Oral History Interview of Patricia Reid

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Interview Summary

Patricia J. Reid, daughter of former South Boston High School headmaster Dr. William Reid, reflects on the impact of the 1974 Garrity decision, which required some students to be bused between Boston neighborhoods with the intention of creating racial balance in the public schools. Ms. Reid discusses her father’s reaction to the decision; community responses to busing and to Dr. Reid; her opinion on the issue; and the public school system today.
Subject Headings

Busing for school integration

*Morgan v. Hennigan* (379 F. Supp. 410)

Reid, Patricia J.


South Boston (Boston, Mass.)

South Boston High School

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SANNY MOUKAILA: Okay, first of all, I want to greet you and I thank you for assenting to receive me today—And also to offer you my condolences for the death of your father.

PATRICIA REID: Thank you.

MOUKAILA: Okay. For the record, can you please give me your full name?

REID: Patricia J. Reid.

MOUKAILA: If I may ask, where are you born and where do you live?

REID: I was born in Boston, and I still live in Boston, specifically South Boston.

MOUKAILA: Where did you grow up?

REID: In South Boston.

MOUKAILA: In South Boston? What is your connection with the issue of the Garrity Decision?1

REID: Well, I was living in South Boston at the time this all happened. And my father was headmaster at South Boston High School at the time the schools were being desegregated.

MOUKAILA: And so I assume that during that period, you were living in South Boston?

REID: Yes.

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1 The Garrity decision refers to the June 21, 1974, opinion filed by Judge W. Arthur Garrity in the case of Tallulah Morgan et al. v. James Hennigan et al. (379 F. Supp. 410). Judge Garrity ruled that the Boston School Committee had “intentionally brought about and maintained racial segregation” in the Boston Public Schools. When the school committee did not submit a workable desegregation plan as the opinion had required, the court established a plan that called for some students to be bused from their own neighborhoods to attend schools in other neighborhoods, with the goal of creating racial balance in the Boston Public Schools. (See http://www.lib.umb.edu/node/1596 for more information)
MOUKAILA: And what were you doing?

REID: I was working here at John Hancock.

MOUKAILA: At John Hancock?

REID: Yeah. I had graduated from college and had come back home and was working full time.

MOUKAILA: Okay. What do you remember about the period leading to the Garrity Decision?

REID: Leading to it? I remember my father spending the summer prior going through all sorts of paper—The dining room table being covered with paper that he was going through, doing all sorts of studies and analysis, trying to figure out basically how this was going to work, what was going to be done, how they were going to do it and the best way to handle it.

MOUKAILA: Okay, right. How was South Boston involved before that period?

REID: You mean as far as racial considerations, or—?

MOUKAILA: No, like how did you guys talk about it within the neighborhood, how to structure?

REID: Well, I can tell you. I didn't go to South Boston High School, I went to Girls’ Latin, which was a public school in the city, but it was a central high school. My sister graduated from South Boston High School in 1972 and while she was there, at some period of time, there were so many students at South Boston High School that they had to set up an annex down at what is now the Curley Recreation Center. They took one section in the annex and made it into the ninth grade. And Charlie Ray was made basically principal of that section of the high school because the school was just so crowded and they were on extended days so that—I believe it was the

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2 Girls’ Latin School, now called Boston Latin Academy, is a public exam school located in the Dorchester section of Boston.
seniors went in first and then the juniors came in an hour later and the sophomores came an hour later and everyone got out on a staggered time.

And, of course, for many people given that South Boston at that time was very much a blue-collar worker area, lower middle class, maybe middle-middle class, for many people the high school was basically—That was where they went and that was where they graduated from and they usually didn't go beyond that. So the high school was very important to them.

And it was in the neighborhood, it was called South Boston High School, the neighborhood identified with the high school. They were sort of one in the same. And I knew this even without going to the school. (laughs)

MOUKAILA: Okay. How did you learn about the Garrity Decision?

