

Episode Two: ‘I Still Believe in It’

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/23/podcasts/nice-white-parents-serial.html>)

White parents in the 1960s fought to be part of a new, racially integrated school in Brooklyn. So why did their children never attend?

“Nice White Parents” is brought to you by Serial Productions, a New York Times Company.

Chana Joffe-Walt

The New York City Board of Education has an archive of all of its records. Everything that goes into making thousands of schools run for years and years is sitting in boxes in the municipal building. I love the B.O.E. archive.

Chana Joffe-Walt

Good morning. How are you doing?

Chana Joffe-Walt

First of all, to look through it, you have to go to a century-old municipal building downtown. Arched doorways, lots of marble, an echo, vaulted ceilings really makes a person feel like she’s up to something important. You sit at a table, and then a librarian rolls your boxes up to you on a cart. Inside the boxes are all the dramas of a school system. Big ones, tiny ones, bureaucratic, personal, it’s all in there. There’s a union contract and then a zoning plan and special reports on teacher credentialing, a weird personal note from a bureaucrat to his assistant, a three-page single-spaced plea from Cindy’s grandmother, who would please like for her not to be held back in the second grade. An historian friend once pulled a folder out of the archive and a note fell out,

something a teacher clearly made a kid write in the 1950s, that read, quote, “I am a lazy boy. Miss Fitzgerald says, when I go in the army, I will be expendable. Expendable means that the country doesn’t care whether I get killed or not. I do not like to be expendable. I’m going to do my work and improve.”

[Music]

I came to the Board of Ed archive after I attended the gala thrown by the French embassy, the fundraiser for SIS organized by the new upper-class white families coming into the school. I felt like I’d just watched an unveiling ceremony for a brand-new school, but I didn’t really know what it was replacing. Everyone was talking as if this was the first time white parents were taking an interest in the School for International Studies. But at the archive, I found out it wasn’t the first time. White parents had invested in the school before, way before, at the very beginning of the school. Before the beginning. I found a folder labeled I.S. 293, Intermediate School 293, the original name for SIS. And this folder was filled with personal letters to the president of the New York City Board of Education, a man named Max Rubin, pleading with him to please make I.S. 293 an integrated school. “Dear Mr. Rubin, my husband and I were educated in public schools, and we very much want for our children to have this experience. However, we also want them to attend a school which will give them a good education, and today, that is synonymous with an integrated school.” “Dear Mr. Rubin, as a resident of Cobble Hill, a teacher and a parent, I want my child to attend schools which are desegregated. I do not want her to be in a situation in which she will be a member of a small, white, middle-income clique.” These are letters from parents — largely white parents, as far as I could tell — written in 1963, just a few years before I.S. 293 was built. At issue was where the school was going to be built. The Board of Education was

proposing to build the school right next to some housing projects. The school would be almost entirely Black and Puerto Rican. These parents, white parents, came in and said, no, no, no, don't build it there. Put it closer to the white neighborhood. That way, all our kids can go to school together. These parents wanted the school built in what was known as a fringe zone. This was a popular idea at the time, fringe schools to promote school integration. Comes up in the letters. "Dear Mr. Rubin, this neighborhood is changing with the influx of a middle-class group which is very interested in public education for their children." "Dear Mr. Rubin, if there is a possibility of achieving some degree of integration, it is more likely if the Board of Education's theory of fringe schools is applied." And from another letter, "it is apparent from the opinion of the neighborhood groups involved that the situation is not at all hopeless." This lobbying effort was so successful that the Board of Education did move the site of the school. This is why SIS is located where it is today, on the fringe, closer to the white side of town, so that it would be integrated.

I tried to imagine who these people were — young, idealistic white parents living in Brooklyn in the 1960s, feeling good about the future. They would have had their children around the time the Supreme Court ruled on Brown versus Board of Education. They probably followed the news of the Civil Rights Movement unfolding down South. Maybe they were supporters or active in the movement themselves. These were white parents saying, we understand we're at a turning point and we have a choice to make right now, and we choose integration. One of my favorite letters was from a couple who left the suburbs to come to New York City for integration, the opposite of white flight. "Dear Mr. Rubin, we have recently moved into the home we purchased at the above address in Cobble Hill. It was our hope in moving into the neighborhood that our children would enjoy the advantages of mixing freely with

children of other classes and races, which we were not able to provide to them when we lived in a Westchester suburb.”

Chana Joffe-Walt

So this is the letter.

Carol Netzer

This is the letter that I wrote? I can't believe it. OK.

Chana Joffe-Walt

This is Carol Netzer. Most of the letter writers were not that hard to find.

