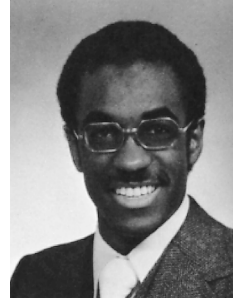


MILTON H. ROYE, JR.

SB 1979 (mechanical engineering) MIT, MBA 1983 Harvard University; from engineer, marketing analyst, divisional staff assistant, and manager to director, North American Program Management, Delphi Interior Lighting Systems, General Motors, 1979-1994; vice president for sales and marketing, Chivas Products, 1995-1997; vice president for sales and engineering, Rubber & Plastic Group, Newcor Inc., 1997- , responsible for new business, product, and process development; member, Detroit chapter, National Black MBA Association; president, MIT Class of 1978, 1988-1993; recipient, Harry Lobdell Distinguished Service Award, MIT Alumni Association, 1991.



I'm a local boy. I grew up in Dorchester, right around the corner from MIT. One of my earliest memories of education was of my uncle, who took a wrong turn in life and wound up getting a couple of degrees from Harvard, teaching me that MIT stands for Harvard. So early on I was programmed as to what I was going to do. He knew I was more interested in math and the sciences. He tried to steer me to Harvard, but that didn't work except for business school.

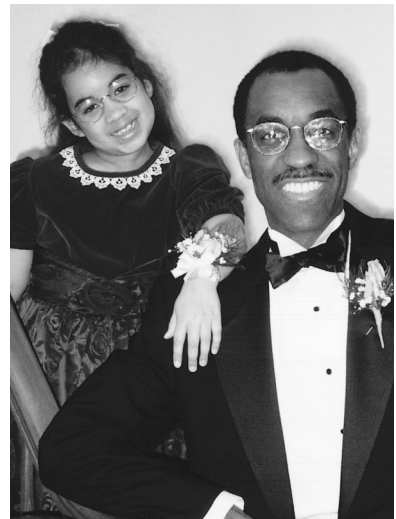
One set of my grandparents is from Jamaica. They first came to the U.S. in the 1920s. Their children were all raised in Jamaica by relatives while my grandparents returned to work in the States. My father came over to the U.S. at the age of fourteen. My other grandparents are from Plymouth and Boston, Massachusetts. My parents grew up a block apart, once my father came over from Jamaica, near the Grove Hall area of Dorchester. I'm their first child. I have a brother who is five years younger than I am.

Both of my parents are retired. My mother was a school teacher, my father was an automobile mechanic. They both drove high standards of excellence. I could always remember my father's co-workers telling me exactly how good my father was at what he did. My mother taught in East Boston, an African-American woman teaching in a basically Italian neighborhood. Everyone loved her and she never had any problems there. She received quite a number of awards from the East Boston community. Until she retired, and I was in business school when she retired, she still had students coming back introducing their chil-

dren to my mother as, "This is Mrs. Roye, my first-grade teacher." Some of her kids had gone through graduate school and came back to recognize her when she retired.

So I grew up with the concepts of the importance of education and being a model of excellence, in terms of both my parents. My maternal grandfather went to Boston University. He was one of the first blacks to graduate from there with a law degree. His name was Howard Gray, and he worked behind the counter at the old South Station Post Office. His brother was chief of police in Plymouth for a number of years. My maternal grandmother attended Boston Normal School, as did my mother—Boston State Teachers' College, now part of the UMass system.

Education was very important in our family. My mother's brother attended Boston Latin,



Edited and excerpted from an oral history interview conducted by Clarence G. Williams with Milton H. Roye, Jr., in Sterling Heights, Michigan, 20 August 1996.

Harvard College, and later Harvard Business School. He worked in New York City as a vice president of both American Express and Chase Manhattan Bank. The key things that I grew up with as standards are that education is important, that you have to try and excel, and that we'll accept whatever you do as long as you push yourself. What my family won't accept is just not trying.

I wound up going to school in East Boston my first six years. I went to the advanced fifth and sixth grades, back when they had those things. Then, for the option of junior high and high school, I looked at both Boston Latin and Roxbury Latin, and was accepted at both. My mother allowed me to make the decision. I said, "Well, Roxbury is closer than Boston, so I'll go to Roxbury Latin." Little did I know that it was actually out in West Roxbury and that I would have to ride the Orange Line and then city buses to get there.

That was what wound up happening. Roxbury Latin is a small private school, around 250 students in six grades, founded in the year 1635. Typically, half of the class would go to Harvard and the other half would go to second-rate schools like Yale, Princeton, and Cornell. That was a joke at the time, and I still believe some of that.

I started out as a bookworm. My high school taught me to get into athletics, and later on at MIT, I played lacrosse and I wrestled. High school gave me a sense of drive and accomplishment. We were expected to go to Ivy League schools. The school was very committed to equal opportunity, so as much as they could in a class of forty, typically four or five students were minority. They really pushed hard to reach out into the Boston school districts. I grew up in grades seven through twelve with kids from Wellesley, Needham, Newton, Brookline, et cetera. It was college preparatory, so by the time I left I had five years of French, four years of Latin, and two years of Greek under my belt. I went through calculus—differential equations. I just took it again at MIT to give myself an easy grade. It was a very classical education, but very strong.

