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Gary Simpson Oral History

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Dr. Gary Simpson, Oral History
Denison University Student, Class of 1984
Denison University Board of Trustees, Member (1993 - Present)

Recorded: August 2, 2010
Interviewed by Vanessa Butler
Transcribed by Ashley Johnson

[INTERVIEWER]: Hello, my name is Vanessa Butler and I'm a member of the class of 2011 at Denison University. I am interviewing you to gain a deeper understanding of how marginalized groups use 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 protests to create social transformation.

Our data collection goal is to complement Denison's existing special collection in archived 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.

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 archive. This interview will take no longer than two hours. You may leave the study at any time. If you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you and you will 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 Pierce 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?

[DR. SIMPSON]: No, I don't.

[INTERVIEWER]: 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 archive. Do I have your permission to audiotape this interview?

[DR. SIMPSON]: 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 attribution 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 may 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 that I can turn the audiotape recorder back on.

So thank you again 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 in honesty 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 archived materials, for the creation of a digital archive, and as data in scholarly papers.

These first questions I will be asking are background questions about how you came to be at Denison, in your particular context, as well as the dynamics of the rest of the campus at that time.

So what city and state are you from?

[DR. SIMPSON]: Columbus, Ohio.

[INTERVIEWER]: What type of high school did you attend? Was it private, public, independent?

[DR. SIMPSON]: Public.

[INTERVIEWER]: And can you describe the racial, ethnic and socio-economic composition of your high school?

[DR. SIMPSON]: We were about fifty-fifty in my high school; came from junior high schools that were maybe ninety percent white and ninety percent black, but when we came together it was about fifty-fifty. Working class and middle class; actually the blacks were probably better off than the whites in that neighborhood at that time going to that school.

Part 2

[DR. SIMPSON]: Let's see, what else did you ask me?

[INTERVIEWER]: I believe you covered all the basics of racial, ethnic and socio-economic composition. What types of extra- curricular activities, clubs or organizations were you active in in high school?

[DR. SIMPSON]: High school? Well, I sang in the choir. But I had a job my senior year, so I didn't do much other than Spanish club and I sang in the choir. That was about it.

[INTERVIEWER]: Did you hold any leadership positions in these activities?

[DR. SIMPSON]: I don't think I did. No, no. I played the piano for the gospel choir.

[INTERVIEWER]: Okay. Overall, did you expect for your college experience to be similar to your high school experience?

[DR. SIMPSON]: I didn't know what to expect in college. I was under no false pretense that it was going to be as similar to my high school days.

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

[DR. SIMPSON]: Very simple. Two words: Cliff Tyree. Clifford Tyree was a trustee of the board at Denison, African American man who ran the youth services bureau in Columbus, Ohio. Very thoughtful and he was a conscious person. And when I was in the fifth grade he started telling me, "you're gonna come to Denison," and I took him at his word. In fact, in eleventh grade I started talking about going to Denison. I never applied to any other school. I went early decision. It was the only college application I filled out.

[INTERVIEWER]: Wow. What were some of your- you said you didn't know what to expect- but what were some of your impressions of Denison before you came, in terms of academics or the culture of the college?

[DR. SIMPSON]: My sister went to Wittenberg; my brother went to Virginia Union. Those were two very different – Virginia Union being a historically Black college. But I was familiar with the small liberal arts colleges in Ohio because of my sister's attendance at Wittenberg. I knew what I was coming to and I didn't know how deeply entrenched it was gonna be in a certain kind of... At the time we were there it was a preppy, and it was hardcore preppy at that point. It was really [inaudible], white Anglo Saxon Protestant, the values and economic, etcetera. It was a different world from the one I came from let me say that.

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

[DR. SIMPSON]: I don't think I heard any on arriving- before arriving; no, I did not.

[INTERVIEWER]: I had the opportunity to hear more about your background before you arrived at Denison and so now we're gonna move into the section about the campus community and your relationship to it. We're also gonna explore what was going on in the country at that time as well while you were at Denison. So the first question deals with what was going on in the country at the time you arrived at Denison and what were the important social, cultural and political issues at that time?

[DR. SIMPSON]: The year, the fall that I came to Denison was the fall of 1980. It was the year Ronald Reagan was elected president. The country was entrenching into conservative values politically. Ronald Reagan had held the office of Governor in California, and...

Part 3

[DR. SIMPSON]: ...it's very blatantly [inaudible] to [inaudible] African Americans and others who were in California. But his reputation as being kind of cold and insensitive political leader was very high. What

was interesting is that that was the story we knew; that was the story that African Americans who came from places like I did [inaudible]. But the white students, by and large, saw Ronald Reagan as he returned to a better day in America.

