

## YVONNE L. GITTENS

BA 1979 Lesley College, MEd 1980 Harvard University; clerk-typist, receptionist, and secretary, Office of Personnel Relations, MIT, 1965-1969; secretary, Opportunity Development Office, 1969-1972; administrative assistant, Department of Urban Studies and Planning, 1972-1979; assistant director, Student Financial Aid Office, 1980-1986; associate director, 1986- ; also served as financial aid advisor and consultant, Project REACH, Freedom House, Roxbury, Mass., 1988-1996; active with Association of Black Admissions and Financial Aid Officers in the Ivy League and Sister Schools; recipient, MIT President's Award for Community Service, 1994.



My grandparents are from Barbados, so we always considered ourselves West Indian. It was always a proud thing to be West Indian, still is. My mother had three sisters and four brothers. I am closer to my mother's family than to my father's family. My father's family were originally from the South and they all lived in Cambridge, grew up in Cambridge, born and raised in Cambridge. All of my grandmother's children were born in Cambridge, literally within walking distance to MIT—I mean, in that Central Square area. That's where most of them still live and that's where I still live. My parents separated when I was about eight years old. A lot of extended family stuff went on. We lived with my grandparents. Everybody in the family lived there at one point or another. I have one brother who's a year younger than me.

My mother always worked in factories until she came to work at MIT. She used to work in the ice cream cone factory, and I always remember that because we always had ice cream cones and very seldom had ice cream to put in them. So we often just ate ice cream cones. When we did have ice cream and the truck came, we went into the house to get ice cream on our cones and didn't buy them from the ice cream truck. That was always interesting. After that, she worked a lot in I guess what they would consider the electronics industry. She worked making speakers. She worked with the original KLH and then, when the K left KLH, she went with him.

So that was basically it. I went to public school in Cambridge straight through high school. When I finished high school, I had no intentions

of going to college. I just wanted to get a job, anything other than a factory job. So basically, that's how I ended up at MIT. I needed a job. I walked into Personnel one day and filled out an application. I didn't get hired right away. I think it was about a month later that somebody called me.

*Do you remember about what year that was?*

Yes, 1965. Either May 17 or May 18, 1965, is when I started work at MIT. I graduated from high school in '64, and for a year I worked at Lechmere and I worked at a couple of other places I can't even remember now.

*So you never actually thought about going to college.*

Never. It's interesting, though, because I always wanted to be a teacher. But the thought of anyone having money for college wasn't there. So if I was going to go, I would have to work days and go



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nights. Once I started working at MIT it was like, why do I need to go to college? I've got a great job. I could go to Filene's Basement, buy clothes, and have my own money.

*When you first applied for a job here, did you apply for a specific job?*

No, I didn't. It's really interesting because I never thought of MIT. MIT and Harvard were not places that black folks in Cambridge would consider working for, because the word was you could only clean toilets or sweep up in the labs. I didn't know anyone who worked at either place. I'm trying to think, at the time there was someone on the City Council—I cannot think of his name—who was not black, but he was trying to get people to apply to places like MIT and Harvard. I got his name from somebody and so that was the reference point I used. I didn't know him, but I used his name as, "Who told you to come to MIT?" His first name was Tom and I can't remember his last name.

So I had no idea. I really didn't have any skills. I mean, I could type and I could take shorthand, but the thought of being hired as a black secretary at MIT I just knew was not going to happen. I knew it was not going to happen because there was just a perception out there in the community that they only hired people of color to do menial jobs. I wasn't going to do that. So when I did get called back for an interview, I was very surprised. I could not figure out what it was they were going to have me do. But I also needed a job, so I went. It's really strange because the person who I gave my application to was not a receptionist. She was one of the personnel officers who happened to be sitting at the reception desk. At that time, Personnel was in the basement of Building 11—where Graphic Arts is now, where the Quick Copy Center is. By the time she called me back, they had moved to Main Street. But she didn't tell me that. She just said, "Come in for an interview."

So I came here, back to Mass Ave, and I came real early, only to find a sign on the door with a map showing you how to get to Main Street. Well, I was not going to cut through this campus. It was just so frightening to me that I walked all the way back up to Central Square and went down Main Street. The map was just a map of buildings showing you how to walk, and I'm like, "No, I'm not walking through these buildings. Someone is

going to arrest me." It was just the fear of being a black person on this campus. You didn't see many. In fact, then most of the black students were international students. There were a lot of African students. There were not a lot of black American students.

So needless to say, I got there on time. But the weirdest thing about that, and I'll never forget to this day, across the street from the personnel building—where Personnel is now—was the old Daggetts Chocolate, I think it was Daggetts Chocolate. Brigham's used to make chocolates there, too. Across the street was Car Fasteners, and when we were seniors in high school, all of the kids who were not going on to college had a career day. You would go to different businesses, you would see what the business did, and then, if you were interested, you would apply for jobs there. When we were seniors in high school, my group went to Car Fasteners and, as we came out, they were working on what is now the personnel building, the Ford building. I said to the teacher who was in charge, "I want to work in that building." He said, "You don't even know what's going to be in that building." And we laughed about it because I knew I didn't want to work at Car Fasteners. The whole environment there for what the women were doing, it seemed like they were just sitting desk-to-desk and they weren't interacting with each other. People were writing and doing bookkeeping and stuff, and I thought, "This is not for me." And that's the building I worked in. That's where Personnel was, and that's still where it is now.

