Angela Henry grew up in a Wilmington cleaved in half by the railroad tracks.

On one side, the white schools.
The white playgrounds.
The white neighborhoods.

On the other side, what was possible for her.

She lived in the Jervay housing project at 10th and Meares — even the public housing was segregated then — with her single mom and five of her 10 siblings. Always a curious and bright child, in the summer she couldn't go to the public library because it was on the other side of those tracks.

“The railroad tracks was your race divide. Once you cross over the railroad tracks, you were in a non-African American area,” she said. “We had a Colored library on Red Cross Street, but that was on the north side of town and we lived on the south side, and we kids were not allowed to go to the other side of town.”

But in the summer, she remembers, missionaries would open the library at Mary Washington Howe school to give the Black children in the neighborhood access to its stacks. Angela, a longtime teacher assistant at Howe, now walks her own students down to the library and remembers what that meant to her as a girl.

“That would open my world to seeing books,” she said. “In this very same room, in this very same library.”
To some, Jim Crow and segregation feel like history. But they are within the lifetime — and the visceral, lived experience — of people working in our district and teaching in our schools.

Angela’s mother, Della, was raised in rural South Carolina by a grandmother who had been born into slavery and worked as a midwife. They were Gullah-Geechee, the descendents of West Africans who maintained their indiginous traditions on the barrier islands.

But sharecropping life was oppressive, a reincarnation of slavery that lasted for decades after emancipation.

“Your life was cotton, tobacco, corn. It was a rural life with such limitations,” she said. “My mother liked school, but education was not really promoted.”

In third grade her family pulled Della out of school so she could pick cotton and peanuts for a white farmer for 50 cents a day.

When she was married and had a baby boy, she and her husband heard about opportunities for Black workers at the port and turpentine factories in Wilmington. In 1940, at the start of WWII, they joined the thousands of Black workers migrating to urban areas seeking a chance to build a life they couldn’t at home.
By the time Angela was growing up, she was one of six of 11 kids living at home, and her mother Della was widowed.

Della worked as a cook at the then all-white Sunset Park Elementary, making everything by hand — stew beef and rice, butter beans and homemade mashed potatoes, scratch donuts and bread — and would walk the two miles home each day.

In the summer she worked at a restaurant on the white side of town, and she would also pick up work as a domestic servant for the wealthier white families.

“Once I went with her to a house where she had done domestic work and I remember we had to go through the back door,” Angela said. “She went to collect her pay and the lady gave it to her and then said, ‘Wait a minute, hold out your hand.’ And she took 50 cents back from her hand and said, ‘This is for the other day when I let you have a sandwich.’”

It was a sandwich the woman had offered and that Della had not asked for. That moment, of being degraded in front of her child and stripped of money she desperately needed to support her family, was seared into both mother and daughter.

“In a way you have to have that thick skin. A lot of things in life you may not like,” Angela said. “You deal with it, but you don’t have to always accept it.”

To this day, her mother, who is 98 years old, won’t eat from other people's homes. She won’t risk it.

“But I never once heard her say, ‘I’m not going back there working anymore.’ She was our provider. She was our safe keeper,” she said. “You couldn’t say what you’re not going to do when you have six mouths at home that are depending on what you do and the decisions you make.”

In elementary school Angela attended Gregory, then a designated Colored school.
New Hanover County, like many districts in North Carolina, was slow to integrate. Fourteen years after the Supreme Court ruled in Brown v. Board of Education that separate was not equal, the schools in New Hanover County were still segregated.

Finally in 1968, instead of integrating all of the high schools, the district suddenly shuttered Williston High School. Williston was a source of community pride and ownership among the Black families on the north side of town, and for generations had been an engine of upward mobility for Black students.

But as School Board Chair Emsley Laney explained at the time, “we felt it would be very difficult to integrate Williston High School and send white students there. It was in a black neighborhood ...”

The 1,100 Black students at Williston would be bused to the two white high schools, New Hanover and Hoggard, and the racial tensions sparked by the closure would smolder for years.

“When New Hanover County Schools implemented integration I was in the fifth grade, and the only reason why they did it then was because the government had come to New Hanover County and forced them to integrate the schools,” she remembered.
Young Angela was one of the first classes of Black students to integrate Lake Forest Elementary, and the next year, Roland-Grise Middle School.

