

FIRST DAY AT MONROVIA DEMONSTRATION ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

I remember my first day at MDES like it was yesterday. Well, like yesteryears since we are talking about more than 60 years ago. I remember being led into the kindergarten class by my mother. She said goodbye at the door and left me standing there. I watched her leave and then turned around to confront this new challenge. I was in a kindergarten class again. How do I merge, mingle or join in with this new group of kids who would become my classmates? First step, find a seat. I zoomed in on a seat in the first row and walked over to claim it. I sat down and decided to focus, not on my fellow classmates, but my new kindergarten teacher. There was something different about her, unlike the teachers at BW Payne Kindergarten from where I was coming. I noticed she was a white lady. That was new to me, enough of a curiosity to refocus my attention on her and cool my anger with my mother for leaving me here.

Before I could relax, a kid walked over and began crying as he claimed I was sitting in his seat. I looked up at him and refused to bulge. He started to cry even louder. The teacher came over to try to resolve the problem. But he refused to leave for any other seat, pleading that he wanted to sit in the seat I was in. I looked around the room, saw another vacant seat in the third row, got up and moved over to it. I just didn't want to get into any trouble on my first day. I watched as the kid sat in his front seat, then looked over at me and smiled. I stared back at him, but did not smile back. Nevertheless, that first encounter with Prince Anderson was the beginning of a lasting friendship that carried on into our adult years.

Yes, I was upset about being in this class. I felt I didn't belong here. I was a recent graduate of another kindergarten school, the B. W. Payne Kindergarten School located at the corner of Warren Street and Benson Street. I remember the graduation ceremony and the traditional parade in the streets of Monrovia dressed in our graduation gowns as the crowd looked on. I remember the graduation program. We all dressed up in long-tailed "two-finger" suits representing the various Presidents of the Republic of Liberia. I represented President Garrison W. Gibson and had a girl on my arm acting as my wife at the program. We had fun. We took lots of pictures. It was an unforgettable experience.

I enjoyed my stay at B. W. Payne Kindergarten School. I remember the singing and recitations. I remember some of my favorite teachers, like Ms Mai Nah and Ms Missy. Right next door to B. W. Payne Kindergarten was C. D. B. King Elementary School. We shared the same large playground. Both schools were enclosed in the same fence. I believe the close proximity was meant to allow the B. W. Payne kindergarten students an easy transition to the C. D. B King elementary school next door. I figured C. D. B. King would have been my new home in elementary school after graduating from B. W. Payne. But my mother had very different plans for me.

A new school, Monrovia Demonstration Elementary School (MDES), was the talk of the town. Build with funds from a USAID grant, this school was constructed with plans to become an exact model of the elementary schools located in the US. Even some of the teachers were brought over from the US to get this school off the ground, bringing in with them lots of books and curriculum plans to revitalize the educational school system in Liberia. The ultimate goal was to pilot an American elementary school curriculum at this school which would then serve as the model for a new system of elementary schools to be build throughout the country. As a feeder to the elementary school, it was decided to introduce a kindergarten class at the Monrovia Demonstration Elementary School just as well.

I graduated from B. W. Payne Kindergarten School when I was 5 years old. The school year ended in December. The new school year began in March. My birthday in January made me 6 years old. This was just old enough to start the new school year at C. D. B. Elementary School in the first grade. But my mother had different plans. She wanted me to be a part of the new educational plan for the Liberian schools. So she took me to Monrovia Demonstration Elementary School, located on Clay Street instead. When we went to visit the first grade class at MDES, she observed a class full of older kids, mainly 6 year olds going on to become 7 year old kids during the school year. She wisely believed this crowd was too matured for me and took me to the kindergarten class instead. This group was mainly 5 year old kids about to become 6 year old kids within the school year. She felt this group was a better fit for me and left me there.

So there I was, starting again in another kindergarten class at a new school, new teacher and new group of classmates. I was curious to see what it would become. And wow! What a beautiful experience! Mrs. Bartells my kindergarten teacher was excellent. My kindergarten classmates were the best! This was the beginning of an eight year relationship and beautiful experiences with the majority of them at MDES to last a lifetime. I enjoyed every moment of it! Thank you mama!