



ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

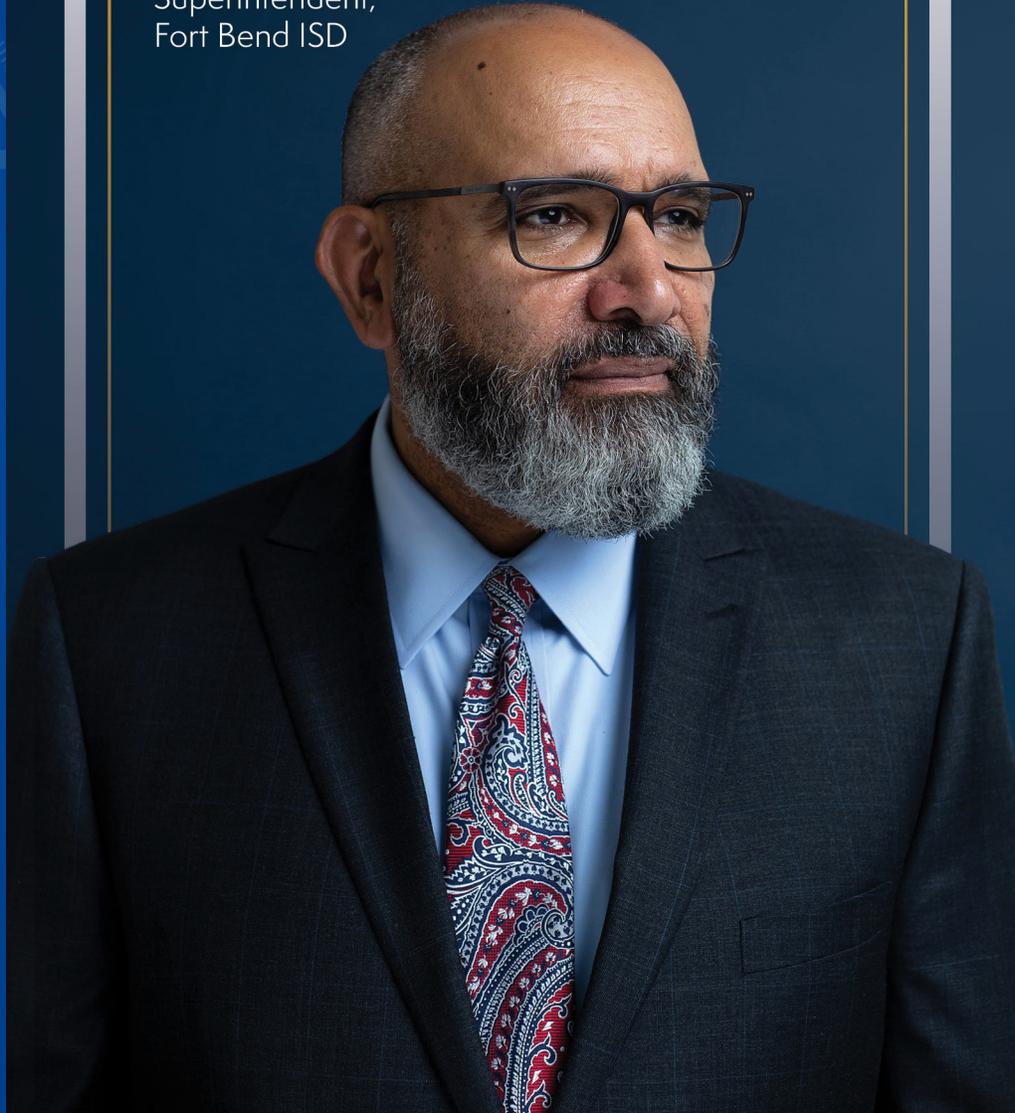
in Celebration of the
City of Sugar Land
60th Anniversary



CITY OF SUGAR LAND

Charles Dupre

Superintendent,
Fort Bend ISD



GOODSILL: Dr. Dupre, as Superintendent of Fort Bend ISD would you tell us something about how the district works, what your job is, past challenges, current challenges, and possible future challenges?

