

REGINALD W. GRIFFITH

b. 1930, BArch 1960 (architecture), MCP 1969 (city planning) MIT; designer, architect, city planner; founder, Griffith Associates, 1970, a firm specializing in city planning and community development; founder and senior partner (1980–1983), *Communitas*; taught city and regional planning at Howard University, University of Pennsylvania, and George Washington University; executive director, National Capital Planning Commission, 1979– ; visiting scholar, MIT, 1989–1991; recipient, Presidential Distinguished Rank Award, 1998.



I was born in 1930 and come from a small family—just my mother, my sister, and I. I grew up in Harlem in New York City. We were like many other small families in Harlem, struggling and poor. This was in the '30s during the Depression. I know I've been very fortunate, even blessed. My sister, Gloria, was three years older than I. Because we were such a small family, we were just very, very close-knit. If I can characterize the family in any way, there was just an immense amount of love between the three of us, really. So in that sense, it was very, very good growing up.

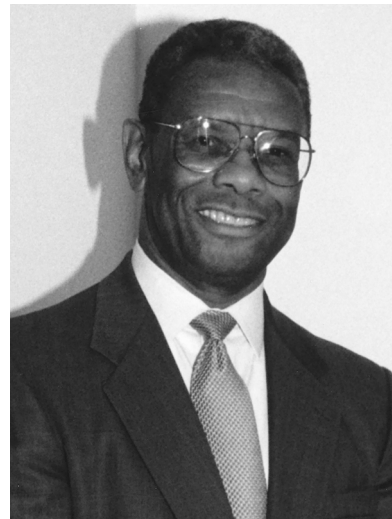
I went to the normal elementary schools in New York—two of them, PS 157 and PS 10. I went to two because we moved, but stayed in the general area. The fact that I went to those two particular schools is also important because of some odd circumstances that developed later.

My mother was very proud. She was a dancer and singer. My father, who had left just about the time I was born, was a musician also. They didn't get along, so they split up. My sister and I were first generation born here. My parents were born in Panama. Before that, their parents were born in other parts of the Caribbean. In a sense, that also impacted me because my mother had a feeling that we—my sister and I—could do whatever we wanted. She didn't think in terms of race. She knew there were racial problems, but she just felt that whatever we wanted to do, if we worked at it, we could do it. That's the way she counseled and encouraged us.

I remember some of the good things and some of the bad things. Some of them are really

mixed, because I remember my mother being concerned that we didn't have enough to eat. This sounds strange today, I know. I was in the lunch and breakfast program in elementary school, where they would give us lunch and breakfast. I didn't go hungry while I was there, although later, after you outgrow the program, it becomes a little more difficult. For example, another thing I remember is being in church with my mother when I was a child and falling out, fainting. She was very concerned and took me to the doctor to find out what was wrong. She later told me that the doctor basically said, "Well, this kid is malnourished."

But in spite of all of that there was just, as I say, so much love and sharing of everything that we never thought of ourselves as being poor. Later, when I was in junior high school, my mother



Edited and excerpted from an oral history interview conducted by Clarence G. Williams with Reginald W. Griffith in Washington, DC, 18 September 1998.

mentioned to me that she hoped she had done the right thing by saying no to one of my teachers in elementary school who had wanted to adopt me, help me, and ease what she imagined was a strain on the family. The teacher—I think her name was Mrs. Polikoff—happened to be a white teacher, and I guess she really liked me. In those days, New York was not quite as segregated as it later became in many areas. Harlem certainly wasn't. There was a mixture.

Because my mother was in music—as I said, she was a dancer and a singer, and interested in both jazz and the classics—my sister and I became interested in those things. I think, in a sense, that saved us. While we hung out with the rest of the kids on the block, we were saved because one, we had a mother who kept saying we could do whatever we wanted to do, and to keep trying; two, we had teachers who were interested in us; and three, because we were poor, we had to work. We had a limited amount of time for hanging out on the block.

That combination worked pretty well, but we didn't escape ghetto ills completely. While elementary school was okay, when it was time to go to junior high school things changed a bit. New York had that system of elementary, junior high, and then high school. The junior high school in the neighborhood was Cooper Junior High School, which was known as the “bucket of blood.” Even though I was working after school, there were things that happened in school. We didn't escape it all. I didn't have to run with gangs because I had a cousin who was close to one of the gangs. I was protected, so to speak. Even so, I was stomped a couple of times, I was stabbed, and I was shot at—fortunately missed.

I know angels or talk about angels is very popular nowadays, but I've believed in angels for a long time because going to a school like that was a challenge. Out of about twenty guys I grew up with, there were three of us who actually ended up in college. One went straight to college, I and another went in a roundabout way. Half of the other guys ended up in jail, and, believe it or not, the other half ended up on the police force—except for one guy who went to the sanitation department. It was a strange group.

The other thing that sort of saved me was the Police Athletic League. For years I lived on Lennox Avenue between 122nd and 123rd, but we used to

hang out on 123rd near the police station. Sooner or later the police got to know us and many of us joined the Police Athletic League, which at that time was a good place for what spare time you had to take up some other thing. I used to draw a lot, so I did some drawing and sketching there. They taught me how to box and some called me “Little Joe Louis.” I figured if I knew how to box I could escape some things.

It was a fun time, even though it was a struggling time. The thing that I remember is that the end of junior high school was really the pivotal point. I had never thought about college, never even thought about anything other than the fact that I was going to earn a living somehow. In junior high school, because I drew a lot, when it was time to go to high school, I looked around and I said, “What do I want to do?” I was pretty decent in math and some of the sciences, so I said, “Gee, I think I'd like to go to one of those schools like Brooklyn Tech or Stuyvesant or Bronx High School of Science.” Those three schools were “the three,” the equivalent of what they have now as magnet schools. They were competitive, so you had to take an exam to get in.

The thing that I remember most is that my guidance counselor in junior high school would not let me take the exams. He said that I couldn't do it. I went home and told my mother, “Gee, I wanted to take these exams, but this guy says I can't do it.” My mother was less than five feet tall, small but actually forceful, and she went over there and spoke to this man. She had a bit of a temper sometimes. She convinced him that I would take the exams. He basically said, “Well, he's just going to embarrass us. He's going to embarrass the school, but if you insist—he's going to embarrass himself—we'll let him take them.” My mother came home and she told me that I could take the exams and that I would pass them.

So I ended up taking the exams. I studied very hard for them. Fortunately, I did pass them.

