Vermelle Diamond Ely: She worked at the Black school that was in Pineville, which was called Sterling.

Speaker 2: Sterling.

Vermelle Diamond Ely: Uh-huh. And Pineville is a small town, which is almost a part of Charlotte now. You know how small cities would just finally end up kind of—Going down South Boulevard 51, the new section, Carmel Commons and all those, it just kind of closed in. And that's where Sterling is located. I think they're still using that building for, I don't know, Headstart. They were using it at one time. But when I went to Pineville, I went to the White school, which was all the way into the city of Pineville, just a few miles down the road from the Black school. That was in 1970 when they first integrated, there were only two of us that went that year. I think there may have been two the year before, but there was still some problems.

Vermelle Diamond Ely: People still were not comfortable with Blacks coming into the neighborhood. My father was retired at the time and he wasn't that comfortable with me going either. So he went with us, spent the first day, helped me with the registration. I was like, "Well, if you're going, you going to work." So he stayed around. I don't think anybody really realized that he came more or less for protection. You have him coming and looking like he going to come in there to kill somebody. So he spent the first day with us to help with registration.

Speaker 2: So where did you teach when you first came back to Charlotte?

Vermelle Diamond Ely: I taught at a school—Marie G. Davis Elementary School, which was located in Southside. That's South Tryon Street. That was another one of the government project areas. One was Southside and the other one was Brook Hill. And they built that school to house those children, serve those children in that area. That's going toward toward York, South Carolina, going in that direction. Because it was York Road, they later built a junior high school, which is called York Road Junior High, right behind where Marie Davis was located and later changed the name to Kennedy Junior High. Kennedy might be still there. The school is still there, I don't know what they're using it for now though. But I taught at Marie Davis, first grade, for 17 years at Marie Davis. And I moved from there in 1970, taught at Pineville for 15 years and that's where I retired from in 1985. And I've been retired since then.

Leslie Brown: When you taught at Marie Davis, in addition to your classroom responsibilities, did you have other responsibilities as a teacher or did you feel you had other responsibilities as a teacher?

Vermelle Diamond Ely: Mother, father, doctor, nurse, because we didn't have all of those things. The nurses and doctors and children would come to school with no clothing and not knowing how to do anything for themselves hardly. It was just one of those things where you were everything to the children. I was going to show you, I had a picture of one of my classes. In fact, I got the book turned around backwards. Did you see it? I had something from both. This was at Marie Davis when the class was all Black. And then when I went to

Pineville, my first year, I don't think I had one Black child in my classroom that first couple years. I think maybe the next year might have had two or three.

Speaker 2: There were three in this one.

Vermelle Diamond Ely: Three in that class. But we were everything, we had to teach them how to do everything for themselves. Even with the parents. They were not home. A lot of times, you'd have to feed them. Excuse me. Show them how to do everything. But they were loving children and they wanted to learn and they were good children. You could tell them what to do, they would do exactly what you say do. We had a principal that used to do little things, see what the children would do during a fire drill. And you may have talked to Dr. Mosley too, Mildred Mosley. Remember her from our meetings? But we worked at the same school and she was another one of, I guess, they call her a strict disciplinarian. But anyway, you say tell the children don't get out of your seat while I'm out of the classroom. You stay here. So one morning Mr. Moreland had a fire drill while we were all in a faculty meeting just to see what the children would do. Because you know my children and Mosley's children didn't move. But some started to run, started to go out and they said, "No, Mrs. Ely said for us not to get out of our seats."

Vermelle Diamond Ely: So I had to kind of change that, unless it's a fire bell, don't get out of your seat. But they didn't leave that room. And now nowadays, if you don't even have to have a five drill, they won't stay in the seats with you in the room with them. You can see how children changed over years though. But they were good children and they learned how to do a lot of things. That's what's so disturbing now, when you see our kids not getting what they really need. I don't know whether integration was good or whether it was bad in a sense. Sometimes I wonder if our children have gotten lost along the way with it because nobody takes the time with them.

