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Technology and the Dream

Reflections on the Black Experience at MIT, 1941–1999

By: Clarence G. Williams

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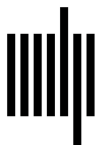
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NELSON ARMSTRONG

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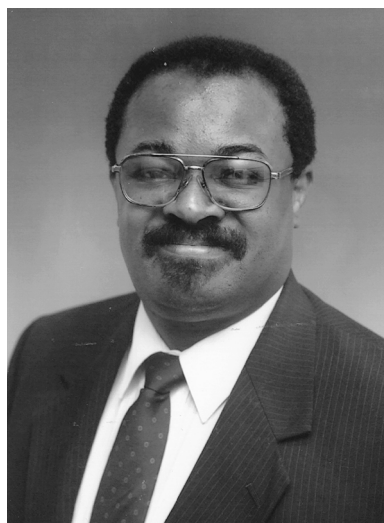


Great fortune for me, I think, starts with Mom and Dad. Both Mom and Dad come out of North Carolina; both Mom and Dad were what may have been called professional folks back in that day, but we're not talking white collar or anything there. Dad was and still is a barber and my mom was lucky enough to go to school to become a registered nurse. Their background just told them that education was the thing to do and they wanted to make sure their kids got it. I've heard all my life, "You kids are going to get a great education if nothing else." There are five of us, the kids that my mom and dad had. I have an older brother, an older sister, a younger sister, and a younger brother. So the five of us grew up very close in age, very close in terms of the things that we did, and Mom and Dad talked about going to school all the time.

In fact, education was so important I'm a kindergarten dropout. I went off to kindergarten when I was five years old and my sister went off to the first grade, elementary school. But my mom, prior to my going off to elementary school, had already taught me to read and had already taught me to tell time. There's a great story in my home, that I used to bother my mom just too much when she was trying to get things done in the house. I was always underfoot and all that kind of stuff. One day my mom, in order to get me from underfoot because she was trying to iron, said she was going to teach me how to tell time. So she took the clock down off the wall and we sat down and she told me what it was all about. She sent me to my room and she said, "Stay there until you learn how to do this," and that would give her

time to go out and iron—all that kind of stuff. The great laugh is I came out in about five minutes. She drilled me to see if I really understood it, and I did.

So after a week or so in kindergarten, I was just luckily prepared just a little bit better than some of the other students. Kindergarten started before the first grade did, so when my sister went off to first grade, I didn't want to be bothered with kindergarten, I went to the first grade with my sister. Having been in the first grade for a month or so, a number of parents around were complaining because they had kids my age and they were a couple of months older than me, as a matter of fact, and they were not in school. Those parents wanted their kids in school since I was, so there's always been talk in the neighborhood about how I was in school and they weren't. My mom was



Edited and excerpted from an oral history interview conducted by Clarence G. Williams with Nelson Armstrong in Hanover, NH, 6 March 1998.

afraid that all these parents would go argue with the principal. Mom said she went first to head the whole thing off, and she still tells the story of how she went to see the principal and wanted to say to him, “Nels is in a play in school. Please let him stay through that play and then I’ll take him out. I know he’s too young and I’ll bring him back next year.” Having heard this, the principal said, “Well, let me go and talk to his teacher about it.” The principal went to see my teacher, Ms. Martha Johnson Brown, my first grade teacher, and Ms. Brown is reported to have said, “No way are you taking him out of here.” Again, I already knew how to read, I already knew how to tell time, so she could send me on various errands that she couldn’t send some other students on.

Because of that, I was a year ahead in school all the way through college. I skipped the first grade literally. I was in the first grade; they deregistered me because I really was too young. I went back the next year and they just skipped me up. The records show that I skipped the first grade, even though I spent the year there deregistered. My first grade teacher wouldn’t let me go. With that kind of background, my brothers and sisters were getting the same thing from my parents in the sense that they would never let us off the hook in terms of “You’ve got to go to school, you’ve got to do this, you’ve got to go do that.” Like many, many other folks that are like me, I think, there was just never a question about whether or not you were going to school, whether or not you were going to go to college and so forth. I cannot remember a time when my parents didn’t talk about that. Even when we were in college, they were still saying “You’re going to do this, you’re going to do that.”

So that, I think, gave me a great start. Because I could read as a four-year-old, my mom would just give me things to read—again, to try to get me from being underfoot. And that love of reading turned into something that somebody told me, I think, when I was still in elementary school: “Read the newspaper every day, not because you’re going to really keep up with what’s going on in the world but you’re practicing your reading.” Between reading the newspaper and going to church, I think I developed a sense of communication. The church part, I think, people hear when I talk, and the reading the newspaper part, I think, people see when I write.

There had to be some very enriching experiences particularly from home and church, I hear you mention, and school. This all was in the South.

I grew up in Newport News, Virginia, right down the street from Richmond, Virginia, which was of course the capital of the Confederacy. So when teachers told me I was growing up in the mid-Atlantic states, they could say what they wanted, it was still the South. None of the people in Newport News thought of themselves as mid-Atlantic.

I was born in 1950, so we’re talking about the 1950s in terms of my early childhood. I went to a public school, which of course in those days was indeed a completely black school. And, following elementary school, I went to a high school that was a completely black high school. I happen to have gone to Booker T. Washington Elementary School and then Huntington High School. Huntington High School, you may note, is one of those cited in the 1954 Supreme Court decision. It is important, as I think about things, to see what Huntington High School was. It was a very, very good black school by everything that I knew, but of course I didn’t know nothing else: my only frame of reference. But it sat facing Orchid Avenue and the back of the school was on Wickham Avenue. Now, as you went from Wickham Avenue south, you didn’t go very far before it turned into the white neighborhood, and none of those white kids, of course, came to Huntington High School. They all went to Newport News High School. The two high schools weren’t that far apart, geographically or physically, but they were miles apart when you think about what we were doing or how they were being recognized or how they were being funded and so forth. We were extremely lucky, I think, at Huntington High School because this man by the name of W. D. Scales was the principal. As a principal, he was never going to let those of us in that high school get away with things too easy. We didn’t particularly like him because of that then, but I think most of my contemporaries would say that we’re very, very proud of him because of it now. He taught us a sense of discipline, and that went from the academics all the way through to sports. You were supposed to be the best you could be. I can remember going off as a sophomore, junior, and senior from Huntington High School to do state math tests. In fact, I went five years in a row and of those five years I won the state math test three

times—and the two times I didn't win, I came in second.

During each of those five trips—we traveled with Newport News High School—I had to sit in the back of the bus, even though I was the champion. I didn't understand those kinds of things. I don't even think I thought twice about it most of the time. But it was a tremendously good high school, when I look back on it. I never would have compared it with much of what's out here, but it was a very, very good school.

I know that for a fact, because you know I taught at Bruton Heights.

I didn't know that.

So I knew what Huntington High was all about, as well as Phoenix High School and those. Well, Huntington High School was the best high school in the area.

Well, in every aspect that principal would always say to us, "You have to be the very, very best and never settle for anything less." In the classrooms, in organizations, in sports, everything, we would get this: "You've got to be the best there is. You've got to go off and do things." So when it came time to go into college, you'd think about where you were going to college, and I thought about the schools that were nearby and so forth. It was a teacher in my high school who came to say, "I know where you need to go to school." With all the encouragement that I was getting from places, I still never would have thought of coming up to a place like Dartmouth College to go to school. But that sense that you're going to do it that started at home with Mom and Dad, and then followed through in elementary school and high school, this is kind of what you ended up doing.

