'You were born to serve'

She confronted a KKK cyclops. She sold ice cream to raise money for school equipment. She befriended her staff through the stress of desegregation. She was true to herself and her craft. She believes it takes a village....

Bertha Maxwell Roddy told a small portion of her life story Tuesday during a visit to the Tuesday Morning Breakfast Forum. Convener Sarah Stevenson said Roddy would return to tell more of her story, which is bound up in the community's school system and its passage through desegregation.

Roddy said she would be at Oxford University in England later this month to deliver a paper on the paradoxes of discrimination.

Roddy, who said she could read by the age of 4 because her illiterate mother brought home the newspaper, took her first teaching position at segregated Alexander Street School in Charlotte in 1954, just months after the U.S. Supreme Court issued its first Brown vs. Board ruling.

Later, after graduating as the first black in the school administration master's program at UNC Greensboro, Roddy interned at Quail Hollow Jr. High. She declined assistant principalships, went instead to Europe and, on her return, took her first principalship at Morgan School in Cherry, the black community nestled between downtown and Myers Park. "Had the time of my life," she said.

Excerpts from Roddy's comments Tuesday:
Early desegregation

"When they decided to close Morgan I had to desegregate. They said, half of your kids will go to Myers Park, some will go to Eastover, and the others will go to Elizabeth. That's what happened. And we're going to send you, I didn't know where they were going to send me. They said Albemarle, and I thought Albemarle, North Carolina and said, no, I ain't going out there.

"When I went over to Myers Park I met with this man who said, 'We're not going to take your kids.' 'Oh, yes you are.' So then I went back and said [to Supt.] Bill Self, you'd better go out and talk to that man because he's telling me he's not taking this. Evidently you haven't prepared this.

"Eastover was a different matter. I loved Eastover because you see that's where Hugh McColl's kids were going to school.... I said to the principal, these [parents at Morgan] work for these people over here [at Eastover]. This community was created for those who were born to be the servants of the Myers Park people, of the Eastover people. Yes, you're going to take these kids."

Many times asked 'Why?'

"Always as a child I had the question 'Why?' My grandmother would pull me through the little park because I couldn't get on the little merry-go-ground. 'Why?' Because I'm colored. Hush. Come on. When we'd go to Mr. Belk's store I could not try on the shoes. 'Why?' Draw a picture and you put your [foot] in the shoe that you're going to get. This is for those young people who don't know what it is that I'm talking about.

"Baby Ray's books came over, and they were so dirty I thought maybe Baby Ray was black. That's how dirty the books that we got from the white people were. But we learned despite those things.

" 'Why?' when I'd go to school and we'd pass by the white school and they would spit on us and call us niggers. Then they ran us down the railroad track so we wouldn't have to pass by the white school. 'Why?' So 'why' became the language of my vocabulary.

"When I got to Charlotte we'd go to the back of the bus, or we stood up from the railroad station right there until we got to The Square [Trade & Tryon] when it became more black. Then we could sit down.... 'Why?'

The first 'Head Start'

"We started Head Start and I have all the evidence to prove it.... Over here on this side of town the little black kids were middle class. They could have something like preschool because they could pay a little money. But over in First Ward, where the kids were po', they couldn't afford that. So I got together with some teachers and said, you
know, we should do something for our kids over here at First Ward. So I went to [then-Superintendent] Bill Self and said, 'Let us use First Ward School.' 'OK.' You know, sometimes all you have to do is ask for some stuff.

"I put together a group of teachers and wrote a curriculum for preschool. It's right there. The name on it is Bernice Sloane Ferguson. She was one of my student teachers at First Ward Elementary School. There are a number of people that's listed there. We honored them, 40 years later, because they wrote the curriculum for preschool.

"And we got so much publicity about those 96 little economically disadvantaged children. They said we called them culturally disadvantaged and they were not. They were economically disadvantaged kids. Some of them lived right there in First Ward and had never been on an escalator, had never been on an elevator, and yet they were coming to the first grade. So that summer we worked for six weeks without pay. Oh, we got lots of publicity. The Associated Press came down and picked it up. You can go back and check the newspapers: It's there. Because I do embellish -- in other words lie. [laugher].

