

JENNIE R. PATRICK

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My pre-college education probably is the most delightful part of my life, as I look back. I'm from a small town called Gadsden, Alabama. I'm the fourth of five children. My parents were uneducated people. I grew up in a very tight-knit family, very warm parents that were very, very strict—lots of love, but tremendous amounts of discipline. I went to segregated schools up until high school and I was among the first blacks to integrate the schools in the South in 1964. Integrating the schools was an experience within itself. I look back and realize that this experience really started opening my eyes about what racism really was about and how people viewed people based just on color rather than character. That summer prior to going to the school, I was the only black person who had signed up in the city because the Klan had announced that the first child that signed up, the family and the child would be killed. My mother raised a real fuss. She threatened to put me out of the house because she was concerned about her family. My father, on the other hand, supported the effort and the community did. They were willing to look after the house and guard the house.

I personally recruited other kids to go. That first year there were approximately eleven of us, and about fifteen hundred white students. It was an interesting situation because, among the whites, they had created an elite school—Gadsden High—in comparison to other white schools. Gadsden High, which I chose to attend, had mostly master's level teachers. The kids who went there were the upper-class kids who had gone pre-

dominantly to private schools up to that point. I personally enjoyed the experience because I went there strictly to learn. I had realized that even within the black community there was a class system. Since I had come from an uneducated background and because I was bright, I was often pushed aside because I academically exceeded the black doctors' and lawyers' children. This problem was really one of the things that helped me to make the decision to integrate the schools.

When I was in eighth grade, another thing that really helped me to make the decision to attend a white school was that while I was taking a math course, I was basically teaching the guy who was teaching math. He was so incompetent! They put me out of the math class and made me sit in the gymnasium for a whole year. They would not allow me to take the tenth-grade math class



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because the guy who was the principal, the black man, had a daughter my age and had a real problem with my gift—my intellectual gift—compared to his daughter's. That really angered me, so I made the decision at that point. "Well, gee, if I've got to deal with black folks who treat me like this, I might as well deal with the white folks and get the best education." That was really all I was after, the education. So that made me move forward.

I'd like to tell you a little bit about the first couple of months at Gadsden High. It was fascinating to me. The very first day of school, they had to send out large numbers of state troopers that separated the black students from the mobs of parents who had bricks and stones and sticks and all kinds of other things that they threw at us. I had gone to school with two big, burly black guys. Probably both of them were at least two hundred pounds, football-looking types of brothers. I remember as we walked past the mob one of them started just physically shaking. I looked at him and I asked him, "What is wrong with you?" He said, "I'm scared." I said, "What the hell are you doing here, then?" He looked at me and I said, "Look, you can't be walking past these people shaking like that." He said, "I didn't know it was going to be like this." I said, "Well, what did you expect?" He was one of the people I had recruited. I said to the fellow, "You just move inside. Let me walk next to the mob." The guy said, "Okay." So as we walked by the mob, I just calmly walked and I looked them in their faces. I had no fear. It was something that was important for me to do and I had made the decision I was going to do it or die doing it.

What grade was this?

I was in the tenth grade at that point. Then what really struck me was the fact that the mob saw no fear in me. They reacted to that. They did not know how to react to me. So many of them stopped and just looked at me and calmed down and we walked on into the school. That sort of taught me something at that point about the power of having no fear. When you show fear, it becomes a weapon against you. Let nothing ever unravel you. It was just one of those things. Death was something that I flirted with in my mind all the time. It was just not something that I really feared because I always believed that, as long as I was doing something that was important to me, it really didn't matter. My attitude really helped me

because I got into many dangerous situations later which I had the strength to endure. Probably most people would not have endured. At one point in the school I was attacked by six football players. They had cornered me off in an isolated place and were telling me that they were going to rape me.

I never thought of myself as being small in stature. I had a friend whose name was Don. I called him my brother. He was really my play brother. He was really a ruffian, though. Don had given me a switchblade that my mother and father didn't know about, and had taught me how to use it. He had said to me, "Never, never, never pull it unless you're swinging it." So when these fellows cornered me, I stood there and then I said to them, "Well, I can't get all of you, but I will take at least one or two of you down. Come and get it." These are big guys and nobody stepped forward. Curses and curses, but nobody stepped forward. It was one of those moments where, yes, I was sweating because I was in real trouble. They were very vicious. They had beaten one young black man to the point where he was hospitalized for months and months. It was the non-violent era. I never pretended to be non-violent, not even to this day.

Peter, my friend, will tell you I've mellowed. Anyway, it was sort of interesting because I was fourteen years old when I integrated the school. I remember the churches. Everything was centered in the churches. We had a church meeting prior to our going and they were telling us how to behave. They were telling us we had to be non-violent. I stood up in the church and my mother was there. My mother, I'm very much like my mother. The spitting image of her physically—probably otherwise too, emotionally.

That spirit and everything as well, you think?

Yes. She sat there in the audience and I stood up and I said, "Well, I have to be honest." That's probably one of my flaws, my honesty—honest to the point of irritation.

I've always known you to be straightforward.

I stood up in the church and I said to the audience, "I want you guys to all know before I go there, I've heard what you had to say, I've understood what you had to say, but I will tell you up front, if Jesus Christ slapped me I'd slap the hell out of him." I will never forget that because when I got home my mother nearly killed me. The people in

the church were just in awe. They did not believe I had said what I said. I said, "Well, I'm not going to take a beating. I won't take a beating from any person." And I meant that. Because of that mindset, by the end of the first semester there were only about five black students left. Of the five black students left, three of us were small girls. All of us were little pistol-whippers. It was interesting and it was funny because, all of a sudden, the white kids realized that not all of the blacks were the same and not all of them were going to abide by the non-violent doctrine and be beaten half to death. That made a difference in terms of the number of attacks that were made.

