

Interview with Shelby Puckett
Recorded on October 11, 2018

Ryan Wesdock: Could you tell me a little bit about yourself?

Shelby Puckett: I'm a native of Patrick county which is next door and I came to Carroll County in 1964 to begin a career in teaching. I taught for a couple of years and then moved into guidance and stayed as a guidance counselor until 1991. In August of 1991, I was moved over to be an assistant principal at Carroll County High School. That's where I ended my career in education in 1998.

RW: You were assistant principal for about a year when this controversy unfolded.

SP: That's correct.

RW: Are there any moments that stand out? What can you remember from the event?

SP: The one that I remember is the day that the secretary came to my office and she said, "we have a parent here who is very upset about a book we're teaching and he wants to speak to the principal." The principal was not in his office at that time and she said, "would you talk to him?" I said I would. A man by the name of Humphrey and I cannot..his son was Gerald..I cannot remember Mr. Humphrey's name. Mr. Humphrey came and he had with him a copy of *Floatplane Notebooks*. He proceeded to tell me that this book was not fit for the students to be studying in the high school. [Hurricane alert sound] I talked to him for a period of time and I listened to him. Then the principal came back to his office. The secretary told the principal that Mr. Humphrey was in my office. So the principal came into my office and Mr. Humphrey repeated again and pointed out he had all the passages marked that he was opposed to. He was somewhat concerned about the language but he was particularly concerned about a sex act that occurs towards the end of the book. The principal looks at me and says - with Mr. Humphrey sitting there - "did you approve this book?" and I said yes sir I did. And he said, to Mr. Humphrey, well we will have this book out of this school by tomorrow. It'll be gone. And so Mr. Humphrey left. And I did not record anything about that in my diary, as I was recording things. I did not record anything about that. I know that he did talk to Marion Goldwasser - the teacher who was teaching the book - and he did talk with her. And I cannot remember, at that point, the particulars of it. The next thing that I remember, Mr. Humphrey has taken a copy of the book to a - he calls himself an evangelist - who has a radio program on WHHV. And Mr. J.B. Lineberry, who was the evangelist, gets up on the radio and starts telling everybody we are teaching this book at Carroll County High School. It's satanic. We're teaching them to be immoral. We're teaching them to have sex. We're doing all these terrible, terrible things. And it's [the book] been

approved by the administration. And he's known the teacher for 25 years. And she's different and she's been sent here from somewhere. I mean it was personal - very, very personal. So that's my recollection of where we went from the point of Mr. Humphrey being there that day, telling me what was wrong with the book, Mr. Golding coming in asking if I approved it. Yes. Mr. Golding said we'll take the book out of the school we'll take it out of the classroom. And then the next part I remember where there was a real to do about it was when Mr. Lineberry took up the cause. And I don't know when he talked - I can't recall having a conversation with Mrs. Goldwasser about Mr. Golding - if Mr. Golding ever did go down there and talk to her that day. I'm assuming he did, I don't know, maybe she has told you about that. But I've lost that part of it.

RW: So was that meeting with Mr. Humphrey - was that unusual? Had that kind of thing happened before?

SP: No, no. I had never...of course I had only been assistant principal for that one year but in working with guidance it was not unusual that I would deal with parent complaints. When parents would come and if they had a complaint about a teacher or something a teacher was doing or saying or teaching, it would come to me, as a guidance counselor. I would work with the parent, work with the teacher, and we would always work it out. Now I never had anything - I never had this kind of complaint come, but I will say that, prior to this, in 1974, we did have a textbook controversy which was the *Responding* series. And we got all the evangelists coming in from West Virginia and we actually got to the point with that one where the school board threatened to burn books.

RW: Like actually burn books?

SP: Actually burn books. And then it got...it was so controversial and everybody was laughing it was serious...well I guess not really laughing, but it was like, it had become a joke that in 1974 Carroll County School board is going to burn, they're going to burn books. So we had gone through - and that was a terrible experience, I mean that was another one of those experiences that were, just one of those things that escalated just totally, totally out of hand. And I guess there were enough of us who had been there for that that this'n is going to escalate the same kind of way.

