

Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher

Her son, Bruce, tells the story of his pioneering mother who became the first African-American to attend OU's School of Law.

Chapter 01 - 1:07

Introduction

Announcer: In 1946, the University of Oklahoma College of Law denied admission to Ada Louis Sipuel Fisher because she was African-American. The OU Law School was an all-white law institution in a town where African-Americans could work and shop as long as they got out before sundown. Oklahomans were determined to support their segregationist constitution but equal to that determination was that a black Oklahoman who had survived slavery to stake a claim in the territory.

OU's denial to Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher became a test case organized by the NAACP to go all the way to the US Supreme Court, and as precedent, strike another blow against separate but equal education. The story ends with Ada Lois becoming a regent of the very university that had once denied her admission.

Her son Bruce is the storyteller, as he passes on what he heard about this landmark test case at his mother's knee. Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher was seventy-one when she died of cancer in 1995.

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Chapter 02 - 4:20

A Cotton Field Birth?

John Erling: My name is John Erling and today's date is October 22, 2015. Bruce, state your full name, please.

Bruce Fisher: My name is Bruce Travis Fisher.

JE: And your middle name comes from?

BF: Well, actually more than just my middle name. My grandfather on my father's side was named Travis Fisher and he was a minister. In fact, he was a Baptist moderator for the Chickasha District, so he was one of the top people in the Baptist Convention.

On my mother's side, her father's name was Travis Bruce Sipuel, TB Sipuel, so I inherited my middle name from both of my grandparents and my first name from my grandfather on my mother's side.

JE: Your date of birth and your present age?

BF: 3/14/52, I am sixty-two years old.

JE: Where are we recording this interview?

BF: In Oklahoma City on Springlake Drive. My parents, when they bought the house in 1962, it was a predominantly white neighborhood. We were the second African-American family to live in this area.

JE: We are in the home where Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher lived.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Where were you born?

BF: I was born in Chickasha.

JE: Your mother's name?

BF: Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher. My father's name was Warren W. Fisher.

JE: Where was your mother born?

BF: Chickasha, Oklahoma.

JE: And your father?

BF: Well, it's kind of sketchy with my dad, I mean, he says that he was born in a cotton field. My dad was born in 1919, and so it was some place in Oklahoma, but I forget which area. It was in southwest Oklahoma. And he traveled around and picked cotton.

JE: Then about you, your education was in Chickasha?

BF: Mom says I was born in the hospital in Chickasha, which is very unusual if that were true. I've got a first cousin, my mother's sister, Helen Huggins, has a son and he and I are three days apart. He was born at home on First Street. We lived at 605 South First Street in Chickasha. It was mostly common for people to be born at home in those days because we African-Americans could not be treated in hospitals. I mean, that was still the days of segregation.

But she says that I was born in the hospital, which was, again, extremely rare.

JE: Well, we'll have to go with her because she was there.

BF: (laughing) To digress for a second, Mom used to tell this story. My grandmother was so light-complected, she was more white than black, she was in the hospital one time and my mother went up to see—Mom told this story all the time—after Mom visited my grandmother and left, she says that there was another lady in the room, a white lady in the room, and she said, "Oh that was so nice of you to be so kind to the little colored girl that was here."

JE: Yeah.

BF: (laughing)

JE: We have more on that we'll talk about. But then your education in Chickasha was?

BF: From the first grade until the third grade I was in Chickasha. And then in the third grade is when I moved to Oklahoma City.

The reason that occurred is because my sister and I lived with my grandparents up until that time. Mom and Dad were in Oklahoma City trying to get established. Mom was between practicing law and getting a job, eventually, at Langston. My dad worked at Tinker Field. But up until the third grade, I lived in Chickasha with my grandparents.

From the third grade I went to school at Edwards Elementary School. We lived at 1129 Belvedere Drive in Carverdale Addition. Not far from there was a school called Edwards Elementary School, and that's where I went to school from the third grade up until the sixth grade. In 1962, we moved to Springlake Drive in the Parkers State area in Oklahoma City. We were the second African-American family to live on Springlake Drive. That enabled me to go to the Northeast High School. That was in the Northeast residential area so I went to Northeast High School.

That was during the time that the dentist filed a lawsuit, in fact, Alfonso Dowel (sp?) filed a lawsuit because he wanted his son to go to Northeast, but they lived in Forest Park and the residential boundaries, that would have been the area that he would have had a choice to go to. But for some reason he was denied and they filed a lawsuit, which led to the eventual Finger Plan in Oklahoma City busing, in other words.

But I was there in 1962. Seventh grade I started at Northeast High School and I was at Northeast from the seventh to the twelfth. After I graduated from Northeast I went to Langston University, from 1969 to 1973, '73 I was accepted on a Fulbright A scholarship to study in West Africa.

After returning from Africa on the Fulbright scholarship, I then moved to Houston, Texas, where I attended college at Texas Southern University and I received a Masters in history at that time.

Chapter 03 - 5:45

A Matter of Black and White

John Erling: I'm using, for much of my research here, the book that your mother wrote, the autobiography of Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher, and the title of it is *A Matter of Black and White*. Let's establish, you helped her write that book?

Bruce Fisher: Yes.

JE: Tell us how you were involved.

BF: Actually, Mom started writing this book in the late '80s. After my dad died in 1987, that became Mama's primary interest. She wanted to write this autobiography. So she would work on it for awhile and then stop, work on it for awhile and stop. In 1993, I began to work with her on the book.

The way we would do it is she would think about something that happened, or I would go to the Historical Society and find things in the newspaper. I would come home and show her the newspaper and say, "Do you remember this?" And she would talk about it. Because Roscoe Dunjee was really the architect behind the plan. And he would document every aspect of the case, so I knew I had a good record to work with.

So I started just going through the *Black Dispatch*, and everything I saw pertaining to her, I'd make a copy of it. So it would kind of follow that path. I would then record, we had a recorder, tape recorder, and she would talk about the newspaper article. I would transcribe it and then bring it back to her. She would edit it and so forth. And that's how we wrote the book.

JE: Let's talk about her parents. Her father, Travis B. Sipuel.

BF: TB Sipuel.

JE: I understand he came from near Columbus, Mississippi. Born there, and he was a minister. What can you tell us about him?

BF: When Mom first became the plaintiff and they filed the lawsuit, that same summer her dad died, TB Sipuel died. So I didn't get a chance to meet him at all. I just heard stories about him. The thing that I remember most is that he became the overseer of the Holiness Church. And in that capacity he was the head bishop, the only bishop, the top bishop in that church organization, which made him a very influential man. So he was independently secure from anyone firing him or anything like that.

I didn't know him very well, but I know that he had a reputation of being a very important guy.

JE: And then her mother, your grandmother—

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Martha Bell Smith, did you have any recollection of her?

BF: Oh yeah. Martha Bell Smith Sipuel, when she married my grandfather became Sipuel. As I said earlier, from the time I was born until the third grade I lived in Chickasha with my grandmother. We called her Big Mama. That was our life. I saw my parents on some weekends. Generally about once or twice a month, Mom and Dad would come from Oklahoma City to visit. During the summers I would get to go stay with them but they were preoccupied with trying to get established in Oklahoma City. So we lived with my grandmother until that time.

I didn't realize this at the time, I knew people treated my grandmother special, but my grandmother had a lot of clout in the African-American community. An example would be that I was not old enough to go to school, but we lived right across the street from Lincoln School, which was the African-American school in Chickasha. My sister is a few years older than I so she was in school. But every day I would get up and put on my clothes and go to school just like I should have been in school. But I walked the halls.

And eventually, the principal got with my grandmother and they were able to get me in school a year earlier. Because I wanted to go to school. So my grandmother was a very influential person in Chickasha.

JE: Now, I'm pursuing this because I think it plays into the story. She was very light-colored.

BF: Absolutely.

JE: And why was that?

BF: She was the produce of a slave ancestry in Arkansas, and my great, great grandmother, so the story goes, was the second wife, you might say, to Captain Smith, they call him Captain Smith, who was the white man who was the owner of the property that they lived on. This was not during slavery, but in Arkansas, at that time, it was almost like slavery. My grandmother was very light-complected. To look at her you would not know she was an African-American, but in Oklahoma, all you needed was one drop of African blood and you were considered black. So no matter that my grandmother was more white than black, she was still designated as being black. But you couldn't tell it to look at her.

And what shocked me was because, you know, I grew up with my grandmother up until the third grade and she lived with us until she died when we moved to Oklahoma City, I never paid any attention to it. I was in my office at the Historical Society one day and Vicky Miles came through. She and I had been friends for a long time, in fact, we were on that trip to Africa together, Fulbright A scholarship.

She looked at the picture of my grandmother on my desk and said, "Oh, who is this white lady?"

And I said, "That's not a white lady, that's my grandmother."

And my grandmother and my mom used to talk about how when traveling sometimes they would have difficulty because my grandmother would be sitting in the colored section of the train and they would ask her to move. But she said she wasn't moving, so she had some problems sometimes with the fact that she was more white than black.

JE: So then, both your mother's parents actually came from slaves? Your grandfather was a son of slaves.

BF: So they say.

JE: Yeah.

BF: My mother says that he was very secretive about his past, so it only came out in bits and pieces. We thought because of the unusual name that it would be, you know, easy to kind of trace his ancestry, but it has not proven to be so.

Chapter 04 - 5:21

Tulsa Race Riot

John Erling: Eventually your grandparents came to Tulsa, I believe, in 1918, coming from Dermott, Arkansas.

Bruce Fisher: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: There they became quite active and organized in North Greenwood Church of God in Christ.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: You can describe what Greenwood was like at that time.

BF: From my perspective growing up, I would hear Mom talking about this thing called the Tulsa Race Riot. It went in one ear and out the other ear because hearing stories around the kitchen table or hearing stories while traveling in the car, she would talk about Roscoe Dunjee and Thurgood Marshall and these kind of things, but there was no reinforcement of this stuff in school. Nobody else was talking about it so I didn't pay a whole lot of attention to it.

But what I do remember Mama saying was that the reason my grandparents moved to Chickasha was because of the Tulsa Race Riot in 1921. She says that that was why they left, but it didn't register with me until I was working at the Oklahoma Historical Society and began to do research. Don Ross and some other people, the Commission was begun and Bob Blackburn asked me to go and sit in for him at the Commission meeting on one occasion. And then it all began to make sense to me.

But I was no different from most people, because most people didn't know anything about the Tulsa Race Riot. So when my mom would talk about it, it kind of went in one ear and out the other, until that occurred. Until I started acting as a representative for Bob on the Commission.

JE: And you were how old at that time?

BF: Oh, heck, I was an adult, I mean, I was grown.

JE: So you didn't hear about it in your school, whites didn't hear about it in their school, and it was not appearing in history books.

BF: No. But my mom would talk about the fact that one of the incidents that occurred during the riot itself, they attempted to get my grandmother *out* of the Greenwood area,

Greenwood being the African-American community that was raised during the Tulsa Race Riot. Again, because my grandmother was so light-complected that they thought she was white, and wanted to get her out of the area. But that's stories that I heard.