So when I walked down Main Street and saw that building, I just busted out laughing. I didn't know I was going to get a job in that building. But I started thinking, "I told someone I was going to work in this building." Sure enough, here I was. The person who interviewed me was Dotty Blair. She was a personnel officer. She hired me to work in Personnel in what they called their "records section." My first supervisor was Pat Langley, and I believe I was the first person of color ever hired in Personnel. I'm not a hundred percent sure, but I believe that I was. It was interesting. There was a Chinese girl, a girl from Germany, myself, an older woman, Bernice, and then there was another woman who was originally from Russia but had been here a while. We did all of the personnel action forms for people

who were newly hired to the Institute. Once they were hired, we would make sure their information got to Payroll so they could get paid on time. If anyone wanted to check on whether or not someone was employed there, they would call us and we would verify employment.

I worked in the records section maybe a year, a year and a half, or two years, and they had an opening for receptionist. I had the nerve to apply for it, only to be told that they had never had a receptionist without a college degree. My answer to that was, “Well, why do you need a college degree to tell people that you don’t have any jobs open?” All the receptionist really did was keep the pencils sharpened, straighten up the magazines, hand out the applications, answer the phone, schedule medical appointments, time the typing tests. We did type some letters, but there wasn’t a big deal.

So I said that and I got the job. There was no reason why this person needed a college degree. Then Doty became my immediate supervisor. She was really a very nice person. She had one bad habit, and that was that she would always call me “Sunshine.” One day I blew up. I said, “I have a name and it is not Sunshine. I consider that derogatory. You can call me Honey, you can call me Sweetie, but do not call me Sunshine. I don’t like it.” After that, we got along fine.

Being a receptionist was very interesting. I got to see institutional racism at its best. Maybe because I was young, I didn’t realize the effect of what I was seeing. I was only eighteen or nineteen years old.

*You were young.*

I graduated from high school at seventeen, so I took a year kind of finding myself. I was eighteen or nineteen. That’s when I learned how to drink gin and tonic too, before I was of age. It was at all the Personnel parties. Did we have some parties? Whoa! But, funny things used to happen when people of color would apply for jobs. All of a sudden, jobs weren’t available. So if you really wanted to get somebody hired, you really had to know who to see in Personnel. At that time, in my eyes, there were about five personnel officers who were not prejudiced. If you had friends whom you wanted to get hired, you would try to fix it so they could get interviewed by those people. You knew there was a sense of fairness about them, at least that’s what I perceived.

*So you really had to sort of direct your contacts.*

Yes, you had to really play games. The other thing is that you got to know the people who were looking for people. They used to send in the job requisitions and you got to know people by talking to them on the phone. So you would call them and say, “I have a friend, would you give them special consideration?” At one time, there were a fair number of people of color coming through the door and getting jobs. They did not last. Included in that group was my brother, who blew it. He could probably still be here. He got an opportunity to work with someone in Project MAC—I can’t even remember what that stands for now, but it was the old computer stuff over in Tech Square. They trained him and he could have used that. But a lot of the guys were young and stupid. I don’t know what it was. Maybe it was a different level of racism they just felt once they got into the departments, I don’t know.

But yes, you did. You saw a lot of stuff go on there, what I would consider illegal immigrants being hired—people who didn’t have the right credentials, but they all got hired, in dining service and Physical Plant mostly. I used to laugh. I had a really good relationship with managers of the dining halls. But they would hire people without coming through Personnel. They would call and they would say, “Fix it up, fix it up.” But they really looked out for the immigrants who were coming over, friends of friends. They had a real tight network and that’s how a lot of people got in—you know, dish washers, pot washers, cooks, etc. They were able to move up through the system, and that didn’t happen a lot for blacks.

When I first started in E19-E18—Physical Plant—there might have been, including the janitor, four blacks in that whole building, or five maybe. There were two in Graphic Arts. There was a Graphic Arts quick copy center in E19. They worked in there. I was in Personnel. Then a young man came to Physical Plant to do accounting stuff. There was the janitor. There was maybe one other woman in the Office of Sponsored Research. I used to just see her. Then after I had been in Personnel for a while, I think a woman came to the Registrar’s Office. I don’t remember what year she came. And one person came to the Bursar’s Office. But there were not many people of color in that building.

*When did Ken Hewitt come, in comparison to you?*

Ken was already in Graphic Arts when I came. He came to Personnel after I had left Personnel.

*What about role models and mentors?*

Dotty Blair, I would say, was a role model, only because I think she was fascinated with this little black girl who didn't have a college degree. It was kind of like *My Fair Lady*. Can I turn her into a silk purse? I think that's what her fascination was, the fact that she and my mother were the same age. I think she became a role model by default. I don't think she ever intended to be.

*I see. Is that to say that there was nobody else?*

No, there was nobody.

*Where did you get your strength from?*

Where did I get my strength? From my mother and my grandmother, just the determination that you have to look out for yourself and you have to open the door a little bit wider for somebody else. They used to run pictures of me in the *Boston Banner*, sitting at the reception desk, "Come see me for a job." I would say, "Don't say that, because I can't give anybody a job. You can come see me to fill out an application, but don't give the impression that I'm going to get anybody hired because it doesn't work that way. You guys know that." You would have people come in and not want to take an application from me because I was black.

*Or look past you, I suspect?*

Look past you, or wait. We had two receptionists, and one of the women I still exchange Christmas cards with in Canada. They hired a lot of student wives too, but there were two from Canada who were very nice. One of them was sitting at the other desk, knee-deep in people and on the phone, and I would say, "Can I help you?" It would be like I was speaking a foreign language. Then my next response was, "Well, just stand there and wait, because it don't make me no difference." Then Dotty would come out and say, "Why aren't you helping?" I said, "Because they don't want to be helped by me. You've got to sign my paycheck if I just sit here all day and do nothing."

