

School Integration Marking Historical Graduation In 1982

Continued from Page 1A

ers and principals were the only thing in between."

"That day we kept them apart," he said, "but we didn't always."

Now, in retrospect, Cansler said "the lion's share of integrating our community was thrown on the schools. Educators were ill-prepared for it, but all in all we did do a good job."

Mertye Rice, a teacher at West Charlotte High School for 28 years, and longtime student council adviser and teacher of the year, remembers when her school was all black and proud of it.

School officials "instilled so much pride in the teachers and the students that we fell in line with it," she said. "It was like a big family."

When desegregation came, "black kids (at West Charlotte) were sent to other schools. They were bitter because this was their school. Their parents had graduated from here, they expected to graduate from here."

"And many of the whites who came were absolutely scared out of their minds," Rice said. "They had heard so much about what black kids do — black people steal, black people rape, all those myths."

It was "talk, talk and more talk" — between teachers and teachers, teachers and students, before, after and during classes — that kept the school from exploding during the early years, Rice said.

Today, "there's a different atmosphere at West Charlotte . . . Now you see a white girl walk up, put an arm around a black boy just in friendly conversation — that was unheard of."

"The youngsters here are uninhibited," Rice said. "I don't think they believe everything their parents taught them."

Charlotte-Mecklenburg school officials have no illusions that all racial problems in the schools have been solved.

This school year, administrators began grouping high school students in three achievement levels — skills (basic), regular and advanced — in required courses. Later, they found many of the system's 10 high schools had heavily white advanced classes and heavily black basic levels. They plan to correct the situation next year by using broad racial guidelines in forming the groups.

Also, school board members want to improve teachers' expectations regarding the performance of black students. Board members said at a retreat earlier this year that some teachers have

not expected minority students to do top-level work.

Despite existing racial problems, school officials say students themselves are vastly different from 12 years ago.

"I don't think there's any doubt about them being different," said Supt. Jay Robinson. "At one time, they didn't understand each other at all, and they fought and everything else. Then there was a time where there were two sets of feelings — the one you expressed and the one you really believed but kept to yourself."

"Now we're reaching the point where our truer feelings can come out, and we can have blacks and whites living and working together."

"This is a great step for a generation in learning the great lesson in human relations," Robinson said. "That we deal with people as individuals — not as a group."

There is other evidence of improvement in Charlotte-Mecklenburg school race relations:

- Of about 200 junior and senior high students excluded from school this year for offenses including gang-fighting, extortion and possessing weapons, school officials know only one instance in which racial motives may have figured in the violation.

- Harding High School, the scene of several violent race riots during the early '70s, received a \$1,000 grant last month from the Ford Foundation for outstanding educational progress, particularly in improving race relations. The school also was invited to apply for a second round of \$20,000 grants.

- The New York Times ran a front-page story last month comparing Charlotte and Boston public schools — pointing up Char-

lotte as a school system where busing and desegregation have worked.

The old, violent days of desegregation and the slow, painful steps forward are mostly ancient history to the Class of 1982.

Linda Myers, a 17-year-old black senior and head cheerleader at Harding, barely remembers the first year of school desegregation when she was a first grader riding a bus more than 7 miles from her home in the city's center to Huntingtowne Farms Elementary in far southwest Charlotte.

"My mother used to say, 'I wish you didn't have to ride the bus,'" said Linda. "But the only thing I remember is that I had to get up so early — I used to hate riding because of that."

But now, she says: "I'd rather go to integrated schools because you meet people. I wouldn't want to go to a school with just all black students. You could get noticed if you're smart or more talented. But white and black people make up the world to me."

It's not only longtime Charlotte school students who say race relations are generally relaxed today.

Until four years ago, 18-year-old Sheri McElroy, a West Charlotte High School senior who is white, attended the newly integrated Omaha, Neb., public schools.

"It seemed really odd there, everybody kept waiting for something to go wrong," she said. "When I came here, integration was just the normal routine, nobody noticed it."

"I don't know anyone who goes here who doesn't have friends both black and white," said Sheri. "It's strange to my parents and to other people sometimes. But I never think about it. I take it for granted."



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