Sheila Baldwin

Sheila Baldwin, the English Department, on Thursday, February twenty-sixth, 1998.

OK, I'd like to start with my cheat sheet here, just for you to describe the circumstances that brought you to Columbia College: when, you know, where you were at, and where the College was at when you arrived
I was a student at, then Loop Junior College, now Harold Washington College. I was, I had just completed my term year for graduation for, with an Associate of Arts degree. And I simply said, whatever I got my first A in during my time in at, in that enrollment at college, and that's what I would major in. So I got my first A in a journalism class and I simply looked around for journalism, a school that offered a journalism, I didn't look very hard, but I had heard of Columbia in slight passing. And I, somehow I applied here and was accepted

What year, I'm sorry, what year was that?
'70... I don't really know. This has to be about '72, '73. I think I came here in '72 or '73; Spring of '73 I think. And during registration I went to, went to registration and I took a journalism class and a writing class, a fiction class at the time, and that's how I came to Columbia, pure and simple just like that. No thought, no anything, just like, 'Here I am. Do with me as you will."

Well, I guess the next question would be why did you stay at Columbia, not only as a student, and then develop that into your professional...
Well, when I was a student here in the Fiction Department, then it was the Writing Department, and it was, I just liked writing. And I had an illness that kind of prohibited me from writing or doing something. But writing brought me back to a state of normalcy, let's say, of being normal of functioning, being a very functioning human being. But, at the same time, it was just something that I was good at. I don't have any direction, I didn't know what I wanted to do, I just thought that I was, you know, I was just here existing. And at the time, also at the time, I was one of the first tutors. I thought that was like a real, something that, something that was very complimentary. Also there was, being in the Writing Department, an effort was to get you to write to point of publication. So I was always among others who were always trying to write to the point of where we could publish our work. I didn't have a story at the time, sometimes I did have a story but it was just like, there was no passion in the story for me. But I didn't know it at the time. I was like here and then I was offered a teaching position as a part-time instructor first and then I moved to an adjunct instructor. So it was just—like a job. It was a job that I was somewhat good at but there was no sense, at this time, of having a job, a teaching job, for educational purpose, educational mission and commitment. It was not an education move, commitment to me. I didn't know why I was teaching. I had no purpose other than just teaching students how to write or what that meant in the field of education. So it was just like a job that I could do. I could have been working at Burger King, I could have been working at a Sears Roebuck, I could have been working as an office manager, it just would have been something that I was good at. But it was writing. It was a job, I was in the department, and I was good at it. Later on, after I had left the department, the department split into two groups, this was sometime later. It became clear as to what I—that I was a teacher. And it took on me, being here such a long time took on a different purpose, a different mission for me, different goal for me, a different way that I looked at my students, a different way that I looked at the College. Because then it was just like Columbia College was still in the air out there as being an hippie-dippy school. And, but after a point I just decided that it was, it had a different educational meaning for me. And while we still were out here being a hippie-dippy school, for me it had a

very real foundation to it. We could be a hippie-dippy school but we have an educational purpose.

Could you expand on that at this point? What you—when that became more clear to you, what that mission of Columbia, to you personally, really happened?

Well, this is what happened, OK? I went to the South, OK? I went to the South to where my mother and her family grew up, in a little town of Charleston, Mississippi.

Was this in the '70s?