REID: Oh gee, I couldn't tell you that. I'm sure my father was one of the first people to know. And I probably heard it at the dining room table. (laughs)

MOUKAILA: Did he tell you about it, like you knew that something like that was coming?

REID: Oh, yes, yeah. Yeah, you knew something was going to happen. I mean, just—You know, you have to realize how long ago this was, and if I remember, I'm not sure I remember all the details. I remember more after it happened than before it happened. Yes, we knew it was going to happen and, of course, originally they didn't know how it was going to happen and then it came out and I believe there were three schools involved; Roxbury, South Boston and Charlestown.³

³ The Boston school desegregation plan was implemented in three phases: the first phase, which began in September 1974, involved redistricting and student transportation, and it only applied in areas where whites and blacks lived near each other; beginning in September 1975, the second phase included all areas of Boston except East Boston and created eight community school districts and one city-wide district; the third phase began in 1977 and established the Department of Implementation to oversee desegregation and compile racial statistics of the public schools.
And I remember, at least as I recall, my father at one point said that was the worst thing they could have done, is to basically single out certain schools and do it that way. If they were going to do it, they should have done the whole city at once.

MOUKAILA: Did you know any children in the school at that time?

REID: I probably did, but it wasn't—we didn't have anyone immediately. My younger brother was still in the Boston public schools, but he was going to Latin School,4 so he wasn't affected by it. And I know my mother was very grateful for the fact that he wasn't and that there was no decision. Because a lot of people made the decision to keep their kids out from school, and you know, there were some kids who probably lost a whole year of school because they just didn't go to school for a year until they set up what became South Boston Heights Academy, I believe it was, which was sort of a private school that was run by the citizens.

He was still at Latin School because he didn't graduate until '79, he graduated from Latin School in '79. Yes, I mean, there were people around that maybe you knew who were up at the school, but no one I could immediately identify.

MOUKAILA: What do you remember about the first day of school [September 1974]?

REID: I went to work as normal. My father went to work. Or did I? There was some period of time where I was away on vacation, I wasn't around, because—and I'd have to go back and look at the dates, if I still had it. I think we—you know, you knew, yes, things were going to be different, but you didn't—let's put it this way. I don't think anyone expected the reaction that they got. I think that took everybody by surprise, the stoning of the buses. I don't think anyone expected that. That caught everyone off guard, I'll tell you that.

MOUKAILA: Did you get involved, during that period, did you get involved in any of the community activity?

4 Boston Latin School is a public exam school founded on April 23, 1635, and is the oldest public school in the United States.
REID: No. Given that my father was in the midst of it, you had to be very careful. You didn't want to do anything to upset anybody either way. And so no, I didn't go to any community meetings or anything like that. I was really just there to support my father when he came home, basically. That's what my mother and I did.

MOUKAILA: What was his position on the issue, your father?

REID: Okay. One thing you have to understand, which I don't think a lot of people knew, when I was at the Perry, when I was in grammar school, they bused kids over, the fourth grade over, from Columbia Point, which was then mostly black public housing. They bused them over to the Perry School where I went and they bused kids to the Gavin School from all over. You know, so it wasn't that I was—and I went to Latin School where you had blacks, you had Jews, you had people from all over the city there. And I was brought up in a very open—you know, as far as you don't—you're not prejudiced against anybody, that was—So this whole thing about—and I also remember my father telling me that he used to go over to Columbia Point and talk to the junior high kids over there and tell them that South Boston High School, because Columbia Point was in the South Boston High School District, “South Boston is your high school. You deserve to do that.”

Now, I remember him making a point, the few times that they tried to send blacks over, they would only send a few over, and he said once, he said, “You know, if they had sent twenty or thirty over, it would have worked and no one would have thought anything of it.” So, you know, the thing that—I think the thing that bothered people wasn't so much—and this is my interpretation, it could be wrong—it wasn't so much the fact that blacks were being bused into South Boston, even though that's the way it looked like, because those were the busses being—it was the fact that their children were being bused out to Roxbury. That's what bothered them, the fact that their children couldn’t go to South Boston High School per se.

