

Starla Lewis and Frankie Conner interview  
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Starla: When I came to Muir, I lived in what they called an open district. I had a choice, I could have gone to Muir, or I could have gone to PHS. And PHS was known for being predominantly a White school. And I said to my mother, "No, I've already experienced that. I want to go to a school where I can date. I want to meet some guys and I want to just be me." And one of the things that happened, going to Muir, was really being in a place where it felt like there was enough of *me* to matter. When children are dispersed and there's nobody like them, it's almost like you become invisible. So I really enjoyed just seeing other people who looked like me. For me it was about seeing my humanity in all people, at the same time acknowledging that it's important to see a reflection of myself. I think that's what Muir did for me, on a personal level.

I remember when Martin Luther King was assassinated, we were supposed to have a powder puff derby, where the girls play football and the guys are the cheerleaders. And I remember some of my white friends being very upset because they cancelled the powder puff derby. It was the day he was assassinated. And I remember saying to one of my friends who was upset about it, "You don't even understand. You just lost your best friend. Anything can happen now." Because my White friends were so oblivious to the magnitude of this man's death.

John Muir, like all schools, they didn't really teach Black Studies or anything like that. What I learned very early was that the people who offended you didn't do it intentionally. It is because our educational system doesn't teach people who we are. We don't learn about each other. We don't even learn about women, let alone different ethnicities.

I feel like I was a child of the Civil Rights movement. Our parents told us, *Be careful, watch out, be safe.*

That's what made me political, looking at the world and seeing the injustice, and then saying I want to do something about that, that's not fair. In 1968, I remember when the first Black girl at John Muir showed up with her hair natural. I remember looking at her, first I thought, *how brave*. And then I thought, that's weird. That's a weird word to associate with a hairdo. But African American women had been taught to be ashamed of our hair. So you never saw it in our natural state. I still straightened my hair. And it wasn't until we graduated, that one of my friends did her hair natural, and I went by her house. And I looked at her, and I always thought she was cute, but then I thought she was *stunning*. Fast forward, my hair's been in some form of its natural state since 1968.

I think that John Muir was a place where students did have some level of consciousness in that we're living the times of all these protests. And we're seeing them. Vietnam, you saw the body bags. They did the death count. They showed the Vietnamese with the flesh falling off their bodies, they actually showed that on TV. So you couldn't not be conscious. When you see people pouring hot coffee on students on the lunchroom. And you know your own personal experience, I remember being in Pasadena when we'd go to Woolworths and we'd sit at the

counter and no one would ever come to help us. They didn't pour coffee on us, but they didn't take our order, either.

I was a FlagGgirl. You see the group that's there, there's only two people of color. Literally, the Black kids started leaving the gymnasium after they called my name, because it was like: there's our one. The history, you saw the books: One. Either one Black Flag Girl or one Black Song Girl, but never two together. That was like a historical moment for John Muir, just because they picked two. Something that minor.

When we went to practice, the Black girls were looking at each other like, which one of us is going to get it. We didn't even think of the White girls as competition. Which one of us. This is what it wasn't representative of: the talent of the girls.

What we knew about PHS was, the racism was very overt there, and they didn't really want to integrate, but when they were forced to integrate, what they did was they redistricted the school district so they could get the athletes. They wanted a good football team. So they would pick Black kids based on the fact that, you're going to benefit us on some level. That's what we knew about PHS.

There was a walkout when Martin Luther King was assassinated. People were in class and the teachers weren't dealing with it. They were just teaching as usual. And then kids started getting up to leave.

Frankie: No, it was planned, the day before, the boys, I remember them talking about it and they said, "Tomorrow, we're going to walk out." And I remember looking out the window seeing the boys do it, mostly boys. Back then, people wore shirts to school, like short sleeve shirts, and they said to wear black armbands. I remember seeing that, I can picture myself looking out the window as they were coming out of the building.

Starla: It was a march that included John Muir, and Blair High School. They met at some park. I left school that day. I didn't stay.

Frankie: I didn't. See, my thing was, we were seniors, if you missed more than 4 or 5 days of school you couldn't get an A in the class. And that was very important for us, getting good grades, and I was sick. I didn't want to add those days up.

Starla: I was very comfortable getting the B. I'll take the lower grade knowing it doesn't reflect who I am or what I know.

Frankie: Good grades were important to me.

Starla: I don't remember them planning it. I just remember folks were walking out and I got up and left. Some of us went to the park area, I didn't stay at the park. I ended up going home. Because for me, I was in grief. I understood the significance of what he was trying to do, and I also understood the power of love and I kept thinking, is this the way people confront love? With murder and violence?

Something happens as we get older, that we're afraid to risk being a part of change. Because change is going to happen. My passion has always been to be a part of the change. I don't want to accept the way things are. I don't want to be complacent that way, in terms of me. But I also know it's very painful, and a lot of people, their pain threshold's not that high. So they can't be a part of it without somehow scarring themselves.

Because we don't connect the past and the present, we keep thinking Oh, everything's gotten so much better. More young black men have been killed at the hands of the police than were killed during lynchings. What kind of progress is that?