Talk a little bit about this teacher who told you that she thought that. Or is it a she?

Yes, a she.

She thought that she knew about this school, this college that she thought you ought to go to. I mean what was her makeup, what was she all about?

Her name is Mamie Bacote. She is a city councilwoman now in the city of Newport News. She was a history teacher, as I remember it. Her husband was a coach on the football team. She was one of those teachers who were able to laugh and hang around with youngsters, yet made sure that you knew where the line was in terms of who's the student and who's the teacher. We could laugh and

have a good time, but "That ain't why you're in this classroom," and "That ain't why you're walking these halls." Everybody liked her because she was young, very pretty, she knew what she was doing, and she related to folks real, real well. I took her course when I was a junior. I had no knowledge of her going off that summer, that she came up here to Dartmouth to go to some program here for the summer. At the beginning of my senior year, you know, it's that time when you're trying to get college applications out everywhere. I can remember the day like it was yesterday when she said, "I know the school that you've got to go to." I thought that was so interesting because, you know, as a senior in high school you start to get a little bit of attention because your SAT scores had looked pretty good. Thirteen people made the top ten in my high school, and I was very lucky to be one of those thirteen. Coming out of a school that had a pretty decent reputation, I thought college was a doable. No disrespect meant to any school whatsoever, but I was very set on going to Hampton because it was there. I had looked at Virginia State because my brother had gone to Virginia State, and I knew my sister was thinking about going there. Local schools were basically what I was looking at.

I was going through all kinds of college materials, but she said, "That school is Dartmouth College." I had never heard of this joint. I didn't know a thing about the Ivy League. I did a little reading and spent a little time in the guidance office, and there was a cadre of students that made up that top ten—top thirteen, actually—and then more. Huntington was indeed no slouch, so I would guess that with a class of 320 or so students, I would bet there were 45 or 50 of us who kind of thought we could go off and do something. Whether or not the rest of them knew anything about the Ivy League or not, I don't know. But I know I didn't. We did go off to Dartmouth and Yale and Brandeis and all kinds of really good schools. A bunch of us spread out in a very, very nice way. My little reading helped me find out about Dartmouth. Mrs. Bacote was very kind to share her thoughts about why, about the environment and so forth. I was kind of paying attention, but not really paying attention. If I had been paying attention, I would have recognized it was an all-male school. I did hear enough to know that on the faculty at Dartmouth was a guy named John Kemeny, who was quite a math giant. He had been an assistant to

Albert Einstein. That kind of intrigued me a bit. Then one day—I worked at my dad’s barber shop on Saturdays—one Saturday I saw a football score, and I think it was either Dartmouth and Harvard or Dartmouth and Pennsylvania, something like that. I don’t remember who won, but the score was 6 to 9 and there it was for real. A real school, you know what I mean? That kind of piqued my interest a little bit. Plus a dear buddy of mine, John Sullivan, who was in the same class as I, he and I were thinking about whether or not we would go to school together. He was very strong academically. He was getting the same kind of a push, but for Yale. So we thought maybe we would apply to the same school or whatever. I ended up coming to Dartmouth, he ended up going to Yale.

So there was that kind of support, peer support as well—people trying to reach just a little bit. But Mrs. Bacote, when you look back on it, was just a teacher looking out for what I guess she thought of as a good student. And I’m sure she did it for more than just me. But it was her insight, if you will—her vision, if you will—that saw it, and I’m thankful that I was lucky enough to follow up on it.

Now, you mentioned earlier that the first time you came to Dartmouth College was when you came to go to school. Talk about that experience coming here to Dartmouth, because this is so far from Virginia and it’s a totally different environment.

I left school early one day in April of my senior year and went home. I don’t remember if I wasn’t feeling well or what. When I got home, I found a letter from Dartmouth saying, “You are admitted and here’s your financial aid package.” I ran back to school and straight to the principal’s office and said, “Look, look, look! I got admitted to Dartmouth!” And from that point on the anxiety started to build. I can remember that just a day or two before I left home to attend Dartmouth, my mom was in the living room ironing some things that we would pack into my trunk. She talked to me about being away from home and living in a white community. She talked about being the best I could be. But you know, I never thought about limits or boundaries that I would have to face. In my hometown, I knew black lawyers and doctors and other professionals, so I was more worried about the cold weather than anything else. I was going to New Hampshire!

My dad got a couple of his friends to drive up with us and the four of us—my dad’s two friends, me, and my dad—jumped in the car and left Newport News at four o’clock in the morning to come here. Now, one of my dad’s friends had been up in this area before, but none of us had ever been to Dartmouth before. I started out driving. I, of course, had never driven this far before. I drove across the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel, and that’s about eighteen miles long. I had never done that before. I’d been to New York once and I’d been to Washington, but those were on school bus trips and then you’re with a whole group of people and supervisors. So this was going off to college, and the first thing I thought of when I got in the car at four o’clock that morning was, “When I get out of this car, I’m going to be in a new world.” Still, I don’t think I knew it was an all-male school.

So we jump in the car and we drive out. I drive all the way up to Delaware, and seeing new sights—just going to a new place—was exciting. It took about twelve, thirteen hours to drive up. The Interstate wasn’t finished then, so the last part took us through the local environment. You got a chance to see this, and so forth. We pulled up, and this place now looks almost exactly the way it did then. The buildings are almost exactly the same. If we went out there and stood in the middle of the green and just did 360 degrees, what you would see that’s different is so slight you might not even recognize it. So this is what I saw when I got here in 1967, and that’s why the “welcome home” theory that I talk about is so important. When people come back, I know they’re looking at what they used to see.

We knew which dorm I was assigned to because they had told us the name of it. There was a little information booth they put out on the green, and they still do. I can remember going to that information booth and they told us where my dorm was. We went down to my dorm room, parked the car, and took a couple things into the dorm room. My dad walked around with me a little bit. We found a few things we needed to find—the bursar’s office, this place where you get your linen from for the room and all that kind of stuff—and then we all went out to dinner. We sat down in a place that was then called the Village Green, and had a nice dinner.

I was just overly excited. This was just all brand new. I don’t see any other black folks. It’s still

just me and I'm still nervous. Dad says, "Well, we're going to go over here and check into a hotel and you can stay in your room or go with us." I say, "No, I'm going with you. You ain't leaving me here with all these white folks by myself. Hell, no." Now not only is this new, I don't know a soul. I have no idea of anybody. I've never been in this place before. I don't know where the bathroom is, you know. So we go and we check into a little motel somewhere and we spend the night. We get up the next morning. We have a real nice breakfast and all that kind of stuff, and we drive back over to the dorm. They park the car, and I get out and I'm expecting everybody to get out and go into this dorm. And my dad says, "I love you." And they're getting ready to go. They got a twelve-hour drive in front of them. It's just dawning on me that in about three minutes I am by myself, I don't know anybody.

And they took off. My dad was filming a lot of this, so he has on videotape me walking away from the car towards the dorm as the car pulls off. I cannot in my lifetime think of a time when I felt more alone than that. I went up into the room and I closed the door, and for the longest time all I did was sit there because I didn't know what else to do. If I walk out that door, not only do I not know where to go, I don't know where not to go, either. I sat there for the longest, longest time. But hunger has a way of saying, "We got to get up out of here," and I did. I finally got up. I made the bed, I remember making the bed. I did some unpacking and stuff. I knew my trunk had been mailed here, so I had to go find UPS somewhere. I had to go find that. I had to go find out how I would eat. Luckily for me, I had been in two programs that gave me a sense of college and got me going. I had been in Upward Bound at Hampton; I had been in pre-college at Hampton. So those two experiences said to me, "We've done this before, we know how to make our way around, we don't know anything here but we've got to go out and find out. And they got this at Hampton, they probably got this here at Dartmouth too." So I struck out, and that was the beginning of it.

