

Early Life in Philadelphia

I grew as I said I grew up in Philadelphia I initially grew up in a section of Philadelphia called North Philadelphia. Um in uh public housing at that point. It was my mother and two sisters. Um and then my mother remarried um and we lived with my stepfather we moved into the German town section of Philadelphia which is where I spent most of my time growing up. I went to catholic school throughout elementary school. Um I went to LaSalle College High School which was associated with LaSalle College at the time. It was a preparatory school. College Preparatory School in Philadelphia. Um what I remember most about LaSalle [inaudible]. Is that um at that point they only had one well we weren't called African Americans then we were called blacks or negro in each class. So I was the designated African American in my class. And then in the class behind me there was another one and the class above. So out of and I always remember that. And what helped me that was difficult times but what anchored me socially and psychologically at that point was the friends I had in my neighborhood. And um in German town. So I would always my refuge was coming home.

Misguided Guidance

What I do remember is that my um and this has happened I hear this a lot this refrain from a lot of African Americans particular at that time is that the guidance counselor at my high school and I remember this like it was yesterday. Um tried to redirect me from college and direct me into some kind of trade and and that that was an awful feeling and something that I still remember and that again that story is not unique to me. I've heard number [inaudible] say and I've read about it. But it's true. And um it is it's painful even to think about it now um that people that individuals would do that. I mean I don't know whether they had a good intentions or not um but they were wrong.

Learning from Father

my biological father uh was I say was because he's uh deceased now. A musician. And he was a very popular musi he was a bandleader of uh at the Apollo Theater which is now very prominent of course. And at that time back in the fifties and sixties they had what all the theaters had what they call a house band. Um. Now it was before so whenever the acts would come to the Apollo or the Uptown in Philadelphia or whatever. Um they would use the house band and his was a house band. The Ruben Phillips band at the Apollo Theater and he did that for twenty years. Whenever I'd go up to New York to see him I would spend my day and night at the Apollo Theater back stage with all these acts and I was uh. So that was a neat part of growing up. And I always um reflect on that remember that be the other part that I think and I would say that it I was contribute to my own life is that I observed my father being able to um interact and feel comfortable with a wide variety of people.

Campus Climates

My first year was at Abington or what we called Ogontz. And uh I remember that was a beautiful place. It was different than um the environment that I was used to it was tranquil. I remember that and it was fun I mean I enjoyed I enjoyed the people. I enjoyed uh playing cards. Um I had [inaudible] playing pinochle and bidwisk and whatever else we did. say when I moved up to um University Park in my second year so this would have been 1965 now. Um. At that time the campus was very isolating for African Americans and it's not just my felt experience but the experience of a number of others. And um what I remember and I don't remember exactly how many students there were raw maybe say twenty thousand but at that time when I came up there were only two hundred African Americans. Um so two hundreds out of two thousand twenty thousand. You do the math. And um because of that we tended to um in general um stay together and um one of the I think salvations for a lot of us were fraternities or sororities. So fraternities I think probably out of two hundred at least a hun fifty percent of people were in fraternities or sororities if not more. I mean that's that's where you really again for the camaraderie the union the emotional and the physical comfort. Salvation. I joined um Kappa Alpha Psi. Um there were three African American fraternities at that time on campus uh. So it was very isolating and again these classes of um fifty a hundred four hundred and you'd be the only African American in the class and so all the the pressures of of that relationship of that environment were tremendous. Um. Looking back on it you can see it more you can experience it I mean you can only experience more but you can um intellectualize about it more you can understand it more. During that time it was just what you went through and everyone was doing it. But it was not a pleasant situation um the awkwardness that you felt by asking questions or not being called on by the professor or or um the the the concern about whether your question was inappropriate or appropriate I mean all of this played and still does for a lot of people play a role in how students um minority students thrive or don't thrive.

The Genesis of the Douglass Association

there was a lot of upheaval uprisings rebel whatever you wanna call them um on various campuses throughout the nation. And in the cities of course we go back to Philadelphia and there were um rebellions and riots and Detroit and New York so everybody felt a need to do something. So it was in the general context that we said something different has to happen at Penn State. While there was a variety of opinion about where to start I think a number of us a number I would think um came together around the idea that it was was a good starting point was a course on that at that time we called it a course on Negro history. In the process of developing a petition and getting acquiring signatures not he petition um the idea grew out to have an organization that would frame particularly say we gotta present this and we and you gotta have an organization a name. You can't

just present this as Fred Phillips so the idea came up for an organization. And uh we called it after Frederick Douglass and we called it the Douglass Association.

The Douglass Association Protests

That was the focus that was the initial genesis and focus of the Douglass Association was around this course. Then well after we got that then we said well what else is needed. Well what else is needed of course is more black students. And you know better better treatment and a number of other things and so then that's what led to um the what we call a mini take over of the administration building. Things were not moving fast and we were not getting the level of support and understanding that we felt we deserved. That if we didn't do something um it could the situation could've gotten worse because there were a lot of individuals who were even more angry right or wrong than I was. And um the this energy had to be directed or I'll say it was truly going to get out of control.

Making a Difference

There was larger push and a larger environment which allowed people to express their concerns. Um to think that um their actions mattered. That we could change the world. Um From race relations to the war to the environment so all of this so in that sense it was a very imp time of empowerment. I think we all felt as students and as individuals not just um African Americans but um all students felt that uh they could make a difference and. And in fact we did.

Career after Penn State

In my professional career um I sought out to change the way in which African Americans viewed psychology so I ended up change and being on a threshold or forefront throughout. And I say that because in courses at that point in psychology and social work um 60's 70's um the understanding of um the psyche and um was really as as you know so Western European based that it didn't have a lot of relevance for me and for people in my community it just didn't. Um in that sense has been true for a lot of people. And um so when I sought out to establish um um my own business Progressive Life Center back in 1982 um we started from an what we called an afro-centric psychology which was spiritually based and of course since that time spirituality has been a lot more accepted in psychology in general. But twenty-five years ago there it was not at all. It was clear that you couldn't even mention that. Particularly and there was not any a awareness of the framework of culture and the contributions that there was an African psychology just was totally uh unheard of. But through the the again my leadership but also the support of a number of others in [inaudible] we've changed that.

The Power of Knowing the Past

There was no connection there was little connection if not any connection between African Americans at that point and persons who were there before. No like there are now. There was uh no um there was no internet there was no web there was not email. Um so there was no record. Had we known more about uh and as I do now what the contributions are of African Americans and others at Penn State twenty years before that would've been um inspiring and invigorating um we didn't know that at the time. Um but my hope is that individuals that um see the entire history can see the development and know um more of where they can go uh in terms of taking the movement and uh to the next level.