**Christian Ragland**

**A Good Foundation**

I grew up in south Jersey, south New Jersey uh in a town called Egg Harbor City. Um I had a wonderful life I was a blessed individual I had both my parents in the household uh I had a father who every 5 minutes of the day would lecture me about some aspect of my life uh starting from when I was in kindergarten to now, and you know I had a mother who uh was very stern in her own way uh you know while my dad did the the more life and social aspects. My mother was all about you know Christian make sure you look good and make sure your tie is straight. Um you know-you know stay away from the girls and you know all the motherly things and uh and I had two younger sisters one who currently is in college and one who's in high school uh but it was a very you know um very lively upbringing you know I was brought up in strong faith as well um you know that was-I think that was a backbone and the foundation of our family was our Christian faith. Uh but overall you know I won't say I had everything, but I recognize now as a 22-year-old male that my parents made a lot of sacrifices for me to be where I’m at now and um it behooves me to-to continue to work hard and you know make a difference for those who uh do not have those same privileges that I had.

**Deciding on Penn State**

In high school I-I was a big time wrestler. I-I was a four-year class president in high school um go figure um but I was really big in wrestling and at the time I wanted to go to Princeton University um I -they had a great political science program they had the Woodrow Wilson school and you know like I guess like uh if you watch the Fresh Prince of Bel Air, like Carlton always wanted to go to Princeton. That was me back in like fifth grade and um I uh said all right seventh grade said I want to go to Princeton so I worked hard and I applied to Princeton and they sent me two rejection letters and I was like maybe they knew that I would come with just one rejection letter like I'm that type of kid where I'm not gonna give up but I just so happened you know to apply to Penn State because they were number one in wrestling at the time and I so I said all right let me-let me try Penn State you know it's only four hours away it's not too far it's not too close. I get here and I realize that my personality matched the school, um people were more lively, people were very energetic um I could kind of immerse myself in many different cultures here um which was interesting because a lot of people thought you know one of the things I was told as an African American student coming to Penn State you’re gonna get a culture shock you know and I think I was brought up to see people um I was always a humanitarian before I you know I tried to distinguish myself from other people um there was really no culture shock for me I knew what I was getting into I knew I was going to the mountains. I knew when I got on my Lion Ambassador tour I was going to be the only black kid there um so I didn't have any expectations like that. Uh so I got here and I just pretty much I felt right um I realized that this was a place that probably suited my personality more so over than Princeton or Georgetown where you may have a lot of people who uh may have been privileged may have been um you know given things their whole lives and may not appreciate the things that I necessarily appreciated it in uh a university.

**Discipline**

I had a discipline about me because I understood my parents made it very clear to me that, listen, you know you're not like everybody else you know, you're a leader and that you need to come back and you need to fight for these communities. Um so when I got to college you know I noticed right away that my discipline didn’t match other people's disciplines when people wanted to go out and party and go out and do other things there was like this uh you know this check system in me that realized that listen you know this is not a time to celebrate anything right now. Uh and it also you know I think going back to as an African American male one of the key things in our community that we lack are father figures um and you can see that very, very um clearly in a lot of our students today and when I got to college you know all of the-the messages and all the lessons that I got from my father um you know who always loved to say listen you think you know everything but I’ve been through everything before um I started to see that and I was very appreciative and I was very quick to say thank you. Uh I you know it's not a day that goes by when you know when I have a conversation with my dad where I tell him about a lesson that he had given me and how it relates to me today. Uh so you know I think just the-to see the-the evidence of why a father figure is important to a male as well as um you know both my parents just kind of giving me that discipline to-to know that at the end of the day, um, it's me myself and I and if I don’t you know have a discipline I can get washed away just like everybody else.

**Reflections on Being President**

It has definitely be-been um... a development for me, a development for my leadership, development for my character, uh development spiritually development in all aspects of my life. I think I went in to be-becoming student body president as a political science major who wanted be a pol-a politician but came out not wanting to be a politician no more and I say that because I realized that all-my whole life I always looked up to Martin Luther King um like almost to a point where it was almost sickening how I just really critiqued this man's life and I told people that was my reason for getting into politics because I wanted to be like him but didn't realize the reason why he wasn't in politics was because he was not the type of person where he let his leadership be boxed um he was not good with bureaucracy, he was not good with red tape, you know he felt like social injustice should be spoken about no matter who cares about it no matter who says uh no or yes so when I got to the role of student body president loved it enjoyed it did a lot of great things I believe I had a successful term but one of the things I realized that was my leadership would not allow me to be comfortable with being boxed in, you know, with being you know in a bureaucracy with being around red tape Christian you can't say this cause you're the president protect the integrity of your position, Christian and those things are fine and good but I realized that was not my leadership style. When I go back to communities after law school I can't be the- I can't go back to these impoverished communities talking about Constitution this that and the third these people are hungry these people are homeless, these people are in need of desperate things so um the student body president experience was good for just the development developmental aspect of it where I was able just to develop my character by going through certain things going through the process the structure but what came out of it was an appreciation for people uh furthermore to the point where I realized that I have a spontaneous style of leadership so it was a learning experience I think overall and uh I have no regrets. I appreciate it every the time the history of it you know we talk about Seth Williams and Jesse Arnelle um you know the shoulders that I’ve stood on and the foundations that they've laid and I make it very clear to people that I would not be in this position if it was not for those-those individuals. And there's nothing special about being a black student body president it-only thing that matters is if-if you're a good leader, um, but you know it would be uh robbery if I did not account for the fact that these guys came through the same process I went through and were able to accomplish a lot and you know I’m definitely appreciative of that.

