

ANTHONY DAVIS

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I was born in Los Angeles, California, on July 20, 1947. When I was two years old, my mother left my father and came back to New York State. I guess he was a pretty tough character, too much so. She just decided that's it, and took me three thousand miles east. She and I had relatives—have and had relatives—in Manhattan and in upstate New York. We settled in Albany, New York. For the most part I grew up in the Arbor Hill section of Albany, New York, which is like growing up in Bedford-Stuyvesant or Harlem or Roxbury.

I have a great mom. She was very loving, but discipline-oriented. I guess she didn't want me to grow up and become the kind of man my father was. So I had love and a lot of discipline. But I think, more importantly, I had a community that cared about me. In the summertime—when I would be out with the boys, in the afternoon or something—if my shirt was dirty, my mother would know it. She would be at work, but somebody would have called her and said, "Mrs. Davis, I saw Tony riding down the street on his bike and he had on a dirty shirt." My mother would say, "Tony, didn't I lay a couple of clean shirts out for you today?" I had it sort of easy in that respect, because I had a whole community of black people who wanted to see me and everybody else—all the other kids—grow up the right way. I think that's something that many people in the same community, Arbor Hill, don't have today. If you call somebody up and say something about their son or daughter, they would tell you where to go. I'm not sure why it's different. I'm sure there are

Edited and excerpted from an oral history interview conducted by Clarence G. Williams with Anthony Davis in Cambridge, Massachusetts, 11 August 1998.

any number of reasons why, but it is different. So I had the benefit of community.

How did you move beyond the community and go to college?

Well, there were always the older guys. I always had my mom, and all my friends always had their mothers. In some cases they had their father in the home. But we always had someone at home saying, "Go to school, go to school, go to school." It seems to me that the pressure that's created or the environment that's created that is the most important is your peer group and the group that's just ahead of you. Right now I'm fifty-one, so we're talking about people who are four or five or six or seven years older than I. I always saw those guys as doing something that was really sort of extraordinary. They played; they hung out; everybody hung out. If you didn't hang out, you were going to be



in trouble. But not only did they hang out, they either did or attempted to do their school work and they attempted to learn. A lot of times it wasn't just about the school work, but it was learning something. Then there were these people who succeeded, these brothers who went on to college. Not only did they *attempt* to learn something, they obviously *learned* something. Some of them went to school because they played ball. Some of them went to school just because they made it through, in spite of guidance counselors saying, "You should go into the Air Force," or "You should go into the Navy." These guys were just hard-headed and they would say, "Listen, I'm going to school. I don't know what he's talking about."

So I had the benefit of seeing this older group of brothers and sisters do what they were supposed to do in high school in order to go on to college. That's what inspired me. Clearly, my mother was there beating the drum for school. But it was the fact that there were any number of people in this group that's slightly older than I that I saw go to school and saw the benefits of their going to school.

Was this an integrated high school that you went to?

Yes, it was definitely an integrated high school. In fact, it was probably something like thirty-five or forty percent Jewish—the high school, Albany High School. There was an emphasis on academics, but I had football and track and cars in my head. I certainly had this notion in my mind, planted by this slightly older peer group and my mom and all of that, sort of pushing gently, but in the front of my mind were girls, sports, and just sort of uncontrolled testosterone. Somehow, though, the idea that you have to go to college or you have to learn "something," and become good at that something in order to live better, dominates one's thinking and actions.

I went to school at a place called Husson College, which is in Maine. I was sort of blessed and cursed. My IQ, the last time it was tested, was 131, yet I'm dyslexic and I have something called executive function, which means I have at times a difficult time pulling out information that is there. It's sort of akin to meeting a person on the street and you know their name, you've worked with them for twenty years, but all of a sudden they're on the street, they're out of context, and you can't connect. Executive function is sort of akin to that.

So I really had a difficult time. Because I had my IQ tested several times, and it was on the decent side, I always had teachers telling me that I was slacking off. I knew I wasn't slacking off, but I knew I had something.

So I wound up going to a little two-year school in Albany, New York, called Albany Business College, and did pretty well. There's something about the transition from high school and, I guess, the way things were presented in this school. From there, I went to this place in Maine—Husson College. There was a brother I knew, a fishing buddy of mine, and we just said, "Yeah, we'll do this. We'll go up there." We didn't know what to expect up in Maine. We just had no idea what it was going to be like. Neither of us had been to Maine. But, you know, Vietnam was going big time.

