

6-13-2013

Oral History Interview on School Residency and Civil Rights (with video)

Gwen Samuel

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Location: Meriden Public Library, Meriden, Connecticut

Recording format: video file

File name: SamuelGwen_video20130613.m4v

Length: 26:27

Transcribed by: Richelle Benjamin, Trinity Class of '15

Additional files: n/a

Abstract:

Gwen Samuel is a mother from Meriden and the founder of the Connecticut Parents Union. Her life's work is dedicated to empowering parents in Connecticut, and around the country, so that they may fight to improve the schools that their children attend. Samuel believes that all parents should have a say in where their children go to school, that they should be able to make a choice and not be forced to send their children to a school that is unsafe or failing. In her efforts to end zip code laws, Gwen Samuel has worked closely with the two 2011 residency cases, rallying support for Tanya McDowell (Bridgeport) and Marie Menard (Stratford), hoping that the injustices against parents in residency case arrests will gain national attention. She hopes that arrests against parents will stop and that, as a whole, failing schools will improve.

Speaker key:

RB: Richelle Benjamin

GS: Gwen Samuel

[all comments by transcriber in brackets]

RB: Okay, um, go ahead and introduce yourself to me and first tell me what you do as far as working for Connecticut's Parents Union, first of all.

GS: First and foremost, I'm a parent. So I have children in the Meriden school system and I founded the Connecticut Parents Union in 2011 when I realized that parents just don't have leverage at the state level, at the legislative level. So I founded the Connecticut Parents Union hoping to level the playing fields to give an organizing base for parents so that they're able to fight more effectively on behalf of their children in Connecticut schools. [00:00:36.21]

RB: Mhm, and when and why did you first become interested in school residency cases?

GS: I mean, it kind of dropped in our lap. So we had just in 2010 just introduced a Parent Empowerment law. Um, you may know it as a parent trigger. So here we are trying to give legal power in the state of Connecticut in 2010 and I just realized everyone had a say so in the rights of children, you know, but parents. So then after 2010 legislative session I said, "I'm gonna organize, we're just gonna create this parent's union," and we got incorporated in January of 2014

and then April, I mean 2011, and then in April of 2011, I hear about a homeless woman that was arrested for putting her 5 year old child in a Norwalk school and it was alleged she was from Bridgeport. I mean, so what could be the harm? Okay. And yet, you know, here you got this arrest, a felony arrest, and I had just never heard of such a thing. I mean, even when I was, um, my son is now fourteen, but I did it, I used my mother's address when I was living in Middletown because Middletown had a full-day kindergarten and Meriden only had a half-day. I'd never heard of such thing as half-day kindergarten, so, I mean, I just thought it was the norm, you did what you, parents just do what they need to do to assure their children are educated well. And they're also safe, and so, when I heard about the law about Tanya McDowell, this is wrong. Maybe Connecticut has just bumped its head or something has occurred that maybe we just need to refresh their memory that it's about the child, not about the parent. And then when I noticed that she was arrested, and then, uh, she was going to court, so then there was online petition. I mean she got over 25,000 signatures. And then, but she had other life challenges, so people didn't want to continue, uh, to support her. Um, but the bottom line is, no matter what you may or may not think about this lady, she did one thing right, probably many things, but the one thing I'm emphasizing is that she had a kindergarten son, he's a black male, and in Connecticut black males are eight, I think it's seven or eight out of ten times more likely to go to prison in Connecticut. So as a parent, she did well by her son by putting him in a high quality, uh, kindergarten program. And how was she, and how did Connecticut value that thinking from a mother? Is by arresting her. And that's when I knew there was something wrong. So then I became on this crusade, I mean, this crusade to, um, reform these, I mean actually to end them. Because that should not, number one, no parent should be getting arrested for putting their kid in a safe and quality school. But also, parents should have the right to choose what's best for their child. And so, I mean, only you know your child best, only you know your living circumstances, only you know what could be, uh, in the best interest of the child. I mean, you can collaborate with folks, but at the end of the day, the child comes home to the family. So to know that there are laws on the books that determine where your child is going to be educated. And, you know, it's just unacceptable. Now if all schools were equal, and all schools were safe, and every school had a quality instruction, and, um, it was just in the benefit, maybe I can revisit it, but that's not the case. We have two Connecticuts: those that have more to choose what's best for their children and those that do not. And that law is unconstitutional in every sense of the word, and it must be, uh, repealed. [00:04:22.01]

