

The New York Town That Tried to Stop Desegregation

It was february 23, 1966, and Frederick K. Brewington had to walk less than a mile to get to school. He and his mom had mapped the routes: He would cross the street and enter the band of trees, tramping over the rocks in the creek. He would emerge from the trees to Bob Whelan Field, then trek across Ocean Avenue, the thoroughfare that cut the district in half. The side streets would carry him from there to Lindner Place Elementary.

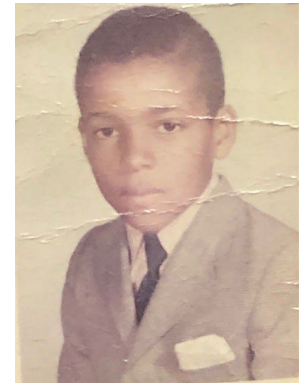
It was the first day of court-ordered desegregation in the Malverne School District on Long Island, New York, more than a decade after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision ordered the integration of the nation's schools. Black people in the area would often say theirs was a city "an ocean apart." White Americans have long used railroads, highways, and bridges as dividing lines, and Ocean Avenue, Malverne's dividing line, was no different. It segregated the town: With few exceptions, white families primarily lived west of it, in Malverne, and Black families lived to the east, in an area known as Lakeview. The schools had been segregated, too. So for Brewington and hundreds of other Black children in the area, after years of demonstrations and legal battles, that brisk, sunny day in February had been a long time coming.

Brewington's family had migrated to Nassau County from the Carolinas in the 1920s. His grandfather, Levi Chapman, was a porter on the railroad—one of the best jobs available to Black men at the time.

Chapman and his wife bought a house on Pinelake Drive, where they raised their seven children.

Segregation was not quite as rigid as it was in the South, and they quickly broke barriers. Brewington's

mother, Mabel, was one of the first Black students to graduate from Malverne High School, which she did in 1940. Frederick was born 16 years later, on December 11, 1956.



As the years went by, residential segregation meant that the district schools were marked by racial imbalance. There was only one high school in the district, so segregation was most apparent at the three elementary schools. Woodfield Road School, to the east in Lakeview, was at least three-quarters Black. Meanwhile, the Davison Avenue and Lindner Place schools were less than 15 percent Black. Brewington is not a “first” in a literal sense, but his story reveals how desegregation has never been a matter of just flipping a switch. In America, desegregation has not only been slow; it has also been cyclical—a seemingly endless loop of efforts, backlash, and efforts anew.

Early in the 1960s, Black families and activists in the Long Island area who were fed up with the status quo began arguing that the state should do more to integrate its schools. Desegregating the schools—meaning having any Black students at all—was one thing, but too many Black students, the coalition argued, were locked out of the educational opportunities at Lindner Place and Davison. At Woodfield Road School, the teachers were phenomenal, Brewington told me, but the extracurriculars were limited. And, material differences aside, the schools were still essentially segregated, which meant they were unequal. Local civil-rights groups such as the Congress of Racial Equality and the NAACP stressed the need for equity in schools. And it seemed that the only way this would be achieved was through meaningful integration.

Throughout 1962, the groups staged protests: picketing outside the elementary and junior-high schools; holding a 24-hour sit-in and fasting inside Malverne High. The state's education commissioner, James Allen Jr., appointed a committee to study the problem. Many such commissions issued reports with little consequence, but when the three-member panel returned with its recommendations in May 1963, Allen acted. There was racial imbalance in the schools, the panel said, and it could be fixed through several methods, including a strategy known as a Princeton plan. The Princeton Borough Board of Education, in New Jersey, had implemented a scheme—which reassigned students based on grade to address racial imbalance—in

the 1940s, and it had become a national model. In Malverne, for example, all students would attend kindergarten through third grade at Lindner Place or Davison; then they would attend Woodfield Road for the last two years of elementary school. The plan, the committee wrote, would “do the most to satisfy current complaints.”



Children from Malverne and Lakeview take part in protests organized by CORE and NAACP. (Courtesy of Frederick Brewington)

Allen took the committee up on its idea and proposed that the district begin implementing the plan in the fall of 1963. Malverne became the first city in New York with a state-designed integration plan, and a test case for what could be done more widely. But white parents, furious with the commissioner’s plan, quickly formed a group called the Taxpayers and Parents Association. They wanted their school district to remain the way it was—racially imbalanced—and quickly sued to block the plan from taking effect.

