They Led the Way

The students who desegregated the schools in Florida’s capital went on to be lawyers, teachers, a doctor and a businessman

BY Ann Beasley Schierhorn PHOTOS BY David LaBelle
TURMOIL OF THE TIME

Civil rights and the schools

MAY 7, 1964 • The U.S. Supreme Court rules state laws establishing separate schools for blacks and whites are unconstitutional in Brown v. Board of Education.

SEPT. 3, 1963 • Six days later, the Leon County Public Schools are integrated by Harold Knowles, Marilyn Hollifield and Phillip Hadley at Leon High School and by Melodee Thompson at Kate Sullivan Elementary School.

SEPT. 15, 1963 • The Ku Klux Klan bombs a Birmingham, Ala., church, killing four black girls.

NOV. 22, 1963 • President Kennedy is assassinated in Dallas.

JULY 2, 1964 • Civil Rights Act outlaws racial segregation in schools, public places and employment.

SEPT. 6, 1964 • Keith Neyland and Mahlon C. Rhaney, Jr. integrate Florida High School at FSU.

SEPT. 1965 • Two percent of Leon County’s black students are in integrated schools.

FALL 1966 • Old Lincoln High School shuts its doors as a school, one of nine former all-black schools to close in Leon County. The closings tear up the community and dislocate black teachers and administrators, many of whom are demoted.

APRIL 1, 1963 • The Leon County school board submits a plan to the federal court, calling for desegregation beginning with the first grade in fall 1963. Another grade is to be added each year. Older students can apply for transfers to new schools.

JUNE 11, 1963 • President John F. Kennedy calls for federal legislation on civil rights. The bill that he submits to Congress is ultimately passed as the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

JUNE 12, 1963 • Civil rights leader Medgar Evers is shot and killed in Jackson, Miss., by a member of the White Citizens’ Council.

DEC. 12, 1969 • Federal appeals court orders Leon County to submit a plan by Feb. 1, 1970, for complete desegregation of the schools.

AUG. 28, 1963 • The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivers his “I Have a Dream” speech in front of the Lincoln Memorial during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. The march rallies support for Kennedy’s civil rights bill and draws attention to economic inequality.

See the world of 1963 in photos ->

A story that needed to be told

THE BAND PLAYED “DIXIE” to end my first assembly as a sophomore at Tallahassee’s Leon High School. Everyone stood up. Reluctantly, I did too. But I wondered about a small group of black students in the back row. What were they feeling as they listened to this relic of the Confederacy? A white student standing in the back let loose with a piercing rebel yell. It was chilling. This was 1965. The school had been desegregated in 1963, but the ritual of “Dixie” survived. The rebel yell’s message in the era of civil rights movement was as unmistakable as the pickup trucks displaying Confederate flag plates and gun racks.

For my junior year, I transferred to Florida High School, the lab school at Florida State University. There I got to know Keith Neyland and Mahlon Rhaney Jr., my classmates who had integrated the school two years before. I also met senior Elaine Thorpe, who had preceded me at Leon and then transferred to Florida High, where she was the first black graduate.

Theris was a story that needed to be told—theirs and the stories of the students who earlier desegregated the public schools in Tallahassee. The Tallahassee Democrat was a conservative, locally owned newspaper at that time. It published a separate black news section well into the 1960s. The Democrat covered the governmental aspects of desegregation and sought to reassure the white community that Tallahassee would not become a Little Rock or Birmingham when faced with school desegregation. But it did not cover the human stories of the black students who led the way.

