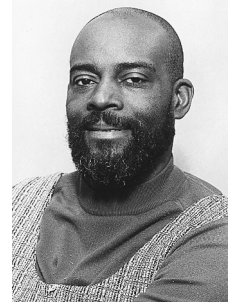


MELVIN H. KING

b. 1928, BS 1951 Claflin College, MEd 1952 Boston Teachers College; United South End Settlement Community organizer for the Community Assembly for a Unified South End (CAUSE); director, Youth Opportunity Center, Youth Training and Employment Program, and Detached Youth Program; executive director, Urban League of Greater Boston, 1967-1971; lecturer in urban studies, MIT, 1971-1976; adjunct professor, 1976-1996; helped organize and directed MIT's Community Fellows Program, bringing minority community activists and government officials to MIT for study and research; served five terms in the Massachusetts state legislature, 1973-1983; candidate for mayor of Boston, 1979 and 1983, and for US congressman, 1986; recipient, NAACP Man of the Year Award, 1966.



My mother was from Guyana and my father was from Barbados. They met and married in Nova Scotia, where my oldest brother was born. On the ship on the way back to Barbados, my oldest sister was born. They lived in Barbados a few years and then left to come to Boston. The rest of us children—seven in all—were born here in Boston's South End, where I still live.

I attended schools in the South End—the Quincy School, where Tunney Lee was a student. I then went to the Abraham Lincoln and the Boston Technical High School, where I graduated in '46. In '47 I went to Claflin College in Orangeburg, South Carolina. I graduated in '51 and went to Boston State College—it was Boston Teachers College then—and received my master's in education.

Then I started working. I taught school and then left to do youth work. I taught at Boston Trade, a high school, and the next year I was assigned to Boston Technical High School. After teaching there a month, I was offered a job at Lincoln House, where I worked part-time as a youth worker. I decided I would move from teaching into youth work, and later became the director of the youth services program.

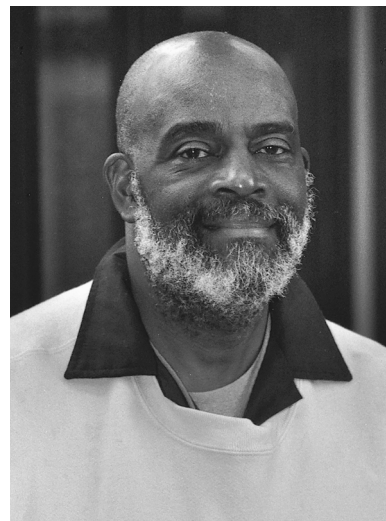
Is there a reason why you decided to switch from teaching?
It gave me an opportunity to do something more directly with young people. I had been a camp counselor. There were a lot of young people, my brother included and others, who were coming up and I thought it was an opportunity to work with them in a different way.

I started working with the youth on the street corners in 1953. At the same time, I was working

on a master's. I ran the after-school program for Cambridge Community Center and worked evenings at the Lincoln House in the South End of Boston. One of the folks at the Lincoln House gym was Ron Crichlow's father. He came up in the neighborhood.

Talk a little bit about the roles you felt were necessary during that period of time. It seems to me that you spent a lot of time working with youth, and that has been something you have been very committed to for such a long time.

I always wanted to do what my big brother was doing, working with street-corner youths. It's interesting that Chester Pierce, when we spoke the other night, talked about my brother. Chet worked with us. I learned a couple things from Chet in that regard. A couple of us were on the basketball team—we were sixteen—and we were supposed



Edited and excerpted from an oral history interview conducted by Clarence G. Williams with Melvin H. King in Boston, Massachusetts, 21 May 1996.

to play in a league for fifteen and under. He helped us to see that we should take the challenge of playing in the senior league, so that the others could play, even though they were not the best players. Anyway, the long and short of it is that we went into the senior league instead of the intermediate league—and we won it. It kind of influenced us to take on a challenge. That's been something that has stuck with me.

Then there was the role that my brother played, because he was there. He went with us wherever we played, and we played all over the city of Boston—East Boston, South Boston, and Hyde Park. He was there and he had a pickup—a little truck that he drove for work—and we would always sit in the back of it.

In any event, in my life there were always these adults who cared about us and who worked with us and who exhorted us and talked to us about issues of race and responsibility. That's the thing I don't think we do enough of with today's youth. It's interesting in a way because you shouldn't have to, at some level. But at another level, it's unreal if you don't. So there were people who said, "Listen, the reality is that you can't be as good as them, you have to be better than them." I mean, that's part of what got us to win that league, in that we just had to be better. And so that was always a piece of the upbringing.