It was a very interesting thing. I remember when he got elected, one of my [inaudible] across the hall- across the walkway from us, black students ran out of his room saying the end of the world is near, the end of the world is near; Ronald Wilson Reagan six, six, six. He thought he was the president of the anti-christ. I don't think that there was that kind of biblical naivety in most of the black students, but for many of us Ronald Reagan's ascendancy to the presidency marked a certain time of caution for blacks who were in many positions of education, or those of us who were in college. I remember that very [inaudible].

[INTERVIEWER]: What were some of your initial reactions after being at Denison as a student?

[DR. SIMPSON]: I think the first thing that one does at a school like Denison is try to prove that you belong there with whatever you feel to be the dominant culture. I realized a couple of things. One, that this was a different world, in many ways, from the world that I had come from directly. It was not just as simple as black and white. I was very involved in my church; there it was more- I don't wanna use the word secular- but the difference was on an intellectual capital(?), not necessarily a religious capital(?). I remember that distinctively.

I remember trying to fit in. At that time, Izod shirts were the mark of the preppy- I spoke about being preppy. Everybody had alligators on their shirts. I probably never wore an alligator on my shirt till I got to Denison. There was a certain kind of pressure; some small ways of being like the majority of people who were at school.

But I also remember that there were times when some people would speak to you, some wouldn't. And some of those that wouldn't speak to you would almost let you know that you were trespassing and you didn't belong here. There were people who tried, for some kind of reason, to posture themselves as if I didn't belong. I'm sure I wasn't by myself.

I also- I wanna say the year before I went in, which would've been the class of 1983 that went in the fall of '79. They had the smallest number of black students they had had for a long time and that was, like, thirteen.

[INTERVIEWER]: Total on campus?

[DR. SIMPSON]: And so in our class, they tried to overcorrect it and they let fifty-six African American students in, which brought the total of students to twenty-one hundred, better known as two thousand - and one hundred; one hundred being the black.

There were, in that class- I remember my first BSU meeting and I kinda just looked around the room and you could tell that some of the students were having a really hard...

Part 4

[DR. SIMPSON]: ...time making adjustments. And I felt, in that room, as if they had just played the numbers game; how they could get there numbers up to look good on paper but they weren't really committed - the school wasn't really committed to the education of all fifty-four of us. And in fact, when we graduated, I think only twenty-five of us out of that fifty-four graduated.

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

[DR. SIMPSON]: Well, I don't know that I went into the school – you know, I was pretty clear about the reason I was there and that was to get an education. But I was not as socially dependent on Denison as you might have found some others to be.

But initial impressions came for the better or for the worse. I don't know. I can't remember. I don't know that I really said, "hey, my mind just changed." I was, quite honestly, always suspicious of being in a context where it wasn't- where there was a presumption that somehow whatever I brought to the table was not quite as good as what my white counterparts brought to the table. And that stayed with me. I don't think that I was ever in a place where I was, I said, "oh, I need a transition somewhere."

I think the other reality was that it was close to Columbus and that gave me an opportunity to go home. And I could always go to Columbus and get a fix on culture if I needed it. I spent a lot of the weekends not in Denison. I would go home, go back to my church. And that, I think, was a part of my sanity.

But I don't remember- quite honestly, I don't remember that any of my impressions changed dramatically one way or another. That's the bottom line answer to that.

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

[DR. SIMPSON]: Oh my God. I actually did find myself getting very much involved in school. I thought one of the things that the small school offered was a number of leadership opportunities.

So, let's see, I was Chief Minister of the Black Student Union, I sang in the gospel choir at one point, I was a fellow in the Religion Department for two years, I was the president of the leadership honorary society Omicron Delta Kappa; Phi Beta Kappa graduate.

I was, incidentally, only the third black Phi Beta Kappa at that time in one hundred fifty years; the first one in the 1890s, and then the one before that was 1981, and then me in 1984. There have been many blacks who have been Phi Beta Kappas since then, which I am very happy about.

But anyways, lets see, I was a head resident of a hall. What else did I do? I stood on student life committees, I worked in the financial aid office. I think those are the ones I remember. That was enough, right?

[INTERVIEWER]: I mean, whatever you feel comfortable with naming.

[DR. SIMPSON]: Oh yeah, I worked in the admissions office. I gave summer tours one year and I was driving from Columbus to work there. And then I also worked on the South African education program one summer. I was...

