

# Gail's Pencil Box

Category: Racism

written by Peggy Rush | June 4, 2020

I was in the fourth grade in 1956, when I became one of the first black students in Kansas City, Kansas, to desegregate Abbott Elementary School. That year was filled with learning experiences for everyone involved—teachers, parents, and both black and white children—but by the end of the school year the ugly incidents had been few. I had great expectations when fifth grade rolled around, but nothing could have prepared me for what was to come.

From the outset, my fifth-grade teacher made it clear to the three black students in her class that she resented our presence and would go out of her way to make our lives and learning experiences difficult and that, in her opinion, we were inferior. As difficult as she was, with constant encouragement and support at home from my parents, I didn't let her dampen my spirits. That is, until the day a fellow classmate misplaced her pencil box and, in front of the entire class, Miss Hoffer accused me of having stolen it.

"Peggy, give Gail back her pencil box!" Miss Hoffer barked, pointing at the new green pencil box on my desk. Shocked, I shook my head. "This isn't Gail's, Miss Hoffer," I replied. "My mother bought it for me last night at Katz."

My pencil box was the same color as the one Gail had misplaced, but my mother had purchased mine the night before at our local variety store. I had brought it with me to class still in its little brown bag, with the price tag stapled to the bag.

"I said, 'Give Gail back her pencil box!'" Miss Hoffer shouted, starting toward my desk. I just shook my head no. That's when she grabbed me.

By one of my long, thick pigtails, Miss Hoffer snatched me up from my seat and dragged me across the classroom, out the door, and across the cold, dark hallway to the girl's bathroom. There, she proceeded to wash my mouth out with lye soap until my tongue was raw, all the while talking about how much she hated us and especially me, since I was also a liar.

I was in tears as she led me back into the classroom. The other children sat in stony silence as we entered—all of them except Gail, who cried out shamefully, "Miss Hoffer, I found my pencil box. It was in my desk."

*Peggy Rush*

*Fredericksburg, Virginia*