That's right. You're talking about in the '60s.

So we were thinking, "Hey, wait a minute now . . ." But as it turned out, Maine was a very, very pleasant experience.

It's simply beautiful up there.

It's beautiful. I guess this is another theme that runs throughout my life and the life of many people I know: you tend to meet someone who doesn't judge you based on ethnicity. It just sort of clicks and, the next thing you know, the person treats you just like a human being, gets to know you and maybe you have things in common or whatever. Both my roommate, who was also black, and I met this guy up there who was a helicopter pilot in Vietnam and sort of had a fire inside him to make money and do things. Just exposure to him renewed this sense in me that there was something outside where I grew up. I wasn't really sure what it was, but I could see it in this guy. His name is Eddie Hemmingsen, and now he owns the Blue Nose Inn and a couple of other inns in Bar Harbor. But it's because of this sort of light in him that both my roommate and I got a sense of, "Yeah, we don't have to work for the state." Anyone growing up in Albany, New York, knows that the state government is the largest employer and you think, "Well, that's where I'll go to work. Everybody else did and there do seem to be some good jobs." But, again, you can sometimes meet someone and suddenly something unexpected opens up. The next thing you know you're sort of beyond your initial expectations.

When I got out of school, I had taken a few computer courses—several computer courses, actually—and then a couple of computer courses at the State University of New York at Albany. I started interviewing for jobs. I just stumbled into this place called the Research Foundation of the State University of New York. It just so happened that they were about to be sued by the one black employee they had, because she had never received any promotions. She obviously believed she should have. No one ever told me exactly who she was by name, but from what I could glean from different individuals, she did actually exist and in fact was about to sue the Research Foundation. Frankly, I thought I was great in the interview. But nonetheless, I did try and confirm the sister's lawsuit after I was hired and reached dead ends myself, the kind of dead ends that told me there was something to this.

In any event, they offered me a job. Once again, I met a person—in this case a guy named Craig Barry, who is white and grew up in a predominantly black neighborhood in Schenectady, New York. I'd say this guy had no issues that would prove problematic. He saw me as someone with the right background. I had these computer courses and they were constructing a state-wide teleprocessing network to link all the various State University of New York locations to this one location in Albany, New York. So I guess the combination of the threat by this woman who was about to sue and the fact that I had some of the background they were looking for sort of got me the job. I got in the door and I worked until like six-thirty or seven o'clock most nights. I worked a lot of Saturdays. I really, really worked. I must have gotten like three promotions or something, three or four promotions in five years. I was moving right along.

Even though I am essentially a ghetto kid, I was oblivious to the fact that there was animosity about my promotion path. One day in 1977, the person who hired me had completed a total reorganization of the Research Foundation and did not receive a job that he thought he should get. He announced that he was going to leave in thirty days. When he left, I started getting aggravation from people—just minor stuff, but the kinds of things that told me it was sort of organized, if not formally organized then informally organized, but nonetheless a concerted sort of “Let's see how far

we can push Tony Davis.” So my mentor Craig Barry left and I realized that I was then a target. So I sent my resumés out and got offers from the National Science Foundation, from Brookhaven National Lab, and from MIT. That's how I got to the Institute in the fall of '77.

Reflect on your overall experience at MIT. You and I have been here pretty much about the same time. I came in 1972, you came in 1977. That's quite a bit of time here. I know that's a lot, but when you reflect on your overall experience at MIT, what—as a professional—can you say about that?

I certainly can't speak as a faculty member because I'm not a faculty member. Faculty members are, in fact, first among equals. They are really members of the club. The rest of us, administrators, we're along for the ride.

A lot of people don't understand that.

A lot of people don't understand that. We're not pulling the wagon, we're sort of walking along behind the wagon. So I speak as an administrator.

I think it would be useful to begin with the transmittal letter I sent to George Dummer in early summer of 1977. I just sent a blind letter to this famous, very well known research administrator, George H. Dummer. Through the national organizations that research administrators belong to, this person—George Dummer—was at the head of the list and rightfully so. He knew his subject inside and out. I sent a blind letter to him, saying, “My name is Anthony Davis and enclosed is my resumé, blah blah blah.” Then, at the bottom of that letter, I cc'd the affirmative action officer. I had no idea who the affirmative action officer was. I had no idea that there was an affirmative action officer. But just something told me, “Put down on the letter to George Dummer, cc: Affirmative Action Officer.” Then I got a copy of that letter and a second envelope, and I addressed that to “Affirmative Action Officer,” and “Enclosed, a copy of the transmittal letter to George Dummer with my resumé.”

