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# Karen Wheeler Oral History

Karen Wheeler

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**Karen Wheeler, Oral History**  
**Denison University Student, Class of 1985**

**Recorded: July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2010**  
**Interviewed by Vanessa Butler**  
**Transcribed by Kiara Sims**

## **Part 1**

*[Interviewer]: Well hello, my name is Vanessa J. Butler, and I am a member of the class of 2011 at Denison University. I am interviewing you to gain a deeper understanding of how marginalized groups used protest to create social transformation by gaining power and influence.*

*In particular, this study seeks to explore and document the historical origins and dynamics of periods of student protest at Denison, by conducting oral history interviews with alumni, students, faculty, and administrators who were a part of these periods. We are interested in learning about the factors and conditions that, one, brought about protest on campus and, two, determined your participation or lack thereof in protest to create social transformation.*

*Our data collection goal is to complement Denison's existing special collection in archive materials on student protest by collecting oral narratives from students, faculty, and staff that participated in black empowerment protest, the Black Student Union, and the development of the Black Studies Center at Denison. Based on our research thus far, Kent State University is the only other college that has a digital archive of oral narratives related to the Kent State shooting located at their library website.*

*Your interview will be tape recorded, transcribed, and placed in a digital archive available at the Denison University Library through its online website, special collections and archives. This interview will take no longer than two hours. You may leave the study at any time. And if you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you, and you would not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision will not affect your future relationship with Denison University.*

*The principal investigators for this study are Dr. Tina D. Piece and Mr. Roger Kosson. Doane Library is sponsoring this project through the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation - Next Generation Libraries Mellon grant for the 2010 to 2012 years. Do you have any questions about this project before we begin?*

[MS. WHEELER]: No ma'am.

*[Interviewer]: Okay, now we'll move into the procedures and [inaudible]. At this point, I would like for you to read over and sign the consent form we have given you. To participate in this*

*research, you must agree to have your interview tape recorded, transcribed, and placed in a digital archive available at the Denison University Library through its online website, special collections and archives. Do I have your permission to audiotape this interview?*

[MS. WHEELER]: Yes, you do.

*[Interviewer]: Audiotape recordings will be transcribed and will become a part of this research data along with my notes. The audiotape data will contain appropriate attributions to your preferred name and title, as well as your affiliation with Denison University at the time of protest activities.*

*Upon your request, portions of your interview will be labeled confidential and separated from the remainder of your answers. You may make this request at any time during the interview by telling me to keep your answer to a particular question or portion of an answer confidential. I will turn off the audiotape recorder upon your request to make confidential statements. Once you have finished making your confidential statements, please inform me so I can turn the audiotape recorder back on.*

*Thank you for agreeing to participate in this project. I will ask you questions related to Denison University and student protest. You are expected to answer each question honestly and to the best of your abilities based on your knowledge and involvement with Denison University and student protest.*

*Information and details obtained in this interview will be used for several purposes: to complement the existing special collection in archive materials for the creation of a digital archive, and as data in scholarly papers.*

*These first questions that I would be asking are background questions about how you came to be at Denison and your particular context, as well as the dynamics of the rest of the campus at that time. So Ms. Wheeler, what city and state are you from?*

[MS. WHEELER]: I am from Columbia, Maryland.

*[Interviewer]: And what kind of high school did you attend?*

[MS. WHEELER]: I actually attended two high schools. I attended a suburban community-based high school and then an urban community magnet high school.

*[Interviewer]: And the suburban school was that private or public?*

[MS. WHEELER]: Both were public

*[Interviewer]: Okay. Can you describe the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic composition of your high school?*

[MS. WHEELER]: The first...

## Part 2

[MS. WHEELER]: ...high school was very multicultural. It was probably sixty percent Caucasian and forty percent diverse cultures, including African American, Asian, Native American, and Middle Eastern. The urban high school I attended was ninety percent African American. Socioeconomic range of both schools was middle, um, no. The suburban school was middle, pretty clear middle income with maybe twenty percent above middle income and ten percent below middle.

*[Interviewer]: What types of extracurricular activities, clubs, or organizations, were you active in at these schools?*

[MS. WHEELER]: Theatre, the performing arts, and the arts and letters, meaning, like, the book club, and the yearbook and student government.

*[Interviewer]: Did you hold any leadership positions in those activities?*

[MS. WHEELER]: I was one of the editors for the yearbook.

*[Interviewer]: Awesome! : Overall, did you expect for your college experience to be similar to your high school experience?*

[MS. WHEELER]: I expected it to be very similar to my suburban high school experience.

*[Interviewer]: Could you please discuss the factors that informed your decision to attend Denison?*

[MS. WHEELER]: It is really quite funny. The reason I mentioned both high schools to you is because my senior year of high school I had a friend from the suburban high school and a friend from the urban high school who did not know each other who both chose Denison. And they both called on the same day, which happened to be fall break, to wish me a happy birthday and to tell me I should come to their school. Independent of each other! Both were African American males.

*[Interviewer]: That is interesting. What were some of your expectations and impressions of Denison before you came, in terms of academics, the culture of the college, and the kind of experience you would have relating to diversity at Denison?*

[MS. WHEELER]: I got just what I expected, honestly. Having grown up in a very multicultural experience throughout my life, I expected the same. I was not surprised by the ratio of African Americans, or people of color, or international students in relationship to the dominant culture. I

actually consciously chose Denison because of the breadth of activities that I could choose from and the social environment.

I think I was surprised when we experienced some racial challenges fall of my freshman year. That was also the time when the Iranians took Americans hostage and would not settle the negotiations before President Carter went out of office. So that was 1980 going into '81. And in hindsight I did not realize just how difficult race relations still were.

Having been a fan of African American history and participated in quiz bowls and competitions from junior high school forward, I felt pretty well versed in African American history and civil rights protests and the achievement and strides that people of color had made and women had made. Because of people like Shirley Chislm, who advocated both for the rights of people of color and for women, I thought, wow, I live in a pretty great age in time when people behave well and treat one another better than worse.

Growing up in Columbia, Maryland, which was one of the first planned cities in the nation where people could live next to each other irrespective of race or religion or economic status. And you couldn't necessarily single a person out and say, "Oh, he or she is living on government assistance," because you did not know. The city was designed in a way for that not to be obvious.