RB: And, um, I know you've done a lot, uh, concerning the Tanya McDowell case. So what kind of things had it, have you worked on in the past as far as, um, you know rally, rallying and gaining support for it? Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

GS: Okay, so, um, Tanya or just from organizing in general?

RB: Um, well both. You can tell me about both.

GS: So, um, because I am a parent, again, I was just your typical parent in two thousand maybe eight or nine. You know, you try to be the soccer mom, you know, you try to do the bake sales even though I bought them all from the grocery store, I didn't really bake them. But I, you know, you, you did what the system told you to do. That's what parents are conditioned to do. You get the letter in the mail, you send your child where they need to be. Even though we know what

school is good, what school is not, or this teacher, "I hope I don't get this teacher," or, "she's a great teacher, I want her," you know. So parents gotta know they have that wheel going, but at the end of the day it's a system that's telling you, and so you accept that. But then as you start to learn, then we got the first, you know, African American president, and so now you have all this awareness on the achievement gap. I'm like, "What is this achievement gap? And who has it?" Right, you know? So I'm trying to figure this thing out, and then you start to ask questions. And then you're like "Why is there an achievement gap? I got black males so is that gonna affect me. How does that work?" And then you start to ask questions, then you start realizing there are two educational systems in Connecticut. And I'm like no, that's not okay with me. So then, when the Tanya McDowell issue occurred, I'm thinking maybe it's isolated, and then, um, another parent reached out to me from Stratford, and she was a non-minority. She was a grandmother, her name is Marie Menard, she owns her home, been on her job for 30 years, she pays into the Stratford educational system. And she was arrested and convicted for stealing an education. But she paid taxes. So the argument is that people are siphoning taxes like the Tanya McDowell's, so then why do you arrest a Marie Menard? Something is inherently wrong with this law. So then when she was arrested, I mean, she paid her rest, she paid close to twenty thousand dollars. She's like double paying because in double pen-penalties, because she paid into a system she's already paid taxes into, and then on top of that, she was convicted as a felony, as a felon, and then on top of that she paid restitution. So it's like these triple whammies on this grandmother who only wanted what's best for her grandchildren. Many didn't know her daughter was a teenage mom, and so she was trying to get her daughter, at the time when they young, you know when a child young, just get her through high school. So those, so she made a conscious decision to keep those kids stable. That's not a government conversation. That's not a superintendent's decision, that's not a law-maker's decision; she is entitled to make sure her child and her family is safe, they're intact, and they're getting an education. And this law took that right from her and penalized her for that right. And so that is what makes this law worse, so if you're saying they're stealing it, what was the case? And she was a non-minority. It just so happens that this law disproportionately targets people of color and impoverished communities. And even more so with the challenge with the law for those who challenge the system, could face retaliation. And we're seeing it already existing where parents are saying, y'know their PPT's are all of a sudden held up, or all of a sudden you become the bad mom or the radical mom. So I'm seen as this radical mom and I'm saying, "How is it radical to want what's best for your children?" No one's saying we're perfect, no one's asking for diamond rings and fancy cars. They're asking for great education to give their kids a fair chance at life. Life is not fair, but they deserve a fair chance at it. And I would love to, I didn't go back to school till I was forty, but I would love for my children to experience high school graduation and have options. And my first--I have four children, so I have two generations of children. I call them non-head start and head start. I say, "I can tell my head-start children, 'Y'know where are your manners?'" You know, my older children. And they were both high school dropouts. But because dropping out wasn't an option, one went back, got his high school diploma, and one went to an alternative school. He went to Job Corps. So they both completed the basics, but there was, number one, there was options there, but then I started to speak to them and ask them like, "Why?" You know, like, "What happened?" And, and yes there are probably things I could have done better as a parent, but the bottom line, there weren't supports that need to be in the schools. The schools didn't meet their needs. So if I understood choice like I understood it now, I should have been able to make a choice and say, "You know what? This high school is not the right fit for my child. What are my options?" Because at the