Vermelle Diamond Ely: In fact, White children don't learn wholesale. You have your good students that are going, you can stand in front of class and work with, talk to them and teach wholesale everybody at the same time. Your smartest children are going to get it anyway, but the slow ones are not. And regardless of whether they're White or Black, they're not going to be able to keep up and they just getting lost in the shuffle. And I think the schools themselves were not equal so far as materialistic things. Not having the books and the equipment to work with them. I think if we had gotten everything that other schools had, our children could have done much more. I spent a fortune. I spent half of what I have made putting back into school trying to teach those children because we didn't get the materials.

Vermelle Diamond Ely: We would go to school supply places and stand and look through the books and things just to see, get the ideas and go back home and try to draw the pictures and try to duplicate what we had seen in the books. The school, we didn't have the money to buy them. And later after I was at Pineville, they started what they call a new way of teaching, new procedures so far as teaching children, what they call learning centers. And they were doing workshops, going to learn how to make this and how to make that. And I told my principal, who was White, I said, I don't want to go to a workshop, learn how to make anything. He looked at me. I know he thought I was crazy, but he said, "What?" I said, "I don't want to go to a workshop to learn how to make anything." I said, "That's all I have done all my life." And I thank the Lord

every day for when I got to the place I could go downtown, go to the store and buy what I needed to teach these children.

Vermelle Diamond Ely: I don't need to go learn how to make anything. In fact, you could send them down here to my classroom, I can show them how to make anything you want to make. He didn't make me go either. It was real funny. He got a kick out of it. He laughed. He said, "What'd you say? You don't want to go?" I said, "No, I don't want to go." But then everybody couldn't understand why I didn't have to go to the workshop. I'd been making stuff all—We didn't even get things like paperclips and thumbtacks. And the books that we got were hand-me-down books from the other schools. Once they were thrown, we could go to the city dump and find first grade readers. Some of them had never been opened. You know how brand new books, the pages are still glued together, kind of never been separated? Brand new books that they had in a school during that year and at the end of that year they were discarded. And the next year, they were the little paperback readers anyway, but they got new books. So the end of the year, when they threw them away, we'd go get them. And those were the books that we had to use. But they still had the words in, that was the most important thing. And that's what it was all about.

Leslie Brown: You talked about the disparity in schools, but what were the signs of segregation?

Vermelle Diamond Ely: So far as the schools were concerned? Signs of segregation? Going back to my early years, and I did a lesson one day, I don't know whether it was during Black History month or when it was, but anyway, I did that with my class, an integrated class. And it was just telling them some of the things, how we grew up, not being able to, for instance, I remember going downtown with my mother. We walked downtown, first of all. And if they were shopping, if you had to go to the restroom, there was not a restroom for you. This was before they had the Coloreds and the Whites. They had little alleys between the buildings. And I just asked the kids, I said, "Can you imagine, how would you feel if you went to town with your mother and there's no place for you to go to the bathroom?" What did you do? We went behind the building. Little boys went behind the cars.

Vermelle Diamond Ely: And then later they had had restrooms that said White and Colored you could go in. Some places had them and some didn't. And the same thing with the water fountains. The lunch counters, we were not able to sit down and eat at the lunch counters. In fact, you weren't even able to go there and buy at most of them. Some of them had a little corner in the back at the end of the counter where you could go and maybe get a hot dog and a drink or you could go right inside the door and buy popcorn and peanuts and take them with you.

Vermelle Diamond Ely: There was some stores that wouldn't allow you to try on things, you just had to buy. There was one store that the only way to, like Montaldo's, you couldn't even go in unless you went down the side. At one time, you couldn't go in at all. Then later, they began to let you come in and go down the side of the building and go upstairs in the back door and do shopping that way. The buses, you had to get on the bus and if there were 20 seats on that bus, they were in the front of the bus, you couldn't sit down. You always had to go to the back of the bus. And you would sometimes ride with 10 to dozen empty seats in the front of the bus and Blacks standing, as long as they stood in the back, but they still couldn't sit down.