Or I would say, "We'll take your application, but nothing is available right now," and they wouldn't take my word for it. So I would just go around the corner and hang out for a few minutes and come back and say, "I just showed this to so-

and-so and they'll be in touch." They would be happy and go away, and I hadn't talked to anybody. That kind of stuff.

*There's kind of a timeframe in terms of your tenure. You were there in Personnel. Give us a rundown of your sequence of jobs.*

I left the reception area to take a job in the benefits section of Personnel, and I worked with John Carley. John was probably a role model. In fact, when I got the first presidential award, he sent me a nice little note. He still lives out in Lincoln. At that time, the Benefits Office was kind of divided into two sections. They had people working with retirement and health insurance and stuff, and then John, Sandy, and I were working on tuition reimbursement. The blood drive, we had a lot to do with the blood drive. It was not a student-run thing. And the community service fund was all out of the Benefits Office. The Benefits Office was the office that began the whole issue of child care, child care for MIT employees. We bought child-care spaces at KLH. I worked with this woman named Sandy. We actually developed that whole thing. We did the orientation for new employees and I used to bake cookies at home for the new employee orientation. But John Carley, Sandy,—I can't think of Sandy's last name—myself, and there was one other person, worked out a plan with KLH where we bought spaces and MIT subsidized part of the day care. I can't think of all the people who came through and used them, but we were the forerunner of the Child Care Office.

I'm going to digress a little here because, after I left Personnel, by this time the Child Care Office was formed and was no longer a part of Personnel Benefits. At one point, when I was working in the urban studies department and had almost finished my bachelor's degree, they had an opening in that office. My bachelor's degree was in child care from Lesley. I applied for a job in the Child Care Office and was told by that personnel rep, who was in Personnel at the time, that I didn't have a degree and I didn't have a real commitment to the Institute. I had only been here since 1965 and this was now 1979. I had like one semester left to complete my degree. I had been working on it ten years at nights, and I didn't have a real commitment? I didn't even get an interview for the job. That was the message. I had worked with the formalization of child care at MIT. And I bet you

those records are nowhere and, if they are, my name's not on them, I'm sure, because I was only a secretary back then.

But we did site visits, we visited KLH, we visited a lot of child care sites in the area, and we settled on KLH as the site that we thought would serve the needs of the people who were looking for child care. But anyway, I stayed in Benefits for a while.

*Let's stick with that a minute, though. You're saying that you were working on your degree in child care, and you lacked one semester, and you applied for this job at that time.*

Right. The qualifications were a bachelor's degree. They did want someone with a bachelor's degree in child care, but I figured one semester shy after ten years of continually working on a degree and you could have asked for my transcript, you could have looked at the tuition benefits that I was getting from the Institute to see that I had been chipping away at this. And I was told that there was no real commitment to the Institute. I don't know. I had already done some fifteen years, right? I didn't have the right credentials. I never followed up to see who was hired. I was just real angry. And whether she knows it or not—and of course she wouldn't because I'd never tell her, I wouldn't give her credit for that—that pushed me to get my master's.

*This was the personnel rep.*

Yes. She works around here somewhere. It's real ironic because I did a financial aid workshop at Brookline High and she was there. This was last year or the year before, I can't even remember. And of course she came up to me afterwards, "Do you remember me?" "Yeah." "I'd love to come by your office and talk to you about these things." I should have told her to kiss ass, but I didn't, and she came by my office and talked to me about financial aid. People need to realize that people they're stepping on and disrespecting, you may need them some day. I could have been a real bitch. I could have said, "Forget you."

*That was something, you said, that pushed you on to get your degree.*

If you're not going to take me seriously with a bachelor's, then I must have a master's. There are other things, and we'll get to those.

I left there to go work for Jim Allison in what MIT called the Opportunity Development Office,

which is the forerunner to Affirmative Action, that's what I keep saying. One of the things we did in the Opportunity Development Office was the head count. We wrote MIT's affirmative action plan. I use that "we" loosely. That office was given the duty of writing the MIT affirmative action plan. The other thing that that office did was we worked a lot—and Jack Newcomb, I think, worked on this too—with the prison release program, helping prisoners get reoriented. And they would be hired.

*Here?*

Here at MIT.

*That's admirable.*

Joe Lynch worked on that. Another employee was having problems in his job, so they put him to work on that program too. They would go out and visit the prison sites and see what kind of skills the guys were learning. A few people came—not a whole lot, but a few people. I think the commitment died pretty much. Dr. Foster had space in there too. He ran the program the Institute just got rid of, MIT's Lowell Institute. It's now gone to Northeastern. Doc Foster had a secretary who worked in another building, but he had space in there. I did a little bit of typing for him. He was a real nice guy.

But I worked for Jim Allison. The other thing that happened out of Jim's office was that the Institute had a commitment to hire minority subcontractors. There are classrooms on the first floor in Building 8 with the moon-shaped windows. Those, and on the second floor too, were done by a black construction company. I can't remember all of them, but I remember that one specifically. The black contractors would use our office sort of as headquarters. If they needed to get phone calls during the day, they would come into that office and I would see that they got their messages and stuff like that. People who had complaints didn't really come to that office too much because there weren't enough people here to complain. If you felt you were being discriminated against, you just left. You didn't feel like you had anywhere you could go and complain. There were union grievances, but those were handled through Personnel and others.

*About what year was that?*

This was prior to my having Nicole. Nicole was born in '72, so this was from '68 or '69 to '72.



When I started working for Jim, I also started going to Northeastern nights. I had decided that being a secretary was like working in a factory. I was going to get a degree. I was going to be somebody. I didn't know what I was going to be, but I was going to be somebody. At the same time, there was a special black summer program here. I don't know if it was Interphase, I don't know what it was.

