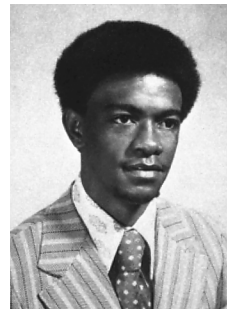


NAPOLEON NELSON

SB 1975 (management) MIT, MBA 1983 Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania; regional specialist, IBM, Kansas City, Mo., 1974–1979; senior management consultant, Ernst & Whinney, 1979–1981; managing consultant, Public Financial Management Inc. (PFM), 1983–1987; director of finance, Philadelphia Port Corporation, 1987–1990; returned to PFM as managing director in 1990; co-leader, PFM’s Strategic Municipal Consulting Practice, with emphasis on revenue raising and expense reducing initiatives to improve the long-term stability and operation of public sector organizations; certified in 1985 as a Municipal Securities Representative; treasurer and trustee, Summit Presbyterian Church; MIT Educational Counselor, 1985–1992.



I’m a managing director and part-owner of a firm called Public Financial Management. It is a financial advisory firm that advises primarily public sector clients—government, cities, counties, states, the authorities, other sorts of non-profit institutions such as hospitals and universities and so forth. We assist these entities with their capital needs—for example, if there is borrowing that they need to do to expand a water system or build a football stadium or for college dormitories and so forth. Frequently those entities need to borrow money and our firm advises them on the best ways to do that. I’ve been working here for a total of ten years and on two different tours of duty, as I call it. The firm itself is a national firm. We actually have an office in Boston. We’re headquartered here in Philadelphia, but there are offices in Boston, Atlanta, San Francisco, Newport Beach, California, and other places around the country.

That’s a little bit about the firm and my title here. My personal clients include the cities of Nashville; Portsmouth; Norfolk, Virginia; Prince George’s County, Maryland; Washington, DC, is a recent client; Clark Atlanta University, Howard University—folks around the country. That’s a bit about what I do.

It sounds like you are a very busy person. Tell us a little bit about your family—your parents and siblings—and where you grew up, as well as any highlights that come to mind about your education, particularly before finishing high school.

I grew up in Birmingham, Alabama. That’s where my mother and father and sister and brother all are

even to this day. I am my father’s son from a third marriage. He’s much older. He celebrated his ninety-fourth birthday, as a matter of fact, a few weeks back. He’s still going strong. He owns a little cafe, sort of a breakfast-lunch business in Birmingham. He’s been on the same block in Birmingham for about fifty years now. He’s a businessman and one of the hardest-working people I’ve ever known. I called him a few weeks back and he was still baking pies for Thanksgiving. I said, “Dad, how’re you feeling?” He said, “Oh, I’m a little achy.” I said, “Well, you’re ninety-four. What did you do today?” He said, “I baked fifty potato pies.” I said, “Well, that’s it. I can see why your body is achy.”

But anyway, that’s my father—hardworking. He taught me a lot in terms of money and so forth. My mother is much younger than he is. I



Edited and excerpted from an oral history interview conducted by Clarence G. Williams with Napoleon Nelson in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 21 December 1996.

would call her a country girl, probably. She grew up sort of rural, then met him. She was actually a waitress in his cafe from the early years. They met there and got married. So they have worked together throughout.

In terms of the educational side, my father had a third-grade education. He actually ran away from home when he was about thirteen years old. I think that is the way the story goes. He was from a little town in Lowndes County, Alabama, which is where the Black Panther Party had some roots. It's where it started. He was not involved in that; he was totally on the other side of that political debate. But, at any rate, he grew up there and ran away from home at thirteen. He hoboed a train and got himself all the way to Birmingham. He found a job washing dishes and never went back home. He found himself interested in the food industry—washing dishes and then waiting tables and learning how to cook.

He's really a self-made man, then.

He is indeed a self-made man, and obviously very, very strong and strong-willed. He's the kind of guy who sees black and white. I mean, there's a right answer and everything else is wrong. But anyway, that's my father.

My mother had a high-school education. It was my mother, I think, who probably instilled in me more of the need or the desire to pursue schooling and the importance of it. She put the emphasis on education in my family. My father was always at work, so she was the one who coached me and tutored me—you know, getting books and making sure I found the right schools. She even sought out the best kindergarten for me, one that had this reputation for getting kids off to a good start. So she drove me across town to this particular kindergarten. As a matter of fact, I remember that we were reading hardback books there. I'm not sure what kind of kindergarten it was, but it had a pretty strict, stern, disciplined sort of approach for those days.