I joined the football team. There were one or two brothers on the football team, but I didn't know where they lived and I didn't know who they were. So for the first couple of weeks, if I wasn't going to class and going to the football practice, I didn't go out my room unless I needed

to get something to eat. I didn't go out my room. I sat in the window seat until one day a brother named Anthony Harley, we called him Fafa, was walking down the street. I didn't know who he was, but I was so happy to see another black person I jumped up out of the window sill—I was on the second floor—ran down the hall, ran down the stairs, ran up to him, and he and I stood there staring at each other. We're not even talking to each other, we're so glad to see somebody else. That was the beginning of me getting to know a few other brothers on campus. Getting to know those brothers, of course, helped me to get to know everybody, because they start to open up just a little bit.

In general, how would you describe your undergraduate experience here? Any highlights, or reflections on issues related to being a black student here?

I am eternally grateful to dear old Dartmouth. I wouldn't be sitting in this seat if that wasn't true. While I am so thankful for the confidence that it gave me, the love that I have for Dartmouth is matched only by the hatred that I have for Dartmouth. And I say that not just now, but I've said it many, many times. I experienced some wonderful things here, but I experienced some really, really bad things here. My freshman year, a buddy of mine from Oregon—a white student—and I went to buy our books for the first time. He was living in the same dorm with me and we had befriended each other. I can remember standing in line waiting to pay for my books. A mother and a child were in front of us, and my buddy and I were just waiting our turn so we could pay for our books. And the little kid was staring at me. It didn't dawn on me why this little kid was staring at me, this little young kid. He's yanking on his mom's skirt and his mom is just trying to push him off. She's trying to pay for her stuff. The little kid finally says, "Look, ma, look. That man doesn't wash." He had never seen anybody that looked like me before, so he thought this was dirt and that I just never took the time to wash.

Then, something far more striking, because that opened up a conversation between me and my classmate. He was from Corvallis, Oregon. On the way back to the dorm, carrying our books, he said, "Nels, you know, you're the first black person I've ever known, I've ever talked to. I'm not trying to be funny, but you know in movies they say black people have tails. Is that true?" Now, we're freshmen in college and he doesn't know that!

So that's the beginning of dear old Dartmouth. That turned me off. I knew there was no malice in that. I mean, he was just asking because he wanted to know for real and he had a friend, me, that he could ask that of. Well, that sure made me wonder about everybody else I was going to school with, because this was supposed to be the prestigious Dartmouth College. These were supposed to be the smart people in the world. What I learned was they were smart, but they were rich and they were privileged. And being so rich and privileged, they had no sense of what many people in the world were going through at all. I can name a whole bunch of things that fall in that light. It is indeed balanced by some good things. But the hatred, by the time I graduated, was indeed stronger than the love—much, much stronger. Like many, I said, "If I ever get out of this hell, I will never come back here again." Of course, my first job was working right here, so I never left.

A lot of good things happened, though. And the good things, they mean a lot more to me now than they did when I graduated. But there was a professor here by the name of Peter Saccio. He's an English professor. He is a great memory for me, when I think about this place, and I'm happy to be able to tell him that from time to time.

He's still here?

Yes, he's still here. I said, "Professor Saccio" one time—this is maybe three years ago. He said, "Well, you know, Nels, you work here. You don't have to call me that no more. You can call me Peter." But he did something that helped me out. Most people who know me, I think, kind of see the Baptist background in me because of the way I talk and the gestures and all that kind of stuff. Well, Peter Saccio was the first professor that I ever had. He's white, but he wears his emotions on his sleeve. He's a professor and he loves being a professor. He teaches Shakespeare. His sense of being an actor, his sense of understanding Shakespeare, as you watch him in front of a course, you know he loves what he's doing. And that reminded me of a Baptist preacher. He caused me to get involved in the classroom in ways I didn't want to do because I was shy. Nobody seems to believe that, but I was shy and wasn't prepared to speak up in front of all these rich kids, white kids, privileged kids. It was 1967. These kids had already been to Europe. These kids had upper-classmen brothers who had fine, fancy cars on

campus. These kids had summer homes on Martha's Vineyard. Summer home? What's that? These people had fathers and uncles who had graduated from Dartmouth. I'd never heard of Dartmouth. These kids were flying down to New York for the weekend. What do you mean flying down to New York for the weekend? Where you get that kind of money from? These kids, on a given weekend, "Let's jump in a car and let's go somewhere." These kids, I was scared to death to speak up in front of these kids. I failed a course in music, that was my major. I failed it because when I got in the course, I knew absolutely nothing about Baroque music. On the very first day, everybody else in the class was talking like they knew it already. So when we took the final exam, they got A's. They all got 100. They would have gotten 100 if they had taken that test on the first day.

Because they already done similar work before.

They already knew it. I would have gotten a zero if we had taken that test on the first day. I failed that course by one point. Now, in my eyes, I learned more than anybody. I was the only one that failed that course. So the bitterness is really, really there, there's just no question about it. My professor, who spent a lot of time talking and discussing all this stuff that those guys knew, didn't give me any personal attention at all. So those kinds of experiences stand out.

On the plus side, Earl Hill came here as a professor in drama. He was the first tenured black professor here. He allowed me to do some theater stuff. There are a couple pictures of me that still hang from those days. That theater is what people see in me now. Nels, the character, comes from that theater stuff; Nels, the character, can go out here and laugh and do all kinds of stuff. Nelson who came here, though, is really, really very quiet and very shy and not that outgoing. But Earl Hill told me something when we were rehearsing for a play once. I was really, really worried that I couldn't remember the lines, and I said to him, "What am I going to do if I mess up in front of all those people?" He said, "Nels, look, they don't know the lines. If you mess up, just ad lib and keep going."

He's still around, though?

He's around. He's retired from the faculty, but he still spends his time here in the summer and the fall doing some research. He's writing a book. He still sees this as home when the weather is good

here. But that one little bit of encouragement has carried me not just through theater, but when I came to work here, you know what I mean? I'm thankful that people think I know what I'm doing. In fact, I do know what I'm doing. But there are times when I'm just as lost as anybody else. I just remember what he said.

That's a tremendous lesson that he taught you.
Big-time lesson.

About just life.

Life, big-time lesson. Peter Saccio taught me you can love what you do and if you find something that you really love, go at it. That's what I think I'm doing here. So I give Peter Saccio all the credit in the world for saying, "You don't have to hold it in; if you like something, let it out." It was just like that Baptist preacher. And Earl Hill was kind of saying the same thing, you know what I mean? "You're going to run into hurdles, you're going to run into bumps, you're going to do some things wrong, you've just got to keep going." Nike wraps it up by saying, "Just do it." Those two people mean so much to me in terms of Dartmouth. They kind of got me going.

That really answers a question I have about the role models in your program here. You've answered that exceedingly well. That says a lot about what can have an impression on a young person's life at a very crucial point, as an undergraduate student. Here you are now, in a professional position where you have seen a lot of stuff, and you remembered that being so impressive on you at that point.

They were, if you will, practicing their craft in the way that they wanted to do it. They were being teachers. That's what they wanted to do, and I would bet that neither of them saw at the moment what was going on in my head. I'm sure that many, many students go through the same thing with different professors, but that for me is the positive of the Dartmouth experience. That's worth every penny you pay to come to a joint like this.