"When the Associated Press picked it up, they came down and said, do you know, people in high places have heard about what you're doing. Because it was something. We carried them out to farms. We did all kinds of things, had something in the park... fixed them something in the park. Somebody here gave enough money that all these little 96 kids got to go out there to the park. See, because I remember going to the park and I couldn't even get on the merry-go-round.

"At the end of that summer... The Charlotte-Mecklenburg School System was asked if they wanted to start Head Start. So they carried our curriculum and they were funded for Head Start. I never taught a day in Head Start, because when they got ready to interview... there were some things I was not willing to give up from what I had started.... Bill Self was honest enough. He said Bertha, I'll tell you, I did carry your curriculum.

"We kept our program and it became a community-oriented Head Start....

**Who are the pawns?**

"The one thing I try to teach my students is systems and how systems are developed. And you have systems because you have those who design it. Then you have the advocates of the system. You have the players. And then you have the pawns. And most of the time, those who are born poor and black are the pawns, educational pawns.

"Who are the designers? I can go back because I have traced it. The first paper I wrote at Chapel Hill, the man couldn't get over it, because I traced it, from the developmental process of the 13 English colonies down to what was happening to black people at that time. And he couldn't believe I had written a paper like that.... Sometimes we have to make sure we understand educational systems. The political system -- who
designed it? History is a great thing. You have to go back and read and find out and research. Who were the advocates? Then who were the players? You see, you've got some players who think they were designers, who think they are something. They're not necessarily so. But you'd better always know who the pawns are.... Go back and look at where you as African-Americans have been in the developmental processes of this country. Open your prison doors. Why did they create prisons in the first place? Who designed them? Who were the advocates? Who are the players? -- and who are the pawns?"

**On being a first**

"That's what you ought to do. You ain't never had a first black this and a first black that. Go out and find out what it is and go do it.

"I was the first black to pop popcorn up there at Woolworth's.... They had the first Christmas parade here, and the little white girl couldn't keep up making sodas and stuff like that. So here down on my end I'd stoop down and do all this stuff and help because it was just inundated with people. And there was this boss, standing over there looking at me and every black there said, 'Bertha, you're going to get fired'. 'Yeah, I guess I am.' He looked at me, said 'Come over here.' I went over there. He said: 'Go work the fountain, but work it with dignity. Get up off your knees.' And that's where I learned."

**Posted to Klan country**

"Out there they had one black teacher. So how many did I take? About six or seven [additional black teachers]. I wasn't going out there by myself. ... I want you to know some of the things we did at Albemarle Road. We didn't have money but we did it anyway, did we not?....

"This was quite an experience going to Albemarle Road because we did unusual things. First of all, I'd close down the school on Thursdays, put them on the bus and sent them over to the Johnston Y where they learned how to swim. And because of that it became a catalyst for the YMCA that you find out there off of Idlewild Road....

"I had three things happen. I had a black teacher who had a nervous breakdown. I had a white teacher... the pressure in the community was more than she could take. And when I went to the hospital to see her I noticed the nurse wouldn't leave the room... she said they won't let me be alone because I tried to commit suicide. The third was a parent who came to the school. I had 534 white students, one black -- I'd take him to school with me every morning to be sure it was desegregated. I hope you can find some humor in this, because there would be days that you would laugh. There would be days that you would cry....

"They would have a choir of maybe 125 kids. They would have stuff that folks now say they can't do in school. That ain't nothing but an excuse. Excuse my French: I usually say what I want to say, be what I want to be. But as I said to someone who was
apologizing for something, I said, 'Look, honey, we've been making chicken salad out of chicken s... all our lives.'

"At Albemarle Road, we did unusual things. We closed down the school. We went over on the bus. We had Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts. We taught industrial arts, sent some over to a parent's house to cook. You name it and we put it in that elementary school. Just in two or three years because, you see, I got tired.

