

The Beginning

I was born in McKeesport Pennsylvania. I grew up in McKeesport Pennsylvania and I lived in McKeesport Pennsylvania until I attended Penn State. Um McKeesport was then a thriving mill town. It no longer is a thriving mill town. Neither thriving nor a mill town. But at that time that it was um at the time that I was growing up in McKeesport it had five movie theaters and it was it was a bustling city. In fact it was the hub of the Mon Valley.

Why I Chose Penn State

I had no idea what the campus looked like. I had no idea where it was located. All I know is that some of the the students who were in the top of their class like I was were going to Pen State. And people talked about it like it was the place to go. Well I wanted to go to "the place to go." I and it was interesting because when I went to see my counselor whom I had not seen during the course of car my high school career. I said to him I want to go to Penn State. And he looked at me and he said well Penn State only takes the uh upper fifth of the class or [inaudible]. And I said well I'm in the upper tenth of the class so I I think and he said well then a smart girl like you should go to Howard. And I said you know what? Howard is a wonderful institution and it is. I had friends that were going to Howard. But D.C. was not my cup of tea you know I'm small town girl. So I said no I really wanna go to Penn State and that's what I did the first time I saw the campus was when my parents brought me up to move into the dorm.

First Day on Campus

My parents brought me up. I had a trunk like everybody else did the black trunk. Packed to the hilt. And um my parents came in and helped me unpack and set up the room. My roommate was a friend of mine from McKeesport who was also attending Penn State and when my parents finished helping me pack they said ok we we're going to leave now. We hugged and off they went. My roommate who was uh very close to her mother uh didn't want her mother to leave when her mother started to leave started to cry and I thought this is not going to be good. And and so finally uh her mother left and uh we started to we walked around the campus. I lived in Atherton Hall, which is now Schreyer's Honors College. And uh maybe that was a a omen of things to come. But uh and I lived downstairs you know where the court yard is in Atherton and I lived downstairs on that floor and we actually could walk out through the court yard at that time or sit in the court yard and study. I loved it.

The African-American Community

I believe that the African American community at that time reached out a lot. We were very supportive of each other but we did realize that we had to live in the world as it was at that time. It was the sixties. I was very active in a lot of the uh civil rights movements at that time. Martin Luther King came to peak at Penn State while I was here. Stokely Carmichael as he was called then. Marion McClellan all came to campus. Uh we had our own civil rights group called the student union for racial equality. Sure. S-U-R-E. But it was reflective of Penn State too because unlike a lot of the uh student groups the president I was vice president the president was white and Jewish so it shows that it was a broadening here. And so that was interesting. Um. The city State College was not as open. And uh there were difficulties. A lot of the uh the upperclassmen especially had a problem finding apartments. there was no place for a male to get a haircut. Actually there was no place for a woman to get her hair done either.

Sometimes very early on you could feel the discomfort of the community when you walked into a store especially if there were a group of African Americans together. But by the time I left it was changing. I actually worked at the Mr. Charles' shop my senior year and I was the first African American woman you hired to work there. But there were some changes going on but they were the same way as the changes in the world. We are um a microcosm of the world. There were um problems there and there were problems here. There were good things happening out there and good things happening here. So and and we learned to deal with those things.

Having Charles Davis As Counselor

I was I was lucky to have the counselors that I did. I had a counselor I had the only black professor on Penn State's campus at that time. His name was Charlie Davis. He was just a won a wonderful English teacher. He had such a a low base rolling voice. And he talked just like this. And when I went in for my counseling sessions we would talk about English and the authors we had read and have just a wonderful time.

Falling in Love at Penn State

My husband was one of the very few African Americans in the college of science. And he thought science was very important but he didn't think English was very important and so um his dean called the dean of the college of liberal arts looking for an English tutor for him and the English tutor turned out to be me. And we became very very good friends because we were both dating other people and I looked at it as a job. And so unlike most of the time when you were going out with uh a young man I could care less whether I had on makeup or what I wore or so we just became friends and we found we had a lot in

common and uh after a while we found out that none we were not only friends but we had fallen in love. And he's still my best friend. He truly is.

The Penn State Experience

I believe that I used my time to the best advantage. I truly enjoyed the experience. I loved being at Penn State University. I loved the campus I loved my campus liked the people liked the faculty. I really did enjoy it. Now having said that I recognized all those other things that I said too. That the world was not a perfect world.

