

uncomfortable; we simply felt we had the right to go to school here. I was born in Georgia, and my dad had paid taxes here just like everyone else.”

‘I just really enjoyed learning’

Growing up in the heart of Atlanta, Early spent many summer days in the Olive Branch Library just across the street from the restaurant owned by her father, John H. Early.

It was the love for reading and the encouragement of her mother, Ruth Early, a public school teacher in Monroe, Ga., that inspired Early to become a teacher herself.

“While growing up, I looked to my mom for inspiration and motivation. She always made it clear that the way one gets ahead is to be educated,” Early said. “But she didn’t have to do a lot of arguing to get me to read or study because I enjoyed it. I was, what you would now call, a nerd. I just really enjoyed learning.”

Early’s interest in music came naturally, too.

“My dad was an amateur singer. He sang at church and at weddings and funerals, and he wanted me to accompany him. So, I started taking piano lessons at the age of 6. Above our restaurant was a piano studio, and I took lessons there for a year. But the teacher would rap you on the knuckles with a pencil if you played a wrong note, so I told my dad, ‘I don’t want to take piano any more.’ But he wouldn’t let me give up. He bought me a set of these books,” Early said pointing to her study shelf, “the International Library of Music, and we had an old upright piano at home, so I just sort of taught myself until I was in high school, and then I started taking lessons again.”

Early’s desire to teach and her love for music finally came together in a high school band class at Henry McNeal Turner High School in Atlanta.

“I had this charismatic band teacher, and I would watch him, and I noticed how the students all seemed to like him,” she said, “and the music was so enjoyable and I said, ‘I think I want to teach music.’”

After sharing her decision, Early’s band teacher took her to what was then Clark College to play with the college band. As high school valedictorian, Early had scholarship offers to Spelman College and Brown University but decided to attend Clark College and major in music education.

“Back then, being a band director was not something expected of women. In fact, I was one of only two women doing it in the whole city of Atlanta when I graduated from Clark,” Early said. “Even today there aren’t that many female band directors. There are more, and that’s good because I don’t think that one’s gender should prescribe what you do.”

‘We weren’t brought up to talk about color.’

“I grew up in segregated Atlanta, but my parents were sort of protective, so we weren’t put into situations where we were made to feel inferior because of our skin color,” Early said. “My mother was very fair, and my father was very dark. But

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Mary Frances Early

we weren’t brought up to talk about color. It wasn’t in our vocabulary to think that people were good or bad because of their skin color, so I was just sort of taken aback that it became a big issue later in my life.”

But there were two times in Early’s childhood that she does remember when race was an issue – even if she didn’t realize it at the time.

“I remember once very vividly – I think I was 8 – we were driving to Florida for a golf tournament my dad was in, and we stopped at a little service station in south Georgia to get gas. We headed toward the restroom as they were filling our tank, and the guy told

my father, ‘You all can’t use the restrooms here.’ So my dad said, ‘Take the gas back out. We don’t trade with people who won’t let us use their facilities.’ My mother was frightened because at that time they were still lynching people in Georgia. But my dad was not afraid of anything. He did not look for trouble, but he protected his family. That stuck in my mind,” Early said.

Another discriminatory incident Early recalls from her childhood occurred on a bus trip with her mother to visit her grandmother in Monroe.

“As I said, my mother was fair and had hair that was brown and straight. When we got on the bus, we sat in the middle and at that time, blacks were expected to sit in the very back seats,” Early said. “The bus driver got up, came back and said to me, ‘You can’t sit there by that white woman.’ And I said, ‘But that’s my mother.’ That was something that really bothered me psychologically. I just couldn’t understand it. My mother did not move. She just comforted me and told me it was OK.”

‘I came to love Georgia ...’

Despite the discrimination she faced at UGA, Early does have some fond memories of her days in the music education department – a place which provided her solace and encouragement.

“I came to love Georgia as a school. I didn’t like a lot of things that went on sometimes, but the music department was a place of refuge,” Early said.

Early is quick to note the transition the University has undergone in the past 40 years, saying the school has exhibited a “greater awareness that bigger efforts need to be made to integrate the student body.”

“I still think our state university should be a little more reflective of what our state looks like, but I think that eventually we’ll get there. By 2002, we ought to be looking at people as people and not people as colors,” Early said. “I am so happy now that there is an office of diversity, and I have met Dr. (Louis) Castenell, and I think he’s a wonderful person. He has a big job. I think that gradually things are getting better. I think that there is a will to make it better, and I hope that in my lifetime I’ll see the kind of equity and diversity that our state university deserves. But I don’t think we should forget our history, because