So anyway, when I went to first grade—that was in the public school in the neighborhood—they were handing out the Dick and Jane books and we were already reading beyond those books. My mother then worked with the principal and said, "Well, he can read more." So they eventually skipped me to second grade. I did not really do first grade. I went straight to second.

A lot of that had to do with your mother, too.

I think so, yes. She was pretty actively involved in trying to find the right sort of situation for me.

Do you have any brothers and sisters?

I have a younger sister as well as an older brother. He's an older brother from my father's second marriage.

Who would you say, particularly before you went to college, were your heroes and role models when you look back now at that period of your life?

That's a tough question, actually. The only person, I think, was Martin Luther King. As I was growing up, he was beginning his career as a civil rights activist. I think that there was a sense of him being a hero. I can remember hearing him and how articulate he was when he spoke, how much respect he had from certain members of the community. So I think in a big way he was a role model.

I had other people that I looked up to for specific things, although I'm not really conscious of trying to imitate other people to a great extent. My father was obviously a strong presence in my life, and still is, in terms of commitment—you know, how to live our commitment and so forth. So I'd say those two people.

Do you remember the process you went through to decide which college you would go to?

Yes. I look back on it and sometimes think it's funny or almost embarrassing how little information I had, in a way. At that time I was a big fan of football, and this is what I remember. I remember always watching football on a Saturday—this is in high school—and at half-time of the football game, a college football game, they'd have these little segments about these two universities that happened to be playing. You know, they'd show "a leader in science" and they'd show some students in a lab or whatever. I'd look at that and through some combination of how well the team was doing, how well the band played, and that thirty-second spot, I started to develop some preferences for schools that I wanted to go to.

I remember Purdue University was one that I really wanted to go to. The thing that really sort of hooked me on that—in addition to the fact that they were leading at half-time in this game, probably—was that their band, the marching band, was going to go to Japan. The guy said that the band

was going to Japan, and I'm like, "Wow, that sounds really cool!" So that became a school then that I wanted to go to. Beyond that, I had some weird sense that I sort of thought I was good at math, so I was looking for sort of a math-science emphasis. You know, I just wanted to go to a place where I thought I could come out and get a good job and have some fun.

That was about it. So Purdue was on my list. The University of Alabama was on my list only because I think they were at that point in time coming out of some of the ugliness of the civil rights era, and I think there was some desire to reach out to some black students at that point.

Bear Bryant was major down there at that time, wasn't he?

Oh yes, absolutely. There are some funny stories about him, too. The University of Alabama didn't have very many black folk on the team at that time. They'd play the University of Southern California frequently. The University of Southern California would come in and just clean their clocks, right? USC would always have some black guy as tailback who'd just run for two hundred yards or something. Bear Bryant was quoted as saying that USC did more to integrate his football team than Martin Luther King did. But at any rate, I gave some thought to the University of Alabama, but I knew I really wasn't going there because I did want to leave Alabama. I felt pretty strongly about this, as did the other guys I hung out with at school. We were going to "get out of Alabama."

Eventually, my guidance counselor—really my guidance counselor and a math teacher at Ullman High School, which is the high school I attended—suggested MIT. There were a couple of people in the year before me who had been admitted to MIT. Our high school actually had a good reputation for math. We had calculus, at an all-black public high school in Birmingham. We had a couple of people who graduated from Ullman and who were accepted at MIT. One of them actually enrolled. So she said, "Maybe you ought to think about that."

I didn't give it any thought. I had never seen the place or read anything about it. I knew MIT was one of these big-time technical schools, but I said, "Okay, fine," more or less to satisfy her. I sent an application in and didn't think any more about it. Then I was accepted and everybody told me,

"You just gotta go, gotta go to MIT." That's what they told me. So I said, "Well, okay." The money was good, as I recall too, in terms of going there. So that was it.

Did you visit MIT before you actually went there?

No. I had never been in Massachusetts.

You were a brave soul.

When I think back on it, it was crazy. I actually described it to my wife that MIT was like my Ellis Island. I think I was like an immigrant to the New World. I imagine I know how immigrants feel who come to this country. I think it was even my first jet airplane ride. Somehow we had coordinated my arrival through the Black Students' Union. Some representatives were going to meet me at the airport on my flight. I forget how we communicated all that. I just got on an airplane in Birmingham and waved good-bye to my mom and dad and that silver tube just took me away and dropped me off in Boston. There were some guys there from the Black Students' Union who picked me up.

When you look back in general, what was your overall experience at MIT as an undergraduate student?