Carol Netzer

We had moved to Scarsdale for the children, because Scarsdale has the best — it probably still does — the best school system in the country, but we hated it. We found that we were bored to death with it. It was bland. It was just homogeneous. But living — I don't know if you've ever lived in a suburb. It's just boring, tedious, you know? There's nothing going on.

Chana Joffe-Walt

She didn't like the suburbs. So they moved to Brooklyn and wrote that letter, which I showed her, her 37-year-old self writing about her hopes for her young children, the choices she made back then.

Carol Netzer

But it sounds as though I was fairly impassioned about it. You know, that it meant something. But I — actually, I can't think what it meant.

[Music]

Chana Joffe-Walt

I went through this box of letters and called as many parents as I could. Most of them didn't remember writing these letters, which isn't surprising, more than 50 years ago and all. What I did find surprising is that, by the time 293 opened, five years later, none of them, not a one, actually sent their kids to I.S. 293.

[Music]

From Serial Productions, I'm Chana Joffe-Walt. This is "Nice White Parents," a series about the 60-year relationship between white parents and the public school down the block, a relationship that began with a commitment to integration. In the 1960s, much like today, white people were surrounded by a movement for the civil rights of Black Americans. White people were forced to contend with systemic racism. And here was a group of white parents who supported the movement for school integration, threw their weight behind it. What happened in those five years between 1963, when these white parents planted an impassioned pro-integration flag on the school, and 1968, when it came time to enroll their children? Why didn't they show up?

These white parents who wanted an integrated I.S. 293, they didn't come to that idea on their own. They were part of a bigger story unfolding around them. I want to zoom out to that dramatic story because it takes us right up to the moment these parents wrote their letters, and then made the decision not to send their kids to the school. To begin, I'd like to introduce you to our main character in this historical, tale, the recipient of the parents' letters, the New York City Board of Education. Back in the 1950s, the New York City Board of Ed was not one of those boring bureaucracies that chugs along in the background, keeping its head down. It had personality. It invested in self-image. For instance, in 1954, when the Supreme Court found school segregation unconstitutional, New York City didn't just say we support

that ruling, it celebrated the Brown v Board decision. And notably, it celebrated itself, calling Brown, quote, “a moral reaffirmation of our fundamental educational principles.” That same year, 1954, the New York City Board of Ed made a film honoring multiculturalism in its schools. [CHILDREN SINGING] The film opens with a multiracial choir of schoolchildren singing “Let Us Break Bread Together.” Like I said, the Board of Ed went the extra mile. The Schools Superintendent was a 66-year-old man named Dr. William Jansen, a man that newspapers described as slow and steady. And he definitely delivers on that promise here.

Archived Recording (William Jansen)

The film you're about to see tells the story of how the schools and community are working together to build brotherhood.

Chana Joffe-Walt

A teacher addresses her classroom, filled with children of all races and ethnicities.

Archived Recording

Who among you can give some of the reasons why people left their native lands to come to the United States of America?

Chana Joffe-Walt

The camera cuts to a white boy, maybe 9 or 10.

Archived Recording

Some came because they wanted to get away from the tyranny and cruelty of kings.

Chana Joffe-Walt

Then a Black girl, around the same age.

Archived Recording

My people are free now. They are proud to be American. But the Negroes were brought here by wicked men who traded in slaves.

Chana Joffe-Walt

This keeps going, kid to kid.

Archived Recording

We came a little while ago from Puerto Rico. My father wanted work. He wants to give me and my brother a good education. Japan is very overcrowded. The people have little land. So many Japanese came to this country because they wanted to farm.

Chana Joffe-Walt

New York City was the biggest city in America, with the largest Black population in America, and it was saying in films, press releases, public speeches, *Brown v Board*, we agree. Separate but equal has no place in the field of public education. No problem here. It was also saying, you know who does have a problem? The South. New York City loved comparing itself to the backward South. There are plenty of examples of this in the Board archives, New Yorkers bragging about their superiority to places like Georgia or Virginia or Louisiana. This was the story the Board of Ed was telling. The South was ignorant and racist. New York City was enlightened and integrated. But here is what it was actually like to walk into a New York City school in a Black neighborhood at this time.

Archived Recording (Mae Mallory)

The school had an awful smell. It was just — oh, it smelled like this county abattoir.

Chana Joffe-Walt

This is an archival recording of a woman named Mae Mallory. In the 1950s, Mallory's two Black children were students in Harlem. And when Mallory walked into their school, she did not see children building brotherhood in interracial classrooms. She saw an all-Black and Puerto Rican school with terrible facilities, in disrepair.