So coming to Denison with that background but also having finished high school at a predominantly African American high school...

### **Part 3**

[MS. WHEELER]: ...that had its history in being one of the only two schools that blacks could go to in Baltimore. I also understood from my perspective and lens at seventeen what being perceived of as being black may mean at a non-black environment. And I was still surprised that people would do stupid things like wear Klan robes to a Halloween party and they said that was acceptable.

*[Interviewer]: As a prospective student, were there any stories about racial tension on Denison's campus you heard about before arriving?*

[MS. WHEELER]: No, actually I hadn't.

*[Interviewer]: Okay, okay. We're going to move into the next section, the campus community and your relationship to it. Now that I have had the opportunity to hear more about your*

*background before your arrival at Denison, we will now explore the questions regarding what was going on in the country at that particular time and what was going on in the campus community. To jump right into it, what was going on in the country at the time you arrived at Denison, you mentioned the Iranian [sic] compact, but what else was going on specifically within this country socially, culturally, and politically?*

[MS. WHEELER]: I just laughed because to have jumped into that before you got to the question is interesting to me and I clearly haven't seen the question, so it was a pretty fascinating time.

One of the things that was going on that I don't know that we paid a lot of attention to as teenagers really on the edge of adulthood, was the fact that the Department of Education was becoming its own department. Up until 1978, the Department of Education had been a part of what we knew as H. E. W. – Health, Education and Welfare. But the importance of education and all of the things that go along with it, the government decided to pull it out and make it its own department, which meant that we were having people pay attention to civil rights issues in education for all people, “others” if you will.

The Bakke decision had just happened with regard to this concept or notion of reverse discrimination in education. Which meant all of those things were gonna impact our experience and some of that was stuff I just happened to be interested in and curious about. So if that's going on and that's influencing how colleges and universities are recruiting, institutions like Denison, I think, were still very much committed to looking at ways to diversify the campus community.

One of the best things I think ever happened to us was President Good. Dr. Good had a philosophy of Denison being a microcosm of the world. And so he was very supportive of admissions, from my perspective, of admissions reaching out to all and looking for ways to be inclusive. So that was happening at Denison in the context of this global piece of multiculturalism.

There was in the background, the issues of apartheid in South Africa bubbling up and people becoming more aware of the role that America had played in, if not supporting, not condoning, not condemning apartheid. And that's happening and then you've got the whole issue of the Shah of Iran being deposed. You also had the issue of Marcos being put out of the Philippines, and so you've got a lot of change in the world, in world leadership and world power happening, and you've got the struggle of Democratic and Republican politics and what that would mean to people of color was a shift in what looked like, from my point of view, a world of inclusiveness and leveling of the playing field for economic growth or potential for economic stability or the ability to make more earnings...

## July 22<sup>nd</sup> Part 4

[MS. WHEELER]: [inaudible]... have more, was going to be retrenched. You know, in hindsight we could see how much it was retrenched. We didn't know that it would be, but we knew that change was in the wind and that with the election of President Reagan that his platform and his position was not one that would necessarily be supportive or inclusive.

So those kinds of things were going on both on the world stage, on the national stage. I think they all lend themselves to the way that we probably conducted ourselves in school. We take cues from our parents and our politics often look like our parents politics until we've gotten enough exposure to make some choices and decisions for ourselves.

*[Interviewer]: Very interesting. What were some of your initial reactions after being at Denison as a student?*

[MS. WHEELER]: In my first year? After I graduated? Help me understand how you want me to focus the answer.

*[Interviewer]: Let's focus on during your first year.*

[MS. WHEELER]: You know what, I absolutely loved Denison. If you gave me a quiz, I could probably still name thirty-eight of the fifty African-American students that started with me my freshman year. We were the largest incoming class of African-Americans. We were one of the largest freshmen classes Denison had ever seen.

So we arrived on campus, some of us had been for campus visits prior to selecting Denison. I had not. I selected the school sight unseen, literally based on the recommendation of two friends and an admissions preview that was done in my hometown.

So I saw the campus when I came in June of 1980 for Freshmen Orientation. I didn't see it again until I arrived in August and was checking into Shaw Hall to discover that I was assigned to the Pine Room.

The Pine Room is in the basement of Shaw Hall. When you walk into Shaw Hall from the quad, its lower level Shaw Hall right. It was really a study room, but because the school was so full, they had turned study rooms in Shaw Hall, Beaver, Shorney, Shepardson, Crawford, and Curtis East, they had turned several of those study rooms into residential rooms [laughs], because we were so overcrowded.

Of course, you had some new dormitory space since then, almost thirty years ago. But I absolutely loved it. I mean, who lives in a dorm room with another girl that's big enough really for four students and you've got beautiful pine walls and a full kitchen next door that you can actually cook in? Mind you, you had to truck down the hall for the bathroom, but no big deal.

*[Interviewer]: How did your initial impressions of Denison change after you arrived and what kinds of impressions changed for the better or for the worse?*

[MS. WHEELER]: My initial impressions did not change a lot. I got what I bought. I got a predominantly upper middle class experience. The African American students that came were people like me or people who came from environments or experiences that I had seen firsthand or been a part of.

I actually think I was kinda surprised by the amount of wealth. There were many more wealthy students in school with us than I expected. I never anticipated counting every third car being a BMW. And that's probably overkill but there were a lot of... I drove a Pinto, a Ford Pinto. So, relatively speaking, I drove a pitiful car, but I think that overall the faculty were supportive and encouraging.

Impressions that were for the worst were that people were really people and sometimes that meant that they weren't as cheery, happy and team-oriented as I would have expected. And that is across the board faculty, staff students. But what you learn is that they were indeed that - a microcosm of the world, so...

## **Part 05**

[MS. WHEELER]:...they weren't always nice.

*[Interviewer]: What organizations were you involved in at Denison?*

[MS. WHEELER]: I was on the Denison Lecture Series, I was the co-chair my junior and senior year, I think. I was the chair one year and co-chair one year, I don't remember if it was junior or senior year.

I was a student advisor. I was a BSU officer and member. I was in the BSU choir. I was a RA or SA. I was a peer tutor. And we had a recruitment and outreach program targeting African American students and I was a student coordinator and facilitator with that.

