

THE MAGAZINE OF THE **FLORIDA** HUMANITIES COUNCIL

# FORUM

SPECIAL ISSUE

MIAMI BEACH LINE, INC.

## **BLACK, WHITE, AND BROWN**

AFTER 50 YEARS  
OF SCHOOL  
DESEGREGATION,  
THE STRUGGLE  
CONTINUES



# OUT IN FRONT

**The trailblazers remember the personal costs and public gains, the open doors and closed minds, the sacrifices and benefits of being the first to step across color lines in Florida schools.**

## Harold Knowles

**I**n biology class at Tallahassee's all-black Lincoln High School, "thirty kids were assigned to one microscope," Harold Knowles recently recalled.

But when Knowles moved to the white Leon High School in 1963, he was surprised to see the difference in what was available to students. "When I got to Leon, every two kids had a microscope. Basically, that had a profound effect on me. The contrast was so enormous. You never had new books at Lincoln. You had used books, and they were marked up and busted up by the time you got them. The school systems would assign old books from Leon to the black high schools down the road. The contrast between the two civilizations was very obvious."

Knowles, now managing shareholder in Tallahassee-based Knowles, Marks & Randolph, the oldest black law firm in North Florida, said he chose to be one of the first black students to integrate Leon because he wanted educational opportunity. "I wasn't trying to be a pioneer," he said. "I wasn't handpicked by anybody. I assumed that anybody would, if given the opportunity, attend the best high school in the county."

But he found out he was one of only three Lincoln students to move to Leon. "It was a real surprise to me. People kept thinking this was a real courageous thing to do. I thought all of my buddies would be over at Leon. Why didn't more come? It was a mixed bag. Some people stayed. I'm sure, because of fear of the unknown. It was certainly something new and different. There were others proud of their tradition at Lincoln."

After graduation, Knowles headed to DePauw University in Greencastle, Ind., before returning to Florida to receive his bachelor's and law degrees from Florida State University. He currently serves on FSU's Board of Trustees.

"I wanted to get the hell out of the South, only to find that the North was probably worse [regarding racism]. I spent two miserable years up there before I returned to Florida and went to Florida State."

Knowles said he believes the educational hurdles for black children today include the large size of schools and the lack of personal support systems. "It's not purely race, but certainly black children have not fared as well. Missing is that underlying support system that was, believe it or not, there in days of segregation," he said. "Teachers lived in your community, knew your parents, attended church or other social organizations. That sub-culture was there."

—Pamela Griner  
Leavy



Harold Knowles



**Doby Flowers today, and as FSU's homecoming queen.**



## Doby Flowers

In 1970, Doby Flowers stood on the 50-yard line of Florida State University's Doak Campbell Stadium and celebrated a break through. She had just been elected FSU's first black homecoming queen.

It was not a personal victory for her, she said, recently reflecting about the event. It was a victory for all black students. They had blazed a trail into the university's top social institution.

"My running for homecoming queen as the candidate of the black student union was not a process of, 'Oh, we want a beauty queen,'" she said. "We wanted to change institutions and the way they saw African Americans as a whole. We wanted access. We wanted every institution to be open to anybody."

The university had already desegregated its academic and athletic programs, she noted. The last frontier was its social programs.

"There was one institution that was social. We thought that homecoming queen was the ultimate symbol of the social." To win, Flowers and her supporters planned a strategy that included operating what she called a campaign-headquarters "war room."

Their victory reinforced the choice she made to attend FSU instead of predominantly black Florida A&M, where her parents, cousins, and some siblings had attended. One of her brothers, Fred Flowers, who had also opted to attend FSU, was one of the first 10 black students to enroll at the university, and was its first black athlete.

"In the effort of desegregation, we went to Florida State," Doby Flowers said. "It was the closest to going away from home, in terms of not knowing the environment, not knowing the people, all of that. Even though things were highly segregated, there was a movement afoot, a wave of change sweeping this country, student protests. With this change, through the eyes of students, the country, the city, the university started to change."

At FSU, she earned a bachelor's degree in social welfare in 1971 and a master's in urban and regional planning in 1973. In 1980, she began a decade of work in New York City for Mayor Ed Koch. In 1990, as New York's commissioner of human resources administration, she oversaw child welfare and a \$5-billion budget. She now is manager at the Tallahassee law firm of Flowers & White.