By the second semester, it was a different crop of black kids who came in. The second student group had some street folks. There was one brother in particular who ended up in prison years later. He really turned the place upside-down, but it made a difference in terms of white people's mentality, in terms of the level of abusiveness that came down. I often tell the story when articles are written about me, about a math class environment. I was the only black kid in the class and the teacher was extremely prejudiced. To be honest, there was not one teacher that I had that was not extremely prejudiced. As I sat in the class, this huge guy stood up, took a chair and rammed it across my back. The pain was excruciating. The teacher stood up at the board, she looked over at me, she kept writing and talking. It took me a little while to sit back up because I was in pain. I sat back up, got my composure, stood up, got myself a chair, and rammed it across his back. The whole class was in an uproar. The teacher said, "Nigra, niggeriss! Get out of here! Get out of this classroom!" I said, "Well, you didn't see him, then you didn't see me. I'm not going anywhere." I took my seat. She looked: "I said, go to the office." I turned around at the fellow and I said, "I said, go to the office." So neither one of us went. It just died down.

So those were the kinds of experiences that I had. Another experience that really blew my mind was that I had a very elderly man who was a chemistry teacher. He was the epitome of racism. I was always a very thrifty individual. My parents gave me lunch money and I saved it. I would take my lunch period and I would study. I would take some food or something to school. It was a fairly large chemistry class, I would say at least two hundred students in the class. It was an auditorium

type of setting. For some reason that day, the teacher sent out the section with all of us little black kids. It was about five or six of us. We tended to sit in a little group. I guess it gave us a sense of security. He sent out the section that had the little black kids in it. It was only a handful of whites that left with us. Unbeknownst to the teacher, I left the room but I was still outside the classroom door. I'm standing there waiting for the class to come out because that's where I normally had my lunch once they got out. I'm waiting and I heard him say, "Well, I'll be damned! I will not tolerate this! You let this nigger who's descended from Africa come over here and do better than you in your own school! I will kick your white asses!" This is the teacher.

I'm in total shock standing outside this door. This happened. This is real. "What? That is my teacher." What had happened was, that particular six weeks I had the highest A in the class. There were other A's by white students, but mine number-wise was just a little higher and that made him furious. Only one of the white kids in the whole class later told me—she was an unusual person—but I had already heard. I wouldn't look at him. He had always been very reserved and controlled when he interacted with the black students. But again, it made me understand about people's behavior and the hypocrisy that is often exhibited in this society. It also made me determined to excel.

Another incident in that school really also surprised me. I've always been very independent, my mother said too independent. She told me I was born with an adult, very independent thought process. I would listen to what was said to me and I would evaluate it from different angles and make my own decision. The other situation involved the counselor of the school. One day on the intercom, I hear my name, "Jennie Patrick, please come to the principal's office and see counselor so-and-so." My heart began beating and I got really scared. "Oh my God, something must have happened to one of my parents." So I go to the counselor's office and she tells me—I'm trying to think of the right word, is it niggeriss? They have a word for the female, "negress" or something that they call black women. Anyway, "a nigger." So she said, "Sit down." I stood there and I looked at her. I said, "What do you want? Has something happened at home?" She said, "No. I just wish to talk to you."

I said, “About what?” She said, “You really are a problem. We just don’t understand you. You don’t behave like a nigger—negress—you don’t fit into the books I’ve studied in any category. Here you are in college prep courses and you’re doing well in these courses. You want to go to college and you’re talking about being a scientist. You’re not supposed to have that kind of mind.” I said, “Who’s talking? Says who?” I stood up, because I had sat down, and I looked at the woman. I don’t remember her name. I said to her, “Let me tell you something. Don’t you ever have the nerve to call me out of my class. You don’t have the right or the authority. Whatever your opinion is about black folks is your problem. I’m not concerned about your book or what you think I’m supposed to do. Now, I’m going back to class. If you ever call me again, you won’t see me.” The lady said, “I just have never seen anything like it. Look at you. Look how you’re talking to me.” I said, “You don’t deserve any more respect than I’ve given you, because you have shown me none.” And I went back to class.

Even in elementary school, I taught my father. I taught him reading, I taught him math. My father was a very bright, very bright man, but he didn’t have the opportunity to get an education. His parents died when he was very small and people took him and used him basically as a slave. So he was fascinated with learning and I was fascinated. I loved to teach. I really loved teaching. I taught him. As I went to school every day, I would come home and I would teach my dad. It really reinforced what I had learned. So for me, learning was fun and it still is. It’s an exciting part of my life.

Did you have any sisters or brothers?

Yes, there are five of us. My oldest brother is a surgeon. My older sister is a registered nurse with a degree. My next brother has a degree from Tuskegee in business management. My oldest brother got, I think, his first degree from Tuskegee in biology. My younger sister has a degree from New York University in finance. So all of us managed to get at least one degree.

Who were your heroes during that period, being the way you were?

There were two black teachers. My fifth grade teacher was a man named Mr. Anthony Knowles. He’s still alive today. He’s a beautiful human being. He took a special interest in me when I was in the fifth grade. He taught me algebra after school. My

sixth grade homeroom teacher was also my English teacher. She was my idol. She was a beautiful brown-skinned black woman who dressed to kill. She wore her high heels. She was poised and she was sophisticated. I would look at her and say, “Gee, I would love to be like her.” She spoke well and she really loved black children. She had no children of her own. Her name was Mrs. Pinkie Bridges and I’ve tried to stay involved in her life even to this day. She has Alzheimer’s. I made it a point to help her relatives find a caretaker for her. She probably does not even realize I’m alive today now, but she’s someone who had a special part in my life. My mother was a very strong, powerful woman, but she was uneducated. She didn’t have that sophistication, that image. So early on, I saw an image of the sophisticated black person that I could look up to and see and admire and respect. The fifth grade teacher, Mr. Knowles, really helped me to understand the power of my brain early on by challenging me. He helped me to become much more stimulated and just more driven. I was always driven beyond what was ever required of me. Learning was just a game. It was fun to the point that I got on people’s nerves. I just enjoyed it. It was a challenge. It was just fascinating.

