

JoAnne Peerman on junior high sit-ins

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An excerpt from an oral history interview conducted in 1991 between Bob Gilgor and Joanne Peerman, an African American woman who grew up in Chapel Hill and experienced integration during the 1960s and 1970s. In this portion of the interview, Harris describes sit-ins she participated in during junior high school and how the issues they were protesting, particularly integrating the cheerleading squad, were resolved. She also recounts how her father, a beloved coach at Lincoln High School and a powerful figure in the black high school community, was called in to break up the protests.

Audio

File:

Duration: 4:45

Transcript:

Audio Transcript

JoAnne Peerman

When I was at the junior high school, the nation was full of racial tension at that time. A lot of the schools were having marches and sit-ins and protests. We, too, were doing the same. That was early integration. The blacks and whites had only been together maybe two, three years prior to my junior high school years. And so we still felt that we were not being fairly represented on cheerleader squads or having enough black teachers that we could relate to. These were some of the things that our little marches were about.

When we did have marches, a lot of times the principal, the people there didn't know how to handle us. They were always peaceful, they were always non-violent, but it was just a matter of us refusing to go to class and sitting-in. It was more like a sit-in. We'd just be out in the hall, in the lobby of the main school, sitting there and singing some Black Power songs we'd heard off of TV that didn't even relate to the situation. But we felt this is how it was supposed to be done. But we were young—seventh, eighth, ninth grade. Just refusing to go to class.

And of course, that created an uproar. The bell would ring and the white students would have to walk between us and try to get to their classes. We'd be sitting in the hall singing and picking our Afros. Eventually, after about two hours, the school system often called somebody that they thought could drive the students back to class or come to some solution. Oftentimes, that was my dad. And that would embarrass me. That would make me feel like, "Wow, he's the Tom. Here he comes. He's going to mess up everything." For a while, I was seriously militant. I was seriously revolutionary. I was against even them, because they were part of the establishment.

I was embarrassing him. I remember one night coming home from school and he was coming home from whatever, practice. And he said, "I don't want you participating in any more of those marches. If you do I'm going to tie you to a tree and shoot you with my shotgun." That was the maddest that I had ever seen him at me. I think, just like I was embarrassed that he came to break up our sit-in, he was embarrassed that I was participating. He just looked at me

and shook his head and said, you know, "You need to go on back to class, now." And that created tension in the home, that he was part of the establishment.

Bob Gilgor

Did you perceive him as wanting the same rights for black people that you wanted? Maybe you didn't. How did you perceive him?

JoAnne Peerman

At that time I just perceived him as a disciplinarian and part of the other side that was just trying to break us up and send us back to class and not listen to what we had to say. And eventually, two or three months down the road, everybody came to the realization—probably not him, but probably their discussion of how we're going to handle these students who keep having sit-ins—they made us form a committee who wrote down demands. What is it we wanted and all that. So, they would meet with a smaller group of the black students. They felt like that was a better way of handling it. And it was, to a degree. As I said, we were just young and we were following in the footsteps of what we heard was going on at the high school. It was just more or less, we were just following a pattern. Sometimes we didn't even have a purpose or anything. And that's what these student representatives showed us, by, you know, "OK, five students will meet with the principal and two teachers and we'll write down your demands." And they had those little meetings. We didn't even have any great concerns. Or if we did, a lot of them were resolved.

Even the players on some of the teams participated when we were trying to get more black cheerleaders. Because they had cheerleader tryouts. All the cheerleaders were white, and all the team was black, with the exception of a few. It was like 80:20. We really felt like we should have more black cheerleaders to support the team. And so even the team said that they would not play if we didn't have more. It got to be more organized. It came together for a purpose.

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