You had a courageous mother.

Oh, yes. She then told me, “Do something that will make you happy. Go to the school that's going to make you happy.” I hadn't thought about college. Bronx High School of Science sort of prepared you for college and Stuyvesant prepared you for college. But Brooklyn Tech had dual-track courses. They had one which was heavy on the

academics for college, and they had another which was more vocationally oriented. I decided it would be wonderful if I could go in there and learn something about art and things that I was interested in. So I went to Brooklyn Tech to take the vocational side. I ended up taking industrial design at Brooklyn Tech, with the idea that I would come out and get a job.

Two things “hit home” in terms of follow-on. One was that while I thought I knew math from junior high school, I didn’t know enough. In one of the first math classes I had, the instructor asked me to do something up on the board. I didn’t do it correctly, and the guy looked at me and said in front of the whole class, “You call yourself a mathematician?” So after that I decided, “Well, I’m going to prove it.”

That was good because I ended up not only trying to prove my worth in math, but in everything. I did very well while I was at Brooklyn Tech. When I finished, I was well trained. In industrial design, they taught you essentially what was going on in the field by giving you these mock projects to work on. I had to design radios and other appliances. Television was just coming out and I had to design television sets. I had to design clocks, cooking ranges, pencils, pens, perfume bottles, industrial drills. It was a fun kind of thing to do because you had to do research in terms of what’s out there now—why do these things operate the way they operate, and how can they be made better in terms of operations? I learned lots by the time I finished high school.

At that point, because I had done well, I said to myself, “Well, now I guess I’ll go get a job as an industrial designer.” I was very fortunate, because New York had the four largest industrial designers in the world there. I decided, and my mother encouraged me, to start at the top. I went to the largest industrial designer—Raymond Loewy Associates—and they virtually wouldn’t even let me in the door. This was in 1949. Then I went to the second largest, Henry Dreyfuss. They let me in the door, sat me down, looked at what I had to show and talked to me, and then basically said, “You’ve got some talent. It would be wonderful if we had an opening, but we don’t have any openings. If anything comes up in the future that we think you might be interested in, we’ll let you know. So thank you very much, good-bye.” I left there and I went to the other two. I got in those

doors also and they said I had talent, but they had no jobs.

So I ended up working at a five-and-dime. Prior to that, I had worked in the five-and-dime as a stockboy while I was going through high school. I went back and they said, “Well, now that you’ve done all of this design stuff, you can be an assistant window dresser.” That’s how I started my “design career,” as an assistant window dresser in W.T. Grant Company on 125th Street in Harlem.

While I was there, about a month or so after I got there, I thought that probably one of the reasons why industrial designers didn’t hire me was because I hadn’t been to college. Pratt Institute in Brooklyn had an evening course in industrial design, so I started going to that evening course. Pratt didn’t offer degree work then. You finished after, I think, about three or four years at night, and you got a certificate. I felt, “Well, maybe that will help me.”

I was in the process of going to Pratt at night and working at the five-and-dime when I got a letter. I have to smile. We didn’t have a phone then either. I got this letter from the Dreyfuss Firm, the second largest industrial designer. They said that they had an opportunity, if I was interested in it, as an office boy. I was excited about it. I spoke to my mother and my sister about it. It was a big decision because at the time my sister, who was three years older than I, was going through nursing school at Bellevue. My mother and I were contributing from what we were earning to help her get through. The office boy job at Henry Dreyfuss paid less than my work at the five-and-dime. But we decided that it was getting my foot in the door of an area I was interested in, so we would struggle and make it.

That was the turning point of my life ... Forgive the tears: my mother died about a year ago.

I’m sorry to hear that.

I’m still going through her belongings, and I found all of this information that she saved, including the work I did at Brooklyn Tech and my industrial designs and letters from the Dreyfuss Firm. It’s a little emotional.

That’s understandable.

I went to work for Dreyfuss as the office boy. It was a very interesting job. This was still in 1949. Dreyfuss had wonderful clients. Their industrial

clients included Hoover Vacuum Cleaners, RCA Victor, Bell Telephone Labs, AT&T, Warner Swayze, John Deere, American Export Lines, Ingraham Clocks, and others. They really had a variety of clients that were just great. So when I went to work there as the office boy, I had to take care of the mail. I read everything that was coming in and everything that was going out. It was interesting because you learn a lot that way. And, I was continuing to go to school at night at Pratt Institute.

At Pratt, they would allow us to choose our projects. They'd say, "Choose a clock or something that's manufactured." I would choose something like a clock, design it for my classwork, and then put the design on the desk of the designer at Dreyfuss who was working on Ingraham clocks. Or, I'd choose to design a radio and put that design on the desk of the designer who was working on RCA Victor projects, indicating, "This is an idea, guys." I was not expecting anything out of it—just "This is an idea," hoping that maybe one day I'd get a chance to work on something.

Henry Dreyfuss was an unusual individual. He had only two offices, even though he was the second largest industrial designer in the world—one in New York and one in California. He would spend three months in one, then the following three months in the other. He lived in California, but he'd bounce back and forth. When he was in New York, they introduced me to him. This great designer seemed to be a very personable guy, and that was the end of it. He was a very, very, very busy man. He worked extremely hard. His wife was in business with him. For some reason, I thought I liked him. Consequently, I just felt at home in that office. The firm had highly talented people. As much work as they did, it was a relatively small office—I don't know, maybe twenty or thirty people. So everybody knew everybody. It was like a little family.

One time Dreyfuss came in near the end of his second three-month tour and said to me, "I understand you've been putting ideas on drawings and leaving them around the office." I said yes. He said, "You really want to be an industrial designer, huh?" I said, "I think so." He said okay and that was the end of the conversation.

Several months after that, after he had gone back and come back again, I was working late one night. It must have been about nine o'clock or so.

I didn't have to go to Pratt that evening, so I was working late. He was there late also and he called me into his office. He said, "Come in and sit down, let's talk." We just started a general conversation and I learned so much in that talk with that man. We discovered that I had gone first to PS 157 and then went to PS 10, while he had gone first to PS 10 and then to PS 157. We laughed about that. I discovered from some of the things he said that he was Jewish, but he believed more in God than in any particular religion. He laughingly said to me, "You know you really have to believe in God." I said, "I believe in God." He said, "It doesn't matter what religion you are." I said, "I know that." He asked, "What are you?" I told him I was a Roman Catholic. At which point, he said, "Do you know where I say my prayers every time just before I have a big meeting and I really have to depend upon it?" His offices were on 58th Street near Fifth Avenue. He said, "You can't guess, can you?" I said no. I was thinking about what synagogues were in the areas and could not guess. He said, "I go to St. Patrick's Cathedral, which is close by. I just sit there quietly and pray and get up and do what I have to do."

