A white Southerner confronts her schooling at a segregated private 'academy' and challenges others to do the same.

Byline: Vanessa Williams

Faced with growing public pressure to end racial segregation in public schools, thousands of white parents in the early 1970s enrolled their children in private academies that sprang up across the South.

Ellen Ann Fentress, a journalist and writer, was one of them. She is telling her story and urging other alumni of "seg academies" to come forward and give testimony about how attending an intentionally segregated school has shaped their lives as well as the social, political and economic fabric of the South.

Fentress first told her story in June, with an essay in the online publication the Bitter Southerner. She wrote of being pulled from her public school in Greenwood, Miss., during her eighth-grade year and plunked down in "a scrambled egg-yellow steel building in a cotton field" called Pillow Academy.

More than 750,000 white children are estimated to have attended more than 3,000 segregated academies during the first half of the 1970s, as public school systems were changed by a Supreme Court ruling upholding busing as a way to force desegregation. Southern public officials had vehemently resisted allowing black and white children to go to the same schools despite the court's landmark 1954 Brown v. Board of Education ruling.

Fentress, an only child who grew up middle class, wrote that she "felt bad about my new school's obvious purpose. I silently fretted I'd be asked, point-blank, by someone who was black what school I attended." She added that although she lived in the Mississippi Delta, which had "the highest proportion of black residents of any region of the country - I surreally never actually knew one black teen in my town of 23,000. That was an immediate byproduct of academy schooling, which limited my stock of life experiences to draw from as an adult."

Dozens of academy graduates reached out, sharing their own stories of confusion and oblivion about why their parents snatched them out of neighborhood schools and put them in the segregated academies. They also confessed sadness and bitterness about how the experience distorted their sense of racial reality.
Last week, Fentress launched a website, the Academy Stories, which will publish testimonials from graduates of the schools. She hopes to use those stories to explore how the effort to skirt school desegregation affected both black and white residents at the time and in the present day. She started the project with a $2,000 grant from the Mississippi Humanities Council.

Fentress graduated from Pillow Academy in 1974. Why has she decided now to look back at that experience? She points to a broader reason and one that is more personal.

"In so many ways the history of the South has really been confronted, for the first time, by white people in this last decade," she said. She noted the 50th anniversaries of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts and the recent heated debates over Confederate flags and statues.

A more specific reason to examine the phenomenon came during Cindy Hyde-Smith's Senate campaign last year. The Jackson Free Press reported that the politician had attended a segregated academy as a teenager and years later made her daughter go to a private school that was started during the early 1970s.

"It was interesting because so many of us had had the same experience and, to so many here, it was like oxygen: White kids go to academies and black kids go to public schools," Fentress said. Because it had become a national news story, she said, it seemed "it was time to reckon with it."

The academies were opened in 13 Southern states and some are still in operation, although they no longer discriminate against students of color. Yet, Fentress said she has been surprised by the number of millennials who have reached out. "They've said, 'The academy in my town is still like that and I want to tell my story.'"

An even more personal and painful reason for Fentress to confront her past came earlier this year when she was at a bookstore to see Kiese Laymon, a fellow Mississippian who teaches English at the University of Mississippi and is the author of the widely praised memoir "Heavy." He talked about the controversy around a photo of someone wearing blackface on Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam's yearbook page for medical school.

As Fentress recalls it, Laymon said, "'Why is it that when a white person is caught in a photo wearing blackface they say, no, it's not them. I want to see a white person say, 'Yeah, that was me and this is what I was thinking.'"

In her essay about her experience at Pillow Academy, Fentress confessed about an incident in the ninth grade when students were encouraged to wear costumes for Mississippi History Day: "I had what I thought a funny idea, since we were assigned to dress up to salute the state's past. I dug in the hall closet at home for a sheet to go as a Ku Klux Klansman. I lacked both the moral empathy and even the acquaintance with a black person to fathom that the
costume choice was not fun but appalling."

She continued: "I failed to think about how, six years before, three young civil-rights volunteers had been captured and murdered by Klansmen 90-odd miles away in Neshoba County. I paraded down the concrete school hall with classmates in blander settler costumes. No one called me on the outfit - neither my parents nor any teacher or classmate. They were as heedless - and white - as I was."

Fentress, in the interview, said her story and those of others are not being told just for the sake of telling.

"This is not a proud narrative and it's not an exercise in negative nostalgia. It's unsettling because it's so close to home," she said. "This is not like confronting the Civil War that deals with what your great grandparents did. This is something you did, something your parents did."

Among the first academy alumni to share their stories is Steve Yarbrough, a novelist who described how his father borrowed money and the family sacrificed household necessities to keep him at the private Indianola Academy in Indianola, Miss. When Yarbrough published the novel "The Oxygen Man," in which the main character flashes back to his time as a student at a private school, his father "told me bitterly that he and my mother hadn't finished paying off the loans until shortly before my thirty-second birthday," he wrote in his essay on the Academy Stories website.

Kristen Green wrote about attending a segregated academy in Prince Edward County, Virginia, from kindergarten through high school, which she said "centered whiteness for me in my formative years, a lesson that I have spent the last two decades trying to unlearn." Green wrote about how county officials shuttered the public schools rather than comply with court-ordered desegregation, leaving black children with no formal education. "Some did nothing for the five years public schools were shut. Some went to classes taught by volunteers in church basements. In order to attend public school, others snuck into neighboring localities, moved with their families out of town, or went to live with relatives or strangers in the North," she wrote. "Some children never returned to school. The entire black community was forever altered by this decision to deny its children an education."

Fentress said she plans to do more than just collect stories. "That would not be helpful. It needs to go somewhere, but before we can do anything, you have to be a truth teller," she said.

For the next three months, she said, she will provide a space for academy grads to tell their truths. Then, she hopes to use those truths to ask bigger questions.

One of the questions that constantly swirls in her head is: "What would the Deep South look like if, in that moment, people in these towns would have said, 'This is new and unsettling,
but we've got to try to make this work in the public schools instead of setting up academies?"