On the day after I graduated from Florida High, my family moved to Washington, D.C., where my father had taken a new job. I studied journalism at Northwestern University outside Chicago, where I met my husband, Carl. Our careers in journalism and education took us to Rochester, N.Y., Iowa City, Iowa, and Kent, Ohio. I knew that someday I would return to Tallahassee to write this story. Carl and I adopted our daughter, Karen, from Korea 30 years ago, and when she was a schoolgirl, I tried to explain what it was like for the students who desegregated the schools. In interviewing the former Tallahassee students, I learned that their children too found it difficult to imagine this era. This project documents the experience of school desegregation to help today’s students understand what it was like to be there. The stories of those who led the way appear in this magazine and in the exhibit created for the John G. Riley Center/Museum of African American History and Culture in Tallahassee. In interviewing, I learned:

• All eight students completed college and attended graduate school.
• Five students have law degrees—two from Harvard. One has both a medical degree and a law degree. Two others have graduate degrees in education.
• Most of their parents were college-educated, and many of them had graduate degrees. Three of the students had parents who were faculty or administrators at Florida A&M University. All of their mothers worked.
• They call their parents their heroes—strong role models who were determined to open more doors for their children.

See the world of 1963 in photos ->

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 2]
Table of contents

3 Introduction: They led the way
5 September 3, 1963: Segregation ends in Florida’s capital

THE IRSTORIES

6 Elaine Thorpe Cox
“I just wanted to be accepted as another human being.”

8 Harold Knowles
“It was worth the price.”

12 Marilyn Holifield
“The power of the inner spirit can triumph today.”

14 Phillip Hadley
He gave up football for academics.

16 In first grade

18 Melodee Thompson
“I enjoy being around people who aren’t like me.”

20 Keith Neyland
He was first to play varsity football and basketball.

22 Mahlon C. Rhaney, Jr.
“My folks taught us we were as good as anybody.”

26 C.B. “Rick” Williams
“My friends – and family – made life worth living.”

28 With thanks to

29 Tell us your story

ON THE COVER
Clockwise from lower left: Keith Neyland, C.B. “Rick” Williams, Melodee Thompson, Mahlon C. Rhaney, Jr., Elaine Thorpe Cox, Phillip Hadley, Harold Knowles and Marilyn Holifield.

INTRODUCTION

They led the way

In September 1963, four African American students walked through the doors of formerly white Leon County public schools in Tallahassee. Their action marked the end of the county’s segregated school system, 100 years after the Emancipation Proclamation.

The students at Leon High School were taunted with racist remarks by classmates who wanted to provoke a fight. They were lonely because most of their classmates were silent. They faced anger from some of their friends who questioned their decision to transfer from black schools.

The students and their parents wanted the best education they could get to open more doors for college. They wanted to advance the cause of civil rights.

This exhibit recognizes these students’ perseverance and that of their contemporaries who integrated the Catholic school, the Florida State University high school and the new Rickards High School. The students went on to become lawyers, teachers, a businessman and a doctor. Here are their stories.

BY Ann Beasley Schierhorn
PHOTOS BY David LaBelle

““They Led the Way” ©2013 by Ann B. Schierhorn.
School of Journalism and Mass Communication.
Kent State University.
P.O. Box 5190.
Kent, OH 44242-0001.
ascusierh@kent.edu.
Photography by David LaBelle used with permission.
Kent State University provided research support for this project.
CraftLabDesign, Broadview Heights, Ohio.”

– Ann Beasley Schierhorn

“I have chosen to use “black” in most instances because the former students used it themselves in the interviews. They grew up before “African American” was popularized. I also have used “integrate” because it was the term used at that time in Tallahassee. But I often switch to “desegregate,” which is the more commonly understood term today.

Although this is the story of one city’s school desegregation, there were many Tallahassees in the South. These were the cities that desegregated without violence but with great sacrifice.

In telling this story, I was fortunate that Glenda Alice Rabby had chronicled Tallahassee’s civil rights movement in “The Pain and the Promise.” Her book provided a solid foundation for this research.

Under ownership by Knight Newspapers and then Gannett Co. Inc., the Democrat began to write about some of the former students when they appeared at events in Tallahassee. Today, it makes a concerted effort to cover the whole community. Executive editor Bob Gabordi opened the news library to me and senior reporter Gerald Ensley provided historical perspective.

My Kent State University colleague David LaBelle made the compelling portraits of the former students and devoted much of a family vacation to do so.