How did I apply to MIT? I had no intention of going to MIT, because I knew I wouldn't get in. I applied for early action, and actually my high school's secretary forced me to apply. She said "Milton, you've got nothing to lose." I said, "But Mrs. Hubbard, I won't get in." She said, "You

won't know unless you try." So I applied for early action, and, lo and behold, I was accepted in November. I still remember the look on my mother's face when I opened the letter. It was a great accomplishment.

You were an early admit?

Early admit, yes. That was November. I had just come home from taking the SAT's again that morning. After that, I only applied to any other school I thought might hold a candle to MIT. That was Cornell. I was accepted there also and made a decision to go to MIT because it was the best school that I had ever heard of. I think that kind of summarizes how I wound up going to MIT. I had been a high achiever and was interested in math and science.

What about role models and mentors in your early stages up to entering college?

There were a couple of people I looked up to. One was my uncle. Like I said, he went to Harvard. I didn't really know him much when I was younger just because of the age difference. He was at Harvard Business School back when I was nearing the end of high school. He was someone who was out in the business world and I had a good feel for who he was.

My parents were role models because of the way they interacted with people. As I said, my mother was an African-American who taught in an Italian neighborhood. Everyone loved her. Color made no difference. That was the way I was raised, that color was irrelevant. I was one of four black students in my class. There were no Hispanics at the time. My best friend was black. He wound up going to Wesleyan and lives in New Hampshire now. But between glee club, football, wrestling, and lacrosse, I had a wide variety of friends, the best in the world. I grew up absolutely color blind. We all loved one another and just had a very good time.

Another role model was probably my father's best friend, another automobile mechanic. He was a boater—serious power boater, heavy horsepower. He was well regarded at what he did. These were the people I looked up to, people who didn't have an overblown impression of themselves and who were actually rather humble. But everybody who knew them pulled me aside and said, "You don't know how really good this person is." It was just a theme that ran through my

parents' friends, that and the fact that people are people.

I lived in Dorchester. It's an all-black neighborhood. I had friends in the neighborhood, but I wasn't that close to them because they didn't push, they didn't strive hard, they just kind of went to school and that was it. I was never able to really relate to people who didn't have the same sense of drive and excellence.

I suspect that a lot of your friendships were developed in school as opposed to in your neighborhood.

Yes. I had one other friend in the neighborhood who went to another of the private schools—Buckingham, Browne and Nichols—which is right around the corner from MIT. We had that private school background in common. There was a group of us that did a lot of ice-skating together, regular ice-skating and speed-skating. But my friend and I had a common educational background, a common drive, which was a little bit different from the neighborhood.

If you had to reflect on your overall experience at MIT, identify what you consider of special significance in your academic and social life, and comment on any collegiate relationships.

A lot of people—particularly in the minority community, graduating from MIT—believed that Tech was hell, couldn't stand the place, and were glad to be out. That was never my perspective. I actually loved going to MIT. We'll talk about my academic difficulties a little bit later. It wasn't smooth sailing, but I loved going to MIT. The only fear I ever had at MIT was one semester I thought I wasn't going to make it. And I said, "What am I going to do? I don't want to leave this place."

I formed some incredible friendships at MIT across a wide variety of living groups and academic disciplines. I was involved in my fraternity, Delta Kappa Epsilon, one of the white on-campus fraternities. I was also involved in the Inter-Fraternity Conference, with Black Mechanical Engineering, and with sports. I was just widely known across campus. I had a group of very close friends. I also had an incredibly broad network of good acquaintances. MIT was home. It always has been and always will be home. I felt very, very comfortable there. This school enabled me to get into a number of different activities. Indirectly, it led me into my current job in sales, which really started back in the Inter-Fraternity Conference

days. It allowed me to pursue an engineering career at General Motors. It's an important credential, an affiliation of which I am very proud. I can't say enough positive things about it. There are always things that one might want to change, but I had a very great number of positive experiences.

If you had to say what was best about your experience at MIT and what was worst about your experience at MIT, what would those things be?

The best is probably a tie between the people I was able to work with and make friendships with, and the discipline that the school gave me. I learned to work my rear end off at MIT, particularly when I was playing sports. Because of playing lacrosse and wrestling, I wound up being in school until four o'clock or thereabouts. I'd play whatever sport I was playing, come home, have dinner, and end up studying from seven at night until two o'clock in the morning. Then I'd go to bed and get up barely in time for breakfast, and continue on.

I was not the world's best student at MIT. I wound up with a B or B-minus average coming out of MIT. I tried hard to keep it up, believe me. I did learn. I came in with excellent study habits. I maintained those and learned to apply myself and do whatever it took to get the job done. That plug-chug-strive-all-through mentality is what I've maintained throughout the rest of my career. If you've got to get it done, you've got to get it done. That was a tremendous part of the MIT educational process.