There's something about playing basketball that deals with this whole issue of teamwork. It's something you can learn from that spreads in a community. Talk a little bit about that.

I think the thing was, being a youth at a time when there were folks around who helped you to understand what working together could accomplish. It was not only what we did on the basketball court, it was what we had to do to get uniforms—fundraising events. We just did a lot of things together, whether it was selling raffle tickets or whatever. It was a kind of pooling of our resources, so that kind of team thing is what comes out of that. You're not only a team on the floor, you're a team on the street, you're a team in all that you do.

So when I started working with youth, I just remembered all the ways people were supportive of me. I decided that if, in my work, we could get some of those things to happen for youth, that could make a difference. Because of wanting to do

what my big brother was doing, I realized that if I was going to get the youth who were on the street corners and in potential trouble to do something different, then I had to get their older brothers and sisters—the young adults—doing things differently. So we started out organizing those folks to be football teams or whatever. And then subsequently, in the next three or four years, we would have seniors and juniors. That's the way we did it, and they all gave dances and did whatever to raise money for their uniforms.

There was a time when I worked at Hampton Institute—from 1964 to '68, I think it was. The interesting thing about that period was that there were a number of young men who came to Boston—Rudy Pierce, John Marshall, Joe Thompson. Sid Holloway was in that group, too. There was a host of them. I've talked to them since, and they really talk about the influence that you and some of the other key leaders had on their lives.

Clarence "Jeep" Jones, Clyde Crawford—we all grew up under that motto. We all had my brother and Chet Pierce, and then there were the people at the church. We came along—Pete Roach, Ed McClure. We had our crew—Mike Haynes, Rindge Jefferson. There were all these folks and we worked with the youth. It's interesting because what Joe said was that somehow the next group didn't do it, so there's been this generation gap and maybe two now. Then there's Al Kinnit and some of those folks, but they just didn't seem to have the institutional connections that we did—St. Mark's, Norfolk House, Shaw House, South End Settlement House, et cetera. So some of that combination of community settlement houses and the churches and their roles seems to have gone.

When you look back at that, what do you think went wrong?

I don't know. It's interesting you say, "What went wrong?" because I think we did some things that went right. I was talking to Chet Pierce a few years ago. I interviewed him and he talked about the issue of predictability in structures, that our lives were more predictable, that there were more structures, that there were certain things that we knew, that there were certain kinds of boundaries around us. Let's just take the automobile. Not having an automobile, the distance you could go from your house for an activity was with the T and the times you could go were limited by when that was available. That's just an example. But right now, youth

set no limits to where they can go, so that the boundary of connecting back isn't there. I think it's something we maybe should think about now.

There was another boundary, and it's a boundary about what we had to do. Joe was remembering Clyde Crawford at his memorial. What Clyde used to tell him was, "Never be in a photo finish with a white person, because they always give it to the white person." Incidentally, Minister Louis Farrakhan also attended that memorial service. Joe said, "Win by five yards." Then there's no question.

That's what we came up with. The part of the boundary I'm talking about is that we knew what we had to do. It was always, "This is why we're doing what we're doing." My father would say, "Don't take anything from anybody, but if they do and they're bigger than you, and you have to, you pick up the stick." But then he would tell me about how it was being the only black person working and how you didn't take any stuff from folks, but that you did your work and you knew you had to be the best.

And so this got played out on the street like this. We used to play stickball. He would watch out the window. I can remember if I went to camp and came back, he'd say, "Well, Maxie hit three sewers." They were on the street, you know, the sewers. They were the markers. So obviously I had to hit between three-and-a-half and four. It was the same with school, the same push. If my older brother came in with words that were misspelled, my father would be on his case. I'd listen to all of this and you know I wasn't going to misspell any words. I was studying spelling words until he died.

So you learned by looking up.

But see, all those kinds of boundaries were there. I don't want to call them boundaries, but they were there. I don't think the young people have a sense of the history of the importance of race in this country. I'm not talking about racists. I'm talking about understanding that this is something that has to happen now. Why should they? On the other hand, it's real. So that's a piece of what, I think, is missing when you say, "What went wrong?" I don't know what went wrong. All I can speculate on is the kinds of boundaries that held us together.

Externally, white oppression keeps us together. However, internally we have a sense of what we need to be about. This country doesn't

have a real sense of purpose. Jesse Jackson was right about keeping hope alive. People thought he was talking about the black folk, and he was talking about the country.

So there is, I think, this illusion—illusion is my word. I'm thinking there was this delusion about what had happened with the civil rights movement. We thought we overcame for a moment. It's been a long moment. We got people elected to office, we got the schools, we got all these things. However, the fact is that the structural issues in this society have not changed. It appeared as if the outside oppression was lessening, but in fact it hadn't. Our guard was let down and people saw themselves being more like what was not good to begin with.