I think overall it was positive for me. Overall, it was positive from a particular perspective. You should talk to my wife about this, though, because she has a lot of opinions about it. We differ a little bit here. I think it taught me how to be a survivor. To me, that's a positive thing. I remember freshman year. As I said, I thought I was good at math when I left high school, so the world was mine. I was co-valedictorian of my high school class, hot stuff in Birmingham, and took that plane ride. And all of a sudden, I'm like nothing. I go from owning the world to being nobody.

Freshman year was like a blur, actually. It was like I didn't know what was happening to me. Just trying to understand Boston accents was hard, but then I had to deal with professors from other countries. I'm struggling just to understand what they're saying, not just the informational content. So it was like, *bang!* But I got through it. As I remember, it was a lot of pass/fail for the most part.

Yes, still is.

I got through it okay. That summer I remember thinking, "I'm going to have to get serious about this MIT thing. I probably don't have enough

good study habits.” I thought I struggled because high school was a little too easy for me and I never had to work quite this hard. So I sort of dedicated myself over the summer to really come out of the box and work hard at MIT.

I remember taking whatever—18.03, Differential Equations—and some other courses. I think I worked about as hard that year as I ever had before or have since, to be honest with you, in terms of the overall energy level and commitment to trying to get done. I basically C’d my way through that year. It was quite a thing to work that hard and still not see the kind of grades that I really wanted.

So I sat down with another guy, another African-American who lived in my dorm there, and I guess he and I were both sort of struggling through. All during this time, as I talked to my parents, they said, “Oh, Napoleon, there is no shame if you’ve got to come back home, you know, and leave that place. There are other schools. Don’t feel like you’ve got to just stay there.” So this other guy and I sat down one day at some point during our sophomore year and sort of said, “What if we don’t do the year, you know?” We felt like you hit Mike Tyson as hard as you could, you know, except he didn’t flinch. “What are we going to do? Are we going to stay here and gut it out or are we going to go on home and find ourselves another place that doesn’t have all these obstacles?” After talking back and forth, we said, “Oh, let’s stay here. We’re going to figure out a way to get out of this place.”

I remember us having this conversation, and frankly we got into trying to understand which semester to take which courses and who to try to take them from—which professors to avoid, which courses had a reputation for giving nice grades, all of that. We just started going through the network, developing strategies to try to figure it out, understanding when to drop, how incompletes work, and all that. We started working at it from that angle, and ultimately we did get out.

But I do remember that feeling of being knocked down and then trying to decide how you were going to react to that. So I think MIT helped me to learn how to work through difficult stuff.

It actually made you stronger as a person, it sounds like, to really be able to stick through tough times and such. I’ve had a number of you say that after that experience, there wasn’t very much that you were afraid of or that

you thought you couldn’t do. Is there anything like that that you think about? Does that make sense to you?

Yes, absolutely. And it’s also that you’re not afraid of anything, and to get through it you do get a sense of accomplishment. I mean, when I was at MIT, it was like awesome and I worked my way through it. You didn’t necessarily feel as if you had a whole bunch of help. You sort of feel like, hey, I got through it more or less on my own. It doesn’t mean that I got through it because I was smarter than anybody, but just that through my own initiative, through my own efforts, I got through.

The other thing—and it was something I found out about MIT students—is that it also makes you pretty humble. I don’t find too many of my classmates and peers who are really arrogant about themselves or what they have done. You come out of that, you’re pretty grounded. You don’t just come out of there feeling like you’re some real hot shot, you know. Even when you accomplish things, you’re still socially kind of conservative in terms of your outlook. You don’t take yourself too seriously, I think.

When I look at all of you across the board, over a thousand black graduates here, there’s only a small percentage of you who decided to do an undergraduate degree in the business area. Was there any reason that you can think of that made you move in that direction?

I started out in civil engineering and I went through about two and a half years. In fact, I finished all of the requirements. It was in my junior year, as I remember, when I switched to management—maybe even second semester of junior year at that. And it was a particular course that led to the switch. I’ll always remember this, too. I was taking the Structures course. There were probably a half dozen core civil engineering courses. I was in Structures and we had a problem set, I guess they still use that term?

Yes, they do.