This was in the '80s; yeah, this was in the '80s. And beforehand I didn't have a clue, as I said, I was just here and I was teaching and I was good at it and I was duh-duh-duh-duh-duh-duh-duh. And I was writing, you know, just had no purpose. But when I went South, suddenly, it put everything in a historical perspective for me. Because here, my grandparents, particularly my grandfather, I had heard how he had gone from town to town, from pillar to post to build schools for the children in his town, the black children of his town. And suddenly, when I was down there, it all became crystal clear to me of his legacy and my grandmother's legacy, one. And two, that perhaps the overwhelming thing or the under it, the thing that had the foundation was visiting the slave cemeteries. They really had, only like slaves were buried here and any people who could not afford to pay for their funeral and expenses were buried here. So suddenly I'm placed in a legacy, in a land, in a country, in this country, that had a distinct meaning for me. It was like, "Oh, this is it. This is why you are a teacher and this is what it means." So when I came back to Columbia it had a different meaning to it. Suddenly I wanted my students to understand more, to really get the knowledge that I was teaching. And it was really exciting for me at that time because it was like bail town for me. And at the same time there was a semblance of the College trying to straighten out its image.

From what to what?

From being hippie to offering, to being a different kind of college, to having a mission. Even though the mission was already in place, you know, we were always to author the culture of out times, and suddenly we were, the College was trying to like really get a grasp at what that meant. So you had a split in the Writing Department and an official English Department. You had the—this is a difficult one for us now, or we are saying that we are an artistic school, an arts college, but so we're in the liberal education courses: arts and education and the arts and communications. Well, how does that, what exactly does that mean for the, all of the departments? You have the professional departments and then you have us. So I think we still have some growing and expanding to do for us to become a school with a mission, with a purpose, with a united mission, instead of one side against the other. You know, you cannot produce work, you'd be limited, let's say, if you just produced work in one field, in the arts, without having read some other stuff.

When, you talked about, you know, your personal, that change, and then your personal shift or change or finding your purpose in the classroom, personally. Where, maybe you could speak a little bit more to where Columbia was at at that time.

Columbia, I don't think was, I think it was just starting out, just starting out. For years it had been rumored that Mike Alexandroff was going to retire and that the chairs were going to retire and duh-duh-duh-duh-duh-duh-duh. But that, I mean, that was back in the '80s and maybe the College was grooming itself for a day when that would happen but it wasn't making a whole lot of head start that I could see. Because you had, you still had people running around and holding onto their turfs. And we do now but then it was really worse. But I don't think the College was at the point where it really wanted to just grasp and take hold of that, of a change, as dynamic of a change that I made in my life. As commitment I don't think it was there yet. It just kind of nudged its way along. I think the thing that really changed it was when Mike retired. And suddenly you had a President who had a different kind of worldview, expanding the Board to, the Board of Directors, to just across the globe, let's say. To bring in, and perhaps this was a vision down the road but it was never communicated to the faculty—at least I didn't hear it, and if I did hear it it was kind of just in and out because it was never focused. And perhaps some people were privy to it but not, I don't think very many of us were. But, so the new President came; there was suddenly a different kind of outlook on life. Not negating what Mike had done all along because I think that he really did, growing, a different kind of... He put together a school for all of the people, all of the students who did not fit well at any other institution. I think those students tend to find themselves here at Columbia. And what the new President has done is say, "Well, we need to have some direction," under the new regime, "We need to have a little more direction as to how we can accommodate these students

and educate these students." You know, something like that.

When you were talking about your trips to the South and kind of being here or going through the motions or not having your passion or your purpose yet. And then you also alluded to some of the tension here at Columbia, struggles over there as between, you know, this institution of alternative education and then with an English Department more traditional. Can you go back, and then bring it to the present as well, you know, why did you stay and why do you continue to stay?
Why did I stay? Because it was, it was a nice job. It was really—I really got a kick out of seeing students, as I always do. It just, light bulbs go off in my head when I see light bulbs go off in their heads and see them make connections that they really just take up on the road, I think that is a very good thing. So I'm committed to just like, continuing that thing, down the path. Also, what just occurred to me was that I became a—there are not that many blacks here on campus. Then, in the '80s, it was not, '70s and '80s, it was not that many, it was less than that; I mean, faculty and staff. So I became a role model for those students who were here, those black students who were here, and the white ones, but particularly the black ones who felt themselves being marginalized and an outcast and sometimes being kicked to the curb by their instructors and being the only, only black person in their classes. You know, it's like, where do you go for support? And so my office continues to be, it started then but it continues to be, an open door for any student but particularly the black students who say, "Where can I go for help?" If not help, just to have, just to have a black person—someone of your own race—who you can just come and say hi to: How are you doing, can you help me out, duh-duh-duh, whatever. That means a lot to me. And I think that was really reinforced when I went to the South because it was right down there, but when I came back from the South it was really something. It was just like, that is why I really understood why I was here, no question about it.