JE: But life was great on Greenwood, it was the black Wall Street and life was good until that all ended May 31, 1921. I believe your grandfather was actually rounded up by the militia.

BF: Yes, so the story goes. You know, that's the story that I heard that he was interned in one of the areas like all the other black people were, so he was treated no differently. But it caused him to leave Tulsa and move to Chickasha. And Chickasha was where both my mother and my uncle and my aunt were born.

JE: Then he was actually brought to a holding pen in Tulsa's McNulty Park. They had a house, also, didn't they? Travis, TB, as you call him, and Martha?

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: They had a little house there.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative), yes.

JE: And what happened to it?

BF: Well, it was burned down. The house was destroyed, the church was destroyed, all of it was destroyed. They moved from there to Chickasha.

Now, keep in mind, what you are saying and reading about was not common knowledge. I mean, no one was talking about the Tulsa Race Riot. That would come up very seldom. What's interesting from my perspective was it wasn't talked about a whole lot at all. I found that to be strange because my mother and father talked about everything. It was interesting to me that I didn't hear much about it as a child, except for these few references from time to time that they were mentioning.

JE: And if whites didn't talk about it, they wanted to cover it up, you would have thought blacks might have been more interested in talking about it and—

BF: And making sure that the story got told.

JE: Right.

BF: And just was not the case. Mom was one of the few people that actually talked about it. She talked about it in class. She taught about it as a professor at Langston University. So students that took classes from her, including me, I had a chance to do that when I was in college too. But if you were a student of hers you got exposed to the Tulsa Race Riot. And probably that's the only place you got exposed to it. Nobody was talking about it. It was not in the books so how would you be talking about it?

But Mom did not teach history from a book, in the first place. She created her own syllabus, that's why people loved her class so much. She talked about the real history.

JE: Well, yeah, not too many professors were that close in blood to the race riots.

BF: Correct.

JE: So she had a feeling of it.

BF: In the same way that she told stories about the guy that was hung in Chickasha.

JE: And we'll get to that here in a moment too. Dick Rowland, of course, was the man—

BF: In Tulsa.

JE: ...in the elevator and that's what spun off the Tulsa Race Riot, how he may have touched the elevator operator and we still don't know that.

BF: Well, then, you know, I had a chance to serve in Bob's place at some of the Tulsa Race Riot Commission leaders, and what happened in the elevator, there were more than one interpretation of what happened in the elevator. That was one of them.

JE: Right. Your mother didn't say that her parents talked about it much to her, did they? If your mother didn't talk to you, she didn't get it from her grandparents either, did she?

BF: No, but it became obvious that my mother knew a lot about the Tulsa Race Riot. She wouldn't have gotten it from anyplace else but my grandparents because it was not talked about in the newspaper. It wasn't something she learned in school, so the details she would talk about had to have come from my grandmother.

JE: Your grandparents talked more to her about it than she talked to you about it.

BF: Yes.

Chapter 05 - 7:10

Chickasha, Oklahoma

John Erling: So then your grandparents moved to Chickasha and life begins to be good there?

Bruce Fisher: It began to be good. My grandfather was the bishop in the Church of God in Christ at a time when there was only one bishop, and that was him. He had a car (laughing). My father was a friend of the family at the time and he was a part-time chauffeur for my grandfather, and so my grandfather spent a lot of time on the road. Life was good.

JE: But that was also a segregated county.

BF: Everything—

JE: Everything in Oklahoma was segregated.

BF: ...in Oklahoma was segregated.

JE: But it was graded county.

BF: Every town, every place in Oklahoma was segregated, because of the laws of Oklahoma. There were residential boundaries and African-Americans had to live in certain sections of town, usually across the track. There was segregation everywhere, in every facet of life.

JE: Known as the "colored" part of town, wasn't that true?

BF: Yeah. And, you know, I can remember in Chickasha going downtown with my grandmother, needing a pair of pants or something and my grandmother would take the pants and hold them around my waist. So I just thought that was the way you bought clothes. I didn't know that she was doing that because we couldn't try on the clothes. I just thought that's the way you bought clothes.

JE: Yeah.

BF: That was kind of the way our life was. But you know? On the flip side of it, I had no idea growing up that we lived in such a restricted environment. Because everything seemed normal to us. You know, living in the segregated African-American community you didn't see racism every day because you wasn't around it. It wasn't until I moved with my parents to a predominantly white area that I really felt the impact of segregation and discrimination and racism.

But growing up, you were insulated in the African-American community so you really didn't see it or feel it.

JE: Where did you move when you began to feel it?

BF: Springlake Drive.

JE: Right here on this street?

BF: Yes, actually on this street.

JE: Well, your grandfather was a bishop of the Church of God in Christ.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And then is it true that the whites broke away from that church to form the Assemblies of God? And that was in 1914. Apparently then the Assemblies of God grew out of that, and I can only imagine, that was *the* Assemblies of God that we know about nationwide.

So then, the firstborn of your grandparents, who was he?

BF: I don't know what his name was, but I just know that the first child was a son who died during birth, I think. Then my uncle, Lemuel, was the second child born to my grandmother. My mom was the third. And then my Aunt Helen was the fourth.

JE: And we can establish that Ada was born February 8, 1924. Overall, maybe you've already described it. What kind of town was Chickasha?

BF: It was a popular town, one of the more popular towns in Southwest Oklahoma. A lot of the military guys from Lawton would frequently come to Chickasha during the weekend. Chickasha had a reputation of being the place to go on the weekends for the guys, particularly out of Lawton. It was a segregated town, like they all were.

My grandmother and grandfather lived on the east side of the tracks, which was kind of the dividing line. During the later years, they began to live just west of the tracks, but it was a segregated town, so we knew where the ends of the neighborhood were.

JE: The Sipel family lived pretty well, I believe?

BF: Absolutely. By the time I came along, you know, they had cars and they had a cellar. There were two houses, 605 South 1st Street was where my grandmother lived, and where my sister and I lived with my grandmother. Just beside it was another house, which she also owned too. These things just seemed so normal to us I didn't think it was a big deal. And between the two houses was a cellar. A storm cellar. And we were one of the very few families that actually had a storm cellar. And again, two houses, who ever heard of that?

Growing up, it just seemed normal to us, but as it turned out, they were very well-situated.

JE: Few had telephones but the Sipeluels did have a telephone.

BF: Absolutely.

JE: I guess the neighbors would probably come over to use that telephone?

BF: Oh yeah, yeah.

JE: They had a radio?

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Weren't they—

BF: You know, when I came along I had a television so, I had a TV, a black and white TV when I came along.

JE: They were living on East Dakota Avenue?

BF: That was before they moved west of the tracks.

JE: Okay. So people would come to, I guess, the front yard, and sit around and listen to the radio.

BF: Even in my time. The time that you're describing when they lived on Dakota, I didn't see that house. I didn't know where the house that was. During my lifetime they were on 1st Street, and that's where they had the two houses with the cellar between them.

JE: During the Depression, neighbors would just help each other out, wouldn't they?

BF: Stories that I was told that was true.

JE: They'd share gardens and people shared, so was Chickasha a good town for your mother to be growing up in?

BF: The description she gave to me was that, again, they were mostly insulated from racist environment and those kinds of things. And she describes a very happy childhood and growing up. During that time she learned a couple of lessons she talked about all the rest of her life. One of those being the story about the Gingerbread Man.

JE: And what's that?

BF: Well, lessons that she would talk about and tell me about my grandmother included one occasion my mother, she loved gingerbread. And so, my grandmother agreed in the hot summertime to make her some gingerbread. So she fired up the woodstove and made her some gingerbread. Gave a piece to her and some buttermilk and a piece to my uncle, Lemuel, and he had some buttermilk.

My mother always admired her brother. She said Lemuel was by far smarter than she was, all his life. And he was athletic. She thought she had the best big brother in the world,

but he could be kind of a comedian also. And he told her, he said, “Lois, I can show you how you can have as much gingerbread as you want.”

She said, “How?”

And he said, “Bury it.”

So Mom dug a hole and planted the gingerbread in the hole. And he said, “Now pour your buttermilk over that and you’ll get a gingerbread tree.”

She did that and then he started laughing after he did that. And my grandmother was watching this whole thing unfold. And she said, “Lois, you and Lemuel come here.” She said, “Lemuel, that was a dirty trick you pulled on your sister. And I’m going to spank you for that.” She said, “Lois, I’m going to spank you too for being such a fool.”

Mom says that she learned a lesson from that, never be dishonest and don’t be simple. But my mom loved her brother, and that became real important later on when the issue of the law school came up.

JE: You said that she said Lois. Did they call her Lois as a child?

BF: They did.

JE: And it wasn’t Ada?

BF: No, they didn’t call her Ada.

JE: So she grew up being Lois?

BF: Well, and the reason I say that is that’s what I heard. I mean, that’s what my dad called her, and, again, they were childhood sweethearts. I mean, so that’s what everybody around her who knew her well called her. They didn’t call her Ada, they called her Lois.

JE: Okay.

BF: Now, those who knew her well called her Sip, S-I-P. Now, you had to be really a friend of the family to get that because that was my grandfather’s nickname, Sip. He didn’t like it if you called him that but that was the name that he was referred to by his close friends, Sip. And Mom was Sip also because of the Spuel name.

JE: You had to be Thurgood Marshall to call her Sip.

BF: And like that.

Chapter 06 - 3:18

A Lynching

John Erling: Now, something that had a profound effect on her life was the lynching of the nineteen-year-old black man in Chickasha. His name was Henry Argo.

Bruce Fisher: And that supposedly was the last documented lynching that occurred in Oklahoma. Lynchings were all too frequent in Oklahoma, but that was the last. They

called it documented lynching in Oklahoma, and it greatly impacted Mom. She told me that story too.

JE: She was only five years old when that happened.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: But still it was a major impact.

BF: That had a big impact on her. She didn't see the lynching, she was in the community—

JE: She felt it.

BF: ...and felt the lynching. And it was similar with my dad. You know, he talked about that in Southwest Oklahoma, where they pick cotton and other things, he talked about occasions when the families would line the lower part of their shacks with two-by-fours and when. And they heard the night riders coming they would all lay on the floor. So that they would have some protection from the bullets and things.

My mom talked about the lynching in kind of the same way. Those were the two stories that I heard about that greatly impacted me. And she said that she knew something wrong and the men were getting their guns together and told them to stay inside and everything. So, yeah, that impacted her greatly.

JE: Well, back then, of course, the Klu Klux Klan was a very powerful force in the States. They promoted that agenda of violence.

BF: Absolutely.

JE: Even whipping parties.

BF: Yes.

JE: So, here is Henry Argo on the morning of May 31, 1930. He went fishing and then later that day, a young white woman who lived near the fishing hole claimed that he had raped her.

BF: So the story goes.

JE: But she looked normal and she was not disheveled. However, the lynching took place anyway.

BF: Yeah.

JE: Just because there was a charge.

BF: Yeah. Again, she lived through that and that story she would tell to me that I remembered also.