Spend a little time talking about how you made the decision to go to college, where you decided to go, and sort of the overall experience.

I knew in the third grade that I was going to college. I had already made that decision. Even in the second grade, I realized I was at a disadvantage because of my social status—my father being a janitor, my mother being a maid. I also realized that I was bright. I somehow made a decision that it was my responsibility to achieve the education that I wanted. So I never ever had any expectations from my parents in terms of sending me to college or doing things for me. My education was strictly my own responsibility. So I was the person from early on pushing for what I wanted to do.

When I was in the third grade, I was skipped. I remember getting extremely angry with my mother because the third grade teacher skipped me, but the principal convinced my mother to put me back in the fourth grade the next year. Skipping was not good for a child, was what he told her. But by the time I was in the third grade, I had already mastered the third and the fourth grade material because my older sister used to

teach me. She used to play school with me. I had a younger sister. She would get angry with me. She was a year younger, with a totally different kind of personality. I'm forceful and she's timid. I wanted to learn and she didn't give a flip about it, so my older sister didn't have much fun with her because she was whining and disruptive. But for me it was like she had a little toy because she could teach me what she knew, and I ate it up. I just really enjoyed it. So when I was put back into the fourth grade that year, I really became a problem child. I disrupted the class. I was really a bad girl. I'd bring in Vaseline and rub it on the little boys' heads. I had a lot of fun, but I was angry with the black principal. I tried even at that stage to rationalize with my mother that she was making a mistake and that he wasn't really being honest. But because he was educated and she was uneducated, she felt that whatever he had to say was the better thing. Years later, his daughter was skipped. It was written up in the newspaper.

Those kinds of things made me become somewhat suspicious of people. I'm very, very protective of myself in terms of what I wanted to do with my life. I was just driven. When I finished high school, I had a full scholarship to UC Berkeley. I didn't know much about Berkeley other than, at that time, it was always on the news because it was the hippie era. I thought, gee, having experienced intense racism at the high school, if there is a place that is less racist, it's Berkeley. I thought, but that really wasn't the reality. I didn't know that at the time. But my mother would not allow me to go to Berkeley and I was angry with her. I ended up here at Tuskegee and I stayed at Tuskegee for three years. In some ways the experience was good. It somewhat calmed me. Being in the high school was such a violent environment in terms of you having to watch your back, the bricks that would go past your head in the hallway—I mean, all kinds of objects. I could be calm in a black environment because the hostility was not there. There was hostility here on another level and I'll talk about that, but this environment helped me to calm down. But I still realized that in terms of the quality of the education, it really wasn't what I wanted.

You knew that even during those three years at the undergraduate level?

Yes, as an undergraduate. The first thing was, I was the first student who ever signed up for chemical

engineering on the campus and probably very few people even know that. The guy who was the head of the chemical engineering department was a Southern white male who is now deceased. I think he died last year. When I came over to sign up, he looked at me and said, "You want to do chemical engineering?" I said, "Yes sir, I do." He said, "Well, I don't think you should." I said, "Well, that's what I want to do. I've done extremely well in chemistry and I want something a little more challenging." He wasn't very pleased. The dean was a white European from the eastern part of Europe, who on national TV actually referred to the inferior black kids who wanted to do engineering. We had some demonstrations on the campus. It was the rowdy part of the '60s, the latter years of the '60s. There were a lot of Eastern Europeans teaching and it was clear to me they had no commitment to our learning process.

I had attempted to sign up for an exchange program at the University of Michigan. I had filled out an application. Apparently the dean put this in the garbage can. I was waiting to get a response and I never heard anything from the school, so I went to the dean and asked him. I said, "I haven't heard anything." He looked at me with this sarcastic face and said, "Well, I don't think you're going to hear anything." I said, "Why?" I was a good student. He said, "Well, I don't remember you even sending in an application." I said, "I came to this office and filled out an application and you told me that that was all I had to do and all I needed to do was wait." That made me angry, so I left Tuskegee. I worked a year.

You mean after your third year, without finishing, you left?

I just left. I quit because the chemical engineering program was also falling apart. I didn't want to do mechanical engineering and didn't want to do electrical. I really was only interested in chemical. I worked and saved money and decided, "I'm going where I really wanted to go," and that was Berkeley. I wrote to Berkeley and got in, but they would not give me money because they had a policy of not giving money to transfer students. I went out there anyway. I had enough money to get me through two quarters. I went out there and I met Dr. Harry Morrison, a beautiful black man. He was my physics professor. He took a personal interest in me. I was taking his class and doing well. I think he noticed that I was sad and down,

and he asked me one day what was wrong. I told him there were days that I didn't have food. I told him that I was running out of money and it looked like I was going to have to drop out of school. I had strange approaches of folks wanting me to model, wanting me to do weird things, and I was always leery of people who wanted me to get involved in activities to make money. But I had decided if I had to, I would drop out again and I would work. He said, "You mean to tell me you don't have a scholarship?" I said, "Well, Berkeley had given me a scholarship early on but they don't give scholarships to transfer students." So he got involved and he got them to give me a grant. Not only did he do that, he went on sabbatical—we're friends to this day—and had me live in his home to take care of his home, and wouldn't charge me a dime.

I think for the record it's important that we mention that Dr. Morrison is one of the distinguished black physicists in this country.

Yes. He's also a mathematician. I think he has two Ph.D.'s, if I'm not mistaken. He's a brilliant man, but he's also a very compassionate and caring man. I have the utmost respect for him. He is one of my heroes. Without him, I'm not sure if I would have been able to pull through the stress that I was under. I had a friend there who, for about a month, fed me off his plate. I was too proud to ever ask my parents for a penny. My parents never gave me a dime to go to college. But I managed to get through Berkeley. That was an experience.

Before you leave that, there's a lot there that is worth getting your opinion about. Margaret Tyler and I have been talking about how particularly you pioneers, and that's what you really are, had to deal with being an invisible black woman. During that Berkeley period, as well as even at Tuskegee, did you experience anything that you could put in that category?