5 Oliver Hazard Perry Elementary School is a public school located in the City Point section of South Boston.
And it’s also, unfortunately, I think the way it is through history, usually the last group to be discriminated against is always the one that discriminates the most. And, of course, South Boston with its Irish, the same thing is true of Charlestown, the Irish background, they were the last group to be discriminated against in Boston and so therefore, it — You know, they were the ones. And when you think about it, you had two groups of people who were basically very much the same as far as economics, the type of jobs they were looking for, the educational background, that were completely at odds. So in many ways, it made no sense. But, that's because (laughs)—Of course, I wasn’t affected. You know, we weren't affected per—We weren't affected by it as far as what happened to the children and with that. Now, as a family yes, we were affected because of what my father was going through.

MOUKAILA: Did he talk about his experience during that time?

REID: Yes and no. I think sometimes when he came home, he just wanted to say—You know, he would be gone from probably seven o’clock in the morning, not get home until nine o’clock at night because he was going to all sorts of meetings after work. And in many ways, I think when he came home he just wanted to sort of relax and forget about it. Yes, if anything big happened he’d say—He might talk about that. But most of the time, I think we tried to avoid it because we felt that he was under enough strain and pressure as it was without trying to get more from him.

I don't know whether he mentioned this in his interview,⁶ but he had police protection. He had two—He had detectives in a car following him and he—My mother kept having to remind him, “Remember, you’re driving for two,” so he couldn't run the yellow lights. (laughs) And then a couple of times, whenever the detectives would just say, Okay, come on, we’ll drive you, rather than—I don't think he was ever concerned. I think the city or the police department assigned the detectives because they were concerned. Given the fact that we lived in the neighborhood, there was very little that at least—And I would go out with my father to do errands and stuff like that and there was very little—You know, there’d still be the “Hi, Doc.” So it’s sort of like they separated him from the job he was doing, and I think that was because he was so highly respected in the community that they could make—I personally never—And I rode the bus to

⁶ OH-053 in the Moakley Oral History Project is an interview with Dr. William Reid.
and from work all the time, and I would hear conversations like, Oh, we should just bomb the school, and stuff like that. But I never heard anyone say anything against my father. And, you know, these were people, they didn't know me from Adam. You know, I’d just overhear conversations.

But no, given the situation, it was never reflected personally on my father. You know, we still went shopping at the local supermarket, we still went to church and all that kind of stuff. Which got off the track. What was the original question?

(simultaneous conversation)

REID: Did he talk about it?

MOUKAILA: Yes.

REID: You might have heard some detail—You know, if something hit the paper and you might have heard some more details, you might have heard a little more. If they didn't get it quite right, you might have heard what the true story was. But I don't particularly—I think we all sort of basically tried to—it was such a bad period of time, we tried to forget about it, the details.

MOUKAILA: When you were riding the bus, like you said earlier, like when you hear that people say, Should we bomb the school, were you not afraid for the safety of your father?

REID: No, because I knew that they—A lot of it was just talk. And I thought, These people are crazy. You know, you think these people—You know, you have to realize, this was thirty years ago, seventies? Thirty years ago. And, you know this bombing thing didn't have the same connotation back then that it does now. No one bombed any place back then. That just wasn’t done. So when you said that, you know, “Oh jeez people, get a life.” (laughs)

MOUKAILA: Did he receive any support from the people of the community, or also from local politicians?
REID: I wouldn’t say from—The local politicians meaning the city politicians?

MOUKAILA: Yes.