He was that type of individual. We ended up talking about everything that evening. We talked about religion. We talked about race. We talked about why he was not the first or the largest industrial designer. It had to do with his ethics. In order to be that large, you'd have to work for Detroit—that is, the car manufacturing industry—and at that point in time car manufacturers were more interested in flash and glitz than they were in safety. I knew they had been after him, wanting him to design for them, because I had read the letters coming in. Remember, I was the office boy. But he never said yes, he never accepted. We talked about a number of things into the night. I felt honored because this was a guy who was very much in demand and his time was extremely valuable. We just had a very wonderful conversation and, as far as I was concerned, it was great that the boss would talk to me in such a personal manner.

That was the end of it, except that he did tell me, "If you really want to be an industrial designer, keep putting your drawings out." The next time he came in, he said, "I want to talk you about what it means to be an industrial designer." So we had another conversation. He told me how at that

point in time the manufacturers depended very heavily on the outside industrial designers. That was going to change, he said. He was right. But at that time manufacturers used independent designs a lot. Your designs had to be right. If you made a mistake in terms of how you designed a product, the manufacturer could lose millions of dollars—or tens of millions, depending on what the product was. Therefore, he said, it was very unlikely that I, as a Negro, could gain the confidence of a manufacturer. It was very difficult for him as a Jewish person to get that kind of confidence. Although he didn't wear his religion on his sleeve, word gets around. However, I did display talent, he said, and therefore I would always have a job with him.

That was nice. I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Well, you're still the office boy. But any time you finish your duties, feel free to work on any project in the office. Just go on the board—design, so to speak—and we'll really consider it in what we do." That was tremendous for me, really tremendous. I was very, very, very happy at Dreyfuss.

Then later, they encouraged me to go to school. He said, "Pratt is nice, but if you really want to be an industrial designer and get a full background, you really should get a degree, not just a certificate." I said, "Well, I can't go to school during the day." He said, "Why not?" I said, "Well, I have to work." He said, "Well, maybe I can help." I said, "No, no, no. You can't help because I've got other obligations," or words to that effect. He said, "What obligations?" I told him I was helping my sister through nursing school. He said, "Well, that's good and you should do that, absolutely. But at some point she'll be finished, so maybe you should at least apply to some of these schools that offer degrees." I said, "Okay, I'll do that." He said, "Some of them have cooperative programs. You can work and you can study." I said, "Okay, I'll do that."

So I applied to several schools. One of his associates in the office, a fellow by the name of Bob Hose, said, "I'd like to see the schools you apply to." In those days there was only one university that gave a degree in industrial design. At all the others, to become an industrial designer you had to take a combination of architecture and mechanical engineering. I think it was the University of Ohio that had the degree program. I was looking at that school and others. People in the office asked, "Which schools are you looking

at?" I'd pull out my list and show them. This fellow Bob Hose said, "I don't see my alma mater there." I said, "What's an alma mater? What are you talking about?" He said, "The school I went to." I said, "Oh, what school did you go to?" He said, "I went to MIT." I thought, "Whew! This guy is thinking that I should be able to even think about going to MIT?" He said, "Well, you know, when I went to MIT they had rather a good support program for people, both financially and in terms of academics and everything. So why don't you apply?" I said, "Really?" "Yeah," he said, "apply and see what happens."

So I applied. I think in those days you had to take some kind of exam or aptitude test. Anyway, I did that and I remember sitting on the bed with my mother and saying to her how much I wanted to go if I could get in. What she said was, "Pray." I said, "Well, I am. If I can get in, I'll never ask God for anything else." She got very upset and said, "Well, don't you ever think you will never ask God for anything else, because that's not the way life is. But I'll pray that you get in."

As it turned out, we got the letter from MIT. I had been accepted at some of the other schools too, but MIT said, "You are qualified in terms of aptitude, etc. We'd love to have you, but you don't have the prerequisites—so sorry. If you get the prerequisites, we'll consider," or words to that effect. I said, "Wow." They listed the prerequisites. I lacked a couple of years of language and a couple of years of advance math—trigonometry and geometry, stuff that I hadn't taken at Brooklyn Tech at a high enough level—and history and all sorts of things, because I had been in this vocational track. They listed all of these courses I needed, and I was devastated. I was happy that they said I could have gotten in, but I was devastated that I didn't have the prerequisites.

I was torn between whether or not I should pursue some of the colleges I did get into, or whether or not there was any way for me to get these prerequisites. I thought about it. I talked to some of the folks in the Dreyfuss office about it. They said, "Hey, you know, we're right here on 58th Street and there's this little preparatory school about three or four blocks away." I said, "What's a preparatory school?" They said, "Well, it's a school that has accelerated courses, so that instead of taking six months to do something, you might be able to do it in three weeks or six weeks. It's very inten-

sive. They have it and you might want to go there and see what they've got." I said, "Yeah, but I couldn't do that because I have to work." They said, "Oh, they've got some courses at night that are accelerated."

So I went and I inquired about it. Sure enough, they said, "What do you need?" I laid out what I needed. They said, "You might be able to do that in about a year-and-a-half." I said, "Really?" They said yes. I said, "Could I do it in a year?" They said, "You're working during the day? No, you can't do it. You'd have to come at night and there's no way you could do that in a year." I said, "I'm going to try." I was young and energetic and a little crazy.

I went home, and my mom and my sister and I talked about it again. Again, there was the decision as to whether or not some of the money that I was earning at Dreyfuss I could take to go to this school, because it would cost me more than I was paying to go to Pratt at night. My mom, my sister, and I decided to try. So I quit Pratt. I had gone through Pratt for one year at night. I quit that and then went to this other school, back to high school at night, in order to get these preparatory courses.

By that time I was a design apprentice, so I was doing more work at Dreyfuss. It was exciting, it was really exciting. I was very, very fortunate. I ended up doing more than I thought I could do. Not only did I take the full load so I'd be finished in twelve months, but according to their rating systems, I was number one academically. I wore myself out. About three or four weeks before the end of the semester, when I was going to finish everything and do final exams, I just collapsed. The doctor said, "Stop. Go to bed for a week and don't think about anything else." That's what I did.