But some of the things that you talked about that possibly could happen at other institutions...
And they do.

...and you used to be that role model. Is there, did you develop a specific commitment to Columbia?
I just like, I like the arts. I like the artistic mold that Columbia has and I like Chicago. So when I hear my friends across the country, educators, administrators, faculty, talk about how desolate it is and how alone they are and, you know, they're the only blacks in the country, in their, on their campus, so... and not much African-American support is given at their college or in their town. I guess I could go someplace if I really wanted to. I probably will, I don't know what's in store for me.

But you see that you're—I mean you are as well committed to that part of the mission of Columbia. The arts and making that accessible to people that...
I like the arts and I like students to recognize themselves in the art, recognize that they—well, for example, one of the courses that I teach-African-American Cultural History—we are told, blacks are told, that we have no culture, we have no history. So it becomes a very exciting part of my experience at Columbia to let the students know that yes, you have a culture: yes, you have a history, and here's what it is, this is how it is, this is the history of it, and this is why you're here, and duh-duh-duh.

Could you remember when that happened for you?
When I started teaching that African-American Cultural Experience course it was like, "Oh!" And all of that happened at the same time, when I went South and all of that happened at the same time. Suddenly it became a very real mission to me to just, a realization like why I was here. And this was the vehicle for me to just like nurture and make certain that it's understood. Because students were not getting that information. They would take classes and they would not see themselves recognized in that class at all. They would take a class and they would, you know, they would... African-American Cultural Experience course, it was the class that let me know why I'm here. And each semester it became—a different excitement, I would say, was added to my plate when I would just think of all of the possibilities that I would have, that I could give the students exposure to. All of the people, what be it, from the Black Panthers, the romanticizing of Malcolm X, of taking them to an August Wilson play or taking them to a Dance Africa exhibit, a performance rather, or taking them to a museum—the Art Institute—or an exhibit on a black, African art. Anything, having them reading literature on blackness, all of that helped and it became extremely rewarding for me as an instructor. It just gave me a very real sense of purpose. And I discovered that this

class is not taught at any other institution in the country. And that itself makes it even more beneficial and more necessary for me to give this kind of, to expose my students to.

In talking with Bert Gall, one of the things that he mentioned: He said Columbia, in the early years, was one of the few places that you would see people of color and women. And you said that this course, you're the only one teaching it. Do you think that is part of Columbia? I mean, does that say something about Columbia or is that something, have you had to fight to bring that or is it encouraged here?
Well, the way the course came about, it started out as a three-week course, then a five-week, then an eight-week course, then a full semester course. I was originally established to highlight some art, an art, three-week art series or something like that. And then a committee got together, that consisted of both black and white faculty and staff, and it became a real course; a turfdom almost. It was wild for a while there. Everyone wanted to, it was really two sides. But it ended up that I would be, and it became a course that, and it still is a course, that black faculty and staff can contribute to. They will call and say, "I've got an art exhibit over here, can I use your class for this performance, can I, you know, what are you reading in your class, duh-duh-duh." So it's a community course. But along with that, there was a while that it was not accepted by the Curriculum Committee for a long time. Part of, partly because it was something, the way that I presented the literature about the course to the committee. I'm gonna let it stand like that. I don't think that that was, that they were, I know that there were other issues that people were not willing to talk about openly. But it is, finally it has been accepted by the Curriculum Committee and that's a good thing because it was, and I, I won't go into that. But, so when I made a presentation of the course in one of my classes that I was taking, and I was told by the instructor that Columbia should be proud to offer this course and it was such a wonderful idea and concept to have people come in and to have the students read and perform and all of that. So part of what Bert Gall is saying is true, but I still think that the College could do much more in seeking out and employing other African-Americans. They're, you know, the pool is small but not that small. You can do much more.