JE: Well, she knew enough about it ahead of time. They said that she ran home and heard this whispering about what was going to happen.

BF: Well—

JE: So she felt that as a five-year-old.

BF: Afterwards she did. She didn't know exactly what it was at first, so she thought it was not something to fear but something to be excited about. And then when she got home and realized that this thing was the terrifying experience that was about to happen.

JE: So the NAACP was organized, I believe, in Chickasha.

BF: No it was organized in Oklahoma City originally in 1915. It was reorganized in 1919, and that's when Roscoe Dunjee took over and became the prominent figure in the NAACP. And the state was divided up into regions and Chickasha, Dr. W. A. J. Bullock was the regional president of the NAACP in this part of the state. So Chickasha, again, was a pretty substantial, prominent community and Dr. Bullock lived in Chickasha.

JE: This then is where Thurgood Marshall also enters the picture originally.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And he helped organize the NAACP there, I believe, in Chickasha. Is that true?

BF: There was a convention in Chickasha that he attended. I would hesitate to say that he organized it because it was already organized. But he came to Chickasha, and that's one of the first places that my mom had a chance to begin to hear something about this powerful and influential guy they called Thurgood Marshall.

Chapter 07 - 4:45

School Segregation

John Erling: Again, about Chickasha, there was a city park, Shannon Springs. It was for whites only. And the theaters, theaters where blacks would sit up in the balconies.

Bruce Fisher: Yes, that's interesting too that I never went to a movie theater in Chickasha. I don't remember going to a movie theater until much later in Oklahoma City. But those are the stories I heard about the theater.

JE: So we should say the State Constitution at that time would forbid the mixing of races in schools, African-Americans, blacks, all other persons, Indians, would be declared white.

BF: Yes. There was an organization called the Oklahoma Association of Negro Teachers. That organization was the African-American educational brain trust. And through that organization, teachers got jobs. African-Americans were educated. They had separate teacher organizations so there was always a dual system of education. Blacks could not attend school with whites. White teachers could not teach black kids, black teachers could not teach white kids. There was total segregation and separation of the races.

The organization that was in charge of the African-American education was that Oklahoma Association of Negro Teachers. But they were prominent people. I mean, growing up in that environment, for me, for a little while, we had great teachers. They were doing an excellent job of teaching African-American kids. Though it was total segregation of the races in education, but the teachers were doing such a good job.

So many of the teachers that we had during those times had went out of state to get advanced degrees.

So while it was a segregated environment educationally, trust me when I say that we were not hurting as a community from that segregation. Yes, segregation is bad, we all know it's bad. The teachers had less to work with.

JE: You weren't suffering any educationally?

BF: The teachers did not allow the lack of those same resources to be an excuse for not giving our kids the best education they could.

JE: Right.

BF: And they gave them a good education.

JE: We should note here that in Chickasha, of course, they went to separate schools. I interviewed Loretta Jackson—

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: She moved a separate school from Verden—

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: ...which was near Chickasha, to property near her house.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Near Dakota Avenue. That's heard somewhere else on this website: voicesofoklahoma.com., and she tells that story. She tells that she was younger than your mother.

BF: Yeah.

JE: But how she just idolized her from the very beginning and she was a big hero to Loretta Jackson.

BF: Yeah.

JE: And you know Loretta?

BF: Yes. The school was a barn at first, and I helped her move the school to Verden.

JE: You did help that.

BF: Yes. And helped to get a grant from the Centennial Commission. Again, I was working at the Centennial Commission and helped to make sure that we got this grant to redo the school. So the school was transformed from a school to a barn and then back from a barn to a school again.

JE: Well, it's a pleasure to talk to you because you were very instrumental in making that happen.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And as you know, when you walk into that it's just like walking into some kind of time machine of some sort. It brings you right back.

BF: Yeah.

JE: As you see these little desks—

BF: Yeah.

JE: ...where these children were.

BF: Yeah.

JE: And they were there because they couldn't go anywhere else.

BF: That's right.

JE: And I like the fact that she has written right on the front: Verden Separate School.

BF: Yeah.

JE: The students come to it now and she uses it as a teaching tool.

BF: Absolutely. But, you know, every town of any size in Oklahoma, had to have some kind of school for African-Americans to go. Lincoln and Chickasha was a consolidated school from first to twelve. And it was recognized as a very good school to attend. And throughout Oklahoma, from then and especially after the Brown versus Board of Education when integration occurred, two things happened. One is they closed most of the black schools. And the other thing is, they fired most of the black teachers. If you talk to any African-American elder who was around prior to Brown to see it happen, who was teaching at that time, they talk about how horrible it was that after integration they closed the school first. Then fired the teachers. And so, very few former schools exist.

But here's what happens. For many years, and still to this day, they have school reunions where the students of those schools that no longer exist, return to the town for a celebration. And Chickasha was the same way. Every so often the Alumni Association would have these things. So everybody would come from near and far back to Chickasha. It wasn't just Chickasha. To all these towns, and have these big reunions that they'd have.

But now, most of the people who attended those separate schools are deceased. And most of those organizations are defunct.

Chapter 08 - 2:45

Separate but Equal

John Erling: Separate but equal. We need to talk about that. You had separate public facilities, but not necessarily equal.

Bruce Fisher: Absolutely not.

JE: Even separate but equal pay phones.

BF: Absolu-

JE: I mean, that's how it got down to it.

BF: Uh-huh (agreement). First thing, you had separate transportation systems. I mean, the first thing they did, they created a separate waiting area, separate places to ride the bus

or to ride the train. Separate water fountains, separate telephones, as you mentioned before. There was another thing too most people probably don't think about when they think about segregation period. If we went to the store, and, you know, as kids we were kind of showed these things, how to do it. If we went to the store or went to the grocery store and we got in line to pay for something, if a white person came up to the register we would have to step back and let them be served first before we could be served.

Now, when you see that happen as a kid growing up, you figure, "Oh, that's just the way things are done." We didn't know it at the time but those were some of the negative effects of segregation and racism. Something as simple as going to a checkout line and you were taught to step aside and let the white people be served first.

JE: As you grew older and became, say, a teenager, did you still fight that?

BF: As a teenager I was living in this house. And I knew down the street there were three shopping centers. Some of them had it on the door, "Whites only." Living next door to me was a kid named Richard Pierce(?), down in that house right next door to us. He and I were best friends, but his dad worked in the oil fields. And when his dad came home his mom would come out in the backyard, "Richard, your dad's here," and he'd have to hop the fence.

But if we to the shopping center down the street they had some stores that had "Whites only," and I knew what stores I could go to and which ones I couldn't.

JE: Was your next door neighbor white?

BF: Yeah.

JE: And it was all right for him to play with you?

BF: It was all right with him. It wasn't all right with his dad, but it was all right with him.

JE: How did that make you feel? Did that make you rebellious or mad as a teenager? Because now you were beginning to say, "Hey, this isn't fair"?

BF: I knew it wasn't fair. I would often get chased home and Richard would run. I'd say, "Richard, why are you running?"

He said, "Well, they don't like the fact that I'm hanging with you so they're going to beat me up if they catch me too."

But growing up in Chickasha and before I moved out here, our communities were insulated so we didn't feel it, until we moved out of the neighborhood or into the predominantly white neighborhood. But growing up in schools, I mean, in Chickasha I had no feeling of racial discrimination because as long as you don't cross the barrier you don't see it.

JE: Then that was the same in Tulsa in the Greenwood, as long as they didn't come downtown.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: So they enjoyed that same kind of living that you did.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Even spent differently. Chickasha spent forty-seven dollars to educate the white students, only thirty-seven dollars to educate the black students.

BF: I thought it was less than that. And those are documented figures.

Chapter 09 - 2:13

Smart Mouth

John Erling: Your mother in school, I understand, had some discipline problems from occasion to occasion. Maybe they called her a smart mouth.

Bruce Fisher: Oh yeah. Yeah. You know, Mom used to always talk about that term, “smart mouth.” And how she used to get in trouble a lot because of that. What I saw and learned about my mom was how assertive she was. And she would tell me that growing up she would get in rock fights with her brother. Her brother and her would get in rock fights with the kids and stuff, and so, she was never one to run from a fight growing up. I mean, she’s always had that kind of personality. She would be with her brother and she felt with her brother, they could take on anybody. Even though she was the preacher’s daughter, which she wasn’t supposed to be doing these kinds of things, she was doing them.

JE: Well, that smart mouth, if that’s what we want to call it—

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: ...helped her because in high school she was on the debate team.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: In 1941, she was valedictorian of her class.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: She sang in the choir, she played trumpet. Did she pass on any musical skills to you?

BF: None whatsoever. And during my lifetime, I saw no evidence of her playing the trumpet. She would talk about the fact that she did though. I was greatly amused when I saw the photograph of her in a band uniform in Chickasha.

JE: And to show you how this goes on, the segregation, a black football team could not play on the field of the white team.

BF: Of course not. And what I heard, I heard my dad talk about, was how exciting it was to go and attend these games between rival schools. Chickasha had a reputation of having a very good football team. And she would talk about the fact that when other people came to town for the football game, and if it got dark they would turn on their headlights of the car so they could finish the game. And how much the competition was between their school and other schools.

The way she told the story to me, we're not like we were so deprived, but how much that they were able to experience in a childhood and an education that prepared her to be able to go on and do great things. So they never talked about it from a position of, "We were so denied of this," that was not the feeling that we got growing up.

Chapter 10 - 3:35

Lois Attends Langston

John Erling: Then she goes on to college in Pine Bluff, Arkansas.

Bruce Fisher: One semester.

JE: Arkansas A&M, just a semester. And why just a semester?

BF: She says, and I'm not sure what the research pointed out, but what she said was that she wanted to be back home, close to home, and wanted to be close to where my dad was. See, my dad and her started dating. Warren Fisher was the best friend of Lemuel Sipuel. They were best friends. That's what got my dad into the Sipuel household in the first place. He was a good friend of the family. Again, my grandfather would have him chauffeuring him around the state. So my dad was a good friend.

So, Mom wanted to get back to where she was close to my dad. I don't know what the research says about it but that's what she told me.

JE: Well, she's the best researcher. Right, right, right. But she goes to Arkansas A&M. She could not go to a public college here in Oklahoma.

BF: Correct.

JE: So she went out of state. And that was a black college then?

BF: Yes.

JE: Eventually though, she becomes a student at Langston University.

BF: Yes.

JE: And she marries your dad, Warren Fisher.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: March 3, 1944.

BF: There was only one institution of higher learning in the state of Oklahoma, that African-Americans could attend, and that was Langston University. The decision to come back home meant the decision to attend Langston. And so, that's what she did.

JE: By the way, Langston was named for John Mercer Langston. He was a black congressman from Virginia.

BF: Yes. And prior to then it was a colored, agricultural, normal something institution.

JE: Why did they name it after John Mercer Langston? He must have had some influence here of some sort.