DUPRE: We really have one purpose and that is to educate students, to prepare students for their future. If you go back to the Texas State Constitution, it provides very clearly for a free, public education for all citizens so they can continue to enjoy the freedoms and contribute to the livelihood of our state. Of course, since the Constitution was written, things have changed a great deal and education looks very different today. But over the years, we continue to shine in our area, our state, and our nation as a district that does a remarkable job of educating our students.

Public education is what we do and some days I wonder how we do it! Today we are educating nearly 77,000

students. The district is celebrating its 60th anniversary. In 1959, the Missouri City ISD and Sugar Land ISD combined to form Fort Bend ISD. The original Missouri City high school became Missouri City middle school, which served the whole district, and Dulles high school was formed to serve the entire district on the Sugar Land side. We are governed by an elected school board; in our lobby we have a list of every member who has ever served in Fort Bend ISD.

GOODSILL: We have interviewed many people from Missouri City and Sugar Land who were involved in the transition, many of whom have been on the FBISD Board of Directors.

DUPRE: That tells a real story. Even Stafford has its unique story in the story of Fort Bend ISD. They separated from the district back in the 1980s.

My experience with the district began 24 years ago. I have been serving as superintendent for seven years now but I actually joined the district as an accountant and internal auditor in 1995 and spent 11 years in the finance office, ultimately becoming the chief financial officer and associate superintendent.

GOODSILL: Tell us about the job of the internal auditor.

DUPRE: The internal auditor functions just as it does in business. It focuses on efficiency and effectiveness. It's a form of program evaluation; for any aspect of the organization, an auditor should be able to determine if they are fulfilling their intended purpose, doing it in an efficient way and spending the right amount of money to accomplish the right tasks, and getting the intended outcomes. It is a very objective job. I am a certified public accountant and I started with Arthur Anderson & Company. It was a good fit for me to come to public education as an auditor because I had the background to take data and synthesize it. After that I consulted with the superintendent and board about whether they are getting the desired return on investment, the effectiveness and efficiency out of the investment in those programs.

GOODSILL: What did you learn doing that job?

DUPRE: I learned the things that helped me be superintendent today. From that job, I worked every aspect of the district, from transportation to curriculum instruction to technology, because I went into all those departments to conduct audits. All the way down to how campuses spend and budget their money.

My second job after that was budget officer. It was another job that gave me a clear view of every single penny this district spends. I met with every budget officer every year, at least 100 meetings every year, to see how they were spending their money and the results they were getting from their investment. Through those two jobs, I realized that I really loved education. When I attended college and got a business degree in 1984, salaries for CPAs were much higher than salaries for teachers. So I ended up going with a CPA and accounting degree although I really wanted to be a teacher.

I had no family, nobody to rely on, so I needed to be able to be independent. And making \$10,000 a year as a teacher in 1984, versus making \$25,000 a year as a CPA, seemed smarter to me. But I feel like God led me back around to where I was called to be in education. I was able to become the associate superintendent of finance and work at the cabinet level with the superintendent on a day-to-day basis.

GOODSILL: What does the job of associate superintendent of finance entail?

DUPRE: That job oversees all the business operations: accounting, accounts payable, accounts receivable, revenue generation, tax collection, risk management, insurance, purchasing and procurement. It is a big job. We have a budget that is close to a billion dollars annually. Most people really don't have a full appreciation of all that goes into an educational system. They think in terms of "well, my kid goes to school. They have a teacher. I see the campus." But they may not realize that we have over 11,000 employees. For every employee, every teacher, and every child that we are educating, it takes a payroll department and a benefits department. We get revenue from taxpayers. We have to buy, through our legal procurement process, every single thing that is used; every book, every pencil, every notepad has to be ordered, delivered, and paid for. So you can see we are running a very large business. We're the largest employer in Fort Bend County. We also have a whole technology division that oversees all the devices, all the networking.

GOODSILL: Is there a superintendent of technology?

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DUPRE: Today we call them chiefs. We have a chief information officer, a chief technology officer, a chief HR officer, a chief financial officer, a chief academic officer who oversees our core business of curriculum and instruction partnered with our chief of schools who actually oversees the specific schools. And the principals all report to that team. Then we have a chief of strategy and planning and monitoring because everything we do is governed with strategic plans. We have high accountability from our board and from the state to set strong goals and achieve those goals on behalf of our students and community. The chief operations officer has 80 campuses and over 100 facilities in total, millions of square footage of buildings that have to be cleaned, floors buffed and mopped and vacuumed, walls and blackboards cleaned, trash cans emptied, all of that.