You were determined.

Yes, it was a different time then. What happened was, I went back and I took the exams and did very well. The school was very embarrassed because the school knew I had been number one, but they also knew I had worn myself out and the doctor had told me to stop. They knew this because I had to get permission from them to stop, and then come back in time for the final exams. They believed that there was no way I'd end up number one, so when they printed up the graduation program, the student listed for the awards was the guy who had been in second place. However, after taking the

exams, I still was number one. They were embarrassed. They said, "We don't know what to do. We didn't expect this. It's all on the program." I was so happy I just said, "I don't care. Give him the awards, as long as I've got the number one standing." They said, "Yes, you got it."

So I got my second high school diploma and, since I was number one, MIT admitted me. That's how I got up there. It was different. The Dreyfuss organization wished me luck, but Henry Dreyfuss went further and said, "It's expensive to go to MIT. Let me help you." I said, "No, thank you—I'll make it." He said, "There's no way to make it without working outside of school, and you don't really want to work that much." I thanked him, but insisted I could make it.

That was stupid—determined, but stupid. My first year at MIT I was living on East Campus. I worked forty hours a week, at night and on weekends too, on the switchboard in the dormitory. I thought that if I worked on the switchboard, I'd have time to study. Sometimes the shift was like from 8 pm or 11 pm to 4 am or 7 am, so I could work, nap, and then get up and go to class—you know, shower, wash up and go. That might have been possible, except that for a kid coming out of Harlem and coming up to MIT, it was a new world, a brand new world. I wanted to find out about it.

I think the same thing was true of the other black guys who came up. There were four of us who entered in September of '51—myself, Bill Antoine, Kermit Lee, and Snowden Williams. All four of us had come from essentially black neighborhoods and we were in this new world. We got involved in all sorts of things. I probably got involved in too much. Bill and I were both on the track and field team. I think Kermit was involved in any number of clubs. Snowden was involved in student government and I was involved in student government, in drama club, and all sorts of things. It was just a wonderful place to be. It was great. The world was mine.

I flunked several courses my first year. Maybe I flunked three of four. I flunked two per semester, I think, which was a shock. Then, I went back during the summer to work for Dreyfuss. They said, "How did you do?" I said, "Well, I didn't do that well, but I'll make it." So we went through the same thing again. Dreyfuss offered to help and I refused.

I went through my sophomore year. I belonged to less activities. Dreyfuss asked me the kinds of things I was involved in. He was an interesting man and, reflecting on my answer, he said, "Well, out of all of those things you're involved in, you might want to stick with student government." I said, "Yeah, I think I will because I really like it. I learn a lot. All sorts of things are going on."

The other thing that happened—I think it was during my freshman year, but it might have been my sophomore year—was that because I was involved in these various activities, I began to know a lot of people. Even though there were just four African-Americans in my class, there were other Africans and of course people from all different countries, fifty or sixty different countries at that time. I used to look at the statistics. That's why I remember some of that. One of the things that happened is that I got rushed by a fraternity. The fraternity, that shall remain unnamed, said, "Hey, Reg,"—"Reggie" in those days—"we like you. Come join us." I said, "Wonderful." I remember being rushed because Gus Simonides was rushed at the same time. We used to talk and joke about it. The fraternity said, "Okay, we're sending your name in to national." The national said no, because I was African-American and it was against their policy. The local guys wanted me, but the national group said no.

That created a bit of a ripple effect. A lot of people got interested in it, including Gus and some others. (Gus is Constantine.) Not too long after that, and I don't know if my situation had anything to do with it or not, I think some of the fraternities became what you call "campus fraternities." Then later on, of course, MIT adopted a policy that the rules of the Institute would be what the fraternities had to abide by and not the national rules, when it came to things like race or ethnicity at least. But that was interesting. For a while, I associated with a black fraternity in Boston. I remember going to Roxbury and meeting with the guys several times. I stopped doing that because it became too much. I was still working and going to school.

Looking back, I was very fortunate, and I know MIT was very good to me. I came in at a time when, at least in the architectural department, they had ninety-five percent truly dedicated, absolutely open-minded faculty, I think. Notice I didn't say a hundred percent.

That's very good, though, ninety-five percent.

That's right. They became interested in me. I was a good designer. I was a bit more mature than my classmates because I had lost those two years between Brooklyn Tech and MIT. And even before that, I had lost another year because when I went from junior high school to Brooklyn Tech, I had to begin in the eighth grade. My junior high school went through the ninth, so I lost a year there. But it was worth it, I thought, at the time. Anyway, I was more mature than my classmates, a few years older.

I did very well in design and architecture. I discovered that I loved architecture, but did not like mechanical engineering that much. At that point, even though I was still interested in industrial design, I said, "Hey, maybe this architecture has something to it."

I went through my sophomore year and this is something of a blur to me. I have to check the exact date. It was either in my sophomore year, but I believe it was at the beginning of my junior year, that my sister—who had finished Bellevue and had married—was murdered. That shook me up. That tore up my mother and myself. It was too much. Bill Antoine I well remember tried to help me, because on the heels of my sister's death the only thing I'd want to do would be to go to the movies. I'd go to class and not be there. I'd work and then sometimes I'd not go to class, and I'd go to movies. Bill would say, "You've got to stop this. You've got to get your head straight." But I'd continue to go to movies.

I think it's at that point that MIT became more of a family. The instructors knew what had happened and they would encourage me to try and they would help me. Anderson watched me. That's Lawrence Anderson, who was the head of the department of architecture.

Yes, I've heard the name.

He watched me for about a year, maybe even a year and a half, go along this bumpy road. He would periodically say, "Maybe you should stop, take off a semester, and come back." I'd say, "No, I can make it." I usually got A's in architectural design courses. Maybe once in a blue moon I'd get a B, but usually I'd get A's. Belluschi thought I was a great designer. I was going to be another I. M. Pei or Le Corbusier or whatever. In my head, I was going to be that. I knew the system. My strategy

was to do well in the heavier-weighted architectural design and related courses, and I'd catch up on the other courses later. I didn't mind flunking a course or two per semester. That wouldn't disqualify me because of the weight of the courses that I knew I could do very well in.

That was my strategy—smart guy. Well, by the time I reached the beginning of my fifth year—architecture had a five-year curriculum—I was approximately a year behind because of the courses I had not passed or had to take over. I had received warnings, but I was never disqualified because my grade point average was just high enough to get by.