Let me shift. We have a lot to talk about. How can you get from Dartmouth to MIT? Try to give us a briefing about how you got from Dartmouth to MIT.

Blessings from above, people who care about you, and luck. I graduated in '71. I worked here for three, three and a half years. I worked here until August of 1974 as a student counselor out of the Dean's Office. It was the beginnings of me hoping

I could give something back to help out students as a whole, but really to help out brothers and sisters. It gave me a start in higher ed. I left here to go get a master's degree from William and Mary. I was lucky that Dartmouth gave me a fellowship to go to school. So I went down to William and Mary, spent a term down there, made A's and B's, did well, but the people at William and Mary—a couple of people at William and Mary—didn't sit well with me. I had one professor who didn't want to call on me when I raised my hand. I was the only black person in the class—again. There was a young lady who was in the class who had graduated from Cornell; everybody else was pretty local. The two of us would raise our hands all the time in class and want to lead discussions. We weren't trying to lead, really, we were just trying to be a part of the discussion. A lot of times when he would ask stuff, he wouldn't call on either one of us. When no one else sometimes could answer the question, he'd finally say, "Okay, one of our distinguished people from the Ivy League can answer." That irked me to no end. I was just trying to be a student there. I'm trying to learn and he would shun us. That didn't sit well with me.

Then I went out to get a part-time job. I had worked at Dartmouth for three years. I had some experience to give. I went to get a job and the little job office broke my heart. I went in, talked about my little experience, and they said, "The only job we can help you find part-time is either working in Colonial Williamsburg as a slave, or you can work at the Colonial Inn as a waiter." I thought, "Now wait a minute, folks, I got a degree from Dartmouth College. That doesn't make me superman, but it does mean I got some intelligence here." "Well, that's all we're going to offer you." Somehow, I equated that to all of Williamsburg. I said, "That's all you all got to offer me? Good-bye." I wrote up here to say, "I'm not going to take advantage of the fellowship next term, I'm going to go back into the world of work." Some people up here that I had worked with out of the student counseling office—that was the career services office—said, "There's a position in administration at MIT. Apply for this."

That's how I learned about the job. I applied for it and went to work in the financial aid office at MIT. I just quit graduate school, if you will, wanted to go to work. They actually directed me to that particular position.

So Dartmouth really directed you to MIT?

Oh yes. See, I have much to give back. I'm not here because I have to be here. I'm in this job because I want to give something back. I really, really do. They didn't have to help me. They could have said, "Thanks for letting us know." They didn't have to say anything about a job at all. I didn't ask them, "Tell me where I can go to work." I said, "I'm not going to take the fellowship, I want to go back to work," and they gave me this information. I typed up a letter and sent it off, got lucky and got interviewed, and met folks like Dr. Clarence Williams, John Turner, and others. That was the beginning of a wonderful, wonderful tenure at MIT.

Tell me a little bit about that experience. I get cloudy because you worked there for a while, you left, and you came back, but the place you spent the most time was that first job that you took there. Is that not correct?

I think that's true.

A combination of the financial and admissions.

Yes. I spent, I think, about five or five and a half years in financial aid and then about five or five and a half years in admissions. So those two come across pretty much the same. Now, I hope that thus far I have made it perfectly clear that, even though I had this love-hate relationship, my love for Dartmouth is unbounded. I love this place. Now, having said that, there is no place on earth that compares to MIT. It is as unique as a single flower that grows in the middle of the desert.

Talk a little bit about that.

What's unique about MIT is that it has the most curious students I've ever known. Most students will look at a TV and, being curious, they'll flip the channels. They might even play with a knob or two. That TV is an interesting thing. They'll plug the game board in and play with it. The MIT student is going to take that thing apart, just pull out the tubes. "Let's see what a transistor means. Does this have to fit this way?" Curious! They want to *know*, you know. *That*, I think, distinguishes MIT from any school I've ever worked at, visited, or whatever. And that permeates the whole place, the way I see it. Everybody there works hard through a given period of time, everybody. It's completely unique in that sense. It's unforgiving in that way, in the sense that people work so hard.

I also felt honored to be working at a place that had a name that big, but I cannot think of a

place that hurt me as much as MIT did. Jack Frailey and the people that made up the financial aid office, I think were very good to me. Sam Jones, who became my mentor inside that office, gave me tremendous opportunities that I think I should count my blessings for. Dan Langdale became a lifetime friend. I could say kudos about Dan Langdale from now until next Thursday non-stop and wouldn't come close to talking about how close friends we are. So I learned a great deal in that. But it really was meeting you and meeting John and meeting other folks that gave me a chance to put my feet on the ground and to relax, because just like Dartmouth and just like so many other places, I'm still the only black kid on the block. I'm lucky enough not to have been the first black person in financial aid there. There were at least two more, I know, who worked in that office before me. But still, when I got there, I was the only one. There's a tremendous pressure that you feel, anyway, because black students coming in or other students of color coming in, parents coming in, they kind of looking at you as somebody that can "Give me that extra break." When we're talking about financial need in this country we're not talking about what you think you need, we're talking about what the government thinks you need, and the two don't always match. The two rarely match, in fact.

The sense of wanting to come in and do a good job and feeling a need to be twice as good, three times as good as anybody else, was crucial. So I cannot tell you how many days that office would close at five and I sat there till eight o'clock, nine o'clock writing up those loans, so I could keep up with what I thought I had to do to be like everybody else. Or the need to read financial aid folders and then read the minority financial aid folders to make sure that we weren't missing things that were important in reading that application, or understanding that family in a way I wasn't sure my colleagues could do. That's not because there was malice in any of my colleagues' hearts, I just don't think they had an understanding of what black kids or Hispanic kids or others were going through. It behooved me, I thought, to try to do that. So there was a tremendous amount of pressure that I was putting on myself in addition to all the pressure I thought was coming.

Then wonderful, wonderful folks like Sam Jones, willing to give me an opportunity to try

some new things. Sam, I remember, was asked by the federal government to do something and he could have gone and done it. He said, “No, I can’t do it but I have a wonderful young colleague here, Nels Armstrong, he’ll come out and do it.” He did that to give me a shot. Where are you going to go to find people who are going to do that kind of thing for you when you’re a young black kid trying to start out? But he did it and he mentored me through the whole thing. Part of that comes from the fact that I have an A-1 personality. I mean, I’m tough on my own, don’t get me wrong. But part of it comes from folks believing in you too, and I’m thankful that he believed in me.

Had you ever worked that hard in your life?

Never. It was day in, it was day out. I was living in Boston, didn’t know anything about Boston, didn’t have an apartment of my own. A buddy, Ron Crichlow, who’s at MIT right now, put me up in his house for three months. I slept on the couch, but I didn’t care. He was kind enough to befriend me enough and to support me enough to give me that much time to get on my feet. I was scared. I was literally scared to death. One of the things, a light point that kind of helped me in the very beginning, was when I started, John Turner wrote in one of the newsletters he sent around that Nails Armstrong had joined—and he spelled my name N-A-I-L-S. I guess my Southern accent had caused him to hear nails instead of Nels. That gives me a great chuckle when I think back on it because I was so new.

The financial aid part was one thing, but I wanted to ask you to talk about the job of being able to travel all over the country and identify these outstanding minority kids. What kind of overall philosophy did you develop in terms of the kind of kids that you could identify? Even today you can tell that they are special in some way. Talk a little bit about that, because I think that’s very important.