RW: So you guys had that, that kind of prior experience made you potentially more cautious with

SP: Maybe, maybe so. I would think so. That one, at the time that one occurred I was president of the CEA, which was the Carroll Education Association, and the education association got

involved with that one - deeply involved with that one. I attended a lot of school board meetings, a lot of meetings with our Superintendent. Our Superintendent at that time was definitely not for - he really was not for banning the book - and he was not for burning the book but it was our school board at that time that was so eager to burn books. Actually the school board hired a lady to work as an assistant in the library in the afternoons. She was seen - and the people who would back this up are probably gone so I'm going to call no names - but she was seen at various times going through books and looking for things and then it got to be not just the *Responding* series itself but a hunt for witchcraft because we were teaching witchcraft in the school. This one escalated and escalated and again I cannot give you all the details of that but, for my part, I ended up contacted - and he's deceased also - I contacted Max Jenkins in Radford who at that time was the head of the ACLU. He was preparing the ACLU to get involved in Carroll County. Our Superintendent retired and we got a new Superintendent in and he worked it out and it finally settled down. But now they did do away with the *Responding* series. We did not use that anymore. So it had been quite an upheaval at that time with that.

RW: What was the objection to the textbook series because I've heard that same story from a number of other people...

SP: Language, stories. I think the biggest thing with the *Responding* series, and see that goes all the way back to '74, was language. And again I just remember somebody coming along with the book and the markings and everything was taken out of context. There was no context to anything it was just like we're going to mark every dirty word we can find. So when Mr. Humphrey came it was like deja vu all over as Yogi Bera says. It was like here we go again, but I really thought that - I guess I really didn't think that it was ever going to go again to where it went - and then when he got Mr. Lineberry involved in it, Mr. Lineberry got on the radio. At one point Mr. Lineberry was even encouraging the students to go out and demonstrate and do all of this. He was really pushing parents to go just as hard as he could.

RW: Talking a little bit about the *Floatplane Notebooks*, so the book itself, you had read it prior to its use in the classroom?

SP: I had read that prior to it, mhm. Now anything that I'm going to say to you about *Floatplane Notebooks*, I'm going to...I got a couple of things to say about that. I approved the book and I would still approve the book for that teacher. And having said that, now I would not approve the book. The reason being I trusted Marion Goldwasser. Now, Mrs. Goldwasser was, in my experience, an extraordinary teacher. We had several of those at school. Not a whole lot and probably not a faculty has a whole lot of them, but Marion Goldwasser was an extraordinary teacher. Her relationships with her students were...she was their friend but it was never that they ever took advantage of it. They respected her. She would elevate her discussions of her books

and her material with those students and get students involved in books that very few other teachers did. We did have some, but she was extraordinary. Now, after almost thirty years, I realize that when I approved that book for one teacher I would have had to approve it for all teachers because then I would have been in trouble. If I had had teacher A saying oh yeah you can use it because I think you can handle it but teacher B no you can't use because no I don't think you can handle it. So in retrospect, I probably never should have approved the book, but it was Marion and I had seen what Marion had done. She had used this book with her advanced classes. We had never had a problem and she was using it now with the non-college bound students. Her rationale was to find books that these students could relate to, that they could, that it would be something they could be knowledgeable about. If you read *Floatplane Notebooks*, it is. It's just a family. It's just a plain family that's not high class or anything. Just a family with hound dogs and a man who comes home wounded from Vietnam. So, yes, I approved the book and, yes, I still again would approve the book for Marion. There were people I would not have wanted to have taught that book at that school. So in all fairness to everybody I probably should never have approved it.

RW: So for you, the approval had a lot to do with her particular quality of teaching?

SP: I would say it had everything to do with it. Everything. Teachers are just like everybody else. You have teachers who are gifted. You have teachers who are good. You have teachers who are mediocre and then you have teachers who are not good. Teachers run the gamut. You know that from going to school. There was another English teacher at that point that comes to mind immediately - and I would have to go back and look it up who was there - but there was another one. I wouldn't have approved it for her. In retrospect I should not have approved it. Not because I thought the book was wrong to read but just that I'm not sure everyone would have handled it. So, yes, it's approval was predicated on what I had seen Marion do with her students.