And overtime myself and three or four others worked with the admissions counselors whenever we had prospects. We would help facilitate getting the prospects to campus, getting them to their student house, and making sure they got everything they needed while they were on campus. And then helping facilitate getting them back to wherever their transportation was, whether they were on a bus, or a train – well, no trains, but a bus or a plane.

*[Interviewer]: Why did you become an active member of those organizations or different activities?*

[MS. WHEELER]: First of all, I loved my school. I absolutely one hundred percent loved my school, and I wanted other people who came to see it and to experience it and hopefully make the same choice. Because I thought that indeed if you could come there you would get a great

education. You might have challenges socially as you try to find your way through life, but that you could make friends with people who would be life friends and potential business partners.

And I thought it was a great place to be, so I wanted to encourage others who were interested in coming to Denison. And I had a good experience in terms of being recruited to come, so that was important.

The BSU choir was easy. One of my friends, one of the two guys who recruited me to Denison, he formed the choir. So we had sung in high school together – he's like, come and do this. Again it was a chance to have some social interactions with others who were interested in similar things. The lecture series because I loved the arts, I loved public relations, and I was a Communication major.

*[Interviewer]: Can you give me a sense of the status of students of color on campus? How many students of color, and what ethnic and racial groups were represented on campus?*

[MS. WHEELER]: Today or back then?

*[Interviewer]: Back then.*

[MS. WHEELER]: My freshman class we started with fifty. Of that fifty, twenty actually graduated on time, meaning within the four-year matriculation period. In addition to the fifty that came in my class, there were approximately, and this is just a quick memory scan, there was probably about another twenty-five or thirty.

A couple of students were on semester abroads when we came our freshman year. So we didn't meet them till second semester our freshman year, or first semester our sophomore year. So I think there were about twenty-five or thirty that were there in addition to when we came. We weren't quite a hundred in 1980, that I'm pretty certain of.

In addition to which, that I can remember, DISA, which was the international student association, had about twenty-five active members that I can recall from between freshman and senior year – well, between being freshman and seniors. And then, in addition to that, there were probably somewhere between five and ten people who kinda floated in and out that I couldn't put a name or face to, but I saw periodically who I can't recall being active members of either BSU or DISA. So my...

## **Part 6**

[MS. WHEELER]: ...numbers could be slightly off.

*[Interviewer]: And what was the climate like for these students and can you share a story to describe the climate?*

[MS. WHEELER]: Coming in, there were, again, against the backdrop of what was happening internationally, things on the surface were very collegial and inviting and open. When we would have conversations somewhere in the latter part, I think, of my freshman and sophomore year, as the world stage got more restless, sometimes the challenges that some of our international peers were feeling were difficult. And one of those, and I think we need to go off the record on this.

*[Interviewer]: Okay, let me...*

## **Part 7**

[MS. WHEELER]: While I lived a comfortable life and felt comfortable in my skin, I think one of the difficult things was begin African American in a dominant environment and finding your place.

One of our freshman classmates, Alice was her name. Alice was a very dark skinned African American woman; she did not become involved actively in any way with the Black Student Union. And I never saw her actively participating or engaged in conversation with her African American peers. And I think there was some question about where her loyalty lied, whether she was a part of us or not. She pledged a white sorority our freshmen year and I think we looked at her strange. She came back and then she left before the end of our sophomore year as well. Don't know what happened to her.

Denison isn't the place for everybody. Being on stage in mainstream America doesn't work for everybody. One of my best friends from high school, Renee Qualls - she should be in your list, she was a part of the fifty. She came to Denison. She is bright, she was smart, socially a lot of fun, but was not comfortable. She was not used to being in a mixed environment on a regular basis.

We went to the urban school together, but we were on the student yearbook together, we were on student class council together, we had traveled to the Bahamas together as a class trip. I thought we had the buddy system. I was very comfortable; she was not. She lasted a month and she couldn't even tell me that she didn't like it because she was afraid I would be unhappy.

That was probably the hardest part of my freshman year. Having one of my three best friends from high school choose to leave. It was also I think her death knell. She went home and she died - literally died, two years later. I forget that sometimes, and it wasn't that people didn't try to make her feel welcome. She had friends outside of me that she made at Denison. I can't think of Ron's last name - Ron Sloan befriended her and he would do anything he could to try to keep her happy and cheerful and, you know, relate.

My freshman year roommate - AJ, Anita Johnson, she is a nurse now down in San Antonio, Texas. She came from New York. Have you ever heard of the ABC program?

*[Interviewer]: Yes Ma'am.*

[MS. WHEELER]: Okay. She was an ABC student, so she should have been able to make it. There is no logical, rational reason. If you go to prep school, the presumption is you have gone from a totally African American experience to a multicultural or dominant cultural experience. If you could do it in high school, you can do it at Denison.

AJ was smart; there's no question about it. She was socially astute, but she woke up one day and decided this wasn't working. So we lost, I think, good students because the fit wasn't right for them. In some cases, they were burnt out already from having done this dance, or they didn't feel welcome in either community.

*[Interviewer]: That can really do a lot of psychological damage to someone, I really think.*

[MS. WHEELER]: I think it can. I think more so than we, you know, thirty years out, I understand it a lot better than I did at nineteen.

*[Interviewer]: What were your relationships like with these students of color when you initially arrived on campus, and did these relationships change during and following protest? And if so, how did they?*

[MS. WHEELER]: Interesting. Our protests... We were lucky. Our protests were so different, and yet the same in some...

## **Part 8**

[MS. WHEELER]: ...If you've read all of the Denisonians and the Bullsheets, which I'm sure you've read, and if you've already had a chance to talk to those who you've seen in the photographs, protesting President Joel P. Smith around the flag pole, who really didn't believe that black students belonged at Denison.

Those students stuck together because they were coming from a similar experience, many of them, and they had a reason for being at Denison, and a purpose. Their momma and daddy said, so this was their only chance for education, or they had picked Denison because of what it could do for their development. I don't think those reasons were any different than the reasons that the students coming in the late seventies and early eighties were coming. Same reasons, but we weren't protesting because somebody - an administration - said we didn't belong there.

It was that people had their own little -isms and schisms of what was socially acceptable, so I think our protest is slightly different. I mean, there was massive discussion about how to respond to the students who wore these KKK robes to the Halloween party down at King Hall, that Halloween, and we didn't rally around the flagpole. We responded through the Bullsheet.