First, I have to give credit to two great teachers—John Mims and John Mack. In addition to those two great teachers was Peter Richardson, who in his own way gave us great rope to either do well or hang ourselves. Then when you’d hang yourself, he’d come and catch you and pick you back up. So as a teacher and as a mentor in that sense, Peter Richardson, the director of admissions while I was there, was wonderful. Julie McLellan, though, was even more wonderful, because Julie would say to

Peter and other people, “You let Nels do that.” She, I think, had the great vision that said, “Let Nels or John Mack or John Mims ...” She would say to Peter, “They know some things we don’t know. They’ve been there. We’ve got to let them go do it. We’ve got to let them make some decisions.” And Peter was good enough to go along with that. I think Peter had great feelings of his own that were very positive, but I think Julie was the real force that made that happen. It really meant taking a look at the philosophy of admissions at MIT and tweaking it here and there and bending it in some places, even trying to break it where you thought you could, because in this country to this day we tend to say that SAT’s determine your future, and that is a very wrong thing to do. Admissions officers all know it’s not true, but we have not quelled the sense that “You got a high SAT score, therefore you’re smart.” That ain’t true. The only thing that an SAT score does specifically is tell you how well you might do in a science course in your first year of college. It doesn’t do anything other than that.

But we live on that in the admissions process. Now again, while English is English no matter where you teach it, while math is math no matter where you teach it, and you’re just going down the line with that—chemistry, physics, whatever—we come up in a different kind of situation. All too often, kids that are seen as slow in elementary school and high school—kids of color—they aren’t slow, they’re faster than other kids, but they seem slow because they get it done quickly and then they’re bored and they act out their boredom. They’re looking for stuff to do. Teachers too often only see skin color, and more often than not—I think it’s subconscious—the teacher says “attention-span disorders” or, “Here’s a kid that’s not paying attention in class, can’t keep up with this, that, and the other,” and so forth. So a teacher starts—no malice intended again, I don’t think, consciously anyway—to put this kid in situations that are considered subordinate, slow, backwards, or special students. Undoubtedly, there are some students that should be in that situation, but there are many who are just plain bored. I know that because I was one of them. I was lucky, though, that a teacher figured me out early enough to put me in a classroom by myself. I took a couple of classes in high school where I was the only one in the class. I was registered in one class, but they had

me sitting in a room all by myself while I studied. I thought it was just because I was a bad kid. It was really because I was smart.

And they were really trying to help you.

I used to play little tricks in school because I was bored. I understood what was going on in the lessons, it's just that I was bored. I needed something else to do to keep me busy.

So you could recognize those little nerds, right?

Yes. Easy, easy. I was also lucky enough to learn from John Mims and John Mack the whole art of presentation. While we all did it differently, and people say I'm blessed with that thing called the gift of gab or whatever, they helped me understand that when you're making a presentation to the audience, it doesn't matter what you think, what really matters is what *they* think, and you need to help them see a realistic picture of what MIT is all about. You've got to get to know that audience in one way or another. I asked myself, if I was sitting out in that audience, "What do I think, based on my knowledge of MIT, really needs to happen?" No one told me this, but the first thing I thought was, "You've got to uneducate those people. You've got to uneducate them before you can educate them." What do you think about MIT? You think two-inch-thick glasses, huge forehead, Hewlett-Packard calculators all around their belt.

So I told that story everywhere I went. I said, "You know what? I'm here to represent MIT and this is what I think you think MIT looks like." It makes people laugh, but they start shaking their head. Because they do that, I say, "Well, I need to cause you not to think that. I need you to wipe the slate clean first." You can do that in front of a large crowd, but you really needed to do it when you wanted to talk about a student of color, because that for them was a much larger barrier. MIT was unreachable. Now for the guidance counselor who thought the same way, that guidance counselor says, "Well, you can't see these students. These students can't handle that." Well, I had to cause that guidance counselor to wipe that slate clean too. I want to get to know the student not just in terms of the paperwork, but I need to know something about that student and that student's family. Because my mom and dad put it in me that I had to make it, maybe these other moms and dads had done the exact same thing and this kid really could do it.

So in getting to know that student, I need to find out something about that student personally and I needed to touch Mom—not physically touch Mom, but emotionally touch Mom. If a kid, I honestly believe, feels emotionally that Mom doesn't think this is a good idea, that kid's not coming to your college. You've got to touch Mom. If you don't, even if it's a good school, if Mom doesn't want her baby to go away, your chances are going down for getting a good student. So it was always important to me to have contact—verbal contact, visible contact, any and every contact you could have—with students of color because they needed to see somebody they could trust, they needed to see somebody they thought they could communicate with in an honest way, they needed to be uneducated so that they could be reeducated about what this place was all about. You needed to feel from them, emote with them, some sense of curiosity and where Mom and Dad's head was. And if you could get that far, you've a much better shot of getting the right kid to look at MIT, apply, and get in.

The admissions process really doesn't take all that into account. It takes into account what are your grades, what are your SAT scores, and what kind of things you participate in. Now that draws a nice wall around the student and, if the culture were the same everywhere, that might be enough. But we know that's not true. We have to somehow see if you can account for all of some of those other things. So a lot of times when my colleagues were going home, I was spending MIT's money making those phone calls. You've got to call them up on the phone.

And talk to them.

Yes. You've got to figure out, "I'm coming into this city at such and such a time. When I come into this city, I'm making this presentation. Will you be there? And when the presentation is over and everybody else is going home, you need to stay here with me for a little while and let's talk as much as we possibly can." Now John Mack I give more credit than anyone in terms of helping me understand that and put that into place.

You mention John Mack and John Mims. That's probably one of the few areas of MIT that has had a very strong continuous mentoring of each minority administrator to come into that area—one teaching the other to the point that, you know, I think a few years ago all five

of you, at that time, came together. It's unheard of in most places that that kind of experience all connected there.

You said it just right—that last word, “connected.” That, I think, was extremely important in the success that I think MIT had, or we had, or whatever you might say back in that day. First and foremost, and I hope this isn't arrogant by including me in it, the cadre of people that you're talking about when you talk about the integrity of a John Mims, when you talk about the heart of a John Mack and what he put into that job, they didn't take it lightly at all. John Mack is a guy that puts his whole heart into what he does and he had the wonderful benefit of what John Mims brought to the job. Me and mine, I was able to gather from both of them. They tutored me. I mean, John Mims thought absolutely nothing of saying, “Nels, you need to think about these kinds of things. When you're going to this city, I know you've got to visit these two mainstream schools, but you need to think about going over there to some black schools.” I got to know John Mack very well before he left and we're still great friends. I saw John Mack less than a month ago.

But to have those kinds of folks who are still willing to say, “Okay, now you're doing a great job, yes, but here's some things you need to think about, here's some things you need to do.” And to John Mack, who would say, “Well Nels, you can use your personality in this way.” That connection. And then Eddie Grado, as you know, fell into that line. Arlene Roane fell into that line. And we all knew each other. We were all able to build one shoulder over the next and people would climb on that shoulder. Nobody had to start over. Nobody had to go back to the beginning.

When you look at that group of people, a tremendous amount of talent and experience developed over the years. You took over that position, coming from the financial aid area where you got tremendous exposure and knowledge, and combined the two. But taking all of that into consideration, the fact is that we still, today, have never had a black in charge of that admissions office, although we've had a tremendous tradition there. That's not only that office; there are others. What's your take on that?