So you, you would like to see this course be the beginning of a larger program that hasn't started?
Well, the larger program, I don't know if we will ever have an African-American Studies Program here. We may, we may not, I don't know. But I do think that it is, it has, the course itself has been talked about as being the introduction to an African Studies course, program. But I think the College at the same time could just hire more black folk, period, whether they want to be part of this course or not, just work here at the College. And that's an issue across the country. How do you get black, where are the missing black people, or something like that, you know. And I don't know where they're looking. But at a school like Columbia, where you have all of these part-time instructors who are experts in their field, you're gonna have to tell me something different, why you can't hire a part-time graphic artist who is black or someone else similar, in the professional field, you know, come on, get with it!

So that, that leads into my next question, and you've certainly touched on several issues that would answer this but, again, maybe if we could go back from when you were a student to the present, that, what have been some of the main challenges or additional challenges that you think Columbia has had to face over the years since you came?
I think their biggest image, the thing that they most, the thing that keeps coming up is that it is a hippie-dippy school. That it is an arts school, that all you come to the College for is to major in art, film, or dance, or something on those artistic schools, or television or something; but we are much more than that. Our science program is, can be better than any, and it really gives us like that courses on science, I don't think that's a good example so I'm just gonna stop there. But I know that in the English Department we offer students connections all the time about how they can, of what they read and how to read so they can enhance their artistic, their creativity. You cannot just operate in a vacuum. Your creativity must be stimulated and must be based in something. So that is a big to-do for the College, it's like, which direction are we going to go in now that we understand that we are not a hippie-dippy school, come on. That's why, perhaps, and hiring a minority faculty and staff is another, but I think the biggest one is that, it's like the image. OK, what are you gonna do? What are you? And I think it was we discover that we can be bold at the same time an arts school and a—we are a liberal arts college, let's say, where you marry the two from, the

two liberal education courses to the artistic ones. How do you do the two, OK? I'm a writer. How do I, do I just sit and write, ignoring all of the culture that I have, that's behind me and around me? Do I do that in a vacuum? Heck no, OK? But that's the chore, that's one that we have to grapple with.

What, do you see a change in the student population? And maybe you can speak to it as a former student but also as a faculty member, when you came or when you started working here to the present.

Well, it tends to be, it seems to me that when I was a student here there were, well, I don't know if I can go back that far because that's not where I saw the change. Excuse me, there were, during the '80s there was a group of students here, for about four or five years, who were just passionate about anything that they took on. It was just incredible. And when they would mentor each other, not formally, but they would say, "OK, you can do it next year." They would make certain that their, that the roles and the positions and the organizations that they started, that there would be somebody behind them to keep it going. And that was good. And they only do things that were just like, they brought the Black, African-American Alliance and then Hispanic Alliance came together, they, for two or three years they had these big presentations in the Hokin, they won national awards for being the only school in the country who did this, you know, like bringing two groups together. You had women's groups and men's groups, and it was just a dynamic time and it was wonderful just to see these kids do this. After they graduated, there was nothing, absolutely nothing, OK? There was a void. We were trying several years to get students to like, just work, you know, just to form a little group by themselves. And they were limited; they could not do anything. And we would try, you know, pull them to the side, counsel them, take them out to lunch and dinner and stuff and it just was to no avail. Then, suddenly, about two years ago there was a group of students who said, "Well, I want to do something." And they did it, OK? And that was really good to see. So that pattern of seeing, and I also have to say this with the group in the '80s, they are in, now they are in, either in school—graduate school—or they are making films or they are out in the world doing something else. George Tillman and Ted Witcher, for example, are products of this group of students from the '80s. And they are out here like saying, "This is what I want to do for a living and this is how dynamic I am and this is where I come from." I don't know what happened to the group...