I am especially grateful to Althemese Barnes, director of the Riley Museum, for readily accepting my exhibit proposal and for opening the door to several of the former students I wanted to reach. I traveled to Tallahassee, Orlando, Miami and Atlanta to interview the former students, and I appreciate their trust.

– Ann Beasley Schierhorn

FROM PAGE 1

They led the way

In September 1963, four African American students walked through the doors of formerly white Leon County public schools in Tallahassee. Their action marked the end of the county’s segregated school system, 100 years after the Emancipation Proclamation.

The students at Leon High School were taunted with racist remarks by classmates who wanted to provoke a fight. They were lonely because most of their classmates were silent. They faced anger from some of their friends who questioned their decision to transfer from black schools.

The students and their parents wanted the best education they could get to open more doors for college. They wanted to advance the cause of civil rights.

This exhibit recognizes these students’ perseverance and that of their contemporaries who integrated the Catholic school, the Florida State University high school and the new Rickards High School. The students went on to become lawyers, teachers, a businessman and a doctor. Here are their stories.

BY Ann Beasley Schierhorn
PHOTOS BY David LaBelle

“I have chosen to use “black” in most instances because the former students used it themselves in the interviews. They grew up before “African American” was popularized. I also have used “integrate” because it was the term used at that time in Tallahassee. But I often switch to “desegregate,” which is the more commonly understood term today.

Although this is the story of one city’s school desegregation, there were many Tallahassees in the South. These were the cities that desegregated without violence but with great sacrifice.

In telling this story, I was fortunate that Glenda Alice Rabby had chronicled Tallahassee’s civil rights movement in “The Pain and the Promise.” Her book provided a solid foundation for this research.

Under ownership by Knight Newspapers and then Gannett Co. Inc., the Democrat began to write about some of the former students when they appeared at events in Tallahassee. Today, it makes a concerted effort to cover the whole community. Executive editor Bob Gabordi opened the news library to me and senior reporter Gerald Ensley provided historical perspective.

My Kent State University colleague David LaBelle made the compelling portraits of the former students and devoted much of a family vacation to do so.

I am especially grateful to Althemese Barnes, director of the Riley Museum, for readily accepting my exhibit proposal and for opening the door to several of the former students I wanted to reach. I traveled to Tallahassee, Orlando, Miami and Atlanta to interview the former students, and I appreciate their trust.

– Ann Beasley Schierhorn
Segregation ends in Florida’s capital

“Three Negro students began classes at Leon High School this morning without any apparent incidents,” the Democrat reported.

The Associated Press story on Florida was even more reassuring: “Not an incident, not so much as a cat-call, was reported as Negro and white children marched from their homes for the 1963–1964 school year.”

This is what Tallahassee’s civic and school leaders wanted. They expressly did not want the Tallahassee or Florida to have the notoriety of Alabama where Gov. George Wallace ordered state troopers to block integration of a Tuskegee school. That was the top news of the day in the Democrat.

On its local section front page, the Democrat published an AP photo of two black students entering Leon High School. The unidentified students were photographed from the back and from a distance. Only their friends would have recognized them as Harold Knowles and Marilyn Holifield.

For these students, there was more to the story.
One year before the Leon County public schools were integrated, Elaine Thorpe quietly entered eighth grade at Blessed Sacrament School, Tallahassee’s all-white Catholic School. At the request of school administrators, she arrived at mid-morning to avoid controversy.

From there, she went to Howard University in Washington, D.C. Elaine was a freshman when the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated and parts of the city erupted in riots. She took part in the student protests at the university. Elaine left college after her junior year and married Raymond Cox, who was entering medical school in Philadelphia. They moved to Atlanta when he began practicing medicine. After the birth of their son, Jason, and their divorce, she completed her bachelor’s degree in psychology with a math minor and her master’s in early childhood education at Georgia State University.

She also received a Montessori teaching certificate and taught in private and public schools for almost 30 years. Before her retirement, she was a kindergarten Montessori teacher in one of the few public school districts in Atlanta to use the method. In 2007, she received a Fulbright-Hays grant for an international educational exchange in Singapore and Malaysia. She developed curriculum to help kindergartners learn about Southeast Asia.