The protest took a different look. We had meetings and conversations through student life, because there were forums and venues to respond in a way that could be heard that couldn't be

heard in the late Sixties and the Seventies. So we protested, but it was a different kind of protest, if you will.

So my relationship with my peers was one of alliance because this was unacceptable behavior. We didn't like it. We knew that we were at school for a reason and a purpose and our mommas and daddies were not gonna be happy if we did things that got us kicked out of school. But we also knew that this was not behavior that we were gonna accept and tolerate in a civil society.

And we had a president who had that same philosophy. So it made protest, I think, easier to be a part of, because you didn't fear – I didn't fear - being put out of school. I also didn't fear being a part of the collective, and I liked the fact that we could collectively say, this is wrong and we don't expect it to happen again, and we expect the administration to respond to it. And the administration responded.

So, I think that we were fortunate to live in the times that we did, with the college president we had. Dr. Good actually, I don't know that I can put words in his mouth, and he's dead - God rest his soul. But one of the things that I thought was interesting is that he supported the freedom of South Africa. And so, when that became an issue and a protest and we built shanties on the yard on the common ground out in front of the student union and the library in that space, in that quadrangle, as a way of saying to the Board of Trustees, we know that some of our funds are invested in funds that support South Africa's apartheid movement. We want you to divest. He responded to that.

You know, he is the creator in my mind, if not in fact, and you would have to do research, but he certainly spearheaded this whole notion of inclusiveness and the South African student exchange program, where he got other schools and the Great Lake College Association to agree to accept students from South Africa. And so, they did a summer program at Denison and then they were scattered to schools in the consortium, including ours, and so our lives were richer for people like Victor Mamabolo (sp?) and Peter Mubunda (sp?), who came as a part of that program, and so again we got...

## **Part 9**

[MS. WHEELER]: ...exposed to a whole new level of what student protest looked like.

*[Interviewer]: Okay. We are now going to move on to the section of the power of the Black community. We are interested in understanding that notion for, one, the institutional structure and, two, the broader social community of Denison. This project defines power as the ability through institutional, which is defined as designated ability to act through university structures and non-institutional coercion or influence, to cause others to act according to the will of a community. So to keep our definition of power in mind, how would you describe the power of the Black community at Denison?*

[MS. WHEELER]: I think that through the Black Student Union, we had significant power and influence. Again, because of the difficulties and the significant anger that was a result of comments from President Smith and the Board's ultimately change in institutional leadership.

A president who was more inclusive and more open, that came as a result of the unionizing of black students in the Black Student Union. I think so frequently, the leadership of the Black Student Union was consulted when there were community issues afoot. The Chief Minister was our representative, as well as the Director of the Black Cultural Center, who by the time I got there was John Jackson. Prior to that had been Chuck Henry. And Chuck was also a Denison grad.

So you've got history building upon itself. You've got a knowledge base and a legacy of what is important to surviving and thriving as an African American at Denison. As a student, as a student of color, there was a legacy of work and effort that had been laid and, I think, because of that work and effort that the community as a whole did have power and influence.

On three different occasions that I am aware of, there was an attempt to relocate the Student Union, from out of Smith. And this notion of kumbaya and inclusiveness and can't we all just get along, perhaps we have moved to a place and an age and a time where there is no need for a Black Student Union.

I think present students and alum alike could come together and say, no, this is a place of history, it's a sanctuary, it is vital for that opportunity to come together. You should not perceive it as a place where power launches and revolutions will be plotted, if you will. But it's a sense of home and everybody should have that sense of home, where they can point to and go back to and touch.

*[Interviewer]: Can you describe or share a story that describes the use of power by the Black community to address their political, social, and economic position at Denison?*

[MS. WHEELER]: I think we have to come back to that one. I have to think.

*[Interviewer]: Okay. Did the power of the Black community change while you were at Denison, and if so, how and what caused that change?*

[MS. WHEELER]: While I was there I think it was strong. I think that it was heard. My observation post-Denison - I finished in '84 - is over the next four years. I did see the notion of inclusiveness and kumbaya, if you will, create a sense of comfortable and multiculturalism that may have diminished that sense of power that...

## Part 10

[MS. WHEELER]:... emanated from the BSU in particular. And I say that to the extent that in the restructuring of administrative tasks and duties, we went from having just the Black Cultural Center and the BSU to actually having a Director of Multiculturalism with Betty Lovelace.

And in bringing some of the things that happened with DISA and the BSU together, bring strength and unity, but I think at the same time it dilutes this notion of power, history, and responsibility and duty to those who laid a foundation to make life easier for students in their process, or progress, through Denison. And perhaps the marginalization of issues that were unique to those two different populations.

And I guess a case in point, and I don't remember the date, I think it was in the Nineties actually, when we basically saw a repeat of bad behavior directed toward African American students through social activities. Again, this whole issue of racist remarks and behavior that looked like Klan behavior, even if it was in mockery or jest. At this point in time, twenty years later, we should expect better. And to have the BSU fighting a battle that should have been resolved, not an issue, not relevant anymore, in a society that should embrace diversity and respect history, was very disappointing.

But I think that we got comfortable, and when I say we I mean African American students, students and faculty at Denison as a whole, that we had become an embracive and inclusive community and surely we were not recruiting students or faculty or staff who didn't have that philosophy. But truth in fact we did. And if you look at the timeline, this is an alumni perspective; I don't know what the student perspective would be. But we went through two presidents, post Dr. Good, pre Dale.

And in that presidency, there were also an institutional shift in recruitment strategy. From recruiting students from major metropolitan cities on the East coast, and recruiting African Americans students from ABC schools, to an internal regional recruiting philosophy of Ohio, Midwest. And if you look at your demographics of African American students between early Nineties through late Nineties, you will see that your African American student population, their geographic location of home, is not the same as the numbers in the Sixties, Seventies, and early Eighties.

And so you get a different mix, and with that mix you get a different sociological philosophy and upbringing which changes the political behavior and attitudes of the student population. And so we end up right back where we were, with people who were very comfortable, and status quo, and power was lost. Political influence was lost and then students find that they've been offended and suddenly it's a different type of anger and response again, which gets you back to flag pole protest versus the 1980's Bullsheet protest.

