

Seth Williams

Early Love for Penn State

I grew up in west Philadelphia in a neighborhood called Cobbs Creek and I was the proud son of a father who attended Penn State. And every Sunday morning I would watch the condensed version of the Penn State football game. It was one hour that came on. And it showed what had happened on Saturday and instead of watching the entire football game it had a condensed into one-hour. So it was really my first introduction to all things Penn State was watching the Penn State football game on Sundays with my father or after we came home from church was listening to Penn State you know football on the radio on Saturdays. As you know my father attended Penn State as did my uncle his brother. And so I grew up knowing all about Penn State, loving Penn State, looking at the yearbook La Vie and thinking about what it must mean to go to such a huge school.

First Experiences at Penn State

Well I grew up in a working class neighborhood that was predominantly African American, probably about 90% African American where most of the kids didn't have the opportunity to go to college and so I had the opportunity. It was instilled in me that I had to go to college after I graduated from high school so it really wasn't an option for me. I originally went to West Point after I graduated from Central High school. I stayed there 197 days. I got a medical discharge. They found out I was allergic to math and chemistry. So they sent me home from West Point and it was a transition. I originally went to Penn State Ogontz, which is now Penn State Abington. And I landed on my feet there and I went to class and joined the Black Student Union and really enjoyed my time at Penn State Ogontz. I was there for two semesters: a spring semester and a summer semester. I was originally a -- I forget the name a type of student I was a you know depending upon how the grades were if I was going to be accepted, a conditional student or some sort of title they had for that. And I did very well and I got accepted to the main campus. I remember my first day vividly at Penn State at the main campus and I walked from my apartment. All the dorms were filled so I couldn't move on campus after I got accepted from being a conditional-- I got accepted at the main campus all the dorms were filled unless I wanted to live like ten people in a study room or something like that like some people do. So I got an apartment off campus. It was called the Peppermill Condominiums 710 South Atherton Street. I remember walking those blocks to the College Avenue then going up to the mall. And just looking around and I remember thinking to myself, "I don't know anyone I see. And I don't see anyone that I know." I was sitting on a bench on the mall and a guy comes up to me. And he says, "Hey, what you doing?" I just started talking to him. He invited me to some party that night somewhere and that began my life at Penn State.

The March to Harrisburg

I helped lead a march. We walked from Penn State to Harrisburg to protest our school's investments in South Africa. I actually coined the phrase that "Apartheid Kills and Penn State pays the bills". And we marched from Penn State to Harrisburg to get our school to divest from South Africa. And today in 2010 everybody thinks that was the right thing but that was not popular in 1987. People thought that Nelson Mandela was a Communist, that he deserved to be... in prison for being a member of you know this organization that was trying to end Apartheid. Um and it wasn't popular. Students did not like the fact that there was a shantytown on the mall. People didn't like the fact that we were. They thought we were saying something negative about the blessed Penn State. But I thought that this was something that had to be said. And as a result of that march Governor Casey wrote a letter to the Board of Trustees and the school did divest from South Africa.

Too Young to Be Scared

I think I might have been too young to be scared. I took it is a badge of honor that I was saying what I thought was the right thing. Of course there were a few people that disagreed with that. I think what was more problematic was the, the silence of the majority of people who just watched. But yeah I received a few death threats. Uh the KKK or people who purported to be members of the KKK put up banners and flyers across the campus, you know making fun of me this black kid who was president of the student government. You know and we got telephone calls to the USG office, someone was going to kill me. So, my parents were a little afraid. The young lady that I was dating that lived in Tener Hall in East Halls she was afraid. But I think I took it as a badge of honor that I was fighting for what I thought was right and the message was getting out and we continued to do what we thought was right and I am here today to talk about it.

Seth as a Controversial Figure

When someone is talking about improving opportunities for African American recruitment and retention or making women studies classes mandatory or I wanted to make sure that students that were gay and lesbian and bisexual were represented on the university student executive council so when people are saying stuff like that and most people were just talking about you know let's hang out at whatever and have beers after class. You know that's a little different and made me somewhat controversial I expect. But I think you need gadflies like that to try to advance different causes and looking back on it I'm very proud of what we did. We did it in a way that was very respectful. We didn't do anything that was deleterious to the school other than shedding light on the fact that things needed to be changed. No one was hurt. There was no violence. There was no destruction of property. I wanted to do things what I thought was the right way.

Bittersweet Experiences

I really enjoyed my time in State College. I tell people it was a tremendous environment while there were of course some aspects of racism and bigotry that we experienced going into stores. I walked into a store on College Avenue and had the storeowner told me "Well, you know our clothes aren't inexpensive." Okay you know. I got plenty money in my pocket right now, my parents have sent me. I don't want your clothes anyway now. My uncle who has a Ph.D. he had gone to Penn State came to visit me and he wanted to take me to the Corner Room to get a meal where he used to often eat when he was there with my father. So he pulled out of the Pepper Mill condominiums, made a left turn to go down um go down what's the name College Avenue no go down to Atherton to get to College and a police officer followed us out of the parking lot and pulled us over. And he said, "Do you, do you boys know where you are going?" This is in like 1988. My uncle just was livid.