You had done so well in your architecture courses.

That's right. I entered my fifth year and Anderson was my instructor in architectural design. I do my normal thing and I know I'm going to get an A or at least a B. Anderson gave me, I think, a D, which disqualified me. There was no way that my grade point average could keep me at MIT. I remember going to him in his office and saying, "You can't do that. It's unfair. You can't possibly do this to me. Look at my work. Look at what I did. Look at my analysis. Look at my design. Look at So-and-So's work that got a B. Look at So-and-So's that got even a C. Look at So-and-So's that got an A. You can't do that to me. It's unfair, absolutely unfair. You just can't do that. How dare you do that!"

Anderson, I remember, just leaned back in his chair behind his desk, looked at me—first somberly, then with a little smile—and said, "Guess you'll have to stop now, won't you?" I was boiling. Not only was I boiling because of being disqualified, but by that time, because of my rocky road, my mother had been concerned about whether or not I was going to make it and I assured her I would. Henry Dreyfuss apparently had been keeping tabs on me and continued to offer assistance. And I had finally said, "Yes, I will accept some financial help." For about a year or two, I had been accepting some financial help from him, so that I wouldn't have to do all that income-producing work. How could this guy, Lawrence B. Anderson, do that to me in an unfair manner? If I deserved it, fine. If I hadn't done the work, fine. But how could he take the work I had done and not grade it correctly and, as a result, not only flunk me out, but put me in a position of disappointing my mother, who had made all of these sacrifices, and

Dreyfuss, who had all this faith in me? How could he do that? I was annoyed, shocked, angry.

That was the worst thing that happened to me at MIT. The interesting thing is that it later turned out to be the very best thing. Anderson said, "Come back in six months." I forget exactly what I said—maybe "I'll be back," but it wasn't said in a nice way.

So I left MIT and I went to work. By this time I wasn't working for Dreyfuss any more because I had become truly interested in architecture and had worked for architectural firms. I got a job with another architectural firm. As it happens, just prior to that, I had injured my leg in athletics. MIT had great services in terms of medical facilities and Dr. Chamberlain, I remember his name, had to operate on my leg. I remember because it was one of those spinal procedures where you're awake and you can see. They cut me in the groin, they cut me at the knee, cut me in the ankle, and then they pull out this long vein. It's gore, but I'm watching this stuff. I'm on crutches when I leave.

Then I get this job in architecture, and no sooner do I start working than the Army says, "You're drafted." I remember going down to the draft board on crutches. I protested, "You can't draft me because I'm going back to school. How can you draft me? I'm 4-F. I'm on crutches." They said, "It'll heal." As it turns out, there was nothing I could do to convince them not to draft me. They gave me my date of reporting. My head cleared up enough for me to do a lot of research. I had taken all of my ROTC coursework. Architecture was a five-year course and I had gone through four-and-a-half years. I found a little regulation that said if you have satisfied your ROTC academic and training requirements, and if you numerically have enough points for a degree from the institution that you're attending, you can accept your commission. I had satisfied the ROTC requirements. Now, I didn't have enough points for an architectural degree, otherwise I would have had my degree. But the regulation didn't say that I had to *have* my degree. It was a numerical thing.

I looked up all of the degree requirements that MIT had, in terms of number of points, and discovered that I had two more points numerically than was necessary for a mathematics degree. So I said to the Army, "Hey, guys, I really don't think I should go. But if I go, at least you should be able

to give me a commission because I meet this qualification." They looked at it and concluded, "Yes, we guess you do."

So the Army commissioned me as an officer in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers based on the numerics. I'm not certain they had to, but they did. Again, I was fortunate. I did well in boot camp, officers' training. I requested to be shipped overseas to Europe because I felt that way I might get to see Rome, Greece, the historically great classical architecture of the world, and learn something. I got shipped to Germany and France. At the time, I just happened to be wearing this ring—the MIT ring which, of course, you get in your junior year. I arrived at this Heavy Construction Battalion that I was assigned to and during my initial briefing about what my assignments would be, this colonel or captain sees the ring and says, "Oh, you're from MIT." I said yes. He says, "Well, I'm an Aggie"—that's the University of Texas, another school that's supposedly great for the Corps of Engineers. Apparently, within the Corps of Engineers there is great respect for MIT, the Aggies, and West Point. He smiles and enthusiastically proclaims, "You're going to be great here, you're going to be great."

I was the second black officer in the entire battalion. There was a major, the executive officer, who was also black. The colonel and all of the others were white. They all assumed I knew a great deal about engineering. I knew I didn't. They assigned me to build all of these missile bases. This was 1956 to 1958 and America was still rebuilding Europe, still correcting the devastating damage of the Second World War. I was assigned to build highways, bridges, missile bases, hangars, and other structures in Germany and France. It was just a great, invigorating time. I was assigned one hell of a load and I had to do it. I didn't have time to think about my sister's death or continue to feel the hurt. I learned how to work with all sorts of people from all walks of life. I learned the value of sergeants. It was a phenomenal experience, a great time. I did so well that my superiors wanted me to become a career army officer and offered to pay for my return to complete my education at MIT.

Several months before I was supposed to be released, I did two things. One is I put in for leave so I could travel to Greece and Rome and see all of the wonderful architecture I hadn't had time to see. And two, I wrote to MIT—to Anderson—and

asked if he would write a letter that might get me released from the Army two months early so that I could begin the semester. Anderson wrote the letter and I was scheduled to be released from service early. I had also scheduled a month's leave in which I could see the great classical European architecture. Then some crisis broke out in Lebanon and they canceled my leave. I didn't see Italy or Greece's great classical architecture, but the Army did let me out on time.

When I got back to MIT, my head was straight. I zipped through my classes and even made the dean's list. I still liked extracurricular work, and I began working with Gyorgy Kepes on some of his private work he was doing with Nishan Bichajian, who was his assistant. I worked on the Time Life Building mural in Rockefeller Center and then the KLM mural which was nearby on Fifth Avenue. We did some creative, arty things. I did well in all my courses. I was flying. Right after my architecture thesis presentation, before the results could be posted, I remember asking Dean Belluschi how I did on my thesis. He said, "You couldn't have done better. Come see me." I remember Anderson looking at me and saying, "Okay, you did it." Shortly after that I went to him and said, "I didn't think I'd get to this point, but I want to thank you for what you forced on me." Once again he leaned back in his chair and smiled. He said, "We wondered if you could do it." I said, "Who's we?" He said, "Me and Henry"—Henry Dreyfuss, the man who had helped me so much, the same man I felt I had disappointed. And he was in on kicking me out.