end of the day, at the beginning of the day, in the middle of the day, it has to be about children. And it's not. This is such a political, toxic conversation or subject that it, it's just not supposed to be this way. So by organizing, getting parents--and it's a tough job that for the last three years, most of my job is just encouraging people. People think, "Oh, it's just easy to go out and organize, rally the troops." Not when you're broken, right? Not when for every, every time you're advocating for your child you're seen as the bad one, or the doors are closed, or "I'm too busy." That can discourage even the best and most, um, engaged parent. So these last three years has just been about awareness, helping parents understand their, their power as the consumer 'cause their child goes in the schools and not us, and until we understand that as parents, it's not about you, it's not even about me. Our children wake up every day and we send them to a building. Do we know if the building has holes in the walls? I've seen schools in Connecticut that do. Is the bathroom sanitized? I've seen bathrooms that just should not, whoever is managing them should not be working for the district. I've seen metal poles hanging out Connecticut schools, schools that just should not be a building. And so but yet, we send our kids there every day and expect them to learn. But yet, kids are resilient. The, y'know, I've met kids who say, "Well that's just how it is." No, it's not. It's like it is because we've allowed it to be so, and this is not okay. So I've said I'm just gonna dedicate my life to reforming this law because and, this is a continuation of the Civil Rights Movement. Because, before the Civil Rights Movement, we were fighting for equal access. Equal access to jobs, equal access to schools, equal access to restaurants and buildings, and theaters. So now because they believe, you know, the sys, the system says, "Now you have access." So what they've done is take this law, but says, "But we still wanna segregate you. So we'll create housing patters." That's where your zoning comes in. Right? That zip code, that's how it is over there. That poor district doesn't have healthy foods in its markets, only convenient stores on every corner, liquor stores on every corner. That's that zip code. They'll have the old building from 1922. I don't have a problem with that if it's maintained to meet the 21st century. But when you're not giving kids that access when there's asbestos, and you're covering lead, and you're not properly, and but yet, you're putting thousands of kids in there every day, and then you're gonna say, "We're gonna test you and you better learn." And, and this--no. It's unacceptable in the wealthiest state in the nation, absolutely. And as I am sitting here just talking to you, I'm like proud, I'm like a proud mom like you mom, like I want my child to have this access to be able to go a Trinity College, or another university, or trade school. But without that solid K through 12 educational foundation, the chances for an African American, a Hispanic, or people that live in the poverty community, it's just not so. And it's not right. [00:12:59.00]

RB: Um, so I think you have good news, as far as what's happening in July.

GS: Oh yeah, absolutely. So, in um, July, so forgive me I'm just watering up because I just think about kids, y'know. But, um. Okay, so in 2011 when the Tanya McDowell case came up, Marie Menard. So Marie Menard, um, we hired an attorney Josephine Miller to represent her. So we part-filed the federal court saying the law is unconstitutional because it doesn't afford equal protections, and it doesn't give due process, so we filed to the federal court and we just got the news, like, um, maybe two weeks ago, two or three weeks ago that we're finally gonna have oral arguments before the federal courts. And that is, like, huge. So I'm telling people, this is history in the making because when we look at Brown vs. Board of Education, we still talk about separate and equal as considered unconstitutional. Zip code laws foster separate and unequal.