RW: How much were you talking with the principal, with the Superintendent McBride? Communicating about what was going on?

SP: Daily, daily. For example, I have one entry in my diary that says I was called into the Superintendent's office today but I was not to tell anybody I was going. It was very secretive. But I don't know what we talked about. See, I didn't record that. I just recorded that I went but I was not to talk to anybody that I was going. I also have a notation in my book that the principal wants to call me in because there's some question whether I'm being loyal to the administration or I'm being loyal to Mrs. Goldwasser. So there was that kind of stuff that was going on; I would say probably on a daily basis from the time that this all came about. Mr. Lineberry got involved in it and it started escalating. I would say every day from then until the end of school there was probably something about *Floatplane Notebooks*, to some degree.

RW: I know at some points based on the editorials that he [Lineberry] wrote and some of the things that the Humphreys wrote in *The Carroll News*, *The Gazette*, and so on. They seem to suggest that they wanted various people in the administration fired. They felt there had been an... error in judgement, I suppose would be a phrase that they would use. Were you ever concerned that this would start to affect you personally and your position?

SP: No, no, I really was not. I mean, I never thought. They were suggesting that I be fired because they sorta zeroed in on the fact that I had approved it as the administrator. I always had more concern, I guess, not of outside sources wanting me fired but rather inside sources. Because like I said I was called in and questioned about my loyalty to the administration. You're an administrator now - are you on the administration's side or are you on Mrs. Goldwasser's side, kind of thing. It's interesting. But as far as ever thinking I was actually going to lose my job and coming home and saying oh my goodness my job's in jeopardy...I can't. My loyalty was questioned but I never felt like I was ever...I never felt like I was going to get fired. And I never felt like Mrs. Goldwasser was going to get fired. Now there were a lot of people who became very angry with her because she kept pushing and she kept pushing and everybody wanted her to stop. Everybody said, you know, just stop this process, you know, let's work something, you know, there was a lot of...I think the faculty kind of went through a change. At the beginning the faculty supported her and then as the months progressed and she ended up filing a grievance and the faculty had a little petition that was going around - the English department I guess started the petition... She did get some outside groups to come in and I thought then that the faculty...I felt she lost some support from the faculty. But I felt at the beginning she had very good faculty support.

RW: So what about the public in general, I guess, outside the school? Do you feel there was broadly popular support in Carroll County or elsewhere for Marion or was there more kind of support for people who didn't want the book to be used?

SP: I always felt that Marion had tremendous support under the circumstances. We had ministers. We had one minister in particular who really stood by her. We had a lot of people with clout. We had a lot of people who remained quiet, who didn't say anything one way or the other, but when you talked to them they were for her. The other thing that she had going for her was that a huge number of students who had been in her classroom - that formed a huge base of support for Marion and what she was doing. At one time I went to a school board meeting for something else completely and I had noted that there was a huge contingency of people there in support of Marion. At one time we were counting people that were involved in what was going on and we had like seven people that were really being vocal against her. I'd always felt through the whole thing that Marion had more support than non-support. Although, she might not have felt that way. I don't know that. Because when people are on the radio saying very ugly things

about you...and I know that she did get one or two calls at home that were threatening to her. So I don't really know all that she went through at that time. But in general I felt the community was more supportive than non-supportive. Actually it was a surprising thing to me, because, you know, we're in a rural community that's very conservative. I would have thought there would have been a broader movement to get rid of me, to get rid of her, that that would have gained momentum. It never did, you know. It was something in passing that I needed to be fired, that she needed to be fired. To the best of my knowledge, it never made it to the school board.

RW: What about the media? So I know there were quite a lot of reports on it. It got a lot of attention in *The Roanoke Times*, specifically. What did the local press kind of think? What was your impression of what they thought? Did you ever chat with them, ever give them an interview? I know a lot of the other people did.