Archived Recording (Mae Mallory)

So my kids told me, says, well, Mommy, this is what we've been trying to tell you all along, that this place is so dirty. And this is why we run home to the bathroom every night. So I went to the bathroom. And in 1957 in New York City, they had toilets that were worse than the toilets in the schools that I went to in Macon, Georgia in the heart of the South. The toilet was a thing that looked like horse stalls. And then it had one long board with holes cut in it. And then you'd have to go and use the toilet, but you couldn't flush it. The water would come down periodically and flush, you know, whatever's there. Now imagine what this is like, you know, dumping waste on top of waste that's sitting there waiting, you know, accumulating till the water comes. This was why this place smelled so bad.

Chana Joffe-Walt

Mae Mallory says the school had two bathrooms for 1,600 children. Mallory's family fled racial violence in the South, like millions of other Black Americans, who headed to places like New York City, where everyone was supposed to be equal. Instead of welcoming these new students and spreading them out, creating interracial classrooms, the Board of Education kept Black and Puerto Rican students segregated in

what were sometimes referred to as ghetto schools, schools that were often just blocks away from white schools. White schools in New York City had toilets that flushed. White children had classrooms with experienced teachers and principals, people who lived in their communities and looked like them. In Black and Puerto Rican schools, half the teachers were not certified to teach by the Board of Education. The buildings were in disrepair, and packed, sometimes more than 1,000 kids in a single hallway. The overcrowding got so bad the Board of Education decided to send kids to school in shifts. And mind you, this was not in the middle of a global pandemic. This was normal, non-crisis school for Black and Puerto Rican kids. One group of children would go to school in the morning until noon. The next group of kids would come in at noon, and stay until 3:00. The Board was literally giving Black kids half an education. In some schools in Harlem, they had triple shifts. This made it harder to learn elementary skills. Reading, for instance. Black parents complained that the schools were not teaching their kids basic literacy, that their white teachers didn't care, that the summer reading programs were only in white communities, that their children were two years behind white children in reading. This at exactly the same time the Board of Education was making a film promoting the virtues of integration. It was effectively running a dual, segregated and unequal school system.

[Music]

For many Black families, the Board of Education was not to be trusted. It did not care for Black children, and it didn't respect the voices and concerns of Black parents. Mae Mallory says she visited her kids' school that day because they'd come home the day before and told her a child had died at school. He was playing in the street at recess. Mallory hardly believed it, but she says when she visited the school, she learned, yes,

indeed, this child was playing the street because the schoolyard was closed. He was hit by a beer truck. And she learned the schoolyard was closed because pieces of steel from the side of the building had fallen into the yard.

Archived Recording (Mae Mallory)

And when I found out that this was true, I went to the principal. So this principal told me that, well, Mrs. Mallory, you really don't have anything to worry about. You see, our sunshine club went to see the mother, and we took her a bag of canned goods. So actually, she's better off, because she had so many children to feed. And I couldn't believe that here a white man is going to tell a Black woman in Harlem that a can of peaches is better than your child. I just didn't know what to do or where to go. But I know you're supposed to do something.

Chana Joffe-Walt

It was 1957, three years after the Supreme Court declared segregation by law unconstitutional. New York City didn't have Jim Crow laws on the books, but Mae Mallory would ask, the schools are segregated. What's the difference? She didn't care whether that segregation was codified by law or by convention. The harm was just as dire. And she wanted it addressed.

Archived Recording (Mae Mallory)

This was nothing to do with wanting to sit next to white folks. But it was obvious that a whole pattern of Black retardation was the program of the Board of Education. So I filed a suit against the Board of Education. And I just fought back.

Chana Joffe-Walt

Integration, Mae Mallory would say, was about, quote, demanding a fair share of the pie. She said, our children want to learn, and they certainly have the ability to learn. What they need is the opportunity. The Board of Education had defined integration as a multiracial choir. It was a virtue in and of itself. Mae Mallory saw integration as a remedy, a way to get the same stuff everyone else had — functioning toilets, books, certified teachers, a full school day. Integration was a means to an end.

[Music]

Mae Mallory won her lawsuit. She and a few other parents were allowed to transfer their kids out of segregated schools. As for the segregation in the entire system, the judge in the lawsuit turned to the Board of Ed and said, this segregation, it's your responsibility. Fix it.

