

Brown vs. Board of Education
A look at desegregation 50 years later

Integration wasn't always a 'spectacle'

In Dover, Del., in 1954, one family plants seeds of quiet, courageous change

By Anita Manning
USA TODAY

DOVER, Del. — What may be the most remarkable thing about the desegregation of Dover High School in 1954 is how unremarkable it was.

The integration of American schools played out in microcosm here in Delaware and is reflected in three generations of one family: Ruth Laws, an educator and civil rights pioneer; her daughter, Cherrita, one of the first black students to enter and graduate from Dover High School; and William, Cherrita's son, who grew up with a deep appreciation for the struggles that went before him.



Entered an all-white world: Cherrita Laws Matthews points out her senior picture in the 1958 Dover High School yearbook. "I wasn't brought up to be fearful," she says of those years.

A bright child who started school early and advanced quickly, skipping second grade, Cherrita Laws Matthews was not yet 12 on the September day when she and a group of carefully chosen black students, eight boys and nine girls, walked into the all-white Dover High as freshmen.

It didn't occur to her to be afraid. "I wasn't brought up to be fearful," she says.

Months earlier, the U.S. Supreme Court had ruled in *Brown vs. Board of Education* that the doctrine of "separate but equal" schools for black and white children was unconstitutional. Two Delaware lawsuits were among cases from several states combined under *Brown*.

Early belief in equality

Matthews, a widow, holds a doctorate in educational administration and supervision and is a speech pathologist at The Dover Academy, a charter school. She credits her parents with instilling in her the belief that a good education is the key to a better life and giving her the confidence to accept as natural, even 50 years ago, her right to equality.

It's a philosophy that was bred into her by a family of educators. Her late father, William, taught industrial arts in Dover, and her mother, Ruth, was a well-known educational administrator and civil rights leader.

After five strokes, Laws is cared for by her daughter in the tidy, attractive house Laws and her husband built in 1937.

In an era when few women (and fewer black women) went to college, Ruth Laws earned a master's at Cornell University and a doctorate from New York University. She retired in 1978 as a vice president of Delaware Technical and Community College.

The son of a Baptist minister, she grew up in Gatesville, N.C., where, along with seven siblings, she was home-schooled by her mother, a teacher. "There was a school available," she says, "but it was inferior, so they refused to send us to it." At night, local white students came to her parents for lessons in reading.

Rejecting the old ways

Though Laws grew up in a segregated society, she never accepted it, her daughter says. Because the local hospital relegated black patients to the basement, Laws went to a hospital in Philadelphia to give birth to her only child.

So, in the summer of 1954, when school board officials and community leaders began to discuss enrolling black students in Dover High, it was natural for the Laws family to be involved. "I figured Cherrita would have a better opportunity" there, Laws says, and "I believed, beyond that, that there should be an equal educational system for all the children."

Not every black child was invited to attend Dover High that first year.

"Because it was a token integration, one of the caveats is that you had to enter the academic track," Matthews says. The students were hand-picked for their likelihood to succeed at the white school, she says, though only Matthews and one other black student stayed long enough to graduate. The others dropped out, moved away or returned to their friends at the segregated high school, she says.

Planning helped pave the way, "because well-meaning people in the community got active," she says. Local newspapers reported that discussions about how best to achieve school desegregation sometimes were tense, but they defused what might have been a volatile situation.

In nearby Milford, it didn't go as well. There, school officials enrolled 11 black students without preparing white parents for the change, and the result was an uprising that forced the resigna-

tion of the school board, temporarily closed the schools and postponed desegregation in the town until the mid-1960s.

In Dover, though, it went smoothly that first day and in the days after. Though black and white children "didn't know each other much then," Matthews says, she doesn't recall any serious problems.

That was more common than most people realize, says Delaware State University historian Bradley Skelcher.

"We have a tendency to zoom in on the spectacle," Skelcher says, creating images that remain icons of the time, such as George Wallace blocking the doorway at the University of Alabama in 1963.

No such spectacle occurred at Dover High, where Matthews quickly established herself by winning a ninth-grade magazine-selling competition that brought money to the school and cake and ice cream to her class. She was invited to a white girl's birthday party.

She remembers a white classmate whose father advised him to "be a part of the solution, not a part of the problem."

Matthews' son, William, 40, a budget analyst in Aberdeen, Md., grew up hearing stories about the civil rights movement and how things were before *Brown vs. Board of Education*. "It kept me cognizant of the fact that a lot of sacrifices had been made," he says. "People had struggled quite a bit, and the things I had benefited from were hard won and not to be taken lightly."

On Sunday evenings, his parents, grandparents and an aunt and uncle (one a school superintendent, one a principal), would get together. Discussions usually ranged from topics of the day to social issues and education.

From those conversations, he says, he learned that "within each of us there's a battle we have to face. We have to continue to strive for excellence within ourselves, to understand the path to success is not always easy and sometimes we have obstacles to overcome, but we have to continue."

"I've learned to make sacrifices, be persistent. I've learned to have the determination it takes to overcome obstacles and continue to reach for my goals."

— William Matthews



Pioneers of a new age: Ruth Laws, left, and her daughter, Cherrita Laws Matthews, were instrumental in the early integration of schools in Dover, Del. Ruth was a respected educator, and Cherrita, then 11, was among 17 black students selected to integrate Dover High School in 1954.



Mindful of the sacrifices: William Matthews, 40, grew up hearing stories about the civil rights movement. He's now a budget analyst in Aberdeen, Md.



Still teaching vital lessons: Cherrita Laws Matthews, a speech pathologist, works with Dover Academy students Nahjmere Sauls, left, DeRon Williams, Marquis Ridgway, Marcus Carney and Jordan Jackson.

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