Civil Rights and integration had brought a rise in backlash activity from the Ku Klux Klan and another group that called itself Rights of White People — in fact North Carolina had the largest Klan presence of any state in the nation, with more than 6,000 members and an official booth set up at the State Fair.

Angela remembers walking home with the other Black students and passing what was then Hugh MacRae Park, and seeing a cross being burned under the long leaf pines.

“You could just see the flame — the imagery of it — from the school. As a matter of fact, that was the first time I had ever seen a cross burning,” she said.

It’s hard to imagine that vulnerable group of 11- and 12-year-olds leaving a school where they didn’t yet feel welcome and seeing the emblem of racial violence as soon as they opened the door.

That image is burned in her memory, Angela said, but she doesn’t let it cast a shadow over her heart.

“One of the things my mother used to always say to us was regardless of what one may do, you don’t ever penalize all. You got good in them, and you got some bad in them, just like you got some good in us, and you got some bad in us,” she said.

“As I became an adult I realized that holding on to things and feelings like that makes you toxic. Do I like it, no. But I never wanted my children to grow up hearing that kind of talk being accepted.”
By 1971, racial tensions erupted into full-fledged violence when buildings were fire-bombed, a Black teenager and a white supremacist were killed, and National Guard troops patrolled the streets and enforced a dawn-to-dusk curfew.

Angela remembers when a member of Wilmington Ten, a group of teenagers and young adults accused of a firebombing but later pardoned, was rounded up from the housing project where she lived.

“The National Guard came right up 10th street in their tanks and they were throwing tear gas into the housing project. I remember when they came to his parents' house and got him — he was only 17,” she said.

Her mother was at her second job at the restaurant and called home in a panic.

“She said, ‘Where’s Derrick?’ and put Derrick on the phone, and, ‘Where’s Barbara?’ and they put Barbara on the phone. She had to hear everybody’s voice, and we had to make sure the door was locked,” she said.

“Could you imagine being a mother and you’ve got teenagers the same age as that boy and worrying about what could happen? A lot of times when people say, ‘I don’t understand why they say ‘Black lives matter’ — that is what we are talking about, because at that time, to some, they didn’t matter as much.”
At Hoggard High School Angela was a serious student and a member of the volleyball team, the spring court, and the majorettes.

She still has her baton and brings it out if there's a parade at Howe.

"I can't do it like I used to," she said. "We used to soak it in kerosene and you could put fire on the end and twirl fire. They got all these protocols now. We were really living."

When an opportunity came to attend a majorette summer camp at a college in Raleigh, her mom sold ice pops and saved the money in a pickle jar to give her daughter the experience of being on a college campus.

“I'd always just sit on the bed and watch her press clothes and make the pleats in the skirts, and she would say, ‘If I had the education you chil’n had now, do you think I’d be workin’ a job like this all day for a lil’ nothin’? If you don’t do nothing else you're going to get your piece of education and learn how to do something.'”
Education was both a way forward and a way to honor those who had sacrificed so much before her. Angela enrolled at Saint Augustine's University in Raleigh, a historically black college, and majored in early childhood education. The great-granddaughter of a woman born into slavery, the daughter of a woman who dropped out of school in third grade to work on a sharecropping farm, was the first person in her family to graduate from college.

“I got my degree,” she said, “and my mama cried and she cried.”

She was offered three jobs in New Hanover County Schools, and she chose Howe, named after pioneering educator Mary Washington Howe, who was the first woman to lead a school in Wilmington and served as principal at Williston for 22 years.

It was the school right around the corner from where Angela grew up.

It was the school where she gained access to a library as a girl when other doors were closed to her.

It represented the power and possibility of an education.

And for 30 years, she has taught multiple generations of pre-schoolers at that same school.
“What keeps me grounded and rooted is they are always willing to forgive and they don't hold a grudge,” she said.

“If something happened at breakfast, by the time it’s center time they are not even thinking about what someone said that hurt their feelings and made them cry. They keep moving forward and that is one of the best, best feelings in the world.”

One of her favorite parts of teaching is storytime, asking her little students questions that expand their understanding of the world and their place in it.
She can look at the trajectory of her family and see opportunity denied, but she also sees incredible resilience, dignity, and achievement.

Her family's story beautifully embodies the tension of Black American history — through the pain there is pride, through the hardship there is incredible contribution, and through the weight of oppression, still they rose.

She has a shirt that says “I am my ancestors' wildest dreams,” and it's hard to imagine someone better suited to wear it.