Are those students, are they making films?

Yeah, they are making. Then you have the people like Cecilia Rutledge who was a student who is in a, she is completing her Masters in Public Policy at UIC. She is, she's involved in a high school program that I have here. She comes on Saturday mornings and volunteers her time, duh-duh-duh. She's gonna go on to get her Ph.D. for, in something, Public Policy and Planning I think, in about a year or two. She has a time limit because I'm giving her the time limit *(Laughs)*. But there are several students of that group who just went out and just said, "I am here, I have a purpose, and I want to do something, and duh-duh-duh." But the other group behind them, I don't know where they are. And they need, just kind of like, are here or there or something like that. But the other group, the latest group of students, they are out here also and they're saying like, "I'm making my mark and this what I'm going to do." And their groups are forming and they have a very clear focus, intent, and concept. So they're here. I think that that is reminiscent of the, when I was in high school during the '60s. That kind of passion that you have. And you find that, I hear from my friends around the country, you find that, who went away to school and found themselves being the only blacks on campus. And they talk about how being the only blacks on campus you had to unify and just get everything done and just come together as one. So the unity and all of that, they don't talk about that existing in the '80s and in the '90s, when this current, the late '90s, that's the kind of passion they're talking about. When I was a student here it was just trying to find yourself, you know. The College was just like, it was really small; less than a thousand people, maybe a thousand people. And we were like, "Whatever." We didn't know. But we were just interested in writing or making a mark in industry or something and we graduated in...

How has, or has, your experience at Columbia influenced your work? I mean, you talk about as a teacher but then your writing, or has it not, has it been more an urban or...

You know, there were, when I was, when I first started teaching here and I taught in the Writing Department and I was a student, I was a student who went into the Writing Department, OK. I was a student, a writing student who

went into teaching, I was asked to teach in the Writing Department. First, part-time, adjunct, full-time, I think, but I think that happened during the split. And we were always told that, you know, your writing was never good enough. And at the time I didn't have a story. I had a play, I think I did a play for my Masters program, for my Masters thesis rather, I went through the program, an MA in Creative Writing. But that was it, it was not a real passion for me to write because I didn't have anything to write about, I had no hope to write about. So it was, so me being here was just like, because of my work, was not an issue at all for me. It was like, "OK, I have to write these pages." So I wrote the pages and called it a day. At that time you had to sit in a class and you would just write a story. And I was very committed about writing some of the stories but it was never like, you know, like a... I hear some of my friends say that they have to—who are writers—who say, "I wake up and I write, and I do this that and other." I'm like, "Hey, such is your life." But then it wasn't an issue at all. Now it is, now that I have, and during the split it was very, it was a very bitter split, extremely...

Could you expand on that? I'm curious.

Yes. It was a split, the Writing Department split into two departments: the Fiction Department and the English Department. Because a number of us felt that, a number of us who were in the Writing Department, felt that—it was so long ago, what was it about? See, that's the interesting thing, because some people still to this day hold grudges. And this happened like in the '80s I think. It's like, there ain't that much time in the world for me to spend on that *(Laughs)*. But it was a very bitter split. I think we didn't like what the Chair was doing. The method, for me...

Was it more the people that eventually became the English?