We, my generation, knew why we were going to school. It was to lift up the race. But why should it now? The race was lifted up. But we knew why. I don't think young people today know why they're going to school. There's no sense of purpose, no sense of direction, and less hope. It's mostly because it's what adults display, rather than where the youth are. And so we have people without hope. Why expect the youth to have hope?

You did a lot of youth work, particularly in the early phase of your career, but at some point you decided you wanted to really get into politics in a much bigger way. I don't know what caused you to do it and when, but could you talk a little bit about the highlights of that period, as well as why you chose to move in that direction?

This is a really interesting thing, because in some way I've always been very political. I was elected citywide to be in charge of, or part of, a tribunal—three of us—who dealt with young people who shined shoes and sold newspapers and who were violating the terms of the license they had. You had to show a license for shining shoes. It was a citywide election. You had to have a license to vote in this particular election. The young people I grew up with—Italian, Greek, and Jewish—were on the corner one day. They decided—I was fourteen, I was in ninth grade, most of them were older than I was, in the tenth grade or in high school—that I should run, and I ran. They did the work in the schools and I won. We were organized. We ran. I got my folks to vote in school. When I went down to the first meeting, I know they were shocked because this little black person walked in as one of them.

So that was kind of my first taste of electoral politics and process. That was probably the first Rainbow Coalition. I think the thing that really tipped me into wanting to do that was when I was practice teaching in South Carolina. I went to Clafin and I started practice teaching in a place called Bowman, South Carolina. It was a school—wooden frame, potbellied stove, outhouses—in 1951. I passed a white school in the area built in brick, with gym, swimming pool, etc. I knew the conditions. I had been there now four years. Incidentally, going South to college was probably the most important thing I did. I then decided, I can even remember the place I was where I said one day, “I’m going to be elected to do something about this.” I was in college, and it was senior year.

What you saw in the South had a lot to do with it. It was the practice teaching. I had seen this stuff in the South. I had been all over—Georgia, Florida—and it wasn’t like I didn’t know South Carolina, but there was something about this contrast and contradiction that made me say, “I’ve got to do that.” I just knew I wanted to speak about this in the electoral process. And I wanted to be active in what else was going on down there when decisions were being made about the work in the NAACP, and their Legal Defense Fund challenged the pieces. It was Judge Waring who said something about what was going on in South Carolina in the schools and the money, et cetera, so they tried to do something which was a reinforcement of *Plessy v. Ferguson*.

However, black people were challenging different aspects of it. People think the 1954 decision was important, but there had been a lot of efforts. Reading *The State*, which was the name of the paper there, we got all the information. You were in it, we were in it, I was in it. I don’t know, it just hit me that I needed to do that. That was kind of when I had a sense of wanting to be active in politics. I was twenty.

How about this strategy from that point on? You did some incredible things over that time. Between that time and the time you decided you wanted to move into an arena like this—MIT—there were some incredible things you did, so you had to have some strategy about how you were going to move. You came back to the North, you began to develop your strategies, and began to move into certain positions. Talk a little bit about that.

Well, I don’t know about a strategy. Some of the things may have been opportunistic—something happened, I was there. I guess if I think about moving from teaching to the settlement on the streets, it was a conscious decision about where I could reach more youth and kind of sustain that. I put fifteen years into building programs for youth, organizing, et cetera, and then was part of this network with Clarence “Jeep” Jones and Jack Shelbourne and folks we’ve described before, in the ’50s. We did that work and worked on the street corners. You could begin to see how some of your work was being frustrated because of other institutions, particularly the schools.

There was an analysis we did that showed a number of young people were dropping out of school. They would come in and say they wanted to get jobs. What can you do? We can’t do anything about it. Then you could get some jobs. Then the question, “Well, why are you dropping out?” So we began looking at what was going on in the schools.

That modeling thing we talked about, the approach then was to see if we could get some of them going to college. We proved that if we got the older ones playing football, then the young ones would do so. Now we said, “If we can get them going to college, finishing high school and going to college, we could begin to get that happening.” And it works, it works, it works.

So we started doing that, which meant tutoring programs, et cetera. At about that time there was the business with this Supreme Court’s decision. Things were beginning to jump around the civil rights movement—Rosa Parks. I remember when the sit-ins took place in Greensboro. Those things were happening and so you began to say, “Well, there’s nothing wrong with the youth. There’s something wrong with these institutions, but we’ve been operating like there was something wrong with the youth.” I said, “Well, one of the things you have to do is to deal with schools.”