He knew about it.

Yes, putting my feet to the fire for my own good. MIT was extremely good for me and to me in a most unusual manner. When I received my degree, Belluschi basically told me I could work for anyone I wanted to in architecture. I said, "Wow, thank you," and he said, "Who do you want to work for?"

But let me digress for a moment. There's an earlier happening I should tell you about. Before that happened, Belluschi had previously called me in and said, "This firm has written to me and asked me to recommend a recent graduate who does churches." Well, I had done several churches. The first project I had in my first architectural design studio when I was a sophomore was a church, and I had done very well. Belluschi had been on the

jury. For my thesis I had designed a rather large church with ancillary housing and school facilities, and did very well on it. Belluschi had seen some of my church designs before, and knew I was interested in churches.

He went on to tell me that, according to the letter, there had been three partners. One partner of the firm had retired. One was currently very, very ill. The third one was carrying on the business. They did mainly churches. Belluschi was known, of course, for his design of churches all over the world.

Belluschi said, basically, "They've written me about this opportunity and want me to recommend somebody. I'd like to recommend you." This firm was in Portland, Maine. I said, "Really?" He said, "Absolutely. Here's the head partner's name. I'll give him a call and let him know you're coming up. And, if you want it, it seems to me that you've got an opportunity to move into the hierarchy of this architectural firm." I was elated, thanked him, and assured him I would follow through.

So I took drawings, samples of art work, and my resumé to this firm in Portland, Maine. When I arrived, there was a lady receptionist on the phone. I'll never forget it. She was on the phone, chewing gum, on what was obviously a personal call. I stood there for about five minutes and she remained on the phone, chewing gum, seeing but ignoring me. I finally said, "Ahem, excuse me." She looks up and says, "Yes?" I answer, "I'm here to see Mr. So-and-So." Mind you, I had been through school and I had lost those three years between Brooklyn Tech and MIT. Then I had lost another year or so because of bumping around, two years serving in the Army. So by this time I must have been about thirty years old. She talks a little longer on the phone, then she calls up this fellow I'm supposed to see, and she says, "Mr. So-and-So, there's a boy out here to see you." The way she said "boy" bothered me, but I tried to ignore it. I just might be working here.

So Mr. So-and-So comes out and says, "How can I help you?" I said, "I'm Reginald Griffith. I was recommended to you by Pietro Belluschi at MIT." The man turned beet red. I mean really, he was so thoroughly embarrassed that I was embarrassed for him. He started sputtering and talking and trying to say things, and finally came out with, "Well, uh, the situation, uh, has changed. It's not

what it was supposed to be, uh, my partner, he's getting much better and, uh . . ." I knew what was going on, but I stayed calm and I said, "Well, sir, can we sit down? Would you like to at least see my work?"

So he says yes and takes me into the conference room and looks at my work, just glances through it really, and asks me, "When did you work for Belluschi?" I replied, "Well, I haven't worked for Belluschi, but I have worked on churches for other architects Belluschi is familiar with. And, Belluschi is also familiar with my work at MIT. Here is my thesis, which is a church design." The guy says, "Oh yes, very, very nice. But as I said, things have changed and I'm sorry, we're just not looking for anyone now—sorry, but thank you very much."

So I left, knowing what the situation was. Some time later after I got back to MIT, Belluschi asked, "How did it go?" I was frank with him. I told him how it went. He was genuinely embarrassed because, he explained, it never occurred to him that he should even mention my race. He had taken the firm's letter as a straightforward request and responded accordingly. He said, "I'm sorry. I thought this was a great opportunity. Believe me, you've got talent. You can work for any architect you want."

I had done lots of thinking on my way back from Maine. I told him truthfully, "Actually, right now I'm not ready to pursue architecture because I've taken several planning courses and I think I can be a better architect if I take even more planning courses." Jack Howard, who was head of the planning department, had invited me to go to graduate school there. I said, "I think I'm just going to work and go to graduate school in order to take some courses." He said, "Well, okay, I'm terribly sorry."

Several days after that, his secretary, who later became Mrs. Belluschi, called me in and said, "I don't know if I should do this, but I want to show you this letter." She showed me the letter that he had written to this firm. It was the most scathing letter I have ever seen. Dean Belluschi was such a nice gentleman if you knew him, if you remember him.

Right, I do.

But when miffed, he certainly wrote the most scathing letter to this firm.

He was extremely upset.

Oh, he was more than upset. But he never told me he had done anything.

So in my experience, there were some very good people at MIT. What happened is, I went through the one year or so of planning school and was hooked. There were some very good people up there at the time in the planning department. There still are. I remember Charles Abrams, who was also a real estate developer out of New York. He used to kid about the things that dealt with development, with real estate, with race—like there not being a problem if such-and-such is the case—for example a very small number of minorities living in a community where they worked, but there can be a tipping point in terms of numbers that can trigger racial issues in communities. So we students got into a lot of those kinds of discussions. He and I hit it off pretty well because we would just tell it like it is. I learned a lot about communities and people, and how design and environment impact people.

I remember Lloyd Rodwin. He and Jack Howard said, “You’ve taken so many of these planning courses, why don’t you go for the degree as opposed to just taking courses to be a better architect?” Later, Lloyd said, “There’s this tremendous opportunity that has turned up, at least I think it’s tremendous. You might want to look at it—IIE, the Institute of International Education. Normally they invite people over to the U.S. from various countries, but they’re trying an experiment of some kind and they’re looking at the possibility of sending people from here over to other places. You”—I had taken his courses in developing countries—“seem to be interested in developing countries. Is there any place you think you’d like to go if you applied and they awarded you a fellowship?” I said, “Yes, I really would like to go to West Africa and study planning issues there.” So he said, “Well, why don’t you apply?”

Sure enough, I applied and I got the fellowship. And I was scheduled to go over to Africa. Three years before that I had met this wonderful young lady, and by that time we had decided to get married. We married just before I was supposed to go to West Africa. It was interesting, because we were young and carefree and adventurous. She became pregnant almost immediately and the question was, can we still go to Africa? Her parents were very upset, but we went. My first child, my son Courtney, was born in Nigeria.