About being the first
“It was not a happy time for me, but I felt that I was making a contribution.” She is glad her son, Jason, didn’t experience what she did, but she wants him to know what his family has been through. She believes that her son’s knowledge of her experience will help him in his own struggles and “give him strength to persevere and live his dreams.”
Entered Leon High School, 1963

Attorney and partner, Knowles & Randolph, the oldest African American law firm in North Florida. Lives in Tallahassee
Each morning, as the three black students got off the bus, a group of white students greeted them with racist jokes and catcalls. Teachers were posted in the hallways, and Harold could tell they were there to make sure the black students got to their next classes safely. Even so, the black students were jostled in the halls.

HE WAS ISOLATED

His mother, Christene Knowles, didn’t want the three students lumped together in all the same classes. Because she wanted Harold to be able to follow his interests, he didn’t see the other two all day. Marilyn and Phillip were in the same assembly, same lunch period and had some classes together. Harold never ate lunch or used a restroom at Leon for two years. If black students sat down in the lunchroom, many white students would stand up and leave, and the unsupervised restrooms were where troublemakers gathered to smoke. He always was vigilant. “Fear does that,” he said.

The experience was doubly painful because some in the black community resented the students. “You think you are better,” they would say. “You betrayed us.” The reaction “cut you to the quick,” Harold said. “We thought we’d be welcomed as gladiators in the black community.”

HIS MOTHER WAS AN ACTIVIST

Christene Knowles was a business teacher at Old Lincoln High School and Harold’s stepfather, Erelson Knowles, was a businessman. In the spring and summer of 1963, Christene went door to door helping other black parents fill out forms to request transfers to white schools. She took heat from other teachers, the school board and the superintendent of schools. But Christene Knowles was a Florida A&M University graduate and, Harold says, “There was no way her son wasn’t going to college.”

Harold went first to DePauw University in Greencastle, Ind., and then to Tallahassee Community College. At Florida State University, he completed his bachelor’s degree in government and earned a law degree. He joined the NAACP and marched in civil rights demonstrations in Indiana and led black student protests at FSU. Later he served on the FSU Board of Trustees with former President J. Stanley Marshall, whose office the black students had occupied during the protests.

Harold grew up in Bethel Missionary Baptist Church, where the minister was the Rev. C.K. Steele, leader of the civil rights movement in Tallahassee. Steele, along with the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, initiated the 1962 class action suit by parents to desegregate the schools. In recent years, Harold has helped his church to build affordable homes for 25 families in Frenchtown, a historically black neighborhood near the Florida Governor’s Mansion. Economic development is the new civil rights movement, he says. He and his wife, Anne, have a son, Clayton, who is an attorney with Knowles & Randolph.

ABOUT BEING FIRST

“It prepared me for going away to college. It was worth the price.”
The y led the way

Entered Leon High School, 1963

Attorney and partner in Holland & Knight law firm, Miami

When she transferred from FAMU High to Leon, she left the university campus where she had grown up taking classes in art and dance and attending concerts and football games. At Leon, the three students were discouraged from participating in extracurricular activities. She belonged to the Spanish Club and Phillip joined the French Club. Those are the only group photos where they appear in their senior yearbook.

Returning to Leon

Today she doesn’t like to talk about the hardships she endured at Leon, saying it was a small part of her life. But in a 1990 speech at the school, she remembered the isolation there. “It was not having friends to compare notes or exchange ideas — unless Phillip or Harold happened to be around,” she said. She encouraged these students to think before going along with the crowd. “You should know that during my years at Leon, one or two reached out to be my friend.”

She transferred to Leon to take science and math courses that weren’t available in the black schools. She also wanted to honor civil rights activists like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. by going to the school where the district spent twice as much as it did on black schools.

A Turning Point

She was in the auditorium in November 1963 when some classmates cheered the announcement that President John F. Kennedy had been assassinated. That solidified her determination to get away from Tallahassee. Her brother Edward suggested Swarthmore College near Philadelphia, where she received her bachelor’s degree in economics. When she graduated, her brother Bishop encouraged her to apply to Harvard Law School, which he also had attended.