Also, there was the opportunity to meet people. I didn't meet as many foreign students as I would have liked. At the time—and I'm not sure how much it has changed—foreign students tended to stick together and there wasn't as much of an opportunity to casually interact. I did live with students from all over the country and interact with them.

Those are some of the positives. The negatives were just that MIT is not easy. You've got to have excellent credentials. I wound up taking 6.071, "Introduction to Electronics," twice. My freshman year, second semester, the score was Girlfriend 1, 6.071 0. I wound up dropping that class and I had to take it again my senior year before I could get out. It wasn't fun. I still have problems figuring out which way electrons flow, left or right. I got more D's than I would like. But I got more A's than I would have expected at times, so it balanced out.

It's a very rigorous institution, but I felt it taught me a lot.

One of the things that I hear from a number of you, and I think I hear you saying something similar, is that the struggle made you stronger, and confident once you got out into the real world. Would you agree with that?

After graduating from MIT, I worked for General Motors for two years and then I went back to Boston to Harvard Business School. Harvard was tough, but in a very different way. There was a saying, the old proverbial "drinking from a firehose at MIT." Yes, there's a lot expected at Harvard, which is probably the second most difficult experience I've been through, but it wasn't hard in quite the same way as MIT.

How was it different?

Harvard tried to expose you to as many different things as they could, so you never went back. You would spend a night on something and become an expert, and you always moved on. It was never like, let's kind of sit and spend two or three or four days exploring this. If you didn't catch it, you almost didn't have time to go back. But there was the sheer workload that they dumped on you at MIT, trying to make you understand that if you can survive this, you can survive anything in the world, be it an engineering dilemma or a leveraged buyout. There were times when I worried at Harvard about my ability to get through, but it wasn't anywhere near the intensity and the frustration that I felt at MIT. Some of the concepts at MIT were difficult, be it in calculus or mechanics of solids or 2.02—system dynamics—with Professor Jim Williams. I took system dynamics with Professor Williams. That was one of my toughest subjects, 2.02. It was just tough conceptually catching on to what was going on.

I didn't have that problem with Harvard. With Harvard, you're just like, what's the key to cracking this case? There's always an insight. That's the way it was portrayed—until you learn the game, there are many keys. It was never, What is the one solution? At MIT, however, the problem was that there was one solution: You either got it or you didn't get it. That was tough sometimes, to catch on to that concept and really figure out what was going on.

Coming back to the Department of Mechanical Engineering, where you got your undergraduate degree,

you mentioned Professor Williams. You took a course under him, right?

Yes, I did.

I suspect you have some memories about the faculty in that department. Talk a little bit about your experience there in the department and your relationship with some of the faculty members, courses, or whatever.

That's one of the most difficult questions you could ask. I have an advantage. I'm on the visiting committee for mechanical engineering and I have been since '89, so a number of the professors I have seen continually. I have seen Professor Williams every couple of years. My thesis advisor was Ernie Cravalho, who is on staff at one of the hospitals.

Massachusetts General.

My thesis advisor was in that HST program, Health Sciences and Technology. I took thermodynamics with him. I'm drawing a blank on some of the other professors. I had Professor Woodie Flowers for design. I didn't know the faculty that well. I wanted to be an engineer, but one of the reasons I left engineering was that I am not a natural-born engineer. I was a student of engineering. I didn't form that many close associations with the faculty. It's kind of hard to go up to someone and talk engineering talk. It would call for getting to know them outside of the classroom, and I didn't have that many opportunities to do that.

The UROP that I was in involved urban planning, which allowed more time to spend with some of that faculty. I spent a lot of time talking with them. One of the things that I'm sorry about, particularly now as I remain involved in the Department of Mechanical Engineering, is that there wasn't more of an opportunity with my strength or lack thereof in the department to really form more close associations with the faculty. I would have liked to have done it. There were other students who were able to do it, but at the time I was studying engineering as opposed to being an absolute devotee of it.

You're unique in one sense, and that is that after graduating you've been very much involved with the institution on a number of levels, which I think is a credit to how you actually feel about MIT. But you also have done the same thing at Harvard Business School. I think that's a major plus for the institutions, when they see a graduate really putting something back by giving his or her time. When you look at the institution from a totally

different view, as a member of the Corporation looking at your own department, what have you seen that has given you a different view about the place, in whatever way?

It's a tough question to answer. Let me get to that one in an indirect way. Let me just quickly recap some of my non-academic involvement with MIT. As I said, I joined one of the fraternities. I will spend a little more time talking about that, because it was one of the majority white fraternities. I wound up being rush chairman of my fraternity, social chairman of my fraternity, and rush chairman of the Inter-Fraternity Conference, which wound up allowing me to meet a number of people. I was very involved with the dean's office, including selecting a new dean at MIT. I got involved with fundraising for the class and wound up becoming a member of the Alumni Fund board and later class president. From there, I became a member of the Alumni Association. Unfortunately, because of work conflicts, I had to turn down an offer to become a vice president of the Alumni Association, which just killed me. Along the way, I received the Lobdell Award for service to MIT.

That's major.

