



THE KIDS ON THE BUS ARE ALRIGHT

An oral history about the first voluntarily desegregated school system in the country from the kids who lived it and the mothers who fought for it.

As told by Francine Graff, Lisa Robinson, Lori Williams, Loretta Weinberg and Theodora Lacey

FRANCINE: It was a warm, spring day in 1971. I stood on a dusty outfield, during a school kickball game with the rest of my third-grade class. The boys dominated the important positions and would yell, “back up” when a strong kicker came up to the plate. We, the girls were stuck in the outfield and dutifully obeyed. Occasionally, we would even catch the red industrial kickball sending the team into a frenzy.



Photos courtesy of the authors



Let people not say that Teaneck waited to be directed, let them say, 'Teaneck led the way'

—Harvey Scribner,
Superintendent of Teaneck Public Schools, 1961-1968

This was not one of those days. The inning was dragging on and the sun was beating down. On one side of me was my friend, Linda*, who was white. On the other side was Donna,* who was Black and kind of a loner. I don't remember her having many friends, Black or white.

Out of nowhere, Donna turned to me and said, "Honky" (a derogatory term for a white person). I looked at her; my head tilted the way a dog looks at its owner when she doesn't understand her language.

"What?" I responded.

Donna said it again. "Honky."

"What?" I said to her again. The word meant nothing to me.

LISA: After three older brothers, my sister Lori and I entered the picture. I was born first. We came before ultrasound technology, so our parents didn't know there were two of us. Ten minutes after I arrived, the doctors checked my mother and said, "Wait, there's another one coming!" This was in 1963 and most fathers experienced birth from the comfort of a hospital waiting room. When they told my dad that he would be

the unexpected "father of twin girls," he supposedly fainted.

Despite the miles between us (we currently live in different countries), Lori and I are very close. Growing up, we spent afternoons lying across our twin beds studying. If one of us would say, "don't forget to read over the section on a particular topic," the other would say, "I know, I just read that part." We share similar tastes and habits but one thing we disagree about is peanut butter. Lori loves peanut butter and I can't stand it.

We grew up in suburban Teaneck, N.J. and our family often spent weekends hosting cookouts in the backyard, eating barbecue and having fun. Going to school in such a diverse community cemented a love for other cultures and a strong tolerance and appreciation for differences that would forever change our life's trajectory.

LORI: Our mother worked as a nurse and our father was a supervisor for the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority in New York City. We had a strong household where academics were stressed, but not at the expense of

family. We were also taught to have love and respect for our neighbors, friends, and classmates. At home, we had chores, took care of our pets, read many African American history books, encyclopedias and mysteries. We had subscriptions to Ebony and Jet magazines and always made time to watch Soul Train, Fat Albert, Happy Days, The Jeffersons, Sanford and Son, Good Times and of course, the nightly news with Walter Cronkite.

LISA: Many days were spent on our block with our mostly African American friends playing spud, hide and seek, red rover, double Dutch, kickball and stickball. Lori and I went to football and basketball games, to the movies, the library, and went roller skating and bowling. We participated in cheerleading, ballet, track and the modern dance club. We also attended church and spent many weekends and summers in New York City.

FRANCINE: In school, I was jealous of the Black girls who were able to do double Dutch jump rope, while all of us white girls only knew how to use a single jump rope. I was too shy to ask them to teach me.



LORI: We weren't focused on redlining, white flight or desegregation issues. At such a young age, we were simply focused on fun, school, and family. As we entered junior high and high school, we became more conscious of race relations not only in Teaneck, but in the world around us.

FRANCINE: Standing on the outfield next to Donna marked four years since I attended kindergarten in the first voluntarily desegregated school system in the country. I lived in Teaneck, a bedroom community known for its good schools, green spaces and its close proximity to New York City. In 1949, the Army chose Teaneck from 10,000 suburban towns nationwide as America's "Model Community." It would be a prototype for the rebuilding of Germany and Japan after World War II showing "Democracy in Action."

In the 1960s, middle class Black families were trying to buy into suburban neighborhoods. Blockbusting real estate agents made a fortune spreading there-goes-the-neighborhood fear. They fueled white flight by saying "Negroes" were moving in and families should "get out" before their home values plummeted.

White families took the bait and sold far below market value. Realtors would then sell the house to a black family, often at double the price. To "preserve" the neighborhood, they would only show black families houses in certain sections of the town. This is how neighborhoods got "turned" and local schools became segregated ones.

