

Oral History - The Battle Over School Integration in Great Neck

Frank Phillips and the Great Neck School Integration Controversy

by Denise Del Valle and Stephanie Hunte

Frank Phillips was a member of the Great Neck school board from 1964 until 1976. This was a period of intense controversy in the struggle to integrate Long Island public schools. In December, 1967, the Center for Urban Education recommended to the Great Neck school board that it participate in an urban-suburban school integration program with New York City. The proposal involved enrolling between 45 and 60 African American children from New York City in Great Neck schools.

Great Neck had a reputation as an enlightened and progressive community. Although its population was over 95% white, the community was a leader in the fight for civil rights. When Martin Luther King, Jr. visited Great Neck, over 2,000 citizens filled Temple Israel hall to meet him. Great Neck seemed an ideal place for a voluntary urban-suburban school integration program.

As a member of the Great Neck school board, Frank Phillips was a strong supporter of this school integration plan. He was impressed with positive evaluations of similar programs in other communities. He was also concerned that rejection of the plan would provide Black separatists with evidence that white communities would not voluntarily support racial integration and white segregationists with an example of liberal hypocrisy.

Shortly after the plan was made public, the school board and local newspapers began receiving letters that either strongly opposed or strongly supported it. In April, 1968, one thousand residents attended a public meeting to discuss the plan. No other topic had ever drawn half that number of people to a school meeting.

According to Frank Phillips, many opponents of the plan were young parents. They had moved out of New York City thinking that Great Neck was a "Shangri-La." The suggestion that the school board allow a bit of New York City into Great Neck shattered this illusion and they responded with fear and hostility. A month after the public meeting, the school budget was defeated for the third time in nine years. Some people attributed the defeat to anti-busing sentiment. The school board was also presented with a petition signed by over eight hundred residents from the southern end of the school district. The petition urged the board to hold a public referendum on the busing plan.

On December 9, 1968, the Great Neck Record carried an advertisement by the "Parents Committee Against New York City to Great Neck School Busing". The ad charged that the school integration plan was being "railroaded through without community knowledge." Board members began to receive threats. One member was threatened with physical violence. Frank Phillips and another member were told that their businesses would be affected.

Instead of retreating, Frank Phillips decided to organize supporters of the integration plan into a "Committee for Conscience and Reason." The committee placed an ad in the Great Neck Record that called for community support of the urban-suburban school integration initiative and was signed by over 180 people.

Opponents of school integration launched a counter-attack at the next school board meeting. They disrupted the proceedings and insisted on speaking even though the integration plan was not on the agenda. As a result of pressure on the school board, its members unanimously agreed to a public "advisory" referendum on the integration plan.

Frank Phillips believes that the referendum inflamed the controversy even further. Supporters and opponents initiated intensive publicity and advertising campaigns. Numerous organizations in the community came out in support of the school integration plan, including a group of Great Neck secondary school students. Two thousand students signed an ad in the local press. It was headed: "Do Not Make Us Be Ashamed of Growing Up in Great Neck". Students also held a parade and filled the 1000 seat auditorium of the North Senior High School for a rally.

The "Committee Against New York City to Great Neck School Busing" published ads claiming that the integration plan would increase the taxes of the local property owners and the rents of the apartment dwellers; that it would mean sending Great Neck children into ghetto schools; and that children would be transferred out of their neighborhood schools to make room for more than 200 incoming city children. According to Frank Phillips, while none of these claims were true, they inflamed the community and were difficult to counter.

On February 6, 1969, the school integration plan appeared to be defeated in an advisory referendum that was marred by voting irregularities. But because people voted in such high numbers, the voting machines could not record all of the ballots, and the results were declared invalid. At its next meeting, the Great Neck school board voted 3 to 2 to continue to pursue the plan. When the fifth board member cast the deciding vote, he said: "I vote my conscience. I vote yes." The auditorium went into an uproar and security guards had to escort board members from the meeting.

Initially the New York City Board of Education was anxious to participate, but after the advisory referendum and the election of two anti-busing candidates to the Great Neck school board, New York declared that it did not want to send children into a hostile environment. Frank Phillips and other supporters of the integration plan tried to convince New York City to implement the plan, but it never was put into operation.

Frank Phillips was the only pro-integration school board member to run for reelection and despite efforts by an opposition group called VOCAL, he was reelected. In 1975, he helped defeat the two board members who had opposed the integration plan. Frank Phillips still believes that compared to other communities, Great Neck is one of the most enlightened school districts.

Questions:

- 1- What was Frank Phillips' role in the Great Neck School integration controversy?
- 2- Why did Frank Phillips believe that Great Neck was an "ideal place" for a voluntary school integration plan?
- 3- The Great Neck school integration plan only involved a small number of children. Why did it become a major "symbolic" issue in the community?
- 4- Do you agree or disagree with the way the Great Neck School Board handled this issue? Why?