*[Interviewer]: Okay.*

[MS. WHEELER]: I know I've taken you down a long path.

*[Interviewer]: No, you're fine. Did you want to go back to the question or did you want the question I previously asked or did you want me to move on into the next section?*

[MS. WHEELER]: Go to the next section and we'll try to come back to that question last as a pick up.

*[Interviewer]: Okay...*

## **Part 11**

*[Interviewer]: Okay well, you kind of already touched on some of the purposes of the Black Student Union, but this whole section is dedicated to the Black Student Union. The first question is, how did you initially learn about the BSU at Denison and what were some your thoughts about it after you learned about the BSU?*

[MS. WHEELER]: Well, one of the most wonderful things that the BSU was doing before I got there and we continued to do, was that there was somebody who was doing that outreach and interfacing with prospective students.

So when you got there, you were assigned a Big Brother or Big Sister in the BSU. You could accept or reject them, but we kind of got together and we took on a freshman. And so there was somebody who you could go to as a place, as a touchstone.

As a person of color there was somebody that would be there if you weren't comfortable or if you just had questions in general. And then you made friends, so you might switch or shift, and that was fine. But at least there was somebody who was gonna check on you.

The first meeting was priceless because you're this wide-eyed freshman and you walk in. And Carl Washington was the Chief Minister my freshman year, and he was this amazing looking guy. First of all, you know, you're seventeen, and...wow. And then he starts talking and he's articulate and explaining our mission and our goals. It wasn't a revolution to declare but it was certainly a community and fun to be had.

But this was home, this was that place where we met on Fridays to talk about what was going on in the community, if there were concerns for the good of all about how we were being treated, if we had trouble in class, if we had concern about an instructor, we could talk about that. But then we also talked about social activities and community activities as well. And so it was a safe place and it was a place where I could learn my history, the history of blacks at Denison.

*[Interviewer]: Did you believe that the BSU was cohesive or fractured? That is, was the Black community able to pursue issues with solidarity?*

[MS. WHEELER]: During my time there I think we did. And I think that we could also agree to disagree. And there were times where we did agree to disagree. We didn't always agree on the same thing, but for the most part when we took a position we didn't fight against it. If we didn't agree with the position that the organization was taking, we didn't fight against it, as I recall.

*[Interviewer]: What kinds of issues fostered the cohesiveness? Like, were there specific events or conditions that brought the Black community together?*

[MS. WHEELER]: Hmm...I think financial aid was always an issue. Interestingly enough, non-student direct, but the recruitment and retention of African American faculty was an issue. During our freshman year, Liz Friedberg was in the Fine Arts Department, and I can't recall to this day, but Kim Derickson could probably remind you better than I all the particulars, but what we saw was faculty coming and going.

And we wanted some accountability from the Administration as to why it was. Now some faculty came in lecturer positions, and I don't think we understood what a lecturer position meant, that it was a temporary thing. But what we knew was that we didn't see a consistent presence of African American faculty in tenure track positions, and if they were we didn't see many of them staying. And so that is an issue the...

## **Part 12**

[MS. WHEELER]: BSU spoke on and made its position known that it was a need for role models, quite honestly. And people who look like us who might be able to understand our -isms, schisms, issues, or needs, and be advocates for and along side of us.

*[Interviewer]: Using the following definitions: radical, meaning the willingness to use unconventional methods to force social change; liberal, the willingness to use conventional methods within political and social institutions to bring about social change; conservative, the belief that personal accomplishments within the Black community would lead to social change to describe one's political ideology toward creating social transformation. How would you describe the BSU's ideology?*

[MS. WHEELER]: At the time that I was there... Give me the first two again.

*[Interviewer]: Radical - the willingness to use unconventional methods to force social change. And liberal, the willingness to use conventional methods within political and social institutions to bring about social change.*

[MS. WHEELER]: I think during the period of time that I was there I would describe the BSU as liberal. I think historically in the research that I did while I was a student there, I would say that they were radical at times and liberal at times. And I am not so sure that we didn't have radical thought while I was there between '80 and '84. I just can't say that I recall us executing the radical philosophy, but I would certainly say that we were liberal for certain.

*[Interviewer]: Did you happen to read any of the writings in the Vanguard or Black Rage?*

[MS. WHEELER]: [Laughing] Yes. James Bell and the Vanguard, yeah.

*[Interviewer]: And in your opinion, what was the impact of these forms of literature within the campus community on black students, other students of color, and white students?*

[MS. WHEELER]: Oh, I think they were fabulous. I think they did what every educational institution dreads but ought to be about, which is to generate action in thought, in conversation, as well as deed. Denzel was quite a guy; I actually spent some time with him. And he was on the backside, on the Vanguard side, and we tried to regenerate that publication actually.

But what I think is awesome is that it moved people to incite many riots in their head, I think, if not physical activity. Do I agree with all of it? No. But did it make some students in the white community scared and afraid? Probably so! Was that a bad thing? No! Why not? Because perhaps they might rethink the things that they say or do in the context of their relationship with others. Am I a burn-baby-burn philosophy child? Probably not! If you make me angry enough, I can be moved in that direction and I think many of us could.

Post all of this, you see Rodney King - that whole incident could've been any of us. Kent State, I don't think Kent State could have ever happened at Denison, but I think that the results of Kent State are evident in a lot of places, and particularly in schools in Ohio, because it just was so close to home. You know, post Kent State, where you see Shephardson today, were actually the ROTC barracks if you didn't know that.

*[Interviewer]: No, I had no idea.*

[MS. WHEELER]: Yeah, they were over there, on the quad there. So those things went away, and schools made room for student protest in a more safe environment in relationship to...

### **Part 13**

[MS. WHEELER]: authority if you will. But I think the Vanguard and Black Rage was designed to challenge and question authority. And you can decide for yourself how you feel about that and how you wanted to respond. Even if it invited you to burn, tear, destroy, I think more than anything, it prompted you to ask, why am I here, what am I doing, and how does this place affect who I am.

*[Interviewer:] How did the BSU educate their members and others on campus about what was going on in the campus community and nationally in terms of social transformation of the position of Black communities in political institutions and societies?*

[MS. WHEELER]: Well, we had formed, internally, again, our Fridays meeting were that place. And then we would actually do forums in partnership with other student organizations. Through student life, with DISA, with the Denison lecture series, with the Women's Center, even with

academic departments, with the Black Studies Department, with perhaps English or others. And, of course, working with those organizations, be a vital part of Black History Month activities, and that was really important.