I had some enlightening experiences over there which I won’t get deeply into, but it was eye-opening. Some of it was racial and I also learned a lot about business. I had been accustomed to the people at MIT and other people I had worked with, and they were all ethical people. Anyway, one of my classmates in planning school, a Nigerian, had gone back and he was hired by the Nigerian government. We thought I might get a job with the government, but by the time the necessary clearance went through, I had found another opportunity with a private British firm. Since the firm was doing work throughout West Africa, I could do my research while working for them. In fact, they promised that not only could I do my research if I accepted the job, but I could have a three-month paid leave period at the tail end in which to really tie the research all together. That was a tremendous opportunity, so I took the job with the private firm.

Because I was a black architect, I was able to bring in some very good business from some of the governments and municipalities. It was a happy life until it was time for them to give me my three months, at which point they renege completely. My wife Lynn and I had depended on this. By this time, my son had just been born. She ended up having to come back home with my son to live with her parents in Tennessee, while I tried to finish my research. To save costs I went native, which was also a good experience because I met a lot of wonderful people throughout West Africa. Three months later I came back to MIT, took more planning courses, and started working for the Boston Redevelopment Authority. Ed Logue was doing wonderful things for Boston.

I did skip one thing. Just before I went over, Belluschi asked me what I really wanted to do. I told him that I really wanted to go to Africa because it was an unusual opportunity to find out what was going on there. But I still remembered that he had said I could work for whoever I wanted to. He had said, “Well, who do you want to work for?” I said, “Well, when I come back and I’m finished with school, I think I’d like to work for Saarinen if I can.” He said, “I’m sure you can.”

While I was in Africa, Saarinen had a brain hemorrhage and died. So when I did come back, I started working with Ed Logue in planning and going to MIT to finish up my planning course work. I got so involved with the BRA and Ed

Logue that I never did finish my thesis while I was there. I kept saying, "I'll finish it, I'll finish it," but things were changing in Boston. Tunney Lee and I, and Konrad Perlman, Dennis Blackett, Richard Ridley, and several others were there. It was a very exciting time, changing the face of Boston with the new Government Center, Roxbury, North Dorchester, and all of that. Logue really pushed us all, and it was great.

As a result of that, I found that even though I loved architecture, there were opportunities to do things for people in planning that didn't exist in architecture. You reach a broader population. While I was up there working with Logue, I got a call from Washington about an opportunity to work with a community organization here called MICCO—the Model Inner City Community Organization. They were starting a new program that would allow community organizations to hire their own planners, as opposed to having to ask and depend upon the municipalities to plan their communities. This was an experiment in terms of using federal money to have communities hire their own local planners who would be directly accountable to the community. Walter Fauntroy here was running that program. I came down and spoke to MICCO's leadership. We liked each other, I got enthused about it, and moved down to Washington. By that time, Lynn and I had three kids—not only my son, but two daughters who had been born in Boston after we got back.

So I started working here in Washington as a community planner and activist, raising all sorts of Cain, talking about how things had to be better here. It was invigorating. I also knew a lot about architecture, and I was shocked that in a city like Washington—with probably one of the highest concentration of educated and professional blacks—there was a limit on what could be done. For example, no black architectural firm had ever designed a new school, they had only designed renovations or additions. Here was MICCO, this community organization, trying to renew the Shaw Area in 1967, and in 1968 Dr. King was assassinated. That changed a lot.

It also changed what might have been my life because just prior to that, about a year earlier, I had an opportunity to meet with Dr. King on a couple of occasions. Walter Fauntroy was very active with the SCLC. Dr. King and the SCLC were thinking about developing a strategy for helping

people, both economically and socially, in inner cities throughout the country. I believe that Dr. King had a number of ideas that would change our society, which is one of the reasons why he was assassinated.

Anyway, as a result of his assassination, Washington blew up. As you know, it was the hardest-hit city in the nation; the Shaw area, where MICCO was based, was one of the hardest-hit. The local planning agencies basically abdicated their functions. They didn't know what to do. So we at MICCO, who were initially finding out from the community what they wanted and finding out what the planning agencies were doing and telling the planning agencies what the community would like, found ourselves in a unique position. The local planning agencies basically backed off, threw up their hands, and said, "What do we do?" The community was saying, "We've got to do something." MICCO filled the vacuum.

As a result, we accomplished a lot. We were able to get black architects their first new schools, but it wasn't easy. In fact, the politics of the situation was such that when we were about to do that, these same architects were offered bigger school additions as a diversionary ploy, because the rules of the game were that if you were doing one school, you couldn't do another. MICCO knew there would be a new Shaw Junior High School, we knew there would be a new Dunbar High School. These were multi-million dollar jobs that were in the heart of the black community and could be given to qualified black architects, and there were lots of qualified black architectural and engineering firms around. So we kept telling these architects and engineers, "Don't accept the additions." Happily, they went along with us. As it turned out, Sultan & Campbell, a black firm, got Shaw Junior High School and Charles Bryant, another black architect, got Dunbar High School. Both did marvelous jobs on them, marvelous jobs. Our strategy worked.

Then I started teaching at Howard University while I was still working with the community organization. Two things happened. One is that Jack Howard, head of MIT's planning department, warned me, "If you don't finish your master's"—I had done everything, all the course work but not the thesis—"I'm going to cut you loose." I said okay and I finished it. The other thing that happened is because I was teaching

now at Howard University, I recognized that MIT had people on its staff like Aaron Fleisher, who had tremendous knowledge in transportation and costs/benefit planning, and Lloyd Rodwin, who was tremendous in planning issues related to developing countries. All of this tremendous talent was up at MIT. Howard University had students interested in this stuff, and had good but not that quality of faculty.

So I began to talk to Jerry Lindsey, who was another MIT graduate—graduate school—about the possibilities of faculty exchange. Jerry said “Yes, that’s a possibility.” Jerry was dean of architecture and city planning at Howard and had asked me to become chairman of the planning department, which I did. Then I approached Jack Howard, the city planning chairman at MIT, and said, “Can we work a deal? There’s a lot happening in Washington that would be of interest to the faculty at MIT, and that same faculty have a heck of a lot of expertise that would be of interest to the students at Howard.” Jack thought it was a great idea and said, “I can’t direct the faculty to do it, but”—and he winks at me—“I’m sure it’ll happen.”

So I went back and met with the Howard people, the Howard faculty and administration, and said, “Here’s a tremendous opportunity.” Jerry was in favor of it, I was in favor of it, but most of the Howard faculty wasn’t. They felt uncomfortable. I said, “Look, you guys have a hell of a lot to offer. You know more about X, Y, Z. You can help the folks up there learn about X, Y, Z. They can help us down here learn so-and-so.” I tried hard, but it didn’t happen. It just didn’t happen, which is a shame.