*It was essentially Project Interphase, but they called it something else initially.*

It had a different name. I affectionately would call Jim "the Paul Bunyan of the Institute," because when anything went wrong with the black students he would step in. The president would be on the phone calling Jim. When the students took over the Faculty Club, Jim to the rescue; when the students assaulted an administrator, Jim to the rescue; when they tried to barricade the President's Office or even had a sit-in out here, it was Jim to the rescue. They just used his bigness to come to the rescue all the time.

I worked with him and then I left on maternity leave. A friend of mine, who is not black, filled in while I was on maternity leave. She and I were really good friends. We used to hang out together. She and I had worked in Personnel together. She called me one day when I was about to come back and said, "Jim doesn't want you back here. He has trumped up all kinds of shit about you and told stuff to Personnel." I thanked her very kindly. I did shortly after that get a letter from him saying that my services were no longer needed by his office. I was angry. I thought this would be a good time to sabotage him by spilling my guts on everything I knew that had gone on in that office. But I got the letter on Friday and I had all weekend to think about it.

I said that I would never take anyone down. My grandmother used to have a saying that God will take care of you. You don't have to do a thing. I can remember when he left here, life goes on. It was interesting because I had another friend who worked in Personnel and she had called and said the same thing, that he had been maligning my character. I said, "That's okay, he'll get his in the end."

I ended up taking a leave and coming back. Well, Nicki was born in March and I didn't come back to MIT until September, so after I got his letter I just took a leave and spent time with my new baby. When I did come back, Personnel wanted to

know about things that had gone on in that office. I said, "I don't know, what are you talking about?" What had happened must have happened, I said, while I was on leave. The woman who replaced me spilled her guts on what she knew. I said, "Fine, let her do it." So I said, "I have no idea," and just left it at that.

So when I came back, I interviewed in the departments of physics and urban studies. I decided urban studies. I liked the field of urban studies. There were lots of people who looked like me out there—students, faculty, not any administrators, but support staff. The place was alive with color. It just felt like this was the place I wanted to be. It did not feel like MIT. That was a good experience.

*So you went there as—?*

As a secretary for the Department of Urban Studies and Planning, with the HUD program. That was a program with HUD, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, funding graduate students. People, my people—black, Mexican-American, Puerto Rican, Native American—were getting money to get a degree from MIT. They were getting their master's and their Ph.D's in urban studies and architecture.

*Sounds like you enjoyed it.*

I loved that. It was the best experience. I'm not saying I liked everybody. There were some students who had to be reminded every once in a while that this was not the land of milk and honey and that they were still black. There were some faculty up there who were extremely racist, and they're still there. There were some who were very sexist, and they're still there. But the students, I have made some of the most lasting relationships with those students. They were my age. They were having kids at the same time I was having my kids. The kids used to hang out together. We used to hang out together. There was the Community Fellows Program.

*Who ran the Community Fellows Program?*

They were over in E40, and it was Mel King and Frank Jones. We didn't see them a lot, but the students would go back and forth. But in the HUD program, the director was Bill Davis. Other professors had office space in there. One professor, who was not minority, got quite an education from having his office there. I basically typed for the director and the other two professors, and kept the stuff straight on the HUD program. Then after Bill

left, Phil Clay became the director of the HUD program. After Phil left, Frank Jones became director of the HUD program. At one point I was not only doing the HUD program, but I was also doing the Ph.D. program under Bob Fogelson. I can't remember. The heads of the programs changed a lot, so I can't remember.

I did like coming to work. I did enjoy that department. There were people up there who I wouldn't piss on if they were on fire. Some of the faculty, they were racist. They were, as I said, sexist. There were some secretaries I really felt sorry for because they didn't know how to handle people who made rude remarks and all the stuff you hear that goes on around here. There was a lot of sleeping around. That's the first time I really became aware of the fact. I was a little bit aware of it when I worked for Jim Allison, that the way you might want to promote your career around here is to sleep with somebody. That, I know, is still going on.

*I had not heard that until one distinguished black faculty member told me this in my early years here. Do you think people understand that?*

I don't think they do, I don't think they do. I think they think this is academia and that that wouldn't happen here, that it happens out in the sleazy corporate world where people are crawling all over, sleeping all over each other to get somewhere. It happens here. The sad part about it is, I don't think it's worth it. I really don't think it's worth it because I think the people who have climbed by that can never go anywhere else because they don't have the credentials. They got where they are because somebody stroked them or whatever.

When I was in urban studies, there was a lot of sleeping around between professors and students, and then when grade time came, people would be angry as hell. We secretaries would just laugh. The secretaries would just say, "Well, he graded you on what you were doing in bed, honey, not what you were doing in the books. You should have known better. You should have waited until after the grades were given out." But a lot of that happened, and people were devastated. There were students and support staff having affairs. Some of the students said, "It looks like a harem." They got carried away with it.

One thing happened when I was in urban studies, when I was working for the then director. Now, mind you, I'm married at this time with two

kids, going to school nights still, still hadn't quite gotten a bachelor's degree yet. The director was trying to promote me from support staff to that exempt category which no longer exists. He came up against a brick wall. The question that was asked of him was, basically, what else was I doing for him? He didn't understand what the question was. And he wasn't a naive person. So he called me and he said, "I'm having a hard time." At this time, it was a black woman in Personnel who asked him this question. And I thought, "What a bitch. Has anybody questioned who she's been sleeping with lately?" He said, "I don't know how to put this." And I said, "They think we're sleeping together, huh?" He said, "What?" I said, "It's everywhere. Don't they realize I have a husband?" And at that time there were no problems in my marriage. I'm not saying there were zero problems, everybody has problems, but there was no evidence that we were heading for a divorce. I had two kids. I said, "I go to school two nights a week and I work full-time." I didn't have time, nor did I need an extramarital affair. I thought, "Can't people just believe that I'm good at what I do administratively?" He finally laughed it off and said, "Oh."