I swear to you I had no idea who it went to. Now—today, 1998, August 12—I have no idea who got that letter. But someone got the letter. I know someone got the letter because I got a mail-gram—which was something short of a telegram, but like a telegram—asking me to come for an interview. As it turned out, there were three jobs that they were recruiting for in the Office of

Sponsored Programs. I didn't know that at the time. As a matter of fact, because of all of the racist nonsense surrounding the busing issue, I didn't really want to go to Boston or the Boston area. But MIT does stand head and shoulders above all of the other single-campus universities that do research. In fact, the research volume at MIT is far above any other single-campus university. There are some multi-campus universities, systems that have in aggregate just as much or more than MIT. But for single campus, MIT stands out—and I should say a single campus without a medical school.

Anyway, I got this mailgram asking me to come over for the interview. I showed up and I observed that there were no computer terminals on the desks. There were no real automated processes. Of course, I had just come from—in fact, still worked at—a place that was highly automated. I thought, “Well, there's some catastrophic event like a head crash.” In those days people used IBM 370's, mainframe computers. I thought there was some reason why there were no terminals. It was just an observation. I didn't even bring it up at the interview. I thought it would be embarrassing, because something had obviously happened: There were no computer terminals. I had what I thought was a wildly successful interview and, like two days later, they offered me the job. Then really, I had to think, “Do I want to go to DC?” The answer was obviously yes. I was single at the time. Why wouldn't I want to go to DC? But being associated with MIT was so prestigious, even more so than the National Science Foundation, and I didn't want to go to Brookhaven National Lab. So I accepted the job at MIT.

I showed up the first day and there were still no computer terminals. I keep mentioning this because that is a definite sign that, even then, we were far behind in automated administrative systems—far behind other institutions across America, in fact. I think one of the first things that the director, George Dummer, asked me was, was I the Anthony Davis from Harvard—to which I responded, no. The second question was, why did I put “cc: Affirmative Action Officer”? Of course, I told him that I thought that would insure that I got an interview. I said that I thought that once you saw my background and my experience, I would be able to compete with anyone else for the job, but that I needed to get an interview. That seemed

to assuage any thoughts he had, second thoughts or suspicions he may have been harboring.

I should say that from that time until almost twenty years later, when I left that office to take a job in another part of MIT, it was a tough row to hoe. There was nonsense and provocation right from the start. It seemed that their response to me had little to do with my ability to do the job that they needed done and had more to do with the fact that somehow I represented in body something that they disliked. That was, that there was this section of the Institute—call it affirmative action, call it EEO, call it whatever one will—that represented the interests of minorities and attempted to redress the many ills that had been done. For instance, I'm the first person of color to be hired in that office. I'm sure they will give anyone reasons why every person of color who applied before me didn't fit the bill, every single one. They'll have a reason why no one else got hired.

So my experience in that office was one of constantly proving myself, always having two strikes and the fact that I would hit a homerun would always make them angry. That's not my experience in total at MIT, but in that particular office—the Office of Sponsored Programs, headed by George Dummer and later headed by Julie Norris—my experience is one of my doing the job, and even surpassing just doing the job, and they were always looking in the other direction when I did something. When I accomplished any task that was particularly difficult, management always was looking the other way. They never saw it. When someone that was on their team—that is, someone that had been pre-selected by them for whatever reason they pre-select people—did something wrong, whether it was not successfully negotiate a contract or do something to cost a faculty member money, they never saw that. But if I negotiated a particularly difficult agreement and got the money, the faculty member in the department whom I acted on behalf of was very grateful, yet my immediate supervisor couldn't acknowledge it. My immediate supervisor couldn't acknowledge it because the structure didn't want it acknowledged.

I must say that there were white individuals in that office who had a similar experience; now, clearly there wasn't the race aspect. Take, for instance, George Prendergast, who is white and who in fact was active in a minority summer

intern program. But even prior to his involvement with that, George Prendergast had a similar experience. Whatever he did, whatever successes he had, they never saw or they pretended not to see. George wasn't the only one. I feel, though, in my case it happened to be race-motivated.