Vermelle Diamond Ely: I can remember, you asked me about where Brooklyn started. I can remember an instance where we were coming from town. It was late. I might have been coming from a movie 'cause it had gotten late in the evening. Had a bus driver—Well, there was a White man that had gotten on and most of the people that rode the number seven bus, which went to Brooklyn were all Black. But this man had gotten on and had asked this lady, this Black lady to get up and let him have her seat. And of course, that didn't sit well with the people on the bus, but they didn't say anything while they were there. But when the bus driver turned the corner, like going into the area that was really called Brooklyn, he called that White man to the front of the bus and asked him to get off.

Vermelle Diamond Ely: He said, "Now, I'm going to suggest to you one thing, your best bet is to get off this bus and go right through there and go back uptown." He said, "Because if I take you down through this neighborhood, there's no telling what's going to happen to you." Because those people were angry about him making the lady get up. And he knew that he had to drive the bus. He was White, but he knew that he had to drive down through those streets that I mentioned earlier, Second Street and McDowell Street. And there's no telling what they would've done to him. So he suggested the safest thing for him to do was to get off his bus because he didn't want any trouble.

Vermelle Diamond Ely: But I remember when one of the lunch counters opened up, well, Grants Five and Dime did open up one complete counter to Blacks. Excuse me. It was downstairs though, but they had the same counter that they had up upstairs, and we had the whole area. Let's see, some of the other, I think I told you about the movies, signs of how we were segregated. We had to have our sports activities, ball games and things like that, not at the stadium but on the high school practice fields. The school that they're getting ready to do now, Irving Avenue, they're going to redo, was originally Harding. Harding High School. And Harding was the place where Second Ward had to go and play their football games. Harding's practice field. Now, Harding's games were at the stadium though, but we had to have our games there because we didn't have a stadium. We didn't have any place for practice. They just practiced on the playground. Pearl Street playground. And the track that they ran was just around the neighborhood, up and down those dirt streets that I told you about. That's how they did their running, training.

Vermelle Diamond Ely: They'd leave the school and go up one street and down another one and down around till they got the Pearl Street playground in where they had their scrimmages. In order to have uniforms, Central High School where CP is, Central Piedmont Community College is now, it's old Central High School. Their school colors must have been blue and white because ours was ended up being blue and white. And that was because we got their hand-me-down uniforms. Once they were discarded, they were given to Second Ward. West Charlotte got Harding's, which were, their colors, I think, were maroon and gold. We ended up with the same colors because we had to use the same uniforms once they discarded them.

Vermelle Diamond Ely: We didn't have a band or anything when I was coming along, but later they were able to do that. And I think they did the same thing with the band uniforms. But this was how, but now all of these schools were still Charlotte Mecklenburg schools. The White high schools got all the equipment that

they needed, all the uniforms, but the Black schools didn't. And it was even rumored, and I don't think it was really rumor because my father had a friend that was a coach and people had heard that the pay was different too for Black teachers and White teachers. A good example of that was one of the coaches who was coach at West Charlotte had the same name as another coach in the city, just so happened. And somehow other, their checks got mixed. The Black coach got the other ones check, went the wrong direction. And that's one of the reasons they found out what was happening, that they were getting paid more.

Vermelle Diamond Ely: When I went to work at Pineville, they would not believe that the video, audio equipment, all the tape recorders and all the film projectors and all the things that they had in that school had dust on them that thick. Had never been used. And we were, at Marie Davis, with one projector, one tape recorder, you know, that kind of thing. And when I got to the other school, all that stuff that had never been touched, it was just sitting there. My mother taught at Davidson, I think I mentioned to you. And in the county, they had a reading program where you went from child to child listening to them read and you had to drag a chair down the aisle or whatever.

Vermelle Diamond Ely: One day they received some of the nicest, prettiest, little rolling stools. Oh, she was so happy she could come over and sit. She had this rolling stool. She didn't had to drag a chair no more. She could roll them down the aisles and listen to the children read. And went back to school the next day and the guy that had delivered him came back and apologized. Said he was so sorry, they was supposed to go to the other school and they picked them up and carried them to the other school. So there were a lot of obvious things that would show you segregation. I guess, I can't start to name 'em. I just think of little instances, but those are some things that just come to mind.

