
**PETERSBURG
VOICES OF CIVIL RIGHTS:
THE ORAL HISTORY**

INTERVIEW OF DR. GERMAINE FAUNTLEROY

conducted by

Hermanze Fauntleroy

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Petersburg, Virginia

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(Interview of Dr. Germaine Fauntleroy
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BY MR. FAUNTLEROY:

Q I am Hermanze Fauntleroy. Today is December 6, 2007. I am interviewing Dr. Germaine Stuart Fauntleroy. Dr. Fauntleroy is a retired superintendent from the Petersburg Public School System where she served as the first female superintendent for the system.

Dr. Fauntleroy, we will be focusing on Petersburg, Virginia today in reference to the civil rights era or civil rights struggle during basically the 1960s. What is your earliest memory of anyone bringing up civil rights issues in your family or among your friends?

A As far as I can remember, it was during the time that I was a student at Virginia State University. I had been selected to go to Washington D.C. with other students. I did not know at that time that I was the only female who would be going. However, it ended with me being the only female and the only black female with a group of about 70 students. There were a few black guys and the rest of the students were white. It was there that I

1 found out that I could not go into certain
2 restaurants, et cetera, but that was in the nation's
3 capital in 1952.

4 Q What was the racial situation at the time
5 that you attended the Petersburg public schools?

6 A The racial situation was such that we had
7 segregated schools. There was a high school for
8 black students. There was a high school for white
9 students. However, I did not realize that there was
10 a difference basically because our parents and our
11 teachers did not talk about it. So we just went to
12 school, and we did what the teachers told us, but
13 there was never anything about the racial situation
14 at that time.

15 Q What is your knowledge in reference to the
16 differences between the black schools and the white
17 schools?

18 A I now know that there was a difference
19 because the black schools did not have all the
20 materials, they did not have all the uniforms that
21 the football teams and the cheerleaders wore. We
22 basically got what the students at Petersburg High
23 School had discarded, but when we were students we
24 did not know that until, I think, our senior year,
25 and someone had mentioned the fact that we had

1 gotten the band uniforms. And the PTA bought
2 uniforms for our band students, and that was the
3 first time that as students we realized that there
4 was a difference.

5 Q How would you describe the differences to
6 your knowledge that existed among the subject matter
7 in terms of the two schools?

8 A It is my understanding now, and again, I
9 repeat, I did not know this at that time, that there
10 were courses that were at Petersburg High School
11 that were not at Peabody High School. The rigorous
12 courses, we did not have a course in calculus. I
13 think our highest math course was in trig. We did
14 not have probability and statistics. We did not
15 have some of the other science courses that were
16 taught at Petersburg High School, so that in the
17 rigor of courses the ones that we had, we did very
18 well with them, but they did not go as far as the
19 ones that were being taught at Petersburg High.

20 Q If we talk about athletics just maybe one
21 question, was there any interaction in terms of
22 participation between the athletic teams at
23 Petersburg High School and Peabody High School?

24 A There was no interaction between the two
25 schools in anything, not in athletics, not in any

1 cheerleading competitions, not in baseball, not in
2 football, not in anything.

3 Q During your period of time as a high
4 school student what would you say was the racial
5 situation and conditions in the City of Petersburg
6 as it related to blacks and whites?

7 A Again, because of the fact that it was not
8 talked about because our parents did not talk about
9 it, because our teachers did not talk about it, as
10 students we did not realize there was a difference.
11 We knew that there were white students. We knew
12 that they played a football game on Thanksgiving
13 day, basically because the cars were parked in front
14 of my house. The students from Petersburg High
15 played at Cameron Field, and on Thanksgiving
16 whatever team they were playing the cars were from
17 Sycamore Street all the way over to St. Matthew's
18 Street, so there were many cars were parked on that
19 street.