Black families didn't want their children in schools that would inevitably end up with less resources and underperforming teachers. As a result, court-ordered bussing was implemented to integrate schools. Many white families were against their kids being bused and fled deeper into the suburbs. In my hometown of Teaneck, a dedicated group of white, Black and Brown citizens put "Not for Sale" signs on their lawns and came together to take a stand. My mother, Loretta Weinberg, a lifelong politician (who is



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currently the Senate Majority Leader in the New Jersey State Senate) was one of those people.

LORETTA: The day before the school board election, I walked around hanging literature on people’s doors in support of the pro-integration candidates. I went back the next day, Election Day, reminding them to vote. When I knocked on one woman’s door she said, “I can’t vote today can I vote tomorrow?” That gave me my first real insight into how uninvolved the general public was. I had to tell her that (at that time) we only had one-day elections in the United States.

LORI: Ms. Theodora Lacey, along with her husband, Dr. Archie Lacey, were the leaders of the desegregation movement in Teaneck. The Laceys, who met during the Montgomery bus boycott, learned from Dr. Martin Luther King how to turn their anger into positive, nonviolent change.

THEODORA: My father was on the Board of Directors at the Dexter Avenue church and helped bring Dr. King to the church. That early influence of Dr. King helped me channel my focus and calm my inner rage. I was never violent, but wrestled with feeling angry about the unjust system I was born into. His eloquence, sincerity and dedication encouraged me to approach life more positively and work for change where ever I could. When I met Dr. King, he was young, brilliant, compassionate, and unpretentious. I was very much influenced by his direct nonviolent approach to

solving problems. That has stayed with me ever since.

On January 30, 1956, Dr. King’s house was bombed by white segregationists while he was speaking at our church regarding the bus boycott. We were all quite upset, but he cautioned us to sit down. Now, I thought I understood the meaning of non-violence, but it was that night that it was really clarified for me.

Dr. King said, “No matter what has happened at my home tonight, the boycott will continue and it will continue nonviolently.” And I said to myself, how can one think about a movement if your family’s life is at stake? But he was always focused and always purposeful in what he attempted to do. He was very badly shaken, but he did not want the community to be shaken and he didn’t want the people who were involved in helping to lead the boycott to lose focus.

When we arrived at the house, we saw that the front had been blown away, but the back was not harmed. Mrs. King was in the back of the house with their baby when the explosion happened. Dr. King came out to the crowd and said, “Put away your weapons.” The people were furious. How could someone do this to a person like Dr. King, who preached nonviolence? He said to us, “We will continue our struggle, peacefully.”

LISA: The Laceys moved to Teaneck in 1960. Mr. Lacey had accepted a position as a professor of science education at Hunter College. As they settled into their new

town, they became concerned. Because of blockbusting, their local schools were becoming segregated. The Laceys joined a bold superintendent, Dr. Harvey Scribner, and together they began the long, controversial battle to voluntarily desegregate the schools. Ms. Lacey would eventually get her master’s and go onto become a beloved science teacher in the schools she helped to integrate.

THEODORA: Dr. Scribner came to the schools in 1961. We were aware of the hiring of a new superintendent and concerned about someone coming from Vermont with little or no experience with people of color. Upon meeting him, our fears were allayed.

We took advantage of Dr. Scribner’s open-door policy to meet with him to discuss community concerns. Later, several such meetings were held in our home. The “secret” in Teaneck was that you could disagree without being afraid of overt retaliation and retribution. School board meetings during the 1960s were often very heated and more exciting than a Broadway show, but week after week the citizens kept working until a consensus was formed.

It was very tense the night the Central sixth-grade plan was voted upon. People thought we were trying to sneak this through without any input. Others were adamantly opposed to busing, and some were out-and-out racist.

The night of the School Board vote, it was difficult to keep order. People were



shouting and making threatening remarks. There were a couple of Blacks that opposed the plan. They blamed too many Black people moving in and upsetting things. Ultimately, the Board voted 7-2 to integrate the schools. It would begin with a Central sixth grade.

Some policemen and firemen came as the meeting was ending. Feelings were raw. There were late night phone calls spewing hate and an organized effort to stop the desegregation plan. There was so much racial strife, we thought we were back in the South! As I look back, it was a miracle that we succeeded without violence.

FRANCINE: In 1968, the Teaneck school board began to see the value of integrating at a younger age. They decided to disband the Central sixth grade and create a

Central kindergarten where Lisa, Lori and I attended the very first class.

