



## Topeka StoryCorps: Sixty Years of Brown

A nomination for the 2015 Helen and Martin Schwartz Prize  
Kansas Humanities Council

The Kansas Humanities Council nominates **Topeka StoryCorps: Sixty Years of Brown** for the 2015 Helen and Martin Schwartz Prize. Coordinated by the Kansas Humanities Council, the project used oral histories to explore the legacy of *Oliver Brown et al. v. the Board of Education of Topeka*, the landmark Supreme Court case that desegregated public schools. Central to the oral histories were the questions: Sixty years later, what does the Brown case mean to Topeka? How is it remembered? This \$10,500 project leveraged \$50,132 in in-kind contributions and reached 51,131 people (to date).

Sixty Years of Brown:

- Engaged citizens with a defining moment in history
- Involved diverse, new audiences
- Created new partnerships



Mrs. Nettie Hunt explains the significance of the Brown v. Board ruling to her daughter, Nikie, on the steps of the U.S. Supreme Court, 1954. *Courtesy of the Library of Congress.*

## Project Background: Understanding the Brown v. Board decision

“We come then to the question presented:  
Does segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race, even though the physical facilities and other ‘tangible’ factors may be equal, deprive the children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities?”

We believe that it does.”

U.S. Supreme Court ruling on *Brown v. Board of Education*, May 1954

In May of 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Oliver Brown et al. v. the Board of Education of Topeka* changed the course of American history. According to the Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site in Topeka, KS, “Often when people think of the case, they remember a little girl whose parents sued so that she could attend an all-white school in her neighborhood. In reality, the story of *Brown v. Board of Education* is far more complex.”

For Topeka, the case began long before 1954. Since the passing of a Kansas law in 1879 that permitted racially segregated elementary schools in certain cities based on population, eleven cases had been filed. The Brown case would be the twelfth.

Initiated in 1950 by the local NAACP chapter in Topeka, thirteen parents volunteered to participate. That summer, they took their children to their neighborhood schools and attempted to enroll them for the upcoming school year. All were refused admission. The children would have to attend one of only four schools in the city for African Americans and, for most, this involved traveling some distance from their homes. On behalf of their children, the parents filed suit against the Topeka Board of Education. Oliver Brown, a minister, was the first parent listed in the suit.

The case was filed in February 1951. The U.S. District Court ruled against the plaintiffs, but placed in the record its acceptance of the psychological evidence that children were adversely affected by segregation. The U.S. Supreme Court would ultimately quote this finding in its 1954 opinion.

By December of 1952, the U.S. Supreme Court had on its docket cases from Kansas, Delaware, the District of Columbia, South Carolina, and Virginia, all challenging the constitutionality of racial segregation in public schools. The five were consolidated under one name, *Oliver Brown et al. v. the Board of Education of Topeka*.

After hearing the case, the Supreme Court justices were unable to come to a decision by June 1953, the end of the Court's 1952-1953 term. The case was retried in December of 1953 and, by then, the justices were unanimous in their decision. Chief Justice Earl Warren delivered the opinion of the court in May 1954:

“We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. . .”

Since then, historians have worked tirelessly to preserve the stories of the attorneys and plaintiffs involved in the *Brown v. Board* case. In addition, in 1992, President George H.W. Bush signed the Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site Act establishing the Monroe Elementary School in Topeka as a national park. Today, the site interprets the Brown decision and its legacy.

## Project Description: Involvement by the Kansas Humanities Council

After a meeting with city leaders in the fall of 2013 to consider ways Topeka could commemorate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Brown v. Board*, the Kansas Humanities Council realized core questions had yet to be answered:

- Sixty years later, how is *Brown v. Board* remembered by Topekans?
- What does the *Brown v. Board* case mean to residents today?

It was time to find and save the personal stories of Topekans affected *by* the decision but not necessarily involved *in* the decision.

To be successful in finding these stories, the Kansas Humanities Council needed strong, community-minded local cultural organizations as partners. As a result, KHC developed key new relationships with the Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library and the Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site, and together identified three goals for the *Sixty Years of Brown* project:

- 1) To preserve personal stories to broaden the understanding of the impact of the Brown decision
- 2) To use contemporary oral histories for improved interpretation, school tours, and public programs
- 3) To keep the history of the *Brown v. Board* case relevant for Topekans of all ages

This partnership resulted in a three-day oral history project in Topeka from May 1-3, 2014. Thirty-six Topeka residents – some recruited, while others volunteered – provided the foundation for the development of a brand-new oral history archive consisting of stories from local residents about post-*Brown* Topeka. The oral histories were conducted by StoryCorps, the national nonprofit organization whose mission is to record, share, and preserve the stories of our lives.