REID: Okay, because many of them were anti-busing and Dad’s position was he had a job to do and he was going to do his job. And I think most people respected that. And he went to a lot of community meetings because I remember him being gone—You know, he’d come home for supper and would have to go out right afterwards. I don't know how he did it, actually, for the period he did it. I can't say, I don't remember anyone particularly supporting him, but I don't remember anyone particularly saying anything bad about him, either. And as I said, since I didn't go to the meetings, I don't know what was said in the meetings. So I'm not sure I can really answer that question.

MOUKAILA: And how about the community, like them—

REID: As I say, we went around the community, we just did our normal lives and I never heard anyone say anything. And I would go a lot of places with my father.

MOUKAILA: What did he think about local politicians’ position on this issue?

REID: Oh, he wouldn't say. He was not the type of person who would comment on things like that. I know he felt that—Well, I shouldn't say this. I think he felt that in many ways they did more harm than good, regardless of what their stance was. There were better ways to handle things. You know, throwing rocks and having riots and all this kind of stuff is not the way he would do things.

MOUKAILA: How much was he involved in the calming down of the situation at South Boston High School?
REID: I think he did his best, from what I understand. I do remember him making some comment about one of the things, when he was removed from the high school, one of the things the judge said was wrong, was when there was a fight in the school usually between black and whites. You put the whites in one room for detention and the blacks in the other room and they looked upon that as being discrimination. And, of course, my father says, “You have two people fighting. Are you going to put them in the same room?” You know, it was almost like these people didn't understand how a school ran. I do remember he did say that he thought the state having—When the local police were replaced by the state police, that was one of the best things that happened because with the local police, the police who were there kept changing, you know, whoever was probably not, you know, doing overtime, was there. But with the state police, it was the same people day after day and it got to the point where they knew who to look out for, who the troublemakers were, who they had to keep their eye on. And so I think he felt having the state troopers there was very helpful.

And I know, I believe at least one, went to the prom with one of the seniors one year. So, yeah, my father could almost calm down any situation within the school itself. I mean, I had—I don't know what it was, one of his students, one of his teachers, tell me my father would walk into a room and everybody would immediately be quiet and sit down and you could hear a pin drop. And I don't think he lost that ability.

MOUKAILA: During that period, did he ever think of resigning?

REID: No. At least not that I heard of. The only thing that was made, the only comment he ever made, was after he had been removed, and I don't know how long after, it might have been a couple of years afterwards, he made some comment that—You know, he got removed between Christmas and the first of the year. He didn't go back after the Christmas break. And I remember him saying that he probably wouldn’t have gone back another year, he probably couldn’t—Now, you have to realize, my father was in his seventies then. No, sixties, he was in his sixties then. Because he retired when he was seventy, and that was about ten years later. No, it wasn’t ten

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7 In December 1975, Judge Garrity placed South Boston High School in federal receivership and removed the school’s administration, including Dr. Reid.
years. No, he was probably in his, yeah, he was in his sixties at that point in time going through this.

But I only heard him say that once, that he probably wouldn’t have gone back for a third year. So that in that way, Garrity did him a favor in the fact that he made the decision for him.

MOUKAILA: After all these events passed and all things calmed down, did your father ever mention it?

REID: No. No, it was basically he was out of the school. He was out of the school, he wasn't out of the school business because he worked in town on labor relations things and on the superintendent’s staff afterwards. But no, he was out of it, he wasn't involved. And he would never, he would never want to do anything that would upset anybody and make someone think that Doc Reid didn't approve of this or that or the other thing that was happening up at the high school. He wouldn't do that.

MOUKAILA: So he never mentioned it when you guys were talking, nothing?