BF: Well, not necessarily here but it's just like every community you go to that had an African-American school, it was named after some prominent African-American. That's why there are so many Douglasses, Frederick Douglass. There were probably twenty Frederick Douglass high schools in Oklahoma. Because the high school is either going to be named Douglass, Woodson, for Carter G. Woodson, Langston. A handful of schools that are all named after some prominent African-American. Lincoln, that was named after Abraham Lincoln.

JE: But I think Langston had good professors when she was going there.

BF: Again, making the best out of what they had. One of the stories that I heard a lot about was how the university was denied a lot of things and my mom decided on one occasion that she was going to force the hand of the officials to do something at Langston. She decided that she would sneak into the president's office and make a phone call to the representative for that area and tell him how bad the situation was. It led to getting sidewalks on Langston's campus. But she talked a lot about the difficult challenges of going to school at Langston.

And I experienced some of those too.

JE: You experienced them too?

BF: Yeah, some of those. When I was at Langston University you don't have the luxury of being able to call out for a pizza like they do if you're at OU. My wife went to University of Oklahoma back when Mom did, but you just didn't have a lot of the same things that were available at other schools.

JE: Did you go to Langston because your mother was there? Was that why? You could have, by that time, gone to any school in Oklahoma.

BF: When I would come visit my mom and when I moved to Oklahoma City with my mom and dad I would ride to work with Mom.

JE: And the work was?

BF: Langston.

JE: Langston.

BF: And so from the time I was in third grade and fourth grade I knew Langston, I mean, I knew everybody at Langston, so it just was a place that when I got out of high school I knew I was going. I had grown up at Langston, so it was a place I was quite familiar with.

Chapter 11 - 2:10**Lois and Law School**

John Erling: So she graduates and then she was thinking about law school.

Bruce Fisher: There were two things that influenced my mom. She had a lawyer in the family and my mom, by the time she was a senior, she was a militant already. She had fought for some changes at Langston as a student there and did something incredibly courageous that nobody else in the world did anything like. She could have suffered expulsion and everything else for it, which was sneaking into the president's office and using his phone to call the state representative to complain about conditions at Langston.

She also had talked with Roscoe Dunjee, the editor of the *Black Dispatch*. Roscoe is by far the most important civil rights activist in Oklahoma history. Roscoe Dunjee, by far. He is the most important civil rights leader in Oklahoma history. And he, by this time, was president of the state NAACP. And my mom, again, by this time she was a radical and she had met with Roscoe, so her instincts were that she was just not going to be deprived of things without complaining about it or doing something about it.

By the time she graduated there was somebody in the family who was a lawyer, she had seen Thurgood Marshall, had seen Roscoe Dunjee, and knew that Roscoe was trying to change things. And so, she, in her own right, was probably ready to do something. She wasn't just set on law school, but it was one of her considerations of what she wanted to do. And it was at that time when Dr. W. J. Bullock came to the house and wanted to talk with my grandparents and my uncle.

JE: Because he'd been to the state NAACP meeting where Thurgood Marshall laid out this strategy to challenge segregated education. And he came to the house to talk about that.

BF: Uh-huh (affirmative).

JE: The separate but equal.

BF: Oh yeah, Dr. Bullock?

JE: Yes.

BF: Yes.

JE: That outright exclusion would not pass muster in this situation, and what they needed was a black Oklahoman who was qualified to attend the law school. But it's interesting, you've added another layer here. Not only was she bright enough but she was already a militant, as you called her. And she was feisty enough.

BF: Absolutely.

JE: And so when they picked her for her brains, I don't know, they must have known too that back in Langston she was—

BF: That came after the fact.

Chapter 12 – 3:25

The Challenge Begins

Bruce Fisher: The NAACP had decided as a strategy that they were going to pursue challenges to the separate schools thing, the discrimination thing. Thurgood had decided, and this is what Mom told me, I don't know what the record says—being a lawyer, he felt that law schools would be more willing to look at the legalities of this and realize that segregation was bad and was contrary to the 14th Amendment of the US Constitution. He just felt that law schools would be the best place to challenge it.

So it wasn't just Oklahoma in which this strategy was being employed. They were looking for challenges to the segregation education in law schools throughout the country, because that's what Thurgood decided he wanted to do. It just happened that my mom was interested in being a lawyer, so there was a strange thing that all of these elements came to a head at my grandparents home when W. J. Bullock came. He told the family he wanted to talk with my grandfather, TB Sipuel, my grandmother, and Lemuel. Because Lemuel was the one that they wanted. Lemuel was the valedictorian of his class also and Dr. Bullock knew that. Dr. Bullock knew that my grandfather was independently financially sound enough that he couldn't be threatened of losing his job.

So Dr. Bullock had talked with Roscoe Dunjee and other NAACP officials and said, "I think I've got the man." They were looking for candidates all over the state of Oklahoma. My grandparents were not the only people that the NAACP were looking at. They were looking all over the state of Oklahoma. They were looking for the right candidate. Dr. Bullock knew the family well enough that he thought this might be the one. So he set up a meeting with my grandparents and Lemuel.

My mom just happened to be in the room. She said, it was kind of like, "Well, what y'all doing?" She just happened to sit there and listen to it.

Dr. Bullock explained to my grandfather and my uncle what was about to happen, that they were getting ready to challenge the University of Oklahoma Law School. And they wanted my uncle to be the plaintiff.

He had just returned from World War II. He listened to what they said, he thought it was a good idea, but he said that he didn't want to do it because he had just got through coming out of a fight that had postponed his life, put his life on hold for awhile to finish, and didn't want to get involved with something else that would take up a considerable part of his life.

My mom is just sitting in the room listening to this. And she said, "Well, I'll do it." And that's how she became the plaintiff because Dr. Bullock also knew about her and thought, "Well, okay, if we can't get the first Sipuel we'll get the second Sipuel."

Again, not talked about very much, but it was because my grandfather was not in a position that anybody could fire him. He was the key to this thing, the fact that he had three kids, all of which were extremely intelligent. He just knew that this family had the right stuff to produce a credible plaintiff to this case.

After my mom agreed to do that, then Dr. Bullock proceeded to ask for her grades and those kinds of things. And Dr. Bullock took that to Roscoe.

And Roscoe looked at and listened to what Dr. Bullock said and said, "Okay."

Then, Dr. Bullock had my mom go to the *Black Dispatcher* office on 2nd Street, to Roscoe's office. There he introduced my mom to Roscoe. Roscoe took one look at her, already knowing whether she was academically qualified, said, "Okay, you're the one."

John Erling: She'd been just six months out of college so she was ready for this.

Chapter 13 - 7:00

The Trip to Norman

John Erling: So the day to apply for admission at OU to set up the case, came, and Dr. George Cross was president. Can you tell us--

Bruce Fisher: Well, what she told me, was that after Dr. Bullock left the house he said he'd be back in touch. Over the next few months, she made several trips back and forth to Oklahoma City, talking with Roscoe Dunjee about the plans. And so, when the day came, it was in the second semester of enrollment, it was she, Dr. Bullock, and Roscoe Dunjee that made the trip to Norman to apply. That's when they went down and made their initial application to the university.

She talked about how Roscoe preferred driving the middle of the road and she was never comfortable with his driving skills. But what's interesting is, you're talking about an all-white town. At that time, Norman was a sundown town.

JE: Tell us what that meant.

BF: That meant that unless you were staying with a white family as a servant, all African-Americans had to be out of town by sundown. No African-Americans could live within the city limits of Norman, Oklahoma. So, in a nutshell, it had the reputation of being a very racist town. Not welcoming to black folks.

In fact, in the early years it had expulsions because there were black people living in Norman. And they were expelled from Norman. What that means is they were told they had to leave and their homes were destroyed and people were threatened. And so, the few blacks that ever tried to move into Norman in '20s and '30s were expelled from

Norman. So by the late '40s, when my mom was enrolling at OU it was well established that Norman was a sundown town and that blacks were not welcome.

But they went to make the admission application. You know, it's hard to imagine what kind of courage that it took. Here you've got probably two of the most courageous African-American men in the state of Oklahoma. You know, Roscoe had an incredible amount of courage. He was involved in many, many civil rights cases. He took many cases to the Supreme Court. And W. J. Bullock.

My mom, she was riding with some of the most courageous men in Oklahoma history. I used to ask her, "Were you afraid?"

She said, "You can't be around these kind of people and be afraid, they just give you too much strength."

JE: Then, Dr. Cross, who I've got to believe wanted her to be admitted and understood their story, rejected her based on the Oklahoma statutes prohibiting black students from attending state schools of Oklahoma.

BF: It—it—

JE: He knew he was setting it up.

BF: It was no secret that my mom and Dr. Bullock and Roscoe walked in the door. Roscoe had already called ahead to tell them he was coming. He was such a brilliant, brilliant and courageous guy. He had already called Dr. Cross and they knew that she was coming, they knew this would happen. Well, even the state regents knew it was going to happen.

The state regents of our education had already taken the position that they knew the NAACP was going to challenge segregation and higher education, they knew that. So they had already told George Cross to be prepared for it, and George had already prepared the letter.

Now, what most people don't know is this, George Cross, when he was in college in Wyoming, had a black roommate, so he was not in agreement with the segregation laws of Oklahoma in the first place. He knew this was outrageous. So, he, I think, secretly, well, we knew about it looking at his work since then, he was secretly hoping that she made it.

JE: Right. So we do have Thurgood Marshall, who, by the way, obviously became the Associate Supreme Court Justice, but he at the time, was the nation's foremost civil rights attorney. I've been calling her Ada, but should I call her Lois? Your mother talked to Marshall and to Amos T. Hall, who was from Tulsa.

BF: Um-hmm, um-hmm (affirmatives).

JE: Tell us about that story and that relationship.

BF: You know, Mom talked about Amos T. Hall almost as much as she talked about Thurgood. Amos T. Hall is one of the unsung heroes of the civil rights movement in Oklahoma. But he was a resident attorney that was chosen and he was out of Tulsa. I wonder about that

because in Oklahoma City you had J. J. Bruce, Bruce and Roy Ann's law firm; the two most prominent African-American lawyers in Oklahoma City. But yet, Amos T. Hall was the guy who was chosen by Thurgood or Roscoe or both to be the resident attorney on the case. He was the guy that was doing most of the work here on the ground in Oklahoma. My mom talked about him a lot.

JE: So obviously, when she was rejected, newspapers and radio would publish that story.

BF: After the initial visit with Roscoe, W. J. Bullock, and my mom, and they had the rejection letter from George Cross, they were waiting on Thurgood Marshall to come down and tell them what to do next. And because of a number of things that were happening around the country, and Thurgood got sick, and a number of other things, several months had transpired and nothing had happened. That's when Roscoe got impatient with the delays and he sent a letter to Thurgood saying that, "You need to hurry up and get down and let's get this thing filed because this lady's kind of neurotic. And we want to get this thing done before the same thing happens to her that happened to Gaines in Missouri.

What happened to Gaines in Missouri was there was a Supreme Court ruling in his favor saying that he had a right to attend the University of Missouri, but before he could even do it, he disappeared.

JE: Yeah.