Part 5

[DR. SIMPSON]:... a member of June orientations staff for two years. I think that's about. I'll remember something else in a minute, but that's all for now.

[INTERVIEWER]: Why did you ultimately become an active member of those organizations?

[DR. SIMPSON]: You know, you have to figure out some way to be involved in the life of the campus. And to be honest, even with that overarching or underlying sense of institutional racism and/or cultural disconnects, I really enjoyed my experience at Denison - thought it represented for me a kind of microcosm of what it meant to be an African American - I prefer the term black so I'll use that- when a black person in a culture that is privileged and that is the whiteness, basically.

And I thought if I learned how to deal with it there, it would serve me well in my life as I [inaudible]. Neither I nor white people were going to disappear. I decided that I wasn't going anywhere and I knew that in this country they weren't going anywhere, so I might as well learn ways to interact and to work in ways that would be beneficial to everybody.

So I got involved with those as a social outlet, as a way of understanding the world beyond Denison and, you know, to do something constructive with my extra time, too.

Oh yes, I remember. I also- do they still do the experimental college? Still do that?

[INTERVIEWER]: No.

[DR. SIMPSON]: The experimental college was when students would - you could teach a class as a student in the experimental college and get a credit for doing that and I taught a class on institutional racism. But anyway, I think those are the reasons I got involved.

[INTERVIEWER]: What other ethnic and racial groups were represented on campus at the time?

[DR. SIMPSON]: At that time, you had the International Students Association. There was not a critical mass of any ethnic groups beside African American, and as I said, that wasn't that much. But the international students were together.

There was no- at that time there was not much of a Latino population at the school. There were some but I don't believe there was a Latino group. And the GLBT group was founded after I left. But I think the Black Student Union was typically the one ethnic grouping that was done on campus.

[INTERVIEWER]: What was the climate like for these students and can you share a story to describe the climate?

[DR. SIMPSON]: For which students? For the others or the international students or for black students, we're talking about now?

[INTERVIEWER]: Let's talk about the other students.

[DR. SIMPSON]: I had some friends in DISA but again, as I remember there were a few women from Bolivia, but it was a small group. I would imagine that their life would be even more complicated than the kind of cultural disconnect that blacks felt because they were also away from their native culture, including language, etcetera. I imagined it could have been all the more lonely in that context - in the middle of Granville, Ohio, which is not - you know, Columbus is...

Part 6

[DR. SIMPSON]:... the closest you have to a metropolitan area. But, you know, Granville is just out in the middle of nowhere. And for anybody who's more cosmopolitan or more global in identity, I think that the quaint town of Granville would pose some problems.

[INTERVIEWER]: What were your relationships like with students of color when you initially arrived on campus and did these relationships change during and following protests or other periods of social change?

[DR. SIMPSON]: When you say students of color now, are you still talking about the other ethnic and racial-ethnic identities of students of color, including black students?

[INTERVIEWER]: Including black students.

[DR. SIMPSON]: Again, I don't think I had much interaction with those students of color, as you call them, beyond the black students. I think the first reaction is, you assume when you see all the black people that, you assume that they all are gonna wanna be involved in activities that would be defined as black - like the Black Student Union and other kind of, you know - not that they would all be Black Studies majors, but things that had to do - like speakers. Black speakers would come to school. You'd expect artists would come to perform, and you'd expect blacks to be there.

It wasn't a rude awakening but an awakening that happened to me was that you can't paint all Black people with the same brush and that there were people who were really deciding that they were gonna individually assimilate into white culture - period. They weren't necessarily interested at all in being around black people.

Some of them had not grown up with that, some of them had lived in neighborhoods and gone to schools that were predominantly white. I mean, they knew that culture more than they knew the culture of black people. I wanna be careful how I say that but that's the way - they were much more at home in the same kind of element as the white people.

[INTERVIEWER]: Did any of your impressions about Denison with respect to racial diversity change and if so, what caused your impressions of the college to change? And this is with respect to racial diversity because I remember you saying that you didn't really remember a point in time where there was a day where your impressions automatically shifted.

[DR. SIMPSON]: Right, right. I don't. I don't think - over time, I think I discovered that there was more solidarity with really cool faculty people than there would be - than there was with students, by and large.

I think the faculty - not all of them because there were also some people on the faculty who were very, very, very much a part of the Ronald Reagan culture that I described earlier.

But there were some very cool faculty people who - and I remember when we did have some racial incidents that they brought back into the context of the classroom and let us talk about, you know, how we felt.