GOODSILL: Not to mention maintenance and air conditioning and plumbing.

DUPRE: That's exactly right. We have whole teams of electricians, HVAC, landscaping, all of it. So that's what it takes to run a public school district.

GOODSILL: It's overwhelming when you think of it like that!

DUPRE: It can be, but I'm telling you, when I drive through our community and pass our schools, I know I'm doing what I am called to do. I look at that school and think, "I'm responsible for that. And I'm responsible for those children who go there every day. I'm responsible to their parents." One day, one of our board members said, "You know, the schools in this diverse community, (we have a vast international community that migrates to Fort Bend ISD for education) represent hope for the future. The future of our freedom, the future of their children in our community." And I agree with that. Of course the business folks rely on us as well because they have to have well trained people for them to hire. Our job is to make sure that by the time our children leave our school system they have the skills they need to be

productive workers. For many of them, that could be a professional route via a college degree. Some of them will go the military. Some will go straight to the work force, maybe through a trade school.

One of the things that we are doing for the first time in the district's history is asking the board to adopt a profile of a graduate. An academic foundation is critical, but we also have seven attributes that we want students to be able to demonstrate when they leave us. Things like being an effective communicator, a collaborator, a compassionate citizen, a critical thinker. These are the kinds of things that you look for in employees, in neighbors, in friends, and in people who contribute to the success of vibrant neighborhoods. Our teachers and our students have really taken to that and they are doing a remarkable job of bringing those skills to life as well as the book sense that we are trying to instill in our children.

GOODSILL: I think I heard you right when you said that people sometimes think about the academic part and the social part of school without thinking about the infrastructure required. It was interesting when you were talking about all the aspects of keeping schools and the district itself running and functioning within budget. Do you want to talk about that part, of staying within budget?

DUPRE: Budget is one of our big drivers. In most public school districts, you will find they get their money and allocate it and spend it. Most school districts, and any government, really, is seen by many citizens as being a bureaucracy, an entitlement, and kind of bloated. I learned a lot from the CFO and Superintendent that I started working for in 1995, Don Hooper. I also worked with Betty Baitland. Today I would say I demonstrate traits of both of them.

One of the things I learned from them is that you don't plan a budget; you budget a plan. I love working for the school board here because the board understands that. They want us to say what our goals are and what we are going to do to get there. What is the plan to get there and then what is it going to cost? And then, like you do at home, if we want to do all this but we don't have the budget to support it, what is our highest priority? Sometimes you have to cut the cable bill or pull back on cell services. Some non-essential things have to go. It is the same thing in public schools. In Fort Bend, as in any large billion-dollar budget, there is always going to be a little waste somewhere. I don't like that, but it is just real. When you have all these people spending money, there is going to be a little bit that is not going exactly where we want it to go or need it to go.

When we take our annual budget to the board for approval, we are very intentional that the budget supports the work and the goals we are trying to achieve. And when you put those kinds of systems in place, it makes the whole thing much easier to manage. Unfortunately, it is the nature of the beast that in 2019 society is very mistrustful of government, whether it be public schools, our state government, or our federal government. We get criticized for having too many administrators, that we are wasting money, and those kinds of things. And often that comes when people have had a disappointing experience. I don't like it when we disappoint people but sometimes things just don't go the way we intend them. It is human failure, sometimes it is things beyond our control. But we are always determined to fix things and try to win our customers back, just as a business would. We want them to support us. Even some of our best customers who love us would sometimes say, "You all waste too much money." So we try to be very intentional about communicating and being transparent. We win awards for transparency. Anyone who really wants



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to see what we are doing can see the whole profile of this district on our website. Any government faces this issue. I am proud that we have the level of transparency that we do. If our citizens really want to know, we can demonstrate to them that we are spending their money effectively.

GOODSILL: Does Fort Bend ISD as a government entity interface with the County in any way?