BF: And again, we're talking about a state in which my mom saw the last lynching occurred. There was no certainty that she was safe. None whatsoever. In fact, things got so bad eventually that Roscoe told her to quit riding public transportation. And they had to drive her everywhere that she went.

So it was Amos T. Hall that escorted her down to file the papers in the District Court in Norman to get the ball rolling.

JE: Well, let's just follow up on Lloyd Gaines. His whereabouts remain unknown to this day.

BF: To this day.

JE: And they never did find him.

BF: That's right.

JE: So, there was fear for your mother.

BF: Absolutely.

JE: On the very same thing. It would take money to fund this legal battle, so they actually went out and solicited funds.

BF: Part of the strategy was knowing that my grandfather was the bishop of the Church of God in Christ. If he could get the churches involved there would be a source of funds to help finance the case. And it worked. My grandfather immediately began to solicit support from his church and through his congregations and allowed Roscoe to utilize the church as a source of helping to get the word out.

And once he did it in his church, then other ministers in other denominations welcomed the idea too. So they went from church to church, meeting to meeting, raising money for the campaign.

That's when my grandfather suffered that massive heart attack in the summer of 1945, and subsequently died. That's when everything could have been derailed completely.

JE: But he also gave a substantial amount to this fund, as a matter of fact.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: By the way, we were talking about lynch mobs, even Thurgood Marshall ran from a lynching.

Chapter 14 - 4:50

The Hearings Begin

John Erling: So now we have a court date, April 6, 1946. They went to the Cleveland County Courthouse. What happened on that date?

Bruce Fisher: Well, that was just the initial filing period and everybody was being prepared for this thing. And so, the judge knew that this was coming, and I think he was on his way fishing and found out that Mom and Amos T. Hall were preparing to file the papers. And so, I think he postponed his trip or something to enable the papers to be filed.

Strange as it may seem, all of these proceeding was not a secret. I mean, everybody was quite aware of what was about to happen. So they made the initial filing and then waited for the court date established that they would have the first hearing.

JE: The hearing opened July 9, 1946, and the hearing was to consider the petition and hear the state's response. I'm reading from her book.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: "Hall and Marshall stated her position that her application to the University of Oklahoma was arbitrarily and illegally rejected pursuant to a policy of denying to qualified Negro applicants the equal protection of the law, solely on the grounds of her race and color." That was the basis of this.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: So in court that day, 1946, mostly whites in there.

BF: Yes. It's interesting too because there were a couple of photographs of the courtroom that day. In fact, there were very few black folks in there, as a matter of fact. I'm not sure why but that was the case.

JE: Before Judge Williams and Amos Hall says Oklahoma was denying her equal protection of the law because it provided legal training to white persons in Norman, "While, I, because

of my race, was required to go out of state.” And then, of course, there would be the financial cost of a continuing segregation.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: This didn’t make sense so the state said, “Separate but equal was still the law of Oklahoma,” and pointed to the state’s segregation on constitution and statutes.

BF: Yeah, this was the first time that she had sat in a courtroom and heard these legal arguments. And she was so impressed with the logic behind it. I mean, she still was quite young, just out of college, for the most part.

JE: So she’s nineteen, twenty, twenty-one years old?

BF: Yeah. But she’s listening to these arguments and is beginning to feel the pressure of being the center of this thing. But she thought, after what she heard, that, “Wow, we’re going to win this thing!” Is what she thought.

JE: It seemed so black and white to her, didn’t it?

BF: Yeah. But this was when she first started to feel the pressure that this was generating. Also, this was the first time that you got a crowd of whites all gathered around to see what’s about to happen here. And I asked her, I said, “Now, did you feel any fear at all at this?”

She said, “No, not a bit.” And you know, she never, ever admitted to having felt any fear. But I certainly would have. I mean, I’d thought to be in the courtroom—but she thought they were going to win.

JE: That seemed so easy. But the judge ruled against your mother.

BF: Yeah, she said that just floored her. She said the argument sounded so logical. This was her first time hearing the attorney argue the case.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

BF: And wouldn’t be the last, but it was the first time she heard them arguing the case. It just mystified her that they could rule against her on the case.

JE: That was naivety there. When you’re sitting there it makes sense.

BF: Yeah.

JE: But then the overall picture was now beginning to filter down upon her.

BF: Yeah.

JE: So then, your father, her husband, Warren, he had been in World War II and he comes home. And then Lois’s father dies September 1946.

BF: Yeah. Now that was such an interesting time because my mom, to lose her father so soon after this case began, she loved her dad so much that this whole thing could have derailed right there. I mean, she could have decided at that point that she did not want to pursue this any longer and life could have taken on a whole different direction.

One of the potential turning points in the whole thing was when her father died. But she made a decision to keep fighting. And, you know, she talked about that a lot. Because

most people, if you read the story, you hear the story, nobody even knows about her dad dying. But that was a very pivotal point for her, whether to keep going or not, after he father died.

JE: Now, it doesn't sound like she was coaxed, like Thurgood Marshall and others who could have said, "You've got to keep going, you've got to keep going."

BF: Well, they were saying that.

JE: Yeah, but—

BF: They were saying that but she had to decide in her own mind. And that's when, I think, the case took on a whole new meaning for her. Because she knew, at that point, that she was fighting for something bigger than them. And it was more important to keep the fight going than anything else.

And then she suffered the same thing again when Roscoe got sick. But we won't go into that now.

JE: We should point out that there were whites who wanted Ada to succeed. Some from OU, as a matter of fact.

BF: Absolutely.

Chapter 15 - 3:40

Oklahoma Supreme Court

John Erling: I'm referring to the book, *A Step Toward Brown Versus Board of Education*.

Bruce Fisher: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: That was written by Cheryl Elizabeth Brown Wattle. How judges perpetuated the image of blacks as inferior. The Oklahoma Supreme Court unanimously ruled that "nothing could more expose a white man to contempt or disrepute than to be called Negro."

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: "Municipal ordinances were passed restricting the purchase of property by African-Americans. Oklahoma City's residential segregation ordinance was deliberately violated by a black citizen to set the stage for a court battle. At the trial, an attorney for the city openly appealed the violence. 'One thing is certain, if these people don't stop meddling with our ordinances there's going to be a lot of dead niggers around you,' argued the attorney to the judge, without reprimand."

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: I just enter that as a case in court here to show the attitudes of people, including judges, at the time.

BF: Yes. Alfalfa Bill Murray, the governor of Oklahoma, used the N word, so—

JE: He did, and Alfalfa Bill Murray also believed that blacks were good for service for bootblacks and so forth, but would not be good attorneys and doctors at all, when in fact, you had some of the best renown attorneys in the country coming here.

BF: Yeah, the president of Langston at that time was a Brown University graduate.

JE: Yes.

BF: Edmond Paige.

JE: We lay that as background that's going on.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And then, the Oklahoma Supreme Court scheduled a hearing for March 4, 1947. The issue was the state denying or providing this plaintiff's constitutional right to equal protection of its law.

BF: And that's when Mom got to see Thurgood in action for the first time. Did three things that gave the greatest impact on her was that State Supreme Court case, the US Supreme Court case, and then the second trip to Norman when Thurgood argued the next case in Norman. That's when she saw him and listened to him that just made her want to be a lawyer more than anything else at that point.

JE: Then on April 29, 1947, the State Supreme Court affirmed the decision of a lower court, which stated she could not be admitted. So they were back to square one.

BF: Again, how do you figure out those arguments of the highest court in Oklahoma, feel the disappointment of them saying no, and keep going? You've got your life on hold but you believe with these people around you are saying enough that you keep your life on hold and keep on pursuing this education.

Now, keep in mind, during this time her brother, he didn't say being a lawyer was a bad thing, he thought being a lawyer was a good thing. So during this same time, while she's trying to get in school, he's already going to law school. He's at Howard University.

JE: And Howard University is—

BF: Law school.

JE: In?

BF: Washington, DC. He ends up getting a law degree and coming back to Oklahoma before she even got in school. So I'm just saying that because she was looking at what her brother was doing too. So it was no slam dunk that she was going to stay on this plan to integrate the University of Oklahoma. There was a lot of behind the scenes things that were taking place and could have derailed this whole thing.

JE: She could have said, "I'm going to go Howard University too."

BF: Just like he did. Yeah.

JE: Exactly. To me, I think there's a crux to this that breaks down the segregation constitution. The court ruled the equal protection clause of the state constitution required equal

facilities must be provided. Upgrade Langston or build regional school. So that was kind of a place where you were pushing the state into a corner.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Because it was going to cost either at upgrading Langston or cost to build a regional school.

BF: Yeah. And this idea of regional schools would be several states coming together to provide these schools for African-Americans.

Chapter 16 - 2:05

Hurtful Words

John Erling: So Sipuel versus Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma, "Beyond that, the petitioner contends that the separate but equal doctrine is basically unsound and unrealistic and in the light of the history of this application should now be repudiated." So there we have the next thing we're testing. "And the lawsuit tested the meaning of our nation's constitutional quality of its conscience." Thurgood Marshall called to say that the Supreme Court had granted your mother's petition, even before the Supreme court heard the case it was having an effect. Letters were coming to your mother. Some were good, some were bad.

Bruce Fisher: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: One called her a "stringy-haired, tall, skinny, sallow-faced negress."

BF: Yeah.

JE: "Who was only a few generations from the jungles of Africa." How sick.

BF: Yeah. Letters were going to Chickasha. Mom talked about this one letter that just said something about nigger girl, or something. And the letter was delivered to our house. I mean, it didn't have any address on it or anything, but the post workers in Chickasha knew well enough who they were talking about that the letter was delivered to our house in Chickasha.

JE: Well, one letter addressed to Ada Lois Sipuel, Nigger, Oklahoma.

BF: Yeah, that's it.

JE: And it came directly to her house.

BF: That's it, that's it. But strangely enough, they had white people that even attended the NAACP conference in Chickasha. So Mom knew enough to know that everybody was not against her.

JE: The college paper, the *Oklahoma Daily*, wondered if she could maintain an acceptable grade average.

BF: Well, everybody did because, keep in mind, no African-American students had attended classes with white students since statehood. It was against the law. Nobody knew whether these rumors they heard about inferiority and those kind of things, were true. Even though, as mentioned before, you had a lot of black people from Oklahoma who would go out of state and go to the same white universities all around the country, get their degrees, come back and teach. They still thought that there was something inferior about African-Americans that would enable them to not be able to compete in the academic world with whites.

Chapter 17 - 4:30

US Supreme Court

John Erling: So, here we come, January 8, 1948, the case was set. Nearly two since she had gone to the registrar's office at OU. Amos Hall, Thurgood Marshall, and your mother walk up the steps of the US Supreme Court building. Did she talk about that to you?

Bruce Fisher: Yeah. My dad, at the time, was living in Rhode Island. And Mom was staying in Chickasha but she would go visit from time to time. And she happened to be in Rhode Island when Thurgood sent a telegram saying that they got the date and was going to the Supreme Court. She called and asked him if she could attend. And he said, "Absolutely." So she was there that day. That was a day that made the lifelong impression on her. Because to come from Chickasha, when this thing first started, and now to end up in front of the Supreme Court was just unbelievable. It had a huge impact on her.