I remember particularly when an incident, and I may be getting ahead of your interview here, but an incident where there were students who dressed up on Halloween with KKK outfits and had a Halloween party with hoods on. And Joan Novak asked me in a class, you know, tell me how that makes you feel and why do you feel that way. I had an opportunity to talk about that pretty openly in the classroom.

That was an ethics class, and I think part of that permission-giving that she gave to kind of give space to and to give voice to the kind of things that I was feeling at that time, was a very important part of my education.

Part 7

[INTERVIEWER]: We are interested in understanding the power of the Black community and one, the institutional structure and two, the broader social community of Denison. This project defines power as the ability through institutional, defined and designated ability, to act through university structures and non-institutional, meaning coercion or influence, to cause others to act according to the will of a community. So keeping our definition of power in mind, how would you describe the power of the Black community at Denison?

[DR. SIMPSON]: Well, I was Chief Minister of the Black Student Union my sophomore year and I was very much in on what was going on in the campus. I thought that there were some administrators who were - in like the Student Life office and the Academic Dean's office, Admissions office - black people who I guess had the special projects of doing things.

I remember one person there; I think he was in the Academic Dean's office. He brought me in and had a conversation with me - a Black woman - brought me in and had a conversation with me that I found out that everything in that conversation was an imprint as a report to - whomever she was reporting to - took great offense to that. You didn't know really, in some ways, who was working for you and who was working against you, even within the construct of your own racial identity.

But I thought we had a - one of the institutional ways we had power was - and I understand this came back around recently - issues of the budget. Having the money for the programming for the Black - basically Black History Month and other kind of things that were not a part of the social norm of the Denison students that were not black. I say non-black students since black people are often referred to as non-white, so I'll use non-black to describe white people.

In every year, every year at the time when the student government had the money allocated from the student activity fees, every year it's always a big argument, fuss, tension in the air about, why does the Black Students Union get so much money to do that when they're only a hundred, etcetera?

So then the crazy thing about that was that the kind of program that we were doing was not just for black people, but for the education of the whole college. Some of these people never would have ever ever seen, never ever would have seen or been exposed to some of the artists, some of the scholars that had come through there because they wouldn't have picked them. If you had a handful - if you had twenty choices then those black people of color wouldn't have been on the list anywhere. We were providing a service of education to the school, also; that's institutionally.

But I would say in my position as a Chief Minister of the Black Student Union and then as a former chief for two years, I would think that I was a person of relative influence [inaudible]. And, you know, that wasn't so bad. I wouldn't say I was the big man on campus, but I had my share of bigness.

Let's see, did we have power? Yes, there was some power but it was misconstrued. I know that I...

Part 8

[DR. SIMPSON]:... could walk into the administration building and speak to any top level members of the executive team - the Provost, the Academic Dean, Student Life Dean, even the President. We had a wonderful President in my time, Bob Good, who was sensitive to the issues of race and made sure that the black students were included in all aspects of college life.

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

[DR. SIMPSON]: I don't know that it changed while I was there. We were not one of those - in our time we were kind of in between the two big explosions. One was the Beta House in which we all heard of. It was a part of the legend and the oral history of Denison when it relates to black students. That was one thing, and then after us, after our time they did the black demand and then, I think, shut down the administrative buildings or something like that.

Not that we were not - not that we were any less engaged nor were we disinterested. I think some of the protest life that happened, happened as a result of a lot of things kind of conflating and or coalescing to make it as a right time for protest.

But I don't think - I think the one time that we had something - what I described - the week after that, the week after that incident, Halloween, the parents came up and we had a guy who was a pretty good artist. Can't remember his name now, I'll say Smith was his last name. But he drew pictures on a banner; you know, like the banner they would have at homecoming all the way across up in Slayter. It had - Ku Klux Klans were there and it said the Black Student Union knows that racism is alive and well at Denison. And it was funny because this past weekend, the next week - do you all still produce the Bullsheet?

[INTERVIEWER]: Yes sir.

[DR. SIMPSON]: The Bullsheet [inaudible] a couple of students said that they couldn't believe black students would choose that weekend to do it because their mother and father didn't come here to be confronted by these kind of things by black, by angry black people, something to that affect.

We just told that person that, you know, that would be a confidential thing, but I'm not gonna cough (?). We as leaders had to set that one straight. But I think that's about it. I don't really remember any lasting change from my time because we were much more engaged in the processes so, you know, people protest and do things because they've been left out of the process. But we were in the process from day one.

[INTERVIEWER]: We're now gonna shift into the section regarding the Black Student Union and these questions are geared specifically to the organization and the solidarity of the members within the organization, and also the Black community as well. So, how did you initially learn about the BSU at Denison, and what were your thoughts about it after you learned some things?

