

## On-the-Site Research Shines a Light on Lived History: Beyond Brown v. Board of Education

By Reggie Alston, VP of Qualitative Research, Ebony Marketing Systems

As America celebrates its 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary, [Reggie Alston](#), Vice President Qualitative Research, Ebony Marketing Systems, Inc., reflects on a project that reshaped how we think about power, community, and history.



Reggie Alston

Over the past year, I had the honor of conducting five focus groups for the National Park Service and Lexicon & Line at each of the five communities whose legal challenges were consolidated into *Brown v. Board of Education*. While we often remember Brown as a Supreme Court decision, what became clear to me is this: Brown is not a ruling, it's a collection of ordinary people refusing to accept oppressive ideas about who deserves opportunity.

The methodology was rooted in the community. One focus group of eight to 12 participants was conducted at each of the five locations. Recruitment was

handled by members of the National Park Service and included participants who were familiar with the history, operations, and/or significance of each site. The focus group sessions in Farmville, VA; Claymont, DE; Washington, DC; and Summerton, SC were held at the Brown v. Board sites. The focus group session in Topeka, KS was conducted at a local library.

As an extension of the focus group in **Claymont, Delaware**, I had the privilege of having a separate conversation with one of the participants, Miss Joan Anderson. Miss Anderson's experiences are connected to *Gebhart v. Belton*, one of the five cases that formed *Brown v. Board of Education*. With her permission, I share her thoughts.

Miss Joan didn't describe history in legal terms. She described it in feelings:

- What it meant to attend a segregated school
- How inequality shaped expectations
- How courage often looked like quiet persistence

Her story reminded me that ordinary people don't always see themselves as "change makers" until history catches up with them.

I had a similar experience in **Summerton, South Carolina** where I had the pleasure of meeting separately with a focus group participant, Cecil Williams. Mr. Williams is a photographer who, at the age of 14, helped capture important Civil Rights Movement events including *Briggs v. Elliott* and the 1968 Orangeburg Massacre. Today, Mr. Williams continues that legacy through his work with [Actively Black](#), using culture and commerce to affirm Black identity and history.

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In **Washington, D.C.**, the *Bolling v. Sharpe* case challenged segregation in the nation's capital. The associated middle school is still functioning today. Students in my focus group told me something powerful: "If people knew this school's history, they'd see us differently."

That stuck with me. History doesn't disappear when buildings change. Ordinary people continue to carry it forward whether through storytelling, education, or cultural expression.

In **Farmville, Virginia**, the Robert Russa Moton Museum is more than a historic site, it's a reminder of what young people can spark.

Formerly Moton High School, this is where Barbara Rose Johns, at just 16 years old, led a student strike protesting unequal school conditions. That action became *Davis v. County School Board*, another pillar of *Brown v. Board*.

During my focus group in Farmville, community members spoke about the museum as a living space and one that connects past courage to present possibility.

This year, Barbara Johns was honored with a statue at the U.S. Capitol replacing a Confederate monument. A powerful shift in who we choose to remember. Ordinary students. Extraordinary impact.

When people hear *Brown v. Board of Education*, they usually think of **Topeka, Kansas** and there's a reason for that. The case name comes from Topeka in part because it represented the Midwest, not the Deep South, underscoring that segregation was a national issue, not a regional one.

Today, the *Brown v. Board of Education* National Historical Park is located in Topeka at the former Monroe Elementary School, a powerful, tangible space where history feels close. Visit the site: <https://www.nps.gov/brvb>. In my conversations there, community members reflected on integration, some describing smoother transitions than in the South, others naming tensions that lingered quietly for decades.

What Topeka reinforced for me is this:

Names matter, but people matter more.

*Brown* is a reminder that everyday choices, made by ordinary families, can shift a nation.

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