Well, I guess I've never thought of myself in terms of being invisible. I realize that people were shocked by my presence and shocked by my mindset. I was puzzled by theirs. They're asking me, "Why?" and I'm wondering, "Why not?" When I got to Berkeley, I was the only American female in the department. I was the only American black. I was the only black, I was told, they had had in ten years. To be honest, when I first got there it didn't even seem to faze me that I was the only one. I went there with a one-dimensional thought

process, just as I had gone to the all-white school. I wanted the best education. I didn't care who was around, what they thought of me or what they did, because my attitude was, once I'm in that classroom, I'm like a sponge. What I absorb in my brain you cannot take away from me. So it really was irrelevant to me what they thought. It didn't even faze me, to be honest. I realized later on that my mindset was a little odd. I think it was so strange to many of the whites that their rejection of me had no impact. It puzzled them. In some instances, it made some of them extremely hostile. That rejection was normally a weapon, but it didn't penetrate me because I had been rejected all my life. It was irrelevant. It did not affect me emotionally. Even to this day, I'm a people-lover, but I am also very much a loner. I spend hours and hours by myself all the time. I don't understand the concept of loneliness, to be honest. When I'm alone, my mind is always going. It's energy and it just doesn't faze me.

Many of the things that happened to me at Berkeley probably would have destroyed most people. Most people really feel pain with rejection. The thing that bothered me was, I think, the one time during my senior class project when the white fellows had a meeting and decided that no student should work with me on the senior design project. They told all the students, "If anybody works with this nigger, we're going to do you in." It normally was a team of four students. The professor was extremely racist. We got to the class and the groups were put together. I looked up and there was nobody in the group with me. I said, "Professor, sir, I don't have a group." He said, "Well, what do you expect? What do you think you're doing in this class, anyway?" I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "If you get this project done, it looks like you're going to do it by yourself." It was shocking to me. One of the Oriental fellows told me in private what had taken place and said, "Everybody's afraid to work with you because of what the white students have said." They were sorry, but that was just the way it was.

That project, that design project, determined whether or not you graduated. Like everything else in my life, anything I want, hey, I just go for it. I decided, "Hell, I'm going to do it, no big deal. I'll do it." The TA of the course was of Spanish origin. He was a foreigner and he said to me, "Now, I understand racism. Jennie, I'm sorry. I

can't do the project with you or for you, but I can help you in any way. I'll try to help you, but you're on your own." I worked like a bull. I worked day and night. I did not get sleep. We hadn't gotten so sophisticated with our technology at that time. We were still using the Wang calculators with the storage space. I remember early one Saturday morning I was really exhausted. I had been up most of the night. I was at the school in one of the labs that had the calculators and I had put in my data. In walk these four white boys who were in the class. They were just so outdone that I had not fallen apart yet. A couple of them grabbed me and the other two went to the calculator and destroyed all my data. That sent me into a rage. Even with all that they had done, that still was not enough. They saw this person who just didn't give up. It was like, "We've got to finish this sucker off." I think that was one of the times that I felt a sense of helplessness. I felt a sense of rage at the same time.

I had a boyfriend. He was an interesting character. He was a street brother—a big, burly black man. He was my release valve. I told him about what had happened. He said, "I'm going to get my buddies from Oakland and go in and turn the place upside-down." He really meant that. I said to him, "Well, you could do something to help me. It's getting out of hand." He went up on the campus, into the chemical engineering building, and told me to help him find these boys. We found a couple of them and he did his ghetto act, threatened them, and made it clear nobody was to ever put their hands on me again. That sort of eliminated the physical abuse problem. The students just sort of stood and looked at me because it was clear that he meant what he said, and he would have done whatever was necessary. Of course, I did not want it to end in that manner. I just simply wanted to be left alone and allowed the opportunity to finish what was required, even though it was being done in a totally unfair and unethical manner.

I managed to finish the project, but it was at the expense of my health. I remember I got extremely ill. I ended up being hospitalized in the end. I was in the hospital for about a week before I even realized I was there. I lost fourteen pounds, which was an enormous amount of weight for a person my size. But I had made it. I had done nearly the impossible. All I wanted was that degree.

I had decided, "I am going to get this degree or I am going to die trying to get the degree."

So that's my story of Berkeley. There are a number of just phenomenal experiences that took place there. A very famous professor who was there was—is—an extreme bigot and went out of his way to destroy me. When he could not intimidate me, he wrote letters about my psychological state, my emotional instability, that I cheated on my grade. I threatened to sue the school and the professor was forced to back off. It was just an incredible experience. When I ended up at MIT, this fellow showed up one day. He's known worldwide. He's famous. He showed up at MIT and he used to ask my advisor all the time, "How is she doing?" He came to MIT and wanted to talk with me. I refused to talk to him. My advisor said, "But Jennie, he really wants to talk to you." I said, "I have no desire to speak to him. I will not talk to him." My advisor said, "What's wrong with him?" I said, "He tried to destroy me and, since he couldn't, he doesn't know what to do with himself." My advisor said, "But he feels that he made a mistake." I said, "He probably feels defeated, but he's probably doing the same thing to other black kids who are weaker and he's getting away with it. He just can't understand how I was able to manage." My advisor said, "Well, just tell him about your research." I said, "No."

I remember he was a guest speaker in the chemical engineering department and I was sitting at the back of the audience. He was up on the podium. Right before he was to talk, he walked off the stage. I saw him walk off the stage and he was coming down the aisle. It never occurred to me that he was coming to me. I'm sitting there thinking, "What should I do?" He walked right up to me and he said, "Jennie, hello." I looked at him. He extended his hand and said, "How are you doing?" I wouldn't shake his hand and he just reached over and grabbed my hand. Everybody is so impressed with this man because he's such a famous person, the kids said, "Jennie, he knows you!" Only the few students near me saw what I had done, that I had refused to shake his hand. Then he turns around and goes back and said, "I really want to talk to you." I said, "No."