Leslie Brown: Did you ever feel like a second class citizen?

Vermelle Diamond Ely: I don't think I ever did. We knew that we weren't allowed to go to certain places and we didn't have certain things. But I don't think we ever realized or felt that we were second class. We felt that we were still just as as good as the next person. We had what we had and we were happy. And I guess if we were poor, we didn't know it. And I don't think we really were, we might have been in somebody's eyesight, but not in ours, I don't think. We had parents and teachers that made you feel wanted and loved. The community was just like an extended family. Everybody helped everybody else.

Vermelle Diamond Ely: You had teachers that would do for you, give you, if your parents didn't have to give you, nobody went hungry. Nobody went without books. Nobody went without clothing and that kind of thing. It was just like we were one big happy family and we didn't feel like we were second class. And I just didn't register with her until, I guess after I got older and looked back. And it is too late to feel like I was second class by that time. But we just felt like we were deprived of a lot of things and our children probably could have accomplished much more had they had equal opportunities.

Vermelle Diamond Ely: Our teachers were well trained, they went to good colleges. And I think even coming from the experience that I had after I went to the White school, it got to the place, when I first went there, I was just like a bear. I was coming there to eat up some of their children. But eventually, everybody wanted

their child in your room because they had experienced, talking to other parents. And their children had learned so much more and had done so much more. And it got to the place where Black teachers had the reputation of being good teachers. And they had to earn that, though, after everyone was going to the school. Because like I said, at first, I don't know what they thought we were going to do with them. But then after that, your principal would have to tell them, everybody cannot be in that classroom. But it was interesting, it was an experience.

Speaker 2: Were there certain values that you really tried to instill in your students?

Vermelle Diamond Ely: Yes, to try to get some of their ideas. Children are easy to talk to. They brought a lot of things from home, you could tell that, with the name calling and things like that. And the first thing I tried to instill in them, that is one word that you need to get out of your vocabulary and get it out as soon as you possibly can because that one word can cause you to get killed. And that was the word, nigger. And some of them come in there and it's the first thing, "That little nigger said so and so to me." I said, "I have told you more than one time. And so somebody's going to end up setting an example for the rest of you pretty soon because I'm going to turn my head." I said that to myself. But when you call one of them a nigger and he jumps up and hits you, don't look at me.

Vermelle Diamond Ely: But they learn fast. And I said, "If you use those words, you better use them at home. Don't let anybody hear you, because that's a word that, you'd think, and nothing against you. You've heard this before, we will use that word talking to each other. But it is a different thing when it comes from somebody else, I don't know why, but it's been a bad word to Blacks for a long time. And I guess maybe it always will be. But I tried to get my children to realize that all of you are human beings and you wouldn't want to be treated, and this was a lesson that I was trying to teach them when I was telling them about how would you feel if you have, and some of them even cried. But what did you do? And they were so sympathetic of the things that you couldn't do.

Vermelle Diamond Ely: And I also tried to show them the difference in color. Color had no meaning. That little Black boy said so and so. That little White girl said this to me. Let's just leave color out of it. That little boy or that little girl, we all just human beings. And they would start with Black and White. And so one day I just had a lesson with a piece of chalk, which was white and a black crayon. And I used the children as examples and I put the white chalk to one of the little White girl's arm. I said, "Now, is she the color of this chalk? What color is this chalk? It's white. But she's not actually the color of this chalk, is she?" Of course, they said, no. She belongs to a White race. This is race, not color. Black, by that time, Negroes, Colored people or what have you, had decided that a lot of people in the White race could not pronounce the word "Negro." It didn't ever come out like that. So they decided they wanted to be called Black, which took me a long time to use that term. But I just tried to show them that we were not the same color as that black crayon either.

Vermelle Diamond Ely: So we were talking about races of people. So those were just some of the little things that we tried, which were very important, I think, that to help them to get to understand one another and understand that we were all human beings and we need to learn how to live together and play together. And

it really worked. Like I said, children are easy to get this across to, the parents were the ones that had the problems.