And then on top of that, you're violating people equal protection law because they don't arrest every parent. There is no system to arrest. If you speak to anyone, "So how do you determine who gets arrested?" Bad hair day, the Stratford's under deposition is, Stratford's superintendent said--what did she, what were, her exact words--something like, well that day, y'know Marie Menard, like, almost came across her desk. And she did this, and I said, "What about the other 50?" "We let some people go, one lady was sick so we let her go," and it was so random. It's like, are you serious? The fourteenth amendment doesn't allow you to do that, y'know. If you're going to arrest parents, arrest them all, or none at all. So they created, by just arresting Marie Menard, no one else has ever been arrested in Stratford. Zero. Nada. And so then what happened was, no there have been other arrests since because they don't want the Tanya McDowell sit. So, the fact that you have that kind of power to choose who you arrest or not, something is wrong with the law. And then on top of that, why I was talking to representative Bruce Miller, um, Bruce Morris of Norwalk, is because we have a statute that addresses this. Statue ten-dash-one-eighty-six states, "If there are issues with school residency, a parent can appeal before the local school board. If the local school board doesn't meet the need, then they can go to the state board of education. If the state doesn't resolve the issue, they can go to court but the state has the option to sue." So you have a civil and administrative remedy, yet you choose to put handcuffs on parents and create child-welfare cases. We have families in Connecticut who are--and across the country--who are giving up custody of their children to family members and friends just to give kids a good education. That was not what the Constitution was founded on. That wasn't, y'know, "All men are created equal." Right? The, the right to pursue life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That was not what it was intended. Happiness is either you gave birth to that child, and, or you were able to adopt a child, or you become a proud foster mom, y'know? That is pursuing happiness, being able to share and help a young one to grow. But to know there is a law on the book that says, I will make you a convicted felon if you try to do right by that child, if you try to educate them. So that happiness now becomes, "Do I give custody of this, my precious loved one, to an aunt or an uncle? Do I lose my right as a parent to give my child an education?" That is not okay. Because in Connecticut, it states as of 2010, the Supreme Court ruled that children are entitled to the type of quality of education, that they can be productive citizens, that they're able to engage in voting, and/or go to college, or get a, a employment. That can't happen if you can't read. So the law that I helped get passed in 2010 was uh, Parent Empowerment law, and so it came in the form of what they called School Governance councils. That means the lowest school governance, the lowest performance schools within the state of Connecticut have to have school governance councils. We have three hundred and fifty five failing schools that have not made adequate progress in reading and math. Reading is a core subject. That is what the constitution is saying: give them access to the skill sets in the edu-, the quality of education so that they can be able to read and write and do arithmetic. And yet you have three hundred and fifty five failing schools as of May 24, 2013. You had a hundred and eighty four in 2010, so you know you have this many failing schools and yet you wanna arrest parents who try to give their kids a good one? Even you have identified the school can't meet the need. So these are the challenges that Connecticut faced and we're hoping that a judge will say, "This is unconstitutional, separate and unequal didn't work before the Civil Rights, it's not okay now, and these families are entitled to equal protections and due process." The administrative remedies statute ten-dash-one eighty six gives them due process through the local board school, but but just arresting them is heavy-handed prosecution. You're talking about people who deal with murderers and rapists and bank robbers, and now they're arresting people for education. What

does the district attorney gonna, what would be his argument? Uh, this is an educational issue, not a criminal issue. And so we've made something that's the pillar of our country, education, something that's criminal and, and wrong. It is not a crime for a parent who loves her child to want the best for them. And it's strange because these failing schools should be charged with educational neglect but if a parent didn't send their kid to school, it's educational neglect. And I tell parents, if you know a school is failing and you send your baby, then you are guilty of educational neglect. I feel like I've given my children educational neglect because I've sent them to schools, like, that if I could change back the hands of time and had the right to choose--which I am taking my right now, by the way--I would have made better choices because I would have understood. But as you get older when you know better, you do better. So that's where we are today. [00:19:59.23]

RB: Okay. And um, so with this court day, um, I know you, there are some changes that you definitely want to see, um, happening in the near future. What are your, what are your pan, plans for the future as far, eh, as far as this issue and what changes would you like to see in the next coming years?