[DR. SIMPSON]: Well, I think that, the only thing that...

Part 9

[DR. SIMPSON]:... needs to be put on the table is Black Student Union organizations were a part - we spoke earlier about the social, what was going on larger in the country. This was a phenomenon across college campuses, recognizing primarily that there was no place or station in these institutions of the dominant culture. There were no places where black students could - not just socialize together, but have a space that would be theirs in the midst of that.

So Black Student Unions and political power and many of those, even the language that your Black Student Union at the time, came straight out of the Black Student Movement, which was a kind of quasi-intellectual connection to the Black Panthers and all of that. The kind of militancy - it was intellectual militancy at its best in its original design. Though a lot of black students who were empowered by the certain kind of militancy that they saw out in the neighborhoods and in their communities, when they came to college they formed that kind of intellectual militancy in the schools. So that's just the history behind the Black Student Movement.

I kind of went there looking for that place. I considered myself an intellectual. I was up on revolutionary and militant intellectualism, and that was gonna be a place where we did that. It was a place to say some words that you don't get to say in a larger context of college, like, "What's up, my brother and sister?"

So to hold each other accountable on the matters of gender and those kind of things. I mean, that was what the Black Student Union was for; it wasn't a social - originally a social outlet. People always said the Black Student Union at Denison threw the best parties, but that wasn't what it was for. What it was for was to galvanize, to support, encourage, to bring safety, and to give space for the investment of intellectual capital into revolutionary ideas.

That came straight from the Sixties but in 1980 we still had some of those vestiges going on. And I should say that again, the election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency - Ronald Reagan was the Governor while this kind of intellectual and socio-economic militancy was going on in California. So it was a certain kind of identification that this might be a moment where we had to be intellectually militant and/or revolutionary. So that's how that started.

Now I do need to say while I'm talking about this, for those of us who have that as our database in our history, the black student organization, that is troubling to me to see that the Black Student Union today has open membership. It was never designed to be – it's not a cultural thing. And even black students did not - there were black students who did not belong and who chose not to identify with it. It was a certain type of black student that was in that, historically had been in Black Student Union movements.

But it is - you know how I serve the university now and here I am. Of course, I'm sure there are some people who say, "Wow, how could a black person be a trustee at this school, too?" But I do think that that reality of seeing the Black Student Union forced, in some ways - and now, here's your definition of power coming back out - that we were taught, and we teach, and I still...

Part 10

[DR. SIMPSON]:... hold this, that racism was always a function of power.

You gave me a power definition earlier, that racism itself was always a function of power. And that, granted, that we all are prejudiced and biased in some way, but a group of black students - a handful of black students at a school like Denison who say that, for some reason they don't care for white people, has no power behind it, because they can't organize it doing their thing. They can't put any money down on it, they don't have any weapons in order to amass some kind of control or power. They have no military. They have no military identity. They're just students expressing their frustration.

But, you know, such was the case in South Africa, you're talking about larger things with white Afrikaners. That was the big issue, the other big issue of our day. There was a divestment of funds in South Africa and institutions where colleges, and all those who had money invested in companies in South Africa, were called on to divest their money because of the racism of apartheid.

But in South Africa, although whites represented a minority of people, they had all the connections to the military machinery. They had the governmental control and all that kind of thing. So racism has never been about more black people here than white people so black people can say we got the power. It's always been a question of the function of power.

And now, a black person expresses a certain kind of disdain for a history of being second-class citizens in this country and he or she says I don't like white people, and all of a sudden, that person is a racist. Now they might be universalizing, they might be doing something; but a racist, no, they have no power.

Nobody accepts that definition in the popular culture right now, and I think that's a real problem. Or how black students can't be effective in their own organization and be effective- now they've lost something when they had open membership to whoever wants.

People can be affiliated and be supportive of Black Student Unions, but they have to have other identities in there. It's a big cultural shift and it takes a lot to get used to, I'll just say that. I hope I'm not being too honest.

[INTERVIEWER]: No, remember you have to be open and honest with each of your answers.

[DR. SIMPSON]: Okay, well I have no problem with it. I have no problem with it. Anyways, that was a long answer, I'm sorry.

[INTERVIEWER]: No, no, it's fine. 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 will lead to social change. To describe ones political ideology toward creating social transformation, how would you describe the BSU's ideology?

[DR. SIMPSON]: I think it had the share on the facade of being radical, but it really was much more. There's a part of me that just wants to deconstruct that whole schema, if you don't mind.

