

First Impressions of Penn State

I had applied to one school to go to college Penn State. I was accepted at Penn State . I never saw Penn State. I actually got a partial scholarship it was called the Black Scholars Program. And they sponsored a trip up to Penn State supposedly to woo you to come to Penn State but I already accepted before I went on the trip. So my first trip was a bus trip up to Penn State with a bunch of Black scholars which they called them back then and had a ball. I mean we were all a bunch of high school seniors. We were all together going to college. We got to stay in the dorms eat with the college students and we had a ball. That was my first. It was a big school but that was what kind of what I wanted. I wanted that big institution. Um and had a ball.

Making Friends Early

I mean I was um as you tell I walked in sort of predisposed and I like Penn State. Um now there was you know a lot of friends there. I mean you think 18 years old you walk into a dorm and all of a sudden you got all of this freedom. All these people and um new friends as you called them. Now I had a little advantage. I went there with my twin brother. So we weren't alone so we were roommates our first couple of years in school so I kind of had a comfort zone going in. And being identical twins kind of attracted attention from people um and so we we really had we got a lot of friends quickly. We got involved with a lot of things very quickly. I had overall very positive experience.

Wanting More Diversity

I went through uh four years at Penn State and the only time I ever had an African American faculty member was a Black studies class so I was a business student and I think at the time I am not sure there was an African American faculty member in the College of Business when I was there. So you know we recognized it was needed and hopefully we helped to do something. We were involved with recruiting. We were involved in a lot of uh activities at Penn State to attract more students and faculty members um so we wanted that but we also. We wanted to live for the moment too. I was only 18 19 years old. I was there to have fun. So as well as grades. That's where mom and dad as well as grades but we had a ball. But we did recognize that there was a need that was there wasn't enough of us there. And so we tried to work to help that bring more there.

Minority Phenomenon

It was an interesting dynamic. If you are a very small minority you tend to cluster even more. and so you you tended to have that dynamic so you had people I think the old adage in the cafeteria all the Blacks ate together. Um and you know we all at parties we only went to the Black parties for the most part. Um so it was I mean you do tend to cluster together when you are very few. As a matter of fact you hope that you the more students you get the more those folks can branch out a little bit and experience even more things.

The Black Arts Festival

But there was at the time there was a Black arts festival um and you know growing up in pretty. Most of the schools I went to were pretty integrated so in that sense there wasn't really a concentration on Black history Black art and so having that concentration at least for a week. I think it was a week long event when I was there. Um gave me some insight into things I hadn't really experienced before.

Brotherhood Day

Brotherhood day was the day to try to unite the races and get speakers and try to get to learn about each other. Today it is still going on. It's Ebony and Ivory Week. As a matter of fact the founder of Ebony and Ivory week was on the brotherhood day committee back then so it kind of created a a a stream where it kept going. I think they have been celebrating that for twenty some years almost thirty some years they've been doing that so. It's nice. That was an event I thought was real nice. They had some good speakers that came to campus. Uh Julian Bond uh Benjamin Hooks, Martin Luther King, III, Joe Paterno spoke at one or two of the events and uh it was really nice event.

The African-American Chronicles

The Penn State University African American Chronicles um is basically a timeline of significant African American events and experiences at Penn State from 1899 when the first African American arrived to 2008 even though we do actually we are keeping up with current events as well. Um the Chronicles basically is sort of a collective memory trying to put together all the things that different people have done uh or or insight different people have had in the past and kind of put it together in one document as much as we can. Recognizing that there is other more detailed documents that you can go to to get to get at a specific event a little bit better than ours. But uh you know we noticed it hadn't been done before. Um we know that there were some small editorials or columns that were created that talked about different events or that people had interviewed a number of different people. Nothing as as broad as this nothing that kind of if you read

through it you could get a little sense of the journey that African Americans have taken at Penn State and that's what we tried to create.

One of the problems at Penn State if you really look at it was um there weren't a lot of bridges from the different generations to the next. African American faculty members didn't come onboard until 1956. And so basically once a student group left all that memory all the things they did kind of left with them. There was no bridge to that and so we thought it was important to create that bridge uh moving forward. In addition I guess there's two phases. There's a n awful lot of African Alumni who have done an awful lot to get Penn State to where Penn State is today and Penn State's a great university and it's gotten to be great because of all the efforts of all these people alumni, faculty, staff whatever and one of the stories was missing. The African American story tends to be missing in that in that equation. So connecting the alumni in other words embracing them getting their stories letting people understand how those things evolved thought was important not only for the alumni but also the current students. Because these are some really inspirational stories in some cases. And if we don't get them now they are going to be pretty much lost for time. And we may have lost some we don't really know. But we're really trying to capture them now. I even say even as mundane as look at what a group of students did in the 1980s a program they put on and maybe a group today can can you know redo that and do that program. If it was successful maybe 80s maybe it will be successful now. Penn State historically has this image of this lily white institution in the middle of Pennsylvania and honestly I mean African Americans have been involved deeply since the first one came on campus and have really been a big part of sort of the fabric of Penn State. And why I know people recognize that from a sports standpoint. They don't recognize it from the other aspects as well. And that's what we're trying to sort of communicate. Penn State is Penn State because of all its students all the alumni all the faculty and staff and we're just trying to put that missing piece at least one of those missing pieces uh in place so that people recognize that.