So we started organizing around the schools. Then the question of the School Committee came up and I expressed some interest. One of the persons who was on this committee for Boston public schools said, “Well, are you interested?” Roy Richardson was a member and wanted to know if I’d come to meetings. This was 1961.

Then I got more involved with the NAACP, with the education committee. When you talk

about what went wrong, I'm not sure anything went wrong, but I do think about the fact that here was the NAACP and people said they weren't doing anything. But the other side of it was that anybody who was doing anything political in the country had been exposed to the NAACP. So if you look at the different folks who did things in the '60s in Boston, you go back and most of us had been members of the NAACP.

The other piece I didn't talk about was that I was a member of the Young Progressives, which was a real left-sponsored organization. It was as close to Communist as one could be. It was never labeled as such, however. One of the persons I got exposed to was Paul Robeson. When I was eighteen or nineteen, I used to go to these meetings over on Mass Ave., between that and the NAACP. I remember a hot afternoon in June at Liberty Hall—that's a place in Dudley Station—and people in there were packed. It was hot, and Paul Robeson spoke and sang. I was awed by him. He was magnificent. He was a football player, all-American, he sang, he was a lawyer—everything. I remember when I met his son and then later his granddaughter.

See, I don't think many of today's youth have this kind of experience. I don't think they have black newspapers in their houses. We had the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the *Baltimore Afro-American*, the *Chronicle*, the *Guardian*. We went to the barber-shop, they were there—celebrities in these papers. So it seems to me when you ask what happened, all these things fed into our race consciousness. I didn't know about Claflin before I went there.

Here's another piece about this, because it proves my impression. Because of segregation, people who wanted to get their degrees in sacred theology, and who lived in the South, would go to Morehouse or Morris Brown or Claflin—one of those schools for their undergraduate degree. Then they had to come North to schools like Boston University, the Episcopal Theological School, or Harvard Divinity School for their advanced degrees.

Boston College?

No, not BC. But when they came to the churches here to do their internship work, we had contact with these folks from these schools by going to our Sunday school and church. And because they couldn't study there, they came here. Otherwise, we wouldn't have been exposed to as many black

people who had been in college, who could talk about Wiley in Texas, who could talk about Lincoln in Missouri or Lincoln in Pennsylvania, all those kinds of schools that were down there—except we didn't have anybody from Claflin until I finished high school.

There was a guy named Chuck Mosely, who had been teaching at Claflin. He said to one of my friends, Bill Smith, who became a U.S. Assistant Commissioner of Education—"They're looking for people who play football and other sports at Claflin College." But my folks wouldn't let me go because my mouth was too big at that point. My brother told my mother that she should not let me go South, because he knew I would get into trouble. Anyhow, the next year the coach came up and sat in my mother's kitchen and said he would take care of me if I did attend. And he did. It was a good move.

But I guess the point here is that segregation got us exposed to the folks who came North. We had all that material. I had gone through that kind of exposure when we started working, and that was what I wanted to do in the community—get those kinds of things going. And it worked. We started getting young people going to college. One of the most exciting days working was when a youngster came in and said to my co-worker, "Gus! Gus! I want to go to college, too. Jerry's brother is going and I know I'm smarter than he is." The names are not accurate, but the scene is absolutely true.

So when you're asking about where the political move came from, that's what happened. We began to see that things weren't going on in school. We were into pushing and being available. Then I ran for office and got involved with the NAACP. That's when I worked with Ruth Batson, who had been working in the settlement house. She had also run for school committee in '59, unsuccessfully. So we teamed up with Paul Parks and others, got the education committee moving, and then we got into negotiations with the school department. From then on I was in the middle of everything.

Then I went to work at the Urban League. That was in 1967 to '71.

So you worked for the NAACP.

No, no. I was head of their education committee, which was not a paid job. From '51 to '67, I worked in youth work, whether at Cambridge Community

Center or the United South End Settlements. From '67 to '71, I worked for the Urban League. From '71 to the present, I've been here at MIT. So essentially, I've had three jobs—four years, fifteen years, and twenty-five years.

You never held a position in the state at all?

I was elected. I was a state legislator for ten years, but I was here at the same time.

Talk a little bit about your political career, along with coming to MIT.

I think what might be important to understand is that, in coming to MIT, we had just come out of working in the Urban League. This was in 1971. We had the issues with Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, assassination and the riots, and then we had the situation with Tent City in Boston, where we took over the parking lot, around getting housing built. Moving over to MIT was very interesting, in that the first office space was Building 9. I walked around here and said, "The walls are white, the ceiling's white, and the people are all white." So I asked them to take me out of there and moved over to Kendall Square, to E49, which was the Urban Systems Lab. What then happened there was this race for Congress, with Hubie Jones running in 1972.