And then we always had the Black Arts Festival in the spring, and that was a Thursday through Sunday celebration of blacks in the performing arts. And there were a variety of things from plays, to concerts, musicians, and then a dance or dinner dance of some sort, and then a church service of some sort. And those I think are great moments of pride.

One of the most wonderful things that I took away my freshman year that I still use as an educator was Tony Cade Bambara the author came to speak to us that year. I think we did it in conjunction with the Denison Lecture Series, but there was a public performance and evening with her. But then there was a private time with her; she came and spent time with the BSU. And in that conversation, she talked to us about double standards and interpreting the acts of others and the meaning of sayings.

And that kind of laid a foundation, I think, for many of us in our thoughts about how we could do the work that we thought was important in the BSU in terms of advocating for social change and equity, and looking at the nuances of what is said.

And I don't know if anybody ever shared this with you or not, but what she talked about was, she talked about the fairytales, in particular Goldie Locks. Goldie Locks and the three bears seems like a wonderful fairytale of this lovely little girl who's been lost and is trying to get home. Goldie Locks, in fact, is a criminal. She breaks into the three bears' home - trespass. She eats a little bit of each of their three porridges - theft. She sits in their chairs and breaks them. She sleeps in their beds. She burns up their firewood, which is conversion.

I now use Goldie Locks when I teach the law, when I teach personal injury and tort law. But it was Tony Cade Bambara's description of how the world can see things. As children we see fairytales one way, as adults we see it in another way when we're reading it to our children. But if you were to analyze the actions and the behaviors in societal standards and norms of what we expect people to do, Goldie Locks is a criminal.

And so our lives that we lead, we must examine them through multiple lenses in how we interact with others and how they perceive us, and how we interact with others and what it is we want them to perceive. So I think the BSU did a great job during that time of trying to educate and inform and be inclusive and outreach and share concerns, and our concerns with the larger community...

#### **Part 14**

[MS. WHEELER]: ...to get them to at least hear and respect, if not accept or agree.

*[Interviewer]: We're now going to move into BSU and their role in protest. Can you share a story describing a time of heightened racial tension at Denison?*

[MS. WHEELER]: Hmm. Actually, there were two. The one that I think was interesting was when President Reagan was elected. The night of his election and the inauguration brought a lot of discomfort and mistrust of what the world would be like and what our lives at Denison would be like. The Republican will, nationally, was being seen in the response of the Caucasian students on campus. And the Democratic loss was being felt by African Americans students, some more so than others, some expressing despondent behavior.

But certainly after President Reagan went into office, there were some tensions in terms of what we could expect. It wasn't talked about a whole lot, I don't think, but I think it was certainly some discomfort that was there. I keep going back to that Halloween incident because that was major tension. People were not happy, they were not comfortable, they were looking over their shoulders because the words and the exchange in the Bullsheet were very heated. And it was perceived as an attack on all black people because of the conversations that started going back and forth in the Bullsheet in terms of the discourse and people were not happy.

*[Interviewer]: Would you describe what you remember about the BSU's involvement during this time of political action or mobilization? And it would be particularly helpful if you could tell me a story about a particular racial incident and describe for me the BSU's involvement.*

[MS. WHEELER]: I know there's two of them in the back of my head and I can't do it because I can't get the story straight to give you the who and the what. So I'm sorry I can't answer that.

*[Interviewer]: Okay. Did the BSU have a coalition with other organizations on campus during this time?*

[MS. WHEELER]: Yes. We worked with the international student association, DISA. Actively, we did stuff together with them. We also did stuff with the women who were coalescing in the Women's Center, in particular those two organizations. We also worked with the student lecture series group actively. I think those were the three, but the coalition with DISA was the most active and one where I think we all felt very comfortable engaging others.

*[Interviewer]: What were some of the power dynamics of the coalition? Were there struggles for leadership, visibility or influences over the agenda for change?*

[MS. WHEELER]: You know, not that I recall. I think when the issues were of importance, it was a unified front; in response, perhaps the way that information was written, there may have been an agreement to disagree periodically, but I don't recall ever seeing a power struggle in that way. I think we were more interested in the common ground.

*[Interviewer]: What were your personal responses to the racial tension and social change methods during this time period while you were on campus and did you participate in social change methods...*

## **Part 15**

*[Interviewer]: if so, why; and if not, why?*

MS. WHEELER: You know it's interesting. I think it goes back to going to the two high schools I went to. Every now and then I feel real revolutionary. I wanted to be a part of the conversation in hope that there was a place for everybody to have a seat at the table in influencing the bigger policies of the college.

I think there were some peers who were readily able to interface with all facets of the college and the community: white, black, pink, green, male, female, gay, straight, international, non-Christian, non-faith, Jewish, Islamic. Sometimes I think in my own sense of who I was, my identity, I could vacillate, and that wasn't always a clear message of who or what I stood for. So sometimes I might be giving off burn-baby-burn when really I just wanted kumbaya.

But my goal was to be a part of a change when it was for the good of all and an opportunity for people to get what they came to school for, which is first and foremost a good education. And then secondly, a community that was comfortable where they felt welcomed and safe, that always was important to me.

So the activities that I chose to participate in, in being a tutor, in being a SA were my way of trying to be sure that the needs of the minorities were heard. And raising questions at the table about inclusiveness, or how policies or decisions that were being made would impact them. To the extent that when Dr. Good announced that he would be retiring because of an inoperable brain tumor, I wanted a seat at the table in selecting the new president of what was my college, what was my home, my place where I felt happy. And I wanted others who looked like me, be they people of color or female, would have an experience that would make a difference in the rest of their lives.

*[Interviewer]: If there were intense periods of protest, were there times when students behaved emotionally? And what kinds of behaviors were exhibited?*

[MS. WHEELER]: You know, I wouldn't say intense protest in the way that I think about what happened again back in the late Sixties, early Seventies at Denison. But periods of protest and discomfort from where we were at that stage in our lives as people of color, there were a range of emotions from this stress that I'm never gonna get a fair shake and I keep getting beat down because I'm a person of color, to this is outrageous and I hate this place and, you know, I'm gonna fight these people who said racial slurs, or who carved the word "Nigger" into Alice's door.