I'm still a member of the Corporation visiting committee for mechanical engineering and I also do educational counseling on the side. So I've been involved with fundraising, with the alumni services, alumni interaction, recruiting and management of the Department of Mechanical Engineering—paid political announcement: “best of any department in the country, of course.”

It has been interesting to look at MIT as a business. It is very much that, particularly my involvement in the financial side with some of the cost-cutting now coming along. It's an institution that I feel very strongly about and that I give time to. I am still trying to figure out how it works—the mechanics of the Institute, the psychology of its products and services, and the psychology of the interaction between people. How is this group working with that group and how do you encourage graduate students to want to belong? It's becoming almost less of the mechanical engineering discipline and more of the human interaction, the business and the personal side that I'm getting involved with. More and more of the professional side of me is coming out, as opposed to the academic.

It's paralleling my growth as an individual in the work force. I started as an engineer, then became a business planner, then became a manager, and finally a director at General Motors Corporation, one of thirty-six hundred executives worldwide before I left. The scope of the issues that I've been dealing with in the corporate world, I've had that same perspective at MIT. The two are parallel in supporting one another. I've used examples from one in the other.

As a student, you don't see the layers of the place. But then, given your position now, being able to look down at the place, what are the nuggets of gold that you see down there and the things that you see that maybe need to be tightened up? There are things you didn't understand when you were going through, but now there are things you do understand based on your experience and your knowledge.

There are two MIT's, the academic side and the management side. A good example is, professors at Harvard Business School consult on transportation dynamics and how to schedule things, including how to schedule the selection of courses by students. Yet Harvard Business School has one of the worst systems in the country, of students being able to get into the courses they want to. So it's monkey see, not monkey do.

When you look at MIT, it's much the same. You've got a Department of Mechanical Engineering with individuals who are recognized as being the best in their field in the country, yet they're wrestling with a number of fundamental questions. How is the department managed? How does mechanical engineering interface with the School of Engineering? How does the School of Engineering interface with the School of Humanities, and so forth? You don't see those issues when you're a student. You just know your individual professors. You don't know why courses appear and disappear. You do learn about the “Institute Screw,” which is that the best professors in teaching are always not awarded tenure. That's very unfortunate. We still deal with those same issues on the visiting committee, because we're talking with the undergrads and the grad students and the faculty and what not. But you do see a lot more of what goes on on the business side—fighting for resources, fighting for lab space and lab facilities because things are antiquated, et cetera.

I'm on an engineering department visiting committee. Athletics would be the same. The Committee on Academic Performance? I imagine the same issues would be there. If you're a student, you want to say, "Give me one more chance." But if you're on the committee, you look at a number of people who obviously are outside the boundaries of where people can probably be successful at MIT. Then you're looking at a business decision. How much more money can you put into an incremental person when you have scarce resources? How are you utilizing resources to get the best bang for the buck?

It has been fascinating, looking at the growth of new programs at MIT to meet the changing needs of the institution and its survival, and to meet the needs of business and government. How do you get the funding? MIT does at times get a little bit conservative and run behind other organizations in terms of reaching out financially to those at the forefront of change. But what are the strings that are attached to that grant? How much do you reach out to foreign governments for financial assistance, and what do you give up in return? What do you do if the American companies aren't willing to fund areas in which you want to do research?

My involvement now is looking much more at the Institute as an ongoing business. Setting up the office for lobbying in Washington, DC, for example, never would have been done twenty or thirty years ago. It's a reality. We are probably a little bit late in doing it, but those are the kinds of things that you see more of now. It's very interesting.

About that move of setting up an office in Washington. It was only when President Vest came that we decided to do that. Like you were suggesting, it may have been something we should have done five, six, maybe ten years ago.

One of the difficulties, because of the youth of MIT students, is imparting enough knowledge to them. You can't teach them everything about the world. You can teach them engineering. But you've got to teach them more about the social sciences. You've got to teach them more about writing. When you do all that, you want to teach them more about working in groups. Now you want to teach them about organizational dynamics and politics. Then finally there's big business—well, you can't do it all.

But I think that MIT probably does a good job of exposing people to a lot. That's where the number and variety of clubs are a tremendous asset. If you want to get involved—not so much on the athletic side, which I did, but with some of the other clubs—you interact with the MIT administration. I was able to do that by working with the dean's office on some things. Through my work with the dean's office, I saw what politics was all about and how power plays worked between the various organizations. That was really my first view of what the business world would be like, in terms of life not always being fair. There are good people doing well and having to move on, due to circumstances outside of their control.

So I think that encouraging students to get involved in as broad a variety of things as MIT does makes the students stronger. They go out armed with an MIT degree that someone says is not sufficiently reality-based. But the fact is that the total MIT experience can make the MIT grad a very powerful person, if they can take advantage of it all.

You mentioned the fact that you had some involvement with student affairs and a lot of involvement with the fraternity arena. When you look back at that experience, are there any things that stand out, that keep coming back as valuable things that have helped you to do some of the things that you have been doing outside?