**Biggest Challenge as President**

I think probably one of the hardest things um to see, you know, as we-we all know there's been some extreme disproportionate budget cuts uh within the Pennsylvania state legislature. Um before the cuts I would get about I would say I got about 50 to 60 emails from students and parents already struggling to pay tuition, um, you know stories I remember I got a story from uh-uh a mother-a single mother from Connecticut who sent me an email because she saw that I was you know trying to fight for this she said you know I just want you to know that I have foregone uh internet access you know I’ve foregone you know new clothes I’ve foregone you know refinancing my house just to pay for one year of schooling and you know just to think about that could be anybody's parents that could be my parents making those same sacrifices or getting emails from students who say you know I’m a first generation student but, and you know I thought I was recruited to stay here I thought I was recruited to you know to stay here all four years but apparently I can't afford it and you know now I’m just gonna have to go home and work um and it you know potentially these people being discouraged and really there was nothing I can do besides go to the leadership of the administration and say hey, this is a real problem and then when the budget came out um people were even more worried and nervous and you know understanding that I only have a little bit of time left before I graduate this is going to be a true uh issue in the future and you know I think morally I didn't know what to do you know I wish I had millions and billions of dollars just to-to give back but, you know, I was just kind of hurt and you know burdened by the fact that you have the same type of person like me who wants to get their education for some reason or another but maybe hindered because of things out of their control uh and you think about it you know I believe all of our parents you know when they raise us they tell get good grades in school elementary school you've gotta come home with A's and B's if you come home with a C, you know there's going to be problems-at least that's how it was for me. And then you get you know you have these parents tell these kids this and then they get through elementary school they get through middle school they get through high school and they do exactly what you say and then it's time for them to go to college and now they can't go because they can't afford it and now it's like well what did I work so hard for for 12 years if I can't uh reap the benefits of it. So I think uh that whole process of affordability and accessibility of higher education was probably the-the biggest problem or obstacle for me to deal with.

**Becoming a Critical Thinker**

Being at Penn State is definitely uh has been a well-rounded experience for me and I wouldn't trade it for the world. What I can honestly say that I learned to be in my four years at Penn State is a critical thinker and I think we-we-we brush over the fact, the importance of being a critical thinker. A critical thinker is not the smartes-may not be the smartest person in the room but they know how to analyze they know how to look at a problem and say what's wrong with it what can be done to fix it why the original uh solution is not working and then move forward. I think the world is full of critical thinkers who may not have a college degree or may not be educated, um, and we see that when we talk about Afr-the African American community. Our ancestors who were not educated knew how to fix a problem they knew how to do things because they were critical thinkers and I think Penn State afforded me that opportunity because it was such a great place with so many different things going on with so many different issues where you had to sit down and kind of talk to yourself and say what can I do as an individual uh to fix this problem and then you say that to a group of twenty other students who may have different you know views and then what you have is a critical thinking process where you're debating other people’s solutions you know you're networking with other people um that whole diversity of thought uh is really coming into play and I think Penn State really afforded me that because, uh, I believe I got an A plus in that area.

**Pride**

I was proud to be a black male on campus and that's the way I view my leadership, you know I never you know was flaunting that Oh I’m a black student body president I was saying I'm a leader but just to let you know I'm also African American you know and I am building above these stereotypes that are put on me in the real world um and you know in the back- I never said it to anybody- but in the back of my head I never forgot where I came from. Um and that was something that I wanted to tell our community on campus you know I think if there's anything that they respected about me it was that you know there's this um this connotation that when African American males get, or men and women, get places they forget where they come from some people say oh they you know they forget about the community or they-they assimilate it but I made it very clear listen you know first and foremost I don’t believe in you know that's a black man that’s a white woman I believe in people. But with that being said I do realize that my skin color is black and I realized that you know there's a history with that that I'm proud of and you know in the back of my mind I always kept that there and I always you know was conscious of that so you know in my leadership I excelled to be a great man but I also excelled to be a great black man as well for the-the history of my culture for just the extreme pride I have for being African American.