In looking at the legacy of *Brown v. Board of Education*, she said, "Brown got rid of the laws that separated people. It gave access." But she emphasized that in actuality, segregation still exists in schools. Some public schools today are virtually all black, as are the academic tracts within many schools, Flowers said. "But the legacy of *Brown v. Board of Education* is great in spite of this. In spite of how far we have to go, we've come a very long way."

—*Patricia Griner Leavy*

## LaVon Bracy

Racial slurs and painful abuse mar high school memories for LaVon Wright Bracy, the first black student to integrate the Alachua County Public School System in 1964. She was the only black graduate in the Gainesville High School class of 1965.

"That was...40 years ago, and it's still very vivid in my mind, the hatred and abuse I had taken from white folk," Bracy said.

That year, her father, the Rev. Thomas Wright Sr., served as president of Gainesville's chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which won a school-desegregation lawsuit in 1964. Bracy volunteered to spend her senior year at Gainesville High after no other black students came forward.

"It was horrible," she recalled. "I was abused, misused, every day. It was not unusual to be called 'nigger' at least 10 times a day, to be shoved 10 times a day. My classmates acted as if I had the plague if I was to sit down. The library would empty. Four or five tables in the lunchroom would get up.

"They took a pact to make sure life was as horrible as possible for me. One day, I was jumped by a white male student and his friend. [After being repeatedly punched and stomped,] I was bleeding. The principal saw I was bleeding profusely. I told him I needed to call my dad and get to a hospital. He said, how did he know that I didn't come from home that way?"

After this experience, Bracy wanted nothing to do with attending a predominantly white university. Her father urged her to attend the University of Florida, but she chose instead to attend Fisk University in Nashville, Tenn.

"I needed to go where I was a majority," she said. "Fisk was wonderful. I think every [black] kid ought to have the opportunity of going to a predominantly black school for a sense of commitment, a sense of knowing who you are, a sense of sacrifice and history you don't get when you go to a white-majority school. Our history is not appreciated by the masses. It took me four years to heal, and I don't know if I'm healed yet."

Bracy earned her bachelor's degree at Fisk, a master's in education from the University of Miami, and a doctorate in higher education administration from the University of Florida. Now she is co-founder and administrator of New Covenant Baptist Church of Orlando.

In assessing the situation today, Bracy said that despite *Brown v. Board of Education*, she still feels the races are divided. "I think the economy has a lot to do with it. Our leadership is more concerned about the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. There's no prescription to help those genuinely in need, and no one cares. No one cares if African-American kids can't read."

—Pamela Griner Leavy

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LaVon Bracy



## Michael Haygood

Black students who integrated white schools “paid a price,” said Michael Haygood, one of 30 students to transfer in 1966 from Leesburg’s all-black Carver High School to white Leesburg High.

“You have to be very strong. People tend to somewhat isolate you. You make a sacrifice,” he said. “I wasn’t willing to do it after high school.” Though his high school guidance counselors and teachers encouraged him to go on to predominantly white University of Florida or Stetson or Rollins colleges, “I said, ‘No way,’” Haygood recently recalled.

“My philosophy about life is such that all things happen for a reason, whether or not the experience was a good one. I don’t judge good or bad, because they all make you what you are. By the time I finished, which was two years, I wanted nothing more to do with an integrated school. I chose a predominantly black college.”

Haygood earned a bachelor’s degree in political science at Hampton Institute, now Hampton University, in Virginia. “I still wasn’t universally loved by everyone, but I knew at least no one hated me because I was black,” he said.

“They may have disliked me because I was from Florida or had hung out with different crowds. No one disliked me because I was black.”

He then chose to attend the University of Florida law school, graduating in 1975. He said attending the predominantly white professional school worked out fine, because “life is not centered around the school as much as it is in undergraduate school. I had white friends and lots of Jewish friends.”

Haygood, a lawyer in Florida for some 30 years, now practices real estate transaction law in West Palm Beach. During the past several years, he and another Leesburg native, Bill McBride, traveled around the state presenting public forums about their early years during the period of racial segregation. McBride was a colleague of Haygood’s at law firm Holland & Knight and was a candidate for governor in 2002. The two men described their experiences in a program titled “Same Town, Different Lives” sponsored by the Florida Humanities Council.

In discussing the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, Haygood described it as “necessary,” but said that black students have lost the benefits they had in segregated schools, where they were in the mainstream and held leadership positions in school.

“There were simply some benefits to the old system as far as the development of black students was concerned. That’s not to say that...the decision wasn’t necessary. Our society wouldn’t continue to exist being separate as it was.”