I did get the promotion and I did get the raise, but it bothered me to think that somebody would say that. And not only did they say it to him, they asked other people around the institution who knew me. "Well, how's her married life? How are things between them?" See, people knew my husband was running around before I knew he was running around. They always say the wife is the last to know, but it's hard to keep up when you're working full-time, raising two kids, going to school nights, and trying to be involved in the kids' activities. I was also on the board at the Cambridge Community Center, so I was involved in the community as well.

*Was working in the HUD program the best of your experiences, when you think about MIT?*

That was my best experience. If you ask me about a mentor, Frank Jones was my mentor. He did say to me at some point, "Look, you're not going to be the director of the HUD program. No, you cannot have my job. Go back to school." So I did. I applied to Harvard. I was scared as could be. You've got to remember, I had been working there since 1965. Except for two maternity leaves, I had not been anywhere. I had only been going to school

nights, so I didn't know what it was like to be a real, full-time student.

I started at Northeastern and transferred to Lesley. I cannot tell you anything about anybody in the classes with me at Lesley. All I know is that I graduated from Lesley in August of 1979 to start Harvard in September of 1979. Harvard admitted me in April without completing my degree. Of course, my acceptance was really contingent upon completing the degree. I think I had two weeks between the time I finished my degree and the time I started at Harvard. One other woman just happened to finish the same time I did. I can't even remember her name, but we were there, the first time Lesley had a summer commencement. It was at one of those big old churches up in Harvard Square. We didn't even wear caps and gowns. We had decided we weren't going to do that. She looked at me and I looked at her and said, "We were in classes together, huh?" And we both laughed. She said, "You know, this doesn't feel like a graduation because usually you're sitting with people whom you can reminisce with—remember this freshman year, remember this, remember that?" And I said, "I'm just so glad to be through."

The interesting thing about that was that when we graduated from Lesley, the person who handed us our diplomas was Catherine Stratton. And I have a picture. I've got to look for it now because that's in a Lesley publication—you know how they send you out those alumni things? In the next alumni thing that came out—it wasn't highlighted, but mentioning that first summer graduation—there was a picture of me accepting my degree from Catherine Stratton. Of all the people who graduated that night and all the pictures that were taken, why was that one picture in the book? She didn't know me and I didn't know her. I didn't know she was on the board at Lesley. Yet I have worked here, I began working here before they opened the student center which is named after her husband. It's strange the way things happen, strange the way things happen. I've got to look for that picture.

*I remember that period. The thing that I always thought was so interesting is that you had some inner strength to continue on for your master's, given the family responsibilities and all the other stuff that was happening. We were trying to also get our friend to do some things. In fact, didn't Chuck Willie help?*

Chuck was my advisor at Harvard. I guess if Chuck had had it his way, I would have gone on for my doctorate, and I'm sorry I didn't. It's not too late. I just don't feel like it now. The strength is now going in other directions. It's more into my kids and their goals. One of the people I interviewed with was Chuck, and I interviewed with Belinda Wilson. I guess I should have latched onto her star.

I'm the only one in my family with a master's degree on my mother's side or my father's side, the only one. I think a cousin on my father's side may have a master's degree, but I'm not sure. But there aren't a lot of us. I have cousins forever, cousins forever, and I think we can count on one hand the cousins with bachelor's degrees. I have four cousins with bachelor's degrees. Even when I look at the kids, the cousins, my oldest daughter's generation, she's the first of the grandchildren. And she's not the oldest. My cousins have kids older than her. They have not gone to college. She is the only one. On her father's side, she is the oldest grandchild. She is the third oldest cousin. If the Gittens cousins of her generation were to all get together, two of them have degrees, two are currently in college, and the rest are out in the world.

*How did you do it?*

Part stubbornness, part I'll show them, part just wanting something better for myself. That's a hard question to answer. I've always been, "Don't tell me I can't do it, because I will if I want to." If I don't want to, I don't care about it, I don't give a shit. But I've always been determined.

My grandmother said that I walked at nine months. There was something about me that made her feel I was going to go the furthest of the grandchildren. It's interesting, because I always feel her presence and my grandfather's presence. I feel like I'm never alone because they're always right with me, and my grandfather died when I was in high school. My grandmother just died in the '80s. So my kids were lucky. They had two great-grandmothers whom they got to know, really got to know. Kendra, my youngest, will tell you she doesn't remember them, but she was five or six when my grandmother died. She just has selective amnesia.

But in urban studies, there was definitely a sense of togetherness. If somebody needed something, there was somebody there for them. I have



no idea what it's like now. I don't even think they get the numbers of minority students. I just got a call from a former student who is living in St. Croix. In fact, he called me a while ago and we've been talking back and forth. The number of invitations, "Come visit when you're in town, see me." I could literally go out of town to any of these meetings I go to and not go to a meeting, for keeping up or catching up with all the alumni. Every time students come into town, they stop by to see me. People just jump in and see me. I get calls from undergraduates, "You don't remember me, but I've got a friend who's coming," or a sister or a brother or somebody, and I say, "I do remember you."

*Before we go to that piece that I know is very much related to a number of people who you added on after you left urban studies—that is, the financial aid area—I want to stick with this point about you. I've watched it and I want to get your feeling about this, because you have a personality which has been consistent.*

I know. I tell my minister that all the time. Every time we get a new minister, I say, "When you're ready to bury me, there's one thing you've got to say, that I was consistent."