Let me just back up before I say that. A couple of things came together. I was on the ward committee, and a couple of members from the ward committee had tried to get elected from Ward 4. Then we had a double district that combined Wards 4 and 10, which was Jamaica Plain and Mission Hill. They had more registered Democrats, so what usually happened was that the Ward 4 person would do okay in Ward 4 but would get a handful of votes in Ward 10. The Ward 10 people would get a handful of votes in Ward 4, but because the number of Democrats in Ward 10 was much greater, they always got more votes in Ward 10 than the total others got in 4 and 10.

So the ward committee then decided that it made some sense for me to run, because they thought I could not only get votes in the South End but I could get votes in Ward 10. I said to them, "Look, I'm going to Barbados and Guyana with my family." This was in July. I said, "I'll take out the papers. I'll give you the papers, you get the signatures and when I come back, if you get the signatures, you have to set up a meeting for a committee that's going to do the fundraising and all

that." It's a point I've always tried to make—you don't run yourself, you run with a group or as part of a group that decides they want to run and you become the candidate for them.

So that happened. When I came back from Barbados and Guyana, they had the signatures. We had a meeting either the same night I got back or the next night, and we put out a plan because you have to raise the money. They said, "This is how we raise money," and they started collecting some then. And then they said, "We have to talk about what the platform is. You have to say what you want." So it is strictly built from the ward committee. This was not something I was going to do. When you have that kind of base, it was an easier thing to do.

So then, as we were in the program, Hubie decided he was going to run for Congress because Congressman McCormick had retired. In any event, one of the things that came together was the fact that my running gave some impetus to Hubie's campaign, because I had a base in the South End and in Mission Hill. As a matter of fact, other than Roxbury, the places where he did well was where I did well. So we brought people out.

I was elected to the state legislature in 1972, with the term beginning in January 1973. I stayed in office until the first week of January 1983, when the best legislation in the country to divest from South Africa was passed. We learned to use the legislative process. I worked. I was on the education committee, the health care committee, and the committee on natural resources. We were able to do some things in all those areas in terms of particular issues that we were concerned about. One of the first pieces of legislation I got through was the Massachusetts Farm and Gardening Act, which turned over state land to people so they could use it to grow food. A lot of these neighborhood community gardens began to emerge as a result. One of the reasons I got into gardening came during a campaign meeting with some Latino folks who said, "Listen, why can't we use some of this land to grow food?" This was the land that had been taken for the highway. We were still in the process of trying to stop the highway, which we eventually did. Roxbury Community College sits on that land today.

So I filed the legislation which eventually led to the Massachusetts Farm and Gardening Act. In the meantime, I got a number of bucks in the bud-

get to hire some of those folks to clean the land up and to put a fence around the area. That was great, we were on our way, I got the legislation through for the community gardens, et cetera. It was a major piece of our first term in the legislature.

One thing we were able to do was use MIT as a way to bring community, university, business, and the legislative process together. Out of this we developed the Wednesday Breakfast Club. Now let me go back to the Southwest Corridor, because one piece of it I talked about was the garden piece. Well, we wanted to file legislation so that all the community groups that had come together to stop the highway would have a way to do some economic development. So we first filed what we called the Southwest Corridor Development Corporation, which was going to make it like Massport and others—the Turnpike Authority—so that they could float bonds and do that kind of business. The folks thought we should have some other thing that would allow for economic development to take place. And so, having filed legislation, it became a question of figuring out what that entity could be. Well, it subsequently got to be the Massachusetts Community Development Finance Corporation—the first to legitimize community development corporations in the country, a quasi-public organization with the capacity to work with businesses that created jobs paying above minimum wage and in areas where unemployment was high.

To get to there, we set up what was called the Wednesday Breakfast Club. Initially, we were meeting and folks said, “We can’t meet this day, we can’t meet that day.” I said, “Listen, if you can come Wednesday mornings early, I’ll fix breakfast.” I had a couple of things in mind. The Community Fellows met on Tuesday nights and we used to have food catered in, and it looked very obvious to me that most of the evenings there would be some food left over. And so I said, “I’m going to put it in a little refrigerator,” and the next day I would heat up the food and the folks would come for breakfast. Or I would fix up food and make stuff. I invented a lot of different kinds of foods and dishes with what I call “luck-ups.”

What I meant by luck-ups is that I’d come in and there would be some ingredient missing, so I would look and see whatever else was there. If I didn’t have butter, I figured out that I could use salad dressing. Or I’d make grits. Or if I had grits

that had been left over, I’d bring them in and then I’d put them in the oven and bake them. So there was always something—putting salmon in the bottom, pouring corn bread over it. That’s one of my favorite dishes now. But the luck-up was that you just threw it together and you “lucked up.” But the folks, they ate everything. Some time I should do a recipe book with all the food I put together.