You know, and you asked me about incidents and that's one of them that happened. Somewhere along the line, there were slurs painted on a bathroom mirror, things taped to doors. And those things I think provoke rage and an immediate emotional response to fight whoever did that, to take them down. But in most instances, you know, I think that through conversation and through biding of time and coming together and talking things out internally, then a written response or – I don't want to say a demand - but a request to the appropriate administrators were executed. And...

## Part 16

[MS. WHEELER]: responses were made. It's funny, when we talk I don't know where this personal story fits. But it's funny the things you forget and then you remember. You asked me about a personal story, and I think one of your questions was about a personal story where something happened, and there was protest of some sort. I don't even know that my peers know, I think my best friend knew and I think the BSU chief minister at the time knew.

But I got a citation my sophomore year of college that my room had been inspected and I was being cited for smoking pot. And I thought that was the funniest thing since sliced bread since I've never done drugs in my life because my mother threatened to kill me if I did. And I took her serious; you didn't play with my mom.

So when I got the citation, I complained about it and Seth Patton was the director at the time, and he wouldn't take it back. And so I protested all the way up through Student Life and I wanted it retracted, and I wanted an apology because I never smoked pot. There was no evidence of pot in my room. And the citation was for me and my room, and I had to go all the way up to the Dean of Student Life.

And I did inform the BSU Chief Minister and got support for the fact that... And my question was, why me? You know, there were things in my room that indicated that I was a person of color. Is it because I am a person of color? Is it because you've made a mistake? But, you know, I'm this pretty much cookie-cutter, goody two shoes, so clearly it wasn't me, and I didn't want my name disparaged, nor did I want something in my record that was false. And it took a week to get it resolved, and it got resolved. But those kinds of things happened periodically. And my sense is anecdotal – I can't prove it - was that it did happen with students of color more frequently than not.

Now that I've totally skewed your questions again...

*[Interviewer]: No, no, all of this is really helpful and I think will be beneficial to the digital archive, so anything that you would like to share is definitely taken. How were these behaviors perceived by whites? This is going back to the different emotions that were exhibited. How were*

*these behaviors perceived by whites, or those opposed to social change and/or the goals of the black students?*

[MS. WHEELER]: I think that by whites who didn't understand the issues, that they were shocked and thought, you know, you people, quote unquote, "you people" have it good; I don't know what you're complaining about. You're here just like we are, you have a dorm room just like we do, and you have a chance to go to school just like we do. What's your problem? And get over yourself, quite honestly.

One of the more interesting things toward the end of our academic career was that we were coming upon graduation; we lost two classmates. One died, I think, literally from alcohol poisoning and the other died in an accident, hit their head in a water accident. But about the same time, there were students who weren't gonna be able to graduate because they didn't have quality points, and other students who were in similar situations who suddenly graduated. Those students were students of color who did not graduate, and those students who did suddenly graduate were Anglo.

So even until the end, there were perceptions of disparate treatment. And do we know the details of why each of those happened? No, but on the outside, all you know is what you see. And so I think that those feelings of anger and rage and emotions that we may have seen in our freshman and sophomore year was in response to...

## **Part 17**

[MS. WHEELER]: uh, protest or political unrest or changes in society kind of reversed themselves. In that Anglo students were looking at us like get over yourself, you know, move on, what's the big deal, we don't get it. To now we're seeing this change and we're not happy about it but we're at the end of our careers, and so what do we do? We get over ourselves and we move on. We don't come back and question it because it's graduation time and you're leaving.

*[Interviewer]: Nationally and/or internationally, were there any other events of student protest based upon racial conflicts going on at the time? And if so, did the Black community at Denison ever look to these incidents as an example? For example, earlier in the interview you mentioned shanty protests. Anything like that, if you could share a little bit more of how that came about and the involvement of the Black community within that.*

[MS. WHEELER]: You know, I don't remember all of the particulars now, but I do know that we were aware, we were always conscious of the international issues around the apartheid. And nationally, more and more was being revealed and brought to light. And so as that movement expanded, as the conversations and the media was putting forth the financials of organizations, the histories of organizations, it became more apparent that if we're going to this school, and it's a private institution that has significant endowed funds, that we should be asking the question of where are our funds invested.

If we say that Denison with its historical religious roots, even though we are multicultural, all inclusive of all faiths, the reality is that we have very historical ties to religion, and were established as a religious institution. So what is our good will, what is our rightful place and duty to humankind? And so, students and faculty alike began asking that question and collectively looked at how we could continue the work and the business of being educators, being students, and being global citizens right here at home.

And the way to do that was the shanty protests, as well as the written request or demands depending on who you asked. To the board of just an equitable behavior internally if how we do our business of teaching, learning, living, as well as the maintenance of our finances to do that, and do it in a way that is not going to support the harm or the detriment of others.

You know, one of the other things that I've mentioned on the periphery that I think is also important and maybe we didn't do it in formal protest in a significant way that I could point to, there may be somebody else who could point to that.

We were also mindful of a couple other things that were going on in society and in social living at that time and that was things that were going on in South America. We had international exchanges to Bogata, Columbia; Argentina, and um, let's see, Argentina; Bogata, Columbia, um, I don't think anybody was going to Peru at the time. But people of color, students of color, were choosing some of those exchanges to South America. We also had students from South America, so we had students from Columbia, from Argentina, from Brazil, in particular across the..

## **Part 18**

[MS. WHEELER]: ...four years that I was there. And we were also having the students from South Africa that were coming through the formal program that Dr. Good had established and then we had international students coming from other places - of their own will and volition.

But we were mindful through - in their action with these students - of issues and concerns that were happening back in their home country and the role that America may be playing in the demise of community or the popping up of what would become - and what we know now as the stronghold that really harmed society, Nicaragua included. And so that was in our conscience during that time.

Did we make an active protest about those things? Not that I recall. But were we aware? Was it in our conscious? Was it in our conversation? Yes!

And then the other one, which is one that I don't think people like to talk a lot about, was gay and lesbian rights. Gay and lesbian rights were evolving. We had the gay and lesbian association on campus. Even if it wasn't something that you supported or believed in, there may have been times when we coalesced for the good of the interest of minorities, and rights being preserved

irrespective of your -ism or your schism. And so I do think that there were times probably when we did work together; there were times when that was hard.