The English Department and the Fiction Department, OK? Both were at, were culprits in this. But the people who became the English Department really wanted to leave the Writing Department because it was, just some things going on that, you know, we really didn't think was right. You have to talk to them about it. To be perfectly honest with you, I really forgot what that was about. But it was such a bitter fight and move 'til, it just left you, to me rather, it left me in a state of, "Why am I ain't writing no more?" Because one of the things I do remember was that I was told we would never write. I mean, I'm finding memos in my office of people, from people, who said that she doesn't write much and that she never wrote much and I don't think she should get this promotion and I don't think this, and I'm like, "How can I feel?" And they'd laugh in your face and whip you and stuff and they would find these hidden documents that they left behind about this. And I'm like, "Man, look at here!" So for a while I was kind of dejected, because of that, that I found all those memos that I found and that the impression was that I would never write. And then I just like, I had, I think the most important thing: I didn't have a story. There was nothing for me to write about. So now that I'm older and wiser, you know, and I do write some publication, I probably will do that. So, but before then it was like a non-issue. I don't have anything to write, one; two, you have said I couldn't write, that was way down early in the game. But now I'm into a different kind of writing. I do expository writing; writing on education, and then culture, and fiction last, or something like that.

I want to return, before the tape ends, I'm fascinated with a couple things, when you said going South, not having a story, and then what you tried to accomplish through your course over the years. And it sounded like some of the examples that you gave that, being in an urban setting is key to exposing your students to a lot of the things, but yet the catalyst for this was this trip south. Are most of your students that you are identifying, or the African-American students that you are bringing this to primarily, are they more urban or...can you get in that taste of what you, your epiphany?

I think what happened, what was clear to me and that it is clear to me, because I hear it when I talk to people about the course who are—for example, I was comparing, a student had taken a course and he wanted, and now he's at, in Champaign going to school down there. So when I compared the syllabi that he, from my course with the woman who teaches a similar course down there, similar, OK? There's no comparison. And I was telling her that we have the students read, certainly, we have them read African-American literature, we have them discuss it. And we take them to places, we bring in speakers. And there's nothing like it, OK, in an urban setting as Chicago. New York, perhaps, D.C., certainly, Baltimore, certainly; but in the small towns across the country there's nothing like it. And that's important for me to have my students to understand who come from backgrounds, educational backgrounds, where black culture is not even recognized, OK? They can go through all of their grammar

school and high school and not even had read an African-American book. So it is important for me to say, "You have a culture, OK? It exists here in the city. On the South Side of Chicago there was a section called Bronzeville. This is where all of the black people, not all of the black people, but this is where some of the black people hung out. Do you know who Louie Armstrong was? Do you know who Billie Holiday was? Do you know who James Baldwin was? Do you know about the Obasi Workshop writers? You don't? Well, here's what they do." Do you know about slavery, for example, they don't even have a clue, OK? They just hear about it. They hear about the march on, the Civil Rights Movement. It doesn't mean anything to them. They hear about the Black Panthers and they even want to be a Black Panther but they don't know very much about the Black Panthers. So it becomes important for me to say, "This is what you are, why you are. Because of these people, you know, and because of the strives and stuff that they have made, that you can do this too." And they give, it means so much more to them when they understand that they come from not only the United States and that there is culture here, but over in Africa. One of the speakers that we brought to the course was Dr. Erskine Peters, who was at the University of Notre Dame, who came in and he gave a very real poetry lesson as to how Africa is viewed and how far it is viewed and why we are called primitive and—are we primitive? And he brought in slides of huts, very elaborate homes that these people have with intricately woven mats for their homes and all this gorgeous bead-work and intricate hairstyles. And it's like, this is culture, this is your work. Maybe you could hook that up some kind of way, made the connection between that African beauty and aesthetics to Gwendolyn Brooks' work where she talks about, very simply about, I forget the poem... how she talks about ordinary people and made the class look at ordinary people, look at themselves, you know, and make connections. So that's really good, really, really good. So it's important for me to explain that to them and have them understand that. So when they go out and they become a creative artist they don't always want to shoot for, "Well, who are you gonna make a movie about, or who would you like to be or what would you like to do? You're gonna make a movie about who? Oprah Winfrey? No. Go to your own backyard, OK? And see." So when Tillman made the movie Soul Food, even though he didn't take the class, that was very good. When Ted Witcher made the film Love Jones about, and he's the perfect example. When he made the film Love Jones he, after he graduated, I think it was after he graduated that he went to the club Spices that was just a black little bar where black artists got together and just hung out writing poetry, getting up in front of the mic and reading poetry, black poetry. You know, which was a rarity. And then he makes a film about it. It's not about something big and ornate but it was big enough for him to write it. He wrote a film about an educated group of people, OK? Black people, normal, everyday; an artist, a photographer rather, and a writer, OK? You don't have to go out and look for that; it's right there for you. And I would tell the students that they should take a Black Music class. And then they're like, "Why? Why? Why? Why?" "You might just want to write a film or direct a play or do something that, and what kind of music are you gonna have?" Hip-hop is not always gonna last. So in his film he had jazz in there and blues, and duh-duh-duh. It was very good to see.