GS: So we've actually started the End Zip Code Education Laws campaign, which is a social justice and civil rights movement. Um, we're going to do an eleven state tour, public awareness tours, we're traveling the country talking about the issues and we're targeting our colleges, getting our young people because it's a lot like paying it forward. You're here now as young people, now there are people in high school and middle school that need your help as young people to help them get an opportunity, if they choose to attend a college like you're able to attend. So, we're asking people to come out of their comfort zones to support this because all children deserve a good quality education, no matter where they live, no matter what the color of their skin is. So we're starting this campaign, this actually will launch on July 24th because we'll be have, holding press conference. And now that I've met you, I'm thinking about, "Okay, Trinity should probably be a site." And so we're, um, I think it's going to be September, we're launching at Howard University in DC, and then we're hitting Chicago, Detroit, New York, New Jersey, Atlanta, Georgia. These are all relationships we're working now and so we're just traveling to some of the key states, um, some of them are battlegrounds states where they have mass school closings of these schools. And that is gonna, that these closings are even concerning me because if you're closing so many schools, how are you going to enforce the school residency? How they're going to do it is by telling you, "Your child is goes here or there." Suppose that school is not gonna meet the need. It's unsafe, you can't make someone put their kids in unsafe conditions. So we're starting with this public awareness campaign. We just created our Twitter account, like, End-Zip-Code-Laws, uh, twitter, and, um, we're working on the proposal to get sponsors, to help us sponsor to bring awareness to this. And we're hoping that the oral arguments, um, that the judge says, y'know, sides with the children, because this is all about children, we tend to make education about how I feel as a parent, well I feel my child should do--What does your child need? You know, even be, everyone had the basic needs and then our kids grow up to be individuals, and so that means we need to engage them in the conversation. They may be making poor choices but at the end of the day if the wanna be doctor, or they love math, or the love science, or they love tech. Then let's look at what the choices are as an education, so that you can give them that exposure to nurture those dreams. And Connecticut I, y'know, with all due respect to the great institutions we have, I think it's just a, a dream oppressor because you have so many

schools that could do better. We spend billions of dollars in education and this is the best we can do? Handcuffing parents, that's really, the wealthiest state in the nation, with some of the most prestigious universities in the country. We have some of the poorest districts in the country, but we also have some of the most prestigious, and this is the best that we can do? It's not okay, and so we're hoping that the judge, y'know, comes and sees all this, and says, you are it, Mr. or Mrs. Man, whoever you are on July 24. You are almost the most important person in the lives of Connecticut's children, specially blacks and Hispanics and those that live in poor because we're gonna need you to make a decision that--Is it okay for us to prosecute the parents of children, who only want their constitutional right to access a great and safe education? Or are you going to use the constitution for what it's worth in saying you cannot violate people constitutional rights? They deserve equal protection and due process. And looking at this law and it, and the law is just unconstitutional. That would just change the conversation in the country. I would have to move I'm sure. But, it would change the conversation. And action steps, 'cause I would make sure you couldn't just talk about this, you would have to do something about it. And that would have to be, you'd have to give parents choice. Now, the challenge and I understand being the devil advocate that communities, y'know, these resources are tight in the districts and it's the property tax that pays for the schools, I get that. So my plea to the suburban, that's why I love your title of your, um, thing, cities, suburbs and schools; like I actually love it. So what I wanna say to the suburban communities, and the more fluent communities. We are not trying to take resources from your district, we want great schools like you. Join us! Help those that are less fortunate. Fix the law so that they can go to school in their own neighborhood. Who wants to put their kindergarten child on the bus for an hour to go to a different Avon, or some other, because you have a quality education? I want the same access that you want, and we work just as hard, we're all taxpayers, we all should be registered voters unless religion, y'know dictates otherwise. So we're all influencing a d, democracy, so help us create, these are babies. They don't vote, they don't sign medical release forms, they can't even go outside and play without asking, but yet, we put them in these un, these failing schools and expect them to perform, and expect them to do this and that, and they're not being allowed to grow, life, flowers in a nurturing, caring and committed environment; and that's our responsibility as adults, so. Looking forward to the campaign, we're definitely gonna keep you a part of it, um, and we'll see what the next steps bring. [00:26:23.05]

RB: Well, well, thank you. That's all my questions.

GS: Alright then.