For three days, Topekans told stories to one another about their school experiences, perspectives, friendships, hardships, and life in Topeka post-*Brown*. On the evening before the interviews were to begin, the three organizations hosted a reception and training session at the Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site. Part instruction, part fellowship, the evening allowed interviewees to meet the StoryCorps facilitators, share memories, and build a sense of community and camaraderie.

### A few examples of Stories Shared during *Sixty Years of Brown*



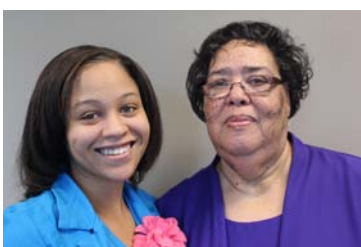
#### Bill Bunten and Jack Alexander

In the 1940s, Alexander played basketball for the Topeka High Ramblers, the segregated African American basketball team while Bunten played for the all-white Topeka High Trojans. Both lifelong Topekans, Bunten later became mayor while Alexander was the city's first African American city council member. Bunten interviewed Alexander about his school experiences and life in Topeka both pre- and post-*Brown*.



#### Joyce Revely and Eric McHenry

Eric McHenry, a Washburn University English professor and Topeka native, interviewed family friend Joyce Revely. For generations, Revely's family has lived in the Tennessee Town neighborhood, a historic African American community in Topeka. Revely's son, Wesley, was McHenry's best friend before he died from complications related to sickle cell anemia. Joyce talked with McHenry about her experience growing up in Topeka.



#### Kelsie Gonzalez and Katherine Sawyer

Gonzalez interviewed Sawyer, her grandmother. Sawyer discussed her childhood experience of the long, crowded bus rides to segregated schools. She also talked about what it was like to testify during the *Brown v. Board* trial, the only child called to do so. Her granddaughter provided insight into the contemporary experience of blacks in Topeka and continuing challenges.



Dale Cushinberry and J.B. Bauersfeld

J.B. Bauersfeld interviewed his former high school principal, Dale Cushinberry. Cushinberry discussed the African American community pre-and post- *Brown* and how it felt to attend a newly integrated school. Bauersfeld spoke about his experience going to school in the 1990s at Highland Park, a predominantly African American school in Topeka.



Madison Wallace and Darren Canady

Darren Canady, English professor at the University of Kansas and Topeka High alum, interviewed Madison Wallace, a graduating senior in 2014. Wallace is a theater enthusiast and Canady is an accomplished playwright. The two compared their high school experiences in Topeka, and explored how race and integration continue to be a part of the education system and Topeka's social structure.



Duane Pomeroy and Janel Johnson

Duane Pomeroy, a former USD 501 school board member, interviewed Janel Johnson, current USD 501 school board president. As a school board member in the 1980s, Pomeroy was listed as the defendant in a class action lawsuit against the district for failure to comply with the requirements of *Brown v. Board*. The case was nicknamed Brown 2. The two talked about their roles as school board president and their expectations for the future.



Pastor T.D. Hicks and Pastor Tobias Schlingensiepen

Tobias Schlingensiepen, a pastor at the First Congregational Church, interviewed T.D. Hicks, pastor at the Antioch Missionary Baptist Church in Topeka. The two have taken on several projects together to address persistent challenges of issues of race in Topeka.

The stories are now archived in the Library of Congress in Washington DC, the Topeka Shawnee County Public Library, and the Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site. The two local organizations will use the interviews for future public programs, listening parties, exhibitions, teacher seminars, and expanded curriculum for classroom use.

Kansas Public Radio also received copies of the interviews, edited them into two-minute episodes, and aired twelve of the eighteen during the winter months of 2015. The edited interviews will soon be on the KHC website while all resources will be made easily available for schoolchildren, teachers, researchers, and the general public. The findings, and importance of these reactions, will resonate nationwide.

## Public Impact: Numbers and Anecdotes

A summary of the number of people involved in the *Sixty Years of Brown* project:

Oral History Interviews	36
Training and Opening reception	45
Interview on <i>I've Got Issues</i> program, KTWU local public television	16,000
Interview on <i>Central Standard</i> program, KCUR Kansas City Public Radio	8,000
Feature on <i>Sunflower Journeys</i> program, KTWU local public television	16,000
Feature on <i>KPR Presents</i> program, Kansas Public Radio	850
Twelve weeks of Topeka StoryCorps on Kansas Public Radio	10,200
Total reach (so far)	51,131

Anecdotal evidence of impact:

“I think the legacy of this project is that we took the temperature of our community. We gained a clearer understanding of people living in the era of Brown – the inside story – but also a clearer understanding 60 years later. By making *Sixty Years of Brown* an intergenerational project, we were able to capture the **then** and **now** about Topeka. This temperature check will serve us again when we reconsider in the future how little or far we as a community have progressed.”