Life After Penn State

I went back to my hometown. I applied uh for a teaching position. I became it you know at the time that I was coming through it wasn't hard to be the first African American to do something so um needless to say I became the first African American to to teach on the secondary level. And uh I taught English. Loved teaching it. Got married that summer. Uh continued to teach. Over the course of uh several years I had two children and I also got a masters degree and then I started to teach at Penn State. I taught at Penn State and then I became assistant dean of student affairs while I still taught I still taught while I was assistant dean of student affairs. And then I um decided that I would go to law school. It had been something that had been percolating since the civil rights days in at Penn State. And the more I thought about and the more that I saw my husband and I had started uh counseling and tutorial service for min for disadvantaged and minority students. And I was able to see how you could accomplish um improvements in life through the law. And so I thought more about it and decided that I wanted to go to law school. So I actually changed professions.

Setting Precedence

I was the first African American woman to be elected to the bench in Allegheny County. The year was 1989. Now did I feel good about that? No. It should have happened a long time before. Was it good that it was happening at that time? Yes because other people could see that it could be done. And do even greater things. And I really feel that I'm sure that when people read the cases that I decided as a trial judge or that I tried as a trial lawyer people will say well this case was more significant because it had this impact or the other case was more significant because of the impact it had. But every case I had was significant because of the people that were involved. As a lawyer I don't know how many cases I tried. A lot. As a judge I have no idea how many cases that I heard. Again a lot. but for the people who came before me it was their only case. And so that was the important case and therefore that had to be the important case to me. And so if during the course of the year I heard fifty automobile cases or a hundred automobile cases I couldn't say oh my goodness another automobile case. No. It was this special case for these parties. And that's the way that I looked at it and I think that's why I enjoyed it so much

because I never thought I'm going to go to work and I'm going to hear the same cases over and over again. I never thought of it that way.

Joining the Pennsylvania Supreme Court

I absolutely loved being on the trial level. That's where the action is that's where you see the witnesses and uh that's where you make the decisions that's where you truly are affecting people's lives so I loved being on on the trial bench and was there for sixteen years. I never wanted to run for the appellate court. I had been asked several times to be run for the appellate court but I was enjoying what I was doing very much. But then again I'm not silly and I've never been accused of being a fool. And when the governor called and said I want you to appoint you I said I'm ready. And uh it was just a wonderful experience because I was able to to mix the scholarly part.

What It Means to Be a Penn Stater

To be a Penn Stater means a lot because it means I had access to quality education like everybody else has. So whether you you know live in a rural county and and you've never been outside of the acreage on your farm or you lived in the middle of of a city in an urban area where you have have um poverty or gangs or whatever. We all have a chance to do a lot better because we have an access we have access to this kind of quality education.

The Importance of Opportunity

I think it's important just that people know. All people know that you're capable of doing so much. And it's not because of the color of the skin and it's not because of your height and it's not because you're rich or poor. It's because there's something that's within you that you can develop or choose not to develop but if you choose not to develop then you can't bellyache about it. Because all the world owes you is an opportunity. And you can take advantage of it or you cannot. But that's all the world owes you and I'll fight forever to give you the opportunity but I'm going to be really upset if you don't take advantage of it.

Telling the Story

The fact is is that it's really important for us to know the background of people who are moving and accomplishing not because we should hold those people up but because we

then know that we are capable of achieving too. And those are the kinds of stories that you want to hear. You don't want to hear grandiose accounts. But you wanna hear that yeah you know there were some good and there were some bad. That you don't get any place without a lot of hard work. That you can dream but dreams don't come true unless you keep working. That sometimes you have to give up some things in order to achieve. That maybe you never get to stop. Um that it's important to enjoy what you do because you work too long not to enjoy it. You know I still I still have a skip in my step when I'm walking up you know toward Old Main because I love what I do. And but those are all the things that that are part of our stories. And whether it's history or her story we all need to tell them so people realize what it's like that they don't think that you were born like this. That they know that I grew up in McKeesport in a house right across from the projects. That I grew up in a neighborhood that was so ethnically diverse that I can make great chicken pirogues holouska and lasagna. That's important to know that people were capable. Then. Of living together and enjoying each other and learning that there's more the same about us than there is different and that a lot of the things that are different about us are surface. They're they're not important. So. Yes people need to know those stories and then they need to tell their own stories. And then at some point you know what? We'll tell the stories but we'll tell them for different reasons.