So by bringing those people together every Wednesday morning for five years, we were able to put together legislation and go through the process. I understood that if you want to get a piece of legislation through that people think is very complicated and long, one of the things you want to do is make it a study. You get people together and make it a study. I got to be one of the chairs of the study committee. Then we could use the Commerce and Labor Committee staff, and if we got money for this study, which I did from Ford Foundation once, we could hire people to do the work.

So we did that. We did the political work that was necessary to get people on board. One of the stories I have to tell is that John Finnegan, who was then chair of the Committee on Ways and Means, responded to our first proposal saying, “That communist, socialist legislation would never get through here.” And guess who went to the microphone advocating for it, after the people in his neighborhood got to him about the importance of this legislation?

At those breakfasts, all the mayor’s and governor’s candidates would come. Anybody who had an economic development idea would come to these breakfasts and meet. We had Michael Dukakis, we had Ed King, we had Frank Hatch. A number of people running for office would come and we would ask them questions. And it was the same for other people with different legislative ideas. We in the Wednesday Breakfast Club influenced a lot of the state’s economic development legislation.

Who were some of those people?

DeForrest Brown, who was with one of the organizations, Belden Daniels, Dave Smith. There was somebody who was with Circle, Bennett Harrison from the faculty, and Sandy Kaplan from the Commerce and Labor staff. There were a couple of people—George Morrison and my brother Lloyd from Roxbury Action Program (RAP). There

would be some of the students who were in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning. A number of participants in the Breakfast Club, interestingly enough, went on to get into jobs in the city working for my opponent in the mayoral race in 1983. We did a number of things with Community Development Finance Corporation and Community Economic Development Assistance Corporation, and we had a major impact on several other economic development programs.

I remember something, I guess it was shortly after I came here, when I first met you. There was something that you had done either here at MIT or somewhere else, I think it may have been here, where you wanted to make a point about something and you took garbage and put it on a table. What was that all about?

Well, we were at the Urban League. We would go to the United Way and ask them for more money to do the programs, and we kept getting shot down. It turned out the reason we were getting shot down was that we were organizing workers to get jobs in the construction industry. The people who were on the allocations board were union members—union leadership—and they were shooting us down because we were challenging them, you see. Their view of what the United Way should fund was non-threatening organizations.

They had this big luncheon where they would make their fundraising report. I guess it was at the Park Plaza. I think it had another name then, the Statler. So we went down and we marched in. We came with garbage bags and marched to every table, picked the scraps off the tables, and then went to the microphone and said, as we dropped the scraps over the people, that we were not going to take scraps from the table any more. And we withdrew from the United Way.

And you know what happened? Later in the month, at an Urban League meeting in St. Louis, several people from cities across the country came up and started thanking me—“The United Way increased our allocation directly related to what you did in Boston.” This was their local United Way, because this thing ran around the country. Then they changed the allocation policies here.

I knew it had a major effect because we heard a lot about it on this campus. Even the top administration here, I think, became a little more afraid when you went there and stood for something. Could you tell us, when you think about the time you've spent at MIT—and you've

spent a lot of time with the students, with a set of courses, and the Community Fellows Program particularly—what are the highlights for you in terms of what you have done here?

I don't think about what I've done. I think more about what the people who have come to the Program have done. I think in the last several years—and, actually, throughout—that there has been a real recognition on the part of the students of the valuable connections to reality and program and ideas that have come from the Community Fellows. I don't think there can be any question about the impact that has had on the students. I think it's even more significant on the part of black MIT students, who find few persons who talk “real” about their lives.

I think there's one thing with what turned out to be a course in indigenous planning. Note that I'm talking about the students, not necessarily the Community Fellows. Students came who were concerned about what had happened in their planning and institutional policy course. They felt shut out because the paradigms didn't recognize them. So I said to them, “Well, why are you complaining? Why don't you run your own course?” So sure enough, they did. It wasn't making a big leap. Recently there was published this *Journal of Indigenous Planning*, and that's a direct result of that approach. In between, they ran their course and the feedback they got was good. They went before all the student body and the department, and talked about their course and about the fact that they thought they were developing this fifth paradigm.

I think that way of working with and getting students to look at their own power and capacity to teach and to do things is the kind of thing I liked about being here. I like the course I worked in called “Peace, Justice, and Development.” I think getting something like that, so they were talking about issues of peace and justice in the planning school—and at MIT—is imperative in a planning school, a school where there's urban studies.