Then there is another unfortunate shame. When I left MICCO, I tried to get them to hire someone else who was good, who had the same kinds of thoughts about community development and people, and so on. I had two people in mind, and my number one choice was Langley Keyes, who was teaching at MIT. I brought Langley down and he spoke to MICCO’s board. The board said, “He’s really great, but we can’t hire him.” You know, it was reverse discrimination. I said, “Okay, I’ve got another one for you.” That’s when I brought down Bill Stewart. Bill started working as the executive director of the MICCO group while I went on and did other things.

Which Bill Stewart?

A black classmate in city planning from MIT. Bill is now in Minnesota. It’s a small world and we connect. The network goes on.

But I guess my feeling is that MIT had been really, really great to me. They—the faculty and administration—were hard-nosed about it when they needed to be. Did I run into any discrimination? Well, yes, there was the fraternity thing. But that was somewhat outside of the MIT family. In terms of instructors, yes, I think there was one guy up there who was biased. No matter what I did, I couldn’t get through to him. The same was true of other black students, and he was part of the architectural program. A number of us went around him, finally, because you could take courses in other departments at MIT to satisfy a course in architecture. So we did that.

I remember when I did my thesis, he questioned me very pointedly about how something could actually work. If I get into too much detail, you’ll know who I’m talking about, so I’ll be general. As part of my architectural bachelor’s thesis, I had to focus on two other related areas, and I focused on such-and-such. He said, “Yes, but even so, in my expertise you have to do so-and-so.” I said, “Yes, I have looked at that. As a matter of fact, I have consulted with so-and-so in department so-and-so, and he assures me that this is not only feasible but it’s a better system.” So everything worked fine.

But that was an individual and not the predominant feeling or atmosphere while I was at MIT. Do I have any advice to offer other black students, faculty members, etc.? My experience may not be the normal experience, so I feel a little odd. I hope it’s close to the normal experience, but from my point of view I don’t think it’s a black thing at MIT. It wasn’t when I was there, but then there were fewer of us there at the time. I’m not naive enough to think that with change of numbers things don’t change. I just can’t say what it is today. But from my perspective, I’d like to have students today think of MIT as really being both a great challenge and opportunity, think about MIT instructors and students as being more conscious of and responsive to you as an individual—to your mental thought process, to your initiative, to your ambition, and to your character—than to think that they’d be looking

at someone's color or race. Some of that will happen, but I think if it does happen it's in the isolated circumstance. You treat it as an isolated circumstance rather than the culture of the Institute. My experience has been that, while there may be some individuals up there who clearly have been shaped by society and may have a different opinion of blacks than is true, the culture of MIT in general is one of non-discrimination and in some cases it may even be affirmative.

That's my experience within personal limitations. I say affirmative because I believe that within the limitations of their entrance requirements, they're affirmative. The biased people I have run up against there are very few. There may be a few more misinformed types, but you can inform those. I remember as a sophomore being in one of my humanities classes when the subject of intelligence came up, and a lively debate was going on. One of the students really believed that it was no fault of people of color, especially African types, but they just didn't have it the way "we"—he was Caucasian—have it. The instructor looked at him and said, "You really believe that?" He says, "Yes, it's not their fault—it's just the way it is." The instructor said, "Well, what about Reg over there?" The guy said, "Oh, he's an exception maybe." That's misinformed. That's being shaped by a limited society and not having enough exposure to the world.

I think the Institute is good. When I've served on committees up there, I would have liked to see more people of color on the committees. I know they have some. I don't know why they don't have more, but I'm not sure what the circumstances are or were. I don't know. As I say, I've been very fortunate. The angels have been with me.

It's a very tremendous story that you've outlined here. All I can say is that it has been a struggle, but the truth is that it has been a happy struggle.

The fraternity issue was controversial during the time that you were there as a student in the mid-'50s. In 1952, the Institute Committee passed a resolution opposing discrimination, and on April 8, 1953, appointed members of the Discrimination Committee made up of you, Oliver Johns, Harry Schreiber, and William Layson, under the chairmanship of Dale Strait. Do you remember anything like that?

I remember some of the names well. In terms of the committee, I can't fully recall what the committee specifically did. I do know that in my freshman and sophomore year—especially in my sophomore year, which would be 1952–53—something alerted me to look at the blacks, especially the number of African Americans, who had been admitted. I discovered that there had been the four in my class, and that there were four in the previous class. That would be the class of 1954, I guess. There were four in the subsequent class, which would be the class of 1956. I don't know why. When we discussed it—and we did speak about it to some people, both in the student body and the administration—the answer was "no quota." But on the face of it, it would appear there might have been a quota. Happily, things have changed.

There were several of you at MIT. You mentioned William Antoine.

Bill Antoine, yes—William Antoine.

Do you remember Leonard Massey?

No, he wasn't one of the four in my class. Let me explain the four. When I speak of four, I'm speaking about African-Americans who came from high school to MIT. I'm not speaking about transferees in from other colleges, and there were several of those. And, of course, he may have been in a class ahead of or behind me. I remember the name, but not the person.

He actually came from New York as well and he just passed about a month ago.

During 1954 and '55, Eldon Reiley, you, and others on the Institute Committee started planning to host this intercollegiate conference on racial and religious discrimination in American universities. In fact, the conference was held at MIT in March of 1955, with speakers such as John Hope Franklin in attendance. Do you recall anything about that conference at all, any of the events leading up to it?

Yes and no. Unfortunately, it's mainly no. I recall that we met many times to organize and think about subjects to be addressed and about who might participate. I do not recall specifically the particulars of planning for it. I should probably speak to Eldon and try to have him jog my memory. But again, that was a bit of a tumultuous time for me. It's when I was still trying to cope

with my sister's death, struggling and using my strategy to stay in MIT. So, it's hard.

Any input that you have about that conference is important because you were the only black associated with the planning. That conference, as we look at our history at MIT, is really quite historical because it was the first time that any university in the country—at least during that period—had decided to bring together college and university representatives from all over the country to come to a conference to deal with the issue of discrimination.

You say that as I sit here in amazement. I guess if we did it, and clearly we did, I'm not sure that I or any of us knew it was the first time for a conference of that sort. It's something that we just probably thought was necessary and here was one avenue by which to pursue it—the normal MIT analytical approach.