

LESSON 3 HANDOUT

Integrating McDonogh 19—Oral History Transcripts

Tessie Prevost Williams

Williams was interviewed by Mark Cave in at her home in LaPlace, Louisiana, on August 3, 2017, for the NOLA Resistance oral history project. Below is an excerpt from 75-minute interview.

CAVE: Talk about the drive to school. Who was with you?

WILLIAMS: My daddy. And he told me—they only thing he told me I remember is that, “Once we get out this car give me your hand and look straight ahead. And don’t you worry about a thing. I’m here. I’m here to protect you. I’m here.” And I remember seeing the picture of me with him, and of course I didn’t look straight ahead. I was looking around to see what was going on. And you could hear this crowd screaming and hollering, screaming and—and I was like—well, and then you saw the police on horses. And it was like Mardi Gras. That’s what it looked like. And we got up and we went up the steps. I went up and he came behind me, and then when we got in there they didn’t know what to do with us. So, I remember my daddy sitting—we were sitting outside the principal’s office in the hallway. He was sitting down. I sat down a little while and might jump, hopscotch, or whatever. And I’m like, “Daddy, well what are we going to do?” He said, “I don’t know baby. I don’t know. You know, I don’t know what they going to do.” So, I don’t remember Leona and Gail while we were in the hallway. I don’t know where they were. I don’t remember them. The only thing I remember is once we got in the classroom it was the three of us. But um....

CAVE: What were you thinking when the kids were being pulled out?

WILLIAMS: I was just wondering what was going on. And I asked the teacher, “Well, where are the children going?” And she said, “Just don’t worry about it. Just don’t worry about it.” And I’m like—because I always was a very inquisitive child, and I would ask and ask and ask and ask until I got an answer. You know, sometimes my mother would always tell me, “Sometimes Tessie…” If I see somebody and I know I know their face, I’m going to keep saying, “Well, I know you from somewhere.” And you’ll say, “Well, no, no, no, no.” And my momma says, “Sometime people don’t want to answer.” You know? But that’s how I was. I always was like that, from a child. And so, she was like, “Well, just don’t worry about it.” And I’m looking around and I’m like, “Well, where they going? Well, where are—why we can’t leave?” You know? And after a while it was just the three of us. And then after that it was just the three of us for an entire year.

Leona Tate

Tate was interviewed by Mark Cave at the Lower Ninth Ward Living Museum in New Orleans on February 21, 2018, for the NOLA Resistance oral history project. Below is an excerpt from their 62-minute interview.

CAVE: I know you’ve told the story many times, but walk us through very slowly and in detail that first day.

TATE: When I woke up that morning my house was—family members was all over. You would have thought it was a Christmas holiday and everybody was getting ready and preparing the food for the dinner. But they were there to help my mama prepare me to leave, and I remember everybody having a task. There was somebody when my mom combed my hair. Somebody got me dressed. It was a happy moment, I remember, but when a car pulled up, a black car which was the marshals, the house got real quiet. I can remember that silence. I remember it like it was yesterday.

My mother and I left with the two men. It was two white men. Not that I knew they were white then, but it was two white men with the hat and the banner on they arm. I do remember that. Got in the car, and I can remember Mama telling me, “Sit to the back. Do not put your face to the window and look straight ahead.” Still not thinking of anything. Still not thinking. So we drove to the school and once we made that turn—we came in from the back of the school, and once we made that turn on St. Claude, masses of people were there. And anybody from New Orleans would have thought the same thing we thought, that we were about miss a parade because we had to go to school. I could hear the yelling and screaming. I couldn’t make out what they were saying and had no idea all of that was focused on me. I remember seeing the police on horseback holding the people back, and I’m thinking, they’re holding them back so the car that I’m in wouldn’t hit them.

So we got in the building. We walked up the steps that morning and went through the door. The principal’s office was straight ahead. I guess we were asked to sit outside the office. We sat out there for a long time. We were out there long enough for the three of us to play hopscotch in the blocks on the floor, so I’m sure we were there quite a while. Once we did get placed in the classroom, I can remember trying to speak to a little girl and it was like I was invisible. She didn’t

even—it was like she didn't even hear me, and I know we were like almost shoulder to shoulder. She didn't look my way. She didn't move. She didn't do anything. No response at all. It was like I didn't even—I wasn't even there. But in a few minutes all the students that were there when we got there were gone. By the end of the day, we were the only three in the entire building, and that lasted a year and a half.

Gail Étienne-Stripling

Étienne-Stripling was interviewed by Mark Cave at the Lower Ninth Ward Living Museum in New Orleans on November 18, 2017, for the NOLA Resistance oral history project. Below is an excerpt from their 61-minute interview.

CAVE: Talk about that first day at school—your dad's decision to make you go to school.

ETIÉENNE-STRIPLING: I don't remember before being—just having a conversation about my going to school. I remember—what I remember about that first day was driving up to the school in the car. I don't even remember getting in the car, but I remember driving up to the school, and then seeing all the people and the crowds of people, and I didn't know what was going on. And it looked like they wanted to kill us. I mean as a kid that's probably—that's what I thought, and I'm just looking out the window trying to see what was going on. I'll never forget that day. I'll never forget that day. I remember going up the stairs. I remember sitting in the hallway at the school. I think Tessie, Leona—we were all out there with our parents. That's basically all I remember the first day.

CAVE: Who took you to school that day?

ETIÉENNE-STRIPLING: If I'm not mistaken, my mom and my dad was there, and then afterwards, it was my mom, and then I think my dad, and then later on, it was just the mothers was walking with us.

CAVE: So you lived within walking distance of the school?

ETIÉENNE-STRIPLING: Oh, yeah.

CAVE: Okay, what was your address?

ETIÉENNE-STRIPLING: Fourteen oh three, Charbonnet Street. That was one of the reasons why my daddy wanted me to go there too. Why pass up a school to go to another school when I could walk to this one? It was so close.

CAVE: Yeah, do you remember anything about the morning before you left? Was it—could you tell something was different?

ETIÉENNE-STRIPLING: I don't remember that. You know, I don't know if that's my way of protecting myself as a kid. A lot of that stuff that happened before I got to the school. I don't have any recollection of it at all.

CAVE: Talk about going into the school that first day.

ETIÉENNE-STRIPLING: I remember walking up the stairs going to the school, and I remember the crowd—the bigger thing to me that day was the crowds of people, the way they were acting and making all the noises, and hollering at us, and I'm wondering what did I do to make them act the way they were acting? You see grown people, and I think one lady was pregnant, and they were on neutral ground, and all I see is all of these white people. I don't see any black people, but they tell me

that they were there, but all I can see is just the white people and the police trying to keep them back like they want to get to us, and I just didn't understand why.