**Meeting President Barack Obama**

Meeting President Barack Obama was definitely a milestone in my life but I think just being able to see him physically and see somebody who really worked hard to get where he was at was probably the bigger lesson. I remember vividly what had happened-I-I was sitting in his meeting with Kalpen Modi, the-his director of engagement and we was in a small room behind rec hall before he gave his speech and uh randomly this secret service guy walks in like throws the door open like that's a little dramatic isn't it, and then not thinking oh uh cause the President's about to come in and I just remember standing up and seeing how tall he was and just you know him coming over shaking my hand and having a conversation it was just-it was an awesome experience, um and you know I’m definitely blessed and fortunate to have those experiences to you know tell my kids one day about. He asked me how's it like being president and uh I was like it's okay uh just like that you know uh I can't complain. I was tryna be cool and calm and collect like he was cause that's one cool calm collect man uh you know I don’t think I've ever seen him get out of character he's always been the same uh when you watch him on TV he's very you know he sticks to his guns, but uh we talked about you know energy and innovation and you know, his plans for um winning the future and I think it was just great because you know-you know we got a president who's trying to include our generation and I think that's a lot of times where a lot of politicians miss out is that they things good for their generation but forget that our generation’s gonna come behind them um just like this higher education battle you know these legislature they're doing what they think is good for their generation but don't understand that our generation's gonna come and pick up the slack so how about we lay a foundation for us so, and I think President Barack Obama exhibited that in his speech and in our conversation about how he needed us to continue to do what we're doing so that uh we can move forward as a-a nation.

**Future Plans**

I plan to become a public policy and government attorney um my goal is to go back to communities where I realize in through my observation you know we have a lot of people who say we need to go back to our communities we need to fix our communities but what being-being a critical thinker- I said okay let me figure out what I can do with my uniqueness and-and what I'm trying to do to fix our communities, and what I realized was that communities suffer because there's no legal representation there um there's nobody there to fight for them with the state and federal government for grants. There’s nobody there who can legally represent them in a courtroom when it's-when we're talking about the urban planning. My goal is to you know get a law degree so I can move forward there with public policy, be able to write policies, you know it's one thing to be able to-to rally and march and to you know get really energetic about an issue but if we don't have any tools that's gonna continue to be concrete so when I’m long gone you know the next generation of leaders can come back and say well, here's a strategic plan that was left for us to policy and you know that's what I desire to do and you know to do it uh like Martin Luther King said you know it so good that nobody else can follow you. Uh and you know I desire to kind of take it from there- Also I think um you know I wanna go back to you know my ministry back at home and continue to do work with that ministry and you know who does a lot of homeless outreach who does a lot of you know child care does a lot of um reinvesting in our communities um but I-I really have did a 180 where I thought I was coming to college to be a poli-sci major to get to the top in politics but realized that my leadership level goes back to the grassroots as-aspect of it and um you know finding a way to legally articulate for communities and you know that's my passion. I think 15 years from now when people look at this tape I just hope they can say well uh well there's nothing different from what he's done from college you know he's just continuing uh to work for people and being a humanitarian.

**The Importance of History**

You can't move forward if you don’t know where you come from. Um and I think that's been a hindrance and uh a lot of our world today you know we forget the history. You know we forget-we sometimes we reinvent the wheel uh when the wheel has already been invented and um that's something that I have been appreciative of history in general you know when I look at certain aspects of life you know when I was kind of tackling the situation or if I'm looking at uh a problem in communities and societies I go back to see, I know this is not a new problem so I go back to see how they dealt with it in the past, but specifically with African Americans in our community on campus, you know I think we need to appreciate our history because it's very rich and it's very strong just at Penn State- you know I'm not even speaking about the rest of the world- just at Penn State there's a rich history and culture of African Americans. Um but if we don't document it if we don't you know find ways to articulate it to our students uh they won't understand why they're-um you know being African American is more than just being something-um skin color it's a-there's a legacy behind it you know? There’s a history behind it. Uh so I think it's important that we continue to document our history that's why you know I-I used to think it was corny but now I write in a journal um because I realize that it's- you know I can do many you know things and I can say great things I can you know talk about and discuss things but if I don’t have it written down I'm not gonna remember it later.

**Advice to Future Students**

Don't forget where you come from and I don’t mean that from a race standpoint, I mean that from whatever you're passionate about find a way to bring that back to your community. Um you know because again you know we're here for 4 years but we're here for 4 years of education and uh character building and leadership building um and one of the things I’m very critical of um, students and I say this everywhere I go is that you are not here just for yourself. You're here for somebody else as well whether that be your family, whether that be your community, but somebody is depending on you. So you know for prospective students you know don't take advantage of- I mean don't um you know don't play around or take lightly your education here because uh this going to be a crucial factor to who you're going to be in life.