[INTERVIEWER]: Go ahead.

[DR. SIMPSON]: Because if liberal is about reforming or changing or making an alternative - what was your definition, what was your second thing about what liberal is?

[INTERVIEWER]: Well, I'll just read you the whole thing: the willingness to use conventional methods within political and social institutions to bring about social change.

[DR. SIMPSON]: I think the real philosophy behind a Black Student Union organization, black student organization...

Part 11

[DR. SIMPSON]:... in which the BSU was, model was by any means necessary. I don't think that any one of those things represent the full opportunity or the full range of message that were employed or needed to be employed at any given time; that certain circumstances called for certain types of methodology.

And I think that when we were to sit down and think about a strategy to address something, all three of those voices were always present. And we found ourselves taking action at times based upon which was the most pragmatic approach in that moment. I want to resist labeling any one of those as the predominant philosophy. I would say all of those people were at the table.

I remember in terms of the budget, the DCA budget. I remember James Bell, who would go out - he was a Senator - he would get himself elected as Senator and, man, when the budget thing came up, James would basically hold the whole Student Senate hostage until people got their money. Not with any weapons or anything, just with his mouth. He would just talk people down and start yelling and screaming in the middle of the thing.

It wouldn't be my choice of how to get it done, but I know when he was done we walked out with the money. But you had people like that, you had folks who can sit at the table and negotiate. I mean, it was all of that, and I don't think the issue had any one approach.

And I am guessing, because I am teaching now in graduate school and I just had a conversation about race in my class. And I asked students in a mixed class, where do you think black people are on the social spectrum. And many whites caricature black people as being radical and militant, when in reality black people in this country are just as conservative as the whites are, by and large, by the nature of being American.

But you didn't ask me that – I digress, I'm sorry. Go ahead, give me the next question. I'm ready - you got me for another two hours.

[INTERVIEWER]: I don't know if it's going to be that long. Did you ever read any of the writings in the Vanguard or Black Rage? And in your opinion what was the impact of these forms of literature within the campus community?

[DR. SIMPSON]: The Vanguard or what?

[INTERVIEWER]: Black Rage. Were those pieces of literature circulating on campus while you were here?

[DR. SIMPSON]: Not that I remember. Now in the Black Studies Center there were journals and articles from black intellectuals. But I don't remember those two pieces being there.

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

[DR. SIMPSON]: Well, I think one of the major functions of the Black Student Organization is - and also one of the major burdens - and that is there is a lot of ignorance in the culture in general. For some of the whites at Denison, that was their first time leaving among black people. They ask ignorant questions like: Why do all you guys sit together in the cafeteria and all that kinda thing?

Part 12

[DR. SIMPSON]: Well, the only reason why you notice it is because we are black. You know, if you say everybody who likes volleyball sits at one table and wear a certain color shirt, people would notice that too. But the fact that they say, "You're always together." Because that was one of the few places, because you would be in a classroom, you might be the only person in the classroom. But, you know, at lunch, dinner, and breakfast, you can spend some time and that's as much of a slice of home as you can get there.

And I think part of our work was to educate people, although many people resented that as a responsibility. You get tired of educating white people. It's like they were just determined to be ignorant. And I think that part of what had to happen in the culture or at the time was for us to find ourselves and be resourceful.

We would introduce – individuals and others would introduce - some of the larger issues like I mentioned about divestment in South Africa. I mentioned the Halloween thing that we had. It was my second year that I was there. Every few years there is some white student that dresses up on Halloween in black face and they don't understand because they haven't been exposed. And you discover, quite honestly, that your

social exposure to Denison is much more than your white counterpart, because you've been exposed to diversity, including that culture which is very different, by and large, from the culture that I came up in.

And so we did programming, we used Black History Month as a way to bring people in, get speakers in and stuff. I remember writing a Bullsheet editorial - and in fact John Jackson disagreed with me when I put it out there, but I put it out there anyway. I was saying that white students were not coming to the Black History Month programs, and that the purpose of a university is the exchange of ideas and all those kinds of things.

People want me to come to stuff I have no interest in but I go in order to be exposed, and you don't want to be exposed to this part, which is a part of your history. And John Jackson said to me that he thought that my note was saying that the measure of success for Black History Month is not determined by the numbers of white people who come, which I agreed with.

But my point was - in fact that year I was the chair of the Black History Month program; that was my senior year. Instead of doing Black History Month, we did Black Herstory Month, with an emphasis on black women, which I was very proud. I thought it was important also to bring the difference between black women who were interested in issues of women and how those issues are different from your white feminists.

