

Growing Up

I grew up in Cleveland, Ohio. I was born in 1947. I am an only child. I attended elementary junior high and senior high in Cleveland, Ohio. I lived in a working class neighborhood. My father was a uh laborer. My mother often did day work in some of the suburban areas. And I uh had a very engaging childhood. Uh I had very uh good teachers in elementary school. I lived in a community that was predominantly Black and there were very few white students in my uh elementary school. When I went to junior high it was much more of an integrated setting as was my senior high.

Early Activism

When I was in undergraduate school I was very active in the student protest movement in Terra Haute my roommate and I were the editors of a Black student newspaper called Saying it Loud that was distributed at uh my campus at Indiana State University which is also located in Terra Haute and St. Mary of the Woods College and I was very much involvement in trying to promote community development.

Student Protests: First Wave

I've had the opportunity to um I guess be involved in three waves of of student uh protests. Uh the first wave I think was probably 1987 or so. I may I may have the date wrong. But it was the students took over the telecommunications building and there was a subsequent meeting involving the student leaders as well as the administration that led to commitments to significantly increase the resources that were available to to support the interest of the of the Black student community. That meeting uh was held in the old Paul Robison Cultural Center. And at the time that the meeting was agreed to and all parties were there, no one had been determined as the moderator for that particular meeting. And uh the two choices that the students proposed was either myself or Mr. Lawrence Young who was then the director of the Paul Robison Cultural Center. And uh Larry Young told me that since he had to make sure that all the logistics were in place. That I should be the one to moderate that meeting. And uh so I wound up having to uh to take on the responsibility. Um it was difficult simply because you are trying to find a way of bringing parties together that often have very different ideas about what ought to be done as well as different ways of communicating that different styles of discussion as well with students being very heated with administrators are much more inclined to talk in much more measure tones. We did get through that that process and I think that did help to to move us forward in important ways and contribute significantly to the uh decision to create the Black Studies Department our Department of African American Studies out of the program status.

Student Protests: Second Wave

The second wave of student protest uh was I think had sort of similar source of origins that students simply felt that the university wasn't paying close enough attention to their needs and again I was if I recall I was uh sitting at home in my kitchen and I got a call from the president's office because these students had taken over the Robison Center uh new Robison Center at that time. And so I along with two other colleagues Dr. Bernard Bill and and Dr. Vernus Wellman were asked to come in and try to uh negotiate a settlement. Uh this process was a little bit more elongated than the than the first time. U h and over a course of several days we were eventually able to uh to get a resolution that led to the creation of the Africana Research Center among other among other outcomes. Uh again it's it was challenging but uh when one is able to sort of see the resolution in sight you feel that it 's time well spent.

Life in State College

Well State College was the smallest community that I have lived in. So of course we had to get used to a very different type of experience. It was also very uh close community. The school system is very very good so I was very happy with the opportunities that my children had and I was fortunate that at the same time I was coming in there wee a number of other uh African American faculty that were also coming to the university. We were able to establish a very close network and establish uh friendships that have persisted even up to his date.

New Students, New Challenges

When the second issue arose I guess my initial reaction is oh no not again. Because I still I'll always remember the first negotiation session but uh one of the challenges at a university is you always have new cohorts of students coming in so they are experiencing the university very differently and they have different expectations than earlier cohorts of students and in the second negotiation we were able to bring in some of the students who had been involved in the earlier protests who are able to communicate to the students some of the similarities and differences between their the things that they fought for and the newer cohorts and that eased the process of negotiation as well. On the other side the university is typically takes a posture of that the administration is in charge and the students are violating uh university rules and ought to be punished for their involvement in these activities. So part of my role in that situation is to try to convince the administration that being heavy handed is not the way in which you can most effectively resolve uh the this particular situation. In fact with the first uh situation when the students took over the telecommunications uh building the State Police came in with with riot gear that looked like they were part of Darth Vader's army so to speak and that escalated the whole process and led to I think public support for the students' position and the actual

negotiation session. In the second situation uh some of the members of administration were pushing the president to take a very hard line and as were some of the members of the Board of Trustees but uh fortunately to his credit Graham Spanier was willing to let the negotiations play out long enough for us to actually get a resolution.

Students Distrust Faculty

I thought most of the demands that were made by the students were uh were reasonable. Uh as a faculty member I probably would have framed some of them differently or refined them. But you don't have that option. Even though some of the faculty offered to advise students so that they would be able to frame their demands in ways that uh would make it easier to reach a resolution students as students do were wanted to take on this as their own []. They saw themselves as being the advocates and that perhaps some of the faculty members had become too close to the administration. And I fully understood that because in the late 60s I was doing the same thing that I was and I was an activist at my institution. I had a four inch Afro. I wore uh dark glasses. I was a Black Power advocate. And I did not take the advice of my mentors and faculty members at that time so it's sort of a natural I think distrust that students would have for those whom they see perhaps have become too comfortable.

The Framework to Foster Diversity

The framework for diversity evolved out of a long process that actually goes back to the 1970s. Uh in the 1970s there was a desegregation order that required that institutions of higher education uh take very specific actions to try and increase the representation of African American students in their student body. Because Penn State is a state related institution as opposed to a state institution it was always a question of whether or not uh Penn State, University of Pittsburgh, Lincoln, etc would be required to participate in that type of desegregation effort. In 1983 there was an order that said state related institutions did have to become involved in that process. And so Penn State established what was called the Equal Opportunity Planning Committee, which was designed to try to provide some oversight and guidance as to how we might work to hopefully increase the recruitment as well as the retention of African American students. There was still advocacy for much for a uh a line position that had overall responsibility for the management of diversity and that actually led to the decision to create a position called the vice provost of education equity. Um I was the initial holder of the position of Vice Provost of education Equity so I got the opportunity to actually shape that position and to negotiate uh the type of supports that are needed.

The Role of Vice Provost for Educational Equity

As vice provost for education I was responsible for advocating for all underrepresented groups. And so I had to be able to identify and empathize and to advocate effectively for a variety of different groups and to sort of overcome the perception that this was a Black position. So that was one of the principle challenges uh that I faced and actually the most difficult battles that I had as vice provost were not over racial equity they were over equity for the lesbian and gay bisexual and transgendered population. And I considered the fact that I was able to win a lot of those battles as being as much of an accomplishment as as any of the other areas. Um I think I'd also say that in the course of the mid-nine early to mid-nineteen eighties issue of Apartheid South Africa was also very much a on the minds of students as well as the society as a whole and I have the opportunity of being involved in shaping that the university polices there which I considered to be something that I am very proud of of being able to be involved in.

Change is Cyclical

Well I believe that change is cyclical and I so I think the reason that you see recurrences of protests over time is that once you've achieved a certain plateau people get comfortable and they are not as diligent in trying to ensure that you maintain that progress and so you start to see some slippage in some areas and that slippage is observed by new cohorts who come in and have different expectations and that starts the cycle again of rejuvenation and recommitment to those goals.

Importance of Video Documentation

Creating a video like this is important because it provides a benchmark where you can access where you are as an institution down the road that uh as an example new students coming in may see the institution as having made little progress because they are seeing the fruits of a lot of hard work and commitment over a long period of time. And what this video does is allow them to see where we've come from and hopefully I'll provide them a vision of where we are going. Uh secondly I think it's important because the way in which our society processes information now is much more visual than than before so a narrative account simply is not going to have the impact . Individuals need to see the faces of people to see uh who's tread that particular path beforehand and to simply believe that they can be here also.