Her first job after law school was assistant counsel with the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. She worked as general counsel to the New York Division for Youth and was a federal appellate law clerk before joining Holland & Knight law firm in 1981.

She was the first African American lawyer at Holland & Knight, an international law firm that traces its Florida origins to the late 1890s. Later at Holland & Knight, she became the first black female partner in a major law firm in Florida and was chosen the firm’s outstanding attorney of the year. Black Enterprise magazine named her as one of nation’s top employment lawyers. She is passionate about encouraging young people to reach for higher goals than they imagined. She said, “The power of the inner spirit can triumph today.”

About Being First

“I did it to bring Leon High School and Tallahassee closer to a democracy. I did it to honor those who had struggled before me. I did it to make a path for those who would come after me.”
This was his second experience integrating a school – he had been one of 13 students to integrate Ft. Lauderdale Everglades Junior High School. In high school, he was living east of Tallahassee off Paul Russell Road with his grandmother, Alberta McClendon, and his aunt, Lillie McClendon. Both had a large role in raising him. He also consulted his father, Lloyd, a teacher in Ft. Lauderdale, who backed his choice to transfer to Leon.

At Leon, Phillip faced catcalls and twice was slugged by a white student in a hallway. The second time it happened, he said, "I dropped my books and squared off." Teachers intervened and the white student was taken to the office of principal Robert Stevens. The student who had been taunting Phillip since he arrived at Leon "did not say one word for the rest of the year," Phillip said.

Outside of school he encountered the harassment other blacks in the community were dealing with each day. Once as he was getting a snack at a gas station during a walk home from school, a car with four or five young white men drove up next to him. "A pistol came out and bam-bam-bam," Phillip said. He looked at his chest to see if he was bleeding. Then he realized he had been shot at with blanks. "It could have been real bullets."

DREAMED OF BEING A DOCTOR

Phillip's goal was to get into Florida State University and then medical school. He had wanted to be a doctor since he was "knee-high to a gnat." At Leon, he had textbooks that were up-to-date and classes that covered more material. He graduated in the top 10 percent of his class and entered FSU in 1965, when there were only 13 full-time black students out of the 10,000 enrolled at the university.

He graduated with a bachelor's degree in criminology and a commission as a second lieutenant in the U. S. Army. One of his professors suggested he get a law degree, which he did later in life.

He entered the University of Florida Medical School in 1970, the same year the first black medical students graduated. In med school, he spent a rotation with Dr. Alexander Brickler, who served the black community in Tallahassee and, with him, delivered his first baby. Since then, as an obstetrician-gynecologist, he has delivered more than 5,000 babies. "With every baby, I am always in awe of God and his work."

LOOKING BACK

Younger African Americans need to have some idea of history and what a struggle it was, he said. "They should never take for granted all that they have. Life is so much better for them now."
In first grade

Melodee Thompson was in a class of 32 first graders at Kate Sullivan Elementary School in fall 1963. Her experience was different from that of the three older black students who desegregated Leon in same year.

She attributes that to the age of her classmates and the efforts of her teacher, Virginia Shebel, who was chosen or volunteered for the job because she was not originally from Tallahassee.

Melodee was the first black student to attend formerly white schools from first grade through high school graduation. Her school years marked the transition from segregation to full desegregation in the Leon County public schools.

The central building of Kate Sullivan School looks much the same as it did when Melodee Thompson entered first grade. Her class planted pine seedlings that grew into the tall trees in front of the school.
Lee Thompson, a senior at Old Lincoln High, walked his 6-year-old sister, Melodee, into Kate Sullivan Elementary School to start first grade. Their mother, Rosa Thompson, waited in their car down the street. Melodee was the first and only black student to attend the formerly all-white school that year. While Lee always had gone to segregated schools, she never would.

At first, Melodee was a curiosity at Kate Sullivan, but she found first grade students just wanted to play. She has fond memories of her first grade teacher, who brought a television set into the classroom so the students could watch “Senorita Maria” on WFSU. She fell in love with Spanish.