There are a whole lot of [inaudible] of what it means to be feminist, vis-a-vis womenist, and black theology and other things. And I thought we would expose people to some of that and I was furious that white students felt like they didn't need to come. But the major part of the vehicle for educating people was providing venues, speakers, and student-initiated information distribution on the plight of black people in America and around the world.

[INTERVIEWER]: How would you describe the BSU's approach to creating social change during your time as a student? That is what methods, whether it be protest, demands, sit-ins, incorporation into student government, did the BSU use to create social change? I believe you touched on this a little bit already but...

Part 13

[DR. SIMPSON]: I'll tell you one of the things we did, because we were getting some kind of critical mass. We were intentional about representation. If we could just get black students to run for Senate and to get them elected and get them involved in student government. By the time I left we had our first black Denison student government president.

I think, by and large, it's kind of hard. I don't think it was any intentional strategy by the Black Student Union, except to encourage people to vote. It was not as organized, quite honestly, I think the folks who made the demands a few years after us were much more - that was John Smith, I think, was chief minister then. I think they were much more strategically organized than we were.

We were still accumulating the kind of critical mass to be relevant. And I don't think that we had any strategy other than, in our time, other than representation. It was important to be represented.

[INTERVIEWER]: Can you share a story describing a time of heightened racial tension at Denison?

[DR. SIMPSON]: I think I talked about it. I think that was the only big thing during my years. I'd like to take credit for that, and say nothing really big went down while I was there because they knew better. But I do think that ours was an age more of diplomacy and inclusive politicking, and political power sharing, and negotiating and all of that.

Much more so than people before and after because survival was at stake and basic health and safety and people had to respond with greater or equal force. That was not my experience. I can't really recall anything in my time in that Ku Klux Klan outfit. That was my freshman or sophomore year. It got kinda quiet after that.

[INTERVIEWER]: Were there any other organizations that the BSU formed coalitions with in order to bring about social change on campus?

[DR. SIMPSON]: No, there wasn't; not in my time.

[INTERVIEWER]: Okay. Did you find - well you kind of touched on that already - faculty, staff, and administration that were in support or opposition of your endeavors?

[DR. SIMPSON]: Yeah, I did answer that. Yes, there were faculty and administration.

[INTERVIEWER]: Okay. Well, since you already touched on these questions in this section, I'll just go ahead and move on to our wrap-up. These questions focus on the consequences and outcomes of the political action and periods of social change.

So 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? For example, effects of the BSU being cohesive, effects on the university such as policy change, or effects on the student body. And were there also any negative effects, as well?

[DR. SIMPSON]: Again, I don't know that we faced any real defining moment faced before and after us. But I do think that the struggle, race, even if it's [inaudible]. I remember in my day, by the time we were seniors we had phones in our room and that was really a big...

Part 14

[DR. SIMPSON]: ...thing. But before that we had phones in the hallway, so you'd have to go answer the phone in the hallway and sit in the hallway and talk.

And I was sitting in the hallway, outside of the room full of white women who - one of them said to another, you know, well you look like a nigger. You know they realized I was out there, they shut the door and they were embarrassed and all of that kind of stuff.

You know those kind of things will always - lying underneath the surface of civility in American culture. There is no way to get around that kinda - those things are deeply seeded, and we were trying in our day to take - in some ways we were, we were the heirs to the Civil Rights Movements and this way the Civil

Rights Movement was really just an appeal en masse of black people in America, to tell America just be true to what you said on paper.

In the same way we were living out that kind of interaction with the school and saying, look, you got us here, let's be true to what you said you were on paper. You invited us here to come to school. Just allow us to be who we are in the midst of this.

I think for the most part that happened. There were always incidents and again, the weekends – you didn't ask any questions about how many of those things that might have been problems along racial lines may have had alcohol involved. You know, I think on the weekends when I wasn't around, there might have been the usual kind of skirmishes and stuff.

But in many ways, without blatantly or blindly accepting that, I think black students knew they were in a college that gave a certain kind, that paid homage to a certain type of American culture, which was white, upper middle class, suburban in some ways although many people weren't suburban, or rich neighborhoods or whatever.

I think going there was a recognition that [inaudible] an opportunity to prove that I could compete with the best of people. When I use that term, I don't know that, by and large, we had any major events that we could say, something good came out of it. I mean, the reality is whenever there was struggle, you were guaranteed the next year's BSU meeting, even the black people who didn't want to identify with black people. If they thought it was a matter of survival and safety, they would - everybody would be in those meeting.

