

ISP INTERVIEWS

Leona Tate, Gail Etienne, Tessie Prevost

November 14, 1960: Getting ready for school

1. Let's start with November 14, 1960. I'd like you all just to take a moment and go back in your mind to that day...starting in the morning when you got dressed and ready for school. Tell me what each of you **wore that day**.
 - Do you remember what color your dresses were?
 - What about your shoes? What kind of shoes did you wear?
 - You all wore bows in your hair, right?
 - Ms. Leona, you had a purse—do you remember what was in it?
2. Ms. Tessie, I spoke to your mother, and she told me that, at the beginning of every week, she would **lay out your clothes and choose your outfits** for each day of the week. Do you remember doing that with your mother?
3. Ms. Dorothy also told me that she got a call from the principal at McDonogh 19, and he **told her NOT to get you all dressed up** for school. Why do you think he would tell her that?
 - But clearly none of your parents did that, because you all wore such pretty outfits that day...

Getting to school

4. At some point that morning, **federal marshals** showed up at your homes... Do you remember what you thought when you saw them? Did you understand why they were there?
5. Ms. Tessie, I know one of the **marshals made a promise to your mother**. Tell me about that.
6. Ms. Leona and Ms. Gail, you drove with the marshals to school. Did your parents give you any **instructions about what to do—or NOT to do**—in the car on the way to school?

- Did you follow their instructions?
7. Ms. Leona: at some point, as you were heading to school in this big black car, you've said **you started to hear a lot of noise**. Tell me what you heard.
 8. What did you think when you heard all that noise?
 9. When did you realize that it wasn't **Mardi Gras**?
 10. Ms. Gail, there's a **famous picture** of you in the car that morning. You're looking out the window and your eyes are just huge. What was happening outside that car at that moment? What did you see? What did you hear?
 - Could you see people's faces?
 - What did they look like?
 - Could you make out what they were saying?
 - Were you scared?

Black community support

11. There was also a crowd of people who **came out to cheer you on** that day, right? Tell me about them.
12. Could you see them from where you were?
13. We have a newspaper picture of them out there on that day, would you like to take a look at it?

Waiting at school

14. Okay, so eventually you all get through the chaos outside school and get **inside the building**...What happened then? Did you go straight to class?
15. How long did you wait outside the office?
16. What did you do with all that time?

White children pulled out

17. At some point that day, you've said you saw **white parents coming to pull their kids** out of school. Tell me about that.

18. What did you think was happening?
19. So what happened for the rest of the year, then? Did the white kids ever come back?
20. So **who was left** in the school?
21. And how long did this go on?

Building lock-down

22. So here you are, you three. The only students left in the whole school. What was that year like for you? **Did you have your own classroom?**
23. I understand the school made modifications to the **windows of your classroom**. Tell me about that...
24. What about **lunchtime**...where did you eat your lunch?
25. Where did you play at lunch and recess?
26. Were there any other special rules that you had to follow that year? (water fountains)
27. You know, to me, all of this sounds so terrible, but I've seen interviews with you three where you've said **you felt fine during this first year**—that you even had fun, the three of you together. Explain *that* to me.

Nationwide support, marshals support

28. All three of you have talked about the **Christmas presents and cards** you got from your supporters that year. Tell me about those.
29. Did you **stay in touch with the marshals** who escorted you that year?
30. I understand that one of the marshals asked for his **ashes to be buried at McDonogh 19**. What did you think when you learned that?

BREAK

TJ Semmes

31. So, in 1961, McDonogh 19 became an all-black school, and you three had to move on to integrate yet ANOTHER school, TJ Semmes...**What do you think about when you think about TJ Semmes?**
 - Ms. Leona...Ms. Tessie...Ms. Gail...

32. You know, after the whole nation watched what happened to you three at McDonogh 19, I think most people would've expected the staff at Semmes to take extra special care of you...**Did anyone at Semmes reach out when you arrived, try to make you feel welcome, try to make you feel safe?**
33. What *did* happen there?
34. So, did the school do ANYTHING to help you?
35. **What about the teachers?** What were they doing during all this?
36. Ms. Leona: You've talked about an incident that happened one day when you tried to take the **bus home from school**. Tell me about that.
37. How did you all deal with this?
38. I've also heard all three of you talk about a **certain tree at lunchtime**—why was this tree so important to you?
39. Ms. Tessie, at some point, you've said you started to **fight back**. Tell me about that.
40. What happened when you fought back? How did the school deal with it?
41. Ms. Gail: you've said that you started **suffering from anxiety** when you were a little girl. Do you think that was because of your experience integrating these schools?
42. This experience at Semmes is still with you, isn't it?
43. Today, right now, if you could talk to those students and teachers who gave you such a hard time, **what would you say to them?**
44. At any point while you all were going through this did anyone offer you girls any **counseling?**
45. Not the school? not the City? not the NAACP?
46. What about your Church?
47. At some point, I know Ms. Tessie went to **Rivers Frederick**, which was an all-Black school. Did you all go to segregated Black schools for middle school?
48. Ms. Tessie: Why did your parents decide to send you to Rivers?
49. How did it go for you there?

Nicholls High School

50. Ms. Leona, Ms. Gail: You met up again when you got to **Nicholls High School**. And this time, there were a fair number of Black kids at the school with you. So were you famous with them? Did they know that you had been the first ones to integrate Louisiana schools?
51. How did they treat you?
52. You got to Nicholls just as there was a big controversy there. Tell me what happened.
53. So here you are in high school in 1970—10 years after you integrated McDonogh 19—and the white students are singing Civil War songs and waving Confederate flags...I mean, was this just a few annoying kids or was it a schoolwide thing?
54. Did either of you get involved in this push to get rid of all these Confederate symbols?
55. Why/not?

Self-realization

56. When you integrated McDonogh 19 you were all very small. You've said you didn't even really know how big a deal it was. So **when did you first realize that you'd done something historic**—something that changed the whole country?
57. How did you feel about it then?
58. Ms. Leona: I read that, for a long time, **you yourself didn't talk much** about how you integrated New Orleans schools. Why not?
59. Did you **talk to your parents** about it? Why/not?
60. Did any of you talk to your parents about it?
61. What did you say?
62. Do you ever think about **what it must have been like for your parents** to watch you go through what you went through at school?
63. What do you think about that?
64. Did you ever worry about them, and what they themselves were going through?

Historical erasure

65. When you three integrated McDonogh 19, the whole world was watching it on TV. It was world news. But today, **very few people know what you did**. How do you feel about that?
66. When did your kids start to ask you about it?
67. What did they ask?
68. What did you tell them?
69. What do you tell children now when you talk to them about this time in your life?

TEP Center

70. Ms. Leona: How did you get the idea to **create the TEP Center**? Tell me that story...
71. Ms. Gail, Ms. Tessie: When did Ms. Leona tell you that she was thinking about opening the TEP Center? And what did you think?
72. What are you hoping will happen at the TEP Center when it opens? For families? For children? For the Lower Ninth Ward?
73. What do you think is the most important thing that you'd like **people to know about your story**?