**HER MOTHER WAS DETERMINED**

Melodee lived on Mahan Drive east of Tallahassee. Her mother, Rosa, worked as a maid when Melodee started first grade and later operated a day care center. Her father, John, always worked two jobs. He was a custodian for the city of Tallahassee and for FSU. Rosa fought to get a good education for Melodee. She had enrolled her in Barrow Hill, an all-black elementary school, when she was 5, a year earlier than permitted. Melodee attended school there for a month, she said, “but they caught me.” So the next year, when Leon County schools were to be integrated in the first grade, Rosa enrolled Melodee in Kate Sullivan.

School buses were still segregated. After the first day, Melodee traveled by bus to Lincoln High School with her sister, Bonnie, and then rode another bus with the three black high school students going to Leon. After they were dropped off, the driver took her alone the last few blocks to Kate Sullivan.

A few students taunted her, but she was not harassed as the high school students were. One boy told her his mother had cut her out of a classroom photo. She told him, “So what?”

**FITTING IN**

Melodee, who previously had used black dialect, adapted to the speech pattern of her classmates. This fascinated her mother’s friends, who would ask her to say the Pledge of Allegiance in Spanish so her Southern drawl could be heard.

When Melodee was in second grade, another black student entered as a first grader. They were the only two black students in the school until Melodee was in fourth grade. Then a large number of African American students entered Kate Sullivan. Melodee went to Elizabeth Cobb Middle School and then to Leon, where she took Spanish, French and German. By the time she graduated from Leon in 1975, the schools were completely desegregated.

Melodee attended Florida State University and took graduate courses at the University of Salamanca, Spain. She has taught English at Fairview Middle School and Spanish at Rickards High School and Florida Virtual School. For a semester, she taught in Mexico as part of a Fulbright Teacher’s Exchange.

**ABOUT BEING FIRST**

“I am thankful to have had the experience. It taught me how to deal with situations with race, to see differences and not to see every opposition as racist. I enjoy knowing and experiencing being around people who aren’t like me.”
The year after the Leon County Public Schools were integrated, FAMU history Professor Leedell Neyland went to see the administrator of FSU’s Florida High School and told him it was time to integrate the school. He applied for his son, Keith, to transfer from FAMU’s lab school as a freshman. When the administrator agreed, Leedell Neyland said, “I’m not going to send him alone.”

The year after the Leon County Public Schools were integrated, FAMU history Professor Leedell Neyland went to see the administrator of FSU’s Florida High School and told him it was time to integrate the school. He applied for his son, Keith, to transfer from FAMU’s lab school as a freshman. When the administrator agreed, Leedell Neyland said, “I’m not going to send him alone.”

The administrator said Keith could choose whomever he wanted to accompany him. He asked his good friend, Mahlon Rhaney. Keith said some of their experiences were degrading and humiliating.

Keith’s mother, Della Neyland, taught kindergarten at the FAMU lab school and Mahlon’s parents were educators, too. But many students Florida High stereotyped them. “Some students didn’t understand why we spoke decent English,” he said. “Some students were incredibly nice to us. Most were neutral.”

Both Keith and Mahlon excelled in the classroom at Florida High and were selected for the National Honor Society. Keith joined the Key Club, a boys’ service club, during his sophomore year and was managing editor of the student newspaper as a senior.

The two friends had been athletes as well as top students at FAMU lab school, but they were told not to go out for football or basketball. Florida High administrators said, “We can’t be sure we can protect you.”

By sophomore year, Keith was running track and playing basketball for Florida High. After he won the 440-yard dash in the state championship, the football coach told Keith the players had voted to ask him to go out for the team. He agreed and was, he believes, the first black student to integrate varsity football and basketball in north Florida. “I was a novelty – the star of the show whether I wanted to be or not. I never felt totally a part of it.”

