

**Bertha Morgan**  
**Interviewed by Hannah Corning, Loy Norrix High School**  
**Katie Lynn, Western Michigan University**  
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**Katie:** What is your favorite childhood memory?

**Ms. Morgan:** My favorite childhood memory is moving to the projects, actually, where I was born in Knoxville, Tennessee. And we lived on one corner; my uncle lived on the corner down from us; my aunt lived across the corner from him. We were having a birthday party for my brother and my cousin. So we put a sheet on the outside of the building and we had a projector and all the kids from the neighborhood would come over and we'd get together and had a birthday party. And that was just before we were getting ready to move to Detroit from Knoxville, Tennessee. So, we had a going-away party and a birthday party. So, that was my favorite time because all the family was there.

**H:** How did your education play a role in your life?

**BM:** My education gave me the foundation to prove that girls are smart. My brothers would always instill, or challenge me: "you have to prove that girls are smart." And my father would encourage me. He told me: "You have to be independent. You have to show that you're intelligent". And he kept telling me these things. So, I didn't want to do anything mediocre. I always wanted to reach for the stars. I didn't want to go to the average school; I wanted to go to the best school. So, I applied to the best school, in Detroit, when I went to high school. And then when I went to college, I decided to be a teacher. So I went the education route. That's what brought me to Kalamazoo actually.

**K:** Was your race or ethnicity ever a factor in getting into school, or a profession, or getting a job?

**BM:** Not in getting into school. My elementary school was integrated. My middle school was integrated. High school, I applied to High School of Commerce which was integrated and then later on transferred to Cass Technical High School. I went to a predominately African- American college and the recruiters came to that college looking for minority teachers. So, that's when I was hired, because Kalamazoo was in the process of undergoing de-segregation, and they needed more minority teachers, and that was a major factor in me coming here.

**Katie Lynn:** And going along with that, what do you think about with society, how portraying race compared to maybe when you were growing up how that's changed if for the better or worse?

**Bertha Morgan:** There are still a lot of people who stereotype in my generation, and still some a little younger than my generation, because of the way they were taught, and they haven't given that up. They're still in denial that race is still an issue. But when you look at the different institutions, for example the last hired is usually a person of color. So, the first ones usually laid off are the persons of color. There are still certain neighborhoods where people of color, once they move in, other people move out. It still exists. So, the people in my generation and a little younger than my generation still have some issues. But again it was exposure, and they don't want to give that up. And they think if I do a little bit I'm helping the cause. But this has been something that's been going on for generations and generations and generations and it won't go away overnight - unfortunately.

**Katie Lynn:** In conclusion, do you think segregation still exists today?

**Bertha Morgan:** Very much so, and very much so in a lot of our institutions. Until we realize that we have a diverse society, that we have a melting pot, and we can't cookie cut everybody and do things the same way we've been doing it, we're going to continue having a lot of problem. People stereotype. People don't get promoted because of race; people still don't get hired because of race. And our institutions have to do a better job. It's sad, but a student could go through Loy Norrix High School and not have a teacher of color. And Loy Norrix High School has almost 1300 students. So when you think about that with 55% African American or students of color - go through that school and not have a teacher who looks like them. That's sad. But when you look at the hiring practices, they need to improve. But people have to stop being in denial and think everything's okay. It's not okay. We need to help students to understand, yes, you have to get along with everybody. But once in awhile it would be nice to see someone in a key role - a role model who looks like you. And that would help you to realize, yes I can be somebody. Yes, we have Barack Obama, but everybody can't be president of the United States. But yes you can be a teacher; yes you can be a doctor or a lawyer. You can be something other than a security guard, and it's nothing wrong with being a security guard, but when all your security guards are people of color and you know statistics show people of color in the schools have the highest suspension rate, and that they have the lowest test scores, then we need some relevancy there. So yes, segregation is still there and we need to do a better job of cleaning that up.

**Katie Lynn:** What do you think that, what do you think you could do, just to help out with it, even like the little things, not like you haven't done anything already, but just I think you have already have done, with teaching and you know being minister and everything. Just explain a little more what you think could be done, not just by you, but maybe your kids or something?

**Bertha Morgan:** Well, education is the key. First of all people need to understand what racism is and it's not just a black/white issue. It's the misuse of power. And we have to stop oppressing people because of where they live, and what they wear, even though some things can change in terms of what they wear. And try to understand their culture, their exposure. And, if I understand your exposure, then I'm not so quick to criticize or condemn because of certain things that you do. For example, in some cultures, it's not respectful to look an adult in the eye, so they look down. While the first thing we do when a student or a person looks away or looks down is say what? "Look at me." Well, if you've been taught that's disrespectful, then it's hard for you to do that. So we need to learn to understand. We used to have multicultural days, and we would just take the day to learn about other cultures, and I think that helped students to get along better, and once I know about you and you know about me... It kind of reminds me of exchange students. When they come they're in a different culture. If you go to their country, that's a different culture, and once you get to know each other, then they become close friends, brothers and sisters or whatever. So, education. Like I say, I can teach people about my culture and I can teach them about other cultures to which I've been exposed. I can teach them what racism is and what racism is not. And once there is a true understanding then people can realize yes, "I do have some tendencies that I can change". And you have to be willing to change. And that's the key, and if we're all willing, as we laugh when we see on TV, "Can't we all just get along." But that's the bottom line.

**Katie Lynn:** well, thank you so much.

**K:** How do you feel about race relations in Kalamazoo today?

**BM:** I feel that race relations in Kalamazoo have taken two steps backwards. Looking back at all the Civil Rights events, looking at the desegregation you would think that things would get better. But looking at test scores you see that minority students are still at the bottom of the scale. The achievement gap has widened. I find that people still do not treat people with respect. Most recently, within the past three years, I feel I've had personal attacks and it just seems that we aren't really trying to make the situation better. We're trying to sugar coat it or sweep things under the rug without actually coming to grips with the fact that we need to make some changes in order to make this work.

**H:** What are the major obstacles to positive race and ethnicity in our society today.

**BM:** The major obstacles are, well I would say, denial. Denying that there is a problem. Not willing to be open-minded, to attend workshops to find out exactly what the problems are. Those are the obstacles - too many people saying "oh it doesn't exist," and it does.

**K:** The Kalamazoo community, in general, do you feel that they have been supportive of you and your family, as African Americans, in general, throughout the years.

**BM:** By Kalamazoo community you mean Kalamazoo itself? The surrounding areas?

**K:** Yeah, Kalamazoo itself. If you could be more specific. If not, if there's more examples of around the community...

**BM:** Yeah I would say Kalamazoo itself, has been, as far as my family's concerned, has been kind to my family. But, if I were to go beyond that, say to Portage, then there have been some instances in Portage that have been not so kind. For example, I had one daughter who attempted to be a cheerleader. Couldn't become a cheerleader in Portage but she could go to Valley and become a cheerleader. So the skills were there. Another daughter - excellent athlete. She holds a record at Portage Northern. She was on all-star teams in soft ball, three-point shooter in basketball. But her coach would not play her his senior year. No explanation. But that's the way he had done others in the past. And I thought, well he's changing. But when my daughter became a senior I saw the same behavior. So that kind of behavior was quite evident. And this is the same person you see out in the public drop his head and walk right by you. You know, some people still have that attitude - that they're better than someone else and they show it. But that's their problem.

**H:** Do you think you have been treated differently by your peers because of your race?

**MM:** By my peers? Not really. I think my peers, for the most part, respect the experience because after all I've been in the district 40 years. They accept that experience, as one person told me today, "and that wisdom". I appreciate them telling me that. So, it's not so much from peers. It's been from some administrators but not my peers. There are a few peers who walk by and not speak or pretend they're looking the other way and whether or not it's because my race or that's just the way they are - it's difficult to say. I really don't feel that my peers think about the race issue.

**K:** ... do you think that, as an African American, you have to work harder, throughout your life, you had to work harder whether it was in school or in your profession just to meet the, to meet the regular? When everyone else is just working, you feel like have to work harder, just to meet people's expectations?

**BM:** I feel that African Americans always have to work harder. We have to go the extra mile - because people have low expectations for us. So we always have to prove that we're not hired just for the quota. We're hired because we can do the job. We're accepted in the school because we can do the work. This is what I tell my students; this is what I've told my children. You have to be the best that you can be

because you're going to be competing. My two sons graduated from the United States Naval Academy. You do not get into the United States Naval Academy being mediocre. But still, they have to work harder, even with that. But whenever I mention the Naval Academy a lot of respect pops up. Eyebrows raise. "You had *two* sons"? Yes, graduated from the Naval Academy. They both had Congressional nominations to attend. So, I'm proud of that.

**H:** When you coached, what were some hardships you and your team went through?

**BM:** Oh, when I coached girls basketball at Loy Norrix High School. First of all, we had to practice in the hallway and shoot at waste baskets. And that was the hardship when I first started because my team was all Caucasian. Then when we had desegregation ordered to come through, and we had the bussing, and I had African Americans on my team, the refereeing was not fair. We'd have 50 fouls; the other team would have 6 to 9. When we would play certain schools, we'd have to be escorted to the bus. People would throw rocks at the bus. We'd have to have delay in the games because people would throw things on the floor. They'd throw money; they would throw candy. They would throw things on the floor. So, that's what made it difficult. It was difficult enough getting girls into the league. But then, we had to go through all the obstacles of people not accepting African Americans on the team. Some places we went they didn't even want us to use the locker rooms. So we would have to have our clothes on, under their street clothes.

**Katie Lynn:** If you felt that you did not have to prove yourself in society as an African American female do you think you'd be where you are today?

**Bertha Morgan:** Probably not. We have to have goals. And, because people kept telling me I needed to do this, then I'd set a goal to accomplish that. I agree with them. And I don't think I would have tried as hard. But in having the goals and thinking about them, you know, some people write goals on their refrigerator. I wrote 'em on my mind. I have to do this. I have to be the best. I want to be the best. It was an intrinsic thing. But I wanted to prove to myself; I wanted to prove to others that I'm capable. One thing too, in coming up in time of great racial tension, that gave me even more motivation to prove that I was just as good as the next person. That if I'm sitting in a classroom, or I have the same opportunity as someone else and I'm just as good as that person, that I can do it. So, it pushed me.

**Katie Lynn:** Do think our generation, more specifically, my generation, has done a better job in making race less of an issue?

**Bertha Morgan:** I think you're less colorblind because you've been exposed. For someone who hasn't been exposed to a lot of different racial groups, ethnic groups, different cultures, then it would be culture shock. They wouldn't know how to speak, how to accept the language, how to accept the dress. It's almost like some people of my generation look at the way your generation dress and they think "Wow. Why don't they change clothes, or why don't they pull up their pants?" You know. It's just exposure. So your generation is more tolerant, like I said, more colorblind, because you haven't been taught to dislike a person because of their color. There's still some out there, there's still some denial. I'm not saying totally. But for the most part, I think your generation is more accepting. You see more interracial couples. You're able to go pretty much where you choose to go. There's still some profiling, you know, if you see certain people in certain neighborhoods, it's still not acceptable, but overall, those are older people also aren't accepting that, but not necessarily the young generation.