

School Desegregation: A Historical Graduation

By **LISA HAMMERSLY**
Observer Staff Writer

This Friday, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school system will graduate its first desegregation babies.

The 4,900 seniors in the Class of 1982 are Charlotte's first public school graduates to attend integrated schools for all 12 grades.

These seniors — who dimly remember high school race riots in the early '70s — say times have changed: Their black and white classes, black and white homecoming queens and black and white friendships are commonplace.

"Integration is just normal for us," said Harding High School senior Doug Welch. "It's been like that as long as I can remember.

"When I was in the first grade, I was really exposed to black people for the first time. It was like they were foreigners. You know,

those people were different.

"Now, you're walking down the halls and you see a (black) student and think, 'There's so-and-so.'" Doug said. "The race doesn't come into it."

Welch and a dozen other black and white seniors — including longtime Charlotte-Mecklenburg students and transfer students, student body leaders and others chosen at random — say they've never seen a race riot, or even a serious racial confrontation at their schools, though they heard about them on the news or through older brothers and sisters.

But there are teachers and principals who vividly recall the federal court-ordered busing decision, implemented in the fall of 1970, when Charlotte's 103 schools, including about 15 all-black schools, were desegregated for the first time.

And they say they'll never forget the bitterness that stirred racial gang fights and riots in the schools from 1970 through 1974.

Richard Cansler, principal at West Charlotte High School, the system's only formerly all-black high school, remembers an early morning 12 years ago at North Mecklenburg High School when several dozen black students seemed unusually quiet as they walked off the buses.

Cansler, a driver education teacher at the time, watched and worried. Then he saw what was brewing.

"Here came a group of black students carrying chains, two-by-fours and bricks," Cansler recalled. "And around the corner came an equal number of white kids with chains, two-by-fours, bricks — and a rebel flag. The teach-

See SCHOOL Page 10A, Col. 4