Outside of you and John Turner—I still put you two there—nobody cared about us. That's not to say that the John Wynnes or the Peter Richardsons or the Jack Fraileys and so forth didn't try. They

cared about us, in the sense that we were part of their staffs. I think they were willing to help us with what we wanted to do, but they didn't truly set out to mentor us over and above all else. In a lot of ways, we developed friendships with them and working relationships with them, but we need to see young folks coming up where somebody grabs hold of them and paves the way for them. You did that for me. John Turner was kind enough to help do some of that for me, but basically, in my eyes, you did that for me. I had an opportunity to meet a whole lot of folks, but I don't think they reached out to me in any way at MIT.

I remember you and John took Larry and me—there might have been others, but I remember the four of us—out to lunch one day, and you were talking about the admissions position and a couple of other things. You guys probably knew a little bit more about what was coming than we did, and you said, “Nels, you got any thought about moving up? You got any thought about looking at the directorship if it comes open?” And I can remember saying real quick, “Not me, not me.” Now, I didn't think anybody would pay attention to me if I did run. You may remember later on I decided, “Let me throw my hat in there,” and I went about trying to talk to people. I never got the impression that anybody would take me seriously. And then when I went through it, and some people's eyes opened up a little bit, I think they were surprised that I would do it, but I still don't think they took me seriously in any way whatsoever.

And I was crushed, I was absolutely crushed. This was the very start of me knowing that I was leaving MIT, when Michael Behnke got hired. No disrespect meant to Michael. I think he proved himself to be a very good dean of admissions. Constantine Simonides told me, “Nels, you're not ready to take on a job like this.” Then to turn around when Michael Behnke is hired and say, “Nels, we need you to teach him the ropes,” how in the hell am I going to teach him the ropes if I'm not ready? That was just the beginning for me. I knew I was gone. I'm not going to sit here and let this man tell me, you know, I'm not ready when—again, forgive the arrogance—I knew I had developed a bit of a national presence, I knew then that the financial aid and the admissions community across this country was saying, “Nels Armstrong was somebody that was out here.”

I even got a letter from that group that all of you were a part of.

ABAFOILSS?

ABAFOILSS, telling me that if they can't hire Nels Armstrong, I don't know who they can hire.

Well, I really thought after that luncheon, I really did say to myself, "Nels, this ain't a job that you cannot do. You are indeed ready for this." I don't think too many people, too many white administrators and folks, got to really, really make a difference for me. Beyond your support and one or two others, I don't think I had much support. Other than the black caucus, MIT never, never, never made me feel at home. And I gave that place my heart.

Oh, I know you did.

Never made me feel at home. Never.

It's interesting, because I don't think people, particularly whites, understand how difficult it is to live and try to have a social life and work at a place like MIT. As a single person as you were, and to put in the kind of time that you had to put in—we're talking about hard time—and then, in a way, not being rewarded.

It would have been nice if they had paid me for what I was doing. They didn't seem to mind. The president, the vice presidents, they didn't seem to mind that you put in all this extra time with students.

The whole idea of value. I've seen so many of us leave that place so pissed because they felt like they were just not valued. I'm telling you.

The first time I left because I knew I was burned out. There was just no way in the world I could stay. When I came back, because of the Alumni Fund, it wasn't because I called them. Joe Collins came down to see me in Baltimore because they were starting a new program. They wanted somebody, as they said, that had the kind of experience that I had to go out and launch this new national program, the Alumni Fund Leadership Program. They needed presentation skills, they needed somebody who could travel and who knew the alumni well, and so forth. And I fit the bill. I went back and I was only an assistant director, you know what I mean?

When you came back?

Yes. I had been an associate director in two different offices. I started to work and that same old feeling started to creep back in.

What was that feeling?

I'm not truly valued for what they want to get out of me. They want me to give it 180% and if I could creep another little 20% in there and do two full-time jobs, all the better. But it wasn't like I was getting paid big money or nothing like that. I knew lots of folks that weren't working as hard as I was and, granted different pay scales for different things, I was just putting in too much. I said, "If I'm going to do this, I might as well come home and do it." Which is striking in itself because of what I just said, "Come home." I do feel at home here. MIT *never* made me feel at home, and I had put in eleven or eleven and a half years at that joint.

A lot of hard time. I mean, I don't know of anybody who worked harder.

I did. I'll never forget this. I talk about this now because of what it did to me. I visited twenty-four cities in twenty-eight days. I visited an average of three high schools a day, I did a presentation almost every single night, I did guidance counselor breakfasts and so forth. That was what I was supposed to do. And then, on top of that, I made phone calls and visits to the homes of students of color. None of my colleagues had to do that, not one. I give Dan Langdale credit because at a meeting, when we would be dividing up the work, Dan would say, "We should all take a little extra share so that Nels has time to do all these things we expect Nels to do. We should take some of that load off of him." No one else ever said that. Dan Langdale almost always said it. He understood. But doing all those things, reading all the minority folders extra, going the extra mile to deal with students who were coming into your office, working with parents because they were coming in and they needed some extra help, there was no compensation for that. And compensation doesn't have to be dollars. But there was no compensation for that whatsoever.

You mention that at that point, working that hard, anybody would eventually get burned out, and even more so when you don't get the feeling that you're being valued. What would you recommend to a young Nels who gets to that point? What kind of advice would you recommend to a young Nels who has gotten to a point like that?

Well, there's a couple things I recommend even before then, because it's one thing that we just don't do well, particularly when we're young and

starting out: We don't believe in vacations. Now for me, I came from a family that never really took vacations, so I didn't understand how these people could just take two weeks off and go down to the Vineyard. I didn't have any money to do it anyway. But we black folks don't do very well at taking vacations when we're youngsters. I'm hoping that those of us who may be a little older can push the idea or enhance the idea: Take some time off and go do whatever you want to do. We are still at a point where we feel the need to work harder than anybody else for the sake of making it. Under that umbrella is where I think we lose out, taking vacations or those times when we need to refuel. We don't leave work on the table too often because we believe, and too often it's true, if we leave work on the table, we pay the price for it. Other folks leave work on the table and they don't get punished for it. We need to help youngsters learn that you can leave some of that work on the table, or we have to figure out ways of distributing that, or you've got to learn how to take a vacation and figure out how not to worry about it.

Also, when you get caught up in all the work that we do, somehow—and I haven't figured this one out yet, even though I hope I'm doing a better job of it than I used to—we've got to say to our counterparts, "In the same way you all expect me to take on all this extra work, but even more to do the work that we are asked to do, you've got to do the work that we are asked to do." Today, if a minority prospect, a heavy hitter, a big pocket, a person of color comes up, I still get the call. "Nels, here's a unique African-American. The salary and everything indicates that we can really get something out of this. Why don't you make a call on this and initiate something?" I can appreciate where they're coming from, but I don't get to do that. We need to do some alumni relations, but I don't get to go and say, "There's a white guy. Why don't you go out there and meet that white guy?" I've got to go out there and do my job. That two-way street is still in front of us. We haven't changed that in the least bit. Hopefully we can help some folks look at those kinds of things.

And a last piece, maybe not the last, we need to look at ourselves just a little bit different because while they're working us to death, *we're* working us to death. Sometimes we still want to save the world and maybe we just need to save our neighborhood.

Maybe we need to come back home and save the world another time.

Yes. We'll save the world later. Let somebody else worry about that neighborhood for a little while. Let's just take care of ourselves a little bit, because we put a lot into what we do and we should be able to define our self-worth without saying, "We've got to have a heart attack," without saying, "We've got to work eighty hours a week in order to get done what everybody else is expecting us to do." We need to learn how to define our forty hours a week the same way everybody else defines their forty hours a week.

