she knew well the lesson Bowen learned in 1994, that having a parent of the wrong color meant that you were a "mistake." And if you were a mistake, then so was your child, *ad infinitum*.

The fear of being grandparents to such a "mistake" doubtless drove these girls' parents, like Humphries in neighboring Alabama, to keep the proms separate lest their daughters become viewed as social pariahs by the white community with its time-worn emphasis on keeping up appearances. They could not understand why an outsider like Laub cared about the way they did things. People like her were an oddity to folks like the white store manager Keyke worked under. When Keyke asked him why he didn't care to change the way things were, his reply was simply, "Well, it's always been like that." Keyke observed that all the things a black person would have to say were shushed by white people refusing to see a problem.⁶⁷ Nevertheless progressive racial

⁶⁵ Laub, 38.

⁶⁶ Laub, 40.

⁶⁷ Laub, 40

thinkers in the town sought to promote racial intermingling as less and less of a boogeyman. They wanted closed minds to break free of their bondage.

For the black seniors of the Montgomery County High School Class of 2009, the possibility of an integrated prom was a foregone conclusion. But that was about to change. On May 21st that year, Laub's photo essay, "A Prom Divided," was published in the *New York Times Magazine*. On the opening pages of the article (24-25), Laub made an interesting choice in juxtaposing the photos of the separate prom groups: the prom group photo of the white students was dwarfed by the group photo spread of the black students gathered outside the community center in nearby Vidalia.⁶⁸ The subtext was clear: for generations of black students in Mount Vernon who had been relegated to the back burner, these black juniors and seniors were finally given their time to shine.

Following the article's publication, Mount Vernon's white residents found themselves under a microscope. Their town's archaic tradition of segregated proms had been exposed and now they had to respond to the national outrage garnered by it, and fast. In only a few days following the publication of Laub's article, the local parents held a town meeting and decided to hold an integrated prom for next year, 2010.⁶⁹ In the years that followed, from 2010 to 2012, Laub interviewed and photographed interracial couples who would be attending their first integrated proms.

⁶⁸ Laub, 72-73.

⁶⁹ Laub, 75.

The After Party

Throughout these stories of small towns and their proms, it was the loud minority who brought about change to a tradition steeped in fear. Wedowee exemplifies the power of social outcasts taking a stand for their place within the community. Charleston exhibits the influence of nationwide pressure as a result of persuasive broadcasting. Mount Vernon demonstrates the impact of images displaying clearly the problem at hand. Each location's events forced the local majority to confront the reality of evolving social norms.

These changes bring hope for our posterity, showing the world that diversity is achievable and meaningful. Learning about different ethnicities can improve personal understanding. It takes time and effort but in the end it is worth it. These proms are proof that black and white people can interact without hate and that they can benefit from those relationships. And it starts with all of us.

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Revision Memo

- Re-organized the chronology
- Re-wrote the introduction
- Revised the thesis
- Fixed the conclusion
- Added some additional scholarship
- Fixed grammatical errors