I went back to my lab and I was sitting there doing my research routine that I had. He walks up into my lab later that afternoon. He stands at my desk and he says, "You won't even talk to me." I

said, “For what? What do you want to talk to me about? Why do you want to talk?” He said, “I was wrong about you. I made a mistake.” I said, “So you say you made a mistake.” He said, “I’m really sorry. Will you forgive me?” I said, “No, I won’t forgive you. You’re saying you made a mistake. It’s just that you’re puzzled because you didn’t defeat me. If you really feel that you made a mistake, are you absolutely sure you’re not treating other young black kids the same way you treated me?”

As years went on, I checked. Berkeley is still a bad scene. Seemingly, it only has one black person at a time—maybe two, I think. The last time I was out there, chemical engineering had one little black girl in the undergraduate school, maybe two black Ph.D. students. One of the students had no confidence. They had just wiped the student out. The student sister was just grateful to get the degree, the kind of mindset that pains me. If you get the degree and you have no confidence, they have still won. They’ve won the game. It takes a rather strong-willed individual to go through not only the physical drain but the mental and the psychological hoops, and still maintain confidence.

Jennie, you spent how many years at MIT?

Six years.

Talk about that experience.

MIT was a fascinating experience for me. MIT, because of my fascination with learning, was really a fun place. There was just so much to learn and so many smart, smart people. But MIT had lots of problems as well in terms of racism and other kinds of issues. As you know, I raise hell. But I was fair and it was because I felt it was necessary. I remember there were some real issues with the medical department in terms of how black kids were treated. There were just some things. I saw young black kids who were really brilliant who had a totally different kind of mindset than I had. As I said, I have never sought approval from people. It just was irrelevant, just no meaning whatsoever to me. I’d always make a decision. This is what I’m going to do. I always have another plan if it didn’t go quite the way I wanted. She just moves on about her business, right?

That’s what you’ve done.

That was just the way that I operated. MIT was just challenging. My advisor, that’s another whole story. He is a fascinating man, a famous thermody-

namist. He has a very interesting kind of mind. He took me on as a student, even though he had heard about my reputation at Berkeley as being a tough kid, a hell raiser. He was fascinated with me. When I got there, there weren’t other black females around. There was one black American guy doing a Ph.D. in the program. There was a white American female. There were only a handful of females in the Ph.D. program in the chemical engineering department. It didn’t faze me. But what really impressed me about MIT was it was the first time I had seen such large numbers of black kids doing engineering, science, and math. The professors had gotten used to seeing bright black kids in their classes. The racism was still there, but it was not the extreme shock that I had experienced at Berkeley from the professors.

So MIT was like heaven compared to Berkeley. I think most people probably would have thought the reverse. Berkeley had a reputation as a liberal institution, but that liberalism was only in the social sciences. In the technical areas, it was extremely racist. I remember the first time there was a riot on campus during the time I was there. I used to live above the campus. I looked down and I could see the tear gas, I could see the cops. I thought, “Gee, I guess there’ll be no classes today.” Then I thought, “Well, I better go check,” so I put my little bag on my back and hopped on down there. I got to the engineering building and the class was in full session. It was a whole different world.

The racism was extreme. There was only a handful of black kids who had the nerve to try to venture doing the sciences and engineering at Berkeley. I remember a couple years ago I had a discussion with Paul Gray and he seemed shocked that I had fond memories of MIT. I look at every situation for what it’s worth. MIT gave me what I needed.

Actually, I’m kind of amazed, too.

I went there for one purpose and that was to learn.

It’s consistent with what you’ve said all along.

I don’t care what people think of me.

Obviously, that has to be true.

It is. I think I’m a good person. I’m a kind, giving, and loving person. I’m an extremely honest person, and so I am what I am. You can take me or leave me. I try my very best not to impose on others.

What would you say was best about your experience at MIT? You may have already answered that, but what would you say was worst about your experience at MIT?

I think the worst experience I had at MIT was one time I got ill and I was locked in a back room in the medical department for hours without medical attention. I was too ill to get off the cart. I could not believe the mindset behind the events that took place, the lying and the deceit and the framing. This physician had suggested that I had VD and I was highly offended. I thought, "VD? Why would I have a venereal disease?" When I became angry and annoyed by his suggestion, I said, "I want to be taken to my black gynecologist in the city. I want to be taken to my doctor." He said, "No, you're going to be treated by our doctors." I said, "No, I do not want to be treated by the physicians here on this campus. I have my own private doctor." Because I took that stance, they locked me in this room. I have letters still about that event. You probably recall them.

I recall the incident very well. I didn't know the details until I hear you talking now.

They locked me in the room. If I was guessing, I would say four or five hours or so passed. They realized I was getting sicker and sicker. I woke up and I was in the infirmary with tubes running up my arms. I was outraged at what had happened. How dare they take advantage of my illness and then tell me I have VD when I did not, and without an examination. It was the epitome of racism and disrespect for the character of black people. Because of my outspoken mindset, I just would not accept what was said to me. When I got up out of the infirmary, the first thing I wanted to do was confront the doctor. I remember going to the infirmary and saying I wanted to see him. He starts running around and the nurse starts running around and the next thing I knew, there was this claim that I had kicked this doctor's office door down. I'm sure you recall that. The claim was that I had kicked his door down while he was examining a white male patient. This statement in itself was sickness. I had not even touched the man's door. I had knocked on his door. And then the nurse, to stand and verify that outrageous lie really taught me an enormous lesson about why black people end up in prison by being framed about something that's not even close to reality. That was

a frightening experience for me. I really understood the vulgarity, the sickness of racism from that experience.