Probably the selection of a living group wound up becoming one of the most important things that I did. I could have lived at home, but my parents said, "We'll fund you living wherever you want to. We don't want you to go out to Cornell just because that means being away from home. Wherever you go, you can live on campus." I went to the dormitories, but I wanted something that was a little more intensely personal in the way of interaction. So I started looking at the Greek system. My grandfather had a brother who had worked as a cook at one of the fraternities. He had recommended I go look at that fraternity and that I go to the one around the corner. His brother had worked at the Phi Beta Epsilon fraternity, and he said, "Go look at the Deke house, Delta Kappa Epsilon."

I remember there were some really neat people over there. At the time, they had two black professionals who worked there—Lou Gosman, the house man, and Jack the cook. They both

remembered my grandfather. It was almost a family thing, I wound up pledging that fraternity. I was the first black who ever pledged that particular fraternity, but I knew the two black workers who were there. That was very much a part of the reality—not that I was incredibly close to them, but there was a degree of comfort there, I suppose.

There weren't that many blacks who ever joined the fraternity system at MIT. At one point in time I had done a survey, trying to go back through that history. I'll never find it—I lost it years ago. I think I came up with maybe twenty-five blacks. It was a relatively low number by the time I graduated in 1978, the number of blacks who had joined or stayed with fraternities. There are more now. At the time, the dormitory living group known as Chocolate City had just been created. It was around the '76 time frame. I started in '74. Within the other dorms, there were all-black floors. That was not something I was very interested in, which does separate me from probably the majority of the students who had gone to MIT.

The majority of the black students?

The minority students at MIT. Again, I didn't go to a public high school. I went to a private high school, so my whole educational upbringing was around white folk. And that really makes a difference. I went to the MIT fraternities and they asked, "Do you want to be around all black folk?" I had never done that before, so it didn't seem natural to me. It wasn't an issue for me. They asked me some good questions about joining the fraternity, "Are you really prepared to do this?" I gave it right back in their face and that impressed them. I never had any problems in the fraternity. I had a number of good friends there. It was definitely a different experience, because most of the other black students wound up living together.

It's a very good point you're making on this. By the way, my son went to Buckingham, Browne and Nichols. What year did he graduate?

'84, I think. Based on your pre-college experiences, it was sort of a natural phenomenon for you to move in that direction.

When you look back at it now, I hear you saying there have been some real pluses in terms of being exposed to the fraternity system and being possibly the first black in that fraternity. What have been some of the payoffs from your viewpoint?

The reality is this, that it is still an all-white work world. I left MIT and went to General Motors. General Motors is the largest organization in the world. When I went to General Motors, there were no black executives at the division I went to in Dayton, Ohio. When I moved to the Detroit area, there was one black professional in my organization and he was in human resources. When I went to the corporate financial staff that runs General Motors, there was one executive-level black on the entire GM financial staff.

That's in the comptroller staff?

Comptroller staff at the General Motors Headquarters building. When I went back to my division in an engineering management position, I worked with the Cadillac Motor Car division. In four months, I had one meeting in which there was another black person present. When I became an executive, there were ninety of us who were executives at that particular operating unit, and there were only three other executives who were black. This is as director of program management. Of the ninety or ninety-one executives who were bonus-eligible, there were only three that were black. So General Motors was, is, and is still remaining a white-run corporation.

Did I ever feel that? No, because it was natural in high school, it was natural at MIT, it was natural at Harvard. I grew up in that world and I knew how to interact in it. Yes, I wish that there were other black people, but I got used to the fact that I would almost always be the first. I was the first to have done this, the first to have done that. I just became used to being the one blazing the trail. There were no other role models who were minority members.

If I go back, it all started with being in a white fraternity. I was very much aware of that then. At the time, in 1974, I was the only black member of a fraternity, to the best of my knowledge. You're talking twenty-two years ago, so it's hard for me to remember. I do recall that some other folk came along later, both in my fraternity and in others. But I think I did some surveying of all of my fellow rush chairmen in 1976 and asked them, "Have you ever pledged a black before?" The numbers came back, and twenty-five is a bit too high—it's got to be closer to ten or fifteen by the time I was a senior, very low. I had to have been definite first for my house, and within the first five or six ever at MIT.

You were not only in that fraternity situation as a first, but also in a number of these corporate positions that you held. You had six or seven positions at General Motors, moving up to a directorship. You have had to recognize racial slights that just come from being who you are. How do you deal with those things?

You can do it one of two ways. You can be hypersensitive or you can shrug it off and just say, "It's going to be there, so why even pay attention to it?"

Going back to living groups for a second. We'll talk about Black Mechanical Engineering. Black ME kept me in school my sophomore year. I don't think I would have survived without that organization's support. That was the period in time when, in spite of the support structures in place at my fraternity, I wasn't getting it. It wasn't enough for me to really catch on to the things I was struggling with. The Black ME was incredibly supportive, and I formed some very close associations with some of my fellow members of Black ME.