We had an African American man who from, I think, many people's perspective, was a transsexual, because there were days when he wore skirts and he wore long hair. But his physical gender was male and so there were these other things that were happening in the social context of living that could evolve into student protest or student unrest in support of the rights of those other entities. I just don't recall them evolving to a mega level that created physical protest the way we did the shanties or significant or prolonged protest and writings.

*[Interviewer]: I now have a few questions to ask to wrap up our interview, and these questions will focus on the consequences and outcomes of the political action and periods of social change. What were some of the positive outcomes or effects of the political action that the BSU engaged in? And can you give me an example or share a story that illustrates one of the positive effects?*

[MS. WHEELER]: I think one of the positive effects of the work that we did was the notion of faculty recruitment and retention and sustainability of faculty leadership. Valerie Lee was on tenure track when we came there. John Jackson, I think, had tenure. James Freeman was on tenure track in Psychology. Freeman was in Psychology, Jackson was in Religion, and Val Lee was in English.

But I think that our efforts, our support, our continued questioning of this in conjunction with, and I didn't mention this earlier on but I want to make sure that we note, that the Black Alumni Association revived itself while we were students, if you will. They were kind of there but active-inactive, but they became much more active again during my latter years there. And I think that our continued conversations, questions, and engagement of the administration did result in a more concerted effort to recruit and retain tenure track faculty. Desmond Hammond came before we left and stayed until his retirement and death...

## **Part 19**

[MS. WHEELER]: along with a few others that have come since that time. So I think that is one of the more positive outcomes because to lose three lecture-slash-potential [inaudible] - and you'd have to investigate because I don't know for certain their status - but to lose three African American faculty at the end of our first year was very disheartening.

But through time and effort and continued registering of that concern, we did see change by the time we were seniors. I think that along with the notion of student support, services continue to expand and increase. Student life had one African American – pretty consistently one African American Residential Life full-time staff member that increased the number of recruiting officers of color and admissions in Student Life staff increased while we were there.

And that was, I think, a direct correlation to the concern about having advocates in administration. You know, I already shared with you I have mixed feelings about the role the Office of Multicultural Affairs played. I think it was an important position; I'm just not sure about the other parts of it.

*[Interviewer]: Were there also negative effects? For example, misunderstanding from the student body, negative perceptions by the administration, or by faculty?*

MS. WHEELER: You know, I don't ever recall a negative by faculty that I can point to as a whole. You know, that we could brand the faculty as being negative about students of color and protest. I think we had a more liberal faculty than not.

So that one, I think that in the context of localism, I think, as senior administration shifted. Some of the senior administration perceptions may have been negative but the balance of faculty and others pulled those perceptions or attitudes back into place. And by that, I don't mean that they singled out African Americans or people of color as, this behavior is bad and so that group is always bad.

But the shift was a more subtle shift and your time has come and gone, you have an equal playing field, get over yourself, and we have no reason to pay attention to you as a particular group. And I think that is much more dangerous, quite honestly, than a direct negative response. You can see a direct negative response; you can attempt to address it or readdress it. But this notion that the playing field is now level, all God's people are equal, and we see them as all equal at Denison, and therefore I don't need to take the time to know you – not just as a student or an alum - but a person of color who may have had a different experience than this alum standing next to me. I think that occurred during the period of time post my tenure there, and I think that was very harmful.

*[Interviewer]: If we consider black empowerment to refer to the feeling that blacks as a group can create change on campus, did these events of social change increase or decrease your collective sense of empowerment? And did you also gain a sense of personal empowerment?*

[MS. WHEELER]: Yes! I think that I had a sense of personal empowerment just because of my life experiences before I came there. But I also felt that as a part of a group, that I had immutable characteristics like: female, color, age...

## **Part 20**

[MS. WHEELER]:...those weren't things that I could change. But by being with a group of people who were very similar when things happened as a result of those immutable characteristics that we could respond to, I wasn't alone. I never felt like I was alone, that there were others that I could go to individually or collectively if I had concerns about what I was experiencing in the classroom or in life, you know, just the growing pains of life. So I think from

the protest point of view, where there were issues that we thought might have been X, Y, or Z, I never felt like I was alone, that there was a collective I could go to.

*[Interviewer]: And then finally, thinking back on your experiences at Denison and the goals of this project, are there any additional comments you would like to make related to the social transformation of the Black community at Denison and the BSU?*

[MS. WHEELER]: Nope! I don't think so. I think that the depth and the breadth of your questions touched on things that I perceived, I felt, I experienced. And the differences that I saw in looking at the works and the activities of the students of the late Sixties and Seventies in relationship to my peer group. And I thank you for doing the work.

*[Interviewer]: Well, thank you for allowing me to interview you and I want to thank you again for sharing with me a bit of your history. Because I definitely gained a lot more appreciation about the black history of Denison's campus. And I know that other individuals, not just from my generation but other generations to come, would definitely hone in on this knowledge and it will benefit them, not only as a black student but as a black individual. So thank you.*

[MS. WHEELER]: You are welcome. Just a thought, I think all three individuals are deceased and you may have done the work to determine it. But if you can get the papers or any documents from their estates, if in fact they are deceased, you would find, I think, another interesting piece of this puzzle. And that was Hal Walker, Florida Fisher, and Robert Anderson. Robert Anderson was class of '47, Hal Walker was class of '57, and Florida Fisher was somewhere in the 50s, and I don't remember the exact date.

*[Interviewer]: And Florida's last name is?*

[MS. WHEELER]: Her maiden name was Fisher. I'm pretty certain Hal Walker is deceased; he was a CBS correspondent for the network.

*[Interviewer]: I think there is a scholarship in Miss Fisher's name.*

[MS. WHEELER]: There is. Institutionally, there was a decision made; it wasn't something established by her family. It was an institutional decision to honor her. And I've actually got a picture of her from, it was either her freshman year at Denison or her senior year in high school. If I find it I'll send you a copy.

*[Interviewer]: Okay, well thank you so much and...*

[MS. WHEELER]: Your welcome my dear.

*[Interviewer]: I hope you have a great day.*

[MS. WHEELER]: You too. Take care!