Learning Penn State's History

I am a big history buff so I love American history US history in general. African American history particularly and if you make it Penn State African American history you really put you are in my sweet spot. But I being a history buff didn't mean that when I was on campus I understood the history the African American history of Penn State. I certainly understood Penn State's history. I was actually a tour guide. I used to teach that to freshmen. And say this is the building and this is who it is named after. This is why we have the creamery. All those good things. But the African American story wasn't told. I didn't know about the African American story at all. Um so when I started this this journey or this effort I learned as much as anyone else in this effort. A lot of it was a surprise to me.

Penn State's Radicals

One you say surprising things for me is that a lot of the I was looking at a lot of the African American graduates from the late 60s sort of the radical years as you want to call them um and in a lot of cases you always hear about these radicals as being martyrs like they sacrificed everything and they end up you know homeless on the street somewhere. Not the African American Penn State radicals. They didn't end up homeless. Every time I call them it's always doctor this or esquire that or judge this or you know CPA this. Those folks did very well for themselves. I thought I did well until I started calling some of these alumni from the late '60s and early '70s. So there were no martyrism there. Those folks have done very very well. And if you talk to any of them they will give Penn State credit for that. Even though they were the ones saying you got to recruit more students. You got to do this. And in the administration's face. And people sometimes perceive that as you don't like us. But the bottom line is why would I spend effort trying to make you better if I didn't like you. I mean I'd just walk away.

Spreading the Penn State Advantage

Honestly the biggest driver to wanting to help Penn State in its recruitment of African Americans uh students is because we believe or always believed that having a Penn State education was an advantage. And it's certainly been an advantage for me. It certainly helped me to achieve things I didn't wouldn't wouldn't maybe not been able to achieve or have access to and I want most students to make sure that is an option they have. Um and we we want to make sure that um you know Penn State you know kind of gets out there. This is something that can help you fulfill some of those dreams you might have. Now I left Penn State and I've worked in Michigan, California, Georgia wherever and the common denominator is I go in anywhere and say I am a Penn State grad immediate credibility. You know what I mean no matter what.

Seeing Change at Penn State

Um when I graduated like I said Penn State I would say maybe 2 percent African American students. Maybe not even one percent faculty members. Um I believe the latest numbers is Penn State 5. Something percent students and 3.something percent faculty members. But what's and some of that dynamics is there are so many students are African American students at Penn State they don't all have to be together. I mean it's enough of them that they can be everywhere and do everything. They don't all have to know each other. Uh Rick Collins who was the head of the Douglas Association of the Black Student Union in the late '60s in a note to me said he almost cried when he figured out there's 20 times more Black students at Penn State than when he was at Penn State in the late 60s.

Re-Engaging Alumni

One is I hope some of the African American alumni will be even more engaged in Penn State. I think some of the alumni especially African Americans who put a lot of effort in improving Penn State in various ways uh disengaged upon graduation because at the time their efforts weren't necessarily viewed as positive by the university. You know getting more students. I mean The Douglas Association said we want a thousand Black students here in two years. And this is the time when they had like 200 on campus and the administration obviously said you can't do that. You guys are nuts. Now they got almost 5000 Black students at Penn State. And I am just saying those people don't get credit. Those people in their effort and some of some of that took courage. Those people could have been. People don't recognize in the late '60s students were expelled for certain protests and things like that Black students and white students depending on what you were doing. And so it took some courage for them to do that and not to be recognized for that has to be kind of deflating and a lot of those students disengage.

Standing on Shoulders

I want the students to recognize that we've done a lot of good things at the university and they have some shoulders to stand on and I want them to set the bar high. I want them to understand that you are here and just like I was at the university uh through the efforts of some people who came before me that they are here through the efforts of some people who came before them. And they have a little bit of a responsibility to make sure not only do they do it right but also they help bring some more folks onboard to make sure they can take advantage of what the university has to offer. So we are hoping that they can connect a little toward their reality in the past and I know um the students you know for the most part were oblivious to the history. I know that because I know most of the alumni were oblivious to the history. So I think it's important to engage both those groups.

Giving Credit

Penn State as a history has been fairly progressive but there's acts of discrimination that have taken place by the Penn State University, it's students or the State College Borough that certainly are real and have influenced the perceptions of African Americans about Penn State. Everything that's negative wasn't unreal. Some of it was real. However, I do think Penn State doesn't get the credit it deserves for some of their stances and some of their positions and some of the things they've done. I mean there's not many predominantly white universities that have had two African American head its board of trustees. There's not uh many white institutions in the 1950s that elected a Black man to head its student government you know by overwhelming landslide. You know being one of the first African American to head a major institution's uh student government. There's

not many universities put in place the programs and efforts that Penn State's done to attract students and faculty members. I think Penn State results have always been tough to come by and so they get and rightfully so. You need to be judged by your results but certainly the effort and certainly some of the things have happened positive Penn State need to be recognized too and I think they don't get recognized as much.