*Tell us a little bit about that consistency and how people have reacted to it.*

I think it's gotten me in more trouble than not. Maybe it's because I don't like people who are phony. I don't know how to put it. I can think back to being in fourth grade and quitting school because the teacher was messing with me. My mother went to the school the next day and said, "Look, I work in a factory. I get paid by the hour. The hours I'm not there, I don't get paid. I'm not coming back up to this school again. Don't be messing with my daughter."

I see a lot of me in both of my girls, especially my youngest daughter. I think it's going to get her in trouble because people are not tolerant anymore of outspoken black women. The mood of the '60s and '70s is gone. It is time for us to be quiet and be good little negroes, and I cannot do that. I know there's a book entitled *The Good Negro*. I might have to go buy it and read it and see what it's all about.

A lot of people don't like my directness. It's interesting. When they were considering me for the position in financial aid, I had had several run-ins with one of the aid officers, when I was in

urban studies. She used to just mess with the students. She made them jump through hoops for money. I would say, "Black people need money. Students need money. Don't play games with them. If you're playing games, then you're not helping." So one of the questions they asked my former boss was, "Well, you know she's got a temper." He said, "If that was a white male, it would be considered arrogance and it would be good. If she has an issue with somebody, she's going to bring it out and usually she's right about it." If I'm wrong, I'll tell you I'm wrong. But if I'm right, it's like a dog with a bone: I'm not going to let go until I get my point across. And I think I've mellowed. (You don't think I've mellowed. Okay, I haven't mellowed—I went through a mellowing process.)

I do remember in urban studies when I had my own personnel rep, separate from the one everyone else had, because I threatened the other one. She was messing with me, okay? I was trying to work on a degree. There were two classes I needed. I'm in summer school. I was going to school around the clock. I did not have the luxury of taking the summers off. One of the classes met in the morning at eight o'clock, so I had cleared it with the Department of Urban Studies that I would take this eight o'clock class. It was an hour class. That meant I would probably get to work by nine-thirty, but I would stay an extra half-hour or I would give up a half-hour and have a half-hour lunch. She's going to tell me, "You can't do that." I said, "Excuse me? Tell you what, you come over here to Building 7 and tell me to my face I can't do that, and your ass is going over the railing. That's not a threat, that's a promise."

So they had to get another person to be my personnel rep. "Who can you get along with over there?" But the woman was messing with me. I had been at MIT all these years. I wasn't trying to stiff anyone. The course was required. The only time it was going to meet was in the morning. I was going to have to wait another whole summer to see even if it was offered and if it was going to be offered at the end of the day. The next summer, I'm taking courses that start at five and not getting home until nine-thirty. Did I ask anybody for anything special?

So that kind of stuff just bothered me. She said, "You're going to set a precedent." Did anyone else in urban studies get a degree while I was up there? Did anybody else even care? Did anyone

have to do my work? If the professors were coming and saying this was interfering, then I could understand. But it's the summer. How many students are around during the summer? A handful. It's not the academic year. That kind of stuff.

But I think I've mellowed. I don't threaten bodily harm anymore. I'd think about it, but I don't threaten it. It's just the injustices I see that bother me.

*The kind of inconsistencies that have probably touched you and get to you more than anything else over a long period of time—having been here for a long time—could you talk a little bit about some that you have seen in the institution where we have spent pretty much our whole career?*

Okay. How can someone who's working in Personnel be allowed to physically slap another employee and not be terminated, but be found another job somewhere until things cool down? That person is still working in the Institute now. I can't even begin to remember all of them because, after a while, you just throw them out. You don't even remember them, you just throw them out.

But there are just so many things you see. You know the games they play. "You don't like working for someone, so we'll go stick you over here for a few months. I think it's the basement of Hayden Library where they've got all that extra space. You just sit there until something comes up in the *Tech Talk* that you like and we'll try to get you in there." And all the while you are still getting paid.

*Do you think qualifications play any role in employment of blacks here at the Institute?*

Yes, the qualifications. You have to be much more qualified to get a job. I think some of the people of color who work in Personnel have been gatekeepers. I had it out with a couple of people. When I was trying to hire somebody, "Well, I don't think that person is qualified." I said, "Wait a minute. I want that person to work for me. If it doesn't work out, I'll get rid of him and we'll get somebody else. Let's give the person a chance, let's give the person a chance." I think they do that much more for white folks than they do for blacks.

Only two folks in the office have master's degrees, okay? It doesn't mean anything. I would be willing to bet you if you were to lay out the salaries, I'm not the highest paid next to the director. I should be. I've got a master's. I've been in the

Institute longer than anybody. I can tell you right now who the highest paid in that office is. Why? Because to buy him back, somebody cut a deal. So we have to make less than him? Because he's male? Because he left and came back? Because he thinks he knows more? And I'm not saying this to be vicious. I like him. He's one of the few people in the Student Financial Aid Office and the Institute that I like. I can be honest with him. We feel the same way about the things we see being done to minority students. Whenever you bring it up, "Well, can you keep statistics so we can prove it?" Simple, when you say this is a black student who wants an un-cosigned loan as opposed to saying this is a student who wants a cosigned loan.

*You bring up the issue. That job there is something that maybe we could talk a little about, because that's the one that you have been in the longest.*

Yes. Let's see, I started there in '80, so it will be sixteen years in August.

*Sixteen years. That is a lot of time and experience in that area. How has that been? You've seen a lot of directors, a lot of things, and have dealt with many if not all the students of color who have come through this place.*

It's been up and down, it's been interesting. A couple of us went to visit a sick colleague the other day. He's not doing well, health-wise. I respect him, but it's interesting because I'm not sure where he falls in terms of minority students. I think part of it was that he tried to father everybody, or grandfather everybody, but I know a couple of the run-ins that I had with him were around the issue of minority students, where I think I'm fair. I think if I see a student who obviously needs to be made to toe the line, I'm going to do it, where some folks won't do it because it may be interpreted as racism or whatever. There have been minority students he's handled who have gotten to the point where it was beyond repair, and then he would dump it in my lap and say, "Can you fix this?" Then you end up with it, even though you might not have been in on it in the beginning, and everyone is looking at you.