Another experience at MIT that left a permanent scar—not only on my body, but in my soul—was this white surgeon who had examined my breast and found a lump. It happened to be a small cyst. A cyst, you can drain the fluid out of it. But I didn't know it was a cyst. He said, "You need some surgery." I said, "If you say I have to have surgery, then what I would want you to agree to is that you cut around the nipple of the breast." The lump was close enough that you could get the lump out. When I woke up, it was a nightmare. This racist white man had cut across a young black woman's breast, straight across it, and made a hideous scar. I thought, you know, racism is ugly, it is cruel, it is vicious, and it is illogical. He resented the intellect, he resented the request. But he agreed. So it also taught me the lack of integrity and principles by these people because they deal with you on a different level, as if you're not even there. I went to him later on and told him what I thought of him, and it wasn't very much. At that point I decided, I'm extremely protective of my body and extremely suspicious of white physicians, but I learned a lesson. I think many black people learn it too late because it oftentimes costs them their lives.

Those are really severe negative experiences. It was just really racism. MIT had racism in lots of different forms, but my attitude is I have no problem with a racist. I often tell white people this when I run across them and they really are racist. I've had to tell many a boss that. "I really have no problem with you being racist. I have a problem when you decide to share your racism with me. Not only do I have a problem, you then have a problem, and that problem is me."

For young black women, one of the first lessons I think that's important is to believe in yourself. If you don't believe in yourself, they've won as well. But in addition to that belief, one must truly love oneself and respect oneself. If you truly love yourself, then it's very easy for others to love you. You never have to quest or seek love. If you truly respect yourself, it prevents you from getting into situations that compromise you. If you believe in yourself, it allows whatever intellect that you have to flourish. You don't doubt yourself and you don't hesitate to take actions on things that

you need to take actions on. But the other thing is to be honest with oneself. The honesty prevents you from making a fool of yourself, from rejecting reality, from denying reality, and from overlooking things that are often very harmful to yourself.

I think those things. And then I think another issue is, what truly is important in life? What is the real essence of life itself? If you truly understand that we're going to die, we are really going to die, once that really sinks in I think what it does is it gives you a perspective in terms of what is important and what isn't important. Material things? I am a person who loves beauty. I love the beauty of nature. I'm a tremendous nature lover. I garden for twelve, sixteen hours a day. My husband has to bring me in sometimes. I'm out there at night and he says, "Jennie, please come in. It's dark, come in." But I'm at peace. I'm at peace when I crawl in the dirt. You start understanding that to have a title and a position is nice, it's nice to have money in one's pocket. I try to get people to start thinking in terms of having some financial security, but doing it in a way such that it is not what drives you. Use your intellect and be shrewd in how you go about things. Use your intellect in every aspect of your life so that you can keep focus on what's truly important. If you are loved and you can love, you have really accomplished the ultimate in life. There is nothing else beyond that, and I truly mean that.

I've watched you very carefully during your years at MIT, particularly that period. I've followed what has happened and how you've dealt with your life since then, and you actually are speaking the honest truth. You really do live by those principles.

Oh, yes, I live by what I say. I share my thoughts with people. Oftentimes I share my perspective on life. I'm very open. As I said, I love people. I've had people that I don't even remember, but I've met them, who will call me and say, "Jennie, you've had such an impact on my life because you gave me a different way of looking at life and dealing with issues that I deal with." I've learned to keep my private life very private. I learned that lesson many years ago, but I have a wonderful husband in my life. He's an oddball, he probably has to be to tolerate me, but he is my best friend. He is my very best friend. He is often fascinated with my mind. He helps me also to understand the reaction often of other people towards me. Sometimes I get violent reactions towards my per-

sonality and I wonder what the problem is. He will say, "Jennie! You've just done such-and-such-and-such and you've made the person feel bad because he's been such-and-such," or whatever it is.

I am extremely giving. There's nothing that I have that I won't give up. I'll fight you if it comes to my life now, but the material things are not a big deal to me. He tells me that, even in the corporate setting, the kinds of things I've done and I've said to people, he said, "People can't comprehend someone like you saying those things with your education, with your level of sophistication, and the intellect. They figure that you would be beholden to the material things—the power, the status, the money. But none of that means anything to me. It's totally irrelevant. I can give it up in a heartbeat, and I have. It has no value. I am who I am. I do not allow other people to define me and that's one of the things I've shared with my husband. I've had some horrible things done to me in life, horrible things. I've had a gun put to my head twice in my life by whites who were in a rage with their racism. I've had cruel things done to me by white people. But I don't hold those things in. I am the master of my life. I will not let you penetrate my soul, because that's all I've got. You can only go as far as I let you.

I remember what I once told a boss and I remember the shock on his face. He was an extreme bigot. He was a white man in his early sixties, a Ph.D. chemist, and he was a reasonably high-level manager. He hated black people and he hated Orientals. He started working with me and I said to him—his name was Jim—I said, "Jim, you've got some interesting attitudes. I don't mind your attitudes. You obviously have a hard time dealing with black folks and Oriental people, and that's okay. You're my boss. But one thing you need to know about me before this goes too far. The fact that you are my boss is of no real consequence to me." He looked at me in shock. He said, "What?" I said, "I'm the kind of person, I love everybody. If you allow me, I will give you the ultimate love and the ultimate respect. But you must earn my respect. It's not automatically given. The fact that you are my boss does not automatically give you power over me. In fact, it gives you absolutely no power over me because I give you none." He said, "How do you fix your mouth to say the things that you say?" I said, "It's easy, because I meant what I said. So let's try to respect each other."

The man had a sense of what I call muffled rage and he worked to destroy me. He couldn't do it. I said to him, "Jim, I keep telling you,"—many, many months later—"you cannot destroy me. You cannot imagine what I've been through in my life. You are not a match for me." He said to me, "You know, you have really broken down my confidence." And I described him. That's one of my gifts, to be able to analyze people within a very short period of time in detail. I don't share it too often, only when it's necessary. I analyzed him and he sat there in shock. He came back and he said, "You know, I thought that I really had accomplished something, but after you said what you said to me, you made me realize that I really hadn't done much with my life. It was so easy because I am a white male and I fit into a pattern." I talked about his bigotry and the smallness and the hatred. I said, "You rationalize what you've done. It's possible that you have enjoyed what you've done to the weak people that you've run across. But now you're angry because you've run across me, and you can't penetrate me. You have no impact on me." He said to me, "You know, you're right. All the things you've said about me went into the core of my soul. It took me a long time to realize why you were so different. You're the only black person, or any person, that I ever met who did not seek acceptance. The other people, the majority of people I meet, all people—black, white, yellow—they seek acceptance and it's an enormous weakness. You can always get them. That is what makes you so different. On top of it, there is not an ounce of fear in you. You have more balls than any man." He's a smart man.