Now, on the question of responsibility, the Board of Education was cagey. And that caginess set the stage for the I.S. 293 parents when it came time to send their kids to the school. Here's what happened. The Schools Superintendent, William Jansen, decided school segregation was not his problem. In fact, he rejected the idea that New York City had segregated schools in the first place. After all, New York City was not barring Black children from entering white schools. This wasn't the South. Segregation, Jansen said, is such an unfortunate word. He preferred the phrase racial imbalance or racial separation. The way he saw it, racial imbalance in the schools was just a matter of housing. Neighborhoods were segregated. Again, unfortunate, but that had nothing to do with the schools. To make this argument, William Jansen had to ignore the many powerful tools available to the Board of Education. The Board of Education was responsible for where kids went to school. It decided where to build new schools. It drew zoning lines. It decided where experienced teachers teach. There were many ways the Board could have made schools less segregated. I know this because of

the Board's own reports. Jansen did very little to break up school segregation, but man, did he study it. He organized commissions that led to reports that led to further study. You see a pattern emerge, starting in the late 1950s, that looks something like this. Black parents and civil rights groups would pressure the Board to act on segregation. The Board would invite its critics to join a commission to investigate the problem. The commission would study the schools, discover extreme segregation, lay out solutions. The Board of Ed would then take a tiny step toward implementing some of the recommendations until white parents started to complain about the changes, at which point the Board would back off and say it needed more evidence. Another commission, another report. For instance, there's the Report on the Committee on Integration, a Plan for Integration, the City's Children and the Challenge of Racial Discrimination, Redoubling Efforts on Integration, the Board Commission on Integration, the Status of the Public School Education of Negro and Puerto Rican Children in New York City, and, my favorite, a bound little red book from 1960 called Toward Greater Opportunity, which summarizes the previous investigations with this groundbreaking conclusion. Quote, "we must integrate as much and as quickly as we can." I want to pause for one second and step out of the past back into the world we all live in, just to point out that, over the last few years in New York City, we've been reliving this chapter of history. It's eerie. New York City schools are segregated. There's a growing movement to do something about that. And for the first five years of his administration, the city's mayor, Mayor Bill de Blasio, responded in the following way. He refused to say the word segregation, commissioned a number of reports on school diversity. He's pointed a finger at housing problems as a way to say this isn't our fault, and he's studying the problem deeply, which, again, is not segregation, no matter how many times reporters would ask the mayor at press conferences, why don't you use that word?

Archived Recording (Bill De Blasio)

I don't get lost in terminology. I think the notion of saying we have to diversify our schools is the best way to say it.

Chana Joffe-Walt

I heard a live call-in show on WNYC, the public radio station. A young integration advocate, an 11th grader named Tiffani Torres, asked the mayor, how much longer until you do something?

Archived Recording (Tiffani Torres)

And how much more time do you need to study the issue? So to repeat my question, how much longer will it take?

Archived Recording (Bill De Blasio)

Tiffani, with all due respect, I really think you're not hearing what we're saying to you, so I'll repeat it. There is a task force, an extraordinary task force, which I've met with. They are coming forward with their next report in a matter of weeks. So when that diversity task force comes out with their report, I think they're amazing. I think they've done fantastic work. And so far, there's a high level —

Chana Joffe-Walt

Mayor de Blasio likes to point out that this was a problem created by people long before him, which is exactly what people long before him said, too.

[Music]

In the late 1950s, when Black parents and civil rights activists also asked the Board of Ed, why is it taking so long, board members complained about the, quote, extremists who wanted instant integration.

Superintendent Jansen said, “some people want us to build Rome in one day.” While the Board of Education was building Rome in 1956, ‘57, ‘59, and in 1960, 1962, ‘63, Black parents found each other on PTAs, in civil rights organizations, pro-integration groups. They formed new groups, organized sit-ins, boycotts, demanded the Board provide a timetable for citywide integration. They joined forces with Puerto Rican parents, and their numbers grew. These were volunteers, mothers mostly, who left their jobs at the end of a workday and headed directly to a meeting about how to get the Board to give their kids the education white children were already receiving. Finally, in 1964, 10 years after Brown versus Board, Black and Puerto Rican parents said, enough. They were sick of waiting, sick of lawsuits, sick of asking for a remedy, sick of being ignored. So they went big, spectacularly big. They shut down the schools. They organized a civil rights demonstration that was the largest in US history, larger than the March on Washington. It was called Freedom Day, a massive school boycott.

Archived Recording

(CHANTING) Freedom now!

Chana Joffe-Walt

On February 3rd, 1964, parents headed out to schools in the morning before sunrise to spread the word about the boycott. It was freezing cold that day. There’s a brief TV news clip of a group of mothers picketing outside their kids’ school at the start of the school day. They’re holding up signs that say, “we demand a real integration timetable now,” and “integration means better schools for all.” They’re handing out leaflets to other parents about Freedom Day, looking spirited and cold. A white NBC news reporter in a fedora walks up to one of the women.