It was decided that we would all be bused to a central location, so the burden wasn't solely placed on black families. White mothers complained that their children would not be able to come home for hot lunches. My mother was thrilled to pack me a peanut butter and marshmallow fluff sandwich and not see me for the rest of the day.

THEODORA: Later, as children were bused throughout the elementary schools, they were required to bring their lunch. Their white classmates went home because they remained in their neighborhood. White parents requested for their children to be allowed to remain in school for lunch. The principals discouraged this, saying that "healthy

children go home to have lunch."

Needless to say, this did not sit well with me and some others. I immediately responded that "we were equally concerned about our children's health, as every other parent" and that if "it was indeed true, changes must be made to accommodate the 'bused kids' in returning home." Upon reflection, that policy was changed and all students were granted permission to remain at school for lunch. The children were elated.

LORI: In 1968, against the backdrop of Dr. King's assassination and all of the ongoing turmoil in the country, my twin sister Lisa and I were about to head into the first voluntarily integrated kindergarten class in the country. In an ironic twist, we lived across the street from the school and were able to have



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our mother walk us over. Simultaneously, Francine (Weinberg) Graff, another 5-year-old whom we hadn't yet met, would wait with her mother to board the bus from the other side of town. It wouldn't be until years later as adults, that Lisa, Francine and I would recall the significance of this historic first day of kindergarten.

Our mother proudly held our hand as she ushered us into Washington Irving School. As we walked through the doors, it was instilled in us to remember that we were Black and we were proud. This would become our personal rallying cry for life. Life in Teaneck was seen through the eyes of children who had no idea they were a part of a larger, diversity-based initiative which gave us the foundation to stand firm.

FRANCINE: At five years old, I stepped onto a big, yellow bus that was headed to Washington Irving School with white, Black and Brown children — many of whom became lifelong classmates and friends. I never heard disparaging words, until Donna said “honky” in the outfield during the kickball game.

After more rounds of “Honky” and “What?” my friend Linda walked over and said, “She’s calling you a bad word, you should call her a “N” (she said the full word). I had no idea what that word meant either.

I wish I could say that like a scripted Hollywood ending, I spun on my heels, clasped Donna’s hand and we walked

away together, but I didn't. I looked at her and said it; the “N-word.” Donna said nothing, the inning finally ended, and we walked off the field to take our turn to kick. I felt slightly sick to my stomach.

Even though I was only eight years old, that day is seared in my memory. I somehow knew that I had participated in the cycle of hate that is passed from generation to generation.

LORI: There were times when we got together with some of our white classmates, particularly Ellen and Debi, our friends from the other side of town. Deb’s uncle would pick us up and take us roller skating. On one occasion Debi told her mother she was going to cancel her birthday party unless “the twins” were there. This became a big deal and Debi’s mother called our mother to express why she wanted to cancel her party. Growing up in Teaneck enabled friendships across color lines and our friend Debi was no exception.

FRANCINE: In middle and high school, my locker was next to “the twins,” Lisa and Lori Williams. They were (and are) brilliant, athletic and beautiful. We greeted each other every day with warm smiles. Lisa and I were on the volleyball team, where she quickly got my vote to be the team captain. She was kind and a natural leader. We tumbled through school with our lockers side by side for many years, but we never saw each other outside of school. Despite the fact that we were integrated, we were still

disappointedly segregated.

LISA: When I was picked as a co-captain of the volleyball team, the coach was surprised. He thought I was too quiet, and in a private conversation questioned whether my teammates had made a mistake. Later, when he was giving out awards at a school assembly he told the audience, “Now I see why her teammates selected her to be the co-captain.” Apparently, he realized that leaders didn't need to be loud, egotistical or pushy to be effective.

One time, a group of us were coming from the movies walking down Cedar Lane (our town’s main street), when a truck full of white guys drinking beer kept yelling, “(N-word), go home!”

We told our mother, who reminded us that there would always be jerks and not to let these types of people deter us. Our parents, Vernon and Hortense, always instilled a strong message of, “Keep your head to the sky! Keep the faith and trust God!”

FRANCINE: Blockbusting had succeeded in drawing color lines, with whites living on one side of town and Blacks on the other side. In Teaneck High School, there was a “white door” on one side of the school and a “Black door” on the other side. Kids came in from the side of town they lived in. During our school orientation, a senior stood up and told us these doors “didn't exist”. That was how they dealt with racial problems, by pretending they weren't there.