20 The basketball team, we played at the
21 rec. on Harding Street. We did not know that there
22 was a gym at Petersburg High because we had never
23 been there. We just didn't think about it. So
24 there were conditions that existed, but they existed
25 almost in a vacuum, I would say. We were children

1 who loved what we were doing we enjoyed playing
2 basketball. We enjoyed going to football games to
3 see our students play, and we really didn't think
4 about what was happening with the Petersburg High
5 students.

6 Q Did you have the opportunity to go to
7 Sycamore Street and some of the other areas where
8 there were retail type stores for any reason at all?

9 A Yes. I used to go downtown with my
10 mother, for example, and I knew that we weren't
11 allowed to try hats on or try clothes on that were
12 in the store, but that was rare. Rarely did I go
13 with my mother there. We went to the grocery
14 stores, et cetera. But my mother did most of the
15 buying and she brought the clothes home to us. But
16 I knew that there was, again, a difference but it
17 did not bother me that I couldn't go. Nobody made
18 that distinction as far as I was concerned.

19 I saw the signs. I saw the signs
20 that said, you know, the water was for colored,
21 colored water and white water. And it happened so
22 sparingly because my mother just did not allow us to
23 be in that environment, that again, it did not -- it
24 did not basically confront me because my mother kept
25 us at home and she did -- she went out and she made

1 those purchases, so we weren't involved with it, but
2 I knew it existed.

3 Q What did you do after you graduated from
4 high school?

5 A After I graduated from high school the
6 first thing that I did I registered to vote. And
7 when I did that, it was quite interesting because I
8 had to go to the gentleman's house. It was on
9 Washington Street. And you had to take a test at
10 that time. And I took the test and I passed it and
11 I paid them my money and I was a registered voter.

12 I knew that there were people who
13 could not pass the test. I knew there were people
14 who did not have the money to pay after they had
15 taken it. And I guess that was my first encounter
16 with real racial discrimination. I was in college.
17 I had met other students at that time from other
18 parts of the state and other parts of the United
19 States. And a different kind of world was opening
20 up to me. So, yes, I realized it at that point.

21 Q You attended Virginia State after you
22 graduated; what did you do at that time?

23 A When I finished Virginia State I
24 attended -- I started working at a school where one
25 of my professors had told me definitely not to work.

1 I had gone with this particular professor with some
2 other English majors to a city in the eastern part
3 of the state to judge a competition, an English
4 competition, the students had to write. And in
5 going to that particular school this professor had
6 told us not to ever teach in that particular county.

7 And by the time that I graduated I
8 really had forgotten that he had told us that, and
9 when I finished school I started teaching in that
10 county. And I guess that was when it hit me full
11 force because the superintendent in that particular
12 county would come to the front of the school each
13 morning, below his horn, and the principal would go
14 out and take the morning report. But the
15 superintendent would not set foot on the grounds
16 where the black students attended.

17 Well, by that time I was, I guess,
18 very much disturbed, if you will. I just felt that
19 it was very wrong for the principal to do it. I
20 felt that he wasn't a man, that he should have made
21 it known that the superintendent could come in the
22 building and could take the reports or come in the
23 building and at least see what the children were
24 doing and see how they were reacting to the
25 situation. But it did not happen.

1 Q How long did you work in that particular
2 situation?

3 A Only one year. One year was the length of
4 time, and I tried to rally people to do something
5 about the situation. I was attending Virginia State
6 still and taking some graduate courses. I was told
7 by a professor that we should do something, that as
8 teachers, and beginning teachers at that, that it
9 was our responsibility. And so I tried to talk to
10 other people and talk to the people in that county
11 but, of course what they were doing, it was their
12 livelihood. They were working on the farms of these
13 people. Most of them were sharecroppers, and it was
14 a rural area so it was very difficult to do anything
15 about that situation there.

16 Things got a little bit better. They
17 built another high school, because the high school
18 really was very, very bad where they were.