DUPRE: We are an independent school district, which means we have our own elected board and we operate as our own division of government. So we DO interact with the County and with all of our municipalities. There have always been good relationships but one of the ways we have taken that to another level in the last several years is by hosting joint meetings with city councils. I have strong alignment with the city managers because they are like the administrative CEO as I am the superintendent. You asked specifically about the county and yes, we do a lot of things with the county. Sometimes it is a major project. Right now we are working with the county on the original Missouri City gym. We decided it over to the county and they are restoring it so they can bring it back to its original beauty and make it a great venue in our community.

GOODSILL: I took a whole series of interviews of students who had gone to school there back in the day. They shared their memories.

GOODSILL: Tell us about challenges in the past.

DUPRE: If you look at Fort Bend ISD within the context of the state of Texas, there are around 1150-1180 public school districts in the state. At this point in 2019, we are the 8th largest in the state with about 77,000 students. We were 7th but our neighbor, Katy ISD, is growing faster than we are right now. I suspect we may get bumped up at some point because other districts like Austin ISD are shrinking and losing students. So we may get back up to 7th or even 6th at some point.

We are one of the top 10 in the state but to give context the vast majority of districts in the state of Texas have fewer than 1,000 kids. If you go out to far west Texas, there is a lot of empty space where there are very few kids. When there are only 100 kids in a school, those kids spend an hour or two on a bus. In comparison we are a unique suburban area in the state of Texas. Every municipality in Fort Bend ISD is highly acclaimed, and people love living out here. And that's whether it is Missouri City, Fresno/Arcola, Sugar Land, part of Richmond and even a little bit of Houston. People like living in this community. We have easy accessibility to the Energy Corridor, the Medical Center, the Galleria, and downtown. You can get anywhere from here relatively quickly without the congestion you get in many other commutes in the Houston area. So I think people want to live here.

I started working here in 1995. At that time, we had about 35 campuses. Today we have 80. Twenty-four years ago we had about 35,000 students. The district has grown rapidly during the late 1980s, the 1990s, and the early 2000s. Now we are starting to get built out. Our demographers project we will peak at about 85,000-88,000 students at some point in the next ten years. There are two things going on. You have undeveloped land in each of the three regions of the district. Up north, you find it off SH-99, the Grand Parkway, in the Aliana community. In the central region,



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the Riverstone community is still being built out. And in the southern region, all down FM-521, Sienna is still growing and there are also at least 8-10 new developments coming up on FM-521, going out of the county that direction. So we have a new high school under construction today. We are designing a new middle school and about five more elementary schools are planned for the next 6-7 years. So there are pockets of land that are still developing but in the next 10 years, we believe that will be pretty well accounted for.

You constantly have to be going back to the voters for bond money because we need more schools, or money to take care of the schools we have. So the voters are used to passing a bond about every three to four years to maintain the growth. That's always a challenge because you have the skepticism and concern about if we are spending their money well. This last bond was \$992 million, nearly a billion dollars. That was more than double what the district had previously ever had.

GOODSILL: Almost a billion in the bond, and the budget every year is a billion dollars?

DUPRE: Yes ma'am. We're running a district and it costs money! The budget to build the new high school is around \$150 million. Over the years, as the economy changes, everything gets more expensive.

GOODSILL: And as schools age, everything gets more expensive to maintain.

DUPRE: That's exactly right. We are working hard to get everything up to a current code. I'm proud of the work we are doing, that billion dollars we asked for is getting us new band halls, new choir rooms, and new science labs. There is a lot of upgrading and enhancement. I think there is \$150 million for new technology devices to really help our students have the best equipment.

With regards to growth, the other thing we see is the phenomenon called aging in place. Colony Bend is a prime example of this, right in the heart of this community. It was built back in the early 1980s. The school was vibrant and thriving as the First Colony community came alive and developed. Then, once we got into the 2000s, older people were living in their homes and their children were long gone. The school

population got so low that at one point the district considered closing the school. Today the school is full as younger families regenerate that neighborhood. One of our greatest future challenges is managing growth. It is a fine line. You don't want to be overbuilt with too many schools. We could keep building more and more schools but every few years we draw new boundaries to load kids into the schools where the seats are. And that is always an exceptionally challenging issue. For now, we have a handful of schools that are significantly underutilized, at 50% capacity or less. They are in regions that don't align with where current population growth. So we have to build a new school because the only other option is to move numerous neighborhoods, to domino children from one school to the next. When you want community based schools, you don't want to take kids out of their home community to another community just to create space for kids from another community to come into their community. Balancing enrollment at one school will naturally affect other schools, and it is always our goal to minimize the disruption to our students, and, to the greatest extent possible, keeping them within their neighborhood or community.