You think in your case it was racially motivated, but how do you explain people like Prendergast and other whites who you could see having difficulties? When you look at all that, what do you come away with?

That's an excellent question. Again, in my case I do believe it's racially motivated, but clearly one couldn't say that for George Prendergast or any number of people. There's an Irish-Catholic person named Andy Brown, who retired and went back to Ireland, who worked on the fifth floor. One would attempt to argue that he's Irish and Catholic and therefore a part of the predominant ethnic group here, the ethnic group in power as far as administration goes, yet he was clearly out. I honestly believe that there are a number of people that come in all colors who tend to be very decent folk, tend to be very principled, tend not to be able to be manipulated by the boss. When the boss wants something bad on person B, the boss knows he or she can't go to person A to have it carried out because person A just won't participate. But persons C, D, E, and F would do it in a heartbeat.

I may not be giving you a precise answer, but there's something about a number of people at MIT. Doreen Morris and George Prendergast are two such. There are others. These people seem to really be principled people, for the most part. You can't make Nazis out of them, you know what I mean? If this were World War II, if this were 1937 or 1938, and they were German and could become part of the Nazi regime, they would probably leave Germany or they would be secreting people to safety. But they wouldn't participate. I think these kinds of people exist everywhere. It's my belief—or, I should say more properly from my standpoint—the thing that has allowed me to stay here and prosper isn't the fact that I could successfully fight off the people in the Office of Sponsored Programs who set about to prove that the affirmative action candidate was inferior. It's not that I was successful at doing that. It's really that there are a number of people, a network of people—you're one of them, Doreen Morris is one of them, George Prendergast is one of them—

there's a small network of people who actually care about what happens here and care about righting inequities. When this small group of people identifies a person who is hardworking, who is effective, intelligent, and gives their all, when that person is set upon, this small group of people tend to get involved, tend to insert themselves. Sometimes you never know where it's coming from, but you know somehow that you just dodged a bullet. That doesn't mean that another bullet isn't coming for you, but what it does mean is that there are these people who will not put up with nonsense even when the nonsense comes from the highest level.

A friend of mine who happens to be white—I won't name him because there's some legal action at this point—had to persuade the then-head of the National Magnet Laboratory that a candidate for a secretarial job, the candidate happened to be a black woman, should get the job. This head of the National Magnet Lab didn't want her to have it. Yet this guy said, "That's crazy. You've entrusted me to this job, dealing with affirmative action. This person should have the job." I happen to know that this person not only dealt at this secretarial level but he also dealt with another person, an African-American woman, at a much higher level in the National Magnet Lab.

So it's this group of people that sort of spring out of the woodwork that has allowed me to stay some twenty-one years now. Hopefully, four years from now I'll retire from MIT and hopefully I'll make it through the next four years. But it isn't about how intelligent I am, how hardworking I am, how effective I am in doing that work. It's about a combination of things coming together. One of the major parts of this "combination of things" is the fact that there are some people at MIT who do care, and who act.

You talked a lot about the kind of atmosphere that you worked in for two decades. You've seen a lot of changes—particularly in the last, say, seven or eight years, particularly since we have started going through some changes based on the reengineering process. As an "old-timer," what do you see that you are concerned about in general at the institution and what things do you see that are very positive going into the next century, based on the changes that have occurred here recently?

For the most part, if we look at the change agents, I think we'll find that the change agents—those

people responsible for designing and implementing change—are the same individuals who are in very high, very responsible positions that led us to this very place that causes us to need this massive change. I think it's like taking the captain of the Titanic, plucking him off the ship, and then giving him another ship and firing everybody else who is alive and saying, "We can always get deckhands, but we need this same captain and the captain's first mate and the crew." I think it is the height of ridiculousness to first acknowledge that we are in a position that needs this massive reengineering effort, and then to have those people who caused this situation to design and implement the changes. It's absolute folly.

Recently I read that the former governor of the state of Virginia, Wilder, refused to become the president of Virginia Union. I think the reason he refused, after being selected, was that he wanted to let go something like thirteen high-placed individuals in the organization. I should say that I'm not for administrative death squads—you know, the night of the long knives—but I am for an acknowledgment that one must get rid of the people who are in positions that allowed us to get into the shape we're in. Back on the Wilder story, I guess he wanted to let go thirteen of these highly placed people. Maybe the Corporation or Board of Directors, whatever they call it there, wouldn't allow that, so he withdrew his application for the job.