19 Q When you left that particular situation in
20 that county where did you go?

21 A I came to Petersburg, and I was teaching a
22 fourth grade class, and I had to teach a fourth
23 grade class. That was the only way I could get a
24 job in Petersburg. I had to teach a fourth grade
25 class because my husband was teaching in the high

1 school. I was a straight English major with French
2 and history as a minor -- as minors, but it was
3 almost impossible for husband and wife to work in
4 the same school, so I went to the Henry Williams and
5 taught fourth grade.

6 Q You were living in Petersburg at that
7 time?

8 A Yes, I was.

9 Q You had graduated from high school in
10 Petersburg?

11 A I graduated from high school, elementary,
12 and what we called then junior high in Petersburg.
13 I had never been outside of the City of Petersburg
14 to attend school.

15 Q And now you have returned to Petersburg
16 and you are working in the public school system in
17 Petersburg?

18 A Yes, as a teacher.

19 Q What were the conditions as you saw them
20 at that time? First of all, was the system still
21 segregated at that time?

22 A When I started teaching the system was
23 still segregated. And we were getting the books,
24 for example, that the kids had used at the white
25 schools. Things are basically the same as when I

1 was a student when I returned to teach.

2 Q Review, if you will, the conditions in the
3 City of Petersburg at that time when you returned to
4 teach.

5 A In the city itself we could not -- you
6 could not go to the library and sit down and read a
7 book. We could go to the library and go downstairs
8 in the basement. That's where blacks were supposed
9 to go to get their books. So most of us went to
10 Virginia State when we wanted to get research
11 materials, et cetera, because we could not use the
12 library in Petersburg. We could not go to bus
13 stations, and train stations or any means of
14 transportation. They were segregated.

15 In the city itself, it was more
16 integrated really then than it is now, because you
17 had whites living on one side of many streets and
18 blacks living on the other side. And that was in
19 most communities.

20 Q Did you ever think that it would be
21 necessary to get involved in any of the activities
22 that were taking place or about to take place as far
23 as the civil rights struggle was concerned at that
24 time?

25 A Well, I -- by the time that I had finished

1 college, I also had three -- I had two children. I
2 had two girls. So I was determined that they would
3 have a better life than I had had, and I wanted them
4 to go to an integrated school system, and so I got
5 involved really with trying to integrate the schools
6 in Petersburg because of my two girls.

7 Q Explain trying to cause that to happen.

8 A Well, I worked with some lawyers and went
9 around to different homes, people we thought would
10 be willing to try to register their children in the
11 predominantly white schools. We got a list of them,
12 and we petitioned the courts to let the children
13 attend Bowling Junior High School. It was not an
14 easy task, and I didn't do it by myself, either. I
15 was with a group of people because there were some
16 others at that time, also, who had just gotten tired
17 of seeing conditions the way that they were. And so
18 we determined to send the children to an integrated
19 school system.

20 It did not work the first time. Then
21 we got some different lawyers, and we were able to
22 do that.

23 Q Did your daughter attend Bowling Junior
24 High School?

25 A No. The city closed that particular

1 school down. It was never used as a school after we
2 petitioned to integrate it. It was used as a social
3 services building, and it is now a high rise for the
4 elderly, so they never did attend that school, but
5 then it was a perfectly good school, and it was a
6 great school, a great building but, no, they never
7 did attend that one, but they did attend the
8 Petersburg High School, they attended Jackson
9 Elementary School and they attended Walnut Hill
10 School.

11 Q Were there other conditions in the City of
12 Petersburg that the citizens or at least some of the
13 citizens in Petersburg began to address?

14 A Well, you had another situation that I
15 think helped to bring this to sort of a
16 confrontational point of addressing some issues.
17 There were many of the young men who were coming
18 back to Petersburg from the war. They had fought
19 for their country, and they were coming back to
20 conditions that were the same as when they left.
21 Because of the fact that they had been out, they had
22 seen how other people lived, they had been to other
23 parts of the United States where schools were
24 integrated, where people lived together, and they
25 lived well, there were many of them who had been to

1 Europe, they had married, especially the German
2 women, they were coming back, and so you had
3 integrated families and these people wanted a decent
4 place to live. They wanted to come back home to
5 their own city to live.

