



The 1964 Milby homecoming queen candidates reflected Houston Independent School District's policy to remain segregated ten years after *Brown v. Board of Education*. That did not change until 1966.

Photo courtesy of the Milby High School yearbook, *The Buffalo*, 1964.

# The Long Road Ahead: Desegregation in HISD and Milby High School

By Emily Harris

The year 2024 marks the seventieth anniversary of the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), which found racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional. This ruling paved the way towards integration in public schools nationwide and set a crucial precedent in the fight to end segregation. The process of implementing the *Brown* decision varied from state to state, city to city, and district to district, each with their own story. Some areas became symbolic battlegrounds along the way, as with Little Rock, Arkansas. In 1957, the governor, the Arkansas National Guard, and protestors prevented nine African American teenagers from attending Central High School until President Eisenhower federalized the state National Guard and sent the U.S. Army's 101st Airborne to protect the students, known as the Little Rock Nine, and enable them to attend classes.<sup>1</sup>

In other areas, the story of school desegregation is less widely known, as with the Houston Independent School District (HISD). Today, HISD is the largest school district in Texas, and the eighth largest in the country. It serves the nation's fourth largest city and one of the most ethnically diverse in the United States.<sup>2</sup> Looking historically at individual communities and schools, specifically Harrisburg and Milby High School, provides a way to examine the

legacy of desegregation in areas and institutions that are integral to the city's historical and social fabric.

## School Segregation in Jim Crow Houston

School segregation in Houston is rooted in Texas's history as part of the former Confederacy and its post-Reconstruction Jim Crow policies that entrenched the color line between Black and White people by law and custom. In 1876, Texas ratified a state constitution that mandated "separate schools shall be provided for the white and colored children." In August 1876, the state legislature passed a law establishing free public schools in Houston and providing state funds for their operation, which Houston voters approved in December, creating the Houston Public School System. Black and White schools were to have "impartial provision," yet overcrowding, disrepair, and inadequate funds, programs, and materials continually disadvantaged Houston's Black schools. In 1896, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld this "separate but equal" principle in public accommodations in *Plessy v. Ferguson*.<sup>3</sup>

In 1923, Houstonians voted to create the Houston Independent School District making the school system independent of the city government. Shortly thereafter, HISD began constructing new schools to serve the city's growing population, which doubled from 138,276 in 1920 to 292,352

in 1930.<sup>4</sup> Milby High School and John H. Reagan High School, now Heights High School, opened in 1926 for White students, while Jack Yates and Phillis Wheatley High Schools opened in 1926 and 1927, respectively, for Black students.

Throughout this time, Houston experienced an influx of people. African Americans began migrating to Houston after emancipation in 1865 and continued throughout the early twentieth century as part of the Great Migration. Waves of ethnic Mexicans also settled in Houston between 1900 and 1930. Typically coming from rural backgrounds, migrants made the transition to an urban lifestyle, and with it, faced the challenges of racial discrimination and segregation. The rule of law in Houston designated African Americans as Black, while Anglos and ethnic Mexicans were considered White.<sup>5</sup>

In practice, Anglo Houstonians unequivocally sat at the top of the racial hierarchy in the public sphere; they expected deference, enforced distance, and in some instances perpetuated violence to keep African Americans and ethnic Mexicans in their place. In response, people of color established autonomous and tightly knit communities that offered spaces of solidarity against Jim Crow policies.

### **Harrisburg and Milby High School Before *Brown v. Board of Education***

Houston formally annexed Harrisburg in 1926, the same year Milby High School opened. At the time, Harrisburg housed a largely Anglo population of working-class families. Milby's student population mirrored such trends, remaining predominantly Anglo up through the late 1960s. Dr. Les Fullerton, a 1959 Milby graduate, recalled his childhood growing up in nearby Pecan Park in the 1940s and 1950s. He described the area as a mostly rural setting with lots of



*Savannah Kay (1869-1951), affectionately known as "Mother Kay," provided African American students a progressive education and improved the community.*

Photo used in accordance with Title 17 U.S.C. Section 107.

neighborhood activity. During his time at Milby, he remembered the student body being around ninety percent Anglo.<sup>6</sup>

While some residential areas felt like insular, rural communities in the early twentieth century, Harrisburg functioned as a major economic engine for the whole city, given its location on the Houston Ship Channel. By 1955, Harrisburg became part of Houston's larger East End. Situated within the hub of industrial growth, the East End had already been experiencing an influx of Latino, African American, and Asian immigrants and migrants seeking jobs. This created multiculturalism, which stood out from the rest of the city. Harrisburg and the East End remained as such until desegregation led Anglos to relocate to other areas of Houston.<sup>7</sup>