I thought that was quite courageous.

Yes. I thought, quite frankly, if MIT were in such a state that we needed what we needed—and I think many people agreed that we did—the first thing President Vest should have done is to come in with his own team of people and either buy out or in some way move aside the present structure, the administrative structure at the top that now exists. Clearly, they weren't getting the job done. If they were, we wouldn't have purchased the wrong product, SAP; we wouldn't have hired the consultants and paid them what we paid them. So from my standpoint, and I admit that this place needs massive change, I don't want the captain of the Titanic at the helm of another ship. I don't want the people who are responsible for the Institute's position, as weak as it is now, designing and implementing the changes needed. I simply don't trust that they have whatever it takes to do the job

properly. If they did, we wouldn't be in the shape we're in. It's crazy. Right now you have many administrative officers—and that is a sort of financial/administrative job that exists in all of the academic departments and all of the labs and all of the centers—attempting to learn a product, an administrative product, SAP, that doesn't give us what we had before we got SAP.

So your opinion about SAP is—?

My opinion of SAP is that it's the wrong product for us. It's probably the best product in the world for a manufacturing concern, but for a university it's probably not the right product.

For the layman, explain what SAP is.

SAP is an administrative accounting software. The application, as we will use it, will be to record the funds from research grants and contracts and to function as an accounting software, that is, to record all of the disbursements and to be the system of record. Now, keep in mind we do somewhere between 360 and 380 million dollars in research volume every year. The groans that are coming from the administrative officers, who have to work with this very cumbersome product, are immense. Yet if someone like Bill Smith, who is a senior financial officer at the Research Lab of Electronics, outlines why this is the wrong product—step by step, clearly—people just disregard his acknowledgment of this fact. They do so because someone at the top level has decided that we're going to use this product, and there are so many sheep—or there were in the beginning—who would just go along with whatever the leader wants to do.

So I really feel for MIT. Frankly—in spite of the difficult times I have had here, and I thought I've fought pretty well—I sort of love the place. It's a fascinating, fascinating institution.

What makes it that way?

I think it's a combination of the students we have and the faculty members we have. They are just really some of the most interesting people you will ever meet. When I left the Office of Sponsored Programs, I didn't want the office to give me a party. I thought it would have been sheer hypocrisy and I didn't want to have anything to do with a phony party. In fact, two people have left subsequently to my having left and they also have refused a party. But when I left, the biology

department phoned my wife and said, “We’re going to give Tony a surprise party, whether he likes it or not.” Here at the surprise party are David Baltimore, who won the Nobel Prize when he was like thirty-seven years old, and Phil Sharp, also a Nobel laureate, and a whole host of secretaries and administrators and faculty members, many of whom have a three- or four-million dollar research volume each and could have spent two hours doing something else besides cheering me at this party.

That had to be moving.

It really was. It was very moving.

You didn’t know anything?

I had no idea, I had no idea.

That’s fabulous, because I’ve heard you talk about how you really enjoyed working with that department over the years.

Oh, a great department. David Baltimore joked about my saying that I tried to keep the various faculty members off the front page of the *Globe*. The faculty members typically want to buy a certain item on their research grants or contracts, and there are all sorts of regulations that go along with those contracts. Sometimes you can make a certain type of purchase and sometimes you can’t. The day you write a budget, five minutes later that budget is outdated. As a consequence, the need to purchase something you have no approval for is ever-present and that’s where the audit difficulties come in.

It’s a very fascinating place. My wife and I weren’t blessed with children, but if we had kids I don’t know if I’d want them to come to the Institute as undergraduates. I think there may be better places. However, to do graduate work and postgraduate work, I think this is the best place in the world. The reason I say that is because just from the stories I’ve heard in the articles in *Tech Talk* over the years, a young minority person is likely to hear any and all type of nonsense from some of these faculty members, with regard to the faculty members’ opinion of the racial group that these young people come from—whether they’re Asians or African-Americans or brothers and sisters from the Caribbean or wherever. You’ve heard me talk about the ones that are just an absolute delight, but some of these faculty members—in spite of their intelligence, in spite of how many dollars in research volume they have each year—

can be very ignorant people. The impact they have on some of these young minority students I think can be devastating. Just over the years, reading some of the comments that maybe come out of the math department and other places, it’s a serious business to expose a young person—who naturally looks up to a faculty member—to some of the sheer ignorance that’s in some of these people’s heads, in spite of whatever their IQ is or where they got their degrees.