REID: No, the only thing I can remember him saying is when he was relieved, Judge Garrity put—Oh, I can picture him, but I can’t think of his name—One of his assistant headmasters in charge. And my father said, “Well gee, that makes a lot of sense because after all, I trained this guy.” You know, so he would do the same thing Dad did, my father did. And then at one point, and I don't know why it was, but we were at the dining room table and I don't know what we were talking about, but the word panacea came up. And I think it might have been my younger brother who asked, “What does panacea mean?” And my father came up with, “Oh well, Judge Garrity thinks Winegar8 is the panacea,” for the school. And, you know, we just cracked up. But that's the only thing that—

My father was the kind of person who figures, you know—And actually our family. You know, things happen for the best, one way or the other, so, that was sort of the family attitude. In fact,

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8 Jerome Winegar was appointed headmaster of South Boston High School by the federal court in 1976.
we were very glad he was out of it. You didn't realize how stressful it was until my father wasn’t going back to the school. And I noticed the stress level in the household, even though my brother wasn’t involved, he was going to a different school, my mother was a stay at home mom. I was working full time here. You didn't realize how stressed out you were just being there, connected to him, until it was over. And then, you know, it’s sort of like the stress level in the house just dropped dramatically.

MOUKAILA: Okay. Did he ever mention if it was the right thing to do, or how it could be done differently?

REID: Well, I think he did think that the whole city should have been done rather than just select schools, because then it felt like those schools were being targeted. The problem is Boston was based, it was designed in neighborhood—Boston is made up of neighborhoods, and neighborhoods had schools. And the problem wasn’t that the schools were desegregated, were segregated, it was that the neighborhoods were segregated. And busing kids in didn't solve the problem. In fact, and I think he would agree—In fact, I might have got this from my father, basically they said race relations—Busing set race relations in the city back a whole generation. It did more harm than good, and it also, my personal opinion, having been a Boston public school student, all four of us were, the quality of the education in the school, in all the schools throughout the city, just went downhill after that. I'm not sure they've ever really recovered, even after all these years, got up to the level where we were.

I mean, that was one thing my father—You know, and as he told the judge when he was testifying, he said if he didn't think he was running a good quality school, he wouldn’t have sent his daughter there, my sister. And he said, you know, he mentioned he had graduates going to Harvard, he had graduates going to the military academies and all, you know, so he had achieved a very high success rate as far as getting the students to look beyond South Boston, elsewhere. And busing didn't—Busing sort of set everything back, probably because the kids didn't, stopped going to school for a while.
So busing didn't help, it hurt. The goal may have been what they were trying to achieve, which—
I mean, my understanding was they always thought the reason they were busing the kids was
because they didn't think that the black areas were getting the same quality education as the
white areas. And so therefore, they thought if they segregated it, that would even out. I think
actually what happened is everything went down. So it didn't accomplish what it was supposed
to accomplish.

MOUKAILA: Tell me about that you—What was your position on the issue back then,
personally?

REID: Personally? My personal position? Unfortunately, I could see both sides. (laughs) See,
having gone to school with blacks, having blacks in school didn't mean anything to me. But, we
were [an] untypical South Boston family. I mean, I grew up in a household where both parents
were college graduates. One parent had advanced degrees. That was unusual. It was also unusual,
the fact that all four of us went all from kindergarten through senior year to the public schools,
especially for a Catholic family because most Catholic families sent their children to the
parochial schools. In fact, that was one reason why Southie became so crowded, is a lot of
parochial schools were closing. And before busing started, there had been rumors about Boston
College High closing, which would have been even more kids wanting, more boys wanting to go
to South Boston High School.

So, I basically couldn’t see—And also the fact that I traveled to school every day, because my
school was located in Codman Square in Dorchester, and so I took a public bus, the T, to school
every day. So busing? Big deal. And as I said, when I was at the Perry, when I was in fifth grade,
they were busing kids over from Columbia Point to the Perry to go to school there. So, I
basically couldn’t figure out what, you know, this whole anti-black thing was just beyond my
comprehension. And, of course, then I think a lot of it is because many of these people didn't
personally know any blacks, unfortunately, because they just were so isolated in their
neighborhoods and their schools that they just never had the opportunity to meet any.
MOUKAILA: So do you think that people who had power at that time like politicians or anybody who had power did their job well?