6 Because of these conditions there
7 were many people now involved in trying to get some
8 things changed that had not been for the time
9 before.

10 Q Did you believe that it was necessary to
11 be involved in causing that to happen?

12 A Yes, I did. I got involved when the
13 minister of the church where my family attended -- I
14 did not attend that particular church. I attended a
15 different church, but my husband and my daughters
16 belonged to Gillfield. There was a Reverend Walker
17 who was the pastor there, and he and his wife and
18 children had attempted to use the library in
19 Petersburg and they were arrested.

20 And from that point on I was very
21 much involved with the struggle, if you will. I had
22 gone to Trailways Bus station and had attempted to
23 get tickets and I had assisted with putting up
24 picket lines. I had tried to get teachers to work
25 with us in getting children involved. It wasn't

1 easy because people were afraid. They were afraid
2 they would lose their jobs, and they were afraid
3 that many of them would be hurt.

4 You still had the organization such
5 as the KKK in this area. And you had people who
6 were dependent on the livelihood of working in
7 places where these folk were, so people were afraid.
8 And it wasn't an easy task.

9 But, again, I made telephone calls to
10 just about all the teachers, and we had their word
11 that they would be on the picket line to open
12 stores, to go to the library, to try to get into
13 some of the hotels and motels, but they didn't --
14 they didn't come forward as readily as you would
15 have expected them to.

16 Q As a result of Reverend Walker and being a
17 minister in the city, did other churches become
18 involved in the struggle?

19 A The pastor at Zion Baptist Church, and
20 that was the church that -- that is the church where
21 I attend, Reverend Williams was involved. Reverend
22 Reid at First Baptist was involved. Most of the
23 churches in the area did become involved, and that
24 is no longer the case. I mean, when we look at the
25 way that it is today, the churches are not involved

1 as much as they were at that time, but the churches
2 were very much involved in the struggle in trying to
3 get people to have their equal rights.

4 Q What is your memory in reference to how
5 Virginia State College at that time, now Virginia
6 State University, was involved, particularly maybe
7 through their students?

8 A There was a gentleman by the name of.
9 David Gunther. He was -- he worked in the dining
10 hall. He was one of the supervisors there. He
11 worked very closely with students at Virginia State.
12 He also had a business in Petersburg. He had a
13 restaurant called the Golden Horseshoe. But he
14 worked and tried to get students to come to
15 Petersburg to have a voter registration, with
16 picketing. And they held meetings. Eventually,
17 SNCC came in and we had people who came in from
18 Atlanta. Reverend Walker then became involved with
19 Reverend Martin Luther King. We had those
20 individuals here in the city.

21 And it was a time when people were
22 really then very much involved, so Virginia State
23 was involved, not necessarily through the efforts of
24 their top administrators, because Reverend Walker
25 was barred from being on campus, but some of the

1 other people did assist the students and
2 participated themselves. There weren't many, but
3 there were some.

4 And Martin Luther King when he came
5 and gave two of his speeches, one at -- in the
6 football field, and one at Jones Hall.

7 Q What do you think still needs to be done
8 in Petersburg in an effort to bring about true
9 change and the involvement of people in reference to
10 really, really working towards bringing about a city
11 that is for all of the people?

12 A Well, things have gotten better. I think
13 part of it was because the children went to school
14 together, and for a while before we had -- we had
15 one incident that happened after integration that
16 really helped to cause the school system to be
17 divided. I think many of the white parents and
18 black parents, too, took their kids out of the
19 public schools in Petersburg. But I think during
20 that period, when young people get together, they
21 don't really care that much about race. There were
22 kids who were living in the city, and even though
23 the schools were separated they still played
24 together, they played basketball, played football,
25 did things together.