—Pamela Griner Leavy



Michael Haygood

## Reubin Askew

Calling school segregation a form of “apartheid,” Reubin Askew, Florida’s governor for most of the 1970s, supported busing as an effective way to bring about needed change.

“We weren’t saying this was necessarily the ultimate answer to anything,” Askew said in a recent interview. “It was, ‘How do you break the back of the system that was so cruel and inhumane?’ If you had black schools by choice, that would have been different; had they been equal, it might have been different.”

Askew won election in 1970 against incumbent Claude Kirk, whose anti-busing actions included ordering the Manatee County school board to defy a federal court order and twice suspending the board and superintendent. After Askew was elected, he made his first official speech advocating busing at the 1971 summer graduation ceremonies of his alma mater, the University of Florida law school.

“Some at the graduation and some at the university couldn’t understand why I made the speech. It was important to me to make it strong and, in effect, say [that] while none of us liked busing, black children had been bused all over town. It wasn’t until we started busing white children that it became a real big issue. While I personally didn’t like it, I felt it was imperative that we obeyed the courts, and it was the right thing to do.”

Askew closely monitored school openings in the fall of 1971. Despite reports of bomb threats in three Florida counties, he told school superintendents to implement federal court orders and be a “positive part of trying to end segregation in our public schools.”

“We had the quietest and most successful opening. I’m told by those closest to the education process, [it was] the best [the state] had since we got into accelerated desegregation.”

Now a senior fellow at the John Scott Dailey Florida Institute of government at Florida State University, Askew said, “Florida was as segregated as any state in the nation. I think Brown was a reassurance of the worth of an individual and that the right to fair and equal education is a fundamental constitutional right, and by any attempt to avoid this principle, a person would have to be responsible to the federal courts.”

—Pamela Griner Leavy



Reubin Askew



The Porter family (from left to right): Joy Porter Wright, Samahra Wright, Alvin Porter, Morgan Rachel Smith, Jennifer Porter-Smith, Daphne Porter.

## The Porters

Graduation photographs and diplomas cover the walls of the Porter home. Scrapbooks packed with newspaper clippings and pictures chronicle the family's accomplishments—and some of the changes brought by *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Parents Alvin and Daphne Porter have bachelor's degrees in education from Bethune-Cookman College and master's degrees from Florida A&M University. Both are retired educators with more than 40 years' tenure in segregated, and desegregated, Pinellas County schools.

Their son, Alvin Jr., was one of the first black students to integrate a white school—and he suffered from the experience. "In the first and second grade at the black school here, he was thriving, a leader, outgoing and extroverted," Daphne Porter said. "When the teacher had a play, he had a lead part. Once he started at another school, his personality changed, and [this] affected him throughout his years."

Their daughters, Joy Porter Wright and Jennifer Porter-Smith, graduated from integrated Lakewood High School in St. Petersburg and pursued different paths to college.

Wright chose to attend predominantly black Florida A&M and graduated in 1987 with a degree in broadcast journalism. "It was a lot different from high school. Even though Lakewood was integrated, black students were still in the minority. Then you attend college, and all you see are beautiful black faces from all over the country—New York and Washington—and you are exposed to their cultures as well. I learned a lot from them, being a native Floridian. It was a real exciting experience." She now lives near Orlando and serves as program coordinator for the Orange County Parks and Recreation Department.



Porter-Smith decided to attend the University of Florida, where she earned a bachelor's degree in psychology and master's and doctorate degrees in physiological psychology. She also spent five post-graduate years studying pharmacology at the University of Pittsburgh. She currently works as a consultant to the Orange County school system.

She chose to attend UF, she said, "because I felt they had the program that interested me most at the time, pre-med." But she found it necessary to form relationships with other African-American students in her program so they could study together, and she looked to Florida

A&M for her social life.

The Porter parents have different perspectives when looking at the impact of school desegregation. Alvin Porter noted that segregated black community schools had the advantage of strict discipline. "There were certain things that were just taboo, that you couldn't do, because if you did, your parents found out and you were punished when you got home." Such close ties and disciplinary consequences were eliminated when black students were bused to distant schools, he said. "A lot of black students didn't succeed, and the culture is suffering."

Daphne Porter said school problems today are a result of "environmental influences" throughout the culture, not just busing. She remembers saying in college that putting black and white students together in classrooms wouldn't create "magic."

But now she believes, "Maybe there was something 'magic' that happened when children of different races sat, listened, played, worked, and ate together in school. I see the long-term legacy of *Brown v. Education* as a positive one."

—Pamela Griner Leavy