I can remember one of my classmates. We were walking back, the person's dorm was a little further down the road from mine, and we were talking about where I lived. I asked the question, "Why do you live in Chocolate City?" He said, "Well, I might have to go to school with whites, but I don't have to like them. I don't want to live with them." I remember saying to myself, "This individual is smarter than I am. Doesn't this individual recognize that there aren't any black-owned firms to speak of? This person will have to work with them when he graduates." It was really a shock to me to hear the sentiment come out. These folks were obviously smart enough to go to MIT, smarter than me academically, but yet they still had this "us versus them" outlook.

Again, I wasn't raised that way. I was fortunate that wasn't the role model from my grandparents and my parents. Do I see racial slights? Only when somebody figuratively hits me with a two-by-four. I've had incidents at Faneuil Hall Marketplace. I have gone to South Boston back in the '76 to '78 time frame, the height of court-ordered school busing. Being from Dorchester, I knew then not to be caught in Southie at the dead of night. For urban planning, I went out into an island in the harbor in the middle of the day and I was still scared to death. I've had a variety of experiences. I've definitely had experiences where it's pretty obvious that I was talented, but they were going to make me wait my time for whatever reasons. I just

wound up looking past that and saying, "All I can do is excel and I'm armed with an MIT degree."

For whatever reasons, I went to MIT and I never whined. I figured I'd probably leave Boston. I never wanted to work somewhere and have someone say, "Where did you go to school?"—and then tell them and they'd say, "Where is that again?" I wanted a credential that no one could ever argue with. They'd say, "Okay, I accept you as being talented. Let's move on."

The same thing with Harvard Business School. I wanted something that people would not question, "Can this person really do it?" And it has worked. People say, "Jeez! You're black, you went to MIT, and you went to Harvard. You've got the world by the tail." And I say, "Well, that's fine. Now let's get on to business." So having been at those places establishes your credibility and doesn't allow people to use the kinds of excuses that kill other people. I've seen other black professionals who have been talented, but haven't had the credentials. They had to put in the extra one or two years to get things done.

So have I utilized the pedigree or whatever? I sure have, the same as everyone else who uses the country club membership or the old boys' network. MIT and Harvard have enabled me to establish instant credibility wherever I've gone at General Motors. That's the only corporation I've worked for. I've worked in at least six different organizations within General Motors. MIT and Harvard gave me credibility there.

Going back to the whole ethnic thing of where I chose to live, recognizing it's a white world came into my selection of living group—living with people, seeing people as people, putting their pants on one leg at a time, having fun, going out drinking, carousing with them. People are people. There is no distance between myself and folks of blackness or whiteness or yellowness or whateverness.

Based on your experience, is there any advice you might offer to other young Miltons coming to an MIT or coming to a General Motors after they've finished at an institution like MIT?

If you ask me what was my biggest regret at MIT, it was that I didn't play lacrosse my senior year. I was also taking 2.30, which is one of the fundamental, core courses before you get out of mechanical engineering. It was a tough course. I had to lighten up my work load to make sure I'd

get through it. I dropped lacrosse, which is a sport that I absolutely loved. My grades didn't appreciably go up and I was tremendously unhappy because of not playing a sport.

So I think that you've got to pace yourself, but also always maintain balance. I'm struggling with that in my current job because there's just so much going on. But you can't just do the academic thing. If you go back to where we started our conversation, I talked about the academics but also about the people. My advice would be to meet and interact with as many different types of people as you can. I was a mechanical engineer, which I shared with a lot of people with whom I was in athletics. I was in the fraternity system. I was also very interested in urban planning. I came very close to switching out of mechanical engineering into urban planning, but urban planners don't get paid very well, so I stayed in engineering. But branching out let me meet a very, very different type of person in urban planning and architecture. I got involved, although not planning it, with the Inter-Fraternity Conference, which led to a lot of work with the dean's office and some other commissions on things I don't even remember anymore. It introduced me to a wide, wide variety of people. It gave me an experience base that you'll never get with just studying and getting good grades.

I would say that grades are important, but they're not everything. An MIT graduate with good grades is still an MIT graduate. What do they call the person who graduates at the bottom of his or her class at the Harvard Medical School? They call him or her "doctor." You've got to get out of MIT. That's the primary prerogative. You can't flunk out. But if you come in with a good academic preparation and groundwork, the more broadly you can create yourself as a person, the more it will help you going out into the work world.

When I started at General Motors, I got involved in recruiting right away. Two months after starting with General Motors, I was back at MIT recruiting. That doesn't usually happen. Through all of my career at General Motors, I advanced by not just doing what was asked of me, but saying, "Where is there a need? How can I reach out and help some other people?" In doing that, it taught me more and it increased my knowledge base. So you can't just go forward, you have to go sideways at the same time. That would be my advice.

The third piece of advice would be that you've got to manage your own career. You can't trust someone else to manage your career for you. A mentor is important. I had some along the way. I didn't cultivate them as strongly as perhaps I should have, but I was always able to impress the right people and I impressed them enough that they would say, "We'll take this person under our wing." But I also didn't trust them to say, "This is what you're going to do, and this is where you're going to go." I said, "I think I need to do X. I just have a feeling that it will benefit me." And if you look at my career—between engineering, marketing, business planning, finance, engineering management, and directorship—I created that career with no one else's help.