The board has done a good job of putting policy in place that shows an understanding that some schools are going to have lesser utilization and some will be a little higher. But we have a range within which we expect our schools to fluctuate. We are going to have to make some hard decisions in some areas, whether we are going to close schools and dispose of property.

GOODSILL: The school district owns the property the schools are on, right? And they are an asset they could either liquidate or continue to maintain. If there aren't enough students to populate the school, it becomes a loss leader?

DUPRE: That's right. It's a sunk cost at that point. The building is paid for but you have to maintain it. You can't just let it sit abandoned.

GOODSILL: It sounds like there has to be some concern about which communities will be repopulated with young families so the school be fully utilized, or not.

DUPRE: That's right. There are two individuals with doctorate degrees who support us in that area. They are consultants that we pay, out of College Station. They research future trends. It is amazing, the process they go through. Every November/December they deliver a full volume of information about our demographic projects for the next 10 years. It is updated annually. They visit with developers, realtors, and all the commercial folks. They look at every tract in our community every year to see if there are new houses, businesses, and/or apartments and what is happening on these tracts. They can predict that in certain neighborhoods, depending on the price of the home and the size of the lots, how many students are going to come from each home. Sometimes it is 2.5 per home in a certain neighborhood. Apartments generate a certain number of students historically. They study all this data and tell us what we need to plan toward. Every single year they are within fractions of the projection. It's a science. We could hire people to do that because it could be a full time job, but this is what these people do all day, every day. It is a much better use of our resources to pay them.



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We have been documented as the most diverse public school district in the United States, with 100 different languages spoken in our community. For many years the district was right at 25% of each of the major ethnic groups: Asian, Hispanic, Black, and White. That has now shifted. White is down to about 15-16%; Asian has increased; Hispanic has increased, and Black is maintaining stable. So we are trending the way of Houston and the state. More Hispanic immigrants come and more children are born in the Hispanic community.

As superintendent, I can honestly say that this diversity presents few challenges because our community gets along so well. The challenges we face related to the diversity relate to the types of diversity and the breadth of diversity. I often talk about our having the richest of the rich living right over here on Palm Royale in Sweetwater, and we have the poorest of the poor with some children out in the northern region of our district who still don't have running water. Our job is to meet the needs of each of those unique children and help them achieve their full potential. A very different investment of time, energy, resources, and money based is required depending on the needs of the students. You hear a lot about that kids count on us for a meal and we have strong systems in place to support those children. We also have a large international community who come here for education.

The loudest outcry we are hearing from our community is stress in our students. We know that's coming from social media. In many of our students' lives, there is this intense pressure to be a high achiever, because their parents made sacrifices to bring them here for this education. And the expectation is, "You are GOING to get 100; you are not going to get a 98 or 99." So the children are manifesting that stress.

I had a young woman sitting in my office a couple of years ago, crying because "I'm in Advanced Placement (AP) classes and I'm not doing well. I want out. But all my friends are in them. I'm going to lose my friends and they are going to make fun of me if I step down." She was lost. She didn't know what to do. I told her she had to be independent and she had to do what was best for her. I asked her, "Do you parents support you?" She said, "Yes." And I said, "Then you need to rely on your parents' support." But some of our children are trapped with the parents and the peers saying, "No, you have to do this. You have to stay there."

GOODSILL: Talk to me about the effect of social media from your perspective.

DUPRE: Smart phones have been around since 2001, and all the children we are educating now have been born since that time. To make it worse, their parents have been raising them with phones in their pockets and their hands. This summer I was reading an article about children drowning in a swimming pool within feet of their parents while the parent was engaged with a phone! Even the best children at that age have the perception that the world is all about them, probably because the camera is on them 24/7. And that was before social media. Social media has made it much worse. As they are watching their peers apparently living in all the exciting and glamorous lives, they are constantly doubting if they measure up. Who am I, what am I, why am I not having that life? Not realizing that most of what they are seeing is Snapchat filtered, beautifully presented, staged pictures. It does have an impact on the developmental needs of the children and we are seeing much more trauma, stress, and anxiety in our students. But I do think it's exacerbated by the parents' engagement with social media.