The first time we did the course, I advertised it as one in which, if you come, it's because you want to shape the course. Don't come if you do not want to be involved in planning the course and take some responsibility for it. Well, people must not have believed me because they came and I said, “Okay, I'm going to tell you what I think about in terms of peace, justice, and development.

Peace . . .” And I asked them to go through it. I said, “Okay, now what aspect of it should we work on? Remember, this course is one which we jointly put together.” Well, nobody said a word. I didn’t say a word and we sat there and sat there and sat there. We agreed we would come back, and they came back and we sat there. Of course, there’s always somebody who can’t stand it at that level. Anyhow, they raised the question and didn’t get much of a response, so we sat there.

I think by the third week, people figured out that if they were going to get something, they were going to have to put something in because I was not going to say anything. I could sit there. They were all women. Without any doubt, it was the best course or class I had in this school. And if you ask any of them, I think they will tell you why—because it was their class and they put it together, it was our class and we put it together. We did the work and we used an inside-outside approach, which is the only one that made sense—well, it made sense to me.

Each week we would come inside, we would talk about something, and we would get to a point and say, “Okay, we have to go outside and get this information.” So each of us would take a piece of what we needed to go outside and research, and then we would each come back and talk about it and see how it fit into where we were before. And then we would say, “Okay, we need more information about this piece,” and we would all take a piece and go outside and do it.

So we had this inside-outside approach, and everybody—everybody in the room—did their work. I don’t think there was a time when somebody came in and said, “Well, I didn’t have time to do this work.” We all did our work. As soon as I left that class, I was doing what I was supposed to be doing, because I was in it. I think if you talk to the people who were in class this semester, the first semester, they will share that. Anyhow, it’s the kind of approach that I liked, and when we had the last class, it was one of the most emotional classes I have ever been in.

Are you talking about this last term?

No. The one this last term was, but this was the first time. But we’ve done it consistently. We want to get people to do that. People are used to somebody coming in and directing them and saying, “This is what you’ve got to do.” And I say, “So hey,

I don’t have anywhere to go for the next hour and a half.”

They didn’t believe you.

But they sure did later, and they really appreciated the fact that this was their class.

You mentioned that kind of method you use. I don’t know whether it was exactly the same thing, but Jeff Howard mentioned something similar to that this morning. He talked about “inside-outside.”

To talk about the Fellows Program would be to talk about a twenty-five-year high. That’s what it was.

That’s obvious if you look at this past weekend in terms of most Fellows expressing their appreciation for the Program and all of the development. And their appreciation for you is obvious. There aren’t many people here who have been able to touch people, talented folks of color, like that.

The other thing I like is the number of folks who have gone on and received master’s degrees. There were a number of folks who ran for political office—in Boston, Gloria Fox and Byron Rushing; Mary Barros, New Bedford; and Sara Garcia, Cambridge.

What would be the downside of your experiences?

I think there are a couple of things. For instance, I think the place is fad-like. They’re doing something about Mission Hill, but fundamentally if there’s a riot, then there’s this big move to deal with the problems of this society and its impact on persons of color. But if there are no riots, even though the objective conditions are the same, then there isn’t any real move to deal with those conditions now. The other side of it is that one of the ways you begin to look at those issues is to bring people in from those places. And they don’t have the capacity to bring in those folks and to address their concerns—not everybody. There isn’t a reason in relationship to dealing with the folks who are most adversely affected by this society. It’s a little better that they’re looking at Mission Hill at this point. But the connection comes because one of the students was working on this project and was looking for assistance.

I think the second thing is with the issue around Jennings. I think it’s a general issue around who defines legitimacy, who defines scholarship, who defines excellence. Our view about a person and the person’s relevance has to do with the conditions that people are facing and that person’s role

in dealing with the research and analysis which helps people to look at their condition, look at solutions, and think of ways to implement them. To me, that's the reason for academia, to do that. The thing is, some of it is practice, some of it is research. Then the downside is that real practice is not lifted up to a place of importance.

I think that's a downside. The other is that it's a struggle to get a representational group of people. The department may be in some ways in terms of students better than others, but if you took the Community Fellows away, most of the time this place would look like milk. I look at the numbers we have and say, well, subtract fifteen and what do you have? It shouldn't be that way. The other side is that if you talk to some of the students, it's fad-like. You know, Poland comes on and so they rush to support things in Poland. Every day in Africa there are places. They don't have anybody who's an Africanist who can really look at what kind of development or pieces are needed in Africa. Every once in a while somebody comes through, just in terms of an ongoing kind of thing.