His worst experience was playing in small towns like Monticello, 26 miles from Tallahassee. “It was unbelievable.” At a basketball game in the high school gym, he could hear students in the stands make demeaning comments about him. Then spitballs started raining down on the bench, and his teammates slid away from him. As a fight broke out on the floor, someone grabbed him from behind in a bear hug. It was Coach Bob Albertson, protecting him. “He was a great guy,” Keith said.

The University of Pittsburgh gave him a full scholarship to play football, but because of an injury in his senior year of high school, he never played. He earned his bachelor’s degree in history and a law degree at Pitt. He has spent most of his career in Pittsburgh as an arbitrator for U.S. Steel Corp./U.S. Steelworkers union and as director of human resources for Holy Family Institute, a Catholic charity. Keith and his former wife, Carol Awkard Neyland, have one daughter, Lindsey. He now teaches employment law and helps FAMU students prepare for the bar exam.

To this day, he said he feels self-conscious. He had to be perfect in high school. He regrets what he perceives he missed at FAMU High and being resented by people at FAMU. But the decision was his father’s idea and he didn’t doubt his judgment.

“It was incredibly beneficial because we don’t live in a homogeneous society,” he said.

TO TODAY’S STUDENTS
“Appreciate the sacrifices and the gains you have made on the backs of others.”

Over his desk is a poster of Jackie Robinson, the first African American to play major league baseball.
MAHLON C. RHANEY, JR.

then
Entered Florida High School, 1964

now
Senior Vice President, Benton-Georgia LLC, Atlanta
Mahlon Rhaney and Keith Neyland began their freshman year at Florida High eating their sack lunches outdoors behind the gym to avoid name-calling and hostile comments from other students in the lunchroom.

“What are you doing here? Go home,” some students would say to them. “After a while,” Mahlon said, “they figured out that we were not going away, and it got better.”

His father, Mahlon C. Rhaney, Sr., was dean of arts and sciences at FAMU when his son got the chance to go to FSU’s Florida High School. His mother, Pilar Rhaney, who was from Cuba, taught Spanish at Lincoln High School. Mahlon’s neighbor, legendary FAMU football coach Jake Gaither, who encouraged him to send comments from other students in the lunchroom.

By the time Mahlon was a junior, he was playing both baseball and basketball, and so was his brother, Mike, a sophomore. He remembers the away basketball games in small towns as “horrible” because of the racist cheers. “At times it was amusing — their hatred and ignorance,” he said. “It made us determined to do better.”

Coach Gaither influenced Mahlon’s career path again when he encouraged U.S. Sen. George Smathers of Florida to nominate Mahlon for the Air Force Academy. Mahlon was accepted and was one of about 16 blacks in a class of 1,280. He returned to the South to teach. When his sons were teenagers, he was dean of arts and sciences at FAMU.

“Mack,” which he adopted in the Air Force, “taught us we were as good as anybody,” Mahlon said.

His father expected a lot and filtered a lot of racism, Mahlon said. He urged his children: “Do the right thing and be the best you can be. Everything else will take care of itself.”

If that didn’t work, he told them, “Use that as the motivation to do something positive.”

Looking back

“I don’t know if I would have gotten into the Air Force Academy if I hadn’t gone to Florida High. The multicultural environment has made it easier since.”
Rick Williams transferred to Rickards as a junior and became the first black student to graduate from the new high school. The former middle school had been converted into a high school by adding one grade a year.

He was one of three students who integrated Rickards High in 1965. The others were Vincent Deal, a sophomore, and Andre Barnes, a freshman. Because he was older, Rick never had classes with them.

NOT LEARNING ENOUGH
His father, C.B. Williams, Jr., was a graduate of Tuskegee Institute and a master plumber who worked in air conditioning and refrigeration. His mother, Dollie Williams, was a registered nurse and a FAMU graduate. Rick’s father decided he wasn’t learning enough in Tallahassee’s segregated schools and sent him to Boggs Academy, a black boarding school in Georgia, for his first two years of high school. Then as the upper grades were added at Rickards, he told Rick, “That’s where you are going to school.”