“There were levels of discontent with Black children going to school with white children that were voiced and made very clear,” Brewington recently told me over Zoom from his office, a few miles from Malverne in Hempstead, New York. “I’ve had a chance as a lawyer now to go back and read some of the cases and the rulings by the courts, and you can read straight through—you don’t even need much of a filter to see where people were coming from.” School-board officials used the suit as cover to defy the commissioner’s order, arguing that they could not take any action until the litigation was resolved.

Reporters spoke with Brewington when he arrived at school. They asked him how he felt; they asked how he had prepared for the day; they asked what his mom had told him. “She told me to be on my best behavior and not to walk on anybody’s lawn, because remember they don’t want you over there anyway,” he told them.

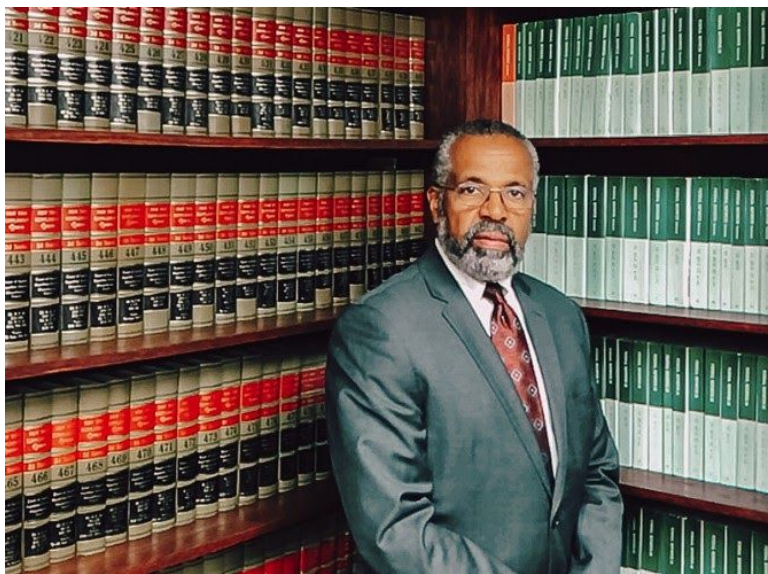
When his mother picked up the paper the next day and saw the quote, she turned to him. His laugh boomed through my computer speakers as he remembered. “She goes, ‘Did you tell them that?’ and I said, ‘Yeah, that’s what you told me!’”

Malverne’s school-integration fight didn’t end that February. Some white families began sending their children to private schools. Racist practices by real-estate agents further deepened residential segregation. People made the same arguments in new ways. Busing became the inconvenience. A bill in the New York State legislature, in

April 1966, which would have banned busing, was panned by one Black New York lawmaker: “Bringing this bill to the floor of the Senate for debate and its passage gives comfort to every nut in the country who hates Negroes.”

No, these fights do not end. They evolve.

“He is sometimes called the Thurgood Marshall of Long Island,” *The New York Times* wrote of Brewington in a profile in 2003. He had just come off more than a decade of work arguing that the Hempstead election system discriminated against Black candidates—a case he had recently won. Brewington was born into a civil-rights battle, and he continues it today. And in Nassau County, he still sees injustice everywhere—how a drive down a road remains the difference between blight and affluence.



Fred Brewington at his law offices in Hempstead, New York, where he's still fighting for civil rights (Bethany Mollenkoff)

Two abutting school districts embody the dichotomy clearly, he told me: Hempstead Union Free School District and Garden City Public Schools. “As soon as you leave Hempstead, the canopy of the roads change, the broad byways open up, the yards become more lush,” he said. “If you sneeze while you’re driving down [Clinton Avenue], you’ll miss the point when it happens.” And as a *Newsday* investigation showed in 2019, the schools remain racially unbalanced. At Jackson Main Elementary in Hempstead, for example, fewer than 3 percent of the students are white, 70 percent are Hispanic, and 26 percent are Black. Locust Elementary School in nearby Garden City is 86 percent white.

It is jarring to realize that the difference is as stark now as it was when Brewington was in school; it’s even more galling that the arguments for maintaining the status quo remain unchanged. The language used may be different, Brewington said, “but once you scratch the surface and unpeel the onion, you’re getting right down to those biases, getting down to those same levels of misinformation and hatred, and race does become a factor.”

I spoke with Brewington in the weeks after George Floyd’s murder. The protests and increased support for the Black Lives Matter movement had created hope in him that things could be different in the future. But he was also worried that everything—the progress

America has made—could fall off a cliff. “We really find ourselves at the precipice of a very important time in history,” he said. “The confluence of where we are now”—between a pandemic, an election, and a movement for justice—“could make things really different than where we’ve been in the past.”