And I guess, you know [inaudible] was right - without any struggle there's no progress. But I don't know that we did much to – here's the problem. Every four years – can you pause that for a moment, I've gotta answer the door?

[INTERVIEWER]: Yes, sir.

[DR. SIMPSON]: Hold on.

Part 15

[DR. SIMPSON]: I think I would characterize our period as a period of diplomacy and, as I said, a kind of extension of hopefulness of what our parents and grandparents told us about the Civil Rights Movement. I think that – and really our parents who told us all we had to do is get the opportunity, get the chance and we could compete with others. And we did that quite honestly.

But I don't know if I had any expectations that the school was somehow going to be magically transformed into a place that – as some of your more conservative people talk about – a place that didn't see color. I think that's crazy. You know, I think, to say you don't see color is to make me Ralph Ellison's invisible man. You know what I'm saying?

You say you don't see color, well you just denied my whole existence because I am who I am. I just don't want difference to be translated into deficiency. I think my philosophy at least when I was BSU chair and even now, is that I want to be at the table if you are going to have a discussion about what life is like in

this culture, in this school, in this institution, in this country. You are not going to do that without me because I am an American too. I think that's the way we grabbed at it in our day.

By the way, I was voted most radical my senior year, which is hilarious. But anyway.

[INTERVIEWER]: The final question is, 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?

[DR. SIMPSON]: Well, like I said, I had no illusion about who I was when I walked in there. And I think that for some black students yes, it became a way - for example, I know we are talking about the Black Student Union, but for many students to get an opportunity to look firsthand at their own contribution within the discipline, within history.

Like, for example, one professor - who happened to be white, but his specialization was blacks during the Roosevelt era of U.S. politics, FDR, the black kitchen cabinet, you know, Mary [inaudible] and those folks. To be able to hear those stories, to explore them intellectually, to have the opportunity in English and in other places, to see the contributions of people who look like me, who were like me, who in my usual classes, in, like, introductory courses, that those conversations were never considered to be a part of what it meant to, like, be having introduction.

How can you have an introduction to English literature and not read a black book, not read James Baldwin, you know what I'm saying, not read Alice Walker? I think those kinds of demands - the curricular revision demands, those kind of things, yes, made a change in the school.

Before I was there, there was a general education requirement. I can't remember the number, but they did away with it. That everybody was supposed to take a course in either - it started out Black Studies but it kept getting watered down. In Black Studies, an interdisciplinary course - either Black Studies or Women's Studies, and then they stretched it out some more and then they finally did away with it. I'm not sure that the school is the better for doing away with that program, with that...

Part 16

[DR. SIMPSON]:...requirement for the students.

And I think black students have been the ones who have insisted on that, have insisted on hiring of black faculty, recognizing that, you know, you know how the black students here, you can get all the black students there you want to, but if they do not see some walking, talking, living, breathing role models; that a higher education is attainable by seeing black people teaching them in the classrooms. You know, you're fighting an uphill battle.

I remember - and I know you said wrapping up, but you reminded me of a story. The provost at the time, we were trying to get a black economics professor to have tenure. Every time, there were three or four black professors at that time who were up for tenure. And every time they were up for tenure, as Chief Minister of the BSU, I would send a letter to the Provost telling him that the black students want this professor to get tenure. But this economics professor did not get tenure.

But I sent him a note, as insensitive and unaware as he was, he was the Provost of the school at the time. And I sent him a note saying that black students are always capitalized with a 'B,' you know. He sent me back, and he said thank you for your letter and we would consider all of the opinions of students whether black, capital 'B,' or white, capital 'W.'

Now listen. I know what he was saying to me, right? But see, I'm trying to see - the reason why I capitalized the 'B' in black is because we don't have to capitalize white for them to have power - you understand what I'm saying? In this country, we don't even say white, we just say American.

But I knew what he was doing; I knew exactly what he was doing. He was telling me - that was his idea of saying, you know - he might have put it under the façade of being equal, but what he really was telling me is, I still got the power here.

But anyway, I digress. Is there anything else? it hasn't been two hours; it's been an hour and sixteen minutes.

[INTERVIEWER]: Well, it can take up to two hours so that is not like a mandatory time frame. But I think you definitely shared some information that is conducive not just to my research but also other students. I'll be excited when the digital archive is up and everyone's stories and testimonies will be available to the general public

[DR. SIMPSON]: Oh lord! Is this thing still on?

[INTERVIEWER]: You want me to turn it off?

[DR. SIMPSON]: Yeah, cause I need to tell you something.

[INTERVIEWER]: Okay... TAPE OFF