"We sold ice cream to pay for the cubicles that were wired. We had a very highly innovative school and [Supt. and later N.C. Supt.] Craig Phillips was very proud of it. But Marilyn Huff, who was on the school board at that time and one of my dear friends, I said, Marilyn, I want to leave because these people cannot get over the fact that I am black. She said, Oh Bertha, it's not like that. ... She had somebody there from the Albemarle community that was working in the kitchen. She said you go in here and I'm going to go ask. 'You know, there was a lady who's principal over there.' 'Yeah, uh-huh, she's all right if she just wasn't black....

I said to [Supt.] Bill [Self], I have to leave... and I don't want to work for you anymore. 'What are you going to do, Bertha? We'll give you a school in the black community.' No. You made me a martyr in the white community.... If you had given me Myers Park, if you had given me Park Road, instead of Albemarle Road, I could have done more in that community.'...

"People out there were running from Clanton Park... 'because the nigras are coming'. Kids don't even see and they don't know what they have been taught. And you talk about these community schools? How are these folk going to learn humankind? I don't know. You have a challenge before you and if you start lumping all these folks back to where you were, you're in trouble.

**Meeting the cyclops**

"Most of the time they didn't confront me. What they would do would beat up on [school secretary] Ann Cloninger and some of the teachers. Well, I'm away and when I got back Ann says Oh this man came in and it was awful. He jumped all over the place and he is with the KKK and he told me, 'you tell that principal' -- he didn't know I was black -- 'you tell that principal to get my child out of that nigger's classroom.' So I called him up on the phone. 'Mr. blah-blah-blah, I hear that you like to have a special meeting. Please come down to the school tonight at 6 o'clock.'... If I was going to get hung or lynched I wanted to be sure they did it just before the PTA meeting so they would be able to see what they had done to me....

"Well, he could have fallen over when he found out I was black. So I said, 'Come right in, you and your wife. I hear that you have some problems with, I want you to know ... is one of the best black teachers I have and under no circumstance would I take your child out of ... the class.' 'Oh, well, I don't know why your secretary got, I didn't say that.'... The next day, the mother came down. She said, he said everything to your secretary... I
couldn't believe that he sat there and [denied saying what he said.]... But sometimes it was a matter of confronting."

**Departing for UNCC**

"Bill said, 'What are you going to do?' 'Put diapers on gnats.' By this time I had "not certified" a teacher from a very aristocratic family. I knew John [Chase] wasn't going to hire me. But he said, I respect you, Bertha, for the fact that you were not going to allow into the system somebody who is not prepared. If you want to come to UNCC.... because of John Chase I went to UNCC."

**Black Panthers, and history**

"At this time, had I not been married to Maxwell, I would have joined the Black Panther Party. I would have, because most people do not understand what the Black Panthers were about. You take the media and they brainwash you and they leave. Yes, they went in there and murdered like nobody's business. I teach a course in civil rights. When I have to go through Emmett Till, all the way up to Rosa Parks. You must understand history. You must understand SNCC. What was the SNCC about? And when you don't have the historical memory. And that's what's wrong with people who are designing -- you're not designing because all the systems have been designed for you. Most of your advocates get above the glass ceiling. Most of you are nothing but players. Most of us are pawns."

**The gospel according to...**

"I was born po'. Anybody here born po'? Today I'm poor. How many have credit cards? You are poor now because you owe your soul to the company store."

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"I had a great relationship with Billy Wireman at Queens. We had built a real connection. You can tell real people when you see 'em, and Bllly Wireman was a real person."

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"If you read a magazine that come out some years ago, I was at UNCC and they said, Bertha, what did you want to be when you grew up, and I said I wanted to be a nurse in a crazy house -- and I had arrived, because I was at UNCC."

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"It is true that it takes a village to raise a child. We must remember that. That is a part of our legacy. That is a part of our heritage. And that you were born with a purpose. You
weren’t born just to drive around in these fine cars and have all these kinds of stuff. You were born to serve.”

The Forum welcomes all persons to its meetings beginning at 8 a.m. most Tuesdays of the year at the West Charlotte Recreation Center, 2222 Kendall Drive, Charlotte, NC down the hill from West Charlotte High School.