REID: As far as I could—And this is based on what I recall, the only people who did anything well regarding all of that was—It seemed like the state troopers who were assigned to the school did a good job. My father’s staff did, I think, an excellent job considering the circumstances they had to teach under. I have a lot of admiration for all the students who showed up day after day to attend, who wanted to, who cared enough to get an education that they went to school under those circumstances. As far as the people who were making the decisions, no. I do know that this—I mean, the superintendent supported my father, so he—I think the school officials were sort of caught in the middle. They had very little say about it. It was basically, Judge Garrity was really the only one, and the local people, local civic leaders. I don’t want to just say politicians because they weren’t all politicians, they were local civil leaders. How they handled things, I don't think they did the job well.

MOUKAILA: What do you think of the school system today?

REID: I don't think it’s reached the standard it was back in the late sixties, early seventies before busing started. I think they still have—But I don't think that's only Boston, I think education in general has gone downhill. And I don't think—Yes, I think the schools are more diverse, but I don't think that's, but the neighborhoods are also more diverse. I can see that just riding the bus to and from work and walking around the neighborhood.

The one thing that—The unfortunate thing is what it did. Well, there were two things. One is we used to have people from Columbia Point and other places used to come down and swim at Pleasure Bay, use the beaches during the summer, which were in the South Boston neighborhood. Now, these were all state beaches, they weren't city beaches, they were state beaches. But after this trouble with busing, anyone who was colored was afraid to come—Had colored skin was afraid to come into the neighborhood. And I'm thinking, Okay, this isn’t right, this isn’t fair.
The other thing is, unfortunately, you became very—I don’t—Race conscious in that you would be places and you’d look around and you’d see, are there all whites? How many blacks? My sister graduated from college in ’76 and moved out to Chicago. And where she was living was on the south side of Chicago. And we walked down to the, I think it was to get her telephone hooked up, or something like that. And then we were taking a bus downtown. And I realized we were the only white people on the bus. Now, that didn't bother me, but I don't think, if I hadn't been through this issue and had lived through the busing thing, that I would have even thought about that.

It’s just that those are the things—You just become conscious of things that just sort of pass you by without even thinking one way or the other about it. And that bothered me, the fact that you were becoming conscious of that kind of stuff.

MOUKAILA: Was the Garrity Decision, then, worth doing?

REID: I don't think so. I don't see that it accomplished what they were hoping to do as far as the quality of education. I think it made the relationship between whites and blacks in certain parts of the city much worse for a long period of time than they should have been. So, I understand what they were trying to do, but using the schools to do it, I don't think was the way, you know, that kind of —The way they did it wasn’t the right way to go about it.

MOUKAILA: Just like the school system, do you think the education has gone down? Did they not achieve actually what—

REID: No, I don't think they did. I don't think they achieved the educational goals that they were trying to do, of improving quality education for everyone. I think it went down for everybody. But that's my opinion as an outsider. I'm not basing that on any statistics or anything like that. And, whether that would have happened anyway, maybe not at that particular time, but in another five years, just given the way—I mean, I frankly think education throughout the country has gone down from what you hear. That I keep thinking we need to go back to the basics; reading, writing and arithmetic. (laughs)
MOUKAILA: Do you have anything to add to this interview?

REID: The one thing I just, the one thing that I feel is, and I think this is something probably I picked up from my father, is unfortunately the people who are making this decision about the education of the students didn't know anything about running a school. Really didn't know. I mean, they might have been called experts in the field, but didn't have the practical experience about how you run a school. And that many of the things that, in the court ruling, that led to my father’s removal, were things that anyone who knew anything about the school business and how you run a school, would have done the same thing.

MOUKAILA: I would like to thank you for this interview and (inaudible) I'm happy to meet you and have spoken about this issue. Thank you.

REID: Well, you're welcome. Sorry I couldn't remember as much as you would have liked.

MOUKAILA: It’s all right, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW