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Introduction

My husband, Monte Pascoe, and I, along with many other families—white, Black, and Hispanic—were deeply involved in the effort to desegregate School District No. 1, also known as Denver public schools. Although I offer just one white person’s perspective among many, which comes with the knowledge that I carry unconscious bias, I believe this story should be told and that people living today should understand the kind of community we all had hoped to create.

Monte’s family moved from Iowa to Denver when he was in third grade, and his family was deeply attached to Montview Boulevard Presbyterian. In addition to attending services, his father, Don, served as an elder, and his mother, Marjorie, was a member of many church groups. They were compassionate—the kind of people who tried to help anyone who needed it.

In the Boy Scouts, Monte earned every possible honor: God and Country, Eagle Scout, Order of the Arrow. Monte learned the importance of teamwork in sports, which he began participating in when he was nine years old. At East High School, he was a star athlete, playing football, basketball,

and track and playing in the national East-West football game after being named a high school all-American. During his senior year, Monte was part of the state championship mile relay. Monte earned a scholarship to Dartmouth, where he won the Barrett Cup as the outstanding senior, and he was awarded another scholarship, this one to Stanford Law School. His sense of justice developed further as he learned more about the inequities in our legal system.

I grew up in a small town in Wisconsin. My mother was widowed when I was eighteen months old and my sisters were three and seven years old. I don't recall any Black people in my town, but after my mother transferred to St. Louis with the civil service when I was twelve, I learned that much of life in that city was segregated. There were identifiable Black or white schools and swimming pools, but the buses were mixed. The schools and the church I attended in Clayton, just outside of St. Louis, were almost completely white. A teacher at Clayton High School, under the auspices of the National Conference of Christians and Jews, organized monthly meetings of student representatives from all the high schools in the metropolitan St. Louis area, which necessarily included schools that were nearly all Black. As one of those representatives, I had my first experience talking with young Black people. We met monthly and, among other things, went to the art museum together. A few of us visited an all-Black high school, where I experienced the discomfort of what it feels like to be in the minority. Later, when my mother was transferred to Colorado, I went to Aurora High School and the University of Colorado, both almost entirely white at the time.

Monte and I were married the summer after we graduated from college, and we lived in Menlo Park, California, while he attended Stanford Law School. I taught in a high school with a large Black population in East Palo Alto, but because I taught average English classes, I had few Black students, who were mostly in remedial classes—suggesting the disadvantages of the elementary schools in Black neighborhoods. When Monte graduated from law school in 1960 we returned to Denver, where he started his law practice. We soon had our first child. Then our relatively peaceful lives were disturbed by cataclysmic national events.

One shock after another tore up America in the 1960s, a rapidly changing background for the beginning of desegregation efforts. The first came shortly after the inauguration of President John F. Kennedy: the thirteen-day

Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962. We all feared that Russian missiles in Cuba, armed with nuclear bombs, would destroy cities in the United States. Kennedy announced an embargo on materials for the missile sites, which was effected by surrounding Cuba with US Navy ships. Finally, Kennedy and Russian premier Nikita Khrushchev agreed that the missiles and the missile sites would be destroyed. In return, Kennedy secretly agreed to remove American missiles in Turkey. The nation was greatly relieved that nuclear war was averted.

But anti-Black racial violence increased in the United States. In June 1963, Medgar Evers, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP's) Mississippi field secretary, was fatally shot in his driveway by a segregationist. In September, four Black girls were killed in a bomb attack at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, which shocked many white and Black Americans.

President Kennedy's voice in the civil rights debate was silenced in November 1963 when he was assassinated in Dallas, Texas.

Despite the violence, Martin Luther King Jr. came to Denver the following January. He spoke at Montview Boulevard Presbyterian Church to a thousand people, some standing outside in the falling snow and listening to him through loudspeakers. His visit became a catalyst for movements already under way in Denver.¹

In June 1964, three civil rights workers in Mississippi—a local Black man, James Early Chaney, along with two fellow white volunteers, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner—went missing. A widely publicized FBI investigation led to the discovery of their bodies in an earthen dam. The men had been working with the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) to register Black voters.

After Kennedy's assassination, the violence against civil rights workers, the march on Washington, and continued ongoing violence across the country and particularly in the South, the impetus for the Civil Rights Act grew until it passed on July 2, 1964, followed by the key Voting Rights Act on August 6, 1965. These laws aroused hope and expectations among minority groups, yet there were no immediate changes in living and voting opportunities.

Closer to home, our family experienced our own tragedy. After having two healthy children, Sarah in 1960 and Ted in 1963, our beautiful baby Donald

Kirk, born in 1967, struggled for three weeks in the hospital and died. In later years we determined that he probably had cystic fibrosis, but that wasn't recognized at the time. This was the most difficult loss we had ever experienced. When I told six-year-old Sarah that God had decided to take our baby, she said, "I think God's a meany!" In her child's way, she expressed what we were feeling. Our family sorrow and the nation's losses seemed to be all of a piece. We were blessed with another little boy, Will, in 1968, but he was born with cystic fibrosis, a genetic disease that challenged him throughout his life.

The nation's violence was far from over. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated on April 4, 1968, setting off violence in many cities in the North and the South. His assassination directly gave rise to the efforts to desegregate Denver Public Schools because it inspired Rachel Noel and Ed Benton to write a resolution calling for the integration of the entire school system.

In 1968, Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated after winning the California Democratic primary. We had driven to Colorado Springs that night to meet Vice President Hubert Humphrey, who was planning to speak at the Air Force Academy graduation, because Monte was advancing the trip. However, after the assassination, Humphrey immediately flew back to Washington. Later in the summer, amid growing protests over the Vietnam War, there was chaos at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, where Monte coordinated the Colorado Humphrey delegation.

Denver was famously known as a sleepy little cow town in the 1960s, where night life closed down by 8 p.m. Most of the important levers of power were held by white men, including those in the city and state government. There was little interaction between whites and Blacks and Hispanics outside of the employment world, and even that was limited. Racial or ethnic groups lived in the silos of different neighborhoods, and they attended different schools, churches, and social events. White people were often unaware of the racism experienced by Blacks and Hispanics.

This was the January 1969 setting in which Monte decided to join incumbent Ed Benton and run for the Denver school board on a pro-integration platform. He believed citizens would be willing to change old patterns and ways of thinking to ensure that minority children had the equal educational opportunity they deserved, leading, in turn, to a better society in which the talents and contributions of people of all races and ethnic and religious backgrounds could be appreciated and celebrated. Desegregation would be

difficult, but it was far less painful than the poverty engendered by segregation, which resulted in lower achievement, lower lifetime income, poorer health, and a shorter life span. Schools were not the only locus of racism in our society, but school integration was a necessary first step in dismantling systemic racism.

My involvement in desegregation came as a school monitor and member of the Community Education Council established by Judge William Doyle to oversee his desegregation order in *Keyes v. School District No. 1* [Denver] filed in 1969. In the spring of 1969, before the first court order, our two oldest children, Sarah and Ted, open-enrolled at Hallett Elementary School—a majority Black school—for the 1969–1970 school year because we wanted to demonstrate that integration could work and could also provide Black and white children with a better education. At the end of that year, they returned to their neighborhood school, primarily because we expected that the court orders to implement desegregation would happen the following year—though in fact it took far longer. By fall of 1969 the United States Supreme Court had already upheld and ordered implementation of the integration of northeast Denver schools three days before school started. We were optimistic that the plaintiffs would win the lawsuit and that the court would soon order the desegregation of all of Denver’s schools. Then our support would be needed for the integration of our neighborhood school, Dora Moore. We had no illusion that Denver could be desegregated through the kind of open enrollment we had experienced at Hallett, where only 38 percent of the school was white in 1969–1970.

All three of our children attended Denver public schools, including Dora Moore Elementary School, Byers and Morey Junior High Schools, and East High School.

We firmly believed, and I still believe today, that the community should provide equal educational opportunity in integrated schools to every child of every race and ethnicity.

During the years in which the lawsuit continued, Monte served twelve years on the Denver Water Board and twelve years on the Colorado School of Mines Board, was appointed by Governor Richard Lamm to head the state Department of Natural Resources, and ran for mayor of Denver. He was state chair of the Democratic Party and a delegate to two national Democratic conventions. All of his adult life he practiced law, except when

he was director of the Department of Natural Resources. After his sudden death in 2006, Denver's mayor created the annual Monte Pascoe award for civic leadership.

During the same period, I earned a PhD in English literature at the University of Denver, was a delegate to two national Democratic conventions, and was elected to the first two of three four-year terms in the Colorado State Senate. At the time I was elected to the senate, I was the sixth woman and the eleventh Democrat among the thirty-five senators. Eventually, I served as Democratic caucus chair and chair of the education committee. I focused on full funding for education, particularly preschool, as well as a bill to ease the transition to English in achievement tests for bilingual children and another to make mental health treatment available to schoolchildren. Among the sixty-plus bills I sponsored were many designed to remove inequities in the law, for example, laws that impoverished divorcées, penalized spouses of those on Medicaid, or disadvantaged LGBTQ partners. I passed a bill establishing an organ donor registry and another that guarantees freedom of the press for students. My first year in office—several years before the Columbine school shooting and before the federal ban—I sponsored a bill to ban the sale of assault weapons. Nearly every year after that, I sponsored gun control legislation, none of which passed. I was always allied with the two Black members of the senate with whom I served, whether with Regis Groff to fight against capital punishment or condemn apartheid in South Africa or Gloria Tanner and her resolution on preserving Dearfield, a Black pioneer settlement.

A word about the organization of the book: I tell the story of the struggle to desegregate the Denver Public Schools, from the implementation of the court orders in 1969 and 1974 to the end of court supervision twenty-six years later, in 1995. It begins with the citizen studies that exposed the inequities of segregated schools. Then the desegregation battle begins with Rachel Noel's proposal to integrate the entire school system, followed by the momentous pro-integration campaign of Ed Benton and Monte Pascoe for the school board in 1969. When anti-busers won that election and reversed the integration plan for northeast Denver, the *Keyes* case was filed. The book follows the case through briefs, transcripts, and decisions as it moved through the courts several times until the United States Supreme Court decision in 1974.

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Many people assert that we tried integration and it didn't work. That simply isn't true.

Even when begrudgingly implemented by the school district, for as long as it was in effect, desegregation provided more opportunity for minority children and raised the achievement of Black and Hispanic children without lowering the achievement of white children. This is the proof.