

Impact of Father's Death

Well Uh my the origin of my family is actually in Pennsylvania. Central Pennsylvania, Claysburg. Both my mother and my father grew up there. And my father he fought in the Second World War. He was actually a battlefield medic. And uh they got married and uh I was born actually in Roaring Springs, Pennsylvania. Uh but my father used the GI Bill to go to New York and study at the RCA technical school. He became a television repairman and that was about for ten years that he was doing that. And he died suddenly of a massive heart attack. The thing is that I was extremely close to him. And when he died it was like center of my universe just collapsed. Uh and I became a rather depressed kid. I was only ten and he was 33 when he got out. Yeah very young man. And the thing is that uh for about a year I just wandered around in a fog and eventually what happened is I came across a book that changed my life was H. G. Wells book the time machine. And that gave me an inspiration because I thought if I could build a time machine then I could go back into the past and seeing him again and maybe save his life. And I thought if I could save his life then that would change everything. I was only eleven years old and for the me the difference between fantasy and and reality were blurred but that became my secret mission. I say secret because I didn't tell anyone. I knew they were already worried about me and if I told them I wanted to build a time machine I wasn't sure they wanted to deal with its consequences. So what I did was to keep it a secret and uh eventually that was the thing that kept me on course too. Because uh a lot of things I think would have happened differently if I didn't have that as the main focus and main goal in my life.

Mother's Example

My mother was only 30 when my father died. And she had four kids the oldest of which was ten. And the youngest of which was four and she was African American in the '50s and things were extremely tight even though she had a high school education. She could only get the most menial uh types of jobs. But yet she kept the family together. She survived and I think it's a lot of her fortitude and pride that helped us throughout our lives.

Interest in Physics

I came across another book and another person who changed my life. It was uh a popular books called the Universe and Dr. Einstein. And the thing is in that book it said that Einstein who I knew was this supposed to be this great scientific genius said that time was not something that was fixed. That we could alter time. Now I couldn't understand all the details about that but I realized that if it said that Einstein said that time could be altered then that must mean that it might be possible to have a time machine so I knew that if I could understand about Einstein then I could understand maybe how to build a time machine. So that became my second uh passion was to understand Einstein. And

during the time that I was in the service I developed this interest in physics. And eventually I decided to go to Penn State.

Experiences at Penn State

I started at Penn State in '66. That was really right in the height of the Vietnam War period. I started when the Vietnam War period was just heating up and uh there was a lot of unrest. These were the years as time developed you know of the student protests and it was really very very divisive time in the country. And uh of course this was during the period of time when Robert Kennedy was assassinated and Martin Luther King was assassinated. I mean it was a very very difficult time. And it I experienced that feeling on the campus but there wasn't any major incidents at least you know uh on the State College campus like there had been at some of the other universities. One of the things that I do remember when I was here was the fact that there was actually sensitivity uh. One young woman asked me you know do you prefer to be called Black or you know African American or what what is it that you. But just that kind of you know uh sensitivity to me was saying something about how students were were uh feeling about it. That they were sensitive to it. That they were hoping to be apart of this change. The faculty were really exceptional. I mean I truly felt they were dedicated to what they were doing and I felt that AI really learned a lot. But also as I said they were interested in as me a person as well. So I felt like both of those aspects were nurtured and I still have the contact with some of the faculty members as a result of that. In particular my thesis advisor. So it Penn State was just actually a completely wonderful experience and I maintained a strong connection with the Penn State Altoona.

Alumni Fellow Award

One of the things that has been extremely pleased to me is that in 2008 I received the university's highest award as the Alumni Fellow Award. So I am extremely proud of that. And the company that I kept when that award happened you know the president of the university had this oh incredible you know uh banquet. It was just like I mean it was just like absolutely wonderful uh it was something that made me very very proud of being a part of the university and as I said I think that this is a fantastic university.

Racial Profiling in State College

But uh I was when I got married I should say that my wife was white. And I remember going through state College one time in our car and it was like you know a weekend afternoon and we weren't speeding and you know I wasn't doing anything and got stopped by the p9olice. In our time that we call that racial profiling. Uh and I felt that you know why did they stop us. You know because it wasn't like the headlight taillight or something like that you know. It was almost like I had this it might have been paranoia

but I had this feeling like it was because the two of us were there together was the reason why they stopped us. So that was one incident that happened. But once again it was in the town. It wasn't something that happened on campus.