Despite a predominantly Anglo student population, Milby did have students of color prior to desegregation. Issues of *The Buffalo*, Milby's yearbook, appear to show that marginal numbers of Latino and Asian American students attended Milby by 1940, as both were considered legally White. Solidifying that policy, Texas courts ruled in 1948 that public school segregation of Mexican American students unconstitutional. The decision made it illegal to deliberately segregate Mexican American students from White schools and within their facilities, though it did not address the segregation of African American students.<sup>8</sup> However, change came slowly.

Maria Jimenez, a 1969 Milby graduate, experienced the area's shifting demographics as a student. In her last year attending Edison Junior High School in Magnolia Park, she recalled being part of a new Latino majority due to white flight. However, during her time at Milby, she estimated Latinos made up only fifteen percent of the student body.<sup>9</sup> Attending Milby more than a decade after the *Brown* decision, Maria's story reflects the lengthy delay in implementing desegregation.

### **Stage 1: Reality Confronts HISD Board of Education**

When the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision was announced on May 17, 1954, HISD was the largest racially segregated public school system in the United States. Segregationists denounced the ruling and vowed "massive resistance" to school desegregation. Newly reelected Texas governor Allan Shivers expressed "revolt" at the decision, pledging Texas would make no changes in its segregated public schools. According to the Supreme Court's unanimous decision, segregation of schools made them "inherently unequal," and therefore violated the Constitution under the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. Most



*The original Harrisburg Colored Elementary School operated until 1952, when it was demolished and rebuilt in Smith's Addition. The new school, Kay Elementary, was named for its former principal, Savannah Georgia Kay.*

Photo used in accordance with Title 17 U.S.C. Section 107.

When Les Fullerton played football at Milby, Black teams played on Thursday nights, and White teams played on Fridays. The Milby Buffs and Booker T. Washington Eagles wore the same colors and shared their uniforms, washing them before the next day's games. Les always wondered about the Black student who shared his number 16 uniform.

Photo courtesy of  
The Buffalo, 1959.



White people in the district opposed the ruling, prompting HISD to operate “as if nothing had happened.” Although the decision declared school segregation unconstitutional, it did not address implementation until May 31, 1955, in a case known as *Brown II*. Recognizing that compliance called for dramatic changes in the South, the court ordered school districts to proceed “with all deliberate speed” in a gradual but steady manner to desegregate their public schools.<sup>10</sup>

By March 1955, a few months prior to *Brown II*, HISD Board of Education members, with a four-to-three liberal majority, tiptoed towards desegregation. They assembled the Biracial Committee, consisting of twelve White and eight Black citizens, to study the potential procedures and problems the district might face. In August 1955, the committee recommended that HISD prepare for complete integration of its schools at the start of the next school year in September 1956. But by the end of 1955, it became clear that HISD did not intend to implement the recommendations of its Biracial Committee.<sup>11</sup> What followed on December 26, 1956, was a milestone moment in the struggle to desegregate HISD.

Three Black attorneys—Henry E. Doyle, Francis L. Williams, and Heaulin E. Lott—filed a lawsuit against HISD in federal district court on behalf of Delores Ross, Beneva Williams, and all Black Texas schoolchildren. Nine-year-old Ross attempted to enroll at the all-White Sherman Elementary School two blocks from her house, rather than walking fourteen blocks to the all-Black Crawford Elementary School. Similarly, fourteen-year-old Williams attempted to enroll in the nearby, all-White McReynolds Junior High School, rather than walking twenty-one blocks to the all-Black E. O. Smith Junior High School. HISD officials refused to register either child. The plaintiffs asked the court for a definitive ruling on their legal rights, to declare state laws mandating school segregation



Although Latinos attended Milby with Anglo students, the senior photos from the 1950 yearbook showed mostly segregated groups of people with Spanish surnames.