JE: As I understand it, each side, the state's and your mother's side, each given an hour.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And were very aware of—is this your dog?

BF: Yes.

JE: What's your dog's name?

BF: Princess.

JE: Princess is trying to get in on this conversation. Thurgood Marshall was hardly interrupted by the judges. And Oklahoma state attorneys were interrupted many, many times, which revealed their frustration by the judges and the tone of their voice.

BF: Um-hmm, um-hmm (affirmatives). I can't remember her talking about how the case was presented. But she said she could determine from the questioning that the state was not winning the case. She thought that from the time she heard the arguments that Thurgood's case was so logical that they were not going to rule against them. But she had seen it happen before and was quite anxious to figure out how this was going to turn out.

But she talked about being with Thurgood and the lawyers. She went to the practice session at Howard University, the night before the case was presented. She said, "To be around all those lawyers who were testing strategies on how to present the case," she said that was a phenomenal experience for her to witness that in preparation for this case. I don't think very many people know that. But it was an awesome experience, she said, that night before.

JE: Then it took four days after the hearing before the court issued its ruling. So those had to be four agonizing days.

BF: Yeah, but as it turns out, pretty quickly in terms of Supreme Court how they work, that was very swift. She went back to Rhode Island after the case was presented and she lived with my dad up in Rhode Island when the decision was made.

JE: A one-page order that she was entitled to secure legal education afforded by a state institution. The court ordered that Oklahoma provide for the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment and provide it as soon as it does for applicants of any other group.

BF: Which would seem to suggest that if anybody is going to law school then everybody is going to law school. So she was quite excited at the decision and immediately caught a plane back to Oklahoma. There was a photograph of my mom at the airport being greeted by my grandmother. My grandmother was wearing this mink coat.

And Mom was so happy. Even on the plane she said people knew who she was. And that's one other thing, by this time, she is one of the most recognized African-American women in America. I mean, everybody knew who she was. She wasn't an actress, she wasn't a singer, but her photograph was in *Look* magazine, *Time* magazine, every major newspaper across the country. So when she got on the plane everybody there knew who she was. And when they got to Oklahoma City and were getting ready to get off, there were a crowd of reporters welling out there, taking pictures and everything.

She's fully expecting she's fixin' to go to law school. And that's when Roscoe Dunjee told her to be careful of what she says because there might be some problems.

JE: Well, Thurgood Marshall was happy, of course, but he was restrained because he said the battle was not over until she had actually enrolled. And he told her to return immediately and prepare to enroll.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And as you've said, newspapers, of course, across the country were carrying all this. The *New York Times*, "A move of startling suddenness." *Washington Post* quoted Oklahoma's Chancellor of Higher Education, Dr. Nash, as saying that, "The state would, of course, obey the ruling." The newspaper, *Daily Oklahoman*, conducted a poll resulting in 82 percent of the law school were ready to welcome her to their classes.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

Chapter 18 - 4:22**Sham Law School**

John Erling: But it appeared that Oklahoma might try to evade the court by setting up a sham law school somewhere else.

Bruce Fisher: Um-hmm (affirmative). And that's when my mom went to Chickasha and she said, seven days later, I think it was, she received a telegram saying that Oklahoma had just established the Langston University School of Law. And that it was open for enrollment. My mom, when she got off the plane, was expecting to go to the University of Oklahoma. She was not going to accept anything less than that.

So, once again, she had to make up in her mind what she was going to do with her life. And the decision was to keep fighting but not to attend the sham law school.

JE: I should say that then the Oklahoma Supreme Court issued its opinion, directing the Board of Regents for Higher Education to either close the law school for white students or to afford her and others similar situated educational opportunity in accordance with the 14th Amendment.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And they demanded that further proceedings must preserve Oklahoma's separate but equal system. They were still hanging on to that.

BF: Yeah.

JE: So the state attorney general issued a resolution ordering the State Board of Regents to establish a Langston University College of Law to be located in the state capitol and to be fully operational by the following Monday, January 26, 1948. Oh the folly in all of this.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative). Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Then they announced that several fourth floor committee rooms were to be turned into the new school. And the law library on the first floor would serve as the separate law school library.

BF: Um-hmm, um-hmm (affirmatives).

JE: And the state actually felt that they were setting up a better law school than the one at Norman. They announced three law professors, so registration was to be Monday, January 26, in room 426 at the state capitol.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: They actually thought they were setting up a better law school than a law school that had been established for years and years and years.

BF: They actually said that they thought that. Nobody in their right mind believes that.

Throughout this whole period of time, there were some people, including some African-

Americans, who thought that all of this was designed to get more funding for Langston University in the first place. She told me that there were some people in the African-American community and at Langston who thought that this was just a strategy to get more money for Langston. They weren't sure that she was doing this to really go to law school.

JE: Speaking of money, a fundraiser was set up again, they needed more money. Oklahoma City's Tabernacle Church emergency fund, seven hundred people turned out, raised seven hundred in cash and three hundred dollars in pledges.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: That had to make her feel good that the community was so behind her.

BF: Oh yeah.

JE: And then Judge Henshaw ruled that there was no ruling concerning the quality of the new school. The mere existence of a separate school was enough to present admission to the University of Oklahoma.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Judge Hall took exception and gave notice that there would be an appeal. So, here we're still plodding along.

BF: Yeah. That was really the big fight. The big fight came when they wanted to challenge the idea that the Langston School of Law was not equal to the University of Oklahoma Law School.

JE: Which was five decades old, by the way. So on Monday, January 26, 1948, she went to apply at the University of Oklahoma but was denied.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Because the law school was substantially equal to the University of Oklahoma Law School, they thought. The sham school opened, and guess what? No one attended.

BF: Before it closed there was one guy that—

JE: That's true, T. M. Roberts. He finally came to attend.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And then after the Sipuel decision, the University of Arkansas announced that African-Americans would be admitted to their university. So here's this frustration again on your mother's part.

BF: Yeah.

JE: When she gets to think, "Okay, now it's going to happen."

BF: Now it's going to happen.

JE: And here we go again.

BF: Here we go again. One of the statements Mom said Thurgood would always tell her is, "Girlie," because he called her Girlie, "Girlie, we're just building a record." That was always his phrase. "Girlie, we're just building a record."

So she said that disappointment was out of the question. If you knew my mom, you never heard her show any sign of weakness. I don't know what it was about her character, but as I think about it now, she just was not a person to ever think that this is not going to work.

Chapter 19 - 5:20

Separate but Not Equal

John Erling: Well, here's another part now that came along because when they said they could attend the University of Oklahoma but we'd provide equal school—

Bruce Fisher: After admission?

JE: Yeah. Then six black students applied for undergraduate enrollment. So they began to test it in six different programs.

BF: Well, that didn't just happen. Roscoe, again, he's the architect behind the deal. And when they made the decision to set up the Lakes law school, Roscoe told Mom, "Just hang in there. If they think they can set up that school overnight we'll see what happens when they have to build a number of schools like that." So Roscoe got the other six people and went to apply. There was Roscoe's strategy to make that happen. And the idea thinking was, "If you think you can build one school overnight, let's see you try to build a medical school and a graduate school and all these other schools."

JE: And so, then, they had a problem. Dr. Cross called Lloyd Noble, who was president of the Board of Regents, and they had a meeting and no one knew what to do. So we had Fisher versus Hearst, Judge Hearst and the decision went against Lois.

BF: But that was the court case, which probably had the biggest impact second next to the US Supreme Court. That was the case Mama talked about the most. Because that was when she saw all of the top lawyers and deans of school of law throughout the university come in and speak in support of her case, which was that there's no way that the Langston School of Law can be considered equal to the University of Oklahoma.

They brought Thurgood back to town, they brought Robert Ming to Oklahoma, the deans of all these other law schools came, and that was the one that really shocked her, when they ruled against her on that one. Because she could not see how in the world, after listening to those arguments, that they could consider Langston School of Law equal to the University of Oklahoma School of Law.

JE: And so, those who are listening, let me remind you again that we are in the home where Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher lived.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And your dog is barking at the postman who just came up to your house. And that's why she went into that. So that's all part of the deal of going here.

So anyway, they had to start at the district level all over again. And this time would have to prove that the school crowded overnight into a few spare rooms at the capitol. A school with one student was less than the equal to well-established law school chosen by 552 white students in Norman. And as you've already alluded, Thurgood Marshall led this group of black lawyers on this case.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: But to show you how bright they were and these attorneys, they still could not eat in Norman.

BF: Right. Mom talked about that an awful lot. That was one of her favorite memories.

JE: What did she say? How did they eat? What did they do?

BF: I don't know if that's in the research or not, but at one point while Thurgood was cross examining somebody on the stand, Mom's legal team that was doing such a good job of cross examining somebody, they were just ripping him to shreds. And finally, one of the lawyers said, "Turn him loose, Thurgood."

JE: And let him go?

BF: Yeah. Let him go.

JE: We've seen this suffering enough for today.

BF: Yeah, yeah, but then they said that, "Okay, now, where are we going to eat?" And they realized at that point that you've got all of these top lawyers around and nowhere in Norman can they eat. So they rounded up some change, and they had a peanut machine outside. They had to buy peanuts for their lunch and soda pop.

And Mom said that Thurgood told her, "Now, Girlie, I'm going to argue this case. But from on you're in charge of baloney sandwiches."

JE: But the next day, ladies of the church came along with sandwiches.

BF: Yeah.

JE: And, of course, these learned men couldn't stay in any hotels and so they stayed in private homes.

BF: Yeah. And, you know, you can go around Oklahoma City, to any function in Oklahoma City that has people who are older enough to have lived during that time, and you'd be surprised how many people have connections with this case. Because Thurgood and his team and Robert Ming and other lawyers before that stayed with them from time to time as they came to town.

I get approached all the time from my oldest talking about Thurgood was here, he stayed over here with us, or he came to our house. And Robert Ming came to our house, and just amazed at how often that it happens.

JE: Yeah. But, after all that was said and done, Judge Henshaw ruled that the Langston facility was substantially equal to the University of Oklahoma Law School.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Pretty amazing.

BF: Yeah. And again, he said, “Girlie was just building a record,” because he knew that he wouldn’t get justice in Oklahoma. He knew that.

JE: I’m reading from your mother’s book, just a paragraph here, and it shows her feistiness: Those men and this woman were neither extremists, agitators, or troublemakers, they were attorneys. And I wanted to become one. We all knew that the time for patience was past. We represented a race that had been in this country since 1619, before the Mayflower had dumped the Pilgrims on Plymouth Rock. Our patience and goodwill had earned us chains as slaves, scars as freedmen, and daily insults as second class citizens.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Man, that’s powerful stuff that she wrote. So, I think you talked about a bus. She rode on a bus with her friend and had to stand in the aisle.

Chapter 20 - 2:30

George McLaurin

John Erling: So then the attention was on the six who tried to enter the undergraduate program at OU.