We had a problem set where there was a cross-section of a bridge and you had about a hundred rivets all over this section of the bridge. The assignment was to calculate the force on each rivet—north, south, east, and west—you know, the force on each rivet. I guess we got that assignment on a Friday and it was due on Monday. I remember sitting at my desk with this problem set, “Well, I’d better jump on this assignment, you know, and get it done so I can turn it in Monday.” I frankly also

remember a good friend of mine who was also from Ullman who went to Boston University, and they partied a little bit better than we did. He was making me aware of some party, and I remember sitting there looking at this problem set and thinking, “You know, I could do this. It’s going to take me a lot of time to get this thing finished, but I’m not sure I want to do this for a life’s work, even though I can.”

So I sat there and felt, “Oh my gosh, so what do I do?” And I remember right then going back through the course catalogue and looking at all the things that I had and what I could do. There were a few alternatives where I could make this late switch and still get out close to on time, if you will. Management was one of them. I could drag along a lot of civil engineering and carry it as a minor or something. I had some interest in business because my father was a businessman. So I looked at business and finance. As I said, I thought I was good at math, but I was good at numbers—and they’re quite different at MIT. I didn’t realize that until after I’d gotten there. The abstract sort of study of math was not something that I had any particular skill in, but numbers I could manipulate in my head.

That fits right into management.

That’s right, exactly. So I ended up finding my home there, in a way.

Now that you mention, for example, what your father was doing and also what you really liked and so forth, it was a place that allowed you to be able to somehow or another figure that out. You figured it out for yourself, in a way. It wasn’t as haphazard as a lot of people may think sometimes.

Yes. It was sort of this event, you know, this thing that happened, this combination of things—this particular homework assignment and other thoughts that I had regarding what I wanted to do with my time.

You had to come to grips yourself as to just really what you wanted to do and what you didn’t want to do.
Right, right.

What would you say was best about your experience at MIT, and what would you say was worst?

I guess a couple of things. Actually, it is probably a tie for best. I think one thing is somehow being able to look back on it as a place in my life that helped make me a survivor and helped me to

understand what that means. It invented an environment where I had to make decisions, where I had to begin to come to grips with what I did and didn’t do well and how to get myself up off the floor. I think back kindly on that. Also, some of the people—I mean, a lot of the black students, African-Americans, were very close during those years and I think that was also important. I’ve got some friendships that continue to this day. So that was a very positive piece of it as well.

On the negative side, for me, anyway, MIT is a place that chips away at your self-esteem. It can be kind of rugged in that way. It felt a little hostile as an environment. There were instances where I went to talk to the professor because I didn’t understand something and he gave me the teaching assistant. I would go to the teaching assistant and they wouldn’t want to spend any time with me either. Many times I almost had to demand their attention. And they’d say, “Well, I don’t know, maybe you’re not getting it, maybe you ought to drop this course.” You get that kind of thing. It’s sort of discouraging. It’s not affirming. It’s hard to think of it as affirming—for me, anyway.

But also, interestingly, because of the times, one of the first difficult things that I did involved not the white professors or teaching assistants but, ironically, the Black Students’ Union. As I said, there were these black students who met me at the airport and took me to MIT. Then about a day or two later, as I remember, within the first week—probably it was orientation week—I’ll never forget they took me to a place that was over in Roxbury. There was a lot of civil rights activism going on at the time. They took me to this place and I can’t think of the name of it now. It would be like a House of Umoja or something here in Philadelphia. It was like some institute and there were just people—sort of radical young thinkers, black thinkers—who were talking about things.

It wasn’t the Freedom House, was it?

It could have been. At any rate, we went to this place that basically served as an archive for black militant action. I’ll never forget, one of the things that they did was they talked about the King Arthur Plan. They took us in this room and they had maps on the wall and lots of stuff like that. The maps were all of the locations where nerve gas was being stored in the country. And the message was, basically, that the white man has these places all

just ready for black people like us and they were going to round us up one day. It was like going to be the Holocaust all over again. I remember being very nervous.

So anyway, MIT was sort of hostile in one way. Also, I felt there was this racial hostility in the environment. So that was kind of tough to integrate. You sort of became very distrustful of people in general.

Well, it was a tough time, like you say—that period, the early '70s. Civil rights in this country were going through some real tough times. In fact, when you look at it, that whole decade is where we actually made some major efforts based on just demonstrations and things of that kind.

Yes. Oh, yes.

What would you say about people whom you met at MIT who were influential on your career?

I think about the things that I worked on and the places, civil engineering. There were not a lot of influential people for me. I remember Dean Hope. As I recall, she was dean of student affairs. I remember her. She was kind of like mom away from home. So I have memories of her being there and sharing conversations with her and her trying to help me think through and work through things.

I really never connected with other faculty or staff to a great extent. There were other people I knew, but I never really got close enough to share a whole lot of things with them about the place. So, there weren't a lot of people, actually.