Photo courtesy of The Buffalo, 1950.

unconstitutional, and an injunction against HISD requiring segregation. The case, *Ross v. Houston Independent School District*, became an ongoing battle that pressured HISD to adopt and implement an official desegregation plan.<sup>12</sup>

Milby High School alumnus, Dr. Don Williams, recalled his mother's experience attending segregated schools in the 1940s and 1950s. Don and his mother lived in her childhood home on Lawndale, just down the street from Milby High School and across the railroad tracks. Although there were multiple schools nearby, his mother attended the Harrisburg Colored Elementary School on the corner of Elm and San Antonio Streets, one of the few Black schools in the neighborhood. Mrs. Williams had to leave Harrisburg to attend Black junior high and high schools, graduating from Jack Yates High School in 1956, the year HISD's desegregation process began. Reflecting on her own experiences during this transition, Don's mother knew she would live to see one of her children attend Milby, one of the top schools in the heart of their community. Don enrolled in the early 1980s and has taught there since 2015.<sup>13</sup>

## Stage 2: Trial and Error

The November 1956 HISD school board election resulted in a new conservative majority, which created its own desegregation committee, the Committee to Study Integration, in 1957, likely compelled by the *Ross* lawsuit. Interestingly, the committee distinguished between desegregation and integration, defining the former as allowing any child to attend a school they previously were barred from attending due to their race, and the latter as placing every child into all school activities, curricular and extracurricular, after being admitted to a desegregated school. Ultimately, the committee recommended and the board approved that HISD begin desegregation with first-grade no later than 1960, when its current campus building program was completed, and progress with one grade level each successive year.<sup>14</sup>

After hearing the *Ross* case in May, on October 15, 1957, Federal District Judge Ben Connally declared HISD's policy a violation of the plaintiffs' constitutional rights. He ordered HISD to cease racial segregation but did not provide a timetable or deadline, nor did he require HISD to enroll Ross or Williams in the all-White schools. Still lacking progress by 1959, Judge Connally ordered HISD to file a

statement detailing the steps it had taken toward desegregation and its plan to comply with his 1957 order, setting a deadline of June 1, 1960. Any other attempts to delay would be an



*Houston educational television station KUHT-TV broadcast HISD board meetings from the early 1950s until the board discontinued the practice in 1964. Heated debates arose from board members, parents, and community members, particularly regarding desegregation. Some Houstonians referred to them as “Monday Night Fights.”*

Photo courtesy of KUHT Records, University of Houston Libraries Special Collections, ark:/84475/do7849t355p.

indication of “bad faith” and result in a federal desegregation plan imposed upon HISD.<sup>15</sup>

HISD board president Henry Petersen proposed a plan to present to the court, which the board adopted and submitted to integrate on a voluntary and area basis for grades one through twelve, dependent on the superintendent and administrative staff’s advice. Judge Connally rejected HISD’s plan as a “palpable sham and subterfuge designed only to accomplish further evasion and delay.”<sup>16</sup> He ordered HISD to implement a stairstep system, beginning in September 1960, by integrating the first-grade, then adding one more grade each year until the district was fully integrated by 1972.

On Tuesday, September 6, 1960, HISD agreed to start accepting Black students’ applications to White schools the next day. By Thursday, September 8, the *Houston Post* announced that Black students who qualified for enrollment would be notified by 10:30 a.m. on Friday. This led most Houstonians to assume Black students would not be present for class until at least the following Monday, thus eliminating any potential for opposition. Black parents understood this; Marcellas Day escorted his son Tyrone to his first day at Kashmere Gardens Elementary on September 8, 1960, making civil rights history as its first African American student.<sup>17</sup>

Beginning in the late 1960s through the 1970s, Milby High School began to integrate its faculty and student body. The first Black students began attending Milby as early as 1966, and Black faculty members joined as early as 1968. In the 1970s and early 1980s, Milby alumna Annette Oseguera recalled the student body still being predominantly White, with a small but growing population of African American and Latino students. From the elementary to high school

level, Annette experienced changing attitudes towards desegregation. Involved in busing efforts to integrate schools, Annette attended Henderson Elementary across the railroad tracks from her house instead of nearby Pugh Elementary. She witnessed the discrimination of White faculty towards Black children at Henderson, but at Milby, she recalled students getting along relatively well.<sup>18</sup>

Milby 1970 alumna, Antoinette Garcia, now Guerra, also recalled a tolerant atmosphere. As the captain of the COED Cadettes drill team and the first Latina homecoming queen, Antoinette signaled the acceptance of minority students in aspects of campus culture. She also recalled that in 1970, the students voted her and an African American boy, Lynn Johnson, the most popular seniors.<sup>19</sup>