Bruce Fisher: Yeah.

JE: Thurgood Marshall selected one for the test case. It was a fifty-year-old man, George McLaurin.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And the three-judge panel ruled that the state must either admit McLaurin or discontinue its graduate program in education for white students.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative). They were faced with the decision at that point, “Are we going to build separate schools for all of these people going?” And no matter what discipline they applied in—

JE: Right.

BF: That was kind of the nail in the coffin, because they knew they couldn’t produce schools for everything. McLaurin was an older gentleman, and though he admitted first, he did not survive to graduate.

JE: But it was decided that he was to be admitted, but that it would have to maintain segregation. So he enrolls October 13, 1948.

BF: And Mom talked about the fact that they made rules for them, certain doors that they could go in the classrooms, certain places that they could sit. They tried to maintain segregation in the classrooms by placing the black students either outside of the classroom or create some type of artificial separation between them and the rest of the class. And that was to make sure that they were separate from those classrooms.

Mom said that when they'd go to the library, they couldn't go through and look for the books that they wanted to do. They gave them a table to sit at and they could tell the attendants what they wanted and they would go get the book and bring it back to them. There were certain doors that they could go into. At the cafeteria they couldn't get in line with the rest of the students to eat. They brought out some steaming tables with food. They had a certain area that they had and they blocked it off with some kind of rope or partition around it to keep other students out and keep Mom and them in.

But, you know, Mom used to say that even in the cafeteria, you had students at the University of Oklahoma that thought it was so disgusting what they were doing that they would take it upon themselves to try to break down the barriers. So you had white students that tried to come into the designated area that they were eating at, and set their trays down and eat with them.

JE: We should point out that McLaurin was actually put in a broom closet. And he could peer out the classroom to see the front of the room and see the blackboard.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: So, in essence, George McLaurin became the first black student to attend the University of Oklahoma.

BF: Absolutely. That was in the fall of 1948.

JE: Yes.

BF: Mom didn't get in until June of '49.

JE: Right.

Chapter 21 - 5:05

"Colored" Chair

John Erling: Meanwhile, her case is tied up on appeal. Any time she applied she was referred to the Langston School until the sham law school ran out of funds and they actually closed their doors, June 30, 1949.

Bruce Fisher: It was only two weeks left before the school would have run out of money, but the summer session had already begun and, I think, that's when the courage of Dr. Cross

should be recognized. That he, risking violation of the Oklahoma law, told the admissions officer to go ahead and admit my mom.

You know, if people had really been wanting to get him they could have gotten him for breaking the law at that time. He let her in.

JE: Yeah, he even overstepped, not only state courts, but even his own board of regents.

BF: Yes.

JE: And he ordered her admission to be accepted on June 17.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And so, she attended then, two weeks late in an eight-week summer session.

BF: Yeah. She would always talk about the fact that had it not been for the white men in law school, she would have never made it. Because she walked in two weeks late, had no books, no nothing. And this was during the time when the separate but equal rule was still trying to be adhered to. So in her case, it was a little different than George McLaurin's case.

Mom said that they were sitting in the classrooms that were theater style classrooms. Her most memorable recollection was that they brought all the white students down to the front of the class. And then at the very back of the class they put one chair with a sign over it saying, "Colored." When she came into the classroom and looked around and she scanned the way the setup was and she saw that chair with "Colored" in it, she realized that that was her spot. And so she had to march up the steps and sit in the colored chair. And that's where she began her law school studies.

But during that summer session of 1949, she was not only the only African-American in law school, she was the only woman in law school. OU had other women in the school at the time, but during the summer session they were not in that class. So Mom was the only one there that summer.

But the men would take her outside under the shade trees and tutor her and share their books with her and notes with her and help her get caught up. She would not have made it, she says, had it not been for those guys.

JE: Hmm (pondering noise). You just think, "Oh, victory, victory, victory." And even to think, "Oh, I get to go into that classroom now."

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And then see that colored sign.

BF: Here we go again.

JE: Her instructor was Maurice Merrill.

BF: Yeah.

JE: Who had represented the state in opposing her admission and was going to lecture her on the meaning of the American Constitution. According to her he actually became a favorite of hers.

BF: I remember taking Mom to a dinner. At the dinner was Professor Merrill and he became one of her favorites. Her and Dr. Cross were always attending banquets and things together. He was a real special guy to her. She knew that he had done everything he could.

JE: Yeah, but as I understand it, somehow she never escaped the feeling of isolation. I mean, some persons actually question the abilities of blacks to cope and advance in the white academic arena. So she felt this, didn't she?

BF: Yeah.

JE: And when she would go to an empty classroom to study she sat in the front rows. And then when class was to begin, the white students came in and climbed the rows. So then she climbed the rows to go back up into the colored seat.

BF: Yeah, and there would be times when she would walk in and the "Colored" sign that was above her chair would be removed. What happened is, some of the students would come in and take the sign down and throw it away. And they'd have to put the sign back up again and all kind of things.

JE: Can you imagine climbing the stairs to sit in that colored chair?

BF: No.

JE: None of us could know that feeling. But she climbed for a lot of people.

BF: Yeah.

JE: It wasn't just her.

BF: Yeah, but here is also the time in which she recognized everything everybody else had done to help her get there. And that isolation you're talking about refers not only to physical isolation, but the fact that all of the hundreds of people that supported her, it was her job now to graduate. It was her job to succeed at this point.

JE: And she failed her first test.

BF: Yeah, that was the last one she failed.

JE: Yeah, right.

BF: Except for the other one, which was the first time she took the bar.

JE: I just want to read just a little bit again from her autobiography. This is her: African-Americans have traditionally been subjected to prejudice and bigotry. We've been stereotyped as Aunt Jemima, Sapphire, Uncle Tom, and Sambo. We've sat at the back of buses and up front in curtained off cubbyholes on trains. We have climbed stairs to the balcony in theaters. "Whites Only" water fountains and restrooms were everywhere. We have cleaned, cooked, and entertained in clubs and restaurants in which we could not be served. We were relegated to lowest level and lowest paid jobs, last hired, first fired. We fought to defend our country and make the world safe for democracy in a segregated army. We traded in stores that in some places did not permit us to try on the dresses and hats that we were purchasing.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Those were your mother's words.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Man, that's got to make you feel proud, strong, strong words.

Chapter 22 - 2:43

Lois Graduates

John Erling: So, she graduated in August of 1951, and Warren, her husband, did this with her.

They were a team.

Bruce Fisher: Oh yeah.

JE: When she's talked about that.

BF: But when she graduated it was the three of us. My dad, my mom, and me. She was pregnant with me when she graduated.

JE: Okay, all right, you were there. How cool, how cool.

BF: So she tells people that ask her, "Did your son go to law school?" She said, "Well, in a sense."

JE: And then you were at the party afterwards as well.

BF: Yeah.

JE: Now Thurgood Marshall challenged the state because blacks in schools sat segregated, ate segregated. Did the fact of the segregation violate this 14th Amendment? And the US Supreme Court answered with an unanimous, "Yes," on June 5, 1950.

BF: Um-hmm, um-hmm (affirmatives). Mom says that when they went home on that Friday the signs were up as usual. And when they got there on that following Monday the signs were gone.

JE: Yeah.

BF: And she moved down on the front row.

JE: She did move to the front row.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: So all this led to a little girl in Topeka, Kansas, by the name of Linda Brown. And it was what gave Thurgood Marshall precedence in Brown versus Board of Education.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative). Do you know, I think it was Cheryl Wattlely in her book that discovered in a letter that Linda Brown had attended an Ada Sipel Fisher rally during the time that Mom was trying to get in school at OU. And that's when she first heart about my mother.

JE: How about that?

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: So there was a tie.

BF: Oh yeah.

JE: And when your mother applied for admission to the University of Oklahoma in January of '46, all newspapers and radio shouted to the mountaintop that she was trying to enter.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: But when she graduated five years later, nary a word. The white media did not carry it. Only the *Black Dispatch* in Oklahoma City and the *Tulsa Eagle* reported the news. And she ultimately returned to the Langston campus and became a professor. She did some law work though, didn't she?

BF: Yeah, yeah, and I don't remember the cases but one of them that she talked a lot about was a murder case. A black woman in Chickasha had been accused of killing this guy, and she got her a life sentence and she thought that in Oklahoma, considering the fact that she had been found guilty of killing a white man, would have ordinarily have been the death penalty. So she thought that was a big deal.

She also fought to get an African-American admitted into the college in Chickasha. At that time, it was an all girls college. And this lady wanted to get in there and Mom represented her and got her in the school.

JE: Why would that have to be a fight at that point, since this was settled?

BF: Because the school would not admit this lady in.

JE: And she was black?

BF: Yeah. And Mom had to file a lawsuit.

JE: I thought you couldn't do that anymore after the Supreme Court—

BF: They did it.

Chapter 23 - 4:30

Lois Dies

John Erling: Then your uncle, her brother, died in 1961, of a heart attack.

Bruce Fisher: Yeah.

JE: And you have good memory of all that?

BF: Yeah. Mom thought about and reflected on years after that and she used to talk about it, how happy she was that she became the plaintiff and not him. Because she felt like had he been selected that he would not have lived and survived because Norman being a

sundown town, on the campus all it would have taken would have been one allegation of some kind of impropriety involving him and a white female. And it could have cost him his life. She knows that Oklahoma was not above something like that happening, so she was glad the way things turned out the way they did.

Because, even when she was in school, she couldn't stay in Norman school. Every day she'd have to come to campus, study, go to class, but leave before dark, just like everybody else.

My dad was working at Tinker Field at the time. And so, they eventually had a routine worked out where they would leave Chickasha early enough in the morning that my dad could get her to school, drop her off, go to work at Tinker Field, he'd get off work at Tinker Field, come back to Norman and pick her up, and then went back to Chickasha. Or do it when Oklahoma City. Sometimes they had places to stay in Oklahoma City, and eventually had rented a place in Oklahoma City and the same routine would occur. He'd have to come to school, drop her off, go to work, come back, pick her up, and then go home.

JE: Then her mother dies ten years later in 1971, and she died of cancer.

BF: In this house.

JE: She died in this house?

BF: Just like my mom did.

JE: Were you here?

BF: Well, no. My sister was here and some other people were here and I had left and gone somewhere. When I came back—

JE: That's when you came up to the house and saw the lights outside and knew that your mother had died. And she died of cancer as well.

BF: Yeah.

JE: This is understandable, it's tough for you to remember that. And when you saw those lights outside you mean like ambulance lights? Yeah. You knew that—

BF: My mom.

JE: Let me then just read here, she writes about the cancer in the book. She says: At this moment, only my family, my pastor, and a few close friends know of my condition. I remain fairly active on medication and radiation minimized the discomfort. Until my physical deterioration manifests itself I want to be treated as I always have been. How do I treat myself? I find that I was much more troubled by the earlier deaths of my loved ones than I am with the certainty and nearness of my own. I tell the few who know about my illness that I will have accomplished everything I wanted in this life when I finish this book. Because of my strong religious upbringing I look forward to life beyond death. Sunset in this life is sunrise in the next.