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GOODSILL: Because of the distraction factor, or the inability to make a human connection?

DUPRE: I think all of it. Think about the amount of debt people in this country carry and what that represents. People always had debt but it has gone up exponentially. I think a lot of it is related to the trips they think everybody else is taking and that they need to take. The things everybody else is buying, such as the boats and pools. I have watched my own friends on social media, documenting the construction of their beautiful new pool and patio and fire pit. It is easy to look at that and say, "Well, I guess he's doing really well." I think if a person is not emotionally healthy and they internalize it and think, "My life sucks. Why can't I have that? What am I doing wrong that I can't have that?" And you put that in the mix with a child, with the distraction factor, with the lack of personal connection, and you see it is combustible.

We get feedback on both sides of this issue. Some people say, "School needs to be a technology-free zone. They don't need their phones at school." And my answer is, "My son can text with his phone in his pocket. He could still engage in social media." We're living with it. I sit in meetings every day with phones on the table.

What we need to be doing for children is to teach them healthy practices. Healthy appropriate ways to engage with all the technology, not just social media, and to not be a slave to it so that every time it buzzes or rings you have to look at it. We get used to that buzz or beep and it is like Pavlov's dog, that we have to respond to it. It comes back to discipline and establishing values that these changing times present in education.

Some think we need to have no technology; others think they need to have a technology-rich environment. My bottom line is, technology will never replace a teacher. The magic of a teacher is the most valued thing we have in public education. My job as superintendent, and my goal, is to give that to teachers. To allow them to be able to teach, using their skills, the art of teaching, and the magic and the enthusiasm they bring to the classroom.

We have about six generations of teachers in our classrooms right now. I have at least a handful of

teachers who are in their 70s, who are remarkable. They have been in the district 45 years, and I don't see them going anywhere anytime soon! The success most of them have and the reason they are still here, is because they have been adaptable. We have some who have been with us 25-30 years, and they are not as adaptable yet. They haven't realized they don't need to fight the battle of trying to make everything be as it was when they started 25 years ago. They battle us, "I don't need this technology. I don't know how to use this. I don't want this." Then we have the brand new teachers in their 20s who were raised with smart phones and technology and tablets, and they want them in the classrooms. Sometimes we move too slowly for them. They want to be able to use all those cool new tools with their students.

Our job is to have a plan. What are we trying to achieve? What is our goal? It is to educate the kid, academically, and to prepare them with the profile of a graduate so they can move forward into being very productive adults. I want to give each of our children the keys they need to open whatever door they choose to open in the future. Whatever job, whatever community leadership role, whatever it is they want to do, I want them to have the keys - the knowledge, the skills, communication ability, to be able to open any of those doors they choose.

GOODSILL: My mind is full of information! I didn't expect you to be so succinct. (roar of laughter from Dupre) Would you be willing to tell us about your personal background and how it has affected your career?

DUPRE: Yes, it all ties together. I was an orphan born in Morocco in 1961. My adoptive parents were in the Air Force, a white couple, who brought me to the United States. My mother had Type 1 diabetes with numerous complications and that's why she couldn't bear children. When they were in Morocco, they took advantage of the chance to adopt there. She passed away when I was five years old. When I was seven, my dad gave up custody of me, at which time I went to live in an orphanage in Missouri, a faith-based home. I lived there until I was 18.

So I grew up in Missouri at a children's home. I went to a tiny rural high school in Strafford, Missouri. There were 65 students in my graduating class. I was student president, drum major, yearbook editor.

GOODSILL: You just can't help yourself from rising up the ladder, can you! (laughing)

DUPRE: Well, that was part of my overachieving nature! I have since gotten healthier. I'm still success-oriented but I'm not a driven overachiever.

GOODSILL: You are an overachiever in recovery!