The day before the school board election, I walked around hanging literature on people's doors in support of the pro-integration candidates. I went back the next day, Election Day, reminding them to vote. When I knocked on one woman's door she said, 'I can't vote today, can I vote tomorrow?' That gave me my first real insight into how uninvolved the general public was." — Loretta Weinberg

LORI: We heard about people getting beaten up if someone used the wrong door and I recalled fights between whites and Blacks. Today, more than 30 years later, the legacy of the "Black" door and the "white" door continues at the high school. Life was pleasant ninety percent of the time, but there was always that ten percent of uneasiness that lingered in the shadows — both on a personal level and on a national and global level. It was clear that we, the residents of Teaneck past and present, didn't live in a vacuum.

LORETTA: In 1990, I was elected to the Teaneck Town Council right after a Black teenager, Phillip Pannell, was shot (with his hands raised) and killed by a white police officer. Riots erupted and people wondered about the supposed racial harmony of our unique town.

A friend of mine, who is Black, told me that she taught her sons to hold their money in their hands when they walked into a store, so they wouldn't be accused of shoplifting. This was a shocking revelation to me. I always tell people that it would not have occurred to me to teach such a defensive move to my children. I thought I knew a lot, but there was so much I didn't know. On the council, I realized I had to listen to people, to face the fact that we weren't as "harmonious" as we believed and that diversity needs nurturing.

LISA: On April 10, 1990, I was watching the news when I saw rioting in the street, police cars being flipped over, anger, crying, yelling and protesting. I wondered what kind of city would allow this type of atrocity to happen. As if to personally answer my question, the reporter responded, "We'll be right back with this pending story out of Teaneck, N.J., a town known for its racial harmony."

I was crushed. This couldn't be the town where I spent kindergarten through high school, the town where everybody knew everybody's name. The reporter must have made a mistake! But there was no mistake. A young African American teenager, Phillip Pannell, was shot in the back and killed by a white police officer, and reality set in. This was my hometown and its legacy would be forever changed.

It never stops being painful to wake up every day and see that another Black person has been discriminated against, threatened or murdered in a culture of racism. It enrages our hearts. Growing up in Teaneck taught us we deserve more from our world.

FRANCINE: My teenage son, whose diverse group of friends is the norm at school, looks at integration very scientifically. He says "Staying separate is like trying to stop the salmon from returning to its breeding ground. No matter how hard the river tries to obstruct

it, the salmon will always return."

Nelson Mandela said, "People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love. For love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite."

My kids are now in high school. In their classes of 35 to 40 students, stuck under florescent lights and in rooms of cinderblock walls and decaying ceilings, it sometimes feels like a prison. Instead of trying to make the schools better, many white families flee to private school. I've seen it over and over, even in my "good" California school district.

LISA: In 2018, I was set to go on a ride along with the West Palm Beach Police Department. While in the parking lot across the street from the station, I became a criminal suspect 15 minutes before my ride began. As I got out of my car, an officer pulled up next to me and in a loud demeaning tone demanded to know how I got in the parking lot and yelled, "show me your ID, now!" I was dressed professionally and doing nothing suspicious. Was he just having a bad night or was this his normal operandi with Black citizens?

As he continued to yell, I calmly tempered my disgust to let him know I parked there to go on the ride along with his colleagues and squeezed in that I was also the assistant pastor of a local church.



Immediately, he changed his tone of voice and responded with a smile as if we were best friends, “Oh you’re a Reverend? Well, Amen. Have a good night.” He quickly gave me back my ID and got in his car and sped off as if nothing had happened.

But something did happen. He became one more example of what some police do when no one is looking. He became the face of police brutality in an almost empty parking lot. As he hurriedly sped away, I thought even I, a 5’3” Black law-abiding female, am not safe. This wasn’t my first encounter with a racist cop, but I can only imagine how Pannell and others felt the moment before they got murdered. This just wasn’t my time. I went on the ride-along as scheduled and then like many others who survived, I called my mother.

LORI: We know that change will come as people of all races and backgrounds join

together in this struggle. The problem is more than bad cops. Racism is ingrained in every part of our society. We believe that growing up in a diverse town like Teaneck clearly makes a difference.

Decades ago, our collective parents fought for young Black and Brown lives to be educated and nurtured alongside their white counterparts. Racist beliefs must be challenged so that Dr. King’s dream of a just and humane society can finally be realized.

LISA: Redlining still exists, even if it’s subtler today. If I’m looking at a house in your neighborhood, don’t wonder if I can afford to live there. Encourage my daughter into honors and AP classes and don’t presume she isn’t academically prepared and college bound. Lori and I believe, we are all made in the image of God and God sees us all as worthy.