Archived Recording

Ma'am, it's a little after eight o'clock now. How successful has the boycott been so far? Very effective. So far, about 10 children have gone in, and there would be ordinarily 240 children. And 10 have gone into the morning session, which begins at eight o'clock. So you think you've already seen the result? Yes, I think so. The school is just empty. Does it surprise you? No, because we knew how effective — We talked with the parents. We distributed leaflets. We've been working very hard. And we prayed that it would be effective.

Chana Joffe-Walt

There were maps and charts and instructions with picket times and picket captains for hundreds of schools. There were volunteer shifts to make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, to hand out thousands of leaflets and stencil posters. The boycott wasn't just effective — it was extraordinarily effective. Half a million kids stayed home from school that day. Half a million, close to half the school system. But the press barely covered it. After searching every major TV network, I found only one kid who was interviewed, a teenage boy, maybe around 16, on the street with some friends, protesting. A white ABC News reporter doesn't ask him why he's there. The only thing he asks him about is violence. The kid responds.

Archived Recording

We're coming down here today for a peaceful — peaceful— No comment! No, we're not going to be violent. We're just teenagers and kids. And — Do you expect violence here today? No, sir, not if — look at the blue uniforms. You ask me do I expect violence.

Chana Joffe-Walt

He gestures to the police on horseback.

Archived Recording

None of us have any weapons, horses. And all we want is equal education. That's all. Equal education. Thank you. You get all that?

Chana Joffe-Walt

That was it. Every once in a while, I'll hear a politician or friend or school administrator say, yeah, integration was a good idea, but there was no political will to make it happen. 460,000 kids, half the school system. The will was there. The majority wanted integration.

[Music]

After Freedom Day, the Board of Education introduced some small-scale integration plans, and white parents protested. [CHILDREN SINGING]
We love our children. Oh, yes, we do. We will not transfer —

Chana Joffe-Walt

With their own marches, they put on their own school boycott. The flipside of freedom day, a white boycott. The white parents were far fewer in number. But as far as I can tell, they got a thousand times more press coverage.

Archived Recording

Mrs. Carcevski?

Speaker

Yes? Are you going to send Johnny back to school now? No. She belongs here, and I want to send my child here. So nobody is going to tell me where to send my kid.

Chana Joffe-Walt

This protest worked. The Board of Ed backed off. And in the decades since, the Board of Education has never proposed a city-wide integration plan. The schools have never been integrated. I think the fact of white moms in Queens in the 1960s yelling about zoning changes and busing, it's not surprising they played a role in killing school integration efforts. But there was another group of white parents who played a quieter, but I'd argue more forceful, role in killing integration. The white parents who said they supported it, parents like the ones who wrote letters asking for an integrated I.S. 293. How did their vocal support for integration turn lethal? That's after the break. In the American South, schools were desegregated with court orders. Cities and counties mandated desegregation, and the schools desegregated. By the early 1970s, the South was the most integrated region in the country. But New York City did not want to do it that way. No mandates. The New York City Board of Education wanted to appeal to hearts and minds. They wanted to sell white people on the virtues of integration. Have it all happen, quote, "naturally." Some white people were sold. The white parents who wrote letters about I.S. 293. They believed in integration. So I made a lot of calls to ask, why'd you bail? They had a lot of different reasons. One couple got divorced, and moved. Another guy told me he had political ambitions that pulled him out of the city.

Speaker

We loved our brownstone, but I was involved in a political race. And we needed some money for that.

Chana Joffe-Walt

So he sold the house and moved the family to the suburbs, where he thought he'd have a better chance running against Republicans. Many white people moved to the suburbs for jobs, for newly paved roads and subsidized mortgages, leaving Brooklyn behind. I understood what

happened there. But some explanations made less sense. Like one guy I called, he did stay in Brooklyn. On the phone, he was telling me why he believed it was important that I.S. 293 be integrated. But then he said his own kids went to Brooklyn Friends, a Quaker private school. I said, oh, they didn't go to I.S. 293.

Speaker

No. As I said, I'm a Quaker, and —

Chana Joffe-Walt

But you were a Quaker when you wrote this letter, asking for an integrated 293.

Speaker

I believed it. I believed in it, but —

Chana Joffe-Walt

You weren't planning to send your kid there?

Speaker

No, no, no.

Chana Joffe-Walt

What to make of that? When you get what you say you want and then, given the opportunity, don't take it. Maybe you never really wanted it in the first place. Then I spoke to Elaine Hencke. Of all the people I spoke with, everything about Elaine indicated someone who did believe in integration, someone who would send her kids to 293. And yet, she didn't. Elaine was a public school teacher. She taught in an integrated elementary school, until she had her own kids. She was looking forward to sending them to an integrated 293. When her daughter was old

enough for junior high school, Elaine visited the school. She was the only letter writer I spoke with who actually went into the building. If this was going to work with anyone, it was going to be Elaine.