So whether or not I would recommend MIT as a place for undergraduates is something that I would have to think long and hard about. I think we African people in America belong everywhere. We have been everywhere throughout history, a presence no matter where you look on the map. It’s not as though I think we shouldn’t be certain places, but I think we are safer and more nourished in some places than other places. When I use terms like “safer” and “nourished,” I am primarily thinking of the young.

Based on your own experiences here, is there any advice you might offer to other black administrators who would be planning on entering the MIT environment? What advice would you give to a young Tony Davis coming into an environment like this, who was really quite capable and really interested in succeeding in his or her career? Let me just say that when I first got here and they sent one of their hatchet men after me, I essentially told the guy we had to go outside in the parking lot right now and do it. I wasn’t going to play this game of he said something and I said something. I wanted to just cut right to the chase. I’m not proud that I reacted in that way, but once I did that and he didn’t move, I sort of had the measure of just how far they would go. Once I understood that they would only go so far and then they would change tactics, they couldn’t threaten me, they couldn’t bully me, or I would just invite every one of them outside in the parking lot—one by one or all at once, it didn’t matter. Once I understood that I had the measure of how far they would go on that level, I knew that their tactic would change. When their tactic changed, when they became subtle as opposed to overt, what I needed was a Clarence Williams or access to a Clarence Williams—and that’s what I got. Through this access, you never said to me, “Do this, do that, they’re doing this, they’re doing that.” But through your letting me come to you and connect with

you, and through your relating other stories to me, I sort of would come away with this sense that I had an older brother here and he would listen to anything I had to say. He expected me not to go crazy and hurt somebody, but he did expect me to use my head and realize that these people were now subtle and now behind the scenes, and that I should always do my work, I should never let them say that I didn't do my work, and that I should always be on guard. It's through this dialogue that you allowed to take place that I gained strength to get through some of the tough times.

So I guess to answer your question, I don't necessarily know if I would actually tell him anything—this young Tony Davis—because I would be afraid that I would set him off on maybe a wild tangent or that I would somehow negatively impact him. I think what I would do is, I would attempt to establish a dialogue like you did with me, so that he would always know, “When something happens, get over here, let's talk about it, let's kick it around, let's look at it from side to side, inside out, top to bottom, left to right. Let's take it apart and talk about it, because you know they're doing it to you and I know they're doing it to you. Let's see if we can come up with a way to counteract what they're doing.” Any minority person that comes—let me correct that, most minority people who come to MIT, one day or another they're going to have some nonsense delivered to their front door. If they have any sort of physical size or presence about them, then it will be subtle. If they are sort of timid or somehow slight physically, then it will take another form. But one day they will have to deal with some nonsense. It will be a defining moment. I'm sorry to say that in my defining moment I invited the guy out in the parking lot; given my background, it's the only thing I could do at the time. But armed with the dialogue that you allowed to have established between you and me, I could come away thinking, “There's no way they're going to get me. I'm doing my job, I'm better than doing my job. The fact that every time I pull a rabbit out of my hat, administratively they look the other way, I'm not going to let that get me.”

So here I am now. I came here when I was thirty. I'm fifty-one now. I'll probably be here four more years and retire at fifty-five to go to another job, to some other job—just a change, do something different. But I think the reason I've been

here as long as I have is because I've found that there is another way to deal with these people. Sometimes it involves letting this other group of people that I talked about—the people who care, the Doreen Morris and George Prendergast—letting them know what's going on or letting them know that you know what's going on. It was letting me talk to you and having you throw out some possibilities and letting me go with that, almost like a psychiatrist would with a patient. They're not going to tell you, “This is the answer, this is what's wrong with you,” but through this discussion one realizes that there are avenues open.

I have two more questions. The next one is related to what you have said, so you may feel you have dissected that issue enough. This question is really related to what I hope to convey to MIT in this project. I have tried to ask this question of all of you, particularly people like yourself who really, I think, understand this place and have had experiences for a long time and come out of a background where you're not fooled. What suggestions do you have for ways you believe MIT could improve or enhance the experience of blacks at MIT? If you had a chance to really say something to President Vest, or say something to the new top administration, in terms of things you think—based on your own experience—they could do to enhance the experience of the young Tony Davises or undergraduates, what would you say?