### Stage 3: An Optimistic Resolution

Superintendent Billy Reagan brought renewed progress when he assumed the post in 1974. He asked the Board of Education to establish a task force to find an alternative method to the controversial practice of pairing Black and predominantly Latino schools (considered White) to satisfy the court order. In 1975, the board appointed a tri-ethnic committee to implement the Task Force for Quality Integrated Education’s recommendations, including the magnet schools program. Open to students throughout HISD, magnet schools offered unique educational programs and vocational tracts. They would be racially balanced and voluntarily draw students from outside its designated zone. The Texas Education Agency (TEA) developed the Voluntary Interdistrict Education Plan (VIEP) in March 1980, which in conjunction with HISD’s magnet schools, offered tuition waivers and free transportation for students from suburban school districts. HISD adopted the plan in September 1980.<sup>20</sup>

By 1984, Black and Latino students had surpassed White students in the proportion of total enrollment in HISD, and Milby had added an Asian-American Club to its extracurricular opportunities. The same year, the district settled disputes over the racial composition of magnet schools as it continued to implement VIEP. On September 11, 1984, HISD held a news conference and document-signing ceremony at Sherman Elementary School. Delores Ross, now



*One of Milby’s first Black students, Lorenzo Williams, second from left in the second row, actively participated in the ROTC program.*

Photo courtesy of *The Buffalo*, 1966.



*The Milby High School senior class voted Antoinette Garcia and Lynn Johnson the most popular seniors of 1970. Garcia was the first Latina and Johnson was the first African American selected in the role.*

Photo courtesy of *The Buffalo*, 1970.



*As Milby began desegregating its student body in the late 1960s, Black faculty members joined the staff as early as 1968, and Ernest Dickerson became the first Black assistant principal by 1972.*

Photo courtesy of *The Buffalo*, 1972.

an adult, attended the ceremony at the school where she had been denied admission twenty-eight years earlier. She remarked, “We finally accomplished something.”<sup>21</sup> This marked the end of HISD’s thirty-year legal confrontation with desegregation.

For alumni like Maria Jimenez who experienced the early phases of this process at Milby High School, the transition reflected more than just numbers on paper. Growing up, Maria witnessed injustices all around her and experienced it herself at school and in her community. At an early age, she became committed to the elimination of systemic inequalities. Her education at Milby, particularly her involvement in debate, strengthened her pursuit of political science and activism. Throughout her life, she worked tirelessly to ensure people were not isolated but had equal protection and opportunity, which had finally come to fruition at Milby.<sup>22</sup>

A 1987 Milby graduate, Josette Glaze exemplifies this new chapter. Josette was a member of Milby’s Petrochemical Magnet Program and the only Black member of the COED Cadettes at the time. By the mid-1980s, Milby had become highly diverse due to the magnet initiative and changing



*Members of the 1984 graduating class represent students of multiple identities, cultures, and languages. Milby students belonged to a cohort of peers that reflected the community of Harrisburg and the city of Houston.*

Photo courtesy of *The Buffalo*, 1984.

neighborhood demographics. Josette, a “social butterfly,” met many different people through the magnet program and formed part of a diverse social circle. They called themselves “the Breakfast Club” because they were a multicultural, diverse group. Beyond her own experience, Josette recalled the Milby student body getting along well, and interracial friendships and romances were commonplace. Her participation in the COED Cadettes was also a factor, as the uniform and Milby pride brought students together, forming lasting bonds of fellowship. Josette’s mother instilled in her this attitude of tolerance and respect – a testament echoed by multiple Milby alumni: “My mother always was a big believer in ... exposing us to other people. She always believed in there’s more than just us, there’s all kinds of people in the world ... So, color didn’t mean anything to me. I just liked people.”<sup>23</sup>

### **Old School to New School: The Impact of Desegregation**

Today, demographic patterns for Houston, HISD, and Milby have continued to shift since the era of segregation. In the 2022-2023 school year, African Americans and Latinos were the greatest proportion of HISD students at roughly 84 percent. At Milby High School, 95 percent of enrolled students were Latino. The current demographics of Harrisburg mirrored this trend, with Latino residents as the plurality at 45 percent, almost double the combined proportion of White and Black residents.<sup>24</sup> Milby remains a bedrock of the community, carrying on multiple generational lineages and creating prospective professionals for Harrisburg’s technical industries. Its status and unique character were shaped by the complex, multi-decade process of desegregation and the fight for inclusion. This history speaks to the nuanced significance of desegregation in Houston. It unifies generations of Milby alumni and current students who experienced their school overcoming adversity and scrutiny of broader battles to cement a legacy of campus and community pride. **HH**

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