Anyhow, those are aspects of it. There are points here, for example, when the funds were getting low, and Hubie Jones and Frank Jones were working to put together this equity thing. What happened is that there was a little crisis over the Charles River. Funds got low and we were put on the back burner. When you tell folks about that, they don't seem to get it, that implicit in that is a racist approach—that this group is not important. It only becomes important when there is money that can be made, just in terms of a way of thinking that says these are valuable and you need to really work on this.

What advice would you give to the potential young Mel Kings who will be growing up in the future? If they had a chance to listen to you, what kind of advice would you give them if they were eighteen, nineteen, twenty, twenty-one years old?

The thing I would want for them is to get the kind of skills and tools of analysis, critical analysis and thinking. I would want them to really think about how to communicate in as many media as possible—writing, the use of whatever technology, but at the same time to know the techniques of communication over process, the methods, and the use of the language. That's important—the tools of analysis, the ability to express themselves.

I would want them to think about other interests—not self-interests—to see the strengths they have, to see the beauty they have and the strengths they have, and to look for opportunity and not security. I think if there's one thing I would say about what it was for me, I never worried about security. There was opportunity, always an opportunity, or you could make some. I would say security is a sense of insecurity. What I would think about is that you look for opportunity, the opportunity to make a difference in somebody else's life, to make a difference in the community that you live in. I don't care whether it's with your work or after work.

One thing, it's part of the critical analysis to be able to challenge and confront from a sense of compassion. Any oppression, all oppression—all, not just one—might be solved by being involved. I would want for them to feel the importance of lifting their voices, that they understand that it's not just their voice but that they have to lift every voice. I think about James Weldon Johnson's "Lift Every Voice." I would want them to think about the art in them and the music in them, the music that can express the harmony. I would want for them to really understand the importance of taking care of their bodies and their minds.

My father would say, "Don't take anything from anybody." In other words, be nice to everybody, but if somebody messes with you, and you have to, then you pick up a stick. When we're talking about people being benefited, there's got to be a stick. If the stick is a pen, then it ought to be that you can write the analysis. If it's a sword, then it ought to be that you can cut through to the oppressor.

I would want them to really be in touch with the struggles that have gone on. I can't say be appreciative, but if they do critical analysis, they should be appreciative of what their ancestors have gone through. I want them—if they're black or Latino or Asian or Native American, it seems to me Native Americans are more in touch with this—to be real conscious of the importance of not only lifting up the race, but lifting up others as well and worrying about coalition building. I want them to do that. I want them to think about cooperative work. I want them to know that struggle is the highest form of education.

See, I also want them to know that we're in institutions like MIT and that you can't operate in

isolation. They have these four I's of oppression developed by Youth Build USA—"Ideology," which is the basis for supremacy; "Institution," the way they manifest and carry it out; "Interpersonal," how these individuals are protected to do what they want to do; and "Internalization," what people internalize. The other two I's that I add are "Isolation" and "Individualism." You perpetuate that by trying to do things individually and in isolation, when in fact this is an organized society and it requires the effort of the group. It doesn't mean that some individuals don't do some things, but that's an individual point—some things that you can organize change the structure of things.

So yes, I want them to understand the importance of being part of a group and not operating in isolation. I want them to be positive about their accomplishments and the accomplishments of others. I guess the only way I could really close this would be to suggest that they understand the power of love and the dangers in love and power, but in the power of love to understand the intersection of love and power.

One of the things I think is important is one of the things I've struggled with many of the Fellows to do. Like one of them says, "You know, I came here thinking that somebody was going to fill me up with something." I used to think he was angry with me because I wouldn't give him the answers. He said, "I got the message that I had to get it out of me, that I had to figure some things out—and it was because you believed that I could figure them out." I think that's very, very important. It's a way of lifting up every voice, that you lift up what's inside, your voice that's inside. This woman from Seattle who used to be so angry, I could just sense it because it's just, "Well, tell us." I said, "Well, you have experiences—tell me about your experiences."

This class I just joined at Harvard, it's something I've gotten into. You ask people to talk about the systems that affect their lives because they have to value their lives. Part of the problem is that we have created a system where somebody else is always better, who knows more, and it robs us of the fundamental things we know. I know more about what I ate this morning than you do. It happens with parents in schools where they don't understand. They know more about their children. They've had them all this time. They brought them

up, the mothers did. They've done these things. They know what the twitch is from and all that. But we have gotten into this thing where we've robbed people of the sense of self, the sense of power, the sense of what they know.

So I would tell them that they need to think about bringing out their experiences, because they are valuable in telling their own stories. Other people are going to have to tell their stories. People think other people's stories have more going for them. No, your story is very important. You're at the center of your story, you're at the edge of their story.

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Reflections on the Black Experience at MIT, 1941–1999

By: Clarence G. Williams

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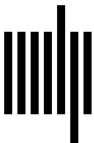
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