Incidentally, that's not unusual from what I've heard a number of you say, particularly in that period like '70 to '75 or '76. It was a tough time. That group of you had to fight to make some of the things that we are able to benefit from, that our students benefit from now. A lot of things your group—that first five, six years of the '70s period—really had to create, many of the people in the '80s have benefited from.

That's good. I'm glad to think that there are some things that came out of it.

Based on your own experience, is there any advice you might offer to other black students who would be entering or planning to enter MIT?

I don't know. It's interesting you raise that, because I've got a son who is a junior in high school and he's starting to think about schools. In school he's scored pretty well in math on the PSAT's and

such, so he might be considering MIT and I've been in that mode of trying to think about colleges and students going there. I would hope that in part what you said is true, that it's a little different now than it was then.

I think if I had to give advice, I'd almost want to go back to see how MIT feels now versus when I was there. If I were advising some kid to go to the MIT that I went to, I might say that you just need to be prepared to be sort of flexible and nimble in terms of how the place might buffet you around a little bit. Don't dig your heels in too much as you deal with MIT—sort of watch it, go with it. I would say also try to be a little broader in terms of your friendships there, really do try to get to know people to a greater extent than I did, try to find more roots in the place than I did.

It's a very valid, important point that you're making. I've had just this last two days a couple of people who have said that if they had to do it again they would actually broaden their experiences a little bit more. I don't know how it was when you first got there, but MIT has changed tremendously in the sense that if you look at the undergraduate student body, most of the recruiters who come are shocked. You're talking about over thirty percent of the undergraduate population being Asian students. It's almost shocking when you walk on the campus and you see mostly people of color. You're talking about over fifty percent. It's amazing. That's the shift, you see. So some of the later-year graduates are saying they would take advantage of that rich culture—people coming from all over the world and that kind of thing.

That's great. I can believe that that change would happen. Even with my kids, I know that the kind of high school experience they had is just quite different from the high school experience I had. My son turns towards groups—people he talks to—that are a very diverse body of people. So that's great. I'm going to have to get back up there and spend some time walking the campus again.

Would you send your son or daughter to MIT? Where do you come down on that? I know your wife probably has her views as well.

She does. They're different from mine, but I think she would agree that MIT has served us very well in terms of the kinds of things that we've been able to do since then. I mean, there is a perception in the marketplace about an MIT degree that says something to people in a way that even Harvard or Yale doesn't say to people.

Could you say more about what it says?

I do a lot of recruiting here for my company. We go out to interview undergraduates from around the country, and an MIT degree says you're solid, generally sort of solid and competent. It's not like you're somebody's son or daughter. Generally, it's something about you as an individual. It's not a legacy thing, or at least that's the view of it. If it's MIT, then you know that these people are sort of solid citizens. Certainly there's the technical piece of it, but yes—just solid. I mean, sometimes you go to other places and find a lot more b.s. artists. MIT people are not generally thought of as b.s. artists.

And you can relate to that too, can't you?

That's the truth. One way or another you had to work awfully hard.

That's right, there are no honorary degrees at that place. I mean, you have got to earn it.

Yes. And I think even my wife, though I won't try to preview her comments, is not quite as positive as I am, but I think that she would even agree that it has served her well. People see that MIT and say, "Oh, MIT!" Sometimes we're embarrassed because people think that we're rocket scientists or something, you know. Of course, they want to then come to us about some technical question—"Well, what do you think about microbiology or quantum mechanics?" And I say, "Well, I don't know."

So I would say yes. If I thought that my kid had the right kind of skill and aptitude for the MIT that I know of, I'd send him, absolutely.

Is there any other topic, any other issue, that comes to mind as you reflect on your own experience and on the experience of other blacks at MIT?

We've talked about the academic side of things, we've gotten into the social side of things. It's funny—as I got your letter and talked to one of the gentlemen—the young man, I guess, who's working with you on setting up interviews and things—it did sort of strike me that there are a lot of people that I want to touch base with now. I think that we're all getting to be forty-something, I guess, and a lot of us, I'm sure, are doing things and going places and it would be nice to kind of catch up with each other to figure out how we could perhaps be helpful to each other yet again. Time gets away from you a little bit. You spend a lot of time and energy in other places. For me, this feels like a way to tie back in.

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Technology and the Dream

Reflections on the Black Experience at MIT, 1941–1999

By: Clarence G. Williams

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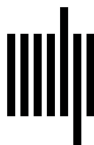
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