Elaine Hencke

I didn't know quite what to make of it because the school had a nice plant. Physically, it was a nice school. But it just seemed chaotic and noisy, and kids were disruptive. And kids — [LAUGHS] — kids were doing the wrong things, you know? And kids do. I mean, it wasn't that they were nasty kids or doing — it was not drugs. It was not drugs. It was just — it just seemed too chaotic to me at the time.

Chana Joffe-Walt

Elaine and I talked for a long time I pushed her — not to make her feel bad, but to get to what felt like a more real answer. At the time that you are visiting, was it majority Black and Hispanic kids?

Elaine Hencke

Yes, I'm sure it was.

Chana Joffe-Walt

And did that have anything to do with the way that you saw the classroom as disruptive and chaotic?

Elaine Hencke

I would hope not.

I'm not — I'm not sure how well educated they were, or — you know, I don't know. I don't know why I'm going into this.

Chana Joffe-Walt

Well, did you have reason to think that they weren't well educated?

Elaine Hencke

Before 293? Well, their reading levels were way down. You know.

Chana Joffe-Walt

I'm just — when you say chaos and disruptive, I'm trusting that what you saw was chaotic and disruptive. But I also know that those are words white people use — we use to express our racial fears, to express real racial fears. Do you think that's what was happening with you?

Elaine Hencke

I don't think I would admit to that. I don't think that was true. But what I may have thought was that these kids are not expected to do so well in school, all the way from the beginning of school. And here they are, really unprepared in some way, for junior high school or — I mean, the reading levels were low.

Chana Joffe-Walt

Elaine told me when she wrote that letter to the Board of Education, she pictured her children becoming friends with Black kids, learning side-by-side, learning that all children are equal. That's what motivated her to write that letter. She wanted the picture of integration the Board of Ed was promoting — the picture of harmonious integration. But when she visited I.S. 293, that didn't seem possible. The reading levels were low. The kids were not entering the school on equal grounds. Her white children had received years of high quality teaching at well-resourced schools. The kids coming from segregated elementary schools had not had that experience.

Elaine Hencke

I mean, one of the problems is that many of the white kids had higher sort of academic skills, or skills. They could read better. I think — I mean, if the white kids knew how to read in first grade and — and I guess there were Black kids who also could. But it just seemed as if most of the black kids didn't really learn — learn to read.

Chana Joffe-Walt

But part of the — part of the vocal complaints of black parents at this period of time was that their kids were not learning how to read because schools were segregated, and their kids were kept in schools that were inferior. And that was part of the argument for integration.

Elaine Hencke

Yes, yes.

Chana Joffe-Walt

That their kids were not going to get the resources, and quality teaching, and good facilities unless they were in the same buildings with kids like yours.

Elaine Hencke

Right.

I don't know what to say to that. I just — I guess I just began to feel that things were really difficult for these kids. Schools were not made for them. If the schools were made for them, with their background, what would they be like?

I think there was — and that's another whole thing. I don't know about it. I think there was sort of anger in the black community at the white community. A lot of the teachers were white. There were more white

teachers, I suppose. People said that that was racism. And of course, it was racism. But maybe the kids were a little angry at the school. I wouldn't — I couldn't fault them for that. But on the other hand, then they don't get as much from the school. I don't know. I thought the problems were kind of enormous. And I guess I just, at one point, I just decided that my kids should go — went to Brooklyn Friends. And we could afford to pay for it. It wasn't easy, you know. It was — [LAUGHS] but —

Chana Joffe-Walt

Did your feelings about integration change? Did you believe in it less?

Elaine Hencke

Maybe.

I think I would have said no, theoretically. But maybe they did. I guess I saw it as a more difficult project then. I sort of did back off from it. I just —

Chana Joffe-Walt

Yeah. It felt when you guys wrote these letters like, this is — integration is this exciting ideal, and we can be part of it, and it's going to be a meaningful project that's also going to be kind of easy.

Elaine Hencke

I certainly didn't think it would be so difficult. But I — I was, I was innocent, you know? I don't know. I still believe in it. I do.

[Music]

Chana Joffe-Walt

I think what Elaine actually meant was not that she was innocent, but that she was naive. She was naive about the reality of segregation, the

harm of it. And naive about what it would take to undo it. She did not know. And I think she didn't want to know. When Elaine said the word innocent, I felt a jolt of recognition. I felt like Elaine had walked me right up to the truth about her, and about me.