I think that's an excellent point. In fact, I think one of the things that helped me here recently is that I've come to that realization. If I hear you correctly, you can't spend your time trying to prove who you are over a host of years because it would never be seen in the way that you think it will be seen.

Because they ain't looking for it.

They ain't looking for it and would never see it.

They ain't going to see it, I don't care what you do. It's just not going to happen, you know what I mean? I'm not coining any kind of phrase here, I know I'm not, but let me say it anyway: Some of my best friends is white folks. And even they don't appreciate and don't understand, from time to time, what you're going through.

In fact, I was talking to Jim Bishop yesterday, and maybe you can give a perspective because you have had a very broad experience too. He was saying, and I was agreeing with him, that even with "our best white friends"—we were talking about MIT and we said like a Paul Gray and my colleague like a Mary Rowe and some people—don't seem to get it totally as to what this is and what the extra mile and all the other stuff is that we have to go through.

They don't get it.

They don't believe it, it seems like, or something. Can you elaborate on that?

What happens at 4:30 or 5:00, depending on where you work? You go home. Our colleagues go back to a world that's just like the one they work in. It's all white. And when they go home, whatever stress and strain they had from the day I believe they have the opportunity to let go of it. At 4:30 or 5:00 you and I can go home, but we still have to go to the gas station to buy gas, we still have to go to the grocery store—and if you're unlucky like me to

be single, what you're going to do? I pay taxes—not state income taxes, but federal income taxes here. The supermarkets they go shop at, the same supermarket I go shop at. Our colleagues recognize us at work, but oftentimes don't recognize us in the street. That's because they expect to see us at work and they don't expect to see us in the street. So at work they see us, they recognize us, they know they're going to deal with us and so forth. Outside of work they're not expecting that. So if they pass you in the street, it's not like there's any malice there but they don't have to deal with it. Race ain't on their mind. And race never, ever leaves my mind because when it leaves my mind, I'm going to get hurt, I'm going to jail, I'm going to get shot or whatever. I ain't stupid.

I was in the airport yesterday coming back from New York. A colleague of mine was getting on the same plane. I'm sitting there just like you're sitting there, and my colleague came over to read the boards and look at the flights. It just happens to be a she. She's standing there reading the flights just like this. I'm sitting right there.

You're right here? She hasn't even seen you.

Now, I'll bet in her conscious or subconscious all she sees is an African-American person. She knows my face, she doesn't even see me. Two minutes later they call the boarding and I say hello and she didn't respond. I knew just to leave it alone. I knew I could say something else, she'd look down, and in a second or so she would recognize me. I deliberately said, "Let's do this same old experiment we do everywhere else." So as we were boarding, I walk up behind her and I say, "Oh, on your way back home, are you?" She looks around and for the first half a second, like always, she doesn't recognize me. She doesn't know. It's out of context. Then she recognizes me, though it does take her a half a second. She recognizes who I am, now we're buddy-buddy. Now we're walking on the plane together, we're talking. There was not one ounce of malice in all of that. But there was no expectation of any kind. Not that there would be a Nels Armstrong, but there was no expectation that she would know someone of color anywhere other than these folks that she works with. So it could have been New York, it could have been the gas station down the street. There's just no expectation of it. So we are part of their world at work. We might be a part of their world if we go to the same

church or if we sit in the same club. But outside of those specific things, we don't count for anything whatsoever. We don't count.

That's an excellent example.

That was yesterday. That was a colleague I've been working here with for three years.

Let me tell you, we spent a year in North Carolina. We went to the same grocery store for that entire year. We went back about two weeks ago, we went back. The white waiters, the white cashiers who were off duty walking around the grocery store said, "Where you been? Haven't seen you in a good little while." The black folk, "Haven't seen you. Where you been?" I mean, every time we would go there, "How you doing?" I had one cashier—we bought about \$150 worth of groceries—she said "Wait a minute," and I was trying to figure out what the lady was doing. She goes back to her office there, where all the people have their belongings, she goes back and comes back with these reduction tickets that they give and took \$50 off our groceries. We have had in the past year, being there, more positive value from not only black folks but just everybody.

You are in the South.

You are in the South.

Right, because they do have the expectation that you're going to be there.

Exactly. That's why your point is so valid.

Right. There is that expectation that you're part of life.

You are a part of life.

And we're not that.

You're not even part of life in a place like what we're talking about here. I think it's very unhealthy over a long period of time.

Right. I love it here, you know that. I say it over and over again. If I didn't travel, I couldn't stay here. I love my job. It's the quality of life that makes it difficult here. Here's another piece that I think rings true and makes the point. There are thirty-five or maybe forty of us—I might be slightly on the high side, I'm not sure—that work here. There is to my knowledge no black family—that is, Mom and Dad are black with young kids—that lives here. So there is no example that students get to look at, that other families get to look at and so forth. We have a number of interracial marriages, I have nothing negative to say about that. Those people love each other. If I go

out here and I find somebody that I fall in love with, I don't want nobody questioning what that person looks like. That's my business. But we need to see, these youngsters need to see in school here, a sense of what their future is going to be. Part of that future at least, I hope, includes some black folks married to each other with some little kids. That part is not here.

When we were at MIT, there were only, as I recall, two families that were visible in terms of that kind of example—John Turner, and Mildred and myself.

That's it.

Today, if you go beyond us now and just say, "Who do you look at down there? Who really cares to look at you?" there is only one family. That's John Wilson and his wife, Carol Wilson. They have three kids—a little boy, two girls.

Now that not only hurts the environment that students are living in, but for us who are looking for peers and all that kind of stuff, it's dreadful.

It's a good point.

Absolutely dreadful. Folks say, "Nels, who do you hang out with?" I say, "Listen, as hard as I work, when I get home, I want to lock that door. I don't want nobody coming there and bothering me. Hang out? Shit, I got to get some sleep because I got to be back in this stuff in the morning, and it takes every ounce of energy I've got." Sometimes people say, "Nels, how do you do it?" I say, "You just don't understand how I have to stand at the door in the morning and stop, just before I walk out, and take a deep breath and say 'Okay, here we go' because I'm leaving a culture once I step outside that door." Ain't nobody else, other than people of color, got to do that.

It's very difficult for somebody other than somebody of color to understand.

Yes. I stand out in my yard, doing some work in my yard, a guy comes by and sees me, he stops and says, "Yes, I've seen you over here working this yard a couple of times. Do you have a business card or something? Can you come on over to my yard?" I explain that I live here. This is my house, you know what I mean?

And people think you're telling a story. I can guarantee you and Mildred will tell you, the same thing has happened to me.

I hear you, man.

The same thing.

Because there's no expectation that you're going to be there.

Well, I haven't had anybody put it quite like you put it—that there's no expectation. That, I think, is very important.

I want to ask you another area just to spend a little bit of time. You've hit on it already to a certain extent, but I think it's important to say a little bit more about it. Because you have dealt with and continue to deal with students, is there any advice you would give to black students coming into a place like MIT, coming into a place like Dartmouth, in terms of what could help them if they were to read what you are saying? Try to give them the best advice you could give them based on all this very extensive experience you've had with colleges and universities. What advice would you give them in terms of their life, coming through a place like a Dartmouth, coming through a place like an MIT and a Case Western, and all these places you've been?