On the first day, at least one of his teachers didn’t know his class was being integrated. When Rick showed up for social studies, the teacher met him at the door and said, “You just go walk outside a little while. I need to talk to this class.” Rick said the students behaved that day and for the rest of the semester. He said the teachers had control in all his classes. Outside the classroom the other students made life more difficult with name-calling and pranks. “I ate by myself all my first year,” he said, “because if you sat down, they’d get up.” By his senior year, about 50 black students were attending the high school, and he joined a group of seven or eight for lunch every day.

MOTORCYCLE TROUBLE
In his first year, other students regularly disabled Rick’s Honda 50 motorcycle. “Every day I had to call my daddy to come get it started because they did something to it,” he said. Eventually, the principal solved the problem by moving the motorcycle parking so it was right outside his office window.

For Rick’s senior year, his father gave him a 1955 Chevrolet. On the first day he drove it, someone put boards with nails under the parked car. After Rick backed out of the parking space, his car had four flat tires. For the rest of the year, he circled the car before driving away.

When he graduated, “my daddy gave me a choice of Tuskegee, Tuskegee or Tuskegee,” he said. “I had a really, really, really good time there. Then my daddy parked his car next to the dorm and told me, ‘Put your clothes in the car. You are going home.’ ”

He settled down as a student and finished his bachelor’s and master’s degrees in math education at FAMU, where he also was certified in educational leadership. Rick began his 40-year career with Leon County Schools by teaching math at Bellevue Middle School and has served as assistant principal of four middle schools. He is now coordinator for Intervention, Equity and Support Services. Rick and his wife, Bonita, have been married for 40 years. He has three sons: Juan Williams, from a relationship before he was married, and two sons from his marriage, Clarence B. Williams IV and Swinton Williams, who died in an accident.

LOOKING BACK
Rick said the maturity he gained at boarding school helped him keep his temper amid the name-calling. And he said, “I was able to keep the core of my friends. Some went to Leon, and they — and family — made life worth living. School was not a place we enjoyed. We’d go to school for 3:15 — to get out when the bell rang.”
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

WITH THANKS TO:

Althemese Barnes, Director of John G. Riley Center/ Museum of African American History and Culture

Kent State University:

Director Thor Wasbotten, School of Journalism and Mass Communication
Dean Stanley T. Wearden, College of Communication and Information
Vice President Alfreda Brown, Division of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

University Research Council

Executive editor Bob Gabordi and senior writer Gerald Ensley of the Tallahassee Democrat

J. Stanley Marshall, president of Florida State University, 1969-1976

Glenda Alice Rabby, author of “The Pain and the Promise: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Tallahassee, Fla.”

Robert G. Richards, director of archival operations, the National Archives at Atlanta

Robert F. Sanchez, teacher at Florida High School during integration who knew many of the students. Now policy director, the James Madison Institute.

Kate Sullivan Elementary School
LeRoy Collins Leon County Public Library

WERE YOU THERE?
Tell us your story

Share your experiences with the John G. Riley House Center/Museum of African American History and Culture in Tallahassee. Send to info@rileymuseum.org and abarnes2619@gmail.com.

From left, Elaine Thorpe Cox, Melodee Thompson, Mahlon C. Rhaney, Jr. and C.B. “Rick” Williams recalled their experiences for visitors at the opening reception of “They Led the Way” at the Riley Museum. Harold Knowles and Keith Neyland also attended and shared their stories.

The exhibit, “They Led the Way,” was created by Ann Beasley Schierhorn, professor of Journalism and Mass Communication at Kent State University who grew up in Tallahassee. She attended Leon High and graduated from Florida High in 1968.

The exhibit features the photography of David LaBelle, nationally known photojournalist who is director of the photojournalism program at Kent State.
Elaine Thorpe Cox, center, reads the story of Marilyn Holifield’s experience with her mother, Annette Thorpe, and Marilyn’s brother, Edward Holifield. The exhibit, “They Led the Way,” will be on display through February 2014 at the John G. Riley House Center/Museum of African American History and Culture in Tallahassee. It then will travel to other museums.

‘I just wanted to be accepted as another human being’