When one gets what they get from you, it's the truth. It's honest. You tell it like it is whether they want to hear it or not.

Absolutely.

I think that's very unusual.

I guess one of the things that I find most troublesome is that I hope that more black people will get the strength, the personal emotional strength, to not be captured by the system and its values, but to establish our own set of values that gives us the flexibility of caring and thinking about someone other than ourselves. That is our biggest weakness within our community. Those of us who have the means and the education, we have become so diluted because the things that we aspire to are

basically meaningless. If you can only do for yourself, you haven't done much in life, by my book. You really haven't accomplished much. I see too many people like that. It's self, self, self, self, self. Again, I tell any young person, "When you run across people like that, run from them." Seriously. Run from them because they are trouble in every way that you put them. If it's in your personal life, they're a problem. If it's in your professional life, they are a problem.

That's the one thing that bothers me. It bothers me and sometimes it makes me wonder if I'm a fool. Maybe I'm really the one with the problem because I sometimes feel like I have a disease of giving. My mother used to say to me, "Jennie, you're a natural born sucker." Even as a child, I would say, "Mom, I'm really not a sucker. I really do know what I'm doing." It doesn't hurt me to give. In fact, if I'm not giving, it hurts. I have people who feel enormous hatred towards me. Because of my mindset, I guess it brings out a sense of guilt. They're busy grabbing and I guess somehow I make them become aware of the differences in us. It brings out anger. It brings out hatred, intense hatred. I don't mean to bring that out in people. I don't mean to anger people. I simply want people to love each other. It's as simple as that. I want people to love each other and I want people to take care of those who can't take care of themselves and to reach out, but it's particularly needed in the black community. We seem to be moving backwards and I guess that's another thing. I've gotten to be a middle-aged woman here now. I look and I see young black people with different mindsets.

I think you cannot be too far out of the wrong category. Otherwise, we would not see the difficulties that we have in our black community, almost in every phase. If you look at higher education, historically black institutions, you look at kids coming out of high school and so forth, we're worse off now than we were in the '60s.

Yes, we are.

Obviously, we are not loving ourselves.

No, we are not.

So what you are saying has much that's right, in my book, because clearly we really don't realize how much we are hated. We all have to do our different things, but there is a certain amount of giving we've got to give back to ourselves and we're not.

No, we're not. Why should we expect someone else to take care of us? It's silly. It really is silly. Another thing about us that fascinates me, we always rationalize another man's behavior. We always find a way to justify someone's ill behavior. I don't understand that. I've said my honesty probably is a flaw. The honesty which I live by, the honesty that I have, won't allow me to pretend something is when it isn't.

You have raised questions even when I was younger in these positions that I've held at MIT. It's deep reflection. I would have to say everything I've ever heard you raise, it has been the kind of issue that if we had guts about it, most of us would have raised it as well. Clearly, you raised these issues because you had guts and you did not yield to the kinds of things that people, particularly whites, throw at us to keep us down for saying and doing the kinds of things that we must do if we are going to be respected. That's the one thing. I mean, I know very well how your department—chemical engineering—probably would have done so many things differently about you if you had been some other lay-down person. But you never were.

No.

There are a lot of injustices that have been done, but despite all, there have been those who have been able—like yourself—to stand tall and come out of there. Young people need to see that, because I think that's part of the problem that we have. They don't see any of us. They've hidden all of you from those young people. So when these young people run into these terrible kinds of situations like you have described, most of them—if not all of them—fall apart.

Yes. That's what is expected. I've had some interesting comments made to me, by white males in particular. Apparently I'm fascinating to white males and often very intimidating to black males. A white man said to me one day, "I don't understand you. You've gone to the best institutions and yet you're still black. You obviously have a strong mind." My advisor, Robert Reid, also said that—"Jennie, you have refused to assimilate." I said, "You can bet your bottom on it. I will never assimilate. I am what I am, I am what I am. Take me or leave me. But for me to deny who I am is to disrespect myself. If I disrespect myself, I cannot tolerate me. I tolerate disrespect from no one."

Whatever it is that you have—if you could only develop yourself an institute to help to teach and work with young people!

Well, that is my goal. My husband is working hard to give me that flexibility.

There are very few people who could ever do that and you happen to be one. It's a gift.

It is a gift—it is a gift. My advisor, he's a brilliant man. I've always been fascinated with him and he with me. Tremendous conflict at times, but we both had mutual respect for each other. He saw early on my skills, my management skills. He saw my teaching skills. It fascinated him, the ability that I have to analyze personalities and minds, because he's deep. There are only a very few people in my life who really get to know the total Jennie, because the total Jennie is very vulnerable, she's very childlike. My husband often says to me, "Jennie, if people really knew you, they would call you a paper tiger. But you scare the daylights out of most people."

In reality, though, I am like a little girl. I am playful, just full of life, very childlike. But I can't afford for most people to see that side of me because most people are mean, most people would destroy that element. So I protect it, who I am. I don't pretend. I'm the kind of person who will sit up and see pain and suffering on the television news and bust out into tears because I feel for people. I really want to make a difference in others' lives. I'm trying to make a difference.

There are a few of you who, I think, have a different message to give. I am trying to put something together that we can leave as a history, so young people can have some sense about who you were and how you became what you are, which is very outstanding in any respect given the kind of circumstances that you've had to operate in.