Following and Continuing Legacies

My father got to Penn State in 1941. It was a much different climate. As bad as I might have thought or some of my classmates thought it might have been, in the mid 80s it was nothing compared to the disrespect and indignities that my father, my uncle Mitchell, my father's good friend Dennie Hoggard who played football at Penn State, Mr. Triplett. All these outstanding men were facing indignities every day. They couldn't live on campus. They couldn't get their hair cut at any of the barbershops in State College. Things that we just take for granted. So they lived with disrespect that was geometrically and exponentially greater than what I ever have experienced. My father and his friends came back from fighting for their nation from World War II and said they weren't going to have those standards anymore. That they were going to live wherever they wanted. If they didn't want to live on campus they wouldn't but they weren't going to have anybody tell them they couldn't so they founded the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity chapter at Penn State. They founded the NAACP chapter. They led protests so that they could get their hair cut at barbershops in State College. So yes, I think what we did in the mid 80s hopefully it leaves a legacy for students that are there today that you can make a difference, that people organizing and dealing with things in a non-violent way can make a positive impact.

Preparation for the Future

A lot of the experiences I had in dealing with the president of the university, the board of trustees, the mayor of State College, the police commissioner, the police chief I think his name was Chief Williams as well in State College dealing with the media doing interviews. All of those things were both the personification of my studies as a political science major and black studies minor and also tremendously prepared me for the career that I've had to date, which led me to become an assistant district attorney after graduating from Georgetown Law School. I was the inspector general of the city of Philadelphia investigating corruption and fraud. And now I am the elected district attorney and representing a million and a half people every day trying to make our city safer. All of those skills fighting for justice all of

those skills in articulating and having a vision for a better future really it started and was grown through my experience at Penn State.

Making History

On January the fourth, I became the district attorney of Philadelphia. An accomplishment that comes with it, I was the first African American to become a district attorney in the entire history of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania not just Philadelphia and so that is a staggering fact. I have to pinch myself to think about you know why me? I walk in and see my name up on the glass doors or on the letterhead and I lead an organization of 318 lawyers and a support staff of about another 250 and about an additional 70 sworn police officers and detectives. It's a tremendous honor. I am humbled by the opportunity. I wish my father could have been here for that day that I was sworn in. I think would have been very proud to imagine that, you know, when he grew up Philadelphia still had segregated movie theaters. He would sit on one side of the theater while maybe his white friends sat on the other side. A very segregated city in many ways and even though you think it's the north there was a lot of segregation here. To think, he never would have thought that in his lifetime, that within my lifetime we would have an African American president or that his son would become the district attorney of the city that he lived in. So, it was a tremend--. Sometimes I am speechless in trying to articulate what it means.

Dream Job

I love the job that I have as District Attorney and it's really the only job I ever wanted as an adult. My entire adult life has been projected so that I could become the district attorney. When people ask me what do I want to be when I grow up, it is to be the president. But, not the president of the United States. That would be a great job. I think my dream job would be to be the president at Penn State University. I think that the job that Graham Spanier has that Bryce Jordan has was a great opportunity to improve the quality of life for Pennsylvania in ways that more so than the governor. The President of Penn State can really impact future generations.

Blessed Life Path

I recognize that I'm fortunate. I was given up for adoption in 1967 so I never met my parents. I lived in an orphanage when they called them orphanages. I lived in two foster homes. So, I know my life could have been much different but God blessed me and I was adopted by Rufus and Imelda Williams and they instilled in me the desire to go to school and also again that unless that I am willing to be part of the solution I forfeit my right to complain. So, I am very thankful because I know that I could have been just like anyone else out there that's waiting outside of a liquor store to rob somebody. The majority I've learned of children placed in foster care end up homeless, so I know I could have been in a much different circumstance but for the grace of God, but for the adoption of a loving family.

Penn State Parenting

I enjoy taking my daughters to Penn State, to sitting them on the Nittany Lion shrine and taking pictures of them throughout the years showing them growing up. I hope my daughters go to Penn State. I often I drive the family minivan and I yell out "We are!" and they respond "Penn State!" So, I am being a good parent.

Message to the Students

I hope that students will learn that you can have a vision and a dream and you can make it happen and the only person--when I go talk to kids at schools I tell them don't laugh-- don't let kids laughing at you when you tell them you want to be a veterinarian or you tell them you want to be a TV host or that you want to be whatever your dreams are. Don't care if they're laughing at you, telling you that you'll never be that or that a black kid could never be the DA. You tell them okay, I'll show you.