

Growing up in a Melting Pot

I grew up in the inner-city in Chicago and what we call inner-city was referred to some years ago as a ghetto. And I grew up in a very very interesting part of Chicago. It is where the Chicago Circle Campus is located now. It's it was called when I was living there the Maxwell Street area. And Maxwell Street is historic to uh Chicago. It was in that area where Mrs. O'Leary's cow kicked over you know the lantern that started the Great Chicago Fire so it's one of the oldest neighborhoods. It's where the South Water Market is where all the fruits and vegetables come into the city. But what was so important for me about that experience in living there that it was in my opinion the only real melting pot in Chicago. You know that was the term from the 50s and 60s. I lived on a street called Newberry. It is near Roosevelt and Max and Halstead Street but across Halstead Street were the Italians. And then further down uh and across the street we had um people from the old country. Polish people. And uh I remember that everybody because of the older Polish women in the neighborhood they wore those beautiful printed scarves with with yellows and purples and golds and so forth and they were called babushkas. And the I believe that the older grandmother was also called babushka. And so here you see all of these little Black kids walking around with babushkas. Just as the other people uh wore them. So it was just interesting. It was just interesting to walk down the street and smell the different aromas to see fresh baked bread. You know just to see people who were different and so although it was called the inner-city it was um it was a very important place that shaped me in terms of where what I think now and where I go.

Visiting the Segregated South

When I was a child we wrote the my sister and I went to Alabama and then when we got into southern Indiana that was when you had to get into the Black car. And we'd get off and get into that other car and then we'd ride from Indiana to visit my grandmother who would be waiting at the train station for us. The Black folks got off here and the white people got off there. So it it's it's I've experienced a whole range of of things here in this country. Now after the National Endowment for uh the Arts I said I went to Jackson, Mississippi.

Early Artistic Talent

When I was very young I was identified as having artistic skills. So I went to the School of the Art Institute in Chicago when I was in second grade for some special programs on Saturday. And then later I got into the high school program and then later I had a scholarship to go to the school and it was where I studied to become a painter. And I did that for four years and discovered. And now we're back to the education aspect of this. That I preferred to be with people as opposed to being an isolated artist. And so I took

enough courses to qualify to teach and I got a degree. Uh it's called a bachelor of art education which is an uh BA with education courses. So the School of the Art Institute, the University of Chicago and then I started to teach in Gary, Indiana. I loved the the fact that it was the beginning for so many people for the children is that their lives were not shaped. They had not formed all of their prejudices and so forth. And they were creative. Uh their minds were open. You know the blank slate that we talk about. Uh and I was able to interest them in art and get them involved in projects so that they could express themselves in another way. And that was so important. Because that's the beginning. The formation of our ideas of our thinking and where we will go and be. So it's important to teach at that level and that was my interest and why I did it.

Teaching in Mississippi, Seeing the Klan

I got a call from the dean of the College of Arts at Jackson State University in Jackson, Mississippi. I had never been in the state of Mississippi. And he said your name has been recommended to me as a person who could really head our department here. You know We like your experiences. We know what your background is. And I thought I have worked in some very reputable and University of Oregon in Eugene is a major school in that part of the country. And most of my students were white. I would be the only Black faculty member in many instances. And I remembered the background where I started in Chicago little girl you know sort of scared to death to go down to the art institute in second grade. And I thought there are people like me all over the country and Jackson and Mississippi is considered one of the in terms of education at the lower end of the scale. And I said I owe it to my people. And I left the University of Oregon teaching in the decorate program to go to Jackson State University because it was important to do so. And I never went back. My daughter was old enough. She packed up the house and even my little yellow VW. Put everything on the truck and brought it to Mississippi. And she came as well. And I spent five very very good years . What I call toiling in the vineyard. But it was well worth it. The program was accredited. We uh did a lot with the curriculum. I hired some new faculty and so forth and I did that for five years. It was not an easy experience. Uh my I spent all of my summers in the South but I had never lived there as such. This was the first time. I still consider myself a southerner even though I grew up in Chicago. So that was a very good experience for me. There were some things that uh occurred. This was where um the clan had driven through campus killed some students and the bullet holes were still in the you know on the walls. They never took them off. You know it was near the base of the building and the windows and so you understood the history. They eventually closed that street off that ran straight through the university. But I saw the clan um. They had become so bold by this time. They no longer covered their faces. They would near the major sopping centers where all the cars are turning left or right they were standing there with hate flyers and all of that with no hood on and having open rallies. As a matter of fact I stayed way across the street but I went to one to hear what they had to say. It was uh it was an eye opening experience. And that was in the '70s and I realized that things hadn't changed as much as we thought.

