

Virginia school celebrates its part in Brown case history

By [Bravetta Hassell](#)

Scripps Howard Foundation Wire

ARLINGTON, Va. – Austin Winger, a 12-year old seventh grader at H.B. Woodlawn school, on Monday channeled Michael Jones to tell his classmates what their school was like the day it was desegregated.

Standing no higher than five feet in a summery blue-green suit, Austin-as-Jones said, even though they were in the spotlight, students were well prepared for the day that Jones, two other boys and one girl became the first blacks to attend an integrated public school in Virginia.

Austin prepared for his role by talking to Jones, who attended the ceremony to dedicate a historic marker at the school, but declined to talk.

"I kind of felt privileged to talk with someone who changed history so much," Austin said. "It made me more thankful for the things that I receive and more respectful of other people."

On the 50th anniversary of the Brown v. Board school desegregation decision, students, faculty, neighbors and public officials dedicated the plaque commemorating the 1959 "desegregation" of what was then Stratford Junior High School.

"If you noticed, I do not use the word 'integrated.' I use the word 'desegregated.' 'Integrated' means not voluntary, forced," said Frank K. Wilson, the Arlington school board chair.

Austin was one of two students chosen to share a former student's experience through "swapping stories," in which he assumed the perspective of Michael Jones, who was himself 12 when he walked into uncharted territory.

Stratford, then an all-white junior high school, opened its doors to its first black students on Feb. 2, 1959, more than four years after the unanimous Brown v. Board of Education decision of May 17, 1954.

"I wasn't born yet," laughed Margaret Stephens-Reed, special projects coordinator for Arlington Public Schools and special events and publicity coordinator for the Arlington Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

The NAACP began preparing for the event in October and was joined by the school system, the county and the Black Ministers Association, Stephens-Reed said.

Onlookers stood glistening in the sunny, 80-degree heat. There was a small, colorful gazebo, a couple of trees and at least 100 people – black, white, Asian and Hispanic, in hats and sunglasses, shorts and tank tops and in dresses and suits and ties

"This is truly a history-making day. It is hard to imagine that just 50 years ago, people at a gathering like this would have been shunned and talked about, while others jailed and lynched," said Talmadge Williams, Arlington NAACP president.

And then there was Joseph Macekura, a bespectacled man in his 80s with white and gray hair.

"There are only a few times in the history of our nation to reaffirm the living aspects of the Constitution of the United States," said Macekura, a retired school employee who was a

guidance counselor at Stratford during its desegregation.

The integration of Stratford signaled the end of Virginia's policy of "massive resistance," which involved closing some schools rather than integrating them, according to the plaque that now stands before Woodlawn.

Macekura said he and the school principal were asked by the superintendent in 1957 to begin planning the desegregation. They generated a plan in about two weeks with input from faculty members and held assemblies with the student body.

"Children are a lot more accepting. You don't convert everybody, but that's not the purpose of education. The purpose of education is to understand," Macekura said.

Mahala Mitchell, a Woodlawn student, told the story of a white student from 1959 who remembered soldiers with M-1 rifles surrounding the school.

The children poised on the grass Monday, however, applauded and cheered the speakers, spirituals sung by Woodlawn's choir and the reality that they were the ultimate products of Brown and witnesses to history.

"It was the first school in Virginia, and we happen to be learning about it at the exact same time in history," said Eric Young, 12, a friend of Austin's since the two met last year in sixth grade.

The landmark case of Brown v. the Topeka Board of Education, in conjunction with related cases in Virginia, Delaware, South Carolina and the District of Columbia, ruled "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal."

Blacks and whites would not be gathering together in celebration of such an event had Brown not negated Plessy v. Ferguson's permission for "separate but equal facilities."


"That wouldn't be cool," Eric said. "I probably wouldn't be friends with him," motioning toward Austin.

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Wire

1090 Vermont Ave. N.W. - Suite
1000

Washington, D.C. 20005

phone: 202-408-2748

fax: 202-682-2143