MLK walkout

It was controversial. There were administrators who were upset and wanted to punish people, and then there were others who said let it alone. When King died, there were riots, because I remember my mom didn't want me to go nowhere. *Stay in the house. Be safe.* Our walkout at school was more peaceful.

Frankie: And the white kids were scared, because they had heard about it. Like, worried scared. Worried.

Starla: There were a few [white kids who walked out], because some people get it. Some people are sheltered and they don't have a clue what's going on.

I know the class after us, one of the things they did to shake up the school was, that we had a prom king and queen, so he was White and she was Black and they went to the prom together, in protest. The teachers did not know what to do with that. Even Frankie being on the court—there were two black girls on the court, that was the first time. The homecoming court.

Frankie: There was never a black girl for homecoming queen until like the '70s.

When I was a senior in high school, we had a class, I guess it was social sciences so you learned about Sociology, Psychology and Anthropology. And when we got onto Psychology I go, "Oh, this is fascinating. I'd really like to learn why people behave the way they do because I feel like I'm the only normal person. Everybody else is crazy, I'd like to figure them out. I wanted to be a Psychologist. So, when I went to my counselor, I told him, "I want to be a psychologist." He said, "Oh, I don't think you can do that, why don't you pursue this other interest you have," which was fashion design. And because he told me that, I ended up going to LA Trade Tech to be a fashion designer... I realized I would probably wind up being a pattern maker and that was not for me.

So, after the first semester I started taking all academic courses at LA Trade Tech and I transferred to PCC and I got a degree in Home Ec, because part of it was Child Development. And then I transferred to San Diego State because they were the only college that had a degree for Child Development where I could do more than just be a preschool teacher. But most of my courses were Psychology and the course I liked the most was Experimental Psychology. And that's where I said, you know, the Psychology is where I really wanted to go, but I ended up in

the counseling program. After I worked a few years as a counselor, I got laid off from LAUSD and I said, "Now I'm going to go back to school to be a Psychologist."

So I ended up doing what I wanted to do, and the Child Psychology served me well because I ended up being a School Psychologist for 31 years. But he deterred me.

And I told other people about that experience and this guy I dated, Henry Harper, he told me he had the same counselor, McSweeney, he seemed really nice, too, and when he was in there for his Junior evaluation, he said, "Oh what are you going to do," and he was trying to tell him about different trades, and he noticed on his paperwork that his father was a principal and his mother was a teacher. So he changed his tune. I didn't learn that until I was in my 40s, though! And I always thought that I couldn't do it. Luckily, I had a professor at Cal State LA and she told me I was brilliant... she was the first one that ever told me that I could do it, and that I was smart. No one ever told me I was smart until I was in college.

I found out they wanted all the girls to go into clerical work, accounting and stuff, and they wanted the ethnic groups to go into blue collar. But they didn't even want the girls to go to college.

Starla: For me, school was something that I looked at, I said, *OK, how do I get through*, and I did what I needed to do. I didn't feel like I had been taught much, I didn't feel like it served me in any way. And when I graduated and went to Pasadena City College, I was actually thinking about dropping out because I was just bored, and I just couldn't relate. And then I realized, even back then, our curriculum, it wasn't inclusive. So therefore, I knew a lot about White folks, I knew a lot about famous White men who did great things. I didn't know anything about White women. I didn't learn anything about myself. I didn't learn anything about my Asian friends or my Mexican friends or even the Native American people who lived here. And I was offended by that. It got worse for me in college.

One of the things that college did was, I took my first Black studies class. And I said to myself, this is the information that I needed as a child in order to understand why I'm not inferior. This is the information that my friends needed in order to really know me. This is the information that my teachers needed because teachers can't teach who teachers don't know. This is the information that my nation needs so it doesn't self-destruct.

Frankie: The only time I felt different was when my counselor told me I couldn't make it. And I was always a good student. I always had good grades.

Starla: If it hadn't been for that Black Studies class, I never would have been a teacher. I thought, if I teach this, then my people could heal. My people could learn to love themselves. My people could stop trying to emulate everybody else. My people could stand on their own history and culture and build whatever it is they wanted to build.

Flag girls

Starla: There were two because times were changing. People were protesting the status quo. And for probably the first time at Muir, two people got it because of their talents, not because of the color of their skin.

Song girls were, cheerleaders with pom-poms. They were the popular kids.

Frankie: You got to do a lot of fun activities together. You performed at the auditorium for pep rallies.

Starla: You got out of class.

Frankie: And you wore these cute little outfits. It was just something extra special for you to do in high school.

Starla: It would be no different, I think, than being the class president. You're somebody on campus, whatever that somebody is. I did it because I thought it would be fun. My mother was very strict so I thought it would get me out places—without her. Our mothers were so strict.

The walkout was over discrimination. In whatever area it was. It doesn't matter if it was cheerleaders. If you ran for class president, and everybody knew you were the best and they just bypassed you for a white guy, that could be a walkout. If you were valedictorian because you were the best, and they picked somebody else over you that was white, that would be a walkout because we're talking about equity and fairness. And so, it's a protest against injustice more than "song girl-ism" or "black girl-ism." It's not fair that the best don't have an opportunity to shine.