You talked about several students that are, I mean, have been an impact or that you remember and maybe you think will. Are there any faculty members or peers that, again, since you came to Columbia that you remember that were particularly influential or...

That I had? Paul Carter-Harrison. Paul Carter-Harrison was my thesis advisor. And he, I would always remember him not because he was the chair of the Theater Department, not because he was, I forgot what other hats he wore, but because he was the only person, only black person on staff who could work with me on a play that I was writing. I was writing a black play and my advisors were, or the people in the Writing Department, were all white except for me and George Bailey and Eric May. I think at this time Eric May had left. But it was only George Bailey and myself. And, so who else on campus could I get who would help me with this, with my play? And, because there were some very clear issues that only a black-on-black experience could've, could help you out with, could help me out as the writer. And the, when I went to Paul Carter-Harrison and I asked him...

I'm just curious, sorry to interrupt, did any of your faculty members that were not black say, "You know, you really have to see...?" I mean, were they in tune with that or did they see that not as an issue?

Well, they kind of felt it was an issue, I would think that they would have felt it was an issue but

when I told someone that I had asked Paul to be on my committee this person said, "He will eat you alive." And I said to myself, "Well, better now then when I get out there, OK?" Better now, I don't know if I said that to that person or not but I remember having thought, "Better now for him to eat me alive than later." So when I graduate, at that point I graduate thinking that I got a degree, I know what I'm talking about, you know. They're like, "Get out of here!" So whether they thought it, I don't know. But he didn't eat me alive; he didn't eat me alive at all. He just told me like, "These are some things," and we agreed and we disagreed on some things. But he was one of them, the other person was Hermann Connoway, the late dean of students who really, I could go to Hermann and say, "Hermann, I want to do this, book students." And he would say, "Sheila, no. You're costing too much money." I was like, "Hermann, I just need duh-duh-duh-duh. I want to take the students to the play." You tell him to do something, tell somebody else to do something, but he would always, always assist me in getting the money for the students; always. And I just thought that was just really good. Another person is Sam Floyd, who was just a clean-cut administrator, no business. He's the Director for the Center of Black Music Research. And he was really good too because he, just the whole, just the way that the Center functions is very good. Arlene Williams and Sharon Wilson Taylor, you know, they both go very good, very good, very grounded, very realistic, very honest, very open...

What positions did they...

Arlene was the Associate Dean of Students or Assistant Dean of Students. She's no longer here; she retired a couple of years ago. And Sharon is the Associate Dean of Students. She's very good, real clean administrator, she is going to be something. She's going to be like a real good one, like really good; she's really good at math.

Could you give, and again you might have already done some of this, but when you went to Hermann Connoway and said, "I want to do this for the students." Could you maybe give some examples of things over the years that weren't being done that you felt...