THEODORA: I believe if Dr. King was alive today, he would be applauding “Black Lives Matter” and embracing the young people in protesting peacefully. Hate had no place in Dr. King’s life, but justice and love are what guided him every day. He knew well the state of the police in this country, having been arrested numerous times, never resisting or speaking rudely to police officers, even when they were abusive to him.

His most eloquent letter written while in jail, the Letter from Birmingham Jail, says it all. He had empathy for those caught in the web of “white supremacy.” He truly believed that with education, legislation and love, people could learn to live peacefully together. I know for sure his focus today would be on the ballot box, encouraging everyone to vote!

Today, many white people no longer use



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the Teaneck schools and they’re becoming segregated again. While we cannot prevent “white flight” or legislate one’s heart, we can change laws and make every citizen contribute to the well-being of our schools by keeping them strong and vital. With a diverse staff and strong support from the community, I feel confident that what we have worked for was not in vain and that people like [Francine, Lisa and Lori] will help perpetuate the spirit of the importance of living and learning together — that must always be our quest.

FRANCINE: I don’t know what prompted Donna to say “honky” on that hot spring day so many years ago. I can say for sure, we were all thirsty and tired of being stuck in the outfield.

Lisa, Lori and I, along with the rest of the class of 1981, have a unique vision. While we witnessed the growing pains, we are a living history of a town that triumphed. Dr. King’s teachings are alive in us. Despite the color of our skin, the class differences, and the various degrees of dysfunction in our families, we are

woven into the fabric of each other’s hearts and souls.

Congressman John Lewis said, “Ordinary people with extraordinary vision can redeem the soul of America by getting in what I call good trouble, necessary trouble. The battle that our Black, white and Brown parents fought was “good trouble” and it changed us. Diversity, for most of us, isn’t a theory or a program, it’s a normal way of life.

**Some names have been changed.*

ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

Francine Graff has worked as a writer/producer on many unscripted television shows and has written for Lena Dunham’s Lenny Letter. She is currently working on a documentary about her amazing mother, Senator Loretta Weinberg.

Theodora Lacey is an American civil rights activist and educator. She helped organize the Montgomery bus boycott, fought for voting rights and fair housing, and helped lead the effort to integrate the schools in New Jersey. The Teaneck School Board recently voted to rename one of the local elementary schools the “Theodora Smiley Lacey School.” The vote was unanimous.

Reverend, Dr. Lisa Robinson, is a passionate and visionary teacher, preacher, mentor, writer, community activist and spiritual and business advisor. She holds a doctorate in social justice education, a Master of Divinity degree, a master’s in social work, and an MBA. She is also the proud single parent of her daughter Laci. For several years, she served as the assistant pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in West Palm Beach, Fla., but recently relocated back to Charleston, S.C. to care for her aging parents.

Attorney Lori J. Williams, a graduate of Howard University School of Law, is a staunch advocate for diversity, inclusion, and human rights. She has held legal and teaching positions in various cities in the U.S. and abroad, including Chicago, Charleston, S.C., St. Croix, Virgin Islands, and the island of Pohnpei in the Federated States of Micronesia, where she currently serves as an Assistant Attorney General. She also has a Master of Laws in taxation and business and a Master of Arts in teaching English as a second language.

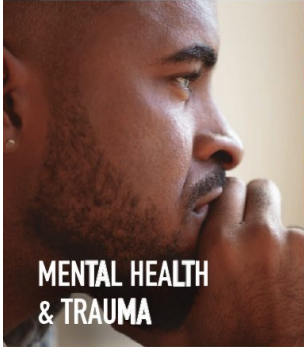
Senator Loretta Weinberg is the Majority Leader in the NJ State Senate and has spent most of her life getting into “good trouble.”



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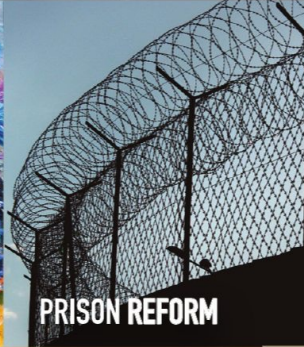
-SEKIWA 'SET' SHAKUR, PRESIDENT



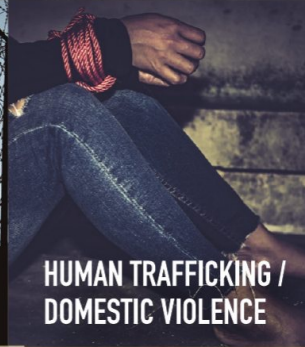
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