Again, another excellent question. If I had an excellent answer, I would have my own book. The answer I'll give you is going to be like most of my answers concerning MIT—rather convoluted and elongated, because it is such an edgy, complex experience here that maybe doesn't suit itself to the answers that sort of just jump right out. I would suggest that we have the kinds of leaders who, if this were—let's say, Selma, Alabama, in the '50s—if our leaders were the sheriff and the sheriff's staff, if the sheriff himself didn't belong to the Klan, the sheriff's first cousin Bubba was the leader of the Klan, and going to the sheriff is a waste of time because the sheriff isn't going to turn his cousin in. The sheriff may look at you and say, “I understand they burned a cross on your lawn. I understand that you've completed any number of tasks in your office and you haven't been promoted for twenty years. That's a terrible thing and I'll look into it for you.” So the sheriff may tell you that this cross that's burning on your lawn, he's going to look into it, but in point of fact if he's not

in the Klan—he might be, but if he’s not in the Klan—so many of his friends and relatives are that he’s not going to do anything.

I’m trying to suggest to you that I really think unless we get the kind of leadership, whatever color they are, that is, of the Clarence Williams, Doreen Morris, George Prendergast type—this principled, intelligent, hardworking type person—I don’t think we’re going to be able to genuinely engage the top level of MIT in any sort of dialogue. We would first have to get them to admit that there are things going on on their watch that they are not dealing with. I won’t mention any names here, but I can think of one professor who is capable of saying anything. I admire this guy, I’m telling you. I admire this guy so much. He may have at one point gone to Vest and said, “You ain’t doing shit.” Vest may have said, “Well, I think I am doing something.” This professor said, “You ain’t doing shit.” I just say that to say that before we can begin any serious dialogue—I’m sure there are some people who would disagree with me—meaningful dialogue can only take place when both people, both sides of the dialogue, are sincere, are genuine, and both have some inkling that there in fact is a problem that is capable of being solved.

I really think that the hierarchy of MIT—although I’ve said that there are people here at MIT who are first-rate individuals, and I mean that, and some of them inhabit the upper reaches of the Institute—at the very top I do not believe that their makeup will allow for any sort of meaningful dialogue. I simply believe that they are concerned with other things—as is the history of the United States of America, at the top, with few exceptions. There have been exceptions, Lincoln and a few exceptions. But I think the people we have at the top here at MIT, currently, are not the kinds of people you could engage in a serious dialogue. I mean a dialogue that is not necessarily accusatory in tone, but a dialogue that is supported by overwhelming instances of racial misbehavior. I simply do not believe in them, I don’t believe in them. If we did have the kind of people you could engage in serious dialogue, I would say to them that there are many things right with MIT and there are many things we do right—but there are some things that we should turn our eye toward, some things that we should examine, and here is the list I have. Chief among them would be the

racial climate of MIT. When you have faculty members telling young African-American students or young Asian students or Mexican-American students or whatever that they may not be capable of learning the contents of this person’s course, where do you go from there? That faculty member should be taken out and guillotined. We should just, you know, bang!—and get somebody else.

I don’t know. I love the place, I hate the place. I’m very concerned that young people, even young white students, come here and in some cases have the misnotions or misconceptions that they have regarding racial minorities confirmed. That just doesn’t help, it doesn’t help.

My last question is simply, is there any topic or issue that comes to mind as you reflect on your own experience and on the experience of other blacks at MIT?

Not really, but I would like to say what I said before—that MIT is a fascinating place. I think that a person coming to MIT will find Arab people, they will find African-Americans, they will find African-based people from all over the world, they will find white people. You will find all sorts of people here. In among that large group, that diverse group of people, you will find some of the nicest, most decent folk anywhere, but you will have to look for them. Maybe that’s true anywhere in life. But if you look for them—I don’t mean make it your mission, your mission should be a job and your family and what have you—when you come in contact with them, if you’re clear enough in your mind to be able to recognize decent folk, you will definitely find them at MIT. Conversely, you will be shocked and mortified by the overt racism that exists here. You have to keep your guard up at all times, but not let your guard being up get in the way of interacting with people you’ll come in contact with.