First and foremost, read. Read as much as you can. Read, just read. Read about who you are. That means black history if you're black, that means Latino history if you're Latino, that means Native history if you're Native, but read as much as you can about who you are. I think that's important because it gives you some foundation to understand how you got here. Without that reading, I have great fear that you get caught by the trappings that are in front of you. The trappings in front of you are getting a good job, making a lot of money, vacationing in the Mediterranean. Nothing's wrong with those things, but there still ain't no expectation you're going to be able to do that. And that glass ceiling still exists.

So reading, I think, gives you the foundation and understanding of what people went through and what progress has been made, what allows you to be where you are, so that you have a sense of what you have to do to move forward. Moving forward for you—and this is, I think, the real point of why you read—moving forward for you is different from moving forward for your peers here. Money, as I look at it—or wealth, as I look at it—we see it as being passed down from one generation to the other, but there's a great deal of wealth in the white community that's being passed from grandparent to grandchild. That's not happening in the black community. There's no or very little grandparent-to-grandchild passing of wealth. That

passage of wealth gives, I think, our white counterparts a great start. Unless they're in medical school or something like that, they're not starting out with huge loans. The down payment for the house is coming from a relative. The first car, the furniture, all that kind of stuff is coming from grandparents and others. When grandparents go off to nursing homes or whatever, all that stuff is getting passed down. So they're starting out in pretty good shape. They're starting out with a house with no huge notes sometimes. They're starting out with all the furniture and other things that come from both sides of that family. Those kids got a springboard in their life.

We're getting out of college with all that debt. Still to this day, even those who may have parents who went off to college, we're still starting out way behind the eight-ball. But if we haven't read enough to understand where we come from, we tend to think that we're supposed to jump in and move just like everybody else is supposed to jump in and move. They're going to get a job at Goldman Sachs or they're getting a job at Morgan Stanley or Bear Stearns or whatever it is, and they're going off all over the world and so forth. They ain't got the things to worry about that we've got to worry about, and I ain't said nothing about race yet in terms of what you've got to worry about. I'm just talking about the financial piece of getting started. Now, with that financial piece not there, you ain't got no house, you've got an apartment somewhere. So your money is just going out in the air. You don't have family that can give you the connections in New York City to put you in a place that's going to work for you. You've got to come out of your pocket and you've got to come out of your head to try to figure out how we make this work. Meanwhile, your peers, who are one year out of college and two years out of college, they're already vacationing in Europe. They're already vacationing in this, that, and the other place. Their families already have a summer home that you can take advantage of, and we're still burning the candle at both ends.

Reading, I think, and understanding what that history is all about, gives you a foundation to say, "Aha! Black folks were able to make this step, and make this step. They have to sacrifice to do this, they have to sacrifice to do that. Now I'm in it, I've got to sacrifice here, I got to sacrifice there, but this is the step that I need to take." So you are,

with that knowledge, defining what your move is and where you go as opposed to being caught in the trappings of what you see and trying to do what everybody else is doing. You can't do what everybody else is doing.

That's so true.

Read. Read as much as you can and read some stuff just for fun. I mean, I love Walter Mosley. I just read *Always Outnumbered, Always Outgunned*. I love that book, love that book. While it was just pure fun to read, it still helps you see the picture, you know what I mean? Even though it's fiction, it's not talking about the history of black people and all that kind of stuff, it's still worth reading. It just so happens that I read the book *First Person, First People*, that's about the Native American struggle. It's actually essays written by Dartmouth alums, but the same sense. It still focuses you on the fact that you live in this society and, while this society has some roadblocks for you and all that kind of stuff, if you read and understand who you are, you can figure out ways to chip away at that road block. Read. And then read to your children, so your children will start to read too.

Let me come back and ask you, if you could give some advice to the leadership of MIT regarding ways to enhance, improve the experience for blacks at MIT, what would you say after spending some very valuable years there?

If I had control of a place like MIT or Dartmouth or any of these places, and I thought now was a time to really make a difference in terms of the life or the product that I'm trying to produce when I'm looking at diversity and all that kind of stuff, I'd find some way to educate white people.

What do you mean by that?

That whole notion of expectation again. What's not changing in my opinion fast enough is what our colleagues deal with. Every time we talk about diversity, every time we talk about how we make it better for all these disadvantaged people, we expect them to do something. That's us. But we don't expect, it seems, white folks to change in any serious way. All of America is seen as a melting pot of values, but when the melting is over, we still end up with a Eurocentric thought. So what happened to the melting? If I could do something, it would revolve around—which is what I hope I do here in talking to my colleagues and my staff and everybody else—trying to give them as much of my

experience and as much of other folks' experience as I can give them so they can see something different. But I know they go home at 4:30, I know they go home at 5:00, and once they get home they don't have to think about it no more. I want them to think about race, their own race. White folks don't even see themselves as a race. I want to do something that causes them to see a different world because without that, the expectation is still that we're trying to climb up to their level. I'm not trying to climb up to their level. Up and down ain't got nothing to do with this. It ain't about taking something from them, which I think all too often it seems, it ain't about changing them because they're wrong or that kind of thing. They need an experience that helps them see the world, as opposed to sitting on a pedestal and thinking the world is trying to get to them. The pedestal needs to go away and we need to understand that we are all just sitting right here together. Most people of color understand that because you ain't got no choice. How do we put them in that situation too, where they have no choice but to understand that that's not going to hurt them?

I've had my Native American alumni, I've had my African-American alumni, and now I have my Asian-American alumni, all trying to say to our Alumni Council, "We want to be a part of this. We're coming to you and saying that we have expertise that we want to give you, that we're prepared to be a part of this." The answer, unfortunately, still comes more often than not, "We need a slot over here so that our people of color can have a slot here." That's better than nothing, but that's not really what people asked. They don't want to have a slot. Nobody's asking, "Please give us a helping hand." We're part of this. I've got expertise here that I want to give you.

They're not asking for a slot.

No, no. I should have as much opportunity to be the class rep here, the club rep there, the vice president here—"Let me sit on this"—purely because I'm a Dartmouth alum and I bring something that many other Dartmouth alums don't bring. I don't want to sit here and say, "Okay now, what do you want to know about the Native American voice on that? Okay, you want to know the Native American voice on that? I don't know necessarily all of the Native American voice on that, but I'm an expert as an alum and I want to come to the

table that way." So what would I do? What advice would I give young brothers and sisters? Let's find a way to help teach these white folks something because they're the ones that really need to learn a little something. They still come to these joints like MIT and everywhere else with privilege, and that privilege gives them a very narrow view of what the world is all about. If we don't do anything to change that narrow view, than what difference does it make what brothers and sisters do?

Right. Any other topic or comment you want to make?
Just "Thanks," to people like you. I don't say that in any way just to make you happy. I say that because folks like you teach folks like me, and I hope folks like me continue to teach others that come along that it's really possible. Your ears would burn if you knew how much Larry and I talk about this. While we both are appreciative of our own talents and skills, while we both think we've got something going, we don't know where we would be if it weren't for you and the John Turners of the world. That fragile moment when you're a youngster trying to start out is *really* fragile, and you could go either way real quick. I know a lot of folks that got started in this business and ain't in this no more. You may or may not remember, when we were trying to do those black issues in predominantly white colleges, I used to say a lot, "Yes, but I want to look out for the junior faculty or the junior administrator or something like that." I always wanted to look out for those folks who weren't at the top. And that's because I always felt that's where I was. There are times even now that I have to remind myself, "You're the director, man." It's just, I think, part of that whole thing that history puts on us, making us believe sometimes that we're not quite up to snuff. So I thank you. We need more of you and I hope my arrogance doesn't get in the way of me saying we need more of me. We need more folks who can be there.

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