It's one of the most well orchestrated careers I have ever seen.

I didn't organize it that way up front. I was able to move from one to two, because it made logical sense not to go from one to one-and-a-half or from one to five. You've got to take responsibility for becoming who and what you're going to be. Mechanical engineering and urban planning don't go together, but that's what I was interested in. It created a softer side of me as an engineer in terms of asking, "How does the world work? How will people interact?" That same discipline—how do communities work and evolve?—led to my pseudo-psychological interest in how decisions are made in the work world. I never took psychology, but I think I have a very good understanding of how and what motivates people.

Again, I created that myself. I think you have to want to study whatever it is you're going to study, but I think you also have to ask, "What do I want to have as a skill base?" And it's not just in the mechanical skills or whatever your diploma is going to say, but in your overall skill base as a person. You have to manage that.

Here you were moving all the way up the ladder. When you became the director for worldwide program management—I think, in December 1992—you were actually responsible for a revenue of five hundred million dollars, is that right?

Yes.

You were really moving. That seemed to me to have been a very fantastic achievement at that point. Then all of a sudden, you decided that you would leave in December

1994 and go and be a part owner of Chivas Products Limited. How do you explain that?

I had been with General Motors for sixteen years. I had been a director for the last two years. I was promoted in September of 1992. I had Cadillac and Saturn as my customers. Then in December, I basically created the worldwide program management organization, focusing on North America.

Actually, I made two choices. They wanted me after a year to do the whole world. I said, "I can't do that. We have promised things to our customers. I have promised things to our customers and we're not prepared to execute on those yet. I will not let those customers down." It would have been a great job, traveling around the world and growing our business. But I said, "I've made commitments to Chrysler and Ford and Toyota that we're not prepared to meet yet. I will not leave that work undone." I had a strong commitment to the customer, to meeting customers' needs, to being excellent.

To back up, within my segment of General Motors, we were selling to non-GM customers. It has been a very important part of the GM business plan to grow that part of the component operations, to reduce the component groups' reliance on GM as a sole customer, and to get fifty percent of our revenue by meeting non-GM customer needs for Ford, Mercedes-Benz, et cetera. I was able to put together a team of crazy people like myself who were incredibly motivated to meet the customers' needs. Then, based within GM as our employer, we tried to understand and meet non-GM needs.

We did that for two years. We had a fair amount of success while I was there. I say "fair" because we had a horrible reputation for responsiveness. We turned that reputation around to the point where we won business with Mercedes. Within a few months of my leaving, we were in business with Honda and Toyota. We kept a number of customers. We just did a lot of outstanding things.

Why did I leave? I loved working with customers outside of GM. I love the different mentalities, different mindsets. GM is an organization that is going through a lot of turmoil, trying to figure out how to change itself. I wasn't sure of where I was going to be able to go within that organization as it continued to evolve. It was struggling with questions like, how does a GM meet the

needs of supplying Toyota and Mercedes? After two years, my organization really wasn't there yet. I said, "It will be, but I'm going to have to slow down." I was just going to have to drop my standard for excellence and for timeliness, to adopt the mentality of "we'll get there when we get there." I wasn't prepared to do that.

The other thing that I looked at was, where will I eventually go within General Motors? I was doing very well, but where would I want to go three years hence or four years hence?

The same thing you had done in the past, looking out for your own career.

Exactly. As I looked within the General Motors organization, and GM is a great company that's doing a lot of neat things, they're still struggling with redefining themselves and their whole method of operating. I've been spoiled. If I'm working with the Chryslers and the Fords and the Toyotas, I am already there. I could maintain my career on the tangent, very important for the component groups, where GM was going—or I could look at the corporate structure and say, "I can't get back into this."

So I started looking at where I might want to go. I started looking at General Electric and some other companies like that. My wife had some interviews at GE. One of my associates, the chairman of what is now my current employer—and who had been a GM executive, a very highly decorated Vietnam veteran—was trying to buy his own company. We had been exchanging viewpoints. There was an opportunity across the country, particularly in the automotive industry, to grow minority-owned businesses. The federal government had started it. The federal government is still a little shaky at the moment in terms of how far it's going to push growing minority businesses, but within the Big Three—GM, Ford, Chrysler—it's perceived as a sound business move because of the growth of the minority population. You've got to create more minority enterprises. So there's a window of opportunity by the Big Three and their suppliers to increase the purchases from about \$4.1 or \$4.3 billion at the end of '94 to \$10 billion by the year 2000. To do it, they're going to have to grow minority-owned companies.

Anyway, the chairman of Chivas Products, when he bought the company, had been talking with me about my coming on board as his vice

president of sales and marketing. What was attractive was the fact that he wanted to go after the same customers I was chasing. Chrysler was his biggest account, which I spent a lot of time going after. General Motors is next, which I was coming out of. Ford was important too. So it was an opportunity for me to become part owner of a company, to join—with a window of risk for opportunity—a minority-owned firm that had the opportunity to grow fantastically, and to work with someone who also had that same standard of excellence that I talked about in regard to my high school, MIT, and my role models in the form of my parents and grandparents.