5- In your opinion, how did local, regional, and national events contribute to the defeat of the Great Neck school integration plan?

An interview with Emil "Al" Cianciulli

By Jennifer Palacio and Denise Del Valle

Al Cianciulli, a lawyer, is currently the legal counsel for Hofstra University. From 1966-1969 he served on the Great Neck, New York Board of Education. According to Al Cianciulli, the United States in the 1960's was "a more stratified society than it is now." In Great Neck, where he had grown up and still lived, Black people lived in isolated places like Spinney Hill and an area around Steamboat Road. They generally held low-paying menial jobs, often working as domestics for white families in the community.

"Many white families in Great Neck participated in the national Civil Rights movement and this had a positive affect on the way people saw things. At the same time, there was growing resentment over the Vietnam War and development of the peace movement. The Civil Rights movement and the peace movement made this an era of great militancy. Young people were more rebellious than they are now. That was the general flavor of the time when Frank Phillips and I became active on the Great Neck School Board. We saw injustice reflected in education, housing, and employment opportunities and we wanted to change these conditions.

I went to high school in Great Neck, and then I attended Hofstra University and Fordham Law School. Later, I was elected to the local school board. Great Neck was a very wealthy community. It spent more per student than any other district on the Island and had a well endowed school system. It had high property values and the community taxed itself to support its schools. The town had a large number of college graduates, so education was valued.

At that time, my wife and I had a daughter attending a parochial elementary school and a son in a Great Neck public elementary school. In addition, we "adopted" a Black child from South Carolina as part of an Urban League program called "STEP" (Student Transfer Education Program). The program was designed to assist Black youngsters with strong academic potential who were attending sub-standard schools in the South. The young person we "adopted" shared my daughter's bedroom and attended Great Neck High School during her sophomore, junior and senior years. Later, she graduated from Hofstra University under the NOAH program and went on to earn a Masters degree. She now heads daycare centers in South Carolina. All three of these young people were significantly affected by the controversy over school integration in Great Neck. I believe it had a lasting effect in shaping their values and their attitudes as they grew to maturity.

In the middle 1960's the school age population of Great Neck was beginning to diminish. Someone in the community suggested that, since we had empty seats and elementary classrooms in nearby Queens schools were overcrowded, we bring some of those students into our school system. I felt we had a social obligation to try to help these children, whether they were Black or white.

This idea led to a lot of turmoil in what was a relatively liberal community. You would think that there was a threat from a hoard of warriors. These were just small children and a small number of them. But busing was a "buzz word" in the 1960's. This was a very modest proposal, but I guess it brought out the worst racial fears and prejudices in people. The tension level was hard to describe. People felt that "I don't want my child in a class with these people." There were angry and enormously disruptive public meetings that led to a referendum where the community voted not to do it.

Because it was an advisory referendum, the school board still had to vote on the plan. In this very hostile atmosphere, the board was split and I cast the deciding vote in favor of doing it. I voted this way as a matter of conscience. However, in the long run the plan never went into operation.

Because of my vote for the school integration plan, I became a symbol that divided our community in a very bitter way. I got a lot of hate mail and people signed petitions asking me to leave town, even people that I knew and with whom I attended high school. After all of this controversy, it didn't take a rocket scientist to tell me that I should not run for reelection to the school board. I was not electable. In any event, I was very disappointed by what happened in the community and the failure to implement this plan. Perhaps the board, including myself, did not handle the question properly. But I never regretted taking a principled stand on this position.

In the next election, Great Neck residents chose a much more conservative school board. The new board tried to fire the superintendent of schools because he had supported the school busing plan. There was a series of circus-like hearings in the auditorium of one of the elementary schools. My law firm represented the school superintendent before the Great Neck Board of Education and the New York State Department of Education. We won the case and the superintendent went on to finish his career in Great Neck.

The issue of busing was never introduced again because everyone in the community was deadly afraid of the whole idea. Ultimately, the bruises from that time began to fade. Great Neck had had a wonderful history of social and educational innovation. However, I don't think people ever recovered from that period.

After I left the school board, I stayed in Great Neck because I was not going to let anyone drive me out of town. Eventually, eight years later, I did move. I still have many friends in Great Neck, but I remember this battle for school integration as a very bruising experience."

Questions:

- 1- Why did Al Cianciulli become an advocate for civil rights?
- 2- What evidence is there that the Great Neck community strongly valued education?
- 3- Why does Al Cianciulli believe many people opposed the school integration plan?
- 4- Why did Al Cianciulli decide not to run for reelection?
- 5- If you were in Al Cianciulli's position, how would you have voted on the school integration plan? Why?
- 6- Would you question the decision to send Al Cianciulli's daughter to a parochial school instead of a public school? Why?