One of the hardest things for me was when I was a freshman advisor and I had one young lady in particular—very, very difficult. She should not have been here. She was too young. She was going through a lot in terms of medication for depression and stuff, and had gotten some bad advice from her dad once about not taking her medicine

anymore and all that. She had gone through Interphase. By October, Columbus Day weekend, I was on the phone calling her father saying, “Come and get her. Take her home. Get her out of here.” There were three—at least two, maybe three—black women on the staff here who accused me of being a gatekeeper, and that I was no better than the rest of the people asking that young lady to leave. She eventually got her degree from here, but she did not need to be here that year. She had just turned seventeen. She was too young. She had a lot of problems she needed to iron out. She came back to visit me last year. She’s now got a graduate degree and is now working.

*She’s in DC, you said?*

Yes. But she put me through my paces when she was here. It was at the time I was going through my divorce. She was very, very needy, to the point that every day I had to say, “Did you bathe, did you eat, did you comb your hair, did you, did you, did you?” She went through being, “I think I’m lesbian—no, I think I’m not. I think I want to marry this African prince who already told me he has at least two other wives,” who was a graduate student here whose neck I was ready to wring. Nobody came to me and said, “You’re not trained as a counselor,” but nobody else wanted to touch it. I later found out—I guess back then Interphase used to make the selection on who to have advise the minority students—that I was basically set up. It was said, “Yes, give this one to Yvonne because she’s going to be a pain in the butt.” Okay. What can I say?

You know, what bothers me in that office is that people will not admit to being racist. I think all of us have to admit there is a bit of racism in all of us, be it color-racism, religion-racism, age-racism, whatever it is. What I’ve become more and more aware of is how treacherous white women are toward one another. If they’re going to be that treacherous toward one another, I know I don’t stand a chance. What interests me is the way they’re able to pull the wool over the director’s eyes. I guess I’m very vocal. At one point I said to him, “Can’t you see the bullshit?” “Well, you’ll have to let me know when it’s coming.” “Hello?” It’s amazing. Is it because they don’t want to see it or they really just don’t see it?

And that’s what I ask myself a lot. I go through days when I say, “Lord, help me to act

more white.” Then I say, “No, no, no, I’m only kidding.” Be careful what you pray for. My grandmother used to always say, “You’ve got to learn how to bite your tongue,” but it hurts. I had an aunt who used to say, “Your mouth has no cover.” I’d be like, “Yeah, right, it doesn’t.” I can’t think of too many things that I’ve said that I’ve regretted. Maybe the way I’ve said them could have been said differently, but the bottom line is they were the truth. That’s what really hurts. People don’t want to hear the truth. So how do you learn to get your point across without hurting anyone’s feelings and still be truthful? Some days I do a better job of it than others, but it’s a constant, constant, constant battle.

I’m constantly teaching Nicole and Kendra how to be strong black women, but not to the point where you can’t advance in white America, because that’s all there is for you.

*Well, it’s a tough one.*

And Kendra is going to have a real hard time. Nicole’s beginning to see it. I think working in Purchasing here at MIT opened her eyes.

*Is Kendra more like you?*

Yes. They both have me, but Kendra’s mouth is mine. She’ll take on anybody. I know pretty much my limits, but just recently she had a verbal tête-à-tête with a state trooper on the highway in New York or Connecticut. I can’t remember where she was because I wasn’t with her. It was a car full of kids, college students, and she said, “Mom, he went to cuff me and brushed my butt. You know it was all over. ‘You touched my backside, you dirty old man! You pervert!’” “You want to go?” He let her go. And she’ll tell you in a minute, “My father’s a cop. I know my rights.”

She’s much like a kid learning to walk. They’ll walk off the edge of the pool because they have no fear. I don’t know what it’s going to take, but I constantly talk to her about it. One of these days, someone is just going to say, “Pow! Now tell your dad.”

*Well, you know, I have more and more appreciation. People who are like that pay the price.*

Oh, yes.

*On the other hand, though, they help others.*

Well, I won’t have ulcers, that’s for sure. I don’t suffer from high blood pressure. So maybe health-wise, I’ll end up okay.

*The thing about it, which is hard and I think that's not said enough to people like you, is that you say what most of us think.*

Well, that's what I say to people even in the office. I say, "You're all thinking it. You just don't have the balls to say it." So I'm constantly out there on my own. It's not unusual to come back from a staff meeting and somebody would say, "I'm so glad you said that because I was thinking it." And I say, "Well, speak up. All you have to say is, 'Gee, I feel the same way Yvonne does.' You don't have to say the words. I've already said them. If you don't have the balls to say it in the staff meeting, send the director a note, a little e-mail."

*They won't do it.*

They won't. Oh, I know they won't. I had a woman come to me the other day, because we had a reengineering thing, and I said, "This is what I heard." And someone else said, "Oh, you didn't hear that. I don't know where that's coming from." This is the director, now. He said, "Okay." We get back to the office and she said, "I heard the same thing you did." I said, "No you didn't, because you didn't have the heart to speak up." She walked out of my office and I don't care. I said, "Don't come to me and tell me you heard it. Tell him you heard it."

*That's not new to you, I'm sure, because you've heard it all your life. But it's one of those things that I don't think is going to change any time soon.*

It won't. It's too bad, though. This is 1996 and no one could have told me when I came here in 1965 that we would be as far back. We're back to where we were then.