SP: No. When they first started coming I had a terrible, terrible sinus infection and I had laryngitis and couldn't talk so I got out of talking that way. And then, later on, they didn't have any low ones talking - you know, low level - either the Superintendent would do the talking or Mr. Golding would do the talking. But as I recollect, not too long after all this started, I think Dr. McBride became kind of the spokesperson. I do remember there were editorials against Mr. Golding because he did not fight that at all. There were some editorials against the way that he had handled it and he didn't like that. *The Roanoke Times*, I always thought, were supportive. I mean they were always opposed to censorship and I always thought what they put out was good because it was always in support of, let's not censor books, let's not burn books. And I know Channel 7 came and maybe Channel 10 came. I don't know if Channel 12 out of Winston [Winston-Salem, NC] ever got there or not. I know they were there that one day when we were supposed to have that big demonstration. I always thought *The Roanoke Times* was...I always thought Paul Dellinger was very supportive. I mean, Paul Dellinger was very opposed to censorship. At least he was at that point. I don't know if he still is or not. He has to be older than me!

RW: So what was the process for the book being removed? And what was the policy for it? Because it seems like in the reporting there is a lot of going back and forth about whether or not the principal could just take the book from the classroom, whether or not that was McBride's decision, whether or not it should have gone through the [Textbook] committee...

SP: After the *Responding* series crisis that we had, when the new Superintendent came in, he set up a committee system to review books that were complained about. And of course that was in nineteen seventy-....so that was like 18 years beforehand. In 18 years there had never been a book complained about. So I suspect we all had forgotten that we had that process in place. I think it took getting into this and getting some people outside the county who were not involved

to start looking at well hold on now wait a minute, you have a process. The principal doesn't go in and take the books away. The parent, according to this, with what was set up with the committee back in '75 when they finally got all that worked out, was the parent was to meet with the teacher. Then he put in writing what his complaints were, but you didn't just go in and say I don't like this book, I don't like the words in it, and the book disappears. But again, I don't think at that time, again, with it being 18 years before and the process had never been used, probably none of us even thought about that process - initially, initially. And then it had gotten so disjointed and so discombobulated and all of that, by the time Marion, I'm sure was the person who found that policy and then came back and said could we follow the policy. Well then the question became, well is it too late to start over? I mean we had been into this for two or three months and all of that. If I'm not mistaken they didn't finish the book. I think she put the book on hold, maybe. They didn't go back to using it. They didn't take it out of the classroom, but it almost seems to me she did not finish the process. And then the question became, well, we'll do this and we'll do something else, is it too late to go back and start that process? Marion felt sure that it was not. She was the one who continued to be insistent that the process that had been put in place be followed. Then, eventually, it was. Because I know there were a lot of people looking for that policy. I can remember people coming into my office have you got a county handbook. We need to go back and see what the policy was with that. Because I had been involved to some extent with that as CEA president when that committee system was set up. But again like I said at 18 years nobody had ever come. You'd never had a book challenged and so I guess we sorta... we grew complacent.

RW: So what was your feeling about kinda the school? Were students talking about this? Did they care? Did they even know?

SP: Well, generally I don't know. When I tell you that I don't know, administrators, just like in a lot of places, are the last people to know anything that's going on. When you're not out with the students, you don't have great feel for what they do or what they're thinking. Now, I know when Mr. Lineberry...I know this because I loved the man who taught electronics and he always kept a radio in his room and he was one of these people if the kids were working he would, like if there was a big ball game going on or something, he would let the kids listen to the ball game. He wouldn't let them stop working, but they could work and listen to the game. and when Mr. Lineberry would come on on Friday morning, he'd turn the radio on and a lot of the kids who were in that English class would go to Mr. Hill's class to listen to the radio to see what Mr. Lineberry was going to say on that day.

RW: When the screening committee came back and the school board approved the kind of compromise position - it was not used for eleventh grade, it was used for 12th grade AP classes and it was a 3-2 split - what was your take on the decision and their kind of reasoning behind it?

SP: At that time we had what they called “curriculum specialists.” And we had a curriculum specialist for science, math, social studies, and English. Marion, of course, was the English curriculum specialist. One of those curriculum specialists pretty much headed up the committee. He had wanted to make it available, as I understood it, only for college kids and AP kids or whatever. I guess it’s like with a lot of compromises. Most of us were to the point where we wanted it to end. Most of us thought it could have had a better ending than it did. It limited, I think, what you could do with students, but again I think it had gone on for so long that most people were like if this is the best we can do let’s take it. But it’s not the best of all things, you know.