A Change Has Come!!!!! -1

In 1963, a monumental shift began in our community with the integration of elementary and junior high schools. This was a pivotal moment—a new chapter that fundamentally changed our lives. It was the year when Black children were sent to schools closest to their neighborhood due to the need for transportation. Yet, despite the promise of improvement, many of the resources provided to them were hand-me-downs. Nevertheless, the children persevered, enduring changes that were both difficult and unwelcome.

This transformation was driven by the hardships Black children endured just to attend Mountain View Elementary School on Bouchelle Street. They had to walk long distances, often in harsh weather conditions, to reach school. Families advocated for relief, petitioning the Board of Education to shorten the journey or provide transportation. Eventually, their efforts bore fruit—a green bus was assigned to transport the children. However, the bus only took them to the corner of North Green and Caldwell Streets, near Mrs. O'Neil's house (a beloved black elementary school teacher), leaving them to walk the remaining distance to school.

Seven determined mothers, later known as the "West Concord 7"—Ruth Forney, Mildred Largent, Annie J. Hicks, Willette Chambers, Laura Thomas, Lucille Rutherford, and Rose Johnson—led the fight for transportation. Their persistence brought about a remarkable change, improving the lives of many children in the community.

In 1964, we turned around and had a Walk –in March at Wool-Worth Store. This March was led by the pastor of Slades Chapel AME Zion Church – Rev. James L. Hunt, our pastor. The personnel were not very friendly to us because they felt like we were not worthy to eat their food because of the color of our skin. They should not serve black people. We sat there for a while, while rude comments were made to us. We don't serve people of your color. They continued to talk degrading to us; and finally, the manager said, serve them, let them eat at this time but we are not going to serve them again. However, after discussion and debate over the years, we were finally served at the food counter. What a relief it was to all of the people.

By 1965, another wave of change swept in with the end of school choice, forcing many students from Olive Hill High School—the only high school in the county for Black students—to attend various high schools in different communities. Olive Hill was a beloved institution, and the transition was particularly hard on the rising seniors, who were reluctant to leave a familiar and supportive environment. I was assigned to Morganton High School, a place I disliked from the start.

The reception at Morganton High was far from welcoming. Some teachers and administrators displayed outright hostility, questioning our intelligence and finding excuses to fail us. My English teacher, for instance, accused me of not writing my own essay—a claim my mother refuted during a conference with the principal. At Olive Hill, teachers were strict but nurturing, instilling in us a drive to excel. The contrast was stark and disheartening.

Academically, I struggled to adapt to an environment where Black achievements were undervalued. Our history lessons barely touched on Black contributions, focusing almost exclusively on slavery. Despite these challenges, I found solace in choir, where singing provided a much-needed escape. Socially, the experience was mixed. Some students eventually accepted us, but many did not, and we were excluded from most clubs. However, there were

bright moments, like Robert Bandy and Loretta Thomas becoming runners-up in a school contest.

Basketball became another outlet for me. My cousin, Connie Williams, and I made the team after challenging tryouts. Connie's height made her a great guard, while my speed made me a strong point guard. I still remember scoring the final two points that secured a state championship win in 1966. Our team photo now resides in the museum in Raleigh. Yet, even on the court, we faced hostility. I was once thrown into a shower fully clothed—whether as an initiation or rejection, I'll never know. At times, racial slurs rang out during games, and we were often barred from getting off the bus in certain towns. Thankfully, our coach, Mrs. Amos, fiercely protected us, and eventually, the team accepted us, easing some of the tension.

Graduation day was bittersweet. As soon as I threw my cap and gown into the air, I walked away, relieved to leave that chapter behind.

Post-graduation, the road ahead wasn't smooth. Despite applying to several historically Black colleges, I didn't hear back from any. Later, I discovered that some applications were never processed. Unexpectedly, I was accepted to Berea College in Kentucky, though I don't recall applying. My experience there was marred by prejudice, much like Morganton High. I left after one year.

I later attended East Tennessee State University, but discrimination persisted there as well. Ultimately, I returned home and enrolled at Western Piedmont College in Morganton. Though I didn't complete my degree, I became a cheerleader and enjoyed the experience. I later worked for Ingles Food store as a cashier, even though I had some purchasers who were not quiet friendly who would say nasty things to me. However. My boss man would come to the stand where I was and inform them that the negative behavior was rude, impolite and not necessary. In addition. One of my former classmates – Greta Tate worked with me in the store in the meat department. What a good life I had, it was great and I was released from all of the prejudice and bias that I encountered in the past;

Life took a turn when I met James Robert Hemphill from Old Fort, NC. We fell in love, married, and had two children. We later moved to California, where I completed my education and embraced my calling as a preacher.

Through it all—the struggles, the triumphs, and the lessons learned—I've remained grateful for the resilience and determination instilled in me by my community and family. These experiences shaped the person I am today.

At Olive Hill High School, we learned far more than academics. As a segregated Black school in the South, our teachers taught us proper etiquette, public manners—especially in interactions with white people—discipline, and how to carry ourselves with dignity. Boys had designated days to wear dress shirts, pants, and ties, while girls wore dresses every day, with specific days to dress even more formally. These lessons weren't just about appearance; they were about self-respect and treating others with dignity. These invaluable teachings were absent in the integrated schools, but they remain a cornerstone of what I carry with me today.

Submitted by Rev. Dr. Charlene Forney Hemphill – 1966 graduate of Morganton High School