*That's a good point. Spend a minute or two talking about that. If you look at the '70s and all the way up to the '90s here, what has been your experience in terms of progress and where we stand now?*

There has been very little progress. There may have been some progress on the student side, in terms of the number of students we're admitting. But when I look at the number of support staff and professional staff and faculty, we've gone backwards. We've gone backwards. People joke and say, "So goes California, so goes the rest of the world—or the rest of the country." I think the anti-affirmative action thing has already latched on, we just haven't talked about it. California had the balls to say out loud what the rest of the country has been doing.

Sometimes people really realize that you have to get beyond. One officer in the office would say, "Well, some of them are Jewish," and I'd say, "When I look at a group of white women, I don't say she's Greek, she's Italian, she's Jewish, she's Polish, she's Catholic. I see white women. When you look at a group of black women, you don't stop to think she may be Nigerian, she may be Trinidadian. All you see are black women and, even more than that, you see niggers. That's all you see. So you can't count yourself. Once in a while, I may look at someone and say, 'Gee, based on that nose, she could be Jewish.' But I can't really tell the difference sometimes between Greek and Italian. I really can't. I'm not just saying that, unless they were to start speaking in their native language."

We were talking the other day and a colleague was saying how when you see a guy with dreadlocks, even if he's got a suit on, he's going to get a bad rap because that hairstyle creates a fear. I said, "Yeah, but I feel the same way. I'm saying that when I see a guy with dreadlocks, it conjures up images for me as a black woman too. That's everybody's problem. But the same way, if you see a punk rocker with spiked hair, don't you get the same feelings I get?" He said, "Yes, you're right." Yes, I'm going to clutch my pocketbook just as hard. I'm going to clutch it harder going by the punk rocker than I am a rasta in a suit. Now you get a rasta in street clothes and a punk rocker in street clothes, I'm going to clutch the bag hard for both of them.

*Based on all of your experiences here—and they're so extensive, I think it's a very important question to raise before we get to the end—what advice would you offer to other blacks who would be coming or applying to MIT as employees, a staff person, or even as support staff?*

You know what I'd like to see us do—and we did this when we were in Jim Allison's office—is have a picnic. We did it out at the Blue Hills. I remember driving my own car, but I think we supplied school buses. There were hot dogs and hamburgers, and you could bring whatever you wanted. The funny thing about it was that we sent out an invitation to all black employees and we got a call from a couple of people. At that time, it was basically black employees. We didn't have a whole bunch of Hispanics and others, but this could be all-inclusive. Some people called and wanted to know how did we know they were black. One of

them happened to be married to a distant cousin of mine—not that distant, but anyway—and I said, “Oh, so you’re not so-and-so’s wife and you’re not black anymore? Well, wait till I tell his mother.” She went off on me and I was like, “Don’t worry, don’t come to our picnic then.”

I would love to see us have a day of unity. I know the Institute would frown on that. They would be very uncomfortable with that. But I’m not saying other groups couldn’t have their day of unity either. I would love to see us do a picnic, roller-skating party, Christmas party. I think the Christmas party used to be really great. I know OME tries to do a get-together of everyone in September, but it doesn’t feel right. I don’t know. I would love to see a day so that when new employees came, they got some sort of thing like what Nelson used to organize—a way for people to just, “If you feel like it, this is what’s happening,” get together.

I think the Kwanzaa celebration is geared towards students. There’s really nothing geared towards employees, and I think we need it. I think we need something exclusive from the students because the students are going to knit together around courses, around athletics. But we don’t really have anything that we can knit together around. I’d love to see something like that happen.

*That is, for all the employees.*

All employees, but mostly service and support staff came. That’s the way that picnic worked. I’m sure I didn’t meet half the people who were there that day, but we just kind of took over Houghton’s Pond.

*Where did you have it?*

Houghton’s Pond, up in the Blue Hills.

*That was a good distance from here.*

Yes. We provided school buses that left from either West Garage or Albany Garage or somewhere, and we provided directions. (Oh, be still my heart! I just thought of someone I used to have a crush on who worked here. We went to that picnic together. Oh, my God. I wonder where he is.) You’ll get people who don’t want to come, but you’ll get people who will come and will enjoy it and will say, “When are we going to do it again?”

Talbot House is too far. We used to do it in urban studies, go up to Talbot House. But that was more a student-oriented thing. We did a couple of

things out at Endicott House in Dedham, but it’s got to be away from MIT.

*That’s very true. We need maybe to get back to that.*

Like I said, the Institute will question the whole issue of why you are going to need a day to be on your own. And there will be some people who will say, “I wouldn’t come because I don’t want a day when it’s just all minorities.” But the invitation is out there, take it or leave it.

*Hopefully, we can have some help in getting that done, possibly. Any other topic you’d like to mention before we stop?*

Other than, where is MIT’s real commitment to affirmative action? When are they going to do something about it? When are they going to hire? And I’m not talking about that watered-down job description that Personnel keeps putting in *Tech Talk*. I don’t think the vice president for human resources, as that person stands now, is qualified to be the affirmative action officer. I don’t think she’s qualified to be the vice president for human resources, but that’s neither here nor there. She can have that job if that’s what she wants. We need a real affirmative action officer reporting directly to the president and not to the vice president for human resources, and let that person decide what kind of staff they need—if this Institute is serious about affirmative action. And then they’re going to have to kick butt with the faculty, because that’s where the biggest problem lies. That’s where the biggest problem lies.



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# Technology and the Dream

## Reflections on the Black Experience at MIT, 1941–1999

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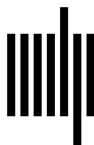
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