When my own kids were old enough, I sent them to our zoned public school. It was racially mixed and economically mixed. I was excited about that. And it was nice walking to school with neighbors, people I likely never would have gotten to know otherwise. My kid's first day of school was another boy's first week in the country. He'd just moved from China, and his mom asked the neighbor where the school was. When she said goodbye that first morning, I think he thought I was a teacher, and he crawled into my lap. We had no words in common, so I just held him while he screamed and cried. By the holiday show three months later, I watched that same boy belt out "This Pretty Planet" on a stage with his classmates. He was the star. He nailed the hand motions. Every other kid up on stage was just following his lead, just trying to keep up. It was such a sweet picture, all of them up there — Black kids, and Mexican kids, and Colombian, and Asian and white kids. And all of us adults supporting all of them. It's moving, to me, this picture of integration. It is also, I'm realizing right now, writing these words down, the very same picture the Board of Education put forth in 1954 — a multiracial choir singing together, building brotherhood. And it's dangerous, I think, this picture of integration. It seems perfectly designed to preserve my innocence, to make me comfortable, not to remedy inequality, but a way to bypass it entirely. I can sit in that assembly and feel good about the gauzy display of integration without ever being asked to think about the fact that much of the time, white kids in the school building are having a different educational experience than kids of color. A large share of the white students at the school are clustered in a gifted program. They have separate classrooms and separate teachers. We all blithely call these

white children gifted and talented, G&T, starting at four years old. White children are performing better at the school than black children and Latino children. White families are the loudest and most powerful voices in the building. The advantages white kids had back in the 1950s, they're still in place. When Elaine said she was innocent, I thought about the things we say, nice, white parents, to each other about why we won't send our kids to segregated schools — because they're too strict, or too chaotic, or too disruptive. Because the test scores are bad, because we want more play. We want fewer worksheets. Because we don't want to ride a bus. We don't want uniforms. We don't want tests. We want innocence. We need it, to protect us from the reality that we are the ones creating the segregation, and we're not sure we're ready to give it up.

[Music]

Elaine was not for segregation. But in the end, she wasn't really for integration, either. All of the choices she made, choices she had the luxury of making, were meant to advantage her own kids. And I understand that. That's what parents do.

Elaine

I remember thinking very clearly that OK, I believe in this. But I don't sort of want to sacrifice my children to it. I have to look at what they will learn, and what they will do. And for people who sent their kids to 293, it seemed to work out well. So that made me think, well, maybe I made a mistake. Maybe they should have gone there. I know at one point it was very clear to me that I had beliefs that I thought were kind of contrary to my own children's best interests. And I decided that I wasn't going to use them to sort of extend my own beliefs. But then I regretted that, because that wasn't really true.

Chana Joffe-Walt

You regretted what?

Elaine

Well, I kind of wish I had sent them to 293 because Joan's kids had a good experience there.

Chana Joffe-Walt

Elaine's friend Joan, another white mom who did send her kids to I.S. 293. Elaine still feels bad about her choice. But not everyone felt bad.

Carol Netzer

We were not pious, kind of, oh, the kids have to go to public school. Not at all. I went to public schools, and there's nothing to write about.

Chana Joffe-Walt

Carol is the woman who wrote the letter about how she'd come to New York City from the suburbs for integration. I had a hard time reconciling her lack of piety with her letter, which I read back to her, about wanting her kids to mix freely with children of other classes and races. [READING] — which we were not able to provide for them when we lived in the Westchester suburb.

Carol Netzer

That was all true. Yeah, yeah.

Chana Joffe-Walt

You remember feeling that way?

Carol Netzer

Well, I don't really remember feeling that way. And I think that we say a lot of things that are politically correct, without even realizing that

we are not telling exactly how we feel. So I can't really guarantee that it was 100% the way I felt. I don't really remember. Probably close to it, but I mean, I'm a liberal, you know?

Chana Joffe-Walt

As a parent, did you — do you remember feeling like, I hope my kid has experiences outside of just people like them?

Carol Netzer

Not especially. I mean, we rushed right away to send them to private school, right? So what was most important to us was that they get the best education. But one of the things that changed it was St. Anne's School, a sort of progressive school with this man, headmaster, who was brilliant. Opened up St. Anne's. And if you keep working on this, you'll hear a lot about St. Anne's.