We're not just going to go out with our hats in our hands saying, "Hey, we're a minority-owned firm and you've got to give us business." We're going to go out and say, "We are going to become an excellent firm. We aren't there yet"—because I will never lie to a customer—"but this is our goal, this is our vision, and this is where we're heading. Are you interested in working with us, helping to develop us so that we can grow?" And that's what I've done.

I made the choice of leaving the world's largest corporation, right on the verge of receiving the first bonus that had been paid by General Motors to executives in the last five years. I left that on the table because there are more important things than money. Our family checkbook doesn't always agree with that, but there are more important things—job satisfaction, and being able to have an organization that is dedicated to meeting customer needs and a chance to grow this enterprise.

What have we done thus far? We signed a joint venture with a company that has sales of around \$2.5 billion to create a new company in the Detroit Empowerment Zone. It's a six-year joint venture that will have total revenues of \$900 million. It will be 51 percent owned by Chivas Products and 49 percent by our joint venture partner, to assemble interior trim components. We've won other business with other tier-one companies as well as with General Motors and Chrysler. It has been an opportunity to grow something I truly believe in, to recreate who and what we were as a majority-owned firm—it's now minority-owned—and to do it with a standard that says, "We're not going to stick with what we can get by on. We are going to push for a level of excellence in everything that we do."

Your theme about this company at the present time is one that was a theme when you were in pre-college doing the things that you did then, motivated by your parents and others—that is, excellence and commitment to people. Those things come before even money and advancement, and that's something that we don't have a lot of.

Good guys do not always finish first, everyone knows that. I've had my share of setbacks. But by and large, I've seen—even with politics—that if you believe in excellence and you do everything you can in that manner and you're a people-oriented person, you'll get what you deserve. You might sometimes wait a couple of years to get something, but you can make it happen.

My high school gave me a sense for people and MIT really honed it. My high school definitely pushed us for excellence and, again, MIT sharpened that. You couldn't just give up. You had to try your hardest. I'm coming out representing an institution that is regarded as being the best, which is a privilege that I take quite seriously. I don't want to say that I don't want to "let down the name of MIT." That sounds a little presumptuous. But it's important to me. Yes, it's very much a part of who and what I am, oriented around people and striving for excellence, as long as it doesn't put me into an early grave.

Is there any other point you want to make before we stop?

One of the things that I have wrestled with is the question, was there—or is there—more that MIT could have done to enhance the black experience at MIT? It's a tough question for me to answer. As I said, I'm a little outside of "the black norm." I joined the Black Students' Union, but I didn't do a whole lot with them. I didn't orient my social life around the black experience at MIT. I certainly had a good number of black friends, some of whom I still see on recruiting trips. Black Mechanical Engineering, as I said, kept me in school with the support of the department and support from the other students. Financial aid is always an issue for minority students. Again, I've seen the financial side of MIT. It's always a struggle. It's a very expensive school. They do what they can and it's never enough. It's never enough for anyone there, white or black. Paul Gray, during his presidency, was very supportive of "affirmative action" when it was called that, or "inclusion and diversity" when the focus changed.

So I wrestle with what else could have been done. I know that students always want more minority faculty. Mechanical engineering is in that same boat. But I've seen the frustration on the part of the faculty, in terms of the partnerships with Howard and some of the other traditionally black colleges in trying to bring people up through joint programs. They are looking for someone to show them something different. I don't know how to make MIT a more supportive environment. It's a white, sometimes cold institution. It's got very high standards and there is a tremendous fall-off. Every case of a black Ph.D. student who doesn't receive tenure is scrutinized. I get mailings and this and that. It's tough. All departments are sensitive. Is there an element of racism? I'm sure there is. Is there an element of pro-American, anti-foreign? I'm sure there's that too. People are people.

So I don't know. I don't have a magic solution as to how to deal with that. It would have been nice to have had more black role models. Yes, we had Professor Williams. But Professor Williams had so many people clamoring after him to be an example that I didn't feel comfortable adding to that load. Had there been other black faculty, that might have been where I would have reached out to meet more of the faculty—choosing a black faculty member over a white faculty member—but I just could not see myself adding to Professor Williams's already high load. He was the one and the only—you talk about sore thumbs sticking out.

So that remains a frustration. Looking at it from both sides, it's easy to say, "Let's do it." But when you're part of a system and someone challenges you—"Okay, what are we going to do?"—and no one can think of anything, you kind of have to pause and say, "I don't know." That's the only question I don't have an answer for. More financial aid would always be great, but they're pushing the envelope as far as they can, so far as I can see.

You're actually participating to try to see in the future how things can be improved in that arena. The mere fact that you are still on the Corporation visiting committee for mechanical engineering says that you're not just talking, you're really participating in the process. I think that clearly gives us an edge to be able to address these problems and to continue to address these problems, because they're not easy problems.

And, as you said before, MIT is a very prestigious institution. When you start talking about faculty members, I don't care who they are, there are a host of them who are very, very good who have to drop by the wayside because they don't meet the standards.

That's exactly it.