BF: It was in December of 1992, that I carried her to the doctor's office. I was in there and he told my mom about the cancer. They had been treating her for a heart condition. The cancer just kind of slipped up on them. We had been working on the book since '93, and it was

in December that she found out that the cancer was terminal. We got it out of them, they expected that she could survive probably ten months. So we knew she had about ten months.

By this time, I had quit my job at Langston and was just working full time with her on the book. We were in the last phases of the book. She knew she had about ten months to live, and we got the final copy to the University of Oklahoma Press in May. We'd gone back and forth with Danny Global on editing stuff.

JE: Um-hmm, um-hmm (affirmatives).

BF: They used to really fight about that. He'd take it out, she'd put it back in. In May, we got the book to OU Press and everybody was satisfied with it. And she did tell David Boren, he knew. He came to the hospital to see her. And he told her he was going to do everything he could to get that book finished in time for her to see it.

In July or August, they brought the galleys to her, the camera ready pages to her. She saw that and they were now trying to get it printed. And she died in October and didn't see the final book.

JE: Her husband died, your father—

BF: He had died much earlier in '87.

JE: In '87, of a heart attack.

BF: Yeah, in the backyard.

Chapter 24 - 2:12

Board of Regents

John Erling: As we've talked this whole story and how they tried to keep her out of the University of Oklahoma, in '91, she received an honorary doctorate from the University—

Bruce Fisher: Yeah.

JE: ...of Oklahoma.

BF: Yeah.

JE: Were you there for that?

BF: Yeah, um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: What a day.

BF: The lady from Walmart—

JE: Walton?

BF: Sam Walton, his wife also got one of those.

JE: Helen.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: At the same time?

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And then, the round robin, the topper—

BF: Yeah. Well, she was already serving on the OU Foundation at that time.

JE: Okay.

BF: And it was then that David Walters—

JE: Former governor.

BF: Former governor of Oklahoma, had called her and asked about appointing her to the board of regents. She told him, “No, thank you.” But George Nye tried to get her appointed during this time. But she’d have to quit working at Langston to do it because she couldn’t be a professor at one university and serve on the board of regents at another university. So she said no, she wasn’t going to do that.

But then David Walters called and talked to her about it and she said no. She tells the story all the time. David Walters came over here, I was here that day.

JE: In this house?

BF: Yeah, and he came over here and asked her one more time if she would do it. He said, “If the doctor says it’s okay, will you do it?”

She said, “Well, since you go through all the trouble to come over here to ask, you get my doctor to approve it then I’ll do it.”

So the doctor consented that she was healthy enough to do it, so she agreed to do it, but still reluctantly.

JE: It just so happens that I was at an event where David Walters was in Tulsa about a month ago. And he told me that story. Because I said I was going to interview you.

BF: Um-hmm, um-hmm (affirmatives).

JE: And he told me that story. He felt so proud of it, and he should have been.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And then she became quite active on it and took it on, it’s a serious job.

BF: Absolutely. I remember during the Anita Hill thing she would go to the board meetings with a button on saying, “I believe in Anita Hill.” She was still radical, I mean, Mom didn’t stop being who she was until the end.

JE: And then in ’93, Ada Sipuel Fisher Day in Chickasha. And since I’ve been to Chickasha, of course, they have the Ada Sipuel street signs there.

BF: There’s one of them right behind you there.

JE: Yeah, there it is.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And then she dies October 18, 1995. She was really only seventy-one years old.

BF: Both my parents died at seventy-one years old, ten years apart.

Chapter 25 - 4:10**Through the Back Door**

John Erling: So, as we look back on this, obviously, you're so proud and should be. What was the quality you drew the most from her? What did she teach you?

Bruce Fisher: Well, Mom, it wasn't so much what she taught me, it was what she taught to students and she taught at Langston University. She would always talk about the lawyers like Thurgood, James Nabrit, and Robert Carter and all of those. She said that these were social engineers. So she could do anything, contribute anything to the improving the people who fought for freedom and the rights of everybody. That's what she wanted to do. So she prided herself in trying to teach her students that they could make a difference.

And some of her students did make a difference. Melvin Hall, the guy who went on the board with her, was one of her students. Obeo Turay, who was the state representative was one of her students. She prided herself on being a contributor to social engineers, as she called them.

JE: We talked a lot about the '40s and early '50s here on her story.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And we wonder how far we've come, because here we are in October of 2015, and in St. Louis area, I heard today, the seventh black church had burned in the St. Louis area.

BF: Right.

JE: And they don't know who's doing it, but it's obviously a racial thing. And so, you kind of wonder, well, how far have we come?

BF: Well—

JE: I think as a nation a lot, but haven't stamped out that racist attitude.

BF: Well, also, this is the sesquicentennial of the Civil War. I mean, we're just 150 years away. Her dad was born in 1877, her dad. So we're not talking about a whole lot of time here.

JE: Right.

BF: And to think that 150 years after the Civil War an African-American is president of the United States, that is, that is unbelievable. So while we see some of these things happening, just horrible, horrible things happen, there has been an awful lot of progress.

JE: Yes.

BF: An awful lot of progress. Would we like it if we didn't have any backlash to the progress? Yeah, it would be really nice, but I think a lot about what I thought that Thurgood Marshall was trying to accomplish with his lawsuit. There were two strategies, you know, that I had a chance to watch from growing up. I had what Mom did in the courts, and what Clara Loper did in the streets.

Mom aligned herself with those who wanted to use the legal remedy of the courts. Clara Looper with the civil disobedience and the appeal to the consciousness of people.

So I had a chance to watch both of those strategies. And it took both of the strategies, and it's taken both of the strategies, but it was real interesting from my vantage point to see and know these two women, both of which were just giants, and to see each one have the courage to go down that path to achieve the same results.

You know, I developed the African-American exhibit at the History Center, the first one and the second one. I created this lunch counter at the Katz Drug Store. I was in the exhibit doing something one day and it finally dawned on me or something I remembered. When I was a kid we were living in Carbondale so it was around 1958, or a little before that maybe.

I remember we would do something kind of different in our family. We would have Chinese food. I thought everybody was doing it but now I know that very few people were doing it. But we would have Chinese food once a month or so. And we would all get in the car and go downtown and Daddy would go in the alley and go to this Chinese restaurant and come out with the Chinese food. We'd take it home, have a big spread on the table and have the Chinese food.

But it didn't dawn on me until I was at the History Center and standing at the lunch counter that we were in the alley. Dad did go through the back door. Not because he wanted to, but because he had to. And sitting in the car next to him was this lady who did this unbelievable thing, took this case to the Supreme Court, and she's sitting in the seat in the alley while he goes in the back of the restaurant to get the food.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

BF: Sometimes we make changes in one area and we think that we've done something really great, only to go and look at another direction and see that we haven't made much progress at all.

Chapter 26 - 4:25

Clara Looper

John Erling: Quickly tell our students that are listening, Clara Looper, what she did.

Bruce Fisher: Clara Looper led the first nationally recognized sit-in movement in America. It was 1958, at Katz Drug Store downtown Oklahoma City. She led fourteen youth to sit-in and that began to open the restaurants to all people. That was 1958, eventually it led to a national movement, and then subsequently, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, that ended segregation in public accommodations.

JE: So they just sat at that lunch counter and dared them to do anything to them?

BF: Yeah, because they weren't breaking the law, I mean, they just were there. But that's a huge story that has its roots here in Oklahoma, that you'll probably tell on another story.

JE: Yes. And I understand those fourteen students, she gave credit to them because had they gone out East—

BF: Well—

JE: ...they realized, well, they could eat anywhere out there.

BF: Yeah. Clara Looper was the head of the NAACP Youth Council. She was a teacher at Dunjee High School also, and she would produce these plays to have her students act out these plays. And that's how she taught was through doing things like that. And one play that she did was called *Brother President* about Martin Luther King. The NAACP officials for a national conference asked her if she would bring the play to the national conference and she said yes. So she rounded up enough money to charter a bus to take the kids and she strategically took them on the northern route going up where they could, for the first time in their life, experience going in a restaurant and sitting at a restaurant and eating for the first time in their life, staying at a hotel.

So they saw a whole different side of living that they'd been opposed to in Oklahoma. On the way back, she brought them through Mississippi, Arkansas, and back to Oklahoma. And then they wanted to do something to make a difference.

At that meeting, they discussed things that they could do and that's how they came up with the idea of doing the sit-in. And so she rounded up a couple of people with cars and said, "If y'all want to do this, let's go." She took them downtown and that was the beginning of the change.

At the 1959 National NAACP Convention there was a report filed by the Youth in Congress division that talked about the great success that the young people in Oklahoma had with the sit-in movement that led to the whole regional chain of restaurants changing their policy. And in that room were the students from South Carolina, Greensboro. They listened to what was done, went back to Greensboro, and they did it there. And then Greensboro since got the credit for being the first, but it wasn't. It was in Oklahoma City.

JE: Yeah. Well, I really want to thank you. And it's just really something to sit in this home where your mother lived.

BF: Yep.

JE: To tell the story. So, we've heard a lot about her. What would you like us to remember the most about your mother?

BF: That she had the courage to sustain her faith that the US Constitution meant what it said. She was able to get in law school, but most importantly, she was able to get out. Most of the plaintiffs and the desegregation cases, they succeeded in getting the doors open, but they don't succeed, in this case, graduating. Because she felt that if they had sacrificed

what they did to get ahead in school, it was her job to get out of school. She stressed that with all of her students that you've got to not only get in, but you've got to get out.

That, to me, I think is the most important thing. Because it was not easy to get in school, but once you were there, that's that isolation you were talking about awhile ago. I contend that more than the physical isolation was the fact that she had to study and graduate. She had to. And she did.

JE: Yep, she did. Remarkable story.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: There should be a documentary, a film, or something made.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Have people talked to you about that?

BF: Umm (pondering noise).

JE: I mean, it should be done. I mean, it has all the staging for that kind of thing.

BF: Um-hmm (affirmative). And got the players.

JE: Yeah.

BF: There's been a play but there's no movie made about Thurgood Marshall. He is one of the most important African-American figures since Frederick Douglass.

JE: Yeah. And many schools named after him as well. Marshall Elementary—

BF: Yeah, um-hmm, um-hmm (affirmatives).

JE: ...in Tulsa is named after him, as a matter of fact.

Thank you for letting me come into your home here.

BF: You're welcome.

JE: And visiting and telling the story. I appreciate it very much.

BF: You're welcome. Thank you for doing it.

JE: You bet.

Chapter 27 - O:33

Conclusion

Announcer: This oral history presentation is made possible through the support of our generous foundation-funders. We encourage you to join them by making your donation, which will allow us to record future stories. Students, teachers, and librarians are using this website for research and the general public is listening every day to these great Oklahomans share their life experience. Thank you for your support as we preserve Oklahoma's legacy one voice at a time, on *VoicesofOklahoma.com*.