Chana Joffe-Walt

I'm not going to tell you a lot about St. Anne's, except to say this — it's one of the most prominent private schools in Brooklyn. Upscale neighborhood, prime real estate, lots of heavy-hitters send their kids to St. Anne's. I had heard of it. What I didn't know is that St. Anne's opened at the very same time that Black parents were waging their strongest fight for integration in New York City, in 1965. Right when a lot of the letter writers would have been looking for schools. And it wasn't just St. Anne's. New progressive private schools were opening and expanding all over the city. Brooklyn Friends School expanded into a new building, and would double its enrollment. They were opening private schools in the South, too. But down there, it was all very explicit. They became known as quote, unquote, "segregation academies," schools for white people who were wholeheartedly committed to avoiding integration. In the North, private schools opened as if they

were completely disconnected from everything else that was happening at that very moment. St. Anne's marketed itself as a pioneer, a community of like-minded, gifted kids, no grades. Lots of talk about progressive, child-centered education, the whole child. At one point in my conversation with Carol Netzer I was talking about how integration was happening around his time. And she surprised me by saying, no, not at that time.

Carol Netzer

I think the — I think that you may be off on the timing for me, because it was too early. They didn't start really any kind of crusade about integrating until well after I had left the neighborhood.

Chana Joffe-Walt

No, they were integrating the schools in the '60s, though.

Carol Netzer

Oh. It didn't make much of a splash. We weren't against it. There was — it wasn't a big item.

Chana Joffe-Walt

That's how easy it was to walk away from integration in New York City. You could do it without even knowing you'd thrown a bomb over your shoulder on the way out.

[Music]

Here is what I think happened over those five years between the writing of the letters in 1963 and not sending their kids to the school in 1968. Those five years were a battle between the Board of Education's definition of integration and the actual integration that black parents wanted. For black parents, integration was about safe schools for their

children, with qualified teachers and functioning toilets, a full day of school. For them, integration was a remedy for injustice. The Board of Ed, though, took that definition and retooled it. Integration wasn't a means to an end. It was about racial harmony and diversity. The Board spun integration into a virtue that white parents could feel good about. And their side triumphed. That's the definition of integration that stuck, that's still with us today. It's the version of integration that was being celebrated 50 years later, at the French Cultural Services Building at the Gala for SAS.

In some of my calls with the white letter writers, a few people mentioned that yes, they wanted integration. But also, they wanted the school closer to them. They weren't comfortable sending their kids over to the other side of the neighborhood. Which brings me to one final letter from the other side of the neighborhood. One I haven't told you about, from the I.S. 293 folder in the archives. It's one of the only letters, as far as I can tell, that is not from a white parent. It's from the Tenants Association for the Gowanus Houses, a housing project, home to mostly Black and Puerto Rican families. They also wanted a school closer to them. The letter from the Tenants Association is formal and straightforward. It says, please build the school on the original site you proposed, right next to the projects. That way, they explained, our kids won't have to cross many streets. We'll get recreational facilities, which we desperately need. And it'll be close to the people who will actually use it. The letter says they represent over 1,000 families. The white families, they numbered a couple dozen. Still, in the name of integration, the white letter writers got what they wanted — a new building close to where they lived, that they did not attend. Note the Black and Puerto Rican families we're not asking to share a school with white people. They were not seeking integration. That's not what their letter was about. They were asking for a school, period. The school they got was

three blocks further than they wanted. And from the moment it opened, I.S. 293 was de facto segregated — an overwhelmingly Black and Puerto Rican school. What were those years like, once the white parents pushing their priorities went away? Once there were no more efforts at feel-good integration, and the community was finally left alone? Was that better? That's next time, on "Nice White Parents."

"Nice White Parents" is produced by Julie Snyder and me, with editing on this episode from Sarah Koenig, Nancy Updike and Ira Glass. Neil Drumming is our Managing Editor. Eve Ewing and Rachel Lissy are our editorial consultants. Fact-checking and research by Ben Phelan, with additional research from Lilly Sullivan. Archival research by Rebecca Kent. Music supervision and mixing by Stowe Nelson. Our Director of Operations is Seth Lind. Julie Whitaker is our Digital Manager. Finance management by Cassie Howley and production management by Frances Swanson. The original music for Nice White Parents is by The Bad Plus, with additional music written and performed by Matt McGinley. A thank you to all the people and organizations who helped provide archival sound for this episode, including the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Andy Lanset at WNYC, Ruta Abolins and the Walter J. Brown Media Archives at the University of Georgia and David Ment, Dwight Johnson and all the other people at the Board of Education archives. Special thanks to Francine Almash, Jeanne Theoharis, Matt Delmont, Paula Marie Seniors, Ashley Farmer, Sherrilyn Ifill, Monifa Edwards, Charles Isaacs, Noliwe Rooks, Jerald Podair and Judith Kafka.

"Nice White Parents" is produced by Serial Productions, a New York Times Company.