I have worked with a lot of black people on an individual level. I remember, for a while at MIT, I had become a focal point for black students on the campus. I lived at Ashdown House and there were several black graduate students who were really struggling psychologically, emotionally, and academically. They would come to my room and study at night. It was fascinating. It was the strength that I had that drew them to me.

I just want to tell you that I've interviewed a number of people who have mentioned you in terms of what you meant to them, even probably some whom you don't know. I don't think you've seen the video that I helped to put together. The students are the ones who decided they wanted to do this video called the "Intuitively

Obvious” series. There was an incident on campus, a racial incident. Black students were going to demonstrate, but they decided they were going to do something more effective. You really should see it because one of the young ladies mentioned you. She had never had the experience of seeing a black woman chemical engineer Ph.D., and you meant a lot to her. She is now at Berkeley working on her Ph.D. Her name is Kristala Jones. In several other interviews people have mentioned your name, so you really do have a tremendous influence on a lot of younger people, more than you realize.

My thought process is not the normal and it helps them to regroup how they deal with life. I’ve had lots of honors and I guess I probably have not responded the way most people would respond. I have some letters that some of the students here wrote about me. This year, 1996, I got listed in the *Who’s Who of American Teachers*. One young lady—it was one of the star students, her name is Tracy Nunn—wrote this essay about me just on her own and sent it in. When I read the essay, I broke down and cried. It was such a moving essay. The things that she talked about I had actually forgotten, that I had done in terms of my interactions with her. I actually bought that *Who’s Who of American Teachers* because of what was said in the essay and the emotions that went with it. I guess one of the things that has pained me in life is the fact that I don’t have children. But now I have lots of children. One young lady had been in my class and I failed her the first time. She is now my little daughter. We’re so, so close. We couldn’t be any closer. She wrote a letter about the impact that I had in her life. It’s just been an interesting experience. What I realize is that my personality is so strong, and I didn’t realize that for many, many years. That is interesting right there. I did not realize it. It’s so strong, it’s intimidating to people. At MIT, too.

I can just see it as if it was today, MIT at that time.

It just never occurred to me, the forcefulness that was there. I’ll tell you something else that really stung me was my size, with people referring to me as petite. What was wrong with these people? I thought of myself as a big person. I told this to an audience of about thirty-five hundred women and they roared. My sister, my older sister, one day said to me, “Jennie, what is wrong with you? All of your clothes are too big. Every time I see you, you look like a sack lady. Why do you buy your dresses so big?” I said, “Well, I wear a size ten.” She said,

“Your coat hangs off, everything hangs off. You don’t wear a size ten.” I said, “Well, all of my clothes are tens.” She said, “That’s what I’m telling you. They’re too big.”

So she took me shopping. She had me try on a ten and she showed me how it laid. She made me try on an eight and a six and a four. I’m a six and a four. So here I am, two sizes, basically three sizes off. She said, “You’re a small person.” I said, “I am not a small person, I am not a small person!” She said, “No, you are a small person, Jennie. This has gone on for years. It just puzzles me. Are you shy?” “Yes, I am shy.” Most people won’t believe that. I’m very, very shy. She said, “Are you trying to hide your body?” Yes, to a point I was. But I thought of myself really as a big person. If I had not, I promise you I couldn’t have gone up against men who were two or three times my size. I physically went up against them without a second thought. Particularly white women would always comment on my size. “You’re so petite.” I kept saying, “What is wrong with these girls?” I basically had become a middle-aged person before I accepted and realized that I was what they call petite.

At MIT they wanted to send three campus guards at me. It was a discussion group, a meeting. There was an incident in the cafeteria and I had been tough. There were some things that they would do to black kids that they didn’t do to white kids, and that ticked me off. They were in this meeting and the discussion was that they needed to contain me. The guy said, “You need to get about three guards and go get her to stop her.” Somebody, one of the white deans or somebody in the meeting, said, “Is she that big?” This was a black guy talking here, he said, “Well, she’s dangerous. She’s dangerous. She’s really dangerous. You’re going to need three men to contain her.” Then this other person said, “She’s probably about 115 pounds. She’s a small woman.” The white guy roared, “Why do you need three men for a woman that size?” This guy reiterated how dangerous I was.

It was so fascinating to one of the other participants that that person wanted to share this with me. The person said, “You know, it’s amazing how threatened these people are by you.” The guy really brought the point home. He said, “I don’t think you need to send three men.” My supporter said, “I’m telling you, if you send three men at her, you’re going to piss her off and she’s really going

to act up.” They were right. I would have really acted up. You better listen to what I say, because that is not the right attitude when you need to deal with me. If you rationalize with me, I’ll be reasonable, but if you come at me with force, I’m going to come back at you with force. It’s not going to be pleasant.

Those were the kinds of things that people just really used to strike with. Another incident in the chemical engineering department that really blew me away. I passed a room one day and these three big, burly white guys, not one of them was less than 220 pounds, was attacking this African student who really was an athlete but he was a coward. That’s the only way to describe him. He was a weak-minded brilliant student and they were attacking this guy. He was like what I call a joker, the little African guy. They were attacking him and I saw the situation. I went into the room. This was in the old chemical engineering building. I just rushed into the room and I asked them, “What on earth are you doing?” They immediately released the guy. “Jennie, Jennie, Jennie, Jennie! We don’t have any beef with you.” Outside the door was a black professor and a white professor. The professors reported to the head of the department that I had attacked these three guys. Now the African guy ran out of the room and left me.

Standing there with the others.

With the white guys.

With the three white guys.

He’s a true coward. I lost total respect for him. But the white guys were not about to have a confrontation with me. “Jennie, just stay calm.” Now, I was chewing them out and telling them how racist they were and that I wouldn’t tolerate their behavior and them attacking a black person. But what really got me was the two professors. Here I am, my size, attacking over 600-and-some pounds plus. That’s illogical. But that again was an incident that showed me the power of the mind. Those guys knew my mindset. If it had become necessary now, they would have been dealt with. They knew that. That just fascinated me. I said, “Well, the mind is powerful.” It really is powerful.