Why is it that when, this was, I was trying to figure out... There's a time when I wanted the students to just recognize some people in the community. And it started out where we had like a hundred black women—at this time I was with The League of Black Women. And they were, we had compiled this list of a hundred black women in the city from all walks of life. And about fifty of those women came. Carol Mosley Braun came, Diane Burns came, Abna, not Abna, what's her name...oh, gosh, I can't even think of her name. She was very old; she used to work for the Defender too. She was, I can't even think of her. Gwendolyn Brooks almost came. That was a, she was a trip. No, but it was an interesting thing because when we told Hermann that Gwendolyn, that we had invited Gwendolyn Brooks he went, "You invited Gwendolyn Brooks?" I said, "Yeah." And he was like, "Now I got to find a way to get her. Go get her! We can't bring a limo for her, we have to do something else for her!" So we hustled a little... and we went over to her house and she was like, well, she couldn't come but it was just like an experience. It was like, she was royalty. You know, that was Gwendolyn Brooks. So all of these black women came one year. The next year we had the students, from all over the African-American groups, came together; they gave a presentation in my class. They had invited twenty-five African-Americans, some on campus, some outside of campus. And they put a little ceremony together, they gave them little plaques and stuff like that and just let them do whatever they wanted to do. They picked the people who they wanted to honor and stuff like that. And he was like, "That's good." When I wanted to take the part of the course involved exposing the students to elements beyond the movies and Burger King or wherever they go to eat. So we took the students to the Goodman to see several of August Wilson's plays. And there were students who sat behind me who wanted to, one of the characters, a couple of the characters were talking about, they were using a rap or something to approach one and they were like, "Man..." And Hermann would never go on these ventures but he would always make certain that the students went. And I thought that was really inspiring. It was so nice that he would just think to do that. I don't know where he got the money from but he just went like, whatever, you know. He would complain and tell me that he wasn't going to do it and dah-dah-dah. And I would go, "OK." and he would do it in the end. It was really nice, it was really nice. When students wanted to go to the choir, the Student Choir wanted to go to Atlanta, he went, "Yeah, OK." He had strict rules

with something like that, I was their Faculty Advisor and they, we got a bus a couple of times and went to Atlanta. And it was such a tremendous experience for the students because they, being in Chicago is one thing. And being at a school, at Columbia, where they were getting no help at all with this Gospel Choir that they were starting. They had an excellent Director, Choir Director, and he was just outstanding. But when they went to the South to this Gospel College Choir Conference and they had to perform before judges, then they saw what they were up against across the country. And the first tine they went they got an unsatisfactory because they could not sing. They had no stage presence and the singing that they were doing here was hollering compared to what the rest of the students in the country were doing at this conference. So the second time, they moved up a little more. And the third time they went, they got an excellent, superior rating and the Choir Director got similar ratings: excellent, superior. It was really good for the students because it just showed them where they were. Here at Columbia is one thing, you know; you can sing and you can perform, and duh-duh-duh. But when you get out into the world you've got to just show your stuff and that you are it and can make the mark. And that was really good for them. And some of those students who went through that experience are now performing in several plays here in the city. Chester Gregory was one of the students who, several years ago... what's that one's name, I can't think. But he's doing really good. And Sophia went with them to the South and she is doing, she just finished a tour with Hair. She was in Hair in Europe. So they're doing real good but it was all through the exposure that Hermann allowed them to jam.

Finally, because we're running out of tape, again, this is something, you've anticipated a lot of the questions. But what do you see, you know, in the future of Columbia, or present, its greatest challenge?

Just to straighten out what we are. And I can go, it goes, it can only go one way. I'm going to be optimistic. We have to marry the two groups together. There should be no professional and other, OK? They have to come together because that's one of the ways that we will make it; we will survive in this country. Well, not this country, but at this College, there's too much division here and we, if it continues like professional and other, you know, it's just not a good deal, not a good deal. I mean, it's even filtered down to the admittance, admitting, those people who work at the doors or something like that, "Well, we don't offer... You should go take your general studies somewhere else." You shouldn't do that. You should take it here and you should understand that there is a reason why we offer it here. And...