Donna Rae Pearson, Local History Librarian, Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library

“The project gave us new knowledge about the everyday life of Topeka during the time of *Brown v. Board of Education* and after...Something I could not find or read about in any text. I could hear the emotion in their voices and I heard stories that have never been recorded in history books. I have a new perspective and one that I will be able to share with visitors.”

Nick Murray, Education Specialist, Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site

In what was arguably the most important Supreme Court decision of all time, Topeka helped break down barriers of hate, ignorance, and bigotry to create a better world. Our participation [in this project] should [be] a constant reminder that the struggle for equality for all is not a battle that is ever won but an approach to life we all must continue to pursue...”

Nathan Schmidt, Topeka city council member

“This [Topeka] StoryCorps series [on Kansas Public Radio] is the best thing to have happened among archives, libraries, museums, and the general public since the adoption of the Dewey Decimal system – Imho. Whoever developed this idea is deserving of greater public acknowledgement and praise. I am convinced within these memories is a formula which can lead humanity away from more violent communication...and toward an elevating dialog...it could happen...could too.”

Mike Watow, Facebook post, after a Topeka StoryCorps interview aired, Winter 2015

## Financial Structure

Bringing StoryCorps to Topeka was the major expense for the *Sixty Years of Brown* project. For three days of interviews, StoryCorps charged \$10,500. The Kansas Humanities Council was the fundraiser for the project and raised the needed funds from Topeka business, foundations, and individuals. Outside funding was secured from local businesses and organizations:

Security Benefit	\$ 2,500
Capitol Federal Foundation	\$ 2,100
Greater Topeka Fund	\$ 1,500
Westar Energy	\$ 1,000
Fairlawn Plaza Shopping Mall	\$ 1,000
Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library	\$ 1,000
Brown v. Board National Historic Site	\$ 1,000
Private Contributions	\$ 453
<hr/> Total raised	<hr/> \$10,553

### Cost Share Breakdown

The four partner organizations donated staff, time, and resources including facilities, equipment, the opening reception, supplies, training, publicity, and promotions:

Kansas Humanities Council	\$ 6,105
Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library	\$ 4,417
Brown v. Board National Historic Site	\$ 3,310
Kansas Public Radio	\$36,300
<hr/> Cost Share Total	<hr/> \$50,132

### In conclusion:

The *Brown v. Board of Education* decision is a defining moment in American history. Although Topeka is the city most closely associated with the 1954 decision, the legacy and obligations of *Brown* belong to all Americans. The Kansas Humanities Council was honored to create, develop, and coordinate this project and to do our part to keep the significance and relevance of the Brown decision on the minds of today's Kansans. *Sixty Years of Brown* encouraged important, personal discussions about race and illuminated the conditions of contemporary life in Topeka, Kansas post-Brown.

### **Contact Information:**

Julie Mulvihill  
Executive Director  
Kansas Humanities Council  
[julie@kansashumanities.org](mailto:julie@kansashumanities.org)  
785-357-0359  
[www.kansashumanities.org](http://www.kansashumanities.org)

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION for the FEDERATION WEBSITE

**Topeka StoryCorps: Sixty Years of Brown** was a city-wide, intergenerational oral history project that explored the legacy of *Oliver Brown et al. v. the Board of Education of Topeka*, the landmark Supreme Court case that desegregated public schools. Central to the oral histories were the questions: *Sixty years later, what does the Brown case mean to Topeka? How is it remembered?* The Kansas Humanities Council created and developed the project.

LINKS TO PROGRAM INFORMATION about the Kansas Humanities Council and the Topeka StoryCorps project

- [www.kansashumanities.org](http://www.kansashumanities.org)
- <http://kansaspublicradio.org/blog/kpr-staff/storycorps-voices-topeka-60-years-after-brown-v-board-education>
- <http://kansashumanities.org/?s=StoryCorps>
- <http://storycorps.org/60-years-after-brown-v-board/>
- <http://www.neh.gov/divisions/fedstate/featured-project/storycorps-comes-topeka-kansas>
- <http://cjonline.com/news/2014-05-09/storycorps-project-document-long-lasting-effects-brown-v-board>

IMAGE FOR FEDERATION WEBSITE

*Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.*