Coming to Penn State in the 1980s

When I first came to Penn State university uh I'll give you an incident that happened in Old Main even though it was years later. Since there were so few minorities in any positions administrative positions there there was a uh a person who I guess very familiar with the university who came to see me. And they knew my name. Vice Provost Hampton and when the person came he was sitting in our chairs where we would normally have visitors sit. And my my administrative assistant who was a she was white female. She was slightly younger than me. I had walked out of the office and uh started to give her some instructions about something that I wanted to get done. And the person who was standing um walked toward the two of us and looked at me and said can I see Dr. Hampton. Now that tells you what people thought and that's the kind of thing I think students were really concerned about. That was one incident. That was early. I don't think that that will happen now because there are enough of us in visible positions. Dr. Atawomi for example who's in international programs. Um so I don't think that would happen again but the most interesting thing and funny thing happened with a um a mother who also . Remember I keep saying that these influences are from the outside. So the mother called up the head of the this was when I was head of the School of Visual Arts. And she had a complaint and so I used my proper voice and she said I just want you to know that that they gave my daughter a Black roommate and just don't like that. And she was just railing and railing about it. And I thought this woman thinks that Penn State is still all white. And uh I never told her that I was Black. I just reassured her that if there were really any concerns about compatibility uh with her daughter's roommate that there was somebody to talk to and she could work that out. But when I hung the phone up I thought we have not progressed as far as I thought we had. Yes there are still issues in society and still issues here at the university.

Understanding Student Protests

Penn State University has been very very good for me. I have no regrets. None at all about being here. And I have a perspective from both ends of the scale. As that I know exactly what students were talking about. I have no I had and still have no illusions about the realities of life in general especially related to racial issues and and civil rights and so forth. I understand that very very clearly. And I see Penn State University and then I'll talk about the students as a microcosm of society. What happens here is no different from the kinds of things that we face outside of the university. So when the students um began to uh uh take over take over the union and the the um the communications building I understood exactly why they did it and how and how what tactics they were using because I saw it in the '60s. And it was just the same thing. People had had enough. They wanted change. And here I am part of that central administration and here are Black students and t hey were not only Black. There were white students. They were male.

They were female. Hispanic students. There were a lot of people supporting that cause. So how did I feel about it. I understood that the people in the '60s put me here. And I understood that. But I was what they were working toward. They wanted representation and here I am. So here I am I am in the middle of this psychologically and I talk very frankly because it was still Bryce Jordan and Bill Richardson here during the the real first one. And I said you've got to understand the frustration of a Black student going into a class and and sometimes ignored or sometimes having their responses to a question or an idea suddenly put down because the people around them have no frame of reference for it. And then there was a matter of courses. The idea the students wanted to have a content that related to their experiences that would also help them after they left the university. Because going being in a university that does not relate to you and I've had some of those experiences I'll share one with you in a minute that does not relate to you nor understand why why you are here. And often times see you as a token. You got this because you are Black. You got this because you were low income. Uh and if you didn't have that you wouldn't be here. They they let you in when somebody else white should have been let in because you were minority and they have to make their quota. Can you imagine getting that kind of feedback and that attitude when you walked on campus and in your classroom. So I understood exactly what it was. And I spoke my mind to the administrators and I was the only one in the room other than the dean of um um the vice president was for student affairs was African American. And we would be in the room. Jim Stewart came a semester after I did. And we would be the only ones in the room. And do we sort of bow down and become a traitor to the cause? No. But students didn't always know what went on and I am not going out and say and I told them this and that because that's not going to help make them listen. They listened carefully because I was at the table. You see that's what people need to understand. If you you can't influence unless you are at the table. The outside influences that put you at the table are very very important. Okay but unless you are there to have some kind of leverage or to bring some insights it is uh you can't help the situation but you can't always explain that to students. There a was certain instance the students expected me to come out and stand with them and shake my finger at the administration and then if I didn't do it. You're a traitor and you just want to keep your job. No there's a different way to fight this battle.

Warrior Philosophy

There was a philosophy I used to talk with other friends about. You need warriors. You need people who will shake the system and will go out and fight. Just as the students here on campus did that. But once the warriors have fought the battle and won the battle so to speak unless you have that next wave of people who are prepared to step in and take the positions that you fought for and I thought if I had my if I had quit school and went to lead the charge where would I be now?

Going to Africa

I went to Africa. I had been there before for a very important festival in 1978 which was the largest gathering of Black people African and the Diaspora in Legals, Nigeria. And I had always wanted to go back so this time I went back. And I began to work with colleagues in Ghana and Nigeria on paralleling or looking at the relationship between African American artists and African artists starting with the 1960s because that was a very pivotal period for everybody. The freeing of not the freeing. To some degree that's what it was. But the independence of African countries Ghana, you know Nigeria around that period. So I went to Africa and worked with colleagues on that idea of paralleling the arts in African West Africa primarily not the total of Africa. Primarily the horn because of the slave trade and the influence in the relationship. I did that for a year and came back for an idea for a brand new course on looking at the arts and culture of African and African Americans between 1960 to the present.

Recruiting Strong Minority Faculty

It is important to have African American faculty uh on campus and other minorities. And these two things are hand in hand for me. It the faculty must be able to hang with the big boys. Sometimes we place a lot of emphasis just on the image. But I found at Penn State that in addition to having the image we brought a lot of brain power with it. And so images are not all we need. We need the substance to go with it because getting um a face a woman or an Asian or Native American in and not with that person not having the the the wherewith all to deal with the system I think it's destructive. Okay. You you don't bring in a student or even an African American faculty just because they are Black. No. They bring with them the the intellect the research skills and so forth. So we I think we've done well. We've hired um a number of very very fine faculty members with reputations. We had to work to get them here.

Belief

There is some faith and belief that things that occur have meaning beyond just that immediate incident. And that everything works toward the good. For those that work hard. Try and believe. And so that for for me has been how I've been able to live and be very happy here. Because there are people who will rise to the occasion.