1 After the integration piece there
2 were many types of conferences that helped to make
3 people aware of human and civil rights. Within the
4 school system, staff had to go to these conferences.
5 They were away from the school setting. Children
6 had organizations that they belonged where that was
7 emphasized, the fact that you had to be humane to
8 each other. So I think through those efforts things
9 became better.

10 Today I think that when you look back
11 on that period we probably could have done much
12 more, but in a way, it may have been a good thing,
13 because people have to change themselves. I don't
14 think there was any type of organization or a
15 conference that you can go to that will change your
16 mind. I think it is only through interaction with
17 another individual that people become aware of the
18 strength, weaknesses, the likes and dislikes of
19 those people. Some people will find that they are
20 just like their own, and others will find that they
21 don't want to be bothered, and that's all a part of
22 life, but at least they get that opportunity now.
23 Before the opportunity wasn't there.

24 So in that way I think that the city
25 has grown. I don't see people fighting anymore like

1 they were at that point. We had riots where the
2 students actually marched on the mall because they
3 could not use it, and they were going to tear it up.
4 And when things are like that, nobody really
5 benefits, and we don't have that kind of situation
6 now.

7 There's still, of course, some racial
8 tension. There still may be racial turmoil in some
9 instances, and it may not be as evident as it was at
10 that time, and it may not be as overt as it was at
11 that time. But it is there in some instances.

12 Q Additional comments on the growth and
13 understanding of Petersburg?

14 A I believe that education is the key to
15 most problems. If people are educated and if they
16 really know anything about other human beings that
17 that is the mainstay in trying to bring and better
18 relationships. It doesn't make any difference
19 whether it is between the races, a husband and wife
20 or children and parents, because you find many
21 families in turmoil now just because they don't
22 understand each other.

23 As far as our city is concerned, I
24 think it is coming about now because we have some
25 new growth coming. I mean, you can see it. It is

1 evident. I have found that when you have people who
2 are poor, and they have to be concerned about making
3 a living, they have to be concerned about health
4 care, they see other people with it, that it is very
5 hard to talk about racial harmony in those
6 circumstances. But if you find that people are at
7 least making a decent living, that people have
8 decent health care, that people have an opportunity
9 to go to schools, that they go and have good
10 teachers, people who are really interested in them,
11 where they have a vigorous curriculum, and children
12 learn, and can really do well, I think then you have
13 a difference in the way that they look at life.

14 In Petersburg now we have the
15 Petersburg symphony. We have the arts that put on
16 their productions every second Friday. We had the
17 Petersburg Forum, even though that has now gone out
18 of existence. But these are opportunities for
19 people to see the better side of human beings, and
20 if we can continue with these and maybe enhance them
21 some, I believe that life can be much better than it
22 is even now.

23 So I have great hope for our city and
24 for our population. I guess maybe I lived long
25 enough now that it doesn't matter to me so much

1 about what people think or feel as to, you know,
2 whether I am a black person, or whether a female,
3 because I found myself in those situations for all
4 of my life from that first encounter when I was
5 student at Virginia State and I was the only black
6 female to attend that conference in Washington, D.C.
7 And it was quite interesting at that point because
8 of all the girls there at the conference, not a
9 black boy said anything to me, but there were white
10 boys who did.

11 So it doesn't make a difference so
12 much about the races, I don't think. I think that
13 it is, again, it is about how you treat people and
14 how people feel about each other.

15 Q Well, we certainly appreciate your taking
16 the time to come and share with us this afternoon,
17 and we appreciate your discussions and thoughts that
18 you have shared. So again, thank you very much.

19 A I would like to add one thing.

20 Q Yes.

21 A There is a school in another state where
22 the children are very, very bright. They -- it's a
23 residential school. And their basic curriculum has
24 to do with math and science. Students who finish
25 there or who attend and take the SAT, score higher

1 than the students at the University of North
2 Carolina and at Duke. If we had schools like that
3 all over the United States, I believe that we would
4 have a fantastic world. I think that education,
5 again, is going to be the key.

6 Q Thank you very much.

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