

READING

Interview with Ellen Jackson

Ellen Jackson was the director of Freedom House, a Roxbury organization that provided information and support to African American families as their children were assigned to new schools in white neighborhoods of Boston in 1974. In an interview, Jackson described the afternoon of the first day of school in 1974 and its aftermath:

Well, the phones, the hotlines, started ringing. And in a few minutes the official word came in that buses coming from the elementary school had been pelted and had been stoned. And they were coming directly to Freedom House . . . When the kids came, everybody just broke out in tears and started crying. The kids were crying. They had glass in their hair. They were scared. And they were shivering and crying. Talking about they wanted to go home. We tried to gently usher them into the auditorium. And wipe off the little bit of bruises that they had. Small bruises and the dirt. Picked the glass out of their hair. And then we were calling parents, based on the numbers we had, to come up to Freedom House.

When the parents got there, they were as angry with me as I would have been if it had been my own child . . . And they said, "You listened to the mayor and look what happened. My kid's not going back tomorrow. I'm not letting him be, or her be, subjected to this anymore." I mean, basically parents said, "The hell with it, we're not going to do this anymore. We trusted you." And that hurt because I knew where they were coming from. I could feel their pain myself. And that feeling of trust, because I had trusted some other people who had promised me that this was not going to happen . . .

Jackson demanded that Boston's mayor, Kevin White, come to Freedom House that evening to meet with the parents. Parents began gathering long before the meeting's starting time of around 6 p.m. Jackson describes what happened when the mayor entered the room.

And before he could even speak, parents were standing up and saying, "We've been betrayed again. We've been betrayed again. We put our kids out here and we take chances with our kids. We didn't want to do it, but you promised us. What are you going to do for us now, Kevin?" It was a difficult time to calm the audience down.

When he heard many of the comments, and many of the accusations, and many of the allegations, and much of the anger and the rage and the frustration from the parents, they said, "We're not going." He turned around and he said, "Wait a minute. Give me," he pleaded, he pleaded and said, "give me one more chance. Let your kids get on those buses tomorrow." He said, "I promise you this will never happen again." There was a pause in the room, and you could feel the silence. People were fighting with themselves, their consciences. Whether or not they should allow their kids to go. Should they take this chance? How could they be assured? Should they trust his word again? When that silence came, someone from the Bay State side of Columbia Point Project yelled, "No, we're not going to have it. We're going to have our own people there. If it's going to be like this, we're going to send our own people on these buses" . . .

We didn't know how many kids were going to turn out that next day, but we met all night long. And we decided then that we'd have to really form groups to follow the buses over the next morning to South Boston. And that we possibly would have to start on a regular basis from that day on to have people in a sense just watching and monitoring what was happening as the buses went up the hill. I remember we stated that to the police commissioner and he said, "Well, we don't want it. We're not going to be responsible." We said, "You haven't been responsible for us up to now, so we'll take the responsibility on our own. We'll be responsible for ourselves. At the same time, we've got to be responsible for our kids. And these are all of our kids. We may not be their biological parents, but they're our children. We've encouraged these people to participate in this process. And therefore we have a responsibility." But that was a night that changed the whole idea that this was going to be an easy, easy process. It was clear it was not.¹

¹ Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s* (Bantam, 1990), Kindle edition, 602-05.