DUPRE: I AM! Sometimes a broken background leads you to behavior. Some go to alcohol addictions. I went to achievement and affirmation addictions. I'm thankful that I have a really good wife of almost 35 years and I've had some good therapists and some good friends, and my faith has been

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sustaining through all of that. We raised our two children and we have a seven-year-old grandson who is a blessing. He started second grade yesterday. They live in the Austin area.

I left Fort Bend for seven years but it is what really prepared me for this job. It was just magical. Again, back to my faith, I think it was ordained. I left here as chief financial officer and went to Pflugerville ISD, which is right outside of Austin. It's a good-sized district with about 25,000 students now. I moved there in 2006 to be deputy superintendent. Four months later, I was superintendent and I served there as superintendent for seven years before coming back to Fort Bend six years ago. A lot of people say you can't go back home but I feel just wonderful that I was able to leave here and come back here. It really is where I began my career, and if I have my way, it'll be where I retire, where I will conclude my career.

You may not want to record this because it sounds arrogant. But you talked about my being succinct. One of the gifts I have been blessed with is communication. Words have always been important to me. Writing is something I've always been good at, as is the spoken word and public speaking. So in interviews I can usually get to the heart of it. I'm very thankful because in my job, communication really has been part of my success. It is SO important. The community needs to know and trust what I say. I lead from integrity and heart and I think that comes through in my words and my actions and how I engage with people.

I think that goes back to the fact that my English teacher, Elaine Taylor, who is now Elaine Fisher, took me in when I was in 7th grade. She challenged me, "You know, we're give a spelling test down here tomorrow. It's a national spelling test competition. Why don't you come and take it?" I was in 7th grade and I was in a room with a bunch of seniors and I did better than all of them on this spelling test. She ended up being my Yearbook advisor, Newspaper advisor, and English teacher in this small school. We are still friends today. I had her here a few years ago for our opening convocation and introduced her as the most important and influential teacher in my life, and why I love her and why she is so important to me. She really helped me to learn strong communication, writing, and speaking skills, along with Janice Rhome, who is now Janice Fossett, who was my speech and debate teacher.

GOODSILL: I bet you loved speech and debate.

DUPRE: I did! (laughs)

GOODSILL: Do you know your ethnicity?

DUPRE: I spent my life not knowing if I were full Moroccan or if were American/Moroccan with a white father and a Moroccan woman. 23andMe told me I am 50% Moroccan and I have some other east African roots as well as some Spanish and European roots. It's pretty evident from that profile that I probably would have come from the region or Morocco.

My adoptive dad left me in 1969 and I did not see him again until 2003. He was in his late 70s-early 80s and I was in my 40s. We reconnected and talked several

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times a year until his death in 2014. I went to see him a few times in Alabama where he lived, and we ended well. He was never my dad or anything like that, but I honored the role that he played in bringing me from Morocco to the United States.

For our 30th anniversary, my wife and I went on a cruise from London, to Spain, Portugal, and Morocco. With one day in Morocco, we arranged for a private guide, independent of the cruise line, to meet us at the dock. He met us the minute we got there and brought us back at the last minute. We literally had 12 hours in Morocco. He drove us out of the city into the country. We did not get to go to Casablanca, where I was born, but we went into a small medina region and did shopping and sightseeing with this wonderful young man who was our tour guide. He had a partner who met us in the city and together they showed us a wonderful day.

GOODSILL: You felt at home when you were there?

DUPRE: I told my wife that day, "I'm not black. I'm not African-American except in the very truest sense. I am Moroccan. These are my people." And for the first time, I really felt at home and felt connected.

But I came back from that trip and said, “We have some work to do.” We have diversity fairs and culture nights and all these cool things. You have children from Holland with the Dutch costumes, and the German children with lederhosen, and all these kids have their costumes and their foods, and they know their home countries and they can celebrate all that. But for many of our African-American children, they get Africa, a continent. They don’t know if they are Nigerian or Moroccan or from any other area. Slavery broke their history. Some have parents who have gone through the work to help them identify their roots. But I wonder if doing DNA analysis, such as 23andMe, with our children who struggle with identity, discipline, and various distracters from effective learning, it might make a difference. An “identity” might perhaps make them feel more complete, the way it made me feel more complete.

GOODSILL: This is an interesting conversation!

DUPRE: (big pause, and then a big laugh!) I appreciate that. I don’t like to be boring!

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