Attempted Recruitment by the FBI

There wasn't because there wasn't that many Black students at the time. There wasn't really. There was a very very small African American community so there wasn't any kind of cohesiveness at least that I could detect. There was I had a fellow African American student who was a physics major as well. Uh but besides him I didn't really encounter that many. I have to say that um the government however had a particular interest in the community because you know this was at the time that riots were going on like the Watts Race Riot and I actually was propositioned by the FBI uh to spy yeah. The thing is that they contacted me because and they their story was that they felt excuse me for a moment. The FBI contacted me because and told me that they felt that uh they knew I was patriotic. I had gotten my discharge and everything like that. And that I might be interested in further helping my country and that they didn't really want me to spy or anything like that but if I became a part of some of the uh groups that were on the campus and just took mental notes and you know told them about what was happening that they would appreciate it. I was appalled and I told them to forget about it. And they were kind of scary because uh they actually said they implied that they would let me go on with my career but that if they had wanted to that they could have derailed things for me and I have no doubt that they probably could have. But that was a scary experience.

The Importance of Having a Goal

If the FBI hadn't approached me I what they did in substance was they radicalized me by approaching me. When I say that is I became actually much more interested in the movements and things that were going on. I started reading things like James Baldwin's uh the Fire Next Time and saying yeah you know but I never became any part but what for me was the way to uh uh you might say the best revenge was success and for me the way in which I would show the society that I was equal and capable of doing things was by succeeding in my career. I mean that was to me a way which I focused my attention.

The Importance of Having a Goal

When you have a goal when you have a mission and I think it's something that I actually try to communicate to young people. When I talk when I give talks I you know one of the things you need to have in your life is a goal a focus because you are able to survive so many things so many distractions so many things like that because of the fact that you have this this uh goal that you want to accomplish and that that and I try to say it doesn't have to be a goal in science. It could be whatever area. filmmaking whatever just as long

as you have something a direction in which you want to do. Because then that allows you to pull things together and to survive a lot of the you know things that you encounter in life. And I think that that's one of the reasons why in fact one of the phrases that I say uh to kids is that I think that was because I had this goal and this mission is one of the reasons why I ended up at Penn State rather than the state pen.

Spike Lee Film

The Spike Lee teaches film at uh New York University. And he two of his graduate students heard the program on This American Life in which they did a feature about me. It was very beautifully done program. Uh it's on was called My Brilliant Plan on uh and they his students heard this and they got. I written a book it's the book is actually a memoir it's uh entitled time Traveler. And it's actually a memoir that talks about my life and what I've gone through as well as talking about the real possibility of time travel based on theories of Einstein. Any case they were very moved by the story and so they contacted Spike and said I think you'd be interested in this guy. And um Spike turned out he was giving a major talk at the University of Connecticut. He came to the um he contacted the physics department to say that he'd like to see me. Now the thing is that this was happening at the end of March so I thought when they contacted me was yeah April Fool's you know but he contacted me by email and said he wanted to talk with me. So we spent a couple of hours and I gave him a copy autographed copy of my book and he was finishing filming a film that's out now. It's a great film. It's called Miracle of St. Anna. It's about the African American buffalo soldiers who fought against the Germans in Italy in the Second World War behind enemy lines. Any case he took it with him and he said he'd get back to me and I wasn't sure I would ever hear from him again. And it's when he came back from Italy he called me and he said you know this is a great book. He said I want to make a feature film of it. That for me is one of the heights of both my professional and uh my personal career because Spike Lee's movies have always s been a powerful to me. From his movies his breakthrough movie Do the Right Thing which I think is one of the most powerful movies uh right up to you know Malcolm X you know right up through his current movies. I think he's just you know a superb gifted director. And for him to have chosen to do a feature film and this his a regular feature film not a documentary you know. It's going to have major actors associated with it for me is very very exciting. And uh they've recently finished and they are now it's in the phase very active development and I am very much looking forward to seeing uh how it plays out.